# Stargate Explorer

**by** Greysgate

## Summary

Daniel accompanies SG-13 on a mission to a planet located by the random dialing program, one that was intentionally left out of the Ancients' database. What he finds there sends him on an epic journey with a new alien race, and brings him to the greatest tragedy he will ever suffer.

## Notes

This series was written after the airing of the last episode of Stargate SG-1. I believed the story of the Stargate was always Daniel's tale, far more than anyone else's, so this is what I thought should have happened after SG-1's last mission in the series universe. Would've made a great spin-off, IMHO.

Kudos and cheers to Jude, who was my fabulous alpha/beta reader for this series.

Daniel pushed the stem on his watch to turn off the alarm and swore softly in Flemish. “Never enough hours in a day,” he muttered to his empty office. With a sigh, he jotted down one last note on his tablet, tossed down a couple of Tylenol for his pounding headache, and grabbed his briefing folder and laptop. He was almost to the door when he remembered he’d left a document open on his desktop computer, so he went back to save and close the file.

SG-13 and General Landry were already in the briefing room when Daniel arrived. He took a seat at the far end of the table and started setting up his laptop, accessing the proper file and the slides he wanted while the General brought the meeting to order. Daniel split his attention between listening to the opening chatter and connecting his computer to the projector. By the time he was done, Landry was just finishing up.

“This planet lies at the furthest reaches of our galaxy, farther away from Earth than any other Stargate,” he stated, his eyes scanning a report in his hands, then making eye contact with each of the assembled SGC staff. “It’s a long way from home, people. From all appearances, the area around the ‘gate is deserted, but we’re planning a UAV survey once you’ve got a camp established and an initial recon completed. Doctor Jackson has information on what makes this world of interest to the SGC.”

Daniel stood up to address the team, putting up the first slide on screen. “P9X-1017 has several unique features, in addition to the extra number in the planetary designation,” he began, adjusting his glasses. He brought up an image from the MALP survey, showing the DHD and a large object behind it. “As you can see, there’s an obelisk on this world similar to the one built by the Asgard on Cimmeria, which was used as a defensive device against the Goa’uld.”

He pushed a button on the remote control and brought up an image of Thor’s Hammer from SG-1’s first visit to the ancient Viking world. Using the laser pointer on the end of the remote, he cast a red dot on the circular base beneath the Cimmerian DHD and returned to the previous slide. “There appears to be a landing platform on this planet, too, though it’s mostly covered by a fine powder initially identified as some kind of biological ash. A road extends past the obelisk as far as the MALP cameras can record, cutting straight through the landscape and continuing for miles. Most interesting, though, is what’s been done to the Stargate itself.”

The next slide showed a partial view of the alien ‘gate.

Nobody spoke.

“The inscriptions on this pillar are completely different from those on Cimmeria,” Daniel
continued, bringing up a photograph of the obelisk on the new alien world. “It has similar
dimensions, but the writing on the face of the obelisk is in numerous ancient languages. So far,
we’ve counted seventeen different scripts.”

He turned to face the General. “Sir, I think this could be really important. If this obelisk was,
indeed, made by the Asgard, we have no record of it in their data banks. I think we should take a
closer look, and since Colonel Carter isn’t available at the moment, I recommend Captain Jennifer
Hailey as the best candidate to determine what this other device is.”

SG-13 had recently lost Lieutenant Simon Wells to a permanent base assignment in security, and
Captain Kimura Satterfield had taken his place on the team. Daniel had helped with testing both
Hailey and Satterfield before putting them into the field when they were green lieutenants, and
both young women had acquitted themselves admirably, advancing in rank, responsibility, and
accomplishments. He had every confidence in Satterfield as a developing linguist and knew that
Hailey, as Sam’s protégé, would be able to handle any challenge alien technology might present,
just as her mentor would have.

Landry cocked his head, considering. His gaze shifted from Satterfield to Daniel and back. “Doctor
Jackson, I’d like you to accompany SG-13 on this one, since Doctor Balinsky is still in the
infirmary. You have the most extensive expertise with ancient languages of anyone at the SGC,
with no disrespect intended to Captain Satterfield.” He gave her a polite nod.

She flashed a brief smile, followed by an expression Daniel read as relief.

“If this discovery is as important as you and the rest of our experts seem to think, we’re going to
need our best on this mission.” The General flipped his briefing folder closed, signaling the end of
the meeting. “I’ll make arrangements for you and Captain Hailey to join the team’s roster
temporarily, and will see to it that your schedules are cleared accordingly. SG-13, you have a go.”
He stood up. “You’ll be heading out tomorrow at 0900 hours.”

As the military personnel around him got to their feet out of respect for their commander, Daniel
sighed. This was an unexpected development. He glanced at Satterfield, whom he’d expected to
tackle the team’s linguistic duties during Balinsky’s recovery, but she just grinned at him and
shrugged, hurrying out of the briefing room.

The General took his folder to his office and shut the door.

“Well, Doc,” drawled Colonel David Dixon, taking his time gathering his papers, “looks like
you’re ours for a bit. I always wanted to take your brain for a test drive, see how you work. Jack
used to tell some wild stories about you. Did you really throw a tantrum over fairy tales?”

Irritated, Daniel shot back, “I was under an alien influence at the time.”

“Riiiiiiight,” said Bosworth with a chuckle. “This is gonna be fun.” The team’s second-in-
command strolled out of the briefing room with a cocky strut.

Daniel sat back down, temporarily overwhelmed. He stared at the computer and his report, then
started disconnecting the projector and shutting his laptop down. A stream of unspoken curses in
several languages scrolled through his mind as he gritted his teeth, slamming his briefing folder on
top of the computer.

“Never enough time to get it all done,” he grumbled, stowing his things under his arm and
stomping toward the corridor and the elevator. “I don’t get paid enough for this.” He stepped into
the lift and punched the button for the eighteenth floor that housed his office and lab. “And I need
a vacation!” Frustrated, he slammed the heel of his hand against the elevator door as the car started to ascend.

As soon as he reached his office, he sent out a barrage of emails to rearrange his schedule, then stared at his desk for a few minutes, thinking of all the things he had to do, including some pleasurable things, too. Then he pulled up a time-off request from the forms database, printed it out – in quadruplicate – filled in the appropriate dates, signed it, and put the papers in a folder for routing to General Landry for approval.

If the rest of his team could have a few days off, then so could he. The SGC wouldn’t fall apart if Daniel Jackson weren’t there every day, and he needed a little distance to get his perspective back. He was tired, his brain was fried, and he wanted to just do nothing for a little while and see how that felt.

Once he got back from this mission and a sabbatical, he’d be ready to take up the yoke again and serve the greater good of humanity. His teammates would understand if he didn’t say goodbye but just disappeared as soon as he got back to the base. The work would wait; it would always be there, even if he weren’t.

That was part of the problem. No matter who came and went on what team, the fight went on endlessly. Daniel had been the one to open Pandora’s Box, and he had yet to find the promised gem of Hope in the ancient myth. He was beginning to think his journey through the Stargate would never end, that he might be caught up in some electronic dream or endless loop that kept him fighting, wearing him down, with no resolution in sight.

Part of him wanted out, and it was getting hard to resist.

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**July 4**

**P9X-1017**

“Never seen a Stargate with a halo before,” mused Captain Bosworth, squinting up at the brilliantly glinting crystals attached to the outer ring of the alien wormhole generator. “How ‘bout you, Doc?”

He turned to address his temporary teammate.

Daniel Jackson was standing on the far side of the DHD, examining the tall gray stone pillar he had come to investigate. “Nope. First time,” he replied distractedly, turning to catch the eye of his new commanding officer. “Colonel, this pillar has characters from each of the scripts of the Four Races.” It was covered with runes, hieroglyphs, and other ancient scripts.

His every step around the tall stone sent clouds of white ash into the air around his feet, making him sneeze. The thick carpet of powder covered most of the landscape, wisps of it blowing away on the breeze, carrying it off past the gray and brown stones and boulders marking the perimeter.

“Yeah, but what does it say?” Dixon shot back, finishing his walk around the immediate area, eyes searching for possible threats.

“As far as I can tell, it’s just the number three repeated in every language,” Daniel answered. “That’s just a first-glance finding, though. Maybe it means something different taken as a whole. I need to study it some more.”

“‘Course you do,” said the Colonel with a wry grin. “Bosworth, set up camp so Daniel can do his
thing. I think we’re gonna be here a while.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bosworth, Hailey and Satterfield knew their assigned duties and performed them with practiced precision. The ash was too deep to get good purchase to set the tent pegs, so a site was chosen on higher ground, about a hundred yards from the ‘gate. In short order, the encampment was assembled with tents and sun-filtering awnings, gear had been placed, and the junior members of the team returned to their CO for additional assignments.

“Okay, let’s see what’s at the end of the yellow brick road,” said the Colonel lightly. “Hailey, you eyeball those crystals to see if you can find out why this ‘gate has a crown.”

“Just from the similarities to the Cimmerian ‘gate,” Daniel interjected, finally turning away from the stone, “I’d say it’s likely that this is some sort of scanning device.” He pointed to the pillar behind him with his thumb. “Maybe it activates when someone’s dialing out, rather than arriving.” He gave the chevron-shaped top of the device a wary glance. “I’d suggest caution when contacting the base, anyway.”

“Right. I’m gonna send the MALP and FRED back and report in. Let’s get to it, people! Chop-chop.” Dixon clapped his hands with a glance at his 2IC, and Bosworth positioned the Field Remote Expeditionary Device they’d used to carry the heaviest gear for a return trip through the Stargate. Captain Satterfield drove the MALP up beside the FRED, and everyone cleared the paved circle between the DHD and the ‘gate, just to be safe.

Dixon’s face was tense as he dialed the coordinates for Earth, then pressed the red crystal dome in the center.

As Daniel had predicted, a brilliant green light shot out of the top of the obelisk, continuously sweeping the area between it and the Stargate, back and forth, passing harmlessly over Dixon and the equipment. Once the wormhole stabilized, he pressed the button on his comm unit while Satterfield sent the team’s IDC through her GDO.

“SG-13, reporting in,” Dixon called through the radio to the base. “Sending MALP and FRED back home. It’s a balmy seventy-five degrees here on P9X-1017, not a cloud in the sky, and a mild breeze blowing our skirts up. No sign of natives. Daniel says the pillar has the number three carved all over it, and it appears to be a scanner that activates on outgoing dialing. Everybody’s still here and A-OK. Looks like whatever it is doesn’t have a problem with us or our equipment.”

“That’s good news, Colonel,” General Landry’s voice returned through the speaker. “Prepare for UAV launch once the wormhole shuts down. We’ll expect a preliminary report from your team in forty-eight hours. Expect further orders once we’ve examined the additional data from the UAV survey. Landry, out.”

“Roger, sir.”

Daniel watched the two vehicles disappear through the event horizon, and shortly afterward the watery surface vanished. Moments later an incoming wormhole established and a small drone flew out of the center of the Stargate. It tracked the evenly paved road that led away from the ‘gate – made of yellowish tan stones, just like the one in L. Frank Baum’s classic tale – and disappeared into the horizon.

“Sir.” Captain Hailey was looking up at the sky.
Everyone else followed her gaze, including the Colonel.

“Whatcha got, Captain?” Dixon asked easily.

The azure vault of atmosphere was dominated by a single large moon slightly larger than Earth’s, but vastly different in appearance. It was blue, hinting at the possibility of vast oceans on its surface, with icy white caps at each pole. Spinning around its center were several slender Saturnine rings in an orderly rainbow of color. Glimmering in the sky between the planet and its moon were numerous other tiny points of light, shimmering like daytime stars, but rather than a random scattering, they were evenly spaced. That meant they weren’t naturally occurring, but artificially placed.

“Okay,” said Dixon, still looking at the tiny lights, thinking it through. “They don’t appear to be moving.”

“No, sir,” Hailey verified. “I spotted a few earlier, when we first arrived, and they seemed to disappear. Now there are more of them, but they don’t stay on very long.”

Daniel glanced at the lights’ position in the sky, then turned his back to them, shading his eyes as he looked toward the sunrise. “Maybe it’s just a reflection,” he observed, “following the path of this sun.”

Hailey glanced toward the position of the yellow star. “That would make sense. The objects are too regularly spaced to be a natural formation, so maybe it’s some kind of planetary shield or defense mechanism.”

Dixon nodded, his expression tense. He took out his binoculars and studied the glimmers. “Okay. Boz, you keep an eye on the sky. We don’t want any surprises here. Whatever they are, they’re too far away to make out.”

“Yessir.” Bosworth took up a position, both hands cradling his P-90.

Hailey and Daniel returned to their separate studies, while Bosworth, Satterfield and the Colonel watched the perimeter for potential threats.

“Lookit the size a that bug!” Satterfield gasped, pointing to a wind-sculpted rock formation about ten feet away.

Following her finger, Daniel spied a dragonfly-like thing lifting off and speeding away from them. It wasn’t close enough to glean any details, just its approximate shape and size. It disappeared over the crest of the rocks into the clear blue sky.

“Big as my hand,” Bosworth murmured. He shot a nervous glance at his CO. “You don’t think they’re bloodsuckers, do you, sir?”

“How the hell would I know, Boz? Just keep your eyes open, everyone. Don’t let ‘em get too close, just in case. I’m sure everyone remembers what happened to Teal’c when that alien bug stung him a few years back. Don’t take any chances.”

Daniel glanced into the pockets of his tactical vest. “Do we have mosquito spray in here?” he asked, half teasing.

Instantly, Bosworth started searching his pockets, too, which was precisely the reaction Daniel had been expecting. He grinned and gave the Captain a playful push on the shoulder when everybody chuckled. “I doubt they’d have the same response as an Earth mosquito, Boz. Just messin’ with
“Not funny, Daniel,” the other man said with a glare, which broke a beat later into a good-natured grin.

As Daniel returned to his study of the carvings, Satterfield was already busy setting up the monitor and joystick for planet-side control of the UAV. The drone could travel 75 miles per hour, and with recent upgrades from technology provided by the Asgard, its range had been expanded from only one hour to eight, which was important because the road they were tracking ended three hundred miles away from the Stargate.

What lay at the end of it was a step pyramid, the stones on its sides and each of the four levels covered with writing; however, the images captured by the UAV weren’t clear enough to show anything recognizable, merely tantalizing suggestions of characters in the languages of the Four Races.

Daniel stared at the pictures on the view screen, almost salivating with the desire to take a look at the structure, to run his hands over the carvings and see it in person. They’d never had another find quite like this one – an unusual combination of Four Races and ancient Earth writing, Asgard technology, architecture similar to ancient Mayan, and a uniquely enhanced Stargate. He turned to Colonel Dixon, eyebrows raised in a silent plea, hoping he could make all that clear.

Before he could say a word, the older man gave him a knowing smile and shook his head. “Looks like we’re gonna be here a while.” He turned to Satterfield. “Dial up the base, Captain. Let’s see if we can get some of those hot new toys the SGC just acquired and take ‘em for a spin.”

“Which ones, sir?” she asked expectantly.

“A couple of Polaris ATVs and that hot little Kawasaki mule. Don’t know about you, but no way I’m walking three hundred miles, even if the scenery is pretty further down the road. Get Landry on the horn. We’ll need extra provisions, too.” He grinned at Bosworth. “And maybe they’ll even throw in some mosquito spray for Boz.”

Everyone had another chuckle, and Daniel wandered over to the camp to take a break and have a little something to eat.

By nightfall, there were two newly outfitted ATVs and a 4X4 mule parked behind their tents, fully loaded with plenty of supplies for the long trek ahead of them. These vehicles had been converted to use naquadah power cells rather than gasoline, enabling them to travel long distances without carrying extra fuel. Each ATV could carry enough supplies, food, clothing, and shelter for two for as much as two weeks, and the mule would haul four passengers, equipment and provisions for the rest of the team. Traveling lightly was important, and the less they carried, the faster the vehicles could transport them.

What had been originally planned as a one-day mission would now stretch into a week or more, but Daniel was stoked for the trek. This planet had a lot to offer, and so far there seemed to be nothing to fear. Appearances were often deceiving, though, as many an SG team had learned from experience, so as night fell, each of them took their turns at watch and prepared for a long but hopefully fruitful mission to this alien world.

Chapter 2: Captive

July 5
The vibration from an unexpected activation of the Stargate pulled everyone from their bedrolls in the wee hours, reaching for whatever weaponry they carried. Most of the team had been sleeping; the night had been utterly quiet and still until the Stargate awakened them.

The wheel was still spinning up when they gathered outside their tents. Hailey had been on watch, but the moment Colonel Dixon emerged from his tent, he was in command. “Get your weapons and take cover in the rocks!” he ordered. “Nobody make a sound. Radio silence, till you hear from me. Let’s see who’s coming and find out what they want before we take action.”

Daniel knew they weren’t expecting anyone from the base. He returned to his tent, boots still unlaced but on his feet, fetched his Beretta and two extra clips of ammo, and paired up with Satterfield. They took cover behind some boulders that gave a good view of the camp but hid them from sight.

An alien raced out of the event horizon at a dead run, roaring and armed. He was Teal’c’s size and build, but far from human. Small silvery scales glinting in the moonlight covered his face and arms, and a mane of dark brownish hair sprouted from the back of his head, around his throat, and down his chest. His face was something out of a nightmare, werewolf-savage with sharp teeth and glowing yellow eyes.

Dozens more followed him. The creatures began to hunt for them; noses lifted in the air, they followed the human scent and headed directly for the rocks that hid Captain Hailey. From Daniel’s point of view, the tiny woman was invisible, but the aliens found her with little trouble, dragging her out from behind her cover by the collar of her jacket.

She screamed as one of them swung at her with a powerful fist and her face caved in, blood splattering everywhere. She died instantly, crumpling like a rag doll to the ground.

Daniel was horrified; he couldn’t believe what he’d just seen.

Then Dixon squeezed off a burst of fire with an order to attack crackling through the radio. Bosworth took out two of the creatures, but there were so many, and they just kept coming. Satterfield cried out, taking aim with her P-90, her muzzle flashes in the darkness lighting up her tear-stained face.

Several of the aliens fell, but more and more exited the watery portal, an army of them filling up the area around the Stargate, climbing into the rocks where the team had made camp. They carried weapons similar to the Jaffa staff but with a shorter stick, almost a baton, that they could aim and fire with one hand. Discharges of bright yellow flame roared into the stillness, striking the rocks shielding SG-13 from view.

Bosworth was the next to die. There was no hope of winning against those numbers, and in a matter of minutes, the survivors were surrounded. Dixon ordered their surrender, and the team laid down their arms. One by one, they were dragged back to the landing pad in front of the Stargate.

Daniel watched in dismay as Satterfield was summarily executed, tears streaming down her face. One blast to the forehead and she fell backward, her body crumpled and lifeless, her pretty face covered in blood, tears and gray matter.

The leader of the aliens strode up to Colonel Dixon and snarled, “You de Yaks’n?”

“Yaks’n,” the beast tried again. “Dan-el Yaks’n.”


Dixon was protecting him, Daniel knew, only he wasn’t so sure that was a good idea. Still, that look Dixon had given him had told him to keep silent. If they were looking for Daniel, maybe they’d take Dixon and leave Daniel behind, alive, so he could return to the base and report what had happened. It was a slim chance, but a chance nonetheless.

The alien commander pressed his weapon against the Colonel’s forehead, this time speaking in rough, growling Latin.

Another of the aliens spoke in the same tongue, his tone of voice hesitant, almost apologetic, his body language supplicating.

Daniel understood them, and he was certain he was the only one who did. They were talking about his glasses, the subordinate reminding the leader that Daniel Jackson wore a contraption with two small lenses on his face. They looked around at the two survivors, both on their knees, hands clasped behind their heads, not moving.

It had been an automatic reaction for Daniel to reach for his glasses in the tent as he’d groped for his gun. He’d put them on by reflex, so he could see to shoot accurately. None of the others on the team wore them but him. They were on his face, in plain sight.

“I’m Daniel Jackson,” Daniel blurted in Latin. “Please, let him live! I am the one you want.”

“Shut up, Doc,” Dixon growled. “I don’t think they mean to ask for your autograph. I’m tryin’ to save your ass!”

The leader glanced at the Colonel with his bare face, then back at Daniel. With a snarling grimace that might have passed for a smile, he squeezed off two shots, executing Dixon without mercy.

“Bring him,” the alien commander snarled, heading for the DHD.

“Oh, God,” Daniel breathed, his eyes filling with tears as he surveyed his teammates’ bodies. They were all dead now, all but him. “I’m so sorry.”

Two of the alien soldiers yanked Daniel to his feet, bound his hands behind him, and marched him toward the ‘gate. Others carried their own dead and wounded, leaving the human bodies behind. One of them dialed a ‘gate address, but Daniel couldn’t see all the glyphs. Moments later, the obelisk scanner passed harmlessly over them as they approached the event horizon.

At the other end of the wormhole, they arrived inside an enclosed metal structure populated by more of the bipedal aliens. A vibration through his boots told him there was a powerful engine at work nearby, and Daniel’s first thought was that they were inside a spaceship. It wasn’t the typical Goa’uld/Egyptian hybrid he was accustomed to seeing, however; the design elements were Greco-Roman, with lots of white marble and elegant columns.

He was forced down a short corridor to a small cell with smooth metal walls, ceiling and floor, the interior closed off by a force field that his captors activated once they’d shoved him inside the little room. His only comforts were a metal shelf that might serve as a sleeping platform, complete with a sliding panel in the middle that opened to a toilet hole. Inside that was a screen that would let waste pass through, but nowhere near big enough to consider as a possible avenue of escape.
No one spoke to him. He had no idea why he’d been singled out from the team and everyone else killed. He had no intention of cooperating or giving them anything; he’d rather die than help them. As far as he was concerned, they’d destroyed any possible leverage they might have had over him by killing his friends.

The SGC would be returning to the campsite when SG-13 didn’t report in on time, and his teammates’ bodies would be discovered and returned home for burial, but no one would know what had happened to him. No one from Earth had ever seen aliens like those who had captured him, and he had no idea where they had originated; neither would anyone else. There was no way they could track him, so he was on his own.

He had no idea how these aliens had found him, and hoped it hadn’t been through a traitor in the midst of the SGC.

He simmered with rage as he examined his cell for every possible avenue of escape. If he could manage to free himself, he might be able to get home. And just maybe, if he were lucky, he’d be able to find a way to avenge his murdered teammates.

That idea fueled his hope, but he found that was all he had left.

The People gathered at the camp, surveying the carnage around them. This attack had been unexpected, but was not yet cause for alarm. After all, those who had been struck down might well have deserved their fate.

The bodies of the visitors were gathered up and carried off to await dissection and analysis. The alien’s shelters, weapons, and transportation vehicles were given a cursory examination; it was determined they might require further study, but they were dismissed as unimportant for the moment. Meanwhile, the items would be protected from ravaging beasts and made invisible until the inquiry was completed, in case the attackers returned for whatever the first visitors had brought with them.

In due time, in the city of Shahr, the council of elders met to determine a course of action once all the necessary information on the aliens had been acquired.

“They were only primitive beings,” Mountain announced. “They cannot be of those whom we called ‘Friend’ in the long-ago.”

“Their tools and machines are crude,” agreed Forest. “We have been able to glean some information from them, but not enough to piece together a complete language reference. They seem to have no knowledge of us.”

“Have we been so completely erased from the universe?” asked Sky. “Is it possible no one knows we are here?”

Grass grunted and scratched his bearded chin. “Is why we here. To be lost.”

“But they are not The Ones?” asked Mountain.

“No,” declared Sky. “We do not believe so.”

“No,” agreed Forest.
“Must observe rites,” stated Grass firmly, steepling his fingers over his lap.

“Agreed.” Mountain rose and led the procession out of the council hall.

The bodies of the dead strangers were cremated, their ashes returned to the base of the portal through which they had come, blended with the dust of all the People who had passed in every generation since they had arrived on that isolated world.

The People mourned them as their own and, when the ceremony was over, they returned to their respective places in their world. Nothing had changed; for them, things were no different than they had been before the Wheel of Worlds opened to admit their visitors and those who had taken the life force of all but one of them.

If others came, the People would be waiting, always watching and waiting, as they had done for millennia.

July 6

Somewhere In Space

Outside his cell, two of the scaly aliens stood guard.

Daniel’s belly growled. The one meal he’d eaten at the camp had been just enough to keep him going, but he was slowly dehydrating from lack of water. He was exhausted, but he dared not lie down and sleep with no one to keep watch. This kind of treatment was designed to break him down, but he’d been through worse.

By his chronometer, he knew that almost 24 hours had passed since his arrival, and no one had bothered to speak to him or interact in any way. Soon the communication deadline with the SGC would pass, and a contingent of Marines would be sent to investigate what had happened to SG-13. Their bodies would be discovered and taken back to the base for burial, their supplies gathered and returned home. Daniel would be listed as MIA; no one would know what had happened to him or where to attempt to mount a rescue. Even he didn’t know where he was.

Pacing, looking around, thinking, keeping one eye on the doorway in the anteroom outside his cell, he examined his prison for the bazillionth time, looking for any weakness he might exploit, thinking and calculating all possibilities, trying to cement in his mind the path from his cell to the Stargate; he’d need to remember that, if and when an opportunity for escape presented itself.

Finally, a visitor arrived, an old woman – a human – and Daniel felt a slight sense of relief at the sight of her. A small black lightning bolt was tattooed on her forehead, marking her as a Jaffa. This was a symbol he hadn’t seen before, but he knew instantly whose it was. Earth mythology told him that detail. She was a servant of Zeus.

She handed him a tray laden with food and water, passed through a slot in the wall on one side of the energy barrier that served as both door and window. He took the tray and set it down on the shelf in his cell. Since his alien captors had spoken to him in Latin, he guessed his visitor might use the same language.

“Greetings,” said Daniel with a smile. He touched his chest with one hand. “My name is Da——“
“I know who you are,” the woman whispered in Latin, fear in her eyes as she meaningfully glanced at each guard. “For your own sake, I beg you to give Zeus whatever he asks.” She dropped her gaze, gave him a slight bow of respect, and started to turn away.

“Please!” Daniel beseeched her. “Wait!” He reached toward the door, wanting to grab her arm and hold her, but was zapped for his trouble by the force field. “Do you know what he wants with me?”

“Such important things are not for a slave to know,” she replied meekly, eyes downcast. “You must cooperate, or the price you pay will be terrible. Zeus has great power. We must not question him.”

Daniel felt his opportunity slipping away. “What is your name?”

“Zera. I am to see to your meals.” She bowed again and hurried away.

With a sigh, Daniel sat down and examined the food and drink, sniffing suspiciously at the contents of the large metal tankard he’d been given. In the end, his thirst won out, and he gulped down the cool liquid, his eyes closing in utter bliss. The food was simple and filling; a bowl held a plain stew with meat and vegetables, and two slices of bread lay alongside it. The meal would hold him for another day; at least now he had hope that they didn’t intend to starve him to death.

He knew the Earthly mythology of Zeus, son of Cronos, father of the Greco-Roman gods. His symbol, marking the woman’s forehead, was the lightning bolt. Zeus had a reputation for infidelity, whimsy and great wrath, but how much of that would hold true in this alien culture remained to be seen.

Daniel assumed this was yet another Goa’uld who had enslaved both human Jaffa and these beastly aliens, whatever they were.

He waited for the woman to return for the empty tray, and when she did, he thanked her with a warm smile. That eased her tension a little, softening her expression, but she didn’t smile back.

He decided to try for more information. “Zera, are we on a space ship?”

She gave him a little nod. “I cannot tell you more. You will learn all you need to know when Zeus arrives, and you are presented to him.” She hesitated, met his gaze with a pleading one of her own, and bowed.

He let her go without more questions, sensing he might be putting her in danger for the interaction. He hadn’t missed the narrowed gaze of the scaly werewolf guard to his left, who had obviously monitored their conversation, its head turned toward the doorway.

Daniel decided to try another tack. “What are your people called?” he asked the creature in elegantly precise Latin.

“Ting-sha,” it replied in a frosty growl. It turned away, steadfastly refusing to answer any of Daniel’s other questions.

At least he had an identity for his captors now. That was something.

Chapter 3: Death
July 7

Somewhere in Space

A Ting-sha soldier, splendidly bedecked in golden armor, swept into the anteroom with a snarl that jolted Daniel’s guards into a half-crouch of submission. “Bring de Yaks’n,” he ordered, his pronunciation of Latin mangled by the lack of oral dexterity of his animal mouth. “Zeus has come.”

The guards hurried to obey him, unlocking the cell door and holding Daniel by each arm. Their grip was painful as their claw-tipped fingers poked into his skin through the tough BDU jacket.

As the group passed by the ‘gate room, Daniel confirmed he’d remembered the way correctly.

He noted numerous Jaffa passing through the corridors and at work in various rooms. All the technologically advanced positions were held by Jaffa; all the guards and military were Ting-sha. There was a distinct air of subservient fear expressed on the faces of the humans, along with distrust and hatred in the eyes of the alien soldiers.

“Go dere,” ordered the Ting-sha officer. It pointed into a luxuriously decorated, spacious room with a high ceiling. At first glance, the chamber reminded Daniel of the throne room on Ra’s space ship, but this place had Roman touches with an overabundance of gaudy gold and crimson velvet.

The guards brought him up to a dais poised before an enormous window looking out into the black of space, ribbons of light passing by that he recognized as the current of hyperspace travel. At the center of the dais was a grand throne with its back to him.

Standing on either side of the chair were Jaffa priests, the mark of Zeus emblazoned on their brows, golden garlands set on their heads. Their white Roman robes were draped with cloaks fastened over one shoulder with gold brooches. One priest held a censer, which he swung slightly to perfume the air; the other had his hands pressed together in prayer. All around them, additional worshipers were stationed near the walls, keeping the area around the dais clear, their voices mingled in a pleasant subtle murmur of praise.

The throne began to turn as Daniel was pushed down to his knees.

One of the priests announced, “All hail Zeus, mightiest of the gods.”

Soft chanting echoed louder in the room, a Latin prayer of adoration to the ancient god.

Daniel’s face was pushed down to the floor, preventing him from getting a look at the Goa’uld. The guards knelt with him, making sure he stayed bent over.

“Well, well, so this is the famous Doctor Daniel Jackson,” called a merry voice above him speaking Latin, like his minions. “Let me have a look, shall we? But keep him on his knees, where he belongs.” A note of malice laced the last phrase.

The guard’s hand moved from the back of Daniel's head and he sat back on his heels, lifting his gaze to finally meet his captor’s.

The being on the throne was a human male. His eyes flashed with the white light of Goa’uld possession, dimming down to reveal pale gray irises. The host was quite handsome, with fair skin and golden blond hair.

“I expected you to be a smaller man,” Zeus quipped. “Softer, perhaps. You don’t quite fit the
Daniel didn’t say anything, biting back the retort that came instantly to mind.

“Not taking the bait, I see.” The Goa’uld smiled coolly. “No matter. We shall get down to business, then. I need a password from you. Something Colonel Carter would use to protect important information.”

“Sorry. If you know so much about me, you know I don’t cooperate with false gods or tyrants.”

“I expected as much.” Zeus held out a hand to the praying priest, who reached into his cloak and retrieved a small circular gadget.

“This device,” Zeus turned it to display it to Daniel, but brought it no closer, “was once in the possession of Baal,” Zeus explained. “Your Colonel Carter did him the great favor of downloading the Stargate Command database into it for him. Do you remember that?”

Daniel lowered his eyes, embarrassed by the reminder of his teammate’s blunder, an act admittedly committed under duress, with Baal holding SGC personnel hostage and threatening their lives in exchange for the data. At least Daniel had the comfort of knowing she’d managed to password-protect the information so the system lord wouldn’t have easy access to it.

Only Baal didn’t have it anymore. This Zeus character apparently had taken it from him and was now trying to use Daniel to hack into it.

“Sorry, but I don’t know Sam’s passwords.” He lifted his chin in bold rebellion, giving Zeus a small, defiant smile, showing him just how sorry he wasn’t. “They’re unique to each individual. We aren’t permitted to share them with anyone.”

Smirking, Zeus replied, “Ah, but you know Colonel Carter well. You have worked closely with her for ten of your years. You are both scientists, with like minds. You can make educated guesses that my people cannot.”

“You’re a god, right?” Daniel shrugged. “You figure it out.”

The guard at his right reacted instantly to this affront, using his weapon to crack Daniel across the back of his head. He saw stars as he fell to the floor, momentarily breathless from the pain. He sucked in a ragged gasp as soon as he could manage it, not moving until the ocular disturbance began to fade, and his skull settled down to a pounding throb.

“My children do not appreciate your—” Zeus paused, as though searching for the proper phrase, “attempt at humor,” he observed lightly with a small chuckle.

Daniel rolled onto his side, one hand instinctively clutching the back of his head, and made eye contact, watching as the priest tucked the device back into a fold in his white robe.

The Goa’uld’s expression turned angry, gray eyes flashing a warning as he leaned forward on his throne, his elbows on his knees. “I want this information, Doctor Jackson, but I do not need it. You will give it to me, or you will not. I do not care. I have more than one reason for bringing you here, as you shall soon see. Your people would benefit greatly from your cooperation, but the reprieve would only be temporary, I assure you.”

What Zeus was hinting at didn’t make sense. “I’m not going to help you,” Daniel told him firmly.

The Goa’uld relaxed in his chair and smiled. “Perhaps not today, but eventually…” He clasped his
hands over his lap. “Everyone has a breaking point, Doctor. Even you.” He glanced at the Ting-sha officer. “Take him away. Inquire every hour to determine if he has changed his mind.”

The alien inclined his head and gracefully dropped to one knee, then rose and growled an order to the guards, who hustled Daniel back to his cell.

Once again inside his bare prison, Daniel asked, “What is he planning?” He hoped one of the aliens would answer out of reflex; they were loyal to their god, but didn’t seem too bright.

No one answered him.

The energy barrier on his cell door activated with a low-pitched hum, and Daniel settled down to a long, tiring stay in jail.

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**July 8**

**P9X-1017**

After Colonel Griff surveyed the landscape one last time, he glanced at the smooth, trackless ash surrounding the Stargate. He pressed the button on his comm unit, squinting at the rippling event horizon of an active wormhole. “No sign of SG-13 or any of their equipment, General Landry,” he reported. “No tracks, no response on the radio, nothing. It’s as if they were never here.”

“How much territory did you cover, Colonel?”

“We know they would have headed down that road behind me,” Griff replied, wary eyes still shifting to the surrounding territory. The place made him uneasy; he felt as though they were being watched, but all they’d seen around them were a few big bug things hovering around the rocky perimeter. “Given the elapsed time involved, we know they couldn’t have gotten more than halfway to that pyramid, and we went past that point. There’s absolutely nothing here, General -- no evidence of campsites, detours or anything else. The place gives me the creeps, but we haven’t seen any aliens or anything else that could account for their disappearance.”

“Might have something to do with that pillar, or the corona on the Stargate,” Landry told him. “If that’s the case, then we’ll want to be very careful how we approach studying that site. We’ll put it on the list for Odyssey to explore on their way back from Atlantis. Meanwhile, report back to the base, and we’ll discuss how to handle further search and rescue for SG-13.”

“Roger that, sir. We’re on our way back now.” Griff gestured for his team to proceed ahead of him through the event horizon.

He glanced over his shoulder at the empty landscape behind him, watching a giant dragonfly lift off from one of the boulders above the ridge surrounding the ‘gate area.

The place had spooked him, and he couldn’t get out of there fast enough. He turned and stepped through the watery surface of the wormhole, in a hurry to get home.

Whatever had happened to SG-13, he knew it wasn’t good, but he’d be first to volunteer for a return trip to find them, once they had more information. He didn’t want to leave anyone behind in that place; it smelled of death to him, and he didn’t like it.
July 8

Somewhere in Space

Daniel’s knees protested the way he’d been shoved onto them by the Ting-sha soldiers at his sides. He tasted blood from the split lip one of them had given him just before being brought into the audience chamber. It had been a long night, since Daniel hadn’t slept in a couple of days; he’d just started to nod off from exhaustion when the hourly inquiries began.

He glared up at Zeus, who was staring haughtily down at him from his enormous gilded marble throne. Lack of food and sleep were making Daniel a little confused, and his emotions were set to a hair-trigger by the ordeal, but there was one certainty he still held. “I won’t tell you a damned thing,” he growled between clenched teeth.

“I grow weary of your resistance to my commands,” said the Goa’uld, his voice unnaturally deep and throaty, “and I warned you of the price you would pay if you refused me.” He lifted his elegantly chiseled chin and smirked at his captive.

“Then why haven’t you killed me already?” demanded Daniel. “I’m never going to help you.”

“You shall bear witness to my power, Doctor Jackson, and you will learn that it is futile to resist my will,” said the haughty being. “For too long, the Tau’ri have been a thorn in the side of the Goa’uld. I have been patient, waiting as the System Lords made war on each other; as they killed one another off, I absorbed many of their territories. I have watched the Tau’ri destroy them one by one, seen great weapons stolen from their grasp, and at last, it is time to make my presence known.”

“What about the Ori priors, and their armies of converts?” Daniel snapped. “You planning to take them on, too?”

Zeus chuckled. “I have the means,” he assured his prisoner, “as you shall see.” He flicked a hand at his First Prime, giving a silent, pre-arranged command to the Jaffa standing beside the dais.

The warrior’s hands moved over a control panel on the bridge of the ship, and the white marble wall behind the throne began to divide into two halves, separating to reveal a panoramic view of black, starry space. In the center of the view screen glowed the jewel-like beauty of a familiar blue-green planet. Earth.

Zeus’ ship had to have some sort of cloaking device, making it completely undetectable, because instead of any sign of spacecraft rushing to fend off an attack, there was only peaceful, silent space. Daniel’s heart beat faster, harder; his mouth went dry.

“Behold,” announced Zeus, “the measure of my wrath against the Tau’ri. Your people shall plague me no more.” He stood and placed his hand on a blue crystal sphere set on a podium beside his throne. The sphere lit up, and Daniel could hear and feel an eerily familiar deeply pitched hum vibrating through his body as a weapon charged up somewhere in the ship’s core.

A frisson of alarm nudged him closer to full-fledged panic. Zeus was going to attack Earth! He was going to destroy it, and no one knew it was coming.
“No!” Daniel cried. He struggled against his captors as he lurched to his feet and tried to throw his body at Zeus to stop him, but he was too late, his effort too small; there were too many guards keeping him in place. “No, please! Stop! I’ll do anything you want! Just don’t—"

A bright flash drew his gaze back to the massive window, and as he watched in mind-numbing horror, a brilliant pulse of energy shot out from the ship, directly into the area of the Pacific where the volcanic island chain of Hawaii ought to be. A massive beam of power flowed into the vent through the Earth's crust, exciting the thermal energy inside the active volcano, tunneling into the molten core. The planet fractured along a major fault line and shattered into flaming chunks, and the force of the blast expanded outward, quickly engulfing the moon and demolishing it as well.

In the space between one heartbeat and the next, Daniel’s world was gone, his people utterly destroyed. Glowing debris left a fiery trail, marking the place where so much life had once flourished.

Daniel stopped struggling. Still and silent, he stared at the screen, unable to fully process what he’d just seen; it wasn’t possible that Earth had been obliterated. He couldn’t imagine such a thing; he couldn’t wrap his mind around it. Time ceased to tick away for him as that memory replayed over and over until it was seared indelibly into his soul.

Then, there was nothing.

Zeus watched his prisoner’s expression of horror turn to a blank mask dominated by glazed, unseeing eyes. The Goa’uld strolled down the steps of the dais and waved away the guards, reveling in the emptiness he saw in the famous Doctor Jackson’s eyes. He leaned in close to the human’s ear and whispered, “Such is the price to be paid for rejecting the rule of the gods.”

He smiled, his heart filled with contempt and cruel triumph, and pulled away, waiting for a challenging snarl or capitulation, but Jackson didn’t move.

Slowly waving one hand before the human’s eyes, Zeus saw there was no reaction to his remark at all. Doctor Daniel Jackson seemed to be gone, only the shell of his body remaining behind. Apparently, the shock of seeing his home world destroyed had been too much for the man to bear.

Zeus’ victory was a little hollow now, but still satisfying in its own way. The Tau’ri would no longer be a constant source of irritation. The Jaffa nation was still shaky enough in its infancy to be toppled with application of the right force, at the right time, in the most important places. Only Baal stood in Zeus’s way now, and with weapons like this one, combined with his newly acquired toy from Baal, there were few obstacles left to conquer.

There remained, of course, the matter of the Ori incursion, but that was simple enough to solve; any planet that fell to those religious zealots would be destroyed. After losing enough worlds, it would become obvious to the Ori’s that any attempt to conquer this galaxy was futile; in a few months, it would all belong to Zeus. His patience had paid off handsomely, and ultimate domination would soon be in his grasp.

He pushed Jackson’s shoulder, watching him wobble and instinctively adjust his balance. Zeus lifted the man’s right arm and moved his supporting hand away, chuckling as the limb remained where he had placed it, floating in mid-air.

“Put that back in its cell,” he ordered with a last scathing stare at his captive. “When the famous
Doctor Jackson recovers from his shock, put him to work unlocking the database device. See to it that he survives long enough to fulfill his purpose.” The Ting-sha guards nodded and hustled Jackson off, dragging him by both arms, his feet barely moving.

Zeus turned away to return to his throne. He gazed out the portal at the fiery fragments, which were still moving away from the explosion.

He glanced at the priest standing by his throne. “You may accompany me to Olympus through the chaapa’ai,” he announced. Turning to his Jaffa First Prime, he ordered, “Tell the ship’s master to send word to all my high priests when Doctor Jackson has returned to himself. Until then, the ship is to maintain a course to Olympus. A celebration of my victory against the Tau’ri will be held there.”

“The word of Zeus,” said the priest, bowing to his god.

As he strode out of his audience chamber, his personal guard accompanying him as he headed for the Stargate room, the Goa’uld laughed softly to himself. The destruction of Earth was something everyone in the galaxy would be talking about forever. All would tremble at his name! The galaxy was his… or soon would be.

It was a good day.

Chapter 4: Escape

August 1

Not unlike surfacing from submersion under water, Daniel’s consciousness rose up from a sheltered place in his soul, and he realized his eyes were open. From somewhere came a vague awareness of a significant passage of time, but he had no idea how long it had been since he’d been in sync with the world around him.

A vague sensation of loss clung to him like a second skin, making it difficult to breathe; he couldn’t remember what had happened to him, or how he’d come to be in that unfamiliar place. His first tentative effort to search his memory brought a sharp stab of pain; he decided not to explore that at the moment. Some buried instinct told him there were things to be done, action needing to be taken, but he didn’t have a clue what that was. He would have to figure it out, and that would take a little patience. He would know the right moment to move, but he’d have to be patient until it came.

He knew instinctively that he should observe his surroundings for some indication of what was happening. The room in which he lay was bare, cold metal, including the shelf beneath him, just barely warmed by his body heat.

Then he realized he was naked, lying down over a hole just beneath his buttocks. The stink of his filthy body was strong enough to make him gag, and he became aware of a slow, burning sensation along his buttocks and thighs, where his skin was chapped from being unclean. From his physical condition, he guessed he’d been reclining there for some time, relatively unattended.

No guards were in view, but he could hear them talking, just out of sight, probably right past the perimeter of his tiny prison. He listened closely, taking care to keep still, eyes focused on the ceiling above him. He would play along with whatever his captors wanted, checking their reactions
for cues to his recent behavior.

His empty belly growled.

“You turn to wash de Yaks’n, Darek,” said a male voice in rough Latin.

“I did last time,” argued another, deeper voice from the opposite side of the doorway. “By Zeus, he stinks!”

Oh, yes, please, Daniel thought. A bath would feel wonderful – and it would get him out of that cell.

A heavy sigh sounded to the left. “Zeus should kill him. Would be merciful.”

“Shhhh!” hissed the guard on the right. “You want his wrath, K’kez? Tell a god, be merciful? You brain-sick.”

Soft beeps sounded, and a moment later the door to the cell unlocked. The one called K’kez showed himself, stepping into the open cell. His wolfish face relaxed a little, and he sighed. “I not see dis one ever right again.”

Darek eyed his companion. “If he wakes,” stated the Ting-sha guard grimly, “he as strong as Jaffa say; I not see our home gone and live.”

At the alien’s words, Daniel felt some huge black thing rise up inside him, threatening to engulf him again. He fought it, refusing to think about it, about why he was there, and what he might have seen. He had to concentrate on here and now, and finding a way to escape. He didn’t know what these creatures were talking about and didn’t want to, not now. The holes in his memory would probably fill in later; if they didn’t, he thought he might be okay with that, too. He had the sense that it was something horrible, something he didn’t want to know.

The two guards pulled Daniel to his feet. One wrapped a cloth around him, roughly tying it over his chest, and then they pulled him along in a stumbling walk, using the fabric as a leash. He concentrated on where they were going, remembering every step. He’d need to be fast, moving from place to place, whenever the time came to leave.

They took him to the nearest showers, where they stripped his covering off, unceremoniously shoved him under a spigot, and turned on the spray. It was instantly a warm, soothing temperature, a soapy mixture alternating with clear rinse water. Closing his eyes and swallowing the blissful groan of pleasure as the dirt, oil, and waste were sluiced from his body, he stood still beneath the jet, letting the stream force his head down. He dared not move to scrub himself, just let the water do the work.

Nearby, the guards chatted amiably. Daniel struggled to hear them, carefully adjusting his stance to keep his ears clear of the downpour. What he heard didn’t provide him with anything useful, so he would need to be patient. For the moment, he just enjoyed the water and what cleanliness he could get. When the shower shut off, K’kez wrapped a clean blanket over his shoulders and towed him back to his cell.

The guard sat him down over the toilet hole and draped the blanket over his lap, then returned to its post outside the cell, activating the invisible barrier over the doorway.

A few minutes later, Daniel was pleased to see an old woman appear. She kept her eyes downcast and bowed to the guards, waiting for them to shut off the force field sealing off his cell. As she shuffled toward him carrying a food tray, he sat very still, keeping his gaze fixed on the far wall.
She sat down beside him and scooped up a spoonful of gruel, touching his lower lip with it.
“Come on, now,” she cooed gently in soft Latin. “Open up. Be a good boy.”

He opened his mouth and accepted the bland-tasting food, swallowing it automatically. As long as she shoveled it in, he ate until his stomach was blissfully full. Once the bowl was empty, she wiped his face with a damp towel, kindly patted his shoulder, and took her supplies away.

K'kez entered the cell as she left and grasped Daniel by the shoulders. The Ting-sha twisted him and pushed at him, guiding his unresisting body into a supine position, then lifted his legs onto the shelf into a fully reclining position.

A moment later, Daniel heard the force field activate, sealing him inside the tiny room again.

Later, eyes closed and on the edge of sleep, glimmering memories of long hours spent uncovering fragments of pottery with fine brushes slowly appeared, bits of his past reminding him of a career as an archaeologist. Language was another love, and he let the sounds of Latin, Greek, Phoenician, and other ancient tongues provide a musical soundtrack to the images floating through his consciousness, spreading out like roots, grounding him to who and what he was. His name appeared – Daniel Jackson – and more pieces fell into place, old memories that gave him comfort and peace.

Where he was and why he was there still eluded him, but he knew that information would come. He was a patient man; his profession had demanded it, requiring long hours of research and slow, delicate work to uncover a buried past or a fragment of meaning in long-dead scripts. Daniel would watch and listen, and learn everything he could of Zeus’s plans for him, waiting for just the right moment to slip away. They’d passed other humans in the corridor, so he might be able to blend in with them, if he could find the proper clothing.

Above everything else, he knew how to wait, and he would stay as long as it took to escape.

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**August 7**

K'kez was snoring, asleep on his feet. His usual partner was absent, and there was no one else guarding the door… but the electronic barrier was still in place, flashing with an occasional spark of energy. Escape eluded Daniel for another day, even though all his ducks had politely lined up in a neat row, and most of his memories had returned, including how he'd used his skills for the last ten years. He'd been a part of an organization called Stargate Command, and his mission had been to protect his people from alien threats.

This was obviously one of them.

There was a Stargate on board, housed in one of the cargo rooms nearby. Daniel had felt the rotation rumbling through the decks, and he’d heard it activating. Through it, he could go anywhere, as soon as he was free.

He now also knew why Zeus had captured him. The stolen device was being kept in a laboratory on the way to the showers; he'd heard two Jaffa scientists talking about it while they were bathing, and he’d seen them afterward as they worked on it. Daniel was connected to it somehow and knew that it was valuable, which meant he had to either destroy it, or take it with him.

Daniel had also learned where to find clothing, weapons, and a handful of supplies. He knew the
rhythm of the society that lived on board the ship. He knew the best time to move. All he needed was an opportunity… and then he’d go.

_Gotta get out of here. Get back ho—_

_No, can’t go home, because…_

_No GDO, that’s it._

_That was why he couldn’t go back, he told himself. He couldn’t go to Earth or the Alpha site, because he didn’t have his GDO. That was the problem. He’d have to go somewhere else, then._

_But where?_

Every time he pondered his destination, his mind shied away from familiar places, edging toward panic. The allies he’d met in the past might have become converts to the Ori or turned against the Tau’ri. Every familiar place led him inexplicably back to the same idea.

_The last mission._

He fixed on the latest work he’d been doing, and decided that was where he ought to go. It was the last place Zeus and his people would look for him. There were supplies on that planet, too. He’d been taken from camp, and there were stores of rations and survival gear packed into the vehicles they’d been planning to use to travel to the distant ruins SG-13 had gone to explore. If he could just slip quietly away, he could hide there for a while before moving on to someplace else.

With that destination firmly in mind, he resigned himself to waiting a little longer for his moment.

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_August 20_

_Somewhere in Space_

Time passed. Daniel had no idea exactly how long, but the span seemed like weeks. He sat perfectly still, day after day, meditating and planning, daydreaming and remembering distant history lessons and details of long-ago archaeological digs. Eventually he grew bored, and his commitment to the plan waned. Sometimes he thought he would go mad from the inactivity, but every time he sat on the verge of screaming out loud, he summoned up a memory of Zeus’s face, smiling at him, smug and cruel.

Daniel’s mind would quiet then. Hatred filled him up with steamy heat, slow and deadly. He would contemplate his revenge, picturing all manner of horrible fates visiting themselves upon the Goa’uld. Sometimes the creature’s end would be the result of some disaster, but more often, it would involve torture and slow death at the hands of the aliens who served him. Either way, Daniel would be standing by, watching with satisfaction.

Never did he imagine killing Zeus with his own hands, but always, in every scenario, it was the result of something Daniel had inspired. That was how he craved it; not as murder, but as justice on a grand, cosmic scale. The vengeance Daniel wanted carried out had to be bigger than just one man; it needed to be something no one would _ever_ forget.
Ba’al stood on the bridge, glowering at the swirling rainbow of hyperspace outside the ship. Ten 
ha’taks had been sent to this quadrant of space to search for Zeus’s ship, and Ba'al was spoiling for 
a fight. He’d killed half a world as penalty for allowing the Hub to be stolen from him, and he was 
determined to get the device back. It hadn’t taken long to ferret out who had purloined it, and only 
a few weeks to acquire a possible location of the thieves.

That upstart Zeus had been lurking in the background for millennia, sniffing at Chronos’s skirts, 
currying his favor, sucking up to him. Once the Tau’ri had killed Chronos, Zeus had disappeared 
into the background, but now he was making his move.

Stealing the Hub had been the first play of his game. Then he’d sent out ships with his wolfish 
Ting-sha armies, taking Ba'al's most recently acquired territories, flexing his military muscle, 
making Ba’al look weak. Zeus might be greatly outnumbered by Ba’al’s forces, but his weapons 
were impressive, and his cunning keenly felt.

“We have found him, my lord!” announced a voice behind him.

Ba’al looked over his shoulder and spared a haughty glance for his First Prime. “You are certain it 
is Zeus?”

“Yes, Lord of the North.” Down on one knee, pale-faced and trembling, Para’c stared intently at 
the polished black marble floor. He was tall and powerfully built, his golden tattoo gleaming 
against his forehead. A black moustache and beard framed his mouth, but he kept his jaw line 
neatly shaved, clearly revealing his handsome face. Para'c was a powerful man, feared throughout 
the galaxy, yet now he uncertainly knelt before his god. “He has come to this area of space from 
the First World. He—” Para’c swallowed hard.

“You are afraid,” Ba’al sneered. “Do you fear Zeus more than me?”

Para’c's dark eyes shifted back and forth, as if seeking some avenue of escape. In perfect 
subservience, he dipped his bald head lower. “N-no, my lord. Ba’al is the most powerful—”

“Then why do you shake like a frightened child?” Ba’al sneered as he turned to face his minion, 
staring down his nose at the weakling.

“Forgive me, my lord. It is said... Zeus has destroyed the First World! He has smashed the 
resistance of the Tau’ri. If he has such power—” Para’c choked on his words. His hands were 
raised in supplication, but he dared not meet his god's gaze. He was truly terrified and bent so low, 
his forehead almost touched the floor.

Ba’al dared not show his surprise. He narrowed his gaze and clenched his teeth, hating Zeus even 
more. If true, an event of this magnitude would not go unnoticed. It could very well swing the 
balance of power between the gods, winning voluntary converts who would believe Zeus were the 
more powerful of the two.

“Call every ship,” Ba’al ordered. “Coordinate the attack so that all appear at once as we drop out of 
hyperspace. Target the ship’s weapons and engines first to disable it, but take no chances, and leave 
no survivors. If we can question his crew and retrieve the Hub, so be it. If not, it will be destroyed 
along with Zeus and his ship.”

He turned his back on the slave, hatred boiling inside him.

Zeus would regret the day he’d chosen to reach for what belonged to Ba’al.

Ba’al would see to that personally.
Zeus’s mothership shuddered violently, a deep roar echoing down the corridors. It took a few seconds for Daniel’s body to react to the event, but his guards instantly raised their weapons and growled. Either their vessel was under attack, or some other object had hit it, and the impact was somewhere near the brig.

Another violent quake, and Daniel was sure the ship was under attack. The ceiling in Daniel’s cell buckled slightly, and the barrier at the door shorted and went out. Out in the corridor, people were scrambling everywhere. Both guards left their posts as a call came over the PA system for damage control.

As soon as the room was clear, Daniel forced himself to action, wrapping his meager blanket around himself, and heading for the opening to his cell. He’d lost significant muscle tone, and weakness made his head spin. His heart was racing as he eased through the doorway, grateful when his guess that the barrier had been deactivated proved correct.

He hurried out into the corridor, but no one seemed to notice one more body among the shouting, frenzied crowd. Someone down the hallway started firing, but the shots weren’t directed at him. Even though he was filthy and practically naked, Daniel was ignored as he headed for the armory to fetch a zat, which he secreted in the folds of his blanket. He ran for the storage rooms, hurried into clothing and boots that would further help him blend in, gathered up some field rations, a zat and a water canteen. He put everything into a kind of shoulder bag he found, and then headed for the lab.

The device that had been so important to Zeus was fitted into a machine connected to a Goa’uld computer station. It was running some kind of program, but the characters were in Ancient script rather than hieroglyphs. Daniel didn't waste any time trying to figure out how to turn the computer off or whether improper removal might damage the device. He simply pried it out and yanked it free, dropped it into the shoulder bag, and ran for the cargo hold.

In minutes that seemed like hours, Daniel waited in the bay where the Stargate was kept, squeezed in with dozens of others who had been shoved aside as panic-stricken Ting-sha soldiers and Jaffa abandoned ship.

He needed a way to dial his own destination, and to make sure no one followed him. For that, he’d have to make use of the high emotion surging through the corridors. “We’ll never get out in time!” he shouted, pleased to feel the level of panic in the room jump up several notches. Turning to a Jaffa standing beside him, he grabbed the man's arm. “Bar the door! It’s the only way we’ll make it.”

Hysteria in the Jaffa's eyes sent him into action. The alien fought against others pushing into the room and grabbed a few more Jaffa to help him. They were manually closing the door panels, forcing everyone in the corridors back, closing them out. A few Ting-sha helped them, and one jammed its baton weapon between the ornate door handles to keep the passage closed.

The ship continued to shake and shudder, but Daniel waited, backing away from the commotion, hiding himself as those who had helped lock the room departed through the 'gate. Finally, only a small group of Ting-sha were left in the room as the doors began to open, the baton starting to bend. He wouldn’t have much more time. He had to act now.

With practiced precision, he aimed his zat at the last five Ting-sha warriors and took them out, dodging their weapons fire with the last of his strength. He stepped up to the DHD and punched in
the coordinates from the last mission, glancing over his shoulder as the doors groaned open a little further. Someone started shooting at him, and he ran out of the line of fire, getting as close as he could to the ‘gate while avoiding the forming kawoosh.

As soon as the event horizon stabilized, he made a mad dash and darted through it. He rolled onto the other side, breathless and exhausted, while weapons fire came through and kicked up dust all around him. As soon as he could get to his feet, he stumbled behind the ‘gate, shielding himself with one side of the great wheel, ready to shoot anyone who followed him, but none of the alien soldiers took the risk of coming after him.

After a moment, the wormhole shut down.

It was quiet on that alien world, the sun just beginning to rise.

Daniel surveyed the rocky, barren, gray landscape all around the Stargate, and found it empty, save for the occasional large dragonfly. He waited to see if anyone would redial his destination, but the portal remained still and silent. He sat down to catch his breath, maintaining his position of using the Stargate as a shield, and searched through his bag for something to eat and drink.

The SGC camp was only a few hundred feet away, right where they'd left it. He squinted and could just make out the blurry images of the vehicles, but the tents were piles of canvas lying on the ground. He knew there would be additional food and water there, as well as weapons and an extra pair of glasses, but he needed to stay in that protected spot for just a little longer, to rest and make sure he hadn't been followed.

Hours later, there was still no sign of pursuit. Daniel was getting drowsy; the constant state of alertness and his weakened physical condition had exhausted him. He remembered the previous survey data from this world; there had been some concerns about large predatory mammals, so he thought he should search for some sort of shelter where he could recover a bit. He couldn't sleep in a tent, since there was no one to stand watch while he slept, and the camp was too close to the Stargate. If anyone came after him, he'd need to be out of sight, away from there. He decided he could come back tomorrow to search through the supplies, pick out a vehicle, and put some distance between himself and the Stargate.

All around him, there was little but rocky ground and powdery ash. Pinnacles and boulders rose and fell in wind- and water-sculpted twists and curls, dotted with loose pebbles, fringed with short, hairy-looking brown grass. It was starting to get hot, now that the sun was fully up, and not a single cloud offered the possibility of shade or rain.

The mission to that planet had been to travel down the yellow brick road to the step pyramid that lay three hundred miles distant. It would be a long journey on foot, but Daniel had his choice of the ATVs or the mule at the camp whenever he was ready to travel. He vaguely remembered some crevices nearby where he might take shelter, providing no alien creatures had beaten him to it. Picking up the canteen marked with Zeus’s lightning bolt, he took a swig of water and started off at a slow walk, keeping watch on the surrounding terrain for native dangers and seeking a suitable place to rest.

He was stumbling by the time he found shelter, a mostly horizontal fracture in the rock. The crack was barely big enough to admit him, but he wedged himself into it. He pulled his pack in after him, pushing it up by his head, where it would be easy to reach and provide him a little padding. He surveyed the brightness outside and, seeing nothing moving in the mid-day heat, he fell instantly, deeply asleep.
The First Night

The People crept stealthily into the opening of the crevice, keeping toward the walls, hugging the shadows, almost invisible in the darkness. The leader gave signals to two others, who moved into position near the visitor’s head. They created a field to induce and hold him in an alpha state, while another conducted a full-body scan. When they had finished, they retreated from the cave and gathered together on a cliff top facing the opening, far enough away that they could not be heard.

“He is not one of the Ancients,” said the leader, scanning through the data. “There are anomalies.”

“His companions were also not Ancients,” another observed. “They were primitive. Their crude tools and weapons prove his people were no threat to us. That is why we removed the cloaking field on their campsite after the second group return to their world.”

“Might those who died here have been in the service of this one? He was most important, the one the invaders took.” The first speaker’s data readout needed a boost, and she brightened the glow of the screen inside her visor to make it easier to read the information. She looked closer, then removed her helmet in surprise. “He is in possession of the Ancient’s device! The council must be informed. They will want him watched closely.”

“He is an enigma that bears studying before we decide what to do with him,” a third agreed. “He is more advanced than his companions were, yet more primitive than the Ancients.”

“We will test him to determine what threat he may pose to us before we show ourselves,” the first decided.

“He has seen us already,” another observed, “and paid us no mind, as if he did not recognize us.”

A shuffling sound drew their attention to the canyon floor outside, and the group watched a scritchna amble across the stony path, sniffing the trail where the traveler had walked, poking its elongated nose into the crevice to take a deeper whiff of his scent.

They watched, judging the Ancient-who-was-not-Ancient on his reactions, in an effort to determine his nature. If he could not protect himself, he might be killed or eaten, and they would never know his true purpose in visiting their world. They would not interfere unless it appeared that something might be gained from a relationship with him.

“We might let him disappear without his ever knowing we exist,” the leader declared.

“But he has the Hub, and may take it with him.”

The first shrugged. “We cannot use it. Only one such as he can unlock the Wheel of Worlds. It would be useless to us.”

“Then that is good reason to earn his trust, if we can.”

The first crossed her arms, cocking her head in consideration. “We will see what he knows of us. If he brings a message from the Ancients, we will hear it. If he does not know us, we will test his character and determine if he can be trusted. If he believes he can gain nothing from us, his actions
will be true. Send word to the council to advise us. We will learn what his purpose is on our world, and if he has come to hunt us, we will finally have our war.”

The People were not as innocent and accepting as they had once been. They had learned too late not to trust easily, but they had understood the lesson well. The stranger among them would be scanned and tested, his memories searched, recorded, and studied, and soon they would have the truth of who he was and what he wanted.

After that, they would decide if he should live or die.

The sound of rolling pebbles awakened Daniel, pulling him unwillingly from sleep. When he opened his eyes, he saw only darkness for a moment, realizing the rest of the day had passed and night had fallen outside his tiny cave.

But he was no longer alone.

A snuffling sound sent his senses into full alert. As his eyes adjusted, he could see the landscape outside, faintly lit by the stars. Tiny lights flickered on and off in the distance, the faint illumination in constant motion, swooping down and rising out of sight. He thought the luminescence looked like fireflies, but their swarming also alerted him to the presence of something else outside the cave, the source of the noise that had awakened him.

It had four stubby feet, and one of those limbs reached in where he lay. Long, sharp, curved claws scratched at the rock right in front of his face, and he jerked backward, wedging himself further into the crevice. The creature’s claws were scraping along the rock floor, coming out empty, looking for prey.

Daniel took that moment to reach for his supply bag, digging out his stolen zat with trembling fingers.

A long snout pressed into the crack, searching for him. A light-colored tongue licked toward him, slurping along the rocks he had squeezed against. The animal apparently liked the taste of him, and licked some more.

He shot it.

With a squeal of surprise and alarm, the thing crumpled and thrashed on the ground for a moment, then lay still. Knowing it was either playing possum or actually stunned, Daniel shot it again to make sure it was dead, then one more time to disintegrate the carcass. He didn’t want it attracting more predators to the area.

He crawled to the entrance of his hiding place and slowly, carefully peered out, glancing around for any other night hunters. The fireflies remained distant, nearly invisible against the night sky and the rocky landscape, but they seemed to pose no threat. The night was otherwise quiet as Daniel wedged himself back into his little hidey-hole.

After a few minutes, the firefly light show faded to blackness, and he decided the bugs had gone off somewhere else. That gave him some peace of mind, so he took the time to eat and drink a little before returning to much-needed sleep.
Until he made it back to the camp the following morning, Daniel didn’t let himself think about anything but survival. The SGC transport vehicles were still there, but the bodies of his slain companions were gone. The supplies that had been unpacked were also missing, probably carried off by some of the local fauna, but the items stored in the ATV lockers were still there, as was the stuff that had been packed in the 4X4 mule.

He now had stores of fresh water, purification tablets, MREs, extra clothing and boots, survival gear and medical supplies. He located an extra pair of glasses he’d packed as a back-up, a journal and pen, and a few precious reference books. There was also a spare laptop, complete with a naquadah power cell that would last for two years, extra small arms and a supply of ammo.

He could survive with these tools at his disposal.

There was still no sign of pursuit, but he kept watch on his surroundings as he explored the camp for provisions and cleaned up a little, aware that he also needed to defend himself against wild animals, such as the anteater-thing he’d killed the previous night. He sat down and made himself comfortable with the device he’d stolen to see if he could crack Sam’s code. He wasn’t sure what it actually did, but he’d either figure it out or destroy it, just to keep it out of enemy hands.

The device was plate-shaped, about five inches in diameter. It looked to be made of raw naquadah, the same dark grayish material that formed the Stargate. Inscribed on its face were all 39 glyphs on the ‘gate, arranged in three concentric circles just like a DHD, with a small blue stone in the center, rather than a red one like the actual devices carried. Around those three circles were additional keys inscribed with the characters Daniel had come to recognize as the writing of the Ancients.

He examined the edge of the device and found several holes he thought might be ports for downloading or uploading data. On the back of the device was an alphanumeric arrangement of keys, inscribed in Ancient characters. Above that was a view screen in the shape of a half-circle.

It took him a few minutes to figure out how to turn it on. Once activated, the screen lit up with a dark blue background and azure lettering, a faint hum emanating from the device. A message popped up in English, accompanied by a single chiming note, requiring a user name and password, along with a warning that all data would be destroyed after three attempts to access the information without the correct cipher.

Daniel smiled. “Good girl, Sam,” he murmured quietly. He leaned his head back against a low cliff and thought of her, trying to figure out what she’d use for this password. He’d learned some of her others through their close association of the last ten years, because they’d all been aware that death was a constant companion, and they’d never known when they’d leave the base and not return.

_Fishing_ was one of them, a private joke between Jack and the rest of SG-1. _Indian_ was another, for her beloved motorcycle. But what would she have used to protect the SGC database?

As he pondered that, remembering all they’d been through in the past ten years, tears welled up and spilled down his cheeks. He set the device on the ground beside him and pushed the heels of his hands against his closed eyelids. He didn't want the distraction of memories and the emotions that accompanied them; not now. He just wanted to do his job.

Daniel gripped his head in both hands as the unwanted conclusions pushed themselves into the forefront of his mind.

Jack was dead. He had been at his newest post in Washington DC, serving as head of Homeworld
The brunt of the memory hit him like a staff blast.

_Earth was gone,_ vaporized in an explosion of light.

Daniel sucked in a deep, sharp breath and roared in soul-deep agony. This time, as the shattering loss ripped through him, there was no sheltering darkness rising up to offer him a place to hide from the truth. He wept and keened, thrashing against the rocks, trying to hold himself against an anguish so massive it threatened to tear him apart.

Deep in a paroxysm of grief and loss, his body shuddered, and he flung himself onto hands and knees. His stomach rebelled, and he vomited from the violent spasms. Reeling, lost, he crawled away from the foul smell and wiped reflexively at his mouth.

“No!” he sobbed, assailed again by the memory of what he’d seen, his face wet with tears, head hanging. “It’s not true! Earth is still _there._ It has to be. It _has_ to be! This can't be real.”

_Only he knew it was._ In the core of his soul, he had felt it when his planet exploded. His people were gone, all but a handful of them who had been off-world on missions, at the Alpha base, on board the few space ships elsewhere in the galaxy, or in Atlantis.

Now he was alone, and he would never again go home.

“Oh, God,” he sighed wearily. He sat down beside the low cliff and curled up into a ball, resting his shoulder against the rocks. He closed his eyes and tuck ed his chin against his chest, arms wrapped around his belly, rocking himself, his lament erupting from the very center of his being, “My world is gone. Billions of people, all gone.”

He covered his face with his palms. No more tears fell, because he had none. He was exhausted from grief, but couldn’t sleep. Finally, he put his hands down and sat there quietly, staring at the camp, watching night fall, remembering.

“All that history,” he whispered brokenly, “gone.”

He would never again see the Great Pyramids or the Sphinx, the Roman Coliseum or Stonehenge. He would never stand in awe of Michelangelo’s enormous _David_ or the small but delicate painting of Da Vinci’s _Mona Lisa._ The _Magna Charta_ and Gutenberg’s _Bible_ had vanished, along with the US Constitution and the Dead Sea scrolls. Every ancient treasure that he had seen and touched, every book he’d read, every record of dead civilizations he’d studied on his home world – all of it had vanished _forever._

He bowed his head, his heart aching all over again.

Daniel had lost everything. He had nothing now. His reason for living was gone.

Closing his eyes, he lay down on the ground and stretched out, positioning himself for death. He told himself he would just lie there until he stopped breathing. Dying would be easy now. All he had to do was wait for death to arrive.
“He sleeps again,” observed the leader.

The People moved in and gathered around their visitor’s head.

Another induced the alpha state and began recording his brainwaves, as they had done the previous night.

“We do not have enough language data to communicate with him in his tongue,” the leader stated, a note of sympathy in her voice. “He appears to be in severe emotional distress.”

“He has not raised weapons against us,” offered another, “though we have been in plain sight. He remained wary until he began to search the Hub.”

“What has he found in the data?”

“The reaction we observed has nothing to do with the Hub,” stated the one conducting the brainwave recording. “Look at this memory.” With one hand, he downloaded the data into the communication link between all the team members.

For a moment, there was only silence.

“His world!” whispered the leader in horrified awe. “He mourns the loss of his world.”

“As we do ours,” murmured the third. “It is something we have in common.”

“He wishes to die,” said the first. “I see no threat here. The only one at risk is the being who killed his people.”

She turned to the third, saying quietly, “Send word to the council. We will continue to record his memories as he sleeps, and study his language. If the elders give permission, we will greet him properly. We await their command.”

Her subordinate gave her a bow of understanding and respect, and then she watched him fly off into the night.

She sat down on a small stone and studied the moonlit profile of their visitor. His eyes were closed, face turned up to the sky, the strange contraption with the clear lenses still perched on his nose. “He is no stranger to grief,” she observed to her remaining companion. “His has not been an easy life.”

“No, but it has only strengthened him,” said the other with a nod. “He has no fear of death.”

“He has a good heart. Perhaps he will choose friendship with us.” She smiled and cocked her head. “I would like to become better acquainted with him.”

Her teammate chuckled. “He is not your size, friend.”

She shrugged, grinning hugely. There had been stranger relationships in the past. He was pretty, after all, in an alien sort of way. “I will wait to see how things turn out. Let me see more.”

Adjusting the speed of the download, she began to watch the memories scroll across her visor in real time, enjoying the glimpses into this alien’s life, as well as the view of an alien world she would never see.
Chapter 6: Sky

August 22

One Day Later

P9X-1017

For as long as Daniel could manage, he kept still. Boredom settled in, so he turned his mind back to the memories of Earth’s destruction. He replayed the vision over and over, but the more he thought about it, the more he needed to move. He got up to pee, and then he ate a little something before pulling out his journal and starting to write.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, the need to act pushed Daniel into a decision. He had to get busy, and that brought him back to the reason he'd returned to P9X-1017. He studied the three vehicles still parked at the perimeter of the camp.

There were two Polaris ATVs, just the right size for one or two travelers, and a Kawasaki 4X4 mule that ran on a modified naquadah power cell. It would have carried four members of an SG team and the bulk of their supplies, most of which were still stored in the trunks. He unpacked anything he wouldn’t need and added other items from the trunks of the ATVs that he could use, including some clean BDUs in his size. He put those in the top of one of the storage bins on the mule.

He hadn’t put on fresh clothes yet because he wanted a bath first. There was a river not far away where he intended to wash up and store some extra water for his trip. Daniel climbed aboard the mule, started it up and drove off. The simple thought of getting himself truly clean for the first time in weeks lifted his spirits.

When he arrived and parked the vehicle, he doffed the shapeless gray tunic he’d stolen aboard Zeus’s vessel and left it in reach on the rocky river bank. Carefully, he stepped into the water with a precious cake of unscented military-issue soap, and lathered himself from head to toe. He soaped up his hair and scrubbed his skin raw, cleaning away all the sweat and filth from his captivity, then washed his face and shaved with the sharp edge of his field knife. He cleaned his glasses and rinsed them, carefully drying off the lenses with a corner of the discarded tunic, then used it to dry himself off a little. Not wanting to litter the pristine landscape, he tossed the damp tunic onto the mule.

After dressing in a fresh uniform and finger-combing his hair, he tied a black bandana on his head to help keep the sweat out of his eyes, since the day promised to be warm. He opened and unhurriedly ate a sun-heated MRE, enjoying the familiar bland food as he sat and thought over his plans.

The pyramid was another three days’ journey from the Stargate, and he remembered from the UAV survey that water would be scarce until he arrived, so he filled the extra canteens, dropping water purification pellets into them.

He was preparing to mount up and ride away when movement in the water caught his attention. A dark spot was floating toward him, caught in the current and being swept away. He thought it might be one of the alien dragonflies, and wanted a closer look at the bugs.

This had been exactly the sort of behavior that had tried Jack O'Neill's patience, Daniel recalled with a fond, fleeting grin. Daniel's natural curiosity outstripped his fear, and he could almost hear Jack's voice in that familiar impatient snap, "Damn it, Daniel! Don't touch that thing."
But whatever else the creature was, it was now helpless.

Stepping onto a flat rock, he watched it drift closer, moving weakly, its four clear wings flapping in faint flutters, its six-inch-long black body flailing about in the current. He squatted down and reached for it, scooping it up carefully in his palm. Holding it up in the air near his face, he studied it closely, giving its sleek body a delicate nudge with one fingertip.

Its anatomy made no sense. No eyes were visible on the glossy, dark head, but there was a shiny, visor-like slice across the front that might be some sort of visual apparatus. The long tubular black body was covered by a hard shell on the back, to which four long, clear, iridescent wings were attached. The underside appeared soft and shiny, and two appendages dangled limply from just under the head.

A gradually approaching buzzing sound caught his attention; when he glanced upstream, he saw a cloud of more of the big dragonflies heading his way. “Looks like your buddies have come to rescue you, little guy,” he said quietly. He gently laid the insect down on the dry top of another rock and stepped away.

He didn’t wait to see what the swarm’s reaction would be and hurried to mount the mule and get back to the journey ahead.

Daniel felt much better, now that he was clean. He decided he’d keep heading for the pyramid at the end of that long road and see if he could figure out who had built it, for what purpose, and what the carvings could tell him. He might as well make himself useful, if only to satisfy his own curiosity.

Somehow the idea of going to Alpha Base wasn’t very appealing. He couldn't put his finger on why, exactly; just that it didn't feel right, and all he had to trust at the moment were his instincts, shattered as they were. Daniel was aware of remaining gaps in his memory, but events were filling in as memories slid and locked into place. He'd get it all back eventually, he was certain. For now, he didn't intend to waste time just sitting around. He needed something to do, and traveling down that wide, straight path seemed to be moving in the right direction.

He zoomed off at the Kawasaki’s top speed and enjoyed the scenery, steering clear of weighty thoughts for the moment. There would be plenty of time for that, he decided, because he was unable to just lie down and die.

Stopping periodically to eat and relieve himself, Daniel spent most of the day traveling. The mule covered a lot of distance, the hum of the engine the only sound Daniel heard for hours. He spotted birds in the distance and the occasional flash of movement from creatures on the ground, but there appeared to be no immediate threats.

He had to work hard to keep his guard up. His mind would drift with the hypnotic vibration of the Kawasaki motor running through his body, until he was driving via a lifetime of practice and only a flicker of conscious attention.

Without warning, a vision of a blond man's face suddenly popped into Daniel's memory, and he dodged it, startled. The vehicle veered on the road, following his instinctive reaction, jolting him out of his reverie. A sense of heart-pounding terror followed by cold hatred was attached to the memory, but Daniel couldn't place where he’d seen the man, or put a name to the face.

He corrected his course, then glanced around the surrounding terrain for potential danger, but there was nothing in view aside from rocks and canyon under the bright, merciless sun. As the journey continued, Daniel remained wary, steeled against further distractions. The day came and went,
pauses in the trek for meal and bathroom breaks, long hours passing beneath the mule's black rubber tires rolling down the long, precisely straight, paved road.

As the landscape began to change from arid, stony desolation to rolling grasslands dotted with low trees, Daniel decided to stop and rest for the evening. He'd been driving all day and needed a change of pace while there was still some light left, something that might allow him a chance to relax a little. He chose the place he'd spend the night with care, seeking some kind of cover where he'd be shielded from any prowling predators.

He made camp at the edge of the grasslands and retired to the shelter of a tall spiny-leaved tree, its gracefully draped branches making a naturally protected spot at its gnarled base. Daniel made an effort to keep his attention focused on his surroundings as he meticulously groomed the area beneath the limbs for a small fire pit. He gathered dead wood and tinder and built the fire, chose the MRE he'd have for dinner and dessert from the mule's storage lockers, mentally shying away from what had happened to him, to his world.

_Time for that later,_ he promised himself. The loss was still too fresh, too painful. Remembering agonized and befuddled him and he needed to keep his wits about him, all alone in that strange place. He'd made his camp, and now it was time to rest.

Daniel sat cross-legged beneath the tree and pulled the plate-shaped device he'd stolen from his captors out of one of the storage bins in the mule. Having nothing better to do, he decided to see what the costly little item might do. There had to be a reason it was shaped like a DHD; perhaps it served as one, in case the dialing device on the planet were broken or missing. His people had encountered that situation enough times to know that an Ancient probably wouldn't want to get stuck on a hostile alien world. This device would make a handy backup, if that were indeed what it did.

He got out his journal and started copying down the characters on the DHD side of the keys outside the 'gate glyphs, translating them literally first, then attempting to deduce the actual meaning of the functions. What he found was amazing. Not only was the little object apparently a portable DHD, it also functioned as a lock. It could override access so the DHD keys wouldn’t work to dial in or out, requiring access from the hand-held device to activate the Stargate.

“No wonder they wanted this so badly,” he murmured aloud.

He studied the PDHD, as he had decided to call the Ancients’ device, fiddling with it until he figured out how to turn it on. Then he began to consider Sam’s password puzzle, and what she might have chosen as the key to access the information this machine might contain.

He thought about dates: her birthday, the day she’d received her promotion to Lieutenant Colonel, or the anniversary of her mother’s death. He considered special events in her life, such as her astrophysics degree, her numerous commendations, her ill-fated engagement to Pete Shanahan, but all of those seemed too simple somehow. Sam’s password to information this valuable would be symbolic but unexpected, something an alien might never guess. This was the most important thing in her life.

Gazing down at the characters, he typed in a word: survival.

A prompt appeared. _Access denied. Second attempt invalid._

That meant that someone had already tried and failed to unlock the device. Daniel wasn't sure how many more chances he'd have before the failsafe she'd programmed would activate, destroying the information forever. If he didn’t get it right, then the device would be useless, and he could smash
it in good conscience.

A fond memory slipped into his thoughts, and he found himself smiling again. Sam had been a good friend to him. She had truly cared about him as a person, and they had shared a long, deep friendship, as had every member of SG-1. December had been Sam's favorite month. Buying holiday gifts for her brother’s children would always make her light up inside, and he had always loved seeing her so happy.

He took a chance and typed in *Merry_Christmas*.

The password field disappeared for a moment as he held his breath.

*Access granted,* the screen flashed.

Information began scrolling in English, describing the data for each ‘gate address that had been entered into the SGC’s system. He stopped the scroll and entered a specific set of glyphs, the ones for this world. The only information recorded included the SGC designation, P9X-1017, and indication that the Stargate on this planet was working. It was all old data, with nothing useful to offer.

Next, he tried looking for the coordinates for Dakara. If he could dial the planet where the Jaffa High Council met, he might find a way to other survivors of Earth. It seemed like the best place to try as a first stop, whenever he returned to the Stargate and prepared to leave the world where he was now encamped.

Unhappy to discover he didn’t know how to utilize the search function, he began reading the various entries to see if he could find Dakara manually. There were hundreds of thousands of Stargates in the database, accessible only by keying in the glyphs, and Daniel couldn’t remember the address to the sacred Jaffa world.

This was going to take him a while.

*How long?* he asked himself. Daniel thought about how much time had already passed since… then. The Jaffa who didn’t have symbiotes would need regular doses of Tretonin, and those sources were dwindling with the dissipation of the Goa’uld throughout the galaxy. Now that Earth was gone, production of most of the drug would be lost, too. The Jaffa and the remaining Tok’ra were not on good terms, and no cure had been found for Jaffa dependence on either symbiotes or Tretonin.

Their time was limited. Daniel wasn’t sure how much had passed since his capture, and it might already be too late for the Jaffa. The reign of the Goa’uld was steadily diminishing by impending extinction, and they were taking the Jaffa with them by default. Daniel decided he didn’t want to think about that, either; there were more than enough tragedies weighing on his mind.

Daniel set the device into his lap, staring at his campfire as he considered what he’d discovered so far. He made note of his findings in his journal as the sun sank lower toward the horizon. A zat at his side, he glanced up every minute or two to check the perimeter for beasties.

It occurred to Daniel that there might be additional information stored in the device aside from the SGC data, so he began a search using the characters inscribed in Ancients’ text. Checking into the logs for P9X-1017 by the glyph address, he discovered there was already a partial lock in place for it. Notes briefly mentioned some kind of protective order, but the only identifying remark as to who it referred to was the number three, the same information that had been carved into the stone pillar near the DHD.
He deduced that the Ancients had wanted to contain something here, and had somehow locked the Stargate to prevent the enigmatic Number Three from leaving. No one else had been barred from coming and going, though, evidenced by Colonel Dixon’s successful dialing of the SGC base, and the departure of the aliens who had ambushed SG-13 and taken him prisoner.

If something were here that the Ancients had feared, then Daniel had stepped into a place where there was great potential danger, very powerful, and very old. He needed to be careful, if he were to survive.

That thought struck him as ironic, since he’d so recently been contemplating lying down to wait for death, and he chuckled. “What the hell,” he said, getting to his feet. “I don’t have anything better to do. Might as well go out to meet my doom and find out what was so scary here it had to be locked up.”

He decided to disable the Stargate completely, denying access to all users. Daniel wasn’t certain what sort of range the device had, if he were too far away, or if it would even work the way he had guessed, but it wouldn’t hurt to try. He could always unlock it later, if he didn’t get eaten or killed along the way. He set the lock, turned off the device and returned it to the mule's storage locker for the night.

As dusk settled into twilight, the fireflies he'd seen the first night from the little cave came out again, and he paused to watch them. He could barely see the bodies of the big bugs in the near-darkness, but he found they bore a remarkable similarity to the dragonfly he’d rescued at the river. The lights they flashed were cleverly placed under the middle of their bodies, instead of at the tip of the tail like Earth’s fireflies. Rather than the pale, yellow-green or light blue of natural phosphorescence, their glow was a brighter white, providing excellent illumination of the landscape just below them.

The insects maintained a respectful distance, and that satisfied him. They didn’t seem like bloodthirsty creatures, but he thought it wise not to fall asleep while they were nearby, just in case. He put aside his journal and watched them until they flew off into the distance, all but one.

That one bobbed closer, hesitant, and he studied it with interest. He decided these were the same creatures as the dragonflies, able to light up in darkness. If they weren't the same species, then they were closely related.

One bug fluttered around the low-hanging branches above his head, threading among the spiky leaves. At last, it chose to settle on a branch not far from his face, off to the right, away from the rising heat of the fire, clinging to the branch with its two appendages. For a moment, it was perfectly still, its rounded head angled right at him.

He smiled, admiring its shiny black streamlined form, gleaming with amber firelight. “You don’t look like any bug I’ve ever seen,” he commented to it. “Pretty.”

The dragonfly’s head cocked to the left. It released its perch and buzzed up into the air, then hovered at eye level about two feet from his face, off to the right, away from the rising heat of the fire, clinging to the branch with its two appendages. For a moment, it was perfectly still, its rounded head angled right at him.

He smiled, admiring its shiny black streamlined form, gleaming with amber firelight. “You don’t look like any bug I’ve ever seen,” he commented to it. “Pretty.”

The dragonfly’s head cocked to the left. It released its perch and buzzed up into the air, then hovered at eye level about two feet from his face, as if it were studying him right back. Its wings beat the air so fast, they were just a blur against the dark leaves and faintly glowing sky. The light on its underbelly was focused on Daniel's knee.

He sat very still, ready to swat it if it looked like it was about to sting or feed on him. He started noticing details then, and what he saw made him even more curious, far less certain if this might be a bug of any kind. He leaned a little closer. “I wonder what you are?” he murmured.

The creature’s head tilted the other direction, then the pitch of its humming wings changed. Its
body angle tilted, slowly lowering from horizontal to vertical. Its light went out, and it descended until it deftly landed on a rock right beside Daniel’s knee. What had initially appeared to be an elongated abdomen separated into two black-clad legs, and two arms bent outward, settling gloved hands on narrow hips. The wings stilled, and the being rested fully on its feet atop the stone. Its anatomy looked amazingly humanoid now, except for the smooth, featureless head.

One hand moved across its chest, tiny fingers dancing in a precise pattern of movement, then touching a spot at the base of its neck. Its head – or rather, a helmet – clicked open, then folded back into the collar at its nape, similar to the way the Horus and Anubis guard’s intricate headdresses had vanished on Abydos, almost like magic.

Daniel’s heart started beating faster as he watched this transformation. “Oh,” Daniel whispered, his eyes widening. “How beautiful you are!”

The alien’s head was obviously not human, but damned close. Big green eyes were about twice the proportion of a human’s, and its nose was delicate, slender, less defined. Dark blue tattoos swirled over its golden skin, and short, spiky, lavender hair framed its appealing face.

“A fairy,” Daniel told himself with an awe-struck grin. “I wonder if you’re where the Earth legend came from?” He started to reach out to touch it, then put his hand back down. He didn’t want to scare it, but needed to find a way to communicate. He thought it would have spoken to him already if it knew English.

“Antquietas?” asked the being. Its first try had been barely audible, but it touched something on its chest that amplified its voice before repeating the question.

“Ancients?” he translated stupidly, then realized it was asking him if he were an Ancient. He replied in that language. “No, I am not an Ancient. I am a human; a Tau’ri from the first world, which we called Earth.” A lump rose in his throat as he spoke the name of his lost world in the past tense, and tears filled his eyes. “My planet was destroyed.”

“Ah.” It nodded, its expression sober. “Welcome. We have been watching you for some time.”

He realized the truth of that statement with a little start. SG-13 had seen them almost since the moment they had stepped through the Stargate. They had been watching his every move, following him wherever he went, hovering and darting benignly through the air, studying him without giving away the fact that they were intelligent beings. He and his people had ignored them, as if they were… well, insects.

The thought embarrassed him that he’d taken for granted that intelligent alien life would never come in such a diminutive size.

“My name is Daniel Jackson,” he told it cordially, pleased that he was being accepted. He glanced up at more dragonflies now hovering nearby or clinging to the limbs of the tree all around him, each of them opening their helmets to reveal their faces. The lights fixed to their chest-plates shone on him and the alien ambassador, illuminating them clearly.

The aliens laughed at his introduction, the sound like a whisper of breeze, except for the enhanced voice of his host. Not understanding the source of their humor, he smiled a little self-consciously. ”Did I say something funny?” he asked.

”Names have power,” explained the fairy, hands spreading wide. “You give yours too easily. Even our children know better than to give their true names to anyone.”
“Oh.” Daniel knew of other cultures that had similar beliefs, so he was intrigued. "Then how do you call each other?"

Its answer was a soft chuckle, modified by the booster. “We know who is being addressed, always.”

Memory dawned suddenly. “The one like you whom I pulled from the water, is he all right? Or she?” He was suddenly very pleased to have rescued it, and wondered if that gesture was why these people had chosen to interact with him.

The fairy placed both hands on its chest and gave him a slight bow. “I am well. Thank you for my life. Your response to my distress was a true expression of your character, since you expected nothing from us in return.”

“I am pleased to have helped you,” he returned formally. “I would enjoy getting to know you and your kind. Who are you?”

“We are the People,” said the fairy politely. "You may name each of us whatever you wish.”

More of them began to alight all around them, removing their helmets so he could see their faces. There were a multitude of skin tones, from pale to dark. Hair colors were a rainbow of shades, and eyes had just as much variety. Every figure was lean and fit, every face symmetrical and delicate. This was the most lovely race Daniel had ever seen – and by far, the smallest.

“Wow,” he breathed in wonder. He couldn’t possibly name them all, and decided he would wait until he got acquainted with them to decide what to call them. “I am honored to meet you. All of you. Please call me Daniel.”

“As you wish.”

Another thought struck Daniel as he studied the People. They were all rather androgynous, and he couldn’t tell any particular differences in their body shapes. “Um, do you have genders? I wouldn’t want to offend you by mistaking one for another.”

The fairies all looked positively startled by that admission.

His host bent forward, head angled in obvious curiosity. “Would you be offended to be called by the wrong gender?” it asked him incredulously.

“Well, I suppose many of my people would be unhappy to be mistaken for the opposite sex, yes.”

“If there is such division, how do you manage to reproduce?” The lavender-haired fairy’s brows scrunched down in confusion.

Daniel chuckled. “Well, that’s actually not much of a problem,” he answered lightly, then remembered with a jolt that Earth was gone. He sobered. “My species is scattered throughout the galaxy, and we are many.” Glancing down at the fire, he felt his grief touched with a sense of hope. The human race hadn’t really disappeared with Earth’s destruction, not at all.

Lavender-hair smiled. “We have many shades of gender, determined by biology, identity and attraction,” it told him sagely, “and we will not be offended if you choose incorrectly. Each has its part to play, and none is more or less important than any other.”

“That sounds like woman’s wisdom,” he joked, smiling broadly. “I’ll call you Claire, after my mother.”
A look of shock flashed across the fairy’s face, then grew suddenly grave. “This is a great honor. Not only have you saved my life, you have also paid me a great tribute, to carry the name of the one who gave you life.”

“What can you tell me about your people, Claire?” He rested his elbows on his knees and leaned closer, gazing down at his new friend standing on the rock between him and the campfire.

“We live in the sky,” she answered, gesturing upward. “We have watched you since you came to our world the first time, with the others of your kind. Your loss touches us, but we must learn more about you before we may share our secrets with you.”

Another fairy with pale pink hair and sky-blue eyes flew closer, hovering directly to his left. “We will stand watch while you rest, friend. You were wise to take shelter your first night here. There are many dangerous creatures that walk the night, and you have not been secure.”

“Now you are no longer alone,” agreed another fairy, one with pale green hair and turquoise eyes. “Thank you,” Daniel told them sincerely. “I’m grateful for your protection, and for your friendship.” He wasn’t sure they’d be all that formidable against an animal the size of that anteater-thing that had hunted him, but they could at least wake him up so he could defend himself.

He was tired, but the excitement of discovery wouldn’t let him sleep just yet.

“Could we talk a little while longer?” he asked hopefully.

“Maybe I could answer some of your questions, tell you about my people. That would help us get to know each other better.”

After all, he had nothing left to lose.

“Yes, tell us,” agreed Claire. “We wish to know what brought you here, who attacked and killed your people, and why.”

Daniel tried to start at the beginning of the mission to their world, but his story began to get jumbled up because he had to keep starting over and explaining details of cause and effect, and by the time he started getting really sleepy he was so confused, he didn’t know where he was in the narrative. The aliens didn’t seem to mind, but finally they gently encouraged him to lie down and rest, with his promise to continue the tale in the morning.

These people, whatever they were, seemed nice. He hadn’t realized how very lonely and isolated he’d felt since his capture, and being in their company had been a comfort to him. He thought he might enjoy getting to know them, and looked forward to the experience.

For the first time in weeks, when he closed his eyes, he slept deeply, and even his dreams were peaceful.

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Chapter 7: Grass

"His race is so very young," declared the elder sympathetically, gazing from her perch in the tree branches at the human's sleeping form. "This one has endured great suffering."

"So would anyone who has lost their world," observed the one called Claire. "They have dangerous
"As we once had dangerous friends," added the elder. She combed her pale green hair back with her fingers, her expression thoughtful. "And he has the Hub."

"We could take it from him," suggested another of the People.

"None of our kind can unlock it. We cannot even touch the device," Claire countered with a shake of her lavender head. "We must wait for him to choose. If we suggest that he do it, he might become suspicious and leave without unlocking it. We cannot allow that."

"Then we should earn his confidence," said the one with pink hair.

The elder agreed. "He trusts easily, but he must still be tried. The Council will determine if he will be accepted among us. I will fly ahead and make the request. We will meet at Shahr."

"I will observe him and begin the inquisition," agreed Claire. "Who will stay with me?" She glanced around, making eye contact with the others.

Two of the People nodded. The rest of the Sky Clan flew off into the night to make preparations for the trial, and Claire settled on the ground beside the fire that dwarfed her. She raised both hands and the flames began to sputter and die, extinguishing to glowing coals, then going completely out as she brought her arms downward. It would be better not to attract any curious wildlife to the light of the fire, making the job of watching over the People's visitor a little simpler.

After all, there was no need to advertise Sky's presence there as they left the canyons and advanced into the meadowlands. Grass Clan would undoubtedly have watched them coming and would be prepared. Until the Council determined how much to interact with the human, Grass would remain unseen. They were not as bold as Sky, but had a great cunning that set them apart from their smaller relatives.

Somewhere out there, many eyes were watching both the visitor and Sky Clan, messages were being sent, and Daniel Jackson's fate hung in the balance. The People had been fooled once, but they would not be caught off-guard again.

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August 24
The Next Morning

Daniel sat up and blinked, gazing around at the unfamiliar landscape, looking for his new friends. Most of the crowd that had gathered around him the previous night was gone; only three of the aliens remained nearby. The one he'd named Claire sat on the rock beside the cold fire pit, the others perched on branches in the tree above him, keeping watch.

He thought about names for the other two, reaching for his glasses and putting them on as he considered what to call them.

One had rosy pink locks. Another had longer hair than the others he'd seen, royal blue at the roots fading to pale blue at the ends, and all the way down to the fairy's shoulders. He wondered if they artificially colored their hair or if the rainbow of shades was natural, but he decided not to ask. The subject might come up in conversation later.
"Good morning," he greeted them with a slight smile. It was getting much easier to converse in the language of the Ancients, and he was glad he'd been able to find a communication bridge with these intriguing little aliens.

"You rested well," observed Claire. "The kill did not disturb you?"

Daniel's smile disappeared. "Kill?"

"A ghidan was hunting as you slept." Claire turned away from Daniel and clasped her hands behind her. Her clear wings, glistening with iridescent color in the morning sunshine, folded down against her back and thighs with an audible snap. "Would you like to see it?"

"Um." He needed to pee, but decided to go with the invitation first. He didn't want to be rude. "All right, if it's not far. Lead the way."

Claire's wings flicked up into position, and she zoomed off, with Daniel following at a brisk pace. Twenty feet away, Claire hovered in mid-air above the grass, and Daniel stopped when he could see the dead creature, hidden by the knee-high blades.

"Reminds me of a warthog, only uglier," he observed, staring down at the tawny body marked with light brown vertical stripes. The coloring would camouflage it well in the tall vegetation. The animal had big, mean-looking tusks erupting from its elongated muzzle and small, evil eyes. "What does it eat?"

Claire looked pointedly at Daniel, one fine lavender eyebrow arched. "Whatever it can scavenge or kill," she replied with a shrug. Her meaning was clear; if they hadn't gotten to the beast first, it would likely have attempted to make Daniel its next meal.

Deep wounds had been gouged into the animal, and there was a lot of blood on the carcass and the surrounding area. Daniel decided he had seriously underestimated the fairies' ability to protect him.

"I suppose we are even now," he said softly. "Thank you for protecting me."

Claire chuckled. "We did not save you from the ghidan. We killed it for you to eat."

Blue-hair zoomed into view, performing a lovely aerobatic twirl. "And we do not keep a tally of debts. Your food supply is limited. This will feed you for some time."

"Oh. Um. Thank you." Daniel stared at the dead animal. He didn't quite know what to think about this gift, but his other need was becoming more urgent. "Excuse me. I have to go. Um." He pointed to nothing in particular and moved away from the carcass and his camp, looking for a little privacy to relieve himself.

He didn't get any and had to endure being studied while he urinated, his face flaming. Then he had to explain why he had turned that fancy shade of bright red, after a lengthy account of what he'd intended to do and that he wanted to do it alone, then being flatly denied discretion. They wanted to learn about him and found his customs interesting; apparently, they had no familiarity with the concept of privacy.

"Do your people not make waste?" he asked, feeling slightly irritated as he buttoned his trousers. He didn't look at any of them as he walked purposefully back to the camp to restart his fire and
make coffee. Breakfast would wait.

Pink-hair patted the shiny black suit encasing its body, which Daniel now noted in the daylight had broad shoulders, narrow hips and a distinctly generous male package. "This garment, which we call s'resh, converts our waste to fuel for the khemba."

"The what? I do not know that word."

The fairy spun around quickly in mid-air, putting his back to Daniel. "The vest that houses our wings and flying apparatus. It is called khemba."

Daniel looked closer and noticed the tiny joints attaching the buzzing wings to a small, slightly bulging casing on the being’s back. He'd thought the wings were natural features, along with the firefly light, but now realized that both of those devices were cleverly designed machines.

He had ignored these aliens in the beginning, when he'd believed them to be merely insects, likening them to dragonflies of Earth. Now he understood they were anything but such simple creatures. These people were far more advanced than he had initially assumed.

"Wow." Daniel searched through his memory for an appropriately expressive word in Ancient. He grinned and shook his head, thinking how foolish his articulation of wonder would sound in a language other than English. Slang just didn't translate properly. "The s'resh is a fascinating device."

"Yes. It gives us shelter from the elements, protects us from injury, and offers many tools for our use. We take it off only to mate, or when we return to--"

Claire buzzed into the speaker's view and hissed at him, cutting him off. She looked furious. "Enough! You are too free with your mouth."

The pink-haired one growled back, obviously irritated at the command, and the two tangled in a mad swirl of too-fast-to-see movement. Claire darted at him as soon as they separated, intent on driving him back, and finally Pink flew away to a higher branch of the tree, sitting down in a sulky huff.

As Claire turned back to face Daniel, her face was composed in a mask of triumph, green eyes half closed but glittering with leashed anger. "We are a passionate people," she said in a low growl. "Apologies." She offered Daniel a contrite bow. "Sometimes we forget ourselves. We have had no visitors for many generations, and our manners have lapsed."

"All is well," Daniel assured her. "Forgive me if I ask too many questions. I only want to learn, but I understand there may be things you do not want to share with me yet."

He smiled, looking for a change of subject. "I will now make a drink my people favor, called coffee. Would any of you like to try some?"

"I will," the blue-haired one volunteered gaily, flying past his face.

"Female?" he asked cautiously, reaching into one of the storage bins on the rear of the Kawasaki mule for the items he'd need to make the brew.

The fairy nodded and gave him a bright smile.
"I will call you Lapis, after a beautiful semi-precious stone from Earth. It was often used in ancient Egyptian jewelry." He explained a little about Egyptian culture and history while he started a new fire and made himself some java from his dwindling stores.

He considered names for the other fairy. Daniel wanted something manly for the pink-haired guy, who was scrappy but friendly, and obviously didn't like being reined in. Daniel's eyes misted a little as he decided on another commemorative name. "My best friend's name was Jack O'Neill," he called up to the top of the tree. "You remind me of him a little, so I will call you Jack. Do you approve?"

The pink fairy stared down at Daniel, and his scowl morphed into a wry, satisfied smile. "Honored," he returned with a bob of his head. "You must tell me all about this Jack."

"He was a great warrior," said Daniel thickly, swirling the black coffee around in his cup to cool it, "and my best friend. He was a simple, yet very complicated man. He loved certain animals on Earth called dogs, children, our country, and our world, not necessarily in that order. And an intoxicating drink we call beer. And The Simpsons." The fairies wouldn't get that last reference, but there was no translating the name or the premise of the animated television series.

"He was very entertaining. I think you would have liked him immediately. Or else he would have infuriated you at first contact and started a war." Daniel smiled, his grief easing a tiny bit as he remembered all the things about Colonel Jack O'Neill that he loved and would miss. "There was not always a middle ground with him."

Maybe Jack would have been a little perturbed by Daniel tacking his moniker onto a fairy with pink hair, but since he wasn't around to make his objection known, Daniel decided to stick with his original choice.

The newly-named Jack swooped down, artfully dodging the branches, and plopped onto Daniel's shoulder. "I believe I would like this friend of yours. What were his skills?"

"He was a great pilot of our flying machines. And a commander of many warriors."

Glancing up at Claire with a smug smile, Jack challenged, "A commander. Hah!"

"So you dream," said Claire dryly with a shake of her lavender head.

Daniel took a sip of the coffee to test the temperature, then offered the cup to Jack. "Careful, it's very hot." He held it still, the cup braced against his shoulder, but realized that wasn't going to work; the rim of the cup was much too big to fit into the little guy's mouth.

He dipped his finger into the warm liquid and held it up, offering up a tiny bead to try.

Jack licked at the drop. He immediately made a face and stuck out his tongue with distaste. "Ehhh. Bitter."

"I suppose it is an acquired taste," Daniel agreed. Lapis landed on his other shoulder to sample the brew and had two laps from his fingertip, but Claire chose not to give the drink a try, so Daniel finished the cup by himself.

Later, as he skinned and dressed the ghidan carcass they had so obligingly killed for him, he
answered their never-ending questions about him and his life back on Earth. He put a haunch near the cold fire pit, intending to cook it for dinner that night, slicing the rest of the meat into thin strips and hanging it on low tree limbs to begin drying. He was halfway through deciding what to do with the surplus remains, taking a moment to rest both his body and his vocal cords, when a cool flicker of shade passed over him.

It was a big shadow, and he looked up immediately.

The closest approximation to any animal he'd ever seen was an artist's recreation of *Archeopteryx*. The flying creature was as much lizard as bird, and Daniel couldn't decide if it was covered in feathers or scales. The underside of its body and wings were light blue, close to the color of the sky, but the top was dark blue with red and yellow patches, as bright and bold as a macaw, barely glimpsed as it banked into a turn high above him. Its beak was sharply hooked, indicative of it being a carnivore or scavenger -- some kind of raptor -- and its wingspan was at least twelve feet, certainly big enough to think of a half-starved human as a suitable dinner.

Alarmed now, Daniel watched the bird-like thing wheel and come back toward him. Instinctively, he squatted down, his field knife clutched in his blood-slicked grip. If he ran, he might attract the creature's attention, but it might also have been interested in the carcass he was handling. He hoped that was what the predator wanted, and would gladly give up the *ghidan* without a fight.

He stepped away from the carcass, moving slowly, keeping his gaze on the circling bird, stealing a glance at the last place he'd seen Claire and Jack hovering. That was when he noticed his companions were gone.

"Where did everyone go?" he called warily, trying to hide in the tall grass and still look around for his new friends.

A rosy streak flashed by him, buzzing in his ear, causing him to turn almost in time to dodge the talons of a second bird that had come up behind him in stealthy surprise. Razor-sharp claws raked his left shoulder, cutting through the tactical vest, BDU jacket and T-shirt, digging into the meat of his muscles as he clamped his teeth down on a scream.

Whirling around with his right hand, he stabbed upward into the base of the creature's leg, just as he was hoisted a couple of feet into the air by the raptor's momentum. With a harsh squawk, the thing released him, flapping wildly, knocked out of its flight path by his strike and unbalanced by the sudden release of Daniel's weight. Startled and hurt, the lizard-bird unsuccessfully struggled to regain its equilibrium and increase altitude in an effort to flee the attack from its intended prey.

Falling back to the ground, Daniel's full weight landed hard on his left foot, which turned underneath him, sending spears of bright pain up his calf and into his knee and hip. This time, he *did* cry out as his leg crumpled, his momentum carrying both him and the huge predator to the ground. Daniel collapsed hard onto his wounded shoulder, landing half on top of the bird. Screeching its protest at this unexpected assault, frantic wings beat about his head, knocking off his glasses.

The creature lashed out with its sharp beak, raking it down Daniel's back as it tried to haul itself out from under him. Half blind with pain and panic, he managed to jerk his knife free. He was instinctively aware the bird would go for his eyes, so he closed them tight, tucking his chin down to his chest and swinging his arm back and forth over his head, slashing and stabbing with the blade, not daring to look for a target. He felt its beak tearing at his hand, but he couldn't risk getting off the bird or letting go of the knife handle.
"Roll back!" called a small voice not far from his ear.

Without thinking, Daniel obeyed, flipping onto his back on top of the bird, effectively pinning its writhing head to the ground. Another quick swipe with his blade, this time with a more deliberate target, and the thing was dead, still jerking and flopping, but silent now, and no longer attacking him. He lay still, panting, bleeding and sweating, trying to decide just how badly he'd been hurt.

He rolled to his right, using that hand to help him get to his knees, still clutching the knife in a desperate grip and gasping as he fought to drag some air into his agonized body. He'd sustained deep cuts in his upper left shoulder, and his left ankle was either badly sprained or broken. Blood from his own wounds, or the bird's, or both, was gluing his T-shirt and jacket to his torso.

He knew he couldn't be distracted by his injuries or pain, not yet. There had been two of the creatures, and he'd killed only one of them. The other was probably still nearby, and so were the fairies. Tears stinging his eyes, he blinked and scrubbed at them with his sleeve, then lifted his head to look for his friends.

He spied Jack hovering just above the knee-high grass surrounding him, pink hair the only recognizable feature Daniel could see without his glasses. "Is everyone all right?" he called out. He squinted at the blurry dot that was Claire a little further back, coming up from the direction of the warthog kill, Lapis trailing her by several feet. A brief search of the surrounding ground found Daniel's lost eyewear, and he ducked down to scoop them up and push them onto his face, then aim his worried gaze back at his tiny friends.

"The other sh'khan!" cried Claire, zooming toward Daniel, pointing behind him. "It is attacking Grass Clan!"

The other lizard-bird, thought Daniel.

Claire whizzed off in the direction she'd indicated.

"You cannot reach our brother in time!" called Jack, who sped off after her, a pink blur of blinding motion.

Daniel struggled to get to his feet, carrying his weight on his uninjured right leg and shakily using his left only for balance. Not far away, he saw the first lizard-bird swooping down like an eagle, wings folded back to reduce drag, legs extended and claws open, reaching for its intended prey. Its target was a barely-visible tuft of silvery hair sticking up above the top of the tawny grass.

Claire was only halfway there, and so small against the massive bird.

After only an instant spent weighing his options, Daniel dropped his knife and reached for the holster on his right hip. He unsnapped the Beretta and drew it, thumbing off the safety as he raised it to aim. He drew a bead on the bird's body and squeezed off one shot. The recoil jerked his arm upward, sending a shockwave into his body and making him clench his teeth against the pain. The flying predator jerked in the air as the bullet hit home, and Daniel quickly put another into it, just to make sure he'd killed it.

When it crashed to the ground without touching its mark, limp and lifeless, Daniel collapsed, landing hard on his buttocks. Stunned and shaken, he gazed down at himself, at the blood seeping through his jacket, trickling over his left arm hand. His wounds were still sharp with pain, making
it hard to catch his breath. His damaged right hand wouldn't open and he had to pry his pistol out of
his grip with the other one, gasping as his injured flesh flexed with the movement.

He pushed the safety back into place with his left hand and laid the Beretta on the ground, glancing
around for his companions, then off into the distance toward the horizon, trying to see if the
newcomer might be approaching. The silver tuft had disappeared, its owner no doubt shocked by
the roar of the pistol and the sight of a sh'khan dropping dead in front of it. The fairies' Grass Clan
friend was safe; that was all that mattered to Daniel.

Lapis floated into his line of sight. "Well done, friend," she said with a congratulatory smile.

Daniel just nodded. Still panting and gasping for breath, he studied his left foot, where his boot
was constricting him. He wasn't sure he'd be able to get it off without some cutting, but he didn't
have spares in the mule. He didn't even know if he could make it back to camp in that shape. He
decided it would be better to try to get it off before it swelled even more, so he bent his leg to
begin unlacing the footwear. Every movement was infused with bright pain, but he had to get this
done immediately.

He let his left arm dangle until he had the laces worked free with his bleeding right hand, trying to
give himself as much of a chance to rest as possible. The warm sunshine was making him sweat,
and tears mixed with the salty droplets running into his eyes and down his face as he struggled to
get the boot off his swollen foot. Both hands gripping the leather uppers, the boot finally slipped
free, and he fell backward with a cry of agony, rolling quickly onto his uninjured right side.

Keening softly and concentrating only on breathing, he didn't move when the sea of tall, tawny
blades parted and a member of what had to be the Grass Clan made an appearance.

Squinting from the throbbing pain, Daniel was more than a little surprised at what he saw.

The alien was about three feet tall, with the same oversized eyes, delicate nose, and small mouth as
the fairies, but he was many times their diminutive size and much stockier in build. He seemed to
be male, since his mouth was framed with a wispy mustache and a long, silky beard. Some of his
silvery hair had been pulled up into a tufted ponytail on top of his head, the rest draping down his
back in a long mane. Faint lines, probably indicative of advancing age, creased his face, and his
oversized irises were a remarkable shade of purple.

He had a distinctively different style of dress from his smaller fairy cousins; the black jumpsuit,
helmet, and mechanical wings were noticeably absent. This fellow wore a tan tunic, brown pants
with lots of pockets, and tan boots. He wore a brown and green striped cape thrown over his
shoulders, and riding on his left hip was a pouch fastened to his belt.

He gave Daniel a rather stilted bow. "I thank you for my life," he said formally. His voice was
gravelly but pleasant, another hint at his age. He spoke the language of the Ancients with a lyrical
accent, more like chanting than speaking.

Daniel just nodded against the flattened grass, lying still on his side. "Welcome," he panted, then
pointed at himself. "Daniel Jackson." Talking was just too much effort at the moment.

"Yes, friend." The newcomer clapped his small hands together in a show of impatience, eyeing
Daniel's obvious need for assistance. "Now, we fix you. Sh'khan make nasty wounds." He
regarded Claire, grunting disapprovingly and waving a hand in her direction, as if to dismiss her
from their presence. "Sky Clan too slow," he muttered.
"Hah!" crowed Jack. He crossed his arms over his chest, hovering over Daniel in a distinctly Peter Pan pose. "We killed the ghidan."

"Anyone can kill ghidan, even child! Earthbound be better hunters." The bigger alien swept the fairies with a smug grin and waggled elegantly arched silver eyebrows at them.

"You sit up," Grass commanded. "Must get wounds cleaned and give remedies before fever comes."

"I have my own medicines in my camp," Daniel assured him, grunting with pain as he moved slowly into a more upright position. "A white pouch with a red symbol on it. The drugs inside it will help me fight off sickness."

The Grass Clan alien shrugged. "From your world, yes. Maybe not from this one. We see. I return soon." He fixed Claire with a firm gaze and shook a warning finger at her. "You watch new friend. Keep safe."

"Perhaps you should mind the sky as well as you do the ground," Claire shot back, tilting her chin up and raising her lavender eyebrows. "Your hunt will be more successful if you are not dead."

"Bah!" The hunter pivoted on his heel and ambled off toward Daniel's camp to fetch the medical kit packed into the mule, at Daniel's request.

Daniel had to smile at their contention over his care and keeping. There didn't seem to be any real animosity between the races, just a sense of one-upmanship that kept them jockeying for any scrap of superiority -- much as he and Jack had always done. There was cooperation when it counted, concern for one another's welfare, exhibited by the Sky Clan's immediate reaction when one of the Grass Clan had been threatened, but once the danger was past, the teasing began.

He thought he might grow very fond of these people, and hoped they were becoming friends.

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Chapter 8: Friends

August 23

Late Afternoon

Compounded by his recent imprisonment, the blood loss from the lizard-bird attack was making Daniel light-headed and weak, sending his body into shock. He fought it, struggling against the pain of his wounds, concentrating on breathing and the concerned looks on the faces of the three fairies hovering around him. He'd been hurt worse in the field, but there had always been the promise of returning to the SGC's infirmary for recovery. Now that option wasn't available; he'd have to survive with these people's help, or not at all.

Daniel's camp was less than a hundred feet away, but it felt like hours went by as he waited for the Grass Clan alien to come back with his medical kit and two canteens. As soon as Daniel saw the tuft of silver hair moving back toward him above the tall grass, he forced himself into a sitting position. It was an exercise in agony; every part of him hurt with the movement.
“May I call you Hunter?” he asked, unbuttoning his BDU jacket. He grimaced as he pulled the gear vest and jacket off together. “Or do Grass Clan feel differently about sharing their names?”

“Hunter,” the alien repeated approvingly from beside him, pawing through Daniel’s med kit. “Yes, you call me Hunter. Is strong name. Who your clan? You look like Forest.”

The opened medical kit and one of the canteens were close enough that Daniel could reach them now. Mumbling his thanks, he picked up some ibuprofen and broad-spectrum antibiotics, tore open each packet and swallowed the tablets with a mouthful of water from the second canteen. After another long swallow, he capped the container and set it down.

Daniel didn’t understand Hunter's clan reference but tried to answer the question anyway. “Um, my given name is Daniel,” he explained, reaching for the hem of his black T-shirt. He sucked in a preparatory breath and pulled the garment off over his head, grunting as some of the cloth stuck to the drying blood surrounding his wounds. He panted a moment, gripping the ruined shirt in his right hand until he could speak again. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, already dry once more from exertion and blood loss, which was carrying him rapidly toward dehydration. “My family name is Jackson, so I guess that would be my clan. The Jacksons were originally from England, but I am second-generation American on my maternal side. Her family was Dutch, called the Ballards.”

“Two clans? Bah! You Forest.” The old alien opened the spare canteen and gave the treated water a sniff. He shuffled closer and began to slowly pour the liquid over the punctures in Daniel’s shoulder, daubing the blood away with a spare pair of clean white underwear retrieved from the mule.

“Not from here,” Daniel reminded his newest friend through clenched teeth, shivering as the cool water poured over his clammy skin. He dug a small bottle of hydrogen peroxide out of the med kit and handed it over to the alien, showing him briefly how to use it and explaining what it did.

Hunter grunted, dismissing Daniel’s retort, concentrating on cleaning his injuries. He was thorough, using up all of the peroxide and half the water in the extra canteen. Daniel now had the other container and was drinking from it, taking in as much as he could hold.

“Grass Clan are notoriously stubborn,” observed Claire with a shrug, hovering in Daniel’s line of sight. “You will not be able to convince him you are not Forest Clan. You are the right size, though your eyes are too small and your nose is… uh, big.”

Looking up at Claire, Daniel asked in amazement, “So Forest Clan is an even larger race of your people? My size?”

“Yes,” answered Hunter, working behind Daniel now, cleaning the punctures over his shoulder blade. “Mountain even bigger. You see soon, if you live.”

“If I live?” Daniel returned with a slight sense of alarm. He eyed his swollen left foot, which was turning purple and black with bruising from the fall. “These aren’t exactly life-threatening wounds, you know.”

“You not from here,” the Grass Clan alien repeated back to him. “Could be many strange sicknesses you not know. Injury makes entrance for all manner of ugly.”

“True.” Daniel sat quietly while Hunter finished cleaning and dressing his wounds, then came around to examine his ankle.
“Not broken,” the alien declared after a thorough prodding and lots of squeezing, through which Daniel kept his jaws clamped to avoid screaming. “Only sprained.” Hunter pulled a small roll of fabric from his pouch and wrapped up Daniel’s ankle with obvious healer’s skill.

The older alien made eye contact and finally sat down on the ground beside Daniel’s booted right foot. “You hungry?”

All Daniel wanted was more water and just to lie still until the ibuprofen kicked in, and he could rest. “Not really. I—”


“If you can call *that* cooking,” sniped Jack, who flew between them, dancing on the air and rolling his eyes. “Truly, they use so many spices and seasonings, you cannot taste the original essence of the dish. Some ingredients are so hot—”


Not far from where Daniel lay on the flattened grass, Hunter built a cooking fire, the pit carefully lined with stones and cleared of debris that might accidentally spread the flames. From a pack hidden beneath his cape, he pulled a small, shallow pot, filled it with water, and set it on the blaze to heat. He selected several tiny leather bags from his pouch and sorted through them carefully. Each was marked with a symbol but, while some of the writing looked vaguely familiar, Daniel couldn’t place where he might have previously seen the script. His mind was getting clouded from his recent exertions and shock, and he thought he might be running a slight temperature.

The older alien opened one tiny bag and sniffed it, made a ghastly face and pulled it quickly away from his nose. “I make you tea,” he said with a chuckle, a mischievous twinkle in his purple eyes. “You drink. Help you with fever.”

“Um, no thanks,” Daniel returned politely, not sure he wanted any of the stinky brew. “I will use my medicines. But I appreciate everything you have done for me.” He struggled to sit up, in need of more water and wanting to check his stores of medical supplies. The movement made his wounds flare with fresh pain.

“Is good for pain, too,” Hunter told him sagely, dropping a pinch of the powder into the pot of water to steep. "You drink tea. Will help you feel better."

Daniel didn’t argue further. He had morphine in his pack, but that was for wounds far more severe than he had sustained and he needed to save it, just in case. A dose of acetaminophen on top of the ibuprofen he’d had a few hours ago might help with the fever and creeping ache in his bones. There were differences between his physiology and that of these aliens that might entail far more than eye size and the shapes of their noses, making him wary of their medications which might do him more harm than good, but he didn't have the strength to refuse.

Hunter waved the cup under Daniel's nose, and a smell that was an unpleasant cross between sweaty socks and vomit made him instinctively turn his face away, swallowing against the bile rising in his throat. He held up a hand. “No, thanks! Gah.” He almost gagged.

"Drink fast," Hunter urged. "Taste not as bad as smell." He was insistent, continuing to push the cup toward his guest.
Daniel finally accepted it, held his breath, and downed the disgusting liquid in three long swallows. "Ugh! That's the single most horrible smell I've ever encountered," he blurted in English.

Apparently, the comment needed no translation. His companions all laughed and nodded in agreement.

"Now, we feed you," Hunter announced, and went to fetch the warthog haunch Daniel had left at his camp.

Claire hovered watchfully over Daniel, while Jack and Lapis buzzed off to begin collecting herbs and berries, delivering them to the new campsite before darting off to look for more. Hunter built a spit for roasting the meat and set it to cook, then went to rummage through the mule's storage lockers for additional cooking utensils. He seemed delighted at the finds, and quickly set about combining the various ingredients Sky Clan provided, arguing with them good-naturedly over the composition of the dishes.

Whenever he temporarily roused himself from his exhausted dozing, Daniel couldn’t help grinning as he watched the two races interact. “There seems to be plenty of that warthog-thing,” he suggested, rolling carefully onto his right side with a grunt. “Maybe you can just cook a little of it plain for Sky Clan, and I'll try it both ways.”

“Many mouths to feed now,” said Hunter with a nod to his left. “I cook ghidan and both sh’khan. All will share feast.”

Following Hunter’s gaze, Daniel noticed more of the Grass Clan appearing at the edges of the flattened meadow enclosure, likely lured there by the savory cooking smells that wafted up into the air. All of them were about the same size as Hunter, but with a wide variety of attire. Some wore tunics and pants, others long robes, and a few were clothed in elegantly detailed gowns. They looked like children playing dress-up, he thought, their genderless faces wide-eyed and innocent.

Three of them came to haul off the two sh’khan carcasses, and several others brought rolled-up carpets, poles, coils of rope, folded tarps, cooking pots, and more of Daniel’s supplies from the camp. In short order, a large awning had been put up over him, the grass flattened beneath it and covered with the carpets. They built a crude but sturdy bed for him of lashed-together saplings, rope, and a tough, soft fabric, and several of them helped him carefully onto it.

The move was agonizing, but once he'd settled, the discomfort faded quickly to a deep throbbing. Daniel turned his attention to the activity around him, studying his hosts and their behavior for a little distraction. He nodded off for a few minutes here and there, waking to drink more water, and then returned to his napping and observing the little People as they worked.

Setting up the camp was a noisy affair, with the Grass Clan shouting and squabbling with each other or arguing with the Sky Clan, who had taken up supervisory positions, directing the others and alternately being consulted or ignored.

Claire hovered possessively over Daniel, scrutinizing everyone who came to offer him anything, sampling everything and approving it before allowing the snacks or drinks to be accepted. She argued with Hunter over seasoning at the nearby cook-fire, darting back and forth to ask Daniel’s opinion and serve as mediator in determining what would or would not go into the meal.

A blessed sense of contentment filled Daniel as he lay on his cot, watching the industrious little people taking care of him. The camp was a cheerful place with an air of merriment, and Daniel felt his spirits lifting despite his pain. He continued to doze on and off until Hunter announced that his meal had been prepared, and helped him into a sitting position beneath the canvas awning.
As the sun slid behind the distant mountain peaks, Daniel tasted more dishes than he could count by the light of scattered torches and campfires, set to chase away the coming darkness. The ghidan tasted similar to pork, flavored with something like mint and pepper, both hot and cool at the same time. The sh’khan had a strong citrus tang, yet it was quite oily and spiced with something so hot he could barely get it down. The Grass people all laughed at his reaction, but the Sky Clan fairies simply gazed at him with silent but smug self-assurance, reminding him that he had been warned.

A celebration started once the food was cleared away, complete with music and dancing, and everyone seemed to enjoy it. Daniel watched with heavy eyelids, smiling contentedly from his horizontal position on the bed, while Hunter sat nearby at a cook-fire, chewing on a plant stem and listening to what Daniel guessed to be a storyteller, though Daniel couldn’t understand a word of the monologue. His gaze wandered as he listened to the hypnotic voice of the narrator, searching the perimeter of the camp out of long years of habit, concerned about the dangerous wildlife he'd encountered, and wanting to make sure his new friends would be protected.

When he saw that Grass Clan had already posted sentinels, keeping watch on the surrounding sea of grass as well as what he could see of the star-lit sky, he decided they didn't need him to look out for their safety. Seeing the sentries brought Daniel reassurance, and he longed to put down a few notes in his journal.

He tried to sit, but was too weak from exhaustion, injuries, and the ordeal of his recent imprisonment. After a little more observation of his lively new friends, Daniel's eyes began to burn from fatigue, and he decided he'd done enough for the day. The temperature was dropping and it was getting a little chilly, so he asked for a blanket from his stores in the mule. Hunter fetched it and helped him cover up, giving him a final pat once he was comfortable.

Daniel took a second dose of his supply of antibiotics and swallowed them with another long gulp of water, then set his med kit on the ground and lay back, desperately in need of rest. Claire descended from her hovering post above him where she'd been keeping watch, and settled on the framework of his cot for the night. Daniel wished his hosts a good night, rolled onto his uninjured right side, and closed his eyes, sinking almost instantly into an exhausted sleep.

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Chapter 9: Fever

August 24

The Next Day

The visitor's body was burning with fever. He lay keening in agonized delirium, with several members of Grass and Sky Clans watching him, and waiting.

“He has a benevolent nature,” Claire declared firmly, hovering above the bed in the faint early morning light. “He is kind and did not hesitate to rescue another, even though he had been injured himself. Our test was successful.”

“Is brave,” agreed Hunter, stroking his beard thoughtfully with finger and thumb. “Wait and see. Will sacrifice himself.” He crossed his arms over his chest and lifted his chin in satisfied self-assurance.

“He will have to heal before he goes further,” said Jack, alighting on the edge of the bed. He leaned wearily against Claire, making no effort to stifle a huge yawn.
“You were not supposed to warn him,” the lavender-haired one reminded her subordinate with a frown, nudging him with her elbow. “We were to watch his reaction to another in danger, not to interfere.”

Jack sat upright and shot her a glare. He crossed his arms over his chest, but made no retort.

“Sh’khan would have taken our visitor's head off,” countered Hunter in a low mumble. “Is good this one helped,” he gestured toward Jack, “but should have lured smaller adversary.”

“We are at the edge of the grasslands,” Lapis pointed out with a wave of her hand toward the direction they had come. “Not many predatory creatures overlap the lands between Sky and Grass, and the sh’khan was the best we could do on short notice. Perhaps Forest will have better luck, when we reach their territory.”

“No need to see him fight more animals,” Hunter shot back emphatically as he shook his head and waved one hand dismissively. “Need to see reaction to conflict, how he choose sides. This will tell us much.”

“Agreed,” said Claire. She nodded at Jack, who prepared to begin the nightly scan of the visitor’s memories.

He moved to stand near the top of Daniel's head, balanced on the framework of the makeshift bed, and extended his arms, activating the controls in his black s’resh uniform. Once an alpha state had been induced and was being maintained in Daniel, Jack monitored the alpha cycle and initiated a brainwave scan, feeding it into the system and downloading the data into the proper catalog for study and storage.

Daniel’s early memories had been reviewed, and now those with the highest emotional resonance were to be sought out and examined. The analysis was conducted at advanced speed until the images were verified as significant. Claire ran the first one back at slightly faster than real time on the inside of her visor, describing to Grass the events as they unfolded. Her voice changed from factual reporting to breathless wonder as she finished the narrative.

With trembling fingers, she opened up her helmet and made brief eye contact with the larger alien. Then all eyes turned to regard the stranger as he lay shivering and whimpering in his feverish dreams.

For a long time, no one spoke.

“This changes everything,” Claire declared gravely. She turned her attention to the elder from Grass Clan. “Have we heard from the Council?”

“Soon,” Hunter stated with certainty. He eyed his patient, who was trembling and pale beneath the blankets they had put over him. “He must drink more taimin tea now. Everyone help. We must not lose him.”

Roused to semi-consciousness, a delirious Daniel tried to shake them off as they propped him into a sitting position. He jerked away from their touch, complaining and whining in his own language, but Claire spoke softly into his ear, offering comforting words, while Hunter stroked his hair and gently poured the brew into his mouth, a few drops at a time.

Getting the vile liquid down required some time, but they were a very patient people. They had learned to wait for generations, the price they had paid for the trust and passion of their past.

Perhaps soon, their exile would be over.
Two Hours Later

Three of the elders sat in the Council chamber, watching the playback of the latest of their visitor's holographically recorded memories.

"This is unexpected," observed the Sky elder. She turned wide turquoise eyes up to the senior member of their group. "What does it mean?"

The Mountain elder's gaze did not waver from the images radiating with light in the center of their circle. He waved a hand over the controls, running the second event back a little, then starting it up again. "We should make ready for a great journey," he rumbled quietly.

Seen through their visitor's perspective, they found themselves looking into the large, intense, blue eyes of a golden-haired female of a similar mold to the one called Daniel Jackson. He and she were engaged in a conflict, though at the moment they both stood still, just staring at each other. The female wore the face of a familiar friend, but he did not allow the affection he felt for the original affect his feelings about the duplicate, for this one was his enemy. She was not human, as he was, but had been made to look like someone he knew. This being was a machine, and the battle between them was taking place inside him, in his mind.

He pushed and strained at the direct force she applied, while a small, subtle part of him wormed its way into her consciousness, searching for a key.

"Gotcha!" he whispered harshly at the moment of triumph.

She knew instantly that she'd been beaten. Furious, her arm formed into a sharp, pointed blade and she thrust it into him, piercing his heart. He crumpled to the floor, his victory complete, his sacrifice made willingly.

This conflict had not been about power, or about winning for the sake of conquest. It had been about saving others, giving his friends time to take the actions necessary to vanquish a dangerous, deadly enemy, one that threatened all life in the galaxy.

He'd given his life to save billions of others, staring his enemy down, looking his own death in the eye and acutely aware of the price he would pay before the battle had even begun.

Then, at the last moment, as he lay dying on the floor, his body disappeared in a flash of light.

Mountain held the image there, thinking about what he'd seen.

"This one has an important destiny," the Forest elder observed, a note of wonder in his voice. "To have been offered such power and then to relinquish it speaks greatly about his character."

"He has given his life many times," agreed Sky. "He thinks nothing of sacrificing himself, if it is for the good of others." She cocked her head, studying Mountain. "Yet he loves life and learning. Perhaps our veil of tears may finally be lifted."

"Or perhaps they are just beginning," he returned sagely. "With great destiny comes greater sacrifice. Are the People truly prepared for such a journey?"

Forest straightened, lifting his chin. "We have been preparing for millennia, friend. We are ready."
Mountain met his steady gaze, eyes narrowing. "This path will return us to our past, and lead us to our future. The quest will be a terrible one, filled with danger and death. It is ironic that this journey should be guided by one who is not of the People."

"The weight of an entire race is a heavy burden for one being to carry," Sky cautioned with a sorrowful sigh as she gazed down at the frozen image, "especially when he has carried so much already."

"If we do not tell him," Forest suggested sympathetically, "perhaps he will not notice the extra burden on his soul."

Mountain ran through the images one more time, for the benefit of the Council. The human had once suffered a violent, agonizing death through radiation poisoning, in order to save the lives of an entire world, a people he barely knew, fully cognizant of the consequences of his actions as he did so. Years later, he had fought the one-on-one battle for control of a tide of alien machines, stopping them just long enough for a weapon to be activated that would destroy them, once again ensuring the safety of countless other lives at the cost of his own.

He had suffered other deaths as well, but these two were most significant to the People. With these, he had shed his body and become light. This was a great warrior, indeed; one filled with cosmic purpose. It was the People's duty to offer him aid.

The decision of the three elders was unanimous; they would befriend him and support him in his quest, whatever that might be, for his footsteps would shake the cosmos.

Sky turned off the recording. "I will carry a message to Grass, instructing him to bring our new friend to the city of Shahr."

"I will make a place ready for him when he arrives," volunteered Mountain, "and see to it that preparations for the journey are made in Ahmega."

"I will meet the travelers and guide them here," Forest added. "He will be welcomed among us as one of our own." The elder paused, head cocked, thinking. Then his lips curled as he asked the others, "Should he be given the jing? Only the greatest among the People are allowed that privilege."

"Perhaps the jing might keep him with us longer," suggested Sky. "If we are in agreement, I will carry it to him."

"It shall be done, by and for the People, and also for the All," said Mountain gravely with a nod of agreement. "And so it begins."

The elders vanished from the council chamber, and one by one they departed on their various missions to make the one called Daniel Jackson at home among them.

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*Chapter 10: Forest*

*August 27*

*Three Days Later*
“Feel better?”

Daniel groaned a little, lifting his hand to rub at gritty eyes. He scratched at an itch on his cheek and found several days’ worth of stubble growing there. Vaguely, he remembered being sick and some damned strange dreams. The People had apparently taken good care of him while he’d been so ill, seeing to all his needs, helping him hydrate and relieve himself, but he was desperately dry.

“Thirsty,” he rasped in a parched whisper, struggling to remember to speak in the language of the Ancients.

“Good,” Hunter replied with a wry grin. “Have more taimin tea.”

The foul odor brought back fuzzy memories of a lot of the disgusting brew being poured into him over the last several days. He instinctively turned his face away, swallowing against the bile rising in his throat, and held up a hand. “No, thank you! Gah.” He almost gagged.

“Nasty, yes,” the little alien cheerfully agreed, pushing the steaming cup back at him, “but also saved life. Drink. Then go to bushes.”

Trembling and weak, Daniel sat up, held his breath, and downed the cup of liquid in three noisy gulps. Fortunately, it didn’t taste quite as bad as it smelled, but the aftertaste was bitter and made him shudder. He handed the empty cup back and mumbled, "How long have I been ill?"

"Long enough. We give you our medicine, you get well. Other injuries better, too." Daniel glanced at the gash on the back of his hand, noting that it was only a dark pink, scabby line now. He tested his shoulder and found it was just a little sore. Whatever the People had done to treat him had repaired his body at a remarkable rate, far faster than any human being could heal on his own. What should have taken weeks had apparently only taken a few days to accomplish.

He suddenly realized he wasn’t wearing his glasses -- they were nowhere in sight -- but he could clearly see the forming scar on his hand. To verify his visual acuity, he glanced around the area beneath the awning and the rest of the camp outside it, and was stunned to take note that his eyesight had somehow been miraculously repaired.

"The corrective lenses I wore," he said, pointing at his face and drawing circles in the air over his eyes, brows twitching together in confusion. "I no longer need… How is this possible?"

"Good tea," Hunter answered with a gravelly chuckle.

"I guess the hell," Daniel murmured in astonished English. He put his feet on the floor and automatically shifted his weight in an attempt to get up. Very quickly, he sat back down, grimacing and wishing he’d been a little less in a fog and paying more attention before he’d tried to rise.

“You better,” Hunter chuckled, “not fixed. Will need these.” He held out a pair of crutches made from sturdy tree limbs, just the right size for him.

“Thank you,” Daniel ground out as he heaved himself onto them. He hobbled out from under the awning and toward the nearest appropriate spot to relieve himself.

When he was done, he limped back toward the canopy, where Hunter served him a breakfast of a bowl of fruit, roasted ghidan, and some kind of oatmeal-like concoction. Daniel ate until he was stuffed and washed everything down with a floral-scented, spiced sweet tea. When he had finished, he felt much better, clearer-headed, and far healthier than he should have been.
"That tea is amazing," he admitted to Hunter, trying to get information as well as being conversational. "My people do not normally recover so quickly."

Hunter made a non-committal noise just as two of the Grass Clan folk brought a big leather bag stretched across a pole, filled with water that had been gently heated over a fire. "You bathe now," Hunter announced. "Important to stay clean."

Daniel nodded, suddenly aware of his sweaty body. His BDU was crusty with salt from the fever, and he knew he'd feel even better with clean clothes. This time, he didn't hesitate to strip down and wash himself off with a cake of soap Hunter provided from the supplies in the mule. The aliens gave him a small cloth to use as a meager towel, and when he was clean, he carefully donned a fresh uniform that Hunter brought him from the storage compartments.

By the time he finished cleaning up, he was exhausted, so he stretched out for a nap on his makeshift bed, which had been freshly covered with a clean blanket by Grass Clan.

Throughout the day, Hunter interrupted Daniel's peaceful recovery to ply him with more of the terrible tea, refusing to accept Daniel's polite attempts to decline it. The more of the nasty stuff he swallowed, the better he felt. As the hours passed, he found himself sitting up, moving with little pain and starting to truly enjoy himself.

His companions chatted with him whenever he was awake, but ever the scientist, Daniel was enchanted to listen to the clans speaking to each other in their native tongues, which were different from the Ancients' language that they used when speaking to him. Sky Clan's dialect featured elements of whistling and lovely trills, similar to bird-song, while Grass Clan's vocabulary was punctuated with clicks, croaks, and chirps resembling animal calls. It appeared they used two vastly different languages, yet neither race seemed to have a problem understanding the other, apparently completely bilingual.

The disparity in speech patterns between Sky and Grass was as distinctive as their clothing and size, but it was apparent to Daniel that they were simply two races of the same species. Grass Clan was energetic, easy-going, but egotistical. The people of Sky Clan were more aloof and cautious, secretive but assertive. Their tempers were quicker, and they also seemed very protective of those they chose to embrace, as evidenced by Claire’s close attention to him during his recovery.

Another marked difference between the races was their coloring. Where Sky Clan had fair skin decorated with tattoos, Grass Clan was darker. Their hair, too, represented earthy tones, from silver and gold to muted green and brown, while Sky Clan had tresses in all the colors of a pastel rainbow, like tiny, delicate flowers. Both races were fit and beautiful, each one a pleasure to Daniel’s eyes.

He wondered what environmental imperative had created such a huge difference in size and build. There was so much to learn about these people. His curiosity was definitely piqued, and he looked forward to additional study of the various races as he encountered them.

The camp became much quieter as twilight fell, and he noticed more Sky Clan buzzing about the edges of the gathering, their night-lights shining on the distant grass, keeping watch for any predators. Daniel began to carefully shuffle about without his crutches, chatting with several of the People, inquiring about various activities he observed. His sprained ankle still pained him a little, but not enough that he couldn't bear weight on it for a few steps. He estimated he'd be hardly favoring his injury at all by morning.

When he began to grow weary, he limped back to the awning for a long night's sleep, downing another cup of the disgusting tea without protest.
"Sleep well," Hunter told him, wrapping up in a blanket on the ground beside the cot. "We journey with sun."

"We leave in the morning?" asked Daniel. Sometimes the Grass Clan's syntax made them a little difficult to understand.

"Mmmmmh." Hunter's eyes were closed. He lay very still, his breathing deep and even.

Daniel thought that might have been an affirmative answer, but he wanted to be sure he'd understood correctly; he had some concerns -- he didn't know where they were going, or what the People intended to do with him. He glanced around for someone else to ask, but his Sky Clan companions weren't in sight, and everyone else was too far away to call without disturbing Hunter. Deciding his questions would wait till dawn, Daniel closed his eyes with a grateful sigh, sliding instantly off into peaceful sleep.

Soon after sunrise, after Daniel had finished a hearty breakfast, Hunter rinsed out the bowls and packed them into the mule, which was parked not far away.

The rest of Grass Clan was already taking down the shelter, packing up camp. A blessed sense of contentment filled Daniel as he watched the industrious little people, comparing what he knew of these two races and wondering about the other two he hadn't yet seen.

Hunter motioned to him, ambling toward the mule and the abandoned camp Daniel had set up days earlier. "Come," the elder alien called to him. "We go now."

Daniel walked gingerly over to the mule, relieved to find his ankle almost completely healed. The three Sky Clan fairies -- including a fourth with pale green hair and turquoise eyes that Daniel vaguely remembered from his first meeting with the flying aliens -- joined them and hovered above the hood until he'd taken his seat inside the roll cage of the transport.

"Um, where are we going?" Daniel asked, leaning on the steering wheel as he surveyed the quickly vanishing community.

"That way!" called the fairies.

Three of the four were pointing in the direction of the road, but Jack was indicating -- well, nothing Daniel could see, except for more grass. Claire spotted Jack's error, and, with a roll of her green eyes, she gave his arm a little shove to indicate the proper direction. Jack grinned and winked at Daniel.

"Okay," Daniel returned, unable to keep an amused chuckle from slipping out. "What is that way?" He stowed his makeshift crutches in the open cab -- just in case he might need them -- and put his foot on the brake, preparing to start the mule's engine.

"Rest of journey." Hunter climbed up next to Daniel stretched out his stubby legs, only his feet and ankles hanging off the seat. "We go now."

"Safety first." Daniel put his seat belt on, demonstrating for Hunter how to fasten his own belt and waiting until the alien buckled himself in.

Daniel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was still tired from his illness and injuries, but ready to get going and see what lay ahead. He was about to ask about their destination when Hunter leaned over the dash, pawed at the controls impatiently and pushed several buttons, as though to hurry Daniel and get the vehicle started.
"Cut that out!" Daniel blurted in English, giving the offending hands a frustrated shove. He frowned down at Hunter and told him carefully in Ancient, "Please sit still and allow me to operate this. It can be dangerous."

“Bah! Child’s plaything.” Hunter eyed Daniel's hands on the steering wheel suspiciously, and he waved at him, pointing toward the road in the distance. “We go.”

“As long as you keep your mitts to yourself,” Daniel grumbled, again in English.

The older alien raised a curious eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. "Someone is irritable today," he mumbled under his breath.

Ignoring that comment, Daniel sighed and glanced up at the fairies hovering just outside the vehicle. “Do you think you can keep up?”

“We are very fast,” Jack assured him with a broad grin, darting around in elegant arcs and loops. He paused in the air long enough to activate his helmet and adjust the visor, then gestured toward Daniel to lead the way.

“What about everyone else?” he asked, glancing around the rapidly disappearing camp. Already, most of those who had come to attend him were gone. Only a few were left, taking down his shelter and obliterating most of the evidence of their encampment. Even the grass had somehow been restored to its upright stance, and the aliens were quickly fading into the sea of tawny blades.

The fourth fairy also flew off, heading alone in another direction.

“Only our journey, now,” said Hunter. “We go.”

Daniel lapsed into English again. “All rightie, then.” He pushed the starter button on the dash, put the vehicle into gear, and headed off across the meadow toward the road. The mule bounced over the uneven ground, giving Hunter a good jostle, which made Daniel grin in amusement. Once they were on the smooth stone surface of the alien highway, Daniel glanced around at his airborne companions to make sure they were still with them and, after allowing Hunter a chance to grab onto the roll bar for a little extra security, Daniel took off at top speed to see just how fast those little wings could fly.

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**August 30**

**Three Days Later**

As the hours passed, rolling meadows slowly became dotted with occasional trees. Daniel’s companions were quick to point out the great diversity of birds, animals and insects as they flew, plodded or scurried past the mule. He felt as if he’d been dropped into a *Walking With Dinosaurs* documentary. The wildlife was generally of gigantic proportions, either in the size of individual animals or of their herds; everything flourished on this world. It was beautiful and exciting, as well as occasionally terrifying.

They had just arrived at the edge of the grasslands, where the meadows merged with a leafy canopy of huge ferns and broad-leaved trees, when there was a sudden movement to their left. Hunter’s warning cry made Daniel glance over just in time to see a huge animal charging toward them. He swerved, slamming on the brakes as he tried to maneuver around the creature, but it was galloping right across the road in front of them. The mule skidded, its rugged all-terrain tires...
screeching as it slammed sideways against the enormous legs of the beast. The vehicle tipped up onto its two right wheels before it bounced back onto all four, sliding around in a circle as Daniel fought the steering wheel for control.

“Run!” Hunter shouted as he scrabbled at his seat belt, tearing it open, and leaping out of the vehicle. “Run!”

Claire launched herself out of Daniel's breast pocket, careening through the air and out of the mule's open cab.

That was when Daniel caught sight of another animal bearing down on them, one of the same species but easily three times the size of the long-necked giant with which they’d already collided. The 4X4 had barely slid to a stop when he threw himself out of it, landing hard on his belly and automatically rolling onto his side. He scrambled to hands and knees and pushed up into a stumbling run, hot on Hunter’s heels, heading for cover in the trees.

As soon as they were safely under cover, Daniel turned to look back at the mule, now being attacked by the second, larger animal. “What is that?” he panted.


The “baby” was twice the size of an adult elephant, with thick, heavy legs and mottled tan and brown fur, looking like some bizarre crossbreed of giraffe and *Apatosaurus*. The mother could have easily looked into a sixth story window of any high-rise building back on Earth.

With a sinking heart, Daniel watched as the gigantic adult used its long tail to take a final swipe at the mule, flipping the insignificant vehicle upside down onto its roll cage and swatting it down the road with a screech of metal scraping against stone. When the *zannu* was satisfied the mule was no longer a threat, it herded its offspring into the trees on the far side of the road without a backward glance.

After a few moments, silence returned, and Hunter stood up, ambling slowly back toward the road with Daniel in tow. The Sky Clan fairies were already at the vehicle, inspecting the damage.

Daniel stared down at the wreck, hands on hips, sighing heavily. “What exactly is a *zannu*?” he asked, glancing at the trees where the creatures had disappeared. He and his friends had barely escaped intact. The mule hadn’t been so lucky, and most of his supplies now lay stomped and scattered along the stone road and in the vegetation that lined it.

“Eats tops of trees,” said Hunter, bending to pick up an unopened MRE packet, giving it a curious squeeze and sniff. “Mostly harmless.”

“You should see what feeds on them,” Claire commented climbing back into the breast pocket of Daniel’s BDU jacket. The little fairy had made herself at home in Daniel’s clothing for most of the trip, choosing to ride rather than fly. She yawned and stretched, kicking around in the pocket to create some additional space for herself.

“I would rather avoid that, thank you,” Daniel replied with a trace of impatience. He glanced at the surrounding terrain, not sure if he was pleased to finally be hitting the woods. Back in the grasslands, they could see large animals coming at them for miles around, but with the foliage encroaching against the pavement and crowding in close, it would be easy for wild beasts to suddenly leap out at them, like the baby *zannu* had done.

Squatting down next to the crumpled mule, he began to retrieve his provisions, starting with a
backpack he tugged free of the wrecked storage compartment. His laptop -- strapped into a case fastened to the back of the seat -- was fortunately unscathed, and Daniel tucked it lovingly into the bottom of the knapsack before continuing to rummage through the spilled gear and supplies. Numerous silver MRE pouches lay scattered over the pavement, some whole, others crushed into oblivion. His last clean uniform was wedged into the wreck, and the one undamaged canteen dangled from the steering wheel, inside the upside-down cab.

Tucked just under a messy pile of MREs was the little round Dial Home Device, also completely unharmed. Daniel put it in the thigh pocket of his uniform pants and collected as many of the unopened meal pouches as he could carry. He stood up, intending to lay the packages in a single pile on the roadside until he could get everything he needed gathered up and stuffed into the backpack.

When he turned, however, he found himself face to face with what could only be a member of the Forest Clan. He was definitely male, with broad shoulders, a powerful chest, slim waist and hips, his body draped in a loose-fitting tunic and pants, girded with a wide leather belt. Suede boots reached up to his knees, and everything he wore was of an alien camo design, mottled green and brown, colors that would blend perfectly with the woodsy background. His long, dark green hair was gathered above his ears and put up into a ponytail, and dark golden eyes ringed with burnt orange stared back at Daniel with cool interest.

The Forest Clan male’s approach had been totally silent, surprising Daniel into dropping about half of what he’d collected, most of it sliding to the pavement with a noisy patter. “Oh, hello,” he said, backing away, trying to gather his wits. “Um, I’m Daniel.”

“This will be a scout of the Forest Clan,” Claire told him, crawling back out of his pocket and up on his shoulder. She took a seat there, holding onto Daniel’s utility vest with both hands. Daniel held very still to keep from shaking her loose. “Scout? Oh. More are coming, then?”

Sidestepping the human-sized alien, Daniel bent over to set the rest of the MREs on the side of the road next to the open backpack, freeing his hands, which he wiped nervously on his trousers. He smiled, mesmerized by those arresting alien eyes. The scout was striking, like a work of art come to life.

“We have been watching you for some time,” the alien told him in a rich, resonant voice, his speech marked by a strong accent, elegant and fluid.

Daniel wondered if each Clan had a unique dialect of their own, suggested by the differences in the way they spoke the Ancients’ language. “I have been anticipating meeting Forest Clan for many days now,” he assured the stranger. “Are others of your people nearby?”

He nodded, gesturing around himself. “Always. Wherever there are trees on this world, among them you will find my Clan.” He bent to begin helping gather Daniel’s things, turning some of the objects over in his hands for a quick examination before putting them into the pile with the other items already collected.

Daniel glanced around, looking for others like the scout, but saw nothing, not a shadow or flicker of movement among the trees.

“Forest Clan shy,” Hunter explained. He nodded toward the stranger. “Scout is bold, not like rest of clan.”

“Scout,” Daniel repeated, glancing up into the alien’s amazing eyes again as he retrieved a box of
ammo for the Beretta. “May I call you that?”

He shrugged. “If it pleases you.” A hint of a smile played around his mouth.

“Thank you.” Daniel went back to picking up the mess, wondering at these people’s remarkable ability to avoid the use of each other’s names, including his.Interestingly,not once in the days he’d been there had anyone spoken his name, but as Claire had told him in the beginning, there was never any question who was being addressed at any given time.

“You not need all that,” Hunter told him, nodding his head toward the amassed goods at the roadside. ”Travel light, friend."

Daniel glanced at his companions, who were apparently carrying very little in the way of survival gear. Whatever they did to stay alive, he could do as well. They’d already shown they would help provide for him. "Oh. Right."

Stowing only the bare necessities into the backpack, Daniel loaded a canteen, a supply of water purification tablets, extra ammo and his last clean uniform on top of the laptop. He made sure his Beretta was in its place in its holster, checked to see that the zat was in a side pocket, and strapped his field knife to his hip. He clipped the pack into the shoulder clasps of his utility vest, adjusted the weight comfortably against his back, and fastened the stabilizing straps at the bottom, tightening them on each side to keep the pack from shifting.

Once he had everything ready to go, Daniel made eye contact with Scout and smiled at him. "Ready. Thank you for your patience."

The alien nodded, but instead of continuing down the road, he stepped off into the trees.

“Wait, I thought we were going that way, to the pyramid?” Daniel pointed down the untraveled road.

“We cannot go there,” Scout corrected with a shake of his head. “Not yet.”

“More zannu?” Daniel asked, taking a step to follow him. “Perhaps we can go around—”

“Not zannu,” Scout told him with a half smile. “The council of elders wishes to speak with you. We are to take you to the city of Shahr.”

Startled, Daniel stopped again. “Is it far? We saw no cities in our survey.”

“With your primitive tools, that is no surprise.” Scout turned away, continuing off the road into the trackless woods.

Daniel glanced down at Hunter, now passing him to follow Scout. “You told me nothing about a city.”

“You not ask,” Hunter said enigmatically, his face unreadable. He shot Daniel a glance, along with a tiny grin, that said plainly enough that there would be many more revelations in store for the newcomer to their world.

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Chapter 11: History
August 30

Daniel hurried to catch up to his companions, heedlessly snapping twigs underfoot, and brushing against leaves and limbs in his path. He lamented the loss of the mule, but realized he’d have had to leave it behind for this trip into the forest anyway. The fairies zoomed past him into the woods, disappearing ahead of Daniel and the two larger aliens.

Scout glanced down at Hunter, with a nod over his shoulder to indicate their human friend. “Noisy, is he not?”

“We teach him to walk soon,” the little alien replied nonchalantly.

“I know how to walk,” said Daniel in his own defense. He slowed his pace a little and took more care to step quietly. “See?”

The aliens chuckled and shook their heads as they exchanged an amused look.

Daniel listened and watched the two as they moved with the easy grace of big cats, avoiding debris on the ground, carefully choosing where to place their feet, swaying and dipping their bodies to keep from touching anything in their path. He barely heard Hunter’s small boots padding the soft, damp forest floor, and the only sound of movement from Scout was the almost-indiscernible rustle of his clothing; their stealth was impressive.

Another of Scout’s people joined their party, suddenly appearing not far from Daniel's left elbow, as if he'd been traveling with them for some time. In short order, a third member of Forest Clan caught Daniel's eye, then a fourth. None of the other travelers seemed to consider their unexpected emergence, seemingly out of thin air, as noteworthy. Daniel had seen some damned strange things in the past, so he made an effort to shrug off the sensation of uneasiness their growing numbers were causing him as they trekked through the trees.

He studied the newcomers, curious about Forest Clan. As with Grass Clan, their coloring seemed to match their surroundings, with hair in darker shades of green, brown, gray, or black, and skin tones varying from tan to chocolate brown. They were an elegant people, uniformly attractive, some recognizably male or female, others enigmatically androgynous.

As they moved through the vegetation like shadows, Daniel waited for them to speak to one another, since he was anxious to hear their language, but they kept silent as they walked. After a few minutes, the hush started to feel a tad creepy, so he turned to the nearest member of the Forest Clan for a little conversation, making an effort to keep his voice down. “Is your clan always this reticent?”

The female sidled up to him, matching his stride. Her skin was caramel colored, her light brown hair streaked with mahogany, eyes a piercing gray. “Beware the Sadeesh,” she whispered, and laid her fingertips on her lips to indicate Daniel should be quiet.

“What is that?” Daniel murmured back, leaning closer to hear the answer.

Scout held up a hand in a familiar gesture, and Daniel stopped in his tracks, as did everyone else.

The female pointed, and Daniel squinted at movement in the distance. His eyes widened when he got a good look at the thing that had caused the party to halt. It was as big and dangerous-looking as a Tyrannosaurus Rex, but covered in short gray and black mottled fur. Large triangular ears swiveled all around as it paused and listened for movement, its huge, ugly head turning from side to side. Finally it seemed satisfied that nothing interesting was nearby, so it
continued through the trees, making lots of noise in the underbrush.

The party stood frozen until the *sadeesh* stalked away, disappearing in the distance. Daniel let out a sigh of relief.

“That must be what eats the thing that stepped on my vehicle,” Daniel mused quietly.

“Us, too, if catch us,” said Hunter with a nod. “Stay quiet. May be more.”

They walked for hours through the seemingly trackless woods. Daniel was surprised at how fit he felt, amazed yet again by his miraculous recovery. His energy level was good, and he had no trouble keeping up with the others.

When Scout suggested they stop to eat, the Forest Clan climbed up the trunk of a giant tree, then dropped a vine down for Hunter to help haul him up. Daniel decided to show his agility, so following their custom, he climbed up by himself, using the hand- and foot-holds he’d seen the others use.

“Did we come up here for a reason?” he asked, settling astride a large limb, resting his back against the trunk.

“To be safe, while we rest,” answered Scout. “We have far to go yet, and must travel quietly to avoid more *sadeesh*. High in the trees, we may eat in peace and enjoy quiet conversation for a little while.”

That made sense. “Tell me about your city. How far away is it?” Daniel pulled out his canteen and one of the MREs, tearing the pouch open with his teeth. He opened the body-temperature packet of macaroni and cheese and tucked the rest of the contents of the pouch into his jacket breast pocket for later.

Scout grinned, his merry eyes dancing. “On the other side of the world.”

Daniel almost choked on the first bite of his food. “Excuse me? And you plan for us to walk all the way?”

Everyone laughed so good-naturedly, Daniel found himself smiling.

“You see soon,” said Hunter. “Not far now.”

“Ohhh-kay,” Daniel drawled in English, more for himself than his hosts. He didn’t get the joke, but hoped someone would explain it to him eventually. He studied his hosts, ever curious about the difference in size between races. Some were only six inches tall, others six feet. He dug into the silver entrée pouch for another bite, hoping his next question would be answered and not put off, as many had been so far.

“Why are the Clans so different from each other?”

Hunter and Claire looked to Scout, keeping quiet, waiting for a cue from their larger cousin before responding.

“In the long-ago,” Scout told him, accepting a handful of dried berries from Hunter, “the People were one race, all one size, all alike. We traveled to many places through the Wheel of Worlds, roaming everywhere – forest, grasslands, deserts, lands of snow and ice.”

“The Wheel of Worlds? We call it a Stargate,” Daniel told them, doing his best to translate the
With a slight nod, Scout continued. “We made our homes everywhere, and over many eons, we adapted to the lands in which we lived. Some became small. Others very small.” He smiled at Claire and Jack, seated comfortably on each of Daniel’s shoulders, before meeting Daniel’s openly curious gaze. “Still others became giants.”

Sadness seemed to settle over him like a heavy weight. “In those days, we were still innocent, and we sought to make friends wherever we went. We trusted easily and shared our gifts generously, but in time, those we believed to be our allies betrayed us. They plotted against us, attacked us, and most of the People were killed. The rest were brought here, where even more died from exposure, starvation and disease. We were left here with nothing -- no tools, weapons, or food, to survive or die, however the All decreed.”

Scout defiantly lifted his chin, gazing at Daniel through narrowed eyes that now glimmered with anger. “When the time comes, we will fight those who imprisoned us in the long-ago time. Until then, we train and prepare for when we meet our enemies once again.”

Daniel nodded, saddened by this tale of woe. “Many humans would do the same,” he agreed. “Some would try to negotiate for peace, though I have learned that doesn’t always work.”

A memory flashed through his mind, and he smiled a little. “An advanced race we once met in our travels through the Stargate told my people we were ‘very young’, and that we did not always do as we were told, which was true. Like you, we also wanted to learn, which is why we went through the Stargate the first time, just to see what was out there.”

He sobered, remembering why they had begun regular ‘gate travel in the first place. “An alien race called the Goa’uld attacked us and kidnapped one of the team guarding the Stargate. Our soldiers went after her.” Suddenly, he wasn’t hungry anymore. He stared at the MRE pouch as more memories fueled his buried rage. “The Goa’uld killed her. They came to the planet where I’d made a home with my wife, and they took her, too.” Emotion choked him, constricting his throat.

“They also kill her?” asked Hunter, popping a few more berries into his mouth. There was curiosity in his open gaze, along with a flicker of grim sympathy in his purple eyes.

Swallowing his anger down, Daniel nodded. “We fought them for many years, but they finally destroyed my world. Destroyed it.” He didn’t know what else to say. Holding back tears, he felt his chin trembling as he met Scout’s sympathetic, understanding gaze.

The alien turned on the tree limb beside Daniel, his knee just touching Daniel's thigh as he reached behind his guest to pluck a bunch of grape-sized blue berries from a stem sticking out of the trunk. “You wish to kill them, these Goa’uld?” he asked flatly.

“Yes,” Daniel rasped. He was ashamed by how much he wanted vengeance, but comforted himself with the belief that Earth deserved justice, too.

He straightened as the face of a handsome blond man seared suddenly through his memory. Zeus, Daniel realized, another hole in his memory suddenly filled. That was the being who had destroyed his planet. Daniel owed Zeus retribution; the debt had to be repaid.

“All of them?” Scout glanced up from beneath his dark lashes, his golden eyes flashing, sparking with some fiery emotion, his expression unreadable. He popped several of the berries into his mouth, his tongue stroking along his lower lip to catch a dribble of juice.
“Yes.” Daniel directed his gaze guiltily at his hand, the silver food pouch trembling in his grip. He shrugged. “No. Maybe. I do not know. I want justice for my people. I want freedom for those who live under the unjust rule of the Goa’uld.” He explained about the relationship between the symbiote and its host, the difference between the personalities of Goa’uld and Tok’ra, and the dependence of the Jaffa on the Goa’uld for their lives.

“Do I want to destroy them?” he continued, at war with himself. “That is a hard question, because it has no simple answer. I do not know how to kill all the Goa’uld without killing their hosts or causing the extinction of the Jaffa,” he admitted, “but if I could, I would do it. Definitely.” He sighed and shook his head, then made eye contact with Scout. “I do not know how the People feel about that, but if you are also at war, maybe you can understand.”

“We do,” agreed Scout with a nod. “Perhaps you might join us in our fight for freedom.”

Daniel shrugged. “I would need to know more first. I must speak with your elders and learn about you and your enemies before I make any decisions.” He’d learned many hard lessons over the last ten years, and had come to trust his instincts about aliens. These seemed like good people with values similar to his own, and if their tale of genocide were true, then it would be right to help them. If they had lied, he would eventually discover the truth.

“We not take war lightly,” Hunter warned him.

“Nor do I,” Daniel agreed. “I have been in battle many times, and have seen firsthand the horror and ugliness, all the suffering it causes.” Memories swept him away, his body remembering the smell of burned flesh and gunpowder, the sound of P90 and staff weapon fire, the fear and chaos that had set his heart pounding and his nerves on edge. He closed his eyes as a shadow of remembered agony gripped him in the seconds before ascension, then carried him back to the moment he’d handled the naquadria core that had killed him.

He’d cheated death over and over again in the last decade. He didn’t particularly want to live a long life now, anyway. His home was gone, as were his friends and family. He was rootless, a nomad who would never belong anywhere again.

“You have been wounded in battle,” observed Scout, his head tilting with curiosity, his expression gentle, respectful.

“Many times.” He lifted his weary gaze after a moment to Scout’s unusual amber eyes, then dug in the pouch for another bite of food he didn’t particularly want to eat.

“You must have been a great hero on your world,” said Jack into his right ear.

Daniel chuckled bitterly and shook his head. “No. Not really. I was rather a nobody.”

“Then your people must have had very high standards for heroism,” deduced Scout with a grin, “or else they were fools.” He gestured to his comrades, who began to pack away their refreshments. The Forest Clan leader turned back to his guest. "Come, friend. We will continue our journey.”

After several more hours of walking, Daniel knew he was utterly lost in the woods. He’d been buried in his thoughts for some time now, depending on his new friends to warn him of any danger and keep him safe. Daniel did his best to pay attention to where they were going, but his mind wandered during the long spans of quiet, tumbling over old memories, examining his life.

He’d improved his combat skills over the last decade, but had never really applied himself to truly developing his effectiveness in the field. He studied how these aliens moved and did his best to
emulate them, taking care to follow in Scout’s footsteps as closely as possible. His efforts didn’t go unnoticed, and as soon as Scout announced they had passed out of the territory of the predatory sadeesh, the air of silence and watchful tension lifted from the entire party.

“You are learning to walk well,” observed Claire from her perch in his pocket.

“Sometimes I am a little slow,” he whispered dryly. “Do you know how much further we have to travel? I did not quite understand the joke you all thought was so funny when I asked earlier.”

“You are not enjoying the journey?” Jack asked, a smile in his amplified voice as he buzzed near Daniel's ear. “I have not often visited Forest Clan. I find this place much more lovely than the rocky lands that are Sky Clan’s watch.”

“It is beautiful, yes,” agreed Daniel, “and this has been a pleasant trip – except for the nearly-being-eaten-or-trampled parts.”

He sighed, inhaling a deep breath filled with the scents of rich earth, thick greenery, damp and flowers. “So why do you not travel much? Why not live here with the Forest Clan, if you prefer the woods?”

Claire jiggled against him, shifting her position in his pocket. “Sky Clan watches the Wheel of Worlds. It is our sacred duty to all the People of Far Lands.”

“And you warn the others when visitors arrive? That would make your race the first line of defense.”


Scout chuckled, his rich voice floating over his shoulder. "Yes. Hope you never meet any of the Mountain Clan in battle, friend."

“You are alive only because the People allow it,” Claire assured him.

Those statements were made with such nonchalance, Daniel didn’t doubt their veracity. A little shiver of respectful fear shimmied up his spine, then faded away with Daniel's confidence in their friendship. “Um. Thank you. May I ask why you chose to let me live? Not that I am ungrateful, only curious.”

“An admirable trait,” declared Scout, “and the very reason why you are here. We wished to learn about you and your people. Like you, we are curious, and cannot abide a mystery. We had to know what you are.”

As a thought struck Daniel, he stopped in his tracks. “What happened to my teammates who were killed?”

“You walked in their ashes when you returned,” Scout told him, a touch of compassion in his voice. “We did not know the traditions of your race for the dead, so we honored them with ours, and mourned their loss as family.” He paused, turning to make eye contact, genuine sadness etched into his beautiful face.

Daniel choked up, a sudden rush of tears blurring his vision. He swallowed down his grief, blinking to clear his eyes. “Thank you,” he growled huskily.

He contemplated that, trying to imagine what it must have been like from the People's perspective
when SG-13 had come through the Stargate, and all the events afterward. Then another idea occurred to him. "Did others of my kind come through the Wheel of Worlds, searching for my team?"

"Yes," answered Claire from his pocket. "We were still studying your companions and the equipment left behind, so we hid your camp from them. The searchers found nothing, and left through the Wheel. We believe they did not know your friends were killed, or that you were taken. We were not ready to show ourselves to any of you, then. Perhaps we were in error in that decision, but it is done."

With a nod, Daniel agreed. The aliens had actually performed a valuable service by keeping the camp intact, because those supplies had given Daniel food, shelter, clothing, and survival gear he wouldn't have otherwise had. Considering the weakened state he'd had been in when he'd returned to that world, he might not have lived without their indirect assistance.

Still, all that was history now, and the SGC was gone. It would be best to concentrate on the matters at hand and leave the reminiscing to another time.

They traveled quietly until the golden shafts of sunlight cutting through the leaves of the massive trees surrounding them attained a long afternoon slant. Some of the trees were as lofty as sequoias, others broad and leafy, with huge trunks and gnarled roots and branches spreading a thick canopy above their heads. Daniel felt as if he’d suddenly stepped into a scene from Lord of the Rings, to a place peopled by alien fairies, dwarves and elves. There was something surreal about the experience, both magical and perfectly ordinary. Daniel had walked in hundreds of forests, traveled and talked with many aliens in the last decade of his life, and there was little about this trek that was any different from all those other missions, save the fact that he was the only human among them.

“We have arrived,” announced Scout, coming to a stop in the mossy landscape.

“Where?” Daniel glanced around them and saw nothing but forest.

Everyone else in the party had also halted.

Facing the expanse of woodland ahead of them, Scout held up his left hand, and the air seemed to ripple around his palm. Sun-dappled trees began to shimmer and fade before him, and after a moment, part of the forest landscape just ahead of their party vanished.

At first, what lay before them was so bright, Daniel was temporarily blinded. As his vision adjusted, he saw a twenty-foot ring cut into the forest floor, completely cleared of trees and vegetation, lit by the unbroken glow of late afternoon sunshine. Geometric shapes and symbols he didn’t recognize were scored onto the floor, and the circular pavement gleamed with what appeared to be precious metals and gems, glittering in the daylight.

The Forest Clan escort stepped onto the platform, heedless of the materials on which they walked. Hunter followed them, and the group turned to wait for Daniel. Even Claire extricated herself from his pocket and flew off to join them.

“Are you not coming?” she asked with a grin, flying backward so she could see him.

“Oh, yes, of course I am. Sorry.” He stepped onto the disk, unable to take his eyes off the design beneath his feet. "Are we really going to the other side of the world?" As he spoke, the golden disk under his boots promptly disappeared as he felt a suspiciously familiar tingle, something like the sensation that accompanied an Asgard transporter beam. The floor appeared to turn to silver,
the design repeated in a plain base metal that was no longer in the midst of the woods.

"We already have," Scout confirmed, a touch of wry humor in his resonant voice.

"Well, Toto," Daniel murmured aloud in English, strictly for his own amusement, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

Chapter 12: Shahr

August 30

Daniel glanced up from the circular platform, realizing that they had, indeed, been transported, out of the middle of the forest and into an enclosed space. He found himself inside an enormous dome, hundreds of feet high. The architecture was amazing, filled with artistic detail and organic embellishment. Earthy colors at the base of the walls became sky colors in the dome, filling the gigantic room with light.

If his new friends had told him correctly, their party was now standing on the other side of the planet.

He turned wide eyes to the others, now exiting the arrival platform, and spied a creature that Daniel could only assume was a member of the Mountain Clan, and quite obviously male.

This being was a giant in every sense of the word. Daniel guessed his height at somewhere around ten feet tall. Where Sky Clan were delicate in build, Forest were lean and Grass on the stocky side, this being was massively built, with a broad but benevolent face and thick, muscular limbs. He was dressed in a burgundy leather vest and loincloth, with red metal gauntlets on his forearms and fingerless gloves on his sturdy hands. Metallic greaves of dark burnt orange covered his hairy shins, but his feet were bare.

Long gunmetal-blue hair framed his dark brown face, and his eyes were steely gray. He smiled at Daniel, his expression filled with kindness. “Welcome to Shahr, first city of the People,” he rumbled, his voice a deep bass, as befitting his great size, but surprisingly gentle.

“Wow,” breathed Daniel, awestruck at the sights, both his surroundings, and the alien who had come to greet them. He gathered his wits and stepped right up to the big guy, the top of his head just about even with the giant's chest. “I’m pleased to meet you. My name is—”

“All the People know who you are,” the huge alien assured him with a kind smile. “The city has been preparing for your arrival for many days now.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

Scout, Hunter, and the three members of Sky Clan followed the Mountain Clan male, whom Daniel decided to call Denali, the Native American name for Mount McKinley. It meant "Great One," and this fellow was decidedly impressive.

The others of the Forest Clan dispersed through several arched doorways leading into brightly lit areas. Additional openings were darkened and quiet, still more leading out into what looked like busy urban streets. There must have been fifty different passages leading away from the arrival center.
Daniel watched some of the Forest Clan move away from them, while following his party toward a different destination. “Where are they going?” he asked no one in particular.

“Home,” replied Scout. “Their Hunt is finished. They have learned to live in harmony with the All, and thus have earned the right to live as adults. They may now choose mates and bear children. Those who have not yet fulfilled the Hunt may not.”

“It is a rite of passage,” Claire added, darting about his head. “All of the People must do this as they mature. It is necessary to spend time learning to survive without the aid of any of our tools, with only what they know, before they truly belong to their Clan. It is a living lesson of our history that we must never forget.”

Daniel pondered that information, comparing it to what Scout had told him in the forest, of how their enemies had relocated them to this world without provisions or technology. This was an echo of the far past, but he suspected the tradition had become much more than that now. The People used the experience not only to test their young’s knowledge of survival, but also to learn to be in harmony with nature, to observe and respect the rhythms of life in the wild.

An event of great tragedy had become a lesson in wisdom.

“What about those who don’t succeed?” he asked thoughtfully.

“The All takes them,” replied Hunter, his gravelly voice thick and rough with emotion. The little Grass Clan male kept his eyes straight ahead. His meaning was clear.

*Survive or die.* The lesson was a harsh one.

They approached one of the unlit arches and a soft amber glow illuminated the interior, which proved to be a small room.

Daniel realized suddenly that he couldn’t see outside, regardless of where he looked. There were no windows in sight, no breezes. He looked at Scout. “Are we underground? And really on the other side of the planet?”

“We are,” the Mountain Clan male answered with a slight nod of his head. Denali held up his left arm as if checking a watch, his thick fingers dancing over sparkly bits set into the metal gauntlets. Then he rotated his left hand palm-up and held it out toward Daniel.

Above the pad of Denali's fingerless glove, a holographic image of a planet appeared. A small green continent about the size of Australia sat in the southern hemisphere in a vast ocean, a long ridge of mountains curving up the northern coast past the equator and fading into a string of islands that disappeared over the top of the globe.

“Here is the Wheel of Worlds,” said the giant, touching a portion of the continent with his fingertip.

Instantly, the image zoomed in to show a tiny rocky landscape with the crystal-crowned Stargate and the long, straight road stretching away from it. Daniel could see the step-pyramid in the distance, ringed by the mountains that formed the northern coast. Not far from it, off to the west, he could see the location of the transporter pad they’d hiked through the woods to reach, glimmering with gold and jewels.

Denali grasped the image of the globe between two fingers and rotated it to show Daniel the other side of the planet. A second continent, twice the size of the first, connected to it through the island chain.
“Here is the city of Shahr,” the alien giant explained, touching the southern coastal mountains.

A map spread out from his fingertip beneath the illuminated surface of the hologram, expanding to an area so enormous Daniel’s eyes widened and his mouth formed a small “o” of surprise. The city of Shahr appeared to be the size of the entire state of California.

Daniel tried to swallow, his mouth suddenly dry. “Do you have other cities?” he asked.

With a smile and nod, Denali touched two other spots on the same continent. “This is Zhwahyu,” he said, pointing to another spot near the western polar cap, “and this—” His fingertip illuminated a small city on the northern coast that extended in long, wide spears beneath the ocean.

Claire zipped between Daniel and the hologram. “The elders are waiting,” she interrupted. She didn’t look too happy, either, her mouth drawn up tight, emerald eyes flashing up at the Mountain Clan guide.

Scout gently touched Denali’s arm with a warm smile. “Yes,” he agreed. “We should be on our way. There will be plenty of time for geography lessons later.”

“Of course.” The giant gave Daniel an apologetic smile and turned the projection off. He bowed a little. “This way,” he said politely, leading them into an anteroom.

Daniel glanced around the room for a moment before he realized they had stepped into another transporter. By the time he’d turned to face the doorway where they’d entered, the big domed room was gone. In its place was a darkened corridor, leading off to either side. Claire flew up to perch on the giant’s shoulder and gave Daniel a smile, staying right where she was. The rest of Sky Clan landed on a small shelf on the wall and took seats on a padded bench that seemed to be made just for them.

Mountain stood at parade rest, his wrists lightly clasped behind him, obviously not going anywhere.

“Come,” said Hunter, tugging on Daniel’s sleeve.

He followed the little alien to the left into the dark corridor. Hunter stepped into a small booth with a pillow on the floor, just his size.

Daniel started to follow him inside, but Hunter grasped a black curtain at the doorway and nodded to his right. “You next,” Hunter advised. Then he pulled the curtain closed between them with a jerk.

“This way,” Scout offered, easing past him in the hallway. He gestured into another small booth, where a larger cushion awaited. “Please sit here. When the council has assembled, we will speak with you.”

Daniel thanked him and sat down on the thick pad. He heard the curtain close behind him and Scout’s near-silent footsteps retreating further down the hallway. Daniel flinched as a red light passed over him in a precise grid. When it shut off, the booth plunged into complete darkness. An instant later, he appeared to be sitting in a room with a member of each of the Clans, easily recognizable by their build and coloring, but all miraculously the same height.

*Holograms,* he told himself, *to make everyone equal in this forum.*

He couldn’t help smiling at a six-foot-tall Hunter seated at his right.
Scout was seated to his left, and Daniel exchanged a glance between the two aliens he knew, smiling. “I’m honored to have traveled with two of the elders of the People,” he said with genuine pleasure.

“We welcome you, friend,” said the human-sized Sky Clan representative. She was the lone female in the group, a mane of pale green hair framing her delicate face, big turquoise eyes staring back at him. Daniel recognized her as one of the fairies in the tree when they had first approached him at the edge of the grasslands, and he had seen her again during his recovery after the sh’khan attack.

“I thank all of the People for the hospitality you have extended to me,” Daniel returned politely, shifting right into diplomat mode. “I would not have survived without your assistance. I owe the People my life.”

“Perhaps,” said Mountain with a shrug. Of all the People, this one showed his age far more than any of the others, with tiny lines around his mouth and eyes. His black hair was liberally streaked with silver, and there was significant wisdom in his rust-colored eyes. “You should know, friend, that much of what has happened to you here has been by design, to test your character.”

That was a little surprising. Had they somehow controlled the animals that had attacked? He considered that idea and measured his response. “What did you learn?”


“You are honest,” Sky observed. “You have not lied to us.”

“How would you know?” blurted Daniel, then almost wished he hadn’t said anything. Then again, that might have been the response they sought.

Scout’s amber eyes narrowed slightly. “As I told you, the People do not trust easily. We have gone to great lengths to study you, your reactions, your language, habits, and memories.”

“I haven’t really told you that much,” Daniel returned, resisting the urge to shrug, “and I could’ve been making things up.”

Mountain shook his broad head. “Long ago, we learned not to trust what we were told by those who claimed to be our friends. We learned to look deeper, and so we have seen the truth of who you are.” He waved a hand over the space in the center of the circle around which they sat, and another holographic scene appeared.

Daniel found himself looking down at an image of the device Ernest Littlefield had studied during the fifty years he’d been marooned after the first use of Earth’s Stargate in 1945. SG-1 and Catherine Langford, Ernest’s lost love, had rescued him from that planet, but Daniel had been sorely tempted to stay behind and study the machine. Only Jack’s friendship and counsel had brought him home safely.

The next image showed his first sight of the Asgard in the testing chamber on Cimmeria. Another showed Lya, one of the xenophobic Nox, smiling up at him. Every vision had been from Daniel’s point of view, as if they had been seen through Daniel’s own eyes, as if…

Daniel’s stomach clenched. “Those look like…” He cleared his throat and tried again. “Are those my memories?”

Hunter nodded, his expression sober. “Yes.”

“Ohmygod,” he whispered in English, bowing his head, covering his face with his palms. He
struggled to breathe, shocked and horrified beyond belief. These people had looked into his thoughts, into his mind! They might have seen everything, every dark moment, every unsavory memory, all the stupid, hateful things about himself that he believed or knew. They had the capability to view his most intimate moments, the experiences that he most treasured and feared. They could look at what he knew about humanity as a whole and make their own determinations, simply from what he had seen and heard as he had lived his life.

He lifted uncertain eyes to search their faces, dreading their reaction to this intimate knowledge of the human being in their midst. He had failed more often than he'd succeeded in almost everything he'd attempted, but he'd kept working, kept trying to make a difference. In the end, he'd failed spectacularly, because his world was now gone. His head and heart ached, and he put his head down for a moment in shame.

Daniel held his breath, mentally preparing himself for their reaction, and lifted his gaze to the holographic faces assembled around him. There was no judgment in the alien eyes cast upon him in curiosity, seeking only understanding and knowledge. Their expressions were kind and open, simply waiting for his response.

Sky Elder leaned forward, her mint-green eyebrows drawn together in confusion. “We find your people's concept of privacy interesting. You appear distressed that we have witnessed your past, yet we have found that you have lived an honorable existence. What is the purpose of keeping secrets, when so much of your time has been experienced and shared with others who have participated in it? Does that not make each life public?”

They thought he was honorable? After all they might have seen in his memories, they still welcomed him? Daniel was astonished. He pushed past the embarrassment he felt and tried to put his best diplomatic face forward, saving the self-recriminations for later.

“It is cultural, really,” he told them, keeping his tone of voice positive, upbeat. “There are many other Earth societies that do not embrace the idea of privacy to the same degree. Many others are much more open than mine.”

He wondered how much of his past they’d been privy to, what deeply personal details they might have seen. He decided he didn’t want to know. What had been done was done, and as they had said, the review of his life was educational material for them.

Lifting his chin, he made eye contact with Scout, seated to his left. “I take it these tests, whatever they were, have helped the elders come to a decision about me?” He was hurt, embarrassed, angry.

“They have,” declared the Forest elder. “You will be welcome among us as an equal, a full citizen of Shahr. We will teach you our languages and customs as you wish, and give you access to our library of knowledge. We ask only that you contribute what you can, that you and your people might be remembered.”

A sudden rush of gratitude filled Daniel, chasing away his doubt and embarrassment. “I would be honored,” he told them with pleasure. He wanted that monument to his people and their rich history, and if he were the last remaining source of information, he’d gladly give them everything he knew.

“Then there is only one matter left to address,” stated Sky, her expression suddenly shuttering closed. “Something of prime importance to the People. We have seen in your memories the destruction of the Asgard by their own hands.”

Daniel started slightly in surprise. "You know the Asgard?"
Mountain nodded. "Long ago."

Looking down at his lap, Daniel played with his fingers as a wave of subdued grief pulled at him, the destruction of the Asgard home world reminding him of the sight of Earth being blown apart in similar fashion. "Yes. They faced evolutionary extinction and chose to engineer their own end, rather than die out slowly. They chose to leave the legacy of their technology to us, along with a history of their culture. It covered millions of years, far more than we might have studied in our lifetimes. I was in the process of researching it, when I could spare the time."

He sighed and shook his head, drowning in sorrow. "All that may be lost along with the rest of my world. I do not know."

Scout’s handsome face darkened and Daniel saw a similar reaction in the other elders’ expressions. A tingle of intuition crept across the nape of his neck. "May I ask why you want to know about the Asgard?"

“We wished to know if there was mention of the People in their history.” Mountain’s eyes were cool, glittering with leashed anger.

Warning shimmied with cool fingers up Daniel’s spine. "Not that I know. They never mentioned ‘the People’ and I heard no reference to the history the Forest elder told me in the woods.” He simply couldn’t believe the Asgard could have participated in such a ruthless extermination of any race as these people had suffered in their past.

Hunter expelled a weary sigh and shook his head, sadness in his gaze as he eyed the other elders. "We are forgotten."

“What of the Ancients?” asked Sky. “And the Nox?”

The question, and the frigid tone of voice with which it had been asked, made gooseflesh rise on Daniel’s forearms and nape. "The Nox keep to themselves and have had little dealings with us, because they think we are too primitive and violent. The Ancients…"

He felt a little shiver run through his body. "A plague struck them long ago, and no colony was left untouched, even in other galaxies. They either died or ascended. We do not know exactly when the last colony on other planets disappeared, but on Earth, the Ancients vanished a million years ago, as we measure time. We suspect the last of them may have met their fate several thousand of our years earlier."

At this news, astonished looks flashed all around the circle, and the elders began talking in their own dialects, none of which Daniel understood. Voices rose in pitch and volume until everyone was shouting. Hands sliced through the air. Fists were raised and shaken.

Finally the furor died down to utter silence. Defeat and hopelessness was written on every sad, shocked face.

“Plague?” asked Hunter, his voice calm now, touched with sorrow. “Ancients all dead? All?”

Daniel shook his head. “Some ascended to a higher plane of existence,” Daniel reiterated. “They exist without physical bodies, as pure energy, in a state of enlightenment. They have strict rules against interfering with those on the mortal plane.”

“Enlightenment. Bah!” Hunter shook his head, frowning. “Ancients not capable of this.”

Daniel frowned, considering, and then deciding on full disclosure, since they might have recorded
other memories of his, ones he couldn’t reach on his own. “I speak from first-hand knowledge, since I was among them for a time. There was an accident.” He swallowed hard, pushing past his memory of the reactor overload on Kelowna and the agony that had followed. “I was dying, and one of the Ancients had been watching me. She showed me how to ascend.”

Every eye was fixed on him. No one moved or spoke. The aliens’ collective astonishment was palpable.

Daniel sighed, fiddling with his hands again. “I remember none of that time, not whether it was my choice to return to mortal form, or if the Ancients exiled me.” He shrugged. “Later, I made a second attempt at ascension, which was obviously not successful, but I suspect that was my last chance to become one of them. I am at peace with this.”

He searched the faces of the elders for some sign of how that confession had been received.

Scout gazed down at the center of the circle, which Daniel guessed was actually some kind of control panel. He manipulated the holographic display and the image of Daniel's first ascension materialized, seen through the bandages wrapped around his head as his body collapsed, surrounded by the faces of his friends. The Forest elder watched as the view was blotted out by a brilliant white light when the soul of Daniel Jackson floated up into the air, then crashed what appeared to be moments later onto mossy, soft earth in the form of a naked, shivering man.

Daniel glanced away, wishing he hadn't seen even that much of the images stolen from his mind. He was mortified, horrified, a sense of violation seeping through him, making him feel utterly naked and vulnerable. He struggled to remind himself of the importance of remaining in the moment, concentrating on the matters at hand. There would be time to experience the emotional repercussions of this mind-rape later.

Sky sighed, speaking to the other elders, but in the language of the Ancients for Daniel’s benefit. “This explains why he seemed more advanced than those who came with him, but marked him as more primitive, different from the First.”

“The First?” asked Daniel. They were talking about him, and he needed to pay attention, especially since they were often cryptic in their speech.

She nodded. “In the long-ago, two races met when they came to this galaxy to explore. The Asgard were the oldest race, travelers and mapmakers. The Second, Antquietas, were also very old. They built colonies and began to settle on many worlds. They met many other alien races during their exploration of the galaxy, but none who were close to them in development, not until they discovered the People.

“We were a young race then, brilliant and vibrant, full of promise, already living on many, many worlds and traveling among the stars. We introduced the Nox to the others, and an alliance of four great races was born.”

Mountain took up the narrative. "The Ancients gathered representatives of the four Clans from the many worlds we had settled, taking only a fraction of our numbers under the ruse of friendship. Their attack on our colonies was swift, executed with precision at the same moment all through the galaxy. We had no warning, no chance to fight back and, once the destruction was complete, a few survivors were sent here through the Wheel to bear witness to the others, as a warning. We were not to attempt escape from this world, and so we have been forced to remain here in exile."

"We know the Nox did not participate in the war because they were pacifists, and violence was not their way," added Scout. "We are not as certain about the Asgard, but they did not come to our aid, and so both races bear some responsibility by default for our imprisonment."
In that moment, everything clicked into terrible place in Daniel’s mind. He was horrified by what he was thinking, hoping he was wrong. His stomach rolled. “In your languages, what is the word for ‘the People?’” he asked thickly, his throat constricting.

"Same in all Clan tongues. People of Far Lands." Hunter’s chin tipped up proudly. "Furlings."

Daniel flinched as if he’d been struck. He bowed his head in grief, trying to get a grip on both his emotions and his thoughts. His eyes pricked with tears, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, struggling to make sense of this mess. Finally, he sighed and made eye contact with Sky.

“The Asgard were never comfortable talking to us about the Furlings,” he told them, looking at them one by one. “The Nox told us nothing about anything. And the Ancients… Perhaps you are the reason why they now refuse to interfere with other cultures. Perhaps they felt guilty about what they had done to your ancestors.” He shook his head, still failing to grasp the enormity of what had happened to these people, his mind and heart reeling.

“All I can tell you is that we were told the Furlings existed. We were never able to find any trace of you except in two places: one we called Heliopolis, which you saw in my memories. There were four languages written on the walls of a great meeting place, but the building crumbled into the sea, taking the language translator with it. The other place was a world where my people found Furling writing in some ruins, inviting others to come to their utopian paradise. The only remains found were human and Goa’uld, and they had all been dead for some time."

The aliens were all staring at the floor, stunned defeat and unimaginable loss written on their faces.

“Our enemies are gone,” observed Mountain. “Only the Nox remain. Perhaps they can tell us why the others turned against us. It is something we must know.”

"The Nox have buried their Stargate,” Daniel informed them sadly, also needing to understand why the Furlings had been condemned to this place, hunted down and destroyed by the other races. It made no sense to him. There had to be something he was overlooking, something really important. Maybe the Nox had the answers.

"We have tried to contact them by sending a ship to their world, but they can make themselves invisible. They would not speak with us.” Daniel studied the shocked, angry faces surrounding him. "They might not with you, either. They might be afraid of you."

"We would not harm them," snapped Sky. "There is no honor in fighting cowards."

“No justice,” agreed Hunter.

“The Third Race,” murmured Daniel, studying their alien, almost-human faces. He sympathized with them easily, understanding their grief and loss, but found a sense of wonder forming in his heart.

He’d found the Furlings!

Then he remembered something else.

Number Three.

The scanner in the pillar at the Stargate only operated when dialing out. The portable DHD had a lock in place for Number Three – the Third Race, preventing them from leaving the planet.
“They meant this world to be your prison.”

Scout straightened his shoulders and lifted his head, his mouth pressed into a firm, angry line as he composed his thoughts. “We were never told what crime we had committed. We were simply relocated here or killed.”

Hunter’s purple eyes gleamed intently, his gravelly voice deeper, darker. “People innocent then. Trusted too easily. But lesson not wasted. We learned.”

Daniel wondered if this tale were a hundred percent truthful, or engineered to engage his sympathy. It might also have changed over eons of retelling, embroidering upon reality with drama that might eventually have been considered fact. He had no way to know how much was history and how much was fiction.

Then again, a truly advanced race would have had more than one way off this rock.

“Do you not have spacecraft?” he asked. “You could have built ships to return to your travels and find the Ancients. The Stargate is not the only way to explore.”

Scout passed a hand over the holograph control and brought up a view of the planet in the center of their circle. Completely encompassing the globe were scores of tiny, brilliant dots glittering with light.

Daniel remembered Captain Hailey, shortly after their SG team had first arrived, pointing them out in the sky, reflecting the morning sunshine.

“We cannot launch any such craft until the Hub releases the Wheel of Worlds. To do so would be to destroy the ships and those who pilot them. We have already tried.”

“The Hub?”

“The Ancient device you carry,” explained Mountain quietly, his deep voice rumbling. “You can operate it. We cannot.”

“You have earned our trust, friend,” said Scout with a gleam of joy in his amber eyes. “Now it remains for us to earn yours. If we succeed, perhaps you may choose to release us from our prison.” His expression grew sober, uncertain. “If we do not, then perhaps the others were right to lock us away.”

Daniel wondered how this race could make such a judgment about themselves. He thought he might have found a truly honorable, noble people here, and felt privileged to be among them.

Scout’s somber expression melted into a tiny, hopeful smile, respect and a little wonder gleaming in his amber eyes. He extended both hands toward Daniel, palm down, then palm up, as if to show that he was unarmed. “My true name,” he intoned with great formality, “is el-Mikha.”

Sky made the same gesture. “My name is el-Riel.”

“el-Rafa,” said Mountain.

Hunter chuckled. “el-Ur, honored guest. Welcome to Shahr.”

Daniel felt a lump forming in his throat. He thought he should say something weighty and important, but nothing came to mind. “Thank you, friends. You have made me feel at home.” He guessed the hand gestures they had all made were similar to a handshake among his people, meant
to reassure, and so he repeated the sign to each of them.

Everyone was smiling now, a sense of relief lightening the mood in the council chamber.

“I have questions,” Daniel said, leaning forward eagerly. “There is so much I need to know.”

“In time,” el-Ur advised with a paternal grin. “For now, you rest, eat, sleep. Then you learn.”

Glancing down at his dirty clothes, Daniel sniffed, his skin prickling with dirt and sweat. “A bath and clean clothes would be nice.”

“Such comforts are easy to provide and already await you,” Scout assured him. “Come. We will see a little of the city on the way to your new home. Whenever you are ready, you are free to explore. Nothing will be beyond your access.”

Daniel was stunned. Such wide-open acceptance was unheard-of in his world. “Thank you. I’m eager to learn about all the People. I have been for a very long time.”

One by one, the holographic images of the elders winked out and subdued lighting came on in the booth where Daniel sat, trying to take in this turn of events and fully grasp what had just happened.

Smiling, Scout opened the curtain and led him and Hunter back to the transporter room, where their Mountain escort and Claire still waited for him. An instant later, they stepped out into a busy metropolitan street, with the city stretching out in all directions from them. Passages were filled with lithe Forest Clan and Grass Clan, with Mountain giants stepping carefully around them. Sky Clan zoomed about in their flight gear above everyone else’s heads, most in plain clothes and piloting various types of flying machines.

There were young and old, children and adults, as far as he could see. In many ways, Shahr resembled other cities he’d seen, with buildings, people, potted flowers, shops and markets everywhere, but there also was a sense of serenity here that he’d never before experienced.

Shahr also had features that set it apart from every other urban center Daniel had visited. There were no animals in sight -- no pets on leashes, no livestock, no working or service animals. The city was entirely underground, level upon level in staggered terraces, stretching up, down and away in every direction. Buildings weren’t just functional definitions of space; they were individual works of art, painted and carved right out of the living stone of the planet with breathtaking embellishments and decoration. Great rock arms and arches reached out in massive shapes of trees, gigantic representations of various Clan members, and soaring birds or beasts. Even the walkways beneath their feet were gloriously paved with mosaics. Balconies made of gem-encrusted metals connected levels or lined terraces. Intricately patterned grates and bridges were placed above flowing streams contained in canals of various sizes, some flowing into waterfalls that provided a soft white-noise background to the burble of voices all around him.

Sometimes Daniel was so dumbstruck he stopped walking, just staring at some magnificent detail he encountered. His eyes were wide with wonder, his mouth hanging open, his breathing shallow and halting as his gaze cast all around, and then he would force himself to keep moving, following his guides. He wanted to explore, to touch and talk and listen, but he was also exhausted and hungry. He’d need to rest before he could fully appreciate this beautiful place.

Daniel felt as if he were walking down the golden streets of Heaven itself.

They rounded a corner and stepped into a small courtyard, clean and open, the stone floor decorated with gold and silver swirls that reminded Daniel of stylized symbols of air currents used
in many ancient Earth cultures. A waterfall flowed over the edge of a balcony above the roof of a small building set apart from everything else by sheltered walkways. The upper balcony was upheld by a tall statue of a Sky Clan female, head bowed gracefully, arms holding up the stone channel of the waterway, reminding Daniel of ancient Greek columns. The fairy's body was set as the corner pillar for the building, and the wings were made of iridescent glass, providing windows for the dwelling. At the statue's feet, the walkway curved around and out of sight, forming an inset balcony beneath the overhanging level, under the streaming fall.

A notched gothic archway was set into the stone wall toward the back, away from the damp spray.

Daniel realized there were no doors on any of the buildings he’d seen; not a single door anywhere in the city. Everyone had access to everyone else. That spoke of a remarkable level of trust among their society, as well as an utter lack of privacy.

Scout gestured to the opening. “These rooms are yours. There is clean clothing made especially for you inside, and fresh food. Nari will stay with you to see to your needs.”

“Nari? Why do some names have the prefix ‘el’ and others do not?”

"El is our word for the All," explained Scout. "Only those whose lives are lived in direct service to the All add the prefix to their names, as a reminder that we are here to serve." The Forest elder gave him a polite half-bow.

"Like priests and priestesses?"

Scout chuckled. "Not as you know them, no. We are something quite different. There is no direct translation that we have found in your language, or that of the Ancients that we now use. Perhaps one day, you will understand, but for now, you must rest."

Claire did an aerial pirouette two feet from his face. “You may continue to call me by your honored mother’s name, if you wish, but my true name is Nari.” She sped away into the apartment, and the lights came on as she entered.

“Thank you,” said Daniel to no one in particular, everyone surrounding him as he strolled into a spacious sitting room in his new apartment. Many furnishings were carved directly out of the rock in a clean, simple arrangement. Fabrics were sumptuous and soft-looking, and the view out the fairy-wing windows was peaceful and relaxing.

The others who had been traveling with him offered gracious bows at the doorway and then left, all except Claire.

“Come,” she said brightly. “I will show you the rest of your new home.”

On to the Next Chapter
Chapter Summary

Daniel returns to Alpha to introduce his new friends. Jack visits their homeworld for a formal introduction before allowing them to have Daniel back to continue his research.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13: Reunion

October 27

Two Months Later

The city of Shahr was as exciting to Daniel as it was beautiful. With his growing grasp of the various Furling dialects, he had graduated from traveling with Claire as his guide and translator to exploring alone, seeking out anything and everything of interest. The shops, which boasted abundant wares, fascinated him. He visited schools filled with bright, well-behaved children eager to learn. Temples were filled with believers who followed a single religion. Galleries dazzled him with art beyond imagining. Performances of music, dance, and theater left him overwhelmed. His life was rich and full, and he fell headlong in love with Furling culture.

Some parts, however, were a little harder for him to bear.

All two billion Furlings were closely monitored, their movements tracked by genetically engineered bio-markers implanted at birth. Mental health screenings were provided routinely, and those who presented a danger to themselves or others were withdrawn from society and treated until they were stable. Each citizen’s life experiences were scanned daily, and Daniel was no exception. Automated memory recorders were built into sleeping areas, and all mental activity was logged as individuals slept.

As the council of elders had told him, there was no true privacy for anyone, nor any expectation of it. Every life was a public matter, every thought potentially common knowledge. That bothered him a great deal, but the Furlings believed it provided a greater good to the community, ensuring safety of the citizens and increasing the knowledge base at the same time. Daniel understood the value the People placed in the practice and accepted that he didn’t have a choice in the matter.

He made daily visits to the central library to study their history, verifying the stories he’d been told by examining the Furlings’ oldest artifacts from the beginning of their exile on the planet they called Furdani. The text had been chiseled into ancient stone panels now housed in a special display room, written in each of the languages of the Four Races. Daniel’s fluency in both Ancient and Asgard told him the tale in excruciating detail.

On the same morning he finished the translation, he took a walk to clear his head, letting his gaze roam around the various priceless objects in the museum. Wandering from room to room, he found
other tidbits of the Furlings’ past, including some more recent items.

He let his thoughts drift, just looking at the wondrous bits of alien history, until he came to large glass case. Inside it were five familiar uniforms in various shades of drab greens and browns. One was flattened and arranged in pieces. Another clothed a human-shaped manikin made of unpainted clay. The other three were in neatly folded stacks, all of them bearing bloodstains now dried into brown crusts. Alongside them, a holographic display showed a three-dimensional DNA helix that looked sickeningly familiar.

Daniel recognized the BDUs of the team that had escorted him to the planet, including a cast-off one of his own uniforms. As far as he could tell, every piece of their personal equipment was present, except for the stores that had been left at the campsite and what he’d taken on his journey in the mule. His stomach tightened as he studied at the clothes, reading the nametapes of each of his dead teammates: Dixon, Bosworth, Satterfield...

Then his gaze landed on Hailey's tactical vest.

Her radio was still there, still intact.

Resting beside it in the display was her GDO.

*He could go home!*

Struggling to contain his excitement, he touched a communication device he wore over his left ear – standard issue for every Furling citizen – and requested contact with Scout.

A moment later, the Forest Clan elder’s voice came through the tiny amplifier, speaking in newly acquired English, flavored with an elegant Furling accent.

“Greetings, my friend. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking at a display in the library,” Daniel said, trying to contain his excitement, “and I'd like to borrow a couple of things from it. If I can do that, I'll also need transportation to the Stargate. I may be able to contact some of the survivors of my world at an outpost we maintained. The Stargate there is protected, and they have to know who's coming before they'll allow visitors to enter.”

He took a long, deep breath, as the momentous impact of his own words reverberated inside him. “I want to go home, Scout. I want to see my people, if they're still alive.”

There was a pause, during which Daniel fleetingly wondered if the Furlings might not want him to leave.

“I will have the library master retrieve the items for you,” the elder returned graciously. “Then I will meet you at your home to help you pack whatever you wish to take with you.”

Daniel wilted a little with relief. "Thank you. I can't tell you how much this means to me."

"I would imagine it is *the* most important thing to you," his friend returned with a smile in his voice, "as it should be. They will be pleased to see you, yes?"

"Yes," Daniel agreed. "Very much. And I'll be happy to see them, too."

Half an hour later, Daniel was back at home searching through his gear, choosing what he might need to take with him, and placing only the most important things into a rucksack he normally used
for shopping. His hands were shaking as he slipped the last item into the bag.

Pausing for a moment in his haste, he ran through a mental list of items and made sure he had everything he'd need. His heart pounding and mouth dry, he checked the precious GDO unit for at least the twentieth time, patting it where he had it strapped to his wrist beneath his sleeve. Instinctively, he reached up to his left shoulder to fondle the SGC-issue radio, now fastened to his black cloak.

When he was sure he hadn't forgotten anything, he turned to face Scout, who had been watching him from his easy slouch against the bedroom doorjamb.

“I think that's everything I'll need for a few days,” Daniel told him with a nervous smile.

The Forest elder tilted his head, arms crossed over his chest. “You have forgotten the most important item,” he remarked with a nod toward the nightstand by Daniel’s bed. “You must take the Hub with you. It is of no use to us.”

“Oh. Of course. Thanks.” Daniel was rattled; his T-shirt was sticking to his back and armpits, and his face was sweating. The apartment was temperate, but he was nervous as hell, excited about seeing other human faces for the first time in months.

He picked up the portable DHD and started to tuck it away. Then his thoughts screeched to a halt and he studied the small round device in his hands, realizing how terribly important it was to those he'd be leaving behind, the alien race who had become his friends. He lifted his gaze to Scout's, hoping for understanding.

“It is not a requirement that you release the lock for the People,” Scout assured him, lifting his chin proudly. “We will allow you to leave this world whenever you choose, and will welcome you back as our friend, even without the promise of our freedom. There is no obligation here.” He smiled, his expression sad but genuinely warm.

That admission made Daniel feel a little guilty. He had the power to unlock the ‘gate and set the Furlings free, but he hadn’t come to a decision yet whether it was the right thing to do. He still had serious questions, and needed more time to consider reasons why they might have been exiled here by the Ancients. The Furlings' generosity and kindness toward him could still be a ploy, part of a trap they might spring at the last moment, making him a prisoner rather than a guest. He just wasn’t sure, not so much because of anything they had or hadn’t done; mostly he wasn’t sure of himself.

He'd been through a lot recently, and he was aware that his judgment might be skewed in their favor, considering he’d been homeless, and they’d taken him in. He’d rather be safe than sorry and needed to keep digging into their culture and history, to be sure his decisions were rational before he unlocked the Stargate for the People to travel to other worlds. It would be a momentous decision with enormous ramifications for everyone involved, and he needed to take his time, be sure of himself and of the Furlings.

Daniel kept his opinions and uncertainties to himself as he shouldered his pack and checked the radio and GDO yet again.

“Come,” Scout offered with a smile. "I will escort you to the Wheel. This time, your journey will be shorter than the one that brought you to Shahr.”

"Oh?” Daniel followed the Forest elder out into the courtyard with a brief backward glance at his apartment.
"When you first arrived, we could have brought you right to the city," Scout explained, "but we did not know who you were or if you meant us harm. We took the long way because we wished to learn more about you. Now we have no such need for caution, and you are in a hurry to return home. I will escort you directly to the Wheel."

It was a short walk to the transporter nearest Daniel’s apartment. Moments later, they stood at the pillar beside the Stargate, the portable DHD in Daniel's hand. Then he lifted his wary gaze to meet the elder’s amber eyes.

There was heartbreaking sadness in that alien face. Scout bravely lifted his chin and offered a warm smile with his farewell. “Good journey, friend.” He stepped away, hands clasped behind his back, moving well behind the stone pillar. “I cannot approach closer, or I will be incinerated when the Wheel activates.”

Daniel’s mouth dropped open at that revelation, and he turned to look at the Stargate, anger at the Ancients simmering in the pit of his belly. So that was the purpose of the crystal crown around the device! If the scanner in the pillar detected one of the Third Race in proximity to an outgoing wormhole, he’d be destroyed.


Then Daniel turned to the matter at hand. Ever the scientist, he had to check his theory that the small device was a lock on the Stargate. He dialed the Alpha site with the full-sized DHD, but the great wheel didn’t spin. Absolutely nothing happened.

Using the glyphs on the portable dialing device, Daniel dialed Alpha again, with the same results. Even though he’d been miles away when he’d explored the PDHD two months earlier, the small device in his hands overrode the larger one completely, as he’d suspected. As he'd sat under that tree in the grasslands, Daniel had locked the Stargate completely to all travelers. Now he had to unlock it, so he could leave the new Furling homeworld.

Daniel entered the proper user ID and password that Sam had set up as a safeguard against Ba'al. Since he didn't know how to adjust the device to only allow humans to pass through the Furdani ‘gate, he reset the coding to lock out ‘Number Three,’ and cleared access to all others.

When he'd reset the PDHD, Daniel dialed the Alpha colony on the portable device and pushed the blue button to engage it. The Stargate began to spin and the chevrons engaged. A mass of quantum particles emitted by the generator inside the wheel shimmered and exploded violently into the familiar *kawoosh*, then settled into a calmly rippling event horizon.

At that moment, the scanner’s sensors traced over everything within range of the ‘gate. The green beam continued to flash over the area as Daniel stepped up to the ring and slipped the PDHD into the bottom of his rucksack.

He pushed up the sleeve of his tunic and entered the last ID code from his temporary assignment with SG-13 on the GDO. Then he activated the transmission button on his radio and spoke into the microphone. “This is Daniel Jackson, requesting ID verification and authorization to enter Alpha base,” he called, his voice tight, stomach tied in knots. He didn’t even know if they were still there,
or if that planet had been blown out of the sky, too.

He glanced at Scout, now easing out from behind the sheltering pillar, but keeping well out of range of the scanner’s green rays. The Forest elder's expression was wary, but as he made eye contact with Daniel, he gave a small, reassuring smile and encouraging nod.

For a moment, there was only silence. Then a familiar voice sounded from the radio speaker on his shoulder. “Daniel? Where the hell have you been?”

For a moment, Daniel couldn’t breathe or blink. He stared at the wormhole, thinking he had to be hearing things, but there was no mistaking that voice. He gripped the radio harder. “Jack?”

“Get your ass through the ‘gate, Jackson!” General O’Neill barked gruffly. “You got some ‘splainin’ to do.” Pause. “And welcome home, buddy.” His last phrase was spoken softly, with husky warmth.

As joy and relief surged through Daniel, he offered Scout a smile and a wave goodbye as he headed for the wormhole. Soon, his molecules were sliding through the tunnel at faster-than-light speed.

The smaller embarkation room on Alpha featured a control room on the same level as the ‘gate, and a handful of Marines SFs were on duty. Every face Daniel saw was filled with shock and disbelief, quickly followed by smiles and cheers for one of their own coming home.

Seconds after his feet left the ramp, Jack plowed through the open blast door, his dark eyes fierce, his step purposeful and not slowing down in the least as he approached. His body slammed against Daniel’s, arms wrapping about his shoulders and almost lifting him off the floor. Jack buried his face against Daniel’s neck, one hand fisted in his long black cloak, holding on tightly, the other clasping the back of his head.

“God, Daniel,” he whispered shakily. “I thought you were dead!” Jack’s bear hug barely let him breathe. When he pulled away a moment later, Jack was grinning hugely, an uncharacteristic glaze of tears glistening in his eyes.

Daniel was smiling from ear to ear. "Jack! You're alive! All this time, I thought you were gone." Then his fragile hold on celebration began to slip toward grief, and he could see in Jack's eyes that his friend realized it.

"C'mon," Jack growled, grabbing him by the sleeve. "Conference room. You remember where it is, right?"

Just a nod was all Daniel could muster in the way of response. Still trying to get a grip on himself, Daniel let Jack haul him away from the ‘gate, down the corridor and into a small conference room.

Once the door was closed, and he squared off with his old friend, Daniel found his memory of Earth fragmenting in flame and debris in those familiar dark eyes. He couldn’t stop the tears, sobbing as Jack took him into his arms again.

“It’s okay,” Jack murmured, patting his shoulder. “We’re safe. We made it.”

The image of Zeus’s smirking face swallowed up Daniel's nightmare remembrance of the death of their world. Daniel took a step back, hands curling into fists at his sides. Grief morphed into rage as he snarled, “Safe? How can you say that, Jack? Nobody is safe! Zeus destroyed Earth, and as long as he's still out there—”
Jack held up a cautionary hand, then put it on Daniel's shoulder, giving him a little shake, his brows twitching down in confusion. "Whoa, hold on there, hotshot! Zeus? As in, the guy with the lightning bolts?"

"He's a Goa'uld," snapped Daniel. "He made me—" His voice broke, and Daniel sucked back a sob as his fragile grip on his emotions gave way. He shoved the next trembling words out of his mouth with all his heartbreak and loss, unable to see through the watery veil of his tears, panting with soul-deep agony. "He... he made me watch, Jack! Couldn't—"

Daniel turned away, tottering a few steps toward the table and resting his palms on the flat surface, trying to steady himself, to wrangle a little more self-control. He struggled to breathe. "Couldn't stop him. I failed. Failed all of Earth. Failed everyone."

"My God! You saw it happen?" The shock in Jack's voice was palpable.

A small wad of tissues appeared in front of Daniel's face, and he took them gratefully, blowing his nose and sniffling until the emotional rush subsided. "Thanks for getting me out of the 'gate room so fast," he said quietly, voice still shaky. "I thought I had all my crying done months ago. Guess not."]

Jack perched one hip on the edge of the table, studying his friend. "I doubt that's something you'll ever get over, Danny," he said gently. "We didn't know for sure... exactly what happened. We found out afterward. **Odyssey** came back from Atlantis and found a debris field where the planet ought to be."

Daniel nodded, dabbing at his nose again with the soaked tissues and gratefully accepting a fresh one from his friend. He pushed the images away and concentrated on the words. He could deal with the words. "Weren't you supposed to be in DC?"

"Was," Jack returned, nodding. "Came here with a couple of other folks from the SGC and the Pentagon, then couldn't get back. Doc Lam is here. Siler. Walter. A few more you know."

Daniel almost couldn't bring himself to ask, but he had to know. "Who?"

"No one from SG-1 besides you, that we know of," said Jack with a shake of his head. "Carter was supposed to go to Atlantis, but--" He sighed and shook off the moment of silent grief. After a deep breath, he gave Daniel a fixed, plastic smile. "We're makin' do with what we've got. I think we're gonna be okay."

A ridiculous thought appeared in Daniel's mind. He lifted his head and made eye contact. "Does that mean you're... Ohmygod, who's in charge here, Jack?"

O'Neill's eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "Well..."

"Doomed!" said Daniel, throwing up his hands in mock horror and resignation. "We're all doomed. Jack O'Neill is the President!"

"Ranking officer, not President. And there will be elections. Eventually," Jack quipped, pretending wounded pride.

Daniel was thrilled to have the chance to play their familiar game again. He lost his composure and the deadpan look he'd been trying to maintain started to slip, easing into a tiny smile. He gave his friend's shoulder a playful, hesitant little punch. "I've missed you, Jack." He sighed as he let go. "I suppose you have a lot of questions?" he asked, finally sitting in one of the chairs.
Jack took his place in another and leaned his elbows on the table. “No, just the one. Where ya been? I came to Alpha on such short notice, I didn't know the status of any of the teams in the field.”

“I've been on P9X-1017,” Daniel shot back. “Mostly, anyway. I was kidnapped from there and spent some time on a space ship. When I escaped, that was the only place I could think to go where Zeus wouldn't look for me.”

“And he didn’t, I take it?” asked Jack.


“Oh? Little and furry?” Jack's head tipped back in that familiar, clueless look.

“Well, not furry. Some are little. Others, not so much.”

“Well. It was just a guess.”

They continued their casual debriefing until Jack’s stomach rumbled, then headed to the commissary for a meal, which Jack ordered specially from the base stores. When they finished eating, Jack took Daniel to the infirmary for a thorough check-up by Doctor Lam, then to a Quonset hut divided up into guest quarters, where Jack got him settled, promising to finish catching up in the morning.

Preparing for bed, Daniel unpacked his things, all but one item.

He sat on the side of his military cot with his rucksack in his hands, not daring to bring the PDHD out into view. He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t told Jack about it yet, what it did or why the Furlings needed it – and him – to return, but he thought it best to be cautious.

Jack had explained in some detail how, since Earth was gone, this place was now home base for all the displaced humans from the SGC. Alpha was under martial law, governed by the military with a council of civilian advisors representing each of the various international contingents and academic departments, with Jack commanding.

While military leadership was probably necessary until the colony was well established and the populace fully recovered from the loss of Earth, it wasn't an ideal situation for commencing diplomatic relations with the Furlings. Daniel trusted Jack as a person, but the military had far different objectives than civilians. He and Jack had butted heads on many occasions when they were teammates, and Daniel had defied his direct orders more than once. That might not go over so well in this environment, and Daniel wanted to get the lay of the land before he gave Jack enough rope to hang him.

He slid the rucksack under his cot and began undressing for bed, taking care that the Ancients’ device remained safely out of sight.

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Chapter 14: Alpha

September 13

The Next Day
After so many nights in his comfortable bed in Shahr, Daniel found sleeping on a hard military cot difficult, so he rose early for a leisurely early breakfast with Jack at the commissary.

When they'd finished, the two men adjourned to a private conference room, where there was a small table and chairs. At one end of the seating arrangement, a tripod with a digital video camera had been set up.

Daniel's heart sank as he realized what would be taking place; a formal debriefing would be put on record for posterity, and he would have to relive the death of Earth in gut-wrenching detail. He fully expected to be thoroughly questioned about the part he'd played in the tragedy. For the moment, this was just a mission report; it could be much more than that later.

The weight of responsibility for Earth's destruction was heavy on his conscience and heart, but in Daniel's mind there could be no more severe penalty lodged against him than having been witness to the event. He had refused to cooperate with a Goa'uld, unaware of the great cost for that rebellion until it was too late; even if he had given Zeus what he'd wanted, there had been no guarantee that decision would have saved Earth.

A military body might later make a determination of his guilt or innocence. Jack was his friend and would believe what Daniel told him, but this business was as serious as it could get, and Jack might not be the only person to decide his fate. Things were different now, and there was no forecasting how this news might be taken by those now responsible for the fate of the remains of Earth societies.

He watched fondly as Jack placed a box of tissues on the middle of the table, anticipating how difficult this would be. He gave his friend a broken smile and sat down with a sigh. "Whenever you're ready," he murmured as he folded his hands on the table.

Jack turned on the recorder himself and began asking questions, which Daniel answered at length and in as much detail as he could recall, taking care to leave nothing out. Once he was finished with his narrative, he'd described up to the point where he'd returned to P9X-1017 as a fugitive, just trying to survive, emotionally ravaged and mentally fogged. Somehow, Daniel had managed to get through the tale without breaking down, but there had been several times when he'd had to stop and take a few deep breaths, gathering his emotions and then suppressing them, in order to continue.

"That's enough for now," Jack told him gently, patting his arm on the table between them. He reached over to turn off the video recorder and sat back in his chair. "I'm sorry, Daniel. I know that was rough." His expression was sympathetic but grave.

"I'm fine," Daniel returned automatically, blotting his misty eyes and wiping his runny nose with a wadded-up, thoroughly molested piece of tissue. "Thanks for the break."

"Yeah. Just sit here for a sec, will ya? I'll be right back."

With a weary sigh, Daniel crossed his arms on the table and put his head down on them, just resting until the debriefing resumed. In a few minutes, Jack returned with a cup of fresh coffee and two manila folders that he put on the table in front of him, passing the mug to Daniel. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. Wanna show you some stuff."

Grateful for the coffee, Daniel accepted the mug with an appreciative sniff.

Jack opened the top folder, which was filled with photographs, charts, diagrams and reports, and began talking about Alpha and plans for developing the colony as the last remnant of Earth. "Our
"top priority here is survival," he explained. "We were so used to getting shipments of supplies from the SGC, never really fleshing out any programs for complete independence from home, and now we're heading into winter on this planet without enough food and supplies. *Odyssey*'s in orbit over us, and she's outfitted with that cool Asgard replication technology, but there's only so much we can do with it. Needs are greater than the hardware's capacity to provide, especially when you include the production of Tretonin for millions of Jaffa. That's why I came here, initially."

"Speaking of which," reaching across the table, Daniel plucked at Jack's sleeve hopefully, "have you heard... do you know anything about... Teal'c's family?"

"I haven't been able to..." Jack shook his head, eyes haunted, expression grim. "The inspection that brought me here was so last-minute, I wasn't able to get a full report on what teams were out on missions, where they went, any of that. We were gonna put in a full production plant for manufacturing Tretonin, and I was supposed to approve the building site and plans. Hammond was initially scheduled to do that, but he was called away for... something else."

Daniel suspected this was one of those "need to know" things he didn't need to know, so he let Jack's vagueness stand without asking for more details. "Do you know if he's..."

Jack shrugged and looked away, eyes on the folders on the table. "We still get the occasional straggler, like you, who got stranded without GDOs or comm units and couldn't contact us, but most everyone's accounted for, to the best of our reckoning. Haven't heard from the Jaffa or the Tok'ra, but we haven't really sent anyone out lookin' to make contact, either. We've been kinda busy here. Just tryin' to stay alive, y'know?"

Daniel nodded. "Of course. That'd have to be first priority." He wanted to ask about which others had made it to Alpha with Jack, but he'd find out those answers in time. He directed his gaze at the table, his mind and heart still shying away from the loss, and waited.

O'Neill cleared his throat. "So. About that survival thing." He pulled the second folder out from under the first. He fidgeted with it, as if he didn't want to talk about whatever was inside.

Finally, he just shoved it at Daniel and growled, "Well, just read the memo. As ranking officer, I've put together a council of advisors from all the various international contingents, academic branches, and military officers. It's the best we can do for government in the short term, and this is part of the survival plan they've put together for Alpha." His speech was very formal and General-esque, not at all his usual casual flippancy, so Daniel knew the subject was serious.

Ignoring the thrill of apprehension that skittered down his spine, Daniel opened the folder and began to scan the document. The paper was dated months ago, shortly after Alpha had lost contact with Earth, and the confirmation of the planet's disappearance was confirmed by *Odyssey* on a return mission from Atlantis. It was signed by General O'Neill and each member of the council, and as Daniel speed-read his way through it, his guts clenched and turned cold.

"No," he said flatly. "I'm not doing this."

"You're in the top ten percent of the brains in this outfit," Jack argued. "Everyone's ponied up, Daniel."

"So? I'm not doing it. Period." He crossed his arms over his chest, felt his chin tip up in defiance, digging in his heels, glaring at the General.

Forcing a smile, Jack sat back in his chair, hands fidgeting, trying hard to lighten the mood and the
subject matter, to coax rather than order. "Oh, c'mon, Daniel! We've got inspirational material for whatever suits your fancy. Miss July was pretty hot. I mean, she's no Mary Steenburgen or Uma Thurman, but she's hot. This is a military installation, for cryin' out loud! We've got plenty of pictures."

"No, Jack."

"C'mon! Don't make me give you an order." Jack's face gave ample evidence of his embarrassment and frustration. And his complete willingness to do just that and order complicity, if necessary.

Willfully clinging to his determined stubbornness, Daniel sat back in his chair, fuming, embarrassed as hell, and completely reluctant to agree with the terms of the memorandum. "Did you… you know? Did you do it?"

Pushing out of his chair, Jack began to pace on the far side of the little room, worrying at the back of his neck with one hand, obviously uncomfortable with the subject. "All the guys here have, Daniel." He stopped pacing and eyed Daniel, hands on hips. "Just lie back and think of England. Whatever it takes, you know?"

"We're talkin' about survival here! Donations will be frozen and saved for later, if you don't find a partner right away. You won't have to even know what happens to it…. them…. whatever. You know, if you don't wanna." Jack shot him a glance, nervous, unhappy, equally embarrassed, but firm in his decision.

He sighed and shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. "I asked Doc Lam to skip that part of your arrival clearance exam. Figured it'd be better if you heard it from me. So, whenever we're done here...

Daniel got up from the table so fast, his chair fell over backward. Both men flinched at the crash, but their gazes remained locked together. "I said no," Daniel snapped in a tight-lipped growl, "and that should be enough!" He was certain his shock and dismay were all over his face. He didn't want to explain what was going on inside him, especially not to another man.

In the months since Earth had been destroyed, Daniel hadn't felt the slightest need for or hint of physical desire. He'd been living among aliens with utterly no privacy, not a moment to himself that wouldn't be logged into their memory recorders. Sex had been absolutely the last thing on his mind, shoved so far into the background, he wasn't sure he could find it again. He didn't want to try, either, certainly not under orders. He couldn't even think about giving a genetic donation, which the memo required of every male at Alpha for later use when a full-scale repopulation scheme would be put into place.

"Nobody else had a choice," Jack added with an edge of bitterness in his voice. "Why should you?"

"None of your business," Daniel shot back, "and no one's gonna make me do it, damn it!" He left the conference room at a brisk walk, striding out of the building with Jack calling him, trying to catch up.

Daniel didn't want to talk to him, didn't want to look at him; he just wanted to get away. Only he didn't have anywhere to go. Everywhere he looked there were other humans, some with familiar faces, all with familiar clothes, mostly in BDUs or fatigues.

All of them were adults. There were no children here, only military personnel, along with a small contingent of civilian scientists and academics consulting for the SGC.
He stopped in the middle of the outdoor compound, just staring around him. Temporary buildings of corrugated tin were going up beside more labor-intensive structures of hand-made brick and chiseled stone. Paths were messy with churned-up mud from constant footsteps and recent rain because there were no sidewalks here, no pavement, no cars or trucks, no schools or playgrounds or the sound of high-pitched little voices raised in laughter.

His heart burned, and grief gripped him once again. He didn't want to bring children into this or any other world, not when there was someone like Zeus out there, waiting to prey upon them.

Then he thought of his late wife.

Daniel had wanted to have a family with Sha’re, but he’d convinced her to wait, thinking they had time to waste. If only he’d listened to her pleas for a baby and complied with them, he might have had something of her to keep. A memory of her heavy with that bastard Apophis’s child surfaced unbidden, and Daniel bent over, a hand pressed to his chest.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Jack catch up to him, easing into place at his side. Jack's hands were on his hips, his posture filled with tension and anger. O'Neill wouldn't understand Daniel's reluctance. He'd want to know why he’d refused so vehemently, but Daniel couldn't tell Jack everything. Not yet.

"Sha're," he whispered hoarsely. The ache in his heart was just starting to ease a little, and Daniel slowly straightened up, meeting his friend's concerned gaze.

Impatience with Daniel's reluctance added an edge to Jack's voice, making it sound harsher than he probably intended. "Shake it off, Daniel. Come look at what we've accomplished here. Take your mind off things for a while, and we'll talk about it later."

Daniel nodded, pressing the heels of his palms to his tired eyes. Aching and lost inside, he took a deep breath and started off, walking blindly beside the man at his left, following along only out of instinct and trust. Jack would take care of him, he knew. Jack was his friend. For now, all Daniel had to do was put one foot in front of the other and listen.

The two men wandered around the crude city filled with tents, dotted here and there with Quonset huts, cindercrete buildings, and tin sheds. It looked like something out of World War II. More permanent buildings were under construction, but for now, the place felt like the refugee camp it was. Most of the people Daniel saw wore military fatigues or lab coats, and men outnumbered the women almost four to one.

Jack had his head down and his hands in his trouser pockets as they strolled. “We’ve made a lot of progress,” he said with a touch of pride, his earlier impatience now gone. “Pretty good for two months’ work.”

It took Daniel a couple of breaths before he could get the words out, his hand gesturing around them to indicate the people in view. “H-how many?”

“Survived?” Jack glanced up at the hospital compound with its large red-cross insignia painted on the side of the largest building. “A little over two thousand, all told. That includes the folks at Atlantis, those who were already here on Alpha, crews of the ships we had out, and the off-world teams that made it back. They're not all here, either. The Atlantis crew is still out there, and the ships' crews are still aboard. We've only got five hundred at Alpha. This was just supposed to be an outpost, you know?”

Two thousand survivors, out of nearly seven billion, and only two thousand on that world.
The news made Daniel ill. He hung his head, eyes squeezing closed as he tried to choke back the gastric juices crawling up the back of his throat and into his mouth.

“You okay?”

Daniel shook his head, opening his eyes and staring at the ground as he walked, swallowing his grief back down. “No, not really. Doubt I ever will be, after this.”

“Understandable,” agreed Jack. “Doc Lam says you’re in fine health, though. Eyesight’s perfect now, and all your scars are gone. How’d that happen?”

“A few cups of stinky tea.” Daniel shot back with a sad little grin. “I’ll see if the Furlings would be interested in trading with us. It’s not so bad, after you get used to it.”

“They good folks?” Jack eyed him briefly. “You didn't say much about 'em.”

“They remind me a lot of us, though they look different,” said Daniel contentedly. “Similar values and nature. I… need to get back there soon.”

Jack’s expression hardened. He glanced guiltily at the ground and kicked a pebble in mid-stride. He looked angry, but not at Daniel. “I can’t allow you to go back.”

“What?” Daniel stopped walking, hardly able to believe what he’d just heard. “Of course, I’m going back! I’m not finished—"

“I said you’re not leavin’ here!” Jack cut in, raising his voice slightly, planting himself in front of Daniel, meeting his gaze with a fierce glare, his face set, leaving no room for argument. “You’re the best academic we have. Best translator. Best linguist. You’ve got more of Earth’s history rollin’ around in your head than anyone else who’s left alive, and we can't afford to lose that. We need you here, so you’re stayin’. Period.”

“You don’t understand!” Daniel snapped as he closed the gap between them, getting right up in Jack's face. “I promised them I’d be back. There’s something important I have to do for them, and I’m the only one who can!”

Hands on hips, Jack gave Daniel his finest General glare. “Look, we’ve got way too much to do just to survive here. We need you teaching, so you’ll teach. You belong here.”

Daniel couldn't believe what he was hearing. This wasn't the Jack O'Neill he knew, always ready to spit in the enemy's eye. Being in charge of the last bastion of humanity had changed him. Other things were more important than finding big honkin' space guns now.

Then Daniel remembered something else. “What about Zeus?”

Jack stared at him for another moment. His gaze turned flinty. His mouth set into a firm, angry line. “What about him?” His voice had an edge that could have cut steel. He looked away and started walking, his pace no longer aimless and lazy.

Daniel hurried to catch up and fall into step. “Aren’t we going after him?”

“No.”

“What?” Daniel grabbed Jack's arm and spun him around to a stop. “Just ‘no’? That’s it?”

“We’re not goin’ after Zeus, or anyone else,” Jack growled, leaning in for emphasis, eyes sparking
with frustration. “We can’t afford to lose any more people. We don’t have a military infrastructure anymore, Daniel. He comes here,” Jack flicked an index finger towards the ground under his boots, “we’ll damn sure give him a fight, but we’re not goin’ after him and take the risk of him goin’ on the offensive. I can’t afford to risk any of my people, not if I don’t have to.” He started off again, his stride angry and purposeful, fists clenched at his sides and swinging through the air with each step.

Daniel needed to say something to make Jack see reason, so he made a leap. “The Furlings can help us,” he called after his old friend as he hurried to catch up to him again. “They have amazing technology.”

“So do we, thanks to the Asgard,” Jack shot back over his shoulder. He rounded on Daniel, this time using that same index finger to point up into the air. “Odyssey's in orbit above this planet on full-time watch. We’ve downloaded and installed most of the technology on it here, and we’ll keep at it till we’re finished, but we’ve still gotta survive while we're doin’ that. Lotsa mouths to feed, and barely any resources here this time of year. We need… everything. We use the replication hardware 24/7, and it's still not enough. We've gotta make do on our own, and use that stuff just for the things we need most.” He started off again, headed somewhere else fast.

Daniel kept up with him, trotting sideways so he could watch Jack's face. “But the Furlings are survival experts. Ages ago, they were marooned on their planet with nothing, and they built a mind-blowing advanced civilization. They’ve been through what we’re going through now, and they have more than enough resources for everyone here. They can help us. Please, Jack! Just let me go back and ask them.”

O’Neill didn’t slow down.

“Jack!”

“Daniel.”

“Jack!”

“Daniel!”

The two men stopped walking, staring at each other. Daniel jabbed his hands onto his hips, mentally immovable, staring at Jack’s obstinate gaze. Daniel knew he could make a bargain here, but the price would be steep. "Look... I’ll do it, okay?" Daniel ground out. "I'll agree to the sperm donation. I'll try, anyway." He glanced away, taking sudden interest in a boulder beside the walkway. "It might just take me a little time, is all."

Jack shrugged. "Magazine. Cup. How hard can it... Never mind."

Daniel couldn't meet Jack's eyes. His head was bowed, his shoulders hunched. He dropped his hands limply to his sides. "You'll get my best effort, then. Things are just... a little slow in that department right now. I've been going through some pretty heavy stuff." It was an embarrassing admission, but necessary. Daniel needed to avoid having a deadline hanging over his head; he'd have to be able to relax, and right now, under these conditions, he couldn't possibly accomplish what was being asked of him. "Just consider going back with me and talk to the Furlings."

After a moment, Jack’s resolve crumbled a little. “Survival experts, huh?” he asked, his voice back in its usual casual, reasonable range.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” said a cocky O’Neill. He stood still, his head tilted back as he pretended to examine a passing cloud. After a few moments, he lowered his gaze and fixed it on his Daniel's face. “All right. You win. We’ll go callin’ on your new friends. But as soon as we’re done talkin’, we come straight back here, and you’ll get that sample to our medical personnel. Then you’ll get on with your life here on Alpha. Understood?”

Laughing, Daniel slapped Jack's shoulder, committing to nothing and deftly changing the subject. “C’mon. You're gonna like the Furlings.”

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**Chapter 15: Heavy Light**

**October 31**

**The Next Day**

No greeting party met Jack and Daniel when they arrived on Furdani. The rocky, arid landscape was empty, no signs of dragonflies or any other alien creatures in view. It was early morning, an hour or so after sunrise, and the air smelled of recent rain, but the skies were clear and cloudless, a brilliant crystal blue.

"Okay," said Jack after a quick scan of their surroundings. "Now what?"

The two Polaris ATVs were exactly where Daniel had left them months earlier, in the abandoned camp overlooking the Stargate. He felt a slight tinge of disappointment, wondering briefly where the Furlings might be. Hadn't they said they'd welcome him and his friends back?

"Maybe they'll show up as we travel," he guessed. He glanced at the other man, hoping Jack would understand their caution and not presume a trap had been set.

Jack's eyes, shaded by his black ball cap, were narrowed, squinting against the brightness of the sky. He looked wary. "Yeah," he agreed as he grabbed his sunglasses from where they hung on their cord around his neck and slipped them over his eyes. "Can't see 'em, but I can feel 'em. They're looking me over, all right."

What Jack didn't say, his immediate sense of distrust flagged by the absence of their hosts, was written clearly on his face.

Daniel didn't know how to work the transporter that had brought him from Shahr to the 'gate, didn't even know where to find the controls. Touching the Furling communication device, which he still wore attached to the curve of his ear, he called for Scout, but there was no immediate answer.

"Well, we should be on our way, then," Daniel suggested, nodding toward the vehicles. I never made it to that pyramid, so we'll try looking for them there. It's about three days' journey on the ATVs. I don't think you want to walk that far."

He and Jack began their journey down the long road, their gear stowed in two of the ATVs taken from the abandoned camp. They'd been driving for several hours when the Forest elder's deep voice sounded unexpectedly in his ear, causing Daniel to flinch and swerve slightly. "Greetings, Daniel. Please continue toward the wreck of your other vehicle. We will meet you there."

The transmission was clear above the noise of the ATV's motor, but Daniel wasn't sure his response would be. He pulled over and cut the engine, and Jack followed suit a little further down
the road. "Hey, Scout! Where are you? I was expecting someone to meet us--"

"We prefer to allow your friend to become accustomed to our world before we make his acquaintance," said the elder pleasantly. "There are things he should see before he meets us. Take your time, and show him the abundance of our world. We will join you soon."

Jack cut the engine and got off the ATV, wandering up for a chat. "Somebody finally talk to you?" he guessed.

"They'll meet us later," Daniel told him. He glanced down at the P-90 strapped to the other man's body. "It's okay, Jack. They want me to show you around, and to be sure you won't hurt them. Once burned, twice shy, you know? They were betrayed by people they believed were their friends."

O'Neill considered that in silence. Then he nodded and, without further comment, returned to his vehicle to continue their journey down the long road.

The People waited until Jack was sleeping on the first night, and Daniel was on watch.

Claire came into view first, barely visible in the glow of the campfire near where Jack lay in his bedroll. She didn’t speak to Daniel, just hovered in the air, helmet open, and studied the sleeping man.

“I was wondering when one of you were going to make an appearance,” Daniel whispered. “Is there a problem?”

“He knows he is being watched,” she told him, turning up the vocal volume on her suit just enough to be audible to him. She smiled a little. "You did not tell him we would be observing."

“I didn't have to say anything. He already knew. He's a lifetime warrior."

Claire motioned to her nearby cohorts, and Daniel watched as one of the black-suited Sky Clan settled to the surface of the road just above the top of Jack’s head. The Furling’s hands moved over the controls on the chest plate of his suit, and then he held out his arms and stood very still.

“Wait, what is he doing?” Daniel whispered, glancing at Claire.

“Recording his thoughts, as we did yours,” she told him.

“No, stop!” Daniel begged, holding out a hand to the little guy doing the scanning. He felt alarm rising inside him as he turned wide eyes to Claire. “Look, you can’t do that with him. He’ll never trust any of you if you do, and I can't tell you how important this is. Please!”

The lavender-haired fairy gave a signal, and the Furling performing the brainwave review stopped, eyeing her for further direction.

“We must be certain we can trust him,” Claire returned with a little shrug. "As you said, he is a lifetime warrior. He is not certain you have judged us accurately."

“You trust me,” Daniel whispered, calming down a little. “I trust him. I’m vouching for him and asking you to stop the recording. He’d see what you’re doing as reason to make war against you. He’s the leader of the remainder of our people, and he knows things… things that can’t be shared. It’s vital, or I wouldn’t ask for this. Please!”

She cocked her head in a listening posture, hesitating for a moment, probably receiving instructions
on her communication device. Then she nodded and lifted her gaze to meet his. “We trust you, friend,” said Claire softly, giving him a gracious bow. “Follow the road to its end, to a special place that we call Heavy Light, and we will meet you there for a formal ceremony of introduction to the People.” Then she activated her helmet and flew off with her companions.

For a long time, the night was quiet. A gentle breeze ruffled Daniel’s hair, which was starting to get a little long, since he hadn’t had a haircut in more than three months. He pushed it back and glanced at his companion, stretched out on the road in his sleeping bag.

“I suppose you heard all that,” Daniel said quietly.

Jack didn’t move a muscle, nor did his breathing change. He gave every appearance of being sound asleep. “Yup.”

Daniel nodded, fully aware that Jack couldn’t see him well in the flickering light of the campfire. Daniel had just been confirming things for himself. “The Furlings don’t understand the concept of privacy, even in your thoughts. I just figured you had state secrets and… other things they didn’t necessarily need to know.”

“And you figured right. I was getting ready to shoot that little mosquito.”


“Sounded like mosquitoes.”

Daniel tried to picture the meeting in his head, but just couldn’t.

There was something about the thought of Jack O’Neill laying eyes on real, living fairies that would just never get old.

November 3

Three Days Later

None of the People made additional appearances. For three days, he and Jack traveled down the barren road, apparently alone. As they bypassed the wreck of Daniel’s Kawasaki mule, destroyed on his previous visit to the planet, he told Jack about the creature that had stomped on it.

As they drove warily down the section of the road cutting through the wooded area, continuing into the mountains, numerous wild animals made their appearance, seen from a safe distance. Jack was impressed. “Something that size could feed quite a few folks,” he observed after a brief view of a massive, fleeting dannu. “That would be a hell of a hunting trip, to bag one of those.”

“I’m sure the Forest Clan would be happy to take you on safari when we get done with the meet-and-greet,” Daniel returned with a grin.

It was close to sunset on the third day of travel when the end of the road finally came into view, revealing the step-pyramid, which was old and weather-beaten, worn down by the elements until the edges of each level were cracked and rounded, rather than smooth and sharp-edged. The structure had piqued Daniel’s interest from the initial UAV survey conducted months earlier. This had been his original destination, but destiny had sidetracked him, brought him new friends, and reconnected him with part of his past.
Now he had the opportunity to see what he'd come to study in the first place, as well as to discover its purpose in an alien society.

He relaxed a little as he spotted a welcoming party waiting for them at the base of the pyramid, but it was not made up of the race he had expected. Four of the Mountain Clan stood as honor guards, each of them carrying a device that looked much like a staff weapon, but topped with what appeared to be flaming swords. The giants had their feet spread at shoulder width, their arms extended, both hands clasping the long handles of the blazing weapons. They made no move, no threatening gestures, standing perfectly still, eyes fixed straight ahead.

Daniel recognized one of the aliens as the fellow who had greeted him upon his arrival in Shahr. Denali turned his head and inclined it slightly toward Daniel, whispering brief instructions in Ancient, then gesturing toward the steps with one hand. When he finished speaking, he gave another tiny bow and resumed his previous stance, eyes forward, face composed, both hands on his staff.

“Daniel?” The question in Jack’s expression spoke volumes. Uncertainty threaded through his voice.

Without looking at his friend, Daniel knew Jack's grip would be tightening on his P-90. Threatening or not, the aliens had weapons, and pretty impressive ones at that.

He glanced at his friend and gave him a reassuring little smile. "Let me take the lead here. All right?"

"You didn't tell me they were so big," said Jack, "just that there were four races of them, but… Well. I wasn't expecting this."

"I intentionally left out a few details. Some things you just have to see in person." Daniel nodded and let his gaze travel up the steps, where he spotted the Mountain Clan elder waiting for them on the first level. He gestured toward the elder with his index finger. “We’re supposed to go up. This is a ceremonial thing for them, a formal introduction of the People to the leader of Earth. It's a great honor.”

He walked purposefully between the four giants at the base of the pyramid, headed for the steps, and felt Jack edge a little closer to him. “Don’t worry. They're big, but they won’t hurt us.” He was sure Jack was just moving in to protect him, but it gave him a little internal chuckle to think Jack might just be a tad intimidated by their sheer size. These weren't the first aliens they'd met who dwarfed humans so much, but Mountain Clan had a presence about them that was undeniably powerful.

Jack cleared his throat, casting his gaze up at the ten-foot-tall sentinels. “Definitely not mosquitoes.”

“These guys weren’t our visitors last night,” Daniel clarified. “This is the Mountain Clan.”

“Of course they are.”

Jack followed him up the long flight to the first level, and Daniel greeted the elder warmly, using the palm-up/palm-down hand gesture he remembered from the council meeting.

“You are welcome, friend,” said el-Rafa, his lined face breaking into a smile and returning the gesture.

Daniel was surprised to hear the alien speaking fluent but elegantly accented English.
“I’m glad to be back,” Daniel told him honestly. He hesitated with the introductions, then decided to start with the familiar, gesturing toward Jack. “This is General Jack O’Neill, leader of the survivors of Earth.”

Jack let go of his P-90 with his right hand and extended it toward the enormous alien. “Pleased to meet you,” he said formally. Then he glanced at the size of the hand reaching out to return the shake and drew his back, giving a little wave instead. "Never mind the handshake."

“Only one leader?” el-Rafa inquired, squatting down to be closer to eye level with the humans. “No council?”

“Well, we do sort of have a council,” Jack said, “but I’m kind of the primary… Um. Listen, no offense, but I really didn’t come to talk politics. We’re still trying to get our act together. Better government will come later. Right now, we need order, and I’m the most experienced, sad to say. We’ve got more important things on our minds right now than who’s in charge.”

“Yes, of course,” said el-Rafa with a gracious nod. “We can help you, if you wish it. We have plentiful resources your people are welcome to share. We have come to understand your people have many fine qualities through the example of our mutual friend. It is because we trust and honor him,” he gave a slight nod of acknowledgment to Daniel before turning his attention back to Jack,” that we make this offer of assistance to the survivors of Earth.”

A wave of warmth and respect swept over Daniel. He and Jack hadn’t even asked yet, and already the Furlings were offering to help. These people knew what it felt like to be refugees. They understood the challenges and stood ready to help meet them.

It was something the SGC would have done, once upon a time.

“That’s very generous,” said Jack. He shifted his stance slightly, tilting his head as he studied the alien, his gaze narrowed, studying the giant.

Daniel saw the gleam of distrust in those brown eyes he knew so well, but wasn’t fast enough to speak before his friend got the question out of his mouth.

“What do you want from us in return?”

“Your survival.”

“Why?”

“Because you are a worthy race.” El-Rafa’s expression was serene, confident, completely sincere.

Jack turned to Daniel. “You must’ve made quite an impression on these folks.”

Daniel shrugged. “They know what it’s like to be in our position, Jack. They’ve been there, remember?”

“Nobody wants nothing for something,” Jack returned thoughtfully, turning his penetrating gaze back to the elder. “There has to be a catch.”

“Translation?” asked el-Rafa, turning to Daniel.

“A price to be paid for your generosity,” he explained. “Jack thinks you’re trying to hide some kind of condition on the deal.”
“Ah.” The giant studied Jack with a slight smile. “Were our positions reversed, would you ask a price for our lives?”

Daniel squelched a grin, pleased that the alien seemed to understand the way Jack’s mind worked, which was a pretty amazing feat by itself.

“No,” said Jack. He considered, then nodded, some of the tension in his face easing. “Okay. That’s good. We appreciate it.”

El-Rafa stepped aside, one massive hand gesturing toward the stairs. “Please continue. There are others waiting to meet you, friend.”

The two men mounted the steps again, ascending to the next level of the pyramid, where Scout waited for them.

A murmur of noise made them turn after they’d gone halfway up to the next level. On the ground below, a crowd was gathering, seeming to appear out of thin air, some in large groups forming from flashes of transporter beams. This was starting to appear like a much bigger deal than a simple welcome for Daniel’s return visit.

Jack shot Daniel an inquiring look. "What was that fella’s name, anyway? Don’t think I caught it in the introduction,” Jack observed as they made it up the last few steps.

“You didn’t,” Daniel returned wryly. “I can’t give you their names. You’ll have to wait till they know you better. They have to share that with you when they're ready.”

“Huh?”

“You can call them whatever you want. Anything inoffensive, I mean. Good names.”

“Really?”

“Greetings, and be welcome to Furdani,” said Scout with a broad smile as they made it to the second landing. "This is an ancient place of celebration for the People. We are pleased you have joined us." His handling of English was graced with a melodious flair, with glottal ‘r’ s and subtly dropped vowel-sounds at the ends of his sentences.

Daniel performed the introductions again, informing Jack that he called the Forest Clan elder Scout.

Jack glanced below and nodded in the direction of the forming assembly at the base. “What’s with the crowd? You guys planning a human sacrifice or something?”

Instantly, Daniel shot Jack a frown and elbowed him gently in the ribs to silently tell him to cut the crap. "Jack!"

Scout laughed. “Nothing so unpleasant, I assure you. We are here to initiate a formal meeting of our people, as well as the return of our friend. We wish to honor him with a celebration of the gifts he has given us.”

Daniel glanced at Jack’s face, his eyebrows raised in silent question. “Beats me,” Daniel said with a shrug, clueless about what those ‘gifts’ might have been.

“Well,” said Jack, hooking his left thumb into the waistband of his trousers, a relaxed set to his shoulders, “I like parties. Especially if there's cake.” He winced a little, shifting his weight and
adjusting his stance slightly.

Even though Scout undoubtedly didn’t understand the reference about cake at parties, he didn’t miss the grimace. “Is there a problem? Are you uncomfortable?”

“He’s knees,” Daniel explained, knowing Jack wouldn’t admit his pain and recognizing the look he’d seen on his face. “These stairs are hard for him.” He glanced back at the stone steps they had just traveled.

“Ahh. Please allow me to help.” The elder took a step toward Jack and knelt on the hard stone platform. His face just at Jack’s hip-level, he raised his hands, palm out, as though intending to grasp Jack’s legs.

O’Neill stepped back instinctively, hands going to his P-90. “Whoa. Hold on there, buddy!”


Scout glanced up at Jack, waiting for permission to continue, his hands in the air, hovering near Jack’s knees.

After a moment’s consideration, Jack stepped back into place, shooting a warning glare at Daniel. Scout placed his palms carefully, lightly, on Jack’s legs, took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly. He didn’t move for a couple of minutes, but the tension in Jack’s face drained away.

The green-haired elder stood up, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. “Feel better?”

Jack shifted from one leg to the other, flexing his joints, testing them. “Haven’t felt that good in thirty years! Wow.” he answered, wonder lightening his tone. “Thanks.” Eyebrows lifted in Daniel’s direction again.

“I didn’t know they could do that,” Daniel responded with another shrug.

“These folks are just full of surprises, aren’t they?”

“Third Race,” Daniel returned. “They should be.”

That reminded him of why he’d asked to come back to this world. The Furlings had let him leave with the device that held them prisoner, with no guarantee that he would ever return. They had been kind and hospitable to him, and he had seen nothing in their history to indicate they had deserved their fate; at least, not by human standards. He had never truly understood the positions the Ancients, Asgard, and Nox had taken in their refusal to help Earth fight the Goa’uld.

The Furlings’ similarity to human nature was striking. They had trusted him, and by allowing him to leave without any conditions, they had earned his trust. Suddenly, the decision was firm in his mind and heart.

They deserved to be free. If time proved he’d made the wrong choice, then he was willing to take full responsibility for that. For the moment, the Furlings were needed on Alpha, and the only way they’d get there was if he unlocked the Stargate.

He faced Scout, squaring his shoulders. “Scout, I’d really like to stay here a while longer to study your history, languages, and culture, but I can’t. I have to go back to our outpost and teach what I know about Earth, so our history won’t be lost. I doubt I’ll be able to return to your world.”
The elder studied his face soberly, his disappointment obvious. “This is your decision?”

“No, it was mine,” Jack answered. “Daniel’s an expert we can’t afford to lose. We need him.”

“It is not so much the man,” asked Scout, “but his knowledge that you must have?”

Jack nodded.

“Then we can provide you with what he knows,” the elder returned confidently. “That is an easy thing. We can also give you our collective knowledge.”

Daniel looked right into Scout’s eyes as he spoke, watching the elder’s gaze move from Jack’s face to his. He wanted to make his announcement subtly, without letting Jack know the Furlings were prisoners here. “You could also send some of your people to our colony, if General O’Neill is amenable, to help with labor, hunting, and expert advice on building a new civilization from the ground up.”

A wave of surprise flashed across Scout’s face, understanding Daniel's secret message instantly. “You are certain?” His response was breathless, startled.

“I am. It’s time the People returned to their travels through the universe.” He smiled at Scout.

The elder’s amber eyes filled with tears as he turned to O’Neill. His voice was husky with emotion, and his chin quivered slightly. “Is it your wish to have our help as you rebuild?”

“We’ll talk about it,” said Jack. "We'll get to know each other, see what the possibilities are. We'd prefer to trade, where we can, instead of just take hand-outs."

Scout nodded. "You have your pride," he agreed, and patted Daniel's shoulder. "We have seen this through our friend, and we understand. You will have our help, as much or as little as you desire, and we are happy to teach your people all we know. We ask only that you also listen to our counsel about how that knowledge is used."

"As long as we're not obliged to take your advice, if we choose not to," Jack returned with a nod. He frowned and lifted his chin, looking a little clueless. "So how, exactly, do you plan to give us Daniel's knowledge without Daniel? I don't get that part of the deal."

“They’ve recorded my whole life, Jack,” Daniel explained, then turned quickly back to Scout, “which I’d like to edit, by the way, before it leaves this world. There’s stuff I’d like to keep private, if the People don’t mind.”

“Like?” asked the General, his eyebrows lifting in obvious curiosity.

“None of your business,” Daniel shot back, feeling his face heat up. “Same kind of stuff you wouldn’t want in a holographic library.”

“That would be my whole life,” quipped Jack, “but I think I get it.”

“Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that one out.”

“We wish to make our friends welcome guests,” Scout continued, lifting his hands upward and outward in a magnanimous gesture, as if offering them the world, then gave Daniel's shoulders a brief squeeze before settling loose fists on his hips. “We believe Daniel will make an excellent liaison between our people, able to advise us on many cultural matters.”
“As long as he reports back on a regular basis, I suppose that’s a… maybe.” Jack didn’t look too happy about this turn in conversation, and the glance he shot Daniel said so in glaring silent detail. This was what he’d told Daniel was not going to happen, and now it had.

Daniel wasn’t sorry about that, nor was he going to pass up the opportunity to learn more about the aliens. “Then it’s settled?”

“There should be more talking,” Jack assured him. “We’ll send over a couple of diplomat types to tidy things up, make sure there are no more shoes to be dropped. You know how I feel about falling footwear.” That last comment was meant for Daniel, accompanied by a frown as he shifted his gaze.

“I do not understand,” said Scout. He clasped his hands behind his back and leaned slightly forward toward Jack for emphasis.

“I’ll explain later,” Daniel assured him with a grin.

"Very well, then." The elder gave him an elegant bow. “This is a great day for the People. Please continue.” He gestured up the steps.

Jack and Daniel ascended to the next level, where Hunter stood waiting.

The Grass Clan elder had his hands clasped behind him, and he was looking up at the stars, humming some tune that had to be off-key, but since Daniel didn't know the music, it could be perfectly pitched. He beamed at Daniel, speaking in heavily accented English. “Welcome!”

Then his eyes raked Jack up and down with a note of disapproval. “Who this?”

Daniel told him.

Hunger grunted, then glanced up at the man he knew. “You better looking.”

A startled, nervous laugh burst out of Daniel. That was the last thing he'd expected to hear. “Uh, well, um…”

Jack just glared at Daniel, wordlessly condemning Daniel’s bad taste in friends. “Nice to meet you, too, Shorty,” he told the little alien, a trace of irritation and wounded vanity in his voice.

“Grass Clan are very blunt,” Daniel hurried to explain to his old friend. “Who’s to say they even have the same standards of--”

“It’s okay,” Jack shot back, lifting his chin and staring down his nose at the alien, one hand raised, palm out, as if to stop the conversation. “The elf guy was prettier than this pipsqueak, too.”

Hunter cocked his head, looking up at the General. “You like fishing?”

Jack’s head whipped around and down to regard the elder. “Yeah. Why?”

“We go fishing.” Hunter stepped aside and waved them up the next set of steps.

“That was kind of…” Jack observed, glancing backward. “Maybe I misjudged the little shrimp.”

Daniel shook his head, unable to stifle a grin. “I think the feeling’s mutual.”

“Well, we’ve seen giants, elves and dwarves. What’s next, fairies?” asked Jack flippantly. "They seem to be getting smaller as we go up."
“You’re not gonna believe it.” Daniel kept his face composed as they mounted the last few steps to the bare, flat top of the pyramid. There were no structures here, just a mosaic of various sized square, rectangular and L-shaped stones paving the surface.

At first, they didn’t see anything, so Jack turned around and looked down on the crowd below them. A multitude had congregated all around the base of the monument. There was a festive air to the gathering, dotted by impromptu performers and tents with clouds of smoke from cooking fires drifting out from beneath them, accompanied by the smell of roasting meat, cooking vegetables, and fragrant teas.

When Daniel spotted the mint-green-haired Sky Clan elder rising up from the middle of the platform and zooming toward them, he tapped Jack on the shoulder. El-Riel hovered in the air at eye level a few feet away from their faces. Her shape was clear against the bright sky, colored in beautiful ribbons by the sun descending toward the horizon. Her beautiful turquoise eyes glowed in the waning light.

“Daniel,” said Jack casually, just staring at the elder. “There are fairies. I’m looking at one.”

“These are Sky Clan,” Daniel corrected, offering a slight bow of respect toward the tiny alien, “fourth tribe of the Furlings.”

“Maybe Gramma O’Neill wasn’t nuts after all.”

“We welcome the survivors of Earth,” el-Riel announced, lifting her arms. “May our people grow strong in friendship, for we are much alike.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Jack told her, still slightly in shock. He hadn't even blinked since he first caught sight of her. He held out his hand, palm up, just below her in invitation.

With a great show of trust, the Sky Clan elder lowered herself and settled there, her wings falling still and silent. Jack brought her closer to his face, looking her over carefully. “Wow. Hot.”

El-Riel embraced Jack’s thumb with one arm, holding on as he turned his hand this way and that to get a better look at her. “You are fortunate to have arrived in time to participate in a cultural celebration of the People,” she told them gaily. “You will be our honored guests. We hope you will join us as we eat, drink, and enjoy the treasures of Heavy Light.”

Daniel leaned forward. “Heavy Light?”

The elder swept the area with her free hand, her tiny face beaming with pride. “This place. It is a monument to all we once were, and hope to be again.” She let go of Jack’s thumb and leapt into the air, her wings automatically kicking into high speed, allowing her to hover again. “Please be at home with us. When you have reached the base, turn your eyes here to the top, and you will understand the reason for the name we have chosen for this ancient place of celebration.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Jack.

El-Riel zoomed off, disappearing quickly.

Jack turned to Daniel. “Fairies, elves, dwarves and giants. I’ll be damned. I think you left a lot out of your mission report.”

“I thought you needed to see this for yourself.” Daniel turned and toward the steps with Jack at his side. “How’re your knees?”
“Don’t start, Daniel.”

“So. Party?”

“I think so, yes. There aren't any papers to sign, sacred dances to do, stupid ancient customs to follow?”

Daniel glanced around them at the empty platform, then down the long staircase at the elders ambling down toward the base. “Apparently not. I think we’re done.”

“I like their treaty negotiations. Simple.”

“Yeah, that was easy, wasn’t it? Let's go find some cake.”

"They have cake?"

"Yes, Jack. They have cake. And pie and a lot of other sweet stuff."

"I think I'm gonna like it here!"

"I think you will, too."

They went down to the base, where lavender-haired Claire met them, zooming around Daniel’s head excitedly. She perched on his shoulder, holding onto part of his black cloak so she could talk to Jack, who seemed completely enchanted with her. Daniel concentrated on leading his old friend around the festival, barely listening as Jack relaxed and flirted his brains out with pretty much everyone. The smile in his voice was obvious.

Daniel procured drinks for them, along with the necessary pastries, as they wandered aimlessly through the crowd. When the sun dipped lower in the sky and began to set, Claire leaped off his shoulder and led them back to the road facing the front of the pyramid. The hubbub began to quiet, and all eyes turned to the monument.

Claire hovered in front of Daniel, a dark shape in the air. “Tonight, we honor your Beethoven, friend.”

“What? How…”

“This is one of the many wonderful gifts you have given us,” she explained. “In your memories we have found so much beauty and wisdom from the history of Earth. Now your treasures belong to us as well.”

A faint grinding noise drew his attention back to the pyramid. Some of the stones on the top level began to rise, and along with them, long beams of colored light flashed and held like lasers. The light seemed to vibrate, and notes of music played in concert with the glowing colors. A gigantic stone arch lifted into view, high above the other stones that rose, sounded their notes of colored light, then sank out of sight into the platform. Then a ball of light began to form on the underside of the enormous lintel.

It fell from the arch as if it were a drop of water, striking the surface of the roof. The sound it made was something like a clap of thunder, a heartbeat, and a bass drum all rolled into one.

“Ohhhhh,” breathed Daniel, as awestruck by the sight as he was by the sound.

Another drop of light fell, then another, setting up a rhythm. Two pillars exchanged a red beam
between them, quivering with the harmonious voices of something akin to violin and viola. Another set of stones sang the sweetly melancholy notes of a cello with a green glow, and another piped the clear golden notes of a flute. The instruments of an Earthly orchestra preached the glorious, familiar music in light and sound, drawn from Daniel’s soul through the stones.

When the piece was finished, Daniel sat quivering in the darkness, staring up at the alien instrument in wonder. He had never heard Beethoven's Fifth Symphony played with such tremendous passion.

Jack’s hand patted his shoulder. He gave him a long look. He didn’t have to say a word.

Daniel knew his old friend understood now. Music really was the most universal language of all, and the Furlings had expressed themselves eloquently. He’d have to talk to them about that sometime, if he could ever find the right words.

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Chapter 16: Freedom

November 1

The Next Day

“Some concert last night, huh?” asked Jack as he sauntered down the road. “That’s quite a music box these folks have.”

“I’ll say.” Daniel agreed. The memory of the Furling music and light show still choked him up, but he tucked it away, concentrating on the obelisk near the Stargate as they approached it.

He still hadn’t mentioned the locking device to Jack. It just didn’t feel like the right time, and he’d learned to trust his intuition over the years. The weight of the PDHD tugged at his trouser pocket, but was well hidden by the drape of his cloak over his back and thighs.

“So, you’ll be sending some diplomats through when you get back to Alpha?” asked Daniel casually.

“I’d still feel better about this if you’d come back with me now,” Jack admitted, his expression growing a little tense. “There are other reasons why you’re needed.”

“I’ll be right after you,” he promised. “I have something to do here, and then I’ll be on my way. The People have a lot of supplies to drop off, and once they’re done with that, the elders will stay on to talk to the diplomatic team.”

Jack nodded. “I’m trusting you on this.” He clapped Daniel on the shoulder and smiled, his face relaxing a bit. “Good to see you, Daniel. Just when I think you’re really, finally, permanently dead, there y’are.”

Daniel grinned at him. “The proverbial bad penny?”

“More like a Cheshire cat with nine lives.”

Jack ambled around the pillar and used the DHD to key in the glyphs for the Alpha base. While he waited for the gate to finish dialing, he eyed the mass of gathered Furlings, all of whom were giving the Stargate a wide berth. He was looking for one in particular, and finally he spied the
Grass Clan elder not far behind Daniel.

“I’ll be back for that fishing date as soon as I can,” he called out to Hunter. “Maybe we’ll even bag us some of those warthogs Daniel told me about.”

“Ghidan,” the alien corrected with a gravelly laugh. “See you soon, O’Neill.”

Moments later, after a final wave to Daniel, Jack was gone, and the event horizon vanished after him.

Stepping up to the DHD, Daniel finally pulled the portable dialing device out of his pocket. He activated it, keyed in the password, and brought up the settings for Furdani. Before he made the edits, he glanced up, his gaze traveling over the crowd. “Today, the People will be free,” he announced simply. “I believe I have chosen wisely.”

Scout moved up beside him on the landing pad, his dark green hair sparkling in the sunlight. “The People owe you a debt that can never be repaid, friend.” He took a deep breath, looking around at his position beside the DHD. “I will be the first to attempt to pass through the Wheel of Worlds. I hope you have succeeded in unlocking it for us.”

That sobered Daniel. If he hadn’t set the data properly, the Forest Clan elder would be vaporized; his life was literally in Daniel’s hands. His throat tightened as he tried to swallow, his mouth gone suddenly dry.

He looked down at the data screen, updated the entry, and verified that there was no longer a lock in place on the ‘gate. He programmed in the symbols for Alpha site, then pushed the blue button on the PDHD and slipped it back into his pocket. Glancing up at the golden chevron on top of the obelisk, he listened as the *kawoosh* sounded, then settled into placid ripples.

The scanner, installed by the Ancients so many centuries before, remained still and silent.

Scout smiled at him as relief swept through Daniel. He let go a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and gestured toward the event horizon. The elder took a confident step forward, his shoulders squared, head up.

"I'd like to introduce you to my people," said Daniel. "I'd be honored if you would accompany me to Alpha, the place we now call home."

A cheer went up from the crowd, echoing in his ears as Daniel strode toward the wormhole accompanied by a handful of Furlings bearing gifts, supplies, and knowledge intended to help the refugees from Earth survive. Just a few steps more, and the People would be truly free to travel wherever they chose.

Daniel felt proud to have done it. This was an important day, both for the Furlings, and for their new friends, the human race.

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*December 1*

*One Month Later*

*Alpha*
Daniel sighed in the darkened guest quarters, lying on his lumpy bunk and staring up at the corrugated aluminum ceiling. Claire was fast asleep, tucked into her tiny bed on the nightstand, but Daniel couldn't close his eyes. Jack had reminded him earlier in the day that he still hadn't made the genetic donation he'd promised, and that he needed to hop to it and get it done. Daniel had sworn to try, only there were still issues, and he hadn't grown any closer to feeling capable of... doing that.

He knew he had to at least make an attempt, but there always seemed to be someone around, and Daniel wanted privacy. During the last month, he'd spent far more time on Furdani than he had on Alpha. At either place, he'd been in the constant company of Furlings. Even now, his tiny Sky Clan companion was nearby.

He shot a wary glance at Claire in her padded box, illuminated in silvery profile by a narrow beam of moonlight, and realized this was as good an opportunity as he'd ever get. He sat up on the edge of the bunk, brushing his long bangs out of his eyes with one hand. He finger-combed his hair back, momentarily mulling over the idea of getting it cut sometime soon, but then he remembered the promise he'd made to himself to let it grow until Zeus had been captured and put away forever. It was almost long enough for a ponytail now, and he usually kept it tucked behind his ears to get it out of his face.

As stealthily as possible, he padded barefoot into the bathroom and grabbed the sample cup, still sealed in its sterile package, from the storage cabinet that held the towels and bathroom supplies.

He put his back to the door and leaned against it to make sure he wasn't interrupted. He closed his eyes and thought of Sha're.

All he found in the memory was grief and loneliness. He missed his wife, the warmth of her sleeping by his side. More than anything else, he missed the lightness she had brought to his life for such a brief time, her devoted companionship, and the golden peal of her laughter.

After a protracted attempt to shift his imagination toward other inspirational material, he discovered his initial instinct was correct. Wherever his mind went, he couldn't hold on to the fantasies without some inadvertent reminder that Earth was gone. Not only was almost everyone who had ever attracted his interest dead, frankly, this was not a universe into which he wanted to bring more children. The shadow of grief for the loss of his world still stood in his way.

An earnest fifteen minutes of trying, he finally gave up and put the cup back into the cabinet and shuffled back to his lumpy bunk. He sighed as he settled under the covers and tried for some sleep, but that effort was also short-lived. Voices raised in alarm outside the Quonset hut pulled him from his bunk, and he headed for the door with Claire buzzing right behind him.

"What is happening?" she asked sleepily.

"I don't know." He pulled open the thin aluminum door, and a chilly gust of wind swept around them.

The scent of rain filled the night air as a flash of lightning momentarily lit up the area. The cold reminded him to throw his cape over his undershirt. He jammed his feet into Furling-made suede boots, quickly fastening the self-sealing straps over his calves.

The bright glow on the chest plate of Claire's s'resh lit their way as they hurried to join several others jogging toward the infirmary. They followed a handful of people heading across the compound, toward the door of the base hospital, where they found three men supporting others, with a fourth carrying a woman in his arms.
Daniel glanced around for signs of battle, but there were none. What he did see were more people heading for the infirmary.

A woman staggering along not far away from him dropped to the dirt, and he rushed to pick her up. She was burning up with fever. It wasn't until he had carried her into the infirmary that he realized who she was.

Doctor Carolyn Lam was unconscious when they reached the interior of the infirmary. He glanced around for somewhere to put her and noticed as he called for a medic that all the exam tables and beds were already taken. People were standing everywhere, crowding the large reception room.

Nurses were taking temperatures and charting symptoms, while doctors completed examinations and consulted with the Furlings standing by to offer their aid. Fluids were given, and Grass Clan pressed cups of their foul-smelling tea on every patient. Some of the ailing took a whiff and refused the brew, declaring they'd rather take their chances with medications they knew and trusted.

Daniel carried Doctor Lam to an exam table where a man was sitting up, apparently about to leave. He placed the unconscious woman on the table, moving the man aside, then grabbed the nearest Furling -- a Grass Clan female -- and towed her over to Carolyn's bedside.

Doctor Lam roused slightly and began to shiver. "Sick," she moaned. "Fever. Came on. Fast." She tried to lift a hand to cover her eyes, squinting against the bright lighting.

"Give taimin tea," the Furling pronounced after a brief check of her patient’s vital signs. She pressed a cup of the hot liquid into Daniel's hands. Then the Furling moved away, angling for a nearby patient.

He took the drink and scooped an arm beneath Carolyn's narrow shoulders, in an effort to lift her up. "You have to drink this," he instructed the doctor. "I know how bad it smells, but it'll help. I promise. Just trust me. This stuff saved my life."

Carolyn flinched, instinctively turning her head away from the noxious odor. After a few moments of hesitation, she forced herself to face the cup and sip at the contents. When she had finished, Daniel let her relax against the pillow and drift off to sleep.

As soon as Daniel finished with Doctor Lam, he was called to assist with someone else, then another. He lost track of time as he helped medicate the patients, more arriving until it seemed every person on base must have been crowding into the infirmary. He pushed back his own weariness and fatigue, staying on his feet and keeping busy dispensing doses of the noxious tea, hour after long hour.

Finally, he stood staring at the cup in his hands, wondering what he was supposed to be doing with it, and decided he was thirsty. He drank the cup of taimin tea and set the empty container down on a nearby table. There was nowhere to sit or lie down, and he was tired. He couldn't think anymore, couldn't remember why he was even there. There were so many sick people, constantly coming in and going out.

"Daniel."

He looked up at the sound of his name and the familiar voice that had called him.

Jack O'Neill stood not far away at the end of the aisle, holding Daniel’s cloak out to him. "You're dead on your feet, buddy," he said gently, his face etched with worry. "You've been at this all day. Come on. Get some rest. You can help out more tomorrow."
Daniel couldn't form a coherent reply, just walked toward his friend, wrapped up in his warm cloak, and accompanied him outside into the wan autumn sunlight.

Jack's hand patted his shoulder as they crossed the compound. "Doc Warner says it looks like the worst is over. Folks are shaking this whatever-it-is off, but none of our medicines could fight it. Good thing you brought the Furlings here, or a lot of folks wouldn't have made it."

A sense of justification filled Daniel, but he was too tired to talk. He just nodded wearily.

"I know, I know. You told me so," Jack quipped. "Don't rub it in."

Daniel couldn't help smiling. They could banter without a single word, they knew each other so well.

They walked for a little while in silence, entering Daniel's quarters with Jack on his heels. As he crossed the small room, Daniel pulled off his boots, leaving them where they landed.

"You were a lot of help at the infirmary," Jack observed quietly. "I know medicine's not your field, but the nursing staff said you have a great bedside manner. I think it's been good for you to be among humans for a while."

Daniel thought about that as he removed his black tunic and dropped it on the floor just outside his bathroom, barely breaking stride as he stripped off his pants.

"The Furlings have been very good to me," Daniel countered after a yawn.

"But they're not human," argued Jack gently. "Get cleaned up, and we'll talk a minute." He waved Daniel into the bathroom and turned away.

Daniel showered without waiting for the water to heat up, just wanting to get clean. He scrubbed himself efficiently, turned off the spray and wrapped up in an old blue bathrobe on his way to his bunk. The cold water had energized him a little, helped him clear his head so he could think better.

"I know what you're doing on Furling-world is important," Jack went on, continuing the thread of his previous speech, "but I think you should spend more time here. Reconnect to the human race."

There was more than a little wisdom in that comment, and Daniel smiled. "Maybe being the guy in charge has been good for you, Jack. I think you're finally starting to grow up."

"And since the elf guy fixed my knees, and it's heading toward winter here," Jack added lightly, "I was thinkin' I might teach you to ice skate. We could play hockey. You be the goalie, and I'll shoot pucks at you. It'll be fun."

"I should have known there was an ulterior motive." Daniel had the strength to glare for a moment, then flopped down on his pillow, sighed and closed his eyes. He made a disapproving noise as he felt himself sliding off quickly toward sleep.

"I'm just sayin'."

A soft chuckle sounded, and Daniel felt a large hand ruffling his too-long hair, messing it up and scattering damp strands all over his face. He was too tired to care or smooth it back.

"Get some rest, Danny. We miss you here."

The door opened and closed, and Daniel pulled the covers up around himself, relaxing into his
pillow and dropping off to a deep, exhausted slumber.

December 11

Ten Days Later

The aftereffects of the illness that had hit Alpha so hard were still bothering a few of the colonists and crew of the Odyssey, but there’d been no fatalities, thanks to the Furlings’ medical assistance; the number of sick was rapidly dwindling. Daniel still helped out in the clinic every day, one of many who dispensed tea packets to patients who were well enough to take it on their own. The source of the illness was under investigation, but so far, its origin had proved elusive.

When not volunteering at the infirmary, he was assisting with lesson plans for teaching archaeological, anthropological and linguistic courses, based on the information now stored in the newly-installed Furling database, downloaded directly from his memories into a brand new supercomputer, also supplied by their alien friends. He’d managed to edit out most of the personal stuff, but there were still a lot of his childhood experiences in Egypt he’d chosen to leave intact, just for the sake of posterity.

Daniel's breath made cloudy puffs in the early morning air as he strolled from the infirmary to the archives. He looked around, studying the people moving about in their daily routines, a liberal sprinkling of Furlings among them. The drawn, worried looks of the human population during his first visit to Alpha were gone, replaced with ones of contentment and hope. His alien friends had made a significant difference here, and he felt a growing urge to return to his studies of their culture.

Daniel had been amazed by their technology as well, and he was thrilled the Furlings were sharing it with the colony. They had volunteered healers to teach Alpha doctors and exchange information about human biology. They were sending hunters to locate game on Alpha to increase the local food supplies, and botanists to assist with exploring for edible native fare and therapeutic plants. Regular deliveries of food and medicines were being made, and the Furlings were assisting with manual labor for building and architects for planning the settlement. Wherever the humans needed a helping hand, the Furlings were there to offer it, asking nothing in return but friendship and a free exchange of knowledge.

He was part of that bargain, and needed to get back to it. All he had to do now was tell Jack he was leaving again. Maybe he'd just email a memo instead. That way, he'd already be back when Jack read it.

Coward, he teased himself with a wry smile.

Still, the sense of urgency to return to Furdani built inside him. The longer he stayed on Alpha, the more he found his thoughts obsessively turning to Zeus. A frustrating sense of helplessness ate away at him, making him feel weak and defeated. Perhaps a change of scenery and less time spent looking into human faces would help him accept the fact that the Goa'uld would not be punished for his crime.

Clouds gathered and a cold rain began to fall as Daniel made his way across the compound. He gathered his cloak about him and pulled up the hood as he trudged toward the sturdy stone building that housed the base's computer core in a secure, humidity-controlled work area.
He pushed open the swinging doors and removed his mantle, shaking off the droplets of water and hanging the garment on a hook by the door.

As he signed the register logbook at the reception desk, Daniel smiled at the security person on duty, Airman Roberts. Just four weeks before, a construction accident had crushed and severed the man’s left leg just above the knee. The Furlings had literally fashioned him a new one, utilizing a process similar to a 3D printer, depositing layer upon layer of bone, muscle and skin tissues. As Roberts lay heavily sedated for a day, they had joined the new appendage to his living flesh, which was a perfect biological match to his own body. After a few weeks of recovery, allowing the tissues to fully knit together, he'd be as good as new.

"Hey, Roberts. How's the leg?" Daniel asked.

The airman beamed, glancing down at his left leg, which lay supported on a shelf extending from the wheelchair in which he sat. He gave his thigh a fond pat. "Healing pretty good, Doctor Jackson," said the young man brightly. "I never thought such a thing was possible. Those Furlings just blow me away!"

"Yeah, they're pretty cool," Daniel agreed.

Roberts buzzed him in, and the heavy security door swung open, admitting Daniel to a large, dimly lit room filled with tiny shelves that housed a variety of compressed data storage devices: CDs, DVDs, portable hard drives crammed to the gills with information. The archive also held digital photographs of famous paintings, buildings, statues, and other precious artifacts, complete libraries of books and reference information. Records of all kinds had been stored in the facility as a way of preserving the most important memories of Earth, just in case. Now it was the only record of Earth that remained, aside from the recollections of those who had been there.

After logging into the database on the Alpha servers, Daniel resumed his latest search through the records for historical background to support a theory that had dawned on him recently. It would take a lot of study before he'd be ready to discuss his findings with anyone, and until he was more certain of his facts, he wanted to keep his theories to himself.

He spent hours in the building, searching record after record, until his dry eyes burned from fatigue. He was hungry and tired, and a glance at his watch told him he was long overdue for a meal and a nap.

Just as he was preparing to log off, he remembered the memo he wanted to send to Jack, so he typed it up. Daniel knew he should tell Jack in person, especially after that conversation a couple of weeks back about reconnecting with humanity, but Daniel didn't want to deal with the fallout. Jack might well confine Daniel to the base until he gave that donation, which wasn't going to happen any time soon.

His finger poised over the "Send" button for a moment, contemplating the wisdom of his electronic farewell, then decided that, if he hurried, he might just be gone before Jack got it. If luck weren't with him, Jack would be waiting for him at the Stargate with a couple of SFs. With a shrug, Daniel dispatched the message on its way through the base intranet, logged off the server, and shut down the station. He signed out at the desk register and, with a wave to Airman Roberts, Daniel gathered up his cloak and headed for the commissary.

Claire zoomed up almost immediately. "I have been looking for you," she told him gaily. "Have you been in hiding?"

"Researching," he corrected with a grin. "What's up?"
"The elder wishes to see you. He sent me to locate you."

"Elder? Which one?" Daniel knew the Mountain elder never left Shahr, but Hunter and Scout visited Alpha frequently.

"The elder of your people," she said with a tinkling laugh. "He is a very interesting person."

"Oh. Jack. Yeah." He gave her a reluctant grimace intended to be a smile and pointed to the commissary. "I'm just gonna go eat first. Wanna come?"

"Will there be cake?" Her face brightening expectantly, she clapped her hands together and did a quick aerial pirouette.

Daniel laughed. "You sound just like Jack. I think you've been spending too much time with him."

"With who?" asked O'Neill, striding up alongside them and falling into step with Daniel as Claire circled them.

"Whom," Daniel corrected automatically. "And we were talking about you, Elder." He chuckled at Jack's melodramatically insulted look.

"You callin' me old?"

"It's a title of respect, bestowed on you by the People," explained Daniel with a gesture toward the Sky Clan woman zooming erratically above their heads.

"Oh. Well, Tinkerbelle can call me anything she wants," Jack returned, shoulders back and head held high with pride.

"Tinkerbelle was a blonde, Jack." Daniel shrugged and sighed, shaking his head. "Claire has lavender hair."

"Can't help that," Jack argued playfully, clasping his hands behind his back. "She answers to that name."

"Answers to Claire, too," Daniel shot back, suppressing a grin.

"So. Food?"

"Yep. Hungry?"

"Will there be cake?"

"I'm feeling a sense of déjà vu here."

"Speaking of, have you… you know… yet?"

"Working on it." Daniel walked a little faster, not wanting to touch on that intimate topic of discussion.

"It's not that hard."

"That seems to be the problem, in a nutshell." Daniel felt his face flush with heat.

"Oh! Well." Jack cleared his throat. "Maybe the Furlings have a tea for that."
"A tea for what?" asked Claire, darting backward in spurts to keep up with their forward motion and still make eye contact. She blinked innocently, her big green eyes wide with curiosity.

Two voices answered in perfect unison. "Never mind!"

The trio entered the commissary and got into line, letting dinner and friendship guide them to a more pleasant conversation.

Moments after parting ways with his old friend, Daniel was packed and heading for the Stargate, where he found no SFs waiting for him, no Jack with a stern look in his eye.

As Daniel gave Sergeant Harriman the coordinates of his usual destination, he had no way of knowing that this would be his last visit to Alpha for a long, long time.

Chapter 17: Gaia

December 20

Nine Days Later

P9X-1017

Every day when Daniel returned to his quarters in Shahr, he felt as if his head might explode from all the knowledge he was obtaining from the Furlings. He wasn’t sleeping well, because his mind wouldn’t shut down at night, racing with so much thinking. The things he’d seen in the library after his return from Alpha colony were amazing. The human academicians and scientists traveling to Furdani were learning a great deal from the highly advanced Third Race.

Most astounding of all was Daniel’s discovery of the *aap*, a device identical to the one SG-1 had found and lost at Heliopolis, the meeting place of the Four Races where Doctor Ernest Littlefield had been trapped for fifty years. This time, however, Daniel was able to quiz the Furlings about it, to learn from one of the cultures that had helped to create the machine. For a while, the experience left him enthralled, intoxicated… but even that eventually lost its appeal.

Every new discovery inextricably led back to what he had lost, what had been so violently taken from his people. The nightmares returned, and Daniel couldn’t concentrate on his work. All he could think about now was Zeus.

Now that there was no SG-1 to hunt him down, the Goa’uld was free to roam the galaxy with impunity, believing he had destroyed his greatest inconvenience -- the Tau'ri. There would be no justice, no punishment, not even a shadow of threat to the tyrant. All that remained of Earth's people were too busy struggling to live another day and build some kind of future, using the meager remains of their culture and the legacy left to them by the Asgard.

Daniel started spending more time in the Furling version of a gymnasium, trying to work off some of that frustration. He physically pushed himself to the limit every day, returning to his studies only after his body was exhausted.

It was just a matter of time until Daniel’s growing disquiet was noticed.

As he left the gym with the Forest Clan elder, he shot a glance at his friend, noticing his pointed stare. Scout was wearing a new pair of tooled leather gauntlets over his forearms that reminded...
Daniel of the ones the Mountain Clan guide, Denali, had worn when he first came to Shahr.

“You seem troubled,” Scout observed, as they headed for the nearest transporter booth. The elder had mastered English perfectly, including the use of contractions and what slang Daniel used, though Scout spoke with the same lilting accent he'd had when conversing in the Ancients’ tongue. “You don’t eat properly, and your sleep is filled with troubling dreams.”

This was the hardest part of living with the Furlings – everyone knew everyone else’s business. All they had to do was check a person’s most recent memory recordings to know what they’d been doing, what they’d been thinking. Every life was an open book.

But Daniel knew this particular inquiry was being made only because the elder was concerned about him. Their society considered Daniel a valuable addition, an important liaison to the human race. Even more than that, though, the two had become good friends in the last few months.

Daniel shrugged. “It’s okay, really,” he said with a polite smile. “I’m fine.”

“Yet each time you return from your brief visits to Alpha, you grow more distracted. Does something there disturb you?”

“It’s hard to watch what they’re going through,” Daniel admitted, his face pulling down into a scowl. God, how he hated Zeus! “Especially knowing there’s not a damned thing I can do about it.”

“What if there were?”

Before he could select their destination, Daniel lifted his fingers off the city map he had pulled up on the touch-screen in the transporter booth. He glanced at Scout, trying to read the alien’s cool expression. All he saw was a hint of mystery twinkling in the elder’s unfathomable amber eyes.

“My people have to concentrate on survival,” Daniel muttered, hating the sound of the words he’d heard so many times from Jack. They held an air of defeat for him.

“I wasn't asking about your people,” Scout clarified coolly. “I meant you, personally. If you had another option, a way to obtain justice for your world… would you take it?”

Clenching his jaws in frustration, fighting back a tide of rising anger, Daniel growled unhappily, “There’s not a lot I can do against somebody like Zeus, Scout. I’m just one man.”

“As is he,” the alien returned smugly.

“He has an army,” Daniel shot back impatiently.

Scout lifted his chin proudly, gazing down his nose at Daniel. “And you have the Third Race.”

The implications of that hint sent a shockwave through Daniel’s consciousness. It took him a moment to gather his wits and fully realize what appeared to be on the table here. “Do you mean… you'd fight Zeus for us? Why?”

“Many reasons, Daniel. Do you wish our assistance in your quest?”

“I don’t know.” Daniel’s heart was pounding in his ears. He was sweating, trembling, excited, yet unable to quite commit to the belief that he’d heard correctly and this wasn’t some kind of cruel dream. “First, I’d have to know why you’re helping us. All of it, because I get the feeling there’s a lot more than you've told me so far.” He glanced away to program in the transporter destination
closest to his home, waited the mere seconds for the relocation to take place, then led the way out of the booth down the block from the apartment.

“Your race cannot fight for themselves,” Scout explained. “Your resources and personnel are needed to rebuild, not to make war; we understand this, and agree. We've been where they are, and they do, indeed, have no choice, if they are to survive.”

“Okay.” Daniel’s mouth was dry. His stomach was clenching.

“We were denied an opportunity for justice against the Ancients,” Scout went on, “and there are many who feel participation in a struggle against your enemy would give us vicarious victory over our past. A way to face our demons, as you might say.”

Both arguments made sense. Still, Daniel held back his answer, keeping his gaze on the path toward his quarters. He dared not hope this offer was real. "We can't afford to draw attention to Alpha," Daniel told the elder, remembering Jack's warning. "If Zeus finds out there were survivors, he'll go after them, too."

Scout nodded. “It has always been our way to protect those who can't help themselves,” he went on, “because we believe it's the right thing to do. The universe requires balance, and we've been gifted with the power to help achieve that. We can protect Alpha, as well as seek out your enemy.”

He felt Scout’s warm hand settle on his shoulder, grip it, and stop him. The two faced each other on the grated walkway above a flowing stream. There was warmth and kindness in the elder’s paternal expression.

“It's also the wish of those who've come to know you well that you're in need of your own peace of mind,” Scout added. “The Nox believed that comes from a lack of resistance, from pacifism, but nature’s laws tell a different story.”

He glanced down at the water bubbling and swirling beneath their feet. “Water isn't always calmly flowing. Sometimes it’s cold and hard, or raging tides that will sweep away anything in its path. Sometimes it disappears into the air, where it becomes too heavy and falls to the ground again as rain. It can be gentle and healing, or driven by wind hard enough to strip flesh off bone.”

Daniel nodded, getting the picture. “The Nox are always gentle, flowing streams. The Furlings are water in all forms, even great waves that crash against the shore and crush boulders into pebbles.”

Scout smiled, nodding approvingly. “Yes, Daniel. So now I ask you again: do you wish to seek justice for your race?”

A sense of rightness and gratitude settled into Daniel like falling snow. “Yes, el-Mikha. I do. What do you want from me in return?”

“Only what we've asked from the beginning,” said the elder quietly. “Your knowledge and friendship. We wish to learn everything we can about other races, for we are very curious.” He smiled fondly, searching Daniel’s face with his eyes. “And somewhere, out there in the stars, our distant history lies hidden. We don't have those you'd call archaeologists, seekers of the past. We can benefit from your knowledge in finding our roots, wherever they may be buried on distant worlds.”

“Then tell me what you want me to do,” said Daniel confidently. He felt almost euphoric, his body lightweight, his head tingling.

Scout patted his shoulder, turned him back to the path and started walking again. “First, you must
prepare. Finish your training as a warrior.”

Daniel shrugged. “Okay. I’ve never really committed myself to learning more than what I’d need to get by. I suppose I could always improve.”

“You must learn to be stealthy, to fight your enemies with cunning and skill. You have a sharp mind, but use your strategic skills too little. I have heard you argue with General O’Neill and know how clever you can be, when the stakes are high. With training, you can be a dangerous enemy.”

He’d never thought about himself in that way, always resisting the militarism that the SGC had tried to force on him. When he’d first joined, he’d been like the Nox. Now, he was leaning more toward Scout’s point of view. It felt right. He was ready.

They stepped into Daniel’s apartment and went into the bedroom. Daniel laid out a clean outfit the Furlings had made for him. By his choice, every garment had been fashioned of black cloth, as a symbol of mourning for his lost world. His trousers were modeled on the BDU pants, with cargo pockets on the thighs. Long-sleeved or sleeveless tunics with high collars covered his upper body, tied at the waist with a matching sash. Over his back and arms, a hooded cape provided the warmth necessary for comfort in the cool underground city.

Every garment bore his personal mark as a decoration, stitched into the fabric with silky dark gray thread: an inverted “V” with a tiny halo, the Stargate symbol for Earth. On his trousers, the logo might be in a pattern around the hem, emblazoning a pocket or trailing up the outer seams. Tunics carried the design up long sleeves or as a single larger glyph on the chest. One of his capes featured the logo in the center of his back, the other in small rows around the edges.

"I've seen others of the Forest clan in training," Daniel told his companion as he laid out his clothes. "I'd be honored to learn your fighting style."

"Then I'd be equally honored to teach you," Scout told him with a happy smile.

With Scout in tow, Daniel hesitated before cleaning up after his workout.

The elder followed him into the bathroom, tucked into a back corner and walled off from the sleeping area with a curved glass wall down which a constant fall of water ran in ripples, acting more as a room divider than an actual wall. Scout leaned against the doorjamb, his thumbs hooked into the waistband of his brown suede trousers. "I can set up a training program at the place where you perform your exercise," he continued while Daniel doffed his tunic, shoes, and socks. "There's an interactive hologram that will help teach you the techniques, and when you need an actual opponent, I'll schedule some time with you."

"Your people have such fascinating technology," Daniel observed, his hands hesitating on the fastener at the top of his pants.

He'd rather have bathed in private, but the Furlings didn't understand such things. Scout would think nothing of having a conversation with him in the nude, because there was no sexual content to such an encounter between them. Claire had learned to leave Daniel alone in the bathroom because he got so distracted and embarrassed, but there were times when she still forgot and would zoom right in and start talking.

At least Scout was another guy. Daniel turned his back to finish undressing and started the water, always just the right steamy-hot temperature. Apparently, Scout wasn't finished with this chat yet, so Daniel would just have to deal with having a guest at an unsettling time.
The elder paid no attention to Daniel's nudity. "You should know there's a reason why I came to see you." There was something in his voice that made Daniel turn his head just enough to make eye contact and keep his face out of the spray.

Scout's shoulders were squared. He stood at parade rest now, hands clasped behind his back, his expression braced, anticipating, his eyes hooded, secretive.

"We prepared for millennia for our release from this world," he explained. "The moment you set us free, we took to our travels again."

This wasn't exactly news to Daniel. During his many trips to Alpha and back, he had seen expeditions leaving, teams of Forest and Sky Clans, with only a handful of Grass Clan among them, all heading for other worlds through the unlocked Stargate. He had even been present when a few small teams returned to Furdani.

Still, Scout was trying to tell him something important.

From behind him, the elder's voice rang out, louder than the sound of the falling water. “The People have visited many worlds, now that the Wheel is open to us again. We have discovered several planets populated by both humans and Ting-sha,” he announced. “They all worship Zeus.”

A chill made Daniel’s skin prickle into gooseflesh. He moved his head out from under the spray, soaping his body up as he made eye contact, struggling to maintain his composure. “Have you reported this to General O’Neill?”

“We have.” Scout’s chin lifted. His eyes narrowed. “Alpha will send no one to make inquiries.”

Daniel hesitated, weighing his options, considering the implied offer in his friend’s words. Jack would absolutely lock Daniel up in a stockade and sentence him to hard labor for the rest of his natural life, if he found out about this. For an instant, Daniel felt a pang of conscience, but it was quickly washed away by a rising tide of determination. Zeus had to pay for what he’d done, and if the only way to do that were to sneak off, then Daniel was willing to risk the wrath of O’Neill; it was always easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

“I’ll go. Take me there.”

The alien nodded, a glimmer of approval in his eyes. “There is much for you to learn before you meet this challenge.”

Pieces were coming together in Daniel’s mind. “Okay. You obviously have something planned. I’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

After finishing his shower and getting dressed, he served the Forest elder some fragrant emlaa tea, a Furling favorite, while they talked about the information on the discovery of the Ting-sha planets, discussing which to explore first. Using the projectors built into the gauntlets he was wearing, probably just for this purpose, Scout showed him holograms of star charts. He had come prepared, expecting Daniel to agree to leave with him.

Now they were going to be leaving Furdani without Jack’s permission or knowledge, and also without Daniel having completed his distasteful bargain with his commanding officer. Eventually, he’d have to face up to the ramifications of this decision, but once Daniel had made up his mind to pursue Zeus with the Furlings at his back, no power in the universe aside from death would stop him.

Minutes later, with two small bags packed with Daniel’s most necessary possessions, Scout
escorted him to a transporter and set a destination vocal. Daniel was still working on learning the four Furling dialects, so he had no idea where they were going.

On arrival, Daniel glanced at the clothing the People around them wore. Every costume was the same basic design, but in solid primary colors, none of the somber earth tones the citizens of Shahr wore. The outfits were fitted with neat, short jackets trimmed in black; they looked like military uniforms.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“In the city of Ahmegah.” Scout led the way down a long, busy corridor.

“The third city? I haven’t read much about it, except that most of it’s beneath the ocean floor. Lots of resources come in, but no goods go out.”

Everywhere they went, the bustle stopped for a moment as each Furling stood at attention until Daniel and Scout had passed.

“What’s with the…” He nodded behind them. “Are you military?”

“Not in the way the Tau’ri understand the concept,” Scout explained. “All our people learn the art of war as they attain adulthood, once they have finished the Hunt. It is a matter of honor, pride, and destiny. Those who excel become teachers. The teachers who surpass their peers eventually become elders. The honor of this greeting, however, is not for me,” he added with a wink and a tiny grin.

Oh. Well, that was embarrassing. Daniel simply couldn’t fathom what the Furlings liked about him so much. All he’d done was… set them free. He supposed that was a pretty significant thing, after all.

Eventually the corridor ended in a gallery with floor-to-ceiling windows, and from the view as they approached, Daniel saw they were completely underwater, the nearby submarine landscape well lit but fading to dark blue in the distance. All around them were other long hallways with galleries like this one; what drew Daniel’s attention, though, were the massive structures that each of the galleries overlooked.

The closest one gave an idea of the scale on which the others were built. The distant ones allowed him to see a few more details, though what they were he couldn’t exactly decide. Scout solved that problem with another holographic display above his gauntlets.

The structures in the water were each the size of a small city, built in the shape of a massive sword with wings. A gracefully sweeping cage embraced the handle of the glittering object, sparkling as if made of precious metals and jewels. The holographic miniature turned and rotated with Scout’s direction, then changed to a wire-frame view that revealed the floor plans of the interior.

Whatever these structures were, they were breathtaking.

“What are they?” asked Daniel in an amazed whisper. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.”

“In the long-ago, when the People were first imprisoned here, our first goal was to survive,” Scout explained, his fingers fondly touching the cool glass of the window. “Our second goal was to preserve our knowledge. Our third was freedom. Last of all, we wanted a chance to confront those who had exiled us here, to know the reason why this was done to us. These are our starships, friend, stored here beneath the surface of the water, sheltered for thousands of years, constantly renewed and upgraded with the best of our technology, until we could once again take them to the
stars. There are devices in orbit around this world that keep us here, destroying our ships if they try to leave, but they shut down the moment you released us from our prison.”

He turned to Daniel and smiled. “You've given us our freedom, but we can no longer face our captors, since they ceased to exist long ago. The People now offer you justice for your world, Daniel Jackson.” He tapped one knuckle against the glass, indicating the closest craft. “This will be your home, for as long as you wish to travel with us. Others were launched the day you released us from our prison, and we've been out in the universe exploring. We've met your enemies, but don't really know them yet. We must learn from you, if we're to seek justice for the Tau'ri.”

“B-but-but I--” Daniel swallowed. He looked from Scout’s eyes to the massive vessel and back, a lump in his throat. “I can’t command a crew! I don’t know how.” He shook his head. “I can’t do it.”

“There are many ways to seek a solution to a problem,” Scout assured him. “An experienced commander will direct the daily operations of the ship, but you will guide the crew on board. Together, we'll help you in your quest for justice and a permanent peace, both for the refugees of Earth and for yourself.”

“I--” Daniel stared at the amazing, gigantic starship, floating in the water before him. Tiny lights sparkling on its surface were windows, he realized, and the glowing ball on the pommel was a bridge, bright and clear, with several of the Mountain Clan moving around inside it. The far end of the pointed blade housed engines that were still and silent as the craft sat at anchor, waiting to come to life in space. “Oh, my God.”

“It needs a name,” Scout urged, touching his shoulder lightly. "Your people are so fond of naming everything."

The image of the starship swam in Daniel’s vision as he blinked back tears. “I would like to call her Gaia,” he said huskily. “Mother Earth, the goddess who gave birth to the Titans, the gods, and humankind.”

“Then let me take you to your goddess.” Scout gestured toward a staircase leading downward. “Come, friend. This way.”

Daniel was in a daze as he stepped aboard a crescent-shaped shuttle. The submarine dropped from a dock into the water below it, and Scout piloted the roomy craft toward the Gaia. He gave Daniel an exterior tour first, pointing out the various decks, systems and weapon ports.

“What’s that?” asked Daniel, pointing to the sweeping metallic arcs and swirls embracing most of the bow.

“A wormhole generator for this vessel,” Scout told him. “The rear engines can drive Gaia through space or propel it into hyperspace; we can also make short jumps through a wormhole created for the ship itself. The generator requires a great amount of power, and so can only be used in emergencies.”

“Wow. Jack will want one of those.”

“We will be sending one to Alpha for his assessment.”

"Maybe you should tell the crew of that ship to take their time." The farther away he was from Jack when the General figured out Daniel had another way off Furudi, the better.

"Consider it done."
As they neared the forward curve of one of the wings, a large panel slid back, exposing an empty compartment. Once they’d landed, the door closed and the water was pumped from the enclosed chamber. When it was emptied, Scout opened the submarine’s hatch, and they stepped out onto the hangar deck, where the Gaia’s officers were waiting for inspection.

After a brief meal, during which he met the officers, followed by a short rest, Scout took Daniel on a tour of the main sections of the vessel. Aside from the expected spaces like the bridge, engine room, galley, infirmary, mess hall, crew quarters, and hangar decks – complete with thousands of fighter craft, sized for pilots of each race of the People – there were extras that would have had no place on a battleship designed by humans. There was even a music room, filled with Furling instruments, along with a piano alien craftsmen had fashioned from Daniel’s memories of basic structure and sound, just for him.

He choked up when he saw it. Tucking his gratitude and grief away, he continued on his tour.

There were gardens, a greenhouse, a library and a chapel, and rather than tight, narrow corridors that saved space, every room and passageway was graced with twenty-foot ceilings, softly carpeted floors, and elegantly decorated walls with murals, paintings, and sculpture niches.

Being inside the ship was like visiting a grand castle or world-class museum.

Daniel was stunned. "What kind of starship is this?" he asked his guide. "Why is it so… beautiful? Our spaceships are just… functional. Boxy and boring, all shades of gray."

Scout chuckled. "We believe anything worth doing is worth doing well. Function need not be dull or ugly, so we take care in even the smallest details. The design of every ship has come straight from our hearts, friend; they are symbols of our freedom, and our strength of purpose.” He cocked his head. "Besides, those who work on these craft are expecting to be away from home for long periods of time. They should see beauty daily to help keep them happy and calm. Otherwise, they may grow to resent their assignments so far from the familiar."

"This is a battleship, right?" This was confusing to Daniel, to have a deadly weapon so elegantly decorated. It was a little like dressing up a pistol in mother-of-pearl and gold scrollwork -- something more ceremonial than made to actually use.

"As your people would say, the top of the line."

There was even an embarkation room, outfitted with short-range transporters for beaming to a planet or another nearby spacecraft, as well as a full-sized Stargate with Furling embellishments for passenger or crew travel to more distant places. He studied the ship’s gate, which was covered in gold leaf and encrusted with what looked like jewels. Each constellation glyph lit up from the inside, appearing to be one solid piece rather than a ring inside a wheel, more like the Atlantis ‘gate than Earth’s.

This one, however, didn’t have a DHD. The People had designed something a good deal more advanced to operate their gate. Daniel studied the control panel, taking note of a circular indentation in the center of the device. It looked familiar, but he wasn’t sure of its purpose.

Tapping the depression with one finger, he asked Scout, “What’s this for?”

“The Hub,” he said simply. “The way the Ancients built the Wheels – or Stargates, as you call them – is that one dialing device in proximity to another will override its control of the Wheel. For instance, if we were in orbit around this planet, using this portal would render the one on the surface inoperable until this one shut down. Do you understand?”
“Yes. Stargates being used in space have to be close to a planet that has another wormhole generator to fix the point in space for departure or arrival.” Daniel had experienced that in person on several occasions – fleeing Apophis’ ship just before SG-1 had blown it up came quickly to mind. He’d been on a Goa’uld mother ship in orbit around Earth, but couldn’t activate a wormhole directly to Earth, because the portals were too close to the same point in space. He’d had to go to another planet, using Earth as his embarkation point, then travel back to Earth from there.

“For most Stargates, this is so; however, the Hub will allow you to fix a precise point in space for this ship, this portal, so that you may travel as you wish, from Gaia to any world. You may return here through the Stargate as long as Gaia maintains the same approximate position in space. If we should be forced to move from that area, no wormhole would engage for your return.”

“The People have certainly put a lot of thought into this,” Daniel told his friend. “I don’t know what to say, other than… thank you. That hardly seems like enough.” He felt humbled.

Scout gave him an elegant bow. “You've seen your starship,” he stated quietly. “Now it's time for you to meet your Captain. He was unavoidably detained when you arrived, or he'd have been there to meet you.”

A Mountain Clan giant stepped forward, dressed in royal blue and charcoal. His hair was shiny black, with eyes to match his tunic. The captain gave him a formal bow and gestured with his hands in the traditional Furling greeting.

"Apologies for not joining you earlier," he said warmly, then looked to his right. "I believe you know my executive officer?"

Standing beside the captain was Denali, the same individual who had welcomed Daniel upon his first arrival in Shahr and taken him to meet the council of elders.

"It is good to see you again, my friend."

Daniel smiled at him. "I wondered why I hadn't seen you in a while. You've been here, I suppose?"

Denali nodded. "Yes. There was much to do to prepare the flagship."

"It's very impressive." Daniel glanced around, taking note of the officers he'd already met, performing at their duty stations on the bridge. "Since the People don't have a military, why have you adopted our ranking system? I noticed during the introductions that everyone's using the titles."

The Captain explained with a grin, “We have no military rankings, as do the Tau’ri. We liked the sound of the titles you use, and so we have adopted them as our own. This way, your people will instantly understand our hierarchy.”

“Makes sense,” Daniel returned with a chuckle, “though I'd think that, for a ship this size, you ought to at least be a General or Admiral.”

“I like Captain,” the alien told him, his broad face expanding with a grin. “Welcome aboard, friend.”

“Thank you.” Daniel was a little overwhelmed.

“We will be leaving the dock shortly,” announced the commander. “If you would like to unpack in your quarters and rest, you may join us on the bridge whenever you like. This ship must be handled delicately while subject to the pressure of water, atmosphere and planetary gravitational fields. It
will take many hours to achieve orbit. Once we have reached space, we will send for you to
discuss further plans. Rest well, and enjoy exploring your new home.”

“Pleasure to meet you and the crew, Captain.”

Daniel followed Scout off the bridge, down the main corridor, and into the starboard wing where
the officers’ quarters and VIP suites were located. His rooms were situated first in line, right next
to the library. He didn’t think his heart had slowed down from its wild, excited tattoo since he’d
boarded the ship, but as soon as he stretched out on his bunk, he fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Chapter 18: Judgment

December 20

Daniel stood on the bridge of the massive ship, eyes glued to the vista before him. The cerulean
depths of the ocean became frothy spray, the fine droplets of water fading to clear azure sky, then
giving way to a darkening spectrum of blue as the great machine rose steadily through the thinning
atmosphere. The Furling home world gradually receded below them, the two continents rotating
beneath the hull as the Gaia gradually ascended. The starry ebony vault of space grew darker and
clearer as they rose, until the planet and its single ringed moon were both visible in the same
panorama.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, admiring the verdant continents, sapphire oceans, and snowy white
clouds of the alien world. A pang of longing for Earth squeezed at his heart, but he tenderly
brushed it away.

“Where to, Captain?” he asked, studying the commander of the Gaia, seated on his right.

“We had thought you would be the one to make that decision,” the Mountain Clan officer
answered.

Daniel had been considering that a great deal over the last few hours, as he’d wandered the ship
during their ascent, both to familiarize himself with the vessel's layout and to meet the crew. The
Gaia held a company of two thousand, made up of equal numbers of each Furling Clan, all
working together to maintain a flawless, constant operation of the gigantic craft.

He’d been amazed to find that four decks in the ship’s elegant wings stored a total of five hundred
fighters, each with vastly different weaponry. That was when it had sunk in that these people really
were ready to go to war with him, for the sake of a single member of an alien race.

The Furlings had told him they’d been denied justice for the atrocities committed against them,
without knowing the reason why the other three races had turned against them, but for his own
peace of mind, Daniel had to confirm this view of Furling history; he needed it to hear it from the
horse’s mouth, from someone he knew -- providing they would agree to see him.

He stepped to the navigation center and activated the holographic star map. He’d seen one just like
it in the city of Shahr and had learned how to operate it from Scout. It took him a moment to find
the solar system he wanted, but once he’d located it, he touched the star with one fingertip to zoom
in on the view. Then he indicated a green planet that was second from the sun.

"Do you know this location?” he asked the giant.
The Captain had been watching him bring up the star system; he shook his great head. "When we were placed on Furdani by the Ancients, we had no star maps with us. All the locations of colonies we once inhabited or visited are lost to us. We have only the astronomical data we have been able to glean from the planet's surface with our observational devices."

That was the confirmation Daniel had wanted. He'd had a notion to try to convince Jack to take a small delegation to the Nox homeworld via Odyssey or one of the other Earth starships, to open a dialogue with the Nox and attempt to reclaim the missing part of the Furlings' past. Daniel had researched the location in the Alpha database, working secretly on the right logic and emotional triggers that might persuade the General to grant such a mission, but now it seemed that wouldn't be necessary. The People had ships of their own and could now go wherever they pleased.

There were risks involved, though. He knew already this was a touchy situation; generations of unrest, confusion, and bitterness over what had happened to the Furlings at the hands of the Ancients could provide adequate fuel to start a war the Nox wouldn't fight. Daniel trusted his newest friends, believing with his whole heart that their sense of honor wouldn't allow them to take a military advantage over a pacifist race.

"Take me there," he said quietly. "The Stargate on that planet is closed to my people, and the only way there is by ship." Turning a firm gaze on the captain, he added grimly, "I want to talk to the Nox. Maybe if I speak with them alone, they might tell me why the Ancients imprisoned and destroyed most of your people."

The quiet murmur of background conversation from the bridge crew hushed entirely, the only sound the deep vibration of the ship’s engines through its hull and the high-pitched hum of numerous Sky Clan’s wings as they flew about from station to station.

Every eye on the bridge crew was fixed on him.

"You are certain of this destination?" the Captain asked gravely.

Daniel nodded, then turned his gaze back to the view of the disappearing planet beneath them.

"Set a course for the Nox home world," ordered Captain. "Prime Gaia's wormhole generator for first jump."

He turned to Daniel to explain. "This is a test, which must be performed with every starship on its first voyage. We will not go far through subspace, because the drain on the engines would be too great. After this trial, we will only use the wormholes in emergencies."

Watching the black sky in amazement, Daniel saw a swirl of bright energy flare outward from all around the bridge. A watery fountain reached for them, stopping just short of the nose of the ship, then settled into a rippling ocean edged in light. The Gaia edged into the flattened oval wormhole, sliding down the sub-space rabbit hole and emerging into a black void.

It took Daniel’s vision a moment to adjust from the blinding brightness to the absolute dark of sunless subspace. The curve of the planet below them was gone, along with its pale ringed moon and yellow sun. The ship was surrounded by total darkness, then slipped out into normal space, sparkling with distant stars.

Daniel looked at the holographic star map and saw how much distance they had covered in that leap.

They really are the Third Race, he told himself in awe, lifting his gaze to study the crew in
fascination and hoping he knew what the hell he was doing.

December 23

Three Days Later

Nox Homeworld

Daniel sat at the table in Gaia's main conference room, twiddling a pen in his hands. To his immediate left was the Forest elder. On a holographic screen in the center of the table, the other three Furling elders glowed in a curtain of light, all of equal size. Simultaneously, he and Scout were being imaged on Furdani in the council chambers, the signal transferred between the planet and the starship through a wormhole connection.

They didn't have long to talk, so Daniel didn't waste any time and told them where the ship was in orbit. "I'm about to go down to the planet," he announced to the other three, since Scout already knew his plans. "I wanted the council to be aware I intend to discover what the Nox may know about the exile of your people."

Looks were exchanged.

"You will tell us what you learn?" asked Mountain.

A wry smile lifted one corner of Daniel's mouth. "I don't exactly have a choice in that, since I upload my memories daily, but yes. Of course I'll willingly pass on whatever information I get."

El-Riel bowed, her voice husky with emotion. "We are grateful that you mediate for us."

Scout's hands, folded on the table, moved slowly into his lap as he sat up straighter, his gaze lowered. "It is the opinion of Forest Clan that a judgment should be made against the Nox for whatever part they played in the punishment of our people. What do Grass, Sky, and Mountain say?"

This was an unexpected turn. Daniel sat back in his chair as his heart started to pound. What kind of judgment were they planning to level? Were they going to destroy the Nox, now that they knew where their planet was located?

"The clans agree," said the other three, almost in unison.

"Who will decide the nature of that judgment?" asked Scout.

The images of the three elders appeared to look straight ahead, their eyes aimed right at the human sitting at the end of the table.

"We not able," Hunter observed. "Too close."

"Too much grief," agreed Sky.

"We would not choose fairly," said Mountain with a nod.

Scout's gaze lifted to Daniel's face as well, and he spoke softly. "We cannot be the ones to choose the fate of the Nox. Only someone who is outside the circle of our pain may judge them."
Daniel was speechless. "I don't--" He tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry. "I can't-- You're asking me to judge an entire race? How can I do that?"

The Forest elder's amber eyes narrowed slightly, studying his human friend. "I have discovered an interesting fact about you, friend. Do you know the meaning of your name? I was surprised to learn many of your people do not."

"Yes." Daniel nodded. "It means, 'God is my judge.' "

The images of the other elders burst out in startled laughter.

"I don't get it." Daniel frowned, looking to Scout for an explanation of the in-joke.

"We call the planet where you found us Furdani," said Scout, his eyes gleaming with humor. "In our language, it means, 'The Judged,' because we were condemned as criminals by the Ancients. Now, the guilt of the Nox will be weighed by one chosen by our supreme being, whom we call el. You are Dani-el, or as we would say it, el-Dani. It seems to be the will of el that you are the instrument of our justice."

"Done," said el-Riel. She made the hand gesture toward them that signified the close of the council meeting.

Mountain and Grass did the same.

"Wait!" Daniel protested, but they didn't give him a chance to decline. The transmission winked out, and he and Scout were alone in the conference room. He glared at his alien companion. "That was an ambush!" he growled unhappily. "The council planned that, didn't you?"

For a long moment, Scout just blinked at him innocently. Then the blank mask slipped, and he grinned broadly. "You learn quickly, el-Dani." He cocked his head. "Why do you suppose we have done this?"

Daniel pushed back from the table with a sigh of resignation. "Oh, I understand completely! As Hunter said, you're too emotionally involved to decide for yourself; I'm just not sure the entire Furling race will be happy with any punishment I choose."

Scout rose slowly. "This isn't about making my people happy; it's about an impartial party naming the price to be paid. Whether or not the Nox are willing to atone for their crime is another matter entirely. If they're not, we may require your mediation until an agreement is reached. We could be here a long time, and I know you want to be on your way to search for Zeus."

He turned away and strolled toward the conference room door as Daniel's mouth slowly fell open into an 'O' of enlightened surprise.

The other shoe had just been dropped.

Daniel was going to have to determine a punishment that fit the crime, something the Nox would accept as a penalty for their part in the annihilation and exile of the Third Race. The present generation of woody little aliens might not even be aware of that history or the part their ancestors played in the tragedy, and that would make his task even more difficult. As close as he could calculate it, the Furlings had been exiled close to a million years earlier, but they had long memories and kept excellent records.

"No pressure," he said softly to himself. "I'm sure I'll figure out something. Eventually."
He put his hands on his hips, dropped his head and stared at the floor in resignation for a moment, then squared his shoulders and headed for the transporter room to make his appearance on the planet below.

One moment Daniel had been standing on the deck of the *Gaia*, and the next he was coughing, a brisk wind ruffling his hair as he stood on a narrow paved street in the floating city of the Nox. The air was thin at that elevation, and it took him a moment to adjust and catch his breath. His eyes watered from the breeze, and he blinked to clear them.

All around him, diminutive thatch-haired aliens had come to a standstill, staring at their unexpected visitor.

“My name is Daniel Jackson,” he announced. “I would like to speak with Lya, Anteus, or Ofer.”

I won’t hurt you,” he promised, offering a gentle smile as he kept his hands down at his sides, palms out in supplication.

The crowd began to back away, gathering closer together, murmuring and whispering to one another; they seemed startled at his sudden appearance, as if they’d had no warning. He’d felt sure the Nox would have watched *Gaia’s* approach and that they’d be expecting visitors, but they seemed to have been caught unaware.

Many of them began to vanish, disappearing right before his eyes. The handful that remained continued to retreat, staring at him wide-eyed and silent. No one spoke to him, but he was afraid to step toward them, sensing they might view that as a threat.

It didn’t take long for a familiar face to appear, wending her way through what remained of the bystanders, stepping into the open area between Daniel and the few others who remained. Lya’s smile was tight, and there was no welcome in her eyes, but she gave him a little bow of respect.

“Greetings, Daniel Jackson,” she told him. “What brings you here?”

“Greetings, Lya,” he answered simply. “You should know up front that I’m not here on behalf of my people, but to broker an agreement for another race. I’ve come for some answers. I need to know what happened to the Furlings.”

Faces all around him went slack with shock and fear. Some of the Nox held onto one another, and more began to disappear, hiding behind their shields of invisibility.

Lya straightened, lifting her chin. “The Furlings have been gone for many centuries.” Her answer was evasive, non-committal.

He nodded. “I understand that. What I don’t know is the part the Nox played in their disappearance, or why so many of them were murdered, the rest forced into exile.”

Stepping to one side, she gestured to her right. “Come, Daniel. We will have some tea, and we will talk.”

Daniel didn’t figure he was going to get any straight, quick answers from these people. They spoke in cryptic hints, suggesting rather than informing. This was going to take some time and persistence. “I’d be delighted,” he told her cordially.
A swell of sadness rose up in him. He hoped he was wrong, but if the Nox's remembrance of the past provided a different history, then the Furlings might be proved liars. Then again, the Nox might lie to protect themselves and he'd be none the wiser without proof. Either way, he was sure he was going to get his heart broken again today.

Still, he had to know.

He followed Lya, admiring the view of the city he had never seen up close. As he made his way along the street, he spied more Nox around them, many of them disappearing as he met their curious stares. He stood head and shoulders taller than everyone, and it made him feel like a giant. The woodsy smell of the Nox was as heady as new-mown grass and flowers.

The city was stunning. Gardens were everywhere, filled with colorful insects and birds. Vines clung to the sides of tall, slender building capped with drop-shaped domes piercing the sky. Verdant moss crept between buildings and irregular-shaped paving stones formed the streets and walkways. Small trees provided shade as Daniel and his guide made their way off the main thoroughfare and up a narrow, curving path to the roof of a square, three-story house.

In the middle of the rooftop patio, a circular awning floated in the air without apparent support, providing a little shade from the bright sun. Beneath the canopy was a low, round table with three cushions set around it. Daniel waited for Lya to take her seat, and then knelt on the pillow beside her.

Nafreyu, the Nox boy he'd met in the forest nine years earlier, brought out a tray with tea, cups, and a bowl of fruit. He didn't look a day older than he had when Daniel had first seen him, still an adolescent, and Daniel supposed the Nox must grow very slowly. He knew so little about these aliens, and that saddened him.

The boy smiled, genuine delight in his dark eyes.

“Well, hello, Nafreyu,” said Daniel warmly. “It’s good to see you again.”

“My mother said we wouldn’t be seeing you again,” the boy told him. “Where are your friends? I remember their names. Carter, O’Neill and—”

“We will talk later,” said Lya, a note of stern command in her voice.

Obediently, Nafreyu set the tray down without another word or glance in her direction.

Daniel thought he deserved an answer to his question. “O’Neill is well.” He looked at the teapot instead of the boy's face as he told him the rest. “Carter and Teal’c are dead. My planet… it was destroyed a few months ago. Only a few of us survived.”

Lya paled, obviously shocked and saddened by his announcement. “I am so sorry, Daniel,” she whispered, placing her hand on his forearm.

He glanced sharply at her, wishing once again they'd been able to convince such an advanced race to help them when it had mattered. He pressed his lips together, biting back an angry retort, struggling to control his temper. He concentrated on breathing, gaze on the fruit plate, until he had his emotions in check.

She withdrew her hand and poured the tea as Nafreyu silently moved into the shadows of the house's interior, out of sight. “What truth is it that you seek, Daniel?” she asked again.

“I have to know.” He lifted the cup she offered him and sniffed at its contents. The tea smelled like
flowers – much better than Hunter’s stinky healing brew – but Daniel wasn’t thirsty. He sipped at it to be polite, then held the cup in his lap. “I want to know the Nox version of what became of the Third Race.”

A breeze ruffled the woman’s grassy hair, rustling her gauzy gown. She sipped her tea delicately, taking her time in composing an answer. “Long before the days of the Four Races, we believed ourselves to be a great people, highly cultured and civilized,” she said at last. “For millennia we had peace on our world, for so long that we had forgotten what war and violence were. We developed great science and medicine. We advanced to explore the stars, not knowing what we would find. We were bolder, then.”

“And you found the Furlings.” Daniel took another sip of tea, watching her out of the corner of his eyes rather than look at her directly.

Lya nodded, shifting a little on her pillow. “Our history says they were a wild people, filled with passion. My ancestors thought them barbarians, but they showed only an eagerness to interact peacefully.”

“You were afraid of them.”

“Yes. They were quite unpredictable.” She set her cup down and picked up an oblong bright orange fruit with long cerulean stripes down its sides, staring at it as she went on. “For centuries we talked with them, traded with them. While we were slow to expand into the galaxy, they settled worlds quickly, efficiently. They leaped into conflicts with other races. They would not hear reason.”

“You mean, they wouldn’t listen to the Nox and stay out of other people’s disputes,” he corrected, choosing a small yellow berry from the bowl.

Without confirming or denying his conclusion, Lya continued her tale. “They introduced us to the Ancients and the Asgard, and we began to make treaties with one another, sharing knowledge and culture. The Furlings had much to offer… as well as much that caused us concern.”

Daniel popped the berry into his mouth and looked into her big dark eyes as she sliced the orange fruit into rounded pieces.

“They sent ships to worlds with primitive races, healing their sick and wounded, offering supplies and technology.” Lya’s gaze dropped to the fruit as she lifted a slice to her lips and nibbled it. Tears glistened in her eyes.

“That doesn’t sound like a bad thing to me,” Daniel told her, unable to keep the trace of bitterness out of his voice. “My people do – or did – the same thing.”

She nodded. “I know. There is much in your race that is like theirs. That is why we closed our doors to you.”

“You were afraid of us, too? We offered the Nox our friendship, Lya. We tried to help you. We tried to protect you, not realizing you could protect yourselves.” He was having a little trouble keeping his anger contained. “It would’ve been wise of you to tell us that in the beginning.”

Lya looked away. “By helping others as the Furlings did, giving more primitive races technology when they are not developed enough to handle the responsibility of such power, their minds can be warped. They can be changed into violent creatures that love war and seek to control others.”

“There’s a responsibility that goes along with offering aid and knowledge, just like teaching a child
the difference between right and wrong,” Daniel snapped. “If the Nox had taught my people how to heal, for instance, you could have maintained relations with us to make sure that power wasn’t misused… though I find it hard to conceive of a way to misuse that ability.”

She shook her head, raising her gaze to his, her eyes pleading. “It is not that simple, Daniel.”

“It never is,” he shot back angrily. He took a deep breath, clenching his hands to wrangle a little more self-control. “So what did the Nox do?”

Her smile was sad, begging for understanding. “Our history of that time is not clear. We know only that we were the cause of the tragedy that befell them. We did not take part in it other than instigating the action against them, which the Ancients carried out.”

Daniel felt a little ill, shaken by her confession. Maybe the Nox hadn’t participated in the extermination, but they’d started it. They’d been responsible for the Furlings being all but erased from the galaxy.

“What about the Asgard?”

“They chose to remain somewhat neutral.”

“Somewhat?” Daniel was outraged by her phrasing, but struggled to keep his voice dispassionate. She was spooked enough as it was. He could see the fear in her wide eyes, warring with incredible sadness etched onto her face, and a heavy burden of guilt in her slightly bowed head and drooping shoulders.

Lya looked back at the simple clay cup that held her tea. “The Asgard were great mapmakers. They charted the entire galaxy and knew every world where the Furlings lived. They shared that information with the Ancients.”

A little thrill of elation lifted Daniel's spirits. If the Asgard once knew where the original Furling colonies were, that data was somewhere at the Alpha or in the Odyssey's database, downloaded by the Asgard themselves for posterity. Locating the information could take a long time, but at least it wasn't completely lost. That joy didn't last long, as the sweet aftertaste of the tea and fruit turned bitter in his mouth. “Then what happened?”

“The histories of that era are unclear, as my ancestors intended it to be. You see, the fate of the Third Race was an event that would never be spoken of or recorded by the Nox; it was our greatest shame.”

“So you don’t know what happened to the Furlings?”

“The knowledge of what became of them has been lost to us. To all of us.” She fell silent, her chin lifting in stubborn defense of her people. "Our ancestors came to regret the part they played in what was done. That is all we know for certain, but I am sure they believed they were making the right decision. It is the way of the Nox to choose the best path.”

Daniel couldn’t speak. Hating what he’d just heard, his throat closed up as he fought to swallow his disappointment and grief.

Lya gazed at him with righteous self-assurance. “What happened to the Third Race changed us forever,” she told him with a trace of bitterness in her soft voice. “We withdrew from the alliance, destroyed all our settlements on other worlds and returned here, to our ancestral home. We closed ourselves off as penance.”
“It’s not enough,” Daniel ground out, memories of the survivors’ accounts of the holocaust searing through his memory. “Do you have any idea what they went through?”

She shook her head, her gaze lowering to the plate of fruit on the table. “We do not want to know.”

Daniel couldn’t believe what he was hearing. How could they not want to know the results of their betrayal? How could they turn blind eyes to their own past, and wipe it out so completely?

For a moment, he just sat there, unable to think of anything to say to Lya.

He wasn’t accustomed to words failing him so thoroughly. Then he reached into the thigh pocket of his black trousers and brought out a small silver jar. Daniel set it onto the table with a solid thump and glared at her, demanding silently that she meet his eyes. He was horrified, outraged, aching.

“What is that?” Lya asked, glancing timidly from his face to the container, shrinking back as if it were a bomb.

“Your legacy,” he told her harshly.

Daniel had gone through the Furling Stargate to Alpha colony many times prior to leaving Furdani onboard the Gaia, and every time he’d arrived back on the aliens’ planet, he couldn’t help the lump that had risen in his throat as he’d stepped in the ashes of his teammates and so many millions of Furlings. One day, he had gathered some of them up into this jar, and always carried it with him afterward. He’d even made his own contributions, so he’d never forget.

“What does it contain?” she asked, finally looking back at him.

His eyes prickled, and he blinked to clear his vision. “Blood, tears and ashes,” he whispered. “My blood. My tears. The ashes of my friends, from two worlds. What happened to Earth and the Furlings might have been prevented, if the Nox had really done what was best and lent those in need a helping hand.”

He stared at the little urn, shining softly with reflected sunlight. “Too many others have paid the price of your people’s fear, Lya. The Nox engineered the murder of billions, using the Ancients as your weapon. There’s still a price to be paid. The Furlings are in need of justice. Your people have a great debt to pay.”

Lya sighed and nodded resignedly, dropping her gaze to her lap again. “They were by far the most visionary of the Four Races, Daniel. Masters of change. They had the capacity to become the most powerful race of all, and we destroyed them.”

“Not completely.”

She smiled a little, lopsided and wry. “Then they have survived, and you have found them,” she concluded, meeting his eyes with a flicker of relief in her expression. “This is good news.” She sat a little straighter and lifted her chin. “And now they sit in judgment of us. I will carry their decision to my people, and we will prepare for death.”

He shook his head. “They aren’t going to kill you. They aren’t going to do anything to you. The Furlings have appointed me as their arbiter, and now that I’ve heard your side of the story, I have a sentence for the Nox’s crime.”

Genuine surprise dawned on her face. “What? They-- they have no demands? How? How can this be?”
“It seems they have a better sense of honor and justice than I do.” Faith in his new friends welled up in Daniel’s soul, and he smiled at her smugly. “My decision is this-- the Nox will return to traveling through the Stargate. See with your own eyes how other races suffer and die, witness their struggle against oppression from others. Render aid with healing, and offer helping hands where they’re needed. Learn the difference between those who seek to improve and those who want to own, and learn to face your fears. You didn’t need to be afraid of the Furlings, then or now.”

He got to his feet, glancing at the little silver urn, then back at Lya as she also rose.

“Please convey to the Furlings our sincerest apologies and heartfelt wish for forgiveness,” Lya murmured, offering him a slight bow, hands crossed over her chest. “Your sentence will be carried out. It is just and fair, and too long overdue.”

She raised her gaze to his and reached out to touch his arm. “You should know, Daniel, that the Nox are a dying race. Our numbers are few now.” She gestured toward the skyline of the floating metropolis surrounding them. “This city is the last place where we may be found.”

Somehow, that didn't surprise him. “I’m truly saddened to hear that.”

There was peace in her dark eyes, serenity in her slow smile. “This journey will hasten our extinction, but that is inevitable. It is good that our candles may provide light in the darkness. Thank you, Daniel.”

“I’m sorry, Lya.”

“As are the Nox,” she admitted. “Farewell, Daniel Jackson.”

"Goodbye, Lya." Daniel touched the communication device curled around his left ear. “Ready to return to Gaia,” he called to the ship, still in orbit above the planet.

A moment later he was on the transporter deck, surrounded by stiff-faced Furlings.

He cocked his head, eyeing the ship's commander and the Forest Clan elder. “You could wipe them out now, you know,” he stated, testing them.

"You know we will not," said Captain. "There is no honor in it."

"What did the Nox tell you?” asked Scout, his eyes hooded, dangerous-looking, but intensely curious.

Daniel shook his head. "That portion of their history has been left intentionally vague, Scout. They don't know why it happened, just as their ancestors wanted. I'm sorry I don't have more to tell you."

Scout's chin lifted. "And their penance?"

“You’ll be seeing them out there,” Daniel announced. "It's time they faced their fears and found out what it's like to be in the shoes of those they refused to help."

Scout and Denali exchanged a knowing glance. The tension in their faces melted away. Other officers nodded in agreement and turned away, returning to their duties, passing the word as they went through the ship.

“The punishment fits the crime,” said the Captain with a slow smile to his Forest Clan cousin. He turned to Daniel, gesturing toward the corridor that would take them to the bridge. “Our next destination, friend?”
“Yeah.” Daniel stepped off the transporter pad and followed them down the hallway. “Where, exactly, are the worlds loyal to Zeus, and how long will it take us to get there?”

Scout chuckled. “Not long enough, soondah. I'll begin your training after you've finished your business with the Captain. Then we'll devise a plan for bringing justice to your lost world.”

Daniel frowned in concentration, searching his memory for that alien word. He’d been working hard on learning each dialect of the Furling language, but they were complex. Some had sounds he had difficulty articulating, but he understood the language much better than he spoke it.

“Okay, what’s that word mean? I can’t remember.”

“Soondah,” repeated Scout, enunciating carefully. “It's what we call young people just beginning their training in the arts of war.” He clapped Daniel on the shoulder playfully.

“I’m not some kid, you know,” Daniel pouted.

But in a way, he knew he was. These people had so much to teach him, and he was only beginning his education with them. They would be taking him on great adventures, and this time, he had the opportunity to go wherever he wanted. He could research ancient cultures and learn about alien societies. He wasn’t being pressured by any government or organization to find advanced technology or weapons. The Furlings already had all that, and they were lending their aid to the people on Alpha. Soon, the Nox would, too.

He could become the explorer he’d wanted to be ever since the first time he’d stepped through the Stargate. Somewhere out there, he was sure the reason for the Furlings’ imprisonment had been recorded, just waiting for someone to find it. Lya had said the People had settled many worlds, but none had yet been discovered by the SGC. That was something he might help them do, recover their lost past.

First, though, he needed to hone his combat skills and then track down Zeus.

That was going to take a lot of work, and might well cost him his life. It was a price he was more than willing to pay.

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**Chapter 19: Orders**

**December 23**
**Three Days Later**
**Aboard the Gaia**

*Bap!*

Daniel flinched, but too late; a tiny ink-filled pellet splattered against his bare chest, stinging and leaving a welt and a red stain where it had struck him. He was getting tired. Sweat was dripping down into his eyes, but he dared not wipe his brow and lose a fraction of a second's concentration.

"Move faster," Scout ordered casually, and fired at him again.

*Bap!*

This time, the pellet only grazed his shoulder. "When do I get to shoot you, damn it?" Daniel demanded, dodging another shot, this time successfully.
It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the training; he really did, but he seemed to always be on the receiving end of the pain, and frustration was getting to him.

"All right. Fair enough." Grinning, Scout stripped off the *tissé*, a gauntlet-mounted training weapon, and tossed it to Daniel. "Let's see how you do against an old man, Grasshopper."

Daniel caught the device. "You're not old. Barely hitting middle age, by Furling standards." He stood still, panting as he strapped it onto his forearm, fastening the trigger across his palm.

He waited while Scout removed his belt and tunic to keep the ink pellets from staining his clothes. The elder was lean and muscular, as most of his people were; only those who had injuries or illnesses that prevented them from maintaining high levels of fitness were in less than fighting trim.

"Grasshopper? You know, I really wish Jack hadn't sent you that pop-culture and slang primer," Daniel observed. "You picked up a lot disgustingly fast."

"The People learn quickly," agreed the alien with a saucy grin. "Ready?"

Nodding, Daniel gave him no warning as he raised his arm and squeezed off the first shot.

*And missed.*

It was like watching a Tai Chi master and ballet dancer all rolled into one. Scout not only managed to move out of the way and dodge every pellet, he did it with grace and panache. His movements seemed effortless, and by the time Daniel gave up, Scout hadn't broken a sweat and was barely breathing hard.

"How do you do that?" Daniel demanded.

"I can anticipate your movements by how you prepare for them," Scout told him. He began to demonstrate, raising his right arm as if he were about to fire the weapon. "Your eyes shift to the target first, then your balance changes. You shift your weight slightly before you fire, and you move with your whole arm, when it isn't necessary for the use of the *tissé*. In your mind, you're still shooting a gun or a zat."

That made sense, but some of the finer points Daniel didn't get. Scout fetched another *tissé* and activated a holographic target, setting the device to send signals rather than fire pellets. Daniel made the same adjustment to his *tissé* and listened intently to the lesson.

Half an hour later, they hit the showers, dressed, and went their separate ways. Daniel headed to his recently completed office, looking around in amazement at the incredible décor. This was another Furling touch of beauty, a hallmark of their culture and attention to detail.

They knew Daniel preferred subdued lighting out of habit, when he'd had to combat frequent headaches back at the SGC. He'd often enjoyed working in his shady backyard in Colorado Springs, sitting at a beat-up old picnic table beneath the trees to read or work on his laptop. After examining his memories of that time, the People had created this room as a place for Daniel to work in comfort and peace, with everything he needed at his fingertips.

The room was almost circular, but irregularly shaped. Jutting out from the wall beside his desk was the trunk of a manufactured tree, its limbs reaching up to the ceiling, tiny fabric leaves filtering the
overhead lighting so that only a small patch of dappled artificial sunbeams were cast on his workspace. Air circulation in the room caused the leaves to rustle, creating a soothing background noise. Every wall seemed to be constructed of smoothly chiseled stones, displaying visible signs of wear and weathering, as though they had been standing for centuries. Plants were everywhere, dotted with bright splashes of colorful blooms, but Daniel's favorites were the roses.

Those were not native to the Furlings' world. They had been pulled from Daniel's memory because the People thought they were beautiful, recreated as non-living decorations for his office. Vines were placed up the walls in long trailers, stood at the foot of the tree in long-stemmed bushes or in pots set here and there in small trees or draped from hanging baskets. A delicate floral perfume lightly scented the air, but not one of the realistic-looking plants was alive. They were graceful illusions, along with all the other woodsy decorations in the room, including the soft, moss-colored carpet on the floor.

In a sheltered area on the far side of the tree, a comfortable hammock was hung below a goose-necked reading lamp in a cozy corner, where he could lie back and relax. The lamp could be directed at the pages of his book or other materials, and the beam would move with perfectly synchronized light at just the right intensity, moving in rhythm with the swing of the hammock.

There was just enough outdoorsy decoration to create an atmosphere of serenity, without being overdone. The lines were clean, the furnishings functional, and there was plenty of space. He could even adjust the background noises to add sounds of falling water, thunder, rolling ocean waves or familiar animal calls, and change the ambient scents to more woodsy, spicy, or other aromas specifically geared to help him relax or concentrate. The Furlings seemed to have thought of every comfort for him when designing his workspace.

Daniel sighed as he entered the wonderfully appealing room and took a seat at his desk, preparing to do a little work on a Furling language lesson.

The desk was another amazing tool his hosts had created for his use, giving the appearance of being carved from a solid, massive piece of alabaster, but it was a technologically sophisticated machine designed by the People. The workspace appeared bare except for his laptop, which was a facsimile he preferred using until he grew more familiar with navigating the Furling database. The computer wasn't really there, either, present only as a holograph for him to use to connect to the advanced Furling information center.

He turned the interface on and the whole surface activated. A three-dimensional star map appeared on the left side, schematics of the ship and its crew on the right, along with technical data reporting on every active system in a constant scroll just beneath the plan. His most recent investigations into Furling history were bookmarked on a virtual screen, and his favorite music began to play in the room, taken from Alpha's archives.

He couldn't help smiling, feeling instantly at ease.

Just as he started to navigate to the next language lesson, he discovered a message waiting for him instead.

It was a recorded transmission from Alpha, popping up on the other side of the desk in full holographic 3D. He hesitated before opening the message, not certain if he should just pretend he hadn't received it for a few more days, or go ahead and face the music. There was no way he was going back to Alpha without Zeus's head on a platter, no matter what Jack said.
He pressed his lips together in determination and opened the recording with a scowl at the hologram appearing in the center of the room in a life-size display.

"Hello, Daniel."

An image of Jack was standing, hands clasped behind his back, and he didn't look too happy. He had his General face on, and his dark eyes were smoldering. He'd probably recorded this just when he'd received Daniel's transmission a few hours ago, announcing that he wouldn't be coming back to Alpha for Christmas, due to unforeseen circumstances.

"Oh, brother," Daniel said aloud to himself with a weary sigh. "Here it comes."

"I just talked to Hunter. Heard you took off from Furling-world on a little sightseeing tour in one of their big honkin' new spaceships. I distinctly remember telling you that you were not to go on any witch hunts, but then, you never obeyed orders very well." Jack was obviously restraining himself, but his eyes were snapping with indignation.

Daniel pressed his lips together, knowing he couldn't talk back to a recorded message.

Jack made an effort to appear casual, but his eyes narrowed with growing tension, and the edge in his voice got sharper with every sentence. "We got some visitors yesterday. Nafreyu says hi, by the way." Jack's grin was patronizing, completely insincere. He bounced a little on his toes and shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. "Barn doors and horses come to mind, but I guess we're not in a position to turn down any help from the Nox, no matter how tardy it might be, so thanks for sending 'em. Nice to see 'em again."

"You're welcome," Daniel murmured, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Jack's eyebrows scrunched down as his glare intensified. "So, since you're determined to get your ass shot off by somebody out there, I thought I'd better do my part to make sure someone's watching your six properly. Not that the Furlings can't do that, but... you know me; I like to have my people doing the job."

Daniel's eyes closed. He hung his head and sighed.

"I also distinctly remember telling you that hunting Zeus would likely put Alpha in danger, but I guess that isn't as important as your need for vengeance."

There was the expected knife in the heart and it hurt, just as it was intended to do. Daniel touched his lower lip with his index finger, patting it thoughtfully. "I trust the Furlings, Jack. They'll look out for you."

As though Jack had heard him, he continued, "Yeah, Hunter said they have a couple of their ships on the way here, to look after us. That's what they've told us, anyway. Funny thing -- I didn't know they even had spaceships. That's something else you failed to mention to me."

Of course Jack would be suspicious. Even though the Furlings had already shown they meant no harm and had helped the human refugees neutralize numerous threats, it was part of Jack's nature and his job to be skeptical; that was what made him so good at taking care of others. He was rarely ever caught completely off-guard.

"Send us the coordinates of the planet nearest you with a Stargate, and I'll send your new team to
ya," Jack told him, his jaw tight, glare hot enough to start a fire, "and that's not a request, Daniel. It's an order. Merry damn Christmas to you, too." Jack stood there, glaring into the camera, obviously frustrated he couldn't dress Daniel down further in person. Daniel watched as Jack reached for the "off" switch on his end. "General O'Neill, out."

The holograph disappeared.

"Well." As O'Neill tirades went, that one had been only middling. "Just when you said you couldn't spare anybody, somehow you manage to find a few," Daniel commented wryly to the empty room. "Might as well get this done."

Then he grinned. "Won't they be surprised to find out they're coming right to the ship?"

He headed for the transporter room and put in a call to the Captain to meet him there. The ship would have to come to a full stop, and only Daniel could work the PDHD to open the Stargate to their current location in space. Alpha would have to be contacted with the arrangements, and it could be hours before the team actually arrived.

Daniel was sure Jack would have a thing or two to say to him when a live connection had been established, but he'd rein it in a little because there would be an audience on both ends of the transmission.

Then Daniel chuckled a little as another realization struck home. Jack was going to be mighty pissed off when he found out Daniel was now something along the lines of a fleet admiral. This time, he hadn't just gone off to do his own thing -- he'd taken an entire race with him.

His cheeks hurt from the width of his grin.

The bejeweled Stargate roared to life with a watery flush, then settled down to placid rippling. A moment later, a woman stepped through dressed in green BDUs, suited up for a field mission, including P-90, tactical vest, and a black ball cap. She carried a large green duffel bag, dropping it as soon as she'd crossed the space between the 'gate and the greeting party.

She glanced around the transporter room's elegant décor, then back at Daniel, a flicker of surprise in her eyes as she studied him. "Doctor Jackson, I presume?" She extended a hand to him. "Colonel Rose MacFarland, reporting as ordered, to watch your six, sir."

The Colonel was fiftyish, with dark brown hair gone silver at the temples, and intense brown eyes. She had the look of someone accustomed to giving commands and being obeyed. Her Southern accent was unmistakable, her voice husky, as if she'd been a long-time smoker.

"Welcome aboard the Gaia, Colonel," Daniel told her, shaking her hand.

The Colonel nodded, hurriedly stepping aside with her gear, still taking in the elegant surroundings with wonder in her expression. She shot a final glance at the gilded Stargate. "Shiny. Thought we were gonna meet you on a planet, Doc? This feels like a spaceship."

"You got it in one, Colonel. But we'll get to that, I promise." Daniel turned his gaze back to the rippling event horizon. "How many more are coming?"
"Just two."

Doctor Carolyn Lam was next through the portal, dressed in blue jeans, a black turtleneck sweater and black leather jacket, a stethoscope draped around her neck. She was towing an anti-grav cart supplied by the Furlings, loaded with medical equipment and baggage. As soon as she spied her surroundings, she was obviously more than a little surprised.

"Hello again, Daniel. I wasn't expecting... this. Where are we, exactly?" she asked, coming forward to shake his hand.

"It's good to see you, too, Carolyn," he answered politely. "Welcome aboard the Gaia."

"Indeed."

The sound of that familiar greeting in a deep, rumbling bass voice made Daniel's head jerk upward, looking back at the event horizon at the last traveler to appear. "Teal'c! OhmyGodTeal'c! You're alive!"

"I am."

Daniel rushed him, leaping up and throwing his arms around the big Jaffa's neck with utter abandon. Daniel laughed, giddy with delight at seeing his old friend alive. One of Teal'c's big hands came up around Daniel's ribs and held him in place, both feet dangling off the ground as Daniel pounded his friend's broad back and wide shoulders.

"It is good to see you also, DanielJackson," he intoned. "You look well."

Releasing his grip, Daniel slid down the big man's gray-robed chest, and he looked back into familiar dark eyes. "Teal'c, I thought you were gone! With Earth."

The Jaffa frowned, his narrowed eyes glimmering with leashed hatred. "I was called away suddenly for the birth of my grandson just before the destruction of my adopted world," he told his old friend. "I have also been serving on the Jaffa council, and it has taken me some time to return to Alpha colony. O'Neill and I have had many discussions since my arrival a few days ago, and we both thought it appropriate that I come to visit you." He glanced up meaningfully at the Furlings, then back at Daniel.

"They're our friends, Teal'c," Daniel assured him. "I trust them."

Teal'c inclined his head, meaning that, although Daniel's assurance had been accepted, Teal'c was going to make up his own mind about the truth of that statement.

Then Teal'c's news finally sunk in, and Daniel grinned. "Congratulations! I can't imagine you as a grandfather! You've got to tell me all about the baby, Rya'c and his wife, how the family's doing. I want news!" He put a hand on his friend's shoulder and led him off, the other two new arrivals forgotten on the transporter deck.

"Think he even knows we're still here?" Carolyn asked Rose.

"Boy's got other thangs on his mind," the Colonel returned with a crooked grin. "Let 'im celebrate that."
She turned to face the Mountain Clan giant, who was still watching them from beside the Stargate controls, and approached him with her hand outstretched to introduce herself. "I am Captain," the commander returned politely. "Welcome aboard the Gaia, goddess Earth. I would be pleased to show you to your quarters and give you a tour of your new home."

"That'd be spiffy," Rose told him, gazing with wonder around the spacious, elegant room. "She sure is a pretty gal."

"This vessel has no gender," the Furling told her. "It is a machine."

Doctor Lam smiled and explained to the alien. "It's an old Earth tradition. Ships are often temperamental, but loved like a mate by their captain and crew. Since most of the ancient crews were all male, they gave the vessel a female identity. Sailors were married, in a way, to their ships, and it made sense to them for the craft to be female."

"'Course, we don't do the gender bias thing as much anymore," Rose added. "Women serve in our military, even command some of our boats. It's just so culturally embedded, we all kinda think of 'em as gals." She shrugged. "Whatever works, ya know?"

The giant smiled and nodded. "In deference to our human friends, we shall also adopt this gender identity for Gaia." Captain gestured down the corridor where Daniel and Teal'c had gone. "This way, please."

Daniel leaned against the doorway of the ship's infirmary, watching Dr. Lam mere hours after her arrival. She stood in the middle of the big room, her eyes wide, mouth hanging open, just turning in a small circle, looking around at all the equipment. He loved that look of wonder, whenever humans were introduced to so much Furling technology; they were like kids in a candy store, and he hadn't exactly been immune himself. He was still discovering new things daily, as he explored their database or the ship itself, finding areas he'd missed on his initial inspection, or things that just hadn't stuck in his memory because he'd been so overwhelmed by it all.

"So, what do you think?" he asked, strolling into the room.

"Wow," she breathed, not quite registering his presence. "Look at all the toys!"

"Yeah. Wait till you learn how to work everything. Your head may explode."

She finally made eye contact and focused on him. "You know, this was supposed to be a temporary assignment. I'm here to learn Furling healing methods, to study their physiology and medical technology, but that could take years, Daniel. Maybe the rest of my life." She swore softly under her breath.

Daniel didn't quite catch the word, but let it slide. "You're right. Ernest Littlefield spent fifty years just studying one machine from the Four Races. We've got a whole culture here. The challenge is staggering! I doubt we'll ever understand the depth of what they know."

He glanced around the infirmary, with its gleaming surfaces and elegantly decorated machines. The far wall was composed of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out into the streaming aurora borealis of hyperspace. To the right, unused medical beds were folded up and attached to the wall with swirling gilded clasps. To the left were devices with various screens, platforms, and stations for
Every piece, every device was gorgeous. No detail was too insignificant to decorate. Daniel loved that, too.

"You look healthy," she observed, giving him a head-to-toe sweep. "You've really toned up since I saw you last. Still don't need the glasses?"

"Not anymore," he confessed with a shrug. "Something in that taimin tea they gave me when I was sick a few months ago, I think. Corrected my vision, cured my allergies, and all those headaches I used to have are a thing of the past. I'm in disgustingly perfect shape."

She nodded as she slipped into doctor mode, pulled out a pad of paper and pen from her lab coat pocket, and began to jot down some notes. "I'm going to need a whole range of new samples from you, Daniel. Tissues, hair, skin, bone, body fluids... the works." Her dark eyes rolled up to meet his steady gaze. "And by that I mean all body fluids. Understand?"

He frowned at her, blushing. "I know. I'm working on it."

"I have a formula for a medication that may help."

Viagra came to mind. Daniel pulled a grimace. "Can we talk about this later?"

Her gaze dropped down to her notepad, and she didn't repeat herself. "You've been living on a steady diet of alien food for months now. Your body has changed significantly. I need to know exactly how much, and what's different. I've brought copies of all your previous medical records for comparison."

She looked up at him again, her expression neutral and professional. "A team of the various Clans'll be meeting me here in a few hours to get me started on how to use the diagnostic and research devices. I'll expect you here first thing in the morning to run a full gamut of tests and processing of biological samples. Come see me before you eat breakfast. And don't be late."

For a moment, Daniel just stared at her. He was not happy with this turn of events. He felt great, in the best condition of his life, and the People had taken excellent care of him. Normally he didn't mind the poking and prodding he'd been through at the SGC. It was fairly routine, and he understood why it had had to be done, when he'd been going to various unexplored alien worlds. It was probably smart to do as she suggested, find out how much he'd changed, but that unspoken reminder of the order Jack had given him at Alpha made him balk.

"Look, Doctor Lam, there are other issues besides..." He cleared his throat, blushing to the roots of his hair as he forced the last word out of his mouth. "...performance."

Her gaze softened with compassion. "General O'Neill is getting a little impatient," she assured him. "One of the reasons he sent me here was to make sure you comply with the order. That wasn't the only reason, of course, but it's one of the big ones."

He turned away, talking to the floor, tucking his arms around his ribs, hugging himself for emotional support. "What if I... can't?"

She was a beautiful woman. He didn't want to admit to that kind of shortcoming in front of her. It wasn't... manly.
Her response was gentle. "I wouldn't be surprised if you had a little trouble, considering what you've been through. What you've seen. I saw the taped debriefing, and..." She took a deep breath, then exhaled with a sigh and gave him a sympathetic smile. "We'll figure it out. Don't worry, Daniel."

"Easy for you to say," he grumbled, heading for the door. "You won't be the one with the cup, no magazine, and no privacy."

"You can do it in your quarters, if you'd prefer."

He chuckled bitterly. "Oh, you don't understand, Doctor. There's no such thing as privacy here."

Ignoring her puzzled look, he hurried out the door, down the wide corridor to the quiet of his office, hoping to get his mind off the problem at hand.

Chapter 20: Remembrance

December 24

Aboard the Gaia

A long, black object on Daniel’s bed caught his eye as soon as he entered his quarters; it appeared to be a diving suit. As he leaned closer to examine it, Claire’s faint, unamplified voice carried to him from her sleeping shelf above his bunk.

Automatically he turned to look at her. Rather than zooming around in the air, the Sky Clan female stood by her tiny bed, stark naked and stunningly female. Daniel jerked his head around and immediately put his back to her.

He cleared his throat. “Claire, put something on, please.” He wrapped his arms about himself, looking all around the room except in her direction. “I’m not supposed to see you naked.”

Her voice was faint, but he realized she was calling him, so he moved closer, backing up without turning around. “I said, I am here to teach you how to wear the s’resh,” she shouted. “You must watch, to learn how to put it on and use it.”

Well, crap, he said in his head. That meant he was going to have to get naked in front of her, too.

“Can I leave my underwear on?” he asked with a sigh.

“No. You also cannot fly, since your bones are too heavy for our flight gear.”

Daniel sat down on the bed with a sigh of frustration and began to undress. “Can’t one of the Sky Clan guys show me how to do this?”

“It makes a difference?”

“It does to me.”

She huffed an impatient sigh and rolled her eyes, a wonderfully human gesture. “Very well, then.
Watch as I put on my s'resh, and then I will send someone else to train you.”

That was a little bit of a load off his mind.

He tried to remain completely objective and not notice the details of her body as he studied Claire donning her own tiny black outfit. The seams appeared to magically seal once she fastened them into place, but it took quite a bit of tucking and adjusting for her to get everything fitted just right. Putting on the s’resh looked like a complicated endeavor, rather like putting on a wetsuit, and he could understand now why the fairies didn’t take them off except when necessary.

Later, when Sky Clan Jack arrived, Claire had left his quarters to work with Colonel McFarland on her s’resh training. Daniel stripped down and walked through the complicated dressing process with the little pink-haired male. Once Daniel had the uniform on, Jack showed him all the accessories built into it. Daniel was pleased to note that this unit, made specifically for him, didn’t have the same power requirements without the wings; it would run on tiny replaceable external energy cells, which were fastened down the outer sides of his legs, looking like shiny little obsidian discs.

The s’resh fabric was filled with a network of tubular veins filled with water, which would act as insulation, as well as emergency field supplies. Communication modules were implanted on the chest, along with controls for personal shields, portable lighting, an on-board computer, and data storage. The gauntlets on the arms provided additional controls and weaponry, and at the small of his back, Daniel’s s’resh also had a pouch that would carry the portable DHD.

This garment, unlike his other clothing, did not carry the haloed inverted "V" glyph that was stitched into all his other Furling-made attire, so he asked about its absence.

"This will be your uniform when traveling among your enemies," Jack explained. "You should not advertise your identity, and some might recognize the mark, so we thought it best to leave it off."

That made sense, and Daniel was glad they'd thought of it.

He finger-combed his hair back against his nape and fastened it into a short ponytail with a silver clasp, covered with black enamel, to keep it out of his way and off the collar of the uniform. He wondered how he looked. The Furlings were fastidious but not vain; they didn't use mirrors to check their appearance; in the months he'd been with them, Daniel had only seen glimpses of himself when passing shiny glass or other reflective surfaces. He supposed he must resemble a Goa'uld Super Soldier, but less bulky, and with no ugly helmet.

Once he became accustomed to the weightless fabric against his skin, he felt as though he were completely naked. A glance downward at his personal bits enhanced that image; the garment looked painted on.

“Um, Jack, do you think I could get a little something added to cover… certain parts?” he requested, gesturing toward his crotch, then reaching back and checking out the very obvious cleft of his behind with his fingertips. “Oh, dear.”

Jack rolled his sky blue eyes and sighed. “Truly, I do not understand your people's obsessive need to hide your bodies, friend. All your males have the same organs; there is no mystery there.”

“Your males don’t have the same equipment?”

“Not all of us, no,” Jack told him.

With a crooked grin, he demonstrated the next procedure. "Activate your helmet, like this." The
smooth, shiny dome snapped into place like a hungry mouth devouring his head.

Daniel obliged, fitting the tall, flexible neck of the garment into place and following the sequence of commands that made the device appear like magic. The featureless black visor shielding his eyes revealed a lighted display on the inside, along with a perfectly clear, unobstructed view of his quarters. He could hear Jack’s voice as if the Sky Clan male were right at his ear.

In order to give Daniel more than enough information to answer his question, the alien proceeded to pull up a wealth of biological information on the various Furling genders, the data scrolling up on the inner surface of the visor. Jack used the experience as a launching point in how to operate the computer and communication systems, and by the time they had finished the instruction, Daniel was certain he’d never know everything he needed to be a competent s’resh operator.

These people were so technologically advanced and biologically unique, he observed privately, he had no idea why the Furlings had taken such a liking to the human race.

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**December 25**

**The Next Day**

Dressed in a hoodie and sweat pants, Doctor Carolyn Lam fell into her deliciously warm bed just after midnight, exhausted from three days of cramming technical instructions into her mind. The technology in Gaia’s infirmary was absolutely mind-boggling; she felt like a child compared to her alien hosts. Her brain overloaded daily, forcing her to take frequent breaks just to try to absorb the new information she was learning.

Eventually she’d have to be able to operate the diagnostic machines in order to understand the test results and biological information on both human and Furling patients. Right now, though, she was just tired.

For an hour or so, she tried to sleep, but there was too much going on in her mind, so she gave up. Rising again, she pulled on a pair of socks and some running shoes, and headed for the gym. After a brief workout, she stopped by the galley to pick up some breakfast and then to the dining hall for a break in pleasant surroundings while she ate.

She loved this room. The domed ceiling was brightly lit and resembled a sunny sky, complete with artificial clouds rolling across it. Live potted plants in long containers lined the walls, adding their own oxygen to the room along with a multitude of exotic floral fragrances. It was always so peaceful there, and conversation never rose above a pleasant murmur.

Carrying a bowl of fruit, a small pastry and a cup of soothing tea, Carolyn spied a familiar face at one of the tables and strolled up to say hello. “Mind if I sit down?” she asked.

Obviously having been interrupted from some deep thought, Daniel glanced up at her with intense blue eyes. He sat up straight and closed his journal on the pen with which he’d been writing. “Please,” he said, gesturing toward the bench across from him.

“Cool outfit,” she told him, pointing to the tightly fitted black outfit he was wearing.

He glanced down at his chest self-consciously, then back up at her. “It’s a s’resh,” he explained. “We’ll be using these instead of BDUs when we go off world. I have to learn how to operate my clothes now.”
“It looks very, um… useful. And sounds complicated, as are most things Furling.” She arranged her dishes in front of her and picked up a spoon to stir the Furling equivalent of honey into her tea. “I guess I won’t be needing one of those suits, since I’m not on the away team,” she observed.

“Yeah, you’ll be staying on board the ship.” He took a bite out of a sweet bread. “How are those tests coming?”

She knew he was just being conversational. “I haven’t really gotten started on analysis yet,” she admitted. “My God, I can’t believe how complicated some of their technology is! The Furlings are really an amazing people.” Carolyn leaned forward on her elbows, conspiratorially lowering her voice. “Did you know the Mountain Clan are all male?”

“Yeah, I had a recent Furling biology lesson,” he said, tearing into another bite while the first was only half-chewed. He leaned closer, too. “They have several genders, Carolyn, not just two. It’s kinda hard to tell who’s what, though I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you watched their mating process…es. Like I told you, they have no concept of privacy.”

She chuckled at the idea, but then suddenly sobered as she remembered her Furling trainer’s introduction to the memory recorder. “Daniel, they want me to download everything I know into their database, but I have information I can’t share with them. Military secrets. Privileged medical information.” She hesitated before adding in a harsh whisper, “Private stuff.”

“Yeah.” His expression suddenly cooled, and he slumped in his chair, avoiding her gaze. “Don’t we all.” There was a trace of bitterness in his voice, and he wouldn’t look at her. He tore off another bite of the pastry and stuffed it into his mouth.

Carolyn didn’t especially enjoy the view of his enthusiastic mastication, but he was a guy, after all. Then what he’d said finally registered, and the light bulb went on over her head. “You mean, they did that to you? They got in your head?”

“When I first escaped from Zeus and came back through the Furdani gate, I hadn’t even met any of them yet, but they had most of my life recorded before I even knew what they were doing,” he told her. “They did it while I was sleeping, and then later when I was sick, after that lizard-bird thing got me. Haven’t you kept up with the reports I sent in?”

“Frankly, no. I’ve been a little busy. I was planning on looking over your previous data during down time here, but I haven’t had a moment to myself yet.”

She was still working on identifying that disease that had appeared shortly after General O’Neill and Daniel had returned from Furdani, infecting pretty much everyone at Alpha. The Furlings’ noxious taimin tea had provided a cure for the disease, which they had named Virus A; the medical department had been very busy keeping up with the demand for the tea, as the sickness had inexplicably spread to other worlds. The Jaffa were apparently immune, thanks to their symbiotes or Tretonin, but humans were not; the illness’s effect was being felt everywhere.

She didn’t know what to say to Daniel’s revelation. She was shocked that he’d allow such an intrusion, but if he hadn’t been privy to what they were doing, he couldn’t very well have objected.

“It’s part of their culture,” he went on, still not making eye contact. “I understand why they do it, and I know, if I’m going to learn about them and live among them, it’s a sacrifice I have to make. That doesn’t mean I’m happy that literally everything I do is subject to their scrutiny. I’m getting used to it, but I still don’t like having Claire fly in for a chat when I’m using the bathroom.”

“Oh.” She sat up very straight. “No one’s barged in on me.”
“Yet.” He rose from the table, carrying the last of his snack in one hand, the journal in the other, carefully placed in front of his crotch as though he were suddenly naked. “You can bet they will, as soon as someone thinks they have a need to speak with you at what will likely be the most inconvenient time possible.” Without waiting for any answering comment, he strode away, his long legs carrying him fast.

She looked down at her plate, suddenly not hungry anymore.

Then he was back at her elbow, lightly touching her shoulder for just a moment. “Look, Carolyn,” he said, giving her a sympathetic stare, his expression softening with regret at the way he’d spoken to her, “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. I’ve just got a lot on my mind.” He smiled. "See you at Remembrance tonight.” Then he was gone again.

Doctor Lam sighed and leaned against her hand, elbow on the table, closing her eyes for just a moment. She shook her head, amazed and saddened by the twists and turns the future had brought them both. She took a nibble of the fruit, then decided she wasn’t hungry after all, so she got up to return to her quarters. She hit her bunk again and, after a little tossing and turning, managed to get a few hours' rest.

It didn't register till she checked her messages that it was Christmas Day. She'd been so busy since her arrival, she'd barely had time to think about the approaching holiday, and now it had arrived. The thought brought a sudden rush of grief, as she realized this would be her first Christmas without her family… without her world. There would be no gaily wrapped presents under a sparkling tree, no carols piped into every available audio device, no sentimental cards in bright colors and shiny foil inks.

She and Daniel and the few other humans on board were surrounded by aliens who looked at this holiday as an interesting custom from another world and didn't understand the depth of its meaning, or what it was intended to celebrate, despite the mercantile misappropriation of the last few decades. On this ship hurtling through space, it was just another day.

Swallowing a lump in her throat and blinking back tears, she opened a message from Daniel that appeared on the holographic viewer on her desktop. The tiny figure smiled at her, but his eyes were sad. "Merry Christmas, Carolyn," his image said softly. "Don't forget about Remembrance tonight, deck two in the big assembly hall. There's a homework assignment before you come. Instructions are attached. Sorry I didn't give you more time to do this, but I've been kind of… distracted."

Doctor Lam read the attachment, and with a sigh of resignation, started working on a letter to her late parents. She didn't really understand the point to all this. They were dead; they couldn't possibly read a letter, but this was a Furling custom, and when in Rome…

Typically, no documents were ever printed on Gaia, but the directions indicated a copy would be delivered to her just prior to the Remembrance ceremony that night, at the door to the auditorium. Daniel wasn't specific on the details, just indicating that she should check in at the data center like everyone else, and she'd figure it out.

The day passed quickly, and at the appointed time, she shut down her workstation and headed down the corridor to the second deck, making her way with the rest of a growing crowd toward the cavernous assembly hall.

Just before she entered, she saw what the Furling crew were doing and cued up her file from the system, taking the printed copy from the paper delivery port. It looked like a fine, translucent parchment with her letter written in an elegant, perfect English script, embellished with metallic accents and lovely artistic flourishes decorating the corners of the page. She stared at it as she
ambled forward with the rest of the crew entering the chamber, taking the time to appreciate its beauty.

"Carolyn! Over here!"

She lifted her head as she heard Daniel's voice, and nudged her way through the throng toward the center of the room, where he stood with Teal'c, Rose and Scout.

"Merry Christmas," said Rose, reaching out for a quick hug.

"Indeed," agreed Teal'c.

"Thanks, and Merry Christmas to you," she returned with a polite smile. "Though it really doesn't feel like..." She shrugged and looked at the floor, her throat tightening as a memory of her father lifting her up to put the star on the tree flashed through her mind. She'd been about eight years old, and that had been their last holiday as a happy family. After that, he'd been away on various unaccompanied tours of duty, and then her parents had divorced. She'd grown to understand his role in the military once she grew up, but she'd never really forgiven him.

She looked at the letter again, and the lovely text blurred with tears.

The instructions had said to write down everything she wanted to say to whomever she had lost. Now the words seemed trite, though they had certainly been difficult and heartfelt at the time she typed them into the file. There was so much more she wanted to say now, but her parents would never hear it, because they were gone.

A melodious bell-like sound began to toll, the vibration pulsing through her body like a gentle puff of breeze, then echoing up her legs from the floor. The buzz of conversation hushed instantly, and Scout stepped from their group to the center of the room. A circular section of floor lifted him upward, so he could see the entire assembly.

He began to speak, his fine voice amplified to fill the room, but Carolyn didn't understand a word of the alien language.

Daniel started to translate, his gaze fixed on the speaker, keeping his own voice low for the three humans who needed the interpretation.

"Today is the day of Remembrance," he announced softly. "We will not forget those who have been lost. We celebrate our love for them, and speak to them with our hearts. In this way, they will live forever, for love does not know time or the limitations of death. Love is eternal, and we thank our Creator for this, the greatest gift of all." The podium lowered, and Scout stepped down to the floor again.

As soon as he'd rejoined his party, a shallow bowl-shaped fixture began to lower from the ceiling. It was about twelve feet in diameter, but only about a foot deep, a shiny golden dish floating freely and descending slowly to give the audience time to move back.

Scout put a hand on Rose's shoulder and handed her his parchment. "It's the custom to share our words with one who is living. It's not mandatory, but I'd be honored if you would read mine, friend Rose. Daniel helped me write part of it in English. I'm still learning your written language."

Colonel MacFarland smiled up at him and nodded. "Same here, hon." She gave him a small square paper. "And here's mine, to my son."

Carolyn watched as they began to read, their emotions evident on their faces. Both were deeply
moved, and afterward, they approached the dish together. They exchanged letters again, then both
gently tossed their own parchment into the golden bowl. The pages sailed over the wide circle and
settled to the bottom, instantly vaporizing into a spray of amber-edged brilliance, sparks traveling
upward in random curls of light.

Others followed suit, depositing their letters into the dish, watching the paper vanish, and then
turning away to make room for more to approach.

"Our words go out to those whom we have lost," Daniel added, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
energy to energy, blending with the souls of those who are all around us. That's the last part of the
speech Scout made, but I didn't get it until now. It's a beautiful sentiment."

He turned to Teal'c and handed over a small scroll. "That's a letter to my parents," he explained.

The Jaffa gave him a paper with a brief paragraph written in hieroglyphs, probably by Teal'c's own
hand, in his native language. "My letter is to my late wife, and to Master Brata’c."

Then Daniel turned to Carolyn with a little trepidation in his eyes. He held out his hand to her and,
clutched in it was a thick, heavy roll of the parchment paper. "I'd be honored if you’d read mine,
Doctor. Just the last few lines, really, because the rest would take too long, I guess." He shrugged
and ducked his head. "Maybe I didn't really get the right idea what this Remembrance thing was
supposed to be about."

"Okay. Sure."

She took the paper and unrolled it, glancing at the bottom of the page, which read, "You will never
be forgotten, and I am so incredibly sorry for letting you down."

Her gaze wandered upward, where she saw several columns of script on the page, each bearing a
small name. Many were ones she recognized from Alpha, as well as from Stargate Command. Her
own name was there, as well as her father's. She unrolled even more, scanning the list without
reading every single entry, because doing that would have taken hours -- maybe even days.

The President of the United States was listed, along with all the other world leaders. Figures of
modern history, peacemakers, doctors and scientists, educators and artists each had their names on
Daniel’s list. Others she didn't recognize, but the paper kept going as her astonishment increased.
She held onto the sides of the scroll and let the ends drop, unrolling all the way, snaking across the
floor.

"Who are these people, Daniel?" she asked, frowning up at him. "There must be thousands of
names here!"

He stared at the floor for a moment, then turned his misty gaze toward the incinerator and crossed
his arms over his ribs. "That's everyone from Earth that I could remember," he told her. "I set up a
search parameter and had the ship's database scan all my recorded memories for the names every
person I’ve ever met, weeded out the duplicates and those whose lives I knew would be recorded in
history. Some I added back just because… well." He shrugged, unable to express his grief with
mere words.

Carolyn gaped, glancing from the lengthy, detailed list to its author and back. "This must've
taken…"

"Months of work," he finished for her, nodding. "Yes. But I wanted them to be remembered today."

Scout reached for a length of the paper on the floor and picked it up. "You didn't misunderstand
the purpose of Remembrance, el-Dani. This is elegant proof of your grasp of the concept." He patted Daniel on the shoulder. "Are you ready to send your message now?"

Daniel nodded. He helped gather up the long coil of paper and, with the aid of his friends, pitched it into the golden bowl. A long spout of flame-bright light licked upward, and the crowd gasped in awe as it burst into a sparkling cloud. The dust fanned out quickly over the assembly and settled in a shimmering rain, coating people, clothing, walls, ceiling and floor in glittering ash.

"I have the feeling this isn't going to wipe off easily," Daniel observed, passing a hand over the black leathery sleeve of his new s’resh.

"It will be everywhere for days," Scout assured him, "a beautiful reminder of this ceremony."

He turned toward the exit, leading the others away from the incinerator, making room for more of the crew to deposit their letters to the lost. "When our young ones are away on the Hunt to become adults, wandering the wild lands on the day of Remembrance, they write on leaves and cast them into a fire. We obviously can't do that on Gaia, so we're using the method practiced in the temples of our cities. The paper is specially constructed for this ceremony."

"It's beautiful," Carolyn observed. She gazed down at her glimmering skin and noticed that the cloud was thinning as they moved toward the door. The ventilation system would carry the ash all over the ship. "Is this stuff safe to breathe?"

"Of course," Scout told her. "The ash causes a mild euphoria and sense of well-being, but it's harmless."

"I hope there aren't any emergencies before this stuff wears off, then."

"If so, the effects will be nullified by the body's reactive chemistry. No worries, Doctor. We are quite safe." He smiled at her. "I hope you enjoyed your first Remembrance, and that it will bring you a little peace." Then he patted Daniel on the shoulder. "And you especially, my friend."

"Fond Remembrance," said Daniel, glancing up at the elder, then turning his pensive gaze back to the floor as they made their way through the crowd.

Carolyn watched as the group split up to go their separate ways, scattering down the corridors, but before Daniel ambled out of sight, she called to him.

His head came up as he turned to face her. "Yes?"

"I know it's not exactly…" She stopped herself.

Way to go, Carolyn. Remind him of how miserable he is, and on this day of all days.

Remembrance was an interesting observance, sure, but she and Daniel were human beings, damn it! They had their own customs and traditions, and she didn't want that to be forgotten.

"I just..."

She couldn't get the words out, but someone needed to say them. There had been no card, no gifts or tree, no reminders of any kind, and she felt the loss keenly. She lifted her chin and squared her shoulders, but just then, Daniel smiled at her.

As if sensing her need, he said softly, "Merry Christmas, Carolyn."
The wall inside her came down and she felt herself relaxing for the first time since she'd arrived on the ship. She grinned back. "Merry Christmas, Daniel. Thank you."

He just nodded, a trace of sadness lingering in his eyes, then turned and continued down the corridor, disappearing into the crowd.

"God bless us, every one," she murmured to herself, quoting Dickens' Tiny Tim as she headed back to the infirmary for more study. Everywhere she looked, the ship and people had taken on a faint sheen of gold, giving it an almost magical appearance, something right out of a fairy tale.

A couple of Sky Clan people flew by, turning in mid-air as they called to her, "Merry Christmas, Doctor Lam." There it was, the phrase she'd been missing all day, echoing up and down the hall on the lips of the Furlings.

"Fond Remembrance," she returned.

It almost made her feel at home.

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Chapter 21: Rose

December 26

Daniel’s Office, Aboard the Gaia

Colonel Rose MacFarland had an impeccable military record. Daniel read through her digital file, examining the commendations and declassified information on the woman Jack had sent to look after him. She had a degree in computer science and another in aeronautical engineering. She also spoke Arabic, Japanese, and Mandarin Chinese -- three difficult but much in demand languages for the United States military, when there had still been an Earth.

There were several pictures included in the file Daniel had received from Alpha, and one photograph in particular caught his attention.

She’d had a son, Christopher, who had been an Air Force Major killed in action in Desert Storm. Even Daniel could see the man's strong resemblance to himself; he suspected that had been why she’d given him such a long look when they first met on the transport deck a few days earlier. He also had an idea that was why Jack had picked her for the job, depending on her maternal instinct to kick in and engage her natural protectiveness of someone who seemed familiar and loved.

He was still viewing the record when the Colonel knocked on the open doorframe to announce herself. “You wanted to see me, Doctor?”

“Just Daniel,” he corrected with a smile. “Please, sit down.” He gestured to the guest chair on the other side of his desk.

“Thanks.” She gazed wonderingly around the fabulous room as she settled into her seat. “This is some ship, huh?”

“The Furlings never go halfway with anything,” he agreed. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Nah, I’m good. I suppose this is where we have our getting-to-know-you chat, seein’ as you’ve got my service record up.” She nodded at the hologram, her eyes fixing on the image of her late
son. Self-conscious, she turned away to study the amazing room instead, taking in the beautiful details, then glanced back at the display of her file. She met Daniel's gaze through the floating photograph and lifted her chin in silent pride.

“This... your late son.... that's why Jack sent you, isn’t it?” Daniel asked directly.

“I reckon’ so. Heard a lot aboutucha, but didn't know whatcha looked like till I came on board. The resemblance…” She shrugged and gave him a wry grin, fond memories softening the flintiness of her gaze. “You don’t sound or act like Chris, though. He was a lively son of a gun, always crackin’ jokes. More like the Gen’ral, if we’re being honest with one another.”

“I just want to make sure this isn’t going to be a problem for you.” Daniel studied her, the ease in her posture, the lines in her face, finding serenity in her expression.

“I’m fine with it, Dan’l. I know how important y’are, and the Gen’ral’s smart to want someone to look out for ya. I’m honored to’ve been chosen, but…” She shook her head. “Your resemblance to my boy isn’t the only reason he picked me, y’know. I’m too old to be very useful for the other stuff they’re concentratin' on right now. Never was much good at construction work or babysitting.”

“You’re babysitting me,” he teased gently.

“Yeah, but you’re potty trained and can handle yourself, from what I’ve heard.” She gave him a full-fledged grin and a wink. “’Course, Jack talked my ear off ‘bout some of the shit, pardon my French, you’ve gotten yourself into, and I think I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

Daniel shook his head. “I guess some things I’ll never live down.” He sighed and stood up, extending his hand across the desk to her. “Well, as long as you don’t expect too much in the way of... um, actual obedience… I suppose we’ll get along, Colonel.”

“Rose.” She shook his hand firmly, then they both resumed their seats. "Just don't call me Rosie, unless you want your ass kicked seven ways to Sunday."

“Rose it is, then.” He nodded in acknowledgment. “Well, since you’re gonna be here a while, maybe you can help me with something.”

Colonel MacFarland leaned her elbows on the desk. “Sure thing, hon. Whatcha need?”

He cleared her service record from the holographic desktop and pulled up a visual display of the Furlings’ Stargate database. “Since you know a thing or two about computer science… There are 39 glyphs on the Stargate,” he began. “How many possible addresses does that allow?”

She bowed her head, calculating. “One-point-nine billion,” she answered, her lazy drawl suddenly disappearing as the subject changed from casual conversation to serious information exchange, “if the addresses are seven-digit. Add a ZPM and eight-digit addresses with extra distance calculations, and you’ve got 63 billion possible worlds. I hear the Furlings can make those high-powered batteries with no problem.”

“Yes, they can,” said Daniel with a nod and a sigh. “Okay, so that’s a lot of places to explore. What I was looking at is this.”

He typed in search parameters and brought up a star chart showing every possible Stargate location in four colors. He pointed to several locations as he continued, “This is information from the SGC database. The purple ones are from the Abydos cartouche. In blue are the ones Jack added manually to the SGC system when he had the Ancients’ database downloaded into his brain a few years back. These in yellow are ones Sam’s random dialing program had located and were set for
exploration or already visited by the SGC. The red ones are addresses that we locked out for
security reasons or couldn’t get to engage.”

“My, my. That still leaves a lot of places left to check out.”

Daniel pointed to a yellow dot at the edge of the Milky Way, right beside a vast area of open space.
“This is Furdani, P9X-1017.”

“Okay.”

“It was one of the random dialing destinations,” Daniel told her, “which means it wasn’t in either
the Goa’uld’s or the Ancients’ databases. It was completely off the map.”

“And?”

“The Ancients knew about it. They’d been there and set up a Stargate. Why wasn’t it in their
database?” He sat back in his chair and studied her, waiting to see if she came to the same
conclusion he had.

Rose frowned, staring at the dot. “Good question. You’ve compared this to the Furlings’ star charts,
too, right? Anything interesting in there?”

"Unfortunately, no. When they were left to die on Furdani, they lost all the locations of their
homeworld and colonies. All they have is astronomical data they’ve amassed by watching the
heavens from their new world. These are just stars and planets to them."

"What about the Asgard database?" asked Rose, studying the yellow dot that was Furdani a little
longer before raising her gaze to meet Daniel’s. "Any other histories or mythologies that might
point to worlds not listed in the intel we have?"

Daniel's eyes widened as a thought struck him, but he quickly shuttled the idea away, as if she
might see it in his head. He smiled. "I’ll check on that. The Asgard had very detailed star maps, but
we haven't been able to study all the data yet. That would take centuries. We can send a message to
Alpha to request that information while we're traveling through subspace, but in order to do
‘conference calls,’ so to speak, we’d have to go to full stop and send a signal through the
wormhole."

Rose shrugged. "I dunno, Dan'l. These Furlings have some pretty damned impressive computers.
The amount of data they can collate in the short-term is…” She chuckled. "…astronomical. Let me
contact the Gen’ral and see if he'll send us the Asgard star map download in a data burst."

She rose from her seat and eyed him as he sat back in his chair. "I get a sense that you're looking
for something in particular. Wanna share?"

"I want to know where the Furlings came from,” he returned quietly, steepling his fingers. "If we
can find some of their colonies, maybe we'll be able to find traces of why this happened to them."

Rose put her hands on her hips and sighed. "I know of at least one place of theirs that we've already
been.”

Daniel's eyebrows shot upward and he leaned forward in his chair. "Really?"

"Thought you read all of SG-1’s mission reports from when you were dead?" she shot back with a
lazy roll of her brown eyes. "Musta missed one."
"I wasn't exactly dead," he corrected.

"Was. I read the reports and heard eyewitness accounts."

"Wasn't. But that's beside the point. Which planet are you talking about? I don't remember any references to discoveries of Furling culture."

She leaned over the holographic star chart, bracing her palms on the desktop, and studied it. "There was this temple with an invitation written in Furling script to come join them in their utopia, more or less. O'Neill and that scoundrel, Harry Maybourne, got stranded there and had a steady diet of some psychedelic alien jimson weed for a while. Right about there, I believe." She poked at an area with a small yellow sun well distant from known Furling space, holding her fingertip in the middle of a tiny star system.

Daniel marked the area where she was pointing. "I'll check it out. You'll request the information from Jack, right?"

"Right." She cocked her head, her gaze narrowing as she studied him, and put both palms flat on the desk again. "And how does this affect your vendetta against Zeus?"

His mouth dropped open in surprise. He glanced away for a moment to gather his wits. Jack must have told her all the details of his debriefing, warning her what Daniel would be thinking. "It's not a vendetta," he snapped.

"Does it change anything?"

"Maybe. The People are already out there exploring, but they don't have any archaeologists, and Alpha can't spare any. If the Furlings find traces of their past, they'll need my help."

"Meanwhile, we look for Zeus?" The Colonel straightened and stood at parade rest, her wrists clasped behind her back.

"That's the plan."

Her expression hardened, and she nodded, her smile grim and determined, eyes hooded. Her head came up and she looked every inch a soldier, the gentle matronly exterior suddenly gone. "Count me in, Dan'. I want to see the sumbitch pay for what he did to Earth."

"Nobody wants that more than me," he assured her. "Meanwhile, you'll send that message to Jack?"

"On it," she shot back, pivoted on her heel and left with a purposeful stride.

He liked her already, and thought they'd get along just fine.

Rose had given him an idea, but he'd needed to wait till she was gone to follow up on it. From a drawer to his left, he retrieved the PDHD and set it on his desk.

"Now, how do I interface this thing…?" he mused to himself. He fiddled with the little round device until he gave up and pushed it aside with a huff of frustration. As it slid to the center of the desktop, the characters on the screen flashed simultaneously onto the holographic display, integrated into the star map.

He smiled a little and leaned forward, studying the placement so he'd remember how to access the system next time. "Oh. I guess it just had to be in the right place."
He used the PDHD to search the Alpha database, looking for any gate addresses in the area Rose had indicated, and found one. The address had a footnote added in Ancient: Colony of Three. His pulse quickened with growing excitement as he glanced up at the three-dimensional map. The planet's location had been calculated by Sam Carter's cold-dialing program, but nowhere else in the SGC's system. Its discovery had been a lucky mathematical combination, a sheer accident that the site had even been explored at all.

Like Furdani, the address of that world had been intended by the Ancients to remain a secret.

This was important, the first link to unraveling the Furlings' past. He needed to go there, to take a look at whatever had been found, because no one had done much digging into it, or he'd have heard about the results.

Daniel synchronized the PDHD with the Furling database and ran additional comparisons.

Green dots began to appear on the map, scattered all over the galaxy. Two of them had yellow halos, along with an alphanumeric designation from the SGC, marking them as explored. Daniel was almost beside himself with excitement, because there had to be more information than he'd seen. Teams from Earth had been to two of these worlds and missed the fact that they were once Furling colonies.

The PDHD carried the "Colony of Three" designations for all of the hidden worlds, verifying their locations and the Furling connection, but the most important one was missing. He tried a search by keyword, by notation, by every possible combination he could conceive, but nowhere in the PDHD could he find the location of the Furling homeworld. That, he knew, would be the most important place of all in this quest for the Furlings' past.

If it even still existed.

He touched the communication device attached to his left ear. "Claire, Scout, Captain, I have something I need you all to see. Please come to my office."

The trio listened to his dissertation on the discovery of possible Furling colonies with subdued excitement. As Daniel explained their significance and potential value, they began to discuss plans for reconnaissance, which ships might be closest to the newly located worlds, and what they would do when they arrived.

Once that was done, all eyes turned to Daniel to determine Gaia's course. "We are already headed for a world under the rule of Zeus," Captain reminded him. "Do you wish to continue, or to avert course for one of these worlds?"

Daniel considered how selfish it might be for him to choose to continue to their current destination. He studied the star chart, pulling up Gaia's location, and compared it to the nearest of the green dots. Then he recalled what Rose had told him, and knew he needed more information.

"I have to wait to hear from Alpha," he told them with a trace of genuine regret. "I have to know what the SGC found on the possible Furling colonies they've already explored. That will affect whether we should re-visit one of those two planets, or try for an unexplored one in our vicinity. Until I know all that, we should probably maintain our present heading and see what we can find out about Zeus. What do you think?"

Captain nodded. "We will maintain present course."

"And you will continue your training, so you'll be prepared for possible combat when we arrive,"
Claire floated into the star map, her tiny wings a busy blur. She stared at one of the green-and-yellow dots with interest, the light coloring her face with surreal shadows. "I will be interested to see one of the far lands of our ancestors, whenever we arrive, el-Dani. Thank you for finding this for us. You are a true friend."

She beamed at him, zoomed in close and placed a miniature kiss on his cheek, then buzzed out of the office.

Daniel was a little shocked at her unexpected display of gratitude.

"Sky Clan are impulsive, are they not?" asked Captain with a little chuckle.

"Their energy leaves one breathless," agreed Scout. He grinned at Daniel. "If only she weren't so small."

"Oh, come on!" Daniel carped, suddenly embarrassed for what they were obviously thinking. "That's not how she feels about me at all! She's just..." His hands flailed around as he searched for some appropriate word to describe her interest in Furling history.

"Enchanting?" Scout finished for him enthusiastically. "We all feel that way about Sky Clan. They're so... interesting."

"Passionate." Mountain sighed dreamily, his eyes rolling skyward.

"Stop." Daniel held up both hands, finally catching on that his friends were teasing him. Furling humor was a little obtuse for him, but he was getting it at last. "You guys set me up, right?"

"Not everything we do is planned," said Scout with a wink, rising from his seat. "Only the important things."

"But we are not ones to pass up a valuable opportunity," agreed Captain, who had been standing during the meeting rather than sit on one of the small chairs. "You make it so easy with your many inhibitions, and we are enjoying learning how to... what is the expression? Manipulate your controls?" He glanced at Scout.

"Push his buttons," the elder corrected with a little chuckle.

Daniel scratched at his cheek with one fingertip, trying to maintain a façade of irritation. "Thanks, guys." He was secretly charmed by his new friends and their little conspiracy. "Expect payment in kind."

"I'll see you in the training room at the usual time tomorrow morning," said Scout as he strolled out of the office. "Unless Sky Clan has other plans for you."

"Knock it off, Scout," Daniel shot back with mock gruffness through a smile. "Be there with bells on."

"That would defeat the purpose of learning to be stealthy."

Daniel just chuckled and shook his head as his alien friends left him to his work.

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Chapter 22: Recon
The away team, comprised of Daniel, Rose, Teal’c, Scout and two other Furlings, assembled in a spacious briefing room just off the bridge, seated at a round table with Captain.

“We will maintain a position here,” the ship's commander said, bringing up a holographic projection of the solar system they were approaching. “The most distant planet will provide us a place to keep watch and listen to your transmissions. If we are called to war, we will send the fighters in first, then follow up with Gaia’s approach. Depending on the information obtained, you may choose to leave this world without announcing such intentions, in which case, our discretion will be advantageous.”

Scout followed up, enlarging the view of the second planet. “We established trade months ago with the population on this world and are accepted among them as a neutral party, as long as our presence is kept to a minimum, and we do not interfere with their religion.”

He pointed to a section of one continent to zoom in on a single city. “This is the major temple for Zeus on this world, called Olympus. He has been here recently, but left several days ago, his destination unknown. It is said that he travels by whim rather than planning, in order to prevent others from mounting an attack based upon a known pattern. Still, we may be able to glean some additional information on his habits and the hold he has upon his slaves.”

“As our friend here,” the elder gave Daniel a small smile and an acknowledging nod of his head, “has told us, the humans under Zeus’s control live in fear of his wrath. The Ting-sha who rule them in the name of the priests are cruel, and we believe the Jaffa would welcome deliverance.”

This wasn’t news to Daniel. He’d seen enough on Zeus’s ship and from previous experience with the Goa’uld to know that many of the Jaffa would respond well to the seeds of rebellion. All they’d need would be the right inspiration at the right time; he and his comrades could provide that.

“We will make contact with others of the People once we arrive,” Scout went on as he looked at the humans at the table one by one. “In order to keep your identity concealed, you must wear s’resh and keep your faces covered at all times. There were many Jaffa and Ting-sha on Zeus’ ship who saw Daniel, and it would endanger us all if you were to be recognized.”

Daniel nodded, agreeing with the plan so far. He glanced at Colonel MacFarland, seated to his left.

“What weaponry will we be carryin’?” she asked, typing in a note on the right gauntlet of her new s’resh. “We’ve been trainin’ with y’all’s stuff, but I’m more comfortable with my standard-issue —”

“Earth weapons might also be recognized from the Ting-sha’s previous encounter with SG-13,” Scout countered. “You must wield ours, Rose.”

The Colonel sighed. “You’re right, sir. Sorry for interruptin’.”

“We have additional information on the nature of the Ting-sha, which the People have observed and documented for us,” Scout added, gesturing toward another member of the newly-formed away team.

This was one of the Forest Clan null-genders, who bore no sexual markers at all. These beings
were mostly androgynous in appearance, but some had neither sexual organs nor attractions; others had one or the other. This one had deep blue eyes and black hair, and Daniel had been told he was as sexually neutral as an Asgard, but had chosen a male gender identity. The humans called him Jet, for the color of his raven locks.

Jet programmed in another hologram and stood up. Gazing down at the images, he gave his report. “The Ting-sha are not as intelligent as humans. Their language skills are limited and they do not reason well, which makes them perfectly obedient slaves. The structure of their society is that of a pack, all following a strict hierarchy of leadership. Their innate sense of loyalty also makes them an excellent selection for soldiers, for they do not question their masters and their belief in Zeus as a god is absolute. They enjoy fighting and are prolific breeders. We have found them on every world where Zeus has a hold, and the Ting-sha have proven an effective force for helping him maintain his rule. We cannot hope to influence the Ting-sha in sufficient numbers to create rebellion. We must, therefore, concentrate our efforts on the human Jaffa population.”

“A wolf pack,” commented Rose with a trace of disgust. “Wonder if they howl at the moon?”

“Not that we have observed,” answered Jet factually as he resumed his seat.

Daniel caught Rose’s grin and squelched one of his own. “How have the People acquired this information?” he asked.

“We have sent out ships to explore, along with small parties of traders who left through the Wheel of Worlds as soon as it was opened,” Captain answered. “Our goods are much in demand everywhere we go. On this planet, we are called the Artisans.”

Scout stood again. “I will play the part of one with great power and wealth, and the humans will act as my security staff. Two members of my household, “ he gestured to Jet and a Forest Clan female the humans had named Janet, due to her uncanny resemblance to the late Doctor Fraiser, “will accompany us, to tend our affairs as we interact with both Jaffa and Ting-sha. Our contacts have advised us that this hierarchy is expected behavior in Olympian society, and it will help us to blend in.”

He turned to address the humans. “The s’resh will keep your voices inaudible so that your comments can only be heard by the People. If you wish to speak aloud, the s’resh will modulate your voices so they cannot be recognized; this will also help to keep your identities hidden.”

Scout eyed Daniel and Teal’c. “You will decide how best to foment rebellion among the Jaffa.”

“That’s gonna depend on what information we acquire,” Rose told him. “You’ve already got a plan for that, I’m guessin’.”

The Forest Clan elder nodded. “We will visit the People now trading on Olympus and then go to the temple to present an offering to Zeus. This will make the priests more amenable to our inquiries about their god. Afterward, we will decide how long to stay on Olympus and where to go next in our search.” He glanced at Daniel for approval.

Daniel found everyone at the table looking at him. “Um, I’m not a military commander,” he told them, holding up his hands.

“Perhaps not,” agreed Teal’c with an arched eyebrow, “but you know the Goa’uld and the Jaffa far better than the Furlings, who look to you for guidance in this conflict, for they are fine warriors themselves. You will do well, DanielJackson.”
Daniel’s gaze met the Jaffa’s and held it. That vote of confidence meant a lot to him, as did the fact that he knew his old friend still lived. He smiled slightly and nodded. “Okay. Is there anything else we need to know?”

Questions were asked and answered, and an hour later, the team was checking their gear in the transport room as they stood on the pad beside the bejeweled Stargate. A cape draped over Daniel’s shoulders hid the PDHD in its shielded carrying case at the small of his back, and a few taps on the controls brought the helmet up from its hiding place at the base of the s’resh to cover his head. The team, all except for one last member, stood by while their destination was programmed into the Furling ‘gate.

When Scout arrived, Daniel’s mouth dropped open. The elder was resplendent in black robes trimmed in gold that elegantly disguised the s’resh he wore underneath. His dark green hair had been dressed into a smooth, shining mane held with golden clasps at his nape. The backs of his gloved hands sparkled with gems, and a pair of huge, clear, sparkling brooches fastened a cape onto his shoulders.

He looked like a king… which Daniel supposed he really was, after a fashion.

Rose sidled up to Scout and teased through the helmet speakers, “Holy moley, honey! Where’ve you been hidin’?” She looked him up and down in obvious admiration. “You clean up gooood!”

The elder chuckled as he gave a nod to the Captain, who stood by the Stargate controls. “I believe we’re ready to depart.” He counted off numbers as he tapped each of the away team on the shoulder to give their exit order, positioning himself next-to-last, with Daniel bringing up his six.

Teal’c and Rose would be first, Janet and Jet next, then the master of the house and a bodyguard to watch his back.

Daniel hoped they’d find Zeus on the planet below. He wanted the chance to confront the monster who had destroyed his world, and dole out a little justice of his own, but as he stepped toward the ship’s Stargate, he realized it wasn't really justice he wanted -- it was revenge.

_Aboard the Gaia_

Carolyn Lam carried her breakfast to her office, still tired but eager to get started on the day. The Furlings were excellent teachers and their equipment was a physician’s wet dream, but there was still so much to learn. Her excitement never waned, so she let fatigue determine when she took her breaks.

Every morning at nine o'clock Alpha time, she connected to the base for uploads of important data, reports and orders, sending back the information she had collected in her own research.

Buried in the current download was a brief report that caught her eye regarding Virus A, the disease that had stricken Alpha colony several months earlier. She read it twice before contacting Denali, the executive officer on board the Furling vessel, to establish a live link to communicate with the base.

Now that _Gaia_ was at full stop in the Olympus star system, interactive communication was possible between Alpha and the ship.

Once the connection was made, she waited until she could speak directly with Doctor Karl Warner,
now Chief Medical Officer of the colony and her immediate superior.

She smiled at the holographic image of her boss. “Hey, Karl. How’s everybody there?”

He chuckled, smoothing a hand over his wavy gray hair, now much longer than military standards once allowed. “Obnoxiously healthy! I think the Furlings are going to render us out of a job soon, Carolyn. I don’t think I’ve ever seen such an absence of illness before! Except for the occasional surgery to repair accidental damage, there’s not a lot for us MDs to do here these days. Which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, you know. How about you?”

She nodded and laughed a little. “Yeah, here, too. I’m still getting my feet wet with all this amazing technology. Blows my mind sometimes.”

“You know, I suppose there are worse things than a doctor being out of a job.” He cocked his head. “Believe it or not, I was thinking about switching over to agriculture. There’s a lot of need for that here. For the moment, I’ve been doing more research than actual practice of medicine.”

“Yeah, about that,” she began, bringing the conversational pleasantries to a close and getting down to business. “I was looking at Doctor Jensen’s report on Virus A. Has a source been found for it yet?”

Warner shook his head. “The incubation period of the illness varies with the health of the individual, so we haven’t been able to pinpoint an absolute starting date for the infection. Some fall ill within days of exposure; others may hold off as much as a few months before they actually have symptoms. All we know for sure is that Alpha was the first place where it presented, sometime after Omega Day.”

That was the day Earth had been destroyed, she knew. She glanced back at the report, thinking. "I'm starting to wonder if we might be looking at the wrong thing. Maybe instead of researching everyone who's had the virus, we should be checking out those who haven't. I don't see a listing here of those who showed no symptoms on Alpha."

"Let me pull that up." Warner's image turned slightly away, and his hands began to move off-screen in the familiar pattern of typing on a keyboard. "Um, looks like..." He squinted at the screen and leaned closer. "Almost a hundred percent infection rate. Only General O'Neill hasn't presented with any symptoms... hmmm... and Doctor Jackson, as well, but he may have had it and not known it during the period prior to his arrival on Alpha."

"None of the Furlings have shown any signs of it, either. In fact, I've never heard them talk about it except when they were treating us." She frowned. "You don't think they brought it to us, do you?"

"Well, if they did, they also provided the remedy," Doctor Warner reminded her. "That vile tea of theirs has a perfect cure rate, and it's also a great booster to the immune system, as close to a miracle drug as we've ever found."

She rested her chin in her hand and reviewed the report again. "Would you mind taking a look at General O'Neill’s antibodies? If he has some kind of natural immunity to the virus, it could be important."

“Sure thing. Anything else I can do for you?”

“I’d like to take a look at the General’s complete medical history, just in case I may have missed something. Maybe you and the Furling healers there on Alpha can do a complete rework of his samples. Could be helpful.”
Warner nodded, then all traces of humor vanished. He cleared his throat and folded his hands on the desktop. “Have you completed retrieval of Doctor Jackson’s other requested samples?”

“Not yet.” She shook her head, shuffling some papers on her desk to avoid eye contact. “It’s complicated, Karl, but I’m working on it.”

Carolyn didn’t tell him that Daniel wasn’t even on board the ship. If the Alpha council learned he’d gone off-world on missions to hunt down Zeus, they’d have her head on a platter, and Daniel would be summoned back to Alpha permanently. Somehow, she doubted he’d obey that order, but she didn’t want to put him into that position. Provided, of course, he didn’t get killed while he was on Olympus. If that happened, she’d be in some very serious trouble.

“I’ll be sure to let you know as soon as we have it, sir;” she told him coolly. “Lam, out.”

She severed the connection immediately and buried her face in her hands.

Earth had required a lot of Daniel Jackson over the past ten years of his life, and to her knowledge, no one had ever publicly acknowledged his contributions. Now the survivors of his planet were making demands that, in her opinion, they had no right to ask. Maybe it was time for the military to stop giving orders, and to think about what was right for people. Maybe it was time they just left Daniel alone to do what he wanted for a change. He’d earned that.

Carolyn sighed and opened up the holographic interface with Gaia’s immense data banks, pulling up records on Furling physiology to look for traces of the alien virus and antibodies in their systems, to see how they managed to avoid the illness. She ate mechanically while she studied, part of her mind working on the problem with completing her mission and her duty to her patient’s rights. There had to be a way to service both, where everyone would be satisfied with the results.

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**Olympus**

As soon as Daniel exited the Stargate, he started to sweat in the temperature-perfected environment of the s'resh. Ahead of him, Teal’c stood with his feet braced, his identity concealed behind the helmet of his new uniform. To his left, Rose was equally disguised, both of them looking every inch the professional soldier. Jet and Janet, the Furling retainers, were just behind the Jaffa, positioned to protect Scout, who stood at the center of their group. The three humans wore helmets, but the Furlings had left their heads uncovered so they would be recognized as Artisans on that alien world.

The away team was surrounded by Ting-sha soldiers – twenty of them – on guard duty at the ‘gate.

One of them approached Jet, studying his face with narrowed eyes. “You ‘uman?” it asked in a low growl of mangled Latin. It reached out and placed a thick-skinned palm against Jet’s chest to stop him from advancing further.

Jet’s reaction was instantaneous and savage. He grasped the Ting-sha’s wrist, twisted it and forced the alien soldier down on one knee. “How dare you confuse us with slaves!” Jet snarled, his Latin perfect and cultured.

The other Ting-sha lurched toward them, weapons lifting to firing position.
Teal’c, Colonel MacFarland, and Daniel stepped closer to Scout, taking up defensive stances.

“We are Artisans, you beast!” Jet announced with the haughtiness of a born noble.

From that posture of submission, the wolfish commander growled over its shoulder at the other Ting-sha, forcing them back. It stood as Jet released the wristlock, giving the entire party a closer look. “Artisans?” it repeated, head lowered slightly in humiliation.

Jet reached out again, his fingertips flicking a brooch fastened to the silvery scales covering the Ting-sha commander’s chest. “You wear our handiwork but do not recognize us,” said Jet haughtily. “We will inform our merchants not to trade with you until you can tell the difference. What is your name, Ting-sha?”

For a moment, the alien’s pointed ears pitched forward, its yellow eyes widening in surprise and dismay. Then its ears folded contritely back against its furry head as it gave him a slight bow. “Pardon, Artisan. Forgive Hamuk?”

“Your request will be considered.” Jet lifted his head and looked around the busy city square. “We are to be met here by one of our people. Show us where we may wait comfortably.”

“Hamuk cannot leave post,” said the commander, its voice colored with genuine regret. “Grak take you.” The Ting-sha turned, growling and snapping orders to one of its underlings and making gestures that indicated haste to obey, speaking in their own alien language. The one called Grak bowed toward its master, head cocked to one side, exposing his throat in a gesture of submission.

Daniel was surprised to see a translation of the Ting-sha verbal commands written in English begin to scroll up on the inside of the visor of his helmet.

“This is so cool,” said Rose’s voice in an admiring whisper through the speaker at Daniel’s ear.

“Indeed,” agreed Teal’c.

Though the sky was clear, and it appeared to be a warm day in the city, Daniel was perfectly comfortable inside the s’resh and marveled at the extent of Furling technology. The suit was weightless and comfortable, equipped with extensive technology, offering climate control, weaponry and defensive capabilities, and it looked damn cool at the same time. Rose was right about the s’resh, and Daniel made a mental note to thank his alien friends for the gift.

Jet turned with a small bow to Scout. “This way, my lord.”

The party started off toward a large marble hall two hundred feet away. The façade was graced with a wide porch lined with columns, offering shade from the noonday sun. The structure appeared to be some kind of reception station where information and refreshments could be had.

Daniel felt as he often did when visiting other planets – a sense of traveling back in time in a weird juxtaposition with the strangeness of the utterly new and alien. They might have been in Athens, strolling past the Acropolis, except for the presence of strange creatures like the Ting-sha leading beasts of burden that resembled horse-sized greyhounds with vulture heads. Jaffa were dressed in togas of a multitude of solid colors, belted at the waist, covering tight leggings tucked into boots. The buildings surrounding them were grand and massive, but further down the streets leading away from the main square were smaller, more modest structures with plaster walls and clay tile roofs. It was Rome and Greece, ancient and familiar, but also somehow new and alien.

Daniel studied everything he could see, following the others in his party as they headed for the portico.
“Dan’l, heads up,” called Rose through the earpiece. “Folks are movin’ in a little close here.”

He’d forgotten all about being a bodyguard. “Sorry.” He put a hand out, warning people off, putting more space between Scout and the crowd. Once they reached the portico, Grak gave them a bow and left to return to the ‘gate, and Janet found a couch where Scout could sit in the shade. The rest of the team gathered around him, retainers out front, Teal’c at point, Rose and Daniel behind the couch.

They didn’t have long to wait for their contact to arrive.

He was from Mountain Clan, his russet hair pulled back at his nape with a silver clasp, his red tunic showing off a large expanse of massive chest. His gray eyes were lined with kohl, and his mouth tinted with vibrant crimson. He smiled and bowed in greeting. “My lord,” he rumbled, addressing Scout with a deep bow, “the People make you welcome on Olympus. Please follow me to your humble lodgings.”

“Greetings, Friend,” Scout returned cordially as he rose from his seat. “We hope you will share what you have learned of this city on our way.”

Mountain was happy to oblige and an excellent guide. He pointed out sites of interest, prominent buildings, places of historical import. They walked across carefully laid stone streets, and as the architecture simplified and buildings grew smaller in stature, the streets turned to cobblestone, and finally to hard-packed earth. Half an hour from the ‘gate, they were in the marketplace.

The street was lined with shops. Small kiosks took up space in the center of the avenue. There were hawkers with handcarts selling their wares, and a river of people passing up and down in orderly chaos. The rich rubbed elbows with the dangerously poor, Jaffa with Ting-sha, master and slave. In the market, all had needs they meant to satisfy.

Daniel’s senses perked up. As a boy, he’d spent time in Cairo’s bazaars and knew well what to expect here. There would be thieves, assassins, and cutthroats everywhere; one glimpse at Scout in his finery would make him a target. Daniel stopped taking in the sights and watched the people around them instead, concentrating on facial expressions and whether or not hands were in plain sight.

They were getting a lot of attention, and it made Daniel nervous.

Soon enough, they stepped into a walled courtyard beside a small jewelry shop. Once the gate closed behind their party, Daniel relaxed a little, but it wasn't until they were indoors that he felt himself let go of the tension he’d been holding in his body, ready to act in Scout’s defense. He smiled at himself a little in the confines of his helmet, realizing he’d been a real bodyguard for a few minutes.

Mountain turned to give them a slight bow. "You may unmask while you are inside our villa."

Scout nodded in agreement, and the humans deactivated their helmets, baring their faces at last.

"Whew," Rose sighed with a relieved grin. "Gets a little close in there after a while."

Daniel grinned at her. He’d been so comfortable in his helmet, with all the information constantly available to him inside it, that he’d barely noticed being enclosed. He felt a little spoiled by the constant but unobtrusive technological feed on the visor display, and reluctantly opened his helmet.

"Come. We have food and drink prepared." Mountain led the way into the house with its high ceilings and terracotta walls, gesturing them toward three couches around a long rectangular table.
piled with fruits, meats, fish, cheeses, breads, and seasoned vegetables, with beautiful silver pitchers of cold water sweating on each corner beside etched multi-hued glass chalices.

Scout was first to take a seat, and Jet knelt to serve him, as was his place in Scout's household. Daniel and Teal'c shared a sofa, and Daniel began pouring water and handing the goblets to the others as they took their seats. Mountain remained standing at the end of the table facing the group, his hands clasped loosely behind his back.

"The level of savagery in this society is impressive," he commented idly in his own tongue.

" 'Scuse me," Rose interjected with a nod toward the guide, her gaze shifting from Mountain to Daniel, "but what'd he say?"

Daniel translated, keeping his voice low so she and Teal'c could understand the account.

"War is the primary industry here," Mountain continued, "and every young person capable of participating is trained to fight from an early age. Those who do not excel are quickly routed into other supportive industries, such as forging armor or crafting weapons. Those who show an aptitude for battle are quickly added to Zeus' army, but others are used for entertainment."

Daniel's head came up, making an instant historical connection. He addressed the guide in Ancient. "In antiquity on Earth we called them gladiators."

Rose sighed and reactivated her helmet, speaking to the group through the communication link they all wore over their left ears. "I'll just read the translation on my visor, hon," she called into his earpiece.

Teal'c followed suit.

Mountain's expression was grim as he continued his report. "The warriors fight to maim or kill. Only the best survive, and those who do are rewarded with special privileges." He turned to address the Forest elder. "We are just beginning to hear whispered words regarding a system for smuggling those condemned to death in the ring to freedom. It is something we wish to pursue."

Teal'c made a noise, a deep, disapproving growl in the back of his throat. "I wish to assist in this endeavor. Perhaps the Jaffa will offer deeper trust to one of their own."

Jet stepped close to the Mountain guide to translate the humans' remarks for their host.

Scout studied Teal'c's shiny helmet as if he could see the dark eyes behind the visor. "Daniel has told me you were once the servant of a Goa'uld called Apophis." He shifted his gaze to the Furling giant. "Is that name known here? Will Teal'c be treated as a friend or enemy?"

"I am Jaffa," Teal'c declared proudly through the comm link, his posture straightening slightly. "I wish to assist in this endeavor. Perhaps the Jaffa will offer deeper trust to one of their own."

Daniel wasn't so sure, and shook his head. "You might also be mistaken for a spy, Teal'c. Maybe we should investigate a little more before you show off your First Prime tattoo. Otherwise, you might end up in the circus yourself."

"And if you are identified as Jaffa while wearing the s'resh, you might endanger all of the People on this world," added Scout sagely. "We will be cautious. We will be above reproach. We will be honored guests and valued artisans, until the time comes when it becomes necessary to reveal our true purpose here." His orange gaze shifted back to Teal'c. "When that day comes, friend, do not doubt that the Jaffa will have their opportunity to taste freedom. That is my promise to you." He
smiled, leaning forward slightly to emphasize his words. "Be patient. Everything in its own time."

Teal'c's helmet and left shoulder inclined in a slight bow of acquiescence to Scout's authority in the matter. Daniel didn't have to see his friend's face to know he was pleased by that acknowledgment from the Furlings.

Movement at his left made Daniel glance toward the floor. A gray furry thing about the size of a large house cat approached on four silent, stubby paws, head and tail up in curiosity. Large, beady black eyes gazed at him, and two rounded, translucently delicate pink ears on top of its elongated head pitched toward him in interest. It sniffed at the leg of his s'resh and then rubbed itself against him.

"Hello," he said to it gently, reaching down to pet its fur. The amazing gloves of the s'resh translated an approximate feel of the softness through to his hand. "I didn't realize the People kept pets."

"We do not," Mountain told him with a wry grin. "This creature is called a katen. They are native to this planet and have a great dislike for Ting-sha. Their senses are quite sharp, and we keep them to provide us advance warning when the Ting-sha are coming."

The katen leaped lightly onto the sofa and curled up in Daniel's lap. Another one appeared and stretched out beside him. Then an adult katen wandered into the room, and Daniel could sense everyone in his party holding their collective breaths.

"Dan'l, maybe you oughtta leave that thing alone," Rose advised. "Mama might not take kindly to you messin' with her babies, there."

The creature striding into the room was huge, as large and heavy as a full-grown lion or tiger, with a similar build. A shaggy mane framed its muscular neck, and down its back a row of wickedly curved spikes extended out of the thick, soft fur. It moved on silent paws with cat-like grace, head lowered, aloof but watchful black eyes scanning the new arrivals. Then its nostrils flared. Its head came up, and a look of satisfaction brought the corners of its mouth up, eyes half closed.

Daniel stared at it, his heart fluttering with excitement. He'd never seen a live big cat up close, and had always wanted that experience. These alien animals were beautiful creatures, full of life and incredible power. It never occurred to Daniel to be afraid of the beast. He just wanted to touch it, feel the texture of its fur, the warmth of its body heat and the subtle thudding of its beating heart through its ribcage.

It walked regally to him and plopped down on its side at his feet.

"Reckon that's some kind of cat?" asked Rose, her voice breathless with wonder, and maybe a little fear.

"Not even close," Daniel replied, smiling. "Something completely alien, but every bit as magnificent. Don't you think so?"

"I guess the hell!" Rose eased off the sofa, squatted down and held out her gloved hand toward the mother, hoping to get close enough for a pat. Disdainfully, the beast turned its face away from her and rested its chin on Daniel's knee.

The guide chuckled. "The female likes you, friend," he observed bemusedly. Then he turned to eye the Forest Clan elder and murmured quietly in the Mountain dialect, "Furben tara shushen furdani fur-el."
Daniel understood the literal construction of the sentence, but wasn't sure what the giant meant by that enigmatic statement.

Rose's voice sounded in his ear. "You wanna take a shot at explainin' that, Dan'l? Somethin' must've gotten lost in translation."

Janet, the Forest Clan female, answered her. "Fur is an identifier denoting a specific thing, rather than something general. Your word would be 'the'. El is our concept of God. That which created all is neither male nor female, yet both; no gender, yet all genders." She smiled. "To our understanding, of course."

Daniel looked down at the mother katen reclining at his feet and bent to rub his hand over the creature's powerful shoulders, pondering the meaning of the Furling's private comment. He scrubbed the animal's head and ears as he spoke to Rose in English, "The agent of destiny recognizes the Creator's judge. At least, that's what I got from it."

"Oh…kaaay," said Rose. "That's still a little cryptic to me."

"The message is clear," Teal'c rumbled with a note of certainty, nodding slightly.

"I am not certain I understand it, either," Daniel commented to his host in Ancient. "Who is 'the agent of destiny'?"

Scout glanced down at the katen, then up at Daniel's pensive frown. "Animals have a unique ability to sense many things beyond our understanding," he explained. "We look for such signs. The katen are drawn to you."

Feeling terribly self-conscious, Daniel straightened up, taking a big gulp of cold water from his goblet. He shrugged, as if that gesture could dislodge the attention suddenly being cast upon him. "I've just… always been good with… animals. I like them. They like me."

He decided he didn't want to pursue any deeper meanings, and a change of subject was in order. "So what's our next move?" he asked no one in particular with an uncomfortable, false smile. He shot an embarrassed rescue-me-now glance to the man seated beside him.

Teal'c opened his helmet to pop a small fruit into his mouth and take a long draught of water. When he turned to face Daniel, his left eyebrow was lifted, and he was looking terribly smug for some reason.

"Now," Scout answered in English for his teammates, "we will go to the temple of Zeus and make a sacrifice to the god of the Ting-sha, if our gift is ready." His smile was cool and calculating.

"It is," Mountain assured him with a nod, after Janet posed the question in a language the giant understood.

Daniel knew the elder had something up his gilded sleeve, and Daniel was eager to find out what it might be.

On to the Next Chapter
Chapter End Notes

Part of this was an homage to the 3D animated video called Animusic, and my favorite song, Heavy Light. You might be able to find it on YouTube somewhere. :)

Chapter Summary

Daniel and the Furlings continue their pursuit of Zeus, while he explores a deeper mystery behind the scenes.

Chapter 23: Eternal Light

December 29

Olympus

The chief priest's eyes glittered with avarice as he gazed inside the small but exquisite box laid at his feet. His wrinkled face creased into a pleased smile as he lifted his eyes to meet those of the Artisan lord who had brought this tribute for him, along with a small cabinet for Zeus. "Our god will enjoy this new treasure," he said softly, his voice quivering with excitement. He reached into the smaller box and pulled out a wide golden collar and matching cuffs, gifts meant for him. He put them on, caressing the cold metal with greedy fingers.

Daniel watched in silence as Scout played his role. "Would you like to see our homage to Zeus?" asked Scout warmly, smiling and giving the priest a small bow.

"Yes! Yes, of course. A priest must examine and sanctify any offerings to Zeus before they may be presented to our god." The old man tore his attention from his shiny baubles and studied the other container with interest.

As Scout opened the small cupboard's door, Daniel studied the priest's rapturous expression as he saw what the Furlings had brought to the great temple of Zeus: a small device encased in a glass cylinder, inside of which were delicate, thin spirals of gold twirled upward from a star-shaped base, not quite touching at the top of their individual arcs. Each of the spirals supported a chain of sparkling, polished gemstones, floating and twirling beside the golden metal swirls, all with no visible means of support. The cage formed by the spirals housed a bright light at the center, flickering like a flame but radiating all the colors of the spectrum like a living rainbow, reminding Daniel of the pleasure-inducing light-works in the Goa'uld palace SG-1 had explored years ago.

The glow was suspended in the center of the precious metal framework, with no apparent source for the light, and it bathed the interior of the temple with a hypnotic display of multicolored illumination. The priest gasped as he stared at it. "What is this wondrous thing?" he whispered in awe.

"It is very old," Scout answered dramatically. "We found it on another world in an ancient temple devoted to Zeus, and now we are restoring it to him, as a token of our respect." He bowed again, deeply. "It is called the Eternal Light."

Daniel thought Scout was putting on a great show; he almost believed the story himself, except their whole party knew the truth. The device had been built by the Furlings with this specific
purpose in mind: to play upon the ego of a megalomaniac who wouldn't be able to resist such an amazing toy. The device had a tracking beacon surreptitiously built into the base; the hope was that it would be given directly to Zeus, thus enabling the Furlings to keep track of the Goa'uld's movements. Witnessing the priest's reaction, Daniel had no doubt the Furlings had predicted correctly.

He glanced around the temple interior, letting his attention wander as Scout plied the priest with more flattery. A forest of majestic fluted limestone columns surrounded the opithodomos, the outer area of the temple where the public gathered to await religious ceremonies. Brass braziers held brightly burning fires lifted high off the hexagonal-tiled marble floor. There were few worshipers there at that time of day, most engaged in the business of earning their livelihoods, and only a handful of junior priests moved about in the shaded opithodomos.

"Come, come," the high priest gushed, his eyes wide as he glanced between the Furling device and Scout, whom he assumed to be an Artisan king. "You," he gestured toward Janet and Jet, since they had carried the chest into the temple, "must bring the Eternal Light to the naos and place it upon the altar."

After receiving Scout’s nod of agreement, they lifted the heavy case, and the entire entourage followed the priest into the pronaos, an inner room where votive offerings were made. Here the space was lined with bronze shields and the mosaic walls were painted with brightly colored murals depicting Zeus creating the world, the adoring races who worshiped him arranged at his feet.

The priest opened a pair of massive bronze doors, leading the party into the naos, the heart of the temple, where a giant chryselephantine statue of Zeus sat gazing paternally down on a huge altar from his gilded, bejeweled throne.

A tide of emotion swept through Daniel as he gazed up at that stone face through the visor of his helmet. Part of him was filled with awe at seeing a treasure from Earth's distant past. This had to be the statue sculpted by Pheidias in 438 BC! It exactly fit the description recorded by Pausanias; the original was said to have been destroyed or carried off 800 years after it had been built.

The statue stood nearly forty feet high, its head graced with a crown of gilded olive branches, its skin made of sheets of ivory that had turned brown with extreme age. In his right hand, Zeus held a figurine of Nike, goddess of Victory, and gripped in his left was a tall scepter topped with an eagle. The golden mantle draped over Zeus' shoulder and lap was decorated with inlaid animals and lily-flowers, and his sandals were also gilded. The throne was adorned with symbols of other gods, connecting the Greco-Roman to the Egyptian with Sphinxes, the Graces, the Hours and other representations of Victory.

Daniel moved his gaze to the base of the statue, where he read the line of text inscribed in ancient Greek on the right foot: "Pheidias, son of Charmides of Athens, made me." He was looking at a piece of Earth's precious lost past, the genuine article, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. He wanted to weep with joy at the discovery, but as he lifted his eyes to that beautifully sculpted, handsome face, he was filled instead with cold hatred, and his heart hardened.

It was Zeus, all right.

Daniel would never forget that face.

He watched as Jet and Janet set the treasure chest on the altar under the priest's direction. They removed the device from the box and set it down at the feet of the statue, where the rainbow light sparkled and flashed off the gilded surface, making it almost seem alive.
"Is that our guy?" came Rose’s voice through the earpiece.

Daniel nodded reflexively, then remembered his head was covered by the s’resh helmet. "That's him. No doubt about it."

The high priest bowed deeply before the statue, then turned to face the visitors with a smile. "Zeus will be pleased," he stated huskily. "The Artisans will be treated with the honor and respect worthy of such a gift. You will sit with me in the balcony at the arena tonight and bear witness to the might of our god." He clasped his hands together and gave them a polite nod.

Scout hesitated. He glanced at Daniel, quickly, subtly, but Daniel read the question in his eyes and understood that the elder wasn't sure if he were supposed to acknowledge or decline the invitation.

"I think you should probably accept," Daniel advised him through the microphone.

The Forest elder bowed slightly. "I would be delighted." He signaled his party, and everyone pivoted to leave the inner temple.

Daniel was in the lead now, but as he faced the exit, he stopped, staring.

The massive brass doors were engraved with a star map, showing the location of every world under Zeus' control. Some had been freshly incised into the metal, presumably representing recent acquisitions by the Goa'uld overlord. The information was invaluable, and Daniel wanted to record it. He knew there was a setting in the s’resh controls for just such a thing, but couldn't remember the commands.

"We need to get a picture of these doors," he snapped, walking slowly toward them. "Does anyone remember how…?" Daniel smothered a curse, his opportunity lost as a pair of junior priests opened the doors for them, hiding the panels from view against the walls.

Once they were outside the naos and out of earshot of the acolytes, Scout spoke to him softly. "The map has been recorded in all our thoughts, but I will show you how to work the controls in the tools of your s’resh, at a later time. For now, we shall return to our lodgings."

"Oh. Right." Daniel had forgotten about the nightly memory recording, and promised himself to make better use of it as a research tool. He also needed to learn to be more patient with himself and not focus on his perceived failures. The mission wasn't about being perfect, but to be observant and offer his best performance, while trusting his teammates to deliver theirs. If he let himself get too wrapped up in self-recrimination, he could miss something important.

Scout laughed a little, his eyes twinkling. "Don't forget your first days in my house, friend. There are other possibilities you may not remember." His message was cryptic.

Daniel didn't press for an explanation, since they were still in public, but he mulled over what the elder had said all the way back to the marketplace and the Artisan house, still uncertain of Scout's meaning.

Once inside the building, they all opened their helmets. None of them had had time to record the star chart in the temple, and he doubted the quick glance he and the others had would be able to encompass every detail of the huge maps. How could the Furlings have managed?

"We've had extra eyes watching over us, friends," Scout declared to the humans, turning his gaze on Daniel, "just as we watched you from the beginning." He held out his hand, palm up, as if to offer a gift, but his hand was empty.
Daniel heard a familiar hum, barely audible, and the air above Scout's palm began to darken into a familiar shape.

Daniel gaped at the revelation. "Claire! You've been here all along?"

"Holy crap!" exclaimed Rose, sitting down on the nearest piece of furniture.

"Indeed," added Teal'c, his eyebrow lifted in surprise.

More and more of the Sky Clan began to appear, some seated on furniture, others hovering in the air near the ceiling, still more zooming in and out of the doorways. A few Forest Clan people materialized in the corners as well, each clad in helmeted s'resh from head to toe, revealing their race when their visors opened.

A memory of Daniel's first meeting with Forest Clan burst into his consciousness, and he recalled how the aliens had seemed to appear out of the shadows of the trees as they'd trekked toward Shahr. His eyes widened as realization struck him like a thunderbolt. The Furlings had often reminded him they'd been watching him since the moment he stepped through the Stargate on their world. Now, he understood that many of them had been invisible, observing him up close, even when he'd been with SG-13, his every step and action under their direct scrutiny.

Not once had he ever been alone.

For a moment, he felt like a fool not to have made the connection sooner. The evidence had been there all along; he just hadn't paid enough attention to what his senses had been telling him. The quiet drone of tiny wings was a sound he'd been accustomed to screening out on Earth; insects were routinely ignored on his world and his mind filtered out the sound unless they got close. He'd heard them all along, and never noticed.

"Third Race," Daniel said aloud, reminding himself and his human teammates with whom they were dealing. "The Nox can make themselves invisible, heal injuries and raise the dead. The Ancients built Stargates, and the Asgard…" Daniel shook his head, struggling to take it all in, sort it all out. "The Four Races shared their knowledge with each other. Whatever we've seen the others are capable of, we should expect from the Furlings."

He met Scout's acknowledging gaze and added, "You may have been in exile for millennia, but you had all that knowledge when you were marooned on Furdani, and you've obviously maintained a lot of it."

Scout shrugged. "The Nox, Asgard and Ancients may have made advances after our exile that we don't know, just as we may've made discoveries beyond their capabilities at that time, but you're correct in your assumption. We still have much left to reveal to you and your people."

And the Furlings had had every reason to be cautious. They'd been betrayed by those they'd once called friends and allies, nearly destroyed by them. Once burned, twice shy.

Daniel accepted their revelation in the spirit in which it had been intended, a sense of disgruntled acceptance settling into him. So much for what remained of his perception of privacy. Now he'd be listening as well as watching for observers when he wanted a moment alone.

"So, I take it someone was able to record the star chart on the temple doors?"

"Yes," Claire answered, taking to the air again and hovering in his line of sight. "We have images of the entire temple complex waiting for you to study. It is already in the database." She gestured toward his chest and the controls on his suit. "We have been recording all the events surrounding
us from the moment we arrived."

Daniel closed the helmet and accessed the information on his visor. After quickly viewing what he needed, he sighed with relief and folded the helmet back into the collar of his s'resh. "Okay, that's two things you have to teach me now. Cloaking could come in very handy in the field."

"Ditto," said Colonel MacFarland with a wide grin, a mischievous twinkle in her dark eyes as her gaze slid to Teal'c. "No tellin' what a gal could get up to, if she were invisible. There could be... shenanigans." Her eyebrows waggled at him suggestively.

"I am forewarned," Teal'c countered, a sidelong glance at Rose enhanced by a tiny smile from the big Jaffa. "My senses are keen, and I will be aware of your presence, if you should attempt to steal upon me in secret."

"When you least expect it, T-Bone," she taunted him, slapping his shoulder playfully.

His retort was a single arched eyebrow, daring her to try.

"Not touching that conversation with a ten-foot pole," Daniel mumbled. It was obvious that Teal'c and Rose had hit it off, already behaving like long-time friends. Still, it was fun to see them playing like that. He suspected there might be pranks pulled at some point between them, and just hoped they'd harass each other and leave him out of the hi-jinks.

"We'll enjoy a refreshing meal, take a little rest and then have another lesson on the operation of your s'resh," announced Scout. "When we finish, we'll go to the arena for the gladiatorial contests."

Platters of individual-sized meat pies, small casseroles, hearty sandwiches and blocks of cheese were being delivered as they spoke.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Daniel agreed, reaching for a plate and loading it up, starting with one of those tantalizing meat pies.

Chapter 24: Gladiator

December 29

Olympus

On this planet, it was late summer, and the day was bright and clear. A cool breeze from a nearby ocean kept the temperature mild and pleasant, and in the early evening there was still plenty of light to illuminate the coming spectacle.

Daniel brought up the rear as the party of Furlings entered the arena, guided by a youth in a splendid maroon Roman toga. They walked through a well-lit private corridor, up a flight of broad steps, through a short passageway, and out into the sunshine, onto a spacious balcony lavishly decorated with red velvet padded couches and gilded tables. The balcony ledge was draped with scarlet bunting trimmed in gold, and there was matching fabric on an awning above them, which provided some needed shade.
The high priest, Teum, was already seated on a throne, modeled after the one in the temple but simplified, carved of rich reddish wood accented in gold leaf. He did not rise to greet them, but used the wine goblet in his hand to gesture Scout towards a seat on a nearby reclining couch. "Welcome, my lord," Teum said with a little laugh. He appeared to be well on his way to inebriation. "You are just in time. The festivities are about to begin."

"Thank you for your generous invitation," Scout returned politely. He took his seat and extended a hand to Janet without looking at her. She quickly placed a bunch of grapes into his palm, careful not to touch him.

Rose and Teal'c were stationed directly behind the Furling dignitary with his retainers standing at either end of the couch. Daniel guarded the entrance to the balcony, watching from the rear of the group.

The old priest lifted his hand and nodded his head, and a band of musicians on the far side of the stadium began to play a rousing tune. The seats were filled with Ting-sha and Jaffa, who cheered and clapped as the music swelled to a final crescendo, while a grand procession of the various fighters trooped around the circuit of the sandy field below them. After the participants returned to the entrance tunnel beneath the stadium seats, a man in a white toga and iron breastplate strode to the center of the arena and addressed the crowd, announcing the first match.

Daniel knew these would be the mock fights. Twelve men entered the ring with clubs and whips, many looking as if they had no clue why they were there. A few with grim expressions started the action by attacking the others, chasing them around the arena and doing what damage they could. The crowd responded with mockery and laughter, and Daniel saw his Furling companions stiffen as they watched the barbaric display.

Fortunately, little blood was spilled, and the master of ceremonies, or editor, as the Romans called him, returned to send them back underground.

The next event was a display of exotic wild animals. Some were trained beasts that performed tricks; others were merely released and allowed to attack and devour each other. The carnage was sickening, but the Ting-sha soldiers showed noisy appreciation for the gruesome spectacle.

The few animals that survived were then summarily killed by specialized gladiators called bestiari. Slaves hauled the bleeding and half-eaten carcasses to a pit that opened up in the center of the amphitheater, and then raked the stained sand back over the closed door before the next match began.

Platters of meat and bread were brought during this intermission, but none of the Furlings would touch the food. As Daniel sensed a growing displeasure radiating from his friends, he switched to a private communication link and moved closer to the group, positioning himself just behind Teal'c and the Colonel. "Rose, Teal'c, stay alert. Our 'masters' don't look too happy."

He touched the sleeve of Teal'c's s'resh and looked up at his friend's helmeted head as it jerked to face him. Neither man could see each other's face behind their black visors, but Daniel could feel the tension emanating from the Jaffa. "Try to take it easy," he advised gently through the microphone. Teal'c nodded, and Daniel eased a step to the right to get a better view. He could feel his friend relax a little through the light contact.

Knowing there was much worse to come, Daniel tried to prepare himself for what would happen next. He scanned the crowd instead of watching the main event, but the clang of steel on steel and the shouts, grunts of effort, and cries of pain pulled his unwilling gaze to the ring.
These were the professionals gladiators, who trained to fight to the death. There were eight men in the ring, and all but two wore helmets and armor. In three minutes, the first warrior fell, limping off with a wound to his side. Thirty seconds later, another lost consciousness after a sharp rap on the base of his neck. One more minute, and a Jaffa died.

Scout stood up slowly, his face ashen beneath his bronze skin, his hands curling into fists at his sides, but his expression remained composed, carefully neutral. His left arm came up parallel to his chest, right hand reaching for the bejeweled controls of his kingly s'resh.

Fortunately, the old priest was oblivious to his guests, well in his cups and swigging down more wine.

Daniel saw the Furling elder pressing his lips together, head bending over his gauntlet, sensing Scout was about to give an order that would undo them all.

"Don't do it, Scout!" Daniel warned, knowing that no one but the Furlings and his human friends could hear him speak inside his helmet. "It's ugly and terrible, but we can't change their culture with a single act of mercy. We can't show our hand. Not yet." The elder made a great show of adjusting his costume and sat back down, turning gleaming eyes to the violence below him. His body was perfectly erect, hands on knees, gripping with white-knuckled disapproval. All of the Furlings mirrored that sentiment, hating this senseless loss of life.

Had Daniel not known Scout so well, he wouldn't have been able to discern the faint glimmers of revulsion on his face and in his posture.

"Just so you know," Daniel added quietly to the whole team, "it's going to get worse."

Nine minutes after the match began, one Jaffa was left standing, and the contest was over.

The audience exploded in thunderous applause as the field was cleared of the dead and wounded.

When the editor announced the next event, Daniel cursed inwardly. 

Damnatio ad bestias.

Damnation by the beasts, a form of execution reserved for blasphemers.

An old man limped out into the ring, followed by a teenage boy. Behind them, two young men emerged, holding tightly to each other. The Jaffa prisoners walked with their heads up proudly, tears trickling silently down their faces, each forehead emblazoned with the lightning-bolt tattoo of Zeus. Each visage reflected the terrified and hopeless anticipation of impending death.

Last of all was a young, dark-haired woman, her lower arms wrapped around a belly swollen with pregnancy, obviously near term.

She looked vaguely like Sha're.

"No," whispered Daniel, shocked by the sight of her.

"Luz Hala, s'oile!" snapped Scout, giving an order in the dialect of the Forest Clan. He leaped to his feet as he spoke, and his right hand shot out, pointing into the ring. The elder had just commanded Sky Clan to protect the Jaffa in the ring. Daniel heard the order, and fueled by his memories and instinctive need to render aid, he reacted without hesitation. He took a step before he realized what he was doing, eyes glued to the woman in the arena.
Someone called Daniel's name within the confines of his helmet, but he ignored it, barely recognized the voice as Teal'c's. Then he was over the edge of the balcony, holding onto the scarlet bunting, riding it to the sandy ground as the rigging on one side gave way beneath his weight, then fluttered to the ground, completely detached from the balcony.

His brain kicked into gear then, but it was too late. There was no way back to the terrace aside from the gate on the far side of the arena. He was committed now and all hell was breaking loose, voices shouting at him inside his helmet, the crowd almost drowning them out as the audience erupted with surprised shouts and cheers.

"Make the priest a deal, Scout!" Daniel called into the microphone with a glance up at his friends peering over the ledge at him. "Tell him you wanted to show off your people's fighting skills. *Think* of something!"

Daniel bolted and was halfway across the arena, just about to reach the tiny knot of people, when a barred gate opened in a side wall and two full-grown *katen* darted out. The big cat-like creatures were snarling at the Ting-sha who had chased them out of their cage. The animals were probably starving, and the smell of blood was everywhere. For a moment, their attention was directed into the tunnel at their captors, and then the latticed gate dropped closed, trapping the animals in the arena.

They blinked in the bright sunlight, getting their bearings, locating their intended prey. Then their heads dipped and they crouched down, bellies low to the ground as they slunk forward, circling, prowling, sniffing the air. They were hunting now, judging what kind of threat their prey might pose before they committed to attack.

"Crap!" Daniel stopped in the sand, facing the closed gate. There was no way he could deal with these animals. He wasn't fast enough and wasn't competent with Furling weaponry yet, but he touched the sleeve of his *s'resh* without looking at it, hoping he'd activated the right controls.

The *s'resh* initiated a scan of atmospheric readings instead.

He wasn't about to look away from the animals to find his weapons and fiddle with getting them set for use. As he paced toward the beasts, he turned the weather module off and tried another combination, finally activating the *tissé* -- and found it set to dispense paintballs.

The audience roared along with the confused, hungry *katen*. Scout's voice sounded through the communication link in his helmet, but Daniel couldn't understand for the background noise. Daniel's gaze shifted from one *katen* to the other, trying to decide which would attack first.

The crowd noise ebbed to an expectant hush with an under-girding of surprised exclamations as a growl of distant thunder sounded, but Daniel kept his eyes on the animals.

Something pelted against his visor, rapping three times in perfect rhythm.

"We are here to help you," called Claire through the speaker in his helmet.

Daniel couldn't see Claire, but trusted that she was right in front of him. "Okay, what's the plan?"

"Approach the female," said his cloaked friend, "the smaller one."

Another rumble of thunder quieted the crowd to a nervous murmur. The sky darkened, but Daniel didn't shift his attention away from the *katen*. He took a step toward the nearest animal, hands low, palms out and open. He moved slowly to keep from startling it.
Twenty feet away, he eased into a low crouch.

Neither of the *katen* had attacked yet, but they were circling closer, looking for an opening. If the beasts heard the buzzing of Sky Clan's wings, they gave no notice, focused intently on the cluster of people in the center of the amphitheater. The scent of fresh blood was in the air, and nothing would be as important to the starved carnivores as their intended meal.

"Dive!" Claire called to her cloaked companions.

The larger male bolted suddenly away, surprised by a sudden swipe from its invisible attacker. The *katen* turned in a circle, seeking the source of the blow, then directed its attention back to the Jaffa when no enemy was located. It flinched and darted close to the wall as more strikes landed against its solid body.

The female gave a startled leap sideways, then ran for the gate. It yowled unhappily, ears laid back, one paw slapping uncertainly at the air. Backing its hindquarters against the wall, it snarled and cowered, all big eyes and sharp teeth.

Daniel could imagine how the scene in the amphitheater looked. As he drew nearer, the animals backed away. He edged closer, one hand reaching out. Daniel searched for the right button on his chest plate, activating the exterior voice controls, and finally armed the *tissé*, preparing his built-in weapons for use. He felt so sorry for these magnificent animals, hoping he wouldn't have to hurt them.

He knew the *katen* were just abused and hungry. Something was attacking them, but their senses and primitive instincts couldn't process what little information they were getting from the *s'resh*-clad Furlings. The animals were trying to look scary and tough, but underneath the bravado, Daniel knew they were terrified.

"It's okay, girl," he cooed to the nearest one. "That's a good girl. Gooood girl."

The *katen* finally noticed him and gave a fierce growl, backing closer to the wall. It slapped one paw into the air, claws dangerously exposed, obviously threatening.

If he got too close, he knew it would rush him and he'd have to shoot it. He paced in front of the beasts, keeping some distance, hands low, voice soothing, maintaining a steady stream of senseless patter, counting on the sound to hold their focus. Their eyes were on him now, probably more because he was moving and the Jaffa behind him were still, but at least he had the *katens'* attention.

"Drive them to the gate," he murmured softly in Sky Clan dialect. "Hold them there."

The male flinched and wheeled suddenly as something bounced off its flank. It lashed out, sharp claws raking the startled female animal across the nose. It fought back, a flurry of strikes exchanged before they broke apart, then darting toward the tunnel instinctively once they'd realized they were fighting each other and not their invisible attackers. Both animals loosed mournful wails and caterwauls, begging for shelter from their unseen enemy.

The Jaffa in the audience cheered. An unhappy howl went up from the Ting-sha contingent of the crowd. The sudden noise sent the skittish animals darting away, and Daniel danced backward, hoping the animals wouldn't attack.

In their confusion, the beasts started toward the Jaffa, but Daniel hurried to cut them off. He called out to the Jaffa, ordering them to sit down, be still and quiet. He was really pissed off now, desperate for some way to save both the condemned Jaffa and the *katen*. 
The sky darkened and thunder rumbled loudly. Despite Daniel's warning, the humans routed, dashing off in different directions. The woman screamed in terror, and their motion attracted the hungry *katen*.

The animals were fast. Daniel threw himself at the female just before it attacked, hitting it broadside, knocking it down. The female rolled out from underneath him and got to its feet and he hurried to do the same, managing to get onto hands and knees just as the male bowled Daniel over. Its great dagger-like teeth gripped his shoulder, but couldn't pierce the tough fabric of the *s'resh*.

The big male suddenly abandoned its attack, squealed in pain and leapt away. It stood with head lowered, eyes glaring at him, braced on all four feet.

"Run!" Claire called to Daniel through the comm link.

"I can't!" he argued. "They'll chase me. We've got to drive them back to the tunnel. Make it look good, Sky Clan."

He held up a hand, palm facing the male *katen*, and strode slowly toward it, hoping it looked to the audience as if he had some great power over the beast. It continued to jump and flinch, backing away from him as he directed Sky Clan's attacks. He pointed at the female and it ran, heading for the gate with a miserable yowl.

After another few moments, the male joined its mate, tails carried low to the ground in defeat.

The gate finally lifted, and the pair of *katen* dashed inside the tunnel.

"Well done," Scout's voice called from the speaker near Daniel's ear. "You have earned the prisoners' price as my slaves." The elder's message would have been public, audible to the high priest, who was sitting at Scout's side, since the Artisan leader's head wasn't enclosed in the privacy of a helmet.

"Thank you, my friends," Daniel panted inside his *s'resh*, broadcasting to his invisible Sky Clan helpers. He bent over slightly to catch his breath, then turned and gestured to the prisoners to come with him. He straightened and escorted the five Jaffa to the gladiators' gate, waiting for it to be opened.

The prisoners were awestruck, confused. "What is happening?" asked the woman, holding a hand to her rounded belly.

Daniel set the speaker controls to broadcast his voice and adjusted the volume so only those close to him could hear. "Just keep quiet," he told the Jaffa in Latin, so they would understand him. "You will not be executed." He wanted them to calm down, but didn't want them to know too much.

A grumbling Ting-sha soldier let them out of the arena and led the way to the balcony. It gave him an evil, angry stare before taking its leave at the doorway.

"Stay here," Daniel told the prisoners. "All will be well. You are safe."

He started up to the balcony just as Colonel MacFarland was coming down, her gloved fists clenched and swinging angrily at her sides.

Her stern voice was clear in the confines of his helmet. "I swear to God, Dan'l, I thought Jack was talkin' outta his ass with all those wild stories he told me about you, but I'll bet every damn one of 'em was true! What the hell were you thinkin', boy? And turn y'damn speakers off! Yer broadcastin'."
She lightly cuffed his shoulder and continued down the tunnel to take charge of the Jaffa.

He'd probably just scared her, he decided, and she had reacted to that fear with a show of gruffness. Hell, he'd scared himself! He adjusted his system for internal communication and gave a low chuckle. "I'm okay, Rose. Just a little sore." He rubbed his bruised shoulder where the *katen* had bitten him.

"Remind me to kick yer impulsive ass later," she grumbled in his ear.

Daniel smiled as he stepped onto the balcony, his grin hidden by the visor. Scout remained seated on the couch with his back to the entrance, but Teal'c's helmet was turned in his direction. The set of the Jaffa's shoulders indicated both pride and relief that his friend was safe. Daniel went to stand beside him at the end of the Forest Clan elder's couch.

Scout leaned closer to the high priest with a mischievous grin. "What is your opinion of Artisan warriors now, Teum?" he asked lightly, his Latin graced with an elegant, alien accent. "You see, on our world, fighting beasts such as those is a right of passage for our children."

Daniel wondered if that boastful statement weren't far from the truth. He'd seen some of the wildlife on Furdani and knew there were many fearsome predators coming-of-age Furlings encountered during the Hunt that would earn them the rights of adulthood. The *katen* seemed relatively docile compared to the giant *sadeesh* that lived in the woodlands.

The priest's eyes were wide as he glanced at Daniel. "Impressive," the old man said with a drunken slur, "but I am not certain Zeus approves." He pointed to the heavens, indicating the storm clouds that had been gathering in the last few hours.

"Perhaps you should look again." Scout chuckled and nodded toward the arena. "Or perhaps it is our goddess who smiles upon the Artisans this day."

Teum leaned forward unsteadily and looked beneath the overhanging awning at a rapidly clearing blue sky. His face grew slack with wonder and a little fear. The old man nodded. "Zeus is pleased. Your bargain will be honored, Artisan." The Jaffa priest gave a little bow and rose unsteadily from his god's throne.

As Daniel stepped aside for the priest to leave, he studied Scout's expression. The elder was still smiling, a merry glint in his amber eyes. "Come. We shall take these Jaffa to the Artisans' quarters in the marketplace. Then, we shall talk."

"Yep. I'm in trouble," Daniel sighed to himself in the confines of his helmet. He rubbed his aching shoulder and turned to accompany the others back down the tunnel and out of the stadium, just as the sun had almost reached the horizon. As Scout had indicated, the sky was clearing, clouds scudding away on the wind, freshened with the scent of rain.

It would be a pleasant evening, he thought. He found himself smiling at the pregnant Jaffa woman, even though she couldn't see his face and might never know the identity of the man who had saved her life and that of her unborn child.

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*Chapter 25: Journey*

*December 29*
Standing on a balcony on the upper floor of the Artisan house in the Olympian marketplace and sipping water through a straw-like apparatus inside the helmet of his s'resh, Daniel looked down at the passers-by and vendors. He supposed he was eavesdropping, but he almost felt entitled as he listened in on a conversation that was taking place downstairs between the Furlings and the five Jaffa Daniel had rescued. He knew Teal'c and Colonel MacFarland were both present, following what everyone was saying with the aid of the translators in their helmets, but Daniel couldn't show his face on that planet without risking being recognized, not even to the people whose lives he'd just saved.

The old man was called Bathys. "I was a librarian," he told Scout in a shaky voice. "My crime was blasphemy against the one called Zeus. I dared to tell others that he is not a true god."

"You were wise to disbelieve," Teal'c rumbled gently, his s'resh both disguising his voice and providing a Latin translation for his response. "The Goa'uld are not gods. They are tyrants."

"I do not know the one whose symbol you wear," Bathys continued. "Do you not seek to sway others to follow this serpent-god of yours, First Prime?" Daniel imagined the old man had already studied Teal'c's golden forehead tattoo, revealed when he'd opened his helmet earlier.

"The Goa'uld Apophis is dead," Teal'c declared with a note of pride in his voice. "Though I served him and called him my lord for many years, eventually I chose to lead my people in revolt against him and all others of his kind. On many worlds in this galaxy, the Jaffa live free of the tyranny of the false gods. We stand ready to offer your people their freedom as well."

One of the young men spoke. "There are many here who hold this same belief, Teal'c. The Jaffa of Olympus have already been working toward throwing off the rule of Zeus, but the Ting-sha are many and powerful. They blindly follow their god and are quick to act if they hear a breath of rebellion."

"That is why we were cast into the arena," said another male voice. "We were caught attempting to free some of the gladiators condemned to die in combat."

"We will take you to a safe place," Scout offered. "One of the free Jaffa worlds, perhaps?"

Daniel expected that question had gone to Teal'c.

"Indeed," the big man replied. "I will escort them to Chulak and see them settled there."

"I cannot thank you enough for our lives," said the young woman, "and for the life of my child. Will it be possible to speak with the one who risked his own life to save us?"

"He can hear you," Scout told her. "Say to him what you will."

Head bowed, Daniel listened to the five Jaffa express their gratitude, each wishing they could offer him more than mere words. He adjusted the controls to connect to Teal'c's comm device. "Tell them no thanks is necessary, and I'm just glad they're alive."

Daniel smiled as Teal'c's repetition of his message was much more elegantly put than his own simple words.

"We welcome you to the Artisans' house," announced Janet's voice through the speaker. "Please
come with me, and I will show you to rooms where you may bathe and rest. A meal will be served shortly, and tomorrow we will be leaving this world." At that point, Daniel knew the conversation with the rescued Jaffa was over. Their guests would be made comfortable for the night until departure time arrived.

He thought about what he and Scout and the others had accomplished, and what remained to be done. These refugees would be an excellent source of information about the culture of the people under Zeus' rule, and since the Goa'uld himself was no longer present, Daniel couldn't see any valid reason to remain on Olympus. The Furlings who now lived and traded there would remain as a conduit of intelligence, and would no doubt soon make connections with the Jaffa underground. A seed had been planted and would be tended with care.

Meanwhile, no one but Daniel's companions would ever know that he had even been there, and the great statue of Zeus would remain intact, revered by those who lived in awe and fear of their false god. That gnawed at Daniel, but he knew announcing his presence would put the Artisans in danger, if there were any way he got connected to them. His actions in the arena had already done more than enough potential damage. He needed to keep his face covered, and his mouth shut, even though that went against every fiber of his being.

Daniel wanted Zeus to know he had been there, but he couldn't risk exposing his identity and being associated with the Artisans. He wanted to destroy that statue, but the very thought was abhorrent; it was a piece of Earth's lost history, and Daniel's entire life had been about preserving the past. He was at war with himself, and there would be no resolution to that impasse, not in the foreseeable future, if ever.

The s'resh he wore kept him from feeling the light caress of the increasing wind, but the weather data scrolling up inside the helmet visor indicated decreasing barometric pressure and a spike in the relative humidity. A storm was coming, and already dark clouds were gathering overhead, blotting out the stars. Lightning flashed, and thunder rumbled a distant warning as Daniel turned and walked back inside.

Claire regarded him sleepily from her bunk shelf above his bed. "Something troubles you."

Following close on her words, there was a violent crack of thunder, a bolt of sizzling white light illuminating the sky and the room for an instant. She sat up and dangled her s'resh-clad legs over the edge, leaning on her hands as she studied him.

Daniel stepped off the balcony and into the room. He opened his helmet, glad to breathe from the freshening breeze preceding the storm, and patiently explained what he'd been pondering.

The Sky Clan female closed the helmet of her uniform and adjusted the volume on her broadcast so he could hear her more easily. "This is an interesting dilemma," she observed, pushing off the shelf and dropping into a free fall, her wings catching her in midair and lifting her closer to his face. "You want the statue preserved, yes?"

"Yes, but not so it can continue to be part of Zeus's worship," Daniel agreed, nodding. "As far as that monster goes, I only want people to see what kind of pathetic posturing creature he is, and have him remembered for that. But the structure is so old, so fragile; I doubt it could be moved without destroying it."

Claire pondered his statement, her hands clasped in front of her in a contemplative pose. "One moment, please," she told him.

As Daniel sat quietly, watching and waiting, her hands waved in the air, and he knew she was having a private conversation with someone else in the Furling network.
Finally, she spoke to him, a smile in her voice. "Rest easy, friend. We have a solution to your problem."

Daniel raised his helmet once more and asked for details. Inside the privacy of his helmet, he heard Scout's voice describing the plan. The Furlings intended to bring one of their cargo ships to Olympus, one large enough to haul the massive statue of Zeus. Using their transporters, they would bring it into the hold and fly it back to Furdani, where it would be beamed directly into their museum, so that every Furling could see the face of the fiend who had destroyed the world of their liberator and friend, Daniel Jackson.

In that place, Zeus would never be worshipped as a deity but would instead become a marked man whose face was known to every Furling who lived and breathed. That, Daniel decided, would be an acceptable fate for one of the Seven Ancient Wonders of Earth, the only one to have survived its destruction. It would serve as an intergalactic wanted poster, and there would soon be no place for Zeus to hide from the Third Race.

"Once again, I'm in your debt," Daniel told his friends softly.

“As we will always be in yours, friend,” Scout gently reminded him with a smile in his voice.

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**December 30**

**The Next Day**

**Olympus**

The Artisan lord, his pair of retainers, five new slaves, and three helmeted bodyguards stood patiently in the shade on the patio, watching the Stargate where Ting-sha solders still stood guard, checking each departure and arrival.

Scout had recommended they take their time leaving the planet, making it known they were in no hurry to begin their journey home. Jaffa passers-by gave them long looks, pointing and whispering as they stared, no doubt gossiping about the dramatic rescue that had taken place in the arena the previous night.

At last, Scout finally gave the order to move out, and the bodyguards took their places. This time, Daniel stood first in the line, taking point for their return to the ship. Smiling inside the confines of his helmet, he turned to the Mountain Clan Artisan who had been their host and gave him a respectful bow.

Daniel glanced to the left at the massive white marble temple with its colorful mosaic across the top, imagining how his message would appear. The Furlings had presented him with an ingenious plan, one that would serve his purposes well. He had spent several hours composing the message he wanted to send to Zeus and his followers, and finally decided on something simple and brief, written in his own hand, and displayed in an incredibly public and impressive manner.

He only wished he'd be able to see Zeus's face when the asshole read it.

That pleasure, he decided, would be far less satisfying than the build-up of tension and frustration in the Goa'uld as Daniel's warnings accumulated. In time, the trap would be sprung, but not until the reputation of the false god lay in tatters around him. Daniel’s dream was that Zeus would be
discredited, embarrassed, and driven to rash decisions that would ultimately lead to his downfall at the hands of those he ruled.

And with the Third Race at Daniel's side, he had little doubt that dream would come true.

January 1

Two Days Later

Aboard the Gaia

Following several paces behind Bathys and the other rescued Jaffa, Daniel strode alongside Teal'c, his heart heavy as they made their way toward the transport deck and the ship's Stargate. His old friend would be taking the refugees to Chulak to see them resettled, then make his way back to Dakar to report the latest developments with the Furlings to the Jaffa High Council. There had even been talk recently, messages received and returned as they traveled, of Teal'c taking a seat on the council himself.

This was important work, but Daniel would miss his comrade while they were gone. "How soon do you think you'll be back?" he asked Teal'c hopefully. Daniel tugged at the collar of his black tunic, uncomfortable to be back in his normal clothing, now that he'd become accustomed to the weightless fabric of the s'resh.

Teal'c, too, had switched back to his Jaffa robes in preparation for returning to his people. He walked with his hands lightly clasped behind his back. "I do not know," the big man answered. "It will depend on how well the High Council accepts the idea of aid from an advanced race." He shot a meaningful glance at the pink-haired Sky Clan Jack, who was leading a group of three other fairies, buzzing along in front of him and Daniel. Those four members of Sky Clan would be accompanying Teal'c as liaisons to the Jaffa.

Daniel caught his buddy's unspoken message, evident in the shadow of a smile and twinkling eyes. "You like them," he surmised.

Teal'c nodded. "I believe O'Neill will soon understand that these people will scrutinize your six, DanielJackson."

"That's 'watch my six,' " Daniel corrected, his own grin widening, "and yeah, they have so far. I trust them, and Jack needs to learn to do that, too."

Teal'c stopped walking, letting the flight formation move a little further away, out of hearing range. He arched one eyebrow, his expression serious now, but curious. "I have known you for ten years, so I am well aware that it is your instinct to trust others, especially when they have been as kind as the Furlings have been. But do not ignore the fact that long ago, the other races thought it best to almost eradicate them from the galaxy. They saved only a few, and those were sent into exile. Surely there must have been a compelling reason for such devastating action."

Daniel sighed. "I haven't forgotten about that, Teal'c. I'm still looking into their history. That's why I went to the Nox. Only they didn't have the answer, either."

"You could always follow the example set by the Furlings," the big man suggested. "Search through their recorded memories and learn their true motivations. They have already admitted they
are withholding secrets from all of us. It would be a simple matter to research."

Recoiling in dismay, Daniel shook his head. "I'd never do that!" he shot back. "Even though it's part of their culture, it's not part of mine. We respect privacy and don't pry into the intimate thoughts of others. I just..." He shook his head again. "I couldn't. That idea goes against everything I believe. Sorry." Daniel grinned and gave a little chuckle. "You couldn't do it, either, huh?"

The Jaffa's expression was grave. "I could not." He shook his head. "But be careful not to trust too much."

"I'm not as innocent as I was when you first met me." Daniel gave him a sad smile.

Teal'c gave him an approving clap on the shoulder. "No. You have become a fine warrior now. Zeus should be afraid." He smiled, a glimmer of contentment in his dark eyes. "I would not want you hunting me, DanielJackson. You are an excellent comrade, but you would be a formidable enemy."

Daniel wasn't sure how he felt about that statement, but he was certain it had been meant as a compliment. "Thank you?"

The two men continued down the corridor toward the transporter room, where Daniel wished all the travelers a good journey and watched them disappear through the ship's Stargate.

Once the wormhole shut down, Daniel thanked the transport crew and strolled back toward his office, thinking about the research he'd be tackling once he was settled behind his desk. Abruptly, he found himself turning toward Scout's quarters, just wanting a couple of words of sociable chat to ease the parting between companions. Daniel had enjoyed having Teal'c around, and the big guy would be missed. Daniel was lonely already.

The lights were low when he arrived in the lushly decorated entry room. These quarters were simple but elegant, filled with the finest Furling artwork and furniture, befitting an elder of the Forest Clan. Each of the walls held a holographic screen filled with images of an ancient woodland on Furdani. Entering the room was like stepping into a tree-lined glade. Even the air was scented with leaves, flowers, and rich soil.

Scout wasn't in the foyer, so Daniel announced himself quietly. None of Scout's personal staff appeared, so he continued cautiously into the apartment, calling out the elder's formal name. He found his friend in a small alcove off the bedroom, just settling into a contemplative posture that reminded Daniel fondly of Teal'c.

"Greetings," el-Mikha responded with a warm smile. The nook was lit by dozens of palm-sized crystals affixed to the walls, and there was a spare cushion facing him.

"Mind if I join you?" asked Daniel. He, Scout and Teal'c had often meditated together during the few weeks the Jaffa had been on board Gaia.

"Please do," said Scout cheerfully, gesturing invitingly toward the other seat. "In fact, I intended to speak with you later today. There's a subject I'd like to discuss with you."

Daniel lowered himself onto the extra pillow, his legs crossed, wrists propped on his knees. "Okay. What's up?"

Scout's expression was composed, unreadable. "Do you remember the storms on Olympus?"
"There were storms?"

"The first one was during the gladiatorial contest. Didn't you see the clouds gathering overhead, or feel the wind pick up?" Scout was smiling, just a tiny bit.

"I didn't pay much attention to the weather, no," Daniel admitted. "I was focusing on what was happening in the ring. Why do you ask?"

"Before that, as were preparing to leave Furdani, do you recall any of the weather reports over the city of Shahr?"

He shrugged. "Why would I? Shahr is underground."

Scout tilted his head. "At first, we didn't notice it much either, until a pattern began to be established. You see, whenever you returned to Alpha, skies above the city were clear, and the weather was appropriate for the season. On the other hand, when you were in residence at Shahr, the more disturbed you became, the more violent the atmospheric conditions on the surface. That's why I came to you and took you to Ahmega, to show you the ships and make our offer of support for your cause."

"Are you telling me I'm affecting the weather?" Daniel was incredulous. "Sorry, but that's not possible. I don't have that kind of power."

He shook his head, refusing to believe what he was hearing, but his gaze slid guiltily to the floor. Part of him knew he was capable of that, and of much more. He had cast lightning from his fingertips in the middle of building Merlin's weapon to fight the Ori, and he had also performed telekinesis, moving a canteen through the air with only the power of his mind. He'd believed he'd lost the ability to do those things when he'd left Merlin's repository machine behind on the world where they'd found it.

"I've studied many of your memories," Scout went on quietly. "While you're not able to access the events or abilities you had while you were ascended, the information's still there, still part of you. It's something you close off from yourself, because it is so painful to recall."

Daniel ducked his head, pulling at a tiny piece of cuticle sticking up beside a fingernail. "Look, I'd really rather not talk about that."

Scout nodded. "I know, Daniel, but these abilities are growing, along with your level of disquiet. If you don't explore them and learn to harness them, you may become a danger to all around you." He hesitated, his eyes filled with sympathy as Daniel met his concerned gaze. "There's atmosphere in this ship. Already there have been a few incidents with energy overloads, always in your vicinity, always when you're in anguish. We're asking you to let us help you learn to control either your emotions or this power, which we don't truly understand, for your own safety and that of those around you."

Bowing his head, Daniel knew the elder was doing his best to be as diplomatic as he could with this news, but it was still a shock. He took a deep breath and let it go, his shoulders slumping. "What do you want me to do?"

"For the moment, nothing," Scout advised. "Sit still and feel the quiet all around you. Have no thoughts, and let your emotions settle within you. Just breathe, and be."

Closing his eyes, Daniel sat up straight and settled into the meditation posture. He followed his friend's advice, taking the first step on a journey toward opening up his mind to the one place he
never wanted to go for as long as he lived.

Chapter 26: Warning

January 15

Two weeks later

Olympus, in the temple of Zeus

High above the floor of the temple of Zeus, cloaked from the view of the massed congregation, el-Riel hovered in her protective s’resh, the helmet closed. On a whim, the Goa'uld had chosen to visit this planet, and word had been sent immediately to Furdani. el-Riel responded, watching the tyrant hold sway over his followers, disgusted by the groveling of the animalistic Ting-sha as they prostrated themselves mindlessly at Zeus's feet.

The Sky Clan elder had come to Olympus in secret, passing invisibly through the Wheel of Worlds with a shipment of precious metals and gems. She had wanted to see Zeus herself, to study and observe him and glean what she could of his nature.

As intrigued as she was sickened, she studied the physiological scans of the creature on the gaudy golden throne as the information appeared inside her helmet. Two beings, just as Daniel Jackson had described them, were housed in that body. One consciousness was a prisoner of the other, and the symbiosis that held them together might only be sundered with great difficulty. The People could not tackle that challenge without one of them to study directly, but these Goa'uld were apparently quite rare in the galaxy.

That, however, was a matter for another day.

Now, it was time to deliver a message and start the wheels of destiny turning.

Amid great pomp and circumstance, the doors to the inner sanctum of the temple were opened. Twenty priests lined up on either side of the golden throne in the naos, and the acolytes filled the chamber with incense and songs of praise. Zeus graced them all with a beneficent smile as he gazed down in pleasure at the gift brought to him by the Artisans of Furdani a few weeks earlier.

el-Riel could kill him now, but she would not; it had been determined by the council of elders that execution was not the correct punishment for Zeus's crimes. There was much to do before the alien tyrant could be brought to justice, and the People's next action was only the first step, a warning to him and his followers. It would be the first of several opportunities that would allow him to give up his merciless oppression of others.

This was another test of the humans from Earth and of this Goa'uld, and the People were pleased they had not been asked to carry out a death sentence.

el-Riel flew just outside the doorway of the naos and chose an opening in the crowd of junior priests waiting outside the inner sanctum. Directly below her, she initiated a life-sized holographic projection of Daniel Jackson, dressed in fine black robes. At the sudden appearance of the image, those nearest it gasped and moved away, clearing a space.
She knew Zeus had to be looking right at it, directly into the eyes of the hologram, and this was confirmed when she saw the flash of surprise on the Goa'uld's face as he eased slowly to his feet.

el-Riel slowly flew forward, and the previously recorded projection appeared to stride confidently into the naos, stopping just in front of the altar where the Eternal Light glimmered with rainbow radiance.

"Ready the message, Sky Clan," the elder transmitted to her equally invisible companions, their presence marked only by faint heat trails on the inner surface of her visor. Acknowledgements from the five who accompanied her came clearly through the helmet's speakers.

The Goa'uld began to speak to the hologram. "You realize you are a dead man, do you not, Doctor Jackson?" He smiled, just a fraction, casually clasping his wrists behind his back.

The image didn't reply. After a moment's pause, its right arm lifted, hand closed in a fist aimed right at Zeus. The Ting-sha reacted instantly to the possible threat and leaped, flinging themselves at the image. They tumbled right through it, slamming into each other and landing on their bellies in a pile on the floor.

Pleased by the gasps of surprise and awe coming from the crowd, el-Riel directed the hologram to step back.

The Jaffa priests shrank away, pressing their backs to the walls, where some dropped to the floor on their knees. These primitive beings had never seen a hologram and were obviously terrified of its presumed power. "Cowards!" barked Zeus, dropping fisted hands to his sides as he shot scathing glances at his priests. "It is only an image, you idiots!"

The likeness of el-Dani pivoted without a word, one uplifted hand now aimed at the eastern wall.

"On my command," called el-Riel softly, watching a countdown on her visor. "Now!" She activated the motion, and the holographic Daniel began to sweep his arm through the air, index finger pointed as if he were writing on the distant wall.

The others of Sky Clan, hovering in position inches from the intricate mosaic, fired laser-cutting tools they had brought with them, carving words into the tiny ceramic tiles. The letters were twice as tall as they were themselves, and from the perspective of the audience on the floor of the naos, it seemed as though the letters were appearing by magic, incised by bright flames of energy formed at the will of the hologram.

The elder chuckled inside her helmet as her subordinates worked quickly to put up their message.

_Daniel Jackson is coming._

One of the Ting-sha panicked and shot at the hologram, the discharge from its weapon taking a chunk out of the floor. That reaction started a firefight as others responded, shrieking and crying out in fear and pain when blasts hit home. Ting-sha and Jaffa alike fell beneath the terrorized assault, until Zeus's voice finally boomed out in frustration for them to stop.

"Morons!" he bellowed, running a hand through his long blond hair in obvious exasperation. "Fools! Do you not see he is not truly _here?_" He turned to regard the writing, reading it with a quick sweep of his gray eyes.

el-Riel watched his complexion darken and mottle with rage.

The next command was given in a voice that quickly increased in stress level and volume, until
Zeus' fair face was bright red, his eyes glowing white. "I… want… him… FOUND!" He turned back to his minions, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Bring me Daniel Jackson!"

His left hand lifted from his side, his fingertips capped in gold, a metal ribbon wound around his forearm. At the center of his palm was an amber jewel glowing with energy. A shockwave radiated from his hand, lifting those nearest him and flinging them through the air, their bodies smashing against the wall by the door.

Those who could, Jaffa and Ting-sha alike, picked themselves up off the floor and ran from the naos, screaming in panic. Only a few priests kept their places, cowering on their knees at their angry god's feet.

eel-Riel shut the recording down, causing Daniel's likeness to fade away.

Zeus seethed as he stared down at his followers. "Remember that face!" he snarled, tiny drops of spittle flying from his lips as he spoke. "Tell everyone on every world!" He leaned closer to the Jaffa high priest with some final words. "None shall rest until Daniel Jackson has been captured and delivered to me!"

"Yes, my lord," Teum whispered, his voice cracking and trembling with fear. "It will be done."

Zeus returned to his seat on the throne, staring at the Eternal Light in deep concentration.

The audio assembly in el-Riel's s'resh picked up the whisper of a pair of priests not far away from the throne. "How can we capture him? He appears and disappears at will. He writes with fire, cutting through stone with a wave of his hand. Is he a god?"

Apparently, the Goa'uld heard it, too.

With an impatient sigh, Zeus rose from his gilded seat and sauntered over to the hapless man, who was just rising from his belly to his knees. Zeus bent slightly and clasped his left hand over the man's forehead, showing his perfect teeth in a fierce, angry grin. "He is no god!" Zeus growled through clenched jaws. "He is just a man, just like you, and when you bring him to me, I will kill him, just… like… this!"

The jeweled orb on the Goa'uld's palm glowed again and the priest shook with violent tremors of pain. His eyes rolled back in his head and he moaned, the stench of scorched flesh filling the room. The priest finally fell to the floor, blood trickling from his nose, the skin of his brow burned away to the bone, his brain thoroughly cooked.

The handful of worshipers who were left prostrated themselves and began chanting, begging for mercy, reciting prayers of faithfulness and love to their god.

"Sky Clan, withdraw from the temple," el-Riel ordered quietly into the communication network. "We now have a location for the one called Zeus, and I must not lose track of him. The pursuit has begun."

Her order was acknowledged, and on her command, the rest of the cloaked Sky Clan exited the temple, heading back toward the Artisan's house. They would secretly return to Furdani, but el-Riel's mission had already been determined; she would stay with Zeus wherever he went, watching and waiting, and when the moment was right, she would act.

This was the being who had possessed the Hub prior to Daniel Jackson's theft. He had information the Furlings wanted, and they meant to get it. A personality ruled by such a large ego offered many opportunities for leverage. Now he had revealed a potential bargaining chip, and a plan had already
been set in motion to obtain it.

In a few weeks, a specially outfitted ship, cloaked and well protected by other Furling ships, would arrive in orbit around this planet. As it came into transporter range high above this temple, it would dematerialize the great statue of Zeus, reassemble it into the hold, and carry it back to Furdani. There, it would be housed in a museum, where it would no longer be worshiped as the effigy of a false god, but instead, cared for as a priceless relic of a lost world.

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**January 17**

**Two Days Later**

**P3X-367**

A heavy blanket of snow had fallen on this alien world, but Daniel wasn't cold. The s'resh he wore almost constantly now kept him comfortable and clean, and whenever he was away from the ship he kept the helmet in place to conceal his identity, just in case anyone might be watching. He’d grown so accustomed to the view through the visor and the ability to access so much information, he rarely took it down on missions.

The SGC's report from the exploration of this planet had been sketchy at best. Nirrti had kept SG-1 busy while the team was trying to assist the human population in dealing with a strange illness that caused them to literally come apart at the seams. One man had died in the base infirmary, his body breaking down into its basic components in a terrible, painful metamorphosis. Almost upon arrival, the locals had captured the team, and only through Jack's simple but persuasive reasoning with Wodan and Eggar had SG-1 managed to escape with their lives.

Nirrti had been killed, but not before revealing the secrets of an advanced machine she had used to perform her ghastly experiments. Wodan had promised Jack they'd destroy it once they finished changing their people back to normal. The SGC hadn't followed up with anyone to see if that vow had been kept. The villagers had simply kept to themselves, and the connection to the SGC allowed to lapse.

Now, years later, Daniel was visiting the planet for the first time, since the original mission had been conducted during his ascension when Jonas Quinn had been part of the team.

The fortress where SG-1 had visited was now abandoned, but scans from the Gaia indicated the native population was still living in a village further east. That cleared the way for Daniel and company to prowl about without disturbing anyone. Scout, Rose and Denali were all exploring nearby, though the giant had to duck to enter the rapidly deteriorating edifice where Nirrti had kept her deadly machine.

They didn't have to look for long before they located the remains of the device. The platform base was still intact, but overhead, a giant reddish-orange ball had been smashed open, revealing bits of damaged machinery. Not far away, a control station lay tipped over, hammered into a misshapen mass, just as Wodan's people had promised Jack O'Neill they would do years earlier.

Denali peered into the orb attached to the ceiling, squinting as he studied the displaced mechanical innards. "Interesting," he commented. "Much of this looks familiar."

He concentrated then on the walls, which were notably devoid of markings in that room, except for
one spot where a thick layer of plaster had fallen off, revealing the stone wall beneath. He leaned forward, studying the artwork. "I recognize this, too." His pulse quickened with excitement. "This planet was marked as a Furling colony in the PDHD database, and either this building was built by your ancestors, or the people who lived here knew them and influenced their architecture."

"Agreed," said Scout, squatting beside the control station. "I believe this machine was made by our people long ago." He pawed through some of the broken bits and picked up a fractured control crystal with a metal fitting around one end. The lines were clean and elegant, and there was unnecessary embellishment added to it to make it beautiful as well as functional.

Daniel scrabbled at the plaster with his gloved fingertips. "Wish I had my tools," he grumbled to himself. Fortunately, the covering broke easily and came away to reveal more of the writing on the wall. When he found a seam between the stones that made up the wall -- one that shouldn't be there -- he called for help, excitement rising as he realized what he'd found.

"It's a doorway!" exclaimed Rose, tearing off a hunk of the crumbling plaster. "It's been sealed up."

"I'll give you one guess who did that," Daniel shot back triumphantly.

"Nirrti?" Rose asked with a grin, stating the obvious conclusion. Her helmet was open and she was sweating, her face swiped with dirt and powdered with white dust from their excavation.

The door was locked, but with a little effort, the team got it open, and an odor of decay and water wafted to them. Daniel turned on the chest light on his s'resh and stepped forward into the dark room, where he tripped on something and almost went down.

Scout caught his arm and righted him, then angled his chest-light toward the floor to see what had caused Daniel to stumble.

Four Jaffa skeletons, their armor still in place, lay crumpled on the ground.

"Probably the construction crew," Daniel observed with a note of irony as he scanned the area for possible booby traps, both visually and with the aid of the devices built into his protective suit. "Nirrti guarded her secrets jealously."

He took note of the height of the arched ceiling above them, all the elegant architectural detail, and was absolutely certain the Furlings had constructed this building. Leading the way down the passage, he stopped when he came to the end of the corridor. At his feet lay a twenty-foot square filled with water, perfectly still and glassy-smooth like a reflecting pool, except this one had wide steps cut into it, descending into darkness. The first few steps were visible in the glow of their lights, but further down they seemed to vanish into the shadows.

"Why put steps into a pool this size?" Rose asked, folding her arms across her chest. "Where do they go? We can't see the bottom. Those stairs gotta curve at some point."

Daniel's attention had been directed at the columns supporting the ceiling, with incised text in an ancient form of Furling writing. Much of the letters and symbols were filled with dust. "I don't think it was originally intended to be a pool," he commented, directing his light down to the base of the nearest pillar. "Look. There are signs of flooding here. It might be an opening to an underground city like Shahr."

Rose stood peering down into the depths. She sighed. "Y'all know if these suits are water-tight?" she asked. "Cause somebody needs to check out where the stairs go."

"Once the helmet is sealed, yes," replied Scout. He glanced up at Denali towering over their group,
then patted the giant on his shoulder. "Wait for us here and watch our backs, friend."

Denali nodded and stepped back a little, turning so he could see both the pool and the way back to Nirrti's fortress with a glance in either direction.

Daniel activated the sensors on his s'resh, enabling a type of sonar mapping that would help him navigate under the surface. "How much air will we have?"

"The s'resh will filter some from the water," Scout answered, following Daniel's example, "but not enough to give us unlimited range. A timer will show on the display once you're completely submerged, calculating the distance you've traveled and how much time you have left to return to an oxygen-saturated environment. The halfway point will be clear, and I warn you not to push it."

"I'll make sure he heads back on time," said Rose through the communication link. "And just so's y'all know, I'm a certified underwater rescue specialist, from my early days in Special Forces. Either of you boys ever been diving?"

Scout nodded. "I've used the s'resh in this fashion many times."

"Lots of recreational swimming," Daniel answered with a shrug. "A little snorkeling for shallow-water archaeological site exploration, but no diving. I never found the time to learn that."

Rose activated her helmet. "Then you should be aware there are rules. We stay together, always within sight of each other. Check your gear. Stay calm, and if Scout or I give you an order, you don't ask questions or argue, you just do it. We don't know what's down there and it's damned dark, so we have to be careful. If we can't see each other's lights, we come right back up. Understand?"

She put a hand on his shoulder with a firm squeeze.

"Yes, ma'am," he returned, thinking privately that she was every bit as protective of her teammates as Jack O'Neill had been. Not that he minded. In fact, he kind of liked it a little.

After wading shoulders-deep into the water, Daniel checked his suit for leaks, temperature changes, variations in the readouts, but everything seemed to be working properly. Once he was completely underwater, he heard Scout and Rose calling in to verify their communications gear was operational, and he did the same. "I can hear everybody just fine, and the lights cut a decent path in the water. Let's go."

He continued down the steps until he was fully submerged, then put his head down and kicked off, diving into the inky blackness, following the chiseled stone steps downward in a lazy circle. The s'resh-lights penetrated the darkness in widening swaths, eventually disappearing in the dark. The sonar mapping was displayed in readouts on the insides of their helmets, scanning the area with sound, and they swam lower and lower into the depths of the drowned Furling city.

Chapter 27: Battle

January 17

P3X-367

"Breathe, Daniel," called Rose through the comm.
He exhaled with a gasp, not realizing he'd been holding his breath while he swam. The heaviness of the water pressed against him, weighing down his limbs as he stroked and kicked; the unfamiliar sensation heightening his realization that he was well beneath the surface. Instinct triggered and brought a surge of mild panic, forcing his breathing into high gear. Logically, he knew he wasn't drowning; he could breathe just fine, but his body reacted, causing him to flail a little. The whole world narrowed down to the tiny space inside his helmet, all that was separating him from the dark water and the surface he could no longer see.

Rose caught at his shoulder and pulled him around to face her. "Easy, there, Rattler," she cooed gently. "Nice, regular breaths. Everybody feels that way, first time diving. Just take a sec and relax."

Her voice was calming and helped him regain his emotional footing.

She continued to talk to him, concentrating his focus on her rather than the fact that he was hovering in the middle of a dead alien city. "Cave diving isn't like ocean diving," she told him. "The water's been filtered through layers of rock, so it's crystal-clear, no sediment, no algae. Watch your readouts for currents. These stretch-suits--"

"S'resh," he corrected automatically. Then he realized she'd probably done that on purpose, to distract him. He could hear the smile in her voice as she continued with barely a skip.

"--measure the currents just like they do wind speed. Gotta be careful down here, because you can't see the water moving in front of you, and if you swim out into a really fast-moving shear, it can…"
She stopped. "On second thought, never mind. Just stay behind me and watch your data."

"What about the bends?" Daniel asked. "I don't know that much about diving, but I know that's a danger, and the Furlings don't have decompression chambers aboard the Gaia."

"What're "the bends"?" asked Scout. He was swimming in lazy circles around them, his lithe body rippling with the motion of a porpoise, little synchronized kicks propelling him easily through the water.

"Decompression sickness," Rose explained, twirling in the water to face the elder. "The force the water exerts on the body makes the lungs contract in size the deeper we go. Nitrogen filters into the body, so we'll have to come up in stages to avoid developing gas bubbles in our blood."

"Oh, I didn’t know the term, but I understand the problem. We don’t have to be concerned with that, not while we're protected by the s'resh," the alien told them with a little chuckle. "It contains inertial dampeners to shield against the compression of the water, and doesn't allow the penetration of high-pressure gasses or foreign elements into the body. All we need be concerned about is our air supply and, as you mentioned, the water currents."

He continued to swim around his human companions like a fish.

"That's an interesting stroke," Daniel commented, grinning inside his helmet. "I'd like to learn it when we're not in such a hurry."

"We have no pool on Gaia," Scout reminded him, a smile in his words. "Pity we don't have more time for such pleasures. I love the water. Ready?"

"Yeah." Daniel glanced at the colonel's shiny black visor, completely hiding her face and reflecting his own helmeted head. "Thanks, Rose."

She angled away with a strong kick, following Scout down the submerged passageway.
Phosphorescent blue-green algae clung to the stone walls on either side of the staircase, giving off enough light to make the emerging landscape eerily visible, ghostly and grim. The water was crystal clear, filtered by layers of stone, and their lights cut into the chamber below and showed them a stunning panorama filling the cavern. An entire city lay before them, oddly reminiscent of Shahr, but silent, drowned and obviously ancient.

The spires of carved rock were dissolving away, even as other mineral deposits formed and expanded, giving the place the appearance of a giant shipwreck.

"This way," called Scout, undulating through the still water to the left. "If it's a city of the People, we will recognize it, because they're always built in the pattern of our sacred architecture." The others followed him, their arms and legs propelling them with strong, intent strokes.

Daniel felt as though he was flying. His fear of heights made his heart race and his mouth go dry, but he pushed on, staying close to his companions. Their descent into the heart of the multi-level cavern was slow, but he wouldn't have missed out on this adventure. He was tired from the exercise by the time they reached their destination. A check of his oxygen readout revealed they had almost reached the halfway point, so they'd have to hurry.

Without hesitation, Scout led his companions to the entrance of an ancient Furling museum. Right at the entrance, the floor and ceiling showed obvious recent damage. The pattern matched the general size and shape of the components to the DNA re-sequencer in the fortress above ground. Daniel studied it for a moment, amazed by the well-preserved condition of the surfaces. In this lightless world, there was no algae growth, no slime, only the crystallization of minerals on some surfaces. Everything else was perfectly preserved.

"Now we know for sure where Nirrti got that machine," he told his friends.

"We don't have time to waste on an investigation, hon," Rose reminded him. "C'mon. We got work to do here, and not a whole lot of time left. Check your readouts, Dan'l."

"Right." He followed his friends, now several strokes ahead of him, swimming down a wide corridor into the heart of the museum complex.

"Pick an artifact on display to carry back with you, something small and portable that'll be easy to carry while swimming," the elder told Daniel upon arrival in the largest display room. "We have no time to explore. You've used up much more of your oxygen than the Colonel or I, and we must get you back safely."

"You peekin' at his readouts?" asked Rose, a light tease in her voice.

Scout chuckled through the comm link. "I thought it best, yes."

"Be right back," Daniel agreed, thinking to himself that he'd take as long as he needed to choose the right object. Their descent had taken all of ten minutes, but Daniel knew swimming back to the surface with a burden would be slower and more physically taxing, unless the objects they found were very lightweight. He glanced at his readouts and frowned. Maybe he'd just swim a little faster, and he'd make it.

"You agreed to the rules before we hit the water, Dan'l," Rose admonished gently, as if reading his mind. "We'll each grab something, all right?" She started toward a glassed-in case, then turned to Scout. "This stuff isn't booby-trapped or rigged with alarms, is it?"

"Shouldn't be," Daniel answered for him. "The People have an enormous sense of trust."
"Shiny." She pushed on the case and watched as it toppled slowly over in the water. A clear, iridescent crystal pyramid about the size of a small melon rested on the pedestal base, and she grasped it in one hand, holding it aloft. "Got mine."

Daniel glanced around and spied some writing on a nearby wall. He swam toward it, attracted by the Furling script he was still learning to read. There was no way he'd be able to take the entire wall with him, so he activated the recorder on his s'resh helmet and filmed as much of the text as he could illuminate with the light affixed to his chest.

Suddenly, the water all around them began to vibrate with the remnants of a huge shockwave making the surrounding cavern ripple, disturbing the layers of sediment on the cave floor in a visible pattern, the water rumbling with the muted echo of an explosion or quake. A chunk of the ceiling tore loose and dropped to the floor right beside Daniel, pushing him out of the way as it fell, kicking up a cloud of sediment. Other displays sitting on pedestals toppled over all around the trio, churning up the debris in the water, making it hard to see.

"What the hell was that?" demanded Rose, turning to Scout, her voice ringing with alarm. "I thought you said this place wasn't wired?"

Denali's strident voice came through in a group transmission. "The Captain says we are under attack! Return to point of entry immediately."

"But--" Daniel glanced around, searching desperately for something small and portable that he could take.

"Now, or I'm dropping this thing and towing you out!" Rose barked without her customary drawl. Her tone left no doubt she meant him to obey.

He watched with profound regret as she dropped her booty and reached for him when he hesitated. "All right!" he growled unhappily, turning in the water to start back toward the entrance to the drowned city.

As the artifact Rose had been carrying impacted on the floor beneath them, the contact apparently switched the device on, the interior glowing with blue and green light. Daniel glanced down at it and saw a hologram flicker above the point for an instant, and then it was gone, too quickly to record. "Wait!" he called, and started to return to where the pyramid lay. As two sets of hands grabbed for his arms and hauled him upward, Daniel sighed inside the confines of his helmet and resigned himself to the loss.

The cavern that housed the ancient city was collapsing in on itself as the trio adjusted their comm links to pick up the ship's chatter, listening to reports of the attack from Gaia's perspective. The stone structures all around Daniel and his friends shook and sounds of nearby explosions gave evidence that the bombing was still underway. The ancient buildings began to break apart, crashing into chunks and pieces all around them.

Clouds of dust and debris obscured the rooms, making it impossible to see their way out, but Daniel’s s’resh was now sending out sonar signals, bouncing off the structures all around them to show him what his eyes could no longer distinguish. The view inside his helmet changed to a wire-frame display clearly showing him the shapes of his surroundings and the locations of his companions.

By the time they reached the surface, Daniel was exhausted, his legs rubbery and weak as he hauled himself along the stone floor of the fortress.
"This way!" called Denali.

Daniel turned toward the sound of the EXO's voice and struggled to stay on his feet. His limbs were weak and weary, but a spurt of adrenaline gave him his second wind. The group raced out of the disintegrating building just in time to see beams of energy-weapons fire erupting from the sky above them, aimed at the fortress and the submerged city beneath it. They double-timed it to the shelter of a group of trees about a half-klick away, and only once they'd gained that distance did they turn to watch the destruction as it rained down from space.

"Who's shooting at us?" Daniel called through the comm link to his teammates. He couldn't tell from the controlled pandemonium of Gaia's radio chatter.

Three enormous alien ships had emerged from the far side of the planet, where apparently they had been in orbit and hidden behind the curve of the globe. As the enemy had appeared, one ship had opened fire on the Furling ruins below. Another had attacked Gaia without hailing them or offering any sort of introduction or warning. The third had begun to pull away, leaving orbit and heading out into space. Now Gaia was busy fighting back.

"One moment," said Denali, working the controls on the gauntlet of his s'resh. As the group caught their breath, watching helplessly as the ruins were destroyed, the Mountain officer downloaded information from Gaia's database and brought up a holographic recording of the three ships above his left palm. "Here are our enemies, el-Dani."

Rose swore a blue streak as soon as she saw them and stomped off a few paces, muttering to herself, hands on hips, trying to collect her temper.

"Those are Ori ships," Daniel puffed, glancing up at the sky and back to the hologram. "What are they doing here? And why would they want to destroy those ruins? It doesn't make any sense."

"Yes, it does," Rose snapped, opening the helmet of her s'resh with a flick of her finger. She stared at him with hot, angry eyes. "Nirrti obviously found something important down there. We saw the spot where her Jaffa pried the thing off its base. My guess is the leftovers of the Ori army found something, too, and didn't want anyone else snooping around."

She turned to Denali. "Gaia can't beam us up while they're under fire, right?"

"Correct," he said with a nod, his expression grave. "We must wait until their shields are lowered, when the battle is over, to be retrieved."

All eyes turned skyward as everyone tuned into Gaia's background chatter through the comm devices over their left ears. They listened breathlessly, waiting, hearts pounding as more fire poured down on the fortress, completely obliterating the site.

Daniel's heart sat like a cold lump in his chest, each beat aching with hatred of the Ori. Almost immediately, the wind picked up and the temperature started to drop. Thunder rumbled in the distance, muted and choked by a sudden fall of thick, fluffy snowflakes. The piercing wind scattered the snow, driving it against their bare faces.

Scout put a hand on Daniel's shoulder and glanced up at the falling snow. "Be calm, el-Dani," he cautioned, gesturing meaningfully at the sky. "Manage your emotions. This attack will pass, and we will move on from there. Review the writings on the wall in the museum, to give your mind something to occupy it. Control your influence on the weather."

"What?" snapped Rose, her brow furrowed in alarm and confusion. "Daniel's influencing the
"Never mind," Daniel shot back, wanting to avoid the subject entirely.

Fortunately, Rose let the subject drop at the sound of a particularly close volley of blasts and turned her attention back to the attack.

Daniel flipped up his visor, calling up the recording he'd made in the drowned city, struggling to get a grip on his emotions. He put his head down, clasped his wrists behind his back and began to pace, studying and thinking. As he distracted himself, the wind died down and the snowfall began to lighten.

Then Daniel remembered the glimpse of the hologram he'd seen from the device MacFarland had dropped. It reminded him of a DNA helix. He wondered about its significance and was about to try to cross-reference the artifact with the text on the wall when he became aware of a sudden, eerie silence in his helmet. His head came up and he turned toward his companions.

The rain of weapons-fire on the ruins stopped. The unexpected vacuum of silence made him a little off-balance for an instant. There was no sound at all -- not the percussive roar of explosions, no chatter from their ship, no bird or animal noises, just silence. A light dusting of tiny flakes still drifted soundlessly through the air, but they didn't make the typical muffled sparkly sizzle that Daniel associated with snow.

Then he realized it was ash, not precipitation.

The dead calm gave him the creeps.

"Gaia?" whispered Rose, worry etched into her lined face. She touched the comm device on her left ear, made adjustments in the controls in her s'resh, but there were no broadcasts on any frequency. "Do you think she's been hit? Why can't we hear anything?"

Denali was already trying to call the ship. He hailed them on several different channels, but there was no answer.

Daniel's heart sank. Had the three Ori ships destroyed the lone Furling vessel? He stepped forward to hurry towards his friends, but suddenly found himself and the rest of his team on Gaia's transport deck, where Furling crew members were rushing here and there, handling damage control. The tang of smoke was in the air, and one of the corridors leading away from the arrival center was dark.

Denali stepped off the pad and barked at the officer posted to meet them. "Status report."

"The ship has sustained some damage, but the shields held until our enemies departed," a young Forest Clan female replied. "We lost a communication array, though no vital systems were damaged. One enemy ship has been destroyed; the other two have fled; we must make emergency repairs before we can pursue."

"Then they will likely be lost in hyperspace," Denali growled unhappily. "We have scans of their ships?"

"Yes, sir."

"What of our crew?"

The officer's chin dipped downward. "We are in the process of getting the wounded to the
infirmary. The healers are working on the injured as they arrive."

"Casualties?"

"Twenty-seven dead," she reported thickly. "Ninety-four injured."

Daniel's heart sank. Though he realized it wasn't a logical assumption, part of his mind had come to believe that the Furlings were invincible, that whatever they put their minds to would automatically ensure success. He'd seen them the way a child views a parent: having all the answers and able to vanquish all others with their superpowers.

It was crushing to realize they were just as mortal as he was, just as capable of defeat at the hands of a powerful, arrogant enemy. The followers of the Ori had awe-inspiring weapons at their disposal, and even though they had been cut off from their masters with the destruction of the Supergate, those who had been left behind were still a potent threat. Their ships had outnumbered the Furlings three to one, and Gaia's crew hadn't come away from the battle unscathed.

Mountain's lips pressed into a thin, white, angry line for a moment. He touched the communication device on his left ear. "EXO reporting, Captain. We are safely on board." His head tilted in a listening posture, and then he gave a quick nod of confirmation. "Understood."

He bowed to Scout. "I will inspect the damaged areas personally, look in on the infirmary, and then present my report to the Captain."

"I'm going to the infirmary," Daniel announced, stepping down from the transporter pad.

Scout and Rose fell in behind him.

Somewhere along the way, the trio split up to help with the recovery efforts, lending hands to repairs, clearing away debris, pitching in to carry the wounded to the ship's hospital.

Daniel felt his eyes sting with tears and a lump form in his throat once he reached the health facility and saw the effects of the damage with his own eyes.

The dead were everywhere. Furling healers were hard at work performing triage, administering pain relief, cleaning and repairing wounds, moving those who expired out of the way to make room for the steady influx of more casualties. Furlings all around Daniel were bleeding, their flesh scorched and torn, and many were weeping and crying out with pain.

Reality had taken a sudden, agonizing turn.

"Peace, el-Dani," Scout murmured gently from behind him. "Find your balance, friend. Don't complicate the situation by letting your emotions run wild.” The elder put a hand on Daniel's shoulder and turned him away from the infirmary. “These are in good hands. Come with me, and we will meditate a little while."

Daniel's view of the corridor blurred as his eyes filled with tears. He didn't resist, just let Scout propel him to the serenity of his office, where he swallowed down his heart, closed his eyes, and let the elder's soothing voice guide him back to equilibrium, if only for a moment in time.

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_Ten Hours Later_
Aboard the Ori ship, the Faithful

Captain Anthys of Ver Isa paced the deck above the hangar bay, his strides pounding the metal sheeting that made up the floor of the battle cruiser, Faithful. The alien starship had destroyed one Ori vessel, but the one carrying their prize was virtually untouched. His craft, on the other hand, had sustained significant damage.

Even now, as they dropped out of hyperspace, they were making plans to abandon the battle cruiser under his command, the crew transferring to the Gospel, traveling at their side. He would be among the last to leave the Faithful, because he would have to help set the self-destruct mechanism. Today, the Ori had lost two warships and hundreds of devout soldiers… but they had gained so much more.

He only hoped what they had won would be worth their sacrifice. The followers of the Ori had been unable to communicate with the Priors in their home galaxy for almost a year now, and doubt had begun to creep into many hearts. There were rumors that the Ori had been destroyed along with the Supergate, but Anthys could not accept that belief. He'd been promised ascension and spent his life in service to the Ori. His life was nearing the end of its span, and all that kept him going was the assurance of eternity among the celestial beings he worshiped.

Anthys glanced at his left hand, spotted with age, his skin thinned out and shiny. He barely recognized the hand of the warrior he'd once been. Fear of death coiled up in his belly and made his heart thud with sickening speed in his chest. He had to believe in the Ori. Had to.

Transporting the soldiers and crew to their sister ship took hours, and Anthys supervised every departure. Food, weapons and medical supplies were also carried over, along with every other item they could carry that would serve basic needs. Finally, the sequence was initiated into the ship's computer, and the last of the ambulatory personnel gathered at the infirmary door.

Anthys listened to the Prior as he wandered among those who were gravely wounded and could not be moved, imparting final blessings on them and promising them the bliss of ascension. Many were strong in their faith and smiled, certain they were about to join the Ori for their guaranteed reward, but a few cried out, begging to be carried away. Anthys lowered his gaze so he wouldn't have to see the fear in their eyes.

Doubt crept in, just for a moment, its cold hand clutching at his heart. What if the heretic Daniel Jackson's warning were true? What if the promise of Origen really was a lie, and all those who lay here, pleading for their lives, were about to be forfeited for nothing? What if everything Anthys himself believed was untrue? What would become of his own soul, when he reached the moment of death?

He glanced up at the Prior's milky eyes and found them staring at him, as if the ghostly old man could see right into his soul.

Instantly, Anthys pushed aside his fear and lifted his chin proudly. "Hallowed be the Ori," he chanted at the end of the blessing, his voice stronger than the rest. He chastised himself for his weakness in doubting, and committed himself to penance when the proper moment arrived.

The Prior led the way to the transporters. He, Anthys and the last of the officers beamed across to the Gospel, deserting their own ship and its hapless wounded crew members.

Still, Anthys's heart burned, and his spirit remained uneasy. He stormed off the transporter deck.
and made his way to the chapel, already aware where their prize would have been taken. He wanted to see what had been worth the cost of so many lives.

On the altar at the back of the room, an object lay draped with a luminescent gold cloth. It was so small, barely the span of both his hands tall, less than one across.

"Let me see it," he growled to the two Priors standing watch.

Anthys's had proven his mettle and intelligence, as well as his faith, in a lifetime of service. He had risen through the ranks to command armies in the name of the Ori. He had knelt at the feet of the Orisi herself.

"As you wish," the Gospel's senior Prior replied. He bent to lift the cloth off the artifact, holding the fabric up by its corners. "It is called a Zero Point Module, Captain Anthys, and it will provide us with enough power to build another doorway to our galaxy so that more ships and soldiers may come to bring the word of Origen to this dark place."

Anthys stared at the little thing, so fragile-looking, housed in what appeared to be some kind of amber glass.

The priest touched it, and lights inside it began to glow.

"It is so small," Anthys declared, his voice trembling, revealing his doubts and shaky faith. He straightened his posture and steadily met the Prior's rebuking gaze, his voice firm and strong as he added, "But if it helps our cause, then it is indeed a blessing."

Approval glimmered in the priest's milky eyes, and he smiled. "It will be a great thing, Anthys. Of this, you can be certain. All we need do is open the gate to the followers of the Ori, and a cleansing flame will issue forth to bring the light of Origen to all." He chuckled and let the cloth drop back into place, hiding the ZPM from view once more.

A chill of fear shivered up Anthys's spine, and he couldn't help feeling that something had gone terribly wrong somewhere along the way. His life had been touched over and over by the impossible, driven by fate down a path that had taken him far from everything and everyone he had ever loved, and he could see only one end to it. He had not intended to be a soldier; this much he knew, but it had been necessary that he take up the way of the sword.

None could resist the will of the Ori, least of all a simple man like himself.

Chapter 28: Questions

January 19

Two Days Later

Gaia Ready Room

No one had slept much since the battle, each crew member contributing to ship repairs and personnel support. The communications array had taken the most time to fix, after which a message had been sent to Alpha requesting a live conference with General O'Neill and the council of advisors. Now all the senior officers of Gaia sat around the conference table, along with Colonel MacFarland and Doctors Lam and Jackson. The connection was made at the appointed time, and a
two-foot-tall holographic image of the group of the seven men and women from Alpha appeared in the middle of the table.

"Hi, Daniel." Jack’s expression was guarded as his gaze shifted to include the full complement of staff seated in the ship's ready room. "Everyone's here on this end, as requested. What's up?"

There was an attempt at lightness in Jack's voice, but he had to know something significant had happened. "I'm not conducting this meeting, Jack," Daniel returned quietly. "Captain will be discussing the events with you and the Alpha council. I'm just here as an advisor."

"Oh. Okay." Jack eyed the Furling giant seated at Daniel's left. "How're things, Captain?"

Mountain folded his large hands on the tabletop and canted his head in Daniel’s direction. "Our friend advised us that it would be wise to report an attack on the planet we recently visited. Daniel calls them the followers of the Ori." His newly-acquired command of English was excellent. All the officers of Gaia had been required to learn their human allies' language, but none had become as adept with it as Scout.

Jack cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. "Would that be the planet Colonel MacFarland requested the mission report on a few days ago?"

Captain nodded. "It would. Your alphanumeric designation P3X-367, where the Goa’uld, Nirrti, was killed."

The General nodded. "We haven't heard from those folks in a while."

Jack didn't ask if there were survivors, or what damage had been done. He was waiting for the Furling commander to tell the story his way.

Mountain sighed and shook his head. "The villagers are all safe," he told the hologram. "The followers of the Ori were only interested in the ruins of an underground city left by the People. We believe they may have found an important artifact, but are not certain what they took before they blasted the place into pieces."

Jack's eyebrows lifted in unhappy surprise. "There was a Furling city on that planet? Daniel, why didn't you--" He stopped himself and frowned. "Oh. That was when Jonas was with us. Sorry."

Scout grinned slightly. "You're correct in your assumption that Doctor Jackson found the city, General O'Neill," he interjected. "It was beneath the fortress where the one called Nirrti was using one of our machines to re-sequence the DNA of her victims. That is not a science for novices in the subject."

From his seat next to Jack, Doctor Bill Lee leaned forward across the table. "Wait, that was a Furling machine? We were certain it'd been built by the Ancients, but our researchers never got a chance to examine it. We were just going by the descriptions in the reports from SG-1. Are you sure?"

Captain nodded. "We examined the remains of the machine and found where it had been removed from the ruins. Unfortunately, the Ori ships razed the city before we were able to retrieve any artifacts from it ourselves."

"Ships?" asked Jack.

"Three of them," Captain verified. "We destroyed one, but the other two escaped."
Jack's expression shut like a door, his demeanor all business now. "What sort of damage did you folks sustain? Do you need assistance?"

Scout smiled broadly at the table, but kept silent.

Mountain shook his head. "It has taken us two days to repair our communication devices so that we could contact you, General. Other repairs are under way, but we should be fit to travel in another day. We appreciate the kindness of your offer, however." He inclined his head with a slight bow of respect.

"Casualties?" asked Jack.

Carolyn Lam winced, then her composure slipped neatly into place as she answered for her department. "Twenty-nine dead, General, with ninety-two injured. I think those numbers will hold. We shouldn't be losing any more. Most of the wounds were minor and most of the injured are already back at their posts."

Jack nodded, his expression grave. "Do we know what the Ori found in the ruins?"

"No, but you can bet it was incredibly important," Daniel answered. "The Prior they'd sent to convert that world packed up and left with the ships. I've never seen the Ori just drop an attempted conversion like that without punishing the population. They just left, Jack." He rubbed his face warily.

"This was our first encounter with the followers of the Ori," Captain declared. "We are learning, General O'Neill, and we will not be caught unaware again. Our council of elders will be informed, and word of the Ori will be disseminated to all the People. We will visit those worlds you know to be under Ori control and offer aid to those who wish their freedom."

Scout added, "Please share all you know about the Ori with those of us who now live among you on Alpha, and take care to watch your skies and your Stargate. A full report will be transmitted to you shortly, and we on Gaia will be available to answer any questions you may have."

Captain bowed and gave the Furling hand signal to indicate he'd spoken his piece.

Jack addressed Colonel MacFarland. "I assume I'll have your report included in that download?"

She nodded. "The SGC staff on Gaia are all fine, sir. The casualties were all on the Furling side."

"Our condolences for your loss, and our gratitude for looking after our people," said Jack sincerely. "We'll get back to you ASAP, Captain. Thanks for the heads-up, and I'll be looking for your reports shortly. You'll have one from us in return, as soon as we can get the information compiled for you. Alpha, out."

For a moment, there was only silence in the room, everyone occupied by their own thoughts.

Scout sighed and folded his hands. "We should decide our next destination," he observed, and lifted his gaze to Daniel's face.

Daniel had figured that was coming. "To Paradise," he said quietly. "Just don't eat any of the plants while we're there."

Four years ago, while he'd been among the Ascended, SG-1 had visited P5X-777. Jack and Harry Maybourne had disappeared through a portal and been marooned on the planet's moon. The two men had eaten native plants in order to survive, but the hallucinogenic effects had come close to
driving both of them mad. During their absence, SGC scientists had combed over the temple where the portal was located, studying the Furling invitation to join them in a utopian paradise.

Once the men had been rescued, the ruins where they'd been trapped were also studied, but the site was eventually abandoned, the information catalogued and filed away as unimportant.

Daniel couldn't help but wonder just what shadow of information might have been missed in that initial exploration; he looked forward to seeing the site himself.

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**January 20**

**Next Day**

**Gaia Infirmary**

Daniel had been by the infirmary several times over the last few days, visiting with those who’d been wounded in the battle with the Ori ship. Every stop he'd made, Dr. Lam had been there, working with her all-Furling medical staff, learning their healing techniques and applying that knowledge to her already considerable skills. She was dead on her feet, dark circles under her eyes, but she’d refused to leave her patients until the most critical period was over.

"Hey," Daniel said to her as he handed her a tall cup of strong Furling tea. "How're you holding up?"

"Thinking about going to bed for a few hours," she told him with a weary smile, accepting the cup and sipping the contents with a sneer of distaste. "This tastes terrible, but it's kept me going for three days straight. Good stuff." She lifted it in salute to him. "Thanks for bringing it."

She glanced around the spacious ward, once discouragingly empty, now alarmingly full. "I'm gonna make rounds one more time, and then hit the hay. Wanna come with me?" What she'd just offered registered a beat later, and she hurried to clarify. "Um, I mean, on rounds. Do you want to accompany me on rounds?"

She bowed her head, closed her eyes and rubbed her face with a sigh. "Boy, am I tired. Guess that's kind of obvious, huh?"

Daniel grinned, tickled by her unintentional slip of the tongue. "Yeah, a bit." He followed her orderly progress, row by row of beds, watching her kindness as she interacted with her patients, her professionalism as she dealt with her staff, and how intently she listened to her Furling teachers. He marveled at how she managed to deliver the same level of care to all of the wounded, regardless of their size, as they lay in their beds.

For a moment, he remembered Janet Fraser, thinking privately how well the diminutive doctor would have interacted with Grass Clan. He missed her warm smile and dangerous wit. She'd have owned this infirmary in short order -- Jack's "little Napoleon" of a doctor. He smiled at the fond memory.

As his attention shifted from the doctor to her patients, he returned to the questions that had consumed his attention since he'd returned from the drowned city.
Examination of the wreckage of the machine Nirrti had used to alter the DNA of the people on P3X-367 indicated that it had been of Furling origin, not a product of Goa'uld technology, as had originally been assumed. It had all the hallmarks of the Furlings’ sense of artistic design, and they had even found its previous location in the flooded cavern beneath the fortress. There was sufficient evidence to credit the ancient Furling society that had been destroyed with its invention -- but to what purpose? Whose DNA had they wanted to change?

He glanced away, frowning as that thought rattled around in his mind.

A Grass Clan female, whom Carolyn had named Jarvik, strolled up to them with a portable database tablet that linked into the ship's system and handed it over for her review. "Three patients ready to release to their quarters, Jehani," the alien reported, calling the doctor by her Furling title.

Doctor Lam checked through the records, approved the releases, and thanked the Furling healer. Just as she finished, she was summoned to another bedside for a consultation by one of the tiny Sky Clan physicians who worked with her.

Daniel grinned as the light bulb of intuition finally went on over his head. "How many times do I have to see the forest before I finally recognize a tree?" he murmured to himself and shook his head in wonder.

Everything made perfect sense now.

Lya had told him the last time he saw her that the Furlings adapted to a variety of environmental conditions with incredible ease, setting up colonies on planets all over the galaxy. She’d called them 'masters of change,' and now he understood how they'd managed to proliferate so easily on so many worlds. They'd changed their own DNA to be able to survive almost anywhere!

Furdani had been a microcosm of the habitats to which they'd adapted. Sky Clan were tiny and lived in the rocky, arid canyon lands around the Stargate, where food and water were scarce. Grass Clan were tailored for areas a little richer in resources, yet still small enough to hide from large predators in the meadowlands. Forest Clan were lithe and graceful, adept at climbing trees and moving stealthily through the vegetation, and the Mountain giants were tall and strong, capable of carving out great cities from the heart of the bedrock of whatever planet they occupied.

Yet, if all that were true, why were there so many genders? What was the biological purpose of the nulls who were neither male nor female, and incapable of breeding?

What did the helix displayed by that device Rose dropped in the cavern signify? Whose DNA was it, and why had it been in that underwater museum?

So many questions, and he instinctively knew he hadn't yet scratched the surface of this mystery.

The text he’d recorded from the wall in the cavern was incredibly old. The Furling language had changed so much in the millennia since the People had been forcibly removed from that world, the translation was slow going. He’d left it in the hands of the scholars aboard Gaia, checking their reports several times a day to see what progress had been made. Although deciphering the meaning behind the characters was difficult for them, it was all but impossible for him. He likened the challenge to early Earth linguists trying to understand hieroglyphs prior to the discovery of the Rosetta stone. The mystery of the drowned city would take some time to unravel, and might require the discovery of other pieces of Furling history before the true meaning of the text was known.

Meanwhile, they were on their way to P5X-777. It would take approximately ten days' travel to get
there, including time for repairs, but Daniel hoped they'd find something important, something the SGC's first teams had missed. Even if they didn't, the Furlings would want to lay claim to another piece of their heritage, and Daniel wanted to be there for that.

He sidled up to Doctor Lam as she finished her last consultation with a sigh. "Get some rest, Carolyn," he urged quietly. "This is as good a place as any to step back for a little while."

She nodded with a weary grin. "I think I'll do that," she agreed, signing off the duty roster with a Do Not Disturb notation beside her name. "See you later, Daniel."

After he watched her leave the infirmary, he stayed a little longer to visit the wounded, then retreated back to his office to work on his own projects for a while.

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**January 30**

**Ten Days Later**

**P5X-777**

The temple sat perched on the knee of a mountain, halfway up a ridge of rock on a neatly carved pillar of stone. Each of the towers was capped with a pyramid-shaped cone, the largest at the center of the building. Inside, the floors and walls were covered with dirt, and the native vegetation had gained a stronghold in every nook and crack.

The mystery of the portal's auto-dialer had been resolved long ago, and the "Paradise" on the nearby moon fully explored by the SGC. They had found nothing of interest, but now the explorers were the people who had built the elegant temple, alongside a human being with a knack for unraveling secrets. This time, the underground city was discovered through scans conducted on Gaia, halfway across the planet.

No secret doors or passages were found above it, and in the end, the only way to gain access was through Gaia's transporters.

As with the temple ruins on the surface, time and nature had taken their toll on the subterranean city. The area where Daniel, Rose, Scout and Denali arrived was one of the few places still structurally sound. Seismic events and erosion had made most sections of the cavern unstable, much of it already collapsed. Only a few areas had survived intact, but the remains of the once grand metropolis were in total darkness.

The away team arrived with their lights on, all facing a different direction, the illumination reaching out in white fans around them and disappearing into vast space.

For a moment, no one moved as they allowed their eyes to adjust to the dimness.

All around them, giant pillars of rock stretched upward, some tilted at odd angles, others lying sideways on the floor. The stillness was unnerving. There was no sound at all except for their breathing and the whisper of the s'resh fabric they wore flexing as they moved.

"Looks like we're in a marketplace," Daniel observed, eyeing the jagged remains of the buildings around them.

"Then the museum will be this way," Scout added, stepping toward his right.
The others followed his lead, their footsteps crunching against loose rock and throwing up little clouds of dust as they walked, making their way around, over, and through the many obstacles in their path. After two hours of laborious travel, they squeezed into the entrance of what had once been a great library.

The foyer was as far as they got. Chunks of stone, debris and dirt made it clear that the rooms behind the entry were impassable, so they began to examine the objects around them.

A glint of light caught Daniel's eye and he headed for a pillar lying on the floor, no doubt toppled by the quakes. A glass case lay in pieces beside it, and amidst the shards was another clear crystal pyramid lying on its side. He smiled to himself and carefully picked it up in his gloved left hand.

"Hello, beautiful," he said to the artifact fondly, as if meeting an old lover. In the beam from his s'resh, he examined it, looking for cracks or chips, any sign of damage. He sighed as he realized it was still intact. "Maybe now I'll be able to find out what the other one had in it. I hate not knowing things like that."

"Oh, you found another one!" chirped Rose through the comm link. "Lookee what I got. Cool, huh?"

Daniel turned to the woman at his side and gaped as he spied her discovery.

She held a crescent-shaped object about the size of a soup bowl with numerous small buttons and inscribed keys on its upper surface. Intricate designs were incised and embossed all around it, and though centuries of dust and grime were caked into the spaces, the precious metals gleamed softly where she had brushed the dirt away. One finger stroked over a touch-pad in the center, and it flickered to life.

A hologram projected from the center of the device, and the image began speaking in an unfamiliar dialect of Forest Clan, which the translator in his helmet converted into English script on the inside of his visor. The being resembled a Furling, but was still vastly different, with smaller eyes, slitted pupils, and a more prominent nose. Distinctly female, she introduced herself and started describing the displays in the room where they were standing.

"It's a virtual docent," Daniel gushed, unable to even blink as he stared at the recording. "Rose, this must be a guided tour device. That means information on everything that was in this museum will be in here!" He tucked the pyramid into the crook of his left arm and reached for the machine with both hands.

"I knew you'd be happy." She patted his shoulder and handed him the device after turning it off again. "I'll go see what else I can find. Don't run the batteries down in it."

Daniel didn't know how long he stood there gawking at the device, studying the characters on its surface, turning it on and listening, jumping ahead in the narrative, playing back pieces. He was fascinated, overwhelmed by Rose's luck. If they found nothing else, this would make the trip worthwhile. They'd hit the jackpot!

Then a cry of anguish jerked Daniel's head around.

The sound came from the comm link curved over his left ear, and he had no idea where to look for his teammates, but he knew whose voice it had been.

"Scout, where are you?" he called, turning in a circle, looking for his friend.

There was no answer, save the sound of anguished weeping.
Dimly, he saw Rose's helmet reflecting the light from his uniform. "He went this way," she told him, her voice strident, filled with alarm. "His tracks are right here, Daniel. Come on."

They followed the dusty footprints out of the library, around the edge of a crumbling balcony and into the ruins of what had once been a massive temple.

Scout was on his knees, bent over and trembling, his helmet open, long green mane dangling in the dust.

At his side, Denali stood rock-still, staring straight ahead, massive fists dangling loosely at his sides.

Daniel and Rose hurried toward them.

A few steps away, Daniel caught sight of what had wrenched that terrible cry from the elder. 

* Bones. 

The temple was *filled* with them. Large and small skeletons, adults and children alike, lay in enormous heaps. The structure of the skulls verified that they were Furlings.


Daniel's eyes burned, but no tears would come. He settled both of the artifacts in the crook of his left arm as he stopped at Scout's side. Daniel placed his free hand on his friend's shoulder, offering what comfort he could from that simple touch. He understood what the elder was feeling, the gravity of his loss, changed in a single moment from the stuff of dry history to real, personal grief.

These had been Scout's people, millennia ago. They had been destroyed by the Ancients, murdered in a place sacred to them, and abandoned.

Daniel looked down at the alien's bowed head. "Mikha," he called gently, "we should go. There's nothing you can do for them now."

"Their bones must be burned, according to our custom," Scout choked out, his gaze on Daniel's boots rather than meeting his eyes. "I will summon my people, and they will see to it." Tears streaked down his bronze cheeks and dripped off his chiseled jaw.

"Yes. Send for your priests and priestesses. They'll want to clean the temple properly, and pay homage to the lost ones." Daniel waited for his friend to rise, then glanced at Denali, still staring at the mountain of remains.

The giant's helmet was also open, his face was in shadowy profile, but Daniel could see enough of his expression to understand what Denali was thinking and feeling, and it sent a chill of fear through his human heart as he recalled something Hunter had told him about the People.

"Sky watch Wheel. Grass protect. Forest attack. Mountain *destroy.*"

That description now held a more ominous note for Daniel, and he observed privately that he would not want to make an enemy of any of the Furlings. They were no longer prisoners on Furdani, and Sky Clan weren't just sentinels on the Stargate. Now, they were keeping watch on numerous other worlds, invisibly observing other races and societies as they had the Jaffa and Ting-sha population on Olympus.

Grass Clan were healers, offering protection from illness.
Forest were warriors.

Mountain…They were a quiet race, innately gentle and good-natured, but Daniel suspected there were deep passions bubbling beneath their calm, almost unshakable exteriors.

He waited until Scout and Rose were gone to approach the giant, gently touching the big alien's elbow, since he couldn't reach Denali's shoulder.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

Denali's face, lit from below with the glow from Daniel's s'resh, was frightening. His lips twitched as he struggled for words, but he said nothing, just turned away and stomped after the others. Daniel cast a glance back at the tragic scene, and hurried to catch up.

He'd never had a problem keeping company with the dead before, since that was part and parcel of being an archaeologist, studying the bones of those who had passed into history long ago. But there was something about this place that scratched at his soul and made him eager to leave; it was almost as though he could hear the echoes of their screams as they died.

He didn't believe in ghosts, but this place, these people, were not at rest.

He couldn't wait to get back to the ship.

Chapter 29: Pursuit

January 31

Lab Six, aboard the Gaia

Frustrated, Daniel frowned down at the crystal pyramid. He leaned on the counter with both hands, thinking. "We've tried activation with light," he stated aloud. "We've tried dropping it, like Rose did with the one in the drowned city. We've tried direct electrical current, and nothing has displayed the information stored inside it."

He turned to Rose, Doctor Lam and Scout, who were all gathered around him. "Any other ideas?"

"Maybe it's password-protected," offered Carolyn with a shrug.

"Maybe the battery's dead," quipped Rose.

"It's a crystal," Daniel snapped in frustration. "They store energy and information. No batteries required." He blinked at Rose. "What is it with you and batteries, anyway?"

"I don't know, Dan'l, but we've been at this for the better part of a day now, and I'm tired," Rose told him with a sigh, throwing up her hands in resignation. "I'm gonna go to bed now. You kids have fun playin' with your new toy."

Carolyn crossed her arms over her chest and leaned one hip against the counter, angling to make eye contact with Daniel. "She's right, you know. We're all beat. Why don't we just get some rest, and try again in the morning?"

"All right." Daniel dropped his chin onto his chest in defeat. "We'll pick it up again in the morning.
Good night, everyone.

The trio left the lab together and headed toward their quarters, chatting amiably about recent events and shipboard news. Daniel and Scout walked Carolyn to her rooms, then Scout accompanied Daniel to his before wishing his companion pleasant dreams.

Then the elder passed right by the doorway to his apartment, made a circuitous journey to the galley for a snack, and headed back to the lab alone. Three other Furlings were already present, all gathered around the table that held the crystal pyramid: Nari, also called Claire; Rafa, who served as Captain of the *Gaia*, and Rhami, chief healer of the Grass Clan, whom Doctor Lam had named Jarvik. They were the highest-ranking members of the other Clans on the ship; the four of them would be conducting their own private investigation into the mysteries of the relic.

el-Mikha waited until he'd received confirmation from Sky Clan that all three of the humans were in their beds and sleeping before they began.

"Our friends have not privately discovered the records hidden within the crystal, have they?" Captain inquired of the Sky Clan watcher he knew was hovering invisibly nearby.

The pink-haired male, Jack, materialized with helmet open and shook his head. "No. There will be more tests tomorrow."

Captain stared at the crystal pyramid sitting on its smooth base, illuminated from below by a soft blue light. "It is good that we review the data first, in order to be prepared for any unexpected revelations."

"Shall we begin?" asked Nari.

Rhami nodded, took a deep breath, and exhaled a soft, single note in the alto range, holding the pitch precisely. Captain's rich voice boomed in deep bass. Nari's soprano was high-pitched, unamplified, and Scout chimed in with a clear baritone. Their voices merged in perfect harmony, each singing a single tone, their individual security clearance, assigned to them by their rank within Furling society.

The pyramid began to glow as the auditory key activated the information stored within it. An image formed in the heart of the crystal, a section of twisted spiral twirling slowly, revealing every molecule on the DNA helix. Another formed above the peak of the pyramid, and four more projected from each corner of the base, extending outward into the air. Each helix was different from the other.

As their voices faded with their breath, the images dimmed and vanished.

The observers stared at the pyramid, brows furrowed in concentration.

"Recording of the data is complete," Sky Clan Jack reported from a nearby workstation. "The information has been scanned and results will be available... now."

Captain downloaded and displayed the data holographically above the palm of his *s'resh*. A duplicate image of the pyramid with all five spirals, but in much smaller size, formed and held. They stared at it, and no one dared breathe.

Grass pointed to one of the icons radiating from the base. "Us," she stated clearly. Her finger lifted to the helix floating above the central point of the pyramid. "Our friends. Do not understand significance yet. Must study."
"We cannot allow the humans access to this data," Captain announced in a tense murmur.

"Nor can we erase it," Scout added. "el-Dani has seen that the crystal is undamaged. He will eventually discover the resonance key and be able to unlock the information contained within the pyramid. The memory recorder in his quarters indicates the jing we gave him is improving his brain function, which may account for the development of the weather anomalies we have observed originating from him. He is learning a great deal from the technology and histories we have shared with him, and this puzzle will not long hold its mystery." He nodded toward the sleeping crystal.

"Then we must erase part of the data to delay him," suggested Claire. "Allow one piece to be unlocked, while withholding the rest. If he believes he has deciphered the crystal's secret, he will not be tempted to look for more within it."

Jarvik studied the pyramid with narrowed eyes, considering. "Still will not keep him from truth," she observed. "Not for long." She turned to Scout. "Then what?"

The Forest Clan elder's handsome face darkened, his chin tipped downward, his amber eyes gleaming with dangerous intent. "Then we may have to lie outright, rather than skirt around the truth, in order to keep the People safe."

"He will know the difference," Captain argued gently. "Can we risk losing his trust?"

Scout's eyes rolled up to meet the giant's and a slow smile formed. "He has already opened the Wheel of Worlds for us. We are free, and no one will lock us up again."

For a moment, there was silence, and they all glanced down at the crystal.

"Which images do we allow him to see, then?" asked Claire.

"Center," said Jarvik, pointing into the heart of the pyramid.

"It is the most intriguing," agreed Captain. "Any of the four at the base would indicate three others. Why not the top?"

"Jehani would recognize it," Grass stated firmly. "Must be center. Give us time."

"Done." Scout glanced at the giant. "You will see to it?"

"Immediately, Elder." Mountain offered a respectful bow to Forest. "Sleep well."

Scout passed his hands over those of Mountain and Grass. With a nod to the members of Sky Clan, he left the lab with head high and sure steps, retreating to his quarters and his bed. His conscience was clear.

Daniel Jackson would likely unravel truth behind the clues the People had just witnessed, but it would take him time. By then, they would be many steps ahead of him, and certain of the meaning of the symbols they had just seen. If el-Mikha's ancestors had created the virus that had killed the Ancients, as he suspected, then he wanted to know what potential threat the humans might still pose… and whether or not there might still be any risk posed by the Ancients who had ascended to escape the plague.

After all, Daniel had been among the Ascended once. He might even now be working for them as a spy, and the People had learned well not to trust too much. Even the best of friends might betray them at the moment they least expected, and the lessons of their past had not been forgotten. They
February 10

Aboard the Gaia, in orbit around Calliope

Rose leaned against the doorjamb at the entrance to Daniel's quarters, watching him fuss with his new wardrobe. The Furlings had redesigned his s'resh, making it match his skin tone, smoothing the surface so it was almost impossible to tell he was wearing the protective device, sans helmet. Over the top he had on a black Roman-style robe, much like what the Jaffa wore on other Zeus-dominated planets. He was shod in black sandals, and wore no weapons at his sides, only the built-in tissé hidden on the gauntlets beneath the voluminous sleeves of his robe. Wearing any other weaponry outside his garment would have made him stick out from the native population.

One of the retainers from Scout's household had just finished dressing Daniel's hair, now grown out to his shoulders. It was pulled away from his temples and fastened at the back of his head with a gold clasp. The style was more Furling than Roman, but Rose doubted anyone would really clue in to that detail.

"Lookin' good," she commented. "You sure this is a smart thing to do, Dan'l, showin' yer face around like that?"

"I won't be alone," he reminded her distractedly, glancing down at his outfit, tugging and adjusting it. "You'll be right there, along with a dozen or so Sky Clan, Scout and Denali. You'll all just be invisible." He squatted down to tighten the straps on one of his sandals.

"Gen'ral O'Neill will hand me my ass on a plate if anything happens to you," Rose groused.

Daniel's mind was obviously elsewhere as he fidgeted with his clothes, finally turning a plastic smile, probably meant to be reassuring, in her direction. "I'll be fine," he recited. "It's not like I always obeyed Jack's orders back in the old SG-1 days. I'm sure he told you all about that."

She nodded, still observing him, trying to decide if the young man were having second thoughts of his own about this hare-brained mission, or if he were just thinking ahead, planning his moves. "Yup. I'm sure he expects me to do better, too. Maybe have a little motherly influence on you."

He grinned for real now as he reached for a mug of coffee on a nearby table, his eyes aimed at her face.

Rose held her breath as she watched the cup slide a couple of inches across the smooth surface, fitting itself neatly into Daniel's grasp. Her eyes widened as she straightened up, staring at his hand as he lifted the mug to his mouth. "Holy cow," she whispered in awe. "Did you just...?" She pointed, hardly able to believe what she'd just seen.

He didn't seem to know what she was talking about. "What?" He finished off the hot brew and set the empty cup back down.

"You just moved that cup without touching it!" she wheezed breathlessly. "Do it again."

He seemed genuinely startled and glanced down at the empty container as if it might bite him. "I did not."
"Did. Try it. Move the damn cup."

Daniel stared at the mug, frowning. After a moment, he put his hand out toward it and concentrated. He stared intently, fingertips twitching with effort.

Nothing happened.

Rose began to doubt what she thought she'd seen. Maybe it had been closer than she'd known. Maybe the motion of the ship…

She shook her head. "Never mind," she told him. "I musta been seein' things. The stress of watchin' your six is gettin’ to me. Let's get this thing over with, hon."

Daniel straightened up, staring at the cup for another second, then switching off his interest in her theory and returning his attention to the mission at hand.

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**February 15**

**Gaia's Conference Room**

Colonel MacFarland sat at the conference table, waiting for the live connection to Alpha to be established. She had a full report ready to send, but didn't want to just put it into General O'Neill's hands without discussion. It’d be better to answer the questions she knew would be coming before he read it, rather than after the fecal matter hit the oscillating air mover.

Presently, a holograph of O'Neill appeared above the table, looking right at her. He appeared to be alone. So did she.

"Colonel," he greeted her with a slight nod.

"Sir."

He looked a little uncomfortable, his eyes intense. "Have you debugged?"

She knew what he was asking. He wanted to know if her broadcast would be secure, but she knew there was no such thing as privacy aboard the Gaia. "Not possible," she returned with a shake of her head.

He frowned, then nodded. "Acknowledged. What's up?"

"I'm sending a report of recent activity," she informed him, hitting the transfer code on the sleeve of her s'resh, "but there are points I’d like to discuss."

"You want me to read it all now?" he asked, eyebrows rising a little in question.

"No, Sir. Just, well, there are some things you ought to hear in person." She sighed, directing her gaze toward the table, rather than his eyes. "We've established contact with several Jaffa settlements in the last few days. The idea was, get Daniel's face out there. Just have him walk around, be seen. Then a few days later, when Gaia was safely away, the Furlings doing our recon on each of those planets would broadcast that recording they made on Olympus and chisel his message onto the temple walls, just like they did there."

Jack did not look amused, but his tone of voice was light, conversational, not at all masking his
displeasure. "I saw the movie," he quipped. "Burt Lancaster in Valdez is Coming. One of my favorite Westerns, which is probably where Daniel got the idea. God knows he's seen it enough times over Domino’s Ultimate Deep Dish and Coors."

She nodded, letting the anecdote slip by. "The first couple of times, that's what happened, but you know Daniel; just like you warned me, he can't walk away from the hard things." She lifted her gaze to look straight into the General's face, and she actually saw him brace himself.

"And?"

"Something's happening to him, sir. It started before Calliope, the first settlement we visited after Olympus. He..." She swallowed hard, shaken to the core by what she had seen during the last several days.

The General’s deep brown eyes bore into her. "Spit it out, Colonel."

She exhaled noisily. "He's moving things with his mind. At first, he didn't realize he was doing it. Then five days ago we were at a place called Melpomene, and things got ugly. A handful of Jaffa rebels were under attack by the Ting-sha. I told him to get the hell outta there, but--"

"He didn't listen," Jack finished for her, his expression turning grim. "Jumped right in the middle of everything, didn’t he. Is he hurt?"

"Not that time, no, Sir." She loosed an exasperated sigh. "I can't say you didn't warn me."

"I suppose I should just let you tell the tale." He nodded, sat back in his chair, and said, "Go on."

"We got him off Melpomene with just a few scratches, nothing serious, but not before he..." She shook her head, hands flying up in the air in exasperation. "He pulled weapons right out of the Ting-sha's hands, without even touching them. He'd lost it, sir. Daniel was mad as hell, screaming at the wolves to leave those people alone. He didn't even realize. He just did it. Then when it registered, he couldn't do it anymore. Nearly got his ass shot off."

Jack sat forward and laced his fingers together on the table. He looked troubled. "There's more?"

Rose took a deep breath and just said it. "Last time out, which was a couple days ago, he shot lightning out of his hands."

The General didn't explode with anger or alarm as she had expected. He sat back again and glanced at the floor, stroking his lower lip thoughtfully with finger and thumb. Then he looked back into the holographic projector.

"He's actually done all that before, Colonel. You might've missed the mission details because it was classified, but I saw it. Carter reported he was under the influence of Merlin's head-grabber thingy, and started exhibiting some of those Ascended powers. He reported all that was gone by the time they returned to base. Maybe he lied, though I've never known Daniel Jackson to do that, at least, not to the SGC."

"Tell Doc Lam to give him a thorough once-over, every nook and cranny, under one of those fancy Furling microscopes."

"Will do, sir." She glanced around the room, listening for the sound of high-pitched wings in motion, but there was only silence, save for the faint hum of the holographic projector, almost inaudible.
"Colonel?" The General had obviously taken note of her expression as she wrestled with what to say, as well as how to say it.

"I just..." She hesitated, frowning into the comm relay. "Things aren't right with him. I'm wondering if... maybe... the Furlings might be doing something to him."

Jack didn't seem surprised, and considered her notion quickly. "Any proof?"

She shook her head. "Not one iota. It's funny, 'cause I pride myself on being a good judge of character. I've never been wrong about who to trust before. Call it woman's intuition, if you have to, but it's just a gut feeling. Everything in me says we can trust these people. Every fiber of my being says they're good guys, but there's still that nagging... something... that I just can't explain, telling me to watch the hell out. Something's up with Daniel, sir, and I don't have a clue what it is, but he's not right. Not normal."

"Daniel Jackson has never been normal," Jack shot back, his expression deadly serious. "A royal, first-class pain in the ass, yes. An arrogant know-it-all, absolutely. A flaming pacifist, in spades. But he's also a certified genius, light-years ahead of his geeky peers, and one of the best men I've ever known. He never has been and never will be anything near normal. A fact for which we should all be grateful."

Rose cracked a grin at the image of her CO and Daniel's friend. "Yes, sir," she confirmed, recognizing the argument against her perceived mild insult, "but that's not what I meant." Her smile slipped away as she remembered the previous mission, and Daniel's heroic save of a grossly outnumbered group of rebel Jaffa. "He was injured our last time out. Didn't think he was gonna make it. Then two days later, he's up walking around, back at his desk on light duty; that doesn't happen to ordinary human beings."

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The General mulled that over for a moment. "Keep an eye on him, MacFarland," he ordered her. "Be a 24/7 bodyguard, if you have to. Run him under Doc Lam's microscope as many times as it takes, but find out what the hell's going on. Talk to the Furlings on Gaia, and I'll have a chat with the elders still on Furdani. Whoever gets info first, shares."

"Understood."

"You got anything else, Colonel?" asked O'Neill.

"No, Sir. Except..."

"Yes?"

She shrugged. Maybe he'd already heard the rumors and knew what she was going to say. Maybe it would really be news he needed to know. "The Furlings seem to be eager to share information," she mused thoughtfully. "Some of it, anyway, as long as we ask the right questions. They're telling us Daniel's getting quite a following out there among the Jaffa. Some think he's a new god, though he's quick to dispel that every time he goes out. The boy's plan just might be working. He wanted shock and awe, and he's damn sure making Zeus look inept."

Jack cleared his throat and tipped his head back. "Sweet," he returned, obviously trying not to look proud, and failing miserably. "The dweeb's turned into quite the warrior, huh?"

She nodded, grinning hugely. "Woulda made a good covert ops man."

"Well, I don't know about that."
"Read my report, Sir; it'll blow your mind." Her smile softened. "That's all I have, General O'Neill. Thank you for your time."

"Alpha, out."

The transmission disconnected with a touch of Rose's finger on her s'resh. She sighed and sat back in her chair, thinking, hoping she'd be wrong and that her intuition would somehow be off the mark just this once. She had to find out what was happening with Daniel Jackson, before he became a danger to himself or anyone else. He wouldn't be happy about her inquest, but he'd have to deal with it. She was grounding him until Doctor Lam declared him physically and emotionally fit for duty, by the General's orders.

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February 16

Temple of Zeus, Melpomene

Seven bodies lay on the floor at Zeus's feet. He roared at the Jaffa cowering before him, demanding they pay him tribute. The Ting-sha prodded and exploded at his slaves, snapping and howling for their obedience.

"Mercy!" cried a trembling, terrified voice from directly in front of him. "Mercy, great Zeus, greatest of all gods. Please, hear us!"

Zeus's eyes fixed on the figure of a gaunt old man on his knees, white hair disheveled, stubble lining his angular jaw.

Unlike the other scum cowering on the floor, this old man had some spirit. He looked more sad than afraid, and a whim took hold of Zeus. Instead of frying the old fellow with the ribbon device, he crossed his arms over his chest and gazed down his nose. "Speak, slave. Give me a reason why I should spare those who have turned against me."

"We were fools," the Jaffa admitted, bowing his head in shame. "We were misled by a false god. He had such great power!" The elder clasped his hands together prayerfully. "The wind stirred with his displeasure. He disarmed the Ting-sha with his will alone. He wielded the power of the storm. Lightning passed from his naked fingertips. We..."

He glanced around with his rheumy brown eyes, liquid regret trickling down his cheeks. "He said he was not a god, that he was just a man, yet he had such power." He shrugged, lifting his hands in supplication. "What were we to think? We are a simple people, great Zeus. We beg you, forgive our loss of faith. We understand now, truly, that you are to be feared above all."

The Jaffa's earnest plea almost tipped Zeus in his favor. There was unrest everywhere, Jaffa rebellions cropping up in far too many places. If he were merciful, he might be perceived as weak.

Zeus was not weak.

He activated the ribbon device and blasted the old fool along with every other Jaffa in the temple sanctuary, except for the high priest.

He wanted one survivor, one witness to his power, someone who would whisper of this day in terror, and thus enforce the worship of Zeus on this pitiful world. He wanted word of this massacre to spread, to combat the effect of Daniel Jackson's incitement of rebellion.
With a haughty glare, he ordered the priest and the loyal pack of Ting-sha to leave, to spread the word and choose a site for the building of a new, larger, more magnificent temple than this one… because he was about to raze it to the ground.

"Tell everyone," Zeus warned the human, "that Daniel Jackson must be found! He will be delivered to me, or every world he has touched will die!"

The Ting-sha didn't wait for a third warning and scattered like flies about to be swatted. The priest fell down, babbling, clutching at Zeus's gilded sandal. The Goa'uld kicked him, causing the hapless man to fall backwards.

"Run," Zeus commanded, his voice a low, angry growl.

The human struggled to his feet, his face white with fear, skinny legs moving fast.

Moments later aboard his ha'tak, Zeus watched with satisfaction as the ship's powerful weapons were discharged toward the surface to destroy the temple with blinding light.

"To Calliope," he growled to his Jaffa helmsman.

Still fuming, he stood before the viewing portal on the bridge and watched the planet fade from view, his mind turning over and over the reports he'd heard. It wasn't possible that a mere human could do those things, he knew. Perhaps Daniel Jackson had found some new weapon, some previously unknown technology, which had given him those amazing abilities.

Then again, Zeus knew the Earth archaeologist had once been Ascended. If he'd retained or rediscovered his powers…

A slow smile dawned with the warm glow of satisfaction as he closed his eyes and considered the outlandish idea. All Zeus had to do was catch Jackson. It was a simple enough task. There was no place for the human to hide now. The price on his head was vast, and it was only a matter of time before he bowed at the feet of Zeus, offering himself and whatever powers he had in service to his master.

And when he did, Zeus would truly be a god.

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Chapter 30: Bargain

February 18

Gaia's Infirmary

"But Carolyn--"

"That's Doctor Lam," she snapped, whirling on Daniel as he tagged along right behind her, "and I'm not clearing you for duty until I know what the hell is wrong with you!" She flung her hands in the air, then clenched her fists down at her sides in frustration.

Daniel backed up a step in the face of her pique. "But you just said you couldn't find anything wrong with me," he argued tentatively, his brow wrinkled as he tried to circumvent her logic -- or lack thereof. "I have stuff to do." He knew he was whining and simply didn't care. "I need to get back to it."

She jammed her hands onto her hips, frowning at him. "I don't care how long it takes. You're not
leaving this infirmary until I know why you can perform telekinesis and discharge lightning from your hands. You're perfectly healthy, but there's got to be an explanation for this, and I'm going to find it! Besides, I'm under orders here. General O'Neill will personally crucify both me and Colonel MacFarland if I let you off the ship before this issue's been resolved."

He held up both hands, as if to ward her off. "You don't have to let me off the ship to let me go back to work," he suggested. "I can get things done in my office, and that crystal's still in the lab, waiting to be cracked -- so to speak. I'm perfectly normal, Carolyn."

"Daniel."

"You said so yourself, and besides, I drink a lot of that tainin tea and--"

"Daniel."

"You know what it can--"

"Daniel!" she shouted. "Not. Now." She pivoted on her heel, intending to leave him behind in the ward, but he followed her right out of the infirmary, so she rounded on him again, stopping in the corridor. She shot him a furious, impatient glower. "Don't make me call Security."

"But--"

"And stop whining!" She glared at him, hands clenched in the pockets of her lab coat.

He gave her his best pout, trying his hardest to look absolutely pitiful. It was the expression his mother could never resist, always used as a last resort because he hated subterfuge, but he was bored to death. He wanted out of the infirmary.

"All right!" She sighed, holding her hands palm-outward in the universal sign for surrender. "It's against my better judgment, but you can go back to work." She glared at him, forcing him to keep eye contact with her as she pointed at him with her index finger. "But you start every single day in the infirmary, and I test you until we have answers. Plus, you don't set one toe off this ship until you're fully cleared. Understood?"

Both fists pumped the air as he filled with glee, grinning hugely. "Yes! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!" He peeled off, walking briskly toward the science labs.

Doctor Lam rolled her eyes and huffed as she continued on her way.

The crystal pyramid was sitting right where he'd left it the week before. Beside it, the crescent-shaped docent machine lay in pieces. That had been found to be a supreme disappointment, since it would only work in proximity to the museum. It didn't actually store any information, but rather served as a conduit to what had been recorded in the facility, now left far behind. The Furlings were in the process of copying the technology, intending to rebuild it and send the original back to the team of scientists and priests now stationed on that planet, studying their past and burying their dead.

No one else was in sight in the lab, and the latest reports indicated that the pyramid's secrets were still safely hidden within its gleaming planes. Rose had been working with the Furlings, carefully testing the crystal while Daniel had been stuck in the infirmary. She'd reported that she'd gotten nowhere; the artifact kept its silence, filled with mystery. Daniel wanted to make it talk; make it
That thought struck a chord inside him, and he chuckled at the irony. "Of course!" He smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. "I should've thought of this ages ago. It's so basic! Crystals resonate with sound. Duh!"

He located a musical scale in the ship's computers and played selected notes in a range, watching the artifact for a response. It was hours later when he finally got the harmonics right; the internal security mechanism unlocked, and an image appeared. As the computer perfectly held the notes, keeping the display steadily glowing, a spiral of light twirled silently inside the triangular planes of the crystal.

Daniel didn’t yet know what it all meant, but he was inordinately pleased, warm all over from the joy of discovery as he touched the comm link curled around his left ear. "Rose, I had an idea about the pyramid and managed to find the key. Grab Scout and Doctor Lam, and meet me in the lab."

"Well, I'll be damned." Rose shook her head as she gazed down at the countertop minutes later. "You did it, Dan'l."

He eyed the image proudly. "Now, we just need to identify what that hologram is, to start unraveling this puzzle."

“Well, I’m pretty sure I can help you out there.” Doctor Lam stared at the image turning in the heart of the crystal. "I... I've seen it a lot over the past few months, and I know exactly what it is." She turned wide eyes on Daniel.

A little thrill of excitement shot through him. "Really? What?"

Carolyn's gaze shifted to Scout's face, then back to the pyramid. "It's the virus that killed the Ancients." She looked distinctly uncomfortable and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I've been studying the illness that hit Alpha back in December, and I discovered something interesting. The scientists at the installation in Antarctica – remember, where that frozen Ancient woman, Aiyana, was found? They captured the DNA from that organism. The SGC also obtained samples of the virus that the Ori sent to Earth. We determined both had similarities, and might have been a mutation of the same virus."

She tucked her hands into the pockets of her lab coat. "That's the same organism. I'm sure of it."

Daniel's eyes moved from her anxious face to the image, making an unwanted connection. The crystal pyramid had been found in a Furling museum, and now it seemed it held an image of the virus that had destroyed the Ancients. It didn't take a genius to connect the dots, and the picture it revealed wasn't one he wanted to believe.

He turned to Scout. "Maybe your ancestors were looking for a cure, trying to help the Ancients. Just because they knew the structure of the virus doesn't mean anything."

The elder managed a tiny smile. "Perhaps." He shrugged, and his gaze slid away to the pyramid on the counter, glowing with light. "Or perhaps it’s the reason they killed us, as Doctor Lam seems so politely trying not to say." Scout gave her a slight bow with a regretful smile. "Either way, I suspect there's much more to this mystery than we know yet."
“We'll continue looking, and hopefully, when we've found enough pieces of the puzzle, we'll discover the whole truth. Like you, friend, I'm not willing to leap to conclusions, neither to exonerate nor indicate culpability. Not from one small piece of information with no context.”

Without waiting for a reaction from anyone, he left the lab with his hands clasped behind his back, head high.

The three humans just stared at the artifact, each of them equally filled with hope and dread.

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**February 20**

**Four Winds Palace, on the planet Clio**

Zeus never bathed with servants present. He couldn’t tolerate having their unworthy hands anywhere near him, and preferred to wash himself. Once that was completed, he lay in the small pool that was his heated bath, head resting on a silken pillow embroidered with gold thread, leaning against the sloped marble side of the pool. The water was soothing, relaxing his tense muscles, and he drowsed a little, breathing in the scent of perfumed air.

At the far end of the marble enclosure, a serpentine dragon lifted its marble head, arching upward. Its sinuous body encircled the lip of the tub, the gleaming black stone polished with great care. Only it wasn't really a dragon, Zeus knew; it was a representation of the Goa'uld, many times larger than life. This palace, this sculpture, had once belonged to his queen, Hera. She had borne him many thousands of children in this water, but now he kept her in stasis, hidden away, until he had need of her again.

The Jaffa were failing as hosts, turning away from their rightful gods, whereas the Ting-sha were loyal and devoted, without the biological imperative that kept the Jaffa enslaved to their masters.

The Jaffa were outgrowing their usefulness, but their intelligence was still far superior to the bestial Ting-sha. Zeus had decided he would keep both races in thrall a little while longer, until a solution could be found that would offer him both loyalty and brilliance in his slaves.

He sighed, slipping a little further into the warm water. His eyes closed, and he listened to the stillness around him.

The hum of an insect's buzzing wings caught his attention, and he almost called for a servant to come and kill it.

Almost.

His eyes opened to mere slits as he tried to locate the offending pest. From the pitch and speed, he knew it would be big… but there was nothing in view.

He sat up quickly, turning in a circle, intently searching for the bug now, but he appeared to be completely alone. The noise was familiar, registering now as a pitch he'd heard often recently, hidden in the background at temples, on his ships, in his palaces.

He knew that resonance, but there was nothing present that could create such a noise.

Zeus's eyes widened as a memory clicked into place. There was a legend of a flying creature that could make itself invisible; the Goa'uld had been hunting them for millennia. Rumor had it that
Apophis had found them but kept the secret to himself, never availing himself of their power.

This wasn't the planet where the beasts could be found, however. Clio was nowhere near that world, yet invisibility was the only explanation Zeus could find for the sound with no source.

"Show yourself!" he shouted. "I know you are here."

Presently, the hum ceased.

He sloshed around in the water, looking in every direction, trying to determine where the creature might have alighted.

"I am here," called a small, high-pitched voice from behind him.

Zeus turned again, facing the sculpture at the foot of the pool, and then he saw it. His mouth dropped open in surprise, then hastily snapped shut again. Gods, he knew, were never taken unaware.

The creature looked almost human, but with oversized turquoise eyes set in a face framed with spiky, pale green hair. It was dressed in a black suit that covered most of its body -- which he saw appeared to be female -- and had four small wings fastened behind the being's shoulders. A smooth helmet had folded up into the collar of the suit as soon as it materialized.

His host's heart was pounding, both excited and a little afraid of it. Did it mean him harm? Could it do damage the sarcophagus couldn't reverse? Why had it been watching him?

"What do you want?" he demanded haughtily.

The being cocked her small head. "History," she answered enigmatically. She pulled her knees up and embraced them as she sat perched on top of the stone dragon.

"The history of what? I do not understand."

"Are you not a god?" She laughed, a merry little tinkling sound that set Zeus's blood to boiling. "You should know everything."

What trepidation he'd felt a moment ago vanished beneath a wave of righteous anger. "What is it that you think I can give you? Surely you have been spying on me for some reason."

A flicker of surprise flashed across the being's face. Apparently, she wasn't aware he'd realized he'd been under surveillance. Then her expression composed, hardened, and cooled. "You were once in possession of a device my people call the Hub," she explained, calling forth a holographic image of the device above the palm of her left glove. "Where did you obtain it?"

He considered, his mind racing as he immediately recognized the item. His queen, Hera, had stolen it from Ba'al and brought it back to Zeus as a prize. She had learned something of its history and shared the details with him. He'd thought that part of the tale insignificant, compared to the information the device supposedly contained. He'd assumed the machine had been destroyed along with the ship that had carried Daniel Jackson.

The human, however, had survived. Perhaps the Hub had, as well. Now, it seemed, the origin of that ancient machine might be useful to him after all.

Deciding not to answer her query, at least for the moment, he settled himself back against the pillow with a sigh. "Now I know what you want. You shall hear what I want. Perhaps we will
bargain."

Her gaze glittered with frosty certainty. "I might offer you your life. Tell me what I want to know, and I shall not kill you."

He chuckled. "I have no fear of death, Little One," he challenged honestly. "If you kill me, you will most certainly not get your answers. Try again."

"I could cause you great pain," she suggested grimly, her sweet face gone very dark with leashed menace.

"My slaves would come and kill you," he countered easily. "You have no power over me, except in the exchange of item for item."

She hesitated, her expression turning sour, recognizing that she was being forced into a bargain on his terms. "Tell me what you want, and I will tell you if it is something we can provide."

"Can, or will?" he asked with a knowing grin. "Though you are small, I believe that many of you could fulfill my desire, since you can move about without being seen."

She turned her head slightly and sighed, feigning boredom.

He laid out his terms, scooping up handfuls of water as he spoke, and idly watching the liquid drip from his knuckles. When he finished, his imagination was brimming with details and he felt satisfied, happy. "Now, what sort of history is it that you want, little insect?" He flicked the last trickle of water at the tiny being.

The creature didn't flinch, letting the droplets spatter her. "We wish to know the location of the world where the Hub was found. Do you know this information?"

"Yes." His grin widened as he let his gaze travel all around the room, looking everywhere except at his unexpected visitor. He was enjoying this game.

"Have you been there?" she inquired flatly.

"Yes."

"Tell me what you saw," she demanded. "I will know from your description if you are lying."

Zeus thought back to that fruitless journey he's made after Hera had given him the Hub. He sighed, playing in the water again. "Ruins, in a great cavern, accessible only through the transport rings. On the surface, the chaapa'ai was burning with a flame that could not be extinguished. Everything around it was scorched and black. The control device was unlike any other, and instead of the great red crystal at its center, there was only a circular space, carved in detail. That is where the Hub was found."

Only it was Ba'al who had found it, though this little pest didn't need to know that. Hera had stolen it from him, and Zeus had placed Hera in stasis after she had given it to him, because he hadn't wanted to share the prize… or his queen. Though he had already cast her aside prior to her betrayal, he'd expected to go back to her when it had suited him, as long as she remained faithful and in his service. When she had mated with Ba'al to obtain something of interest to Zeus, in an effort to regain his attention, she had sullied herself beyond redemption in his eyes.

She'd gained his notice, all right. And as soon as he'd taken possession of the Hub and followed the trail to its disappointing dead-end, Zeus had summarily removed her from her host and put her in
storage for her trouble. She had been defiled by another System Lord. He should have killed her, but she was a queen, and the Goa'uld were a declining race. As long as he had the potential of breeding with her, it would be useful to keep her alive.

A look of longing touched the tiny alien's face as he described the dead world. The wistfulness melted quickly away when he was finished speaking. She stood up carefully and her glassy wings began to vibrate and hum, beating so fast they were just a blur. She rose into the air, hovering above the marble dragon's head.

"We have a bargain, Zeus," she announced, her voice and expression going dark. "We will make arrangements to bring your prize, and when you have it, you will give us the location of this world. If you do not keep your word, you have my own -- you will die a slow, painful death, one that will take centuries."

Her helmet closed over her head, and then she vanished.

A moment later, the high-pitched background hum was gone.

He was alone now, and before long he would have his treasure.

Soon, he would be a real god.

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March 2

Alpha Council Meeting

Jack O'Neill took his seat, aimlessly shuffling papers until the last of the attendees had taken his seat.

From a brief glance, it was obvious to Jack that Doctor Bill Lee was deeply troubled. He looked a little gray beneath his geeky pallor, and there were dark circles under his bespectacled eyes. Lee was the one who had called this meeting, insisting every head of each department, including the military, be present.

Things had become way less formal in the months since Earth's destruction. Military rank was still recognized in a leadership role, but everyone was sporting longer hair, less-than-crisply-pressed uniforms, and speech was much more casual. Rules had relaxed all over the place, and slowly but surely, an actual government was taking shape. O'Neill was still in charge, but even that would be different soon. This council was evidence of the changes.

After a moment's uncomfortable silence, Jack cleared his throat, his gaze directed at the scientist. "Well, Doctor. The gang's all here."

Bill didn't look up from the table in front of him. He lifted his gaze slightly, but still didn't make eye contact. He started to rock slightly in his chair. "I found something," he mumbled. His head bowed again, this time his stare moving to his lap. "I shouldn't have seen it," he added. There were tears in his voice, but not in his eyes. "Shouldn't have."

"Bill?" Jack felt a shiver of dread brush cold fingers across the back of his neck. "Hello? Are you with us?"

Misty, pale blue eyes turned his direction. Doctor Lee spoke a little louder now, but there was a
roughness to his voice, tinged with heavy emotion. "Daniel -- Doctor Jackson -- he... he advised that we only review information in the Furlings' memory database from the lives of those dead by at least a generation. He said we had a moral obligation as human beings to observe our own rules of privacy, and we agreed with him."

Jack's stomach tightened. That very thing had been the subject of hot debate among the council when the Furlings offered to share their history with Alpha, through their database of every Furling whose memories they had recorded for thousands of years, including current accounts. The military folks wanted to look at everything, to try to get at the basic truths of who these aliens were, how they thought, and what they were planning. The civilians, however, had different ideas, and they had won by an incredibly slim margin in the voting.

"Go on," Jack prodded gently, keeping his voice quiet. It was patently obvious that the scientist was having trouble dealing with what he'd done.

Lee sighed. He shook his head. "We have all of Doctor Jackson's memories, as recent as his last visit to Alpha," Bill continued. "The Furlings made us an interface that would allow his data to be researched for historical and linguistic information, without actually viewing the personal stuff, the actual memories, but..."

Jack watched as the man's eyes filled, his mouth pulling into a grimace as he sucked back a sob. Whatever Lee had witnessed, it was bad. O'Neill kept his mouth shut and waited.

"There was a glitch," said Bill, his voice strained. "I accessed a personal record by mistake. And I think we should all see it. Everyone at Alpha."

"Whoa, wait a minute!" Doctor Warner snapped, holding up both hands in protest. "We already made a decision on this. No one living--"

"I know!" shouted Lee, close to tears now. "Don't you think I know? My vote was the one that carried the ruling, but now." He couldn't finish, just shook his head as fat tears rolled down his cheeks.

Then, without warning, he hit the controls for the holographic viewer, built into each seat at the conference table. In the center of the room, an image appeared. All eyes were glued to it instantly, instinctively, and before anyone could protest, they were all looking at it, viewing the terrible thing that Bill Lee had accidentally beheld.

The image was blurry, but it was impossible not to recognize the familiar stars sparkling in a black velvet sky. Hanging like a slightly out-of-focus blue and green jewel in the center was the unmistakable shape of planet Earth. Framing the view was a brassy metal window incised with indistinct Goa'uld hieroglyphs and Roman characters.

A familiar voice rang out in protest, pleading for mercy, roaring in agony and measureless grief in a gut-wrenching soundtrack.

"Oh, my God," Walter Harriman breathed from Jack's left. "That's Doctor Jackson."

Through Daniel's eyes, they watched him struggle, heard him beg, his voice straining until it broke. They watched, mesmerized, as Zeus looked down his nose and smiled at Daniel's horror and distress. His shock was palpable, fresh and raw, and every member of the council felt it with him. Men and women were openly weeping, some with their faces covered -- everything but their wide, staring eyes -- sobbing softly into their hands.
Jack's mouth wouldn't move. He wanted to yell at Lee to turn it off, but he couldn't. He sat frozen in his chair, just like everyone else, riveted to the final moments of his world, unable to look away.

It exploded in utter silence, fiery fragments flying out into the empty sky.

Then, Earth was gone.

Startled gasps became horrified whimpers, followed by soft sniffing. It was one thing to hear about the destruction, to know it had happened, and quite another to behold it in full color through Daniel's myopic eyes. Even second-hand, viewed with the lack of clarity only nearsighted vision could afford, and after all this time, the impact was devastating.

Every person present witnessed the moment Daniel's struggles ceased, when his mind switched off and his body grew still.

Bill Lee still stared at the table, tears tracking silently down his unshaven face. "I just." He sniffed and took off his glasses, setting them on the table before wiping at his eyes with his sleeve. "I didn't think it was right for Daniel to have to carry that memory all by himself. My God, Jack! What he's done for us. For all of us." He lifted his teary gaze to his commander. "What he's still out there doing."

Jack swallowed down the tightness in his throat. "I know, Bill. And you're right. He shouldn't have to bear this burden alone. Thank you." He sat back in his chair. "I'll have a little chat with our Furling friends and have them strengthen the encryption on the rest of Daniel's memories," he announced to the group. "I don't want any more accidents like this. Doctor Jackson's given up his privacy to live with those folks who don't know the meaning of the word. He shouldn't have to give up his memories, too."

While he spoke, his gaze traveled over the faces of the council members, one by one. None were dry-eyed now; none were untouched by the view of the fate of their world. He studied Doctor Lee, who was obviously still shaken from his discovery, but calmer now that he'd shared the burden.

He'd been right about bringing this to the council. It was something they'd needed to witness first-hand in order to fully grasp the fact that Earth was really, truly gone. It made a difference, and now Jack needed to have a chat with Daniel.

"Do you have anything else on your agenda, Bill?" asked O'Neill.

Lee shook his head. "No, sir."

"All right, then. I have some business for the council," said Jack. "We've been dickin' around with our attempts to form some kind of government, and haven't made enough progress. I say it's about time to hold some elections and get this bird off the ground. I'm ready to retire; in my opinion, we need a President, a real one, and a legislative and judicial branch, not an advisory council with a military leader. So we gotta get our butts in gear and do something about that. The sooner, the better."

Every eye shifted to him and acknowledged his demand with a nod of agreement. Resolve had been strengthened, and Jack knew who had done it.

Daniel Jackson.

Even though the archaeologist wasn't present, seeing that glimpse of his past and knowing he'd managed to move on provided a little needed push to these people. Just after witnessing the most terrible moment of the human race, they were galvanizing themselves to go forward and
accomplish the rebirth of their society. He could see it in their faces, in the lifted chins and straightened shoulders, where moments ago they'd been slumped in their chairs in soul-crushing defeat.

Doctor Lee raised his head and made eye contact. "I nominate Daniel Jackson for President," he said quietly.

Ripples of approval and agreement were voiced all around the table.

Jack chuckled and shook his head. "Well, he'd have my vote, and I think he'd be damned good at it, but I have an idea he'd quote LBJ on that and refuse to serve, if elected. He's got other things on his mind right now, and I doubt we could get him back to Alpha till he's finished with that. We can ask him, though."

What Jack didn't tell them was that he, too, had been affected by the images he'd seen, by Daniel's pleas for mercy for his world, by his cry of horror as he realized his capitulation had come too late. Now Jack could admit to himself that Daniel had been right to do as he had, to pursue the monster who'd destroyed their world, despite Jack's orders to the contrary. And as soon as there was somebody else to fill the role Jack now occupied, he planned to turn over the reins and go help him.

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**Chapter 31: Origins**

**March 6**

**Aboard the Gaia**

Colonel MacFarland stepped off the transporter pad with barely a glance at Daniel, who was standing off to one side, actually wringing his hands, his whole body quivering with anticipation. He'd wanted to go with the away team so badly, but he was still medically grounded, endlessly tested every day to try to discover why some of his Ascended abilities had returned.

She stepped around him as she opened her helmet. "We got nothin', Dan'l. Sorry."

Rose tried to hurry past him, anxious to get out of that clingy uniform and confining headgear, but Daniel pursued her, his long stride easily keeping up. He was close, right at her elbow, and his excitement was obvious, talking so fast his words ran together a little, making his questions hard to understand. "So was there any Furling writing? Did you talk to anyone? Were the Jaffa--"

She lifted her head, intending to order him to just chill out, but one of the built-in circuits in her s'resh fried, just from being too close to him in that energized state. The insulation protected her from being burned, but it made an audible pop and sizzle, and she flinched instinctively.

"Oh, crap, was that me?" Daniel backed off a little, putting a few paces between them. "Sorry, Rose." When she kept walking, he pursued her doggedly -- from a distance. "Sorry, sorry! But what'd you find out? I need details!"

Frustration and weariness hitting their peak, she whirled on him, hands on hips, chin jutting out as she glared. "Dammit, Daniel, can't you give it a rest for five minutes? Give a gal a chance to make a pit stop and catch her breath, wouldja? We've been down there for two days, feelin' out the locals and diggin' in the dirt, and I'd just like to freshen up a bit before we debrief, for cryin' out loud!"
She turned away, muttering so low she was pretty sure he couldn't hear her. "Swear t'God, just like a kid at Christmas, all big eyes and dimples. Any time we go anywhere without him, he's every five minutes on the comm link. Dancing a freakin' jig at the transporter pad when we get back. Can't wait to hear every detail and look at all the data." She huffed to herself, hands waving in the air, then swinging at her sides in loose fists. "Might as well be going with us, the way he carries on."

"I heard that," he called from somewhere behind her. "Could you talk to Jack about that for me? Pleeeeeease?"

With a sigh of resignation, she realized there really wasn't any point in keeping him confined to the ship; his abilities were more useful in the field, as long as he made an effort to keep himself in check. Going out on missions would probably help his emotions stay on a more even keel, as long as they stuck to exploring and stayed away from interaction with Jaffa cultures under Zeus's control.

"Give it a rest!" she threw over her shoulder. "And yes, I'll talk to him, Daniel. Just let me… wind down a little, will ya?"

"Yes, ma'am," he sing-songed back to her, his voice fading as the distance between them increased.

She grinned in spite of her pique, knowing he couldn't see her face as she continued to stride away from him. The varmint was just too damn cute for his own good -- or for hers, apparently. "Gotta let 'im run around outdoors and tire himself out," she muttered under her breath. "Keep 'im busy, and keep him outta trouble, just like a five-year-old."

It wouldn't take more than a day or so to send her recommendation to Alpha and get a response.

"God, I'm so easy," she said, shaking her head at herself. Only a few people could have manipulated her so thoroughly. Her late son had been one of them; Daniel Jackson was another.

She headed to her quarters to peel out of her s'resh, have a hot shower and grab a quick snack. After that, she'd make her report to Daniel and then send her request to General O'Neill to rescind Daniel's desk duty and let him get back to the field.

Rose suspected Jack would just sigh, shake his head and agree to it, just because he understood the pervasive influence of Doctor Jackson all too well himself.

And because they needed him out there. No one would understand that better than the General.

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**March 8**

**The Planet Helicon**

At first glance, the landscape appeared devoid of any artificial structures, but Daniel had grown accustomed to the genius of Furling architecture. Time and the elements had worn away much of the once-great city perched on the isolated mountainside, but there was enough of it left to trigger his admiration. Huge pinnacles of stone reached heavenward, decorated with faint whorls and the remnants of elegant scrollwork. Behind them, a range of snowy peaks cut into the horizon, and all about them a cold wind howled a lonely, haunted song.

Far away, well down the slope in the verdant valley below, trails of smoke smudged the blue sky,
feathery gray plumes from open cooking hearths and the fireplaces of small stone huts. Both Tingsha and Jaffa loyal to Zeus lived there, and Daniel and his away team had given the village a wide berth. The residents didn't come up to the ruins, according to the Artisan spy network, but Scout hadn't wanted to take any chances, so ten of the super-sized Mountain Clan Furlings had come with them and were now patrolling the perimeter, keeping watch on the surrounding territory.

Daniel was pleased to see how well the giants fit in with the scale of the ruins; he surmised that this must have been one of their colonies. The grandeur of the scenery seemed to be a place where Mountain Clan would feel at home.

With a final appreciative scan of the landscape, Daniel turned back to tackling the rocky slope. Scout was twenty feet ahead of him, scattering pebbles with every step, despite the careful placement of his boots. Denali prowled off to Daniel's left, with Rose in the middle between them.

"Holy crap!" she cried suddenly, dropping into a slight crouch and raising her right fist, built-in weaponry aimed and ready to fire.

Daniel turned to catch the briefest glimpse of something just in front of her -- and then it was gone.

"What the hell?" she breathed into the comm link. "Did anybody else catch that but me?"

"What did you see?" asked Denali, taking huge strides toward her.

"No wonder the locals think this place is spooky," Rose growled, straightening up and lowering her arm. "I don't know what that was. Didn't see it for long enough, but it was big." She eyed the giant. "Bigger'n you."

"I think it was a holograph," Daniel told her. "See if you can activate it again. Do whatever it was that you were just doing."

She backed up a bit and tried to repeat her movements, but the image didn't reappear.

Scout's voice called through the link, and more pebbles scattered in his wake as he hurried over the crest of the slope. "This way. I've found the portal to the city."

Daniel, Rose, and Denali raced toward him, but just as they reached the ridge, everyone skidded to a halt beside the elder. The slope flattened slightly, and in the middle of the level spot, a circular marble platform had been carved into the mountain, its weathered surface incised with barely-visible Furling characters. It closely resembled the bejeweled transporter pad Scout had used to take Daniel to Shahr on Furdani. On either side of the disk stood a tall stone pillar; one still erect and intact, the other toppled over on the grass beside the round platform.

What caught their attention, however, was a pair of legs extending from underneath the pillar. The limbs looked human, and as the team drew closer, Daniel thought the clothes looked disturbingly familiar.

Scout was fastest, with Daniel hot on his heels. The elder called for assistance from the nearest of the Mountain Clan, and with some effort, they managed to lift enough of the rock off the body to pull it clear. The man was face down, but Daniel thought he recognized that head of dark hair. He reached to turn him over, but Scout stopped him.

"Let me scan him first. He may need to be taken to the infirmary without being otherwise moved." Scout ran the sensor in his s'resh over the victim, checking for damage, and then shot a meaningful glance at his companions. "He's unconscious. Badly injured, but still alive."
Daniel accessed the bio-scan data through his link and felt his stomach clench. The man was almost cut in half, his midsection squashed flat. Even with the amazing advances of Furling medicine, Daniel was sure these wounds would be too severe for him to survive. All they'd be able to do would be to make him comfortable.

The transport operator on Gaia beamed the team directly to the infirmary with the rescued man, and as soon as the body was turned so he could see the face, Daniel felt himself grow cold inside.

It was Ba'al -- or one of his clones.

Rose nudged Daniel with her elbow as they stood nearby, watching the medical teamwork on their patient. "Isn't that…"

"Yeah," he answered, flicking his helmet open. "It sure looks like the System Lord, Ba'al."

"Doctor Lam," Rose called out. "There's a Goa'uld symbiote inside him. Be careful."

Carolyn didn't look up, her hands busy, attention focused on her patient. "It's not going anywhere, Colonel," she shot back flatly. "Trust me on that."

"Correct, Doctor," gasped Ba'al, his voice unnaturally husky with alien influence. He swallowed visibly and flashed a weak, resigned, totally mirthless smile. "I am dying. We are dying. Nothing. Can stop that. Now." He coughed slightly, his face contorting with the pain it caused him, and a few flecks of blood spotted his lips.

Daniel stepped closer, leaning slightly over the bed to put his face into Ba'al's view. "What were you doing on that world?" he demanded.

Ba'al's dark eyes focused on him. "Ah. Doctor. Jackson." The Goa'uld's feverish gaze moved around his bed, taking in the sight of tiny Sky Clan messengers flying overhead, the diminutive Grass Clan healer, Jarvik, guiding the human doctor, the tall Forest Clan elder standing at Daniel's side, and the giant Mountain Clan male standing at the foot of the bed. He forced another smile, this one tinged with irony, his eyes rolling slowly back to look into Daniel's face.

His words were halting, difficult, obviously spoken with great pain by the symbiote as his host struggled for breath. "These must be. The exiles."

Chatter in the infirmary ceased, and all eyes turned to the man on the treatment platform. Only Doctor Lam kept moving, placing a thick pain relief patch along the base of the Goa'uld's throat, as Jarvik directed her. She started cutting away the black tunic her patient wore, zapping every wound she could find with a small laser tool that immediately closed them up.

Finally, she sighed and straightened up, eyes only for the man in the bed. "That's the best I can do," she said quietly. "The patch should numb the pain in another few seconds. I wish I could do more for you."


"You brought the Hub to the SGC and forced Sam to download our database into it. Zeus stole it from you and tried to make me unlock it. I want to know where you found it." Daniel reached behind him, fumbling to pull the PDHD from its carrying pouch at the small of his back. He held it up for Ba'al to see. "Where did you find this? What were you doing in those ruins?"

When an answer wasn't immediately forthcoming, he leaned a bit closer and rasped out, "Tell me!"
"Looking for. Technology. Weapons."

"Where--"

"Daniel, leave him alone," Lam snapped, giving him a little push. "Let him rest."

Scout gave an order in his native dialect, and Jarvik hurried to carry it out. The little female's hands activated a panel near Ba'al's head, and a memory-recording unit curved upward over the top of his skull.

"Look for. The Burning Gate," said Ba'al wetly, more blood spotting his lips. "For their. Origin."
His gaze softened, turning almost wistful as it shifted to Scout's face. "I would have liked. To have known them."

He closed his eyes and relaxed just as the memory recorder lit up, finally ready to do its job, but an instant too late.

Daniel had seen enough death in the last ten years to know without being told that Ba'al had just died, and whatever information the Goa'uld knew about Furling history had expired with him.

Daniel leaned on the edge of the treatment platform, his head hanging in defeat as Doctor Lam made it official. He frowned, angry and frustrated that they hadn't arrived sooner; if they had, there might have been more they could have done. And there was still so much left to do. There was a whole Furling city down there, waiting to be rediscovered.

"I'm going back to the ruins," he announced to no one in particular as he pivoted on his heel and stormed out of the infirmary, heading for the transport deck, his stride purposeful.

"We all go," Scout agreed. Denali, Rose, and the elder followed him back to the transporter room.

Minutes later, the away team stood on the stone platform on the mountainside, searching for a way inside the cavern beneath the ruins they all knew were there. This city was shielded and they hadn't been able to beam directly into the subterranean structure. It hadn't even shown up on their scan of the planet, which indicated some of the Furling technology might have survived. Maybe some of the Furlings had, too.

This time, they stood six feet apart, walking abreast as they advanced up the slope, carefully searching in a well-defined grid, going over every inch of ground together, each determined to make the planet give up its secrets. It was hours later before they again arrived beside the worn stone transport platform.

Daniel's stomach rumbled. He was tired and leaning toward impatience when he spoke. "Anybody got any ideas? I don't want to leave this site empty-handed, but I'm beginning to think there may be no way down there."

"There's always a way," el-Mikha mused, crossing his arms over his chest. "We simply have to be patient enough to find it."

Denali wandered back down slope, heading to the place where Rose had seen the flash. Just as he crossed the spot, an image appeared in front of him. Instead of disappearing, it held its position, standing just a few feet off to his left. Denali gave a surprised little whuff, raising his hands as if to defend himself.

Daniel whirled around at the sound and froze as he saw his Furling friend and the hologram that stood so close to the giant. "Whoa," Daniel exclaimed under his breath, eyes riveted to the image.
It, too, was a Furling, but unlike any he'd ever seen. For one thing, it was a good six inches taller than Denali, just as Rose had mentioned in the brief glimpse she'd seen of it. For another, it was obviously *female*. Daniel knew there hadn't been any females among Mountain Clan for millennia.

She looked different, too. Her body proportions were much more like a human's, except for her size -- smaller eyes, a more prominent nose, and platinum blonde hair. Her irises and pupils were vastly distinctive, though -- the pale blue iris took up most of the visible eyeball, and the pupils were slitted in the bright sunshine, like a cat's.

When she spoke, her voice seemed to come from everywhere around them. The language was a Mountain dialect, but archaic in form, so some of the words Daniel didn't recognize at all. He had to read the translation on his visor to follow the conversation.

"You are of the People?" asked the hologram.

"I am," Denali answered. His exultant excitement at the appearance of this apparition was obvious, his face lit up with joy. "We would speak with you directly, rather than to your image. By el, we had not thought any of our kind survived on other worlds!"

She cocked her head slightly, her expression sad. "We have not," she returned quietly. "This image is generated automatically in response to the scan of your body. I am programmed to interact only to a small degree."

"We wish to enter the city," Denali stated.

"I cannot grant access. The system is secured, set to welcome the return of our People; however, there is now no one left to allow you entry."

"Then how can we get inside?"

She smiled slightly, a trace of irony in her pale eyes. "The only way to enter the city is to destroy it."

"No!" Denali choked. "We cannot!" He shook his great head, lifting his hands in supplication to the avatar. "What happened here? Are there no survivors? We have so many questions."

The apparition's eyes stared into the far horizon, her expression wistful. "No one has survived. At the time this message is being prepared, our colonies are being destroyed everywhere. Few of us have survived here, and we shall not last much longer, cut off from the surface as we are."

"Is that what happened?" asked Scout, his voice thick with grief. "You sealed yourselves up in the city, and it became your tomb?"

The avatar nodded. "There is nothing else we can do. The Nox have killed the Ancients, and now the Ancients are killing us."

"What?!" blurted Daniel, hurrying over to the image, trying not to get too close, for fear of accidentally shutting it off. "The Nox killed the Ancients? How?"

Frowning, the giantess turned to look at Daniel. She leaned closer, eyes narrowing as she studied him. Her gaze shifted to Rose, and both humans heard a faint, brief hum that accompanied her scrutiny as they were scanned by the machinery guarding the subterranean ruins.

Then the image of the ancient Furling female straightened, looking genuinely surprised as she began to laugh.
"I didn't know computers had a sense of humor," Rose stated dryly, hands on hips. "What's that about? Do we look funny or somethin'?

The hologram's attention turned back to Denali. "We have apparently succeeded, brother," she told him enthusiastically. "This is a cause for celebration. Perhaps we did not die in vain, after all."

"Explain," Denali demanded, his dark brow wrinkling in confusion. "We do not understand."

"You must act quickly," said the giantess, her humor slowly fading. "Soon the planet will begin to shake. The city will fall in upon itself, and you will lose what chance you may have of finding your answers. I repeat; if you would see your past, you must destroy that which protects it and keeps it hidden. Come, brother, while there is still time! You do not have long. The failsafe has been activated by a recent intruder, and what has been set in motion cannot be stopped by my memory."

The apparition abruptly vanished, and the away team exchanged shocked glances.

"The Nox killed the Ancients?" Daniel asked, repeating what the system message had told them. "How did the Furlings succeed? Why was she laughing?"

"We must get to the city before--" Scout's directive was cut off by a strong tremor that ran through the ground beneath them. He turned, glancing toward the village down the slope. "Those people! They may be in danger."

His hand touched the control link on the comm system, and he called the ship. "Captain, scan this area for potential damage by seismic activity. Is the village threatened?"

A moment later, the answer came clearly through the comm link. "Damage will be minor, but there may be casualties."

Scout's attention turned immediately to other matters. He started off down slope at a jog, calling through the link, "Begin sending the People to the village to help evacuate. Target the energy source for the underground city's security generator and destroy it."

"Scans do not penetrate," Captain reminded him. "We do not know if the protective machinery will be in the same place as in our other cities."

"Then guess!" Scout ordered. "Do your best. Destroy it all if you must, but shut it down!"

Then he was running, with the rest of the away team right behind him.

First, they would save lives. Then they would recover their past, if there were anything left of the dead city.

Daniel felt ill, all too aware of the potential for loss here. Instinctive panic set in when the tremors increased. As they neared the settlement populated by Jaffa and Ting-sha, he could hear the percussive strikes of Gaia's weapons hitting the mountainside with laser precision, cutting deep into the planet, searching for the source of the underground city's protective shields.

The earth split along fault lines, and the ground ruptured open all around them. Mud and stone huts toppled into the cavern and newly-created chasms as the bedrock cracked and split. At the same time, plinths of granite pushed upward, cutting into the sky. Everyone was screaming, looking for sanctuary, but there was no such haven during a planetary quake.

Daniel watched groups of people disappear all around him as the Furling crew beamed them aboard the great ship. At times, he couldn't think, too terrified to do anything but run. Then reason
would take hold, and he'd look around for someone to help. His hands went out to everyone who needed it -- even to the wolfish Ting-sha -- dragging them out of rubble, carrying them to huddled clusters to be transported away.

By the time the tremors finally ceased, there were few survivors left in the village, and the sound of screaming had receded to eerie silence. All along the northern edge of the settlement, nothing had been spared. Houses and buildings had been flattened, shaken apart by the quake, or swallowed whole. Wide cracks had opened in the solid rock, but most of the damage to the village had been the result of the ground giving way, falling into the cavern below the surface, where the ancient Furling city had been hidden for eons.

Daniel stood near the edge of the biggest chasm, holding onto a Ting-sha child, who clung to him with an iron grip. He peered down into the abyss, taking note of the silent ruins now visible in neatly terraced layers, disappearing into darkness far below him. Much of the city had been destroyed -- that he could see from where he was standing -- rubble and dust filling doorways and spilling over the edges of balconies, but he hoped there would be something left to study.

He had a new clue, a tantalizing hint that the Furlings' history was even more complicated than he had imagined, and that the Nox had played a much bigger part in the near-genocide than they had admitted. Daniel had to know the truth.

The little one wailing against his helmet was getting heavy, so he turned away from the chasm to carry it toward the handful of villagers, hoping someone there would look after it until it could be reunited with relatives.

After depositing the pup with the other survivors, Daniel went in search of his teammates. He found Scout kneeling beside Rose, applying pressure to a wound in her left chest. She'd fallen into some rubble and been speared with a large piece of broken glass, which was still sticking out of her upper body.

He was arguing with her, his gloved hands on the wide edge of the shard. "Let me--"

"No, God damn it!" she grunted. She batted his hand away with her right arm, then flopped back against the ground, panting in agony. "You pull that thing out, and I'll bleed to death before you can get me back to the ship!"

"Oh, God, Rose!" Daniel cried, hurrying to her side. He dropped to his knees, guts twisting at the sight of his wounded comrade.

Scout's fingertips tightened on the glass. "I have to get this out of you, friend," he pleaded. "Please, let me help you."

"Get me. The hell. Back. To. The. Ship!" she ground out through clenched teeth.

Even though Daniel couldn't see her face behind the visor, he could hear from the way she said the words that she was both pissed off and fighting tremendous pain.

The elder finally acquiesced and turned loose of the shard. He glanced about and spied Denali approaching them with long strides. "Help me get her back to Gaia!" he shouted to the giant. "Carry her to that group waiting for transport." He nodded his head toward the nearest survivors, then bent to help Rose to her feet.

Daniel slipped his arms beneath her on the other side and together, he and Scout lifted her. She grunted with pain but didn't cry out. There were little flecks of white foam mixed with the blood
around her wound, and Daniel realized her left lung had probably been pierced.

"We have to go now," he told Scout, adjusting his comm link to call the ship. "We can't wait for Denali."

It was only a matter of moments before they'd been beamed up and had Rose in the infirmary. A busy medical staff shooed them off, and Daniel walked with Scout into the corridor, where they could watch through the big observation windows without being in the way. It was only then that Daniel noticed several deep slashes across the elder's chest; something had cut him deeply, all the way through the tough fabric of his s'resh. The front of his uniform was stained with blood, and Daniel was sure now that much of it was Scout's, as well as Rose's.

"You should have someone look at that," Daniel suggested, pointing.

"What?" Scout's gaze dropped to his chest. "Oh. I will heal." He turned his attention back to Rose's bed and the group working on her, without the slightest hint of concern for himself.

"Look, I know that taimin tea is great stuff," Daniel returned, "but those are pretty deep cuts. You need stitches, Scout. Come on. I'm sure we can find someone to--" He'd put his hand under one of the elder's elbows, trying to turn and guide him back into the infirmary.

"Leave it!" Scout snapped, pulling his arm away and shooting him a brief glare before returning to his watch over Rose. "I'll be unmarked in a day. This is merely an inconvenience."

Chastened, Daniel didn't argue, even though he'd spent enough time with the Furlings to know a little something about their physiology; none of them healed that fast. Though Scout had exhibited more robust health than all the others around him -- he'd never been ill or injured in the entire time Daniel had known him -- he was still subject to the rules of the flesh. If he didn't want to be bothered now, Daniel would bide his time until Rose had been stabilized before bringing the subject up again.

They waited and watched together.

Eventually, Denali joined them, after tending to his duties in helping to resettle the villagers aboard the ship. His expression was filled with concern as he came to stand beside Scout. "Any word?" he asked quietly.

Daniel was familiar with the rhythm of a trauma team, and he could see from the way they worked that the crisis had passed. Rose lifted her hand, and Daniel heard Scout sigh in relief. "I think she's gonna be okay." He turned to eye the elder. "Can we get someone to look at your cuts now?"

Scout smiled and shook his head. "Thank you for your concern, but it's really nothing. Come, let's check on the Colonel, and then I'll show you." After they'd received a report confirming Rose's eventual recovery, the elder led the way to his quarters, with Denali strolling along behind them, acting as escort.

"The Captain has suggested that our friend here," the giant glanced meaningfully at a small group of Ting-sha being herded down the corridor, carefully avoiding mention of Daniel's name, "be sequestered in the elder's quarters until the refugees have all been cleared from the ship."

Daniel's head came up. His helmet still covered his face, but if he wanted to eat and drink with his identity secure, he'd need to make absolutely sure none of the Jaffa or Ting-sha could see him. He hadn't given that idea a thought until now.

"I could just stay in my rooms or my office," he suggested, not liking the idea of what amounted to
"You have no retainers to stand between you and any unintended visitors, and we have no doors to shut them out," Scout reminded him. "Posting guards outside your quarters would be advertising that there's something or someone inside we don't want anyone to see. If you're in my household, newcomers will be screened before they enter, as would be appropriate for my station in our society."

"I walk right into your place all the time," Daniel countered. "Nobody even notices."

The giant chuckled, his deep voice a soothing rumble behind them. "And you are never unexpected or unobserved. While there are strangers on board, the elder's rooms will be guarded, his staff visible, and there you may remain undisturbed until you are once again free to go wherever you choose without risk of recognition."

As they arrived at the entrance to Scout’s apartments, Daniel saw that guards had already been posted; two Mountain giants, clad in gleaming red and silver armor, were stationed on either side of the door, and they gave Scout a slight bow as he stepped between them.

Having finished his escort duties, Denali continued on his way without coming inside, handing off his charges to the household staff.

Still certain that el-Mikha needed medical attention, Daniel followed him into the suite, all the way through to the elder's private bathing area in the back.

His friend grimaced as he tried to peel off the tight-fitting s'resh, then shot Daniel a frustrated glare. "Would you mind helping me out of this?"

Daniel was already up and pulling on the garment's collar, tugging the close-fitting upper portion of the one-piece suit off over Scout's broad shoulders. It was hard enough to put on or remove those things when there weren't injuries, Daniel knew. "I still think…"

"I'll be fine." The elder grunted as his friend helped extract his other arm. "I can do the rest myself. If you'd like to clean up, you know where the guest quarters are. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks, Scout." As el-Mikha resumed undressing, Daniel turned away and went to the closest of the plush guestrooms, where he cleaned up quickly and rummaged in the closet for something to wear. He dressed in a loose-fitting white tunic and red pants, tied at the waist with a drawstring. These were one-size-fits-most extras, kept for guests who might not have brought their own clothing, and they'd do till he could get to his own duds.

He hadn't worn any color besides black in such a long time, it felt odd to be dressed in anything else.

As soon as he was finished, he padded barefoot back to Scout's door-less bathroom and barged right in, just like all the Furlings did. The elder had already stepped into a pair of black pants, but was still shirtless. Daniel stared in amazement at the mere scratches that remained on Scout's chest.

"You see?" Scout murmured. "Better already." He gingerly touched the reddened skin around the wounds, gently prodding at them to test for soreness. "Ouch!" Grinning, he looked up at Daniel. "Is that the proper English word?"

"Yes. It's more of a sound than a word, but…" Daniel turned wide eyes up to his friend's face. "How is this possible?"
"Elders are of great value to our people," Scout told him enigmatically, buffing his skin dry with a towel, blotting it carefully over the wounds to keep from reopening them. "I've lived far longer than you can imagine." Suddenly, the alien looked weary to the core. "It can be both a blessing and a curse, to live as long as I have," he confided quietly. "As long as I will."

Daniel frowned. "What do you mean?" He'd never actually asked Scout his age, just assuming by his general appearance compared to other Furlings that he was nearing mid-life. "I don't understand. How old are you?"

Scout shrugged and turned away to fetch a clean shirt. "I lost count some time ago. The way I keep track now is by the generations of my family." He gestured with one hand toward the more public rooms of his apartment. "Those of my household aren't my servants, you know, despite how it may appear. They're my descendents, by many generations."

"I had no idea," Daniel whispered. "You sure don't look... um. Why -- how -- uh." His mind was so blown, he couldn't separate all the questions he wanted to ask into a single coherent thought.

"I'll grow old and die, at some point," Scout assured his friend, "only very slowly. Until that time, I live in service to my people. Being an elder of the Forest Clan isn't a position of leadership, as our Ting-sha guests assume, but of servitude. That's the true price of power, el-Dani. Those who rule wisely, do so from the most humble of positions. Remember that."

Daniel nodded, tumbling the concept around in his head. What made the distinction Scout was talking about was an attitude of the heart. By becoming a true servant to his people, the elder rested at the pinnacle of their esteem. The paradox was intriguing.

He began to wonder what other Furling secrets he had yet to discover. He wanted to know how they kept Scout so youthful and healthy, to learn all the history he'd seen during his extended lifetime, to really explore his background. Daniel had so much he still didn't know, and only a mere mortal lifespan to research it all. In a way, he envied Scout his longevity, but he also sympathized with his emotional fatigue.

The elder had probably lost everyone he'd ever loved, one by one, over and over again with each passing generation. Daniel understood loss, but not to that degree. To live that kind of lifespan would wear on a person after a while, and possibly make him less prone to get attached to others.

And yet, as they'd stood outside the infirmary after they'd returned to the ship, it was obvious that Scout cared a great deal about Colonel MacFarland -- not in a romantic way, but as a teammate. That sense of empathy and the respect he had for others made Daniel’s admiration for Scout grow even deeper. It was also obvious to Daniel that Scout was attempting to share a deeply personal insight with him.

This could be a great opportunity to make a first step toward becoming real friends. Daniel liked him, enjoyed his company. They'd spent so much time together in the last six months, yet Daniel really didn't know him at all. He felt he knew the elder, but not el-Mikha himself.

"You don't talk about this much, do you?" asked Daniel intuitively.

Scout shook his head. "Few can understand," he admitted slowly. "Even inside the council, we don't discuss our feelings or share our burdens." Shrugging, he turned away to pull on a tan velvet tunic, embellished with gold thread in the shape of flames rising around the hem, at the cuffs, and across the chest. "Maybe I shouldn't have..." he murmured as he fastened a well-used leather belt around his waist.
"I might not be able to understand," Daniel offered as he watched Scout push his feet into a pair of knee-high black suede boots, "but I know how it feels to be alone in a crowd, to live on the outside of everyone else's lives. And I think you'd find I'm a good listener, if you ever want to talk. Sometimes that helps, just to say what you're feeling."

Scout finger-combed his damp hair, tossing his long evergreen mane back over his shoulder when he was done with the cursory grooming. "I would like that, my friend. Perhaps we'll talk after dinner. Since you're restricted to my quarters until our guests have been resettled, my family and I will be pleased to have you join us." He flashed a smile and led the way to his household dining room with Daniel at his side.

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Chapter 32: War

March 10

Aboard the Gaia over Helicon

Daniel's office was dimly lit, the sound of virtual crickets in the background soothing his jangled nerves. Overhead, the holographic ceiling flickered with artificial starlight.

He leaned his elbows on the cool surface of his desk as he waited for the active communication link to be established to Dakara. While he had the chance to make a live connection, he thought he should check in with his friends and give them an update. He'd already spoken with Jack on Alpha, and now he needed to catch up with Teal'c.

The last two days had been trying, cooped up as he'd been in Scout's quarters, feeling as if he were constantly under guard. The Furlings had finally gotten all the refugees resettled on the planet, and now Daniel was once more free to roam the ship at will, with his face uncovered. He'd grown to cherish working in his beautiful office, and had missed being there every day. It was time to get back to the daily grind; soon they'd be leaving orbit and heading off to explore another potential Furling colony or world under Zeus's control.

As soon as the link was established with Dakara, the desktop lit up with a view of Teal'c in his gray robes.

Daniel smiled. "Hey, Teal'c."

"Greetings, DanielJackson." The Jaffa wasn't one to waste time on idle chitchat. "You have news?"

Daniel decided he might as well follow suit. "Two days ago, we were attacked by the Ori. Scans of the three ships showed that they'd found a ZPM in the Furling ruins we came here to explore. They escaped with it."

The Jaffa looked grim. "We have heard rumors that the followers of the Ori are building a new Supergate. Perhaps they intend to use the ZPM to power it." He sighed. "We also have received word that the Ori were not eliminated by Merlin's weapon, as we had hoped. The Priors have returned to their mission of conversion with renewed vigor, and if a new Supergate is opened, more troops and ships will no doubt soon appear to fuel their efforts to convert this galaxy."

Daniel was silent for a moment. "That's a war we not only can't win, we also can't fight it," he mused.
Teal'c's gaze slid sideways and down. "Perhaps the survivors of Earth cannot," he agreed. His chin tipped up as he faced the camera again, and the tiniest smile lit his eyes. "But do not forget you now have powerful allies in the Furlings. Even the Jaffa nations have not been unaffected by their kindness and generosity."

That veiled reference reminded Daniel that Hunter, the Grass Clan elder, had gone to Dakara with Teal'c. Daniel grinned. "How is our little friend?"

One eyebrow arched, and Teal'c's humor vanished as a frown tugged the corners of his mouth downward. "He enjoys...fishing," the Jaffa announced with obvious disdain.

Daniel had to chuckle a little at that. No doubt Teal'c had been roped into going fishing with Hunter; knowing how often Teal'c had been coerced into roughing it with Jack at his cabin for R&R, Daniel knew how much the Jaffa hated it. He probably wanted to be rescued.

"You could always come back to Gaia to help me," Daniel suggested helpfully. "The door's still open. More or less."

The big guy inclined his head in gratitude. "I appreciate the offer, DanielJackson, but I now have a permanent place on the High Council. I must see to the future of my people. We have much work to do."

Daniel was filled with a sense of warm pride. "I can't think of anyone better suited to the position, Teal'c. Congratulations."

"Hunter has advised me that he will speak with the Furling elders regarding an alliance against the Ori," Teal'c added. "Since they have taken over many Jaffa worlds, we will be grateful for assistance in combating them."

Daniel nodded. "Maybe fighting the Ori will give them an opportunity to feel they've found justice against the Ancients," he mused.

He glanced away, intending to mention something else, when his gaze landed on a holographic display of an SGC mission report from P3X-367. He remembered Teal'c had been there when Nirrti had been experimenting on his teammates. The machine hadn't been used on Teal'c, but he would still want to know what Daniel and the Furlings had found there on Helicon, in the ruins of their hidden, protected city.

He cleared his throat. "The Furlings were the ones who created the DNA re-sequencer Nirrti used on Sam and Jonas," he said quietly. "They've found another one on this world, Teal'c. They're in the process of installing it here on Gaia so they can study it." He hesitated, trying to read the other man's stoic gaze. "They may have created the virus that destroyed the Ancients. There's also a possibility it was the Nox who killed them. We don't know for sure yet, but we're going to keep looking."

The Jaffa nodded, his expression unreadable. "Then I will await further information from you, DanielJackson," he returned, a slight edge to his voice. "I have nothing further to report."

Daniel nodded. "Same here. See you later, Teal'c."

"Dakara, out."

Daniel watched the image of his friend reach over and sever the virtual connection between his world and the ship. He leaned back in his chair and sighed, the darkness returning to the room, only the glimmer of artificial starlight illuminating the furnishings.
He bowed his head, thinking. They had made so many discoveries so far, yet the truth seemed to always be tantalizingly just out of reach. He brought up the Furling star chart above his desk and studied the layout of the galaxy, with *Gaia's* location marked by a tiny dot of shifting colors, hitting every hue in the spectrum. Captain and Scout would be waiting to discuss his opinion on their next destination, but at the moment, he didn't have a clue where to go.

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**March 22**

**Twelve Days Later**

**Gaia Music Room**

el-Mikha stopped walking just inside the doorway of the music room and leaned against the wall. Above his head, Nari hovered with the high-pitched hum of tiny wings, eyes forward, watching. In the middle of the spacious, high-ceilinged room Daniel Jackson sat at the piano the People had crafted for him from information obtained from Alpha databanks. Except for Daniel, the room was empty and the two Furlings kept their voices low to avoid disturbing their human friend.

Daniel sat with his hands on his thighs, staring at the black and white keys, but making no move to touch them.

"Why does he not play?" Nari asked in a hushed whisper.

"He is waiting for his mind and heart to be right to channel the music," the elder answered in a soft murmur. He himself had once been renowned for his singing, but had not performed for generations; the music had abandoned him long ago, but he still retained his pleasant, although distant, memories of it. It was good to see someone with talent expressing it. "It is a meditation for him."

Daniel bowed his head and closed his eyes, fingers lightly drifting over the keys like a lover's caress. The alien music was muted, moody, and it was obvious that the human had talent.

"What is this piece?" asked Nari, breathless with wonder.

"It is called *Moonlight Sonata*, by an Earth composer with a strange name. I believe Daniel told me his name was... Beethoven." el-Mikha smiled a little, remembering. "See how he touches the keys? He feels the subtle vibrations of the notes with his whole body. He is not a casual musician, as he told us, but an artist."

The melody played over and over, each time with different phrasing, colored with a flood of emotions eloquently spoken by the oddly beautiful instrument.

With a nod of his head, Scout directed the tiny female back outside the music room, into the corridor.

"Somewhere inside him," the elder continued, "are the memories he has kept hidden from himself, walled up, out of everyone's reach. He will soon discover the doorway inside, Nari. When he does, he may find a way to control the powers that endanger all those around him, friend and enemy alike. He will have answers to questions he is reluctant to ask."

He stepped forward and made eye contact with the Sky Clan female that Daniel called Claire. "He may even have answers to questions we would prefer he not know. We must be prepared for this."
Nari hugged herself and gave a delicate little shiver, her expression drawn and sad. "I like him, Elder."

"As do I." el-Mikha sighed resignedly. "He is still distracted by his hunt for Zeus. He would not be pleased to learn that we already know where to find his enemy." He frowned and examined the toes of his boots. His tiny companion didn't know about the deal with the Goa'uld; no one would outside the council of elders, until it had been carried out. There would be outrage, he was sure, but the decision had been made by the council and would be carried out at the proper time.

She turned in mid-air to face him, her face set, eyes half closed and glittering with anger. "And we have found our enemy, as well. The Ori share the same origins as the Ancients. Sky Clan reports that their Wheel of Galaxies has been completed, and more of their warships arrive daily. Have you other news?"

The elder nodded. "The humans call it a Supergate. We are fully at war with their followers, little one."

Nari cocked her head. "How do we fare in battle, my lord?"

He met her gaze calmly. "Our weaponry is evenly matched. There are victories on both sides. This will not be an easy war to fight, but it will serve its purpose and give the People some small measure of justice. What interests me is the rumors of the Ancient weapon Daniel made and sent back through the first Supergate to destroy the Ori. Reports indicate it was disabled before it was activated, but perhaps, if we were to study its design, we might find ways to create an even more effective weapon… one that could be used in this galaxy." He smiled at her knowingly.

She grinned back and zoomed off in a graceful loop, coming back to buzz excitedly around his head. "And the only place to find that information--"

el-Mikha bent his head to look away from her pleased face into the music room just beyond, to the contemplative visage of Daniel Jackson, still immersed in his music. "--is right over there. All we need do is help him find it."

Nari turned in mid-air and faced the piano again. "He plays well."

The elder shrugged, then nodded in agreement. "He has told me he is out of practice, but each note is played with passion. He has the soul of an artist, that is certain."

el-Mikha closed his eyes and listened, ignoring the faint, high-pitched hum of Sky Clan's wings, soaking in the resonance of the golden notes. "Daniel has spent a lifetime looking outside himself and dreaming. Now he must look inside himself and awaken. It is a hard journey he makes, and there is much pain ahead for him." He sighed. "We will give him what comfort we can, Nari. Perhaps, when the time comes, he will forgive us our betrayal, because we showed him kindness."

Nari flew up close, landed on his shoulder and nestled against his neck beneath his hair. "Must we hurt him, el-Mikha?"

He reached up and gently folded his fingers around her lower legs in an affectionate touch. "Yes, Sky. We must. There is no other choice."

The elder had never felt as old and weary as he did at that moment. Filled with regret and sadness, the emotions spilled out, misting his eyes, blurring the distant image of the human he called his friend. All he could do was delay the inevitable, not prevent the future that was already set into motion.
Time was his gift for Daniel Jackson, delaying the inevitable. That was all he had the power to do for the man he called a friend.

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**Gaia Infirmary**

Carolyn Lam bent over the exam table, applying the last of the seals to her latest patient's wound. Jet had been injured off-world, his inner thigh sliced open by the claws of an alien animal as he'd sought to protect his master. The away team had just returned to get him the medical attention he needed.

Only Jet wasn't a 'he.'

The doctor couldn't help stealing a glance at Jet’s crotch as he reclined beneath a disposable paper tunic, with another sanitary drape over his lap. Jet was completely devoid of any genitalia whatsoever, inside or out. Even his DNA, which Carolyn had seen on the molecular level, showed no sexual markers. There were only the physical apertures of elimination, which she knew some Furling null genders made use of in sexual congress with others.

For them, the sex act existed only as entertainment, a curiosity; they could enjoy it, but they never quite understood it. She'd studied some of their psychology and resulting behaviors, but simply couldn't grasp what possible biological purpose such beings might have in Furling genetics. In all of nature, there'd only been the one species she'd ever encountered--

Her head came up. She looked Jet in the eyes, her bedside smile vanishing. "Oh, my God," she whispered as intuition dawned. "Excuse me, Jet, but you're fine, and I just have to… go…"

She held her breath. *Patients came first.* She shook her head, tucking away her excitement. "Sorry. I was distracted." She checked the shiny, transparent chemical "bandage" and decided it was set well enough for him to go. "You can get dressed now. I'd like to see you again in two days to check how that's healing. Meanwhile, no strenuous exercise till then, okay?"

He nodded and smiled at her. "Yes, Jehani."

*Those big, beautiful eyes could do some damage,* she mused privately as she grinned back at him.

After making sure he could get up and no longer needed her aid, she left the examination table and headed for her desk, plopping into her chair. In seconds, she had accessed the Furling database, and set up a search parameter for biological data on the Asgard.

Hours later, she found herself skidding to a stop inside Daniel's office, breathless with excitement and discovery.

Doctor Jackson was asleep at his desk. He must have taken a moment to rest his eyes and drifted off, head resting on his crossed arms, face slack and eyes closed. If he were that tired, he probably should have been in bed in his quarters.

She shook his shoulder, calling his name to waken him.

He sat right up, wiping at his mouth and glancing around, obviously trying to get his bearings. "Carolyn, what are you doing here?" His hands moved on the desk, as though he were shuffling papers, only there was nothing there. He blinked at the holographic files he had open, seeking where he'd left off in his research.
"I just had to talk to somebody!" she blurted, taking a seat in the guest chair. "It's something that's been bugging me since I met the Furlings, and I think I may have found an answer. Have you got a few minutes?"

He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face to help him wake up more fully, and said, "Okay. Shoot."

"It's the Furling null genders," she began, leaning forward. "What's their biological purpose?"

Daniel held up one finger, and his eyebrows lifted. "Um…" His mouth opened and closed as his mind skipped a beat.

"Exactly! There is no purpose. Nowhere in natural history, at least, what we know from Earth, are nulls included in a species population. They're a biological dead-end, incapable of reproduction. The only place we've ever found them is…" She held up both hands and waited for him to get it.

He frowned, his lips pursing slightly. "Well…"

She answered the question for him. "The Asgard! They manipulated their genes to remove all gender markings from their species, depending on cloning for reproduction. What if the Furlings were trying to do the same thing? Or--"

Carolyn stood up and started pacing, her mind racing as she pursued this incredible idea, needing him for a sounding board. "What if they looked ahead and could see the Asgard were going to have problems, and were trying to help them find a way back to becoming a gendered species?"

"But--"

"We know the Asgard had recovered a few cryogenically preserved specimens of their forebears," she continued, arms crossed over her chest, head down as she watched the floor with its velvety green carpeting beneath her shoes. "We know the Furlings had the DNA re-sequencers prior to their exile. We presume they invented those machines to help them adapt to alien environments, which resulted in the development of four distinct races in their own population, but what if they were trying to help the Asgard, too?"

"That might explain why our little gray friends didn't take part in the war," Daniel agreed. "I'd think they might have taken sides with the Furlings against the Ancients and the Nox, though, if that were the case."

"Maybe." Carolyn stopped pacing and eyed him. "Bring up a DNA reference from the Asgard database, if you wouldn't mind. I want to check something." She hurried back to his desk and came to stand beside him, looking over his shoulder at the display.

His fingers slid through the virtual controls on his desktop, accessing the requested information and displaying it in a hologram hovering at one end of his workspace.

"Can you access infirmary records from here? I want to look at a particular record."

He opened the records window, then rose from his chair and moved aside to let her search for the treatment data on her last patient.

She sat down and browsed through the files, opened the right one, and pulled up the DNA scan, displaying it right beside the Asgard one. She studied the two, side by side. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open in surprise. "Oh, my God," she whispered, and covered her mouth with one hand.
"What?" asked Daniel, leaning closer, studying the twin spirals. "I don't know what I'm looking at, here, Carolyn. What do you see?"

Her throat tightened as possibilities shot through her brain at light-speed. "They're related!" she whispered excitedly. "The Furlings and the Asgard. They share some of the same DNA."

She moved the second image so it overlaid the first, making her observation crystal clear.

"Why didn't I see it before?" she whispered, getting up from the chair and pacing again. "The size of their eyes, the shapes of their noses... well, Furlings have prettier noses than the Asgard did, but still..."

"Wait! Wait!" blurted Daniel, sliding into the chair again, his hands busy manipulating the computer interface. "Take a look at the hologram from Helicon."

Carolyn glanced at the desktop, temporarily sidetracked by her cohort's line of thinking. "Yeah, I remember you said it was a Mountain female. They've completely outgrown the need for two genders, reproducing by parthenogenesis, so that image had to be pretty old."

"Partheno..." He scowled at her in confusion.

"Parthenogenesis," she repeated. "Single sex reproduction. They can reproduce spontaneously or in response to sexual stimulation, because they have complete reproductive capabilities built in. They have no need of females anymore because they're not exactly males, as human males are. They're something kind of... biologically unique."

She pointed at the data he'd pulled up from his recorded memory of the hologram of the Mountain Clan female, now displaying a tiny view of her enormous figure on the desktop. "Look at her eyes and nose, how almost human her features are."

She stared, studying. "Close enough that a bio-scan would show Denali as related to her," Carolyn agreed, "but different. Daniel, this is an enormous discovery! Somewhere along the way, the Furlings and the Asgard got together and became a new race."

For a moment, they just stared at each other, shock turning grim as more ideas dawned.

"So why didn't the Asgard help them when the Ancients tried to wipe them out?" she whispered.

"Maybe they tried," he murmured back. "Or maybe they didn't know what was happening until it was too late. There's no account of the annihilation in their history, Carolyn. I've looked. My search routine has been running through their database here on Gaia for weeks now, and there isn't a single entry."

She swallowed hard. "That seems kind of... ominous. I'm guessing we should keep this to ourselves until we have more information, right?"

He nodded. "We have to keep looking for information," he told her grimly. "This is amazing, but I have the feeling it's just the tip of the iceberg. Somewhere there's a missing piece of history waiting to be discovered that'll tell us everything; we just have to find it."

"'Look for the Burning Gate,'" she recited, recalling Baal's dying hint. "Any idea where that might be?"

Daniel flashed a weary smile and sighed. "Still looking."
"Well, why don't you knock off for now, and get some sleep?" she suggested. "You look like you need it."

He gave a raspy little chuckle. "Like I could sleep after this adrenaline rush," he shot back. "Maybe after the excitement's worn off a little. I think I'll get back to it for now."

"Yeah, me, too. Let me know if you find something, okay?" She watched him settle back into his research as she left his office, still reeling from the insight she'd just gained. This changed everything, and the ramifications were staggering.

There was still so much left to know, though, and she was just getting started prying the lid off this box of secrets.

She just hoped she hadn't opened the door to a demonic horde that might destroy them all.

March 24

Two Days Later

Daniel's office, aboard the Gaia

The search routine was almost completed, and Daniel watched the main screen change color as the ship's computer scanned the files for his parameters. All around the edges of the holographic window were orderly groups of icons, titled with the general groupings of information, spreading out like tree roots off the sides with sub-folders. There were thousands of them, and he couldn't possibly have explored them all. Only a small spot in the center of the graphic remained black.

Then the dot was gone, with no matching results.

He frowned at the display, irritated that he hadn't found anything at all.

To his knowledge, the Asgard had only mentioned the Furlings once in the many years the humans had been acquainted with the little gray aliens. Could they, like the Nox, have wiped all traces of the Third Race from their databanks, and kept only the name alive?

Daniel just couldn't believe that. The Asgard were too thorough, too intent on detailed record-keeping to intentionally leave such a significant fact from their own history.

Unless…

He closed his eyes and listened, trying to hear the hum of tiny, invisible wings over the ambient noise constantly playing in his office. In the background was the faint, deep thrum of the ship's engines vibrating all through every surface. He just couldn't tell with all that other sound-clutter if he had company or not, and while he had no real privacy, he needed the sense that he might be alone, if only for his own comfort.

The thought had occurred to him that the Furlings might have intentionally excluded the files he wanted to see, or locked him out of them. It was possible, though not something he wanted to believe of the People whom he now called his friends.

Maybe if he tried a different search parameter…
He opened his eyes and stared at the screen, considering what he should try next. Directing the interface to the search queue, he entered his command text in Asgard script instead of English.

Rather than repeat any of the previous query parameters, he tried a few words that Doctor Lam had inspired.

*Genetic manipulation. DNA re-sequencer. Asgard hybrids.*

This time, he didn't mention the Furlings by name.

He set the search in motion, then started work on a Furling text lesson, copying the pictographic symbols into his journal. Writing in the languages he was learning helped him memorize, and he enjoyed it. Time passed -- he wasn't sure how long, but it couldn't have been more than an hour -- and records began to appear in the background behind the tutorial.

There were lots of them. He entered a secondary filter for those files while the main query continued.


Unable to concentrate on the writing lesson while the distillation proceeded, he just watched the holographic screen.

A file appeared, followed by another.

Daniel couldn't wait for the search to finish, so he opened the first one, scanning for the highlighted words that had matched both query strings.

His eyes widened, his mouth suddenly dry. He reached to scroll downward in the document, shaken by what he was seeing, but before he could follow through with that, something happened.

There was a massive pulse wave of sound that seemed to fill every spectrum from sub-bass to inaudibly high, all at the same time, only lasting for an instant. Accompanying that, a tiny shockwave seemed to emerge from his core and radiate outward through the ship, feeling as though a bomb had detonated inside him, but leaving no damage in its wake. He had no idea what was going on, but it was terrifying. Reacting only on instinct, he bolted out of his chair and ran for the nearest door.

Out in the corridor, Furlings were on the run, faces set and grim.

"What's happening?" he called, dancing on the edge of panic.

The pulse echoed again, fainter but just as arousing. He bleated in shocked surprise and instinctively ducked, pushing himself up against the nearest wall. "What the hell was that?" he demanded of no one in particular.

"We are under attack," someone shouted. "We must report to our battle stations."

Daniel dashed for the nearest elevator, his database search temporarily abandoned.

There were more important things on his mind now; ancient history could wait.

*On to the Next Chapter*
Explorer, Part 4

Chapter Summary

Daniel finally begins finding the answers he's searched for, including the whereabouts of Zeus and what happened to the Furlings. But when he comes face to face with his nemesis, he trusts his new friends to help him find justice... but with unexpected consequences.

Chapter 33: DNA

March 24

Gaia's Bridge

For the first time, Daniel saw how the Furlings responded to aggression. When two Ori warships attacked them, their response had been immediate. Their shields had gone up well before the first salvo of enemy fire hit them. A Forest Clan officer gave orders for evasive action and countermeasures, directing Gaia's responsive maneuvers until a battle strategy could be completed by Captain and his senior officers.

Daniel and Scout stood nearby, ready to help wherever they were needed.

Wave after wave of Furling fighter craft operated by skilled warriors of each of the four Clans, were launched against the enemy. Most of the pilots were Forest and Sky, but each had a specific role to fill in the battle.

Sky Clan's tiny darters were almost impossible to hit, due both to their size and their efficient cloaking mechanisms. Their pilots provided a constant stream of intelligence to other fighter-craft, moving in close to examine the Ori cruisers and probe for weaknesses.

Grass Clan's ships were roughly triangular in shape, with the blunt end of the wedge curved like a shield. They provided protection for Gaia, holding positions near the ship in strictly defensive formations.

Forest's sleek predator-craft attacked furiously, continuously firing on the huge warships as well as the smaller Ori fighters.

It wasn't until the end of the battle that Mountain Clan pilots took to space, flying huge bombers appropriate to their intimidating size. The destruction they caused was massive, and moments after the giants entered the fray, it was over. Both of the Ori ships had been reduced to clouds of shrapnel and dying flame.


He shuddered as he thought about the report he'd seen in the Asgard database just before the battle
began, wondering just how well he really knew these people.

If this project of Three succeeds, the ancient Asgard writer had said, the Ancients and the Nox will be no more. The DNA re-sequencing process has achieved in excess of Third's expectations. We cannot condone this dangerous plan, but neither can we condemn it. We stand by and observe, taking no part, reserving judgment until the final tests have been accomplished and results indicate whether or not annihilation is complete.

That was all Daniel had been able to read before the battle stations alarm had pulsed through the ship.

Now, hours later, Gaia had taken a beating, but emerged victorious. The ship and her crew had sustained damage, and as he hurried back to his office, Daniel took note of what areas had been hit. He'd be busy over the next few days, lending his hands wherever they were needed, but for now, he had to check the rest of that report.

Daniel's office was dark when he stepped inside. The lights didn't activate upon his entry as they usually did. None of the ambient sounds were playing. When the sensory alarm klaxon had sent him on the run, he'd had his computer on and just located an important document in the Asgard database, but now the holographic windows he'd left open on the desktop were gone.

He listened, but there were no tell-tale sounds of possible surveillance, just the stressed voices of the Furlings recovering from battle.

Had someone turned it off, or had it been damaged during the battle? He tried to activate the computer linkup, but everything in his office remained still and silent. Moving to another office in a different section of the ship, he again tried to access the Asgard database.

System damage flashed across the screen in Furling script and English. Unable to access data.

With a sigh, suddenly aware of the high-pitched hum of tiny, cloaked wings nearby, he turned away from the terminal.

Alpha would still have the information, since the Asgard database had been downloaded from there. Daniel could contact Jack and have him access it, or possibly even go back to the camp and find it himself. He'd make arrangements to do that later, but for now, he needed to get to work with relief and repair.

Things were not looking good for the Furlings' claim of innocence, but he sincerely hoped his intuition was all wrong.

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April 23

One Month Later

Gaia Infirmary

Without a word, Daniel set a small, covered specimen container, labeled with his name and SGC ID number, on Carolyn's desk. He stepped back and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers.

She knew instantly what it was and glanced up from the semen sample to his closed expression.
"Thank you," she said quietly. "Were you able to find a little privacy, I hope?"

He nodded and spoke to his boots rather than meet her eyes. "Scout put a lock on my memory scans after a... chat... we had a little while ago. My more recent downloads won't be available for public viewing until after my death."

She nodded. "I've heard the crew grumbling about that since Christmas. Apparently, your life was sort of 'The Truman Show' for them, and they're terribly disappointed."

This was not news to him. "I'm not." He looked rather smug, insufferably pleased.

Carolyn shook her head, trying to hide a bemused smile. "I wasn't aware Scout had the authority to change their policy."

"He's kind of like the President of the Forest Nation," Daniel explained, finally giving her a slight grin, "only with no Secret Service. He's his own bodyguard."

"That was nice of him. I'm sure it helped."

"Yeah, it did. He also gave me a place where I can have some solitude when I need it. That did the trick." Daniel rocked back on his heels a bit, fiddling aimlessly inside his pockets for a moment while his cheeks turned a light shade of pink. "I'm just gonna... go now." Giving her a plastic smile, he ambled out of the infirmary.

She picked up the sample cup, still slightly warm, and carried it over to the analyzer in the testing bay. The examination she'd be conducting was perfunctory, undertaken with every biological sample taken for the Alpha genetics bank, to test for diseases and do a preliminary DNA match -- not that she thought Daniel would have given her anyone else's semen; this was just a formality for the records. She collected a tiny drop of the fluid and placed it on a small glass plate, programmed in the required tests, and started the machine running.

The rest of the sample she placed in a cryogenic unit, sealed away for safekeeping and eventual transfer to Alpha.

It had been a rough ten days for everyone since the battle, but spirits were high, and the Furlings had just finished celebrating another holiday in the midst of the clean up. Apparently, the festive air aboard ship had had a positive effect on Doctor Jackson. This would be a load off both doctor and patient, not to mention General O'Neill, since nobody would have to pester anybody about that sample anymore.

Ten minutes later, after a tea and snack run to the food court, she checked to find the process completed. As she'd expected, the sample was clean, no trace of STDs or other illness.

The other result, however, was unforeseen. She leaned closer to the display panel and read the results, translated into English for her by the ship's database, along with a report in Furling script that she couldn't read.

She ran the comparison again, pulling up a holographic display of the original recorded DNA from samples in SGC records, calibrated the analyzer to make sure it was measuring correctly, and waited while the test was repeated.

The second analysis confirmed the outcome.

The DNA in the sample was close to Daniel's, but not an exact match.
She touched the comm link attached to her left ear and summoned Daniel to the infirmary. She crossed her arms, foot tapping as she waited, trying to figure out what had happened.

When he arrived, he was dressed in a simple black tunic and loose-fitting trousers, possibly having just had a bath and changed clothes. He looked tired, but he hadn't complained about losing any sleep lately. "What's up, Carolyn?" he called, striding over to where she stood in the testing bay, the picture of innocence.

"You wanna explain this?" she asked, hooking one thumb toward the two holographs, side by side above the sample tray. She pointed to the first record. "This is a display of your DNA, taken from SGC records. This is from the sample you just gave me." She turned to aim a stare at him. "They don't match."

He frowned. "What? There must be some mistake! Run it again."

"I did," she returned. "This is the second assay, following a calibration of the analyzer, and it's identical. That is, the test results are identical. The DNA has inexplicable variations that indicate it may not be yours."

Daniel blushed to the roots of his hair, his eyes gleaming with indignation. "I can promise you it isn't anyone else's. There has to be something wrong with the equipment." He frowned mightily at the machine.

"Then the only other possibility is that your DNA has changed."

"What could possibly have done that? I don't understand." His high color faded and a look of faint horror made his eyes widen. He held out one hand and shifted his gaze downward to examine it, as if it might suddenly look completely different than it had moments earlier. "How could I have been changed, Carolyn?"

"I don't know," she told him honestly. "You've been exhibiting Ancient abilities lately. I've been testing the hell out of you for weeks now, and can't find anything, but you can damn sure bet I'm going to. Park your butt on one of the exam beds, Daniel. You're checking into the infirmary."

He didn't argue, just turned around, headed for the closest free bed and started rolling up his left sleeve for the blood draw he knew was coming.

The doctor glanced around at her Furling staff, wishing she had a human or two helping out in there, along with some familiar Earth equipment she knew she could trust. Perhaps it was time for her, the Colonel, and Daniel to return to Alpha for some down time. She could get her testing done there with people she trusted, and maybe whatever was happening to Daniel might stop.

Until then, she owed it to her patient and friend to do everything in her power to figure out this mystery, so she gathered up the equipment she needed to get her research started.

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**April 24**

**The Next Day**

Carolyn and Daniel sat at a table in the garden room, both of them keeping watch for anyone approaching as they faced each other. "The answer was right in front of us," the doctor said quietly over her teacup, "but I didn't put all the pieces together till Jarvik started looking over my shoulder,
pointing and making suggestions. I still can't believe what the results indicate!"

"Oh, please, tease me some more," Daniel shot back dryly. "I so enjoy not knowing what's happening to my own insides."

"Sorry." She gave him a tiny smile. "You're fine, Daniel. Really. It's just… Well, I might as well come out and say it. You've got a Furling gene! Actually, more than one."

Daniel sat back in his chair, eyes wide, mouth dropping open into a small 'o' of surprise. "What?" He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes, disbelief and shock written all over his face. "What?"

"You know, of course, that Doctor Carson Beckett discovered some humans have a gene in common with the Ancients?" she asked, stirring her tea slowly. "General O'Neill is one of them. Beckett had it, too. And John Sheppard."

"Yes, yes, I know, but Furling genes? Me? How the hell--" He threw up his hands, then laid them palm down on the table, leaning closer and making an effort to keep his voice down. "Have I always had them, or is this… new?"

She took a sip of the fragrant, sweet emlæa tea that was her favorite, as she considered all she'd learned about him recently. "You've always had it," she answered slowly. "That part of the DNA profile we worked up was very clear. I just didn't recognize the structure at first." She sighed, lifting her gaze from the cup to his still-startled face.

"So what's changed?" he demanded. "Why did my… um… sample… come up different?"

"Because that's the only component in your body that's changed," she told him. "One tiny piece of code that only affects the chemical trigger on the surface of your… little swimmers. They're healthy, motility's good, but…" She shrugged. "There's a protein coating, kind of like a barrier or shield, on the surface of our haploid cells -- that is, sperm and eggs -- that only recognize other material with the exact same protein. That's what prevents one species from cross-breeding with another, like human and chimpanzee. Even if we mate, we wouldn't produce offspring together. Only species that are very, very closely related can interbreed, like lions and tigers, for instance, because their haploid cells have the same protein coating. Yours is altered now."

For a moment, he was quiet. His complexion lightened a few degrees. "So, are you telling me I'm sterile?"

"I don't know." She shook her head, her stomach knotting up as she thought about this mystery. "Your sperm is different. That's all I can tell you for sure. That, and you've definitely had Virus A at some point. There are antibodies in your blood, so I'm guessing you might've contracted it while you were recovering from that first injury on Furdani."

His gaze dropped to the table. He nodded, his expression tempered with acceptance and sadness. "I've always kind of wondered why Sha're and I didn't have children together." Then he looked up and gave her a slight smile. "I guess I just wasn't meant to have kids.” He stood up, easing out of the chair without pushing back from the table, graceful as a dancer. “Thank you, Doctor."

"Daniel, wait."

He obeyed instantly, one step away, but turned just his upper body toward her, eyes aimed at the toes of his boots.

It was a glassy-eyed look of shame.
"I said I don't know what all this means," she told him firmly. "We won't know until... well, you can enter a blind lottery or put your name on a list and wait till somebody picks you. Which probably wouldn't be long, given your standing in the Alpha community, but that's the only way you can really know for sure, Daniel. And this doesn't necessarily have anything to do with you and your late wife. I'm still not certain why it happened or what caused the alteration, but I'll keep looking. I'll get you answers. I promise."

He nodded. "Thanks."

Then he was gone, his steps measured and silent.

She'd already sent a report and his specimen off to Alpha, but he’d needed to hear the results. It wasn't bad news, after all. He was perfectly healthy, physically fit. Only his ability to procreate was in question, and he didn't have a wife or the prospect of one in the near future. He had time to make that discovery, and hopefully before that time in his life arrived, Carolyn Lam would be able to determine whether fatherhood would be possible for him or not.

This was the downside of being a doctor, the part she hated. If he were sterile, as he suspected, she'd have to be the one to tell him and see the disappointment in his face all over again. He was the kind of guy who ought to have kids. He had wonderful gifts and knowledge to pass on to them as well as a gentle, loving nature, but if something had happened -- some kind of radiation exposure, for example -- she'd figure out when and where he'd been exposed and continue her discussions with her Furling teachers to see if they might be able to repair whatever damage had been done to him.

If he wanted a family someday, she wanted him to have that possibility in his future. As his doctor, it was the least she could do for someone who had already lost so much.

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Chapter 34: Truth

May 24

One Month Later

Aboard the Gaia

Daniel stood on the tiny balcony, leaning on the railing, gazing down at the glowing heart of the great ship. This was his private place, the one room where only he could enter. Scout had closed it off with doors to the balcony and the corridor, locking them with a biological scanner that would only allow Daniel to pass. It was a tiny room, little more than an alcove, but it was his alone.

Whenever he felt restless or stressed, he would shut himself up in the tiny space. In there, he could breathe and relax. He could lose himself for a little while, and his meditations in that room helped tremendously. Day by day, he found more doors opening in his subconscious, and that introspection helped him to shut down the wildly random outbursts of his growing Ascended powers. He could turn them off when needed, and that was all he wanted.

But just now, with the stillness and quiet of solitude gathered around him, he'd found something in his hidden past that he knew would change him forever. He bowed his head, the memory rushing into his consciousness, swirling about, churning in his soul like whitewater.
Leaving the ranks of the Ascended the first time had been his choice, not a punishment handed
down to him by the Others. Watching Jack die over and over at Ba'al's hands had been the starting
point, but being prevented from saving the Abydonians had been the last straw. He'd been
snatched back at the last moment by Oma Desala, then forced to witness the destruction of his
adopted home and his wife's people.

As he stood there in contemplation, so long after the event he'd locked out of his mind, Daniel's
heart ached for the Abydonians, but he forced himself to keep his grief at bay. His hands tingled,
his body reacting to the rising energy, but he closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing,
using the lessons Scout had taught him to keep the newfound memories in check. He didn't want
those powers; with a little more practice, he'd be able to safely tie the abilities off and make
himself normal again.

Only that wasn't all he'd discovered during his introspection. He'd found another memory, bright
and clear, and understood every detail of it. He could build Merlin's weapon, if he wished.

He just wasn't sure he wanted to have the annihilation of an entire race on his hands.

He needed more time to think about that and make sure he chose the right path. Such a weapon
could easily destroy the Ori, but if it were unleashed in this galaxy, it would wipe out the Ancients.
That might be something the Furlings wanted; maybe it was even the justice they deserved.

Or perhaps they had deserved their exile and near-annihilation; he still wasn't sure. There wasn't
enough evidence to know either way. Not yet, but perhaps exploration of the next Furling colonial
world on his list might shed some light on that question.

All he knew for certain was that he didn't want to share this information with the Furlings until he
knew more about why the Ancients had put them away, and that puzzle still remained tantalizingly
unsolved. He would wait and watch, and search for the truth. For now, he had a little peace, and it
was good.

May 27

Three Days Later

The ruins called Con Thien were all above ground, laid out in a spiral with smaller curved trails
cutting through to the larger radiant arms of the streets. Some of the buildings had been blasted to
rubble and dust, others worn away to mere skeletons, but toward the center, a handful still stood in
pristine glory.

Exploring them was the hard part, because the ceilings were only five feet high. This was a world
once populated by Grass Clan, and these ruins had been the center of their civilization on this
devastated planet. Very little life remained near the cities, which were barely more than burned-out
craters. Only this place still gave off an energy signature, which the away team had followed
eagerly, hoping to find another piece of the Furlings’ puzzling, mysterious history.

On this mission, they were accompanied by Jarvik, chief of the Furling infirmary staff. Although
she had the stature of a child, the grief and shock on her face were clearly the outward signs of
adult feelings; she understood what she was seeing around her.

She also seemed to know where she was going, leading the party down side paths, moving always
to the right until they reached the city center. Her small body fit easily through the archway in an outer wall of the central building. It was too small for Denali to enter, and Daniel, Scout, and Rose had to bend over to squeeze through it.

The giant would remain vigilant at the entrance, in contact with the team through the comm link.

By the time they reached the structure's inner chambers, Daniel's back was aching. He needed to stretch, but there was no place to do that, short of lying down flat on the floor.

"Are we there yet?" asked Rose, leaning over with her hands on her knees as they came to a stop inside a large room at the center of the complex. "I'm too old for this kids' clubhouse thang." She joined the others as they examined their surroundings. The walls were lined with dark, silent machinery, many of which bore similarities to the incredibly high-tech analyzers in Gaia's infirmary. "What is this place, anyway?"

Jarvik spoke a single word in her dialect, and immediately, the readout inside Daniel's visor translated, Laboratory.

"What kind?" the Colonel shot back, a definite tone of uneasiness now in her voice.

Curious, she wandered closer to the central unit, reaching out to touch the sleeping device. A sonic pulse similar to the startling ship's klaxon reverberated through their bodies, and her hand bounce off an invisible force field, preventing her from getting near the apparatus.

"Protected," announced Jarvik. She gestured around at the circular room, lined with dormant equipment. "Secret research. Only Grass may touch." She looked a little afraid, her big gray-green eyes shifting to Scout's face as if waiting for instruction to proceed.

Daniel glanced at the elder, who had taken a seat on the floor, knees drawn up, forearms resting on them. "Continue, Rhami," he advised quietly, the picture of calm acceptance. "We are prepared for whatever we might find here."

Daniel was intrigued to hear the healer's true name, and filed the information away for later.

With an acknowledging nod, Jarvik withdrew a small portable power supply, a mini-ZPM of Furling design, from a pouch slung over her shoulder.

They watched as Rhami plugged the powerful little battery into the appropriate hole in the device, and all around them the room came to life. Tiny lights flicked on and machinery began to hum.

Excitement shot through Daniel. This was the first Furling colony they'd found with an intact computer system, and he was hoping they'd find answers here. He was also hyper-aware of the fact that, if things didn't go well, he and Rose would be witnesses. That put them in a precarious position. He would not be unprepared in the event they found something the Furlings wanted kept quiet, so he stepped to one side, casually placing himself between the aliens and Rose.

His fingertips tingled as he recognized the warning sign of potential power discharge, brought on by the thrill of discovery. He couldn't afford to let himself get carried away and possibly damage the machinery in the room, so he quickly tamped down the energy building up inside him.

Still, he might need to defend himself and Rose if what they found here further implicated the Furlings in a plot to destroy the members of the ancient consortium to which they had belonged.

Very carefully, using his mind rather than his hands, he activated the tissé built into his s'resh as a precaution, setting the weapon to stun.
Rhami's small hands swept over the controls on the central database, designed much like a small DHD. "Accessing last security recordings," she reported to the rest of the team. "Final moments of Clan."

A hologram appeared beside the device, showing the whole room in miniature. A dozen or so diminutive Grass Clan researchers lay face down on the floor, hands clasped behind their heads, while human-looking beings -- the Ancients, Daniel assumed -- stood over them with weapons aimed and primed to fire. Every one of the Ancients looked ready to kill, teeth bared, expressions grim and filled with fear and fury.

One of the Furling researchers awkwardly twisted around, in an effort to look up at the Ancient officer in charge. "Must not stop research!" he cried, obviously desperate. "Nox released sickness, not Grass!"

"Silence!" screeched the commander. "They brought us evidence of your plot to destroy us, Furling! It was not their fault the sample was compromised. You have killed us, you murderous traitors, and we shall do the same to you!"

"No! We can save you!" Grass protested, lifting his head still further off the floor. "Sickness not meant to kill, Ancient!" The healer's hands pressed against the floor, and twisted upward a little more, tears streaming down his cheeks. "All will be reborn! All, even Asgard! Please--"

"Liar!" growled the Ancient, his eyes flashing with hatred. He pointed his weapon at the Furling. "Where is the research data? We will find the cure for this plague ourselves, and undo what you have done to us."

Slowly, carefully, the little Grass Clan healer pushed up to his knees and sat back on his heels. He gathered his hands into his lap, left over right. His head swiveled, and eerily, he seemed to look right at the recording device for a moment, speaking to it, rather than to his captor. "Sickness cannot be stopped," he said quietly, resignation etched into his face; he knew he was about to die. "Will change us all. Data is not here. Is hidden."

His fingers moved, barely noticeable, but enough that Daniel saw the strange gesture.

"Tell me where it is!" the Ancient roared.

The Furling shook his head and sighed, gazing at the floor. That was his last breath. His death was vividly recorded, along with the systematic execution of all the other Furlings in the room. The recording scrolled onward, revealing the Ancient soldiers' desperate search for a way into the machinery, but they couldn't touch it, couldn't interact with it; even their weapons fire just bounced off the shields protecting it.

Rhami sent the playback into high-speed, showing the bodies being cleared out and more teams of Ancients arriving and working with the alien technology, trying to hack their way into the system. Their movements grew halting, laborched, their complexions turning sallow or gray as they sickened and then ceased to appear in the room, their numbers thinning out until the lab remained empty and grew dark when the power supply was exhausted.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Daniel sat down on the floor by Scout, and Rose joined them a moment later. "What did that last bit mean?" she asked as he sat down a little hard on the floor. "Sorry, but I always have a little trouble following Grass' conversations."
"I'm wondering about that, too," Daniel agreed. "Is that a reference to the crystal pyramids we found?"

Scout nodded at Rhami. "Perhaps Grass will find more information in the database," he suggested. His shoulders slumped, and he turned a weary, relieved smile on his human companions. "While the People do seem to have been the creators of the virus that killed the Ancients, this seems to support Mountain's message that said the Nox were the ones who released it. According to this account, it was being engineered for another purpose, one it had yet to fulfill."

"And they died before they could achieve it," Daniel added. "They said everyone would be reborn. He directed a question to Grass. "What does that mean?"

The little healer's expression was closed. "Have ideas," she returned enigmatically. "Not ready to say yet. Must study records." Her gaze moved to Scout's face as if searching for support.

"We may find our answers here," the elder agreed. "Please proceed, friend. Report to us as soon as you have a solution to this mystery of our past. I will ask if Doctor Lam wishes to assist."

"I'd like to stay, too," Rose volunteered, "so I can report to General O'Neill."

Scout nodded and got to his feet. He took a step, bent over beneath the low ceiling, and glanced at Daniel. "Would you also like to remain?"

Daniel studied the relief etched into Mikha's face and shot a glance at Rhami, already working on the computer terminal, disarming the shields and setting search parameters, all within full view of the entire party. There was no hint of subterfuge here, no attempt to hide any of the data they'd found.

Daniel felt his last remaining suspicions slipping away. The Furlings had been honest with him from the beginning, if not fully forthcoming with details of every strategy. If he asked the right questions, he'd found they'd given him all the answers. That was the key to communicating with them. They had trusted him with their history, including events that had the potential to be damning to them as a race.

He smiled at Scout and shook his head. "I can check the progress reports from Gaia," he returned cheerfully. "I'll be a lot more comfortable in my office than in these buildings. You remember the way out?"

Twenty minutes later, they'd rejoined Denali and returned to the ship, arriving just as Doctor Lam and six of the Grass Clan medical staff arrived in the transporter room to go down to the surface. He smiled and waved to her, watching as she and the little Furlings disappeared in a shimmer of humming light. Scout kept pace with him, head down, hands clasped behind him, obviously deep in thought.

"You seem relieved to find out your people didn't intentionally kill the Ancients," Daniel mused. "Did you have doubts?"

Mikha nodded. "We have never been a people who expected the worst of others," the elder explained. "We were innocent then, and could not have imagined what the Ancients did to us. They were our friends, according to the historical records we managed to maintain." His gaze lifted to Daniel's face, the orange ring around those amber irises intense. "But those who survived on Furdani theorized the Ancients might have been plotting to make war on us all along. If that were true, then we would not have been prepared. That is the only reason we can imagine our people might have had for creating the virus -- as a way to strike back at those who would do us harm."
For a moment, Daniel just stared into those alien eyes, contemplating what he'd seen in the hologram. The hand movements the Grass Clan scientist had made nagged at him. It was a hint, but he didn't know what it meant, not yet. He'd have to look through the Furling database for the appropriate character in their written scripts to see if he could match it.

*Right hand, first two fingers extended and spread, thumb tucking the last two fingers into the palm. Left hand on top, thumb and index fingertip touching, all the fingers curled into a circle shape, backs of the hands touching.*

"I think there might be another reason your people created this virus," Daniel said carefully. "The researcher said everyone would be *reborn*. That's the key, Mikha. He was trying to buy his people's lives with that promise, only the Ancients didn't listen."

A sensation gripped Daniel's heart as he turned his gaze down the corridor to watch where he was going. It was something like fear, regret, hope, and anticipation all rolled into one. The germ of an idea lay just out of reach in his consciousness; if he could catch it, he thought all the pieces would fall into place at last.

He suspected the Ancients had made a colossal error in judgment by condemning the Furlings to death and exile. If this intuition proved true, the Ancients might have killed off the only race in the galaxy who could have saved them -- *would* have saved them, given a chance.

Daniel made a decision then, and a great weight lifted off his heart. "I'd like you to come with me to my office," he told his companion. "There's something I want to show you. I'm going to start drawing up the plans for a machine the Furlings can use as a weapon against the Ori. We tried it once, but it was apparently destroyed before it could be put into action. This time, I think we can make a few adjustments that will be to everyone's best interest."

"A weapon?" asked Scout, his elegant eyebrows lifting in surprise. "From you?"

"Hey, I just remembered how to build it three days ago," Daniel shot back, recognizing a tease when he heard one. "Gimme a break."

"Very well. What would you like broken?"

Daniel couldn't help grinning.

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*May 29*

*Two Days Later*

*Gaia Infirmary*

Carolyn looked tired as Daniel sidled up beside her in the testing bay. "You rang?" he asked quietly.

She glanced up at him with a weary smile. "Hey, yeah. I wanted to tell you about what we found at Con Thien." Her hands moved expertly over the controls of the database, sliding across virtual screens and pulling up data that floated in the air, inscribed with light. "Apparently, the Nox suspected the Furlings were plotting some kind of biological warfare and stole some samples of the virus from where it was being developed. That's how the contagion began, with the specimen containers being compromised."
"Which is pretty much what those two holograms on Helikon and Con Thien both indicated," he reiterated, nodding. "But why develop the disease in the first place, unless they really were planning a bio-war?"

She smiled, her chin dipped down, dark eyes sparkling with secrets. "Jarvik and I have a theory," she told him. "Can't tell you about it yet, but if it's true..." She shook her head and gave a soft chuckle. "It'll knock the whole galaxy on its collective ass, Daniel."

Oh, how he hated being teased with information just out of reach! He frowned at her. "No hints?"

Her lips pressed together as she struggled to keep silent, and failed. "Okay, just one. Look at this."
Her left hand swept across a sensor panel, and two DNA holographs that had been minimized leapt up into view, spirals twirling silently in the air. She pointed at one. "This is us," she murmured, her gaze riveted to the helix. "Human DNA. Specifically, yours."

He cleared his throat nervously and waited for identification of the other graphic.

"This is Virus A," she whispered. "What do you see?"

Daniel squinted at the images, his eyes shifting from one to the other, back and forth, looking for something, anything that would trigger recognition.

Then he saw it.

His eyes widened. He gasped, "Oh, my God!"

Then he bolted, running out of the infirmary and down the corridor as fast as he could, headed straight for Laboratory Six and the crystal pyramid he'd found months ago, in another set of Furling ruins. The answer had been there all along; he just hadn't been looking for it in the right place.

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Chapter 35: The Bridge

May 30

The Next Day

Gaia Conference Room

The connection to the council was made right on schedule, and a hologram of the group appeared in the middle of the table in the main conference room on board the ship.

Daniel barely recognized Jack, whose face was covered with a neatly trimmed full beard, his hair gone mostly white and now well past his collar, forelock trimmed into bangs that fell near his eyes. He looked like a mountain man, tanned, lean, and full of energy.

He smiled into the video device and gave a friendly little wave. "Yo, Gaia. Daniel and company. How's tricks?" He barely paused when he leveled Daniel with a stern gaze, his friendly grin vanishing. "You been behavin' yourself, keeping out of the hunt for you-know-who?"

With a sigh of resignation, Daniel nodded. "Strictly archaeological pursuits as ordered, yes," he informed his friend, "and we've made a discovery that the entire Furling nation needs to be made
aware of. I see you have their Alpha representatives present, as requested."

Each of the four clans were embodied by at least one member at the table. Tiny Sky Clan were barely visible, hovering near the shoulders of Grass, flashing their s'resh-lights a few times to announce their presence over the holographic connection.

"Of course," Jack returned. "So," he rubbed his hands together, obviously ready to get down to business, "what's up?"

Carolyn Lam, seated at Daniel's left, answered the question, her gaze shifting to Jarvik, who sat next to her. "We're sending you an upload of information obtained at a Furling colony called Con Thien. We were able to obtain complete records of the project they were working on that inadvertently caused the Ancients to attack them."

She nodded, and Jarvik manipulated the controls on the sleeve of her s'resh to send the data through the conference uplink.

"Oh? That's pretty… significant. Big and honkin', even." Jack glanced at some of the diminutive aliens seated among the humans at the table.

"You have no idea how significant," Daniel agreed. "The biggest 'big' ever!"

Jack's dark eyebrows lifted beneath his shaggy silver bangs. "That's pretty obscure, even for you, Daniel."

"I'm not going to spoil the surprise," Daniel shot back, grinning wider. "This is Doctor Lam's show."

Carolyn chuckled slightly. "This is really the Furlings' show," she countered. "They ought to be telling this, but they thought it'd be better coming from me, so…" She shrugged and gave Jarvik a pat on the shoulder.

The little Grass Clan healer smiled and bowed her head.

Daniel knew Jarvik had a right to the pride glowing in her elfin face. He still couldn't believe the data he'd seen with his own eyes. So many questions had been answered for him in the past few days, and he'd made so many startling realizations, his head was still swirling with them. He closed his eyes and just listened, unable to wipe the grin off his face.

"A long time ago," Carolyn began, "four great races met in this galaxy and began to exchange information. Each realized the potential of the others; at first, they celebrated their differences while still seeking ways of understanding each other. We saw this in the aap, the universal language machine that SG-1 found with Doctor Ernest Littlefield. After meeting the Furlings, we learned the aap was their design, a first attempt at bridging the language and culture barriers between the Four Races."

Jack nodded. "This isn't news, Doc." Impatient, as always. "Just give us the headlines."

"Everything in context," she promised, leaning forward slightly. "I have to start at the beginning, or the rest of the story won't make sense."

The General sat back in his chair with a heavy sigh. "Go on."

"At this point, the Asgard had already committed themselves to cloning as the only approved method of reproduction," she added. "They were great geneticists, but with limited imagination.
The Asgard focused on cleaning out the complications of gender behaviors from their species, but didn't look far enough ahead to see that this would be a genetic dead-end for them. By the time they realized that, they were on their way to extinction."

She stared into the video capture device at the center of the hologram on the table. "The Furlings wanted to help, so they began experimenting with a way to bring gender back into Asgard DNA. They found volunteers among their own people who agreed to have their DNA manipulated for the sake of their alien allies, and the DNA re-sequencers were built."

"I thought that was so they could adapt to different alien environments?" asked Doctor Lee from the hologram.

"So did we, at first," Carolyn agreed, nodding, "but I kept coming back to the presence of the null genders in the Furling population. What possible biological purpose could they serve, since they're incapable of reproduction?"

She held up her hands, palms outward. "But wait, I'm getting ahead of myself here."

"I'm dyin' to see where this is going," Jack added, his voice edged with sarcasm. He looked a little bored, his chin now propped in his hand, elbow on the table, doodling on a pad with his pen.

"Buckle your seat belt, Jack," Daniel advised lightly. He glanced at Doctor Lam and nodded for her to continue.

"The Furlings combined their own DNA with that of the Asgard," she announced. "Their eyes became bigger. Their pupils changed shape. Their noses got smaller, and so did their bodies. That's when they got the bright idea to use the re-sequencers to help them adapt to planetary conditions; doing that marked the origin of the four Clans, but that was just another step in an incredibly complex biological puzzle that has only recently been completed."

At the Alpha conference table, Furlings began to speak softly to each other in their native dialects. They were concerned where these ideas were headed, yet anticipation was high. Daniel understood their comments, and waited with Carolyn for their discussion to finish.

"Please, listen to Doctor Lam," Scout admonished them from Daniel's right. "Your questions will soon be answered, as ours have been."

Silence fell on the other end of the wormhole transmission, and all eyes returned to the video device.

"There's a gap in the research history," Carolyn told them. "Some of the machine memory was degraded, so we don't know exactly where the original specimens originated, whether they were created in a Furling laboratory or were the result of some incredibly artistic and detailed gene manipulation, but... from the data we examined at Con Thien, it seems the Furlings concept of a universal means of communication between the Four Races was carried from ideological concept to an actual physical bridge between species."

Dr. Lam beamed. "They created us, General O'Neill! The human race."

The reaction at Alpha was instantly animated and riotous. Human scientists and Furlings alike were dynamic in their discussion, which became louder by the moment. Some stood up, hands waving as they sought to make points, deny, laugh, argue.

Scout barked an order, a single word in the Forest dialect.
Instantly, the Furlings at Alpha hushed and resumed their seats, attention directed at the camera.

The humans took a little longer.

Jack stood up and steered the Alpha council back to their chairs, demanding quiet. When decorum had been restored, he returned to his seat and eyed the Gaia connection. "You got proof of this?"

Carolyn nodded. "Yes, sir. It's in our genes." She leaned over to Jarvik and whispered in her ear, then straightened up, pointing to new holograms rising up from the projector on the conference table, mirrored at the Alpha site.

"These are several human DNA samples from our database. I've highlighted key areas on each sample that are markers from each of the Four Races. We all have them; they just hadn't been identified until now. Some genes are active and responsible for specific physical attributes. Others are inactive, but still present. They're present in every human DNA sample I've examined, without exception."

"But…" Jack's eyebrows darted downward in resistance and confusion, "Daniel didn't have the Ancient gene Doctor Beckett discovered. He couldn't activate any of the devices."

"His is switched off," Carolyn explained, "but still present. Our electron microscopes weren't capable of locating the inactive marker, but the Furling analyzers clearly show--" She pointed at Daniel's sample.

"So that whole Adam and Eve thing is wrong?" Jack looked doubtful.

Scout waded in for the theological discussion. "I've read your Bible," he announced quietly, "and this history could still be accurate. I believe our Creator may well be the same as the One mentioned in your Christian doctrines. If our el, the one you call God, created my Furling ancestors in the image of the Divine, and then we went on to create humans, can it not also be said that God fashioned your species, using us as a tool?"

Jack shook his head. "Kinda boggles the mind," he returned, turning his gaze to his old friend. "You sure about this?"

Daniel held up his hands. "The Furlings who died at Con Thien told us where to look," he told Jack. "I didn't understand at first, but you'll find it in the data burst we sent you at the beginning of this meeting. There's a recording of Grass Clan scientists who were working on the project, under attack by the Ancients. One of the geneticists makes this hand sign," he demonstrated, his right hand in an inverted "peace" sign, his left making the American Sign Language symbol for the letter 'o', backs of his hands touching, "while declaring that the data they were working on was protected."

"And this means..." O'Neill shrugged.

"Look at it, Jack!" Daniel told him, smiling softly, holding his hands higher. "It's the Stargate symbol for Earth!"

"I don't know," Jack returned with a slight shake of his head. "That seems like an awful big leap."

"Verification is in the files we uploaded to you," Carolyn promised. "Every detail of the process, beginning to end, except for that one little gap." She flashed a secretive half-smile.

“And then there's this.” Carolyn turned to Jarvik with additional instruction, and the Furling opened up a hologram of the pyramid crystal Daniel had found in the second set of ruins the Gaia
team had explored. "The first time we examined this artifact, the only image we thought it contained was the DNA helix for Virus A," she stated. "Daniel found another encryption in it that unlocked five other data points. Very important ones."

An image of the pyramid appeared on the table beside the hologram of the Alpha council. The lines of the clear crystal were inscribed with light, gleaming and beautiful, straight planes with sharp edges glinting with the colors of the spectrum. Inside the heart of the crystal, a single helix rotated slowly.

Daniel stared at the three-dimensional picture as he spoke. "Remember when I found the key to the Stargate glyphs, Jack? Six points in space, with a seventh determining the point of origin. I drew a funny little cube to illustrate the concept for General West and all the other brass, including you."

"Yes, I remember." Jack's voice was low and calm. "Seems like a lifetime ago."

"I didn't think about it at first, but there had to be a reason for the choice of the pyramid shape for the crystal," Daniel mused, "otherwise, the Furlings would have chosen a sphere to store the DNA data for the virus. The pyramid has four corners on the base, one for each of the Four Races. Follow the lines upward, and they all merge into a single point at the top. Four points become one, with the aid of the converter at the center."

Daniel huffed an amazed little laugh. "We're the Fifth Race, Jack! The Asgard told us that a long time ago; They just didn't tell us what it meant. Our destiny is to become the bridge between the greatest races in the galaxy."

"What about the virus?" asked Doctor Lee. "Where did it come from? Why were the Furlings studying it?"

"They created it," Carolyn verified, her voice edged with sadness. "They were working on a cure as part of the development process when the Nox interfered. It wasn't supposed to be released until the remedy had been produced and verified." She sighed. "The virus acts as a catalyst, changing only a tiny fraction of the DNA of infected individuals. It's designed to broaden the recognition coding on the protein coating of haploid cells -- that's sperm and egg cells, in layman's terms -- so that interbreeding between species would be possible."

"And why would we want that?" asked Jack, eyebrows raised.

She grinned. "Don't you see, sir? The Nox don't have to die out. The survivors of Earth don't need a genetic lottery, or enforced breeding, or any of the other unpalatable options we've discussed. We can produce offspring with both the Furlings and the Nox, and they with us. It's a brilliant plan, really."

"That's the point of all this," Daniel interjected. "They were trying to build common ground for the Four Races. That's why they developed the aap on Ernest's planet. Becoming a single race -- for the Furlings, that was the key to understanding the other three races -- by becominge them."

"Well." Jack turned to eye Doctor Warner. "I guess that explains it."

Alpha's Chief Medical Officer was grinning from ear to ear and nodding. "I guess the hell!" Warner chuckled as he turned to face the Gaia link. "We had an unexpected pregnancy reported yesterday and have been trying to figure out... um, how it happened. The woman swore she hadn't been intimate with any of the men on base, wasn't on the lottery list, but the test was absolutely positive. I guess we were just looking in the wrong population for the father. Nobody suspected one of the Furlings might be responsible. We hadn't even considered the idea, because they're so
biologically different from us."

"I've begun to suspect anything is possible, with them," Daniel murmured.

"You've given us a lot to think about," Jack stated, leaning back pensively in his chair now, fingers interlaced over his flat belly. "We've had some things going on here, too. The results of the recently-held elections are now official, and thank you for sending in your votes. I'm officially retiring in a couple of weeks, when I hand off command of Alpha to our new Chief here." Jack nodded at Sergeant Harriman, who smiled and ducked his head slightly.

A ripple of congratulations sounded on both sides of the wormhole connection.

Daniel glanced at Colonel MacFarland, sitting across the table from him. "Rose has told us she's being recalled to serve on the Cabinet." He stood up and reached over to shake her hand. "I'll miss you, but I know you'll do great things on Alpha," he told her warmly.

"Thanks, Dan'l." She winked at him. "Y'make a great cheerleader, son."

"And as soon as I get done here," Jack continued, "I'd like to pay a visit to Gaia, if that's okay with the Captain, and take 'er for a spin, see a bit of the galaxy."

"We would be honored to have you among us, General O'Neill," the Mountain Clan commander responded warmly.

"I'll let you know when to expect me, then, and you can send me coordinates when it's time." Jack glanced around the table at the council members and their Furling guests. "Anybody else got anything, or is this enough to keep our heads spinning for a while?"

After a brief discussion, the meeting drew to an excited close, with a promise to come together again soon for more Q&A.

Daniel felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment settle over him. Important questions had been answered for him over the last few days, and any lingering doubts about the Furlings had vanished. Soon he would say farewell to his new friend, Rose, and welcome two old teammates aboard Gaia. Teal'c would also be returning to the ship soon, at the invitation of the Furlings, reuniting the majority of SG-1 again.

The thought of their reunion lifted his spirits. He felt Sam's loss keenly, but it would be great to have most of the old gang back together. A flutter of hope was brushed quickly aside, but returned forcefully to cling to his heart.

Maybe, just maybe, if Jack and Teal'c were with him, he might be able to return to the hunt for Zeus, and finally have a chance at justice for Earth.

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June 12

Two Weeks Later

Gaia Transporter Room

"Greetings, O'Neill," intoned Teal'c from beside the shipboard Stargate ramp. "It is good to see you again."
"T! Buddy! Been a long time." Jack gave the Jaffa a quick, back-slapping hug, then reached out to do the same to Daniel. "You been behavin' yourself, Daniel?" He dropped a large duffel bag on the floor and slipped a backpack from his shoulders as he glanced around the spacious arrival center. "Nice place. Sparkly."

Daniel grinned. "The Furlings don't do anything halfway." He reached down and took the duffel bag, hoisting it over his shoulder while the official introductions were made.

Jack shook hands with Captain, his officers and Scout, congratulated Rose on her new position, and stepped aside as an outgoing wormhole was established that would take her back to Alpha.

"I'll see you soon," Daniel promised her, enveloping her in a firm, affectionate hug.

She gave him a crooked smile. "I'll believe that when I see you comin'," she shot back playfully, her arms tightening about his waist. "Damn sure better write to me, or send me video messages or somethin', though. Promise?"

"I promise." He leaned in and whispered where only she could hear, "Thanks for watching my six. I know I don't make that an easy job for anybody."

She patted his cheek with one hand and gave him a warm smile. "You're like a son to me, Dan'l. I'm sure that's just what Jack intended. You take care out there, ya hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," he promised, "and I will come see you, soon as I can."

She just nodded, turned away, and walked into the rippling blue of the event horizon without a backward glance.

Daniel aimed a fixed smile at Jack, glad to see him again, but feeling more than a little awkward at their changed circumstances. O'Neill was no longer his commander, and he wasn't a civilian consultant attached to the military. If anything, Daniel was more in charge, and Jack was an observer. "Let's get your gear stowed away, and I'll give you the grand tour. Then we can have a little chat about a few things."

"Uh-oh," Jack deadpanned. "Do I need a seat belt for this, too?"

"Probably wouldn't hurt. C'mon. Let's get you settled."

"Lead the way, Daniel. It's your ship, after all."

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**Laboratory Fourteen**

Daniel took a deep breath, his guts clenching as he led the way into the room, with Jack, Teal'c and Scout right behind him.

"This is my workshop," Daniel told them with an expansive gesture.

Jack moseyed over to the counter in the middle of the small room, studying the object sitting on top. "And what sort of toys do you build here, Santa?" he inquired lightly, but it was obvious by the intensity of his gaze that he recognized the small machine.

"You know what that is," Daniel answered, glancing at Teal'c's face as the Jaffa approached the
workbench. "This room is in a different… um, area of space, if you will, so we can keep its contents protected. If it works as planned, and I'm pretty confident it will, then we'll have nothing to fear from the Ori, ever again."

"They have a new Supergate," Jack observed, gaze still on the machine, hands in his pockets. "Maybe we can christen it for 'em."

Daniel shook his head. "This machine is a slightly different design," he said softly. "Merlin's device was engineered to destroy the Ascended. This one…" He smiled. "I have something else in mind for them."

Jack picked up an elegantly detailed screwdriver with a tempered cobalt blue glass handle trimmed in silver. "I'm listening," he said absently, then set the tool back on the counter and made eye contact.

"The Ancients -- and presumably, the Ori, too -- ascended in order to escape certain death," Daniel told his friends. "The Furlings now have a cure for the plague that was killing them. There's no reason they can't return to the mortal plane now, and finish out their lives like everyone else, is there?"

Jack's dark eyes flickered with understanding as his imagination led him to a startling conclusion. "You're going to manually descend them with this thing?" A slow grin began to spread across his entire face.

"Yes."

O'Neill's eyebrows lifted. "Gentlemen, I think this calls for a beer. Maybe a whole keg." He glanced at the elder, standing at Daniel's side. "You folks do have beer, don't you?"

Daniel cleared his throat. "Actually, no, Jack. They don't drink. Alcohol kills brain cells."

"Well, crap! I knew there was somethin' about 'em that bothered me." Jack stuck his hands into his pockets and pulled a frown. "So what do you folks do to let your hair down?"

el-Mikha opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, Daniel cleared his throat loudly and hurried over to Jack. "You really don't wanna know." He towed him toward the door by one elbow. "Let's get something to eat," he suggested.

Jack let the remark pass and called over his shoulder to the others, "You guys comin'?"

Hoping Mikha would keep his mouth shut and not take the opportunity to educate his human audience for once, Daniel glanced over his shoulder at the elder.

Teal'c studied Scout with one eyebrow lifted. "Indeed." He gestured toward the door, respectfully allowing the Furling to precede him.

"Permission to enter," called Scout from the open doorway of Jack's new quarters a few hours later.

"I'll never get used to not having doors," Jack confessed. "C'mon in, Scout." He waved the alien into his foyer. "Take a load off." He set a small stack of metal picture frames on a low table, watching while his guest entered.

"I won't stay long," the elder declared cordially. "You seemed to want to speak to me privately. Did I read your body language correctly? I'm still learning human gestures and expressions, but many
Jack nodded. "Yep. Thought we might have a chat about Daniel. How's he been lately? Doc Lam says he's not showin' signs of the telekinesis or lightnin' shooting out his fingers anymore."

Scout nodded. "He's achieved control of those abilities, though it was a difficult ordeal for him. Why do you ask me, and not Daniel himself?"

One by one, Jack opened the stands on the backs of the picture frames and set them up along the rear edge of the table. "You're the one he spends the most time with," Jack stated, avoiding the elder's eyes. "You'd know best what his state of mind is, and frankly, whenever I ask Daniel himself, his pat response is always, 'I'm fine.' Figured if I wanted to know what was what, I should check with someone close to him."

"Daniel's been through a great deal of trauma," Scout observed, clasping his hands behind his back, his expression cool, unflappable. "He's adjusting very well and is a functioning member of our society. He has tremendous reserves of strength, no doubt due to the many obstacles he's had to overcome in his lifetime."

"You care about him," Jack assessed, making a final adjustment to a photo of Charlie, his late son, and straightening up to meet his guest's eyes. "Well, so do I." He put his hands on his hips.

The elder tilted his head and flashed a half-smile. "Is this a…" Scout's left hand made a few small circles in the air as he searched for the proper slang term. "I can't remember the phrase. Something about bodily waste and competition."

"Pissing contest?" Jack shook his head. "No. I just wanna make sure the Furlings have his best interests at heart."

"We do." Scout's humor faded. His amber eyes gleamed, his dark green eyebrows dipping lower. "In fact, we've been waiting for the right time to speak with you regarding Daniel's clearance to pursue Zeus."

"We have information on the Goa'uld's location. The People are following him now, but we haven't reported his location to Alpha, because we thought his capture and punishment should rightly belong to Daniel. Do you agree?"

Jack knew what Scout was asking. He quickly weighed and measured and considered, then made his decision. "Yes," he said softly. "Let's go get the son of a bitch! It's what Daniel needs. Maybe it'll give him some peace."

"Arriving at Zeus' location will take us some time," Scout informed him. "If he moves elsewhere, we'll have to adjust our course, but eventually, we'll intercept him. There is no place he can go where we won't find him."

"Then consider Daniel un-grounded."

"Done." Scout gave him a slight bow, a gesture of respect from one elder to another. "Is there anything else we can offer that will make you more comfortable, General?"

"Just Jack now. And unless you folks can whip up some beer, I think I'm good."

"I'll see what I can do about the beer." The alien chuckled. "Welcome to Gaia, Jack." He turned and left with silent steps.
For a moment, Jack just stared at the doorway, thinking about their conversation. So damned much had happened over the past eleven months. Few things still had the ability to make his insides knot up, but the thought of Daniel facing off with Zeus was one of them. He didn't know what seeing the Goa'uld up close and personal would do to his friend, or how Daniel might react when he finally laid eyes on the asshole who had destroyed his world, his civilization, almost everything and everyone he held dear.

It might send Daniel over the edge.

It might also free him from the incredible burden he'd been carrying for almost a year.

There was no way to tell which way fate would take him, a flip of the coin either way, but Jack knew pursuing Zeus was something Daniel had to do. Now, Jack would be right beside him, ready to pick up the pieces, if necessary. Either way, it would put an end to the matter once and for all, and that was an absolute must.

Justice or revenge would plot their course through the stars, and in short order, Jack would know which way the winds would be blowing.

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Chapter 36: Restoration

June 17

Five Days Later

Gaia Laboratory Five

"So it begins," announced Teal'c. He removed his gray robe and handed it to Daniel, who stood in the spacious room beside his friend. Barefoot, dressed only in a pair of loosely fitting trousers, Teal’c mounted the open space in the DNA re-sequencer, then turned to confidently face his audience. The Jaffa stood in his usual pose at parade rest, his friends on either side outside the platform, a handful of Furlings busy with various machines all around them.

"You don't have to do this," O'Neill told him, eyeing the alien apparatus with suspicion.

"On the contrary," Teal'c returned quietly, "I must." He nodded toward the device, his gaze traveling up to the five-foot-wide orange ball set into the ceiling above the raised silvery pad. "If the Furlings are successful, my people will be truly free of the Goa'uld." He smiled. "I consider this a great honor."

Glimpsing a tiny movement in his peripheral vision, Daniel grinned as he glanced down at Jack's hands and caught him crossing his fingers for luck.

A memory of General Hammond flashed through Daniel's mind. "Godspeed," he said, reminding them all of the dear friend they’d loved and lost with Earth.

Teal'c inclined his head briefly, then turned his attention to the diminutive Grass Clan healer commanding the controls. "I am ready," he intoned.

Rhami nodded, her tiny fingers dancing across the buttons and levers to activate the re-sequencer. The orange crystal above Teal'c's head began to glow, and a holographic helix formed in the air all around him, slowly spinning as the device scanned his body for exact biological construction.
Once that was completed, she entered additional information into the keypad. Rhami's hands settled on a yellow gel-like pad on the middle of the console, her fingers digging in gently as she altered the construction of the Jaffa's DNA one tiny fraction at a time. With the delicate, touch-sensitive gel, she set new parameters, made a few more adjustments, and finally set the transformation in motion.

Teal'c started to sweat, beads of perspiration rolling down his face and neck.

Jack rubbed at the back of his neck with one hand, head down, and began to pace.

Daniel struggled to try to avoid getting his hopes up, in case this didn't work.

"Come on, come on," whispered Doctor Lam urgently from just behind Jack. "If this works," she murmured to no one in particular, "there won't be a need to build that Tretonin plant on Alpha. We won't have to scavenge for Goa'uld to make the drug. The Jaffa can be human again."

Jack shushed her, still pacing, and stopped long enough to glance at the re-sequencing chamber.

He froze.

Carolyn gasped. "Oh, my God! His pouch -- it's closing up!" She jumped up and down excitedly, totally losing her professional reserve.

Teal'c's stoic expression slipped. He grunted with pain, his hands rising from his sides to hover over his belly’s X-shaped opening. He looked down at himself, watching the slits disappear, and as his abdomen became seamless, rippling with uninterrupted muscle and gleaming with perspiration, he started to laugh.

Daniel had never heard such a sound from the man. It was deep and rich, filled with indescribable joy.

"I am free!" Teal'c shouted, fists punching the air. He kept laughing, looking down at his belly and rubbing his hands gleefully over the smooth, unbroken skin.

The illuminated DNA helix began to fade and disappeared as the lights in the machine went off. Rhami stepped away from the controls and turned to the gathering. "Finished," she announced with a pleased smile.

Teal'c of the Tau'ri stepped off the platform as a human being, no longer needing a symbiote or drug to keep him healthy and extend his life. Now he would age like any other man and be susceptible to illness just like his friends from Earth. His dependence on the Goa'uld was over, as it would now be for the rest of his people.

He raced over to Rhami and swept her up in his arms, lifting her up onto his shoulders as if she were a child. He danced -- Teal'c danced! -- brimming over with excitement that could not be contained, still laughing as he hugged everyone in the room.

Doctor Lam cheered and clapped.

Jack got crabby and poked at his eye, protesting that he had something stuck in there.

Daniel cried unabashedly as he reacted to the fact that Teal'c was only the first to benefit from this research. The information they'd acquired from this procedure would be relayed to every Furling ship and colony, every world where they now lived. Re-sequencers would be built as fast as the People could manage, the technology offered to anyone who wanted to shrug off the yoke of
enforced servitude to and worship of false gods. Soon there would be no more Jaffa; they would all be human, as they had been once upon a time long ago, before the Goa'uld came to enslave them.

This was a moment that would be remembered forever, a debt that might never be repaid. Best of all, though, was that the service had been -- and would continue to be -- rendered out of compassion, with no strings or price tag attached, just because the Furlings wanted to help.

*That* was their true nature.

Daniel thought he'd made a pretty good choice when he'd set them free, releasing the Furlings from their imprisonment by the Ancients. Still, there remained one other question regarding the future of the Jaffa. He turned to the chief healer, now back on her feet.

"What becomes of the symbiotes now incubating? We haven't addressed that yet."

"Must be harvested first," Rhami told him. "Then we set Jaffa free."

That was the benevolent choice, to be sure. It didn't end the threat the Goa'uld posed, though. He remembered the Furdani Stargate, how it had been locked, the planet guarded from space. He thought about Chaka and his people, the Unas, who had been the first unwilling hosts to the snake-like aliens.

"We should try to find them a world where there are no other potential hosts," Daniel added thoughtfully. "One with no Stargate. No one should be able to approach or leave the planet. Maybe in a few thousand years, the Goa'uld will evolve into something more rational, less megalomaniacal. Maybe not. But everyone else should be protected from *them.*"

Daniel studied Scout's face for a reaction, knowing he was basically repeating the fate handed down to the Furlings by the Ancients, but without the genocidal war.

The elder was pensive, considering. He gestured toward the re-sequencer. "There is no longer a threat from them, friend. Anyone taken as a host can be freed."

"You don't know that for sure," Daniel countered. "You haven't successfully separated symbiote and host yet. You've just taken the incubators out of the equation." He understood Scout’s dilemma, the personal cost the elder must be feeling all the way to his core.

el-Mikha smiled. "Then we'll have to capture a Goa'uld and its host, and discover how this may be safely done. I'm not willing to repeat our fate with another race, Daniel, no matter how just you believe it might be. In the minds of the Goa'uld, they are deserving of worship and servitude of others. They must learn to distinguish the truth of what they are from the fantasy of what they wish they were, and imprisonment won't help. We must perfect a way to free the hosts, so they'll no longer pose a threat. Only when their power has been removed will they learn to see reason."

"If we can contact the Tok'ra, they know how," Jack offered. "I've still got connections."

The elder gave him a gracious bow. "We'd be honored to assist them with freeing those who are unwilling hosts; however, if they're not inclined to share the knowledge, we'll happily defer to them."

"This is a great day," announced Teal'c, still smiling broadly. "My people are *free!*"

"Indeed," Daniel agreed. He glanced at his tall friend and saw a single eyebrow arch in response to his intentional theft of Teal'c's pat response.
June 24

One Week Later

Kheb

Jack O'Neill clutched his P-90, his index finger lying flat alongside the trigger guard, ready for action. He frowned as he scanned the temple grounds, though no one was in view. The setting was peaceful, the area still well maintained since SG-1 had been there years earlier.

"I hate this place," he growled, glancing at his companion.

Daniel nodded. "I know." He didn't have to make much of an intuitive leap to figure that out. This had been the starting point in Daniel's journey toward ascension. This was where he'd met Oma Desala for the first time. He turned to Jack. "You can wait here, if you'd like. I won't be long."

O'Neill gave him a brusque nod, then reached up with his left hand to touch the Furling comm device on his ear. "Everything secure at the 'gate, Scout?"

"We're ready," came the reply through the earpiece.

Taking a moment to remove his boots and socks, Daniel stepped up onto the wooden deck and pushed open the shoji-style doors of the temple. A young monk glanced up at him briefly, then returned to his meditation without greeting him.

He took a seat on a floor cushion across from the youth, folding his legs beneath him, wrists balanced on his bent knees. "I've come to speak with Shifu," he announced quietly.

"You have been expected," said the monk without opening his eyes. "He will join you shortly."

"Thank you." Daniel rose and padded back to the deck alone, hands thrust into his trouser pockets. He concentrated on his breathing, in and out, and the sweetly scented air of the well-manicured gardens all around him. It was beautiful there; he thought he might like to visit Kheb now and then, just for the view and the atmosphere of serenity.

He watched Jack patrol the perimeter, gravel crunching beneath his boots as he strolled around the opposite end of the courtyard, watching the horizon beyond the arched doorway set into the surrounding wall. O'Neill's attention was directed outward, on watch, looking away from the isolated building where Daniel stood waiting.

In the meditation hall behind him, the monk remained sitting in silence, unmoving.

"It has been a long time," called a voice to Daniel's left.

Daniel's head whipped around. Not far away, a teenage boy dressed in orange robes stood solemnly observing him. Daniel recognized him immediately, though his features had changed significantly, and he had grown a couple of feet. He still looked like his mother, Sha're.

"Shifu!" Daniel called, smiling in warm welcome. "You're so tall now!"
The Harsesis child was well on the way to becoming a man. He had a slender build and delicate hands that had never known the joy of manual labor. His hair had grown well past his shoulders, and was now worn in Abydonian dreadlocks, pulled back at his nape, rather than shaven. His expression was serene, but his eyes were troubled. He didn't smile.

"Your journey has been a difficult one," he commented.

"Have you been observing?"

"You have come here with a weapon," Shifu stated.

Noting that the youth hadn't answered his question, Daniel told him, "No, not really." Daniel’s welcoming smile dimmed to a shadow of its former brilliance. "You should know me better than that. I've come with an invitation."

"I do not understand."

Daniel shot a glance at Jack, who was strolling not far away, keeping an eye on them, but maintaining his distance. Their chat would be private.

"There's a cure for the plague the Ancients were suffering when they ascended," he told the boy. "They need no longer fear the disease. They can return to mortal form and live out their lives on this plane. I urge them to accept this offer. It's a generous one."

Shifu's head bowed as he contemplated that announcement. "Some may consent. Most will not. They have no need."

"Yes, they do," Daniel told him gently. His heart ached a little for Sha’re. This was her son. Had things been different, he might also have been Daniel's as well. "They have a debt to pay, Shifu. Didn't they tell you about the terrible crime they committed?"

"They were afraid," said the youth. "They did not want to die."

"Neither did the Furlings."

"The Ancients have become enlightened." Shifu's voice held a note of pleading. He was reluctant to let go of the beings who had saved his life and his sanity, and fear glimmered in his dark eyes. "They have helped me learn to control the terrible things in my mind."

Daniel nodded. "Yes, they have. You were one of the few good things they did, Shifu. Most of the time, they turned their backs on people they could have helped. Should have helped. Uncountable billions have suffered enslavement from the race who created you; you know what kind of suffering they've caused. What about all those whom the Ancients chose not to help? Don't they count, too? Why was it all right to help you and not them?" He wrapped his arms around his middle and ambled toward the youth, who fell into step with him as they strolled along the deck surrounding the meditation hall.

"Not interfering is a lesson they learned while they were still mortal." Shifu's pace slowed as he spoke, and he walked a little closer to Daniel's side, as if seeking comfort for emotional distress. "In the end, the Third Race was given mercy. Some were spared."

This subject was obviously uncomfortable for Shifu, but it had to be covered. That was why Daniel had come there, after all. He understood the young man was reasoning his way through behavior he didn't truly understand, trying to justify what he knew, and to defend those who had helped him. "The Ancients left the Furlings with no provisions, no shelter, no way off that world. They left
them there to **die**, Shifu. Far from being an act of mercy, it was the final phase of a punishment they didn't deserve."

Shifu lifted his dark eyes, so like his mother's, to search Daniel's face. "They do not want--"

He was interrupted by a distant rumble of thunder, low and angry, like the growl of a cornered beast.

Surprise flickered into Shifu's expression. "They are preparing to destroy the ship that brought you here!"

Daniel whipped around, shouting to Jack across the courtyard, "**Now!** Tell them to activate the machine!"

Jack's response was immediate; before Daniel even finished his sentence, the order was being relayed.

The sky clouded over and grew dark in a matter of seconds. This time, he knew, it wasn't because of his own stormy emotions.

"Stay here!" Daniel called to Shifu, bolting off the deck, running right for Jack.

Lightning was on the way. Daniel could feel it, and **Jack was the target.**

He wasn't going to make it in time. The hair on his forearms lifted as the static charge in the air increased. His right hand reached out as he ran, fingers spreading wide open.

"No!" Daniel cried. He loosed a pulse of energy, a shockwave that lifted Jack off his feet and flung him backward into a Zen garden, just as a bolt of white light struck the ground where he had been standing. Pebbles scattered everywhere and a cloud of dirt kicked up into the air.

Jack rolled to his feet, glancing up at the sky, racing for Daniel. "I've got nothin' to shoot at!" he cried.

As soon as Jack caught up, Daniel turned, and they raced back to the temple together, as fast as their feet would carry them. His fingertip brushed the controls on the comm link on his ear. "**Any time now,**" Daniel called urgently into the device. "**Just give it--**"

A ball of light hit the ground between them and the temple, and when the glow faded, a naked old man lay curled up on the dirt. Another, and then another appeared, nude men and women of all ages falling out of the sky all around them in a celestial rain. Daniel knew instantly who they were, though he had never seen their faces before.

**These were the Ancients.**

"It's working!" Jack yelled enthusiastically. He glanced around them as they came to a stop at the edge of the deck. "**Holy buckets, Daniel! How many are there?**"

"Thousands," he panted. "**Maybe millions. Not all here.**" Winded from the run and the effort of the telekinetic blow, he leaned forward, hands on knees, to catch his breath. "**The Furlings will be funneling the signal through the Stargate network, like Sam and Jacob did with the energy wave that destroyed the Replicators.**"

"You warned 'em," observed his friend triumphantly. Jack's expression turned grim. He adjusted his grip on the P-90 as he watched the crowd of Ancients in their birthday suits getting to their feet.
"Now it's time to pay the piper for the dance."

Daniel eyed the crowd, then glanced up at the clearing sky.

The old man who had descended first tottered up to them, brushing dirt off his shoulder and turning rheumy, guilty eyes on Daniel. His shoulders were hunched, head tipped downward, like a tiger backed into a corner and about to pounce. "You have forced us back to mortality, used your machine to take from us what we rightfully achieved on our own! What will you do with us now?" he asked, his voice hoarse with accusation and leashed rage.

"For the moment, you learn how to be mortal again," Daniel answered as compassionately as he could. "The Furlings will be bringing food, clothing, and medicines for you. Eventually, you'll all be gathered up and taken through the Stargate to the Nox homeworld."

"And what becomes of us when we get there?" asked a beautiful young woman, not bothering to cover her body with her hands. She looked resentful, angry, maybe a little scared.

Daniel cocked his head, thinking about the punishment the Furling council of elders had suggested, still not understanding it. "Both you and the Nox will be provided simple tools and provisions enough to survive, but all advanced technological devices will be removed from your possession. The Stargate will be taken away. However long it takes you to rebuild your societies from the most basic level, that's when you'll be free to roam the galaxy again. If it takes ten years or a thousand, you'll have that long to really think about the decisions you made. Be grateful they didn't do to you what you did to them."

Most of the Ancients were staring at the ground in shame, but some eyed him with obvious hatred, others had chins held high, no doubt believing they had acted correctly. His judgment brought only a faint ripple of protest, a distant grumbling of disagreement. No one spoke loudly or clearly enough for him to hear, and he knew there would be no argument. Daniel thought the Furlings had been generous, after having spent millennia preparing for a war they would never fight. Given the option, they were a peaceful race. Backed into a corner, they would not easily be defeated.

More than ever, Daniel felt the Furlings had been frighteningly misjudged and was happy he'd been able to help rectify that matter.

He knew the Ancients could try to run and hide, but the virus would find them and, without the Furlings' amazing medicinal tea, any stragglers would die. If they wanted to live, they would submit to this sentence. If they ascended again, they would simply be brought right back to the mortal plane. His machine would be kept running by the Furlings, and if it showed signs of wearing out after a few centuries, they’d keep building more of them.

"What will become of me?" asked Shifu, reaching out to touch Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel smiled at him. "You've committed no crime," he reminded the teenager. "You can go wherever you want."

"My mother's world is gone, as is yours. Where should I go?"

"There's our new home on Alpha," offered Jack lightly, "and the Furlings are nice folks, too. They have a cool music box on their new home world."

Leave it to Jack to simplify things, Daniel thought. "The Furlings are very wise," he suggested. "There are some on Alpha, if you decide you want to go there. I think they may have much to teach you."
The tiniest impish grin touched the corners of Shifu's mouth. "Then I would like to see both places."

"You got it," agreed Jack. He patted the boy on his shoulder as they took a step off the deck. "That is, if it's stopped raining naked people." He glanced hesitantly up at the sky, then at the crowd, which silently parted to let them pass.

"Sky's clearing," Daniel observed, and then his gaze turned to the ground beneath his bare feet.


"Right." He pivoted and turned back to the deck to put on his footwear. He didn't look up at the crowd of Ancients as he pulled on his socks, his mind wandering to far places.

At that moment, a fleet of Furling ships would be closing in on the new Supergate, carrying another of Daniel's machines to the galaxy where the Ori ruled. When they arrived, the Furlings would activate the device and return the Ori to physical form. What became of them afterward would be the decision of those who had worshiped them under penalty of death.

Without the power of the Ori, the Priors would become ordinary mortals again. Truth would reign at last. False gods would be revealed as the imposters they truly were, and humanity would have an opportunity to make a fresh start. Daniel looked forward to that, and to bringing justice to his lost world.

He adjusted his left boot and got to his feet with his head high, eyes forward, step sure. Soon now, he hoped he would be standing face to face with Zeus.

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**Chapter 37: Mountain**

**June 30**

**The Next Day**

**Gaia Transporter Bay**

The event horizon steadied into placid rippling, and a moment later, two Forest Clan warriors stepped through the shipboard Stargate. Their faces were set, expressionless. Behind them, two more figures appeared. One was a ten-foot-tall Mountain Clan Furling, and the other was Ba'al. Advance reports from the Furlings who had captured him declared this was the original, not a clone. If anyone knew besides Ba'al himself, Daniel believed it would be the People.

The Mountain giant held one end of a leather lead, which was attached to a shiny iridescent metal collar fastened around Ba'al's neck, maintaining a hold on his prisoner whose hands were fastened together at the wrists with an elegantly designed gold-embellished tube. The Goa'uld had dried blood on his face -- evidence of injuries already healed by his symbiote. His hair was mussed and dirty, and his black robes were torn in places. He seemed to have put up a good fight, and lost.

Jack stiffened as he lifted his chin and glared down his nose at the alien. "So. Ba'al. Not lookin' very god-like, there." There was an almost jolly note to the droll observation, but his tone grew less flippanent as he added, "Bet you're wonderin' why you're here. As am I." He turned to Scout, who was standing beside Captain. "Can I have him to play with when you're done?"
Scout grinned in spite of himself, but turned away to speak to the Furling soldiers. "Please escort your prisoner to the observation cell."

Daniel had warned them the Goa'uld could secrete a poison that would kill the host, if the symbiote believed it might be in mortal danger. The creatures would rather murder their hosts than give them up. It would be better if the snake didn't know exactly why it had been captured.

"I am not an animal," Ba'al protested, trying to jerk free of his captor's grip.

Mountain's fingers just tightened around the leash. "I suggest you not struggle," said the giant pleasantly. "It would be unfortunate if I accidentally snapped your tiny, delicate neck."

"How dare you lay hands on me?" Ba'al spat, jerking free of Mountain's grip, then turned to look up at his captor, his eyes glowing white with Goa'uld rage. "I will kill you all!"

The Furling caught at him just as one of the Forest Clan dropped down and swept Ba'al's legs out from under him. He fell forward onto his elbows, bouncing slightly on his nose against the floor, but almost immediately he pushed back to his feet, snarling and spitting with unbridled fury, a thin stream of gore trickling over his lips.

Mountain's massive hand enveloped Ba'al's neck and right shoulder, causing his diatribe to die down to a gurgle. The Goa'uld's face turned crimson as he struggled to breathe, and he grew still, finally acquiescing to the giant's control.

Daniel, Jack, and Scout escorted the group to the laboratory, where a special cell had been fashioned to house the dethroned System Lord. Actually, it had been structured to hold any captured host -- Ba'al had simply been the first one the Furlings had caught, which pleased Daniel no end.

He watched with satisfaction as the Goa'uld was marched into his beautifully appointed prison, which was outfitted with an ornately decorated bed accented in gold leaf, a small table and chair and a toilet area. As with everything, the Furlings never did anything halfway.

The giant removed the collar and gilded handcuffs and stepped outside.

For a moment, Ba'al gave his accommodations a cursory smirk of approval. Then he turned cold, calculating dark eyes on his captors. After a moment's hesitation, he lunged forward, but the Mountain giant was a fraction of a second ahead of him, activating an energy barrier with the controls on the sleeve of his s'resh.

Ba'al bounced off the invisible barrier, flung backward to land on his buttocks on the floor. His brief look of surprise quickly morphed into wrath bordering on white-eyed madness. He scrambled to his feet and charged the force field again, this time with less power, so he could maintain his footing, teeth clenched and bared in fury.

He was trapped and knew it, but that didn't stop him from running his mouth, jeering and raging at them. "You cannot keep me here! My Jaffa will come for me, you insignificant fools!"

"Your Jaffa handed you over to us," sneered the giant with a note of superiority, "and then lined up to be relieved of the burden of carrying your children. We will make them whole, and then your offspring will be sent to a place where they can do no harm."

Ba'al roared with frustration, raising his fists and shaking them at his captors, his eyes glittering with madness. He panted, his gaze moving from one face to the next, studying those who were watching him like an animal in a zoo. He started to pace back and forth in his enclosure,
calculating now, hands clasped behind his back.

After a few moments, he stopped and stared at the giant who towered above them all, fixing him with a narrowed gaze. "I will escape this prison," Ba'al growled, his voice dripping with venom, "and when I do, I will take you for my new host! There will be none who can stand in my way then." He smiled darkly. "That would be very pleasing to me."

As if he hadn't heard the threat, completely discounting it, Mountain turned to the waiting Grass Clan staff. "I hope you will have results for us soon," he stated, offering them a slight bow of respect. He stepped to one side.

All eyes turned to the chief healer.

"Scanning," called Rhami from a control station at the center of the lab.

A ribbon of blue-green light passed from wall to wall inside the cell.

Ba'al glanced up, startled, then turned back to his audience. "What are you doing to me?"

No one answered.

Right about now, Daniel knew, the symbiote would be getting a clue as to why he'd been captured. As long as the creature held some kind of hope for escape, the host would be safe, but once it became clear this would be its last stop, the alien would release a bio-toxin into the host's bloodstream, and they would die together.

Daniel pretended to study the readings on the diagnostic machine, watching Jack out of the corner of his eye, just in case he needed to run interference and distract the General. Then Daniel's attention was genuinely captured by the data; he was startled to find he understood so much of it now, after almost a year of study of Furling languages, culture and science.

He strolled over to touch Jack on the arm. "Let's get something to eat," Daniel suggested softly. "This is going to take a while. You can come back to poke at him later."

Without another snide comment, Jack turned and left the lab with his friend. When they were well down the corridor, O'Neill asked, "So what do they want with him?"

"For now, only to free the host. The Furlings are all about freedom, you know."

"Yeah. I noticed that about them." Jack gave him a long look. "They're good people, Daniel. I know that in my gut, but... something's not right here." Jack looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I just don't know what it is."

"Didn't you read my reports? We know why they were locked up by the Ancients. Between the Nox's xenophobia, and the Ancients' jumping to conclusions, the Furlings' research was misinterpreted. They were misjudged. That's all there is to it." Daniel was absolutely certain of his conclusions. He'd been over the data personally, all the information the Furlings had gathered at Con Thien.

Jack patted his shoulder briefly. "You’ve got a lot of faith in your friends, buddy. I'm glad you're on our side."

Daniel smiled at him. "Where else would I be?"
July 2

Two Days Later

Corridor Outside Laboratory Eight

It was very late, and there was little activity in the corridors at that hour. Daniel and Jack walked side by side in silence, answering the summons from the Forest Clan elder to witness the results of their research. Daniel could hear voices emanating from the lab as they approached, and though he didn't intend to do it, he paused just outside and eavesdropped on the conversation, Jack crowding right up behind him in an effort to hear, too.

One voice was Ba'al's; the other was Scout's.

"I know where to find the Burning Gate," the Goa'uld called silkily. "If you release me, I will give you the location."

"What is the Burning Gate?" asked el-Mikha, feigning nonchalance. "Your clone mentioned that."

"You have met one of my brothers?" Ba'al seemed genuinely surprised.

"We tried to save his life, but were unsuccessful." Scout's words and tone were carefully neutral. "He told us we should seek this Burning Gate, but gave no hints where we should look."

"It is the homeworld of the Third Race," Ba'al answered. His tone of voice was teasing, meant to tempt, to offer secrets just out of reach.

"Interesting. I believe we will decline your offer, though. We have much more to gain by keeping you."

Daniel smiled a little to himself at that and nudged Jack with his elbow. Holding one finger to his lips to indicate silence, Daniel stepped into the nearly empty lab, hovering in the shadows near the entrance, Jack creeping in right behind him. None of the others present had noticed their appearance.

Ba'al stood in his cell, arms defiantly crossed over his chest, still wearing his torn black robes. Scout leaned casually against a console near the middle of the room, and Rhami of the Grass Clan manipulated the machine. Daniel watched, fascinated, as Rhami's small hands plied the controls of the scanner.

Set into the wall outside the cell was a small water-filled aquarium, the interior illuminated with a pale blue light, bubbles floating up from the bottom to aerate the water. The tank was positioned so Ba'al couldn't see it. He either had no idea what fate awaited him, or was certain escape was still a possibility, because the host was still alive.

Scout turned his head to make eye contact with the new arrivals as they finally came to stand beside him. He gave them an acknowledging nod, then eyed the diminutive healer. "You may begin."

The scanner activated, sweeping over Ba'al's body as it had previously, but this time the color was different, a radiant purple. The Goa'uld gasped as the beam struck his body and held, and he stiffened, back arched, neck cored and straining, hands clenched. He balanced on his toes as though suffering a massive electrical shock, his blood-curdling scream of agony splitting the quiet
of the room.

Daniel's mouth dropped open in surprise, and he glared first at Scout and then at Rhami. "Hey!"

He hadn't been made aware that torture would be part of the process of separating host and symbiote.

Jack looked grim but said nothing, standing at parade rest with flinty gaze fixed on the former System Lord. Ba'al had done far worse to him.

Scout turned to face Daniel, obviously startled by his outburst. "What's the matter?"

Rhami, the Grass Clan healer, didn't look up from her machine.

"What are you doing to him?" Daniel demanded. He stood on the far side of the force field that separated the cell from the lab.

"What we promised," answered Rhami. "Look." She lifted her gaze from the instrumentation panel to the aquarium and nodded toward it.

The tank brightened with an azure glow and, as the light faded, the long, serpentine body of a mature symbiote materialized in the water. The creature thrashed in the container, snapping at the glass in silent fury, then coiled and sprang for the top, only to bounce off the clear lid over its prison.

For a moment, Daniel just stared at it.

_Could it be that easy?_ he wondered.

He turned to look inside the cell at the man standing there -- Ba'al's host, now an ordinary human being once more, after thousands of years of imprisonment in his own body.

He looked stunned, shaken, and as his knees gave way beneath him, he sat down hard on the bed behind him. Disbelieving, he held up his hands, which were now under his control again. As he studied them, tears gathered in his eyes, and he lifted his awestruck gaze to the Furlings. "Thank you," he whispered, his voice quavering. "Thank you."

"What's your name?" asked Daniel gently. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mikha raise his arm and begin programming the release on the force field, preparing to set the man free.

The host gusted a shaky, brief laugh. "It has been so long, I am not certain I remember." He smiled and looked down at his hands again. "I cannot believe it! After all this time." He reached up to blot at his eyes with his torn sleeve.

"Take your time," suggested Scout kindly. "If you can't recall, perhaps we can help you search your memories for your name."

"You have given me the greatest gift," the man told them with a trembling, grateful smile. "I wish to offer you something in return, but I have nothing useful. All I can tell you for certain is that the demon who lived within me did not know the location of the Burning Gate. The clone, the one whose life you tried to save -- he was the one who possessed that information."

Rhami wandered over to stand beside them. "Thank you for your honesty, friend."

Sparkles flashed along the perimeter of the cell as Scout powered down the energy barrier.
Daniel stepped across it immediately and extended his hand in friendship. "Welcome to the Gaia," he said with a smile. "Let's make you comfortable, and when you're ready, you can tell us everything you remember about the Burning Gate. You might still be aware of something that could help us find it."

Jack stood back with arms resolutely crossed over his chest, looking forbidding and dangerous.

Apparently, the host was painfully aware of his hatred. He came forward, dark head bowed before the General, shoulders slumped, body trembling, voice quavering and wholly human. "I am so sorry for what the demon did to you through my hands," he whispered. "Please, General O'Neill, know that I am innocent of the crimes of Ba'al. As his unwilling vessel, I had no choice."

"I know that," said Jack gruffly.

The host placed his hands on his chest and whispered, "I offer you my life, to take in whatever fashion will satisfy your need for justice." He bowed deeper.

O'Neill's hands came down at his sides, and he took a step backward. His gaze moved to the aquarium where the symbiote splashed angrily in the water, then down to the top of the host's head, and finally, up to meet Daniel's guarded gaze.

Daniel saw the uncertainty in Jack's eyes and understood. O'Neill didn't know how to feel about this poor soul. He knew the face as Ba'al, but now the man spoke with a normal voice, deep and soft. Jack understood the hold the symbiotes had on their hosts, but this man's glittering brown eyes had been the ones looking into his as he'd tortured Jack to death over and over, restored to life in a sarcophagus, only to be murdered again, for days upon days.

That would be a difficult thing with which to find any kind of peace.

Wordlessly, Jack pivoted on his heel and left the laboratory.

The host turned confounded eyes up to Daniel's face. "Of all those who have been murdered at my hands," he whispered brokenly, "your friend suffered the most. I cannot die in peace unless I know-."

"Give him time," Daniel told him gently, patting his shoulder. "This won't be easy for him. Or for you."

The man nodded and exhaled a weary sigh. He turned slightly and truly looked around the room for the first time. When he saw the tank with the symbiote in it, he wrenched his head away, breathing hard, staring at the floor. "Please. Get me out of here. I cannot bear to be near that… thing."

"Of course." Daniel gestured toward the doorway. "This way. We have rooms prepared for you."

Rhami stepped up, touching Daniel's sleeve to get his attention. "I will accompany him. The elder wishes to speak with you on another matter." She slipped her small hand into the host's and led him out of the laboratory, free at last.

Daniel felt good about that. His heart was lighter, certain he and his Furling friends were cutting a path of good and righteousness through the galaxy. With a smile, he turned to face Mikha and waited.

The elder's expression was somber, concerned. He seemed a little reluctant to speak, and hesitated, taking a breath, holding it for an instant before letting it out with a sigh. He shook his head, as if
arguing with himself, dropping his gaze to the floor. At last, he lifted his chin and made eye contact, his expression serious and a little sad. "We have a location for Zeus," Mikha told him. "We can continue to seek the Burning Gate, or we can go after your enemy now. The choice is yours, el-Dani."

Shock skittered through Daniel. For a moment, he couldn't form a coherent thought.

He put one hand on Daniel's shoulder and squeezed. "We made a vow to you to deliver justice to your people," the elder added quietly, dropping his hand back down to his side. "Only you can decide what that is. Think well on this, and give me your answer when you're certain what you want to do next." He turned away and headed for the exit.

Daniel understood the choice he was being given. He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and let the memories come. As always, they took his breath away, burning in his heart.

_Earth, beautiful Earth, shattering into flaming bits._

_ Zeus, smugly looking down his nose, reveling in Daniel's shock and grief._

The decision was immediate, and Daniel spoke before his friend reached the doorway. "We hunt for Zeus," he called. "How close are we?"

Mikha stopped but didn't turn around, just spoke over his shoulder, eyes downcast. "A few days. We'll be joined by more of our ships, so we'll have power sufficient to defeat the army he now keeps with him. The battle will take place in space."

Finally, the elder pivoted to face him. "What will you do with him when he's captured, if he isn't killed in the battle?"

"Even if he dies," Daniel shot back, his guts clenching, "he can be restored in the sarcophagus he'll have on board his ship. One way or another, he'll be taken alive."

"And then?"

Instincts of torture and other violence careened madly through Daniel's mind, but he shook his head, trying to get rid of them, sure that wasn't the answer. Mere physical pain wouldn't touch Daniel's requirements for justice. He studied Mikha's haunted face. "I don't know," he answered softly. "I'll figure that out when I look in his eyes."

For a moment, the elder was still and silent. "There's a vast difference between revenge and justice, friend."

Daniel nodded. "I realize that." Needing to move, not able to stand still any longer, he strode past his friend, heading for his private sanctuary. It was a long walk from the labs. Hopefully by the time he arrived, he'd have some idea what needed to be done. It was necessary not just to satisfy his own selfish needs, but for all the others who had survived the destruction of Earth as well.

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**July 5**

**Four Days Later**

Daniel stood on the bridge alongside Jack and the rest of the command crew, staring at the three-
dimensional holographic display in the center of the room. The circular device gave a floor-to-ceiling perspective of space all around the ship, creating a panorama in much smaller scale; it gave them a complete view of the exterior of Gaia, as well as the two other ships approaching. Both were Furling crafts; one was a starship of the same design as the one in which they stood, but the other held a crew of only Mountain Clan and was a vastly different design, a monstrous craft that dwarfed the two starships.

The Muairh, as the larger vessel was called, would be bringing the two sword-shaped craft into a pair of docking bays on the bottom of the massive battleship. The main body of the ship was V-shaped, like the folded wings of a raptor diving toward its prey, the sweeping extensions bristling with weaponry and gleaming cobalt-blue armor trimmed in gold. Nestled into the crux of the outer hull was a thick, multi-level structure composed of what appeared to be hundreds of decks, dotted with windows that were either lit with a warm amber glow or darkly reflecting a surface of iridescently-hued glass. The upper structure, positioned between the points of the sweeping outer wings, divided into a second V, to which an enormous wheel was fixed.

It resembled a Stargate, much larger than any planetary device, yet smaller than the Ori's Supergate.

As Daniel watched, the wheel tilted to a new angle and began to spin. Orange chevrons lit up at regular intervals, and after they locked into place, a giant kawoosh belched out into space behind the ship. Once the event horizon stabilized, an army of Forest Clan fighters hurtled into the great ship's wake. Some of the newly arriving craft headed toward Gaia's many docking bays, the others disappeared into her sister ship, the Hala.

Once the reinforcements were all safely aboard, the Hala eased into docking position with the Muairh. When that delicate operation had been completed, Gaia would be piloted to a second berthing station on the battleship's hull.

After the three vessels had been joined together, they would be closing in on the Goa'uld armada, just a few days' journey ahead of them. The sheer size of the Muairh was intimidating and sent a chill through Daniel as he watched the other ship fasten itself to the underside of the battle cruiser.

Jack pointed into the holograph, at the great wheel attached to the back of the cruiser. "Are there armaments on that Stargate?" he asked, studying the images intently.

"Yes," answered Captain casually. "The loah is capable of tilting and rotating as the cannons on the outer edge are being discharged."

"Can I see the specs on the weaponry?" Jack was twitching a little.

Daniel couldn't decide if that was because he was excitedly curious about the big honkin' space guns, like a little kid with a new toy, or wary. Either way, Daniel's thoughts were on their quarry, not his companions.

"As you wish," Captain declared. He stepped around to Jack's side and showed him how to operate the holograph controls to search for design information on the Muairh.

Still, Daniel found his attention fixating on Captain's narrative as he answered Jack's questions, and Hunter's barely-remembered words of warning came back to him once more.


He felt his belly tighten as he realized just how much firepower the Furlings had at their disposal;
he didn't see how any enemy could defeat them, in the long haul. Zeus and his Ting-sha, now
desperately fleeing through space, didn't have a snowball's chance in hell against these three ships.
They'd catch up in a few days, and the last Goa'uld's rule would be over.

Daniel turned away, needing to think, and found himself wandering aimlessly through Gaia's
corridors, still ruminating on the issue of justice versus revenge. He couldn't concentrate on work
and needed a distraction. Maybe talking to someone would help.

He found himself outside Mikha's apartments and realized he hadn't seen his friend since breakfast.
He went inside and gave a tight smile to Jet, the Forest Clan null who was part of the elder's
household.

The Furling looked a little stressed.

"Hey, Jet," Daniel called. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no. All is well, friend." His dark blue eyes shifted toward the interior of the apartments, and
he hurried to the doorway as Rhami came into the room. The null bent down and spoke with the
healer in whispers, so Daniel couldn't hear. Jet looked even more upset now and shot a glance at
Daniel.

"What's going on?" Daniel demanded. They were hiding something from him; that much was
obvious.

Jet straightened and thanked the healer, who left the apartments without acknowledging Daniel's
presence.

Red flags went up. "What was that about? Why was Grass here?"

The Furling spoke to his boots. "My master is not well."

A shiver of surprise made Daniel's hair stand up. The elder, he knew, was never sick. He hurried
toward the doorway, concerned now. "Tell me what's going on," Daniel demanded as the null fell
into step with him.

Jet's expression shuttered closed. "It is not for me to say," he returned enigmatically.

Daniel went right into Mikha's bedroom. If the elder had been human, there would have been
closed doors and knocking, but Furlings didn't do things that way. If Daniel wanted to talk to
someone, he was expected to just barge right in, no matter what the other person might be doing.
They did it to him, and he had the same rights with them.

Jet hovered at the doorway. "Shall I stay?" he asked his master, "or do you wish to be alone?"

Scout was just pulling a tunic over his head. "All is well," he replied, an edge of tension in his
voice, muffled by the clothing. Once he had the shirt in place, he pulled his hair out of the collar
and tossed the dark green mane over his shoulder, giving it a quick stroke with his fingers to make
sure none of the long strands were sticking up. He glanced up at his visitor and flashed a sad
smile. "We're fine," Scout assured his steward.

The null gave his master a little bow and left the two alone.

"I didn't expect to see you until the evening meal, Dani. What brings you here?"

Daniel didn't answer the question, asking one of his own instead. "What's wrong? Why was Rhami
Mikha shook his head, gusting a little chuckle. "Merely a temporary inconvenience," he answered with a wry smile. "No need to worry. I'll be accompanying you when we board Zeus's ship, after his army has been defeated." He reached for a sash and tied it about his waist. When he finished, he gave his head a little toss to get his hair out of his way, then tied it back with a length of short black cord he pulled from his trouser pocket.

Daniel couldn't help being a little suspicious, but decided to let the attempt at reassurance at least appear to have been successful. "Good. That's good. You should be there." He found he wanted that very much, needed it, in fact. He had come to depend on the Furlings' wisdom and counsel, but particularly Mikha's opinion. If anyone could help Daniel sort out what to do with Zeus, it would be the elder.

"I wouldn't miss it," Mikha told him with a smile. "We will catch up to him in three days, friend. Be ready."

"I will," Daniel promised. He had put away his concern for his friend when he'd first arrived, but the healer's presence nagged at him. "You'd tell me if anything were wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Of course." Scout glanced at his hem, tugging until he had it straightened to his liking. When he looked up at Daniel, his smile seemed contrived, pasted on. He was lying, and Daniel knew it.

Something was wrong with the elder. The Furlings were keeping secrets from him, and this wasn't the first time.

Still, in a few days, everything would be different. Daniel might be dead. Gaia might be destroyed in the battle. Or Zeus might have had justice meted out to him by Daniel Jackson, who still had to decide what to do in the event that actually happened.

After a soft-spoken farewell, Daniel turned away and left the apartments, continuing his aimless prowling of the ship, uncertain that he would ever truly be ready to come face to face with the monster who had destroyed his world, and now distracted by the secrets his friends were obviously not sharing with him. He was worried, and with so much at stake, that was not a good place to be.

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**July 8**

**Three Days Later**

Daniel ran his hands over the rough fabric of his old BDUs, pulled from storage in his quarters just for today. He hadn't worn the uniform since he'd adopted a Furling wardrobe, and the human clothing felt scratchy and oddly alien.

"All set?" asked Jack, appearing in the doorway of Daniel's quarters, his P-90 strapped over his shoulder, a zat holstered on one hip, his sidearm on the other. O'Neill had declined the Furlings' offer of a s'resh of his own. Jack had wanted his own uniform for this battle; he'd argued with them about it and insisted he wear his own clothes. He might have a slight disadvantage not having the helmet with its fancy heads-up display, translator, and cool gadgets, but Jack preferred the familiar.
Daniel had agreed with that idea. The rhythm of gearing up felt like he was finally where he was supposed to be -- going out to save the world again… only there was no longer a world to save. The mission was different this time, but no less vital.

"How much time do we have?" he asked, doing a final verification of the contents of the pockets of his tactical vest. He checked the Beretta on his hip and fingered the zat strapped in the holster under his left hand.

"Locked and loaded," Jack told him. His expression was set, all business. Only his eyes glowed with the maelstrom of emotions swirling inside him. "They're just waiting for us on the bridge."

"On my way," said Daniel, ready for battle. "Can they see the ha'tak?"

"There's about forty of 'em," Jack reported, falling into step beside Daniel as they moved out into the corridor. "Zeus's mothership is in the middle of the pack."

"Forty!" Daniel was surprised by the number. "Do you think the Goa'uld still have a chance?"

Jack's expression turned grim. "There's always a chance, Daniel, but from what I've seen of these folks, it doesn't look good for the Goold. Just a matter of time, and the Furlings are damned patient."

Daniel nodded. His eyes aimed down the corridor, he took big steps, arms swinging at his sides, hands curled into fists, mouth set in a firm, determined line.

Today was one year since he'd watched Earth explode; one year he'd been homeless, lost.

It was also his birthday -- not that anyone else remembered -- and there were only two things he wanted to receive above all else: to see Zeus cornered in a trap he couldn't escape, and to be the one holding a gun to the monster's head.

Like the Furlings, he would have to be patient, to wait and watch and let his alien friends fight the battle their way, with Sky Clan acting as lookouts and guides, Grass Clan maintaining defense of their ships, Forest Clan streaking through space in their fighters in battle with Jaffa pilots, and Mountain moving inexorably forward, annihilating everything in their path.

Once that was done and the way was cleared, parties of Furlings would begin boarding the ha'taks and taking prisoner whatever enemy forces would lay down their arms.

Daniel and Jack would be part of one such team, accompanied by Mikha, Denali, and a handful of other Mountain giants, and once they arrived on board the flagship of Zeus's armada, nothing would stand in their way.

Chapter 38: Omega Day

July 8

Gaia Transporter Room

Daniel stepped onto the transporter, his right palm grazing the Beretta strapped to his hip as his gaze roved restlessly over each face in the boarding party: Jack O’Neill and el-Mikha, along with Denali, Everest, Kilimanjaro and Fuji of the Mountain Clan.
As everyone crowded together to make room for the giants, Mikha jostled against Daniel on the pad. "You should've worn your s'resh," the elder advised quietly. "You need the protection it might give you."

"I want him to see my face," Daniel ground out, eyes straight ahead. "I want him to see me coming."

"That he already knows," Mikha returned, an ominous note in his voice.

"Yes, I suppose he does," Daniel agreed, nodding. "I've certainly left enough messages for him."

"Heads up, eyes open, everyone," ordered Jack, checking his weapon and releasing the safety on the P-90. "We're goin' in hot." He glanced at his old friend and added, "MacFarland's gonna be sorry she missed this, Daniel."

"As long as we get the bastard, I think she'll get over it," Daniel returned tightly, drawing his Beretta from the holster. He cocked his arm, pointing the muzzle at the ceiling, and thumbed off the safety. "Let's go."

He nodded at the Furling manning the transporter controls, his gaze flicking to Captain's face just as they started to dissolve into pure energy. Gaia's commander had tears in his eyes, and he'd been looking right at Daniel. Maybe he'd been saying goodbye. Everyone knew chances were high that not all of the boarding party would be coming back to Gaia.

From the moment they arrived on the Goa'uld flagship, there was no time to think. Staff weapon blasts at the materializing group scattered them in all directions. Twenty or more Ting-sha near the front of the ring room fired at them from behind storage crates and just outside the entrance. The boarding team returned fire, clearing their way to exit the transporter bay.

Everywhere Daniel looked, Jaffa and Ting-sha were running, wide-eyed, terrified. His reputation had preceded him; just making eye contact with him caused some to lay down their arms. When he saw the fear in their faces, he found it grimly satisfying, even though his quarrel wasn't with these misguided slaves, after all, but with their master.

Numerous cloaked Sky Clan had boarded the *ha'tak* in advance of the team's arrival, searching the spacecraft for Zeus; their reports had been filtering into Daniel's ear through the Furling comm link, so he knew his quarry was in the throne room. With every stride he took towards his archenemy, Daniel's memories of Earth's demise fueled his rage and hatred into a star-bright blaze.

Flanked by Jack on one side and Mikha on the other, the four Mountain giants behind them bringing up the rear, Daniel double-timed it down the wide corridors, all of them returning the volleys of those who still resisted, the best and fiercest of Zeus's personal guard, his most ardent believers.

Weapons fire dwindled as they approached the heart of the Goa'uld mother-ship; the tide had turned long ago, and there was no way for the Jaffa to win and save their master. Word of Daniel's arrival had spread, and as soon as the Jaffa and Ting-sha security forces saw the face of the man who hunted their god, they seemed to finally accept that the battle was over.

Daniel peered around the last corner and saw the entrance to the throne room was empty, save for one man -- Zeus's First Prime -- his golden forehead tattoo glinting in the light as he shifted uncertainly on his feet.

When Daniel and his party stepped into view, the Jaffa staggered back against the bulkhead,
gargling a strangled cry of defeat, as if he couldn't decide whether to shoot his staff weapon any way and martyr himself, or lay down his arms in surrender.

el-Mikha made the decision for him. A high-pitched whine sounded as the elder fired his *tissé*, and the First Prime jerked and crumpled to the floor, stunned, leaving the doorway unguarded.

Daniel stepped over his body and peered around the doorframe into the great hall, but there were no further signs of resistance. Boldly, he strode across the threshold, followed closely by Scout, Jack and the giants. The room was empty, save for the golden-haired man standing defiantly before his throne. Not a single bodyguard was left to offer protection to their defeated god.

As Daniel approached, he saw that Zeus's chin was up, but in spite of his confident stance, the Goa'uld was sweating and appeared nervous, his haughty expression belying the air of uncertainly that clung to him.

Daniel headed straight for him, Beretta raised, right arm extended. He didn't stop walking until he stood with the pistol's muzzle inches from the Goa'uld's forehead. In his peripheral vision, Daniel saw Jack move just into view on his left side. Without looking away from Zeus's face, Daniel spoke over his shoulder to his old friend. "You got him in your sights?"

"Affirmative," O'Neill shot back. "We all do."

"Right, then." Daniel stepped backward, out of Zeus's reach, maintaining eye contact with his enemy, still talking to Jack. "I'm gonna put my pistol down. You look after it for me for a minute. I have something to take care of, and I don't wanna take a chance on losing it."

"You got it."

Daniel thumbed the safety on, then squatted down, still maintaining eye contact with Zeus. As soon as he could reach the floor, he slid the pistol in the direction of Jack's voice without looking to see if he'd sent it along correctly. The abrupt halt to the skidding sound verified that he'd aimed true.

He took a deep breath as he stood up, gathering himself, and then using all his might, he threw a punch at Zeus's face. His fist bounced off without impacting, accompanied by the sizzling sound of static electricity as he hit the personal defense shield around the alien.

"Crap!" Daniel shouted, clutching his right hand. The pain was only momentary, but he knew any further attacks would be useless.

Zeus grinned, ego bolstered by his protective device.

"Ah, Daniel?" Jack's voice sounded nonplussed, but Daniel wasn't about to look at him. Not now.

"What?" Daniel was furious. He flexed his hand, wishing he knew where the controls were to that shield. He could use telekinesis to switch it off if he just had that little tidbit of information. Unfortunately, it could be anywhere on Zeus's body armor.

"Did you notice this Goa'uld is unarmed?"

Instantly, Daniel glanced down at Zeus's hands. There was no golden metal ribbon wrapped around either wrist, no gleaming caps on his fingertips.

"That's… unusual," Daniel observed. His rage was starting to fade now. This situation required reason, and he needed all his wits about him. He wrestled for control with his inner demons, thinking, thinking. Something wasn't right about this situation.
At last the Goa’uld found his voice. "You cannot harm me, you fools!" he taunted. He lifted his hands in triumph and laughed. "I am a god!"

"You're an asshole," Daniel barked.

**Why wasn't Zeus armed?** That didn't make sense.

Rather than deducing the answer to that question, an idea came to him. He reached out, quickly searching for the perimeter of the protective field. As the barrier zapped his palm, he backed off a fraction of an inch.

From deep inside him, Daniel summoned up an enormous reserve of energy and discharged it.

Lightning jolted from his fingertips, skittering all along the invisible shield, but didn't penetrate it. The light show was impressive but harmless to the Goa’uld inside; still, it had the desired effect.

Zeus leaped backward, his expression wide-eyed with fear and shock. He recovered quickly, frowning and clenching his fists in impotent fury. "I should have killed you when I destroyed your pitiful little world!" he snarled viciously.

"Yes," Daniel agreed, his voice thick with hatred, "you should have, but you didn't, and now that mistake has come back to bite you on the ass. You murdered billions of people, enslaved billions more, and now you're going to pay."

"If you expect me to feel remorse or guilt, you are sadly mistaken," the alien hissed. "Given the opportunity, I would wipe out all the rest of your kind for what they have done to my people. Have you forgotten that, you insignificant speck of dust?" His eyes glowed white with cold rage, and flecks of spittle flew from his lips as he spoke. "You are no innocent, either."

Daniel started slowly pacing in a circle around his enemy, maintaining eye contact as he herded Zeus toward the doorway, until they were well into the middle of the cavernous room. "I've had a year to think of an appropriate punishment for you," Daniel growled, "but there isn't one." His insides were twisting up, his heart pounding against his ribs.

At the edges of his visual field, he could see the all the others in his party. Jack and Scout stood closest, the four giants positioned near the entrance, cutting off the only path Zeus might use to escape. Every weapon was aimed and ready, but his friends were waiting for Daniel to act.

He was barely able to focus on the face of the abomination standing in front of him. He wanted to shoot the monster and keep on shooting, until Zeus’ brains were splattered all over his gaudy golden throne, but Daniel knew it wouldn't be enough. Taking his revenge in that way would be too quick, and Zeus's pain would be too fleeting. Daniel’s twisted fantasies of slow torture, gradual dismembering, blood, and never-ending screaming shot through his mind, but none of that came anywhere close to satisfying.

He stared into Zeus's blue eyes as the rage and hatred seeped out of him, slowly realizing that no punishment he could conceive would serve his purpose. He had no resolution for what needed to be done to make this monster atone for his crimes. Whatever happened, Daniel knew, would not be going down in that room.

The war was over, but there was still no peace. Zeus had been captured and would answer for his actions somewhere else. Maybe they'd take him to Alpha and hold a trial. The Furlings would probably separate symbiote and host, and the rest of the survivors of Earth could choose what would happen to the snake.
Or maybe the decision didn't belong to any of Zeus's victims, because their emotions would undoubtedly color any sentence handed down. Human justice would be flawed.

Daniel’s guts were trembling, so he took a deep, steadying breath as another memory slid into place, bringing with it a touch of solace. It felt right. "I'm too close," he whispered hoarsely, finally tearing his gaze from his enemy, shifting to take in the view of Mikha's face instead. His shoulders slumped. "I can't be the one to decide."

The Furlings had told him much the same thing long ago, when Daniel had gone to the Nox in search of the reason for the Ancients’ war against the Third Race. They had allowed him to be judge and jury, because they were too emotionally invested to choose a proper punishment for the crime against them. They had acted with great wisdom, and he had learned from their shining example.

The elder nodded, his expression filled with compassion, endless regret in his eyes. Scout cocked his head, his gaze steady and serene. He took a couple of steps and put out a hand to touch Daniel's shoulder. "Do you trust the People, my friend?"

Daniel hung his head in weary resignation. "You've watched over me for quite a while now, given me the benefit of centuries of your people's wisdom and incredibly advanced knowledge. I may not always understand the choices you've made, but yes, I trust you with my life."

"Then we ask you to trust us with this judgment, and to abide by our will. Can you do this?" Mikha's voice was gentle, caring. He eased imperceptibly closer, giving Daniel’s forearm a little squeeze of assurance.

Daniel knew putting his faith in someone else to carry out such a monumental task would be hard; el-Mikha was trying to tell him he understood. "I will," Daniel acknowledged slowly, nodding in agreement. Daniel's sense of relief was vast. "Whatever punishment the Furlings decree for Zeus, I'll accept. I can't say all of my people will agree, though." He shot a glance at Jack, who looked none too pleased at that pronouncement.

"I don't have a problem blowing the bastard away right where he stands," Jack growled, gaze fixed on the Goa'uld, just a few feet away from Daniel and Scout.

"But I do," Daniel shot back, eyeing Jack sternly. "It's not enough." He glanced back at Zeus with disdain. "Not for what he did to Earth."

The Goa'uld just stared at him, his initial bravado obviously fading rapidly, but not in the expected direction. He was quiet -- too quiet -- and he was smiling as if he had won, not been captured and had his power stripped away forever.

That didn't make sense to Daniel.

Zeus continued to smile at him wolfishly, blue eyes gleaming with triumph.


"No," agreed Daniel, shaking his head. "We'll take him back to Gaia. Then… I don't know." He shrugged, truly bewildered at his lack of certainty. The purpose that had driven him for the last year was gone now, and he felt almost empty. Relieved. He offered an embarrassed grin to his old teammate and friend. "Sorry. This is kind of anti-climactic, huh?"

"I guess the hell." The muzzle of O'Neill's P-90 dropped about an inch, still pointed in the System
Lord's direction, as he bent down to pick up Daniel's Beretta from the floor beside his boot. "It's your call, Daniel," he said, an edge of bitter humor in his voice, "but I still say we kill the bastard. Maybe a couple a times. There's bound to be a sarcophagus 'round here someplace."

Daniel sighed heavily, giving Jack a weary smile. "Ask the Furlings if you can play with him before we throw him in prison." He glanced at the elder, already certain Scout would decline.

Mikha came up beside him and patted Daniel's shoulder as if in congratulation… or farewell.

Forest's amber eyes filled with tears, blinked quickly away. "Now, a debt must be paid."

Jack shouted his name in warning.

Daniel glanced at him, catching a glimpse of horror on Jack's face in the same lightning instant that he sensed someone coming up behind him. Hands grasped his shoulders, and instinctively Daniel knew whose they were.

Zeus!

At the same instant, el-Mikha's hand darted beneath Daniel's hair, lifting his ponytail off the back of his neck in a single, quick upward stroke.

Daniel tried to jerk away when he felt Zeus's open mouth press against his nape; the wet heat of lips and tongue moving against his flesh made Daniel's skin crawl. Teeth closed down on him in a firm bite, and almost simultaneously, a lancing pain drove Daniel to his knees, Scout snaking an arm around his waist to support him and hold him upright.

Daniel cried out as he realized Zeus's symbiote was entering his body, taking possession of him.

*And el-Mikha had facilitated the whole thing!* 

Dimly, as though from a great distance, Daniel could see Jack charging toward him, his expression filled with disbelief and shock. Right behind him, Denali and Fuji were gaining on Jack with their huge strides. The giants were grimacing, teeth bared in helpless grief.

"Nooooo!" cried Jack in horror. "You goddamed bastard!" He aimed his P-90 at Scout and fired a short burst as he ran, but Denali cut in front of Jack and batted his rifle's muzzle upward, then wrenched it from his grasp to prevent him from putting more bullets into the Furling elder.

el-Mikha jerked backward as the armor-piercing rounds blasted into him, blood and bits of tissue and muscle splattering everywhere, all over Daniel's uniform and face. He pitched forward, breaking contact with Zeus's former host, and he and Scout dropped to the floor together, their limbs tangling as they fell.

Daniel valiantly fought for breath and sanity, struggling to maintain control of his body and mind, to shut the Goa'uld out. He had never imagined so much pain, like a light too bright, a noise too loud, and his skin was on fire, all the sensations mixed up together and overwhelming him. He was horrified to feel the creature wriggling inside him, digging into his flesh and the base of his brain, insinuating itself around his spinal column, but he couldn't move, couldn't fight the thing. Shock was setting in, robbing him of his wits.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the ragged breathing of the handful of people occupying it, and the pounding steps of Mountain Clan converging on them.

Then Jack was bending over him. "I'll get it out, Daniel!" he promised, his voice cracking with
terror. He rolled Daniel onto his side, panicked fingers digging into the rapidly closing wound in
the back of his neck. "Hold on! Fight it!" Jack’s voice held the edge of a sob as he gasped, "Oh, God, no."

But it was too late, and Daniel knew it. He was looking right at Scout now, the Furling lying on his
side on the floor in a crimson pool of his own blood. The elder was breathing hard, one hand
splayed over the huge wounds in his chest, the other draped limply over his belly. He had eyes
only for Daniel as he whispered, "Bel’akhk riem, Gaha’ad."

Mute and utterly defenseless, Daniel couldn't give any indication he'd understood. He could only
watch as Scout’s eyes closed, his body relaxing. Then Fuji lifted Mikha in his arms and carried him
away at a dead run.

Jack hopped over Daniel's inert body, kneeling in the blood he'd spilled, one foot slipping in the
gore. He bent down to allow Daniel to make eye contact, cradling Daniel's cheek with one bloody
hand. Their eyes connected -- Daniel could still move them -- and Jack spoke volumes without a
single word.

*I'm sorry.*

*Not your fault. You did all you could.*

*Not enough.*

Then two other Mountain Clan giants caught Jack by the arms, wrenching his limbs back as they
grappled with him and pulled him away from Daniel.

"Traitors!" Jack raged, struggling with them, kicking and doing his best to free himself. "We
trusted you! God damn it. Damn you all!" He choked and gagged on his curses, then shifted his
attention back to his friend. "Don't give up, Daniel! I'll help you. I'll find a way." His voice
cracked and broke. "Oh, God," he moaned. "Ohhhh. I'm sorry! I'm so sorry."

He fell to his knees, his muscles slowly giving up the fight. The Furlings forced Jack's body into a
twisted knot, his face pressed against the blood-spattered floor, until he couldn't move. His
breathing came in ragged puffs.

"Take me!" Jack begged, looking into Daniel's eyes, his plea obviously meant for the creature
inside him. "Take me instead. Please!"

His desperate offer was ignored. Zeus already had the host he'd wanted.

Daniel heard it, saw it all happening, but he couldn't speak, couldn't move. His skin tingled, the
initial pain being replaced by a sense of euphoria filling his head, as if he were about to pass out. It
was like he was hovering somewhere nearby, unable to access his nerves and muscles. His body
refused to respond to his commands, but in spite of that, he felt himself get to his feet and lift his
head.

Heat flashed across his forehead. Without seeing himself in a mirror, he knew what that looked
like. His eyes had glowed white as the symbiote took full possession of his body. The wound in
his neck was now completely closed, sealing the monster inside. In the depths of his mind, Daniel
screamed, but no sound came from his throat. His lips curved up into a triumphant smile, and his
eyes glanced down at his new hands.

Heat flashed across the room, searching for the previous host, and found him crouched on the floor
near the throne. The man stared at him uncertainly, a trickle of blood running over his lips and
down his chin from the wound in his throat the symbiote had made when it abandoned his body.

Daniel felt his right hand come up in a dismissive wave. "You may go off somewhere to die now," Zeus said through Daniel's lips, his voice guttural and inhuman.

"Thank you," said the man wetly. "You have released me from eternal torment." He stood slowly, bowed to Daniel, and turned to the remaining Furling giants, his gaze moving from one face to another as he forlornly wrung his hands. "What shall I do now?"

"Come with us to our ship," Denali invited graciously.

He bowed slightly toward Zeus's new host, giving him a smile. "You will also come with us, so that you may fulfill your part of the bargain our elders made with you."

"What?!" Jack shrieked, attacking his captors with renewed vigor and fruitlessly trying to stand up. "You assholes agreed to this? You set him up? I'll kill you! Motherfuckers! I'll kill every goddamned one of you!"

As if on a pre-arranged signal, the Mountain guards let go of Jack, and Denali fired his tissé, rendering him unconscious. As he dropped to the floor in a heap, the sudden silence in the room was shocking, as if someone had just turned off the lights and plunged the room into total darkness. Kilimanjaro squatted to pick up the General's limp body, heaving him over one shoulder.

"I would be pleased to complete our bargain," said Zeus with Daniel's mouth. "When we have arrived at your homeworld, I will require the return of my flagship, so I may be on my way. Until then, it amuses me to be your guest. I am quite interested in your technology." He gestured toward the doorway.

Denali led the way, Zeus/Daniel just behind him, Kilimanjaro carrying an unconscious Jack O'Neill, while Everest and the former host brought up the rear.

The Furlings' war was over now, but for Daniel Jackson, the battle had just begun.

Psychic retreat had been automatic for Daniel. From the moment he'd felt the symbiote trying to get at his mind, he'd sealed himself off from the invasion. This wasn't the first time he'd been a host, after all. He'd been the unwilling recipient of downloads of numerous alien minds years earlier, and hibernation was the only thing that had saved his individuality and allowed the other minds to eventually be removed from his body.

Not too long ago, Daniel had discovered deep recesses in his consciousness, places where he'd had information locked away from himself, things he hadn't wanted to remember from the year he'd spent as an ascended being. Now, that formerly inaccessible place was a haven for him.

It wasn't a real place in the sense of space and time, but he envisioned it with an ambiance that reminded him of the temple garden at Kheb. He strolled the grounds barefoot, contemplating what would happen to him, now that he could no longer control his body. If he concentrated and listened intently enough, he could hear voices, threads of conversation as if from a great distance.

Most of it he didn't want to know. The knowledge of the Furlings' betrayal was about all he could cope with; he was wounded to the core of his soul. He simply couldn't believe Mikha would do this to him. It didn't make sense. The elder had asked Daniel to trust him, and he had.
An instant later, he'd given Daniel to the Goa'uld as a host.

It was easy enough to work out why Zeus would want Daniel's body. The powers he'd exhibited among the Jaffa would be handy tools for someone who wanted to play god, only what Zeus didn’t know was that those abilities didn't come along with the body -- they were part of Daniel's mind, now shut away, out of reach of the symbiote, and there was no way Daniel would let Zeus have access to that place.

If that meant he had to keep himself locked away forever, then so be it. He needed to stay calm and focused, if he were to remain locked down. Thinking about Mikha's betrayal might push him into losing control, and that would play right into Zeus's hands. That was the last thing Daniel wanted.

If necessary, he could spend eternity in this quiet spot, contemplating his fate. But if he could figure out what needed to be done, maybe, if he were strong enough, he just might find a way out of this Hell.

Chapter 39: Satori

July 12

Four Days Later

Gaia's Bridge

"There you have it," said Zeus, gesturing magnanimously toward the holographic view of the planet in orbit below them. "The home world of the Third Race, site of the Burning Gate." He smiled at the Furling Captain. "I now require my ship to be made ready." He glanced around the elegantly decorated control center. "Though I have great admiration for this one, my friends. Perhaps we might arrange a trade."

"We are still accomplishing repairs to your ship, which was damaged in battle, great Zeus." Captain gave him a slight bow. "It will meet us here in a few days. Until then, we would be honored if you would remain aboard Gaia as our guest."

"Of course." Zeus inclined his head slightly. He was tired of ingratiating himself to these tiresome people. He wanted his ship and crew. He wanted to be worshipped again, and he needed to break through the barrier that kept him from the powers of his new host, if he were going to strike fear into other races.

He was close; he knew it. He could sense the human's mind brushing against his own, restless and filled with emotional turmoil. All he needed to do was draw Daniel Jackson out of his mental hibernation, and then Zeus would make the connection that would conquer his weak human mind. That was how it always worked... but not so far with this human; Jackson was proving a worthy challenge for his new master.

With a sigh, Zeus wandered through the ship alone, making his way back to the chambers that had been prepared for him. They were suitable, different from the ones his host had occupied before Zeus took possession of him, according to his hosts. These rooms had gilded furniture, beautiful artworks everywhere, rich jewel-toned upholsteries. They were apartments worthy of his status -- of a king, if not a god.
He stepped inside and admired the appointments, studying a mural on the wall.

He was terribly bored.

"Great Zeus," called a voice from the doorway. "I have brought the wine you requested."

The System Lord turned to face one of the Furlings -- the first officer, he thought, but he didn't know the creature's name. He thought it odd that they kept such things to themselves. Still, the giant would provide him with a bit of distraction while he waited for his ship to be delivered, and he came bearing gifts.

"Attend me," called Zeus, waving the servant into his room.

The giant was quick to obey. He even dropped to one knee to pour and respectfully serve the goblet to his master.

Zeus made a great show of tasting the nectar. It was a trifle sweeter than he liked, but it would do. He swallowed the whole cup down and presented it again for more. Halfway through the second serving, he started to feel a pleasant buzz.

The more he studied this Furling's face, the more certain he was that this was the executive officer, whom General O'Neill had called Denali.

"Tell me," Zeus inquired with a trace of merriment, "what do you intend to do with the human, O'Neill? It would amuse me to bargain for him."

"We are preparing to send him back to his people, now that we have reached our destination."

"Pity. He might have provided me some spectacular entertainment." Zeus took another sip, and began to feel unreasonably tired, even though he'd only risen from an excellent night's sleep a few hours earlier. The painting that had attracted his interest earlier swam a little behind the giant's head, and with a start Zeus realized the wine in his grasp had been drugged.

He turned on unsteady legs, barely catching himself, and held precariously onto his balance as he sought some piece of furniture to catch him before he collapsed to the floor. He couldn't make his legs work, couldn't speak, but he could see, and he still possessed perfect clarity of mind. Fear crept into the Goa'uld's heart, chilling him to the bone.

What treachery was this?

The giant eyed him with disgust as he got to his feet and set aside the serving dishes he'd just used. "Now, great Zeus," he mocked, sneering, "our bargain will be completed."

He lifted the body of Daniel Jackson like a sack of grain, tossed him over one shoulder, and carried him through the ship to an unfamiliar area. The corridor along the way was lined with Furlings of all Clans, each one staring at him with accusing, dangerous eyes.

He was unceremoniously dumped onto a plain, hard bunk in a stark, featureless cell, empty except for the rough bed and a utilitarian toilet area.

Denali stepped back and activated a force field, locking Zeus inside the tiny room.

"This is your prison," said the giant. There was a touch of haughtiness in his voice, triumph gleaming in his eyes. "You will remain here, well fed, well cared for, in perfect health, until you die."
Two more of the Mountain Clan stepped through the door in the anteroom outside the cell and took up posts, hands clasped behind their backs, staring at their prisoner.

Their attention never wavered, and the hatred in their faces was plain.

As the effects of the drug began to fade, Zeus struggled to sit up. "I demand my freedom," he snarled, his speech still slurred.

One of the guards cocked his head. "You have no power except what you are given," he announced, "and the People choose to give you none."

"I will escape!" Zeus claimed. "You cannot hold me here! My people will come for me."

"Your people have abandoned you," rumbled the other guard. "They are being freed from the hold you once had on them, healed from the damage your kind has done. Soon you will all be nothing more than a memory, a horror story told only in the dark, in whispers."

Zeus got to his feet, screaming expletives at them in Goa’uld. Staggering, he walked right into the force-field barrier, bouncing off it with an electric sizzle that zapped along his skin and threw him backwards onto the lowly cot. He was furious, enraged beyond reason.

Daniel couldn't keep his silence any longer. *They're the Furlings, you monster, and you'll never get out of this room! Trust me on that. We're stuck here till you let me die.*

Zeus froze. He felt the mental strike of the words as well as the emotion behind them like a physical blow. Then he smiled and closed his eyes so he could concentrate.

Only he was totally unprepared for what he found when he wormed his way into that other mind. There was no fear, only hatred and the unimaginable pain of a being who had survived the unthinkable. The force of those memories took Zeus's breath away, and he just sat there, bewildered and lost beneath the assault of Jackson’s powerful intellect and passionate nature.

Daniel had been no ordinary human. His mind was a brilliant light, his spirit forged in conflict and shattering loss. He had given up his body more than once, existing on a purely spiritual plane for a time. Daniel Jackson was still his enemy -- now, more than ever.

Wide-eyed and staring, Zeus couldn't get up, couldn't speak. He was panting for breath now, the heart he'd stolen pounding under the ribs he inhabited but would never own. Desperately, he sought some shelter from the mental storm unleashed upon him, but there was none. Inside that purloined body, there was no place to hide from its rightful owner.

A god, he knew, could not feel regret.

For the first time, he admitted to himself that *he was no god.*

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**July 15**

**Three Days Later**

Daniel needed to rest. He'd kept up a constant mental and emotional attack on Zeus for -- well, he didn't really know how long it had been. Days, perhaps.
An eternity.

Zeus had been pacing for hours now, babbling and waving his arms. He shook and shouted at the ghosts Daniel vomited up from his memory, clenching his fists at them, flinching and dodging as though they were physically in the room.


Every victim of the Goa'uld Daniel knew, every crime he had witnessed at their hands, including the destruction of Earth -- he replayed the memories over and over in a constant, violent stream, focusing his emotions like a laser, straight into the mind of the symbiote. All his grief and horror poured into Zeus like acid through a tiny crack, eating away at the opening between them.

The memories alone were enough to drive anyone mad. Daniel thought he must be at least a little crazy, after all that; still, he didn't let up. If Zeus wanted control of Daniel's body, there’d be a price to pay, and this was it. Though he doubted the monster felt any sort of guilt or remorse, the mental noise alone would be deafening. The force of his interaction with Zeus went only one way, the constant tide of memory and emotion driving the Goa'uld's mind further and further away from blending with that of his host.

This was Daniel's "gotcha" moment, the same dance he'd done with RepliCarter when she'd held him prisoner aboard her ship, probing his mind for the secrets of the Ancients that he’d kept so carefully hidden. She had launched an all-out mental assault against him, and he had responded with evasion and emotionally-powered reasoning, all the while sneaking underneath her radar to seize control of her connection with the vast Replicator army.

He knew how to wage this kind of war, on the battlefield of the mind. After working with Scout almost daily on tactics and defensive maneuvers from the Forest Clan arts of war, Daniel had learned to translate all kinds of strategic concepts, and that preparation now served him well.

*Satori,* he thought. It was Japanese, a Zen term that meant 'enlightenment,' but with shades of so much more: discovery, realization, truth, acceptance.

This was a kind of enlightenment he’d never expected to find, but something else was happening as well; something Daniel couldn't explain. The Goa'uld was deteriorating inside him, losing its grip on reality along with its control of Daniel's body. He could sense it growing sick and weak, its health failing rapidly. Sometimes it was completely silent and still.

For moments at a time, Daniel managed to steal control of his body. Occasionally, he just lifted a finger before the creature woke up and seized the reins again, but what had started as an instant here and there, eventually became minutes, longer and longer each time.

As soon as he could manage it, he walked to the bunk and sat down to give his weary body a chance to rest. It felt a little strange, doing what he wanted, but he was certain it wouldn't last. The Goa'uld was just sleeping, he supposed. He'd beaten it down for a bit.

"I want to see General O'Neill, if he's still aboard ship," he told his guards. "Please."

Ten minutes later, his old friend stepped into the anteroom, his face drawn and weary. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he'd begun to look his age. His expression was wary. "You asked to see me?"

Daniel nodded, amazed he was still in command of his muscles and voice. "It's me, Jack," he said softly, "not... the snake." He waved a hand in the air.
Jack looked relieved, but only for a moment. "How is it that you can talk now?"

"Zeus is sick. I think. Maybe." He dared not hope, but the words came out anyway. "Maybe dying."

"That'd be good."

"Yeah." Daniel ran a hand through his matted hair. He felt gritty, like he'd never bathed in his whole life. Suddenly, he didn't know what else to say to his friend.

After a long silence, Jack said softly, "I'm sorry I couldn't save you, Daniel. I just... I didn't see that coming." He shook his head. "I trusted these folks. We both did. I guess maybe we know now why the Ancients thought they needed to be locked up." He shot a scathing glance at one of the Mountain Clan on guard.

The giant's gaze never wavered, fixed resolutely on his prisoner, but his lips thinned with stubborn pride, and he lifted his chin slightly.

"You tried to help." Daniel gave him a fond smile. "You offered to take my place as host. That means a lot to me."

Staring at the floor now, Jack nodded in acknowledgment. "What did Scout say to you?" asked Jack. "You know, after I shot him."

Daniel didn't give him an exact translation, frowning at his hands in his lap, still puzzling over that. "He just asked me to trust him."

Jack snorted derisively. "Yeah, right after he helped you get snaked, he wants you to trust him? Riiiiight. On a frosty day in hell!"

"You will all die in agony!" declared Zeus, the familiar heat once more flashing across his eyes.

Jack stiffened and sucked in a breath. He glanced away and swore softly. "I gotta go," he said quickly, and left the room at a jog.

"I control you, human!" said Zeus aloud.

"Shut up, Daniel ordered the symbiote.

"I control you, human!" said Zeus aloud.

"Those guards over there think you're talking to yourself, said Daniel to his demon. They think you're a nut job. Which you are."
Daniel felt the symbiote direct his eyes to the guards' faces, and the flush of embarrassment was followed by a haughty lift of his chin as he struggled to maintain the appearance of control.

*Give it up, Zeus. They know how pathetic you are.*

Zeus clenched his fists and roared, "Be silent!"

In the privacy of his mind, Daniel chuckled. *What a ridiculous clown you are,* he told the Goa'uld. *I wasted an entire year hating you, and you weren't worth it. Just a crazy, mumbling psycho, talking to shadows and thumping his stolen chest to make people afraid of you. Pitiful.*

Daniel felt his hands go to his head, clamped against his temples. His blood pressure built rapidly as Zeus roared with outrage and fury, again demanding Daniel's silence. "I am a god!" Zeus roared, pounding his fists against the sides of his head. "You will fear me, or I will destroy you!"

He whirled at the sound of more chuckling, glaring at the Furling guards posted across the room, their eyes no longer accusing, only glimmering with bitter humor.

"Nooooooo!" screamed Zeus. "I am a god! Bow down to me! I demand it!" As he pointed to the floor in front of his feet, a tiny lightning bolt shot from his fingertip to his toes, and he screamed in pain.

The guards erupted in full-fledged laughter at the sight, elbowing one another, pointing and jeering at their prisoner.

*You see?* Daniel asked in the echoes of their shared mind. *You'll never leave this cell, Zeus. They'll be laughing at you as long as you keep me alive, never aging, confined to this tiny, bare little room, with just me for company. I'll always be here, Zeus, reminding you what a failure you are, how pathetic you are, inflicting my pain and hatred on you every moment of every single day.*

*Welcome to Hell, little god. I'll never leave you alone. You made a big mistake, choosing me for a host. Maybe the Furlings knew what they were doing, after all.*

Daniel felt his chin tip up, his eyes sliding closed, as Zeus's defeat washed over him.

In a perverse way, it was the best revenge; no sensation had ever felt so sweet, so welcome.

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**Chapter 40: Justice**

**July 31**

**Gaia Prison Cell**

Over the last week or so, Daniel had been contemplating the events that had led him to this point in time. The connections were amazing, delicately intertwined, each decision leading inexorably to the next. He found himself in awe of the People who had adopted him as one of their own.

From the moment he'd set foot on Furdani, he'd never been alone. The Furlings' advice had always been sound and kindly intended. Their wisdom had been hard-won, borne of great tragedy.

And in the end, they'd been right. El-Mikha had asked Daniel to trust him. Now, at last, he understood why.
Carolyn Lam was smiling as she sat in a small chair outside the tiny, drab little room where Daniel paced restlessly. "Zeus is dead, Daniel. I can't explain it, but the scan we performed just this morning confirmed it. From the rate of decomposition we've detected so far, your body should completely absorb the remains within a few weeks."

He nodded. "I knew the symbiote was getting sick," he said. "I just wasn't sure if it was really dead or just in a coma. Nice to know it's gone for good."

"So. Party?" Her grin broadened.

Daniel glanced around the confines of the cell. "Getting out of here would be nice."

"We're just waiting on official clearance from the Furling medical council," she assured him. "Should be any minute now. We'll be moving you back to your old quarters."

That was good news, indeed, but there were other things on Daniel's mind aside from his pending freedom. "Is Jack still on board?"

"Yeah, he is." Carolyn cocked her head, her joy fading fast. "Funny thing 'bout that. The Furlings haven't been in any hurry to ship him back to Alpha." Her expression grew haunted. "I know he wanted to visit you, but he just couldn't bear..." Her eyes misted and cleared quickly. She didn't have to finish the sentence, but gave him a small, trembling, humorless grin. "It was hard enough for me to come check on you every day, Daniel, but as your physician, I had to. General O'Neill asked me every day how you were doing, and we were so hopeful when we saw the symbiote was really on its way out."

She put her hand to the comm link wrapped around her left ear and glanced away as she listened. When she made eye contact again, she was beaming. "Time to go!" she announced, pouncing to her feet. She studied the Mountain guards outside the cell, drawing Daniel's gaze with hers.

The two giants turned in unison and left their posts. One of them stopped at the control panel on the wall and released the force field that kept Daniel prisoner. With a flicker of shimmering light, the barrier disappeared.

It was if an enormous weight lifted off Daniel's shoulders. "I want a bath," he moaned with obvious desire. "Then maybe to sleep for a week."

Doctor Lam gave him a quick, fierce hug and stepped away, her hand reaching up to the communication device again. "I'll tell the General you're on your way to your quarters. He'll probably be waiting for you when you get there."

He was. The moment Daniel turned the corner in the corridor, he found Jack approaching him at a jog. He swept his friend up in a back-slapping hug, then stepped back and grabbed him by the shoulders, grinning madly, eyes misted with tears. "Daniel!" he chortled.

"Jack."

That was all that needed to be said.

Daniel held up one finger. "Bath."

"Definitely."

"Oh. Thanks."
"You're welcome." Jack turned, pounded Daniel's back again and propelled him the rest of the way down the corridor to his rooms. "You wash up, get some sleep, and let me know when you're ready to party."

That took Daniel two days.

Once he was back on his feet, the humans celebrated in his quarters. Jack and Doctor Lam got stinking drunk with him, and they all gorged on the closest thing to beer, pizza, pumpkin pie, and chocolate cake as the Furling kitchens could create. All too soon, though, the party was over and it was time to go home, to return to Alpha and help with rebuilding a new society.

At least, that was the plan.

Daniel's guests had returned to their quarters to start packing, but he couldn't seem to get motivated to sort through his own things. He just wandered around his rooms, picking up items and setting them back down, glancing at the door as if he were waiting for someone to appear, but he had no visitors. The hum of tiny, invisible wings was completely absent.

The Furlings had conspicuously maintained their distance, staying out of sight, holding their voices down as they passed his rooms, keeping his comm channel quiet from chatter. That had made it a trifle difficult to obtain the information he wanted in a more casual manner, so he finally left his quarters to hunt Rhami down in the infirmary and ask his question directly.

He gazed down at the little healer, uncertain if he were really prepared for the truth. "What's happened to el-Mikha?"


"I want to see him. Is it permitted?"

Rhami gave him a little bow, filled with great respect. "Only you can save him."

Daniel was shocked by that insight. He'd wanted to say goodbye to Mikha before transporting off the ship, but now he couldn't leave, not without knowing the elder would be all right. Scout had earned Daniel's gratitude. Mikha deserved so much more than that, but this was unfamiliar territory for Daniel, and he didn't quite know what he'd say to his Furling friend and mentor.

He jogged to the nearest transport chamber and hurried to the chapel from there. Two members of Scout's household stood outside the doorway, their faces drawn, eyes filled with guilt and grief; this looked like a death-watch. After passing an obviously worried Jet standing at parade rest, waiting for his master, Daniel strode purposefully down the aisle.

The chapel of el was a large, open chamber with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. At the far end of the room was a long, low altar bearing only a small, crystal container filled with water, a beautiful Furling geode symbolizing the earth, and a golden metal bowl flickering with a small eternal flame. Above the table, a holographic circle floated in the air, twirling silently in space, the three-dimensional surface of the ring constantly changing colors. That, Daniel knew, was a symbol of el, with no beginning and no end.

Before the altar, a lone figure was down on one knee, head bowed, still and silent, his dark green hair draped over his shoulders and down his back like a veil. He wore loose black robes, devoid of decoration except for a single mark in the middle of the back, barely revealed beneath his mane: the glyph for Earth.
That was Daniel's personal symbol, no doubt donned as part of the elder's penance. Without being told, Daniel knew instinctively what Scout had done. This was his sackcloth and ashes, and he had probably been here in this room for days on end. If he stayed long enough…

A pang of sympathy clutching at his heart, Daniel advanced quietly, moving up on silent feet until he stood beside his friend, certain he could be seen if Mikha's eyes were open. Respectfully, Daniel waited.

There was a tiny movement. Mikha adjusted his position, shifting his weight from one knee to the other with a barely-perceptible groan deep in his throat. His head flinched slightly in Daniel's direction.

"It’s just me, Mikha," announced Daniel softly, sure now that his presence had been acknowledged. "Zeus is dead."

The elder gave a tiny nod of affirmation, but said nothing. He didn't look up, but kept his head slightly bowed, his face hidden behind the curtain of long hair.

"You didn't come to visit me in prison."

Scout's voice sounded rusty from disuse, nothing more than a raspy whisper. "I didn't believe I'd be welcome."

There was such wisdom here, Daniel recognized. The pieces were all falling into place in an amazing display of brilliance and foresight. "Not at first, no. I think I get it now, but I'd like to hear your explanation. Please."

Mikha loosed a sigh and sat back on his heels. Daniel grasped the elder's elbow and helped him to his feet, gesturing him to a bench in the first row, where they sat down together.

Scout put his hands on his knees, rubbing at them absently. He turned his head slightly, speaking to Daniel's boots, only the barest sliver of his forehead visible. "You wanted justice," he stated, his voice gentle, like an adult explaining something simple to a child, "yet you couldn't imagine what that might look like, because the answer was… unthinkable. It would never have entered your mind to share your soul with your greatest enemy, yet that was the only way you'd be able to find what you wanted: for him to experience first-hand all your loss and pain."

"Yes." Tears misted Daniel's eyes. He nodded. "It drove him mad. In the end, I think it may have been what killed him."

"No, Dani." Mikha's head shook slightly, his hair rippling with the negative motion. "That was the jing in your body. The Goa'uld was doomed from the moment he took you, eradicated as effectively as any infection would have done."

"Jing?" Daniel frowned at the elder. "I've never heard that word before, or seen it written. What does it mean?"

The Furling got slowly to his feet again with a grunt of protest. He stretched for a moment, then sighed again as he finally met Daniel's gaze. "It's the greatest treasure my people possess, given to you on Furdani, after we looked into your memories and saw who you were. Only the elders may carry them, because they are rare and precious, the last legacy of our civilization when we were free."

Mikha looked down at himself and placed a hand on his chest. "The jing are tiny machines, created by my ancestors, el-Dani. Their purpose is to preserve life and health, to repair damage, and keep
us fit. Only the greatest minds and hearts among our people are given this gift, always without their knowledge, when their worth is proven. In time, the secret is shared with them."

He met Daniel's startled gaze again, his face etched with grief and resignation.

"What?!" Daniel was horrified by the announcement. "Do you mean, something like nanites are inside me? Replicators?"

The elder nodded. "That will do as a similar frame of reference, yes, though they are much more than that." He dropped his gaze and clasped his hands behind his back as he stepped away.

"Get them out of me!" Daniel blurted, stepping toward the elder. "Shut them off! I don't want them." His hands clutched at his cheek and chest, as if he might dig them out of his body.

"Nor did I, when I was first informed that I'd been chosen," said Mikha solemnly, shaking his head. "The will of the council prevails in this matter, my friend. My vote alone wouldn't carry the decision, though my point of view is far different now than it was when I agreed you should have them." He gave Daniel a fragile smile and took a step toward the door. "You will live a long, healthy life, friend. Longer than any other of your kind."

Daniel felt the blood rushing to his feet, making him light-headed. He could hardly think. "How-how-how long..." He didn't even know how to frame the question.

"How long will you live?" Mikha flashed him a wry smile. "Longer than you want, no doubt. I certainly have." He shrugged. "But you won't live forever. Your body will eventually age and decline when the jing do, as the quality of their resources diminish. Your lifespan will be many times what is normal for your species."

"Oh, God, no!" Daniel sat down heavily on the pew again. He propped his elbows on his knees, fisting his hands in his hair. He started to rock. "Oh, my God. I don't want this. I don't!"

"It is a dangerous gift, friend. Anyone who desires the jing should never have it."

"Take it back. Turn it off. Get it out of me. Please!" Daniel turned anxious eyes toward the being he'd once called his friend. Now he wasn't sure these people could ever be trusted. While they had supported him and been kind on one hand, they had been devious and cruel on the other.

"That can't be done." The elder turned and gazed down at him serenely. "You'll get used to it, in time. I'm sorry, Daniel."

A snippet of conversation from months ago rushed back to the forefront of Daniel's memory. Scout had told Daniel that he was very old, mentioning that the members of his household were his descendants. Only Mikha hadn't told him how old he was, and Daniel hadn't asked, not then.

As if the Furling could read his expression, Mikha told him, "The average lifespan of Forest Clan is five hundred of your years. I stopped counting long ago, but requested a calculation while you were imprisoned. I am over seven thousand of your years, el-Dani."

"Seven. Thousand." Daniel couldn't believe it. He searched Scout's face for some trace of deceit or exaggeration, but there was none, no trace of humor or deception. This was real.

His heart plummeted into his shoes.

"Close enough, yes."
"Wh-why?" Daniel's question was breathless, stunned. His hands flailed in the air as he sought to understand the motive behind doing such a thing to themselves -- or to him, especially without his knowledge or permission.

"Because we value wisdom above all things." Mikha sat down beside him again and clasped his hands in his lap. "Those who are chosen to be elders must prove themselves with many trials. They must demonstrate their innate kindness and selflessness, putting the needs of others above their own. To be an elder among the People is not to be a leader, but to be a servant; I've told you this before."

Daniel blinked back tears as he met Mikha's warm amber gaze. "But I'm not an elder! I'm not even a Furling. I'm human."

Mikha nodded and smiled gently. "And now you'll be the first of the elders of your people. You'll offer them your knowledge and wisdom, for as long as they need it. Their future will be hard enough with your help. I believe that, without you, they might not survive."

"So at some point in my life," Daniel mused, his voice quavering, tears rolling slowly down his cheeks, "everyone I know will be dead." He hugged himself, head bowed in grief and horror.

"No," said the elder, his deep voice resonating with affection and understanding. He shook his head. "You'll know generations of your people. You'll watch them be born, grow up, grow old. You'll say goodbye to them, and you'll mourn for them. The ache of those losses never goes away, but everyone endures the deaths of loved ones as we go through life. In that way, you'll be no different from anyone else. You won't be alone, el-Dani; none of us are."

He stood up and tilted his gaze toward the hologram above the altar. "In our belief system, we're all connected; the spirit of el runs through every living being, joining us together, soul to soul. Killing our enemies is equal to killing ourselves; the Ancients never understood that about us."

The cosmic irony finally dawned upon Daniel, and he straightened. "You keep too much to yourselves," he said with a harsh rasp of laughter. "You can peer into another's mind, and you assume others know what you're thinking, when they don't. You only answer the question that's been asked, instead of fully explaining. Maybe that's why the Ancients jumped to the conclusion that you were trying to kill them off, instead of blending races with them -- because they didn't ask the right questions, and your people assumed they knew your intentions."

He was reeling from this revelation, but slowly recovering his wits, his mind ticking along a few beats after the conversation. "When did you do this to me?"

"A few days after you arrived on Furdani, while you were injured. We couldn't risk losing you, after viewing your… ascension." Mikha shook his head, smiling in wonder as he got to his feet. "We knew then that worlds would shake with the thunder of your footsteps, and that you would lay your enemies low with a tender hand."

Daniel blushed. Bits of his heart soared with unexpected love for these people as the full embrace of their love and respect for him gently nudged the pieces of his broken soul back into place. "You said I was the first. There are others?"

Scout chuckled and turned away. He didn't answer, which Daniel took as a response in itself.

He jumped up and hurried after the Furling. "Who? Who've you chosen? Have you already given them the jing? Have you told them yet?"
"You won't be alone in your servitude to your people. Several have been chosen, and when the time comes, they'll be informed."

"Look, you have to tell humans!" Daniel countered, touching his friend's elbow. "You have to give them a choice, a chance to say no."

Mikha's expression was almost paternal. "Haven't you learned yet that we have reasons for the way we do things?" he asked patiently. "You'll learn from us, Dani." He gave a nod toward the chapel entrance, giving Daniel the tiniest hint to get him started walking toward the doorway. "Our people learned long ago that one who has fallen off a mountain is far closer to enlightenment than one desperately clinging to the peak. In order to fully embrace life, you must be able to let go of it. We did that when we arrived on Furdani. It is the single hardest lesson for anyone to fully grasp. With great suffering comes great wisdom. We were reckless in our energetic youth. Our imprisonment…" He sighed and shook his head. "It tamed us, in a manner of speaking. As hard as it is to admit, what the Ancients did to us… made us wise."

Daniel stopped walking, suddenly eager to continue learning from Mikha. The elder had seen so much of Furling history in person, had learned so many harsh life-lessons -- Daniel didn't want to lose this opportunity. He didn't want Mikha to believe there was any resentment still between them.

"Come with me to Alpha," he blurted. "I've lived among your people now for a year. You should live among mine for a while, learn about us, teach us." Daniel stepped in front of him, blocking his way. "You're my friend, Mikha. It hasn't always been easy for me to see, but I know you've tried to do the right thing for me at every opportunity. Making me a host for Zeus was--"

He swallowed hard and felt the prickle of tears sting his eyes as memories of the constant, agonizing war resurfaced, along with the distant, duller memory of Earth's destruction. "It was the second most terrible thing that ever happened to me, and there have been a lot... It was also the only justice that would ever have been right for my people. They have to know what happened, and I intend to tell them."

A voice called from the doorway, making both of them turn. "You ready to go yet, Daniel?" asked Jack, hanging on the threshold, obviously unwilling to set foot into the chapel.

"In a minute," Daniel called back.

"I don't believe your friend would allow me to visit your new world," observed the elder wistfully, clasping his hands behind his back and bowing his head slightly, "but I appreciate the invitation. I would've enjoyed exploring Alpha and watching your civilization grow."

Daniel studied him, thinking. "If I extend the invitation, Jack and everyone else will honor it. I'll explain. They'll understand. Eventually." He grinned and nodded toward the door, stepping out of Mikha's path. "Come with me."

"Perhaps. Before you return to Alpha, however, we'd be honored if you'd accompany us on our first visit to our ancestral home."

Surprise and confusion twitched Daniel's brows together. "We've been in orbit for weeks now! Why haven't you--"

"We've been waiting for you to be free of your burden." The elder's expression was kind, glowing with pride. "There are those who shatter beneath the weight of their tragedies, and a few, rare others who summon power from them, el-Dani. You are a summoner. We couldn't have made this journey without your guidance, and none of our race will ever set foot on the planet below without
you in attendance. It's an honor you've earned."

Without hesitation, Daniel turned and called across the chapel to his human friend, still hovering in the doorway. "Side trip, Jack. We're going down to the planet."

O'Neill's shoulders slumped briefly in exasperation. "Are you kidding me? I thought you couldn't wait to get outta here!"

"No hurry now," Daniel shot back. "I think I've got plenty of time for everything I want to do." He steered his Furling friend toward the door. "C'mon, Mikha. Let's go see what's down there."

Two steps later, a thought suddenly dawned, and Daniel turned to face the elder as they walked side by side. He nodded toward the man standing in the corridor. "Is Jack one of the… you know… recipients?"

The answer was in the Furling's twinkling amber eyes and ready smile.

Jack was going to be piiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiisssssssssed.

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**The Planet E-Thien**

When the away team arrived on the planet's surface, it was raining. After Daniel cleared away the clouds, they strolled the magnificent streets of the largest of the aboveground cities. The entire planet had been landscaped eons ago, and even after millennia without care, remnants of that order were still apparent in the low walls edging massive gardens and parks. Streams rushed through tamed curves wending alongside golden streets and silver footpaths, half covered by wild vegetation, but still visible enough to declare how miraculous this place had once been.

Jack walked at his side, the two of them trailing after the rest of the away team. In the distance, a flock of Sky Clan were darting into open doorways, their excited chatter coming clearly through the comm link now back in place over Daniel's left ear. A handful of Forest Clan jogged down the streets, heads turning from side to side, keeping watch for danger, their elder moving at a more sedate pace behind the vanguard. At Mikha’s back, still well in front of the humans, Denali and the elder of Mountain Clan walked with long, earth-shaking strides on either side of Rhami and Hunter, who had arrived on board Gaia during Daniel's incarceration, along with the other elders, just for this occasion.

Daniel's eyes roved over the soaring ruins with their fluid lines and rich, artistic detail, aware of his human companion, but not looking at him. He didn't have to see Jack's face to have an idea what was going through his friend's mind. "Finger off the trigger, Jack," Daniel warned quietly, his voice a low, gentle murmur.

"I could kill 'em all right now," O'Neill stated grimly, "for what they did to you. They deserve it."
He shook his head. "I can't even begin to fathom how you must feel, Daniel. They sent you to Hell! How can you--"

"They did the right thing," Daniel cut in, putting a restraining hand on Jack’s forearm. "They didn't give me to Zeus, you know. It was the other way around. They gave him to me."

" Doesn't make a whole hell of a lot of difference, from where I stand."

"Trust me," Daniel said quietly with a wry half-grin. "The difference is vast."
Jack didn't reply.

Daniel could see he was going to have to do a much better job of selling, because O'Neill wasn't buying. He tried a different tack. "The Furlings are great believers in the power of names. Mine means, 'God is my judge.' They took that literally, and decided I was the only one who could judge the Nox for them. They trusted me to find the right punishment for Zeus, too, but I couldn't see it. Not until after he was dead." He reached up with his right hand, his fingertips sliding underneath his hair to the nape of his neck. There was no scar, no sign he had ever been a host, thanks to the jing circulating through his body.

"Oh, I get it, Daniel," Jack growled unhappily. "That doesn't mean I agree. You'd been through enough. It should've been me."

Daniel shook his head. "You didn't see what happened to Earth," he countered, eyes on the golden street passing beneath his boots as it widened into a beautiful circular plaza.

"Yeah. I did."

"What?" Daniel's head whipped around, mouth dropping open in surprise. He grabbed Jack by the sleeve and spun him around. "You didn't!"

Jack nodded. "Doc Lee accessed your memory by accident. He thought the council ought to." He cleared his throat nervously. "Bill's a sneaky bastard sometimes. Didn't give us a chance to look away from the mother of all train wrecks."

"Oh." Daniel could feel the heat from the Stargate not far away, crackling with flame that covered every surface of the device. He stared at it, contemplating that revelation, then shook his head. "It had to be me. Let it go, Jack. Please. The Furlings are good people, and as hard as it was, they made the right choice, the one I couldn't make. They're still suffering from the consequences, especially Mikha."

"Still wish I'd killed him."

Daniel turned to study Jack's stubborn expression. "I'm asking you to forgive him, Jack. Forgive them. Maybe you can't right now, but later. At least try." He shrugged. "I've asked him to come with me to Alpha. He's my friend, and I want to make that plain to everyone. I have to set an example here. I'm thinking you should, too."

O'Neill's lips thinned and his eyes narrowed, keeping any retorts or argument to himself. He glanced at the ground and kicked at some weeds growing up through the precious metal pavement.

Daniel nodded, knowing that was as good as he was going to get for the moment, and turned to his exploration of the Burning Gate and its unique DHD. In the center of the dialing device, the dome-shaped red crystal was absent. In its place was a circular depression, just the size and shape of the PDHD.

He reached into the pouch at the small of his back and withdrew the device. After lining it up, he set it into place, pressing it down with a satisfying click. The response was instantaneous.

A hologram appeared between the gate and the control pedestal. Four figures of equal height but vastly different build, each about the size of a human being, appeared in a semi-circle, their backs to the Stargate. Behind them, rows of script glowed with deep blue light, so bright it hurt Daniel's eyes to look at them, but he stared anyway, needing the details. Above each head, a circle floated, symbolizing el. One of the figures had a pair of wings affixed to its back.
"The original elders," whispered Daniel in awe. "One for each Clan."

He studied the ancient script, barely recognizable compared to modern Furling writing, and was stunned to realize he'd seen it before.

*On Earth.*

The holographic inscription was written in ancient metaphysical symbols called the Celestial alphabet.

Intuition switched on, and he found himself running, heart pounding, straight at the Forest Clan elder. He skidded to a stop, grabbing his Furling friend by the arm, spinning him around. Daniel was breathless, thrilled, certain of his conclusion, but needing confirmation.

"Your name," Daniel blurted. "What does it mean?"

Scout's brows dipped low in confusion. "It's an exaltation of the glory of el. Why?"

"Who is like God!" Daniel crowed, lifting his hands to the sky. "That's what it means, doesn't it?"

The elder nodded. "Yes. Why is the meaning of my name suddenly so important, Dani?"

"Of course!" Daniel jumped up and down, fists pumping the air. He laughed and cheered, delirious to have solved another puzzle.

"What are you going on about?" Jack demanded, joining them.

"Angels! They're angels!" Daniel was beaming.

"Huh?"

"el-Mikha. Mikha-el. Michael! The archangel Michael!" Daniel pointed at Scout. Then he turned to Hunter. "el-Ur, or Urel. Uriel." He smiled at the Sky Clan elder. "el-Riel. Gabriel." Cocking his head, warmed by his certainty, he glanced at Mountain's elder. "And your name would be some form of Raphael, right?"

The giant nodded. "These are not the names with which we were born, but given to us when we assumed our places as elders. Always the same four names."

"Archangels." Daniel looked around him at the other Furlings, reciting aloud the few true names he knew. "Rhamiel. Nariel. Both names of angels in our history. These four are the el-akhim -- their word for elders -- but I didn't make the connection the first time I heard it. We'd pronounce it Elohim, the children of the goddess, el."

He was breathless, giddy as he looked at Jack, hoping he was making some kind of sense. "The Asgard had to have told the story of the Furlings to the humans on Earth. It's even in this place name, Jack! It's called E-Thien. *Eden!* Look at how it's guarded. The images of four glowing beings with halos, one with wings, standing before the Burning Gate, forever barring the way back to this place. It would be easy to garble the details and change it as the story passed through history."

O'Neill shook his head, but there was an obvious glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "Not buying it, Daniel. Sorry."

Daniel grinned and gave a little chuckle as some of the euphoric excitement left him. "Yeah, I
guess that is a little... out there, as far as theories go."

Still, there was something kind of... right... about the idea. If the Furlings weren't the source of the angelic legends in Earth's ancient history, then maybe they should have been.

It would have made a great story, anyway; one that would never be told. The full truth of Furling history might never be fully rediscovered, but he had plenty of time to look for proof for his wild theory. He wanted to know who they really were, how they thought, what they had learned in the long span of time they had survived.

He would spend a little time teaching on Alpha, then return to traveling through the Stargate or on board the great ship, Gaia -- his ship, given to him as a gift by these amazing people. There were so many mysteries still waiting to be solved, so many histories yet to be written. Human colonies had been scattered among the stars by the Goa'uld, the Ancients, and the Asgard, and they might need help. There were more alien civilizations still waiting to be discovered by other races.

Daniel's journey among the stars had just begun.

"Let's see what else we can find," he told his friends with a happy smile as he headed for the nearest inscription, so he could begin his work. "I have a lot to do here, and I'm just getting started."

FIN

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