Lions and Guides and Igigi, Oh My

Summary

With John back at the helm, Atlantis is developing into a thriving city-state. However, the Wraith are still a threat. When Todd and Michael and the other Wraith characters start making their appearances, the ability of the Igigi queen to communicate on their level changes everything. For example, other Wraith do have a name for Todd—Guide of Old. Oddly, Wraith give Colonel Sheppard the exact same name.
Rodney adjusted the radiation hood on his suit and then had to hurry to catch up with John. As far as he was concerned, this was a waste of time. Even if they found Ford, he wasn't going to thank them for hunting him down. The Genii had heard one or two things about Ford and his merry band of Wraith enzyme addicts, and as far as Rodney was concerned, the man was responsible for his own crazy. However, that's not how John saw things. As far as John was concerned, it was all Ellis' fault that Ford wasn't safely at home in Atlantis right now.

Rodney thought that was a little unfair to Ellis, and considering that Rodney hated Ellis with the energy of a star going supernova, that was saying something.

"So," Rodney said, nearly shouting to be heard over the thick plastic in the suit. He hated the heat inside the thing, but he would hate getting exposed to radiation even more. In his job he'd been exposed to so much already that he lived in constant terror of developing some cancer. Hell, the Genii had nearly fried him when he had John had found their underground lair back in year one.

John gave him a look out of the side of his eyes. "Yes?" he drawled.

"We're opening more gardens and hydroponics. Whoever was in charge of the labs ten thousand years ago really should have been fired. Nothing was properly sealed and we're having to disassemble all the equipment." Rodney held his breath and waited for John to ask about the power required for that sort of operation. While Rodney had promised Radek and Samas that he wouldn't tell the whole truth, he'd also said he wouldn't lie to John.

"Uh huh," John said. He wasn't even giving Rodney his full attention.

"We're having to heat sterilize everything."

This time John only grunted.

"And the water treatment systems are requiring the manufacture of new parts altogether. We've had to open a manufacturing plant in Central-West 3 to handle the extra demand. The Genii are talking about sending us another twenty techs to take some of the burden off the Hoff." Rodney held his breath as he waited for John to ask where all that energy had come from, but John just scanned the trees.

It was Teyla who responded. "It sounds like the work is difficult, but to provide emergency supplies for so many who need it is a worthy cause."

"Yes, yes. I know," Rodney snapped.

John turned and raised an eyebrow at him. "Getting a little hot in there, Rodney?"

"It's better than frying my brain with radiation. Some of us have brains to care about," Rodney shot right back. Immediately he could feel his face heat with embarrassment. He hadn't meant to bite John's head off, but he didn't know how to get John to notice the important part of that sentence. They were burning through power like crazy. If they were truly working off the one ZPM from Degan, Rodney never would have signed off on the work they were doing. And since neither Rodney nor Carter had yet won the race to recharge a ZPM on their own, John should be putting two and two together. Should. Clearly John was not giving Rodney his full attention. And now Rodney had gone and insulted his lover. No wonder he couldn't keep relationships going past the two month mark. At least he hadn't before John, and Rodney couldn't help waiting for the moment
when he would say something spectacularly honest and cruel and John would walk out.

Obviously this was not that moment. John gave him a crazy grin. "It's the hair. Radiation doesn't dare try and penetrate my hair," he said. He then shoulder bumped Rodney. "If you're too hot, you can head back to the jumper and wait."

"John and I can continue the search," Teyla agreed.

Rodney grunted. "This is a team thing, and I'm part of this team." Rodney wasn't about to admit it, but he'd hated the months under Ellis when he'd been banned from going off-world because he was too valuable.

"Yes," John agreed, "you are, but you're a hot and possibly hypoglycemic member of this team."

Rodney pushed away and took point for the two second it took John to catch up and move ahead once again. Teyla fell in next to Rodney.

"You are doing valued work. Our allies are very taken with the idea that Atlantis wishes to provide for refugees who find themselves in need of food. While other empires have risen, such as the Genii and the Sateteans, none have ever turned their technology toward charitable work."

"Sateteans?" John asked over his shoulder.

"Another civilization that grew too technologically advanced for the Wraith to tolerate. Unlike the Genii, they were not able to save any part of their world."

"This really is a shitty corner of the universe," John muttered.

"It is," Teyla agreed calmly. "However, many attitudes toward the Lanteans are shifting. Much of the anger people felt in the face of your mistakes is fading now that people see that, like a child, you are attempting to mend that which you broke."

John turned around. "They think we're children?"

"They think you are young and idealistic and very used to a world where you had control in a way that is not possible in this galaxy."

John rested his hand on the end of his weapon. "So they think we're kids?"

Teyla gave him a small smile. "You have provided some rather convincing evidence to that end."

"The lack of respect around here is shocking," John said in a voice that was clearly teasing. Rodney wished he knew how to do that--how to criticize people without sounding like he hated them. John might talk about how he was bad with people, but Rodney never saw it.

"I assure you, the things we say to your face are far less shocking than those we said behind Ellis' back," Teyla offered with a tilt of her head.

"You? I never thought of you as talking behind someone's back." John sounded genuinely surprised.

"Had he bothered accepting any of my requests for a meeting, I would not have felt the need. I could have said all those things to his face." Teyla's smile looked a lot like the one she would use right before hitting someone really hard with a bantos rod.

John laughed.
"Yes, yes, Ellis was an idiot," Rodney said. He had a limited window of opportunity here, and he needed John to ask the right questions because keeping secrets from his lover was giving him ulcers. "If the man hadn't been so desperate for more power to get Atlantis up and running, he never would have taken the risks he did."

John started down the path again. "Says the man who filed a request to go back to Doranda."

"That research has great potential," Rodney said in his own defense. "And yes, right now it makes more sense to focus on the ZPM project because we need to get more of the city up and running."

Rodney paused, mentally willing John to make the damn connection. Clearly Rodney had overestimated the moron’s intelligence. Either that or John was utterly distracted by this wild goose chase. "However, once we have all the ZPMs recharged, I still think the station there shows a lot of potential."

"I'll bring popcorn when you try to get that one past Elizabeth."

"She just think the sun shines out the Ancients' asses," Rodney snapped.

John stopped and turned around to look at him. "Seriously, McKay, what is wrong with you today?"

"Okay, fine. We found the ZPM charging station, okay?" Rodney blurted out. The words flew out like an overstretched balloon that popped. John blinked at him. "What?"

Shit. Samas was going to kill him. Worse, Samas was going to refuse to do any coding related to any of Rodney's projects. And then Radek was going to kill him. "We found the station," Rodney repeated.

John stared at him.

"We have a total of twelve charged ZPMs, but Radek and Samas said we shouldn't tell you because you're a military officer, and you'll tell your superiors, and your superiors are all idiots. Every last one of them has had all common sense removed as part of the promotion process."

John finally found his voice. "They... what?"

Rodney sighed. "Are you being deliberately thick?"

"Deliberately? No," John said, drawing the words out.

"Radek and Samas said that if Earth knew we had a recharging station they would want to take it, but the station is a critical part of the stardrive itself."

"Which is why you've been having tests on the star drive?" John guessed.

"Yes, yes. Those were recharging events. But my point is that you can't take the recharging station out of the city. Atlantis would literally sink if you even tried, and trust me, it wouldn't fit through the Stargate even in pieces. It's mammoth. And Radek says that Earth will insist that the recharger should be on Earth, which means they'll order us to fly Atlantis back to the Milky Way, and from there it's one short step to telling the entire Pegasus galaxy they're on their own because all the IOC really cares about is protecting Earth and their own sorry asses from the Ori."

Teyla looked alarmed now. "Surely they would not do that."

"Oh, they would," John said. "But this is important, Rodney. Twelve ZPMs would be enough to
help defend Earth. Are they willing to sacrifice our home planet?"

"What? No!" Rodney hated that he couldn't explain this right. When he got excited, he always put things in the wrong order--usually whatever order was guaranteed to piss someone off. "We're working to reverse engineer the process and find a way to recharge ZPMs with Earth technology. Once Earth can recharge their own ZPMs, then they won't need our recharging station. And Radek and I had talked about finding a way to claim we found a ZPM off planet. That way we could send it back to Earth."

"You? You would willingly give up a ZPM?" John gave him an amused look. "Elizabeth would suspect something in a heartbeat." He ran a hand through his hair, scrubbing it until the various bits all changed directions. "How did you even find it?"

"Samas did. Once he knew the formulas for recharging a ZPM, he went through every line of code in the database searching for something that used the same formulas. He found the charging station."

"Oh Rodney." John sank down on a nearby tree stump.

Rodney's heart sank. He shouldn't have said anything. He looked to Teyla in desperation, and she was giving him a pitying look that pretty much said it all. Yes, he was a weak, pathetic man who couldn't keep a secret, even when he should.

"John, I believe Radek and Samas have the best of intentions in their hearts," Teyla said gently.

"Yeah, I don't doubt that," John agreed. "But this is... My planet is in danger. The whole reason we're cleaning out these gardens is that it could fall to the Ori at any time."

"And if you defeat the Ori, will you then close these gardens and tell the refugees of this galaxy to go elsewhere?"

John's head snapped up and he looked at her with horror. "No! I would never do that."

"Then you know your calling is to the people of both galaxies. You must do what is right for all the people."

John started shaking his head. "It doesn't work that way. I'm just a colonel."

Teyla gave him a sad look. "Your rank is not as important as your responsibilities to your people, John."

"I think that's the definition of treason."

"Then you must find a way to serve your duty and your people," Teyla said firmly.

When John looked over toward Rodney, Rodney sort of wilted. It was his fault that John was in this position. Worse, this wasn't the sort of mistake Rodney could take back. John sighed. "We finish this mission, and then we decide what to do."

"Are you going to file a report?" Rodney asked miserably. Samas was going to kill him, and worse, he was justified.

"Rodney, I'm barely more than a major. This is my first real command. I can't go making these sorts of decisions by myself."

"But—"
“Rodney,” John growled. Teyla gave Rodney her best ‘shut-up or I’ll hurt you’ look, and Rodney closed his mouth. That’s what he should have done in the first place. He hated secrets, at least big ones that mattered. People had a right to personal secrets. Like his first name—that was no one’s business. And the fact that Abby slept in a coffin—that was the sort of detail that could land a person on the psychological review list, which was totally unjustified. Yes it was morbid, but objectively speaking, it was only wood and fabric, just like most Earth beds. But when it came to big secrets he always ended up spilling his guts to someone he thought had a right to know.

“Teyla, take point,” John said.

She nodded and moved forward. Rodney opened his mouth to offer to go back to the jumper or to join Lorne’s team or something, but John held up one finger in a ‘don’t-say-it’ gesture that made him close his mouth again.

“Colonel,” Teyla said, her voice quiet. Rodney felt a shiver go up his spine, and John moved into a crouch and brought his weapon up.

“'You have something?'”

“I do not know.” Before Teyla could say anything else, she was surrounded by a red glow. She cried out and then slowly folded, her body sinking to the ground.

“Teyla!” Rodney cried out.

“Down!” John hissed. Without waiting to see if Rodney followed the order, he started moving forward. He had his P-90 up, but the red beam caught him and he dropped like a puppet with its strings cut—silently and suddenly.

Rodney was frozen. He should run for help, but he couldn’t leave his team. When a huge man stepped out of the shadows and moved toward Teyla, Rodney pulled out his handgun. “Stay away from her!” he yelled. His hand nearly shook as he held the weapon. This was his first time in the field in almost seven months. It was supposed to be a milk run—a quick look around to see if Ford had set up shop. The man looked feral with hair hanging around his face. Worse, he had a big gun pointing right at Teyla’s slumped form.

“I mean it. Get back!” Rodney took a step forward, and the man brought his weapon up. Rodney fired, but his shot went wide, probably because his hand was shaking so badly. Teyla and John might be dead already. Knowing that the red light was coming for him, Rodney tried leaping to the side, but halfway to the ground, he felt the heat catch him. Red enveloped him, and then everything went black.
Rodney groaned as his body was assaulted with pins and needles. Okay, so it wasn't Wraith stunner levels of annoying, but it sure as hell wasn't good. Someone grunted, and Rodney pried his eyes open. Teyla and John were tied tightly, back to back. It meant they were awkwardly sitting up and slumped. Rodney, however, had been tied up and dumped like a sack of potatoes.

The wild man crouched at the mouth of the cave and pawed through their packs.

"Hey! Those aren't yours!" Rodney snapped.

"They are now." The man didn't even have the good manners to look at his hostage when dismissing his complaints.

"What sort of logic is that? Do you really think you can just take people's stuff?"

The guy finally looked over. "Yep," he answered.

Rodney narrowed his eyes. That was his pack the unwashed barbarian was going through. "Look Conan--"

"Ronon," the barbarian interrupted.

"What?"

The guy looked at Rodney for a second and then went back to rummaging through the pack. "Don't know any Conan. It's Ronon."

Rodney could only blink. An alien barbarian was named Ronon. That was too surreal even for him. "Seriously?"

The guy snorted. "I think I know my own name."

"That's surprising because you don't know how to keep your hands off other people's stuff."

John stirred. "Rodney?" His words were slurred as if he'd been woken up in the middle of the night. As he struggled, he tugged at Teyla, and her head came up.

"Colonel? Rodney?"

John's eyes were narrow slits, but he looked around, and Rodney could just imagine him cataloging every potential weapon, enemy and exit. John was kind of awesome that way. Finally John's eyes settled on him.

"You okay?"

"Ronon the barbarian is going through my things," Rodney complained. "Hey! Don't touch that."
That is a very sophisticated piece of equipment. And wait a minute. Where's my radiation suit? Do you have any idea how much background radiation there is around here? I'm a physicist. I have entirely too much exposure just in the course of my job; I cannot afford any more millisieverts.

"Teyla, you okay?" John asked.

"My head is pounding, but otherwise I am unharmed. Where are we?"

John's gaze travelled to Ronon and stayed there. "I don't know, but I was just about to ask him."

Ronon stood, a P-90 in his hands as he seemed to really look at John. That was not a welcoming sort of gaze. That was a two-millimeters-shy of sane sort of look he had going. The end of the P-90 ended up pointing right at John's middle, and Rodney couldn't breathe. It was almost as bad as when he accidentally ate lemon. He could swear that he could feel the cells in his lungs just shutting down.

"You might want to be careful where you point that thing," John said. "Looks like you have the safety off."

Ronon brought it up to a firing position, and Rodney's throat closed with panic.

"Okay," John said, and he really didn't seem to be taking this as seriously as he should given the circumstances. "Be that way, but my guess is that if you wanted us dead, we'd be dead right now. So why don't you tell us who you are and what you want."

Rodney found his voice. "He's Ronon," he managed to push out despite his tight throat. "And he's stealing our stuff."

"My guess is that it's more like claiming it," John said. "Right?" He looked up at Ronon, but the man had a kill-face that would put Teal'c to shame. And considering that Teal'c had given Rodney his best kill-glare more than once, Rodney could say that with some certainty. Of course, there was also the small fact that Ronon was way more likely to actually do the killing--that might be affecting Rodney’s judgment. "All right. I'll go first since you're not in a chatty mood. I'm Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard," he said, emphasizing his rank as if that was going to impress a barbarian. Idiot. Rodney loved him, but he was an idiot.

"I am Teyla Emmagan," Teyla offered.

Then the cave went silent. John looked over.

"What?" Rodney asked.

John's expression tightened just a little bit. "Would you like to introduce yourself?"

"Oh. Fine. Dr. Rodney McKay, PhD, not MD."

Ronon stared at Rodney for a second, which was not comfortable, and then he turned back to John.

"Colonel?"

"It's my rank. Military designation.” John glanced over at Rodney. “It means I'm in command." The man was remarkably unsubtle.

Ronon frowned, but the P-90 seemed to lower just a fraction of an inch. "Specialist Ronon Dex."

"Specialist?"
Ronon grunted. "Soldier, early rank for specialized training. Hand-to-hand and small weapons."

That wasn't what Rodney had expected. What were the odds they would run into a Pegasus equivalent of a Ranger or a Marine in the middle of nowhere? Of course, this planet was a great hiding place, but still, Rodney only knew of one culture with military ranks, and that was the Genii. Specialist wasn't a Genii rank.

"Military?" John asked.

"Used to be." Ronon gave a small shrug like none of it mattered. "It was a long time ago."

John gave him a friendly smile, one of those smiles that usually ended with the chieftain's daughters trying to climb into his bed. However, as the man who did share John's bed, Rodney was officially vetoing any bed crawling in this case. Ronon smelled. Not even John's Aqua Velva or Rodney's sunscreen could block out the sour stench of unwashed body.

"And now?" John asked.

"Now I'm deciding whether to kill you and your friends." The worst part was that Ronon said that the way another man might comment on the weather.

"What?" Rodney squawked. He was secure enough in his manhood to admit to a little squawking.

"Rodney, calm down," John said. "We all just need to calm down and talk about this rationally. None of us mean any harm."

"He does," Rodney interrupted.

John gave Rodney a dirty look. Right. Like this was his fault. "Let me handle this, Rodney."

"He's not a soldier," Ronon commented.

John pressed his lips together, and only then did Rodney remember that one of John's biggest rules in the field was to avoid drawing attention to himself. Too many people needed technology big brains to fix their broken down crap.

"No," John admitted, "he's not, and he's not any danger to you. I promise you that if you untie him, he will go back to our ship and not bother you."

"I--" Rodney just shut up when John's look turned furious.

"He tried to defend you two," Ronon said. For one moment, Rodney thought he might not hate this guy, but then Ronon had to add, "and he was pretty pathetically bad at it."

"At least I got a shot off," Rodney said. That was better than the other two.

"And missed," Ronon said.

Rodney was starting to wish Samas was here to eat this guy's eyes out.

"Hey, how about we focus on one thing at a time," John said loudly. "Look, just let Rodney go back to the Stargate and we can figure everything else out."

Ronon shifted his attention back to John. "Stargate?"

"Stargate. Big circle thing."
"I've always known it as the 'Ring of the Ancestors.'"

Rodney could see John almost visibly flinch at the mention of Ancestors. If Teyla started her spiel about how John was an Ancestor but he had issues with it, that was not going to go over well with this guy. He did not look like an Ancestor-worshipping Degan.

"You have men guarding it," Ronon added.

"Lots of men," John agreed. "Highly trained soldiers armed with deadly weapons."

"No matter. I have to make it through. If I have to kill all your guys, I will." And again, there was a creepy calm to that threat.

"Hey, hold on. We didn't come here looking for trouble. The whole killing thing is really unnecessary," John hurried to say.

"I wouldn't kill a scholar. I'll let him go," Ronon said with a glance over at Rodney. On the one hand, Rodney appreciated not being threatened with death. On the other, he really didn't want all his friends getting shot.

"Letting Rodney live is a good start," John said. "It'd be even better if you let everyone live. I'll tell you what. You take me to the Gate and I'll tell everyone to let you through. No one dies, and you can be on your way."

Ronon looked like he was on the verge of smiling, and it was not a pleasant expression. "Why should I believe you?" Clearly this guy had huge trust issues.

For a second, John actually seemed at a loss for words. It was a pretty shitty time to run out of charm, actually. "That's a good question," he said, clearing his throat. "Teyla, why should he trust us?"

From his position off to the side, Rodney could see Teyla's slight eyeroll.

"We mean you no harm. We are only here searching for a friend."

"People don't live here. It's not safe to stay too long."

"I keep saying that, but does anyone listen to me about the danger of background radiation? No," Rodney complained quietly. Clearly he didn't do it quietly enough because John glared at him. That man was definitely not getting a blowjob tonight.

"He is young with dark skin. Our people saw him here many weeks back," Teyla explained.

"I saw him. He killed a Wraith and then left. Why are you looking for him?"

Rodney interrupted. "Better question, are there any more Wraith?"

John made his huffing-annoyed noise.

"Seriously, that's a better question. If Ford is gone, it doesn't matter that we're just trying to help him. He's gone. If there are Wraith around, that's a little more important!" Sometimes it amazed Rodney that he had to justify what appeared fairly self-evident statements.

"If you're trying to help, why did he run away when he saw your people?" Ronon asked, ignoring Rodney's very legitimate concerns about Wraith.

"He's not running from us exactly," John said, and clearly he was the world's worst liar.
"Then what is he doing?" Ronon crouched down and gave John a fairly threatening look. "Exactly?"

"It's complicated." John did one of those weird head-tilty things that Rodney kept warning him just made him look like he was lying.

Ronon rocked back on his heels. "You can do better than that," he said, and somehow that sounded like more of a threat then when he'd been actually threatening them.

"I could, but it's a long story and I don't want to bore you," John said with another head tilt. They were so dead.

"I have time." Ronon put one knee on the ground and just stared at John.

"Okay, but it's boring. Don't say I didn't warn you. We were attacked by the Wraith, and Ford was out trying to protect our people."

"You run from the Wraith. If you're good, you pick a few off. You can't defend against them," Ronon interrupted.

"What can I say? We're very good," John said, "and a lot lucky. But Ford got caught by one. The Wraith was feeding on him. Apparently they inject some sort of drug into you when they feed. Ford pulled the trigger on his weapon and killed the Wraith, but he got an overdose of the drug. It kind of messed him up."

"It made him strong... fast," Ronon said.

"And crazy," Rodney offered. Again, everyone glared at him for no reason whatsoever.

"It made it hard for him to think straight," John said, his glare aimed right at Rodney.

Teyla offered, "But we think we can help him if we can find him."

Ronon stood and whirled around. "What's that?" It took a second for Rodney to realize that one of their radios was making a sound. They did have other teams out searching for Ford, so maybe one was close enough to get a signal through all the radiation.

"Radios," John said. Teyla clarified that with "Communication devices."

Ronon pulled out a huge knife, and moved toward Rodney.

"Hey, you said you wouldn't hurt him. Leave him alone!" John started thrashing in his bonds.

Rodney was too scared to do much of anything as Ronon loomed over him with the biggest knife ever, but then the blade cut through his bindings and Rodney's arms were free.

Ronon turned and gave John a disgusted look. "I said I wouldn't hurt a scholar, and I won't." He then ruined the moment by pointing the knife at Rodney. "Unless you try to fight again. Then I'll gut you."

Rodney had been getting up, but at that he froze.


"Do you really think you need to tell me that?" Rodney asked. That was one terrifyingly large knife.

"I think you don't listen to me, and I'm your commanding officer in the field."
"We're lovers. I don't have to worry about you cutting me open," Rodney pointed out.

John sighed. "We seriously need to work on you and secrets, Rod."

Rodney cringed.

"I am already aware of your relationship," Teyla said calmly. "And I am sure that Ronon will take every precaution with Rodney since he now understands his importance."

Ronon reached out and grabbed Rodney by the arm. "I already said I won't kill the scholar," he snapped, and then he jerked Rodney so hard he nearly pulled him off his feet.

"I'm coming. Geez. Use your words," Rodney snapped.

"Rodney!" John practically yelled, and that was his shut-up, shut-up now voice.

Rodney pressed his lips together as Ronon marched him past the packs, picking up a tac vest before they went outside.

"You really don't have to manhandle me. If you tell me where we're going, I can walk on my own," Rodney said as soon as they were out of the cave and away from John's pissy glares.

"Sit," Ronon said, shoving Rodney at a rock.

"Lovely. See, you used words. Now do the same thing without shoving me."

Ronon walked around to Rodney's front and stared at him. "You must be a really good scholar."

"I am," Rodney said, "only how would you know that?"

"Because that one takes you out in the field when you can't keep yourself out of trouble."

"Hey, I'm not the only one who got shot and tied up," Rodney said in his own defense. "Now what do you want?"

Ronon shoved the tac vest at him. "Show me how your communication device works."

"Uh, you push a button and talk into it," Rodney said. "A monkey could manage it."

Ronon put one foot up on the rock that Rodney was sitting on, which gave Rodney an uncomfortably close look at his crotch. But then Ronon leaned in and put the knife right in Rodney's face, which completely distracted him from the crotch. "Show me how the insides of your communication device works, scholar, and if you lie to me about the technology, I might start to assume you're a spy and not a scholar."

Rodney's guts turned to water and he clutched the vest. "I need tools," he said.

Ronon reached into his dreadlocks and pulled out the world's smallest knife. "Don't be stupid," he suggested as he held it out to Rodney, hilt first.

"Right. I'm going to take you on with this." Rodney took the two inch blade and snorted. "Do I look stupid?" He glanced up. "Don't answer that."

He pulled the radio out of the tac vest and used the edge of the blade to start unscrewing the casing. Ronon watched with an intensity Rodney hadn't expected. "What is the outside made out of?"

"What's that made from?"

Rodney looked up. "How technical do you want me to get?"

"Don't use words I wouldn't recognize, but describe the making of plastic."

This guy might look and smell like a barbarian, but he clearly had more under all that hair than the average Conan.

"I'll try. Chemists take oil, which is a black substance from underground that burns very hot and for a long time."

"I know it," Ronon said.

"Okay, they take oil and break it down into..." Rodney frowned, not sure how to explain the next bit without a course on inorganic chemistry. "They use a process called cracking to break oil down into smaller pieces, into monomers called ethylene or propylene."

Ronon grunted, but Rodney figured he couldn't understand all that. "They add different chemicals depending on what they want the plastic to do and heat the mixture until the molecules start to bond." Rodney threaded his fingers to show things coming together. "The bonded molecules have none of the properties of oil. They're hard pellets, little tiny balls. Then those tiny balls are heated and put into molds to make things like radio covers."

Ronon picked up the plastic piece that Rodney had just pulled off the back of the radio. Running a thumb over the texture, he studied it. Most Pegasus natives would have been completely lost, but he looked like he believed Rodney, even if he didn't understand it totally.

"My people had something like it, but it was harder--more brittle. You mixed chemicals used to keep organic material from rotting and you added white crystals and it changed into something you can mold and shape when it's hot and then it holds its shape when it cools.

Rodney sat up. "That's Bakelite. You get it from joining phenol and formaldehyde so that the condensation reaction of the monomers forces the phenol rights to bind with the formaldehyde into rigid polymers. No one in the Pegasus galaxy has any technology near that... no one we've met."

Ronon's expression shut down. One second he was there--curious. The next his face was utterly blank. "This stuff will get you killed," Ronon said, holding up the plastic bit. Angry now, he flung it off to the side.

Rodney could sense the danger, but he still wasn't prepared when Ronon suddenly grabbed him, jerked him off the rock and turned him around so Rodney's back was against his chest. Worse, the knife pressed into Rodney's neck.

John stood there at the mouth of the cave, his P-90 pointed at Ronon. "Let him go and no one has to get hurt. We don't have a problem with you."

"I told you. I have to get through the ring."

"Okay, we can talk about that after you let Rodney go."

Ronon gave a mirthless laugh. "I let him go, and you'll shoot me. Then we're all dead. Your only hope is to let me go through the ring."
John traded confused looks with Teyla. "Okay, I'll bite. Why?"

Ronon's body went perfectly still. "Because the Wraith are coming."

John took a step closer, and Rodney could feel the point of the knife against his neck. "How do you know that?" John asked.

"I know." Ronon said firmly. A slight tremor went through him. "They're hunting me."

John gave a huff of laughter. "Join the club," he said, but Rodney could see how seriously Teyla was taking this.

She lowered her weapon. "You are a runner," she said in a tone that most people used when telling someone they had cancer or their dog had died.

Rodney couldn't see behind him, but whatever Ronon did, it convinced Teyla. She let her P-90 hang at her side, and John was giving her desperate looks. "I have heard stories, but..." She fell silent.

"Um, what's a runner?" John asked.

"I am." Ronon took the knife away from Rodney's throat, but he kept his grip on Rodney's arm. "I was captured during a culling on my planet. I was taken to a ship where a Wraith started to feed on me. Something made him stop. I wasn't good as food, so they operated on me."

"They what? Okay, it isn't bad enough that they eat people, but they play mad scientist too?" Rodney pulled away, and after a brief tussle, Ronon let him go. Rodney turned to look the man in the face. There was no emotion there--just cold fury.

"They put some sort of tracking device in my back and released me. Hunted me." He grinned viscously. "I hunt them back. But I have to keep running. The Wraith will come here and you and your scholar will die."

"Don't do it," John said, but Rodney's brain was already spinning.

"A tracking device? And it can find you on different planets?"

Ronon gave him a strange look. "Yes."

"It must use a subspace signal. That's the only way. This radiation would make the signal weak, but if you've been using this planet for a while, I bet they know that when you go off the grid, you're here."

Ronon gave him a strange look. "There are other radiation planets I use."

"Well, that's remarkable stupid. Do you have any idea how much damage the radiation can do to your DNA?"

"Better that than the Wraith."

Rodney frowned. "Okay, you have me there. Now show me the tracking devise. Snap, snap. We're losing time here."

Ronon started to turn, and Rodney craned his neck, eager to see the technology, but then Ronon kept turning, and then he was in a roll, and red flashed. Rodney turned, confused, only to find Teyla already down, and John on one knee clutching his right arm which hung uselessly. Already Ronon was on his feet, his laser weapon pointed at John's head.
"No!" Rodney cried out.

John looked up defiantly, but on his knees with a disabled arm, he couldn't do much else as Ronon stared down. Rodney was frozen in place. If he had a fraction of John's training, he could take this guy out. Ronon had his back to him even. Rodney looked at John, but John gave a small shake of his head, ordering Rodney to back down.

"You're lucky I had this set to stun," Ronon said.

For a second, John clenched his teeth. "Look, if you want to go through the Gate, go. Give me the radio, and I'll order my men not to stop you."

Ronon took a step back and gestured for John to get on his feet. Slowly John got up, clearly struggling with his right side. "You can tell them in person," Ronon said, "I'm taking you with me."

The logical part of Rodney's brain worked on differences in the energy pattern of this stunner versus zats or Wraith stunners. The rest of him was so frozen with terror that he didn't know what to do. Months without going in the field, and the first time out his team got taken captive not once but twice. If this guy took John, Rodney wasn't sure what would happen. He might not ever see John again. It was bad enough when John was on Earth, but at least Rodney knew he was safe.

"Okay," John said slowly. "I don't have a problem with that, but you know, there's a chance we could help you."

Ronon gave a rough laugh. "Your scholar can't get to my tracking device. They set it so deeply in my flesh that no one can get it out."

"We know a pretty good doctor. Maybe he could take that tracking device out of you."

"Do you think I haven't tried?"

"Oh please," Rodney snapped, "you've seen our technology and you know it's better than anyone else's. You recognized plastic, so you know that advanced technology can do more than most of the witch doctors that feed people on bone dust and magic. I mean, I'm the first to say that medicine isn't a real science, but our doctors have more science in them than anyone you would have talked to."

Ronon half lowered his weapon, which was very good. He looked from Rodney to John, but finally focused on John. "Why would you do that?"

Teyla moaned and started to stir.

John glanced over there before turning his attention back to Ronon. "Because I'm a nice guy. Look, I told you--you hate the Wraith and we hate the Wraith. It's something we all have in common. We came here for our friend, but if he's not here, we're always interested in making new friends."

Ronon backed up a step, and Rodney skittered away to the side to get out of his path. "And what do you want in return?" Ronon demanded.

"Nothing," John said.

"Actually," Rodney interrupted, "access to the subspace transmission frequencies of the Wraith would be very helpful. If I could get my equipment and scan for signals..."

Ronon looked at him oddly. "You want the tracking device?"
"Yes."

"Okay," Ronon said. And then he just shoved his weapon back into the holster like nothing had happened. Rodney really questioned this guy's sanity.

"Good, it's a deal," John said. "Rodney, as soon as Teyla comes to, I want you two to head back to the Stargate and get Elizabeth to approve Dr. Beckett doing a little field surgery." He started to move toward Teyla, and Ronon's gun was out and pointed at him terrifyingly fast.

"If you go for that weapon, I will shoot you, and this does have a kill setting."

John stopped and held his hands out away from his body. "I'm not going to do anything. I was just going to check on Teyla. She'll go back, and I'll stay with you so you know my people aren't going to try and hurt you."

"John," Rodney hissed.

John rolled his eyes. "Ronon isn't going to hurt me. I'm just sitting with a potential friend until we can get all this worked out, right?"

Ronon grunted. Some days Rodney really questioned John's sanity too.

"Colonel?" Teyla sounded confused.

"You might win with bantos rods, but Ronon here can totally kick your ass with a gun," John said with far more cheerfulness than a normal person. Teyla pushed herself up and looked around, clearly checking the situation.

"So it would seem," she said carefully. Ronon watched her.

"I need you to get Rodney back home and ask Elizabeth to have Carson out here."

Teyla pushed herself up off the ground. "Perhaps it would be best if I stayed with Ronon. We could talk."

John shook his head. "Get Rodney back home. Tell Elizabeth that we have a chance at a good ally here, and get her to send help."

"John," Teyla said, and that was her cranky voice.

"That's Colonel John to you." John emphasized his title to make it very clear that he was in charge here. In the city, John didn't blink when Teyla gave him some order about taking two new Athosians guides or giving someone a leave from a team. She could pretty much order him to do anything reasonable, and he just added it to his list. But right now he was definitely feeling the need to be in charge.

Teyla sighed. "We will return quickly," she said. She looked at Ronon's weapon and carefully moved around him. She still had her P-90, but she left it dangling from its strap.

"We should all go back. If you stay here, Elizabeth is going to think he's holding you hostage," Rodney argued. He was not leaving John behind.

"I am," Ronon said.

For a second, Rodney really didn't have a good comeback for that. "Okay, that's not a good way to start a friendship. Hostage-taking is rude in pretty much every culture."
"Rodney," John said sharply. "Go talk to Elizabeth. That's an order."

Rodney crossed his arms over his chest. He wanted to argue, to find a way to take John back with
them and not leave him behind with an armed mad man.

"I'll be fine," John said. "Promise."

"If you're not, I'm hunting you down and killing you again," Rodney warned.

Teyla wrapped a hand around his arm and pulled him back, and Ronon kept his gun pointed right at
John's head. Rodney hated this, but they were the experts when it came to guns and crazy people.

"I can blow you up more ways that you could even imagine," Rodney threatened.

"McKay!" John yelled.

"Rodney, come," Teyla said, and Rodney let himself get pulled away. The second they moved
around the large rock that blocked their view, Rodney started trotting toward the Stargate.

"Hurry up," he called over his shoulder. He planned to break records getting to the Stargate and then
back again.
Welcome the newest Lantean

John tapped his fingers against the rock he was sitting on. "So, do you want to talk about something?" As openings went, it sucked, but honestly, John didn't have a great track record with starting conversations with captors.

"Your bedmate is a menace in the field," Ronon said.

It really made John uncomfortable that Ronon had chosen to focus on Rodney; however, it made sense. If this guy was from a more technologically advanced civilization than most, he would recognize Rodney's value. "He's actually pretty useful when we run into ships and cities and random bombs."

"That happen often?"

John shrugged. "Often enough that it's worth having him around. And yeah, he tends to offend people, but his heart's in the right place." John decided to try for a little redirection. "So, are there any more of you running around in the woods?"

Ronon gave him a calculating look.

"Hey, I'm already unarmed and I don't have any illusions about beating you in hand to hand combat. I'm just wondering if there are any more as good as you are. We can always use good fighters." John offered up his best smile.

"Just me."

"That kind of sucks." John scooted back on the rock and sprawled out. He didn't plan on trying to physically challenge Ronon and he needed to let the man know that. Strangely, Ronon seemed to get more tense. He shifted, his weapon pointed right at John. John looked at the gun. "You don't actually have to do that."

"You won't catch me off guard."

"I never thought I would. You've pretty much handed me my ass on a plate twice. I'm not looking to go for a round three. I still plan to have Carson get that tracker out of your shoulder, and then I plan to offer you a job. We have a pretty nice setup. With twelve ZPMs, they had a very nice setup, but John really wasn't emotionally prepared to deal with that--not now. Part of him really wished he didn't know about any of it because he was going to have to report to someone. If Earth fell... well, John couldn't let that happen, not when he had the ZPMs they could use to defend themselves. The thought made him ill.

But at the same time, he couldn't imagine General Landry reacting well to the fact that the scientists had hidden the recharging station. Samas and Rodney might even get recalled to Earth, and that would not end well. Both had some pretty significant enemies. John had to mentally set all that aside, though because he had a half-feral soldier holding a gun on him. Worse, the guy had fewer conversational skills than John, and that was pretty bad.

"So, if you come visit, you're going to hear a lot of weird stuff about me. Don't believe any of it," John suggested.

Ronon looked at him oddly. "Weird?"
"Teyla and the Hoff have some religious thing with Ancients. You don't worship the Ancestors, do you?" John really couldn't handle any more religious people.

"Not really. They made good machines."

"That they did. I can't get a car that runs for five years, and they build intergalactic transports that work after thousands of years. It's pretty impressive." And with that the conversation died. John really should have left Teyla, but if someone was going to get Elizabeth to send help, Teyla would. The six months that John had been off working with General O'Neill, the two women had formed a united front against Ellis. No way was John going to try and go up against that.

Nope, he would handle military things and let the women run the city. That meant that Teyla talked Elizabeth into humanitarian missions and John got to handle the fact that the city had twelve ZPMs. Maybe he should tell General O'Neill about the ZPMs. He wouldn't order court martials all around. Hopefully. Now John just had to figure out a way to have a private conversation with someone in another galaxy.

"So, did your people make your technology or use what the Ancestors left behind?" John asked. That should be a safe topic.

Ronon gave him a cold stare that made John's soul just about curl up and whimper. So much for safe topics.

"Why are you keeping it secret that you're sharing blankets with the scholar?" Ronon asked.

John cringed. Rodney had too much mouth for his own good. Of course he had to say something about that.

"You fucking him to keep him in line?" Ronon asked sharply.

"What? No!" John blurted out. He also sat up fast, but when Ronon's gun raised a half inch, he settled back down. "No, I would not take advantage of Rodney. It's just... it's complicated."

Ronon grunted. Never in all of history had so much condemnation come through one grunt.

"My people don't believe that those who are on a team together should... share blankets. They think it makes team members less objective and less focused on getting the job done."

"He shouldn't be out here anyway," Ronon said.

John narrowed his eyes. He had Landry making shitty little comments about John's command choices. He had Caldwell running around making a point of giving John orders that almost didn't sound like orders. He had a lot of people waiting for him to fail—including telling him that Rodney shouldn't be in the field—and he sure as hell didn't need someone else telling him how to do his job.

"Rodney has earned his spot on this team and you don't know enough about him or my team to make any sort of judgment. Quite frankly, given time, he would come up with a way to blow you up. He could make a bomb out of mud, and yes, he's going to bitch while he does it, but you do not get to pass judgment."

Ronon frowned and studied John closely. It took him a long time to answer. "Okay," he said with a shrug.

"And we keep it secret because they would make him quit the team." John didn't say anything more. If this guy turned out to be an enemy, John didn't want to reveal a rather significant vulnerability.
One word in the wrong ear, and he'd lose his command. The rules were stupid and archaic and homophobic, but they were the rules. So if Ronon was an enemy, hopefully he would never realize how explosive this piece of information was. If he was a friend, hopefully he would keep it quiet to protect Rodney's spot on the team.

And once again, that killed the conversation. Part of John had a lot of sympathy for the guy, but without someone to start talking, this was turning awkward. Never before had he missed Rodney’s ability to talk non-stop quite so much.

The sun was warm, and John was about to ask if they could go inside the cave when a voice called. "Permission to approach?"

In a blink, Ronon was up and standing behind John, his gun pointed at the back of John's head. That was significantly more uncomfortable than having it pointing at his face.

"Who are you?"

Gibbs moved into sight, his hands held up. "Colonel Sheppard says you're a potential friend, but our leader refused to send the doctor unless she had a little more assurance that the colonel is right. She sent me in to make sure it's safe for our doctor."

“What? She doesn’t trust my judgment?” John said jokingly. At least it was mostly a joke. There was a little butt-hurt in there.

Gibbs gave him a smile. “She doesn’t trust your people skills, Colonel.”

John would have said something, only Ronon demanded, "Your leader is a woman?"

"Yes," John agreed.

"You're not Genii."

John started to turn around, only to get jabbed with the end of the gun. Message received. John settled back down. "No, we're not. In fact, they tried to invade and take our city, but that was a while ago. We have a fairly reasonable treaty with them now. At least we don't shoot at each other." John didn't fool himself. Kolya and Crowley would love to shoot every Lantean and take Atlantis, but as long as they doubted their ability to do that, they would play nice. "Why would you think we were Genii?"

"Genii are the only ones I know about with this much technology," Ronon said.

John traded looks with Gibbs. The Marine was a cagy old bastard, so he probably already understood how unstable this situation was. Ronon was a good guy, but he was pushed to his limits and starting to crumble.

Gibbs moved closer. "We are actually a union of several civilizations and groups. The Hoff and the Degans both have a lot of people with us, and yes, we do have a number of Genii who live among us. We have other cultures you haven't heard of--the Czechoslovakian and Canadian and Igigi."

John wasn't sure he would put those three together, but he also wasn't going to contradict Gibbs, not when the man had Samas to whisper in his ear. Samas was another cagy, shrewd old bastard.

Gibbs lowered his hands. "Teyla says that you're a runner--hunted by the Wraith. I'm impressed."

"You're impressed that they hunt me?" Ronon pressed the gun up to the back of John's head, which
was monumentally unfair because John wasn't saying anything offensive. For once.

"I'm impressed you're alive," Gibbs corrected him. "Wraith are powerful enemies, but you are not only surviving, but now you have a chance to escape them."

"And join you?" Ronon demanded.

Gibbs gave a very cold smile, and that was the point at which John realized that it was Samas driving the bus. "Whether you choose to join is your decision. Do not give the colonel or even Dr. Weir your unconditional support until you understand their reality. Both of them are good people that I would kill to protect, but both serve masters who are less ethical. A few of their superiors could best serve the human race by dying without leaving offspring."

The gun pressed to the back of John's head vanished.

"Many have tried to remove Dr. Weir, but she is too clever for their tricks. They did succeed in removing Colonel Sheppard, but others with more honor found a way to send him back."

"Not all Taskmasters and Leaders deserve the title," Ronon said with a grim tone to his voice that made John think he'd learned that lesson the hard way.

"Yes, but John has earned our respect and you're pointing a weapon at him," Samas said. "If you do him any permanent harm, I will tear your eyes out and leave you to wallow in darkness until the Wraith take you." Samas delivered that line with a coldness that John rarely heard from the Igigi. Normally Samas was more personable than Gibbs. Today, not so much.

There was an ominous silence from behind John. It seemed to take Ronon some time to think about Samas' threat. "You could just let me go through the Ring," Ronon finally suggested.

Samas moved a step closer. "The Wraith want you; therefore, I will either use that to lure Wraith here so I can kill them or I will take their prize away by removing that tracker. I will not help a Wraith get any sort of prize it might want, and they want you running through that ring."

John added, "That and we do like to help people. We're good that way."

Samas gave him a fond look. "John is good that way, as are Rodney and Teyla. I am more interested in moving a battle in the direction I want."

Ronon grunted.

"I do not ask that you disarm yourself. I only ask that you holster the weapon before Dr. Carson comes in. He will remove the tracker."

"You're armed," Ronon said.

Samas tilted his head to the side. "I don't need a weapon to kill you faster than you can defend yourself, but if it makes you feel more comfortable, I can put my weapons on the ground."

John figured these two definitely had some sort of weird vibe going that he did not understand. Usually when people threatened him, he felt less comfortable around them. However Ronon moved to the side and holstered his gun. "Nah," he said as if it didn't matter. "I might challenge you to spar later. I'd like to see if you're as good as you think."

Samas grinned. "I'm better. I've been alive longer than any creature you've ever met, and I've had enemies that would have destroyed the Wraith, and I'm still here." Samas took a step back and leaned
against a rock.

Giving John a shove, Ronon ordered, "Move over."

John was more than happy to. He scooted over and Ronon sat beside him. This guy needed therapy. John tried to play nice and he got all tense. Samas threatened to rip his eyeballs out and he relaxed. Heightmeyer was going to have a field day with this one.

"Dr. Beckett, it's safe to come in," Samas said. He looked at Ronon. "How many Wraith have you killed?"

Ronon propped his foot on a rock and rested his arm on his knee. "Sixteen."

Samas grinned. "Impressive. One at a time or in groups?"

Just then Carson inched his way into view. "Hello. I don't make house calls like this, but I suppose this isn't a house, is it?" He smiled at his own joke, but even John could tell he was nervous.

Immediately, Ronon's attention shifted. "What's in the case, Doc?"

Beckett looked down as if he had to check to see what he was carrying. "Um, surgical implements, diagnostic tools, various drugs, analgesics, antibiotics."

"What?" Ronon looked over at Samas.

"Healing tools," Samas translated. Sometimes the Stargate translator worked wonders, and other times it seemed to fail.

"Specialist Ronon Dex, this is our own Dr. Carson Beckett," John introduced them. "Carson, this is the guy who is stuck with a Wraith homing beacon in his shoulder."

"I have to say that sounds unpleasant," Carson said with a grimace. But then John could almost see him put his professional gameface on. "Well then, off with your shirt. Let's have a look."

Ronon stripped his shirt off, and John swallowed as he looked at the necklace of Wraith bones and teeth... either that or Ronon had a streak of canibalism that led him to kill and dismember really long limbed people with sharp teeth. Before John had suspected the number of kills to be exaggeration. Men sometimes tried to count it as a kill every time they took a shot. But this... this suggested he had that many confirmed Wraith kills.

Carson moved around to the back. "My God! Tell me you didn't try to cut this thing out yourself."

"Yeah. I tried once with a mirror. Couldn't reach. Most of it's from two different doctors."

Carson huffed, and that was definitely his unhappy face. It reminded John of the time one of his nurses and gotten frustrated with Rodney and tried to kick him out because he was complaining of a rash. She hadn't checked it and hadn't realized what Rodney had known—that it was the first symptom in an allergic reaction. Carson had used that same face on the nurse when he'd described in detail all her professional flaws. "No one I know who calls himself a doctor would do this." Clearly aggravated, Carson moved tools around with a little more force than really needed. John made a note to go to one of the other docs for his post-mission checkup. Whatever Ronon's back looked like, it had put Carson in a bad mood.

"Is that Ancestor technology?" Ronon asked.
"Indeed it is. I had to promise Rodney that I would scan the frequencies being used. Otherwise he threatened to come in here and do it himself. Elizabeth—our leader—was very insistent about keeping Rodney away from any potential hostage situations. Now I need you to lie down."

"Not a chance," Ronon said firmly.

For a second, Carson just stared at him. No one talked to Carson that way because as nice as Carson was, if you pissed him off, the man got even. "Now you listen to me," he said in a tone that usually got even John to shut up and get into a bed, "I've located transmitter. It's in the soft tissue next to the second thoracic vertebrae."

"Good. Cut it out." Ronon said with almost no emotion.

"I can't do that with you sitting up like this, and I'm gonna have to give you some anaesthetic to make you sleep."

John could have predicted Ronon’s, "No you're not."

"Excuse me?" Carson gave Ronon a nasty glare and then looked over at John.

John held both hands up, "Don't look at me. I'm the hostage."

Carson then gave John the dirty look.

"Just get to work, Doc."

"This will be horribly painful."

"Okay," Ronon said. John could almost see the smoke coming out of Carson's ears.

"So painful it could cause yer heart to stop. The human body isn't designed for that sort of agony."

Ronon shrugged.

"You're likely to move around, and this is close enough to the spine that if you don't hold perfectly still, I could do you real damage."

"Try not to," Ronon suggested.

"Of all the bloody minded stubborn..." Carson's voice trailed off into muttered curses, but he started getting his equipment set up. John looked over to see what Samas was doing, but he just watched calmly. If Samas wasn't panicked, John figured there wasn't a lot of reason to worry. His ability to smell human emotions meant that John trusted him to know about any danger long before it appeared. If Samas thought Ronon was calm and not an immediate threat, John trusted his judgment.

"So, any idea when the Wraith are going to show up this time?" John asked.

"Nope," Ronon said.

Carson slipped a headpiece with a focused light over his head. "Okay, I'm ready. Look, I just want to say one last time that I really don't think this is a good idea. I'm going be cutting very close to your spinal column here. If you were to flinch—"

"Then I won't flinch," Ronon cut him off.

Carson muttered a few more choice words before flipping down a magnifying lens attached to the
headpiece. “I certainly hope you’re right.”

“If you paralyze me, just make sure you kill me before you leave,” Ronon said.

Carson froze in the middle of raising his scalpel. “You canna…” Carson ran out of words.

“I’ll make sure of it,” Samas promised.

Ronon looked over and nodded. “Okay.” He glanced over at Carson who was still frozen. “Should get it done quick before the Wraith show up.”

“The Wraith. Right.” Carson took a deep breath. “Here we go.”

John felt helpless as he watched Carson work—his full attention on Ronon’s back. Every once in a while, Ronon would give a grunt or close his eyes, but for the most part he bore the pain of the surgery without flinching. John couldn’t have done it. Considering that Ronon was a fairly young man, John didn’t want to even think about what sort of horrors it took to harden him so much.

“Colonel, would you mind holding this up for me?” Carson asked, gesturing toward a tray.

“Of course.” John took the tray and held it closer. Unfortunately, that gave him a close look at the scarred and bloody mess that was Ronon’s shoulder.

“I think I’ve got it,” Carson said. John watched as Carson pulled a round chunk of metal out of Ronon’s back. Ronon slumped forward, rested his hands on his knees and then breathed out slowly. Then, without warning, he just toppled sideways and fell to the ground.

“Bloody idiot. I did warn him,” Carson said. He shoved the device at John and knelt down next to Ronon and checked his pulse. Samas was there, pulling field dressings out of the med kit and handing them over.

“Sir, if you would let me,” Gibbs said, holding out his hand.

John happily surrendered the technology before crouching down next to Ronon to offer some help with the first aid. “Is he going to be okay?”

Carson nodded. “I think so. He’s as tough as a Scottish red deer, this one. Is that tracker still broadcasting?”

John looked over to where either Gibbs or Samas was scanning the tracker. The small piece of metal sat on the rock looking utterly insignificant, but that was the thing that had driven Ronon to run from one planet to another until he couldn’t trust anyone. John felt a little ill just looking at it.

“It’s dead.” The second he spoke, John could tell it was Samas. Good. The onac knew Wraith technology and if he said it was dead, it was.

“We have to assume we have Wraith inbound,” John said. Ronon had mentioned that the radiation weakened the signal, but John suspected that having the leash cut would catch their attention. “I assume Lorne is somewhere close with a jumper?”

Samas nodded. “The nearest clearing is a quarter mile down the path.”

“Can we move him?” John asked Carson. Ronon was a big boy, and if they had to carry him, it was going to be slow going, even with Samas’ strength.

“Can walk,” Ronon muttered without opening his eyes. He started to roll, and Carson put a hand on
his back.

“You most certainly will not,” Carson said sharply.

Ronon ignored the touch and continued to roll right onto his injured shoulder. “If it’s a choice between walking and getting taken by the Wraith again, I’ll walk,” Ronon said. He pushed himself to his feet and nearly toppled over again. Instinct had John reaching out for him, and Ronon clasped hands with him, using that to steady himself.

For one second, John thought Ronon might thank him. They stared at each other, and John could see the hope and the suspicion and the weariness all laid out in his gaze. Then Ronon gave a huff and pulled away. “Where’s this ship of yours?” he asked, but without waiting for any answer, he headed toward the path. John really hoped that he decided to stick around. Yes, he was a good fighter and John could always use a solid soldier. But more than that, Ronon needed a place to heal, and the shoulder was the least of the injuries the man was carrying.
Gibbs and Tony make some plans

Tony arched his back, and Gibbs chuckled. "You're like a cat trying to get its butt scratched," Gibbs said.

"Now that you mention it," Tony said, pushing his ass up into the air. Gibbs obliged by running his hand over the round of Tony's ass. Tony groaned. He would have done more but he was tired, tired, tired. Gibbs had tied him down and touched and tasted and fucked him until Tony was a big pile of mush. "I think you broke me," Tony muttered.

"You'll recover," Gibbs said without much sympathy.

"Maybe. But maybe I won't, and you'll be sorry then."

Gibbs just snorted.

"I used that line before, haven't I?"

"Yep," Gibbs agreed.

"Well you've come close to breaking me before. You're just lucky that I really, really like being broken."

"Hedonist," Gibbs accused him in a fond voice that made a shiver go up Tony's back.

"Guilty as charged." For a time, Tony lay there with the sweat drying on his skin and a sizable wet spot under him. They were really rough on sheets.

About the time Tony was nodding off, Gibbs asked, "Did you finish Tower 14?"

"Yep. All the rooms are open, and nothing tried to blow us up. Life is good."

"We're just lucky that Atlantis talks to you or these room searches might have led to a lot more casualties."

Tony knew that to be true. "Ten thousand years of neglect leads to some pretty unstable conditions. People really should have shut down their experiments and done something to secure unstable materials before leaving."

"They were in the middle of a war with the Wraith. If they hadn't secured weapons, Atlantis would have blown up before we ever got here."

Tony huffed. That was probably true, but he still didn't like the condition that the city had been left in. Too many of the labs they'd opened had hidden dangers and unstable reactions ready to go off. They'd found an ascension machine and a nanobot lab that looked suspiciously like someone had made replicators there. There had been a biological weapons lab and a genetic lab growing a sort of gray gunk that had multiplied rapidly the second it hit oxygen. One lab had a machine ready to blow up after ten thousand years of missing maintenance checks, and another had microfractures in the wall from some sort of explosion centuries ago. Without the city sending him feelings--general anxiety about one room or outright panic at another--they would have suffered more casualties, especially given that Rodney was trying to clear space quickly.

"Does Rodney finally believe that the city talks to you?" Gibbs asked.
"No." Tony laughed. "He has decided there are too many coincidences for dumb luck--even my extraordinary dumb luck--but he's been asking if anyone else thinks I might be another deascended Ancient. He seems to think that's more reasonable than a sentient city."

"According to you, the city isn't all that sentient."

"No, not really," Tony agreed. "I get more feelings than actual thoughts. However Rodney insists that if there were any sort of AI system, that he would have seen some sign in the coding--or that Samas would have."

"Samas doesn't know what AI coding looks like. He has no idea if the city has one."

"That's what Radek says too," Tony said. "Actually it was closer to, 'If we found a storage crystal labeled city AI, we still would not recognize the code because there is no reason to believe the Ancients would use the same basic architecture for the personality.' And then Rodney starts in with the fact that a hammer has to look like a hammer no matter what culture makes it. Once they start the function versus artistic vision argument, I always find a reason to leave."

Gibbs chuckled. "Smart man."

"To stay out of the middle when those two get going? That's not smart, Gibbs. That's just common sense. I don't know how Samas stands those two when they fight."

Gibbs moved his hand up to rest on Tony's shoulder before laying his head down on the pillow. "Samas considers them no different than two posturing symbiotes shaking their fins to impress him. He's actually fairly amused by the display. So, what is the city saying right now?"

Tony listened. He could tell that Sheppard was safe somewhere above them, either sleeping or resting. He had a couple of other echoes, probably Lorne or Miko or Carson. They were the next strongest gene carriers, and Atlantis did tend to track them, not that the others noticed. Well that wasn't exactly true. Tony was almost sure that Miko did notice, but she didn't want to say anything, either because she thought it was stepping on his territory or she didn't want to be thought odd. With Miko it was hard to tell what she had going on in her head.

Atlantis had extra sensors on the medical wing, and Tony could feel a vague sense of alert, but no alarm there. He tried reaching for that elusive sense of 'more' in that empty hallway that always gave him the strangest sense of being watched, but Atlantis didn't seem to be paying it any attention. That meant it seemed to drop away from Tony's awareness.

"Sheppard's safe. I think I can feel a couple of other gene carriers, and there are no problems there. Atlantis is keeping an eye on the medical wing, which I assume means she's watching Ronon Dex, but there's no sense of alarm there."

Gibbs nodded. Reaching over Tony, he grabbed his communicator. "Gibbs to Major Lorne."

Their heads were so close together that Tony could hear the response. "Lorne here, Gunny."

"Want to try that status update?"

"Now?" There was a pause. "Everything's quiet."

"Listen for more than just an alarm," Gibbs said.

There was another long paused, and then Lorne answered, "She's keeping an eye on something."
Gibbs smiled. "Yes, sir. Tony says she has sensors turned up in medical."

"Dex. Is Atlantis concerned?"

"No, just keeping an eye on a newcomer. Tony says she's alert but not upset."

"I would not have been able to get that detailed of a message. This might be a Tony thing," Lorne said. He sounded pretty frustrated about it.

"He's been here a lot more years, and his background has trained him to be open to new ideas. It may just take time, sir," Gibbs said.

Even after all these years, it still bothered Tony to hear Gibbs call the officers "sir." Gibbs was Gibbs. He rose above any rank and was a force of nature by himself. However, that's not how things worked. Gibbs was coming up on fifty, and he was stuck in the military with no way to retire like a normal person. Sometimes Tony really harbored a few homicidal feelings for O'Neill, even if technically he had been trying to help them.

"Thanks, Gunny. Call when you've got another status. Lorne out."

Gibbs took the radio out of his ear and leaned across Tony again to put it on the table.

"Lorne hears her?" Tony wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Clearly not as well as you can," Gibbs said. "After you tagged that ascension machine, Major Lorne asked how accurate your sense of the city was. We started talking and he admitted that he could sometimes feel something that didn't match any of his emotions."

"So you talked him into trying to connect to her?"

Gibbs pressed his lips together. Tony knew that look. That was his, 'I have a clue that I don't want to share with you,' expression. Tony and Kate would see that face and then look at each other in despair because they just knew he was about to shut them out.

"Gibbs, don't do this," Tony asked. They weren't just working together. They were lovers. They were unusual lovers who sometimes included an alien third and Tony still couldn't find any name that fit Gibbs other than Gibbs. LJ was stupid, Leroy was more stupid, and Jethro was... Gibbs just wasn't a Jethro. So they had a few quirks, but shutting each other out should not be an option.

When Gibbs looked over, he seemed almost amused. "I'm starting to think you're just psychic."

"No, I know all your faces."

Gibbs grunted. "Your sense of the city is getting stronger. I don't know if you're refining your skill at listening or..." Gibbs stopped.

"You think the city is getting stronger," Tony said. Rodney had plugged a second ZPM in and then made the ZPM room off limits to anyone who wasn't part of their inner circle. Radek, Samas, Miko, Rodney, and Coleman were the only ones allowed in. Tony thought it was interesting that each of them had been excluded and discriminated against, and now they were the core of the hard sciences. Two women, an alien, a man who'd grown up without running water, and Rodney. And Rodney was so abrasive that he had practically invited people to shut him out. And now they were "The Man," at least when it came to the sciences.

"It's a possibility. I'd rather know for sure."
Tony nodded. He understood Gibbs’ concern, but he also believed that Atlantis had their best interests in mind. She was happy to have people in her. "What does your gut tell you now?"

Gibbs took more time to answer than Tony had expected. Clearly he was not sure—either that or he didn't want to tell Tony something. It was funny. It used to be that Gibbs was the master of keeping secrets. Tony hadn't even found out about his dead wife and daughter until a goa'uld had started poking around in Gibbs' past and Tony had done some research on his own to try and get ahead of the psychopath. But now Gibbs sucked at keeping any sort of secret. "I think," Gibbs said softly, "that you're more open to hearing her. However, that doesn't mean that she isn't getting stronger and more capable of reaching out for you. Hopefully she knows that if I even suspect that she's a danger to you or starts thinking of you as hers, I will take you off Atlantis so fast that she won't be able to stop me." Gibbs said that fiercely. Then he went silent and lay beside Tony, his muscles taut.

"Trying to provoke her?" Tony finally asked.

"Seeing if she can be provoked."

Tony listened. There was still a sense of peace from Sheppard and the general state of alert on the medical wing, but nothing else. "Either she's not listening or she doesn't think it's worth responding to."

"Or she doesn't speak English," Gibbs countered.

Tony frowned. Huh. That actually would make sense, but he'd never thought of it before. "The translation protocols in the Stargate have learned English well enough to provide translations, shouldn't she be able to access them?"

Gibbs grunted. That usually meant that he didn't have another answer, but he didn't like the one Tony was bringing to the table. "Dex is interesting," Gibbs said in the least subtle subject-change in history.

Tony rolled onto his side and looked at Gibbs. "Define interesting." The fact was that Ronon Dex was hot. A blind man could tell that. In the last couple of years, Tony's insecurities had moved to the backseat, but he still had one or two or twelve.

"Hey, he's seriously hot."

Gibbs' expression turned disgusted. "Maybe I should be the one who's worried."

"You have nothing to worry about, boss."

"Neither do you, DiNozzo." With that, Gibbs reached over and caught Tony by the back of the neck and pulled him close. "Samas likes the idea of him carrying a symbiote. He's strong, but as tired and scared as he was, he didn't strike out randomly."

"He didn't look scared."

"He smelled absolutely terrified," Gibbs said softly. It was the voice he used when he talked about victims. Tony settled down against Gibbs' chest and tried to make that jive with what he knew of Ronon. While Tony believed Gibbs, he had to admire how well Ronon hid any fear. The man acted like nothing bothered him.

"I'm going to ask Teyla to talk to Colonel Sheppard."
That seemed like a detour off subject, but Tony knew Gibbs well enough to know the subjects had to relate. "About what?"

"Sheppard wants Ronon for his team. I want to see how well he really handles himself."

"You and Samas both want to check him out?" The two of them might share a body, but they didn't always agree on what was admirable... or right. Gibbs was quietly furious about the science department keeping the ZPMs secret, but since it was Samas and not him that had made the discovery, he didn't feel like it was his place to unilaterally veto their plan. Tony suspected that if Earth had even a hint of danger heading at it that Gibbs would tell all of them to fuck off and send the ZPMs to Earth.

"We both think he has potential, but putting him on a team with our military commander, our city's second in command, and the head scientist seems foolish--especially when he's already proven that he can take them all hostage if he feels the urge."

"You plan to join Sheppard's gate team," Tony said. He could feel the stone in his stomach at the very idea. Sheppard seemed to attract all the weird. If some plan was going to blow up in their faces, Sheppard would be in the middle. And now Gibbs wanted to put himself in that line of fire. And actually, that wasn't all that surprising.

"I want both of us on that team," Gibbs said.

That was surprising. "Really?" Tony pushed away so he could look at Gibbs' face. "You said I was never going on a gate team."

"I said you couldn't go on a gate team unless you could fight at a level that would make it possible for you to defend yourself."

"Yeah, and then the Wraith showed up, and you decided that I had to be able to defend myself from a Wraith. Newsflash Gibbs--you and Ronon are the only two that can actually meet that standard."

"And now you'll be the third."

It took Tony several seconds for his brain to process that and reach the most logical conclusion--the only logical conclusion. "They're grown?" Tony felt a stab of... apprehension? pride? fear? joy? Actually, Tony had no idea how he felt.

"Both your daughters are going to want to be the one to join with you. They'll fight."

Tony's gut churned. "And one will die."

"Not necessarily," Gibbs said. "Samas said they are both very strong and very stubborn, but they aren't as quick to go for the killing blow as Samas or the onac he used to know. They have some of you in there, and you've taught them to look for unconventional solutions."

Tony wasn't sure how he felt about that. He was uncomfortable at the thought of having a kid at all--at having a chance to completely screw up the life of some innocent rugrat whose only mistake was getting born a DiNozzo. But now he had changed the direction of an entire species. Whatever he was feeling, it was definitely a close cousin to fear. Terror even.

Gibbs rested his hand on Tony's cheek. "You don't have to do this. Your life is yours and you don't have to share it."

"I already have, Gibbs. I'm not afraid to host a symbiote."
The smile he got was almost indulgent, as if Tony had said something amusingly wrong. "Joining with a regular symbiote is nothing like joining with a queen, Tony. There will be another personality in there with you. This isn't a blank slate that will form itself to your psyche."

"But she'll have some of my memories in her already. She's my daughter--both of them are."

"Yes," Gibbs agreed, "and she's going to learn a lot about life from joining with you, but she'll bring her own opinions to the joining. The first time someone pisses you off, she's going to want to rip their eyes out."

"That's why you get so intense when you're pissed, isn't it?" Tony asked. He'd seen that look, the one that said that Gibbs was millimeters away from tanking his career and going to prison all for the pure joy and ripping someone's intestines out through their neck. Tony had seen suspects nearly piss their pants when they recognized the danger they were in.

Gibbs shrugged. "I wasn't exactly patient with stupidity before Samas, but he does make it harder."

"Are you ever sorry?" Tony asked. Gibbs' emotional barriers snapped into place so fast that Tony had to fight an instinct to pull back. He knew Gibbs well enough to know that the man had a knee-jerk reaction to talking about feelings, and Tony was confident enough in their relationship that he didn't take it too personally.

"Not exactly sorry," Gibbs said. "I don't regret it, and I still believe that Samas is worth any price I've paid."

He went silent. Tony waited, but the silence continued long past the point where it was comfortable. "But?" Tony prompted him.

"But it's like a marriage you can't get out of. You make it work because there's no other choice, but sometimes you really want to walk out the door and slam it behind you. Only unless you're in a place where it's safe to separate, you can't do that. You get angry and frustrated, and you're locked in the same head together. This is not an easy decision to live with, Tony. I don't want you to make it and then regret your decision."

"Are you saying you don't want me to host?"

Gibbs sighed. "I wish it was that simple. I do want you to host, but I don't want my loyalty to one friend--to Samas--to compromise my loyalty to you. Make this decision for yourself, and I will support you no matter what."

Tony gave a little huff. "Samas is going to want to kick your ass for having this conversation with me while he's in the water."

A wry shrug from Gibbs was all the answer he got.

"I know you and Samas have different ways of doing things," Tony said slowly, "but I respect and love both of you. Can you handle me being a host? Can you handle having a more aggressive person in here without that destroying our relationship?" Tony hadn't even realized he was worried about that until the question was out his mouth and hanging there in the air between them.

Gibbs wrapped his arm around Tony's waist and pulled him close. "When we first started, I think I needed to be in charge all the time. I can handle a more aggressive partner now because ultimately I will always be charge. I'm Gibbs. I'm Samas' equal and your daughter has more sense than to try and challenge that." Gibbs sounded almost amused, but then he turned serious. "I don't know how our relationship will work out, the one between the four of us. However you and I are always solid,
Tony. If we have to limit the Igigi so that we can keep our own relationship healthy, then we will."

"Why would you have to limit Samas?"

Gibbs sighed. "Because he is entirely too used to trying to kill his kids when they annoy him too much. He already knows that he's going to have to control himself more."

Weird. "I don't actually think of Samas as being dangerous."

"He is," Gibbs said, "which is his way, and I've always respected that. But he has to follow my code when he's in my body."

"Right. No murdering innocents for annoying you. You can only scare them into thinking you might." Tony ran his hand over Gibbs' chest. "You want me to carry one of the girls when I go on Sheppard's team. You want her to be able to see Ronon too, don't you?" Tony could feel a distant sort of panic. This was worse than being a father. This was being a father of a creature who was ready to give him a thousand grandkids and who was going to be riding around in him while picking prospective candidates. And true, no Igigi would actually use human DNA, but they would use the symbiote who learned about the world from a host. Tony tried to imagine a symbiote learning about pain and loss and strength and hiding fear from riding around in Ronon.

"He might not want to host," Tony said. He didn't believe it, but he felt the need to play devil's advocate.

"Teyla's people want to."

"What?" Tony pushed himself up onto an elbow so he could look down at Gibbs. "You told her? When were you planning on telling me that you told her?"

Gibbs tugged at Tony's arm until Tony had to choose between struggling against Gibbs or letting himself get pulled back down. He surrendered, and Gibbs pulled him close and then pulled the covers over them.

"I didn't tell her. You can hardly be surprised that she put the pieces together. We've both dropped hints, and she came to me this week and said that whenever Samas' people were ready, hers were very open to discussing a joining. To have someone remember you for thousands of years is a blessing for them. They are always on the edge of dying, not just as individuals but as a people. That makes them value what the Igigi can bring."

Tony thought about what he would do if he thought that his whole culture was at risk of dying. "Ronon will want to host." If Teyla's people were that concerned about saving their world, Ronon would be twice as determined. From what he'd said, Sateda had been a beautiful, well-developed world, and now it was burned out ruins and broken husks of buildings.

"Maybe," Gibbs said, but he didn't sound confident in that.

"No, definitely. The Wraith tried to wipe out his whole world. This would be a way to strike back at them."

"I hope you're right. The first step is to get a better sense of who he is as a man. I plan to tell Teyla that I want you on the team with me because you are better at reading people."

"Than you?" Tony huffed. "Not really." Given Samas' ability to smell deceit, Gibbs and his famous gut made a lot more sense now that Tony knew the truth.
"I can spot lies, but you're quicker to understand why people lie. You are better than I am, and that's why I want you on the team to help assess Ronon if you decide to host. If you don't, you'll have a chance to get to know him in the city."

Tony sighed and stared out into the darkness. "Things are changing," he said softly.

"Hopefully for the better," Gibbs agreed. Gibbs held him tight as some emotion dropped over them, and from there it was silence until Tony finally fell asleep a long time later.
Tony's Mind Games Work on John

Tony stopped to check on Abby who had set herself up in a very small but very private lab on the lowest of the science levels. The room used to be for unidentified specimen storage, but Abby had put her foot down and insisted that specimens would not remain unidentified in any lab that she was associated with. Unsurprisingly, Kavanagh had thrown a fit at her getting her own lab, but Rodney had backed her. Abby cleared the lab; Abby kept the lab. Besides, she had to study for her PhD.

A quick pseudo-soda delivery later, and Tony was on his way to the command tower. Rodney had been twitchy over breakfast, and Tony needed to do a little investigating.

"Hey, Grodin!" Tony called out.

"Tony," came the oh-so formal and British response. In another thirty years, Grodin was going to be another Ducky, only he'd be doing autopsies of broken machines.

"Anything new?"

"Other than the drama that follows when two individuals like the same young man, it's been remarkably quiet. Not one system has gone mysterious offline in at least two days."

"Ten thousand year old equipment," Tony said with a shrug. "I have the feeling our computers aren't going to stand up to time this well."

Grodin laughed. "I am sure they will not. Rodney is in fits over our latest replacement laptops. Apparently the SGC saved money by using a chip that is last year's model."

Tony cringed. That was so not good.

"Exactly," Grodin said. "Had I not been required to man the station, I would have shown an abundance of common sense and fled. As it is, I fear that General Landry is not a fan of anyone on Atlantis right now."

That actually might account for Rodney's weird mood. He did understand that his temper tantrums cost the city a lot of good will back home. Not that knowledge was enough to keep him from throwing a fit when he perceived some general stupidity that he felt duty-bound to point out. Rodney was Rodney.

Tony rested his hip against the edge of the control station. "So, who is fighting over who?"

Grodin leaned toward him. "Hafta and Tasjha, do you know them?"

"Hoff. Hafta is an electrician and her baby brother has been training to become a welder."

"Clearly he is not a baby anymore. He has been making eyes at Croft."

"The Genii scientist?" Tony asked. God he hoped there was some other Croft in the city because the Genii by that name was a schmoozing idiot.

Unfortunately, Grodin nodded. "Yes. Apparently he has been dating Hafta, but recently he has been seen on the docks with Tasjha, and some people are saying it did not look like an avuncular relationship. The two siblings had a spectacular fight just outside the science labs and rumor has it that they are both accusing the other of manipulating Croft."
"Well crap." Tony rubbed his hand over his face. He definitely needed to jump on this before he had an assault to deal with. As much as he loved being part of the community on Atlantis, he really didn't need to deal with this sort of stupidity, especially when Croft was likely the real guilty party. "I think I might need to suggest that Ladon make a few changes in the Genii contingent."

"To hear Croft explain it, this city would not function without his brilliance." The tone was clearly a warning, so Grodin knew something about the Genii that he wasn't saying. Grodin might act all proper, and he would never speak out of turn or repeat hearsay, but he certainly did know more about what was going on than most people.

"He thinks he's that good?"

"You haven't heard his boasts?" Grodin gave Tony an amused look.

"Oh, I really haven't. You know who else hasn't heard that? Rodney or Samas or Abby... this could actually be amusing. I mean, Radek would quietly mock him, but I bet we could arrange for a certain Genii scientist to spend a little quality time with someone who would give him a more accurate assessment of his talent." And if Tony knew one thing about people who had egos it was that they couldn't handle having their egos pricked. Tell them they were wrong, and it was like using a magnifying glass on an ant--they just curled up and died. Rodney destroyed people like that without even noticing. They were stupid; therefore, Rodney crushed them beneath his intellect. Tony was pretty sure Samas and Abby noticed--they just enjoyed doing the damage. Tony would definitely arrange in a little play date for Croft.

"You are an evil man. That is why I like you," Grodin said with a smile.

"Careful, your reputation as a stuffy Englishman is in danger."

"If these cretans think the English are stuffy, they have clearly never seen English comedies, or for that matter, visited England. Just because we have a dry wit does not mean that we are any less likely to admire a well-placed insult."

Tony grinned. "And that is why I like you."

"DiNozzo." Sheppard blurted the name out and then stood near the hall entrance looking like a kid caught with his whole arm elbow deep in cookie jar.

"Colonel," Tony answered. He gave the man a smile, and sure enough, Sheppard got en expression of near panic on his face. The rest of the Pegasus galaxy might think Sheppard was a bad-ass, but Tony liked to think that they were close enough friends that Tony was allowed to see that John was actually a giant dork. He was as bad with secrets as Rodney, and that was saying something. "I was hoping we could talk." Tony had no idea what they were going to talk about, but given John's flinch, they clearly needed to talk about something. Either he really wanted some secret to come out or his poker face was getting worse.

Sheppard looked around. "I have stuff to do. Colonel stuff, you know."

As excuses went, that was lame, even for John. Some days Tony wondered if the man didn't have a symbiote of his own. It would explain how he could go from cool and deadly to utter dweeb in under two seconds. Gibbs and Samas didn't switch as fast as one Colonel John Sheppard. "Okay," Tony said with a shrug. "I guess I can follow you around and we can talk... or I can go talk to Rodney." It was a wild stab in the dark that Rodney's weirdness and the colonel's were related, but clearly it was a good stab. John just sort of deflated.
“Conference room,” John said, and then he headed that way with every line of his body screaming that he’d rather take on a hive ship full of Wraith.

“He’s in a mood,” Grodin whispered.

“Colonel stuff,” Tony said with a wink.

“At least his colonel stuff doesn’t lead to rebellion and funerals,” Grodin pointed out. That sobered Tony pretty damn quickly. Jessica and Private Cooper had been good people. They weren’t the only ones they’d lost out here—not by a long shot. But they were the two who had died because of human arrogance and stupidity. Earther arrogance. Ellis thought that the Pegasus galaxy would bend to his will. Hell, so had Colonel’s Everett and Sumner. See where that got all of them.

The only colonel who seemed able to adapt well enough to avoid horrible mistakes stood in the door to the conference room looking back at Tony like he was awaiting execution.

Tony followed him, suddenly a lot more serious about this. Something was going on, and Grodin was right that when colonel’s got some bad idea in their heads, they made some really dumb mistakes. Well Tony wasn’t going to let that happen to John.

He strode by John, ignored the table and chairs, and headed for the couch. Dropping down, he sprawled out and just looked at john. Gibbs had taught him the value of silence.

Slowly John narrowed his eyes. “What?” he asked. The doors rotated shut at the same time so either John wanted privacy or Atlantis wanted them to keep this private.

“Feel free to start,” Tony suggested. Then he raised his eyebrows in that look that invited someone else to take a turn and waited.

He could see John shift uncomfortably. It only took a few minutes, and the man broke. “I can’t believe Rodney told you,” John said, and with a heavy sigh, he dropped into the nearest chair.

That was an ambiguous statement. That could be “I can’t believe Rodney told you we have a secret love nest’ or “I can’t believe Rodney told you we’re lovers” or “I can’t believe Rodney told you that I’m the one who keeps stealing Lorne’s pens.” In John’s defense, Evan was pretty amusing to watch when he couldn’t find a pen. John could even be talking about the hallway he and Rodney had coopted for a secret remote control car racing course.

“Rodney’s Rodney,” Tony said.

John sat up. “Wait. Do you even know what I’m talking about?”

“I will when I track down Rodney and ask him why the hell he told you. About two seconds later, I’ll know everything.”

John closed his eyes and rubbed his hand over his face. “Shit. You have his number. Some days I don’t understand why I even like him.”

“Because he’s likeable, in a prickly sort of way. You just have to be careful about how you hug him,” Tony said with a shrug.

John laughed. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it.” He took a deep breath and seemed to brace himself. “He told me about the ZPMs.”

Tony’s stomach dropped and he felt like every drop of blood in his veins turned to ice.
“I can see you already know. At least I don’t have to explain it.” John leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “Why did he have to tell me?”

“Because he’s a dork and he loves you and he probably felt like shit every second he didn’t tell you,” Tony said. He reached for his radio. “DiNozzo to Gibbs. We could use you up in the conference room.”

“We?” came the answer.

“Colonel Sheppard.”

There was the briefest pause, but it was enough to let Tony know that Gibbs was worried. Tony couldn’t say anything to reassure him because he didn’t know what Sheppard might do. “On my way,” Gibbs said. “Gibbs out.”

Tony turned off his radio.

“So, Gibbs knows too?” John asked.

This was dangerous territory. Technically Gibbs was committing treason by keeping vital information from a commanding officer. Everett and Ellis would have used it to hang him. Possibly literally. “Gibbs is mad as hell that Rodney didn’t report it to Earth. However, he doesn’t have access to the information as Gunnery Sergeant Gibbs, and he has enough respect for Samas to not use privileged information lightly. I think he’s hoping that Colonel Carter figures out a recharging protocol fast enough that it doesn’t make a difference.”

Sheppard looked at him with concern etched all over his face. He might have said something, except the door slid open and Gibbs was there. Either he’d been in a transporter when Tony had called or he’d run most of the way.

“Colonel,” Gibbs said, nodding politely at Sheppard. Then he stepped inside, and the door quickly slid closed, so quickly that Gibbs took a quick step forward to avoid getting caught as it thumped heavily shut.

“Gunny,” Sheppard said, his voice weary.

“Rodney told him about the ZPMs,” Tony explained.

“Oh.” Gibbs pressed his lips together, and if Rodney had been in the same room, the man would have suffered a full-on Gibbs glare in potentially lethal doses.

Sheppard gave a rough laugh. “Christ, Gunny, this is a little too big to keep secret, don’t you think?”

Gibbs gave Tony a concerned look before he moved over to stand closer to Sheppard. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

Sheppard seemed to sag a little more. “Don’t get all formal on me, Gunny. I need real answers, not military ones.”

“Your real answer just may be your military one, sir.”

John turned his chair to look at Gibbs. “Gunny?”

“If you send all those ZPMs to Earth, what will they do? I know you just finished war college, so think hard.”
“Allocate resources,” John said, but he sounded confused.

“How gets the ZPMs? China? The US? There’s only one chair in Antarctica, so how are the others allocated given the international nature of our mission?”

John sat up a little straighter. “Legally, there’s no way to keep China or Russia from claiming a ZPM, but unlike those of you who went through the Cold War, I’m actually not all that concerned —”

“But who would be concerned?”

There was a half second pause as John seemed to consider that. Then he stood and leaned back against the table. “General Landry, probably. General O’Neill would definitely be concerned, and probably most of the Armed Forces over the age of forty.”

“And will they hand over ZPMs easily?” This was Gibbs at his finest—forcing other people to make the connections for themselves because he was not the giver of easy answers. However John didn’t get frustrated. If anything, he seemed to be getting more and more engaged with every question.

“No, which doesn’t mean they won’t be forced to.” A lightbulb seemed to go off over John’s head. “And that would increase tensions. The other countries in the IOC would have to know that the United States had, again, threatened to keep technology and power for themselves. Given that the gate belongs to the Russians, anti-American sentiments or even coalitions could be very bad.”

Gibbs nodded. “And what would the smaller countries do when they weren’t given a ZPM, but someone they considered a traditional enemy was?”

John was nodding now. “And what would happen if we gave a ZPM to Egypt, who has been one of our largest supporters, and then Israel found out? Gunny, you just took a horrible problem and turned it into an unsolvable one.”

Gibbs gave a half smile and shrugged. “That’s it. It is an unsolvable problem.” Tony watched his lover, and he suddenly realized that Gibbs had known all this before he’d decided to go along with the plan to keep the ZPMs hidden. That actually explained a lot, and Tony was now firmly in Radek and Samas’ camp on the ZPMs. Earth didn’t need that kind of power.

However John was shaking his head now. “If Earth falls because they don’t have the power to run the ships at full capacity or power the chair…” John grimaced before sinking back into his chair. Tony could feel the fear gather in the room. All of them were afraid of exactly that. Part of Tony worried about Abby being out here with Wraith, but another part figured that he’d rather have her in the path of a Wraith invasion than an Ori one. Those people did something worse than kill people—they perverted their whole lives in order to serve a sick and twisted religion. Tony had enough of that while fighting terrorism. He didn’t need to see it on an intergalactic level.

Gibbs came and sat in the chair next to John. “I search every communication for some sort of sign that they’re desperate and they need the power.”

“Radek and Rodney have been coming up with plans for supposedly finding one off world,” Tony said. “That would let us argue that we should keep it, but we all know we’d be overruled. Earth would take that one ZPM.” He didn’t have to add that with only one ZPM, the political fault lines would be easier to navigate. Give earth a dozen ZPMs and the political landscape would shatter. Tony could see that now. A dozen ZPMs would destroy Earth as surely as the Ori.

“They don’t tell us everything,” John said.
“They don’t tell us most things,” Gibbs countered. “Only seems fair to keep a few secrets of our own.”

John scrubbed his hand through his hair, forcing clumps to change direction so they stood out at all angles. Tony understood Rodney’s obsession with it. “Someone should know. If they’re in trouble, they should know what we have to offer them.”

Gibbs leaned forward. “Whoever knows on Earth, they’re in a worse position than we are. They’ll be in the middle. If they don’t call for the ZPMs, they’re going to always wonder how many more battles could have been won if they’d only confiscated them. If they do call for the ZPMs, they’re going to feel guilty for the political fallout which is likely to destroy alliances and possibly take down governments.”

John nodded. “And it has to be someone who understands how dangerous this could be. I think I need to head back to Earth and personally brief General O’Neill.”

Gibbs smiled. “I couldn’t happen to a more deserving guy.”

As much as Tony had mixed feelings about O’Neill and everything he’d done to get them exiled, even he didn’t deserve the crap that was about to land in his lap. However, Tony couldn’t image anyone else handling the news well. If John had to tell someone, that was the only person who might avoid helping crazy Earthers blow themselves to pieces.

Tony just wondered when he’d stopped thinking of himself as being part of that craziness.
Elizabeth kept her eyes focused on the wormhole, but John could almost feel her attention on him. "Do you have any idea why the General requested your presence on Earth?" she asked. Her voice was carefully neutral, but she still managed to communicate her unhappiness.

"No, ma'am," John said. General O'Neill always sent him private briefings, so the idea of getting an order directly from the general wasn't impossible. John just had to hope that O'Neill backed him once John showed up on Earth to report for imaginary orders.

She sighed. "Call me paranoid, but I really dislike having you back on Earth. Things tend to go wrong."

John shrugged. "I'm sure you'll do fine. Just make sure that no one locks Samas in the pool on the lower decks or ignores Teyla, and it will sort itself."

Elizabeth laughed. "Ellis did misunderstand the power players. Honestly, I'm used to military people misreading the political situation, but you are the exception to that rule."

That was so not true that it wasn't funny. It was right up there with people who assumed he was charming--another patently untrue conclusion. He didn't know anything about politics, but when Tony and Gibbs told him to deal with something, he tended to believe that it needed to be taken care of.

She turned and looked at him. "Don't get lost on your way back home, colonel."

"Yes, ma'am," John agreed with a grin. "Are you sure you don't want Major Lorne to have a shot at running the place?"

"I'm sure Major Lorne doesn't want a shot at running it," Elizabeth pointed out. She was nice enough to not point out that Lorne did run most of it. John ran his team, signed off on training exercises that Gibbs designed, and tried to avoid most of the nuts and bolts of running a command

"Sir, Ma'am, the last of the broken Ancient doohickies are through, so it's time for the personnel," Chuck said.

Doohickies. If Rodney ever caught anyone using that name for the weekly technology transfer, lectures would be had. John would have to bring popcorn. "I guess that's my call," John said before giving Elizabeth a nod. He'd already said his goodbyes to everyone else, and hopefully he'd be coming back in exactly one week when it was Earth's turn to open the wormhole.

John felt a twinge of guilt. They took turns to conserve the two ZPMs--the Earth one out of Egypt and the Atlantis one from Degan. However, Atlantis really had twelve and didn't need to conserve anything. John just hoped that General O'Neill had a solution because John didn't want to leave Earth defenseless, and he also didn't want to have the IOC order Atlantis to abandon the Pegasus galaxy. He couldn't live with that--not after he'd played such a crucial role in waking the Wraith. Worse, Gibbs' warnings about Earth politics sounded entirely too possible.

"Good luck," Elizabeth said as John approached the event horizon. John gave her a wave and then stepped through with the handful of personnel heading back.

It felt strange, stepping down the ramp in his dress blues while SGC soldiers guarded from the edges of the room. The captain in charge caught his eye and immediately moved to intercept him.
"Sir, we didn't have your name on the roster."

John gave his best "whatcha gonna do" grin and shrugged. "General O'Neill requested a meeting, and here I am. I hope you have some transportation to DC."

The captain almost twitched. In these days of IOC crackdowns and budgets, John understood how hard it was to move people on short notice.

"I'm fine catching a ride on whatever military supply plane you might have heading east," he said. The captain's relief was almost palpable.

"Honestly, the general didn't warn us, so I don't know what we have in the area. It may be a long, bumpy fight with a lot of changing, sir."

"As long as it gets me back here before the next dial up, that's fine. I just want to get back to my command as soon as possible."

"Understood, sir. If you would head to medical to get cleared, I'll start making arrangements for your transportation." The captain gestured toward the door where the other departing Atlantis people were going. John tried to keep his expression neutral as he followed. The second O'Neill heard that John was on Earth, any chance to keep this quiet was gone. And suddenly John saw a lot of value in keeping this quiet.

John was second guessing himself and cursing Rodney most of the two days it took him to fly back to DC using military transports. Part of him appreciated that he had a lover who respected him enough to avoid secrets. On the other hand, John truly didn't want to be in the middle of this. By the time O'Neill's new aide led him into the general's office, John's stomach was tied in knots. He could almost feel an ulcer start.

The aide opened the door to the main officer, and John stepped inside and offered his old boss a salute.

"Colonel," General O'Neill greeted him, a touch of that dry humor seeping through, "so good of you to come with so little notice."

"Yes, sir." John ducked his head. He'd lived with the general for six months, so he knew a carefully worded reprimand when it came flying at his head at warp speed.

"Cooper, give us a little privacy," O'Neill asked. The aide nodded and pulled the door closed so that John was alone with the general. And the general was unhappy.

"So," O'Neill said, drawing the word out, "what brings you to this part of the universe?"

John gave him a grin. "Oh, you know. The beer, the women."

"The women?" O'Neill rolled his eyes. From his tone, he wasn't convinced that John would chase a woman, which was fair because he wouldn't. Rodney made him happy, even when Rodney made him miserable.

"The hypothetical discussions, then," John said.

O'Neill looked more interested now. "Oh, and what are we hypothetically discussing?"
John took a deep breath and tossed caution to the wind. "Whether having additional power would help Earth defend itself from the Ori," he said.

"Hypothetically speaking," O'Neill said, all pretense at joking gone. The man was intense when that outer layer of humor vanished.

John stood a little straighter and reminded himself that he trusted O'Neill. It was O'Neill that had gotten him back into Atlantis, and John would not repay that by lying. "Yes, sir."

O'Neill retreated behind his desk and sat. "Would this be a significant power source?"

"Yes, sir. Hypothetically."

"Well then, I would have to say that hypothetically it would be nice to have a second significant power source, one that might be compatible with the ancient defense platform. I'm just wondering why we're discussing hypotheticals."

Crap. O'Neill thought they'd found a second ZPM, which wasn't anywhere near the truth. John grimaced and tried to find a way to start the most uncomfortable conversation he'd suffered since his divorce. "Well hypothetically--"

"Drop the joke, Sheppard," O'Neill snapped.

"Yes, sir." John was nearly at full attention now.

O'Neill rolled his eyes. "Sit your ass down, Sheppard. I don't want to get a crick in my neck. So, did you find a ZPM that McKay is playing selfish with?"

John sat on the edge of one of the chairs. "Possibly more than one."

O'Neill leaned back in his chair. "How many more than one?"

"Eleven?" John cringed a little. This is where the shit hit the fan and the IOC ordered Atlantis back to Earth, and John honestly wasn't sure which side of that order he would come down on. Worse, he suspected that O'Neill knew that John's loyalty was wavering a little, so if it came to that, O'Neill might not let him go back to the city.

It took O'Neill a long time to answer. "Eleven?"

"Eleven more than one," John corrected him.

O'Neill closed his eyes and seemed to be counting. "And why aren't we playing halvies with these twelve ZPMs?"

"Because it would be really hard to explain where they came from."

O'Neill frowned. He didn't say anything--he just frowned and leaned farther back in his chair and radiated a sort of disapproval that made John want to curl up and die a little. John hurried to explain.

"Rodney found a recharging station on Atlantis, and he and Radek are afraid that the IOC will order Atlantis back to the Milky Way. However, Rodney is really bad at keeping secrets." John decided to leave Samas out of the mix altogether. Yes, he'd found the station, but O'Neill wasn't a fan of snakes in any form.

"He's worked for the most top-secret projects in the country. I think he's just bad at keeping secrets from you," O'Neill said dryly. "Now, why would the IOC order Atlantis to abandon the Pegasus
"galaxy?" O'Neill asked, cutting right to the heart of John's personal dilemma.

"The station is part of the structural integrity of the city. It can't be removed."

"So your two mad scientists plan to just keep it secret?"

John gave a huff. "That was my first question. Apparently they're working their asses off to find a way to use Earth equipment to recharge a ZPM."

O'Neill blew out a breath and seemed to think about that for a second. At least he wasn't ordering guards to arrest John. Landry would have by now. "Carter said she has a bet going with McKay over who gets there first. I know which geek I'm counting on," General O'Neill said. John didn't comment since O'Neill disliked McKay almost as much as he disliked snakes. It was funny how everyone O'Neill disliked ended up on the other end of the universe.

"Rodney and Radek were going to wait to tell anyone about the recharging station until after someone successfully recharged a ZPM on their own."

O'Neill nodded. "Which would reduce the value of the recharging station. It would become a convenience rather than a vital resource." He rubbed a hand over his face. "Sheppard, you are quickly becoming the most troublesome colonel in the history of the Air Force, and since I'm Air Force, that's actually saying a lot."

"Sorry, sir."

"Yeah, yeah. But this time next year, you're going to be dropping another bomb in my lap and casually asking me what I'd like to do with it."


"You know, a year ago I would have told the IOC about it and let them sort it out."

"And there were a few comments that the IOC would take that much power and promptly self-destruct."

O'Neill leaned forward. "So, is that coming from Elizabeth or Gibbs?"

Panic uncurled in John's stomach. "Sir?" he asked. When all else failed, act ignorant. That was John's motto.

"I know you didn't come up with that yourself, Sheppard. You were my aide for six months, and you only noticed politics when you had your nose shoved in them, and sometimes not then."

Sheppard grimaced. That was true.

"So, if I talk to Elizabeth about her new wealth of power, is she going to know what I'm talking about?" O'Neill gave him a sharp look, and John could see the man who had saved the planet more than once. O'Neill had a hard core to him.

"No, sir," John admitted. "I didn't want to put her in the bad position Rodney left me in."

"So, Gibbs warned you to keep this to yourself." O'Neill did not look amused, but there was no way John was letting one of his men take the blame for any of this, least of all Gibbs.

"No, sir," John said fiercely. "Gibbs didn't want me to keep it secret, but he wanted me to be very careful about who I talked to. He seemed to think that the Chinese and Russians would be pissed as
hell if they caught wind of any of this."

O'Neill seemed to relax just a little. "I sometimes wonder about who you choose to trust, Sheppard."

"People said the same about you taking on the First Prime of Apophis," John pointed out.

That earned him a small smile. "That's true. Half the Senate thinks I'm crazy. It keeps them from calling me too often."

John leaned forward. "Gibbs is right, isn't he? This would do more damage than good if they knew about it."

"Let's see. There's enough power for the countries to fight over, but not enough for everyone to have a ZPM of their own because we don't have that many empties. Yeah, it would be a nightmare."

"They'd fight over energy while the Ori marched to Earth," John said softly. Sometimes he hated his own people. They weren't very logical.

O'Neill shook his head. "They don't want to think the world could fall. They like their delusions."

"And you, sir?" John asked. If he was having a face-to-face with O'Neill, he wanted to know how back this was looking.

For a long time, O'Neill just stared at him. "The others, they don't want to think about evacuations and alpha sites either, but I'm looking at reports, and I'm thinking that you're doing more than Ellis to get Atlantis ready for a massive inflow of refugees."

"We're trying, sir," John agreed. "Lorne had assigned teams to clear new towers room by room, and McKay is using the extra power to bring more hydroponics labs on-line."

"That's a good line Weir came up with--the one about you trying to minimize the damage we've done by providing more humanitarian aid."

"Weir and Teyla came up with that together," John said. He decided to not add that Dr. Weir would leave Teyla in charge when she took a day off or had some event on some allied world. John didn't know if that was her distrust of military in general or a comment on the fact that John had been gone for six months and Teyla did actually know more of the day-to-day operations. Either way, he suspected that neither General O'Neill or the IOC would be amused to know that John had been demoted from second in command to third in command in favor of an Athosian native. The irony was that John thought it was a good move, even if everyone else would be livid at the very thought. Besides, Teyla still took his orders in the field. He just took hers in the city.

"So once you get the gardens up and running, will you be reducing your supply requests?"

John cleared his throat. "No, sir. We're already stockpilling MREs as fast as we can. We're hoping to have a significant supply in case we have visitors."

O'Neill looked slightly impressed. It was a subtle shift in expression, but John knew him well enough to see that he was pleased. "Oh? How many visitors are you planning on?"

"McKay estimates that if you have some warning, you could send us around 15,000."

For a second, O'Neill just looked at him blankly. John was really starting to worry when O'Neill suddenly whistled. "Ellis' best guess was that they could handle six hundred."
"Right now, that probably is what we could handle easily, but give us a couple of months, and we'll be ready for a lot more."

"How many MREs do you have set aside right now, and don't give me the supply numbers you've been turning in for the Air Force. If you want to fake the records believably, Sheppard, you want to change more than the date." O'Neill rolled his eyes like he had just caught John masturbating in the shower. Again.


O'Neill leaned forward fast and slapped his hand on his desk as he stared at John in shock. "Okay, you're officially in charge of the Christmas savings club. Would you like to explain how you managed that?"

John grinned. "Most of the teams are now using local made granola and pemmican. We have happier teams and we put almost all the MREs to one side for true emergencies. The only MREs we're allowing to leave storage are near their expiration date."

"And you have enough local food for that?"

John cringed. This was getting into territory he really didn't want to explore with his commanding officer, especially since John's reports were a little less than truthful.

"Colonel?" O'Neill made a play at sounding unhappy, but in reality he sounded more amused.

"You know the beaming technology that Rodney has been playing with?"

"Do I want to know what he did?"

John really wished that he could keep Rodney out of the discussion and out of O'Neill's line of sight, but the only other scientist who had the same level of input into these clandestine preparations was Samas, and John knew that O'Neill would blow a gasket if he knew how much input Samas had into city operations. "In Rodney's defense, he did send a prototype back for Carter, and she shipped it off to Area 51, so anyone who is really paying attention is aware of what we can do."

"And what can you do?"

"Beam matter into a portable transportation device and then take the device through the Stargate or smuggle it on the Daedelus. A while back, Rodney arranged to purchase a herd of about 400 buffalo, and he transported it to Atlantis on the Daedelus."

O'Neill gave him a shit-eating grin. "The biologists are going to draw and quarter you."

"If they find out, probably. The Athosians turned them loose a good distance from the village. So far, the buffalo really like the Pegasus galaxy, and it only takes one or two animals to make a very large batch of pemmican. The Athosians said that it looks like they're going to have a bumper crop of calves in spring, so we think that's going to be a steady source of protein."

O'Neill just shook his head. "When I give you an order, I need to make sure I'm careful about setting up parameters, don't I?"

"Sir?"

"Come off it, Sheppard. We both know I asked you to start this ball rolling. If it all went to hell tomorrow, how many people could you handle?"
John thought about their current situation. "A thousand would push us to the limit, but I think we could manage it, although we would have to burn a few bridges with our allies."

"And when this is all over, you really think you'd be able to handle 15,000 people?"

John hesitated.

"Colonel?"

"Rodney thinks that if we can get hydroponics up to full capacity and open the two fishing bays he's identified under the city that Atlantis could handle close to 60,000 people, and if we can secure steady sources of protein through larger animal populations on the mainland, that we would probably be closer to a capacity of 100,000, more if people were willing to bunk together."

After that, there was a long silence--a long uncomfortable silence where John realized that O'Neill had never expected any of this. When O'Neill had suggested that John set up Atlantis as an evacuation site, he was thinking of base personnel. He'd never actually understood the real potential of the city, and now John was dropping it in his lap. If Gibbs was right about people not handling power well, this was a big, hairy ball of power John had just dropped in O'Neill's lap.

"So, as Alpha sites go, you're the deluxe model," O'Neill summarized.

"Yes, sir. And can I say that I truly hope we never have to test any of this."

"You and me both," O'Neill agreed wearily. "But we need tactical options, and McKay is right about the IOC--they would order the city back to the Milky Way." While O'Neill didn't say it, John was willing to bet that O'Neill also agreed with Gibbs about the political dangers. O'Neill leaned back in his chair and looked at John sadly. "If any of this gets out, you and I are both going to be up on treason charges for not reporting this, but we can't. If you are too valuable, you're going to have too many eyes on you."

John felt a kick to the gut, but he'd already known as much. "Tell them that I made the decision to hide all this from you, sir. You're needed in this office, so I won't contradict you."

O'Neill snorted. "Damn you're young, Colonel. First, they're going to know that we're close enough that you wouldn't keep this kind of secret. Christ, we lived together for six months, so I think that's going to give them a hint. They'll assume I know, or at least most of them will. The ones that believe your bullshit story will assume I'm an idiot, and I'd much rather be called a traitor than an idiot. But more importantly, you're not taking the fall when your first instinct was to come running home and report the situation. Take the blame when you screw up, and let me handle my screw-ups."

John felt an unfamiliar tightness in his chest. He'd had officers offer to cover for him before, officers that promised they would be by his side. He'd just never believed them. Part of John appreciated that O'Neill didn't take him up on his offer. The other part was terrified. If the military tried to court martial John, he had options. He had friends in other galaxies. Hell, he lived in another galaxy. If O'Neill's political enemies turned on him, John didn't know what the man would do. Hopefully he could still call on the Asgard if the shit hit the fan.

"The good news is that you'll always be welcome in the Pegasus galaxy. I'm sure Teyla could even offer asylum," John offered, and it was only half a joke.

O'Neill snorted. "Every time I disobey orders they seem to give me a promotion, so I'm not too worried. Go on, get out. And if you get a few extra transfers in the next month or so, you might want to let them start handling logistics, because even I could tell your supply reports were faked, and I
don't actually look at the things."

"Yes, sir. I'll remember to lie more effectively or have others do my lying for me."

"Good man. Now head back."

"Yes, sir."
John and Rodney, the old married couple

John read O'Neill's report a third time. This was going to be a royal mess. Master Chief Harriman would be the highest ranked non-commissioned officer, which would eliminate Gibbs' main reason for being on the informal council that made decisions on Atlantis. John wondered if O'Neill's hatred for Samas was showing its ugly head again. John admired the hell out of O'Neill, but he wasn’t blind to the general’s faults.

"What's wrong?" Rodney tried looking over John's shoulder and ended up essentially laying on John's back as he strained to see the tablet.

"O'Neill is sending us more people."

"That doesn't usually make you tense up," Rodney said. He ran his hand down John's side, his talented fingers teasing by skirting the edge of John's ticklish spots. John tried to shift over onto his back, but Rodney was pinning him. Considering he was a scientist, he was a lot more solid and a lot stronger than John had thought before they'd started their relationship. He liked that. He liked feeling Rodney's strength, both physically and emotionally. This was one relationship that didn't feel fragile like so many of John's previous relationships.

John set his tablet aside and then used his full strength to push himself up. Rodney had to move off to the side, and when John turned around, Rodney was smiling at him. God but John loved that crooked smile of his. Ignoring the fact they both had morning breath, John leaned in and kissed Rodney. He might have initiated it, but Rodney threw himself into the kiss with all his passion. John had just started to hope for more when Rodney started to pull away.

"Okay, I have to go to work and you suck at quickies," Rodney said, regret in his voice.

"I do suck," John agreed, wiggling his eyebrows.

Rodney rolled his eyes. "How did I fall for such a dork?"

"Good luck?" John asked.

"Some sort of luck. And if you make me late for work again, I'm going to make your shower run cold. I'll do worse if you make me run late and leave hickeys."

"Then I'll need you to warm me up."

Rodney rolled his eyes again, but he was still smiling, still running his fingers over John's bare hip. "So what has you so tense? And before you ask, no I am not going to help you relax. Genius here. I have work to do unless you want the entire city to sink."

John dropped the seduction. Getting Rodney in the mood in the morning took a lot of effort because his brain was usually already running tests and mentally preparing diatribes against certain members of his department, although it had been a little better lately. John hadn’t seen anyone go running to Elizabeth in tears in nearly two weeks. Maybe their marathon-long evening sex sessions were mellowing Rodney. "O'Neill is sending Chief Master Harriman."

"And?" Rodney flopped onto his back, but his fingers still skimmed across John's body.

"He outranks Gibbs?"
"So?" Rodney sounded supremely unconcerned.

"So that's a shitty thing to do. O'Neill forced Gibbs back into active duty, and now he sends someone who is going to take the position as the top ranked NCO. That's going to push him out of the meetings."

"Wait. What?" Rodney sat up. "Samas is the first one to stop the worst of the stupidity. Just because you have another military moron doesn't mean you can kick Samas out of the meetings, even if Harriman is slightly less stupid than the average goon."

"Nice, Rodney," John said sarcastically, making a face at his lover.

"If I stopped insulting your idiots, you'd start looking for the pod and you know it. Now, why would Samas stop coming to our meetings?"

"Officially, we never listed Samas as attending. We didn't want to aggravate the SGC."

"Do we care what those idiots think?"

"As long as those idiots give us orders, yes, we do." Sometimes it amazed John the way Rodney could just ignore all the politics. No wonder he got sent to Siberia. However, now it was John's job to make sure that Rodney didn't get himself in trouble. And that job was harder than it sounded. Rodney could piss off anyone. John had good evidence to prove it. Even with three new team members—Gibbs, Tony and Ronon, Rodney still seemed to get himself in more trouble than the rest of them combined. Luckily Tony was as good as Teyla at talking people out of killing them, and when people couldn't be talked into playing nice, Gibbs and Ronon were both very skilled at making people dead.

"I need Samas in the meetings. Unless you can find someone else who's been alive for five thousand years to give us advice, the SGC can deal with it." Rodney swung his legs out of bed. "I need coffee."

John knew better than to argue with an under-caffeinated Rodney.

"Why is O'Neill sending him, anyway? Harriman is a fixture at the SGC. I thought he'd be down there until he died and then they'd prop his desiccated and mummified body up in a chair in front of the dialing computer."

"Geez Rodney. Do you practice being offensive?"

"It's a natural talent," Rodney shot right back as he measured coffee into his machine. Ever since Rodney and Samas had figured out how to reverse engineer the Wraith dematerializing technology, John had noticed that the scientists were far less careful with critical supplies like coffee and chocolate and good toilet paper.

"The general mentioned that I'm not particularly good at lying on reports. He mentioned that if we got new personnel, I might want to start letting them do inventory."

"What's that mean?"

"He caught that we were hoarding MREs."

"If that pumped up little martinet—"

"He approves," John interrupted before Rodney could get too far off track. O'Neill's dislike for
Rodney was the minor leagues compared to Rodney’s hatred for O’Neill. “He just thinks I’m really bad at hiding things in the paperwork.” John groaned as he sat up. He really wanted to lay in bed and avoid this newest mess. Wraith were so much easier to deal with than politics.

Rodney gave him an amused look. “You’re just really bad at paperwork. Why don’t you have Lorne do it?”

“He breaks out in hives when I ask him to lie to our superiors.” That was a slight exaggeration, but Lorne clearly wasn’t comfortable doing it, and John disliked ordering a subordinate to do something he felt was unethical. That meant that some of the paperwork John had happily foisted off on Lorne had now drifted back to him.

“Moron,” Rodney declared. “Does he even know how many rules SG1 broke? Hell, it was only their first or second year, and they all disobeyed direct orders, hijacked the Stargate, and took on Apophis’ ship on their own. From what I hear, there were arrest warrants out on all of them up to the point where they saved the planet.”

“Really?” Maybe John needed to read some of those early mission debriefs.

Rodney shook his head and came back to sit on the bed next to John. Their shoulders pressed together, the bare flesh transferring the heat. John leaned into Rodney, basking in this new ability to touch. Rodney felt so safe, and yeah, John understood the irony in that because Rodney was a prickly pear of a man with spines sticking out at every angle. But those spines were so clear and Rodney was so quick to describe any perceived slight in detailed terms that John never felt like he had to tiptoe around in ignorance. If Rodney needed him to know something about their relationship, he would say it in unambiguous terms.

“Sometimes I forget you aren’t one of those officers who came through the SGC. You don’t know all the background on things.”

“Meaning?” John asked without moving. He needed his daily quota of Rodney touch before he had to go out and deal with the world.

“Meaning successful Gate teams can get away with a lot of shit no one else can. SG1 has broken more laws and disobeyed more orders than the rest of the Air Force combined. SG3 is a close second, and SG19 has a reputation for just ignoring superior officers who tell them things they don’t agree with. Considering that they’re experts in covert ops and sometimes their superiors order them to do really stupid things, that’s probably good, but in the rest of the military that would get you kicked out,” Rodney explained. John really didn’t need that last part explained, though. He’d been in the standard military units, and initiative was rarely rewarded.

“So that explains why no one is having a fit about Samas joining a gate team.”

Rodney gave him a look that implied John was the biggest idiot on the entire planet. When John didn’t say anything, Rodney just shook his head with a sort of exaggerated resignation. Clearly he thought he’d settled for someone with a far inferior intellect, and John would be offended only he was fairly sure that there were only two or three people in the universe who would be on the same intellectual level with him.

“I think Samas joined the team because he knows this,” Rodney explained.

“I think Samas joined the team because he didn’t totally trust Ronon and he assumed, and with some good evidence, that Ronon could take the rest of us in a fight if he put his mind to it.”
“Please, he got in a lucky shot. You could take him,” Rodney said.

John raised his eyebrow, but he didn’t actually call Rodney an idiot. John couldn’t take Ronon and he was well aware of it. When Gibbs and Ronon sparred, Gibbs was hard pressed to take him, and Gibbs was a legend in the sparring rooms.

“Okay,” John said, drawing the word out into several syllables. “What point are you trying to make here, Rodney?”

“Samas is on your team. You can pretty much do what you want and the SGC is going to work around that.” Rodney shrugged like it was no big deal. John suspected Rodney was wrong, but maybe he did have more leverage than he’d assumed. Rodney might not be as good with people as he was with nuclear particles, but he didn’t invent things out of the air. For example, when he thought people were trying to kill him, it generally meant they actually did dislike him.

“So, what? We just announce that we’re inviting a snake to our command meetings?”

Rodney poked him in the leg hard enough that it almost hurt.

“Hey, that’s how the SGC is going to see it. I happen to be a big fan of Samas.” John appreciated Samas’ advice, his ability to reverse engineer technology, and his friendship with Rodney. When John had been ordered back to earth, the only thing that kept him from climbing the walls with worry was the knowledge that Rodney had true friends in Samas and Radek. And while Tony and Elizabeth weren’t the same sorts of friends, they liked Rodney and protected him from the worst of his own mistakes.

Rodney got up and poured himself a cup of coffee before he headed into the bathroom. “Figure it out Colonel Sheppard,” he called over his shoulder. John scratched his stomach, looking down when something gathered under his fingernail. Come. Clearly they’d done a really crappy job of cleaning up last night. John picked the dried stuff out from under his fingernail and flicked it onto the floor where the automated cleaning system would pick it up.

After stretching, he reached for his radio and clicked it. “Dr. Weir?”

“Yes, John?”

“Private channel 3,” John suggested.

There was a pause and then an electronic click. “Okay, you have my attention,” she said. Suddenly John realized he was buck naked with drying come on his stomach. And Rodney could come out of the shower at any time, potentially saying something compromising. He was an idiot.

John headed for the door to their living room. Their hidden quarters were a lot more spacious than the rooms they kept half-furnished for show, and their balcony faced out over the ocean where no one had a view in. So John moved to stand near the open balcony door. “O’Neill is sending us some more support personnel, and I have some concerns about one in particular.”

“Oh?” On the other end she was typing, probably pulling up a modified version of the command report he’d gotten from O’Neill.

“Sergeant Harriman is going to be our new ranking NCO.”

Elizabeth didn’t answer immediately. “He’s a very competent man. I’m actually not sure why the general would transfer him out here.”
John wasn’t sure what she had in her report, but he didn’t intent on lying to her any more than he had to. The ZPM recharging station was a secret best kept far from any Earth officials, but Elizabeth deserved to know everything else. “There are two reasons. The official reason is in a report attached to his transfer file. It looks like someone tried to stage a kidnapping. His home was attacked. He was able to hold them off and call in for reinforcements, but it meant that the Daedalus had to beam soldiers directly into his house to secure the location.”

“I see the report now.”

“His two teenage sons were in the house and were exposed to a lot of classified technology.”

“Oh.” Just from her tone, John could imagine the sympathetic grimace on her face. “I can see that would pose a problem.”

“A huge one considering that Sergeant Harriman’s wife died recently, and clearly his family is now a target. Knowing how vital he’s been to SGC operations and knowing that his wife’s death most likely leaves him emotionally vulnerable, the latest theory is that some group on Earth is trying to take advantage of that.”

“I don’t see how transferring him to another galaxy…” Elizabeth’s voice trailed off, and John knew exactly what she was seeing. “I must be reading this wrong.”

“Yes, they’re sending Kyle Harriman, nineteen, and Gary Harriman, seventeen, along with him. Gary is finishing some school work from home while under guard. Kyle was studying to become an electrician, but the SGC figures we can put him in with some of our local technicians and train him here.” John didn’t add that at this point, Atlantis might be safer than earth. At least, Harriman and O’Neill seemed to be betting on that. Unless the SGC figured out a way to neutralize a Prior’s powers, it might even be true. However, having Stargate personnel bring their families made him feel twice and desperate to get Atlantis up and running as a full city. If Earth fell, he wanted to save as much of his homeworld as he could. The very idea of forcing people to worship the ascended made him nauseated in a way he couldn’t even explain.

“I’m not sure this is the best place for teenagers,” Elizabeth said, but her voice was weak and had a little shake in it, so John suspected she’d reached the same conclusion he had.

“By appointing Harriman, that knocks Gibbs out as the top NCO. How do we keep Gibbs and Samas in on the command meetings?”

There was a sigh. “You mean, how do we keep Samas in on the command meetings?”

“Yep,” John agreed easily.

“The SGC is unlikely to have softened their stance.”

“Funny enough, I don’t think they hold all the power anymore,” John pointed out. He waited to see if Elizabeth would laugh and contradict him. He half expected she would. Instead there was a long silence.

“They don’t, but when people are losing power, sometimes that’s when they are most willing to act in order to try to prove that they still have enough power to control you.”

“But wouldn’t they risk proving the opposite?”

Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, but I don’t think that’s how they see it.”
“Then do something to make it seem like a good idea.”

“We could start adding Samas’ names to the report. If they manage to not notice for a period of time, it would be hard for them to object later.”

“Sounds good,” John said. “So we’re still going to have them at the meeting, right?”

“I am not infected with the SGC’s prejudice against Samas or Gibbs. Their insight, particularly Samas’ has proved invaluable. So, you said there were two reasons. What’s the other one?”

“General O’Neill said that I was a terrible liar.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You are, but what was he talking about and what does that have to do with Harriman?”

“He said that my supply reports looked fake, and suggested that other people could see it even more easily than he could.”

“Ah. A month or two of falsified reports might be an officer too busy to do an actual inventory. More than that, and people might start wanting more accurate numbers. I can understand the general’s concerns. So, Harriman is supposed to solve that?”

“When General O’Neill met with me, he said that I needed to learn to falsify reports better or let other people do my lying for me. He then said that if I go new personnel in the next month or so that I should let them handle my paperwork.”

“So Harriman is here to help us stockpile supplies for evacuation without getting caught,” Elizabeth said. “That makes sense. He understands the system better than either of us. That also explains why General O’Neill called you back to Earth for a meeting. Preparing for the loss of Earth is a step that the IOC does not seem willing to take. They continue to push the SGC to produce weapons, sometimes to the point of making very dangerous decisions, but they won’t consider any alternatives.”

John felt more than a little guilty about lying to Elizabeth, but he knew he would rather not know about the ZPMs, so he soothed his conscience with that.

“That still makes things difficult on our end. I have to tell the gunny that O’Neill screwed him over again.”

“Good luck with that,” Elizabeth said, and then with a click of the radio, she was gone.

John thought about what she’d said. At this point he had to consider his Air Force career essentially over. Between the falsified reports, the lying to his superiors and the big gay love affair, he had broken enough rules that he just didn’t see himself as Air Force. He was a warrior focused on preparing his people for the fight against the Wraith or to save as many as he could from the Ori. If O’Neill had given him orders to report back to earth while someone else took command of Atlantis, John suspected he would disobey that order in a heartbeat. And that opened up certain options that he hadn’t had before.

Moving over to the Atlantis intercom system, which Tony had found and John had figured out, he mentally sent out a request for Radek. Unlike Tony who would feel the request immediately, Radek would only realize he was being called when he interfaced with a piece of Ancient tech, so it could take a while. John wandered back into the bedroom. The shower was off, but the bathroom door was still closed. John headed in to find Rodney in a pair of work pants brushing his teeth.
“Did you just send out a call for someone?” he asked, splattering toothpaste everywhere.

“Radek,” John said before he got in the shower. “And you’re not in charge of clean up next time. I have dried come on me.

“You probably still have come in you, too,” Rodney said with far more smugness than required. John shook his head. Rodney had been under some strange delusion that John would want to top all the time, so every time he took the driver’s seat he still tended to act like a rooster strutting around. John probably did have come in him, but it didn’t itch. The stuff on his stomach did.

John turned on the shower with a thought. In the middle of his shower, Atlantis gave him the little jolt that meant someone was calling him. “Radek?” John shouted above the shower.

“Colonel? Sound is very bad.”

“I’m in the shower.”

“Omlouvám. I call back later.”

“No!” John shouted before Radek could vanish. It was too hard to contact him on the system, and John didn’t want this conversation on the Earth radios. “How much work would it take to create a computer virus that inserted one or two words into an official SGC document?”

“You ask for hypothetical reason, yes?” Radek asked, his voice suspicious.

John finished rinsing his hair as he answered. “Yes, hypothetically if a person wanted to add the name Samas to all command minutes from the time I came back on Atlantis, how much effort would that take?” John turned off the water, and the door opened without John doing the opening. Rodney stood there looking at John oddly. Usually Atlantis kept all internal messages private, but John was starting to think the city understood the idea of mates because Gibbs and Tony could always hear each other’s conversations and Rodney could always hear John’s. At one point John had been subjected to Rodney’s, but John had ordered the computer to shut that down.

“Maybe a good programmer could do such a thing,” Radek said, his paranoia front and center.

“Could a good programmer create the virus so that it interacted with every system that downloaded anything from the SGC and made the same changes?” They were on such dangerous territory now. The President downloaded reports from the SGC. All the presidents in the IOC countries downloaded those reports. John was essentially asking Radek to commit treason by infecting their respective leaders’ computers.

There was a long pause. “Would take genius programmer.”

“Would that genius programmer be able to upload his virus with the next dialout?”

“If his boss is not tyrant about the time it takes to create this work of art,” Radek said carefully.

“Then since we have just identified a computer vulnerability, we should test it so we can set up safeguards to make sure no one does exactly that,” John said.

“Ano. Is a very good idea. Testing security of system is always important. I will get to work.”

“You may be getting another call in a second, but I do appreciate this, Radek.”

“Is for Samas, so he will owe me the fee in coffee.” Radek vanish with a little pop that John could
almost feel like a quick change of air pressure.

“We’re hacking the White House?” Rodney asked. It was an almost admiring tone.

“And you are going to be late for work,” John answered.

“I know my body is irresistible, but you cannot just announce that we’re having sex without asking whether I have important meetings that I can’t cancel.”

“I’m calling Tony so we can have a meeting. We need to talk about how things change now that General O’Neill knows about the ZPMs and the extent of our preparations.” John sent out a quick mental query for Tony and got an almost immediate response.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“I need you, Gibbs, Samas, Teyla, Radek and Rodney to meet me. Can we use the NCIS conference room?”

“Sure,” Tony said. “Is there trouble?”

“No, just more change on the way, and it’s easier for you to contact everyone without being noticed.”

There was a pause. “I just buzzed Radek on the intercom, and he’s coming. Gibbs and Samas are with me, I assume you have Rodney.”

“Yeah,” John smiled at the wording. “I do.”

“Then I’ll go get Teyla and meet you at my office.”

Rodney frowned as John terminated their call. “We’re having a meeting?”

“Things are changing Rodney. We need to be prepared to change with them.”
Meet Jo

Gibbs was taking the news fairly well, but since Tony had his girl in him, he could feel Samas’ aggravation. Because they were of the same genetic line, the pheromones and hormones that revealed emotions and even communicated images from one onac to another were particularly vivid. Jo added that she was particularly good at reading such thoughts because she was a strong queen. That was his girl, always confident in herself. Tony had originally named her Jo after Joanna, the first born daughter of the incomparable Tony Bennett. However, he was starting to think that Jo from Little Women was the better allusion.

Jo sent out a small query about whether or not she could simply kill the newcomer, but Tony shut that down immediately. The fewer waves you created, the easier the swimming. But Jo didn’t need easy swimming. She could handle turbulent waters. But killing was a last resort for those that would threaten the genetic lines, not for any annoyance, Tony thought firmly. Samas supported that with a wave of hormones that best translated as “settle before I bite your fins off,” which seemed to be a threat to let someone die slowly of starvation as they could no longer hunt. Jo quieted.

Tony gave Gibbs a dirty look. He could handle Jo without Samas jumping in. Gibbs rolled his eyes.

John looked from Tony to Gibbs and back, clearly confused but not willing to make a big deal out of it. “Gunny, you will still have direct control over all training. Harriman is going to be in charge of the enlisted who are in technical fields only. He might outrank you on paper, but in person, I’ll make sure he knows that you have the experience and my backing.”

“Yes, sir,” Gibbs answered calmly, nothing hinting at the thoughts he was having, but Tony picked up a flash of Samas eating O’Neill’s guts. “I don’t think I have a lot of choice.”

“No, and I don’t either,” Sheppard said with some annoyance. “But I’m not letting O’Neill change the way we run our city. Elizabeth and I agree that you and Samas need to keep coming to command meetings. You may not be the highest ranking NCO, but you know the men. Harriman doesn’t. And Harriman doesn’t have the advantage of having Samas around to provide advice.”

Teyla leaned forward. “John, you have some larger concern or you would not have called this meeting.”

“O’Neill is also sending Harriman's two teenage boys,” Sheppard said. Now that was a shock. Tony looked around the table to see how the others were reacting. Radek seemed alarmed and Teyla was surprised, but Rodney didn’t seem to be reacting much at all. Maybe he didn’t understand the significance of this.

“Your people have not sent children before,” Teyla observed. “This is a change of policy, is it not?”

“A huge one,” John agreed. “It means that O’Neill thinks there's a good chance Earth might fall.”

“No,” Gibbs said, “he’s thought that for a while. Facing an enemy as powerful as the Ori, he would be a fool to ignore the possibility. This means that O’Neill trusts that we can protect our people. That will change his strategy.”

Rodney snorted. “Excuse me if I question your ability to predict O’Neill’s plans. It’s not like you and O’Neill are buddies.”

Gibbs gave Rodney an unfriendly look. “I know O’Neill. I’ve fought with him, and Samas has seen the losing side of enough battles to understand his strategy. Up until now we have been a possible
source of weapons—"

“A Hail Mary play,” Sheppard interrupted. “He invested just enough to pay off if we found something to fight the Ori.”

Gibbs nodded. “And he kept the majority of the resources on Earth, probably to invest in ships he could use to either fight or evacuate people. We were not part of his strategy to protect Earth, but if he believes we are stable, that will figure into his decisions.”

“Will this be beneficial or dangerous?” Teyla asked.

“He’ll send more people,” Gibbs said.

Sheppard nodded. “Lorne and I can handle any military assets, but Teyla, you and Tony are going to have to handle more civilians. I don’t even know what to do with teenagers.”

Teyla gave him a smile that had a touch of pity in it. “The same things you do with adults, John. You find them work they enjoy and help them get settled.”

Tony wished it was that easy. “Earth teenagers are different,” he warned. “Some have been so safe and secure their whole lives that they don’t know how to handle danger.”

“Then we teach them,” Teyla said. “It sounds as if the danger is no greater here than on Earth. They will simply be more aware of it.”

“I wonder if I could get Jeanne to move here,” Rodney said. Tony had no idea who Jeanne was, and he looked at Sheppard. There was a definite lack of jealousy, so Tony was guessing it wasn’t an old girlfriend. Jo tasted the emotions on the air and could sense grief and guilt. Tony assumed that meant family. His own father was still back on Earth and in the crosshairs of the Ori Priors, but Tony had given up that life when he’d chosen to follow Gibbs. He didn’t regret it now.

However, if things got too hairy, maybe he could talk someone into sending them McGee. Jo sorted his memories of his old probie and dismissed him as a host. Tony firmly reminded her that the world was not divided into people who could host for her children and people who wouldn’t. Host cultures had a rich variety of individuals, and she needed to understand the entire tapestry or she would fail as badly as Ra.

Gibbs looked over as Jo felt a stab of fear. Samas was probably picking up on some of their silent conversation. Jo insisted that she would never fail that way. Tony reminded her to understand the larger picture if she wanted to avoid it. Keeping focused too tightly on that one goal or one suspect or one target meant that you missed too much. Jo settled back, willing to admit that Tony and Gibbs and Samas understood more than she did. In the water, focus meant better hunting.

Once Tony refocused on the conversation taking place around the NCIS conference table, he realized he’d missed part of the conversation.

“Why would they do that?” Rodney asked.

Sheppard answered. “Rodney, if you were had two lifeboats after your ship sank, would you put all your smartest people in one boat?”

“I don’t know. Is one of the boats in significantly better shape?”
Teyla raised her eyebrow. “I believe General O’Neill has only now realized that Atlantis is just as secure as Earth. It does make sense that he would send at least some of his people here for safety.”

“If he sends us several hundred scientists, we could still evacuate back to Earth fairly quickly, but if the Ori show up at his doorstep, trying to gather up people from all over the planet could prove very difficult,” Gibbs agreed. “It’s a logical move, and O’Neill is a brilliant tactician, even if he sometimes downplays his intelligence.”

“Well I don’t need legions of idiots taking up lab space,” Rodney declared firmly.

“Come on, Rodney,” Sheppard wheedled, “you know you’d love a big department with all the little scientists begging for your approval.”

Radek snorted. “Or begging to be sent home after they figure out that Atlantis is not as much fun as having lab full of students to order around. Scientists can have big ego.”

“No, really?” Sheppard asked with exaggerated shock.

Rodney glared at him, but Sheppard just grinned at him. Tony really did not understand their relationship, but he could feel the love and joy radiating off them, even as they aggravated and annoyed each other. If Tony spent that much time trying to get under Gibbs’ skin, he’d have brain damage from all the head slaps.

“Bottom line,” Sheppard said as he looked around at everyone, “when Earth opens the wormhole in one week, we have to expect a change in policy. There will be more people coming through, and some of them will be taking refuge here.”

“Do we tell Elizabeth why we’re getting more transfers?” Tony asked.

Sheppard frowned unhappily, but he also shook his head. “The ZPM secret needs to stay secret. That means we don’t put her in the middle of this.”

Rodney sank a little lower in his seat. So he did feel guilty about putting his lover in the middle. Good. He should. Tony liked Rodney, but sometimes he was worse than McBlab ever had been. Huh. McGee, McKay, maybe people of Scottish ancestry were just missing the common sense gene. But then again, Carson seemed to disprove that.

Teyla turned to Tony. “Would you have time to discuss Earth customs regarding children? This is the time to consider how our customs may cause misunderstandings.”

Tony nodded. “I can do that.”

Sheppard nodded. “I’ve already told Elizabeth that O’Neill is aware of our preparations, so she’ll put any change down to that. Gunny, could you coordinate with Lorne on training schedules?”

Gibbs nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“I shall work with Tony on making sure that our people understand the challenges of dealing with young people who have been kept from the truth.” Teyla’s tone made it clear that she didn’t approve of sheltering children that much.

“Rodney and I can start looking at our training,” Radek said.

Sheppard nodded. “Okay. One week. In exactly one week it’s Earth’s turn to open the wormhole, and whatever O’Neill has planned, that’s when it’s going to start.” Sheppard had an expression like
he was ready to walk into a war. Tony wondered what he expected. Jo wondered if any of the new people would be good hosts or if they would pose a threat. She disliked being unable to show herself and her strength, but Tony reminded her that the strongest onac grew in the shade of the shallows. Sometimes hiding was best, just as Samas spend centuries hiding on Earth until he met Gibbs.

Jo sent back a fervid hope she would not have to wait centuries to take her place battling the Wraith and bringing children into the world who could do the same.

One week later, Tony stood by while Harriman introduced himself to Sheppard. Gibbs had found an excuse to be on the mainland with a group of Marines when the wormhole opened, so he missed the show as forty soldiers escorted almost seventy scientists and assorted civilians into the city. It was more than the previous week’s report had led them to expect, and Tony could feel the general state of alarm in the Gate room.

“Welcome to Atlantis, Sergeant,” Sheppard said with a tight smile. “This is our Agent Afloat, Tony DiNozzo. Tony, this is Sergeant Walter Harriman.”

“Sirs,” Walter nodded his head. “My boys are waiting for me, but I promised General O’Neill I would escort this to you personally.” He gestured toward a crate that an airman was pushing.

Sheppard eyed it suspiciously. “Why do I suspect a practical joke?”

“I don’t know, sir, but General O’Neill asked you to open this with Dr. McKay. Permission to get my boys settled before I report for orientation, sir?”

Sheppard nodded. “Granted. And if you need anything…”

“We’ll be fine sir.” He turned and headed back to his two sons, both of whom stood looking around with huge eyes. Harriman’s wife must have been a tall woman, because both boys were taller than their father by at least four inches. Tony watched Teyla make her way over to them. Ronon stood on the balcony looking down at the crowd. Tony suspected the Marines were about to discover they weren’t actually the toughest men in the universe. Ronon liked fresh meat for the training mats. That was one reason Jo was looking forward to the day she could reveal herself. She wanted to test Ronon’s strength for herself instead of simply watching. She already knew he was worthy of a host, but she wanted to prove her own strength to him, to show that she was equally worthy.

“Do you want me to get McKay?” Tony asked. Normally he had a chance to hang with any new people and get to know them, but there were so many that Tony was going to be hard pressed to even remember their names.

“Yeah,” Sheppard said. “He can terrorize the new scientists later. Better yet, he can have Radek do the orientation. That way we won’t be sending back half of them next week when it’s our turn to open the wormhole.”

“Are you suggesting that Rodney scares people away?” Tony asked.

Sheppard rolled his eyes. The nice thing about the colonel was that he didn’t let his own feelings blind him to reality. Tony worked his way through the crowd, greeting people and helping to sort some supplies. Lorne was in the thick of it, checking off boxes and talking to someone at the SGC through his radio, and he gave Tony a quick smile.

Jo would like to have both of them host. John Sheppard and Evan Lorne were strong, and they had the moral center that Tony valued so. She was starting to understand humans well enough to see why
that ethical code was necessary. Unlike onac who could only affect those they could touch with their teeth, humans had a reach that went far behind the length of their own arm.

Tony liked the path of her thoughts, but he reminded her that any hint that either of them had been compromised would lead to them losing their status. As much as Jo wanted to taste the blood of one who had been joined with one of those two, she agreed that the outcome was not worth the risk.

When Tony had first realized that his girls were ready to take a host, he had been afraid that his onac’s desire for genetic material would translate into him having lust for random people. Instead he found he could feel Jo’s interest in certain individuals without being affected himself. And that was good because Jo liked Abby, and if Tony ever developed a sexual interest in the woman he essentially thought of as a little sister, he would stab his own eyes out. Jo found that concept ridiculous. She planned to mate with her brothers, and Tony immediately pushed that thought aside with a lot of humming.

“Rodney!” Tony called. He had a civilian backed into a corner, and from the expression on the guy’s face, he’d already been subjected to one of Rodney’s harangues.

“So next time you think about smuggling something into my city, don’t!” Rodney finished. He whirled around to glare at Tony. “What?” he demanded.

“Whoa, slow down, Rod. I didn’t do anything wrong today, so save that expression for the next time I poke some Ancient device.” Rodney frowned, but Jo could smell the guilt start to drift through the air. Tony slung his arm around Rodney’s shoulders. “The general sent a crate and said you were supposed to be there when Colonel Sheppard opened it.”

“Me?” Rodney demanded.

“Sheppard suspects a practical joke,” Tony said.

Rodney snorted, but his emotions shifted immediately to curiosity and suspicion, the guilt of a mere second ago already forgotten. Rodney’s emotions seemed to pass through so much more quickly and with so much more intensity that sometimes it caught Tony off guard.

Tony looked at the wide-eyed scientist who had already brought Rodney’s ire down on himself. “Whatever you did, don’t do it again. That was the nice version of McKay,” Tony warned him. The guy looked ready to piss himself, but Tony had no doubt that whatever he’d done had been dangerously stupid so he probably deserved it. Warning delivered, Tony hurried after Colonel Sheppard and Rodney. They were heading for one of the side rooms Elizabeth sometimes used for visiting delegations, and Tony followed. If this was a practical joke, he guessed it was going to be worth watching, even if that meant getting caught in the path of it.

By the time Tony got to the room, Rodney had pulled the front off the crate to reveal a Wraith beaming unit. Tony had one of them at the foot of his bed for weeks as Samas has worked to understand the various parts.

“Rodney?” Sheppard asked.

“Clearly he’s sent us something,” Rodney said.

“Yeah, but what?” Sheppard asked.

Rodney stood and gave Sheppard a look that made it clear he didn’t think much of the colonel’s intelligence. “How am I supposed to tell without rematerializing it?”
“Doesn’t that have some sort of display that reveals what’s inside?”

“This is the first retrofitted model that Samas and I created. We sent it back to Earth for Area 51 to study. It doesn’t have the display because we figured they would just shove it into storage and forget it. We didn’t want to waste the spare parts.”

Tony started considering all the things that could have been beamed into it. Jo started feeling an urge to shake her fins as she considered the potential threats. Tony told her to settle before she did something stupid like damage his spinal cord. She did settle, but she was still desperately unhappy.

“What if he’s sent a hundred buffalo? We can’t turn it on in here,” John said.

Rodney made a dismissive noise. “That shows your lack of understanding of the technology. The beam scans the available area and then only rematerialized as much as is safe given the open area.”

“And if this is O’Neill’s revenge and he’s filled it with snakes?” Sheppard asked. Rodney didn’t answer, but he did inch his way closer to the door.

“Why would he do that?” Rodney asked. “I mean, I know he hates me, but I thought he liked you. He let you live in his house for six months.”

“I’m not sure ‘let’ is the right verb,” Sheppard said, but he sounded distracted. “He wouldn’t send anything that was actually dangerous, so turn it on.”

Rodney gave him a suspicious look. “Are you sure?”

“No.”

“Well that’s reassuring,” Rodney complained, but he pressed the code to activate the machine and then retreated to Tony’s side near the door.

The rematerialization light flashed and a dozen or so people stood in front of them, luggage stacked up high behind them, and even a dog in the center. Tony hadn’t expected that. He looked to see how the others were taking it. Sheppard looked confused, Rodney didn’t.

Rodney took a step forward. "Jonas?"

"Dr. McKay!" The man smiled, which was not most people's usual reaction to seeing Rodney.

"Where are we?"

"You don't know?"

Jonas looked around, and when he saw the woman next to him, he smiled and took her by the hand. "No. I only know that Jack said that when we came out of the machine we’d be in a place that was safer, although he did suggest that safe might be a relative term."

Sheppard stepped forward and offered his hand. "I'm Colonel John Sheppard, military commander of Atlantis." Jonas took it and shook with the solemn dignity of someone who didn’t normally shake hands as part of their culture.

"Atlantis?" Jonas’ eyes got large and he turned to the woman. "Shea, do you remember I told you how the Tau'ri were seeking the city of the Ancients? If this is Atlantis, it is the greatest of those cities."

"Honestly?" She looked around. "It's beautiful." Tony had grown so used to the city that he hadn’t
really thought of this room as beautiful. It didn’t have the lit Ancient text or soaring ceilings of some of the other rooms. It did have a window that ran the length of the room and a beautiful view of the other city spire, though.

"Yes, yes, the city is beautiful. Why are you here?" Rodney demanded.

"Rodney, manners," John chided him.

"Whatever. John, this is Jonas Quinn, one time member of SG1 and the scientist who pioneered some of the work on naquadria, including killing Jackson the first time around or maybe the second."

"That wasn't my fault," Jonas said, immediately flushing bright red. Shea moved closer to him and hugged his arm.

"Radiation happens in science, and sometimes things blow up. It isn't about fault," Rodney said. Maybe he was learning a few social graces, although he still put a McKay twist on things. Tony felt sorry for Jonas being the center of that sharp tongue.

“Ignore Rodney. Shock turns of the switch in his brain that warns him not to say something,” Tony said as he stepped forward. He didn’t offer his hand, but he smiled at the entire group. “Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo at your service. I'm sort of the local cop.”

“Cop?” one of them asked.

“Enforcer of laws,” Jonas translated. “It is a pleasure to meet you Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo.”

“Focus people,” Rodney snapped. “Why did O'Neill put you in one of my dematerializers?” Jonas' smile vanished, and John noticed the others shifting uncomfortably.

"You know, we're being bad hosts," Sheppard said. "Let's see if we can't find you some quarters and maybe show you around." His smiled was a little too broad and his words a little too loud. In his own way, he was as unsubtle as Rodney.

Shea smiled at him. She was a small woman with round hips and a baby bump that looked like it was about ready to turn into a baby. Whatever happened, she had risked using unfamiliar technology on her unborn child. Tony figured that made her pretty damn gutsy. "Thank you," she said, tilting her head toward Sheppard. "It has been a difficult time, and we have brought a lot, although I suspect we didn't bring enough." She looked at the stacks around them.

One of the men behind her took a step forward. "We salvaged what we could. I am Tolmach and I've trained on energy systems back on our home planet of Langara. This is Ziau, my wife." He held out his hand and a tall woman stepped closer to him. "She is a glass artisan, although I doubt you have need for such a craft."

"I can do whatever is needed," Ziau quickly added.

"I am Sen," a shorter woman said. "I worked with Jonas in the physics and weapons lab."

Rodney perked up at that, but Tony was more focused on O’Neill’s motives. He was sending them non-Earthers, and Tony was guessing, these were allies. Why would O’Neill send them through the machine when they could have simply stepped through the gate? Something was wrong, but Tony kept silent as the rest of the group quickly introduced themselves. Atlantis had inherited a teacher, two botanists--one of which specialized in poisons--six physicists, a glass blower, a house husband, a
computer coder, and two business owners. Around them they had crated up everything they could save from Kelowna, their home nation-state. Tony wasn’t surprised when their story quickly turned to the Priors.

"The Ori took the entire planet?" Rodney sounded lost when he'd heard their story, told in pieces as each person added a bit. "But the Langarans are logical people who understand science. They aren't backwards peasants who follow some ridiculous religion." Rodney looked lost, and Sheppard took a step closer to him before resting his hand on Rodney’s back. Jonas watched the movement and Jo could smell his relief and satisfaction. Jonas not only liked Rodney, but he liked that Rodney had found a place with people who offered him comfort. That moved the man up a little in Tony’s good opinion. Jo started showing more of an interest.

Jonas sighed. "My people were forced to choose between Origin or death. The priests performed miracles that convinced many, and others simply hid their doubts in order to avoid dying. When I contacted Jack, he said that the Tau'ri leadership had changed, and the new counsel had said that no one could take refuge on earth. They feared being overwhelmed as the Ori pushed farther into the galaxy." Tony felt a helpless rage that politicians had turned their back on allies.

"Bastards," Rodney snapped, and Tony agreed with that. John’s back was stiff. Jo could smell the aggression from the colonel.

"Jack offered to try and smuggle me onto Earth, but he couldn't find a place for all of us, and I wouldn't leave my people." Jonas looked around at the small group around him, and Tony got the feeling this small band had endured a lot together.

"So he sent you here?" Rodney demanded. "Did he mention the Wraith who try to eat people or the crazy natives or the way we sometimes find abandoned Ancient experiments that try to kill us?"

"Sounds like fun," Sen said with a smile that suggested she was only half joking. "At least it's a lot more fun than being asked to pray to egomaniacal aliens twelve hours a day."

Jonas grinned at her. "You can even build big guns to blow up the Wraith."

Sen rubbed her hands together. "Say 'big guns' and I'll follow you anywhere Jonas Quinn." Jonas' wife rolled her eyes.

Rodney was looking around with a bewildered expression, but Tony got it. When you escaped certain death, you had a giddiness that sometimes sounded a little crazy. He remembered the day after Tony had been kidnapped and chained in a sewer to die. That had come not long after Kate had been taken captive by Ari in the middle of NCIS headquarters, and it was like they’d had one too many close calls. They’d gone out for a simple drink and had ended up scamming a group of guys out of their money at the pool tables. They’d both had a strange sort of giddiness at just being alive.

"Rodney, be nice to your new scientists," Sheppard suggested. "After all, they didn't come out of the American universities you hate so much, so there's a small chance you might not want to kill them all after their first day of work."

Jonas laughed so hard that it turned into coughing. It was Shea who answered. "We've heard about McKay's brilliance and his intolerance for stupidity. I have to admit that we sometimes joke that someone should put you in front of an Ori priest and let you scare them back to the world they came from."

"The power of Rodney-bitching," Sheppard said thoughtfully. Rodney glared at him, and Sheppard threw an arm around his shoulders. "We'll save that for last resort. Right now, we need to find you
quarters and show you around. Tony, do you think you could ask Lorne to find them some rooms while I explain to Elizabeth?"

“Sure,” Tony agreed.

“Rodney, maybe you could pack up the rematerializer and send it back to Sam along with a note that General O’Neill accidentally forwarded it to us.”

"Why would..." Rodney stopped. He got it.

O’Neill couldn’t stop the IOC from running the war the way they wanted to, but he could work around them. Tony wondered how many people were going to end up living in Atlantis. Tony looked at Sheppard, and he could almost taste the man’s determination. If he had to hold up Atlantis on his own shoulders, he was determined to live up to the faith O’Neill was putting in him. Tony just hoped that O’Neill didn’t demand too much. Jo whispered that this gave Sheppard a chance to prove his worthiness as a leader. Difficult waters improved the swimming muscles.

“Come this way,” Tony invited Jonas and the others. “I’ll introduce you to Lorne and we can watch the vein on the side of his neck throb when he has to find more quarters.” The truth was that Atlantis had a lot of space, but every new set of quarters they used created the need for more patrols. The new soldiers should make that less of a burden.

“Hopefully we won’t be too much of a bother,” Jonas said. Tony had read enough of the SG1 reports to know that Jonas would be a useful man to have around. Jo looked forward to not only evaluating the strength of these individuals, but seeing what other strong humans O’Neill chose to save in such a way.

Jonas Quinn of SG1. Tony had never expected to meet him.

Then again, it would have to be a pretty messed up reality for O’Neill to allow a former teammate to get captured or killed by the Ori, so maybe he should have expected it.

“I’m sure you guys are going to fit right in,” Tony said.
An old face

Rodney pulled his foot free of the grasping tentacles of the shin-high weeds. “This is ridiculous,” he announced to the team. Tony tried to keep a straight face, but Rodney’s exaggerated misery made it difficult, especially when he kept glancing at Sheppard’s ass and then sending out little waves of lust hormones so strong they made Jo twitch.

“Well, keep complaining about it, and we may get there faster,” Sheppard said over his shoulder.

“Well, couldn't we have met these people on a tropical beach planet, something with tropical drinks?”

“Like lemonade,” Tony offered. Rodney shot him a particularly vicious glare, and Tony grinned back. Rodney’s glare power had long since worn thin with him. Besides, Tony had witnessed Rodney so twisted around on Abby-logic that the man had fled, so that took some of the shine off his scary street-cred.

Teyla sighed and managed in that one sound to make it clear that she found herself far better than the baby-sitting duty life had relegated her to. “Whoever wants to speak with us obviously values their privacy.”

“Yes, well, I value my time, and this is a waste of it,” Rodney muttered.

“Sir, this is a prime place for an ambush, and I’m catching a lot of random scents,” Gibbs warned. Immediately Jo started scenting the air. Tony opened his mouth a little to let more of the air in, but he could only catch random wisps of scent that came from strangers. More than one, but other than that, Jo couldn’t identify much. Tony enjoyed her frustration when she realized that she couldn’t keep up with Samas.

Yeah, Tony had felt the same about Gibbs for years, so Jo could just suck it up and realize that sometimes experience trumped everything else. Jo didn’t take that well, but she did settle down with a grumble. However, he could also tell that she felt a little better knowing that he blamed her lack of experience and not her genetics for any failure.

“This is the mission,” Sheppard said to all of them. Tony could tell that Gibbs was uneasy with it. They had a lot of eggs in one basket with this team, and Tony knew that Gibbs wasn’t particularly thrilled with it. Jo sent out a burst of aggression scent. She would kill any enemies.

Gibbs stopped and gave Tony a warning look.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m on it,” Tony said. Ronon gave him an odd look, but the rest of the team ignored them.

“It strikes me that this is a mission better suited to one of the lower echelon teams,” Rodney said. Yeah, it was an arrogant thought, but Tony could tell that Gibbs agreed. They were putting their leaders at risk for a tip that seemed to offer very little chance of delivering the promised intel on the Wraith.

“Lower echelon?” Ronon asked.

“He means to say less important,” Teyla said with an unhappy look in Rodney’s direction. Of course he completely missed it. With Rodney, you had to slap him in the face with a dead fish if you wanted him to notice anything other than technology or the colonel’s ass.
“Do you have any idea what all those new idiots could be doing back at Atlantis? Those arrogant newcomers think that just because they’re the best and brightest in the SGC that they should—”
McKay ended in a yelp as Gibbs tackled him to the ground. Tony had no idea what was going on, but his body had moved before his brain could even catch up with reality. Stunner fire flew through the trees, and Sheppard and Teyla were already down. Ronon seemed to vanish, which wasn’t easy for a man that large.

Jo sent up sorry-sorry-sorry thoughts about taking over Tony’s body at the same time she prodded him to kill the enemy that had attacked them.

“Hey!” Rodney protested, but Tony couldn’t see him or Gibbs. Tony slowly eased back into the forest, hoping to circle around and find the enemy, but suddenly the air was full of Samas scent. Play dead. Play helpless. Tony’s mind was full of the image of a queen floating in the water, her fins hanging lifeless and her body limp as a challenger approached.

Tony heard the footsteps behind him, far quicker and more surefooted than any human, but Samas’ image held him captive. Then a strong arm caught him around the throat and pulled him up. Tony put up a token resistance, holding back Jo’s strength as Gibbs and Samas had ordered.

“Sergeant Gibbs, we know about your symbiote. Surrender or we’ll hurt your lover.” Tony felt the end of a gun press against his head and he went utterly still. He suspected that without Samas’ scent filling the air, Jo would have panicked and gone crazy, but Tony worked to reinforce Samas’ message, calming her. He’d been captured a lot, and Gibbs had always come for him. Trust the team. It went against every instinct Jo had, but she remembered those times as well. She’d been born with his memories, and now she dived into them, bringing up thoughts of every time Tony had ever been kidnapped. Those weren’t the memories Tony wanted to relive right now, but if it calmed Jo, he’d live with it.

“Sergeant Gibbs?” Tony’s captor called.

“Gunnery Sergeant,” Gibbs corrected him as he stood. He was using a tree for cover, and now that Tony knew where to look, he could see the faint outline of Rodney hiding in the bushes at Gibbs’ feet.

“Gunnery Sergeant,” Tony’s captor said. Two other men appeared on either side of Gibbs, but he didn’t twitch. Gibbs knew how to play it cool, and he was the only person at NCIS who had been kidnapped or taken captive more than Tony, so Tony told Jo to follow his lead.

“Let him and McKay go back to the Stargate and we can talk,” Gibbs offered. Tony really didn’t think Gibbs should be offering to sacrifice half the team, but he did understand the need to get Rodney out of a volatile situation. Rodney was stronger than he gave himself credit for, but that didn’t mean he didn’t do some flailing and panicking along the way.

“No,” Tony’s captor said. “Surrender or we’ll kill this one. We were told to bring Sheppard, Teyla and McKay alive. We don’t have any orders about any others.”

Gibbs made eye contact with Tony long enough for Tony to understand that something was going on. Then Gibbs held his weapon out to one side in surrender.

“What are you doing?” Rodney yelped. One of the bad guys stunned Rodney, and he rolled halfway into the path. Tony’s captor gave him a good shove, and Tony let himself fall forward, anticipating the hit of the stunner as it turned his nerves to fire. He let his body go lax although Jo was already at work eliminating all the effects of the weapon. If anything it helped her to have something to do.
“Ford sent you,” Gibbs said. Samas sent out approval scent. Jo was making him proud, playing the smart game instead of trying to overpower with brute strength.

“How did you know?”

“I can smell him on you. I can smell your addiction, too.”

“Should we stun him?” one of the others asked.

“We don’t know how well a stunner works on someone who has a symbiote. Tie him up and only bring him through after we’ve taken the others. He can cooperate or we can kill his lover.”

Jo had another ripple of fury, and Tony hushed her. They were gaining intelligence, and that was more important than eating the enemy’s guts, at least for now.

“The snake in his head can come out his mouth, so make sure to gag him.”

“You’ll regret this,” Gibbs warned, but then he went silent. Jo was desperate to see if Samas was in danger, so Tony resorted to making fun of her. If she thought Samas needed help from a kid who wasn’t even three years old, she needed onac therapy. Jo wasn’t happy, but she did understand his point. She stayed quiet as these guys picked up Tony’s body and loaded him onto some sort of stretcher.

“What about the one who got away?” Someone asked. So Ronon had escaped. Given the split second of warning Gibbs had provided, Tony was more than a little impressed, and Jo was determined that she would have children by the symbiote who first made it into Ronon. Tony tried to keep her distracted by that thought as another body was loaded onto the stretcher next to his. Sheppard.

“Don’t worry about him. We’ll jump through several gates before we head home.” Tony didn’t doubt Gibbs and Samas, so he knew Ford was behind this, but he sure couldn’t figure out the lieutenant’s game. Kidnapping superior officers and random NCIS agents generally didn’t look good on the service record.

“Get them to the gate before their sixth team member does something stupid.” Tony felt the stretcher get lifted and then he was moving through the air. Gibbs was close, Jo knew that because she could smell the queen scent, but no one spoke as they went through the gate over and over. After five or six jumps they finally started walking. Tony felt Sheppard start to twitch, but then their captors put the stretcher down, and suddenly Tony was caught in the fire of another stunner blast. Damn it. His whole body shivered in the pain of it, and Jo silently screamed.

Safe-safe-hide in the shadows-safe drifted on the air. Tony sent mental thanks out to Samas as he worked to soothe his girl. She didn’t like pain, but there were worse fates than suffering a little pain. Jo wanted to separate. She wanted out of the human body that trapped her, but Tony hushed her, and Samas’ hormones smothered her until she fell to repairing the stunner’s effects. She wasn’t happy, but she followed her mother’s lead.

The stretcher started moving again. They moved into something that smelled damp and cavelike, but Tony kept his eyes shut as he was moved into a hard chair and his arms pulled behind him. He was tightly tied and then a hood was pulled over his head. Only then did Tony open his eyes. He watched through the dark fabric as they pushed Gibbs down into a chair. He had a thick rope of fabric tied around his mouth and head several times. Samas could still get out, but he’d make a mess of Gibbs’ neck if he tried.
Jo was furious, and Tony hushed her again. Gibbs and Samas would have their revenge, and she would not take it from them. Gibbs allowed himself to be tied and then a hood was put over his head. They were definitely in a cave, and from the thickness of the hood, Tony guessed the others would be blind even after they woke up.

It took a while, but first Rodney and then Sheppard and Teyla started making small movements, their heads swinging from side to side as they tried to figure out where they were. Tony took that as a sign to lift his own head.

Men walked in, their weapons looking fairly modern while their clothing looked primitive and worn. Samas called them scavengers, and Tony tended to agree. They put food on the table in front of each of the captives. Tony had Jo sent out a general query about whether it was poison. Communicating this way took a long time because air was not as useful as water for transferring onac thoughts, but luckily the enemy had sat Tony next to Gibbs so he fairly quickly got back a suggestion that Jo sample the food before McKay could poison himself with it.

Two more men came in, again armed to the teeth. Whoever these people were, they had paranoia down to an art, and now that there were several of them in the room, Jo could smell that wrongness to them. Gibbs had accused them of being addicted, and Tony could only hope that was an exaggeration because addicts were the crazy-scary end of the suspect pool.

A dark haired man pulled the hood off Teyla and Rodney before whoever was standing behind Tony pulled his hood off. A half second later, a third guy pulled the colonel’s hood off. Colonel Sheppard shook his head for a second and then looked around. “You guys okay?”

Rodney gave him an incredulous look. “Oh yeah. Fine. Great.” His eyes were focused on Gibbs who had been cruelly gagged.

“You know, this seems like a whole lot of trouble to go through just to get us to dinner,” he commented, “and Gibbs is going to have some trouble eating. It’d be a nice gesture to take that off.” Sheppard looked around, but no one was reacting to him. Tony scented the air, but Jo didn’t understand what she was smelling. Not-right was the closest she could describe it. Samas sent over an image of a Wraith superimposed over a human, and then Tony thought about the fact that Gibbs had mentioned smelling Ford on them. Crap. Ford had gotten more people hooked on the Wraith enzyme. This was not a good thing. “Not a talkative bunch, are you?” Sheppard asked, clearly not aware of any of this.

Tony looked over at Gibbs, but he sent back an image of a queen playing dead, so Tony closed his mouth.

“If we release you from your bindings, do you promise not to attack us?” one of them asked.

“Yeah, we promise,” Sheppard said, and no wonder O’Neill accused him of being a bad liar. He was horrible at it. Tony might have pointed that out, but a new sound distracted him.

Ford came into the room, chuckling like Sheppard had just made a great joke. “Before we untie them, they have to know that they’re among friends.”

The regret smell from Sheppard was enough to make Tony sneeze. “Ford?”

“You thought I was dead, didn’t you, Sheppard?” He walked over and pulled out his knife. Jo stirred unhappily, but neither Jo nor Tony saw any sign that Ford was feeling homicidal. Sure enough, he leaned down and cut the rope between Sheppard’s hands. His men did the same for the rest of the
team. That just left a whole lot of Wraith-addicted fighters with guns between them and freedom.

“I was afraid you might be. I hoped you weren’t.”

“But you replaced me on the team. I’m actually complimented. I hear that it took the famous Gibbs and Tony and some third guy, all to replace me.”

“You have big shoes to fill,” Sheppard said, but he was watching Ford warily. He knew something was wrong. Okay, so the twisted side of Ford’s face and the all-black eye made that clear, but he knew that there was more than met the eye here.

“Guys… Guys, please, eat. Eat.” Ford smiled at all of them.

Tony picked something up and tasted it, letting Jo really analyze it. She found the unusual chemical almost immediately and visualized the entire chemical compound before sending the image over to Gibbs and Samas. The longer Tony had Jo the more he had to respect Gibbs ability to stay focused when he had that kind of distraction in his head.

“It’d be nice if you took the gag off the gunny.”

“The problem is that he has a symbiote in there that could come out. Now I know that’s not a permanent solution, but I have one of my guys working on something, so that just has to stay for now. But don’t worry. You’re all safe.” He leaned over and stole a potato off Rodney’s plate.

Rodney looked at the food and then at Sheppard, his expression clearly pleading. It did smell good. Tony took a bite of the meat and found the same unusual compound in it. Jo was busily tracking what parts of Tony’s body the chemical tried to attach to, but that kept her busy, so he took another bite.

Sheppard gave a small nod, and Rodney started to eat.

Ford smiled. Bastard.

“Well, men, this used to be my team. Well, not those two, but that is the infamous Gunnery Sergeant Gibbs, the trainer of the Atlantean soldiers, and this is our local Agent Afloat. He went after some good men just because they weren’t following the rules exactly.”

“They broke the law,” Tony said. “My job is to enforce the law.”

Ford sat on the edge of the table and looked at him, that one black eye creeping Tony out like mad.

“Sometimes rules are meant to be broken,” he said.

“What’s all this?” Sheppard asked loudly. He was clearly trying to redirect Ford’s attention to him, and Ford gave Tony a conspiratorial ‘whatcha gonna do’ sort of smile at the colonel’s clumsy attempt.

“Just some local vegetables, a sort of alligator thing. It tastes like salted meat. It’s good. Try.”

Sheppard narrowed his eyes. “I’m not talking about the food. What the hell is going on?”

“Who are these men? And why bring us here like this?” Teyla asked.

Ford held up his hands. “Whoa. That’s a lot of questions. But first, congratulations. Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard. Good for you, sir. That’s impressive. I was surprised when I heard Everett was gone, but I suppose Earth wanted someone who could work with the civilian leadership, huh?”
“Something like that,” Sheppard agreed, clearly aggravated.

“I am glad,” Ford said, “but it would have been easier to talk to Everett. I mean, look at me. I can infiltrate Wraith hives. I’ve faster, I heal stronger. Everett would have been the first one to jump on this because this has a real chance to help turn our wars around. This could make a difference on the front line.”

“Like Super Soldiers,” Sheppard said dryly.

Ford opened his mouth, but then he stopped and slowly smiled. “You’re trying to annoy me. It’s not going to work. You see, I’m building something here. Do you see these men? I told them about the enzyme, how it makes you stronger, more aware, more resilient, how it would give us a fighting chance against the Wraith.”

“How it makes you crazy,” Rodney said quietly, but everyone looked at him. “Just thought I’d point out the obvious.”

“Wait,” Sheppard said. “Did you give all your men the enzyme?”

Ford smiled. “Of course. We harvest it from the Wraith the way the Wraith harvest our life force. It’s an eye for an eye… Biblical, you see?”

“I see you’re crazy,” Rodney complained, but Teyla spoke before Ford could answer that.

“Aiden do you mean to tell us that there are live Wraith here in this cave?” Teyla had her best talk-to-the-crazy-person voice, but Jo couldn’t smell any shift in Ford’s emotions at all. Either the enzyme masked normal human pheromones or nothing they said was getting through.

Gibbs sent another image of a queen playing dead, and Tony turned to glare at him. Yes, he’d gotten that message the first twenty times Samas had sent it. Jo was fine. Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

“That’s right. We have several Wraith here,” Ford said proudly.

Teyla leaned forward and gave Ford an earnest look. “The Wraith can communicate with each other over a distance.”

“But not between stars. They’d have to be in this solar system.” Ford smiled at Rodney proudly. “You taught me that.”

“Well, good for me,” Rodney muttered.

Ford laughed. “They can't communicate if they're unconscious.” Clearly he had all sorts of crazy going for him, and Tony did not like where this conversation was going. He looked over at Sheppard, not sure what advice to give, but Sheppard was the only one Ford was even a little likely to listen to.

“Why'd you jump us?” Sheppard asked.

“Yeah… Yeah, I'm sorry about that. It was the only way to get you here.”

“You could have just contacted one of our allies and told us where you were,” Sheppard said. “You know we would have come.”

“Yeah, you and a special ops team.”

In another case of pathetically bad lying, Sheppard protested that he wouldn’t have, but Ford was
already talking again. “I know you think I'm crazy. I brought you all here to show you that you're wrong. I mean, do I look crazy? Do I seem…out of control?”

“Are we speaking in relative terms, or, um…” Rodney made a gesture that could have meant anything.

Ford gestured to one of his men. “Look… Jace here has really fine-tuned the enzyme. We know how to administer it now, how to regulate it, refine it… We've gotten so good, we can even lace food with it.” Tony stopped eating because the others had. He hadn’t expected Ford to reveal that information so quickly, so either he had a plan that he considered foolproof or the enzyme was seriously compromising his judgment. You just didn’t tell people your big evil plan like that. It was stupid, and the Aiden Ford that Tony had known wasn’t stupid. However, addicts rarely kept any part of the common sense they were born with. Jo reassured him that she was already countering the enzyme and had traced its pathways to the aggression centers of the brain.

Great. They were not only addicts, but addicts with a chemically altered aggression center. They were so screwed.

“Excuse me?” Rodney asked.

“Congratulations. You've just had your first dose.”

Rodney spit out his food and stood up so fast his chair went flying. Several of the men tightened their grips on their weapons. “What?!” Rodney demanded.

“Hey Rod, don’t aggravate the guys with the guns,” Tony suggested.

“Rodney, sit down and we can figure this out like friends,” Sheppard added, but he gave Ford a look that made it clear they were no longer any sort of friends. Ford had given his lover an untested and addictive substance and the kill-protect scents rolling off him were enough to make Jo want to shake her fins. She was definitely in Sheppard’s camp on this one.

Tony quieted her and sent her back to try and synthesize a substance that could neutralize the enzyme.

Ford, however missed all the subtext and just went on his merry little way. “I thought long and hard about how to show you that the enzyme was safe… Convince you that it was the first step to defeating the Wraith, so you'd convince Weir, convince the military.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Rodney demanded.

“Hey, settle down, McKay.” Ford said. He gave Sheppard a look, like they were together against Rodney’s case of overreacting. However Ford didn’t notice the deadly calm look Sheppard was giving him.

Rodney didn’t notice the increasing danger either because he kept screaming. “No, I will not settle down! I have been drugged against my will, you little punk!”

“You should not have done this, Aiden,” Teyla said.

“Hey, be as mad as you want. Couple of days, you'll be thanking me. We'll all have a good laugh about this. Now, eat up.” Ford looked at all of them expectantly. The stress hormones and violence was increasing, so Tony grabbed a piece of meat and popped it in his mouth.

Ford gave him a bright smile and patted him on the shoulder. “I knew I liked you for a reason. See,
Colonel? If Tony can be reasonable, you all can. This is for the good of Atlantis—for the good of Earth.”

The worst part was that Tony and Jo could taste his utter certainty that he was telling the truth. He was delusional, but sadly he was still trying to be a good officer defending his world. Tony looked over and Sheppard’s eyes were absolutely dead. He was staring ahead at nothing. He knew. He knew Ford was trying to do the right thing and he knew he was going to have to kill him. This was so not ending well.
Tony was really developing a deep hatred for Ford. He'd kept Rodney hostage and threatened to shoot him when he'd sent Sheppard and Teyla off to watch his boys raid a Genii safehouse. If that wasn't bad enough, he had one of his people create a thick metal collar with a metal hood that looked like one of those old fashioned diving helmets, only made out of a metal grid. It meant that Samas would have to go down and break out through Gibbs' chest if he wanted out of the body.

Jo was having fantasies of ripping Ford's eyes out.

Sheppard walked around leaking fury-fury-fury scents, and while he had talked Ford into taking Rodney off the enzyme, Teyla was near manic. Tony was pretending, but Teyla's natural talent at sparring and the extra strength from the enzyme meant that Tony had taken more than a few hard hits, even with Jo helping him out.

And still Ford had a cheerfulness that made Tony question his sanity. No, that wasn't true. Tony knew he was as nutty as a pistachio tree. And Tony was having to fake being just as loony toons.

“One of the added bonuses of killing a Wraith is, every now and again, you get your hands on a couple of these,” Ford announced proudly. He held up a Wraith data device.

Yeah, we have a couple of those,” Sheppard said. His patience was wearing thin quickly. Three days of Ford’s attitude, and Tony was actually a little impressed by the fact that no one had died yet. Jo was learning about patience.

One of Ford’s guys, Jace, spoke up when Ford seemed genuinely confused by Sheppard’s attitude. “I've been able to calculate that, in the next several days, a major hive will be forced to make a hyperspace pause very near an uninhabited planet that happens to have a Stargate.”

Kanayo picked up from there. “We gate to that planet, get on the hive ship, plant the C4 in the Dart bay, and get out.”

“We could save thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of lives.” Jace was practically bouncing with excitement, and that seemed to reenergize Ford because he looked at the rest of them.

“So?” he asked with all the optimism of a mentally damaged puppy.

Sheppard just stared at him. He was doing that a lot

“Yes, great plan. Just walk up to a hive and plant a little C4. Why didn’t we think of that?” Rodney muttered. He was sitting at one of Jace’s work tables and he picked up a piece of equipment and started turning it in his hands. Sheppard had been keeping his distance, probably to avoid giving Ford any more leverage. Tony was playing at being an enzyme addicted meth head and Teyla actually was one, so Rodney was bearing the brunt of their captivity without any support, and Rodney tended to self-destruct without support. For someone who was so bad with people, Rodney really did do best when he had friends.

“We have a plan. We've got a spaceship,” Ford said in a conspiratorial tone.


“Come see,” Ford said, and then he was practically prancing out of the cave.
Tony looked over at Gibbs, hating the contraption around his head, but also needing to connect with his lover. Gibbs came over, his usual armed shadow right behind him. These people really did have paranoia down to an art. The second Gibbs touched his arm, Tony felt the relief of that rush of communication. Samas was fine—Gibbs was fine. Ford and his henchmen were shortly going to be less than fine, and it was only a matter of whether Sheppard or Gibbs got there first.

“Let’s see what insanity Ford is up to,” Gibbs said. Tony bounced on his toes, mimicking the same sort of wild energy Teyla really did have. Jo was at the edge of her limits, frustrated with being in the body too long and surrounded by enemy she wasn’t allowed to eat. Tony let Samas deal with that for a second while he watched the group. Clearly the body adapted to the enzyme because Ford’s guys weren’t jumpy, but they also hadn’t been too concerned about one of them dying in the raid against the Genii. Tony wished he understood how that would affect them in a fight.

They were outside when Tony saw what Ford’s guys were doing. “Is that a Wraith dart?” Tony asked.

“Okay, I’ll bite. Where’d you get it?” Sheppard asked.

“Does it matter?” Ford walked around it looking at it like it was a pile of gold.

“None of us have had much success flying it. Banged it up pretty bad the last couple of landings. It's in need of some repairs,” Kanayo explained.

“And a real pilot.” Ford looked right at Sheppard.

The cold emotional detachment interrupted by bouts of fury-fury-fury Sheppard had been radiating over the last couple of days vanished under a pure wash of hate that made the air stink. Tony had to fight to avoid recoiling from the chemical onslaught. “This is why you brought us here,” Sheppard said in a calm voice that didn’t match his emotions.

“It’s the reason I waited ‘til now, yes. Samas and McKay can get it flying, and Sheppard, you can fly anything. You’ve said as much.”

Kanayo was nodding. He told Sheppard, “Look, you fly it, you scoop us up, you take us to the hive, you drop us off. All we need is time to lay the charge. We’ll be in and out of there before the Wraith have any idea what’s going on.”

Ford grinned maniacally. “It’s perfect.”

“If you’re three years old and playing make believe,” Rodney said, but just as Ford was turning toward him, Samas stepped forward.

“You have the wrong pilot, Ford.”

Ford shook his head. “If I do, then maybe there’s no reason to keep everyone alive.”

“It’s possible I could fly it,” Sheppard was quick to say, the smell of hate intensifying. He shot Gibbs a nasty look, but Gibbs had stepped back and Samas was there, and he didn’t back down to anyone, not even the military commander of Atlantis or a kidnapper.

“You might fly it,” Samas agreed, “you might even work the transporter, but you could never work the fine controls. Wraith are like onac. They use chemical markers as communication. So a human might be able to turn a dematerializing beam on or off, they might be able to scoop you up and drop you off, but they wouldn’t have much control. You might end up getting rematerialized twenty feet up in the air or right in front of an armed Wraith unit or halfway in a wall.”
Ford looked like he might actually be listening.

“Gunny, I can fly this,” Sheppard said, his voice tight. There was also an undercurrent of deception there. Maybe Sheppard was angry enough that he was finally lying without telegraphing the lie to everyone, but Tony wasn’t sure what big plan he thought he had cooked up.

“Gibbs has stepped back,” Samas said, “and I promise you that I understand Wraith at a level that you can’t comprehend. Every control panel, every piece of equipment, every communication is overlaid with a chemical scent pattern that you can’t even perceive. If you want that dart to fly, I am the only person who can fly it.” Samas looked right at Ford.

“Okay,” Ford said with that obnoxious cheerfulness he’d developed since getting overdosed.

“I want the whole team on this,” Sheppard blurted out. I know my people, Ford, and I want Teyla, Tony and Rodney on the strike team.”

Ford looked at him suspiciously. “It's not a good mission for McKay or DiNozzo. Didn’t you always tell me to look out for the civilians?”

Oh the irony of Ford making that comment was really killing Tony.

Sheppard was shaking his head. “If we need a door open or a computer hacked, McKay should be there to do it. And next to Samas, Tony is the next best expert we have on Wraith language. That's why he's on my team in the first place.” That was oddly true, although Sheppard didn’t know it. Tony had inherited that ability from Jo’s memories of Samas’ work. Tony glanced over at Samas to see if he was reacting, but he was watching Ford.

Tony had Jo send out a query, and Samas sent back an image. Sheppard getting everyone out in the open where he could scoop them up into the dart. Tony immediately realized the advantage of that. Sheppard could then use the dart’s DHD to get to a friendly planet. However, the second Tony started feeling a little hope, Samas sent the image of Ford standing off to the side, laughing at Sheppard and pointing a weapon at him. Shit. Ford knew. And that meant he had another card to play.

“Okay, we can take everyone,” Ford agreed easily. He didn’t smell like a lie to either Tony or Jo, but they were willing to trust Samas’ judgment. Now they just had to figure out how he planned to double cross them. And they needed to figure out how to fix the dart, and Tony needed to figure out how to not only keep faking an enzyme addiction but deal with the fact that a super-strong Teyla left a lot of bruises. And he had to figure out how to keep Jo from losing what little patience she had left.

Yep. This mission was going great. It was going so great that Tony was going to put in for a month’s vacation to recover.

Oh shit. Teyla loved how the enzyme felt and had gone a little Exorcist when Ford’s guys had been late with the last treatment. She was going to have to detox. Tony was taking that vacation on a planet far, far from Atlantis.

Tony hadn’t changed his mind two days later when Ford’s men jumped them. There were back in the same field by the dart, and with one word, Ford suddenly had all his men pointing weapon at the Atlantis team.

Sheppard had a gun pointed right at his back. “What the hell are you doing?” he demanded. Gibbs was sitting on the edge of the dart, that thing finally off his head, but Ford’s men were standing far
back pointing far too many weapons at him.

“Tony and McKay are going to stay here.” Ford nodded and several of the men moved to stand guard. They forced Tony and Rodney back away from the rest of the group, and Tony sent a query to Samas. In response he got that same damn image of a queen playing dead. Jo gave a mental hiss, and Tony didn’t blame her. He was getting sick of this, but with projectile weapons aimed at everyone’s heads, Tony wasn’t sure what to do other than follow Gibbs’ orders.

Sheppard took a step toward Ford. “This isn’t part of the plan.”

“Neither was Gibbs heading back to Atlantis. You didn’t really buy the whole ‘I wanna go home’ speech, did you, huh?” Ford laughed, unable to even see the death that was looking at him through Sheppard’s eyes. “You always underestimated me, Sheppard. Everett understood. He was a Marine. He understood that you do what you need to in war. But you… you never did get it. You got promoted because of your gene, because you can play nice with Dr. Weir. Well now you’re going to play nice with me. Complete the mission and Tony and McKay live.”

For a second, Sheppard didn’t answer, and Tony braced himself for violence to break out right there. Sheppard had a dangerous temper when you finally got through the outer layer of laid-back surfer, and Ford had scraped away every façade to leave the man who had single-handedly killed sixty Genii. Sheppard was something Ford couldn’t understand, and yet he had an utter confidence in his ability to manipulate the man—and manipulate an onac who was five thousand years old. The enzyme was clearly eating his brain.

Eventually Sheppard said, “We can't complete the mission, Ford. It's a bad plan!”

“You said it was a great plan.”

“You didn't buy the whole ‘it's a great plan’ speech, did you?” Sheppard demanded, sarcasm doing little to hide the genuine fury.

Ford raised his weapon and pointed it right at Sheppard’s face. Sheppard didn’t even blink.

“Order Gibbs to get this dart in the air. Oh, and in case anyone feels like sacrificing the two pawns over there.” Ford said with a gesture toward Tony and Rodney, “the Stargate will only dial the planet where we’re going. I had Jace make a couple of modifications to the dart last night.” Ford took a step backward and looked over toward Tony and Rodney. “Get them out of here and keep them under guard.”

Tony allowed himself to be ushered away from the dart. Rodney was almost frantic with a need to go back for Sheppard, but there were too many guns pointed at them. Tony kept Rodney in front of him and he asked Jo for plans that didn’t involve full frontal assaults on armed men. He wanted to kill these guys quietly. One at a time. Preferably painfully.

Jo sent up an option that Tony had never considered. It would take her a little time, but she could make nishta. Then they could enslave Ford’s men and torture them slowly.

Tony vetoed the torture, although not the nishta or the killing. However, with them hopped up on Wraith enzyme, the nishta might not give them full control. Tony was still making plans when the dart passed overhead on its way to the Stargate.

“If he gets killed, you’ll all be sorry,” Rodney warned their motley crew of guards. Tony didn’t bother warning them. He figured the time for that was over. He was ready to take a more direct course of action. Their guards pushed them back into the cave, and the second they were behind a
closed door, Rodney started pacing as if he was the one who had been dosed with enzyme.

“I know you can’t think straight, but we have to do something.” Rodney said.

“I know,” Tony agreed. Jo was working on the nishta as fast as she could. Her body strained to make the required shifts so fast, but she felt a vicious sort of pride that she could do it. The pain didn’t matter. Tony winced as he felt her pain, but he immediately stopped her from trying to segregate it to herself. She needed to focus on nishta, and let Tony handle the rest.

“This is a workroom. What can we use as a weapon?” Tony asked.

“Almost everything in science can be turned into a weapon,” Rodney said dismissively.

“Like what? I need specifics, Rodney.”

Rodney looked around before settling on a large section of machinery. “If enough pressure built up in this system, it could explode.”

“Can you control the explosion—aim it at them and not us?”

“Maybe,” Rodney said, but he had that distant look like he was trying to figure something out. “I don’t know if we have time.”

“Gibbs and Sheppard are too damn smart to let themselves go down easily or quickly. We work smart, Rod. Now what can I do to help?”


Tony looked to where he was pointing and grabbed the box. Jo whined as he turned his head and managed to press on a part of her that was swollen with nishta, and he sent in an apology as he started his work helping Rodney. This had gone far enough.

“How do we run the DHD without the crystals?” Rodney asked.

“After we kill the guards, we search until we find them,” Tony said.

Rodney looked at him, doubt clouding his expression for one minute and then he nodded. The guards had chosen a side, and now they would have to live with it… or not. The best Tony could offer was a quicker death than Jo would have allowed them.
"These blood pressure numbers aren’t back to normal yet,” Carson commented as he looked at the machine monitoring Tony.

Tony ached. The nishta had left his system, but not until making him feel like his head was two sizes too big. Jo had promised that was the only time it would affect him. He would have been immune if Samas had used a full dose the one time he’d used nishta on Tony, but the partial dose meant that Tony had only partial immunity. Tony couldn’t complaint about the headache though, not when Jo was still a secret.

Hopefully she was, anyway. Tony had done a good job of hiding Jo up to their great escape, and he could blame the enzyme for some of his physical feats, but he didn’t know how much Rodney had seen or understood. He’d seemed more distracted by worry over Sheppard, honestly. Tony hadn’t had much time to care because they’d both been focused on making sure the guards were dead—slowed down by the nishta and then blown apart by Rodney’s improvised bomb. The one guy who’d survived had gone down to a broken neck.

And now Tony was sitting in the infirmary hiding Jo in his pants as Carson did a physical. Tony had a near-hysterical thought about explaining to social services that he hid his daughter in his pants. Thinking about that was easier than thinking about Gibbs trapped on a Wraith hive.

"Carson, it’s just the enzyme. I need to move,” Tony said. Jo had been smart enough to create a small amount of enzyme for Carson to find.

Carson let his hand rest on Tony’s shoulder. “We don’t know the effects, lad.”

"The effects are that I’m jittery and that I broke a man’s neck with my bare hands. It’s not a big mystery.”

Lorne stood watching from the door, and Tony could see glimpses of Abby as she paced the area outside the infirmary. “Tony, we need to know how accurate your report is. Are you sure about the planet’s address?” Lorne asked.

“Yeah, ask Rodney if you’re not sure,” Tony said. “They stopped giving him enzyme.”

“Because Ford wanted him to work on the stolen dart?”

Tony glared at Lorne. The man was doing his job—checking the accuracy of a report given by someone who was potentially compromised by a mind-altering substance. However, Tony wasn’t in the mood. “You’d better be getting a rescue together, Lorne.”

Lorne nodded. “We are. We have jumpers being prepped and Radek and Rodney are loading a few experimental weapons we haven’t tried before. Ladon has sent to the Genii homeworld to see if they can get us any intelligence on whether the hive is still in the same system.” Tony looked up. That implied the Genii had more resources than they were admitting to, not that Tony was surprised. Ladon was a tricky bastard in poker or politics.

“I’m going with you.” Tony stood. He could feel Jo’s head slide close to parts that no man wanted sharp teeth anywhere near. He had to force his body to not react.

“No, you aren’t,” Lorne said.
“I’m not so compromised that I can’t help. You don’t have anyone else who can read Wraith as well as I can.”

Lorne couldn’t hide his shock. “You read Wraith?”

“I don’t exactly have a lot of murders to track down in the average day. Yes, I learned Wraith, and I learned from the best Wraith linguist we have in the city, and that makes me the second best expert in the language. If you want on that hive, I can help.”

Lorne shook his head. “You’re a civilian.”

“Bullshit,” Tony said. “There are no civilians out here, Lorne. Not me. Not Rodney. Not Ronon. This is Atlantis. We’re a city. If Earth falls, we’re the last city. If Earth doesn’t, we’re the one outpost between them and an enemy that would eat them. Everyone here has one job, and that’s to protect the city. I don’t care who wears a uniform and who wears a civvies. So I’m going with you or you can deal with it when I stun your guys and steal a jumper to follow.”

“You wouldn’t,” Lorne said.

Tony gave him a nasty grin. "Do you really want to make an enemy out of me? Trust me, I stuck it out with Gibbs at NCIS when every other agent ran for the hills because I'm just mean enough to go toe to toe with him. So you think about that when I threaten to hijack your jumper. If you want, I can even give you the name of a certain FBI agent who will tell you how unreasonable I can be. I stole a body right out from under their noses, and I'm pretty sure that's worse than stealing one of the jumpers."

"I'll put you in the cell," Lorne warned.

The lights overhead flashed brightly and then dimmed down to half power. Tony was startled, but he just crossed his arms and looked at Lorne. He didn't mind taking advantage of a well-timed power surge.

Lorne made his frustrated face, the one that Abby said made him look like a chipmunk, not that Tony would repeat that. Eventually, Lorne sighed. "I'll ask Dr. Weir." With a last unhappy look, Lorne left.

“Do that,” Tony called after him. He was fairly sure that Elizabeth would support his position as long as Carson said he wasn’t too compromised by the enzyme.

“Oh lad, was that really required?” Carson asked.

Carson might have had more to say, but suddenly Abby was flying across the room. "Tony, Tony, Tony! You're okay! We were so worried. Ronon came back and said that you guys were captured, but we couldn't figure out where they'd taken you!" She wrapped her arms around him, and Tony hugged her back.

"I'm okay, Abbs. A little dinged up, but fine."

She pulled back and looked at him. "Gibbs?"

"He can take care of himself."

"But you're going after him? Right?" Abby turned to look at Ronon who had been standing in the corner like a statue the whole time. Ronon looked at Tony.
"Sure we are," Tony agreed. "But if I know Lorne and Weir, they're going to want to plan this, and I need to run off some of this enzyme. It's making me a little jumpy. And I hear Rodney is installing some good weapons on one of the jumpers. We're going to go after him, but it's going to take a little time." And Jo needed to get into the water and swim and work off some of her stress. Maybe Samas was used to staying still in a human body, but Jo had been one knotted cramp after being stuck inside Tony for so long. She needed to swim.

"Won't take too long," Ronon offered.

Abby looked back and forth between them. "I don't like Ford," she said, so clearly she'd been eavesdropping on someone. Either that or she'd been visiting with Rodney. Since he didn't have any enzyme in his blood work, Carson had kicked him loose fairly quickly.

"He's addicted. You know what happens with addicts. I think part of Ford really does like and respect Sheppard and Gibbs and Teyla." After all, it was Rodney that Ford kept threatening to kill, and of course Tony had gotten one or two threats. They were the pawns. Tony was so not happy about that. Jo stirred. Maybe she was picking up on his annoyance and maybe she was just tired of being trapped, but Tony really didn't need to get caught with an onac down his pants.

"Abby, I really am feeling jittery. I have to move. Carson, the best way for me to work this off is for me to go running. You can have Ronon follow me if you want," and Tony really did hope he did, "but I have had my limit of sitting around or standing around or doing nothing."

Carson sighed. "It seems like you don't have much in your system."

"I was doing my best to steal Gibbs' food and not eat much of what they gave me. It's just going to take time to work off the traces."

“And Teyla had more in her?”

Teyla had shitloads more since she didn't have a symbiote to process the poison. “Oh yeah,” Tony agreed. He started edging around Abby. “When she gets here, you can have a long-term victim, someone who can sit hooked up to machines, but Carson, I've got to move.”

Carson rolled his eyes. “Go on with you then. You'd just sneak out when I had my back turned anyway.” Tony gave Abby a quick kiss on the cheek, and then he was running toward the spawning waters. He had to drop her off and then go talk to Ladon. If the Genii had a way to track a hive ship, that meant they had ships or monitoring stations or something more than they’d admitted to. When he hit the transporter, Ronon slipped in behind him, and Tony hit the command for the lower level.

There weren't any transporters terribly close to the spawning waters, so Tony started running as soon as they arrived.

“So, you have one of those things, don’t you?” Ronan asked.

Tony glanced over. “If I did, some people on Earth would want to kill it and put me in prison for letting it in."

“Why?”

“They don’t trust onac because their cousins the goa’uld have enslaved humans.”

“Gibbs doesn’t seem the sort to keep slaves.”

Tony stopped and looked at Ronon. “Gibbs would never enslave anyone, and neither would Samas.
Onac are a warrior species. They join, they fight, and then they go home to share the stories.”

“And they make you stronger?”

“A lot stronger,” Tony agreed.

“I saw you move out there. The others might have missed it, but you’re faster than the humans, and you were faking being knocked out by the stunner. You could have taken them. Why didn’t you?”

Tony reached into his pants and pulled Jo out. She shook her fins, happy to be free, but annoyed by the dryness of her skin. “She makes me stronger, faster, and a lot more dangerous. However, I can also feel Samas’ emotions—it’s like he can send images to me. He told me to play helpless. He wanted information on Ford.”

“I wouldn’t have let them take you if I hadn’t thought you and Gibbs could free the team.” Ronon sounded guilty about that.

“We needed Atlantis to know what was going on—that Ford had attacked us. It was the right move.”

Ronon studied Jo. “Can I have one?”

Tony turned and started running toward the waters again. “They also share our minds. If you take a symbiote, it’s going to know you—everything about you. It’s going to find your favorite memory of Sateda and sing about it in the water. It’s going to brag about whatever fight you get into and probably spend a lot of time trying to convince everyone that he should get most of the credit for your success.” Tony stopped at the door that led into the half flooded area. “Don’t follow me in here, not yet, Ronon.”

Ronon grunted, watching as Tony headed into the room and let Jo go into the water.

“That’s where they are?”

“Yeah.” Tony turned around and looked at Ronon. “Sheppard can’t know, not yet.”

“I can keep a better secret than McKay.”

Tony assumed that was an implied promise that he wouldn’t tell Rodney either.

Ronon waited a second. “Teyla know?”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. The Athosians like the idea that a thousand years from now someone who knew them might still be singing about who they were and what they did.”

“You mean, if I have one of those, it might still be singing about some Wraith I killed a thousand years from now?” Ronon looked at the waters, and Tony had no doubt that Ronon was going in there one way or another. While Tony had suspected that Ronon would want to host, the hunger he saw in Ronon’s face surprised him.

“That’s how they determine status,” Tony explained. “The onac with the best stories, who have done the most dramatic feats of bravery, demand the most respect. They’re the ones the queens will chase and bite in order to get genetic material for the next generation. Onac don’t care about dying. They only care that their stories will be told and either their songs will be repeated or their genetics will be chosen.”

Ronon grunted. “On Sateda, the elder warriors write war songs to celebrate their victories.” He took
a step toward the water. “They ever take over?”

Tony looked at the water. “Jo did when Samas tackled Rodney. Human reflexes weren’t fast enough, so she got me out of danger and then turned control back. Gibbs turns over control and lets Samas take a turn when he’d doing something complicated with machinery. I don’t think the other symbiotes will want to actually take control, but they may react instinctively.” The only other onac that might want control was Jo’s sister, but Samas had forbidden her to take a host for now. She lost the fight and she would yield to Jo and give her time to establish herself as the dominant queen of her generation.

Ronon gave him a curious look. “Samas has to be female for there to be more, but Jo is too, isn’t she? That’s why you talk about them taking over—the females are more aggressive?” he guessed.

While Rodney might joke about Ronon being a barbarian, the man wasn’t. He didn’t miss much. “Male and female don’t really line up with their reality,” Tony said. “Jo and Samas can reproduce, but they are the ones who penetrate the other onac, piercing their skin and taking blood. Female doesn’t quite describe it, and Samas is opposed to being identified that way. Jo does think of herself as a girl, probably because I see her that way.”

“You influence her?”

“Yes.”

“So, what do I have to do to earn the right to claim one?” Ronon watched the water.

“You have to fight them off,” Tony said.

Ronon looked at him, clearly startled.

“The strongest will wait—they’ll want to see how you fight before committing themselves to your quest. The weak will hope for surprise to win the day for them. If you want the strength of a mature and strong onac, you have to fight off the first contenders. The longer you fight, the stronger the onac that you’ll end up pairing with.” Tony hadn’t even finished talking before Ronon was pulling off his leathers.

“How will they attack?”

“They prefer to go in through the mouth where they have a direct route to the part of the brain where they join. They can also get in through the neck.”

“None of the ones who come at me will be kids, will they?” Ronon looked concerned for the first time. Intellectually, Tony knew he was in another galaxy, but until this moment, he had never felt the sharp difference between the world where he’d been born and this place. Right now, watching Ronon’s reactions, he knew Ronon was as alien to him culturally as Jo was different biologically.

“The immature hide from the larger ones. They’re cannibalistic, and the strong will kill or eat the weak. They’re born in such numbers, that dying is not seen as bad in the same way we see a human death as bad.”

“So you’re saying I can kill them?”

“I’m saying if you don’t kill them, the other onac will see that as encouraging weakness in the community. If you kill a foolish onac, that improves the species. They’re alien on a level that I can’t explain.”
“But they’re warriors and they’ll help kill the Wraith. That’s enough for me,” Ronon said as he pulled off his boots. That left him in just a Satedan version of a loin cloth. He moved toward the water, a knife in one hand on his fingers spread wide and ready to defend himself with the other.

Tony wasn’t sure how he felt about the knife, but he suspected the onac would consider it a fair trade for the human lack of killing jaws. One of the first emotions Tony had sensed from Jo was a general sense of horror at the lack of offensive weapons on a human body.

“Should something be happening?” Ronon asked as he watched the water. It was full of ripples, but nothing was coming out.

Tony crouched down to put his hand in the water, and immediately Jo was there, running her flank against his palm. “He wants to host. He wants to go straight into a Wraith hive and take Sheppard back. He wants to fight beside Samas.” Tony knew the words wouldn’t translate, but he also knew she would get some images.

Suddenly a symbiote sailed out of the air toward Ronon. He brought his hand up and the knife flashed through the air and he cut it. It fell back into the water squealing, and there was a small ball of activity as other onac devoured it. Its knowledge of Ronon and the feel of his knife would travel through the water.

Tony’s joining with Jo had been much calmer. Only two symbiotes had fought, and most of their battle had taken place in the water, with Tony as nothing more than a spectator until Jo had won and then leaped into him. Ronon’s joining was more like what Tony had experienced on the onac homeworld when he’d first carried a symbiote. They were coming at Ronon hard and fast, and he fought like a demon.

Older and larger symbiotes were churning the water now, attacking three and four at a time so that Ronon had to spin around constantly to defend himself. Jo brushed against Tony’s hand again, and he could feel her satisfaction. The symbiotes were herding Ronon farther into the water where it would drag against him and slow him down.

Then it happened. Ronon turned too slow, and a symbiote sliced into his neck, driving its body in through the hole. Ronon froze, his knife still held out defensively, but suddenly the waters around him calmed. He blinked and then slowly turned to look at Tony. “That’s it? I have one in me now?”

Tony nodded. “You have a strong one in you.”

Ronon slowly smiled. “Then let’s go kill some Wraith.”
Samas let himself feel the controls. Nothing human ever felt this completely alien to him—nothing Ancient had either. He wondered if the goa’uld would even be able to control this technology with its buried chemical signals. They had trapped themselves inside human hosts so long he wasn’t sure how much they could use their own senses.

The controls even distracted him from Gibbs’ thoughts. Leaving Tony behind had been almost impossibly difficult for both of them, and even now Gibbs was fighting his emotions. Samas felt not only that, but also a more clinical concern for Jo. She was the first of the new onac species to take a host and stand on her own. She had so much of Samas and the old ways—the independence and strength. However she was learning something from Tony that neither Gibbs nor Samas would ever be able to teach her. She was learning to truly trust a team and believe in them even above herself. She had allowed herself to be taken because it served the needs of the group.

No onac or goa’uld before her would have made that choice. Samas’ igigi did make that choice, but only because they were not queens. His breeding offspring would not have risked themselves. They had not.

Samas could only hope Tony would teach her to respect host culture in a way previous onac had not. Onac and unas were separate—always apart except for the time of ceremony. But Samas could not see that working with a host culture that could adapt and change as fast as humans could. Jo needed to find a way to make her two worlds interact with each other.

When Samas checked on the lifesigns in the dematerializer again, Gibbs rejoined him, their minds moving together on the same path. Tony would protect Rodney and potentially slaughter the guards. They were in less danger than the rest of the team. Gibbs wasn’t as sure how they were going to escape a dart rigged to only fly to this target and then back to Ford’s planet.

Samas was confident. It was hardly the first time they’d gone straight at the enemy. When Samas thought of Tony throwing himself into the ring device to follow them onto Ba’al’s ship, he smiled. Tony could do that, so they would survive the Wraith.

The canopy suddenly went dark, all the data vanishing only to be replaced with a scent of home-home-home. It made Samas want to dig his teeth into the Wraith technology. The ship told him that the hive was embracing it, which was easy enough to understand as an auto pilot program.

Samas could feel the ship song change when it entered the hive. The scent of home-home-home grew stronger. The ship noted cargo and offered to rematerialize it. Samas could feel the variations in the hive around him, but he didn’t know for sure which scents signified safety and which danger. Samas mentally mapped the signals, struggling to identify the pattern. The dart grew increasingly shrill in its demands for an answer, and Samas had to trust his instinct and his understanding of the mire of smells.

He waited until he thought they were in a safe area and ordered the dart to rematerialize the cargo. And then, since he was only eighty percent sure that he had landed them safely as opposed to putting them in the middle of a danger zone, Samas waited for a radio signal.

Gibbs was just as happy Tony and Jo weren’t around, not with odds like that, but Samas insisted that their people were likely safe. He continued to insist that, but he didn’t relax until he heard Sheppard’s voice.
“We’re down. Is everything good with you, Gunny?”

“Not even close, Colonel. I suggest you start looking for another exit strategy.”

“Samas?” Sheppard sounded a little stressed.

Ford quickly demanded, “What are you talking about? Are you double crossing us?”

The paranoia in that one was going to cause no end of trouble. “The dart has an automatic docking function, and I can’t disable it. Right now I’m being pulled into a docking bay, and I do not understand the operation of this technology well enough to reprogram it,” Samas said. “I also suspect that I will run into one or two Wraith in a docking bay.”

“So we’re in trouble,” Sheppard summarized. “Great.”

“Maintain radio silence until we’ve laid the charge,” Ford ordered.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Sheppard said. He was holding his mic open, but even then it took Samas’ superior hearing to identify the cocking of the weapon.

“We maintain radio silence,” Ford said again.

“Oh we maintain radio silence,” Sheppard agreed in that tone that said he was going along only to avoid being shot. Samas could easily imagine the expression on the colonel’s face. However, since Samas had his own trouble to navigate, he had to trust that the colonel and Teyla could handle one paranoid and delusional lieutenant and his men. Gibbs had a few fears on that front. He’d seen too many junkies turn on the ones they claimed to love, but as Samas pointed out, the colonel was actually in a far less precarious position than they were.

The dart welcomed the pilot and said something about wholeness. Samas guessed it was saying the ship needed to be checked for wholeness. The words then appeared in the canopy to exit the dart, which had anomalous readings in the systems used to navigate Stargates, in order for worker drones to inspect the vehicle.

Well that was one more thing to thank Ford for. While the autopilot would likely have engaged in any case, Samas’ dart was now going to receive extra attention on landing—all because Ford had altered the dialing computer. If Ford survived this, Samas had a few choice body parts he would like to bite off.

Gibbs provided a defense for Ford’s fingers and other body parts. Ford had understood the danger of allowing Gibbs and Samas unfettered access to technology. That was not paranoid, just smart. And for all his mistakes, and there were many, he wanted to defeat the Wraith.

Samas was still not amused. He gripped the Glock that Ford had given him and prepared to move. The dart told him to prepare for the opening of the canopy and the arrival of hive mates to assist with such a troublesome dart. The interface was oddly polite. A half second later, the canopy dematerialized. Samas took aim at the Wraith tech’s head, pulling the trigger before the creature could react. Its body tumbled down the ladder, and for three whole seconds, Samas thought he might have avoided detection.

That’s when the sirens started.

The high-pitched scream and the sour stench of alarm quickly filled the air. Samas slid down the ladder, and they were already moving toward the corridors when the radio came back to life.
“Gibbs, you there?” Ford demanded. Samas wasn’t sure where Ford thought he might have gone.

“There are ship-wide alerts going off. This might actually be the time for radio silence,” Samas pointed out. He moved quickly, favoring corridors that had less and less of the scent of workers. Gibbs wanted to get to the others, but Samas disagreed. They were all as good as captured until Samas could find another escape route.

Given the human inability to communicate with Wraith technology on a biological level, whether Sheppard was in a cell or wandering corridors didn’t actually matter. He could not assist in any research. Samas was sorry that Rodney was not here. With a symbiote to sense the chemical markers and Rodney's remarkable talents with technology, he would quickly find a weakness in the hive. Without him, Samas would have to find a way to save the team.

Finding his way to the labs required patience and a careful use of all his senses. Eventually he did find what he wanted—a lab door that smelled of only one Wraith. So, like both humans and onac, this species did have its loners, and Samas needed a computer where he would have some uninterrupted time. Samas crouched in a dark corner near the lab door making chemical markers for safe-hive mate-safe. While he would never be able fully communicate as Wraith did, he could blast one with scent, hopefully long enough to confuse him. Then Samas could kill him without raising another alarm.

Plan in place, Samas quickly produced the hormone, entered the lab, and stunned the scientist within for the few seconds required for Gibbs to place several bullets directly into his brain. The Wraith died silently.

With Gibbs still pushing for him to move faster, Samas moved to the computer interface and settled into the seat. The back of the chair was to the door, so either these creatures felt completely safe in their own hives or they were constantly in touch with the chemicals produced by their hive. The hive was alive, but Samas didn't know how the Wraith interacted with it.

Adding that to his ever-growing list of questions about Wraith, their technology and their biology, Samas dug into learning everything he could about this new species. Wraith words flowed across the unstable screen, the words fading and then growing brighter as different scents filled the air. Samas frowned. That wasn't all, though. The shifts in printing had a pattern. Samas threw all his attention into exploring this new world.

Samas only stirred from the chair many hours later when Gibbs' noted a change in the security feeds. The team had been lured into a false escape attempt, but that was many hours past, and Samas only now noticed the stiffness in Gibbs’ body. Gibbs was quick to say that he was fine, but the stench of rotting Wraith body was distracting. And it disturbed Samas that the smell didn’t raise any alarm. Clearly the hive ship considered such scents natural.

What was less natural was the small variations in the visual display off the rear of the hive. Individual stars seemed to waver for a second. Samas only knew one thing that would cause that. A cloaked ship. Samas quickly searched for some sort of access to the hive that the cloak might use. There was the dart bay, but flying into that would require an ungodly amount of either guts or stupidity. No one on the shuttle knew what Samas did—the Wraith depended too much on the living hive and its ability to transmit alarm from one Wraith to another. Any pilot would have to worry about sensors.

“Tony, that had better not be you,” Gibbs muttered as Samas’ hands flew over the controls searching for the others. Kanayao was dead. Ford had been taken to a pod, but then the hive had no information on him. Ford’s whole system was so compromised that the hive had trouble telling if he...
was a human or a Wraith, so Samas suspected that his disappearance meant he had found a way to get more enzyme and vanish from the internal sensors. Turik and Elst were in pods, near death from withdrawal symptoms. Jace and Teyla were in a cell, and Sheppard was in the interrogation chamber. Of course. The colonel’s capacity for finding trouble was unmatched, even by Tony.

Gibbs was torn between meeting the jumper and going for the colonel. Samas stepped back and waited for Gibbs to make this decision.

“Tony,” Gibbs said out loud. Samas nodded, noting the relative locations of all their people before he headed out.

Samas scented Jo long before he spotted Tony. The queen smell drifted through the air, reassuring in a way that Samas had never found his other offspring reassuring. Children were competitors, but Tony had changed that equation. Jo yielded to Samas in a way that onac didn’t. Samas increased his own scent, and waited. Sure enough, Tony edged out of a side corridor.

“Boss?”

“Do I want to know what you’re doing here?” Samas asked as he met his lover in the hall. He curled his hand around Tony’s neck, and both Samas and Gibbs pulled him close for a second before Gibbs head slapped him. “Sneaking onto a hive is a dumb move.”

“You know me, boss. I have to have your six or I worry too much.”

"Where’s Sheppard?" Ronon asked as he came up behind Tony. For a second Samas was caught in a loop of emotions--anger, a brittle sense of loss and a desperate need to save his world. The emotions were so close to Samas' own feelings after his children--his world--had been destroyed by Ra that it took Samas a second to realize that they belonged to someone else. After that initial surprise, Samas considered Ronon before turning to Tony and raising his eyebrow.

"He wanted to help out," Tony said with an unapologetic grin.

Lorne joined them. "And if we don't move fast, we're going to get caught. Gunny, good to see you.” Well that made one member of the rescue who didn’t have a symbiote.

"I'm afraid Gibbs has left this adventure to me," Samas said.

"Samas," Lorne said. "Look, we have a second hive ship floating just off our starboard side, and the Daedalus is behind the planet.”

"Yes," Samas agreed. "These two hives have young queens who have allied with each other to defend themselves from the older queens. However, the alliance is uneasy at best. It is like watching Ra and Hathor trying to maneuver around each other, and I think we all know how that ended." Ronon smelled of confusion, and Samas sent a quick feeling of death and destruction. So the Daedalus had brought them. Given that Caldwell had been taken as a host for a very short period of time, if he learned of Tony’s and Ronon’s onac, he would likely take action. This was cause for some concern.

"Are we going to get the team?" Ronon asked.

"This way," Samas said as he started down the hallway. He brushed his hand across Tony's arm and shared the formula for masking human scent under "hive” smell. Tony gave a quick feeling of agreement, and almost immediately, Jo began to shift her scent.

"Samas, can I get a sitrep?" Lorne asked as he moved to Samas' side. Gibbs pointed out that the
chain of command would be much clearer if he took over, but Samas was not in a mood to feign subservience. For the first time in a millennium, he had children watching him, following him into battle. No, Samas would not let Lorne take charge of this mission.

"Three locations. One for two of Ford's followers, one for Teyla, one for Sheppard. Ford escaped and is somewhere loose on the ship."

"Where are we going first?"

Samas could almost taste Lorne's frustration at not being in charge, but he was keeping his ego in check. He followed Sheppard's lead on that front, and Sheppard might tell Gibbs and Samas what he wanted accomplished or assign tasks, such as training Marines, but he never played CO with Samas. That made him unusual enough in Samas' estimation. In Gibbs' as well. "A few minutes ago when I was searching the Wraith computer database, some drones were taking Sheppard to the queen. I thought we should start there."

Samas could feel the echoes of satisfaction from Ronon and Jo and Tony. They were ready to take on any number of queens to save Sheppard.

"Number of enemy?" Lorne asked.

"You really don't want to know." Samas had learned a lot about Wraith biology, including a small detail about how many drones waited in stasis pods to be woken at any time. He stopped, sensing the Wraith ahead.

"Ronon," Samas said. He could feel Ronan's excitement, his need to prove something. Jo was confused by that reaction, but Samas wasn't. He remembered watching his whole world fall, and he remembered the helplessness and the need to do something. He could very well imagine that Ronon's helpless rage at watching his homeworld fall and his desperate need to strike back at the enemy.

"What?" Lorne barely had time to ask, and then a dead Wraith body came flying through the air to drop in front of them. "Oh." He frowned. "How far to where they have Sheppard?"

"A few more corridors, but there are going to be more Wraith."

Ronon came back, a wild grin on his face. "Good. I'm ready for more Wraith. Let's move."

Oh Samas did approve of this one. He wasn’t sure what he thought of Jo taking the initiative to invite a hosting, but he did approve of her tastes in hosts. "Tony, stay with Lorne," Samas said.

"But—" Tony swallowed the rest of the complaint when Samas turned to give him an unhappy glare. They needed to keep Lorne away from Ronon, and Samas reached out and grabbed Tony's hand, sending that thought across. "Right, boss. Us mere mortals will stay back and cover your six."

Samas nodded. Now was the time for Jo to hide, and for them to hide their hosted children. The time for bragging would come later. Samas could feel Jo’s unhappiness, but Tony agreed with them. Samas gave another nod and then turned to hurry after Ronon. He could feel the glee and the need to reach Sheppard like a tether that pulled him toward the other man.

"You know," Tony was saying softly to Lorne as they followed, "a lesser man could develop an inferiority complex."

"Around those two? If you don’t already have an inferiority complex, I’m sending you to Heightmeyer," Lorne answered.
Retrieving Sheppard turned out to be rather easy. He came bolting around the corner with not a Wraith in sight.

“Ronon? Gunny?”

“Huh. Thought you needed rescue?” Ronon asked, sounding almost disappointed. He was definitely giving the symbiote quite a ride.

“Ford got me out of the room. The hive is ready to start culling. We need to stop it.” By the time Sheppard had made that announcement, Lorne had already caught up with Tony right at his side.

“Well this is starting to feel like a regular reunion. Major, why are you on a hive ship?”

Lorne gave Tony a dirty look. “Because the shuttle likes his commands more than mine. But if we don’t get off this ship, there is a chance that Caldwell is going to try and beam a nuke over here with us still onboard. We have a cloaked shuttle waiting, so maybe we can get off before that happens, sir.”

Sheppard turned and looked back down the corridor. “Ford,” he said softly. Losing the lieutenant was hurting him. Samas wanted to tell him to leave the young fool.

Given the choice of following Sheppard’s lead or Everett’s, Ford had chosen the path of brute force. He had taken his Marine ideals and, with Everett’s encouragement, rejected every bit of subtlety that Sheppard had attempted to drill into his young head. He had turned on his team and tried to prove himself tough enough to take on the universe. Samas would admire that if Ford had the strength to back his own play. He didn’t.

“Sir, the culling,” Lorne said.

Sheppard turned back around. “We have to get the hives to turn on each other. I had the queen back there half convinced that I’m a spy for the other queen, so it shouldn’t be too hard. When they launch darts, I’m going to take one and fire on the other ship.”

Lorne immediately moved into Sheppard’s path, blocking him. “Sir, that is too dangerous. You are needed on Atlantis.”

Sheppard gave him a cocky grin. “Don’t you have any faith in my ability to fly?”

Lorne gave Samas a desperate look, one that was clearly begging for some reinforcement.

“Sheppard, you’re not going out because you are going to help Lorne get Teyla and Jace out of the cells while I get to a computer interface and order this hive to fire at the other one. You have fifteen minutes to get back to the shuttle.” Samas didn’t mention Ford’s other men. He did however, grab Tony’s hand and send him the rest of the information—full schematics for the hive ship, images of where he’d last seen Turik and Elst, his own theory that Ford would try to rescue his men.

“Last I checked, I’m the ranking officer, Gunny, and if I want to fly a really cool ship, I will.”

“You are a child who was not yet conceived when I had my five thousandth birthday, and I will not lose the leader of Atlantis to an unnecessary mission, not when most of your replacements have been devoted to killing me,” Samas said. He looked at Ronon. “You have fifteen minutes to find Ford and drag him back here. Tony will go with you, but if he—”

“Don’t worry,” Ronon cut him off. “He’ll come back or I won’t come back either,” Ronon promised. He turned to Sheppard. “Which way did you last see him?”

The colonel gave a dramatic sigh. “I remember back when I used to have command of things.”
“Sheppard,” Ronon warned.

“That way. Straight down for fifty yards and to your left.”

Ronon grinned as he looked at Tony. “Coming?”

Jo’s pleasure scent was enough to make Samas give serious thought to biting her tail. He wouldn’t mind having more children with her memories and reactions.

“On your six,” Tony promised, and then Ronon and Tony were racing down the hall.

Lorne was looking from Sheppard to Samas, clearly not sure who he was taking orders from at this point, but Sheppard just rolled his eyes and headed down another corridor. “Ford said our people were this way,” Sheppard said. Samas wasn’t sure Jace was one of their people, but clearly Sheppard had decided to adopt the young scientist, and Samas had no objections. Gibbs had one or two concerns, but Samas would leave that to him to express later.

Right now they had people to get off the hive and a war to start.
The shuttle raced away from the fighting ships and toward the planet. “The Daedalus is the other way,” Lorne said. Samas could feel so much—Ronon’s bloodlust and his pride in having ripped Wraith apart with his hands. Jo’s lust and her fear that Samas would steal her prize. Smart girl. She would not need to spawn for years. Samas needed nishta-onac to guard his young and offer their DNA.

He could also smell the adrenaline from Lorne and Sheppard, and the blood from the injured. Teyla didn’t have blood on her, but she stunk of withdrawal and weariness. The others stunk in ways Samas chose to ignore.

Ronon fired his stolen stunner again.

“Geez, you’re going to give Ford brain damage,” Sheppard complained as he raced for the planet. The shuttle rocked with the force of some silent explosion.

“He twitched,” Ronon said.

Lorne looked over his shoulder. “He looks out to me.” Ford lay boneless on the bottom of the shuttle next to Elst.

“Does now,” Ronon agreed.

“Lorne, dial it up,” Sheppard said.

“Yes, sir. You do know that Rodney is going to kill you for not sending a message to let him know we’re okay, right?”

Samas agreed with that.

“Let me handle Rodney. I’ll just explain that I didn’t want to get blasted out of the sky when I compromised our location.”

“Can we please fly faster and talk less?” Teyla asked. All her calm assurance had worn away leaving her reeking of pain and frustration.

“Good idea. I think those hives are about to blow themselves to kingdom come,” Sheppard said. “Lorne, belay my last order. Dial up M3R-485. If we’re going to blast someone with the shockwave from these two exploding, let’s blast someone other than Atlantis.”

Lorne started entering the coordinates as they entered the planet’s atmosphere.

Teyla looked up. “What about the people of this planet?”

“I really hope they’re inside,” John said.

Teyla drew herself up a little straighter, but she didn’t say anything. She just pressed her lips into an unhappy line and radiated a sort of restless anger that all the addicts seemed to leak. The shuttle dove down and went through the ring without slowing.

“Sir, you do know how to give me gray hair,” Lorne complained softly as the shuttle swooped up into high atmosphere.
“Major, you’re Air Force, you’re required to like fast planes.”

“I’m a developmental engineer, sir,” Lorne said dryly. “Should I dial up Atlantis?”

“Yep. Let’s go home.”

“Thank the Ancestors,” Teyla muttered before putting her head back down in her hands. Samas suspected that when she recovered she was going to invite Ford to a lot of bantos lessons.

Sheppard landed the jumper in the gate room, and Samas caught Tony and Ronon by the arms. All three needed a good excuse to avoid medical until they had a chance to get their onac out. Samas quickly passed on his plan.

“Colonel, it’s nice to have you home,” Weir said as she came down the stairs, smiling brightly.

“As much fun as it was hanging out in a Wraith cell, I’m glad to be home,” Sheppard said. “And I brought home our little lost boy. Doc, you might want to use the Wraith restraints this time. He’s still pretty dosed up.”

“Daft bugger,” Carson muttered as he led a medical team into the back of the jumper. They’d retrieved Elst from a pod, but he already smelled of rot, even if he was still making the effort to breathe. Samas expected every rattling breath to be his last, but he fought on. Jace was in much better shape. He huddled on a bench shaking and sweating. Teyla pushed herself to her feet, but she listed badly to one side. “I see I have more than one patient. We’ll get everyone fixed up right as rain.”

Samas chose that moment to feign a stumble. Tony and Ronon caught his arms, and Samas let them carry his weight for a second.

“Jethro, are you alright?” Carson asked, immediately focusing on him with the medical teams evacuated the others from the jumper.

Samas stepped back to let Gibbs handle this. He nodded wearily. “Samas is not used to staying in the body this long, and he is cramped and miserable. He can’t stay in much longer without damaging one of us.”

“Right then, down to your waters with you. I’ll send a nurse along to see that ya get there and back safe.”

“Nah,” Ronon said as he helped Gibbs out of the jumper. “We got this, Doc. You tend to the ones that are actually hurt.” For a second, Carson looked torn.

“I’ve gone through this before when Samas couldn’t get out often enough,” Gibbs said. “Worst case scenario, he has to come out half way down a staircase. It happened once and I took a fall. Ronon is probably better at helping with that than one of your nurses would be. I’ll come to you for a checkup as soon as I let Samas out.”

“If you’re sure…” Carson frowned.

“I am,” Gibbs said. He turned to Sheppard who was now standing at Weir’s side and watching. “Sir, I would like to apologize for Samas. When he’s forced to stay inside a host for too long, he gets…”

“Cranky? Pushy? Likely to call me a child with five thousand years’ worth of catching up to do?” Sheppard finished with a strange sort of cheerfulness. He was amused. That was better than how Ellis or Everett would have reacted.
“All of the above, sir,” Gibbs said. “That said, flying a dart on a suicide mission against the other hive wasn’t the best plan, so I disagree with Samas’ approach, not his logic.”

Weir gave Sheppard a sharp look.

“Did you have to mention that in front of Mom?” Sheppard whined with a look in Weir’s direction.

“I’m sure you would have included it in your debriefing,” Weir said, her eyebrow rising up in challenge.

“Well yeah. Of course I would.” Sheppard gave an exaggerated smile. “You know we tell you everything.” If Sheppard weren’t making such an effort to appear to be lying, that probably would have made Weir suspicious. As it was, she rolled her eyes at him. “Go on and let Samas out before Rodney and the Daedalus are back and those two get into it,” Sheppard ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Gibbs agreed, and he headed for the transport, Ronon and Tony both in tow. A quick trip down into the bowels of the city, and they were headed for the waters.

“Boss, I can explain about Ronon,” Tony said as soon as they left the last of the live sensors behind.

“He figured out you had a symbiote and he wanted one of his own,” Gibbs guessed.

“I hate it when you do that,” Tony complained, but then he had been complaining about that since shortly after he’d taken the job at NCIS. “I reacted too fast when you took Rodney to the ground, didn’t I?”

“No,” Gibbs said. “Jo reacted too fast. You couldn’t have reacted that quickly.”

“True,” Tony said. “She’s not great at undercover work, but she more than makes up for it in kicking ass.”

Ronon grunted. Samas could smell the approval, and he asked, “How much did Tony explain?”

“You people live nearly forever. The onac in me now knows whatever I know, and he’ll tell the others about Sateda and try and claim credit for all the Wraith I killed up there.” Ronon seemed to think about that for a second. “He helped. A lot. I’ve killed them with my hands and a knife in the past, but it wasn’t that easy.”

Ronon’s symbiote was leaking joy scent all over the corridor now.

Samas nodded. “It was a smaller hive, that’s why it was interested in an alliance. It meant they had less food available to them and they were weaker, but they were still significantly stronger than any human. Sheppard and Lorne would have had very reduced odds up there.”

Tony did what he always did—he took the evidence and made sense out of it faster than anyone else could. “There’s something wrong on the hives, some reason why they’re weak and why they’re so quick to expect a betrayal from another hive,” he guessed.

Samas had learned more than he expected from the computer. After he settled issue in the water, he would have to write up reports for the appropriate department heads. In particular, Rodney and Carson both needed to update their assumptions about the Wraith. “Normally this many don’t wake up at once. The more the hives fight with each other and the more they hear of these great hunting grounds and the return of their ancient enemies, the more the queens wake their armies, but they don’t have food for them all.”

“Food.” Ronon snorted. “You mean people.”
Samas shook his head. “The idea that they didn’t consume food didn’t make sense to either Gibbs or me. Any creature needs energy, and the Wraith weren’t taking enough energy from humans to sustain themselves.”

“What are they doing?” Tony asked. “Carson said they don’t have a working digestive system.”

“They have a digestive system that atrophies when they don’t use it,” Samas said. “They do eat, generally a high calorie mix made on their ships, but like most insects, they gorge and then go months or years before needing to eat again. I’d have to study their medical database more to know for sure, but I think they can even go decades between feedings, and if they hibernate, survive for centuries. The iratus allows them to lower their metabolism. When they feed on humans, they do take some energy from the feeding. However, they want the hormones and chemicals that their bodies can’t make. Without those chemicals, they will die.”

“You found that on the ship,” Tony said.

“Yes,” Samas agreed. “To fight them, we have to understand them on a level that humans cannot. Too much of what they communicate with each other comes in the form of scents.”

Ronon caught Samas by the arm and shared a chaotic collection of images from the hive ship. “I could smell things, see images that I’ve never seen on a hive ship before.”

“I’ll explain to all the symbiotes, teach them the Wraith language, as much as I know it,” Samas said. “The next time you host, your symbiote will understand more and help you more.”

“So, I can host again?” Ronon asked. Samas could feel the hope in him.

“Yes. After all, Jo likely wants to use the blood of your symbiote for her first spawn, but I will not allow her near this symbiote. I will be taking this one as one of my chosen to guard my young.” Samas could feel the wash of pride from Ronon’s symbiote and the grudging frustration from Jo.

“That’s a good thing, right?” Ronon asked. “I feel like it’s a good thing, but I don’t actually hear from my symbiote the way you and Gibbs seem to communicate.”

Samas stepped over the threshold to the room that was half flooded and alive with his people. “You probably do hear his voice, Ronon, but my child learned about this world by riding in you. He speaks with your voice. He remembers what you remember. When I take his blood and DNA, I will let the new spawning keep enough of his DNA to also keep some memories of you. If that symbiote in you now were to join with someone else, they would hear you.”

Ronon stopped at the edge of the water and looked down to where small waves lapped at his boots. He seemed to be considering his words carefully, and Samas waited, sending feelings of encouragement to him. “Will this symbiote join with someone else?” Ronon asked.

“Your onac is the first to take a host from this culture,” Samas frowned as he realized he didn’t know what answer Ronon wanted. He was used to his Igigi—his onac. Ronon and Tony had brought something to his children that he didn’t fully understand. He looked over to Tony and Jo.

Tony moved forward. “Why don’t you want this onac to join again?” Tony asked.

Ronon looked up. “Onac are strong enough for my memories.” He looked at Samas. “When we first met on the ship, I could feel it. You know what it’s like to see your world destroyed.”

Samas nodded. “I do.”
Ronon looked out at the water again. “I know Teyla’s people want to host. I don’t want them getting an onac that remembers that. No one should have to carry that memory.”

Samas looked over at Tony, and there was sympathy in his gaze. Luckily, Ronon was distracted with his own thoughts to take offense. “Every onac culture is different,” Samas said. “The Tok-ra and Goa’uld and Igigi all had different rules they lived by. We can make a rule for our culture that says that an onac gets only one chance to host. Given the pain carried by those from the Pegasus galaxy, that might work better than the old rules, which were designed to work with an Unas culture that didn’t have any great enemies or tragedies to remember.”

“I’m not sure I want you to change for me. It’s just—” Ronon looked so calm, but Samas could feel the pain rolling off the man. Gibbs pushed, and Samas slid back and allowed the humans to deal with one another.

“Sharing the pain won’t take it from you,” Gibbs said.

Ronon’s head snapped up. “I don’t want to share it with someone I’ll have to look in the eye,” Ronon said. “Sateda is mine, it belongs to those of us who survived. I’ll share it with the onac because they know what it is to lose a world, but the rest of them don’t.”

“Then we will respect that,” Tony said. “Jo will refuse the blood or flesh of any onac that has hosted more than once.”

“Samas will do the same,” Gibbs agreed. “So to host twice is to give up all chance of offspring.” The rule was a wild departure from other onac cultures, and the queens themselves would have to disregard it because they would outlive many hosts and would need to take new ones to interact with humans. However, the average onac could take his one adventure with a host and be satisfied. “It means that hosts will have to prove their right to take a host. An onac gets one trip outside the home waters. It has to be a trip worthy of singing about for a thousand years.”

Tony nodded. “Hosts should impress us with what they plan to do before being allowed near the waters. If people come here without some mark of approval, onac need to know that it could be a wasted joining.”

“And they will not get another,” Gibbs said. He could feel Samas’ urgency to get out of the body. These issues of culture had to be settled in the waters. He opened his mouth, and Samas leaped from him. Tony followed, dropping Jo into the water a half second before Ronon did the same. Other onac crowded close, their bodies churning the water as Gibbs stepped back and held his hand out toward Tony. Tony took it and moved to his side.

“Huh.” Ronon watched for a second before he stepped back away from the water. “People from Earth make such a big deal about having snakes in their heads, but it wasn’t all that difficult.”

“It will become difficult if the people from Earth figure out that you’ve hosted,” Gibbs warned. “But they are not Goa’uld. They aren’t even Igigi. They are a new people.”

“What do you mean?” Tony gave him an odd look. “They’re all your children, just like the Igigi.

Gibbs watched Tony’s animated expression and looked over to Ronon who felt so much and showed so little. “No, Samas is sure that these children are nothing like his Igigi. They’re just as dangerous, but there’s a subtlety and patience here that the other onac lacked.”

“Turi,” Ronon said softly.

Gibbs raised an eyebrow.
“Okay, I’ll bite,” Tony said when Ronon just continued to stare at the waters. “Who’s Turi?’’

“A knife,” Ronon said. “An assassin’s knife, a specialty on Sateda. It’s thin and more narrow than the small finger. An assassin can stab between two ribs and put the steel through a man’s heart before he feels the first prick of the blade, but it’s also used to put a knife through a person’s neck without hitting any vital organs, a warning that you could have died and with one flick of a wrist you would have.”

“Charming,” Tony said with a wince. As warnings went, that was rather unsubtle.

“It’s a flexible weapon. Most wouldn’t use them because they take skill and patience. It’s not a weapon for someone who’s in a hurry. On Sateda, it’s a metaphor for doing something difficult exactly once and doing it well.”

Gibbs looked down at the waters. He couldn’t make the decision for Samas, but when he returned, Gibbs suspected that he would approve of the name. Turi. It was better to be a culture named after an honest weapon than false gods.
Rodney's pissed

John sat on his narrow bed and half-heartedly watched his laptop. He’d seen this game several hundred times, but when Rodney hit that door, John didn’t want to be in the middle of anything important, so he didn’t want to start any paperwork. And he definitely wasn’t going to watch any of the movies that came in with the last transmission from Earth. Rodney was already pissed enough.

The sad thing was, he had clearly tried to curb his temper in the transmissions from Daedalus. He’d only called John an idiot twice, but there were at least five or six more places where John could clearly hear the word in the silences.

Elizabeth kept sending him amused looks. Sometimes he was fairly sure she had a little sadism in her because she should have been sympathetic instead of gleefully telling him that she would leave it to him to explain the mission to Rodney.

Sure, she could claim that she had to go brief Teyla. Right. Like Grodin or Chuck or Harriman couldn’t do that. No, she was enjoying the thought of siccing a worried and angry Rodney on him. The door chimed, and John almost tipped his laptop off the edge of his bed. Pilot reflexes saved it, and he set it on the side table.

Usually Rodney let himself in, so if he was using the chime, he was really and truly pissed. Maybe John should have gone to their secret apartment. That would remind Rodney that they loved each other and murdering your lover was just too cliché for him. However, it was too late now.

“It’s open,” John called.

The door opened and Jonas Quinn was standing there.

“Dr. Quinn.”

“Colonel Sheppard,” he said with a smile. “Although I’d really prefer to be called Jonas.”

John hesitated. Usually when someone asked you to call them by their first name, you were supposed to reciprocate. But he was the military leader, and that might be slightly inappropriate. John’s social lapses were solved when Jonas kept talking, and John lost his opportunity to say anything.

“Radek finally got his head out from under the ZPM chamber and we’ve been initiating new systems. We think he found an Ancient warship.”

John perked up at that news. “A warship. Intact? Tell me you’re not talking about little warship pieces floating in some orbit.” Radek was cruel enough to do something like that, but Jonas seemed a little too nice for that kind of practical joke.

“No, it’s a whole warship. Radek would have come and told you himself, but your radio was off, and I think he was afraid he would find Rodney here yelling at you about the whole attempted suicide mission.” Jonas gave a shrug like he couldn’t quite figure out people from Earth. “People around here sometimes take Rodney’s temper too seriously.”

“Yeah,” John said with a weak laugh. He’d be avoiding Rodney’s temper too, only he was a big boy and he knew to take his lumps before his lumps got frustrated and had time to stew in their own anger and turn really dangerous. “So, where is this warship?”
“At the edge of the Pegasus galaxy. It’s headed this way, but the engines must be seriously damaged, because it’s barely moving.”

“But barely moving means moving, and that means she’s fixable, right?” John asked hopefully.

Jonas grinned. “I sure hope so. If anyone can fix her, this team can.”

John rubbed his hands together. Today was going to be such a good day. “Any Stargates near? Can we get a puddle jumper over to her?”

“Nothing in that neighborhood. We’re going to have to use the Daedalus—”

“What sort of moron offers to fly a dart against a hive ship?!” Rodney interrupted, already shouting when he came storming into the room. He elbowed Jonas out of the way and focused right in on John. And Jonas—that traitor had the nerve to look amused.

“Rodney, say hello to Jonas,” John said, trying to point out that they had company.

Rodney barely glanced that direction before lasering in on John again. “I thought you were dead!” He shoved John in the chest, and Rodney had a lot of strength behind all the soft curves. “You let me think you morons were still on that ship.”

“Jonas came to tell us about an intact Ancient warship, one that we can hopefully go see and you can fix.” John offered up the ship as a peace offering, but if anything Rodney looked more furious.

“I don’t care about a warship, I care about you, although why I’m not exactly sure. You clearly have only two brain cells under all that hair, and one of them is stuck in suicide mode as its default position.” Rodney shoved him again.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Jonas said as he started to back away, but he still looked amused.

“Tell Elizabeth, try to get permission for a mission,” John said, and then he flinched because Rodney had punched him in the arm.

“One message. You couldn’t send one message?” The door closed, and John was alone with a very irate Rodney. He wasn’t sure if that was better or worse than having an audience for this.

“I couldn’t. It would have given away our position.”

“Then you could have sent something from the hive. Something coded. I would have figured it out.”

“We were kind of busy,” John said apologetically. It earned him a punch in the other arm. “Very busy?” Rodney would have punched him in the arm again, but John caught him by the wrist and pulled him close enough to make swinging more difficult. He understood the frustration, but he wasn’t going to stand still and let Rodney take it out on him. The second their bodies were close, John could feel the tremors that shook Rodney.

“Hey, I’m okay.”

“I thought you were dead,” Rodney said again.

“It takes more than one little hive ship to take me down.”

Rodney glared at him.

“Two little hive ships?” John tried.
Rodney wrenched himself away and ended up on the opposite side of the room. “I can’t do this. I can’t.” He ran his hands through his hair, and John felt his guts knot in fear.

“What can’t you do Rodney?”

Rodney whirled around. “I thought you were dead. I saw the ships. They blew up.” Rodney stalked closer. “Blew. Up.”

Moving slow, John held his hands out. “Our jobs are dangerous. But you know I will always do everything I can to come home to you.”

“Until you can’t!” Rodney screamed. John nodded. Most men in the service did have this argument with their spouses, but John never expected it.

“Most of the time, you’re right there next to me. We both run that risk,” he pointed out.

“And then if we die, we die together. You aren’t off getting yourself killed while I’m left standing on the deck of the Daedalus with Caldwell telling me that I can’t be risked in the field. Do you know where he got that? Ellis! Ellis was always so big with the compliments, but every compliment seemed to end up with me being told what I could and couldn’t do, and then you came back and you were supposed to make it better and not get yourself killed, and I stood on the deck of that ship and I watched the man I love blow up and I… I didn’t know what to do.” Rodney sort of crumbled to the ground.

John leaped forward, but he didn’t get there in time to stop the fall, so he ended up on the ground with Rodney. “Rodney, you’re scaring me a little. You’re supposed to be the angry, logical one.”

Rodney gave a laugh that turned into a sob, and then he fist John’s jacket and pulled him close. “I thought you were dead,” he whispered into John’s shoulder. John wrapped his arms around Rodney and held on as tightly as he could.

“I’m not. I’m okay. I promise I’m okay.”

“But you can’t promise you’ll be okay next time.”

John started rocking gently, and he could feel Rodney relax into his embrace. “No,” he admitted, “I can’t. But you know I love you. You know I’ll come back if there’s any way. Even when I offered to fly the dart, I planned to come back. I was going to fly a raid on the other ship and then when they started firing on each other, run for the planet and gate to another planet.”

“That’s the world’s stupidest plan. It never would have worked.” Rodney’s words were muffled against John’s chest.

“Maybe,” John admitted. It had been a long shot, but it sometimes you played the long odds when you didn’t have any other cards.

“It hurts to love you.” Rodney let go of John’s jacket only to wrap his arms around his waist and hold on tight. “I didn’t think it would hurt so much.”

“Yeah,” John said softly as he rested his cheek on Rodney’s head. “It does hurt. I’m afraid every time I take you though that Stargate. What if I make a mistake? What if I’m the reason you die?” John could feel that ember of pain flare to life at the admission.

“What if I miss something on some repair? What if I blow us up?” Rodney asked miserably.
John pulled back and put his hand under Rodney’s chin to force him to look up. “Hey, we’re both here now. No one has more than that. Think of all the couples back home who have normal jobs, and they don’t know they’re in danger of an Ori attack any day now. We know more, but we’re no different from anyone else.”

Rodney looked at him for a second, those blue eyes studying everything before he pressed them tightly closed. “It hurts so much more than I thought.”

“Yeah,” John agreed. “It does. People leave that out of the love songs.” John had more profound statements on the nature of love, but he lost them when Rodney grabbed his shirt and pulled him forward. Their lips met, and John flinched as his tooth was caught in the impact, but then Rodney kissed him so hard he forgot to complain. Rodney ran his hands up John’s arms until he cupped John’s face and the whole time, his lips and tongue were moving, exploring, pressing in before pulling back in a kiss that came closer to raw sex than anything John had ever experience.

Rodney pressed forward, and John was suddenly off balance and falling backwards. Rodney caught him by the back of the neck, and John fell slower, but he was still pinned down on the ground with all of Rodney on top of him. And his leg was bent at an awkward angle. John tried to roll to the side to free it, but Rodney’s hands were on his hips, holding him down while Rodney moved down to suck at the side of John’s neck.

John arched his back and gasped out Rodney’s name. However, Rodney ignored him in favor of working his way down John’s body, unfastening and unzipping and unbuttoning as he went. John writhed when Rodney uncovered his nipples and then sucked them right through the fabric of his shirt. It made an obscene slurping sound that sent shivers of need through John’s body. Then Rodney pulled on the shirt and John found himself stripped from the waist up before he could fully engage his brain.

He reached for Rodney’s shirt to return the favor, but Rodney was already stripping off, yanking at fabric that stretched obscenely before something gave with an audible tearing noise. Rodney just flung everything at a corner.

“I want to feel you,” Rodney said.

“Huh?” John wasn’t at his articulate best when he had Rodney’s considerable weight pressed down on his hard cock, which was still trapped in pants and his leg was at an awkward angle as they lay on the floor. He hadn’t had sex this uncomfortable since he’d been a teenager.


John waved toward one of the drawers, and Rodney’s weight was suddenly off him. The blood started circulating in his leg again, and when John straightened it out, pins and needles coursed through the limb. “Strip. Off with the clothes,” Rodney demanded. John looked over to see that Rodney was naked and running a lube slicked hand over his hard and beautiful cock.

Suddenly John didn’t care about the floor or the lack of circulation. He pushed his hips up into the air and unfastened his pants as fast as he could. Rodney must have decided it wasn’t fast enough because he came over and pulled at the bottom of one leg so the pants slid right off.

“I want to feel you,” Rodney said, and John finally got with the agenda. Okay, he could do that. He started to push himself up, but Rodney moved up and pressed his hands against John’s shoulders,
pushing him back down to the floor. “I could have lost you,” Rodney said with a desperate edge to his voice. Then John could feel the slick warmth against the head of his cock. Rodney was already slick, but he couldn’t have done much prep because he was tight—almost painfully so.

Rodney leaned back and rested his hands behind him on John’s legs. It was an impossibly flexible move for a large man, and it meant that John couldn’t thrust. He could only grab Rodney’s knees and hold on as Rodney lowered himself slowly onto John’s overly sensitive cock.

Somewhere along the way, John started babbling. He could hear his own voice even if he couldn’t figure out what words he was saying. “Please” had a featured place in there somewhere, as did “hurry up,” and “you’re killing me.” However, other words spilled out unedited and probably without making much sense.

Finally Rodney had all his weight down and John was buried deep. John’s only warning was a crooked smile, and then Rodney started to ride him.

The next minutes were hot and sweaty and mindless. John writhed and struggled. He grabbed at Rodney, only to have his hands slide off without finding purchase. He cried out and then he finally got his knees bent enough that he could plant his heels and thrust up. Rodney’s face twisted into the worst ugly sex face John had ever seen, and then Rodney came, warm splatters of come going everywhere. John’s own thrusts grew wild and uncoordinated before he came deep inside Rodney.

They were both panting and sweaty and looking rough, but neither moved for long minutes. Finally Rodney sank down to the floor next to John. He didn’t even complain about his back.

Staring up at the ceiling and trying to reassemble his scattered brain cells, John realized that if he’d tried to describe any of that, it would have sounded spectacularly bad. Nothing they’d just done should have worked. Right now, they should both be making awkward conversation and trying to avoid words like ‘bad sex.’ But somehow all the awkward bits fit together so well that it had been the best sex of John’s life. He couldn’t even move. If someone paid him to move or ordered him to move, he would still be lying boneless on the floor.

Rodney’s arm and leg were draped over him, and John started to trace circles against Rodney’s elbow.

“Wait,” Rodney muttered, “did you say Ancient warship?”

A bray of laughter slipped out before John could stop it.
The almost siblings

Abby wandered into Rodney’s lab. “How did it go with the ship?”

Rodney glanced up from his work. “I’m sure you got the memo. Sheppard and Caldwell managed to blow it up. Blow it up! Do you know the sort of reverse engineering we could do if we had an intact ship? But no.” Rodney made a face.

Radek snorted. “I think it important to keep Wraith from hyperdrive technology, yes?”

“Of course it is,” Rodney said, “but Sheppard was in there all that time, he got the self-destruct codes, and he never once thought to ask, ‘hey, do you have any repair manuals sitting around?’ No. He’s just focused on blowing up the Wraith.”

“Which were trying to shoot you at time,” Radek argued.

Rodney turned and gave him a truly withering glare. They were so cute together. Sometimes Abby just wanted to take a picture and blow it up for her office. Miko wouldn’t mind. She thought the boys were cute, too. Maybe she could get a high resolution screen capture from the security feeds.

Radek ignored Rodney. “Does Tony say what will happen to Lieutenant Ford?”

Abby wrinkled her nose. No one was going to win in this situation. “The Marines aren’t charging him, but he’s being held for treatment and they don’t know how much long-term damage he’s going to suffer.”

“Sad for everyone,” Radek said softly.

“And the moral is to not run away from your people, get high on alien drugs, and then kidnap your ex-team who are—inexplicably—still trying to help you,” Rodney said. He was showing very little sympathy for Ford, but then Ford had nearly gotten the colonel killed, and Abby suspected that he was going to hold a grudge. Sometimes she really wished she could have a big romance the way he and Colonel Sheppard did. Yeah, they weren’t public, but when Rodney talked about Sheppard on that hive ship, Abby could almost feel his pain. And every time he insulted the colonel, there was this tone there, like he would put up with any stupidity from Sheppard just because he was Sheppard.

And wasn’t that love? Abby wanted someone who would put up with all her flaws and still want to hang out with her. Well, Miko did that, but Miko was her friend. She was like all the nuns rolled up into one, and the first real girl besty Abby had found since puberty where she discovered that other girls were way more into judging her than Abby really could tolerate. Miko was like the nuns. She didn’t notice appearance and she looked at the person inside.

Which explained her total crush on Rodney.

And there were always Tony and Gibbs and Samas. They would always love her and hang with her, but she kinda felt like the third wheel. Or the fourth wheel maybe. So Gibbs taught her hand to hand and took her target shooting and Tony had movie nights, but it wasn’t the same. She wanted someone who longed for her. She wanted the big romance. She wanted it to be like Radek and Selana who would sneak away in the middle of the day and come back looking all rumpled.

“It wasn’t his fault, and he’s going to suffer for it,” Abby said. At best, he was going to be forced out of the Air Force and with his file marked classified, it was going to be really hard for him to find work. But he could go home to his family. Abby hoped that was enough for him. She had worked
too many cases where disabled and emotionally damaged soldiers had lost themselves to drinking or ended up on the streets. Yeah, she was angry with Ford, but she didn’t want that future for him.

“I have to go threaten the new arrivals now.” Rodney slapped his hand down on a thick folder. Clearly the topic of Ford was off limits, and Abby got that. Rodney was going to hold a grudge for a while.

“Yes, yes. Frighten away bad ones, but no more chasing away good people. Hydroponics labs need more botanists or Parrish will drag you into gardens,” Radek warned. Abby had read some of David’s reports, and he was getting a little on the cranky side. Most of his own research into local flora had been put on hold, and that wasn’t fair. If Rodney didn’t take care of the other sciences, they were going to have a rebellion. Abby had a brief fantasy about David running into battle screaming and waving a palm plant while Rodney defended himself with a wrench.

Abby plucked the folder out of Rodney’s hand. “I’ll take this one.” She gave him her brightest smile.

He narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

She smiled. “Because I’m nice.”

“No one is that nice.”

“Because you’ll owe me?” she tried.

“Me?” Radek put on his best innocent face, but she wasn’t buying it. He only looked innocent because he stood so close to Rodney that no one actually thought about some of the things he said. Abby actually admired his insult creativity. “No, I say nothing other than Gibbs is scariest man on city, and you call him your boy.”

Abby put her hands on her hips. “Yeah? And?”

“Might explain why men avoid asking you out on official dates.”

“Oh please. People have no reason to be afraid of my silver fox. Now, back to my original statement. I will take the welcome to Atlantis speech.” Abby smiled and clutched the folder to her chest.

Rodney stared at it in panic, but sure enough, fear of touching the boobies kept him from making a grab. Sometimes it was good to be a woman.

“No. You’ll do something unforgivable like actually welcome them.”

“Do I look stupid?” Abby demanded. No way did he think she would make stupid people welcome. Personally, Abby’s goal was to do a little separating of wheat from chaff and then send some people packing.

Rodney stopped and gave her an incredulous expression before gesturing at her—all of her. It took Abby a half second to catch onto his meaning. Clearly he had a low opinion of her zombie kitty t-
shirt and plaid miniskirt. Either that or he took exception to her collar. He did spend a lot of time staring at it.

“Hey, you’re the one who used the beaming transport to bring all my clothes,” she pointed out. Jenny Shepard back at NCIS headquarters hadn’t won the battle to keep Abby out of plaid miniskirts, Goth collars and platform boots, and the military hadn’t either. Well, they kept her out of platform boots, but that’s because it was really hard to run and fight in six inch platforms, and they lived on a frontline. She was eccentric, not stupid. She always wore sensible shoes and carried a weapon.

“Clearly I didn’t look at them before I scooped them up.” Rodney’s voice was approaching a shout.

“And what does that have to do with me welcoming the baby scientists?” Abby shouted right back.

“Nothing!”

“Then why are we yelling?” Abby yelled.

Rodney stopped. “I don’t know,” he said in a normal voice.

Radek muttered something in Czech before adding, “You two deserve each other.”

“Then I’m taking the orientation.” Abby decided to woman up and admit the truth. “I need to do something. I submitted my dissertation this morning.”

“Then?” Rodney asked. “You used the piece on identifying trace elements in alien artifacts to identify source culture, right? Not the one on genetic diversity near the Stargate? That is too close to medicine and medicine is not science. If you get your doctorate in DNA, I’m giving you to Carson,” Rodney threatened.

Abby grinned. In a lot of ways, Rodney was like Gibbs—they both had their own ways of expressing love, and a person just needed the right secret decoder ring. Luckily, Abby was really good with code.

“I sent the trace elements paper, but I need something to distract me,” she said. “What if my paper doesn’t pass? What if they’re right now deciding all the ways to call it stupid? What if I did the science wrong?” Now that Abby said it out loud, she really was afraid of all that and more. Abby could feel the tears threaten, and Rodney had a panicked expression on his face. He never knew what to do with tears.

“Oh no. There is no crying in science,” he said, pointing a finger at her.

“Are you quoting a baseball movie at me?” Abby put one hand on her hips and started contemplating appropriate revenge.

Rodney rolled his eyes. “If you had any logical reasons for your fears, I would sympathize. You’re being irrational, and you know it. Your science is better than any of those desk-bound morons who wouldn’t know an actual working theory if it mutated into an iratus bug and bit them. I approved of that paper, and I’m much smarter and much more likely to call you an idiot than any of those morons back at the SGC.”

And that was all true. Abby dropped down onto one of the stools. “I always promised myself I wouldn’t get a PhD.”

“You what?” Rodney looked at her like she’d lost her mind.
Abby waved her hand. “PhDs are for people who need a paper to feel special or who want to prove to themselves that they’re smart and then they get the paper and they hold it over everyone’s head like a piece of paper makes you smart when it doesn’t, and then they do stupid things and insist that they can’t be stupid because they have a doctorate.” Abby made a face. She’d worked for a few assholes before she’d finally been promoted to head of forensics at NCIS. Any other agency would have kept hiring more assholes to promote over her.

Rodney snorted. “You’re getting it from the military. Trust me, it doesn’t count.”

“What?”

“The military,” Rodney said slowly. “If you want to get a job outside of Atlantis, no one is going to respect a military doctorate with a dissertation that isn’t even in the public domain. You’ll have to prove yourself because your doctorate won’t be worth the ink it’s printed on. Not outside the military.”

Which meant that Abby would still be judged by her work and not some stupid degree. She smiled. “Thank you,” Abby said. While Rodney hadn’t meant it as a compliment, it was true that people were going to think whatever they were going to think. And now if she could just get her stomach to unknotted, maybe she could get through the next week until her defense.

“You two have conversation like some people garden. Seeds everywhere,” Radek complained. “And I cannot work around this.”

Abby headed over and gave Radek a kiss on the cheek. “I’m going to go distract myself by threatening new people and then making them sign up for bowling.”

Holding her head high, Abby turned and marched out of the room. Behind her, she heard Radek tell Rodney, “Please never reproduce with her.”

As if. Rodney was like a brother to her. Besides, she wanted to see babies with Rodney’s eyes and the colonel’s hair. That would be cute. All the way up to the Gate room, Abby was grinning as she thought about that.
Welcome to Pegasus, Scientist edition

Evan Lorne wandered onto the control level of the Gate room where he could hopefully get a little peek at the new science recruits. McKay’s threats, complete with color pictures of dead people and all the ways the city tended to kill those who were too stupid to live, would be a happy reprieve from the mood in the office.

While Evan had known that the colonel felt bad about Ford, he hadn’t understood how much Sheppard felt for things until he’d seen him ripping through the chain of command trying to get promises that the lieutenant wouldn’t be prosecuted. But it was probably best that Evan did the overseeing of the scientists because as on edge as the colonel was, he’d zat the first scientist who tried to strangle McKay.

From the balcony above the main room, he could see the official Powerpoint presentation of death. Evan suspected that the SGC showed recruits the pictures ahead of time because there used to be a lot more vomiting by this point. Hell, even the soldiers normally got a little green around the gills at the idea of having your brain liquefied from the inside by nano-thingies. That wasn’t something you could fight.

When Evan leaned over the rail, he was shocked to see Abby Scuito standing near the gate, projecting the images onto the wall.

She clicked it off and then typed something into her laptop and the room grew brighter. “Any questions?” she asked. Most of the room was too stunned to say anything.

“Great. Now we’re moving on to the important things. First, I know that most of you had graduate assistants. You made them do your paperwork. You made them grade and file things and write the boring parts of your grants. And then the university administration told you that you absolutely couldn’t have graduate assistants work on the form-whatevers, so you went to your graduate students and told them to do the form-whatevers and not tell administration. And then you bribed them with Caf-Pow and chocolate. You are all experts in doing no paperwork.”

Abby was pacing along the front of the room. If someone dialed in, she would have to jump out of the way, but right now she had the Stargate behind her and it meant that all the eyes were on her. Lorne wondered if she had intentionally chosen a power position or if she was just lucky.

“Now Rodney doesn’t know this because he’s bad with people. That’s Rodney McKay for anyone who doesn’t know him, and no one else is allowed to insult him because Rodney is all sorts of awesome, but saying he’s bad with people is a little like saying that Colonel Sheppard has cowlicks. It’s too obvious to be an insult. Now because he’s bad with people, it’s never occurred to him to bribe them to do his work. It has occurred to me. I have been bribed and I have been the briber. And let me tell you, there will be no bribing anywhere on Atlantis.

“Everyone does his or her own paperwork. Rodney does his own paperwork. Radek does his own paperwork. And you will do your own paperwork. You will not fail to log where a sample came from only to find out that we could have a potential cure for cancer only you were too lazy to write down which planet it came from. You will not shove a sample in the back of the storeroom only to later find that that planet has a great source of naquadah and you were too lazy to do the required tests before filing it away. If I find abandoned samples, I will hunt down every fingerprint, every speck of DNA, until I know every person who ever breathed on that sample. And when I find you, you will suffer.
“If my paperwork isn’t important enough for you, then your paperwork is not important to me. I will delete every grant request, every personnel evaluation, every materials application and vacation request and every other document that you have ever filed.”

Okay, Evan could officially call this the least appropriate science meeting he had ever attended. Normally Rodney just threatened them with death, which a person could argue was hyperbole. Evan was almost positive that Abby meant every word she said. The scientists started to mutter unhappily, and Evan braced himself for the rush of protests and flood of people up to Dr. Weir’s office to file complaints.

Weirdly, it didn’t happen. After several minutes of whispers and shifting, the scientists all settled back down. Abby had been leaning against the Stargate, but now she started up again.

“Next. You do not treat anyone as your personal whipping boy-slash-grunt. Yes, we have Hoff who are city workers. We have welders and electricians and plumbers and none of them will do your work for you. If you are assigned to repair a system, that means you repair it. If one of the Hoff were going to repair it, Radek would have told them to go with you. So if you don’t have a worker, you don’t get to chase one down and take them with you. All Hoff are Radek’s minions, not yours. And if Radek is busy, they are Rodney’s minions, and if you try to turn them into your minions, badness will follow. None of you have minions. You are minionless. And you are not to turn soldiers into minions under any circumstances.”

Evan caught the eye of one of the Marines standing guard. Yeah, they both appreciated that. Evan could not count the number of times he had to rescue some poor airman or private from the clutches of a scientist.

Abby just seemed to be getting started, though. She got even louder as she told them, “Every member of the armed forces in this city was chosen because of their special forces training and off world experience. This is the most prepared, most battle ready and impressive fighting force the world has. You have a Japanese soldier descended from a Samurai. You have an officer who was cut off from reinforcements and single-handedly killed over sixty of the enemy. By himself. While rescuing two members of the city command staff.” It took Evan a second to realize she was talking about Sheppard. The colonel impressed Marines, something Evan had never managed to do.

Abby just kept going. “If you order anyone in this city to carry your boxes, I will hunt you down and let the Marines use you for target practice, and if I’m in a good mood, I might tell them they have to use zats or paint guns instead of real weapons.”

Evan cringed. Oh that was not going to go over well. He appreciated the effort, but SGC scientists were just sort of programmed to treat the military like well-armed pack mules. Hell, General Hammond had encouraged the military to put up with every indignity because it was the only way to keep valuable scientists in the program. They couldn’t openly publish, they weren’t getting the sort of pay people in private industry got, and they were regularly shot at. Appealing to their ego and making them feel like little gods in their own kingdoms was the only way to keep some of them.

Sure enough, one of the scientists stepped forward. “Who the hell are you to tell me how to treat people?”

“Someone who knows more than you,” Abby shot back. “And if you didn’t listen to me introduce myself, that’s just too bad because I don’t repeat myself. I just take revenge on people who don’t listen.”

“I want to talk to your supervisor. Where’s McKay?” The guy started turning in circles, and Lorne vaguely recognized him from the SGC. He’d been one of the worst for pointing to things and
ordering them moved about. Evan had once heard his team suggest that if the man got Goa’uld ed, they’d all have trouble telling. Hell, McKay was cut from the same cloth. He was always telling his team what to do, and Sheppard had the same ‘put up with it’ attitude as most of the SGC people. Evan wondered if he could get Abby to repeat this whole speech for McKay.

Abby started laughing. “Do you really think he’s going to side with you?” she demanded. “Okay, short cheat sheet. I’m Mom. I’ll help you with anything that you’re stuck on, and I won’t even make fun of you. Now like all mothers, I reserve the right to ground you until your hair turns gray if you screw up, but I’ll still love you. But Rodney is Dad. And he’s the ‘wait until your father gets home’ sort of Dad. He’ll scream and rant and tell you all about how you’re the biggest disappointment in the world. Anyone who wants to complain to Rodney had better be prepared to be called an idiot because complaining to him is an idiotic thing to do. Rodney has no patience for stupid.”

“I’m not listening to this.” The man turned around and started to walk off. One of the guards stepped in to block him.

“I’m sorry, sir, but no one is allowed to leave the Gate area without finishing the orientation speech.”

“Get out of my way.”

“No, sir, I will not.” The sergeant reached out to block the guy from reaching the exit. Evan couldn’t put his finger on why he thought it, but it did seem the sergeant was enjoying the chance to refuse the mouthy scientist’s order.

“Doctor,” Evan said loudly, “perhaps you would like to come up here and speak with Dr. Weir.”

The man turned around and looked up to where Evan stood.

“Yes. I would. At least one person around here has some common sense.” He charged up the stairs with the sort of fury Evan normally associated with Rodney after someone had done something so dumb that everyone could understand the depth of the stupidity.

“This way,” Evan said, guiding him toward Dr. Weir’s office. She normally had a line of people with complaints, and at least half of those would go home the second they opened the Stargate again. Evan figured this guy was about to buy himself a one-way ticket off Atlantis. Behind him, he could hear Abby explain how Radek was the crazy uncle who would call you an idiot, but at least he would do it in private, sparing you the horror of having Dad Rodney question your genetics in public.

Evan dropped Dr. Windbag off and headed back to the balcony in time to hear Abby telling them to always listen to their military people.

"If they tell you to jump, you jump. If they tell you hop on one leg and spread chicken feathers, you do it!"

Evan hadn't expected that. Several of the new scientists turned and glared at him as if he was about to give that order. Sadly, this was still going better than it normally did with McKay, and longer. Usually McKay was chasing them away by now, and the stampede up to Dr. Weir’s office started. But Abby seemed to just be getting warmed up. The military version was both shorter and more entertaining. Welcome to Pegasus. Do not touch anything. Do not go anywhere where the lights aren’t on. Don't turn on the lights. Be prepared to throw yourself between danger and any random scientists. Don't fuck up. Actually, that might have been the exact transcript of Sheppard's last speech. He didn't go for all the patriotism and brave new frontiers grandness Ellis had lectured about.
Abby continued without a pause. "And if they tell you something that you know will likely lead to something blowing up, you tell them it will blow them up, and then you come and get McKay. And if they tell you to do something that's just normal-dumb, especially if you're in the field, then you do the dumb thing, and then you come and you get me or McKay or Radek and you tell us. And maybe the dumb thing had a really good reason that the soldiers just didn't explain well."

Evan had to admit that sometimes happened. Trying to explain foot care to a botanist was like trying to distract a butterfly long enough to get it to put on a tac vest. Evan knew that first hand.

"And maybe the soldier was just being stupid. In that case, we tell McKay. He will then track that soldier down and explain in the loudest, most excruciating detail possible exactly how stupid the soldier is being. He will go to the lunch room and tell everyone in a loud voice that the Marines remove brain cells during basic training. He will publicly mock the idiot. He will berate him. He will compare his intelligence to inanimate objects in a way that even the inanimate objects will take offense at. Evan, am I right?" Abby turned to him with a sweet expression that did not match her words.

The reality was that she was McKay's twin, separated at birth and taught to hide her teeth under a layer of smiles.

"Um, pretty much," Evan agreed. He really didn't want to get dragged into this.

"Of course I'm right," she said. And again, Evan had a tickle of an urge to get DNA tests on her and McKay. Unfortunately, Abby wasn't done. "But if McKay called you an idiot and told you that science absolutely did not work that way, and Earth still ordered you to do something, would you?"

Evan took a step away from the balcony. He did not like where this was going--not even a little. "Ma'am, I'm a soldier. I follow orders."

If looks could kill, at least half the scientists would be up on a murder charge. However, as the second-in-command of a frontline base, Evan did not have the luxury of debating civilian control versus military. If his officers issued an order, he followed it. He let Colonel Sheppard worry about what the civilians wanted. That was one job Evan never wanted.

"Military." Abby said the word with this indulgent fondness that Lorne really thought he should be taking offense at. "I love them but you know how they are," she said, nodding. Sadly, most of the scientists were nodding along with her. "And they have such good hearts that you can't hate them any more than you can hate puppies, and you are not allowed to hate puppies. I will kick you off the planet if you try."

Now Evan knew he was offended.

"Which is why we still go to McKay. He pressed charges against three of them, and Tony made sure they were all put in prison. And when Colonel Everett didn't listen to him, Rodney locked the colonel in his bathroom and took over the control tower."

Evan had heard that story more than once. No wonder Everett had retired shortly after leading Atlantis through the siege. This place really was rough on commanders.

"And when Colonel Everett tried to arrest Rodney, Rodney created a forcefield that Everett couldn't get through, hijacked the wormhole, dialed Earth, and blackmailed General O'Neill into getting his ass out here and fixing things. If soldiers are doing something wrong, McKay is your first, last, and best chance of making them so very sorry-sorry-sorry-sorry. Their quarters will have no hot water. All the fresh food will vanish when they show up in for lunch. They'll get stuck in transporters for hours or the city will simply initiate cleaning protocols and dump them in the ocean for a long, cold swim."
Evan frowned. Radek had sworn that had been a random accident. He said that he and Samas were working on protocols to make sure it didn't happen again. Six Marines had been forced to swim halfway around one of the piers before finding a place they could crawl back up to the deck.

"Rodney McKay can do all that and keep his job because he's just that good. You aren't. So you need him. You need him to tell you when you've screwed up, and you need him to tell the military the same." She started pacing the room in front, and Evan had a flashback to watching Patton.

"But you understand this. Radek and Rodney and I have worked for the military for longer than some of our baby Marines have been alive."

Evan cringed when one of the younger Marines looked down from the upper deck to stare at her incredulously. He was six foot two or three and he must have been over two hundred pounds, so Evan was guessing it was a long time since anyone had called him a baby.

"We like them, and if you make our military people miserable, we will make you miserable. We will exact revenge. I will personally lose every piece of paperwork you hand in and do not assume that I can't lose it if you go around me and turn it in directly to Dr. Weir. I can find anything and I can lose anything. The military are here to protect us. More than once they have put their own bodies between us and danger. They offer to die for us, and we will honor that. Every single one of you will join a hand-to-hand self-defense class."

"What if we're no good at it?" a weedy woman asked loudly. She sounded more panicked than defiant.

Abby smiled at her. "Then take Evan's patented 'even Dr. Lee couldn't fail it' self-defense course," she said gently. Abby waved at him. "Major Evan Lorne can teach anyone anything," she said. She offered him a not-entirely-innocent smile.

Evan could feel himself blush and he definitely avoided making eye contact with any of the military people. She wasn't on his team so flirting wasn't against the regs, but Evan had never had a woman do it so unapologetically or publicly.

"I didn't become a geneticist to fight. My hands are too important to risk," a man on the other side of the room said. He did sound defiant. "I will never be some muscle-bound thug." Evan wondered if Dr. Weir was about to have her second visitor.

"You know what's the great equalizer?" Abby bounced on her toes. "Guns! Evan, can you loan me your weapon?" Abby looked up with this hopeful expression.

Evan was starting to panic just a little. "What?"

"I'm going to show them what a good shot I am." The worst part about the request was that Abby had this bubbly expression like this was the best idea in the world.

"No," Evan said firmly.

"What? I'm not going to hit anyone I'm not aiming at," she said, and that was definitely a pout.

Evan was in over his head. "Call it one of those military things," he finally said. "No firing weapons in an area that hasn't been secured for weapons fire."

Abby rolled her eyes, and several of the scientists laughed. "Military," she said in mock exasperation. At least Evan hoped that was an act. "I wouldn't hit anything I didn't want, but when it's not about science, you just have to let them be all anal about their weapons and stuff. But the best part is that
with a weapon, you can defend yourself without having to get close enough to the bad guy to risk getting hurt. Problem solved!" She clapped her hands together.

"I'm not fighting," a woman said. She looked like she was edging toward the stairs to Weir's office.

Abby nodded. "Okay. Then go back. You don't get to play with all the cool Atlantis toys unless you take one of the classes. Boss's orders. Now you can do handguns or you can do bantos rods which is a really cool Athosian ninja thing or you can do hand-to-hand or you can do knife fighting, but you have to do one of those. Anyone who doesn't has to go back to Earth and they will only get to play with the toys we think aren't cool enough and choose to send back home for the losers."

"That's not fair!"

Evan couldn't even tell who said that, but Abby whirled around to face the whole group. "What's not fair is you not taking this seriously. Every five year old in the city is armed, and if there are enemies, they know how to run and hide, and if they're cornered, they can fight. They know how to fight their way to one of our soldiers, and you're saying that if there's an invasion, you're going to stand around with your thumb up your ass and wait for the soldiers to do all the work.

"I don't want my Gibbs or my John or my Evan or any of my baby Marines dying because you're too whiny. If someone invades, I'm going to lock myself in my lab, and if someone gets in, I'm going to shoot them, and my people aren't going to die trying to rush a well-guarded corridor to save me because I put myself in a stupid position. And if any of you cause any of my people to die, you'd better get transferred back to Earth before I can find you. Seriously." Abby had silent tears running down her cheeks, but Evan wasn't sure if that was fear or just an excess of emotion. She had an intensity in her voice that made the hairs on the back of Evan's arms stand up. "Because I will hurt you."

She marched down into the crowd of new scientists, and people stumbled to get out of her way until she stood in front of a man whose hair was just starting to turn white. "They put their lives on the line because that's their job. They protect us. But we have to protect them. We have to make sure we don't get ourselves in the kind of trouble where they have to go on suicide missions for us. They can't tell polyisobutylene from carbonic anhydrase, and they trust us to defend them from a world of science they don't even understand. They live in a city that could kill them all tomorrow, but they trust us to tell them the truth and keep them safe, and I will do anything to protect my people. Anything."

Evan held his breath. Gibbs always talked about Abby as someone to defend, but right now he had the feeling that if she had a weapon, she might shoot this guy in the leg just to make her point.

"They trust us," Abby said, her voice strangled with emotion. "We have to take care of them. We have to take care of every last baby Marine, and that means that we let them teach us how to fight, and then we work really hard to take care of the city so we never have another invasion. We've had a few, so it's not like we're being paranoid. So if you stay you have to promise to take care of our people. All our people."

She whirled back around and marched to the front. The man she'd confronted took one look at her back, turned, and headed for Dr. Weir’s office. Evan had never been so glad to see someone bail. If you listened to that speech and still didn’t want to take a self-defense class, you had no business being near the front lines.

"Next item on the agenda. Pegasus galaxy is really freaky and it's too easy to get all weird sitting in your own room thinking about all the aliens that want to eat you. So we do not let people sit alone in the dark every night. Well, you can six nights a week, but everyone will be signing up for at least
one of our social events."

This was new. Evan had never heard McKay give this part. Honestly, Evan didn’t even know they had social events. Of course, before Harriman, he’d been trapped in the office most nights. Sheppard’s idea of paperwork was somewhat deficient. Lorne still preferred him to Ellis.

"Over here we have sign-ups for bowling. I lead the bowling leagues, and you can see we have theme nights four days a week. Costumes are optional and we are very open in our definitions since clothing can be expensive since it's all handmade around here. I recommend Goth night because we have a very good blood punch we serve. Pirate night is really popular too. The three nights that aren't themed are for serious bowlers, and the teams have tryouts scheduled so check for times." Abby moved to a different section of wall, and now Evan could see the white board leaning against the Ancient walls. "These are the book club sign ups. Fair warning, if the title is a girly book, there's a very good chance we're going to start talking dish about who is dating whom and which guys have the very best asses. Men are welcome, but if you're offended by healthy sexual liberation of women, keep your attitudes to yourself."

Abby looked up to where the young Marine still watched. "Danny, what do the guys do on the manly book days?"

The Marine coughed and looked over toward Evan before answering. "We discuss the book."

Evan rolled his eyes. He was an officer, not stupid. "Probably while drinking moonshine and playing poker," Evan guessed.

The Marine blushed. "I wouldn't know about that, sir."

Abby was moving on. "Colonel Sheppard is in the surf club. If you join in the hope that you'll have access to him so you can talk to him about your pet projects, he maintains the right to set your surfboard on fire. If you always wanted to learn but haven't had time, he loves having newbies. Seriously, some of the coolest people in the city get out and surf. Teyla is awesome at it. And moving on. This is for our birdwatchers..."

Evan tuned out as Abby walked them past station after station—everything from film night to storytelling to rock collecting. Seeing as how he’d been on Atlantis a lot longer than Abby, Evan wasn’t sure how she ended up knowing so much more about what the city had to offer. He didn’t know they had a theater, much less a designated film study night.

And Colonel Sheppard was in the surf club. Evan supposed he shouldn't be surprised, but he was. He was wiling to bet money that either Abby or Tony had talked the colonel into it. Good for them. Leading Atlantis' military had sucked the life out of Ellis, and it was nice to see how easily Sheppard slipped into the role. Maybe getting out and teaching people how to surf was one of the colonel's secrets to success. It'd been a long time since Evan had time to indulge in his art, but maybe he should follow the colonel's footsteps and start an art club now that Harriman was taking over the paperwork—and doing it in half the time Evan had needed. It'd be nice to talk to people about his work and maybe show off a few pieces.

Dr. Weir came out of her office, and looked down at the milling scientists. Abby was darting through the crowd, and from the looks of it, she was having to drag a few people to board to get them to sign up, but she wasn't taking 'no' for an answer.

"I only had two formal complaints. That's a record. Did she tell them they had to take self-defense classes?" Weir leaned against the railing and watched the Gate room floor.
"Yes, ma'am. Baby Marines and all the puppy-like military on this base need the scientists to take care of us before we are forced into suicide missions because of our borderline insane need to take care of them."

Dr. Weir gave him a very odd look. "Maybe I should see if anyone recorded this."

Evan nodded. "Yes ma'am."

After one last look down at the milling crowd, she headed back to her office where Dr. Blowhard and Dr. I’m-too-special-to-fight waited for their tickets off the city. Most of the time, scientists either died or transferred back to Earth in fairly high numbers. Right after Sheppard took command, a small but significant number of military people requested transfers, but after that, they had stabilized and started taking in new recruits. The scientists were far less stable as a whole. Dozens came and far too many turned around and went home within a month. Evan wondered if Abby's approach would change that. He made a mental note to flag the new arrivals’ names and track attrition rates for this cadre.

"And now it's time for the big tour!" Abby called out, and she sounded terrifyingly perky. Once this was over she was going to be searching for caffeine like McKay after three days in the field with no rations. "This way, people. Our first stop is the wonder of the transporter!"

Corporal Withers moved to the balcony next to Evan. "And here I thought Dr. McKay was scary when he gave the welcome speech."

"I hope someone taped that," Evan said. It had been a thing of beauty.

"Yes, sir. Grodin got it all. She's downright terrifying."

"Yeah," Evan agreed, "she is."

"And a little hot."

Evan turned and glared at the corporal.

"Sorry, sir. I am unnoticing that as we speak." Withers had the nerve to grin at him before retreating back to his post.

Evan looked down at the last of the scientists as they followed her out, all their belongings sitting in the gateroom ready for the logistical team to pick them up. Withers was wrong. She'd been a lot hot.
Abby opened her program and started sorting paperwork. Daily updates went into one file, requests another. She glanced through a few of the more sketchy scientists' work and shot back a few nasty emails about their lack of logic and forwarded a couple of others to Radek so he could do the same. More complex emails she set aside to sort a little later.

One of Abby's biggest shocks when she'd been introduced to the Atlantis science community was that everything went straight to the head of the department. Rodney was supposed to juggle all paperwork, do his research, oversee others' research, do evaluations, and oh yes, train and go on missions with his team.

Some of that Rodney brought down on himself by being a total asshole perfectionist. And Abby had quickly figured out that Radek was doing his best to take the pressure off Rodney by intercepting some of the paperwork. However, Radek wasn't pushy enough to step in and officially take over. Abby was. If the others wanted to get to Rodney, they could turn in paperwork that didn't make her wince. If she could spot the errors, then Rodney was going to have all sorts of fits and smothering spells.

True, he still had fits and screamed and sent scientists running out of his lab in utter tears, but at least there were fewer of them. One more upside was that Rodney had more time to scream at the stupid ideas that did get through Abby, so every once in a while she forwarded some report or request from some blowhard straight through to Rodney just to watch Rodney shred them with such perfect precision that his insults could be considered weapons. Abby really did adore that man. If it weren't for the fact that he was totally in love with John, she might even take him for a tumble in bed.

She liked strong. More than that, she liked strong with a side of needy. Growing up with deaf parents, she'd always had love with a side of needy. A big side. When people didn't need her, she felt like she wasn't really connecting with them--like they might drift off because they didn't have that need to anchor them together.

While Abby understood that wasn't exactly mentally healthy, she couldn't convince her emotions to change. She was who she was, and she needed someone who needed her.

That was one of the reasons that she had connected with Gibbs. Yeah, he was the papa bear who had defended her when she came to NCIS, but she was the only one who hugged him. The first time her old boss in the labs had called her a "girl" and completely dismissed her brilliant idea, she had cursed in ASL and Gibbs had signed right back. Abby had been so surprised, and so in need of a friendly connection that she had thrown her arms around him and hugged him hard.

She had felt him stiffen in surprised, and right when she thought she'd made a huge mistake, he hugged her back so hard that she'd been a little breathless, and she had felt him tremble a little. Then she'd known that he needed her. He needed someone to hug him and someone he could protect. After she found out about his daughter, she understood that she had tapped into a deeply buried need and it had pulled them together.

Gibbs had pretty much stayed broken until Tony. Tony was the first person other than her that Gibbs could touch casually. Even when she saw Gibbs with his wives, there was a barrier there--a do not touch sign that none of the women had gotten through as easily as Tony. That's why Abby had never made a play for Tony. Sure, she'd disliked him when she thought he really was the cocky playboy he pretended to be. Once she'd figured out just how many issues he had, she was totally interested, but by then she'd seen how he looked at Gibbs. He could make the big show about being
heterosexual in front of Kate, but Abby had known better, even then.

Now she had slept with Tim when he'd been all geeky and insecure, but after Tony and Gibbs left, he'd started getting an ego that she really didn't find attractive.

Which was ironic. Rodney had a bigger ego than everyone at NCIS put together, but his insecurities were even bigger. She and Miko had laughed about the fact that Miko was turned on by Rodney’s brilliance and passion, and Abby by his insecurities. They’d both agreed that if it weren’t for Colonel Sheppard, they would totally share Rodney. Well, Abby had made the suggestion, and Miko had giggled and nodded. That's why Abby would have to kill Colonel Sheppard if he did anything to hurt Rodney.

Abby finished her work and realized that Rodney had a lack of stupidity to deal with in his morning in-box. She pulled out one of Kavanagh’s emails that she'd set aside to answer herself and added it to Rodney's pile. That would give him a chance to work out a little frustration. As the cherry on the sundae, she shot off a quick email to Kavanagh pointing out that since he had objected so strenuously to her "interference" in his work, she had sent his work directly to Rodney without reviewing it. She emailed copies of that email to Rodney and Elizabeth. Now when he got his ass handed to him on a plate, it could be an extra-public ass-whupping. Those were the best.

Abby was puttering through the rest of the paperwork and she flagged two reports. From the sounds of it, Cooper was having Sensarma either do his paperwork or proofread it. The writing styles were too similar. She would definitely be investigating that little mystery and potentially tanking someone's entire harddrive. Of course she would back it up first, but Cooper wouldn't know that.

Yep, Abby found that she liked being a bit of a lab Nazi. And after she made sure that all her little scientists were in line for inspection by Rodney, she could start working on any mystery substances the teams had brought back.

The door to her tiny lab came open, and Abby looked up, expecting either some timid little scientist asking for help or some blustering idiot scientist demanding she kiss his ass. Instead she found Major Lorne standing in the open door.

"Major!" She smiled at him, and he smiled right back before clearing his throat and giving her a more professional nod of the head.

"Ms. Scuito, or is it doctor?"

Abby snorted. "I'm not telling you because you should call me Abby. Titles are for people who need their egos stroked." Like Rodney, she thought, but she didn't say it.

Lorne nodded slowly. "Okay, Abby it is, but only if you call me Evan."

"Evan. I like it." Evan Lorne. It was a very nicely balanced name. Not too manly, not too frilly, not old fashioned, but not trendy.

"I'm glad. I'll tell my mother."

Abby couldn't tell whether that was serious or Evan being a little snotty and not caring about her approval. She didn't know him well enough to tell.

"I saw your welcome speech," he said.

Abby rolled her eyes. "Elizabeth already gave me the whole spiel. Soldiers are not puppies, yes, yes. I promise to never again make you all sound like you needed to be adopted and taken home for a
bath and a walk." Seriously. Abby loved the armed forces, so getting that speech from Elizabeth was just wrong. And the fact that Colonel Sheppard had smirked his way through it without adding one word just proved her point. The military couldn't be all that upset. She narrowed her eyes and studied Evan. Unless he was here to do the whole 'never disrespect us again' lecture. Abby took it from Elizabeth because she didn't want to make the woman look weak in front of the military, but she didn't plan to sit still for another lecture.

"Actually, I liked the speech," Evan said.

Abby frowned. Huh. She hadn't expected him to admit that.

"Sometimes the scientists forget that we're real people. They needed a little reminding that we're all in this together. Now, I'm not sure how the Marines feel about being called baby Marines..."

Abby rolled her eyes again. "Some of them are babies. They're like nineteen. I have shoes that are nineteen."

Evan laughed. "That's true, but Ronon has taken to calling them baby Marines during training and suggesting that he should go find himself some grown up Marines to play with."

Abby cringed. "That's harsh."

"Gibbs suggested that he was a grown up Marine, and he then kicked Ronon's ass. I didn't realize that Samas gave him that much of an edge."

"Yep. Drowned, shot, beat up, starved, frozen, and in one really strange case, dropped into a vat of insecticide, and Gibbs just kept going. But then Tony is the same. He's been shot, beaten, concussed, and dosed with the plague, and he pulled through. I suspect Samas might have been involved in a few of his recoveries. " Abby followed the evidence. Samas and Gibbs both loved Tony enough that they might have slipped in and done a few repairs when Tony wasn't looking. Then again, maybe Tony had even been looking and knew about Samas before Atlantis. Kate hadn't. No way would Kate have kept a secret like that from her.

"Either that or they're both indestructible," Evan said in an admiring tone.

"That's possible. So, you aren't here to tell me that I'm being unkind and patronizing."

"No," Evan said firmly. "I was actually going to ask you about the clubs."

"Oh!" Abby bounced. Tony had told her to let the older personnel find their own way to the clubs without nagging, but this was great. The people who came during Ellis' reign knew Lorne in a way they didn't know Sheppard. If he joined, their clubs would definitely work. "Do you want to join one? The fencing club? I know Dr. Baudin doesn't look like it, but he's amazing with a sword. Or maybe surfing!"

"I was actually thinking of starting an art club, if you think there's any interest," Evan said, cutting her off. And that was good because Abby had been planning on listing all the clubs with physical activities. Evan Lorne looked like a physical kind of guy. She liked that he surprised her.

"Do you paint or sculpt or do performance art?"

Evan snorted. "I never got into performance art in school, besides, honestly, how do you see the military reacting to me doing some of that stuff?"

Abby pursed her lips and made a show out of thinking about that, but she already knew what he
meant. "Maybe not. I bet you're into painting."

"I bet you're right," he agreed. "It's been a long time since I took any art theory classes, but I have a few supplies, and I bet some other people do too."

Abby frowned. Having a few supplies wasn't fun, and clubs were supposed to be fun. She'd bribed the material production department into making surfboards. They weren't great boards, but they were usable. But now Evan was talking about making due, and it was her self-imposed job to get the clubs the resources they needed to be fun.

"If you don't think it's a good idea..." Evan started backing up.

Abby darted forward and caught him by the hand. "No, no no. It's a great idea. It's so awesome that you're jumping in because Tony totally had to twist Sheppard's arm to get him to get out there and play. All work and no play makes Johnny borderline psychotic and leads to neurotic badness. So you are getting your art club, but we need to get some supplies so you guys can have fun."

"I don't think the military is going to--"

"So we don't ask them," Abby interrupted. If she let him think too much, he was totally going to mess this whole thing up and second guess himself. Instead she dragged him out into the hall. She could hardly wait until Rodney gave permission for the sciences to spread out and open more labs so she could claim a larger space for herself. She was guessing the labs nearest him would be empty the second he let his staff claim any of the new towers, but for now she was exiled to a large corner closet at the end of a hall. It meant that she had to drag Evan quite a distance, but he surprised her by going along without protest.

Abby charged into Rodney's lab, Evan still in tow. "Rodney, give me your credit card so I can buy something you think is totally worthless," she announced. If she told him it was worthless, he was far less likely to waste time asking for a lot of details. Sure enough, he skipped right past what she wanted to purchase and went to the heart of the matter.

"Why would I give you my card?" he demanded.

"Because you like me and I'm not stupid and you don't have enough not stupid people around here," Abby answered. She didn't actually believe that, but compared to Rodney, the rest of them did suffer from an IQ drop.

"She has you there," Radek commented.

Rodney shot a nasty look in his direction. "I don't need help from the peanut gallery."

"You don't even care about money except for making the military pay enough to prove they respect you," Abby said. It was a stab in the dark, but he had mentioned an apartment, and he didn't have any bad habit more expensive than chocolate, so Abby figured it was a good guess.

"That's not the point," Rodney snapped.

"Yes it is. You have money you don't want, I want things that money can buy, and you need to give me the credit card so I can fix that." Abby stuck her hand out.

Rodney frowned as he looked at her. "Are you planning on buying something that will make me fire you?"

"Nope," Abby said. She could feel Rodney's fear, and she wondered how many people had asked
for his trust, and how many had betrayed him. From his reaction, she was guessing more than one. Probably more than a dozen. That explained why Rodney liked her and respected her but he didn’t really trust her. Not truly. He’d never breathed a word about his big gay romance with a military officer. Well if she was going to start asking him for some trust, he was probably more comfortable trusting her with money than with something important. She opened and closed her hand in a grabby-hand gesture.

Rodney sighed and reached for his wallet. “I’m going to regret this.”

“What’s my spending limit?” Abby asked.

“I think this has a $50,000 limit,” Rodney said as he pulled a card out. “But don’t spend all of it,” he quickly added. Abby hurried around the table, and Rodney handed the card over. Only then did he look over to where Evan stood in the doorway looking a little shocked.

“What do you want?” he snapped.

Rodney was so predictable. If someone saw him being nice, he had to immediately compensate. She was guessing that he had been taken advantage of more than once, and he put up all the prickles to make sure it didn’t happen again. She wasn’t surprised. Science was a mean and unforgiving sort of world, and Rodney had been a kid when he’d been thrown in with doctoral students who would have falsified results or removed someone’s kidney with a spoon to get a prime spot in a journal.

Evan held up his hands in surrender. “Nothing. I’m fine. I’m just checking to see if the new escorts are working okay.”

Abby frowned. Evan’s first instinct was to hide that he was here to start an art club. That was an interesting piece of evidence. It was very interesting.

“They’re all idiots,” Rodney announced, “but they aren’t any more idiotic than anyone else you’ve sent for escort.”

Evan nodded. “I’ll be sure to pass on your praise, Dr. McKay.”

Rodney gave Evan an odd look, like he was trying to tell if Evan was being shitty or not, and honestly, he kind of was. Abby glared at him and backhanded him but good.

Evan yelped and grabbed his arm, and that’s when Abby remembered she had on her pyramid onyx ring.

“Be nice,” she said before pushing him out of the lab.

“She is stranger every day,” Radek said behind her back. Abby didn’t care. She had the credit card and a willing volunteer for a new club. They needed clubs to bring science and military people. Yeah, the teams were good for that, but they had too many scientists for everyone to be on a team regularly, and some of the scientists just weren’t team material. Like Miko. She got hives just thinking about it. Personally, Abby would love to be on a team, but Gibbs had vetoed it, and she got it. He’d already lost one daughter, and he needed her to protect him from another loss, and she was really good with people’s needs.

“Maybe this isn’t a good idea,” Evan said as they had almost reached Abby’s lab again.

“What isn’t?” Abby asked absent-mindedly. She could get Lindsey to buy the supplies and smuggle them on the Daedalus, but there’s no way she could ask the poor woman to do the shopping. Caldwell kept her so busy that even when the Daedalus was in dock, Lindsey barely had time for
herself. On the other hand, Radek was kind of amazing at hacking cell satellites when they had the wormhole open, so he could probably get them access to some online shopping. She could have Evan make a list so he didn’t even have to officially see the illegal network connection. They needed a better system because eventually someone at the SGC was going to realize that their network was holey enough to use as a strainer, at least when a hacker had access to Ancient tech it was.

Evan caught her by the arm. “Maybe it’s not a good idea to start an art club,” he said, and that was a serious voice. She had no intention of listening to him, but he was definitely serious.

“No, it’s an absolutely great idea.”

“I don’t want you using McKay’s credit card to buy things for my club,” Evan said.

Ha! He did still think of it as his club, but he was definitely dragging his feet. “I’m not. I’m buying art supplies for whoever I can get to join the art club because that’s part of my job.”

“Your job?”

“Making sure that people have a place to fit in, making sure that people don’t turn into weird loners. Kate even said this is a good idea, although she also suggested that I’m overly invested and slightly obsessive, but it’s not like she’s the first psychologist to say that.”

“Kate Keightmeyer?”

Abby nodded. “Before me, she had trouble getting anyone to really take leisure time seriously. But trust me, I have seen what happens when the bossman gets obsessive and forgets to take time to unwind, and as ugly as that was, I do not need an entire base of people who are that wound tight. I mean the military folk are good at drinking and playing stupid jokes, but that’s no replacement for actually having a little fun, and you are not going to get a botanist into beer pong. It’s just not going to happen. But chess or fencing or art or even rock collecting can really help.”

Abby could see that Evan was trying to get a word in edgewise, but she wasn’t ready to let him say anything yet. He had a look on his face that made it pretty clear he was going to say something stupid. He looked nervous and kept glancing down at the credit card in her hand. Interesting. Abby was starting to form a few theories.

“If you have any young soldiers that aren’t fitting in with the beer pong crowd, I would love to have some military types for some of the clubs like rock collecting and poetry night,” Abby held up her hand, “and before you go saying anything about poetry night, Ronon is running that and all the anthropologists come out looking a little shell-shocked, so the poetry is probably pretty violent. But if you assign them, tell them they have some mission, like getting intelligence on Sateda by listening to the poetry or guarding the guys who are on the beach. That would let them see how cool the clubs are, but you have to tell them that they have to hide the fact that they were ordered there because there’s nothing more unfun than hanging out with someone who has been ordered to hang out with you.” Abby made a face.

“You want me to assign escorts?” Evan asked. He backed up a step, but again, his gaze kept going right down to Rodney’s credit card. So his discomfort was either something specific to Rodney or something related to Rodney-type people, not that many people were like Rodney.

“If you have guys that are at the edge of things, yeah,” Abby said. “The clubs are going to work best if there are military and science people together. That way we can get to know each other better. From what I’ve heard, Ellis kept the military way too separate.”
“He did,” Evan agreed softly, and then he cleared his throat like criticizing a superior officer had stuck in his throat or something. “Look, I like the idea of the clubs, but on second thought, maybe you should find someone else to run the art club.”

“Why?”

Evan blinked at her.

Abby blinked right back.

“I should get back to the office,” he said.

Abby darted in front of him, blocking his escape. “You love art. Why wouldn’t you run the club?”

Evan gave her a smile that probably charmed girls. “Get me a list of clubs that are light on the military side, and I’ll see if I can’t encourage a few of our people to get involved.”

Misdirection. That might be a good move if Abby wasn’t Abby. But she was, and he was not sliding away that easily. She put her hands on her hips and sidestepped to block his retreat. “Why?” she asked again.

He stared at her for a second. “Abby, I really do have duties,” he said, and he looked honestly apologetic as he put his hand on her shoulder to give her a little push to the side.

“I can call the colonel and ask him to give you a few minutes to sort this out.” Abby raised her hand to her radio, and Evan gave her an incredulous look.

“You’re vicious,” he accused her.

She smiled. “Thank you.” She could see the second he caved. His military stiff stance melted into something slouchier.

“Look, I’m the second in command of the military. It might not be a good idea for me to do the art club.” And again, his eyes went to the credit card.

“You think Rodney cares about this?” Abby held up the card. “I could spend $50,000 on bedsheets and he wouldn’t do more than bitch.”

“It’s not…” Evan sighed. “I love the idea of the clubs. I’ve always wanted to learn fencing, so that might be interesting.”

“Great!” Abby said with a smile. “I’ll get you the information so you can set up the art club on a different schedule.”

“Abby, what would Rodney say if he found out that I did art?” Lorne demanded with some exasperation.

Abby shrugged. “He’d tell you it was a waste of time only he thinks the whole military structure is 90 percent wasted time, so I’m not sure he’d bother.” And that’s when Abby figured it out. Big, bad soldier boy was insecure. Well, the best way to deal with an infection was to lance it. “Kavanagh would totally make a big deal out of it,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I bet he and Croft would make fun of you and you should definitely keep them away from the art room because they would totally make fun of your art,” she said. She could see the pain flash across Evan’s face before he hid it beneath a layer of disinterest.
“I really just don’t have time, and I don’t want people investing in an activity that I’m not going to be able to really spend time on.”

“Do you really care what people like Kavanagh and Croft think?” Abby asked gently.

“Of course not,” Evan said entirely too quickly.

“Carson’s grandmother used to paint. He says he’s really bad, but I bet he would love to join,” Abby said, “and the colonel would love to see you treating Atlantis like a city and not just a military post, and Dr. Weir probably would too. People who matter would be really happy for you to have your art.”

“I know that,” Evan said, but he had one of those tiny almost-frowns that suggested that maybe he didn’t know it.

Abby smiled at him and held out her hand. “Let’s go walk out on the pier and we can talk,” she said. “You know, when I went to school, I was scared to even speak to people because my parents were deaf and I wasn’t used to hearing people speak. I talked funny.”

Evan sighed. “This really isn’t necessary and it isn’t on point,” he said.

“Nope,” she agreed even though it was totally both, “but you saw me with the new scientists, and you know I’m the only person in this city who will march straight up to Gibbs and tell him what to do, so do you really think you’re going to win?”

With another sigh, Evan reached up and touched his radio. “Lorne to Sheppard.” He waited a half second. “Abby wants me to give her an escort out to one of the piers, so I may be unavailable for a time.” He smiled as he listened to something the colonel said. “If I don’t show up by dinner, send out search teams, sir.”

Abby rolled her eyes. Why did her boys always make it so hard on themselves? She’d had to work on Gibbs for years before he’d admit that sometimes he needed a hug, and she wasn’t even going to get started on Tony or Rodney. They had too many issues to even count, although Abby figured Gibbs had taken over the Tony-tending.

“Yes, sir,” Evan agreed. “Lorne out.” He turned off the radio with a touch and took Abby’s hand. “I guess for now I’m all yours.”

“Yep,” Abby said. “Now, let’s talk about what art supplies you’re going to need and I want to know all about how you got into art and your favorite schools of painting and everything.” It was going to be an awesome day. Evan didn’t look as convinced of that, but Abby had time to work on him.
Once Carson finished his presentation, he looked around the room. Samas had to control a desire to snap his jaws. This was a terrible plan.

Elizabeth turned to the colonel. “John?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Is it possible to capture a Wraith safely?”

“I would rather discuss whether we have any right to do this in the first place,” Samas said before he could answer. The idea of genetically altering the Wraith disgusted him to the point that he wanted out of this body and away from people who would consider this reasonable.

“I understand the dangers, as does Carson,” Elizabeth said in her best diplomatic voice.

“What gives us the right to genetically alter the Wraith?” Samas asked. Elizabeth didn’t have a quick answer for that.

“I agree,” Teyla said. “This is not advisable.”

“This would let us save them,” Carson said with a bewildered look on his face. Humans sometimes made Samas weary. They lived such short lives and then developed such entrenched attitudes and beliefs.

“By forcing them to change their very species?” Samas demanded. As far as Gibbs was concerned, he would back this plan of Carson’s only if he got to kill the Wraith after it turned human, but they doubted any of those from Earth would allow it.

Carson leaned forward. “You canna be serious. Your search of the Wraith computer confirmed that these were once humans.”

“No, their ancestors were humans.”

“And we can give them that back again,” Carson said.

Samas shook his head. “Their ancestors were also iratus bugs. I doubt any of them would appreciate your offer. They are Wraith. They would not wish to become human any more than you would wish to wake up as a homo erectus.”

Carson looked furious. “Wraith are not a result of natural evolution. Ellia certainly wanted a chance to have a human life, but that bloody idiot Ellis wouldn’t let me treat her. I’m not going to stand by when I could be helping these folk.” If Colonel Ellis had listened, Samas would have made an argument for allowing Ellia to try Carson’s cure. She had been raised by a human and she had loved her adopted father and hated her own nature. She would have embraced the change. Other Wraith would not be as open to this change.

“And what of after this change has taken place?” Teyla asked. “What are we to do with individuals who are no longer a danger, but who remember feeding on us?”

“Who liked feeding on humans,” Samas corrected her. He had no doubt that power played a large part in Wraith culture, and to kill was one of the most basic exercises in power. Samas watched his
own children pursue that joy rather enthusiastically. It was one of the main reasons that he appreciated the one-time rule that Tony had proposed. The Turi should live in the water where they could pursue that drive without having their instincts turned loose in a host culture where death was seen as far more undesirable.

“Carson, would the violent instincts remain after they changed?” Elizabeth asked.

Carson leaned back. “Of course, I can’t say for sure, but I don’t think so. The instinct to eat is powerful, and the Wraith instincts drive them to see humans as food. I also suspect the iratus DNA increases their aggression and decreases inhibitions. We saw that in Lieutenant Ford, poor soul. However, once he was weaned from the enzymes, we saw a return of the old Aiden.”

Samas wasn’t sure he believed that. Ford had gone from aggressive to deeply depressed. And the one person that Samas had truly wanted to save—Jace who had a strong understanding of local technology—had killed himself. The second Rodney was safe, Sheppard refocused on saving Ford, but Samas suspected they had only postponed Ford’s end. Gibbs disagreed. He believed that a strong family and counselling could help the man, but Samas did not change his own opinion.

“So, are we trying this or not?” Sheppard asked as he looked around the room.

“It is worth pursuing,” Elizabeth said.

“I strongly disagree.” Samas quickly countered. Samas knew he had Teyla on his side, and Rodney was wavering, looking from Carson to him and back. Unfortunately, Sheppard looked only to Elizabeth rather than the entire council.

“Your concerns are noted,” Elizabeth said.

“And dismissed?” The second Samas said that, the room went quiet. He could feel the power straining against the old bonds. No doubt Elizabeth could as well. She was a queen in her own right, and Samas had learned that she often won in battles where she lacked the strength to defeat her enemy.

She gave him a small smile. “I understand your concerns, but this is a chance to find a solution other than war.”

Samas felt the teeth in his tail. “My people can see solutions other than war as easily as yours, when they exist.”

Elizabeth twitched an eyebrow.

“This is one of those solutions,” Carson said loudly.

“This is genetically mutating an individual with an untested procedure and without his permission,” Samas said, putting it into Carson’s own terms. Carson immediately lost a lot of the color out of his face.

“Whoa, let’s play nice,” Sheppard said with a desperate look around the table.

“This is also a chance to secure our position, and we will not pass it up,” Elizabeth said firmly. “John, I want a plan for capturing a Wraith within the next twenty-four hours. Carson, double check all your research. We won’t get a second chance at this if it doesn’t work.” And then she stood and nodded at the group before she strode out of the room. It was a powerful play, and Samas did not have the resources required to counter it.
“I dislike this,” Teyla said.

“Lass, I do understand,” Carson said, “but think of the potential benefits. We could save them.”

Teyla smelled distressed.

“Do we seriously care about saving them?” Rodney asked. He closed his laptop and stood up. “Personally, I’m okay with just killing them.”

“Yes, but we can’t just kill them because they’re too tough to die easily,” John pointed out. “Carson, are you sure about doing this?”

Carson nodded. “Aye. This is a way to avoid having to commit genocide, and short of killing the Wraith, I dunna see another solution. They see us as food, so it’s not like we can negotiate a peace with ‘em. This is a real chance at avoiding some sort of final solution.”

Sheppard winced at that reference, and Samas had to give Carson credit for that nasty verbal jab.

“I don’t think we could be called Nazis for defending ourselves. However, genetically manipulating others to be more like ourselves is rather shaky moral ground,” Samas said. Carson still outwardly appeared as convinced as ever, but Samas could smell the first hints of indecision. Despite his unwavering arguments, Carson did understand his moral culpability in this. Teyla studied them, no doubt aware that she was missing something.

“Well I have my orders, so I’ll be trying to figure out how to kidnap a Wraith without getting us all killed.” Sheppard stood and headed for the door, and Rodney was two steps behind him, already muttering about one of his experiments. He was entirely too disengaged to provide the sort of balance Samas needed to counter Elizabeth’s political weight.

“You’ll see,” Carson told him and Teyla. “This will work.” He offered them a tentative smile and then headed after the others.

Teyla looked at him. “This will not end well.”

“No,” Samas agreed. “It will not. And I will not participate in this plan. If Sheppard orders Gibbs to go on this mission, he will do so without my assistance.”

Teyla inclined her head in his direction. “And if another Athosian wished to take your place on the team?” she asked. She never spoke of the Turi unless she was at their pool, but Samas could follow logic. The team would fare better if they had Turi with them. As the Athosian leader, she had chosen not to host, but a few of her people had already volunteered. If those individuals went with Sheppard, they would no doubt wish to take Turi along with them.

Samas stood. “My people have been in enough battles over genetics. I have seen the unintended consequences of others’ foolishness in this matter, and I have no interest in involving myself in any part of this mission.”

Teyla lowered her head, accepting his decision. Gibbs was far less accepting. He wanted to give Sheppard the best tactical support possible, but Samas would not have his Turi participate in this madness. A parent contributed genetics to the young, but other forms of genetic manipulation, any form of genetic alteration or castration, as Ra had done to the queens, was an abomination. Gibbs asked if he was willing to allow Sheppard to die over that belief, but the fact was that Samas would. He would not do to others what Ra had attempted to do to him—what Ra had done to his children.

And Sheppard needed to understand that. While Samas feared he would have to track Sheppard
down, he stood on the far side of the upper platform near an unused console speaking to Lorne.

“...settled with Abby?” he asked, clearly amused by his own question. The tips of Lorne’s ears were turning red, and Samas narrowed his eyes. Abby worked in the labs, so two military officers had no business discussing her. Gibbs was particularly aggravated by this turn of events.

“Yes, sir. There was some browbeating involved, but all’s well that ends well.”

“She made you join a club, didn’t she?” Sheppard asked with a laugh. Immediately Samas could feel Gibbs relax.

“Actually, she made me start one. At least, I will start one once the supplies arrive in a few weeks.”

Sheppard slapped Lorne on the arm. “Good for you. What is it?”

“Um… art. Painting mostly. I really didn’t want her to go out of her way to buy supplies, and the fact that she used McKay’s credit card still disturbs me on a level that I really don’t want to think about, but I still agreed to do it.” Lorne shrugged. “I think. I actually don’t remember parts of the conversation, but I just started agreeing with whatever she said somewhere around the middle of it.”

Sheppard laughed again. “Always be careful of the ones that look sweet, Major. People who come right out and call you names, at least you can see them coming.”

“Yes, sir. I have to admit that I wasn’t prepared to deal with Abby… or her forms of persuasion.”

“I caved the second Tony came to me. I didn’t want to deal with the big guns. You should have seen it when her and McKay got into over some sort of procedures with their reports. Even Radek ran for the hills. Hell, even the gunny has a club.” Sheppard nodded in the general direction of Samas, including him in the conversation.

Lorne turned and smiled at him. “Really, what do you have going, Gunny?”

Samas stared at Lorne until the man’s smile started to fade. “Gibbs and an Athosian man do woodworking twice a week. A number of others have started to come and get assistance on developing their talents.”

Lorne cleared his throat. “Good for him. So, Samas, it looks like you have something to discuss with the colonel. I should probably go sign whatever Harriman wants me to sign in the way of paperwork.”

“I thought I had to sign that stuff,” Sheppard said.

“You do, sir. I perfected your signature a long time ago, but I am very careful to always tell you what you signed.”

“Do I listen?”

“I doubt it.” Lorne nodded at both of them and then headed for the stairs.

Sheppard watched him go for a second. “I think he’s actually losing some of the starch in his uniform.” He sounded pleased about that, but when he turned to look at Samas, he had a much more serious expression. “I won’t debate this with you, Samas. Dr. Weir is the civilian leader of this expedition.”

“I assumed you would take that position.”
Sighing, Sheppard leaned back against a console. “Then why chase me down?”

“To inform you that I will not participate in any mission that furthers this cause.”

Sheppard’s customary slouch immediately vanished as he stood up straight. “Now hold on—”

“My people were genetically altered by Ra who believed he had every right and that he had found the secret to preventing other onac from going to war with him. I will not commit the same sin against another species.”

“Okay,” Sheppard said slowly, drawing the word out. “Samas, these are Wraith. They would eat you if they had a chance.”

“They would eat Gibbs, and for that, they deserve to die. They do not deserve to be genetically castrated.”

For a time, Sheppard just looked at him as though trying to figure something out. “Do you plan on sabotaging this mission?” If any other military officer had asked that question, Samas would have expected the suspicion to turn to threats of arrest. Sheppard simply looked curious about the answer.

“No,” Samas said. “I plan to have nothing to do with it, and when this turns out this is a horrible mistake, whether that takes a year or a hundred years, I plan to point to my objections and suggest that if people spent more time listening to the individual with five thousand years of experience, they would spend less time trying to repair dangerous errors in judgment.”

Samas turned and walked off. Once the size and shape of this disaster became clear, Weir would lose some of her absolute authority… assuming that she was still around. It truly might take a hundred years for this plan to unravel. Unfortunately, Samas expected the negative consequences to appear much more quickly than that.
Gibbs took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. He hated these things, but he had better get used to them. If this plan of Carson’s worked, Samas was considering his options. He did not want to be associated with a host culture that would manipulate others genetically, but he was not in a strong position to leave. It left him cranky and unwilling to join.

“Gibbs?” Tony said. Gibbs turned around to see Tony standing in the door to their quarters. “Hey, you aren’t running exercises with the Marines.”

“I can’t keep up with twenty year olds, not without Samas.”

Tony came in and sat on the edge of their couch. Clearly he was uncomfortable about something. Gibbs pushed his paperwork to the side and gave Tony all his attention. It didn’t take long before he started talking. “They have the Wraith in the cell. Sheppard’s calling him Michael.”

Gibbs sighed and ran a hand over his face. He understood Sheppard’s position a lot better than Carson’s. For Sheppard, this was a weapon, a way to defend his people. Carson’s belief that he was curing these people was just foolishness, and up to this point Gibbs had not thought Carson foolish. “And?” Gibbs asked.

“This isn’t okay,” Tony said.

“You and Samas have mentioned that once or twice.”

“We’re doing it to fix them? Yes, we have to tie them down because they don’t want to be fixed but they’ll be grateful in the end. I’m sorry, but does that sound like any psychopathic killers we might know?”

Gibbs frowned.

“Helms?” Tony said, and that jogged Gibbs’ memory. Helms had targeted gay members of the military—or men he perceived as gay. He hunted them, captured them, and attempted to castrate them in order to help them control their urges. Two of his victims died. Four more had been permanently mutilated. Gibbs leaned back in his chair and looked at Tony. He wasn’t sure what Tony wanted him to do with this, even if he could see there were some parallels. In other ways, the cases were nothing alike. Gibbs didn’t think Carson was a closeted Wraith with a poorly hidden self-destructive streak and fantasies of mutilating himself that he took out on others.

“This isn’t right,” Tony said miserably

“And Samas made that point very clear in the command meeting.”

“It’s not legal.”

Gibbs blew out a breath. Okay, if Tony was talking legalities, he was considering doing something. While Gibbs appreciated Tony’s initiative, he wasn’t sure he wanted Tony going up against Weir. She was much more entrenched and much more dangerous politically than Ellis or Everett had been. “You don’t have authority over civilians.”

“No, but I have authority over members of the military who commit crimes,” Tony said. So he was looking for Gibbs’ seal of approval.
“Are you going to charge Sheppard with kidnapping? This is war, Tony. I don’t think you’re going to get a military judge to back you on that.”

“Now? No,” Tony agreed. “However, the second Carson signs off that Michael is human again, he has human rights, including all the rights of a prisoner of war.”

Which included the right to refuse medicine, Gibbs realized. That’s where Tony was headed. Carson had already admitted that the Wraith DNA was persistent and the first few test cases would have to continue to take medicine to suppress it until he found a better solution. If the human prisoner refused medicine, as was his right, forcing it on him was a clear violation of the law. Carson was acting as an agent of the government, so if he violated that right, Tony might have grounds for an arrest, especially since he was the only law enforcement officer here and he couldn’t turn the case over to anyone else. “Weir and Carson would not be pleased,” Gibbs warned. He didn’t expect that to deter Tony, but he did want his lover to see the real danger here. Tony could get shipped off the city.

“I’ve never backed down to political pressure when it came to the law, Gibbs. I had a boss who told me to do what was right, no matter what.”

Gibbs smiled. “Okay, I’ll back you.”

“I was actually hoping you could get Samas to help me with something.” Tony paused. “I need Samas to talk to the Wraith, explain what Carson is doing and what his rights are after he’s changed.”

Gibbs blew out a breath. “I know you’re trying to do the right thing, but Samas may not want to get involved,” Gibbs warned.

“I know, but it doesn’t feel right to experiment on this guy without telling him anything. Besides, maybe Samas can learn something talking to him, something about how he sees this conversion. If Carson could hear from an actual Wraith about how they saw this cure of his, maybe he’d change his mind.” Tony frowned.

Gibbs had no idea that this was bothering Tony so much. He wished that Samas would allow Jo to join him. Tony would need the support, but Samas’ first goal was to keep his daughter clear of this mess, and Gibbs understood the instinct. “I’ll ask him,” Gibbs said.

Tony smiled. “Thanks, boss.”

Gibbs grunted. His promise wasn’t worth much unless Samas agreed to help, and he wasn’t sure that was going to happen. However, he stood and headed straight for the joining waters. Surprisingly, Tony stayed in the room, but maybe that was for the best. Gibbs really didn’t want to get caught between Samas and Tony as they argued. It was strange enough being in the middle when they had sex.

Of course, part of that discomfort came from the fact that Samas was far too rough with Tony. Tony never complained, and he certainly enjoyed himself or Gibbs would have shut Samas down, but it bothered him to see the bruises Samas sometimes left. He didn’t want to see emotional bruises if Samas refused to help Tony with this.

When he came out of the transporter, he could hear the distant thrum of metal being pounded. Gibbs walked a little faster and around the corner to the pool room to find Ronon pounding away on a half fallen beam.

He looked over at Gibbs and grunted.
“Cleaning up?” Gibbs asked.

Ronon put down the mallet he’d been using to bend a piece of metal strutting and reached down to turn off the welding machine that was still hissing. “Too easy to get to the water. Planned to make it a little more difficult.” Ronon gave him an odd look, and Gibbs remembered that they had actually talked about this.

“Right. I think we’ve all been distracted by the Wraith.”

Ronon’s expression turned murderous. “That’s why I’m down here. Sheppard said he’d call when they need to move that thing, so I’m still hoping I get a chance to kill it.”

Gibbs nodded. He hoped the same only Weir would probably make Ronon’s life uncomfortable, possibly enough that he would leave the city. Gibbs glanced at the water. Or not. Ronon had a lot to stay for. The Turi respected the hell out of him and every time he joined, Gibbs could see the joy he felt in sharing his homeworld with someone who understood the concept of losing everything.

“I’m hoping Samas has calmed down enough to get involved.”

Ronon snorted. “Water keeps churning.”

That wasn’t a good sign. “Tony plans on making some legal moves. Samas will probably want to have his back.” Gibbs hoped so at least.

Ronon leaned against the wall. “Can he stop this?”

“No, but if the treatment works, he can force Carson to let the Wraith revert back. Carson would probably have to go back to Earth to sort it out.”

“And people on Earth talk everything to death,” Ronon finished. He gave a quick nod. “Good.”

Gibbs hoped it turned out well. If not, Tony was going to be at ground zero of a very unpleasant political battle. With that worry on his mind, Gibbs went to the edge of the water and let his hand dangle into it. Samas would taste his worry. Gibbs had expected to wait some time but Samas was flying at him so fast that Gibbs barely had time to open his mouth before Samas was curling around his brain, quickly sorting through recent history.

It would serve Carson right, Samas quickly thought as he considered Tony’s plan. He was less interested in meeting this “Michael,” but Samas didn’t want to leave Tony alone with a Wraith, and he wouldn’t have Jo near it, so he did understand that left him to speak with the creature.

Samas’ mood hadn’t improved by the time they reached the Wraith cell. Lorne was there, and he offered a smile and a quick “Gunny,” which led to Samas glaring at him until Lorne had lost the smile.

“I’m going to speak to him,” Samas said as he walked past Lorne without asking permission. Lorne reached for his radio, but he didn’t comment. Inside the cell, the Wraith stood, its head tilted to one side and the long white hair hanging loose. Samas produced a scent that meant information or maybe curiosity. The nuances of Wraith language were harder to understand that any spoken language.

Immediately the Wraith stood up straighter and he studied Gibbs and Samas. “My brothers will kill you,” he announced.
Samas shifted the chemicals he produced and Gibbs breathed out a long sigh filled with the scent of disbelief.

The Wraith’s scent changed as well, but Samas could not track his changes as easily. It was one thing to learn a few words of a new language, and another to listen to a native speaker. He did know it was a threat.

“I understand less of that than you probably assume,” Samas said, “although I can at least detect your confidence. I promise you that I was alive before you were born and I will be here long after you are gone.”

The Wraith stepped forward. “You’re not human.”

“No,” Samas said. He put a small amount of pressure on Gibbs’ throat, and Gibbs opened his mouth. It allowed Samas to come out. He wrapped himself around Gibbs’ neck and shook his fins and snapped his jaws.

“This is Samas,” Gibbs introduced him. The human language was thick, too dense for his own ears, but Samas could catch most of it. More importantly, Samas could feel the nuances of scent that slid over his skin. Threats, fear, a desire to eat the humans. Nothing greatly surprised Samas, but he still could not decipher many of the chemical compounds. He was most likely missing as much as he understood.

Samas reared up in front of Gibbs’ face, and Gibbs opened his mouth to allow Samas back in.

“You lead the humans against us,” the Wraith accused him, and Samas recognized the underlying belief in the weakness of humans and an equally firm belief that another species must lead them.

“No,” Samas said. He sent out his own scent. He was strong but separate, not leader.

“Not a queen?” The Wraith asked, he jerked his head up as though expecting a lie. Samas couldn’t exactly claim he was not a queen, but that was a discussion best left for another day.

“Others decide what will be done with you.”

The Wraith showed its teeth and sent out more aggression hormones.

“The humans have found a way to strip you of your Iratus DNA and leave behind the human parts. It would make you fully human.”

The Wraith froze. Horror. Disbelief. Lies in search of information. These were blunt and direct scents that Samas had no trouble deciphering.

“Samas, whatcha doin’?” a voice asked. Samas gave Sheppard a quick look before refocusing on the Wraith.

“Here is one who will decide your fate,” Samas said. “I argued that you should be killed—that to turn you into a human was ill-advised.” That word didn’t capture the horror Samas felt at the idea of genetically altering the creature in front of him, but the Wraith didn’t need to know how deeply divided they were about this.

“Hey, how about we leave the Wraith alone to sleep and do Wraithy things until Carson is ready,” Sheppard suggested. Samas ignored him.

“You will be the first of many the humans wish to change,” Samas said.
“I am not a guide,” the Wraith insisted. The word guide came with a wealth of scents—new paths, the changing of a species, walking into the unknown with others following behind. The word also came with fear. To walk in front meant to walk alone, and the Wraith feared that.

“Humans would have others follow,” Samas said, and he waited for the chemical reactions. Wraith and Onac stared at each other, and Samas could taste the need of this one to not be alone. Others following would be better than standing alone, but he did not want to be first. He was nearly desperate on the point. Samas was even more convinced that this plan of Carson’s was a horrible idea.

“Are you two finished with the creepy staring contest?” Sheppard asked, and he moved into Samas’ line of sight, which put his back to the Wraith. Samas could smell the loathing that leaked from Sheppard. He did not want to be here in this position.

Samas took a step back, and with a relieved sigh, Sheppard shifted to stand by his side and look in at the Wraith.

“So,” Sheppard said slowly, “are you developing telepathic powers or are you just eye-fucking a Wraith for fun?”

Samas turned to Sheppard, well aware that the crude language was an attempt to distract him. “Scent is as important as words to Wraith language. I am smelling him.”

“That’s… vaguely creepy.”

“Human scent communicates as well,” Samas pointed out. Sheppard made a face. “Remind me to invest in more deodorant.”

“You will die,” the Wraith announced grandly, its chin up, but the whole time, Samas could smell the terror at being Guide. To be in front was a freedom, but the Wraith did not have positive feelings around the concept of freedom. Not at all.

“No, I will not,” Samas said. “However, once this change has been made, you have human rights, and that includes the right to refuse to continue on this path.”

“Samas,” Sheppard said, his voice a warning.

Samas raised an eyebrow. “Article 13, or do you deny that this law will apply to this individual as soon as he is fully human? Some might argue that it applies to him now.”

“No prisoner of war may be subjected to physical mutilation or to medical or scientific experiments of any kind which are not carried out in his interest,” Sheppard said. “I’ve been reviewing those laws as well, but Carson can argue that this is in his best interest.”

“It is in our best interest,” Samas said, and Sheppard flinched. So he was not fool enough to think this right. He smelled of indecision and distress. “Right now Carson can claim that this individual does not understand the benefit of being human. If he is made human and he still chooses to revert back to his original form, he should know that he has that right.”

Sheppard rubbed a hand over his face. “I thought you agreed to not sabotage this, Samas.”

Samas was very grateful that he was having this conversation with Sheppard rather than Tony. “Would you deny him his rights? Would Dr. Weir claim ignorance of the Geneva Convention?”
“What? No!”

“Then I have sabotaged nothing. I have informed the prisoner that we are attempting to help and that if he perceives this as less than helpful, he can make a legal claim under the Geneva Convention.”

“Wraith aren’t exactly a party to that agreement,” Sheppard said, “and what do you mean a legal claim?”

Samas could smell the Wraith’s confusion, but he focused on Sheppard. “Perhaps I should speak to IOC members, request a clarification of whether this unit is responsible to uphold the Geneva Convention. There are many international members who would be willing to query their home governments.”

“Aw shit, Samas, you’re totally going against the gunny here, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Samas agreed.

Sheppard leaned closer. “You’re digging a hole Gibbs is going to have trouble digging out of.”

Gibbs did disagree with strong-arming the military, but he also understood the danger of this path and the political danger Tony was very willing and able to step into. He moved closer until he was a few scant inches from Sheppard. “Decide how you want to handle this or Tony is going to dig a hole too deep for any of us to climb out of. And while he would not target you, while he has every respect in the world for you, you may well find yourself trying to explain why you followed an illegal order,” Samas warned softly. That warning delivered, he turned and headed for the exit.

Lorne was still just outside the door, and he gave Samas a strange look, but he didn’t comment as Samas walked away. Sheppard would make his choices and Tony would make his. Samas could only attempt to mitigate the damage. And if Sheppard forced him to choose, Samas would sacrifice any member of this expedition to protect Tony and Gibbs. That had never changed and it never would.
Bigger fish to fry

John walked into the observation room with Ronon just behind. They'd both had to hold the Wraith down while Carson's assistants had fastened the restraints. It had turned his stomach. He hadn't gone into the military to participate in this sort of action. Ronon pushed past him and walked over to where Teyla and Elizabeth watched. He gave Elizabeth an unfriendly glare before he took up a position at Teyla's side.

"How is the process working?" Elizabeth asked.

Carson smiled widely. "Quite well. The scans are already showing reduced levels of Wraith hormone, and I believe the treatment may result in memory loss." He walked to the large window and looked down at the prone figure strapped down to the bed. The Wraith was significantly weaker than when they'd started, but he still looked like a Wraith.

"Really?" Elizabeth seemed surprised.

"Aye. He's already confused, and I think it would help his transition if he didn't know where he came from."

John whirled around and looked at Carson. He was staring down at the Wraith in the isolation room with the look of a boy at Christmas.

"What do you mean?" Elizabeth asked.

"If we told him he was one of us, it would be easier to get him to accept treatment and adjust to a human way of life," Carson said. The worst part was that he sounded so damn pleased. He probably was. This would allow him to avoid explaining the involuntary nature of the change.

"Would the amnesia hold?" Elizabeth asked. John turned and gave her an incredulous look.

"If we continue treatment, I see no reason why it shouldn't. I'd like to start setting up a background story, perhaps we can tell Michael he's a member of our military, that's he's suffered an injury."

Elizabeth was nodding. She turned to John with that all-business expression of hers. "Start working on a background for Michael."

"Elizabeth, this is not wise," Teyla objected.

"This is the most humane option open to us," she disagreed, and the worst part was that John got it. He did. If they didn't lie to Michael, they were going to have to look him in the eye and tell him what they'd done and who he was. If he chose to become Wraith again, they were going to have to put him back in the cell and risk watching him starve to death since they couldn't feed him. There were no good answers.

Worse, John knew that Elizabeth was in an even tighter bind because she didn't know they had the ZPM power to run the shields for pretty much forever. So she believed that if the Wraith ever escaped, Atlantis' location and the fact that they were still in one piece could compromise the security of the entire base. John understood why she wanted this. He did. He just couldn't go along no matter how much he wanted to.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Weir, but I am not going to be able to follow that order," John said, bracing himself against the guilt he knew was going to follow.
Elizabeth looked at him with wide eyes. "John?"

"If he's going to be human, I have to give him the same rights as any prisoner of war. I don't have discretion on this matter."

"You certainly do," Carson objected. "We're not talking about having him be a prisoner. In fact, quite the opposite. He could become a functioning member of society."

"He'd still be Wraith," Ronon objected. He'd never really hidden his feelings about this whole matter.

"John, I really do feel it would be best to give Carson's cure a chance to work." Elizabeth's voice had an edge to it that John recognized as a warning.

"And I agreed to that," John said. Honestly, he wasn't sure he should have, but he did trust Elizabeth. She'd put a lot on the line to back him, and most of the time when they disagreed, she was right and he was wrong. When he'd broken quarantine for the whole nanovirus, he'd proven how very wrong he could be. This time he couldn't give her the benefit of the doubt. "However, I cannot allow any member of the military to lie to a prisoner of war about his medical condition or treat him in any way inconsistent with his own best interest." And John was definitely not going to consider the Wraith prisoner he'd handed over to the Hoff, although at the time, he had been in a desperate enough situation and cut off from Earth. Those were excuses not reasons, and he wouldn't repeat his mistake.

"Bloody hell. This is his best interest. You're being a bloody pedant, and quite frankly, I didn't expect it out of you, Colonel." Carson was good an angry now, and John wanted to flinch away from all that anger. He didn't want to be the one to shut other people down, but Samas was right on this. John knew it all along, but it took Samas and Tony's threat to arrest someone to remind him that Elizabeth wasn't the end of the chain of command. They all had others to answer to. Personally, John couldn't tell this Wraith that he was a member of the Air Force and then look General O'Neill in the eye.

John looked right at Carson. "I follow the same military code of conduct as all members of the Air Force--the law. I didn't write the Geneva Convention, but I support every line in it and I won't have my men going against it, not when the prisoner is human."

"What are you talking about?" Carson asked, and he looked honestly confused.

"Article thirteen. Experimenting on prisoners is not allowed, and the second he is a human, then we can't argue that there's a loophole for alien species that consider us a food group because he will be human."

Carson looked utterly stricken, so clearly he had never even considered how someone else might see this situation. "He's not a prisoner," Carson finally said, his voice strained.

"Really? Was he captured during a mission? Is he an agent of an enemy power? Is he free to leave?" John asked.

Elizabeth stepped forward and put a hand on his arm. "John, I see where you're going, but this isn't the way to look at it. Carson's cure gives us a new option, a new way to pursue peace."

"And a potential arrest record."

"What?" Elizabeth pulled her hand back. John was just pissing everyone off today, but if he had to make his friends angry, that was better than testifying in a secret court as they were charged with violation of international law. Unfortunately, John's time working for General O'Neill had made it
very clear that Atlantis had political enemies who would make hay out of this.

"It's illegal. Carson, if Michael is human, you cannot use him for experimentation."

"You make it sound like I'm a monster. Can ya not understand what I'm trying to do?" The pain in Carson's voice was worse than the condemnation.

John cringed. "Of course I can, Carson. I understand, but legally I can't follow an order that violates my oath as an officer."

"I agree with John," Teyla said. "I have been reviewing your laws for the treatment of prisoners, and to subject them to medical experimentation does appear to be a violation." John suspected he knew who gave her those records. Unfortunately, Elizabeth still had an expression of fond exasperation, as if the rest of them simply hadn't yet seen what was obvious to her. And ninety percent of the time, she was right. John thought this was the other ten percent.

"Agent DiNozzo has already shown an interest in this," John added. He hated to throw Tony under the bus, but Elizabeth seemed unmoved, and she had to understand the seriousness of this.

"Tony?" Elizabeth looked confused. "You can't be suggesting he would get involved. This is not an NCIS case."

"He's the only cop around, and he takes his job seriously," John pointed out. He turned to Carson. "If you experiment on a Wraith, folks back home will be very happy to turn the other way. If you experiment on a human, I think certain IOC members will take too much of an interest."

"Colonel Sheppard, perhaps we should discuss this privately," Elizabeth said, and she was clearly angry enough that she was considering ways to dispose of his body.

"Elizabeth, this is a decision that affects the city. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the two of you having a private discussion," Teyla said. For a time, Elizabeth simply looked at Teyla as if unwilling to believe what she was hearing.

"It doesn't actually matter what she says in private or in public," John told Teyla. "The Geneva Convention is not negotiable."

"I understand that, John," Elizabeth said in a soothing voice.

"And if Carson treats it that way, I'm afraid that Tony might escort him through the wormhole in cuffs," John warned her.

"Excuse me?" Carson demanded.

"Do your actions not violate your own laws?" Teyla asked him. "I can understand why Tony is concerned. His position is one that requires him to uphold the laws of your people."

"John, you can talk to him," Elizabeth said in a tone that made it clear that she would accept nothing less from him.

"I can," he agreed, and for a half-second she looked relieved. "Then again, Everett asked me to talk to him on behalf of the four assholes who were bothering Rodney. I actually threatened him if he didn't back down. I ordered him to back down. You can see how well that worked." John shrugged. At the time he'd been quietly furious, but in hindsight, Tony had been right. Laws needed to be upheld. "When it comes to his job, Tony is not going to listen to me."
"He understands that I'm helping," Carson said weakly.

John sighed. "He is not comfortable with this, and his first instinct as a cop is to file charges and let the courts settle the moral ambiguity."

"Sheppard!" Ronon shouted, and John whirled around. Ronon had his hand on his gun and he was staring down into the isolation lab. In seconds, John saw the problem. Michael had one restraint off and he was struggling to free himself from the chest straps.

"Shit," John cursed and then he started running for the lab. He could hear footsteps right behind him, but he didn’t have time to check to see who might have followed. Two airmen guarded the entrance to the lab, and they snapped to attention as John stormed around the corner. “Open! Open, open!” John yelled. His people were good because they didn’t even hesitate. They both opened the lab doors, and John bolted through.

Micheal’s ankles were still restrained, as were his legs and hips, but he had both hands and his chest free. John dashed around the table. “Grab his arm,” John ordered the airman. The Wraith was struggling with the belt around his hips, so one of the airmen grabbed his wrist and the other his elbow. That just left John trying to hold the other side himself.

“I will not be Guide!” the Wraith yelled. He flung John across the room, and he landed in the middle of a tray of medical equipment which promptly flew everywhere. Ronon had his arm and was struggling to hold it while Carson ran for the counter where he had a needle and hopefully a buttload of sedatives.

“What the bloody hell is he talking about?” Carson asked as he started preparing a shot. Ronon had his arm pinned so John started strapping it down again.

“They have some sort of weird religious objection to being different or guiding or something,” John yelled over the Wraith’s wordless cries.

“Religious objection?” Carson turned around, needle in hand. “What do you mean they have a religious objection?”

“Carson!” John said in his best ‘fix this now’ voice. Ronon couldn’t keep the Wraith’s arm still enough for John to get the strap around it, and the two airmen on the other side looked like they were barely holding on.

“Oh, right.” Carson quickly pushed the needle into Michael’s neck. As the medicine went in, Michael’s struggles slowed. “Now, what do you mean they have a religious objection?”

John quickly got the restraints straps in place, checking to see the airmen were doing the same before he answered. “Samas talked to him. Apparently Wraith call people who lead ‘guides’ only being a guide and leading people somewhere new is some sort of terrible fate. He was horrified at being the first to be turned human.”

“Oh.” Carson looked down at the sedated Wraith, and John got the feeling that for the first time Carson was really considering what it might mean to force an individual to change his species.

John’s back had taken a real hit on the medical tray and he reached back to rub a particularly sore spot, but his hand hit something smooth and cool to the touch. John stretched farther, poking it until he realized that something was sticking in his back.

“Um, Carson?” John said, and there was a horrible feeling taking root in his stomach. By the time Carson looked up at him, John had gotten his fingers around the syringe and pulled it out of his back.
Yep, he’d been jabbed good. He brought it around to the front. “Please tell me you had something nice and safe like vitamin D in this,” he asked desperately.

Carson stared at the syringe, his eyes slowly growing large. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Did that break through your skin?”

“That sunk so deep I think I can feel it in my lung,” John answered. “What was in it?”

Carson finally made eye contact. “The Wraith cure. It had a bloody Wraith retrovirus in it.”

John closed his eyes. “Shit.”
The curse of the Atlantis commanders

When the door opened, John turned away from the window prepared for another round of Carson’s endless cheer. It was getting a little old. Instead Gibbs stood at the door, his back military stiff so it was definitely Gibbs and not Samas. It might even be a pissed off Gibbs, but it was hard to tell angry-Gibbs from just-hasn’t-had-enough-coffee-yet Gibbs. “Hey, Gunny. How are things out there?” John asked. He’d asked Lorne to have the gunny report, but that had been yesterday. John had pretty much given up on having anyone obey his orders anymore.

Gibbs gave him a long stare before he finally said, “I'm sure Lorne is giving you updates.”

“Well? Because I'm pretty sure that he's trying to make me feel better. Unless something blows up loud enough for me to hear it, Weir and Lorne are doing the annoyingly cheerful act.” And it was true. John had kicked both of them out until they’d decided to stop annoying him with their optimism. It wasn’t like Atlantis commanders had a great track record. John wondered if he should sit down and write O’Neill an email telling him that he’d been wrong. Atlantis cursed all her military commanders, not just the ones who weren’t named Sheppard. Pushing that thought aside, he pulled up the bottom of his t-shirt and twisted around to show the gunny his skin. “Does my back look worse to you?”

“Significantly.”

John huffed and dropped the shirt. “See? That's honest. I'm not getting a lot of that. Even Rodney's trying to be nice, and Rodney's attempts to be nice are actually a lot more offensive than his normal behavior.” He had a chair and a small desk in the room, and he turned the chair sideways to sit. His back was too tender for anything else.

“I hadn't thought that was possible,” Gibbs said in an unhappy tone. John wondered how it worked between him and Samas because Samas definitely liked Rodney, and Gibbs made no bones about the fact that he really didn’t.

“Yeah, well he told me that blue was a good color—that if he had to turn any color, he'd choose blue. That’s when he realized that Nurse Sheila was in the room and then he was stumbling over his tongue to explain that black skin would be fine, that he wasn’t one of those racists who would rather be dead that be a minority. When she stared at him blankly, he then freaked and said that she wasn't really black, more like dark brown, and dark brown was nicer than blue. At which point he came full circle and told me that blue was a nice color, too. He then completely froze.” Under other circumstances John might have been amused or maybe even rescued Rodney from his own mouth. However, things weren’t looking good, and John couldn’t summon the energy. “Not exactly comforting,” he pointed out.

“Not really,” Gibbs agreed.

“Well that's Rodney.” John gave a weak smile for a second before he ran out of energy to fake it. “I asked him to leave before he cheered me up anymore. Besides, he doesn't need to see this. So how are things really going out there?

Gibbs gave John another of those stares that made John mentally cling to his rank. He outranked Gunny. He absolutely did, even when that stare of his made John feel about five. This is why John went out of his way to avoid ever giving Gibbs a direct order. It was wrong. Eventually Gibbs nodded moved over to the wall with window into the corridor and looked through it. John suspected that if he walked over there he’d find people were watching. John preferred his little corner desk
where the window didn’t have a good line of sight. “I think whatever you said got through to Carson.”

“Oh?”

Gibbs turned to look at him. “He asked what the Wraith's name was.”

That made John feel irrationally relieved. If Carson moved on this issue, then Elizabeth would too. Maybe that would bring her around when John had failed to. “Maybe he does get it then, not that the Wraith are ever good with sharing their names.”

“Actually we do have a name for him.”

“Oh?” That was new. Then again, Gibbs had more experience with interrogation, so maybe John shouldn’t be surprised.

“Wraith apparently use telepathy and scent to give names. I smelled chemicals associated with a general sense of great skill and long experience. Teyla got the image of a Wraith warrior being beamed down from a dart to engage the enemy.”

John waited for Gibbs to give him the actual name, but he just gave John one of those expectant expressions, like he was waiting for John to put the pieces together. “Wait. Are you telling me that his name is One Who Kicks Ass At Sweeping In On A Wraith Culling Beam To Kill Enemies And Has Done It For A Long Time?”

“Essentially.”

“I'll stick with Michael.”

Gibbs graced him with a small smile. “Yes, sir.”

John expected Gibbs to give him something more, but he just stood there. “So, nothing in the city is in danger or on fire?”

“Just you.”

“Thanks, Gunny.” Gibbs was definitely waiting for something. “Speaking of that, is Carson telling Elizabeth anything that he's not telling me?”

“The retrovirus is posing a real problems. He keeps trying to turn it off, but the Wraith DNA is very persistent.”

John let out a breath. He’d suspected as much, but Carson kept giving him all those cheerful reports of how they were going into a new trial and they had lots of different ideas. If John got one more promise that he was fine, he was going to hurt someone—which is why he’d asked Carson to get out. “So he can't cure me,” John said. He tried to keep his voice steady. That changed things. He needed to start making plans to protect the city. Part of John wondered who they would send after him. He was the fourth Atlantis commander to go down to death or disgrace—or in his case transformation into an alien life form. There weren’t going to be a lot of people lining up for his job, and John really hoped Lorne didn’t get promoted into it. He liked Lorne. He really didn’t want Lorne being the next to fall.

“Carson is convinced he still has several possible treatments.”

“Okay, Gunny, I really hate being the practical one. I'm supposed to be the comedic sidekick.
However, if I were being responsible, I would say that I don't have all the time in the world, and we need to start thinking of security measures to protect people from me."

“Is that why you asked me in here?”

“In part, yes,” John said. He wondered if someone in command had appeared in the hall and if that’s why Gibbs was suddenly willing to have a real conversation. If so, that implied either Gibbs or Lorne recognized the danger of having a compromised commanding officer. That should make John feel better, but it really didn’t. “The other part is that I’m hoping Samas can keep an eye on Rodney. He doesn't take care of himself when he gets stressed, and he's going to stress over this because he can't control it. Rodney does not do well with helplessness.”

Gibbs nodded. “Both Samas and I have noticed. We’ll keep an eye on him.”

John relaxed. He knew that Rodney would listen to Samas and Radek, even if he ignored the rest of the world. “That's good. So, will you sit down with Lorne and force him to start looking at some contingency plans? I know from the reports with Ellia that she was exceptionally strong, and of course we know Wraith have regenerative abilities, so I think you need to assume worst case scenario and plan for a future where I have both.”

“Are you assuming that you're going to lose control and pose a threat to the city?” Gibbs gave him a sharp look.

Considering that John had been fighting an urge to grab Rodney and fuck him into the mattress in front of witnesses, considering that when the nurse’s last IV of medicine had burned, John had a flash of homicidal rage, he was pretty sure that was a safe assumption. “I'm already having instinctive responses,” he told Gibbs, leaving it to the gunny to fill in the blanks, “and I'm sure they're only going to get worse, so yes. I am assuming that, and you should as well.”

“There is one way we can help Carson isolate the DNA damage and target the treatment.”

John shifted in his chair. If there were a medical solution, Carson should be in here. “Oh?”

“If you would consent to have Samas sample some of your blood directly, he would have a better chance of describing the structure of the live virus in your system.” Gibbs sounded oddly neutral about it.

“Hey, it's not like Carson isn't making me feel like a vampire victim already. The more the merrier. Now, we're talking about my arm, right? I don't think the IOC would be amused by me hosting Samas.” Truth be told, John wasn’t thrilled with the idea of hosting either, but he wouldn’t say that to Gibbs. He respected the man and his decisions, and enough people already gave him grief about Samas. Every new batch of Marines that arrived had two or three knuckleheads who made trouble until Gibbs’ Marines put them on the right path or helped them have a training accident just serious enough to get them a ticket home to Earth. Not that John officially knew anything about that. He just figured that anyone who was narrow minded enough to target Samas would also run into problems with any number of the other non-Earth people they had on the city.

“No, he can take it from your arm,” Gibbs said.

John held his arm out. “Tell Samas to come out and get his sample then.”

“I have to go get Samas.”

John stood. “Wait. You plan on asking for a sample, but you don't bring Samas in here with you to get it? What's going on, Gibbs?”
The door opened again, and Lorne was standing there. “An abundance of caution, sir.”

“Lorne?” John stood up and took several steps toward his second. He could feel the anger pushing him toward violence. If Lorne was going to turn on Samas after all this time, John wanted to hurt him, to hit him until Lorne understood that he was under John. He would take John’s orders.

A hand caught him by the arm, and John stopped long enough to see Gibbs’ holding him. John pulled back.

“Sir, Rodney has been insisting that Samas join with you to control the infection. Dr. Weir feared that he might take you as a host, not out of any malice,” Lorne said quickly, holding up his palms in surrender, “but as a favor to Dr. McKay.”

John looked at Gibbs, and Gibbs was nodding. “Rodney was rather insistent. Samas and I both told him that it wouldn’t happen, but I think the rest of the staff worried that we might change our minds if we were in here.” Something made John trust Gibbs more than Lorne. That wasn’t right. John frowned as he realized that he was losing track of the conversation. He really shouldn’t be making any command decisions at this point.

He walked over to his bed and sat on the edge. “So, is Samas going to take the sample or not?” he asked.

Lorne frowned. “Dr. Weir and I wanted you to be aware of the danger. If Samas decides to go inside you, there’s not much we can do other than contact Stargate Command.”

“Then I’ll be taken over by an alien I respect instead of the virus that’s turning me into a bug. I’ll take the risk, Major.” John still felt that irrational anger flowing through his veins. He knew he should appreciate that Lorne was protecting him, but he couldn’t.

“I’ll go get Samas,” Gibbs said.

“Gibbs?”

“Sir?”

“Take Lorne with you,” John said. He couldn’t look at Lorne right now. He couldn’t risk having the man refuse his order because John wasn’t sure how much control he had over his temper.

“Yes, sir,” Gibbs agreed. That quick agreement soothed John’s nerves, and he closed his eyes as the two of them left. He was losing his humanity.

The door opened again, and Elizabeth stood there with one of the new sergeants, a man who had years of experience with the SGC and a really big gun.

“John,” Elizabeth said softly.

John closed his eyes.

“I’ll be fine sergeant. You can leave,” she said softly.

John sat up, his eyes open wide even though the light hurt them. The sergeant was turning to leave. “Sergeant Anderson!” he snarled, his control slipping as he gave serious consideration to eviscerating the idiot.

The sergeant snapped to attention. “Yes, sir.”
“Do normally leave command staff in vulnerable positions when they are unarmed and unable to defend themselves from a superior force?” John demanded.

The sergeant flushed. “No, sir.”

“Then I suggest you not do it now unless you want to have a very short stay on Atlantis and a trip back through the Gate with a disciplinary complaint on your record.”

“Yes, sir.” The sergeant was just short of saluting, and John knew that put him in a difficult spot. John was the dangerous superior force and he had just ordered the sergeant to shoot him to defend Elizabeth. It wasn’t the sort of order John had expected to ever give.

“John,” Elizabeth said softly. “I don’t need a guard.”

“You really do,” John said, “although not as much as Lorne. That stunt with Samas has not left me in a good mood.”

“You dislike that we suspected he might take you as a host,” she said softly.

“He’s been our strongest supporter, Elizabeth.”

“He’s done things behind our backs.”

“And they’ve generally turned out well.” John frowned and smelled the air. That scent. He knew it. “Certainly having the Genii here has worked well for you… personally,” he commented. Elizabeth gave a slight blush—just a faint darkening of the skin of her neck and cheeks. Without enhanced vision, John never would have recognized the guilt in her face or the scent of Ladon Radim on her body. He was brilliant, so John wasn’t sure why he was surprised. They were all violating the fraternization regs around here.

“John,” Elizabeth said again, and that was a clear warning.

John smiled, but that seemed to make her more nervous. “I trust Samas, and if he can help Carson identify the genetics of this thing, it’s worth the risk.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Agreed. Lorne and I simply wanted you to be aware of the circumstances. Rodney would also like permission to visit you again. He promises to not say anything offensive this time.” She gave a wry smile as if knowing that was impossible.

“He’s not safe coming in here,” John said. “And he shouldn’t see me like this.”

“He cares about you, John.” From the tone, she was well aware that caring went past what the regs allowed.

John shook his head. “Teyla and Ronon can defend themselves. Rodney has no business being in the same room with me, and quite frankly, neither do you.”

She sighed. “John, if this isn’t reversible…”

“I’m screwed.” John gave another smile. “I know that already. Tell Ronon to take care of things if it comes to that. He won’t let it tear him up like some of the men would.”

“We can’t talk like that,” Elizabeth said sharply.

“I thought we already were.”
“I was talking about the options if Carson can’t reverse some of the physical changes. I have no doubt he’ll be able to stop the progress of this virus neurologically.”

That was a bit of wishful thinking. “So, you’re just worried about what happens if I stay blue?”

“It would pose a problem.”

John laughed. “Yeah, I don’t think the IOC wants a blue commander in charge of their city. But you know, if it comes to that, I’ll let you and O’Neill argue it out with them.” John could feel his aggravation rise as he thought about the IOC. They were so far away, and yet they thought to control him. They thought to tell him what to do, and John could feel a slow burning fury that left him almost trembling with rage. He smiled and played the fool while the IOC schemed behind his back, and John wanted to see every one of them dead.

They’d taken the city from him. They’d put his people under the command of fools. They’d risked everything—shut Elizabeth out of the command structure—shut Teyla out. They didn’t understand, and yet they pranced around wearing their own ignorance like cloaks. They claimed status they couldn’t defend. John distantly heard an alarm go off.

He kept his eyes closed as footsteps rushed around him. He had to control his temper.

“Just calm down, lad. This will ease your heart rate. Someone get another dose. Nurse, put that there.” Carson’s voice was low and soothing, and John let the medicine soothe the terrible anger in his heart. After all, ripping out the guts of an IOC member would definitely look bad on his service record. John felt the moment when the medicine pressed him to sleep, and he didn’t fight it. Sleeping was better than living with these thoughts that weren’t his.
The best laid schemes of mice and Samas

Gibbs walked out of the treatment room Carson had set up for Sheppard feeling more pessimistic than ever. Samas had never seen DNA do what the iratus DNA was doing. The similarities with Wraith were unmistakable; however, Wraith DNA appeared fairly stable, and iratus DNA was not. They had to be, like onac, a fast mutating species, but Samas could see no coherent design behind the mutations. Perhaps the bugs reproduced in such numbers they could allow for random mutations and the unfavorable ones simply fell by the wayside.

Tony was waiting for him, but Gibbs signaled for silence and kept walking. Tony fell in beside him. Even without Jo in him, they understood each other. Gibbs led them to the transporter and chose a small, out of the way tower where Samas had cut the audio surveillance.

"Boss?" Tony asked when the door closed. He took a step forward, and Gibbs rested his hand on Tony’s hip. "Oh, I know that look."

"Colonel Sheppard is accidentally infected with the anti-Wraith virus when he is the only person in the city that has been bitten by an iratus bug." Gibbs laid the facts out on the table.

"That pretty much sums it up," Tony agreed, "which seems like a pretty huge coincidence considering that Carson's Wraith cure wouldn't have affected anyone else."

"You know what I say about coincidence," Gibbs said.

Tony frowned. "Um, yes, but you also know that the colonel backed into that tray."

"Where Carson left out the retrovirus," Gibbs said. "A breech in protocol he has never committed before. His nurses say that failure to follow protocols is one of the fastest ways to get disciplined in Carson’s unit. He drills the medical staff on following procedure.” Gibbs watched Tony. Even without Jo he could practically read his mind. They’d worked together for long enough that he could see the moment that Tony picked up on Gibbs’ suspicion.

“Someone would have to be invisible if they were going to get in there and infect Sheppard,” Tony said slowly.

Gibbs just raised his eyebrows.

"Oh shit," Tony said softly. “Ascended Ancients?’"

Gibbs gave a satisfied grunt. "The odds of the same member of the expedition both getting bit by an iratus and being stuck with that needle are about one in a hundred and ninety thousand. The odds get infinitely bigger when you consider that most people would have died when the iratus bit them and that Carson has never before left out a needle with medicine."

Tony had paled, but that was understandable. With the Ori kicking up trouble in the Milky Way, Gibbs really didn’t want to even consider that they might have an ascended enemy, but it didn’t pay to hide from the truth. "You think one of the ascended Ancients is trying to kill Sheppard? Isn't that a huge violation of their prime directive?"

"I think they break that prime directive any time they feel like it." Gibbs didn't even bother to hide his disgust. "But you're jumping to conclusions, DiNozzo. Do you have the evidence for an attempted murder charge?"
Tony gave him an odd look. "Boss, if something doesn't change, this virus is going to kill Sheppard."

"Which isn't evidence," Gibbs pointed out. He suspected Tony was right, but they didn't get ahead of the evidence--that was a basic rule with investigations. "We do, however, have a case for assault. Get Abby. I want everything you have on this."

"On it," Tony said, but he had a look on his face that meant he definitely wasn’t sure where to start. Gibbs wasn’t either, but he’d discovered that if he just ordered Tony to get something done, he figured it out. He hadn’t worked so hard to recruit Tony for his good looks. At the time he’d met Tony, he was still married and his sex drive had been firmly in reverse.

Tony turned toward the door, but then he was backpedalling as Rodney bulldozed his way into the room.

“That idiot won’t even let me into the room to see him,” Rodney ranted. Gibbs suppressed a flash of frustration and stepped back to let Samas handle the conversation. For Samas it was no different than an onac being denied access to his queen, or for two onac who had a close alliance being divided over the attention of a queen. Such things happened in the water. Gibbs doubted that either analogy covered this situation, but he still preferred to allow Samas to handle McKay.

"Hey, Rod, calm down. He'll be okay," Tony said. He managed to suppress most of the tells that appeared when he lied, but it was clearly a lie. Samas had hoped to get a clear view of the DNA within Sheppard’s body and immediately have a solution, but he had more questions than answers. He would go to the lab and detail the mutating structures he had observed, but he couldn’t see any immediate solution.

"Oh yes, because no one ever dies around here," Rodney snapped at Tony. "We haven't had any number of people die for the stupidest reasons ever." Rodney started to get his hands flying.


"Rod," Tony said soothingly, "Carson’s the best. They’ll figure this out. And now Samas can give them a more detailed picture of the genetic structure." Tony gave Samas and Gibbs a look that practically begged them to do a little reassuring, but Samas had no reassurance to offer.

"They might as well wave voodoo wands over him for all they know about this. How could this happen? How does one person have this much bad luck?" Rodney’s hands were flailing now.

"But on the good side, he's still alive. He's got the good luck to go with the bad," Tony pointed out.

Rodney pointed at Gibbs. "You. Send Samas in there. At least if Samas were in there, he could stabilize the DNA." It was the same argument he’d been making for three days now.

"That's not a good idea," Gibbs said.

"Don't give me all that crap about stupid people not being able to tell the difference between Igigi and Goa'uld." Rodney took a breath. Samas started to say something, but Rodney was off and running at the mouth again, "and the idea of not taking unwilling hosts doesn't count. John isn't unwilling. Yeah, he isn't exactly willing, but he’s not in his right mind. That leaves the decision up to his next of kin, and as his next of kin, I'm telling you to get in there."

Samas felt a flash of aggravation at being told what to do in such a manner, and Gibbs’ own displeasure reinforced that. Perhaps Rodney realized he’d gone too far because he had gone silent as
he stared at Samas.

"I wish I could do as you ask. However, I am far too large. An onac of my age was never intended
to still be in a host and I have needed to make certain compromises with Gibbs’ brain that I fear I
cannot make in Sheppard's case, not in his current condition. Even attempting to join with him would
likely kill him."

"Then send one of the baby onac." Rodney snapped the words out. He knew. He knew of the
joining waters. Samas had an instinctive need to get out of his host, to get out now and ready for
battle. Gibbs had about the same reaction.

“Rodney?” Tony asked. “What are you talking about?”

Samas kept his face blank when all he could think about was his children. Who had Rodney told?
How many people knew of them… threatened them? Ronon had stepped forward, and he was
watching Samas.

"What?" Rodney demanded, clearly oblivious to all the emotions around him. "They can go in there,
can't they?" Rodney looked around with a confusion that didn't match the verbal napalm he had just
dropped on all of them. "What?" he asked again. "Oh." His lips twisted into a frown. "That was a
secret. Ronon, don't tell anyone about that last part."

Gibbs appreciated that bit of irony; Samas was still too worried for any sort of amusement. He was
upset enough that stress hormones ran through Gibbs’ body, making him stiff with rage and fear—
two emotions Samas did not handle well.

"What?" Rodney asked again. "Will you just go get one of the little ones?" Rodney demanded.
"Time is short people." He snapped his fingers, and for one nanosecond, Gibbs thought that Samas
might kill someone, with Rodney near the top of that list.

Maybe Tony realized the danger because he moved so he was physically between them. "Rod, the
colonel isn't going to die in the next hour or even the next day, so just slow down. How did you find
out about the children?"

Depending on the answer, they might already be screwed beyond repair. Gibbs had horrific visions
of the command staff having secret meetings without them. If that was the case, the military would
already have some kill switch in place--some sort of delivery system for symbiote poison. Rodney's
mouth twisted into a frown. "I got anomalous readings from one of the sensors back before we even
reestablished contact with Earth. Radek told me I was being paranoid, but I appropriated a MALP
and used it to film underwater. It's not like they're hidden.” Rodney looked at Samas. “You have
thousands of them down there. Or you did. Once I recalibrated the life sign detector that's slaved to
my station, I realized that your kids have a really bad habit of dying. But you have little ones that
would fit in John." Rodney was watching Gibbs and Samas with a sort of bewilderment. "You can
save him," he said in a small voice.

"He can try, but that leaves the problem of the others finding out about the symbiotes," Tony pointed
out. Samas began to sort through this new information. Rodney had no scent of shame or deceit, so it
did appear that the Turi were safe for now, but this did change the situation. Samas also thought it
strange that Radek would tell Rodney to ignore sensor readings. It was more likely that he had
already seen the readings; however, Radek was even less likely to tell someone than Rodney.
However, that didn’t preclude other members of the science team discovering the Turi.

Rodney threw his hands up in the air in frustration. "Oh please. Igigi are not Goa'uld, and anyone
who's too stupid to understand that has no right even being in this galaxy. That’s the whole reason I
tried to lose the mini-sub that O’Neill sent us because that man is not open minded enough to see reason.”

“Your people do seem kinda stupid,” Ronon offered.

Rodney spun around and glared at Ronon. “Wait. You aren’t surprised. You knew! You knew and you never told me!”

“You never told me, either,” Ronon pointed out, and that was his smug look. Samas could practically smell his pride in having been a host when Rodney didn’t trust him enough to even tell him.

“Of course I didn’t. It wasn’t any of your business,” Rodney whirled around, “but you have to have one of the small ones go in Sheppard and stabilize him.”

Samas shook his head. “They might be able to strength him temporarily, but no symbiote could reverse this virus. I don’t even know if I could, and I cannot join with Sheppard without killing him. I did not lie about that.”

Tony rested his hand on Rodney’s arm. “And if Samas tries and anyone finds out that Sheppard has a symbiote in him, that’s not going to end well.”

Samas thought that was an understatement. He had visions of the SGC sending symbiote poison through the Gate. Before this conflict over the Wraith retrovirus, Samas might have counted on Teyla and Weir to be a defense against that, but Weir clearly had more of the killer warrior in her than he’d given her credit for. She truly would eat her enemy alive and not care about the ethics of it. Samas admired that sort of dedication to a goal, but it meant that he could not count on her, and clearly Teyla was not able to temper Weir’s voice. Samas needed stronger allies in order to ensure survival, and he could not play the long game as he had intended.

"Yes, yes, people are stupid about the Igigi," Rodney agreed. "But we can treat it like some sort of secret mission. Can we save Sheppard now? Chop, chop."

"Rodney, you're asking one of Samas’ children to die for John," Tony said.

“What?” Rodney turned white as a ghost. “No I’m not.”

"Tony, no," Samas said firmly.

“You said yourself that you won’t have any symbiote coming back into the water unless it completed the trials. Are you changing your mind?” From Tony’s tone it was clear that he wanted Samas to bend the rules, which surprised him. As Jo’s host, he understood the danger. After all, Tony had come up with the one trip compromise. It would mean that the Turi would have a culture based in the water—one that saw the host culture as a place to visit, not a realm to take over or a people who lived to serve Turi. And Turi would have to prove themselves in the water—they would have to fight in the rite of hosting. Now Tony would undo all that in order to save one person. Samas wasn’t comfortable.

“You can’t let Sheppard die. I swear, I don’t care if I have to go down there with a fishing net, you aren’t going to let John die without trying something.” McKay sounded frantic, and Tony wrapped an arm around him. It spoke to McKay’s trust in them that he spoke those threats when he was in a position that he couldn’t defend himself. However, Samas would not betray that trust, not even for his children.

"I could call for one who is still a shadow," Samas said.
“And then ask it to die, its genes unused,” Tony said.

Samas stared back.

Rodney stared at them in confusion. “Why would one of them have to die? Just carry it to John and then carry it back.”

Samas gave Rodney a small smile. “It is not that easy. My people were compromised because the rites of joining were ignored. Would you compromise them again?”

“Oh please. Helping someone is not the same as taking unwilling hosts,” Rodney snapped. “So have junior go in there and then let him go home.”

Tony spoke. “Samas is determined that until the Turi culture is truly established, that no onac can come home with any sort of corrupt story to tell. Taking a host that did not fight to earn the joining and then joining only to be exposed to a corrupt DNA code… Samas would not let the symbiote live to sing about that in the water,” Tony said, and the way he said it was a clear condemnation. Samas was surprised at the open defiance, but Gibbs sent up only amusement. Tony didn’t back down, not even from them. He never had, and Samas had best remember it.

“You would kill your own kid?” Rodney asked in a small, horrified voice.

Samas could not afford to have McKay as an enemy, so he hurried to explain even if it was not Rodney’s right to know. “It is not the same as giving up a child. I myself have killed some of those that proved weak. A symbiote is nothing but the memories it carries. The word in our language for one with no unique memories is close to the word shadow. I may spawn a thousand symbiotes with the memories of a single symbiote who has gone on some adventure, and all of them are shadows of each other, identical in every way.”

“Are you saying they aren’t real until they take a host?” Rodney asked.

Samas shook his head. “No. Many have their own adventures. They explore the underwater parts of the city. They go out and fight native wildlife. They do not need a host to go out and develop their own personality apart from what they have inherited from me. Those are not shadows. But those who have only listened to others’ songs are not unique. If all but one of any spawning die, then all that exists in the thousand shadows is still saved in that one creature. And if every shadow dies and I still exist, I can create a thousand more shadows. An individual is only unique after having adventures of his own.”

"If you ever want to have hot water or a safe night's sleep again," Rodney said in a low voice as he pointed a finger at Samas, "you'd better find a way to help John. I just… I don’t want to know if you kill your kid afterward.”

“Samas is trying to protect his people,” Tony said soothingly. Then he gave Samas a look that meant he wasn’t fond of the idea either.

If Samas allowed the hosting, Tony would be unhappy about the death of a shadow. If he did not, Rodney could pose a threat to the Turi. Samas knew what he had to do. “I will have one of the symbiotes join with Sheppard,” Samas said.

"How do we do this, boss?" Tony asked.

This did not make Samas happy, but he did have to admit that this course of action was logical if one thought saving Sheppard was the ultimate goal. "Very carefully,” Samas said. “We’re going to need a distraction in the medical ward in order to get inside Sheppard’s room. Tony, I am closely watched.
because Lorne fears that I will take Sheppard as a host. You will need to carry the Turi."

Ronon offered, "I can provide a distraction."

"So that leaves the sensors and surveillance." Gibbs looked at Rodney.

"Yes yes. I have those. But you can help him, right?" The desperation in Rodney's face had been replaced with a sort of weak hope.

"I don't know. I will send in a symbiote that has my own technical knowledge and Tony's persistence, but that guarantees nothing."


Samas drew himself up and glared at Rodney with such hatred that Rodney startled back.

"I do not have abominations for children. Tony carried a symbiote and faced down a corrupt Goa'uld. With the help of SG1, he stole one of the great mother ships and ensured that the Goa'uld would never again use the onac of homeworld to enslave your people or mine. I used the DNA of his symbiote, the one who sings of his bravery and persistence, and knows his heart."

Tony noticed that Ronon was giving him a very strange look. Yep, Ronon might think of himself as the premier carrier of the male Turi, and he was… now… but Tony had been there first.

"You know Rodney, boss, he just talks without thinking first. You would never be a Goa'uld trick like putting the DNA of the host into the kids. So no eating the scientists." Tony gave Samas a goofy grin. It only took a second for Samas' aggravation to vanish and for Samas to roll his eyes.

"Rodney is a little large to eat. Besides, he's not inferior, and I generally only kill the weak and inferior," he said.

"Or the strong and morally inferior," Tony added. "But we need a timeline on this plan."

The next few minutes were full of schemes and timelines. Samas had much to prepare. He had to get Carson the detailed structure of the iratus DNA. If Carson still felt he needed iratus eggs, Samas could fool a creature that relied so heavily on scent, but that meant only taking those who hosted Turi on the mission. Samas eyed Rodney and wondered if he would host if they could convince Lorne that Sheppard’s team should be the ones to get the samples.

But that posed a new problem. Rodney had many talents and great bravery, but he did not have the physical strength to traverse the physical obstacles Ronon had built to protect the joining waters. Samas disliked having to move quickly, and right now he felt as if everything was spinning out of control too quickly for him to see where they led. It was a most unpleasant sensation.
The investigation

Tony stopped in the doorway and looked around. With new labs open in the next tower, most of the scientists had migrated to spaces farther away from Rodney. Abby, however, had chosen to take over the lab right next door to the one that Rodney and Radek shared most of the time. Clearly someone else had chosen to stay with her because the room was an odd combination of crime scene photography, Abby paraphernalia including Bert and a miniature model of the Navy yard, and tall canvasses with cherry blossoms and stylized birds. Weirdly, it worked. Sort of.

"Abbs?"

"Tony!" she sang as she crawled out from under a table. "Try that," she said.

"Much better," someone else answered from the back of the room. Miko stood up. "The connection is more stable. Thank you."

"Thank you for testing your end," Abby answered.

"Thank you for being willing to get under the table."

"Thank you for not assuming that I can't figure out how to hook up computers."

"Thank you for not treating me like I am invisible," Miko said. They were busy offering bows, and Tony got the feeling these two had done this ritual more than once.

"Not to interrupt the mutual gratitude society, but could I interrupt?" Tony asked. Miko bowed in his direction. "Of course. I must go and retrieve the sword collection."

"It will look awesome on that wall!" Abby agreed brightly. Sword collection? Tony stepped to the side to let Miko leave. He would not have pegged her as one to have a sword collection, but then sometimes the quiet ones hid some pretty odd quirks.

"Isn't she cool?" Abby bubbled. "At the same time Rodney was using the beaming technology to smuggle his stuff onto Atlantis, Miko used a second unit she had assembled in her spare time and had her family send a whole bunch of stuff from home, including art and food and music. She bribed a friend into smuggling it over on the Daedalus. She is so wonderfully subversive!" Abby said in a tone that made it clear that she considered subversive the best compliment in the whole world.

"So, you two are lab mates?"

"Yep!" Abby said. "I never got to pick who I wanted as a lab roomie, and she's awesome. She totally understands why Rodney is amazing. I mean, if he thinks you're stupid, he calls you stupid. He doesn't care what genitals you have or what school you went to or anything. He only cares about the work, and after all the stupid, sexist, elitist crap Miko and I have suffered through, we know how awesome that makes him. And as a bonus, all the privileged asses who've used women and minorities like their own personal lab slaves suddenly find themselves having to do all their own work, and some of them are not all that brilliant when they don't have people to bully into doing their work for them."

Okay, this was definitely a new side to Abby he was seeing. "You never wanted to share your lab in the past."
Abby rolled her eyes. "Because of the sort of assholes that applied at NCIS. I mean, the best analysts would go to the big name labs like over at the FBI, and we would get the dregs, and I do not work with dregs. But now... now I have Miko and Rodney and Radek, and I'm drowning in brilliance. It's perfect. So, what brings you to my domain?" She spread her arms out to encompass the entire lab. It was a nice big lab with three long tables and more machines than Tony could count. No doubt the other scientists had fled it only because it was next door to Rodney.

"Gibbs has a hunch."

"Ohhh." She stood up straighter. Tony suddenly realized that she was several inches shorter, and he looked down to see that she was wearing standard issue Air Force boots. It was the only concession she'd made to living on a military base, though. She still rocked the Goth look with a red miniskirt and a black t-shirt advertising a band Tony had never heard of. Tony might challenge the dress code himself with leather vests and linen shirts, but no one could unsettle an establishment like his Abby. "Where's the evidence?" Abby asked.

"That's what we have to find."

She frowned at him. "I only analyze what you bring me."

"Not this time," Tony said.

"Hinky," she said in that tone that meant she was curious. "Go on."

"Gibbs thinks a little too suspicious that Carson's virus only infected Colonel Sheppard."

Abby made a 'go on' gesture. "So what does he think?"

Tony shrugged. "He doesn't know for sure, but he suspects that some of the colonel's very old friends might be sticking their noses into our business. His very, very old friends."

"Old friends as in?" Abby looked at him suspiciously, and Tony waited for her to make the connection. Sure enough, her eyes got big.

"Ancients? The boss wants us to track down Ancients?" Abby all but bounced on her toes. "Where do we start?"

"By figuring out a way to prove that Gibbs' gut is right and that Ancients have been interfering."

Abby tilted her head to the side and looked at him through narrowed eyes. "You have a plan," she accused him.

Tony grinned. "I always have a plan." And since this was the part he could control, this was what he was going to work on. Tony really hated the idea that Samas would kill a Turi who was willing to step up and help Sheppard. Yeah, that Turi was a shadow until it had an adventure, but going on a mission against a virus shouldn’t be less valued than going on a mission against a Goa'uld. Tony was definitely going to talk to Jo about this, but for right now, he could only work the case he had and bide his time to make his arguments.

Pulling a chair out, Abby plopped down. "Sit and talk," she said pointing at the other chair.

This felt a lot like having the old team back. Of course, for it to feel really like home, Kate would have to be here, but that was an old, dull pain now. Having Abby around just reminded him of it a little more. Tony pulled the second chair out and sat. "Step one would be figuring out every signal and energy signature in that room at the time of the accident."
Abby frowned. "I can analyze like nobody's business, but energy signals are more Rodney's thing." She gave him her tragic face, and Tony knew where this was leading.

"Oh no," he said firmly. "We are not asking Rodney. I like the guy, but he gets very worked up. If he even thought there was a chance that an Ancient was after Sheppard, he would tie himself in knots trying to figure out how to track the bastard down. And when he couldn't, he'd tie himself in knots and call himself a failure. No, there will be no Rodney in this investigation. Don’t you think he’s already under enough stress?"

"But Tony..." She gave him her best pout.

"No." Tony crossed his arms and tried to channel his inner Gibbs. He could withstand Abby eyes. He could. He had to because Tony was not going to risk getting Rodney and his phobias mixed up in this investigation.

"But he could--"

"No," Tony said.

"And--"

"Abby," Tony warned.

She gave an exaggerated huff. "I used to be able to get you to do anything."

"Yeah, well I used to live on Earth and believe that the pyramids were built by Egyptians. We can't have Rodney involved in this." There were not enough antacids in the city for that.

Abby nodded, all the pouting dropped immediately as she seemed to consider the problem. "I would say that Radek was the next best, but Rodney and Radek are inseparable. Radek would rat us out sooner or later, but I really can't navigate the system as well as Rodney's people. Miko would help."

Tony hated the idea of bringing anyone else into this, but if Abby said she didn't have the skills, then they needed an outsider. They couldn't afford to make mistakes. "Can she keep a secret from Rodney?"

That made Abby smile. "Have I mentioned that she's really devious? She can totally keep him away from the investigation."

"Okay then, let's ask her, but I'm trusting you to keep this contained," Tony said.

Her eyes got large. "I promise," she vowed. "I'll treat this just like any other NCIS case, and that means that no one gets the evidence without approval from the lead investigator."

Tony moved to her side and offered her a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, Abby."

"For you? Anything." She caught his hand and squeezed it. "Now go do your investigative thing. You look worried."

She was the only one who him well enough to spot that, but the possibility that Sheppard had an Ancient after him was only half his worry. It was just the half he could try and do something about, even if the something was only confirming or denying Gibbs’ hunch.

"Thanks Abs."

"Hey." She threw herself forward and hugged him tight. “You’re doing the best you can and so is
Carson, and whatever happens, you’re awesome because you’re doing everything you can.” She kept hanging onto him until Tony was damn close to an emotional edge that he couldn’t afford right now.

“He’ll be fine,” Tony said as he extricated himself from Abby’s arms. “Just get on the signals. I should have more for you later today.”

Abby nodded, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Rather than face Abby’s emotions, Tony turned and fled.

Really he had a good excuse. It was time for him to get the fun part of the investigation--paperwork. He had gone to another galaxy, and he still couldn't get away from it. Hopefully Dr. Weir had already approved his request for more access. He’d tried to be vague about why he needed the mission reports, but he'd been honest when he said it was an NCIS investigation. Hopefully she wouldn't make him jump through hoops or write a report for one of the JAG judges to review. Tony wasn't sure how a judge would react to an investigation of an unnamed suspect who was a disembodied Ancient. SGC judges were a little more open minded than most, but that would raise a few eyebrows.

Tony took the long way to his office, stopping by checking on Sheppard’s condition on his way to his office. Sheppard had been moved to a larger and darker room, and he spent most of his time pacing now, so Tony suspected they were running out of time. The team needed to go get iratus eggs and they needed to get a Turi into him before he lost more of his humanity, but Tony wasn’t working on those parts of the plan. Tony had to track down Sheppard’s potential assailant.

Sometimes Tony wondered how Jenny Shepard would react to Tony's office. It had a front area for interviews, but then he had a huge backroom he used as his workroom. One wall was covered in an ancient version of a whiteboard. Rodney said it was actually a film left over from the production of some sort of computer interface glass, but it worked like a white board, so Tony wasn't picky.

At first the mottled blues and greens had been a little distracting, but now he couldn't imagine going back to the Earth version. Tony had various pictures and reports hanging on it, each trapped by the static field of the material itself.

Right now just looking at the wall made Tony feel slightly ill. The diagram of the lab where they were still holding Michael was fine, but the pictures of Sheppard with his skin turning scaly and blue was horrifying. Tony wondered if that’s how SGC people felt when they thought about hosting an onac. If so, maybe he could forgive them some of their shittiness. Not all, but some.

The other wall had a window that overlooked the entire city. It ran the full length of the room, and a door led out onto a balcony where Tony liked to sit as he wrote reports. He had afternoon shade, so it allowed him to smell the salt air and watch the waves against the docks as he wrote up complaints about Marines who made inappropriate jokes and food going missing out of storage three. A few days ago, Tony had complained about the lack of real work for him, and he was never again doing that. Ever.

"Lorne to DiNozzo, are you anywhere near your office?" The call on his comm interrupted Tony's pity party.

"I'm actually in my workroom. Can I help you, Major?"

"I wanted a chance to speak with you."

"I'll be right out." Tony pushed himself. Funny, he didn't even remember sinking down into his
favorite chair. He sent out a mental query before touching a wall, and he got back a general sense of worry and fury centered around the infirmary. Tony assumed that meant that nothing was better with Sheppard.

Once he walked into the outer office, he waved a hand over the doorlock and asked Atlantis to keep it secure. He got back an image of a goat. Some days Tony thought the city was becoming more and more sentient. Other days he was pretty sure that either the city or he had serious mental health issues. However, Tony could only trust that the city would keep his door secure. He didn’t need anyone to see that he was investigating Sheppard’s infection because most people would assume that would imply he was targeting Carson. God knows Carson was walking around telling everyone how it was his fault that John had been infected.

Tony went to the door to the corridor and opened it. Sure enough Lorne stood there with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"Agent DiNozzo."

"Major," Tony answered. This was interesting. "Can I help you with something?"

A frown darted across Lorne's face. "Dr. Weir suggested that I might be able to help you find whatever you needed in the military records you requested."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "So, she wants you to poke around and find out who I'm investigating," he translated.

Lorne shrugged. "Subtle."

"She seems to think you'd tell off anyone who came right out and interfered in your investigation."

Tony nodded. "Smart lady."

Lorne looked at him for a second. "But with Colonel Sheppard sick, the last thing this base needs is people twitching about your investigation. The last time you launched a major investigation, three soldiers got dishonorable discharges, and two were sentenced to prison terms."

"For sexually harassing a civilian, not to mention the civilian in question was vital to the defense of this base and we were under direct attack," Tony shot right back. He would not apologize for doing his job.

Lorne raised his hands. "I'm not disagreeing. I happen to like that this base is a safe place for women and minorities because entirely too many of my postings have been around assholes. I know that's due, in large part, to you. However, people are already under too much stress. If you can tell me where to do some damage control, I can help you. I'm not trying to stop your investigation, and neither is Dr. Weir."

"But you want to know what I'm doing?"

"Exactly." Lorne smiled.

"Not going to happen."

The smile vanished from Lorne's face.
Tony felt a little guilty about adding to the man's stress, but if he talked about any active investigation, Gibbs would head-slap him into a coma, and that would go double for this one. "NCIS policy forbids discussing investigations with anyone who may later become a suspect or witness. I absolutely cannot talk about this, and I'm not doing this because it's you. When I started investigating the four guys who were harassing Rodney, Sheppard asked me to back off, and I didn't then either." Tony still hated that the fourth guy got off, but there hadn't been any surveillance to corroborate the charges. The only consolation was that the guy ended up transferring back to Earth with a big cloud hanging over his career.

"I'm not asking you to back off," Lorne said.

"Good. So open all those files, and I will quietly investigate what I need to."

Lorne stood a little straighter. "How many people know about this investigation of yours?"

That was a fair question. "Gibbs asked me to look into it, and I've asked Abby to process evidence. The three of us have been doing investigations for a long time, so you are not going to get rumors out of us." Tony couldn't say the same of Miko only because he didn't know her well, but he was going to have to trust Abby on that.

Lorne grimaced again. "The gunny thinks there's a problem?"

"Yep."

"Well, shit." Lorne ran a hand over his face. Clearly that convinced Lorne, but then the military people on Atlantis did respect Gibbs more than him. Well, most did and the ones that didn’t had a bad habit of falling down during training and transferring home. "If anything is about to hit the fan, can you at least give me advance warning so I can minimize the splatter?" Lorne asked.

"I can do that," Tony said softly. It meant a lot to him that Lorne trusted Gibbs. And he really hoped they weren’t about to destroy all that trust in one mission to get a Turi into Sheppard.

Lorne reached in his pocket and pulled out a flash drive. "These are the original files. Some of the things in here would not make Earth happy, so they've been creatively edited in the official reports. I trust you'll keep this in confidence?"

"Absolutely," Tony said. "I won't use anything in here for evidence." After all, if they found the guilty party, they couldn't exactly take him to court.

Lorne took a deep breath, but he handed the drive over. "Let me know if you need anything. The military will cooperate with any investigation."

"Thanks."

Lorne shrugged and headed for the door. He clearly wasn't happy, but Tony didn't blame him for that. In the middle of all this, they didn't need more stress. However, if Gibbs was right, they couldn't afford to have an Ancient sticking fingers in their business. So Tony had to figure out a way to prove they were involved and find a way to determine when they were present. After that, someone else was going to have to figure out how to protect Sheppard from nameless beings because that was way above his pay grade. As much as Tony hated to say it, they just might have to go to Chaya for help.
“Unscheduled activation!” Walter called as the Gate started lighting up. Tony looked over his shoulder. “Can we tell if it’s from the iratus world?” he asked. Elizabeth came out of her office with that blank expression that meant she was hiding just how pissed she was.

“It’s from the iratus world,” Walter confirmed.

Tony felt the pressure in his chest ease some. That’s when the anger settled in. “I’m going to kill them. I’m going to kill all three of them. They’re going to be small chunks of meat scattered across the Gatroom floor,” Tony said a little too loudly. Only after he said it did he realize that the threat came dangerously close to threatening to eat them and vomit them back up on dry land. Jo had been spending a little too much time in him as they discussed the whole issue of what do to with Sheppard’s Turi.

“Stand in line, Agent DiNozzo,” Weir suggested. “Lorne, you have your people in place?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. There were a dozen guards on the floor.

“It’s Gibbs’ IDC,” Walter said.

“Lower the force field,” Weir said. Walter hit the control and the force field shimmered and vanished. Not long after, Ronon strode through looking about as cocky as a person could get. He had a bag draped over his shoulder and there was a lot of unidentified goo on his boots. Gibbs was three steps behind him, walking backwards and covering their retreat.

“Someone ask for iratus eggs?” Ronon asked as he swung the bag around. He completely ignored the guards that surrounded him. “That was easy. I need a real challenge next time.”

Gibbs came around to stand next to him, lowering his weapon at the same time. “Any more of a challenge, and we would have left pieces of ourselves on the planet.”

“But we didn’t,” Ronon said with a wolfish grin.

Tony shoved right past a very well armed guard and walked over to Ronon and punched him in the arm.

“What?” Ronon demanded.

“We already had people die trying to get those eggs so you two go by yourself?” Tony demanded.

Ronon poked his thumb in Gibbs’ direction. “It was his idea. Hit him.”

“I know it was his idea!” Tony yelled as he punched Ronon again. “And I can’t hit him.”

Gibbs smirked as he took the bag from Ronon and walked over to Weir. “You couldn’t risk more people, but I could. I thought Ronon and I were fast enough to get the eggs for Carson, and I was right.”

“Gibbs,” Weir said, “I assume Lorne has some words for you. Airman, can you take these to Carson please?” Weir said as she gestured toward the bag. “If Samas had anything to do with this, please have him report to my office after Lorne has spoke with Gibbs,” Weir said, and the whole time she had on her diplomatic face, so Tony was guessing she was royally pissed. That was fine because
after Stevens and Walker died and she vetoed any more plans to get iratus bugs, the entire city was pretty angry with her. The Dagan priests were insisting that John could choose to ascend and then return to them, but pretty much everyone else thought Weir had signed his death warrant. It made her the single most unpopular person on Atlantis since Ellis.

Weir turned and headed for her office, and Gibbs looked at Lorne.

“Yeah, we both know you just did what I wanted to, right?” Lorne asked.

“Yes, sir,” Gibbs agreed.

“And I’m probably going to have to file an Article 15.”

“Yes, sir.” Gibbs stared at Lorne, and Tony knew exactly how it felt when you were delivering bad news to Gibbs and he gave you that stare.

“You have a right to a formal hearing,” Lorne said, and from his tone, he was really hoping Gibbs would fight this.

But then Gibbs never did what his superiors wanted him to do. “I earned it,” Gibbs said mildly.

Ronon nudged Tony hard enough that it almost pushed him over. “What’s that about?”

“Gibbs is in shit for disobeying orders,” Tony said, “which is why you should have told me and I would have gone.”

Ronon looked down at him. “Samas has more experience,” he said. Tony narrowed his eyes and leaned closer.

“You’d better hope Samas bites your tail because Jo will bite your nose off,” he warned in a whisper. Ronon grinned and made a ‘bring it on gesture.’

“Report tomorrow for extra duty.” Lorne ordered Gibbs before he looked at the gathered, most of them Marines. “I’m sure our Marines could use some extra training on how to avoid having unauthorized people go through the Gate,” he said loudly enough that every Marine in the room straightened up a little. “Your extra duty can involve making sure your men are better at their jobs.”

More than one Marine winced, but then Gibbs’ training terrified even SGC veterans, so Tony didn’t blame them.

“Wait. His punishment is to work with his men more?” Ronon asked. “He likes working with his men.”

Tony nodded. “I think Lorne knows that.”

Ronon grunted. “Earthers are weird.”

“Yep,” Tony agreed.

“Report to the infirmary for post-mission checkups,” Lorne said, “and Gunny… good work.”

Gibbs nodded and headed for the transporter. Tony followed with Ronon close behind him. “Carson thinks that with the iratus eggs he can get the colonel’s body to accept the cure,” Tony said.

Gibbs gave him a nod and then the transporter flashed and they were on the Turi level. They walked in silence until they hit the first of Ronon’s obstacles. This was a place where to struts looked to have
fallen, forcing them to climb. Tony suspected most of Atlantis’ people would give up at that point and turn in a work order to Radek. However, after some poking and prodding, Tony was ninety-nine percent sure that Radek would lose that work order because he already knew what was down this corridor.

The next obstacle was much more difficult. A solid wall looked like a door that had fallen so that it tilted forward. However, because the ceilings were so high here, the top of the door was a good seven feet in the air. If you knew exactly the right spot to jump for, the metal edge was rounded and easy to grab. If you didn’t, you were going to mess your hands up. Ronon went first, barely even pausing before he was up and over.

“We should talk before you go in the water,” Tony warned. Gibbs gave him an odd look, but after making the jump, he reached down his hand.

“Oh, so talk.”

“When Ronon’s gone,” Tony said. Because he was holding Gibbs’ hand, he had no doubt that Samas could sense some of his unease, but he didn’t comment. Gibbs just helped him over the wall before sliding down into the next area.

Anyone who got this far would know that this was an intentional obstacle course. When Tony had first seen it, he’d thought it was lame, but he should have known better. Ronon did not do lame. Now, he did things that might cause someone else to be lame, and in this case, he’d created a series of low obstacles out of fragments of metal. Most were thankfully dulled and rounded, and few were higher than a man’s thigh, so Tony could walk right around them. However, when Gibbs and Ronon tried to spar in this knee-high jungle of metal, it was pretty clear that a warrior would have to have reflexes and an ability to look in three directions as a time to fight his way through this thing. It all ended in a wall with two arches. Once Gibbs and Tony went through, all the scrap metal had been removed leaving a clear deck that led straight to the edge of the dark waters.

Ronon had started to bring long straight planks down here, and he was clearly starting to build benches. Jo had brought him a memory—Satedan warriors would watch two warriors fight, slapping their thighs in time as the younger tried to prove he could best his elder. Someone would sing a warrior’s ballad, and if in the time it took to sing, the younger had not won at least a point, he would retire to the bench on the side with the unblooded warriors. Tony had to imagine that if Ronon succeeded in finding any of his people, there would be no unblooded warriors left.

Tony pulled himself out of that memory and looked to where Ronon crouched next to the waters, his fingers still dangling in it. “Ronon, give us a minute?”

Ronon looked up. “Sure.” He stood and headed for the exit.

“And tell Carson’s staff that Gibbs will be in as soon as I’m done being pissed.”

“So, a while?” Ronon asked.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, although when Gibbs found out what he’d done, it was going to be Gibbs and Samas who were pissed. Already they were suspicious.

Tony reached down, and as he expected, Jo was right there waiting. She curled around his arm, and Tony brought her up so she could join. Even after all this time, he still gave a small gag when she found the slit in the back of his throat and pushed her way in.

“So, talk,” Gibbs said. Tony walked to Ronon’s pile of wood and rested his hand on it.
“You value Ronon.”

Gibbs frowned, but the answer to that was so obvious that he clearly didn’t feel a need to answer.

“That’s weird,” Tony said. “Not weird that you should value him because he’s really terrifyingly good at what he does, but your first choice was me.”

“Of course it was.” Gibbs took a step closer, and now he looked concerned.

“Why did you choose me, Gibbs?”

“Is this you fishing for compliments?” Gibbs gave a laugh, but Tony knew him well enough to know that Gibbs was trying to avoid the emotions because he was on unsteady ground and he didn’t know what Tony was talking about. That worked when they’d been back on Earth. When Tony went somewhere Gibbs didn’t want him, all Gibbs had to do was make one crack about Tony being needy, and that would jerk him right back into line. However, they weren’t on Earth, Tony wasn’t needy, and Gibbs’ tricks didn’t actually work on him now, especially since he could feel Gibbs’ unease through Jo.

“I wouldn’t be able to fight my way through that obstacle course. If Teyla or Ronon or even Sheppard were between me and the Turi, I wouldn’t be able to get the water. You created a system where I would have failed, Gibbs.”

Gibbs remained silent, but Samas’ discomfort grew.

“You’ve recreated the onac homeworld with hosts proving their worth through sheer brute muscle. Is that what you want for our people?”

This is where a lesser man would turn defensive and start striking out, but Gibbs narrowed his eyes. He was studying the truth of what Tony was saying and waiting to collect all the evidence. Never in his life had Tony known a lover as well as he knew Gibbs. He could practically read the man’s mind.

“Would Rodney provide good stories? Would Radek or Jonas or Miko?”

“Miko?” Gibbs jumped on that name and looked at Tony incredulously. Jo could feel Samas echoing that emotion.

“She’s brilliant,” Tony said softly. “If a Turi were with her and she made a great discovery, would that be a song worth singing? Have you sung of your discoveries in the Wraith language, of how you reverse engineered the dematerializing beam? You value intellectual quests, but you’re allowing the challenge to become a matter of physical strength.”

Tony waited as Gibbs took the time to think about that. “You want someone else as host,” Gibbs finally concluded.

While Tony could have accused Gibbs of jumping to a conclusion, he was right. “I’m pretty sure Radek knew about the symbiotes from the beginning. He hacked the White House. He lied to General O’Neill. Face it, if you want a bad ass as a host, Radek Zelenka is near the top of that list. Hell, I can think of at least six felonies I should arrest him for, and that’s not even counting his involvement in the black market around here.”

“So what are you proposing?” Gibbs asked. There was still hesitation there, and Jo warned that Samas was deeply uneasy. The idea of challenging to get a symbiote, of having to prove yourself to host was a fundamental part of onac culture. Samas would not yield on that.
“I propose a second challenge,” Tony said. “Call the one we have now the Warrior’s Path or whatever name Ronon chooses. However, I want a second way into this room, one guarded by intellectual challenges—games—puzzles—a test of genius. Let’s create a Scholar’s Path.”

Gibbs gave a quick laugh. “The way Rodney created a test for Abby.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, something like that.”

“And if Abby or Kavanagh gets in through this Scholar’s Path?”

“Kavanagh wouldn’t try, but if he did, I would certainly listen to the song of his symbiote before deciding if it was worth it to bite his tail or vomit him back up on dry land. And if Abby earned her way in here, would you deny her a Turi?”

Gibbs would. Tony could feel that, but he could also feel that Samas would not.

“A Turi who chose a scholar would have to stay with the host longer, would have to learn what the host knew about technology before it could begin to help with focusing the host, performing quick mental calculations, catching errors and improving productivity. Those Turi would understand that the Scholar’s Path is longer and harder, and in the end, those who have stories more interesting than shooting at Wraith will be the first to catch Jo’s attention.”

“This is a big change,” Gibbs said, which was as good as admitting that Tony was right and Gibbs wrong. With Gibbs, you took victories where you found them.

Tony grinned. “No it’s not, boss. You didn’t pick me for my ability to bare-knuckle fight. You or Ziva could have kicked my ass in a heartbeat.”

Gibbs smiled and reached for Tony’s hand. He used that to pull Tony close before resting a palm on his cheek. “In the sparring ring, we might win. But face it, you could always outmaneuver me. You wouldn’t be here otherwise because I would have kept you clear of all of this and handled O’Neill’s ire on my own.”

“You mean you would have fallen on your sword.”

“Yep,” Gibbs agreed.

Tony sighed. “You and Sheppard.”

Gibbs shrugged. “So, would you make it through this Scholar’s Path?”

For a second, Tony thought about it. “Yeah, I would. I’m not as smart as Rodney or Radek, but I have a skill they don’t. I can pretty much talk people into anything, so I would have found a way to con people into giving me codes or helping me through whatever test is there.” It wasn’t arrogance, but Tony knew he would be able to do exactly that.

Gibbs pulled back and looked at Tony, Jo and Samas flashing images back and forth. “What else aren’t you telling me?”

“That there’s a third path,” Tony said unapologetically. Jo was less sanguine, but she sent out her own determination. She would not back down on this any more than Tony would.

“A third path?” Gibbs backed up.

And this is where Tony completely pissed Gibbs off, but since Gibbs was a pull the Band-Aid off
fast sort of person, Tony laid it all out as quickly as he could. He’d practiced this bit ever since Gibbs had taken off for his illicit mission and Tony had retrieved the Turi in Sheppard. After all, if the mission was successful, Carson would move too quickly and the Turi would be in danger of getting caught, and if the mission was unsuccessful, the Turi had no reason to continue the mission because it would only prolong Sheppard’s life, not save him.

“The Queen’s Path is when a Turi is asked to lay down its life in the slim hope of doing some task for the queen. If it succeeds, then it might earn its way back into the water and earn a spot guarding the queen’s spawn. If it fails, it will never touch water again.”

Samas sent out a wave of fury as he realized that Sheppard’s Turi was already in the water. He would not have corruption in the water.

Jo sent out an equal blast of indignation. She would not have Turi die with no hope of bringing stories to the waters.

“You had no right,” Gibbs said.

“No, Samas had no right to tell Jo who she could or could not choose,” Tony said. “The Sheppard Turi knows things that it should not about manipulating hosts. Agreed. And he should not sing, not when there are too few songs and too many would be impressed with a host that should not have been claimed. However, he guards Jo’s nest. He doesn’t sing. And she will choose to honor him with a spawning. He nearly died to keep Sheppard alive. He was willing to die to protect Atlantis. That deserves to be remembered.”

“And if something happens to break him out of the nishta trance? It isn’t absolute.”

“So, you would kill him?” Tony shot right back.

“Shadows…”

“No!” Tony shouted, and Jo blasted the area with anger. “He wasn’t a shadow. Not anymore. He had fought with every ounce of his being to hold off the virus. He had to be clever to get ahead of the mutations and turn Sheppard’s immune system against it. And the whole time, he understood that if McKay was distracted or slipped for one second. If McKay failed to alter one brain scan that revealed the Turi’s presence that he would not only die but he would put us in danger. He was not a shadow.”

Gibbs turned away, and Tony could feel the anger rolling through him. There was nothing else Tony could say, and he wouldn’t say the same things over and over. Either Gibbs would forgive him for this or he wouldn’t. If he didn’t, neither Jo nor Tony gave one nishta guard good odds at protecting Jo’s first children, and they were far too small to protect themselves. While Jo had gone out of her way to move the nest as far from the claiming waters as she dared, there were still too many of Samas’ spawn around for her to truly hide them.

Jo wanted to go back to the waters and help guard her young, but Tony knew better. The fastest way to get Gibbs to make the wrong decision was to try and shove his face in how wrong it was. He needed time.

Turning away, Tony started toward the infirmary. He should check on Sheppard’s condition, and work on his report on his investigation, and warn Carson’s staff that he and Gibbs had a large enough fight that it might take Gibbs a little longer than normal to show up for his post-mission check. Hopefully they’d get one of the nurses who’d seen Gibbs in a really foul mood. That way no one would be calling Gibbs and trying to hurry him along. After all, Tony had given him a lot to
think about, but that was his job as Gibbs’ second. When the boss stopped thinking, Tony had to step up to the plate and get him back on track, even if things turned really ugly.

They’d be okay.

Jo shifted unhappily.

Tony repeated the thought as he dropped down from the obstacle wall. They would be okay.
A potential suspect

“You’re looking a lot better,” Tony told Sheppard when he walked into the room. The lights were still low, but the blue was definitely fading.

“I would say I feel better, but I still kind of feel like crap,” John said. “So, I hear we’re having a meeting in here.”

“It involves you, so I thought it would be easier than having the same briefing twice.”

John gave him a long look. “Okay, what have you done with Carson?”

Tony turned around to look at Sheppard, and for a half second, that suspicious tone of voice cut through to his soul. He was half prepared to babble out explanations about why they’d chosen to let a Turi into him against his will. However, the second he looked at Sheppard’s expression, he recognized the teasing. “Carson is tired of you complaining that you’re bored.”

“If he’d let me out of here, I wouldn’t complain,” John pointed out.

Before they could say anything else, Rodney came into the room. “Okay, I’m here. Let’s hurry this up. I have things to do, people.”

John’s face lit up with such love that it made Tony feel a little mushy. Rodney, however, was looking everywhere except at John. Not good.

“Rodney, good of you to visit,” John said, his voice more cautious now.

Rodney finally looked at him. “It’s not like you wanted me in here.”

“When I had the virus in me, no. I was having some trouble not pinning you the nearest horizontal surface and reenacting a really cheesy porn I once watched.”

“Really?” Rodney straightened up and gave John a small, hopeful smile.

John rolled his eyes. “Yes, Rodney, and since I had a virus in me and people who actually care about the code of conduct were watching, I thought that was a bad idea.”

“But you wanted me?”

“For a genius, you’re an idiot, McKay,” Sheppard complained. He also held out his hand, and Rodney went right to his side.

“They say sometimes people come to realizations when they’re close to death. I thought maybe the realization hadn’t gone in my favor.”

“You’re an idiot, and when I’m not stuck in a hospital bed with an NCIS agent watching, I will prove the depths of your idiocy, McKay,” John promised.

Tony grinned. “Hey, don’t mind me.”

“Please,” Rodney said with a snort. “That’s not going to happen. Now is this a meeting or are you just wasting my time?”

“It’s a meeting,” Tony said. “Teyla, Samas, Lorne, and Weir should be here soon.”
Rodney visibly flinched at Weir’s name. John’s eyebrows went up, but when Rodney didn’t say anything, John looked at Tony. He had no idea what he was supposed to say. She’d authorized one mission to get iratus eggs, but when two of Lorne’s guys had gone down, she refused to allow Gibbs to go back, even after he explained that if there were fewer people he would be able to use Samas’ scent markers to hide them from the bugs. He’d even offered to go alone, which had given Tony gray hairs thinking about, but Samas knew his own limits and he knew if he could get the eggs without getting himself killed.

“She should have let Samas get the eggs,” Rodney finally said, and from his tone, he was not a Weir-fan right now.

“But… I thought she did.” John looked really confused now.

Tony sighed. “She authorized our team and Lorne’s to work together on the first attempt.”

Clearly Sheppard knew how badly things had gone because his gaze fell to the bed and he went utterly still for a moment before he looked back up. “I thought Ronon and Gibbs went back alone.”

Tony nodded, but Rodney jumped in before he could say anything. “She not only refused to let them go back, but she ordered them not to. Samas is a better judge of his own abilities than she is, but she insisted they couldn’t afford to lose more people, as if losing you would be better. Gibbs and Ronon had to go around the Gate room guards, and by that I mean stun them unconscious, and now Weir made Lorne write Gibbs up.”

John looked over to Tony, his eyes large. Tony nodded. “An article 15,” Tony said. It wasn’t a court martial, and it wasn’t like Gibbs was ever going to be considered for a promotion, but it still annoyed Tony.

“Oh,” Sheppard said. He looked a little like someone had hit him with bantos rods.

Teyla chose that moment to appear with Gibbs close behind. “John,” she said warmly. “Are you feeling better?”

“Peachy,” Sheppard said, “I’m bored and I keep having dreams about being a fish and swimming under the city, but other than that and a little bit of blue skin, I seem to be bouncing back.”

Tony very carefully kept his gaze exactly where it had been on the wall. If he looked around, he was afraid he would catch Rodney’s gaze, and the man would blurt everything out.

“A fish?” Teyla gave a light and natural laugh.

“Yeah. Weird, huh? And I kept having to swim away from these really big whales. I mean huge,” John said.

Tony was dying, but Jo just calmly pointed out that the whales really were huge. And they sucked in so much water when they fed that playing chicken with them was quite dangerous. Tony was then treated to a “best of” memory reel of all the times Jo had nearly gotten herself killed. When Gibbs rested his hand on the small of Tony’s back, Tony could feel the amusement there. Gibbs and Samas weren’t too worried. They believed the human ability to self-deceive would easily cover for this. The danger of Carson finding a physical sign of a symbiote was greater than Sheppard remembering on his own.

Tony smiled at the reassurance. They’d made their peace, and Samas had—like an overprotective father—accepted that Jo could choose her own partners, but there was still an unease between them when both Jo and Samas were inside. Jo hated it, and she continued to reach out to her parent, but
Samas was much more hesitant to reciprocate.

“Gunny, I am really sorry you caught flak over this.”

“I disobeyed orders. I expected as much.”

“I’m going to talk to Elizabeth about leaving the discipline of military personnel to military.”

“Yes, sir,” Gibbs said in a tone that made it pretty clear he didn’t think it was worth the trouble.

The door opened again, and Lorne opened the door, stepping aside to hold it open for Weir. “Sir, it’s good to see you up and about and less blue.”

“You’re just glad you’re not in danger of being given this command.”

“Hell yes, sir,” Lorne agreed.

“John,” Weir greeted him, and she sounded genuinely relieved. “You’re looking good.”

“I’ll be better when I know what sort of briefing Tony has. He scares me a little.”

Weir laughed. Tony noticed that others did not, and there was a spike of satisfaction out of Samas. He could smell political blood in the water, and Tony suspected that Weir was about to find out what happened when you pissed off Samas. He almost felt sorry for her.

“Agent DiNozzo?” Weir asked, inviting him to take the seat at the small table pulled up next to John’s bed. Teyla moved to sit next to John and then held out her hand for Rodney to sit next to her. Tony moved to the head of the table where he could run the laptop. He’d done a Powerpoint presentation on the evidence of a potential Ancient intruder. There was something surreal about that.

Weir and Lorne sat across from John, but Gibbs chose to lean against the wall on the far side of the room. John glanced over, but he didn’t comment.

“When Colonel Sheppard was infected with the virus, Gibbs pointed out that the odds of the only person who could have been infected getting stabbed with a random needle were astronomical.”

John looked over at Gibbs and frowned. “Accidents happen, Gunny.”

“That was a little too coincidental for an accident,” Gibbs said, and several people shifted uncomfortably. Tony hit the return button to bring up the next slide.

“I asked Abby and Miko to identify every signal and anomaly in the room at the time. They came back with almost five thousand potential signals.”

“This is Atlantis. Everything gives off signals,” Rodney said. He was clearly getting bored already.

“I had them eliminate every signal that appeared on a daily basis or nearly a daily basis and was left with under two thousand signals.”

Weir leaned forward and studied the screen.

Tony hit return to bring up the next slide. “I then looked at other statistically improbable accidents focusing on two. The first is the time Colonel Sheppard was attacked by the iratus bug and the shuttle just happened to get stuck in the gate, something which has never happened before or since.”

“Thanks for bringing up that good memory,” John complained softly, but Tony kept going.
“The other is the time that John and Rodney were exploring and John fell through the floor into the Ancient compactor which just happened to jam.”

“Fun times,” John said.

Tony went to the next slide. “I found there were three signals active at all three scenes. Miko identified one as a sort of background noise that seems to appear whenever Colonel Sheppard is trying to do something difficult. She believes it might be the city’s attempting to react to his stress.”

“She had to stop anthropomorphizing the city,” Rodney complained. “The city does not react to stress. It’s a machine. Maybe... maybe... John gives it commands when he’s panicking.”

“Hey, I don’t panic.” John frowned. “Much.”

Tony hit the next slide. “I then searched for those two signals. I found one of them appeared multiple times, all associated with Colonel Sheppard and some pretty long odds.” A number of slides appeared, each with two sides. The first showed a signal, the other showed a scene from a security camera. “The same signal appeared when Sheppard chose the address for the Athosian home world at random on our first day, in the back of the shuttle with the iratus bug attached, and when the Genii invaded the city. When I widened the search, I also found that signal at the same time lightening hit and was channeled into the shield to protect Atlantis from the storm, when Rodney found the personal shield, and when the Dagans found the ZPM formula in the philosophy library.”

“How many times does this signal appear on our sensors altogether?” Rodney asked.

“Eight,” Tony said.

“What’s missing?” Weir asked. Tony looked at her. “The signal was everywhere when Chaya came to Atlantis.”

Lorne sucked in a breath. “You’re saying that an Ancient tried to kill the colonel.”

“Well that’s faintly disturbing. Are you sure?” John asked.

“It gets stranger,” Tony warned.

“Oh great,” Rodney complained. “Like it’s not enough we have to worry about the Wraith and the chance that Earth might fall and all the stupid people they keep sending me to supervise, but now we have Ancients trying to kill us? I thought that was the Ori’s job.”

“This is where it gets complicated,” Tony said. “Clearly several of these are associated with the colonel having some pretty damn good luck.”

“The Genii invasion,” John said. “I’m a pilot. I’m trained for rescue, not for the sort of aggressive tactics I used that day. I kept expecting to fall on my face and get captured.”

Tony nodded. Looking at Sheppard’s record and then at what happened during the Genii invasion, the two didn’t match. Teyla normally kicked his ass in hand-to-hand, which didn’t mean that John couldn’t take a Genii in a fair fight, but he shouldn’t have been able to take several dozen of them in a fight. “That was the single strongest signal we got until this latest incident with the virus.”

“So you think we have two Ancients having a fight over whether to help or screw over the colonel?” Lorne asked. He looked over at Sheppard in horror, and Tony could practically read his mind. How do you keep someone safe when it was an invisible and highly advanced individual trying to kill them?
“Let’s look at the iratus bug incident,” Tony said.

“Or not,” John said, but everyone ignored him.

“It would appear that the drive pod refusing to retract was bad luck.”

“Yes, because it was,” Rodney snapped. “I nearly died. We nearly died. Explosive decompression is on the bottom of my list of ways to die.”

“But,” Tony interrupted, “if it hadn’t gotten stuck, Carson would have followed standard procedures to try and save the colonel. We now know that the colonel would have died for good if he hadn’t been stuck in that ship where stopping his heart was the only alternative.”

“So it was lucky?” Sheppard asked.

“It kept you alive,” Tony pointed out.

The sour expression on Rodney’s face made it clear that he wanted to argue. He just couldn’t figure out what to say.

“So, what’s your conclusion?” Weir asked.

Tony leaned back. “I follow the evidence, and right now we don’t have enough for any real conclusions. That might mean we’re in the sort of horrible spot that every investigator dreads—waiting for another crime so you can start trying out theories. However, there are two theories that seem to have some legs. First, this is good luck.”

Sheppard snorted.

Tony ignored him. “At the time, we didn’t know the shuttle getting stuck was actually good luck, so it could be that something is coming and the colonel needs the iratus antibodies for some reason.”

“That’s not a pleasant thought,” Lorne said uneasily.

“No, it’s not,” Tony agreed. “It implies that we need to find out everything we can about the iratus and the changes it made to Colonel Sheppard as fast as possible.”

“And the second alternative?” Weir asked.

Tony didn’t even like considering this option. “That someone was helping Sheppard. The Ancients can’t get involved directly, so one of them might have been playing with the odds a little, only now that Ancient got caught and someone else thought this was a way to remove the colonel because he or she thinks the colonel wouldn’t be here without the interference of the first Ancient.”

Rodney started breathing fast, and Teyla reached over and caught his hand in hers.

“Could this be Chaya doing this?” Sheppard asked.

“I thought about it,” Tony admitted, “but she had to use the Stargate to get back to her planet. I think her wings have been clipped. After looking at Dr. Jackson’s notes, I think this is more likely to be someone who can travel more freely than Chaya or Oma Desala. The signal appeared on the shuttle even though there was no sign of it using the Stargate.”

“Someone hasn’t gotten caught with their hand in the cookie jar yet,” Weir summarized.

Teyla said softly, “I dislike the idea that one of the Ancestors has to hide any assistance he or she
chooses to give John. To help others is a gift, not a crime.”

“But look at what happened with the Ori,” Weir said. “I don’t doubt that at some point they believed they were helping, but when you see people doing things you disapprove of, there is a natural tendency to try and stop them. The Ancients must understand that, particularly given their history with the Ori. By cutting off all contact with those who haven’t ascended or at the very least punishing and limiting those who break the rule, they prevent themselves from becoming Ori through their own good intentions.”

Gibbs looked at Tony. “Sometimes parents have to let go and trust their children to go places they might not approve.”

Teyla nodded. “That is true. My father likely would not have wished for me to leave my people, but had he the power to stop me, he would have stopped me from reaching my potential. Do you believe the Ancients are like parents, afraid to express their own preference for fear of interfering with our own?”

“It makes sense,” Lorne offered. “My mom was not thrilled with me going into the military.”

“Not a fan?” Sheppard asked.

Lorne shrugged. “Sir, she would have been happier if I had gone home and announced I had decided to be an ecoterrorist who supported himself through prostitution, and I was going to start by blowing up the wealthier parts of Los Angeles.”

Sheppard nodded. “My father wanted me to study finance and sit in a corner office and wear a $5000 suit. So if the Ancients are like parents, maybe it’s good that they stay out of it.”

“Only it seems as if at least one of them has chosen not to stay out of it,” Teyla said softly. And really, no one was disagreeing.
Tony leaned back in his chair and looked out over the ocean, ignoring the reports in his lap. Most of the petty crime going on in Atlantis traced back to Walter, so Tony didn't have much incentive to shut it down. Sheppard's hoarding was nothing compared to Walter's ability to tuck supplies away. Tony was starting to wonder if there were any supplies left in Colorado. Between Walter's surprising ability to acquire and hide supplies and the new greenhouses that were starting to produce potatoes, corn, wheat, and rice, the city was going to be self-supporting. At least as long as people didn't mind really boring food. Tony figured that certain spices, candies, and pastries were still going to be in demand, but at least the Daedalus wouldn't have to fill her hold with flour anymore.

Atlantis sent him a query. Tony reached over and touched the wall. "Yes?"

Colonel Sheppard was on the other end. "Got a minute to talk?"

"Yeah, I'm in my office."

"That's weird. So am I." Sheppard sounded confused.

"My inner office," Tony said. "I'll let you in." Before Tony could get up to open the door, Atlantis sent an image of a flock of birds taking off in flight and then the lock disengaged allowing Sheppard into his inner office.

Tony sent a disgusted thought at the city, and Atlantis sent a feeling of apology quickly followed by an image of Sheppard glowing like some medieval saint. "Traitor," Tony whispered. The city was definitely getting stronger, and so was her love for her golden boy.

"Colonel," Tony said as he stood at the door to his balcony.

"Now I see why you picked this office," Sheppard said as he stood and looked out at the ocean. "Nice place."

"I picked it because I have two front rooms and this back room is private enough that I can lay out evidence.

"Then shouldn't you keep the door locked?" He looked confused.

"It was locked. However, Atlantis likes you more than she likes me," Tony said. "She unlocked it, and if she unlocks it for anyone else, I'm going to find some really important crystals and pull them all out."

Tony got an image of himself glowing like a medieval saint.

"Yeah, yeah, you say that now," Tony said. He glanced over, and Sheppard was looking at him like he'd lost his mind. Tony leaned back against the railing. "Do you seriously never get any images from her?"

"It's a machine," Sheppard said slowly.

Tony huffed. "Tell her that. And before you think I've lost it, you should know that Miko gets the images too. Lorne doesn't get the images, but he can get a general sense of security. He said he was having trouble sleeping when you were in the infirmary with your case of bugitis."
"Let's not mention bugs. Ever."

"Yeah, I'm the same way with the plague. In fact, I cringe at any references to the Middle Ages. But my point is that the city knew something was wrong with you, and she kept pinging Major Lorne. Once you really try to connect with the city, she's pretty good at letting you know what she's thinking."

Sheppard shook his head. "I'm just as happy to not have a city in my head, and I suggest that you not mention the possibility that the city is sentient around... oh, pretty much anyone."

Tony laughed. "Yeah, Rodney has given me the lecture two or three or twelve times. 'There is no programming that even hints at an AI system, DiNozzo,’” Tony said, mimicking Rodney. "However, some of us are still getting messages, so we can believe in a sentient city or assume there's a really quirky and potentially senile person in stasis somewhere in the city sending us telepathic messages."

Sheppard made a face but he didn't say anything as he walked over to the wall of windows. He stood there for a moment and then all the glass started sliding to one side leaving the entire room open to the ocean. Tony had not known the room could do that. Sometimes Tony got really tired of being the city's unloved stepchild.

"Have you met the new Satedans?"

"Yeah. Haven't you?" Tony started a little mental dance of panic. Shit.

"Yeah. They seem..." Sheppard leaned against the rail and looked out at the ocean. "Intense," he finished.

"Ronon's kind of an intense guy too."

"And he's a crappy liar," Sheppard said without turning around. "So I figure if I ask you what's going on, maybe I'll get a straight answer." Sheppard turned around and looked at Tony. "Rodney has no idea what's going on, Teyla tells me that this is something to take up with Ronon, I wanted to ask Samas, only Samas is missing and I'm not putting the Gunny in the middle, so that leaves you."

"So you'll put me in the middle?" Tony demanded.

Sheppard grinned at him. "Yep. You aren't under me in the chain of command, so you can tell me to fuck off if I'm pushing too hard. The gunny can't. So, what's up with the Satedans?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Sheppard gave him a very odd look. "Do you have any idea how much it terrifies me when you ask that?"

"It should," Tony agreed. He and Jo both thought that John should know he had hosted a Turi in his head; however, they wouldn't go against Gibbs and Samas on this. That said, the colonel deserved to know that something fairly important was going on. Jonas and Rodney had nearly finished the Scholar’s path, and Radek had already come to Tony and announced that he planned to humiliate Rodney by beating every one of his traps in record time.

"Other colonels get nice simple commands," Sheppard said sadly. "They have people who report to them who actually give them reports as opposed to... you know..."

"People who try to protect them?” Tony asked.
"By not telling me things. That's the part that's a little outside regulation. Is this something that Elizabeth knows?"

"Um..." Tony cleared his throat.

Sheppard sighed. "Great. Okay, if Elizabeth doesn't know, I don't want to know. Just... does Teyla know?"

"Yep," Tony agreed. The colonel looked visibly relieved.

"Okay then. I’ll leave this alone, but I expect you to keep an eye on the Satedans and tell me if I need to know something. Now that that’s settled, what is going on between Ronon and Gibbs? I have a few ideas, but I'm pretty sure you aren't that flexible in your relationship."

"I'm not," Tony quickly agreed. That was actually an unsettling thought.

"Great, that takes one really disturbing option off the table, and it leaves about a half dozen far more disturbing options on it." Sheppard made a face. Maybe he was not as ignorant as Tony had assumed.

Tony understood this was hard on Sheppard. Everyone asked him to lie to his own superiors--Elizabeth kept everyone back home in the dark about Teyla's and Samas' leadership positions and O'Neill asked him to lie about their preparations for Earth's potential defeat. The man was going to collapse under the weight of all the lies and half-truths. "How much do you want to know?"

"If it puts the security of this city in danger, I need to know about it." Sheppard braced himself as though expecting to get hit.

Tony asked the city to close the windows again. "Let's go sit down." He said as he headed for his evidence table. His only current case was the Ancient who was targeting Sheppard, and he couldn't exactly take that to court, so it didn't matter if the potential victim saw the evidence.

"This is not making me feel better," Sheppard warned, but he followed.

"Gibbs and Samas are worried that if we have several thousand military assets coming through the gate, we could have a major problem with training."

"Because SGC people have certain instincts that don't work well here." Sheppard agreed. "Trust me, I understand his concern."

Tony nodded. "They go for firearms and they take body shots. When attacked from the air, they don't wait until the dart is too close to redirect the culling beam."

"Because they're trained that way. Gibbs and I have discussed exactly why we need to retrain Marines before we put them back out into the field where they might run into Wraith."

"He wants to get more local warriors into Atlantis' army. A lot more."

"Which is why Teyla is putting more Athosians on our Gate teams," Sheppard said in a distracted voice. "And by a lot more, you mean..."

Tony shrugged. "A lot. Ronon's first plan was to find this guy who had run away from the fight on Sateda and kill him. Gibbs talked him into tracking this guy's group down and confronting them. Ronon called them all cowards and told them they should have either died fighting the Wraith or, like him, fought until they were taken. He told them that if they wanted to redeem themselves, they could
follow him and the only thing he'd promise them was a chance to die fighting the Wraith, and a chance to take out a lot of Wraith before that happened. And he might have promised running water."

Sheppard leaned back in his chair. "Well shit. That means we have close to thirty suicidal Satedans."

"No, that means we have thirty taskmasters who can train Atlantis marines to have a different set of instincts. Gibbs is hoping that more Satedans might show up if they know there's a place where they can get back some part of what they had. They were an advanced society, so they're probably not thrilled with living in some shack with no electricity."

"And this is his grand plan to reform our armed forces?"

Tony leaned forward. "How much have we adapted because of Teyla and Ronon? How many of the Marines try and copy their fighting styles?"

Sheppard frowned. "A lot of them. More as time goes on."

"Yeah," Tony agreed, "because their fighting style is better. It's dirtier and it requires a lot of getting your ass kicked before learning to kick ass, but Marines generally don't mind suffering a little to get better at their jobs."

"Not usually," Sheppard said. "And if we have thirty or sixty Satedans and our Marines are trained to take head shots, to wait for a dart to be overhead before diving out of the way, and to resort to bladed weapons and go for massive damage rather than using a sidearm when the P90 runs out of ammo, that's going to change the odds. Marines carrying swords."

Sheppard ran his hand over his face. "Yeah, that's going to be different. I'm letting Walter figure out how to request those supplies."

"Marines adapt to the fighting environment, and if all you have is a sidearm, six or eight bullets won't even slow a Wraith down. Cut off his arm, and you've at least annoyed him." Tony figured that Gibbs would have discussed this much with Sheppard if he'd asked. Considering the number of Marines who died because they fell back on sidearms when they ran out of ammo for their main weapon, swords actually made sense. Besides, swords didn't require bullets, and Tony knew they were all concerned about the ammunition situation if Earth fell. Even General O'Neill had managed to smuggle them a shipment of zats through a dematerializer, so the ammo issue was definitely front and center in a lot of people's minds.

"So, Gibbs and Ronon are conspiring to make Atlantis' armed forces more effective?"

Tony wished that was all it was. It also had a lot to do with the Satedans proving they were good enough to carry Turi into battle. The Satedans had chosen quarters close to the warriors' path to the joining waters, and they loved to hear Samas tell stories of Earth and the conflicts with the goa'uld. They felt like the igigi defeat at the hands of the goa'uld mirrored their own defeat, and they saw the rise of the Turi as some sort of promise that their own people could do the same.

"That's part of it," Tony said.

"That's the part you're willing to tell me," Sheppard said.

"I'll tell you everything if you really want to know, but trust me--you don't."

"But Teyla knows?"

"Yep."
"And she doesn't think there's any risk to the city?"

"Nope."

Sheppard shrugged. "Good enough for me. Now, next item on the agenda--why the hell are you leaving my team?"

Tony laughed. Just when he thought he understood Sheppard, the man surprised him. "I was only on it because Gibbs didn't trust Ronon. I think he got over his distrust."

"And I got used to having you around. You're good on the team, Tony."

Tony grinned. "You know, I never thought I would be. I was prepared to suffer through a few trading missions to watch Gibbs' six, but I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it."

"So stay with the team."

Tony shook his head. "Colonel, I actually do have another job."

Sheppard leaned forward. "So does Rodney, so do I. We make it work."

"Yeah, you do," Tony agreed, "but we're getting more and more locals in the city, and that means I have to be on top of things. I have to know who's coming and who's going and who's sleeping with whose sister and which breakups are likely to end in a fistfight in the gate room. Civilians aren't like military--you can't order them to play nice."

"I thought Teyla was handling the locals."

"She is," Tony agreed, "but she doesn't know our laws, and our people expect that local people will respect at least the laws that make sense. Every time a Genii makes some inappropriate comment to a woman scientist, I have to handle it."

Sheppard frowned. "Not Teyla?"

"Do you handle every bit of discipline in the military ranks?" Tony asked. From the face Sheppard made, he understood Tony's point. "She's the big guns. I'm the one who handles all the little stuff. That means I need to have time to deal with the little stuff," Tony explained. He knew one way to make Sheppard understand. He stood and touched the wall, asking Atlantis to turn on the wall’s data display function. "Give me a name or a position of someone in this city."

"Um… Hoff electricians."

Tony sent that thought to Atlantis and a list of names appeared. Tony touched one—Arak He Ulnick—and a long list of names appeared behind it. “This is every person Arak has some connection to,” Tony explained. “This is the woman he lives with, his brother, one of the young people that he took in from one of the culled worlds. This is a coworker he had a fight with.” Tony touched the name, and a report from the day appeared below it. “This is one of our scientists he had a conflict with.” Tony pointed to Kavanagh’s name. Again, when Tony touched it, an incident report appeared.

“I never turn in these reports unless something is serious enough to deserve punishment. Most of the time, the people involved simply need to let some steam off, and I warn them that if they don’t drop the conflict, I’ll report it, and someone could end up facing an exile. Other times, I have to explain laws. You do not want to explain sexual harassment laws to Genii. It’s not fun, but I found that with a large bottle of vodka, you can get them to wrap their heads around it.”
Sheppard went to the wall and touched another name. A different list of names appeared. “How many of these reports do you have?”

“Thousands,” Tony said. “If something happens to me, whoever takes over needs to know where to start. This is what it means to be a cop, to do community policing, although I will admit that when I was in Peoria, I kept my notes in a notebook and not in a ten thousand year old computer database.”

“So, all those times I’ve seen you playing with the kids or hanging out with the women on market day…”?

“That’s the job, Colonel. I need people to talk to me. If anything, we need another police officer out here.” Tony touched the wall. “Current population by home planet,” Tony requested. The numbers flashed on the display.

Earth 439
Hoff 164
Genii 51
Vyus 32
Sateda 26
Athsia 17
Madrona 16
Dagan 16
Langara 14
Boius 7
Shen 6
Hoi 6
Vis Uban 4
Manara 2
Levannan 2
Bedrosia 1

Sheppard whistled. “O’Neill is keeping us busier than I thought.”

“They aren’t all from the Milky Way. We’ve had a more open policy with Wraith refugees since you returned. We’re looking at over seven hundred people, colonel. If we keep growing, we’re going to need a second officer.”

“Someone like your partner from NCIS?”

“McGee?” Tony asked in shock. His brain hadn’t even gone there. “McGee is used to being the smartest person in the room and solving crimes using his computer. I have a lack of embezzlement, identity theft, and murder for hire in the city. No, I need someone who can walk around and talk to people, who can brush the little stuff under the rug with an explanation of Earth rules. I need someone people will feel safe talking to.”

Sheppard stared at the wall as if it had never occurred to him that Atlantis wasn’t his nice small little base anymore. Two cafes had opened on the west docks and they had a regular market day each tenday. As far as Tony was concerned, they had left military base behind a while back and were far more of a city than anything else.

“Do you have someone in mind?”

“Right now? No,” Tony said. “However, we’ve sent some nice guys home with disabilities that got them a discharge. You weren’t here when Thompson lost his left leg when a building collapsed on
him during a Wraith attack, and then there was Carol Bingham who lost most of her hearing during an accident."

“They wouldn’t quality for NCIS,” Sheppard said.

“No, they wouldn’t,” Tony agreed, “but Atlantis is a unique situation. I never have to run anyone down. If I get into a physical confrontation, I have two hundred of the best trained soldiers from earth on call at any given time. I have a computer system that can identify someone if I have the corridor and time stamp. I’m looking for someone to play with kids and gather intel while explaining a few rules to people. I don’t need Dirty Harry.”

Sheppard looked at the list, his finger running down the names of planets. Quite a few were from the Milky Way, and Tony figured he didn’t need to add that people under stress sometimes reacted strangely, and most of their refugees were under a lot of stress. Tony gave Heightmeyer a lot of business. “They all come from worlds with different laws,” Sheppard said.

“Yep,” Tony agreed. “I have a handbook if you want, a shorthand to Earth beliefs and which laws will get you reported to officers.”

Sheppard rubbed his hand over his face. “We are so far outside of official regulations that I can’t even see the line we crossed anymore. I could have lived without knowing any of this.”

“Then you might want to think before you ask anyone more questions. Atlantis is becoming a city, and we both know that certain people on Earth would not like that.”

“No, they wouldn’t.” Sheppard looked at the wall again and laughed. “If they tried to order the city back to Earth, can you even imagine what they would do with a dozen Satedans?”

“I’m picturing Genii having a blast with Earth politics.”

Sheppard grimaced. “Oh, that’s not even funny.”

“Nope.” Tony agreed, “and every time a new person shows up, I need to make sure that they know what they can and cannot do.”

“This from a man who I had to threaten to get him to stop playing sex games in public spaces,” Sheppard pointed out.

Tony grinned. “We still do, but we keep it out of the mess hall and kitchens.”

“Good. That was unsanitary and I really do not ever want to hear Samas describe sex again. I was considering asexuality there for a while.”

Tony shrugged. “The Marines needed to figure out that they couldn’t pull their homophobic shit on Atlantis. That did flush the assholes out of hiding.”

“And I’m sure Gibbs had a word or two with them once he had painted a target on their backs.”

“Maybe,” Tony agreed. “But some laws need to be… discouraged. But this is why I need to leave the team. I have work. I may have more work shortly. Cowen has recalled Ladon Radim as the head of Atlantis research for the Genii. That could mean that he is ready to take whatever intelligence Ladon has collected and do something or it could mean that Ladon isn’t doing enough and Cowen is going to put in someone who is more willing to steal technology. I can’t afford to publish times when I will be out of the city.”
“Crap,” Sheppard said softly. “Did he recall Dahlia?”

“No, but women don’t get much respect from Genii officers, so it could be that he hasn’t even given her another thought.”

“But the bottom line is that you need to be here,” Sheppard finished.

“Yeah, I do. And like I said, if we have good people getting sent home, maybe we can start discussing another person to help out around here.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Sheppard agreed. He turned and looked right at Tony. “Even if you aren’t on the team anymore, you know you’re still a teammate, right?”

Tony smiled. “The next time you get yourself kidnapped, I’ll be the first to come running to your rescue.” Sheppard laughed, but Tony was pretty sure that with the colonel’s luck, it was a matter of ‘when’ rather than ‘if.’
Ladon Radim

Ladon stood outside the drinking establishment in the deep shadows. Even though he was in disguise, he kept to the darkest corners. The Lanteans were observant and he couldn't afford to be seen.

"I dislike this plan," Hilit complained softly.

"I am not fond of it myself, but we have our orders." Ladon watched Lindsey walk beside Lorne. Evan Lorne was a good man, and Ladon hated that the intrigues of Genii leaders were putting him in the middle; however, with Kolya and Cowen scheming, none of them were safe. Ladon was just happy that Dahlia was safely on Atlantis, and he could only hope that the Atlantean sense of justice protected her from bearing the brunt of Ladon’s treachery if Sheppard found out about any of this.

Despite all his misgiving, the fact remained that Lorne was a soldier of the Lanteans, and he and his men were Genii. They accepted danger as part of their duties to their peoples. If Lorne died, it would be accepted. Hopefully. Ladon truly did not want Colonel Sheppard or Samas to seek revenge. Abby was another issue. If Lorne had so much as a hair out of place, that woman would eviscerate him and smile while doing it. She would have made a beautiful Genii, a wife of some great man who removed all obstacles in his path to power, and did so in ways that left everyone believing her to be the sweet and loving one.

He was not fooled. Abby would be like a bear if her mate were touched, and Ladon regretted that this action would destroy his friendship with her. He valued her kindness, her willingness to teach others skills they lacked, and her creativity in delivering a quick and unpleasant retribution to anyone who broke her rules.

He also regretted that he was losing his relationship with Elizabeth. No doubt Cowen and Kolya would both order him to use his relationship with the Lantean leader to gain some advantage, but the woman had the heart of a warrior. She would never allow a man who shared her bed to gain even one word of intelligence. In another universe, Ladon could see himself turning his back on the Genii and choosing to have a family with Elizabeth. They would have beautiful children together, but Cowen and Kolya had made that impossible.

No, Ladon had to consider the potential deaths of his former friends if he wished to protect his people. However, if Lindsey died, Ladon would never earn the forgiveness of those he called friends on Atlantis. They were unyielding in their defense of the scientists.

Curse Cowen and his damn dreams of an empire, and doubly curse Kolya and his plots. Ladon never wanted power, but at this point he feared that if he refused to get involved, he would condemn the Genii people to the machinations of those too short-sighted to see that the real power lay in the city of the Ancients.

"Make sure the scientist does not get caught in the crossfire," Ladon said. He knew her. He had been drunk with her after Atlantis defeated the first Wraith attack. They had stood shoulder to shoulder to object to the heavy hand of first Everett and then Ellis. They had celebrated the return of Colonel Sheppard, and Ladon felt the loss at having been recalled so quickly following that victory.

And when Atlantis’ victories had become his own, Ladon knew he had wandered too far from his own people and their agenda. Right now, he considered that a blessing because his own people had lost their way.
Hilit leaned closer. “I can have my wife Deera get her away from the others.”

“Will she trust you?”

Hilit grimaced. “Dr. Lindsey has helped our people tremendously. She knows that we respect her for that. This whole situation…” Hilit looked around as if checking for one of Cowen’s spies.

Ladon didn’t bother telling him that Kolya’s spies were more dangerous. If Kolya heard even part of this story, he would recognize this plan and he would gut all of them. Ladon wished he had the wisdom of Samas—hell he could use the additional strength and longevity, too, if he planned to make any of this work. He envied Gibbs for having earned the partnership of such a powerful ally.

“We do this and we try and minimize the harm to the Lanteans or we refuse to and Cowen will repeat this maneuver somewhere else. If you like Dr. Lindsey and Major Lorne, then it is best to do this thing here.” Ladon tried to keep his voice firm.

With an unhappy grimace that reminded Ladon of Rodney, Hilit hurried away toward his house. No one said anything to Ladon and he slowly sat before busying his hands with braiding a rope. It gave him good reason to watch the house. Lorne was laughing at something Stevens said to him. Lindsey looked back at them both with a fond expression before Hilit waved at her, inviting her into his home.

The whole team headed into the building.

After waiting a minute or two, Ladon reached into his pocket and triggered his radio. “Stage one complete—target acquired. Send the team.”

Ladon continued to watch as two Genii disguised as locals led an ox pulling a cart into the street. Inside were three enemies of the Genii who were about to be executed and left to burn while wearing the dog tags of Major Lorne and his men. The Lanteans would be distracted. Ladon grimaced. Sheppard would be closer to distraught. Something in Colonel Sheppard yearned to protect his people. Ladon understood why so many believed he was an Ancestor returned to guide them. He had the passion of a father for every soul who lived in the city, and it made Ladon’s heart ache that he was no longer one of those who could stand within Sheppard’s good will.

He must make a sacrifice for his people.

He must give up his right to stand in the city of the Ancestors, and he must give up his science. He wondered if McKay would be strong enough to make the same decision if he were faced with the same political realities Ladon was.

The woman server from the bar came out with another drink. Ladon took the radio out of his pocket and opened the back. A quick twist broke the circuit and guaranteed privacy. “You are friends with the Lanteans, right?” he asked.

She gave him a panicked look.

“You’ve seen the posters?” he asked. Cowen had put out posters on all the ATA-positive Lanteans. He believed that Ladon could create his own gene therapy that would allow the Genii people to use the equipment of the ancestors. It was arrogance and stupidity that led Cowen believe such, and Ladon had encouraged the man’s stupidity for his own reasons.

The serving girl nodded.

“Tomorrow when they come, show them,” he said quietly, “but do not get caught. If you tell the
“Others I told you this, I will call you a liar.”

“But…” her voice trailed off.

Ladon looked at the building and the ox cart with the condemned men sedated and hidden under a tarp. The sun was setting and second crew was moving in with equipment to mimic the sound of Wraith darts. Ladon himself had hidden Wraith stunners in Hilit’s house, and as soon as he had evidence that Lindsey was safely out of the way, he would lead his people to capture the Lanteans who he called friends.

“They deserve better than this,” Ladon said softly. The girl looked ready to cry. Ladon took the drink from her hand and gestured her to leave. He hated this plan. He hated the stupidity of Cowen to believe any of this would work. He loathed the deviousness of Kolya, whose plan likely would work. More than anything, he did not want either of these men leading his people into ruin. For the first time in generations, humans had a chance to fight back against the Wraith, but that required them to set aside their own petty agendas. Cowen and Kolya were not able to do that.

The candle moved in Hilit’s window, and Ladon quickly righted his radio and stood. His unit quickly shifted into position as they had practice. Ladon nodded toward his second and then strode toward the building. He had no time for doubts. He must be as sure as Samas.

He lifted the bolt and walked into Hilit’s house unbidden. When he opened the first cupboard, the Wraith stunners waited for him. The relief that washed through him was testament to the strength of Ladon’s fears. Hilit could have betrayed him.

Keeping the Wraith stunner hidden behind the wall, Ladon stood at the doorway. “Major Lorne, how nice to see you.” Ladon smiled as the Lanteans all turned toward him.

“Ladon!” Lorne’s welcoming smile nearly broke Ladon’s resolve. “I thought your government recalled you to your homeworld.”

“They did. Chief Cowen sent me here to contact you.”

“Oh?” Lorne’s voice was a little sharper now, but he didn’t have time to say anything else because someone screamed, and then the sound of Wraith darts filled the air.

All the Lanteans moved toward the windows, but outside they would only see panicked people screaming in fear. Very few of the people on this planet understood what was to happen tonight. Ladon could see his own people moving into position, and he threw himself down toward the ground. No doubt the Lanteans believed he took cover from the Wraith, but instead he brought his Wraith stunner out and started firing.

Lorne had been on the radio with Lindsey, ordering her to get to the gate and escape, and Ladon hit the major in the back. He crumpled like a broken doll. Ladon’s men took the second man, and only one of the Lanteans made it to any cover.

“Ladon! What are you doing?”

Ladon recognized Lieutenant Stevens’ voice.

“I have orders to leave behind a burning building with three bodies. I would rather not leave your bodies,” Ladon said. “Surrender and I promise I will take you into custody unharmed. Continue to slow my mission and I will set fire to this house and kill you as you try to run out. Your two friends will be left to die in the fire.”
“Why?”

Ladon closed his eyes. Anyone as naïve as Stevens should not be allowed out into the universe where nothing was fair. So many of the Earth-born Lanteans acted much younger than their chronological age. It made Ladon wonder about their mysterious homeworld.

“I have orders. I can only stay here another minute, and I give you my word that I will not harm you.”

“But Cowen could order us killed,” Stevens shouted back. Perhaps he was not as naïve as he first appeared.

“I will speak for you. My word, Lieutenant. You have my word on that. But if you do not surrender, I cannot save any of you.”

Ladon did not expect Stevens to give up, but he wasn’t particularly surprised when the man shifted and happened to expose part of his back. One of Ladon’s men took the shot, and Stevens cried out before his body thumped against the floor. The subconscious often wanted to live, even when the person wished to uphold his values.

“Move them,” Ladon ordered as he stood up. They had very little time to work.

Team two pulled the Lanteans out and started stripping off a view choice pieces of gear. Team three dragged in the three prisoners. All had radiation poisoning—proof that Cowen had insisted on continuing research on the homeworld despite Atlantis’ willingness to share resources. However these three were no scientists. They were condemned prisoners who’d been forced to work in the facility. Two of them looked near enough to death to welcome it. One screamed behind the gag, defiant even to the end. Ladon took Major Lorne’s dog tags and walked over to Stalt and dropped them over the Genii soldier’s head. “I regret that Kolya’s treason has led to this end. Know that your death serves the Genii people well,” Ladon offered his former comrade in arms. They had invaded Atlantis together at one point, but now history had taken them in different directions.

Stalt straightened up, his jaw bulging as he bit into the gag. Ladon took a step back, and Stalt remained in position, staring straight ahead. When Ladon brought his hand down, the unit opened fire on the three prisoners. All fell to the floor stunned.

Ladon turned his back on the sorry mess. “You have sixty seconds to make it look like they’re the Lanteans,” he ordered. He strode outside, and team four was already soaking the building in alcohol. By the time Lindsey went to the Gate, got help and returned, Colonel Sheppard would find proof that Lorne’s team was dead.

Cowen was right about one thing—this would put the Lanteans on the defensive and keep them from putting the pieces to this puzzle together. However, he was wrong about another. Ladon had worked with the Lanteans, drunk with them, mourned with them, and celebrated with them, so he knew the Cowen’s plans would not result in the Genii taking the Puddlejumpers as step one of an invasion of Atlantis. Ladon’s only hope was that he could keep this from becoming step one in a war between the Earthers and the Genii.
“John, John, John, John, John!” Abby called as she ran up the stairs to Weir’s office. She gripped her results tightly and held them up like a sword.

“Abby,” John said. He stepped out of Dr. Weir’s office on a path to intercept her.

“It’s not them.” She shoved her results at his chest. John took them without even glancing at them.

“What’s not who?”

“The bodies. It’s not Lorne. It’s not his team. The DNA didn’t match.” Abby felt like she was going to vibrate to pieces. This meant that Lorne was alive, but it meant that someone had them. Someone wanted them to believe Lorne and his people were dead. That was enormously bad because they weren’t in some city where she could go through surveillance footage to find a clue.

“What?” John caught her by the shoulders.

“Someone put their dog tags on other people.”

John took a step back and looked down at the results she’d shoved into his hand. “It’s not Lorne?” he asked, his voice tense with hope.

“No.” Abby bounced on her toes. It couldn’t be Lorne because she refused to lose him. She finally found a man that needed her and liked her and that had the sort of soul Gibbs and Tony did where any pain he carried he turned into a need to protect others. He was too good a man to disappear, and she wasn’t going to let him just vanish. He was going to come home to her and be safe.

Elizabeth stepped to John’s side. “This has to be related to the posters.”

John nodded.

“What posters?” Abby looked from one to the other. Both of them seemed to avoid her gaze, or try to at least.

John cracked first. “Someone has put out wanted posters for all our ATA positive gate team members.”

“What? Why? That doesn’t make any sense.” Abby narrowed her eyes. “Whoever has Lorne… Tony and Gibbs are going to find them and then I’m going to give them a piece of my mind.” And by mind, Abby kind of meant her sidearm. She wouldn’t kill them, but she knew lots of places to shoot someone that wouldn’t lead to death. It would just hurt. A lot. “I want to help collect evidence,” Abby said. “And I know I’m not normally a go-into-the-field kind of girl, but there’s a really big crime scene and you only have Gibbs and Tony, and normally they would pull in a second team to help with this.”

“Wait, we haven’t authorized an investigation on the planet,” Dr. Weir said.

“I think we’re going to have to,” John said.

“I agree, but we have a number of concerns right now. We can’t afford to have Dr. Scuito in the field when we know someone is targeting us. John, think of what Lorne would say if you put her in danger.”
John grimaced.

“Oh no,” Abby said. She poked her finger at him. “I’m going.”

“Elizabeth is right. We’ll let Gibbs and Tony take a team, but you’ll have to analyze evidence from here.”

“Lorne is out there,” Abby said, frustration making her voice crack in ways she hated. She didn’t want to sound like she was on the verge of crying—not when she had to help. She had to do something.

“I’d like Gibbs working on the situation with… what we were discussing,” Elizabeth commented. Abby narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t think you want Gibbs anywhere near politics,” John said. “Rodney and I can go talk to Cowen.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Cowen has more respect for Gibbs.”

“And if we needed Cowen’s help, I’d send Gibbs, but Rodney and I can deliver a message as well as anyone.”

Abby frowned. Usually John was the first to step back and let Elizabeth and Teyla run things. Mostly they told him what needed to get done, and he did it, but ever since he’d been buggy, he was definitely less with the listening. Everyone knew that Elizabeth had backed the whole retrovirus plan against everyone else’s objections, but Abby didn’t have time for them to be angry with each other. Lorne was out there.

“We need to focus on Lorne,” Abby said. She was really close to crying now.

John smiled at her. “We will. Lorne and his team are priority number one. Have you told Tony and Gibbs about this yet?”

Abby nodded. “I called them on the radio. They were going to grab some gear for collecting evidence, and I said I was going to come tell you.”

“I’m going to see if Ronon and Teyla can go with them. I bet some of the other teams will pitch in too. You watch. We’re going to let Lorne back,” John promised.

“We’ll do our best,” Elizabeth added her own promise. “John, once you get this mission settled, come talk to me before you head out to see Chief Cowen.”

“I’ll be back,” he promised. He touched his earpiece. “Teyla, Ronon, we have evidence that Lorne and his team aren’t dead. Tony and Gibbs are getting together a team to go back to the planet. Are you interested?”

John listened for a couple of seconds, and Abby shifted her weight from foot to foot. She’d almost forgotten how bad it felt when you were waiting for someone. Every time that her boys got kidnapped or injured, she’d be stuck waiting and feeling helpless. And that was still better than how it felt when you knew someone was dead like with Kate. She hated it. When they’d brought the burned bodies back, her whole world had stopped, it was like with Kate only worse.

She had made herself test the DNA, even when Rodney yelled at her and told her to take the day off in his Rodneyish attempt to make her feel better. But now, knowing that he was out there and maybe hurt and definitely captured, it made her want to hurt someone, and she liked to think of herself as a
non-violent person, only then she got scared and angry and wanted her people safe and she realized that she was totally capable of doing all kinds of violence.

Sheppard answered something one of his team said on the radio with a, “Ask Gibbs for his permission, but as long as they know to not actually break anyone, I’m fine with it.”

He paused again, and then finished with, “Okay, meet in the gate room in fifteen minutes.” He turned to her. “They’re coming, and Ronon is bringing some of the Satedans. You know how scary they are.”

Abby nodded. They were scary. If a bunch of them came asking her questions, she would tell them everything.

“We’re going to get Lorne and his guys back. I promise,” John said. He pulled her into a hug, but he wasn’t the right person. Lorne was the person she wanted to get a hug from. It felt good anyway, though, so she hugged him back as hard as she could.


“I will,” John promised again.

Lorne groaned as he started to drift toward consciousness. His whole body had the sort of tingles and barbs that he associated with a Wraith stunner. Those things were a lot less merciful than Goa’uld zats. “Lindsey?” he called. He hated the idea that he’d allowed his scientist to get captured, particularly on a planet where they should have been safe.

After rolling to his side, Lorne started taking stock of their situation. He had Stevens and Sergeant Coughlin with him—both good men. Lindsey was nowhere to be seen, so either she’d made it to the Gate like he’d ordered her to, or their captors had her somewhere else.

In the village, it had sounded like a Wraith attack, but they definitely weren’t on a hive ship. Working at the SGC had knocked a little of the religion out of Lorne, but right now he started some serious praying. They were in a dungeon—primitive heavy iron bars and locks were more effective than Wraith cells that depended on intimidation as much as mechanics.

“How’s Coughlin?” Lorne called. He reached out and poked the man. As he did, he saw his own wrist. Ligature marks. That implied he’d been restrained, and that only would have been necessary if they’d been transported, either farther away from the Gate or to another world altogether. Lorne suspected the second. “Coughlin,” he called again, and he poked the man. Sergeant Coughlin started to groan and twitch. Stevens wasn’t even to the twitching stage yet, so it would be a while before he woke up.

“Bollocks. SG luck strikes again,” Coughlin said wearily. It was a familiar complaint, even if Lorne wasn’t used to hearing it in a British accent.

“New galaxy, same shit,” Lorne agreed. Coughlin grunted and started to move his arms and legs, just small little movements. “Anything damaged?” Lorne asked. If they needed medical help they were screwed. Not only were their weapons gone, but their tac vests, packs, and even dog tags were all missing. Lorne did not want to consider what that meant. Maybe their captors didn’t understand that the tags were used to identify the dead.

And maybe they did and they wanted to make it hard for anyone to identify their bodies. Lorne vowed to keep that thought to himself. Shit. If they didn’t report in on time, Abby was going to
worry herself sick. In all the years Lorne had been at the SGC, he’d never had someone at home waiting. He’d seen what that did to the families—the wives and the kids—and he’d sworn to keep his dick in his pants and never hurt someone like that. And then he’d met Abby.

“I’m fine, sir. The others?” Coughlin asked.

“We only have Stevens. Any word on Lindsey?”

Coughlin grunted. “You took the first shot. You were on the radio with her, telling her to run for the Gate if she didn’t have darts over her. I think she got away.”

Lorne closed his eyes and sent up a prayer of thanks. Hopefully he hadn’t gotten his scientist killed.

“It was Ladon, sir,” Coughlin said.

“What?” Lorne remembered seeing the Genii man at the house, but that’s the last thing he remembered.

Coughlin rolled to one side and got an arm under him. “Ladon opened fire on you, and then there were Genii in the room, firing.”

“Well crap,” Lorne said wearily. If the Genii were willing to attack them, then there was more at risk than a single Gate team. Chief Cowen had wanted Atlantis from day one. The very first report Lorne had read after hearing he was getting this transfer was then-Major Sheppard’s description of the Genii invasion. They were fanatics. Lorne had altered that opinion after coming to Atlantis and meeting Ladon and Dahlia and the others. Now he was quickly revising his assessment right back to where they’d started—they were fanatical fascists.

“Yes, sir,” Coughlin agreed. “Colonel Sheppard will get us out.”

Lorne looked around at the bars. He doubted it. Colonel Sheppard had very little intelligence on where they were. Most of the time, SG teams either rescued themselves or joined the lists of the permanent MIAs. The universe was too large to conduct a search. He felt another stab of regret for leaving Abby to suffer through this. At least she understood his job—she wasn’t some girlfriend who got a visit from someone in uniform who offered platitudes and regrets without ever giving one single detail. Lorne knew that happened more often than not with SGC deaths. You couldn’t tell their families that they had died protecting Earth from an alien invasion. Lorne wondered if would be easier or harder on Abby because she knew the truth.

“I’m sure Sheppard will try, but I’d rather we rescued ourselves, Sergeant.”

Coughlin grinned. “Sounds like a plan, sir. Besides, if Sheppard rescues us, you know he’ll bring McKay and then we’ll never hear the end of it.”

Lorne snorted, and Coughlin laughed.

Back at the SGC, people would have said the same thing about McKay, but they wouldn’t have laughed afterward. Lorne was shocked that when Sheppard put his own team together, he’d chosen McKay again. Sheppard was just lucky he hadn’t latched onto one of the women scientists or he’d spend his career ducking the sort of accusations O’Neill always had trailing after him. Not that people couldn’t gossip anyway. Lorne sometimes heard the same sort of crap about them that he heard about O’Neill and Jackson. People invented reasons to gossip.

Stevens grunted.
“Sleeping beauty awakes,” Coughlin said. He reached out and gave Stevens a shove with his boot. “If we’re really lucky, Samas will find us. That is one alien that carries a grudge when someone fucks with his people.”

“I vote for getting out of here on our own and then rubbing it in all their faces. What resources to you have?”

Coughlin started checking his pockets. Lorne hoped the man had something because his own pockets were so empty they didn’t even have lint.

“No go, sir,” Coughlin said.

“Ladon!” Stevens gasped as he finally woke up. Lorne and Coughlin exchanged an amused look.

“That’d be our favorite backstabbing Genii,” Coughlin agreed.

Stevens moaned and brought his hands up to cover his eyes. “Crap. He said he’d been ordered to make it look like we were dead.”

Lorne’s stomach turned to lead. Shit. The Genii made it look like they were dead? So no one would even come looking. Abby would start planning his memorial service, and his mother would get a visit from some officer offering platitudes. If he was lucky, she wouldn’t dump manure on his as he stood on her steps in his dress blues. Lorne gritted his teeth as he imaged her crying in private, cursing the military and him for choosing this way of life.

“Why?” Coughlin asked.

Stevens shrugged. “He just kept saying he had orders. He said that he was trying to save us, but if I kept trying to hold them off it would take too long and he would actually kill us.”

“Did you surrender?” Lorne asked, careful to keep his voice neutral.

Stevens sat up and twisted around to look at Lorne. He also turned green and looked ready to vomit after the fast move. “Crap,” he muttered as he closed his eyes tightly. “Sir, I don’t turn my weapon over to anyone. However, apparently I do get shot in the ass.”

Coughlin snorted. “You should come train with the Marines more often. That’s the gunny’s favorite trick. He said people get so concerned about where their head is that they forget to cover their ass. That man has shot me in the ass with stunners, zats, paint guns, rocks, and so many random projectiles that I can’t count.”

Stevens lifted his head. “He shoots you with zats and stunners?”

“We’re Marines. We play with the good toys.”

“You’re insane, you mean,” Lorne said.

Coughlin offered him a simple “hoo-rah.”

“Well, you are in good spirits,” a new voice commented. Lorne pulled himself up using the bars on the cell.

“Ladon.” Lorne carefully didn’t let any emotion leak through.

Ladon Radim stood in a Genii uniform on the other side of the bars. “Major Lorne. I’m glad to see you recovering. I’m here to collect a blood sample, and I have two choices about how to make that
happen.” He turned his head slightly to the side, and several more Genii soldiers moved forward. They were all armed—some with Wraith stunners and others with projectile weapons. Without any sort of weapons and being outnumbered, Lorne’s team didn’t have a chance. He gave them a hand signal to stand down.

“What is this?” Lorne asked carefully. He wouldn’t make any assumptions here. On P3X-403, Dr. Jackson had forced him to kneel in surrender for the Unas. That had led to one of the strongest alliances in SG history. The Unas might not be the most articulate of allies, but when given a chance to deliver raw naquadah in order to fight the Goa’uld, Iron Shirt had delivered on his promise and then some.

“What does it look like this is?” Ladon asked with a thinly veiled arrogance Lorne had never before seen in the man.

“A kidnapping,” Lorne said dryly.

“Wrong,” Ladon snapped. “This is the rightful heirs of this galaxy reclaiming what is ours. The Genii have fought and bled and died because of the Wraith. Atlantis is ours.”

Lorne clamped his mouth shut. No one could debate with that sort of rhetoric.

“Now give me your arm so I can take a sample or I will send soldiers in there to obtain my sample in a less gentle manner.”

Lorne didn’t give a shit about the possibility that he might get roughed up, but he didn’t want any of them injured enough to slow down an escape. The first rule of being a prisoner was staying healthy enough to get yourself out of the mess when the time came. However Lorne didn’t want to capitulate too easily. “Why do you want my blood?”

When Ladon gave a near-maniacal grin, Lorne figured that he had just slipped off the sane-train. “You’re ATA-gene positive right?”

Lorne frowned. “I’m going to use your blood and the samples I have from a couple of the others to identify the factor in your blood that makes it possible for you to use the Ancients’ technology.” Ladon tapped the bars. “Arm. Now.”

Lorne started to roll up his left sleeve. He and Ladon had specifically talked about this with Carson. A thousand years ago during the height of the second Genii confederation, they had scientists who could have understood gene therapy; however, Ladon had agreed that his people would not be able to catch up with Lanteans for at least a generation. He worked hard to even follow some of McKay’s instructions, and had taken to taping them so he could review what McKay said. He was a brilliant man, but he was well aware that his society’s lack of technology left him handicapped by a certain ignorance that he would be unlikely to overcome in his lifetime. Ladon had even spoken of his dream that promising young Genii would attend school on Atlantis so they could reach scientific heights he’d been denied.

“So you think you can duplicate Carson’s gene therapy?” Lorne asked as he put his arm through the bars. Ladon wrapped a band around the arm and started rubbing the area above the vein.

“I know I can,” he said confidently, but when he looked up at Lorne’s face, the manic energy was gone, replaced with worry and weariness. “I told you before, anything the Lanteans can do, the Genii have the technology to match, even if it takes us longer.”
“It will take you centuries longer,” Lorne said, “and I seem to remember telling you that last time we had this conversation.”

Ladon’s mouth twitched into a small smile. He’d caught Lorne’s lie. Lorne had explained that the Genii were about fifty to eighty years behind earth, and they would likely progress faster because they knew where they were going. They’d talked about their grandchildren being equals within their lifetimes if they were lucky and the Genii took advantage of what Atlantis had to offer.

“And I told you that my grandchildren would prove you wrong—that Genii would stand at the helm of great ships and in the control tower of Atlantis herself.” Ladon slipped the needle in smoothly and drew the blood. For Ladon to play this game, he had soldiers around him who were reporting back to someone—probably Chief Cowen since that’s who had recalled Ladon. Well if they wanted a show, Lorne would provide it.

“The Genii aren’t going to get anything. Atlantis will find us, and they will wipe your people out.”

“They think you’re dead.”

“You have no idea what sort of danger you’re playing with. You never did, Radim. I told Sheppard and Ellis before him that they should get rid of you, but Samas always championed your case. What did you offer that snake?” Lorne upped the ante, daring Cowen to contact Samas and take advantage of a potential alliance. Samas would play Cowen right up to the point that he ripped the man’s guts out.

“Samas simply recognizes that the Genii have the fortitude to succeed where your people do not. They exiled him, didn’t they? They weren’t willing to listen to the truth and they were afraid to have him on their planet.”

“You people are ignorant,” Lorne said. It broke every diplomatic rule Lorne had learned over years in the SGC, but he had to back Ladon’s play—he didn’t have any other plan here. If need be, he could still kill Ladon as soon as they found a way out of the cell. Lorne had to believe that.

“We’ll see. You’re going to live long enough to see the Genii take Atlantis and your people on their knees. At that point we’ll decide what to do with you.” Ladon pulled the needle out of Lorne’s arm and walked away. All his guards followed, leaving Lorne and his guys locked in a cell no way to escape.

“That went well,” Stevens said.

Lorne dropped down onto the bench bolted to one wall. “Yep,” he agreed. This was not going to be a bright and shining moment in his service record.
The result of all that scheming

John looked at the warehouse. Knots were forming in his gut, although he couldn’t say exactly why. McKay inched closer. “Are we going in or not?”

John wanted to say ‘not.’ Ladon’s story made sense. Cowen was behind the wanted posters for all the ATA gene carriers in Atlantis, and he had taken Lorne and his people. It even made sense that Ladon would want to start his revolution now. If Atlantis went to war with Genii, both sides would lose too much. Despite all that, John had a very bad feeling about all this.

“Sheppard?”

John shook himself free from his imagined fears. “Right. Lifesigns?”

“Six,” Rodney said. “That’s about what Ladon said he had with him, right?”

John nodded. “This should be his command staff.” John twisted around to see his own soldiers spread out. He disliked tricking Ladon out of his ZPM, but Earth wouldn’t get into a Genii civil war, and Rodney insisted that a fully loaded ZPM plus a nuclear weapon could actually take out an entire planet. John would rather avoid having thousands of Genii dead on his conscience.

“Why does this feel too easy?”

“Because it is,” John said. Either Ladon trusted them to bring the weapons Elizabeth had promised or this whole thing was a trap. With most of the team, including Ronon and his Satedean buddies investigating the kidnapping of Lorne and his team, John had two Gate teams backing him up. It was overkill, but after the series of bad missions John had endured, he wasn’t ready to take any risks.

However, John couldn’t walk away from this deal altogether because Ladon promised to help find Lorne if he could only take over the Genii homeworld. John would have helped him for that alone, but Teyla and Elizabeth had both insisted they remain neutral. So he had to stay neutral on the issue of weapons and find some other way to talk Ladon into helping them find Lorne. If Ladon would only try and screw them over, John would have some leverage, so he was actually hoping for a double cross. Well, that and he was hoping he could still trade on his friendship with Ladon after the man figured out that Elizabeth hadn’t sent weapons.

“Okay, let’s go.” John signaled to Edison to get his team moving. Once he was moving, he signaled Captain Griffin to move his unit up.

“Do we think Ladon is going to kill us because we didn’t bring the weapons?” Rodney asked. “If that’s what we’re thinking, maybe we should rethink this whole thing.

John understood that Rodney worked off nerves by running his mouth, so he ignored him and checked for life signs. “Three in the east side, two in the rear, and one signal in the meeting place.”

“So he came alone, like he promised,” Rodney said. John really hoped that was true. If it wasn’t, he was going to start seriously reconsidering whether the curse of the Atlantis command had fallen on him.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? What sort of reassurance is that?” Rodney demanded sharply.
“The only reassurance I have.”

“Well you suck at reassuring,” he snapped.

John was almost sure that one of the Marines snickered. Marines should not snicker. “Rodney, if you want to go back to the gate, you can.”

“What?” Rodney put on his best stubborn expression. “I didn’t say I wasn’t going.”

“Can you not say it softer?”

Rodney harrumphed, but he did settle down. John nodded and moved toward the main building. Ladon promised to wait inside the main storage space, and one life sign waited for them. John moved forward, sliding the door open slightly. Watching the LSD, John watched as Edison’s team moved in on the other entrance, and only then did he move into position.

Weapon up, he scanned the room, and Griffin’s guys came in behind him, moving along the walls and securing the area. The whole time Ladon sat in a chair in the center of the room and waited. “Colonel Sheppard, I’m glad you came,” he said. He put a foot up on the metal box in front of him. “Did you bring my weapons? I’m not sure how much longer Cowen is going to keep your people alive.”

“Yeah,” John said, communicating his unease through his tone. Ladon raised an eyebrow. “Do you have the ZPM you promised?” If Ladon tried to double-cross them, this was going to be so much more pleasant. John really hated stealing from people who hadn’t tried to steal from him first.

“Yep,” Ladon said, crushing that hope. “We’re allies, right? I wouldn’t lie to you.” Using his foot, he slid the box over to John.

This was just getting embarrassing. John reached down to open the case, but then Rodney was there.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. What if it’s booby trapped?”

John just stared at Rodney. Sometimes he had no idea how his lover’s brain even worked.

Ladon laughed. “Rodney, since being transferred off Atlantis, I have missed your paranoia. You would have made a good Genii.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Rodney said dismissively. “You’re the one plotting revolutions and wanting to meet on a dead world.”

“Security, Dr. McKay. It’s all about security. Colonel Sheppard, I have no interest in killing you.”

John had to assume Ladon was telling the truth about that. If assignation were the plan, Ladon had dozens of opportunities without leaving Atlantis. This would be a pretty screwed up scheme just to kill him. He squatted down and flipped open the lid.

“It’s all yours, one ZPM as promised,” Ladon said. “Of course, that’s probably been out of a power for a thousand years.” The doors slammed, and John whirled around, but it was too late. The Marines nearest the door were already sliding to the floor. John could smell the sweet scent of gas, and his knees tried to buckle. He wanted to turn and fire on Ladon, but his legs weren’t working right. To his horror, Rodney fell to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Oh, that’s gas,” Ladon said. “Don’t worry. It won’t kill you either.”

After that, John didn’t remember much of anything. At least he didn’t until he woke up with his left
side aching like a bitch and his hands tied behind his back.

“How do you feel?” Ladon asked, which was always the first and honestly least intelligent question anyone asked John after a period of unconsciousness.

“Like I’ve been gassed.” John pried his eyelids open a little more and tried to focus. “Why didn’t it affect you?”

Ladon shook the needle he held in his hand. Now John felt the sting at the side of his neck. “Antidote.”

Great. The bastard wanted John awake for this. If Ladon planned to retake Atlantis, they might have a problem. He’d lived there for a year, so he had alliances on the city, and right now John was intensely uncomfortable with how many non-Earth people they had on the city. Fifty or so Genii could do a lot of damage. “Where are my men?”

“They’re safe. They’ll wake up in an hour or so with a pretty big headache, but they’re fine. Just like you.

John gave a weak laugh. “I’m a lot of things right now -- fine isn't one of them. Ladon, we had a deal.”

“Funny, I don’t see the weapons Elizabeth promised me.”

“And I don’t see the ZPM.”

“That was your plan? Lure us here, take our weapons, trade us for some more, arm your rebellion? Is that about it? Or hey, maybe you plan to bypass your homeworld and just take Atlantis, because I’d like to see you try that. Samas is going to eat your guts for dinner, and afterwards, there’s a very good chance he’s going to vomit them back up.” John actually got some comfort out of that fact.

“You couldn't be more wrong.”

Boots clicked across the floor, and John turned to see Chief Cowen walk into the room with his smug smile. “There is no rebellion, Colonel Sheppard. Ladon here has only the best interests of the Genii at heart.” His smile got even wider, and John strained at the ropes that bound him. He had an uncontrollable urge to swat the man like a mosquito.

John looked from Cowen to Ladon and back. Ladon had never been a fan of Chief Cowen. He’d been even less enamored of Kolya. After a lot of avoiding, Tony had finally sat down with John and Ladon and made them talk, and John had truly believed he understood the Genii scientist. He’d believed that Ladon Radim was a man who only wanted to pursue science without all the mad plots of Genii leaders getting in the way. John had even put Ladon in the same category as Rodney—as smart men with no stomach for politics. When Ladon had apologized for his actions during the siege and thanked John for allowing him into the city, John had offered his friendship. And now Ladon was buddies with Cowen. Yeah, John never saw it coming. His skills with people were right up there with Rodney’s. Probably worse.

“What the hell is going on here?” John demanded.

“I want to talk with Doctor Weir,” Cowen said, holding up one of the team’s radios. Ladon reached
over and pressed the talk button before giving Cowen a nod.

Cowen smirked before speaking into it. “Doctor Weir, this is Commander Cowen, leader of the Genii.”

Elizabeth’s voice came back over the radio, and John realized that this might be the last time he heard her voice. Cowen hated John. Loathed him. The only person in the universe who hated John more was Kolya. Hell, maybe he was around the corner waiting for a chance to get a little torture in.

“Where is Colonel Sheppard?” Elizabeth asked.

“There is a rebellion against the rightful leaders of the Genii people. Some would view that as an act of war.”

There was a pause before Elizabeth answered. “If you notice, they didn’t take weapons with them. Earth has no intention of getting involved in a civil war.”

“No, you only planned to rob the Genii people of a treasure which is theirs. I will release your men, but I expect something in return.”

“I’m listening,” Elizabeth said. John closed his eyes. No matter what Cowen asked for, Elizabeth had to say no. If they gave in to blackmail, every bad guy in the galaxy would target them. It was a no-win situation. The worst part wasn’t dying, it was knowing that he’d brought Rodney into this mess with him. John ached with regret. Maybe all Abby’s frantic worry had pushed him to move too fast, to make mistakes. John sighed. That wasn’t fair. He’d made command decisions under pressure before, and the fact that his second in command’s girl got weepy was no excuse for getting captured.

“The Genii people need the Lantean ships you call Jumpers. I believe you have ten of them. You have one hour to bring them all here.”

Jumpers? John opened his eyes and studied Cowen. Jumpers were worthless to people who didn’t have the ATA gene. Maybe Cowen planned to keep some of them alive as pilots. That was insane. A pilot could kill himself and everyone on board with a single thought. Something was wrong.

Elizabeth was playing it cool. “And if I don’t?”

Cowen was entirely too happy to tell her. “We will kill one of your team every fifteen minutes until our demands are met. Oh, and we will be starting with Colonel Sheppard.” Cowen turned off the radio.

“What do you want with the Jumpers?” John asked. He didn’t expect an honest answer but maybe they would give something away.

Cowen chuckled and shook his head like John was some sort of idiot they’d found babble nonsense. “What do I want with invisible spaceships that could fly to other worlds and even deliver our atomic weapons?”

“Well, since you put it that way ...” John glanced over at Ladon. The scientist knew that the Jumpers wouldn’t work for them. He had to. He’d lived on Atlantis long enough to know the frustration of having to get an ATA positive person to unlock some damn system. “They’re never going to deal. You’re gonna have to kill us,” John warned him.

“I fully expect to have to kill you,” Cowen said far more enthusiastically than was really appropriate. “Take him to his cell.”

The guard untied John’s hands, and Ladon came around and pointed his weapon at John. “Yes, sir.”
“Suck up,” John accused Ladon. He was still trying to figure out what was going on. However, when people had guns pointed at him, John tried to go along. He preferred to avoid blood, especially his own. So when Ladon gestured for him to head for the door, John obeyed.

John waited until they’d gone through several doors and were alone before he tried again. “Even if we give you the Jumpers, none of the Genii will be able to fly them.”

“T’m working on a treatment that can artificially produce the Ancient gene. In fact, we’ve been collecting samples.”

Oh that didn’t sound good. John had learned to be suspicious of scientists and their samples. “From where?”

Ladon gave him a shove to get him to move around a corner. John stopped as he spotted Rodney, Griffin and the others passed out on the concrete floor. That he’d expected. He didn’t expect to see Lorne and his team standing in the same cell, as alive as… well… someone who hadn’t been burned to a crisp and laid out on Biro’s table.

“Lorne!”

“Colonel,” Lorne said, his gaze flickering over toward Ladon. Either Lorne was trying to tell him something was wrong with Ladon or he was accusing John of being an idiot for getting taken hostage by a scientist. Probably both. A guard came out and opened the cell door, his friend holding a gun on Lorne and the others as Ladon shoved John inside.”

“Catch up quickly. Chief Cowen is punctual with his executions,” Ladon warned. Then he walked away.

John looked at Lorne, momentary too happy to see the major to even worry about Cowen. “Way to be not dead.”

“Thanks, sir! So, are you the rescue?” His tone of voice promised endless teasing if John even attempted to claim that. At least Lorne got caught with his pants down on a mission that was ranked as a level-two, the safest Atlantis personnel went on. John had been on notice, and he still got taken down.

John shrugged. “Well, Samas and Teyla are supposed to be on rescue detail this week, but since I see you here, I'm thinkin' about it.”

Lorne rolled his eyes. “Well, good! Let me know if there's anything we can do to help.”

After that, there wasn’t much to say. A quick debrief, and John knew as much about the situation as he could. Ladon was acting crazy, Cowen wanted to take over the world, and everything seemed pretty normal for a Pegasus everyday. Luckily it wasn’t a tenday because everyone knew the crazy really came out on tenday and holiday.

When Rodney and the others started to wake, John left the soldiers to help each other, and he sat near Rodney. He’d worry about outing them, but Lorne had told him to take care of his scientist, and John trusted his second in command to give him some sort of hint if the gay rumors were starting. Maybe Tony and Gibbs had just worn everyone out on gay gossip. God knows they did a lot of things that inspired talk.

Rodney muttered and flailed a bit as he started to wake, but he didn’t seem to be in the same sort of pain that a person got from a stunner. “What the hell happened?” he muttered when his eyes finally came open.
John shrugged. “We got gassed.”

“Are we in some sort of trouble?”

“Was it the gas or the prison cell that was your first clue?” John asked. Rodney retaliated with a punch in the stomach that made John grunt. “Hey, be nice. I’m scheduled for execution.”

“You’re what?” Rodney seemed to overcome the effects of the gas instantly. “What’s going on? Who’s planning on executing you?”

“Ladon Radim,” Lorne answered when John didn’t.

Rodney used the bars of the cell to pull himself up. “What are you talking about? Ladon wouldn’t kill anyone.”

“That’s funny because I’m pretty sure he killed the three people you thought were us,” Lorne said as he gestured toward his team.

“Oh. Yeah, you were supposed to be dead there for a while,” Rodney said. John cringed. Sometimes he wondered if he didn’t love Rodney just because the man made him look socially competent in comparison.

“He didn’t mean it that way,” John offered.

“I didn’t mean what in what way?” Rodney asked.

Lorne rolled his eyes, but at least he seemed to be more exasperated than actually frustrated. It was improvement—not quick improvement, but John took what he could get.

“Hey, let’s all focus on the part where I’m going to get executed,” John suggested brightly.

Rodney turned and looked at him. “Are you sure you shouldn’t be spending more time with Heightmeyer?”

Lorne muttered sometime that sounded like he was agreeing. Unfortunately, it pretty much killed the conversation for the next several minutes.

“We have to rush them when they come to get you,” Rodney announced out of nowhere.

“That’s going to get people killed,” John pointed out.

Rodney crossed his arms over his chest. “Yeah, but some of us will survive.”

Sometimes that same determination that John loved made him want to strangle Rodney. “They’re trying to get Jumpers. Most of the people in the cell are ATA gene positive, so Cowen is probably looking for slave labor, not fodder for the firing squad. We’re not going to risk getting a lot of people killed to save me.”

“I don’t know, sir. That might be the best option,” Lorne said. “If it comes down to taking a chance at freedom or ending up a Genii slave, I’d rather take my chance.”

Several of the others nodded.

“Forget it,” John said firmly. “Do you have any idea what Abby will do to the rest of the universe if you get killed? And she might find a way to haul your soul back to her lab just so she can yell at you. You have scary taste in women, Major.” Lorne flinched far more than John expected. Clearly he’d
hit a nerve there without trying. John changed tactics. “Teyla, Ronon, Gibbs and Samas are still out there. You will give them time to work.”

The guard approached with Ladon a step behind him.

“Come to kill me?” John asked brightly. If he was going to die, he certainly wasn’t going to beg and humiliate himself. Rodney started muttering about the need for psychotherapy.

“Cowen has just told Elizabeth that I’m down here killing you. He’s given her fifteen minutes before we kill Rodney.”

John’s smile vanished. He could laugh at his own death, but not Rodney’s. Atlantis needed him.

Ladon turned to the guards with them. “We need to get them out of here now. Watch the end of the hall.”

The soldier gave a nod and headed down where they’d come from.

“Um, care to share with the class?” John asked.

“Hidden away at the bottom of this building is a nuclear device,” Ladon said, which was less of an explanation than John was hoping for.

However McKay leaped forward and grabbed Ladon’s arm. The remaining guard twitched but didn’t comment. “You’re going to start your coup!” Rodney sounded so damn enthusiastic about it.

Ladon nodded. “I needed Cowen and his elite guard together in one place. I knew the chance at some Puddle Jumpers would get him here.”

In general, John disapproved of rebellion, but in this case he’d make an exception. “Good one!”

“I’m sorry I put you in the middle, but if Cowen gets his way, the Genii army will declare war on Atlantis. I can’t have that, so I’m taking over. Most of my men are waiting for me on our homeworld. Tonight, the leadership of our people changes hands.”

“I approve of avoiding war with Atlantis,” John said, which was true. If Samas were here, he’d probably tell John to stop being an Earth-based idealist, but John really didn’t like the idea of rebellion at the point of a nuclear weapon, particularly when he was on the same planet with that nuke.

“This way,” Ladon said before he started hurrying down the corridor. A number of guards fell in on either side of the Lanteans, and John’s fingers itched for a weapon. He glanced over and Lorne looked equally frustrated. They were heading for an exit, and the two guards brought their weapons up. All John could do was move in front of Rodney. If a firefight started, at least Rodney wouldn’t be the first to go down. John noticed the others shifting. First Lorne and then Griffin and then the others all arranged themselves to make a solid barrier between Rodney and the weapons. Of course Rodney was in the center complaining bitterly about not being able to see anything but John gave his people a nod of approval.

Ladon stepped forward. “It’s alright. We’re just escorting these prisoners.”

The two guards started to lower the weapons, obviously confused but not willing to point a weapon at an officer. That’s when Ladon’s men shot both of them.

“There's a hidden passage this way. We shouldn't run into any more resistance,” Ladon turned and
ran through the door. The man who had set the nuke was running. John thought that might be significant. He took off after Ladon. They all stormed through a narrow passage with stale air and dust that drifted through narrow beams of light that came in through tiny air slits. Suddenly the tunnel was flooded with light, and John stopped right in front of a ladder. He climbed up before holding out a hand to help Rodney. And Rodney clearly didn’t need any help. He made it up the ladder faster than John had, either because of fear or because climbing ladders into broken machines was what Rodney did.

“Dial up,” John yelled as he started helping the others out of the passage. Lorne got on the other side of the tunnel’s exit, and so the others would climb halfway and then reach out so John and Lorne could swing them out. They exited the tunnel so fast that Samas would be proud. And sadly, Samas had made them practice this particular drill more times than John could count.

“The Gate’s already active!” Rodney sounded frantic.

“It’s to Atlantis. Cowen is holding it open so they can hear Sheppard die,” Ladon said.

“Well isn’t that charming,” Rodney said just as John and Lorne swung the last person clear.

“Insult people later, IDC now,” John called out. His arms ached and his legs were so sore that he knew he definitely needed to find more time to train. Either that or he needed a symbiote. Maybe Gibbs would share. Again, John had that uneasy feeling of sliding through the water. He shoved it aside because sometimes Pandora’s box just needed to stay closed.

John and Ladon were the last through the wormhole. Elizabeth was standing in the middle of the gate room looking shocked, and John couldn’t even see Lorne because he appeared to have a goth octopus attached to him at every point above the knees. Abby was a big girl to be doing the whole leg wrap around hug, and John was going to focus his thoughts on that, and not on the fact that no other colonel had his XO getting full body hugs in the middle of a combat retrieval staging area.

John was even more shocked when Ronon came out of the wormhole and nearly knocked him down. “Bout time you got yourself out of there,” he said, giving John a shove on the arm.

Elizabeth quickly focused her attention on one person. “Ladon? What are you doing here?” Elizabeth demanded.

John wondered how much of her fury came from the fact that she had invited Ladon into her bed. Maybe it had been the once, and maybe they’d been together for longer, but either way, John found that women generally disliked you kidnapping and manipulating their friends after taking them to bed. John noted that the Marines all looked pretty ready to shoot the guy, but Ladon was just grinning.

“It was Ladon’s plan the whole time,” John explained before Elizabeth could order someone to shoot him. “Ladon’s staging a coup, and apparently we were part of the plan.”

Ladon’s radio hissed and then Cowen’s voice came over it. “Ladon, come in!”

Medical personnel started filtering through, looking for injuries, but everyone had come through intact this time. Samas moved closer to McKay and Ladon, an amused look on his face.

Ladon lifted his radio looking even more smug. “This is Ladon.”

“What’s going on?” Cowen sounded pissed.

“I’m sorry it had to come to this, Cowen. You have served our people well. However, your plans
will distract us from our goal of protecting our people and fighting the Wraith.”

There was a long silence, and Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

“What have you done?” Cowen asked in horror.

“What needed doing,” Ladon said, but the radio gave an ungodly hiss, so John wasn’t sure Cowen got the message.

“Shields up!” John yelled. Instantly the shield shimmered into place.

“Well, this should be an interesting debrief,” Elizabeth said as she looked around. She was still giving Ladon the stink eye of a woman who would happily gut him if she just had the privacy to do it. John’s ex-wife used to give him that look all the time.

“It worked,” Samas said. He sounded less confused than John expected.

Ladon slapped him on the arm and smiled. “It did. I should thank you for education you offered me over the last couple of years.”

Samas shook his head. “The solution was obvious. Given the right circumstances, you would have stumbled on it. After all, one must put one’s people ahead of everything else.”

Ladon nodded. “I agree.”

McKay was looking between Samas and Ladon with growing suspicion. Finally he settled on glaring at Samas. “This was your plan. You made a plan where I got gassed and hit my head on the floor. Do you know how valuable my head is?” he demanded.

Ladon laughed. “Rodney, it wasn’t his plan. That was Koyla’s plan to take over the Genii that I coopted. Cowen was obsessed with going to war with Atlantis and then nuking anyone who stood up against a new united Genii federation that would defeat the Wraith. Koyla came up with that plan so he could take charge of the Genii, but he is obsessed with Atlantis and Colonel Sheppard. Both plans would have destroyed the Genii alliance with Atlantis, caused thousands of deaths, and ended with the Genii the most hated people in the galaxy. I never wanted power, but it’s time to unite against the Wraith. If I have to take the reins to lead us in that direction, I will.”

John noticed that his Genii guards were looking at him with a terrifying adoration.

“And you put our people in danger to achieve that end,” Elizabeth said coldly.

Ladon turned and faced her before ducking his head, accepting her censure. “I did. I put the needs of my people ahead of the alliance, but I also took great risks to protect the alliance.”

Samas looked over at John. Even without words, John was very aware of the fact that Samas expected him to step in. Yeah, well John wasn’t that big of a fool. Ladon made this mess he could get out of it on his own.

“Oh please,” Rodney blurted out. “Do you really think the IOC hasn’t contemplated worse? They thought you and Sheppard had gone rogue. When Everett showed up, I bet they had all sorts of contingency plans for locking you two away. Of course, if they’re smart, they had a special cell for me to keep my big brain contained. So don’t act like Ladon is any different from any Earth politician with all their plots.”

A moment ago, Rodney was angry, but now he pushed past Elizabeth and headed for the showers.
Elizabeth looked at John.

“Um, what he said.” John shrugged.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, and John could feel the tensions start to ease.

Ladon stepped forward. “I do know that I have caused some strain between our people, so I also come with a gift. It’s a… difficult gift that the Genii people have struggled to even understand, but I offer it in the hopes that your people can make better use out of it than can we. I am sure Tony has explained that at one point thousands of years ago we were a great alliance. We spanned fifty worlds and had fleets of ships. Then the Wraith woke.”

“He has mentioned something like that,” Elizabeth said cautiously. John could see that she would never again trust Ladon the way she once had. From what Lorne had said, Ladon had tried, from the very beginning, to clue them in that something was happening behind the scenes.

“The first time our empire fell, those ships retained their independence. I have the communication codes and frequencies for one of the few technologically advanced civilizations in this galaxy. The Travelers live on ships and survive by avoiding the Wraith.”

John’s ears perked up at the thought of ships. “Elizabeth?”

She gave him a weary look. “We have ships, John.”

“Ancient war ships?” Ladon asked. It was as if the entire room went silent. However, John noticed that again, Samas looked less surprised than he should have. Even Elizabeth had lost her politician’s mask. Too bad Rodney had left. He would have been panting.

“I swear, if you’re teasing me…” John threatened.

Ladon grinned. “I’m not. Better yet, they don’t fight. They don’t particularly want a warship; however, they believe in living on ships, and their ships are slowly starting to die one by one. They need homes for their people.”

“And they plan to use a warship as one of these new homes?” John wasn’t sure, but he thought hanging out laundry on a war ship just might constitute blasphemy.

“They have a deep mistrust of living on land or a city that is locked in place. For them, survival is about being able to move. If you could offer them what they most need—a way to protect their people without having to put them on the ground—I suspect the Travelers could be a lot of help.” Ladon smiled. “At least, I hope so. However, as I said, they are a gift that is difficult to handle, so the codes and names I offer come with no promises that you will find them particularly reasonable. But then I have every faith that you can handle it.”

Ladon stepped forward and offered Elizabeth a computer drive. Elizabeth looked honestly shocked.

“Thank you. I hope you are not offended when we look on this with some suspicion.”

“Not at all. Suspicion is healthy, Elizabeth. After all, I can only promise that I will do what I find in the best interest of the Genii. I just don’t find it logical to turn on the people who have already proved so successful at killing Wraith. Now as much as I would like to stay, my day is far from over. I must return to my planet.”

“And your coup? Are we going to be getting any requests for medical assistance?” Elizabeth asked.
Ladon tilted his head in her direction. “I don't anticipate any more casualties.”

“Good. Let's make that a condition of our continued good will for each other.”

“Of course,” Ladon said. “It is not in the best interests of my people to cause harm.”

John cleared his throat, but he didn’t mention Cowen and the unit of elite guards he had on that planet. Yeah, John thought they had it coming, but it did seem like Ladon had developed an ability to kill his own if that’s what it took to get the job done.

Samas moved to a spot next to him. “Ladon is lucky I did not realize that Kolya’s plots included you. He might not have survived long enough to lead his coup.”

“Aw. Are you suggesting you worried about me?” John asked. He watched as Elizabeth and Ladon exchanged a few more pleasantries while the Gate engaged. Damn his arm hurt.

Samas was giving him the sort of look Teyla usually gave him right before kicking his ass in practice. That was the look that said he had been slacking. John realized too late that he was rubbing his sore shoulder.

“Aw, gunny. I’m an old man. Have mercy. There’s only so much training I can do,” John objected as he let his hands drop.

The body language shifted, and Gibbs was there. His look was just as calculated as Samas’ had been. “I’m older than you are, sir, and I can do an evacuation drill without straining my shoulder.”

“Yeah, and you have Samas. I don’t suppose I can borrow him, can I?” John asked hopefully.

The shock on Gibbs’ face was comical. Rodney really was missing out on a lot by going to the showers. “You want to borrow Samas?” Gibbs sounded each word out as if trying to figure out their meaning. Lorne looked over, his attention suddenly on them.

“The joints are getting old, gunny. Some of us don’t have anyone helping do the internal repairs. It’s not like I want to keep Samas… I’d just borrow him for a bit.”

Gibbs snorted.

“For a forty-something year old man, I did well out there,” John tried.

Gibbs started to walk away. “Colonel, Major, we’re having evac drills at oh-five-thirty tomorrow on South Two.”

John sagged. He looked over, and Lorne looked equally miserable. The worst part was that Gibbs was right. Hell, John could order Gibbs to not include them, but that wasn’t how he ran his base. Lorne gave him a nasty look. “You had to say something, sir.”

“I just asked for a symbiote.”

Lorne’s glare grew deeper. “And you just had to rub your shoulder in front of him?”

John went back to rubbing his shoulder since the damage was done. “Yeah, that was stupid,” he agreed. “But if I’m getting tortured by Marines, at least I’ll have company. I’ll see you at oh-five-thirty, and welcome back from the dead,” John offered before he headed for the showers. Elizabeth tried to catch his eye, and John started whistling as he hurried away. Sometimes it was good to be in charge, or at least have a job where people sometimes pretended you were.
Meeting the Neighbors

Lagrangian Point satellites were never exciting places to visit, but waiting around for a Traveler ship to show up was a whole new level of boring. John was really starting to regret not going sparring with Telya and Gibbs. Instead he aimed his tennis ball at the wall and threw it again.

“Do you realize how incredible this is?” Rodney asked for the fiftieth time. John loved him… he just had to keep reminding himself of that.

“You do already have an Ancient warship of your own, Rodney. We don’t actually need the Travelers.”

Rodney turned and gave him a look, one that said John was missing vital brain cells. “Do you have any idea how much damage the Hippaforalkus has taken? It will take years to get her in good enough shape to even ferry supplies from one planet to another.” Rodney snorted and turned back to his computer display.

“The Orion,” John corrected him.

“Oh for God’s sake. What is it with you and names?”

“Simple, you come up with terrible names.”

“I didn’t come up with Hippaforalkus, the Ancients did.”

“And it’s a terrible name,” John said. He just didn’t like how it sounded. It sounded like an arrogant man who never listened to people and won battles without thinking about how many of his people died along the way. He would cut off his own toe before he used that name. “She’s the Orion,” John said in his firmest voice.

“Technically, she’s the property of the people from Taranis, so you don’t get to name her at all.” And there was Rodney’s smug and victorious expression. He had Rodney had their own version of sparring, just as vicious as the fight Teyla and Gibbs were off having, only it was all verbal. Usually John had to rein in his tongue, but with Rodney, he could fight all-holds barred.

“Well if I did, I would call her the Orion, and since that’s what I called her in all my reports, I’m pretty sure that everyone on Earth calls her the Orion now.” John gave Rodney a smug look to match.

Rodney snorted. “I should have named her Enterprise.”

“Yes, name her after a car rental business.” John softened his words by moving closer and running his fingers over the back of Rodney’s hands. He loved Rodney’s fingers. They were long and they had a strength and a delicacy that could charm the most sensitive equipment, and when he touched John, it was like every ounce of love Rodney had trouble saying came out in every reverent touch.

Rodney’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Some days I don’t know why I like you.” He slid his chair closer to John so that his shoulder brushed against him. John loved this dance. He love the verbal sparring and the way Rodney’s body always moved toward him without hesitation. He felt confident of Rodney’s love in a way that he had never believed in anyone else, and he was pretty sure that meant he’d been a shitty husband to Nancy.

“Because of my endless charm,” John said with a grin. John slung his arm over Rodney’s shoulders,
and he let his hand wander up to brush across John's hip. This was dangerous territory for them. John always felt a little like he was flying in dangerous territory when they showed any sort of affection in public. Yeah, it was likely to lead to horrible things if something went wrong, but it was still exciting. Rodney was exciting. However, a dishonorable discharge was still a pretty big threat.

“This could be a chance to get you a real Ancient warship of your own,” John said, “one that hasn’t been inside a volcano and shot to pieces by Wraith and stuck in mothballs for ten thousand years.” John understood that Rodney hated being away from his lab, but this was worth it. For the first time, John was truly grateful Ronon was off trying to track down more Satedans because if he had to deal with Ronon boredom and Rodney boredom at the same time, someone would be going out an airlock. It wasn’t like he could publicly use his time-tested methods of distracting Rodney. Well, not much. John ran his fingers over the side of Rodney’s neck, and Rodney utterly froze.

“Any Ancient ship still floating around out here has been in mothballs for ten thousand years,” Rodney pointed out after a second.

“Yeah, but the Aurora was in much better shape than the Orion. I think it’s safe to say that anything that’s been in space is going to have weathered the centuries better than any ships left on the ground.”

“Well of course that’s true. Do you have any idea what atmosphere and gravity do to sensitive parts like subspace engines?” Rodney shoved John’s arm away, but not before John got a look at a very sizeable bulge in Rodney’s pants. Unfortunately, they couldn’t do anything about it. John once had his father walk in on him kissing a girl. He’d come close to dying of humiliation then, so he wasn’t sure what would happen if Gibbs and Teyla walked in on him having sex, but it wouldn’t be good. Neither would report John, so his job would be safe, but the humiliation factor wasn’t worth risking.

“Nope. Besides, we might end up owning this Traveler ship if we play our cards right,” John said. The idea of owning their very own working battleship was way more exciting than borrowing a barely flying hulk that would fall apart if a Wraith looked at it too long.

“We may end up owning the Orion,” Rodney said with some smugness.

John hadn’t seen that coming. “I thought the people of Taranis saw it as a cultural heritage.”

“Yeah, but the anthropologists have been working with Teyla to develop an Atlantan coin. It turns out that the people of Taranis are even more interested in being able to eat and clothe themselves.”

“Atlantean coin?” This was the first John had heard anything about this.

Rodney nodded. “Apparently other planets have used coins and backed them with whatever crops or merchandise they’re known for. There are Genii coins that you can trade in on their home world for a basket of seasonal fruit. But coins haven’t really taken off because you never know when a planet is going to get culled to extinction.”

“Or if they’ll be able to pay the debt,” John pointed out as he thought about the planets they’d visited where the population had been culled to the point that crops rotted in the fields.

“Exactly, which is where Atlantis has the advantage. People know we can’t get culled, so our coins could be worth a lot more. The anthropologists are thinking of linking the coin to five different products: four pounds of potatoes, one pound of flour, one yard of simple fabric, a half-dozen eggs, or five US dollars.”

John frowned. “That seems like expensive flour.” He didn’t think Teyla would cheat people, but that
seemed unfair.

“Do you know how hard it is to get good flour? To produce any quantity of it requires a mill, and that kind of large structure is just waving a red flag at the Wraith, so the alternative is that people have to grind it by hand which takes forever. Teyla already warned us to lay in a big stock of flour because that’s what a lot of people are going to ask for.”

“You’re importing flour from Earth using your dematerializer, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” Rodney said defensively. “But the point is that Elizabeth is talking to the Taranis people about buying the Orion.”

“Ha!”

“What?” Rodney jerked upright.

“You called it the Orion.”

That earned John one of Rodney’s special glares. “Seriously, are you four?”

“Sometimes.” John shrugged. He liked being immature. It kept him from being old and stuffy. Besides, he was wildly, stupidly in love with the way Rodney would glare at him when annoyed.

“Well, I suppose it’s good to embrace your flaws.”

“Wait, does that mean I can turn part of my salary into Atlantis coin and actually spend it?” John asked. He knew the others did all sorts of borderline illegal things with dematerializers and a black market that ran right through Rodney and Radek, but as the military commander, John had tried to be really good and obey all the weight restrictions for importing goods on the Daedalus. Unfortunately that meant that it was easier to just not buy things.

“Novel idea, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I thought I was going to retire as the world’s only involuntary millionaire.”

“I thought I might, but do you know how much 400 buffalo cost?” Rodney made a face.

“A lot?” John hadn’t even thought of asking about that or offering to pay or anything. They should have taken up a collection. Yeah, the biologists might have caught them, but it wasn’t fair that Rodney had picked up the whole cost. John’s salary didn’t come near Rodney’s, but he still had plenty saved up. He could transfer some over.

“If I wasn’t so fond of not starving, I might have thought twice before spending that much. I had to close out two savings accounts and one of my stocks to pay for that,” Rodney complained.

John was definitely transferring money over. “Geez, Rodney. You shouldn’t have to do that.”

“It’s not like I don’t have more where that came from,” he said with a shrug and suddenly it was like he didn’t even care about money. “The government usually keeps me in places like the middle of a New Mexico desert or Siberia or the Antarctic where spending money is a little difficult. Besides, I like the idea that I have a large quantity of food nearby.” And he was definitely dismissing the whole issue now. John really had no hope of ever figuring Rodney out. He could only love the idiot and ignore every other word. "At least that's money well spent. Do you know what Abby spent my money on?"
John had a horrified moment where he imagined what a woman who wore dog collars might buy now that she was involved with his XO. Yeah, John did not want to think about Lorne and Abby, not even for a second. Not even for a nano second. "I'm not sure you should tell me."

"Art supplies. She bought paint, and not the sort that's useful. I wouldn't mind some nice red spray paint I could use to leave warning signs that the less intelligent members of my staff might read. Okay, they probably wouldn't, but at least that would be useful. No, she bought fancy tubes of paint in weird colors."

Ah, Lorne's art club. When John had finally gotten transferred back, he'd been afraid that Colonel Ellis' XO might not fit with John's leadership style. He couldn't have been more wrong. John respected an XO who spent his free time teaching natives how to paint and doing virtual museum tours with other artsy folk.

“So when do Teyla and Elizabeth plan to tell the rest of us about our new currency?”

“I think it was an accident I found out. I charged into Elizabeth’s office demanding that she send Dr. Salworth back to earth during the next transfer. But she said she’ll bring it to the next command meeting.”

“Good to know.”

Rodney crossed his arms and studied John like he was trying to figure something out. John stared right back. “Before you got sent back to Earth for six months, that would have been you in there with Elizabeth,” Rodney said.

“Probably,” John admitted. His time with General O’Neill had shifted alliances a little, but he was still Elizabeth’s staunchest supporter. Usually. Okay, maybe he was a little less enthusiastic since he’d nearly been turned into a bug, but he trusted her motives, and that was more than he trusted anyone else in authority with the exception of General O’Neill. “But you know, it’s fine. This is the Pegasus galaxy, so it does make sense that Teyla should have a little more say into how it’s run.”

“I guess.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” Rodney held his hands up in surrender. “It’s just… you’re American.” The tone of voice he used made it perfectly clear this was not a compliment.

“Meaning?” John demanded.

Rodney huffed at him, like John was the one being unreasonable. “It’s not like your government is well-known for sharing with others.”

“I’m not my government.”

“Clearly.”

“So, how will this money thing work?” John asked. “Can I take my whole salary in Atlantis coin? Can I trade in my savings?”

“Teyla is concerned we overuse money.”

“Teyla is right,” John said without a moment’s hesitation.
“Her and the anthropologists have come up with a scheme. Members of gate teams can draw up to 20 coins per week, scientists and officers on base can pull 18, technicians and enlisted can pull 16, and common workers like the Hoff who run the gardens can pull 14.”

John did a quick mental check of the numbers. “So, a sergeant on a team can pull in more Atlantean coin than a captain who is in charge of the jumpers? That’s a problem.”

Rodney rolled his eyes. “It’s not like the captain isn’t getting paid more. They just get the rest in their regular paycheck.”

That might work, but John did wish Elizabeth had run it past him first. A sizable number of military personnel served on Atlantis. He supposed that instead of giving more coin to gate team members, they could create a hazard duty bonus for anyone worked off the city. If they put hazard duty at six coins per week, but capped the total to twenty for any pay grade, that would end up with the same numbers, but without putting down on paper that an airman was pulling in more than a major. That was not going to fly. He just needed to make sure he talked to Elizabeth soon. “So I can have a hundred dollars a week to spend, and the rest is still stuck in a savings account on a planet I never visit?”

“Yes,” Rodney agreed.

“I may be a millionaire after all, but at least I’ll get there slower.”

“Teyla seems to think that being paid the equivalent of 80 pounds of potatoes a week for jobs that don’t even take all our time makes us all wealthy.”

“In this galaxy, it does.” That fact just made John sad. “And what are we going to do if some planet decides to cash in all their Atlantis coins at once? The whole point of getting our gardens going is to stockpile food, not trade it away.”

“She said flour will be popular, and so will the cloth, but we’ll have a few thousand pounds of flour in storage by the time the coins get out there, and we can make cloth pretty easily as long as we have a compatible plant fiber, and those are found pretty much all over the mainland. If we do have refugees from Earth, no one is going to blame us for asking locals to hold onto coin when we have hungry people. Other planets do that all the time.”

“Yeah, but if we can’t honor the coins, they’re going to lose their value.” John frowned as he realized that he was talking as if he believed Earth would fall. He needed to stop that before his men heard him. It was just that his gut told him that Ori were dangerous—more dangerous than the goa’uld and the wraith and the damn Lucian alliance all put together. Every time John had read a report that came into General O’Neill’s office, he couldn’t stop the bone-deep horror he felt at the idea of the Ori invading the galaxy.

Rodney shrugged. “Until the coin is widely recognized, it will probably be something used inside the city more than anything else. The tenday markets will probably love the idea. Coins work better as currency than eggs.”

“They keep those eggs a really long time considering they don’t have refrigerators,” John agreed as he wrinkled his nose.

“Hey, hey, hey! Look!” Rodney said pointing at the sensors.

“Fat Albert?” John asked. He had his innocent smile ready for when Rodney glared at him.

“I revise my earlier statement. You’re three. The Traveler ship just dropped out of hyperspace.”
John touched his radio. “Sheppard to Gibbs and Teyla. We have Travelers inbound, I’m sending Rodney to cloak the jumper, I’ll meet you at the docking station.”

Sheppard listened to their answers and then with a quick pat on Rodney’s shoulder, he was off and running for the docking station. They were about to meet Travelers.
Gibbs watched the Traveler engineer argue with Rodney. They were cut from the same cloth even if they were nothing alike physically. The Traveler man was much older and wire thin with fingers he used to poke at the circuit in question. Rodney was more about curves and he waved his hands in wild gesticulations, but both were equally adamant that they understood the station the best, and Rodney was in heaven.

Better yet, the other Travelers were enjoying the show as well. They’d sent two female captains and Gibbs had to wonder if that was some sort of test. The Genii generally didn't respect women, so to have two women show up to negotiate any sort of trade relations would have ended things. However, Sheppard was more interested in leaning against whatever wall was closest to Rodney so he could keep an eye on that situation.

Gibbs and Samas agreed that Larrin approved of him, even if she was using her best poker face. She was also pretty quick to keep an eye on her own engineer, and when the conversation had turned heated, she'd even interrupted her attempts to seduce Sheppard in order to keep an eye on their conversation.

But now that it appeared that Rodney and Denhon could yell loudly without meaning any harm at all, everyone had relaxed and started enjoying the show. The second captain, Kitsune, was less obvious than Larrin. She was taking a page from Sheppard's book and leaning against a wall while exchanging small talk with Teyla.

"You'd think every engineer was born with an ego larger than their ship," Larrin said in an indulgent tone after Denhon said something so outrageous that he reduced Rodney to spluttering.

"Rodney's proved he has a right to that ego," Sheppard answered, and there was a mild rebuke in there. Gibbs moved closer, and he could smell the satisfaction in Larrin's scent. So she approved of Sheppard's defense.

The longer the Travelers were here, the more Samas was admiring them, and the more Gibbs suspected that they could be a very valuable addition to the alliance.

The problem was that Weir and the IOC would want to maintain control. Gibbs understood that. In a volatile situation, such as having your homeworld threatened on two fronts, control of resources was vital. However, Samas countered, the IOC was not ally to the Turi, and their stupidity was more likely to get the Earth taken over by the Ori than not. Even O'Neill hedged his bets with the IOC. Atlantis had some of the most brilliant minds from the Milky Way, including quite a few from planets other than Earth. Jonas and his crew had brought real talent to the city, and Samas was proud of both Jonas and the Turi he carried.

He couldn't have carried that Turi had not Tony intervened, Gibbs pointed out in one of the internal debates he had grown so used to over the years. When Samas moved into the water full time, Gibbs would miss the ability to live inside his own head. After that mental comment, Gibbs felt a general sense of acceptance from Samas. He had been so worried about strength that he had nearly made an error; however, Samas pointed out that he had chosen Tony as a queen host and he had listened, so that proved that he was capable of adjusting his plans where needed, which was a strength in and of itself.

Gibbs was amused. Samas managed to turn every decision into some form of proof for his own superiority. Goa'uld evil wasn't genetically hardwired into them until Ra had corrupted his own
people, but the onac were pretty damn arrogant without any genetic manipulation being required.

Samas pointed out that Rodney was just as arrogant, and the Travelers seemed to appreciate that fact.

Gibbs suspected that the Travelers would be less enamored of the Genii, even if their culture was an offshoot of the long-dead Genii Federation. Gibbs considered how the Atlantis team would compare to one of the Genii teams. Teyla had just as much authority as Sheppard in all things except the military, Rodney was valued despite his utter inability to act like a member of the military, and Sheppard slouched. Gibbs had no illusions about that pose of his—it was calculated just as Larrin's wild flirting.

He hoped Rodney knew that because he had given Larrin more than one disgusted look, but Sheppard would have to sort that out.

But no matter how much the Travelers liked what they saw, they wouldn't like IOC politics, Gibbs realized. The IOC and the Genii were equally likely to offend these independent people.

Samas countered that Atlantis didn't have to wrap itself so tightly in the rules of the IOC if they had other power sources.

Not willing to speak against his country and his world, even in the privacy of his own head, Gibbs focused on the others.

Kitsune was talking to Teyla. "You don't worry about taking Rodney onto a planet?"

"He has proven himself quite resourceful," Teyla said in an indulgent tone.

Rodney snorted. "That just means I'm getting used to death by boredom. I could use fewer on-the-ground missions."

"Now Rodney," Sheppard interrupted, "that's just your hatred of physical activity talking. You're a member of the team, so you go where we go."

"Oh?" Rodney made a show of looking around. "So, where's Conan?"

"He had business," Sheppard said, but Samas could smell the concern. Sheppard didn't like Ronon's absence, but Ronon was avoiding him more and more. He wanted to carry the Turi, but he was increasingly uncomfortable lying to someone he respected, so he just avoided Sheppard. Neither Gibbs nor Samas liked the situation, although neither had a solution.

"And I don't?" Rodney demanded, his voice going up an octave. "Do you know how much maintenance it takes to run the city?"

"They never know how much work we do," Denhon jumped in, clearly forgetting that he and Rodney were arguing about the station's computer systems. "It's just 'fix this' and 'change that' as if we're supposed to be snapping our fingers and magically making it happen."

"Oh, isn't that true?" Rodney said, happily picking up Denhon's refrain. "They act like it's all so easy. We should be able to do it all in our sleep because it's not like keeping technology that's thousands of years old in top condition is difficult or anything."

"But Rodney, you make it look easy," Sheppard said with an overly innocent face.

Rodney glared.
That made Larrin break out laughing. "You have his number," she said.

"It's not a hard number to get," Sheppard teased.

Gibbs and Samas definitely liked the Travelers' reactions to that. They liked the easy relationship between military and science. After working with Ladon, Samas understood just how much the science people were ignored unless they could build something with immediate combat usefulness. Even Rodney would have been largely disrespected because so much of his time was spent on theoretic research or basic maintenance of the city. The Genii were a people under siege who had lost much of their appreciation for anything that didn't help them live one more day. The Travelers didn't have that hard edge of desperation, although Samas suspected they would be more than willing to make a few unethical decisions to save their people. Samas suggested a course of action, and Gibbs didn't contradict him although he was unhappy.

"Sir," Gibbs offered. "If you want to take that tour of the ship, I can stay with Rodney."

"What?" Rodney looked over. "If anyone is going to see whether the Travelers have any concept of what it takes to keep an interplanetary ship in good shape, it would be me."

"And can you do that without insulting a potential new alliance?" Gibbs asked. Now he was getting Rodney's killer glare.

Larrin laughed again. "It's almost a competition for engineers. They all have to insult each other's ships."

"Rodney is sort of an insult heavy-weight," Sheppard said. "Besides, Rodney, you don't really want to crawl around in engines when you could be playing with the Ancient database here."

Rodney gave Sheppard a dirty look. "You aren't all that subtle."

"I'm not trying for subtle. You miss it when I'm subtle. I'm coming right out and saying that I don't want you visiting the Traveler ship. You and ships... That's up there with you and grain storage barns," Sheppard said in a blatant reference to their visit to the Genii homeworld. The reminder might have stayed subtle, only Rodney's eyes got large.

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Okay," he said. Larrin grinned, and Sheppard just rolled his eyes.

"We'll even leave Denhon here to fight with him," she said with a wink in Sheppard's direction. "We aren't trying to steal your engineer."

"I was trying to avoid implying you would. But I think I'll leave Gibbs here with him just the same."

"And I'll leave Kitsune," Larrin said with a nod toward the other Traveler captain.

She nodded. "I can watch both their backs." She looked right at Sheppard. "We don't leave our engineers undefended."

"I imagine you don't, not if your ships are your homes," Teyla commented. "I would be very interested in seeing how families adapt to the conditions aboard."

"We get used to the lack of space. It's better to sleep on top of each other than it is to leave family on the ground to be culled."

"Yes, but few people have the choices you do," Teyla said. Larrin gave her a long look before answer. "I guess they don't. So come on, and I'll give you the grand tour. Don't trip over wires, and
avoid touching anything that seems like it might kill you."

"That goes double for you," Rodney said with a finger poke in Sheppard's direction. "Don't touch anything," he said with such venom that it was clear that he was more concerned about the sexy, leather-clad captain than the ship.

Larrin laughed uproariously.


"Yeah, well you miss it when I'm subtle," Rodney said, throwing Sheppard's words back at him.

Sheppard looked over at Gibbs. "He's all yours. Don't let anyone actually kill him if he runs his mouth too much."

"Ha, ha," Rodney sniped.

"We're immune to cranky engineers," Kitsune offered.

Denhon said to her, "And your attitude wouldn't have anything to do with engineers being cranky, would it?"

She grinned. "Nope."

Denhon and Rodney both snorted.

"Come on, I'll show you around," Larrin said. She turned her back on Teyla and headed toward the shuttle dock. Teyla followed.

Sheppard gave Gibbs a last look and Gibbs nodded at him. He'd make sure the Travelers played nice with Rodney. With that silent order to watch Rodney's six, Sheppard headed after Teyla and Larrin.

Rodney sent a concerned look after Sheppard's retreating form, but then Denhon said something about the computer interface, and all his attention went to explaining exactly why Denhon was an idiot.

"So," Samas said to Kitsune, "are you and Larrin of equal rank?"

Kitsune gave him an amused look. "Subtly clearly runs in those from your home world," she said sarcastically.

Samas shrugged. "I wasn't trying to be subtle." He studied her. Gibbs had a good feeling about her, but he still refused to participate in this plan of Samas', so he let Samas take lead.

Eventually, Kitsune shrugged. "We're both captains, but she has more experience. I'd be a fool to try and ignore her lead. So, how about you and Sheppard?"

"It's complicated," Samas said.

Kitsune raised an eyebrow. She had short, dark hair and deep blue eyes, but there was something in the way she held herself that reminded both Samas and Gibbs of Kate. Maybe it was the way she tended to watch people. Even now, her gaze kept moving back to the animated argument Rodney was having with Denhon. "Is that supposed to be an answer?"

“it’s a warning that I don’t have a simple answer, in part because you are speaking to two different individuals.”
“Ah, so Ladon Radim was honest for once. I’m shocked.”

Samas was not surprised to hear that Genii and Travelers shared information, although from the tone they were far less likely to trust each other enough to share any real intelligence or share mission objectives. “He was. I am Samas, the creature who sometimes lives within Gibbs. Sheppard and I work together, but the loyalty I feel toward him has less to do with any rank than it does with an honest respect for his actions.”

“But Gibbs is under him in rank.”

“Yes,” Samas agreed. “He is, and he has seriously offended those back home, so if Sheppard were to ever express displeasure with Gibbs, we would be in a difficult position.”

“But that doesn’t make you take his orders?” Kitsune gave him a searching look. She definitely had a few of Kate’s traits, and some of her less attractive qualities. Gibbs and Samas had never enjoyed having Kate’s attention focused on them, but he could not use his proven method of distraction by ordering Kitsune to find some impossible piece of information for some investigation.

“I have been in far worse positions in my five thousand years of life. I will not compromise myself for Sheppard,” Samas said. “But I also trust him to not ask me to. So, who told you the mythology of the Kitsune?”

She blinked at him. “Perhaps the name has a different meaning in my culture.”

Samas knew many languages and sometimes there were words that sounded similar by coincidence, but he didn’t believe that it was an accident that her name came from one of Miko’s favorite stories. Abby had fallen in love with all Miko’s stories of magical foxes, and a stuffed fox had taken up residence beside Bert the hippo. That thought caused Gibbs’ a small twinge of guilt. He’d been so sure that Atlantis would crush her, that it would turn into a prison, and instead she loved the freedom and the friendships she had found in the city. If it weren’t for rule six, Gibbs might consider apologizing to Rodney for giving him so much grief over exposing Abby to their secrets.

Samas and Gibbs glanced over to where Rodney was almost frothing at the mouth as he and the Traveler engineer screamed at each other with far too much enthusiasm. He was definitely not worth breaking rule six for.

“Perhaps Ladon Radim has told you some of the history and mythology of our home planet and choosing that name was either a warning that you understood more than you allowed us to see or some sort of inside joke that only Travelers would understand.”

The corner of Kitsune’s mouth twitched. “The word does sound a lot like a type of high-velocity weaponry.”

Samas snorted. “You may want to avoid sharing that insight. I suspect the IOC would take it as a threat.” Samas leaned back against the wall and waited to see if she would take the bait.

“The IOC? This is an authority from your home world, correct?”

Samas nodded. “The International Oversight Committee.”

“So, they oversee. Do they also overrule?”

Samas shrugged. “Sometimes.”

Kitsune’s scent shifted and she studied him. Unless Samas was misinterpreting her body’s reactions,
she fully understood that he was intentionally feeding her intelligence.

“And what relationship does Gibbs have with these overseers?”

Yes, she could follow a trail of breadcrumbs just as well as their Kate had. “He would rather avoid that discussion,” Samas said. That allowed him to avoid placing Gibbs in a position where he felt like he was allowing a breech of security, but certainly Kitsune would still understand his meaning.

“IT must be difficult to have someone overseeing all your work.” She spoke slowly. She was probably unsure about how much of this she could trust.

“Rodney.” Samas said loudly enough to interrupt the two engineers. They just happened to finally be in agreement and they were busy sorting a complex maze of crystals in an open panel.

“What?” Rodney snapped without even looking up. His head was under a panel, and his ass was sticking up in the air. Luckily Sheppard wasn’t here because the two of them were getting more obvious every day, and Sheppard definitely would have stared. Hungrily. Sometimes Gibbs worried about that flyboy.

“The IOC overlooks your work more than they interfere with military matters. Are they difficult to work for?” Samas asked.

Rodney’s head made an appearance. “What?” he asked again.

Samas hushed Gibbs’ impatience. “Does the IOC interfere with your work?”

“Are you kidding?”

“No.” Samas walked over and leaned against the console.

“I don’t know… were they interfering when they arbitrarily decided that they were going to send me every idiot that they wanted to keep on the payroll but that was too stupid to keep on Earth?”

“You too? They send me children who cannot wire a control panel,” Denhon commiserated.

“Exactly!” Rodney said triumphantly. He definitely liked having someone who sympathized with his point of view. “They sent me someone who misread one number system because he was using a totally different numbering system, and he almost blew up the city, and when I tried to kick him off, I was ordered to give him another chance. Another chance to do what? Blow up the city?”

Denhon nodded. “They never understand the danger of ignorance.”

“That’s not even a joke. And the IOC is the worst of them. At least if your captain does something stupid, she’s going to blow up with you, but the IOC is back on Earth. If their stupidity gets us blown up, they won’t even have to change their dinner plans.”

“Is it that bad?” Denhon asked, and Samas could see that this concerned Kitsune was well. Good. They should be concerned.

“Worse,” Rodney said. “It turns out that the moron is some politician’s brother. I have to risk death by stupidity because this idiot’s brother controls part of our funding.”

“Would this moron of yours happen to be American?” Samas asked even though he knew full well. Dr. Salworth was the center of most of the science department’s gossip, and Samas had a personal grudge against him after the man had publicly called Abby a maladjusted traitor who’d threatened to
expose the program. That had earned him enemies in both the science and military side because everyone loved Abby. Gibbs pressed against Samas’ control, and Samas quickly sent a reassuring thought. He did not plan to turn the Travelers against America. He only wanted them to see the political reality.

“God… they’re the worst. The Americans think they control everything.”

“Is that a ship?” Denhon asked.

“I wish. It’s a country,” Rodney explained. “They think that because they have more money into the program than anyone else that they should control everything. The sheer arrogance of petty politicians trying to claim credit for the advances we’ve made leaves me wanting to blow up their entire country.”

“Now Rodney, that isn’t nice. Besides, Sheppard wouldn’t let you since that’s his home country,” Samas said. This was working out far better than he’d expected. Certainly Kitsune was getting a crash course in Earth politics that Sheppard likely wouldn’t provide.

“At least they’re better than China,” Rodney said as he wrinkled his nose. “If they try to steal my work one more time, I might do something very unpleasant to their infrastructure,” he warned darkly.

From there, Samas stepped back allowed Rodney to rant. Denhon and Kitsune asked a few pointed questions, but Rodney seemed oblivious to the way he was painting people from Earth. Samas only had to provide a few sharp contrasts so that those who had come to Atlantis appeared much saner than the ones who had stayed on the home world.

Rodney did wind down eventually, and Samas made a suggestion about using the puddlejumpers reserve memory chip to reroute a system, and Rodney and Denhon hurried down to the docking platform. Samas watched them go, but his attention was on Kitsune. She looked amused, which was not the reaction he’d been expecting. Given how much vitriol Rodney had just spilled, he was afraid the Travelers might start running and never come back again.

“So, how much of that was play acting done for my benefit?” Kitsune asked after a few minutes.

“From Rodney… none,” Samas said, tacitly agreeing that he had put on a show for her.

“Are you warning us off an alliance?”

“No, not at all,” Samas said. Gibbs had a few choice words about Samas’ parentage and what he would do if Samas lost them this treaty. “I’m warning you that everyone you meet is going to be honest and genuinely concerned about saving lives.”

“And that requires a warning because…”

“You can’t assume that’s true of the ultimate authorities behind the humans on Atlantis.” Samas could feel Gibbs’ discomfort with the conversation, but he didn’t object again.

“So, if we align ourselves with them, we may find they are less reliable than we hoped,” Kitsune guessed.

Samas shook his head. “If your people were in trouble, Sheppard would disobey his own leaders to do the right thing.”

“Are you sure about that?”
Samas turned and gave her his full attention. So often times he’d heard people whisper about the Gibbs-stare and how no one could withstand it, but Kitsune straightened up and looked him right back in the eye. “He’s done it before,” Samas said firmly. “He’ll do what’s right, and if his people threaten him, he won’t care.”

“That’s a rare man.”

Samas nodded. “He is. And Dr. Weir is very good at outmaneuvering those from the home planet. However, if there were other voices, powerful voices, Weir and Sheppard might have an easier time managing the more difficult topic of their distant leaders.”

Kitsune drew a long breath and studied him. “You want us to save them from your home world?”

“No, not at all,” Samas said before Gibbs could insist on taking over the body again. He was at the limit of how far he was willing to allow Samas to say. His love for his country and his world would not allow him to put either in danger. “The home world has many advantages that you can’t imagine, and they have a lot of insight. I am suggesting that your people could be a good counterbalance. The IOC will only value your ships, and they will attempt to take control of those ships. Sheppard and Weir will value everything the Travelers bring to this alliance.”

“And how are we to ally ourselves with such a divided people?” Kitsune demanded. She was young. Larrin likely would have been a better choice for this conversation, but Samas could only work with the resources he had at hand.

“Make them less divided. Demand your right to sit on a council. Make sure you always maintain control over your ships, and prevent the IOC from purchasing the Ancient ship owned by Taranis. If you have the only ships, you have a power they cannot match. You will be an equal walking into a partnership, and then Earth would be more likely to put something of equal value on the table.”

Kitsune frowned. “I thought Earth had ships of her own.”

“And they must guard the home world. These would be Atlantis ships, captained and controlled by Travelers while Earth provided crew to help run them.”

“And would Earth take these ships from us? If they are, as you suggest, a people without respect for Travelers, what would keep them from betraying us.” She stopped there, but Samas could practically see the unseen words hovering on the air between them. Travelers had been betrayed in the past, probably by the Genii.

“Sheppard would stop them,” Samas said firmly. “Dr. Weir would and Teyla would, and if all else failed, Rodney would. He forced Earth to stop what they were doing once, and he can do it again. I would stop them, or Tony would or any number of a hundred other citizens of Atlantis who have already stood up against those back home. Earth is complicated. Atlantis is not.”

Kitsune frowned again, but Rodney and Denhon interrupted the conversation. They were discussing the use of memory crystals the way some men discussed sex or their favorite porn star. They definitely had a case of lust for some new feat of programming they’d come up with on the way back from the puddle jumper. With one last look his way, Kitsune wandered over to the two of them and watched as they disassembled the rest of a computer console.

Clearly their conversation was over, and that was fine. Samas slid back and allowed Gibbs to take control again. It soothed Gibbs’ frayed nerves, and if Samas was judging things correctly, Kitsune would take this back to Larrin and perhaps other Traveler captains. Samas would have to wait to see how this turned out.
John groaned as his body send up a dozen dull flares. This was not good. As he tried to move he realized just how not good his situation was. He was tied to a chair with his arms at his sides and his knees open and his ankles tied to the chair legs.

The last thing he remembered, Kitsune had invited the whole team for a planet-side dinner with one of their favorite trading partners. Apparently her people were scheduled to move into the Ancient ship that Elizabeth was trying to negotiate the use of. Under Travelers rules, that meant that she had final say on the ship, although she certainly seemed to listen to the other captains. The last John knew, he'd been eating dessert. Clearly he'd been eating a drugged dessert.

When he looked around, he recognized the exposed conduits and hanging wires. He was on a Traveler ship, so that put kidnapping by some other hostile force out. It also meant that if the Travelers were less friendly than they appeared, the rest of the team was in trouble, too.

“Kitsune?” John called out. Footsteps rang against the decking behind him, but John couldn’t twist around enough to see who was there and the chair had a tall back. “So, what’s up?” he asked as casually as he could, and he tried to not think about how badly Rodney was freaking out. He had very little respect for the lack of shielding on Traveler ships or the cancer rates they suffered. If he was in a holding cell on board, he was going to panic. And if he wasn't on the ship, John had an entirely different problem.

“You Earthers, you’re kind of amusing.” The woman walked around to the front.

“Larrin,” John said. She grinned at him and continued to circle. John pulled at the bindings and looked up at her. “Hey, if you wanted a date, you could have just asked.”

She stopped with one hand on the back of the chair and she used her other hand to run her fingers over his jaw. John had a class in this once—the use of sexual attraction to reduce enemy focus. At the time John had come to two conclusions—first, that he used his own good looks in ways that were deeply disturbing once he took a class in manipulation and second, that he was never going to need to know the stupid shit the Air Force made him study. He’d been wrong on one of those.

She moved closer and straddled his lap. Since he was tied with his legs open, she had to really spread her own legs to fit. Then she rested her forearms on his shoulders and leaned closer. “Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard.” She was so close he could feel her warm breath. Thank god he was sleeping with Rodney regularly because if he'd been sexually frustrated, this totally would have worked.

“That’s my name. Don’t wear it out.”

She raised her eyebrows and leaned back until she was holding on to him by his shoulders. “You are an interesting man.”

“I’m a pissed man.”

She shrugged. “Most men are when they get tied to a chair. You really are too trusting about taking things from strangers.”

“Where’s the rest of my team?”

“Safe.”
“Safe the way I am?” John asked, pulling against his bonds.

Larin stood. “I thought we needed to have an honest talk.”

“I find ropes generally aren’t a good way to start a conversation.”

“Really?” She started circling again, and every time she was out of sight, John felt his muscles tighten with fear. The woman did know her intimidation techniques, and John was having to work not to show his fears. “I find that once you tie a man down, he’s motivated to be honest.” When she came back around to the front, she had a knife in hand and was playing with the tip.

“You’re about as subtle as a Bond villain.”

“Who?”

John smiled at her. “It’s not a compliment.”

She gave him a brilliant smile. Even though John was getting regular sex, even he couldn’t miss the invitation in that look.

“Where are the rest of my people?” John asked again. “If you hurt one of them, you’re going to find out what kind of enemies we make.”

“So, hurting them is off limits, but hurting you isn’t? That’s interesting.” She backed up and leaned against the edge of a table. “If you’re honest, no one is going to get hurt.”

John didn’t believe that. He should have known that a group like the Travelers would want Atlantis for themselves, but no matter what Larrin did to him or even to Rodney, he couldn’t help her take the city.

“Let’s get started,” she said in a cheerful voice, and John chose a spot on the wall to focus on as he tried to get into the right mind frame to handle what was about to happen. “Tell me about the IOC.”

Her question shocked him right out of that mind frame. “What?”

“The IOC. Tell me who they are. I don’t want to make alliances with people I don’t understand.”

John frowned. “You drugged me and tied me up to ask me about the IOC?”

“Yep,” she said cheerfully.

“You aren’t that sane, are you?”

She shrugged. “Not really, no. So, brief me on the IOC.” She started playing with the tip of the knife again.

John shifted in his bonds. His training said to resist interrogation, but Elizabeth had already approved a slightly sanitized version of Earth politics for the people of the Pegasus galaxy. She’d had to after the Air Force had pulled him out of the command and then Elizabeth herself had been forced to go back to Earth to try and argue the issue of Everett’s command.

“Earth has a number of major powers, each of whom control territory and has its own ships. The International Oversight Advisory is a group with representatives from these major powers that works together. I come from and work for a military from the United States of America, but since Atlantis is an IOC project, I ultimately answer to them. However, our expedition leader, Elizabeth Weir is the one to speak for them. Not me. I just provide security.” Elizabeth would be proud of how he was
sticking to the official story.

“And these patches indicate different local alliances?” Larrin asked as she walked to the side where John had his US patch.

“Yes.”

She touched his arm. “This is the symbol for the United States of America?”

“Yes.”

“How many states are there?”

“Fifty. Look, you really don’t have to keep me tied up to get this kind of information,” John said in his most reasonable voice.

“Maybe I like seeing you tied up,” she said, and that was an answer too disturbing to deal with. The next time the Travelers wanted to have a conversation, John was sending Major Lorne. He had a flash of Abby’s reaction if some Traveler woman did this to Lorne, and he revised that. He would send Major Teldy.

“What is the relationship between the United States of America and the IOC?”

“The US is part of the IOC.”

“A powerful part or a small part?”

John felt a tingle of discomfort. “Look, these are questions to take up with Elizabeth. She handles the IOC. I handle security on Atlantis.”

“But I don’t have Elizabeth tied up here.” Larrin came over and straddled John’s lap again, and now she had her hand resting on his shoulder, and her knife in hand, and that was way too much sharp edge entirely too close to his neck. She had definitely taken a few classes in intimidation and interrogation. And John figured her skin tight clothing and very amble cleavage shoved under his nose was just one more piece of her interrogation puzzle. “How much power does your US have in this IOC?” she asked in a sweet tone.

“I really don’t know,” John said. He was doing his best to hide his unease, but these questions were more uncomfortable than the ropes.

She hummed. “I actually do like seeing you tied up John. I like it a lot, and I wouldn’t mind keeping you around like this—sort of like a decoration.” She smiled, and unfortunately, John could see that she wasn’t joking. “I could put you in the corner when I had meetings and watch you when I was supposed to be listening to my subcaptains.”

“Atlantis wouldn’t take kindly to that.”

“Accidents happen in space, John. Our ships are old. We could explain that there was a culling. You evacuated with our people, but the ship took off too fast. We’re so sorry to report you were in an area that lost pressure. We could even tell them how we lost a dozen of our own people. We could use the accident as an excuse to request assistance.”

John clenched his teeth together. That story was entirely too plausible.

“Now, how many of these other powers would accuse the United States of America of trying to
abuse their authority?”

“What?” John’s voice rose dangerously high. That was not a stab in the dark. That was a very pointed question from someone who knew something they shouldn’t, and as much as John hated admitting it, if someone had run their mouths too much, Rodney was his first, second, and third suspect. Shit. That meant that Rodney had gone off on one of his anti-American, anti-military rants. For someone who spent most of his life working for the American military, Rodney had some pretty strong feelings.

“How many?” Larrin asked again, and she turned the knife a quarter rotation.

Okay, so John had to minimize this. Clearly they already knew something they shouldn’t, but if John could just convince her to not listen to Rodney, he might be able to solve this.

“Well, Rodney’s country certain complains a lot. Canada is like that. They don’t invest in their own armed forces, but they want to have a full say in how my territory uses the ones we pay for. France is kind of the same. They’re whiners. But like I said, I stay as far away from the IOC as I can.”

“Well then, let’s play a little game. I’ll give you the name of a territory, and you tell me what you know.

England.”

John opened his mouth, but then he closed it again. He couldn’t say anything without compromising himself. The second she hit some sensitive area like China or Russia, he was screwed, and John knew Rodney. If he was really going, he would have said all sorts of things. “I really don’t know. Politics is Elizabeth’s thing,” John said firmly.

“You knew about Canada and France.”

“Actually, I knew about Canada. It’s hard to miss when Rodney is on my team. I don’t actually know if I’m right about France. That’s just what my father used to say about them.” And then there was the French representative that used to come to General O’Neill’s office, and he did whine. A lot. John preferred the Russians who would bluster and threaten or show up with vodka and joke.

Larrin wiggled a little, rubbing herself against him, and when John didn’t rise to the occasion, she lifted her eyebrows at him and smirked.

“Oh, let’s assume you’re telling me the truth.”

“Good.”

“Which you aren’t,” she added. She looked down at him, and John could only stare up. Of course he wasn’t telling her the truth, and he had no plans to start.

“When you have command meetings on the city, who attends?”

And this was back to common knowledge. She was good. She’d start with some innocuous question and then lead them into more dangerous territory. John definitely didn’t have enough training to deal with her. However, if he didn’t at least play along on the easy questions, she could choose a much more dangerous interrogation strategy, one that might include his team. So he answered. “Teyla Emmagen, Elizabeth Weir, Rodney McKay, myself, Gunnery Sergeant Gibbs, Samas.”

“Who has the ultimate authority over the city?”

“Elizabeth.”
“Even if the rest of you disagree?”

“She’s the leader of the expedition.”

She gave him an odd look. “That’s funny, I thought Atlantis was a city, not an expedition.”

“Well we had to expedite to get to the city, “John said with a cheesy grin. Larrin actually laughed.

“Fair enough,” she agreed. “So, Teyla Emmagen is Athosian, and Samas is one of the blended species Ladon Radim described. That means three or four of you are from Earth, depending on whether Gunnery Sergeant Gibbs is actually a voting member of your council.”

“We don’t actually vote. We give Elizabeth advice, and she takes it or she doesn’t.” John was trying very hard to not think about the experiment with Michael. Carson had made him human, but the second he learned he had been a Wraith, he demanded to change back. He hadn’t been able to completely convert back, which left him stuck somewhere in the middle. It made him Guide, which was a title that terrified him, especially since no one was following him. Apparently a Guide with no one to follow translated into Wraith as ‘completely and totally fucked.’ He’d taken Carson’s cure a second time, only to kill himself the second his Wraith DNA was weak enough to avoid regeneration. John actually felt a little bit of sympathy for the guy.

No one had supported Elizabeth’s decision. Teyla and Samas had been furious, Rodney hadn’t cared, and John had concerns, but she had pushed them all aside, and John could not quite get over his aggravation at that.

“And what is Elizabeth’s relationship with the IOC?”

“She works for them.”

Larrin leaned forward. “I thought you all worked for them. Does her service to them have any special significance?”

John hesitated. He could feel the ice thinning under him, but they weren’t at any classified information yet. “She was appointed the leader by them.”

“So, they could theoretically unappoint her.” Larrin was up and pacing in a second. “I understand having a captain at the helm, but are none of you true subcaptains? If every single one of your non-voting council said to take path A, and she chose B, would you truly follow?” She slammed the knife down on the table and whirled around to look at him.

John lifted his chin and stared at her. He suspected they wouldn’t all follow. He would. He followed orders until he saw that his people needed him to do otherwise to survive, but Samas had already proven he would walk away, and he didn’t know what Teyla might do, or all the locals who followed her. The Hoff worked for and worshipped Rodney and Radek, but when they had a complaint, they went to Tony or in the case of a major problem, Teyla. However, he wasn’t about to air their dirty command laundry in front of this woman. When he didn’t respond, she started again.

“I understand that when your leaders back on Earth removed you, they placed in power men of questionable intelligence and foresight.” Larrin was really pacing now, and John could see the verbal traps laid out. Yes, Earth politics made their positions tenuous, especially since Carter and McKay were both close to providing an Earth-based recharging system for ZPMs. The second that happened, people could commute to Atlantis from fucking Colorado. Yes, that would be politically difficult, but John was not having that conversation with Larrin.

“If I don’t get honest answer, I will keep your people and simply disappear. To earn food, I suspect
that McKay would be willing to help our engineers, and to earn a few blankets, you’d be a good boy and help initialize the systems on the new Ancient warship. I’d be in a better position than when we met, and without you, without McKay and Samas, your city would be compromised.”

“You’re making an enemy out of us,” John warned, but even he had to admit that making threats while tied to a chair wasn’t terribly effective, especially since she was right. John hated it when the bad guys were right.

“And you don’t want to do that,” a new voice said. That sounded a lot like Samas. John twisted in the chair, but he couldn’t get turned around well enough to see.

“Proshi? What are you doing?” Larrin asked. John watched a Traveler man walk to the side of John’s chair, his gun pointed steadily at Larrin.

“I’m helping Samas. If you do anything to threaten him, I will kill you.”

“Proshi!” Larrin looked genuinely shocked.

“Captain Larrin,” Gibbs said as he stepped to the Traveler’s side. “Your man will shoot you. When he regains his rightful mind, he will regret it, but you will still be dead. I suggest that you save yourself and your man some grief and surrender.”

Larrin spread her arms to the sides. “So, he’s not in his rightful mind now?”

“No,” Gibbs said firmly, or maybe that was Samas. “Never assume you know all my secrets, Larrin. You never will.”

Instead of getting upset, Larrin slowly smiled as she nodded at Samas. “I will give you credit for being more clever than I expected.”

“I was thousands of years old when you were born. I have secrets that even I’ve forgotten.” Samas had that level of arrogance going that so often annoyed Elizabeth, or at least it had in that first year before they’d learned to work together as a team. Larrin seemed much more accepting of Samas’ ability to throw a monkey wrench in the plans.

“Gibbs, Samas, nice of you to drop in. Is there any chance someone could untie me?” John asked as he studied Samas and tried to figure out what was going on, both with him and with this Proshi who really did look ready to shoot Larrin.

Samas took the gun from Proshi and covered Larrin. “Untie the colonel and then tie her up,” Samas ordered the Traveler.

“Yes, sir.” This Proshi sounded a little too enthusiastic about the order. John couldn’t keep a smirk off his face when Proshi gestured for her to take a seat and then started tying her to the chair.

“So, where are we going from here?” Larrin asked as calmly. John was really starting to resent how calmly she was handling the whole hostage situation.

“We’re going off the ship,” John said. He would have left it there, but Samas holstered his weapon and stopped to offer an olive branch.

“If you want to negotiate a deal, come to Atlantis and talk to Dr. Weir,” Samas said.

Larrin didn’t even look surprised at the offer. “And are you going to hold this against me?”
Samas laughed. “You’re not the first and likely not the last to tie up Colonel Sheppard.” In a second, all the humor vanished and he stepped forward. “However, know this. If you had honestly hurt him, I would have hunted you to the ends of the universe. I would have turned your own people against you. I would have feasted on your entrails. That is, assuming I got to you first because others would be looking to do the same. He is ours. You do not take what is ours,” Samas said, his voice low. Something in the tone made all the hairs on John’s arm stand up. He hadn’t expected that sort of reaction, and Larrin lost a little of her composure in the face of Samas’ threat.

“Let’s get out of here,” John said. He moved to Samas’ side and gave his arm a tug.

Samas stepped back, his head tilted to the side. “Of course.” He gave Larrin another smile, and a chill went up John’s spine. He was really glad Samas was on his side.

“What about Proshi?” Larrin called out as they turned to leave.

John jumped in before Samas could go off on his scary act again. “We’ll give him back when we’re in the clear.”

Larrin was tied up and in the room with three armed people who all had some reason to kill her, and she still had the balls to look calm and collected. He hated her a little. John always felt frazzled when he had people holding him hostage.

Samas gave John a disgusted look, but he nodded. “I will free Proshi.” He turned and looked at Larrin again. “I’m not opposed to your goals, and I don’t feel your negotiating position is unreasonable, but if you try to take my people by force again, I will not give back anyone I might capture during a rescue.” He turned and looked at John in a way that made it very clear that he was warning John right up front that he planned to ignore any order to the contrary.

“Yeah. You tell her,” John said, poking a thumb in Larrin’s direction. She actually had the nerve to laugh, but then Samas was heading for a corridor, and John focused on keeping up, and not trying to get in the last word with Larrin. Now that was one crazy woman.

The ship was eerily silent as they walked the corridors, and the few people that they did meet, Proshi greeted warmly and then sent on their way with a variety of stories. It was the easiest escape John had ever been on. “Where’s the rest of the team?” John asked.

“They never left the planet. They’re still safe,” Samas promised, and a hard fear in the pit of John’s stomach eased. They reached the hanger without much of any challenge, which left John almost itching for a fight. “Tell the colonel about the plan,” Samas ordered Proshi.

“She was going to question him to see if his people could be trusted. She suspects that their political system might not be secure, and some people have said that their home planet may be more like the Genii than we’re comfortable with. The Genii took advantage of our ancestors, and we won’t allow that again,” Proshi said proudly.

John made a face at the almost slavish look Proshi gave Samas as though looking for approval. “Well good for you,” he said rather sarcastically.

“They have a right to protect their own position,” Samas said in that tone that made John feel very young and a little foolish. True, he was about five thousand years younger than Samas, but it still didn’t feel good to have that pointed out. They stopped at a docking bay where a puddle jumper waited with another Traveler standing guard. This was so very, very bad. However, John didn’t comment as Samas ordered both of them to the corridor. After Samas got them to sit on the ground, he leaned over them for a second, and then he came hurrying back, closing the blast door behind
“They’ll regain their senses quickly, so we should leave,” he said as he hurried into the puddle jumper. John didn’t need a second invitation. He slid behind the pilot’s seat. By the time Samas settled into the co-pilot seat, John had the puddle jumper headed out into space. He really considered ignoring what he’d seen and focusing on fact that someone had just kidnapped him as part of alliance negotiations. Sadly, he wasn’t even going to get any sympathy on that front because SG1 had that routine down pat. Dr. Jackson practically considered a capture situation a reasonable first contact scenario. The military wasn’t quite as used to it, but the SGC veterans sure didn’t show a guy much sympathy.

However, John’s repression closet was officially too full and cracking at the corners. There were things he could ignore, like getting kidnapped, but other things… not so much. So he waited until they cleared Larrin’s ship and cloaked. “So, was that nishta?” John asked as casually as he could as the jumper pulled away from Larrin’s ship. John didn’t know what he expected… a lie, a half-truth, an angry outburst. He was out of guesses. Well, he was out of guesses except for one. Nishta. Unless Samas had a portable chemical laboratory up his sleeve, there was only one kind of onac that could produce nishta. John just really hoped that Samas could make up some sort of bullshit story.
"It was nishta," Samas said.

John cringed. Of all the times that Samas had to pick for a rare bit of honesty, this wasn't a good one. No elaboration or explanation. John waited, but it seemed like Samas was happy to leave it right there.

“Handy stuff,” John said after a very awkward silence. “Any reason you don’t use it more often?”

"Do you truly wish to have this conversation?" Samas asked.

The answer to that was no, but since John's repression box was full up and threatening to crack at the edges, he figured it was time to suck it up and face bad news like an officer. True, a really bad officer who had avoided facing the situation up until now, but then John never had claimed to be great with rules. He stopped the jumpers they they drifted in space not too far from a space gate. Clearly Larrin had taken him out of the immediate area.

If it wouldn't hurt Tony, John would be tempted to dump Samas off with Larrin. They deserved each other. "I think I need to have this conversation," John said. And two seconds later, it occurred to him he was locked in a jumper with someone who could physically overpower him. Yep, he was bad with rules and stupid. What idiot had ever promoted him? Oh yeah, that's be O'Neill.

"Very well. I can’t control delivery well, so everyone in the area could end up getting dosed. An electrical jolt or certain chemicals will break the bond immediately, so it’s unpredictable, and if the enemy knows I have the power, they can guard against it.”

For some reason, John hadn't expected a clear assessment of practical application, but maybe Samas was counting on John's ignorance of the drug. “Any reason you didn’t use it with Ford?” John still felt a stab of guilt at the man’s name. Yes, he’d wanted to kill Ford himself when the man had threatened Rodney. If he’d succeeded in hurting Rodney, John would have gutted him. However, he hadn’t hurt Rodney, and he had suffered far more than anyone should have, all because he had tried to save two people and had been fed on by a wraith as a result. Worse, there was nothing he could do now to help Ford, and the hospitals and addiction counselors had only been moderately helpful.

Samas let the silence draw out. John suspected that Samas was having some internal conversation with Gibbs, and quite frankly he was relieved to have the gunny around. If Samas had ended up in someone with fewer morals, John wasn’t sure things would have gone as well. Eventually Samas said, “I didn’t know how nishta would react to the enzyme. There was a danger that I could kill them all or send them into a psychotic rage. With Tony and Rodney in the middle, I wouldn’t take the risk.”

John wanted to be angry. He wanted to have someone to blame when really he blamed himself and the fact that he hadn’t stepped up and done more to stop Everett’s grandstanding. Ford had wanted to impress the man, and John hadn’t done anything to get in there and offer a dose of common sense. However, he had to admit that Samas’ logic had been solid. “Well that’s a good reason. Let’s try to avoid psychotic rages,” he agreed wearily.

“I thought it best.”

“Nifty superpower,” John said weakly. Samas gave him a very odd look.

John really wished he hadn’t been so bored on Earth. If he hadn’t been bored, he wouldn’t have read
anything to try and keep his mind off Atlantis, and if he hadn’t been trying so hard to do that, he
wouldn’t have read all of SG1’s mission reports, and then he could ignored the one truth his brain
kept circling. He sighed, and Samas raised his eyebrows.

Right. Time to get this over with. “So, I already had my suspicions, but this means you’re a queen,
right? I mean, Hathor was the only goa’uld who could nishta people without needing access to a
laboratory and a big honking throne to deliver the chemical.” John forced himself to stop talking and
he prayed that Samas had another explanation or even a plausible lie. John didn’t really mind being
lied to.

“I am,” Samas said and that took all the wind out of John’s sails.

“Thought so,” he admitted unhappily.

“You did?” It wasn’t often that John got to surprise Samas, but apparently he’d managed.

John sighed and turned his attention back to the controls. Clearly Samas wasn't going to get violent
in defense of his secret. Her secret? Yeah, John was going with 'his' until someone told him different.
“The very first conversation I had with the gunny, he told me that you wanted to recreate your world.
I pointed out that we didn't have hosts, and he agreed, but said you were still going to do your best to
create the world you knew. You never once said that onac children were a problem, so I had a few
suspicions.”

Samas studied him. “And you never said anything?”

“Samas, I never questioned that you had our best interests in mind, even when you lied.”

John stopped. Wait. Samas had been with Rodney when the Travelers had gotten a primer on Earth
politics. Well, shit. Yeah, John could see how easily Samas could have prompted Rodney to say too
much. That explained that. As much as John agreed that the Travelers had a right to know who they
were dealing with, he would have avoided airing all the dirty laundry on day one, especially when it
led to getting tied to a chair.

John hated it when that happened.

"So, you aren’t surprised?" Samas asked. "Would you be surprised at the thought that I have already
spawned children?"

John repression box groaned with the weight of all the things he'd been trying to officially not notice.
Clearly Samas didn't plan to let John live in ignorance.

"When I saw the Satedans start congregating down by the flooded sections, I had a few suspicions,
but I know Ronon or Teyla would have come to me if there were a problem. Trusting your people
means you trust them, even when they seem a little crazy.” John shrugged. He didn’t have another
way to describe it. He followed his gut, and his gut said that Samas and Gibbs were part of his team.
His gut also said that he’d had one of Samas’ kids inside his head fighting the iratus infection, but
like he’d thought to himself more than once, that Pandora’s box was better left closed. John didn’t
need rumors that he was compromised haunting his record. His record was splotchy enough without
any more marks on it.

Samas remained silent as John dialed up the planet Larrin had taken him from. “Will you tell Earth?”
Samas asked. He didn't even sound particularly upset or threatening while asking it.

And that was the question. John knew how General O’Neill would react, and part of him felt guilty
as hell for even considering keeping this secret now that he had confirmation. O’Neill had trusted
him with everything… hell, the man had trusted John to save what was left of their planet if all else failed. John carried the weight of that trust. But as much as O’Neill was a fair and just man, let Russians or symbiotes get involved and he was… less than reasonable.

“If they haven’t figured it out, that’s on them,” John finally said. “It’s not like I’ve hidden anything you’ve done, and I plan to tell them two of the Travelers helped us. That’s all I know out of my own personal experience.”

Samas nodded.

“Your people… this is a good alliance, right?” John really needed someone to reassure him he wasn’t completely fucking up, and yeah, Samas was probably the worst person in the world for any sort of honest, unbiased opinions, but John would take what he could get.

“Which alliance? My symbiotes or the Travelers?”

“Oh, I think the Travelers just shot themselves in the foot if they ever wanted an alliance with us,” John said with a snort.

“Why?” Samas asked.

John glanced over. “Excuse me? Samas, you had to rescue me off Larrin’s ship. I’m grateful you could even find me, so I really don’t want to trust any of them again.”

“They have to trust us to be able to defend their people. Is it really unreasonable to ask that we have a sane system of government? Is it unreasonable to apply enough pressure to see how an ally might react?”

For a second, John couldn’t even come up with a response. Was it unreasonable? Since he was the one who’d been tied to a chair, he was going to answer, yes. Hell yes. Fucking hell yes. That had been completely unreasonable. “So you’re okay with discussion that come with bondage?” John demanded. He immediately thanked God and his lucky stars that Tony was not in the jumper because the man would have had too much fun with that. As it was, Samas gave him a sly smile.

“If they had Cowen tied up or Koyla, how do you think they would have reacted?” Samas asked.

John laughed as he imagined the bluster and threats that either man would have issued.

“Exactly,” Samas said. “She now knows you aren’t going to bluster and threaten her. I assume you didn’t bluster and threaten,” Samas said.

“She was doing most of the threatening. I was busy getting tied to a chair,” John said. “But she is too interested in politics on Atlantis.”

“She’s right that our political system is dangerous, though,” Samas said.

John ordered the jumper to stop the atmospheric descent and go into orbit above the planet. He clearly needed to give Samas his attention because he had never said anything against the leadership of the city. Ever. If Samas wanted a change of leadership, that was an issue. “Come on, Samas, we’ve been doing pretty well.” As much as John didn’t want to admit it, he was bothered by Samas’ disapproval.

"When you and Elizabeth are in charge, we have avoided most major catastrophies. However, what would the city be like if Ellis and Woolsey had control? What about if LaPierre sat in Elizabeth’s seat and Colonel Chekov had yours?” Samas’ expression challenged John to really consider those
"I like Colonel Chekov. I wouldn’t like him taking my job, but he’s a good officer." John thought he probably would have done a much better job than the Americans O’Neill had put in charge. He also thought the odds of O’Neill letting a Russian take military command were somewhere between zero and not a chance in Netu.

“Okay, what about Colonel Zukhov?” Samas asked. "If the Americans cut funding and the Russians were the single largest support of the expedition, what sort of leader would Zukhov make?"

John wrinkled his nose. “That could be a problem.”

“Humans plan for years. Onac have to plan for decades—centuries. One day you and Elizabeth will be memories—founders to be remembered and honored, and other people will sit in that chair in Elizabeth’s office. Will that be a dictatorship? Is that what we will leave for our children?”

John really didn't like where this conversation was going. "Samas, this is an Earth operation."

"This is Atlantis," Samas disagreed, "a city built by Ancients and run by a coalition of individuals from both the Milky Way and the Pegasus galaxies. What Larrin wants is balance. The Travelers have never tried to use their superior technology to take over their trading partners, but they have also fought to maintain independence from the Genii. We could have worse allies."

"She wants power," John said.

Samas gave him another of those looks that served to remind John that Samas had five thousand years of experience on him. "No, she wants to be able to stop power. Have you asked after the structure on Traveler ships? How captains run them?"

"Funny enough, but no one really talked to me when they had me tied to a chair. It was more about asking questions."

"Proshi explained a lot."

John snorted. "I bet." John almost felt sorry for the guy. He was going to wake up with no idea of why he would have turned on his own people to help Samas rescue John. Of course, that could also make Travelers wary of crossing Atlantis, and right now that was a good thing.

"A captain runs the ship and his or her orders are never questioned, but there is also a council of subcaptains," Samas explained. John remembered that Larrin had demanded to know if any of them were true subcaptains.

"Subcaptains have power?" John asked.

"If all the subcaptains or all the subcaptains save one disagree with the captain’s orders, they can call a council and force the captain to change the order. They cannot force the captain to take a particular path, but they can veto the path the captain chose."

Samas was not being subtle. "And what do you think this means for us?"

"If Elizabeth had wanted to conduct the Michael experiment, the rest of us could have gotten together. If all of us disagreed, or if you were the only person to support her, then we could have forced her to change her mind, although we would not have been able to force her to take a particular action."
John rubbed a hand over his face. “Samas, Earth will never go for that.”

“Not for a nearly fully functional Ancient warship?”

“No.” Elizabeth might want a ship, but she would fight like a demon to keep her power. The IOC had learned that lesson. Hell, John had learned that lesson.

“How about for an alliance with a species with a dozen of them?” Samas asked.

John's brain whited out for a second. “What?” he finally asked once his higher functions came back online.

Samas nodded. “Travelers win by hiding, and most of their ships were from the first Genii federation; however, they have found a few Ancient ships here and there, warships, transports, scout ships. Some they can run because they’ve rewired them. Others are too damaged to run, so the Travelers simply take note of their position in space.”

"And you think they'll give us this information if why play nice with them even if they're crazy people?"

"Atlantis could do worse than to follow their political system."

It sounded so possible. It sounded kinda good, actually. Atlantis would get her ships back. John envisioned a future with lean ships perched on Atlantis' long piers. He wanted that so much his heart ached a little, but he couldn't see this plan working. "Elizabeth would never agree," John said.

"Why?"

"What?" John wasn't sure he understood the question.

"Why would Elizabeth fight this? All she would lose would be the ability to push a decision through against the wishes of her entire command staff. Do you really think she needs or wants that power?"

John thought about Michael. She had used that power. With a little time, Samas would have convinced Rodney to side with him, and then it would have been the rest of them against the experiment, John neutral because of his position as her military leader, and Elizabeth standing alone.

Remembering the fear on Michael’s face when he realized that he was not fully Wraith again, John couldn’t help but feel like he had done something horrible. He’d participated in an experiment so horrendous that it should be burned out of reality. Maybe part of that was his own near-experience with becoming iratus, but he couldn’t imagine doing anything that hideous again. If Carson wanted another experiment, this time John would vote against it. No Wraith should be forced to be ‘Guide.’

“We need to approach this as something to protect us from future leaders, not her,” John said slowly as he tried to figure out how he might broach the subject. "Elizabeth would be more open if this came from Teyla."

"Of course," Samas agreed.

John rubbed his hand over his face. "Shit. I’m conspiring against the person I swore to uphold, aren’t I?"

"Are you trying to take her out of power?" Samas asked in a very neutral voice, and for one horrible second, John suspected that Samas might back him in a coup. That was going straight into the repression box along with the idea that John had already carried one of Samas' kids. A very
enthusiastic kid who had wild dreams of taking on whales and a strange way of mentally singing every time it blocked the iratus virus from entering a new cell.

"No, no, no, and absolutely no," John said firmly.

"Do you plan to kill her?"

John just glared at Samas, and Samas grinned at him. “You are not conspiring against her. You are creating a city government that has the power to stand against the IOC.”

"And the IOC is going to see that danger in a heart beat," John warned. They could play politics on Atlantis, but that didn't mean Earth was going to roll over and play dead.

"They will. However, they will also see this as a check on American ambition."

"If we mention that Larrin had these negotiations while I was tied to a chair, this is going to be a non-starter," John warned. Great, now he was considering falsifying official reports. He needed to convert to Catholicism so he could go to confession.

"We might want to avoid that conversation," Samas agreed.

John looked at the world spinning below them. If he went down there now, he would need to grab his team and run before Larrin did something crazier, but if he did that, they wouldn't be able to convince Elizabeth to negotiate in good faith. John liked that his de facto commanding officer felt protective of him, but that would be counter to their goals right now. They needed to convince Elizabeth that the Travelers were a more stable power base than the IOC, and John believed they were. The Travelers were crazy as shit, but that was still better than the greedy and short-sighted IOC. "We need to go back and work out the details with her, don’t we?" John said wearily.

"It would make things go more smoothly if she knew you were in favor of her suggestion," Samas agreed.

"So, she might not try and kidnap us before we can warn the others that she’s crazy,” he translated that.

Samas nodded. "Yes, but I honestly believe you are the only one in real danger if our negotiations fair. Remember, they know where Ancient ships are, but they can’t activate most of them."

"Actually, that makes Rodney, me and any gene carrier a target.” John groaned. “And these people are used to playing hide and seek with Wraith, so if they grab our people, we aren’t going to find them again."

"Probably not."

"Unless you nishta one again," John said hopefully.

"Which requires finding one first."

And that was the tactical situation. If John went back, he risked being taken. If he didn't, he risked compromising any long-term treaty. When it came to flying, John knew he was the expert. He was starting to think he might not suck at running a city; however, politics was so far out of his comfort zone that John didn't know what to do, and going back to Elizabeth would set the balls rolling in a direction that might not be to Atlantis’ favor. She wouldn't appreciate Larrin's willingness to kidnap them. Hell, she never had forgiven Crowley and she only allowed Genii in the city because it was easier to keep an eye on the Genii when you had some connection to them, and because John had
convinced her that he knew how to turn an undercover agent. That was proof he had already lied to Elizabeth. And again, he'd done that to back Samas' plan.

"Is going back a good idea?" John came right out and asked.

"No, but it will earn you their respect and it is the best chance of an Alliance. The best chance at ensuring our safety would require us to get the rest of the team and return to Atlantis."

John groaned. Samas just had to put it that way.

He reached for the radio. "Teyla, Rodney, are you there?"

Teyla immediately answered. "John. We were growing concerned. Is Gibbs with you?"

"Yeah, we got an invite to talk to Larrin about a whole bunch of ships they might know where to find."

Rodney's voice interrupted. "Ships, as in many ships? What kind?"

"Hey, we're still negotiating, but I wanted to come back and let you know where we went. The conversation with Larrin just ended up going longer than we thought. Honestly, she's a little scary and I'd suggest we run for the hills, only the idea of having multiple Ancient ships is a little tempting. Samas, Gibbs and I are heading back to see if we can't get Larrin pinned down on some specifics. Teyla, I'm calling Atlantis and requesting a new puddle jumper come and get you and Rodney. Then brief Elizabeth."

Rodney started spluttering about ships and technology and how he was vital to evaluate any offers the Travelers made. Fortunately, Teyla cut him off with a quick assurance she would do both.

John turned off the radio with a sigh. "If you get us killed, I'll make your next life a living hell."

"Sir," Gibbs said in a switch so abrupt that even John couldn't miss it, "I will make sure that Samas keeps the good of the mission in mind."

"That makes me feel better, gunny," John said. "We still might die, but at least I'll die feeling better."

"Nah," Gibbs said, "at worst you'll end up a slave."

John gave Gibbs a truly withering glare before he piloted the shuttle back toward the space gate. Unfortunately Gibbs was as immune to dirty looks as Samas was.
John understood why Samas thought the Travelers were good allies, but he wasn't sure that anyone else would agree. He wasn't sure why he agreed, except for the fact that every time Samas had done something crazy, it had turned out well. The Genii alliance had provided Atlantis with technicians, scientists, military intelligence on the galaxy, and supplies. John wasn't sure what Atlantis would look like without that relationship; however, he suspected they would be a lot more desperate.

"If you want us to have a council government and invite the Travelers in, what excuse do we give the IOC, other than Larrin is certifiably insane and she wants a little planetary diversity on the council?" John doubted the IOC would appreciate that, even if they did have warships.

"I suspect Larrin can be persuasive," Samas said.

John snorted. Personally, he was not likely to take her word if she told him space was black.

"And if we could use this to solidify the current members of the informal council, which would insulate Dr. Weir's position. She would see the benefit in that."

John narrowed his eyes. Wait. "That would make you an official council member or subcaptain or whatever we call it."

Samas got a smug look on his face. "We could call my position the Turi ambassador."

Oh that was strange. John could feel the political waters swirling around him, and right now he wasn't sure who was more devious—Samas or Larrin. Actually, he did know. Samas could run circles around Larrin, and considering that Larrin had run circles around John, that was a little telling. If Samas didn't want to explain himself, he wouldn't. "Turi," John said slowly. "That's the name the Satedans on Atlantis call themselves. That could work. They have a warrior culture that doesn't fit in well with Teyla's people, so it makes sense to have two representatives from the Pegasus galaxy. Well, three if you count Larrin's seat on the council." John watched to see if Samas would offer any more information.

"Likely she will give that seat to Kitsune since it is her people who need the place to live. But that would balance the three people from Earth—the military commander, the science lead, and the IOC representative. And with the IOC representative as the head of the council, it would require at least one person from Earth to veto her decision."

John focused on piloting the puddle jumper. He had the engines on minimum thrust, but they were going to reach Larrin's ship eventually, and then John would lose this window of rare honesty from Samas. "Turi doesn't just mean Satedan, does it?" he came right out and asked.

Samas gave him an amused look. "No, it’s the name for onac on Atlantis."

That was the reality John had been avoiding. "There aren’t going to be any goa’uld style takeovers, are they?" John didn’t believe there would be for a second, but he had to ask.

“No. Their life is in the water, hunting and being hunted. They sing to each other. They play dangerous games with whales and once in a lifetime, they join with someone and learn something about the strange world above their heads before they go home. Their world is the water." Samas sounded so proud of that. O'Neill would call him a fool, but John believed Samas.

"And if that changes, General O’Neill is going to send symbiote poison through the gate so fast that
you aren’t going to have time to get out of Gibbs’ head," John warned.

"That had occurred to me."

John wanted to drop this. He really did, but he could remember swimming to escape whales, and the truth was like a scab he had to pick at. "So, do only Satedans host?"

Samas studied him for a long time. “No, anyone who proves their worth can carry a symbiote. Have you seen the turi blades that the Satedans and some of the Athosians carry?”

“Really thin, wicked looking things?”

Samas nodded. “To carry one is a sign that you have either had a Turi symbiote or you carry one currently.”

John frowned. “Wait. Radek has a pin. It’s a tiny turi blade.”

Samas smiled and nodded. “If we have only Satedan or even only warriors, we would have a rather unbalanced society. Radek and Jonas both host.”

John felt like he'd been punched in the gut. He had no idea why that bothered him, but it did. He was supposed to protect his geeks, and John didn't understand the size and potential danger involved here. “Please tell me Rodney hasn’t considered this," he asked. He felt a cold sort of terror as he waited for the answer.

"Rodney is afraid to host, and I don’t think the secrets he keeps have anything to do with classified material.”

Relief washed through John. "Yeah, Rodney’s got some bad stuff in his background.” John had only teased out a fraction of it. He’d never met a man who guarded his past as jealously as Rodney, but John knew it was bad. “I don’t think it would be a good idea for Rodney to have someone else in his head.”

“A person must fight to earn a Turi. Rodney would have to choose to host and then fight through a mental obstacle course to earn the right.”

“Does a person always choose? Is there any exception to the rule that a host has to earn a Turi?”

John gave Samas a long, searching look.

The corner of Samas' mouth twitched. The cagey old bastard knew exactly what they were really talking about. “In rare circumstances where a person’s life hangs in the balance, exceptions might be made if a person’s next of kin were to beg and threaten enough.”

“Oh.” John let out a long breath. So Rodney knew about the Turi, and he’d begged and-or threatened Samas to get a Turi into John. Yeah, that was an answer John didn’t want ever spoken aloud. “Maybe we won’t mention that.”

“I hadn’t planned to,” Samas agreed.

Eventually they reached their destination, no matter how slow John drove. He wasn't particularly surprised when Larrin's ship was still in position when they returned. It wasn't like Atlantis had ships that could chase her down. He also wasn't surprised when he got the all-clear to land in one of her bays. If he was going to try and capture someone, he'd let them land their ship first. It would make it a lot easier, actually.
John held the jumper in position as the bay doors started to close. "If she tries to tie me to a chair again, I want you to nishta her," John said. He was definitely getting an ulcer.

"I couldn’t do that without exposing you to it as well," Samas warned.

"Fine, I’m okay with that. Just un-nishta me before we get home.” John could see the shock on Samas’ face. Honestly, if Samas meant to cause any harm, he could have done it a long time ago. If John didn't know Samas' history, he'd be offended by how often the man assumed the worst of him. "She’s going to want you on the council." John lowered the jumper to the floor of the docking bay and started shutting down systems.

"Because I am not from Earth, yes."

"The IOC is going to have kittens." John didn't say it, but O'Neill was going to have even more. He hated symbiotes. He even hated Tok’ra, and they were supposed to be allies. Of course, they were allies that screwed humans over as often as not, but at least they weren't trying to take over the universe.

"Yes, but if they find out I’m a queen, they will have given birth to so many already that you won’t be able to find the new batch," Samas said.

Thinking about the Tok’ra made John wonder about something. "You come out of the gunny all the time, can’t they tell by looking at you?"

"If they knew what they were looking for, yes. Luckily for me, they don’t. A Tok’ra would recognize me immediately, but I made avoiding them a condition of my cooperation."

"Yeah, well by cooperation, I'm pretty sure the IOC and military meant keeping you under house arrest," John said. It disgusted him that his people treated others that way, but they also ignored Teyla and generally disregarded Rodney, so it's not like Samas was singled out. O’Neill even tried to fight it when John got his first Russian spetsnaz troops, and those were six of his toughest fighters. Atlantis was full of people either the US military or the IOC hated. In John's case, they both hated him. Elizabeth had spent more than one afternoon trying to get John to understand that he had to play politics better for that very reason.

So maybe the Travelers weren't such bad allies to have around. Yeah, Larrin liked him in slightly creepy ways, but at least she liked him.

"I guess it's time to face the music," John said as he plastered a grin on his face. He didn't even have a weapon since Larrin hadn't been kind enough to leave him armed when she kidnapped him.

John opened the back of the puddle jumper and let Gibbs and Samas take the lead. "Are you sure it's safe to have weapons out?" Samas asked. John stopped next to him, and there were a lot of Traveler weapons pointed at them.

"So, I invited you to talk, huh?" Larrin stepped forward and slipped her sidearm into her holster. It was one of the blasters like Ronon carried, and John wondered if the Travelers would be willing to share. John really liked Ronon's blaster.

"I take it you were listening to our radios," John said.

Larrin smiled. "I love to listen." She winked at him. "I especially love to listen to you."

"Well Samas is the one who convinced me I should come back and talk, but if you don't have your guys put your weapons down, I'm going to start feeling unwelcome, and that might get ugly."
"For you or for us?" Larrin asked.

John didn't answer, and her gaze slowly drifted over to Samas. It was good to have the onac and the gunny on his side because she signaled to their people and the weapons were quickly put away. "Thank you," John said.

Larrin quirked an eyebrow at him. "You are definitely not Genii."

"That's the best compliment I've gotten yet," John said. He'd feel bad about insulting Genii, but he did it to their face too. "So, we're here to talk about whether we can still be allies with someone who is a little crazy."

Her eyebrow went up more.

"Perhaps I should handle the negotiations," Samas suggested.

John considered objecting, but the fact was that he was out of his depth here. He hated politics.

Larrin looked at Samas. "So, you outrank him?"

Samas pursed his lips. "Technically, no. However, he has pledged to defend the command structure of the city--any command structure of the city. He is very careful to not provide his own voice to any debate which does not touch on military issues. If you wanted to take someone who had an understanding of the nuances of power in Atlantis, you could not have chosen more poorly."

John rolled his eyes. "I'd be offended if you weren't right, Samas."

Larrin definitely looked interested, but he wasn't sure that she believed them. She moved toward the corridor, and Samas followed, leaving John to bring up the rear. It meant that he had Larrin's guards at his back, which was a little uncomfortable.

"Sheppard kept telling me I needed to speak to Dr. Weir, that she was the only power on Atlantis."

She stopped long enough to look at John as though daring him to disagree, but he was staying out of this. He'd decided to let Samas handle this mess, and that meant Samas could damn well handle it.

"Power is never that direct," Samas said mildly. "But Colonel Sheppard makes an art out of avoiding any form of power. Most likely that's a reaction to the fact that much of the city believes he is a deascended Ancient and that his every decision is informed by his great wisdom."

"Damn it. Did you have to bring that up?" Sheppard demanded. "Do not listen to him. This whole Ancient thing is crap, and you know it Samas," John snapped.

Samas' expression turned amused, which did not improve John's mood in the least.

Larrin opened a hatch. "I had heard a rumor or two. I thought maybe the good colonel liked to be worshipped."

"Don't start," John warned. He moved to a spot next to Samas, but suddenly Larrin shoved him in the back. John had to dart forward just to keep from falling on his face, and even then his knees caught on something soft and he ended up face down.

He twisted around just in time to see the hatch swing shut and a lock engaged with a loud 'click.' "Damn it! Samas! Get me out of here!" John leaped off the bed where he'd landed and slammed his open hand against the hatch. "Samas!!"
Silence answered him.

"Well shit." John waited. If Samas nishtaed them, it would take a little time for him to order Larrin's crew to open the door. He waited longer. Eventually John had to admit that Samas wasn't coming back for him. John sat on the edge of the bed. The room was so narrow that he didn't have more than six inches on either side, but at least the mattress was comfortable. John flopped back and stared at the ceiling. It was a really comfortable bed, and he didn't have to plot against Elizabeth and the IOC, so that was good.

The worst thing was that John was almost sure Samas had conspired to lock him in a closet-sized bedroom in order to protect him. John got it. He planned to lie to General O'Neill about the symbiotes for the same reason. They both wanted a strong Atlantis that would be the lifeboat if Earth fell to the Ori, and if the general knew about Samas, he would make the wrong decisions.

John was counting rivets in the ceiling when the lock on the door clicked open. He didn't even bother sitting up because he didn't have a whole lot of power here, and he suspected these people weren't much into posturing. It was actually kind of a relief. Sometimes people expected him to be in charge because he was the military commander, but John was the officer who had liked being in Antarctica. He wasn't really into the political posturing.

When the hatch opened, John lifted his head and looked to see who it was. A blond man with a wiry frame leaned against the door. "Well at least she locked you in one of the good rooms. A lot of times she dumps visitors in a storage closet." The man grinned. "I'm Dugir."

John sat up. "John Sheppard."

"Larrin is with the other subcaptain. I take it she decided she didn't want to negotiate with you."

"Something like that," John agreed. "Not to sound suspicious or anything but..." John let his voice trail off. He had no idea if this guy was here to make nice or start a round of torture. Larrin was a little unpredictable.

Dugir laughed. "No need for paranoia. I'm one of Larrin's subcaptains. I'm in charge of landing parties and personal weaponry, and since I'm another one who avoids politics, Larrin asked me to show you around the armory while she figured out how to steal all the political power you don't have bolted down to the decking."

John snorted. "The politics on Atlantis are not that much fun," John warned. Then again, Larrin's idea of fun was kidnapping an ally's leader and tying him to a chair. She might enjoy playing with Woolsey and the IOC crowd. "So, you're just going to show me weapons?"

"Yep. Larrin said I should make you envious of all the big-ass guns we have aboard so she can cheat you during trading."

"I am always up for looking at big ass guns," John said as he got up from the bed.

"Let the others tie themselves in knots. We can go shoot stuff," Dugir said. That was a man after John's heart. John followed him out into the ship.
Tony toed his shoes off in the workroom before heading into their bedroom. He stopped at the door, shocked at the sight of Gibbs laying on the bed when the sun wasn't even completely down.

"Hey. You okay?" he asked softly. He inched into the room, not sure what to expect from a sick Gibbs. This was totally new territory. Now that Tony joined with Jo on a regular basis, he understood because she considered every cold virus an enemy intruder to be destroyed.

Actually, if Tony considered himself the secure facility, a virus was a sort of an invasion, but onac hatred for sharing their host should mean that Samas protected Gibbs from any sort of illness. Tony settled down on the edge of the bed.

Only then did Gibbs shift his arm off his eyes. "Do you ever wonder what the hell we're doing?"

Tony's stomach dropped. Last time Gibbs asked that, Ellis had just threatened to kill Samas and had assigned Gibbs to KP duty.

"What happened?"

Gibbs put his arm back over his eyes. "I'm not sure, but I think I just gave the Atlantis to the Travelers."

"You what?" Tony's voice rose.

In one motion, Gibbs sat up and then stood. The stiffness of his movements suggested that Samas was not in there, which made sense. Gibbs tended to do any and all angsting inside his own head if Samas was around. "Samas made a deal with Larrin."

"With Larrin?"

Gibbs moved to the window. "She's going to offer us two warships, one almost fully functional and one in need of repairs. She'll also tell us where we can find an old repair yard the Ancients used where we might be able to scrounge some parts for the one ship we are already borrowing."

"That's good, right?" Tony asked. He really wasn't seeing any need for angst.

Gibbs turned around. "In return, she'd going to demand a change in political structure."

Tony blinked. "Meaning?" he asked slowly.

"Atlantis will run the way a Traveler ship is run. Elizabeth is captain, or we'll probably use the term commander, but she will have subcaptains who have the power to veto her."

"Oh, she's not going to like that," Tony said. In fact, he cringed when he even thought about how that would go over. It would be like an explosive fart in church. "What did John have to say?"

Gibbs shrugged. "I don't know because Larrin locked him in a closet to keep him out of the way, and Samas let her."

"But... He hasn't said anything about that."

"He also hasn't mentioned that we ended up on Larrin's ship because she kidnapped him and tied him to a chair before using intimidation techniques to try and get information."
Tony's brain was officially broken. "She what?"

"We're allied with Genii. She wanted to know if our military commander was anything like his."

"Oh." Tony couldn't think of anything else to say, just that. If Everett or Ellis had been tied to a chair, heads would be rolling. Heads and arms and possibly torsos. Then again, after hearing some of Evan's stories, Tony assumed O'Neill probably would have shrugged it off. Gibbs kept staring out the window, and Tony struggled to come up with a question that could get the full story out of Gibbs. If this was some coup, Gibbs would have stopped Samas. Unless, of course, Samas had taken over completely, but Tony did not believe him capable of doing that. No way. Samas knew the danger that lay down that path. "So who are the subcaptains that will have this shiny new power over Elizabeth?"

"Samas for one," Gibbs said. That wasn't a surprise. If anything, Tony was surprised it had taken Samas this long to try for more power. "Samas is going to talk to Elizabeth about trying to get an official position for Ambassador of the Turi. He's going to couch this whole scheme in terms of protecting her position. All her subcaptains will be her advisers, which will make the position poison to any other member of the IOC who tried to take her office."

Tony took a deep breath. That might work. Ever since O'Neill had beefed up the American presence on Atlantis--sending Walter and dozens of new personnel--the other countries had tried to do the same. The Russians had sent special forces troops, much to O'Neill's dismay. The French and Italians and Chinese had sent more scientists. The Australians had sent a rescue team. As much as Tony tried to stay out of the politics, he could see the system straining.

"Elizabeth might appreciate the protection from IOC manipulation. The Air Force took John, it's not outside the realm of possibility that they'd use some mistake on her part to remove her from office. God, we might end up with Woolsey, and then what would we do?" The man would have them counting paperclips all day.

Gibbs leaned against the wall, but he kept his gaze out the window. "Teyla would be a council member, along with me and a member to represent the Travelers."

That wasn't so bad. "Will John and Rodney stay on the council?"

Gibbs nodded.

"Okay, that might turn out pretty good." Tony certainly didn't see any reason for getting upset.

When Gibbs turned to look at him, it was clear that Gibbs didn't share his opinion. Gibbs then turned his attention back to the ocean. Tony slowly moved until he could lean against Gibbs' back and wrap an arm around his middle. "Talk to me," Tony said softly.

"I conspired against the leadership of the city."

"It sounds like you conspired to keep something stupid from happening, and we both know that Earth can be stupid." They were both silent for a time, and Tony leaned against Gibbs. Sometimes words weren't enough between them. Both of them had used words against others--in undercover operations, in interrogations rooms. Lies were as natural as breathing. And both of them had been played. Ex-wives, ex-lovers, fathers--they'd both been screwed over. So when things were difficult, they never resorted to words.

Tony leaned into Gibbs, closed his eyes and waited. Eventually, Gibbs rested his hand on Tony's arm, and then Tony traced small circles against Gibbs' stomach.
"Samas told her about the political instabilities on Earth and the potential that Earth could fall."

Tony continued drawing his circles as he waited.

"Samas told her that she couldn't allow Earth to appropriate her ships. She has to keep command staff on them and keep the codes out of Earther hands. Samas also told her about the Ancient ship we already found, and said she had to keep it out of Earth hands because they will lead the Ori right back here in their attempt to save their world."

Tony closed his eyes tightly and thought about Tom Morrow and Probie and even Zeevah. None of them had clearance for the gate, so if the Ori broke Earth's defenses, they'd either die or they'd end up worshipping evil aliens. Ziva would die first, as would Morrow. Tony wasn't sure what Tim would do, but he'd probably pretend to convert and then try and undermine the Ori, only to be killed in some horrible way when he got caught.

Everyone they ever saved, every family member they'd comforted, every colleague and coworker and neighbor... they'd all be lost. Tony felt the pain of that like a knot in his chest that made it hard to breathe. Samas had lost all that once. Tony wasn't sure how he'd survived.

"Realistically," Tony said slowly, "if the Ori get that far, a couple of Ancient ships won't make a difference."

"How many people could they evacuate?" Gibbs asked.

Even now, Gibbs had a 'leave no man behind' philosophy, one that made him a good match for John. Suddenly Tony was so very glad Sheppard had been locked in a closet for this conversation.

"How long would those evacuees live if the Ori followed them back here? How many Pegasus natives would die?"

"Fight on their soil, hide the home waters," Gibbs said softly in a tone that made it clear he was repeating someone, and that sounded a lot like Samas.

"Atlantis is home water for a lot of us, not just the onac," Tony said, but he also understood Gibbs. Part of him wanted to go back to Earth and save everyone, but he didn't know how.

Gibbs looked over his shoulder. "If Atlantis controlled the ship, who would they evacuate?"

Tony had no answer.

"Under the current system, with Sheppard being a member of the US Air Force, who would he be duty-bound to rescue?"

And the lightbulb went on. "He'd have a list of priority targets," Tony said, "President, Vice-President, Joint Chiefs, Congress. There'd be a list of vital personnel, too--scientists, doctors, and critical personnel."

"And the whole political system would move here," Gibbs said. "That's what Samas worries about, that's what he warned Larrin about and what he will point out to Dr. Weir. I let him plot against the President I swore to uphold."

"You mean the President you sent you out here to get rid of you, who allowed Ellis to threaten you life and who kept you under arrest without ever giving you a chance to defend yourself in a court of law?" Tony asked. Honestly, the way Earth had treated Gibbs and Samas had convinced Tony to switch loyalty. He would back Gibbs and Samas in all things, including this attempt to align Atlantis
with the Pegasus galaxy instead of the Milky Way.

"I swore to uphold the Constitution and defend the President," Gibbs said miserably.

"If you saw two people drowning, would you choose the President over a little girl?" Tony asked. Gibbs turned around enough to give Tony a dirty look. Yep, Tony knew which buttons to poke because there was no way Gibbs would ever allow a child to die. "If the Ancient ships go to Earth, Sheppard might save the President, but Resa and Lameyi and Jinto and Wex could all end up dead. I agree with Samas on this."

Gibbs pulled away from Tony, and for a second, Tony feared that he was going to storm off to his wood shop. Instead he moved over to the bed and sat down stiffly. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees and let his head hang.

"You're not turning against Earth or doing something to help the Ori. You're just making sure the lifeboat doesn't sink if the ship goes down."

Gibbs have an amused grunt. "That's almost word for word what Samas said."

"Maybe because he's right."

Another long silence fell, but eventually Gibbs sat up. "I sometimes wonder if that isn't why O'Neil chose the people he did."

"What do you mean?"

"He sent Weir who has seen the worst of human politics. She's had to sit at negotiation tables with people who committed genocide. Then he sends Sheppard, an officer with a reputation for bucking orders and Samas." Gibbs shook his head. "I'm not sure what political game he's playing, but he put a lot of independent thinkers in charge of a remote location."

"You don't think it was an accident?" Tony asked.

Gibbs snorted.

"Maybe not," Tony agreed. Leaders tended to think about stuff like that. Hell, he'd heard more than one rumor at NCIS that said that Gibbs was on the do-not-transfer list because the idea of Gibbs running a remote office with little to no oversight terrified the crap out of the director. Gibbs ran enough circles around Morrow when the man had a desk on the next floor. If they'd stayed at NCIS, Jenny Shepherd would have been absolutely useless at stopping Gibbs. At least, Tony assumed she would have. They'd been lovers, so she might have tried to use that to control him, not that it would have worked.

"Maybe O'Neil will like this plan," Tony suggested.

"The President won't."

"The American president won't. Some of the other presidents might like the idea of a little more balance."

Gibbs ran a hand over his face. "Samas plans to make sure they feel that way."

"And that's Samas for you. I'm pretty sure that everyone knows he's scheming." Jo had infinite respect for Samas' ability to manipulate people.
Finally Gibbs seemed to really hear Tony because he gave a wry smile. "He's not exactly subtle."

"Nope. He's subtle like Ziva with a backpack full of heavy ordinance."

Gibbs actually laughed. With the tension broken, Tony moved to Gibbs' side and sat down. "She really tied Sheppard up?"

"Arms and legs, and she was playing with a knife," Gibbs confirmed. "He was very grateful when I showed up."

"I bet. I really hope Rodney never hears that story or he's going to blow her ship up."

Gibbs smiled. Clearly he wouldn't be talking Rodney out of any violence. Then Gibbs reached over and rested his hand on Tony's knee. "I warned her that if she hurt my people I'd make her pay in slow and painful ways."

"There's something really sexy about that."

"Is there?" Gibbs asked as if he didn't know that Tony had a kink for having pushy lovers. And Gibbs could be the pushiest, most dominant man in two galaxies. Tony loved it.

Gibbs caught Tony's wrist and squeezed. Even after years together, a simple touch was enough to make Tony hard. "So you like it when I threaten people?" Gibbs asked. He shifted around and started leaning toward Tony.

"Well, Boss, it's actually more the protective streak than the actual threat of violence."

"Really?" Gibbs started to press Tony back onto the mattress. Even though it meant he was twisted uncomfortably with his legs hanging off the side of the bed, Tony yielded. Gibbs forced him back and then pinned his wrists down to his sides. "So, you like it when I threaten people?"

"Always did, boss."

Gibbs shifted around and then moved Tony's arms over his head, pinning both with one hand, which left his other hand free. He ran his rough, work-calloused hands over Tony's cheek. For a while, Gibbs had lost the wood-working callouses, but now he had his workshop and his carpentry students, and his hands felt like the old Gibbs—like they had when he used to slap Tony upside the back of the head in the bull pen or the way they'd felt when Tony had been sick with the plague and Gibbs had rested his palm against Tony's forehead.

Tony had a callous kink.

Gibbs slid his work-hardened hand under the bottom of Tony's shirt, and Tony arched up into the touch. Gibbs leaned close and whispered, "It's been too long since you were tied up so I could explore every inch of you."

Tony groaned. He wasn't able to form a coherent response because all his blood was headed straight for the little head. His cock hurt so much.

"What do you think of that?" Gibbs asked, his warm breath tickling the hairs along the side of Tony's neck.

"Not really able to form thoughts at this point, boss," Tony confessed.

"Then it's definitely been too long." Then Gibbs was gone, and Tony blinked at the ceiling as Gibbs
walked around the bed whistling. "Up you go, Tony," Gibbs urged him, and he helped Tony sit up. When Tony reached for Gibbs, Gibbs pulled the bottom of Tony's shirt up so that Tony's arms were trapped and the fabric covered his head. The linen was light enough to breathe easily and see shadows, but all the detail was obscured.

Before Tony could pull the shirt the rest of the way off, Gibbs pinned him down onto the bed and held Tony's arms flat against the mattress. "Comfortable?" The question was definitely sarcastic.

"Pants are a little tight," Tony answered. He could see the shadows darkening as Gibbs leaned closer, and then Gibbs kissed him right through the shirt. The texture of the Athosian fabric pressed into Tony's lips, and the unfamiliar sensation sent a shiver through him. Gibbs tightened his hold on Tony's wrists.

"Tough," Gibbs said.

And that was Tony's dick getting even harder. Gibbs shifted and leaned in to kiss Tony's shoulder before Tony felt the rope going around his wrists. His head and arms were still tangled in his shirt, so he could only see shadows as Gibbs worked.

Soon enough, Tony was tightly tied, and then Gibbs ran a warm hand over Tony's chest. "You are beautiful," Gibbs said as he straddled Tony. Gibbs wasn't much for sweet talk or compliments until he had Tony tied down. Then he got downright mushy, not that Tony would ever say that to his face. Gibbs skimmed his fingers over Tony's bare stomach.

"Come on, boss, you're killing me," Tony complained softly.

"You need something to keep that mouth busy." After saying that, Gibbs gave Tony a crushing kiss. Their lips pressed together so hard that Tony could feel the imprint of the fabric press against him.

Curling his fist around the ropes, Tony squirmed, but he didn't have any leverage, and soon Gibbs starting kissing his way down over Tony's bare chest. Slowly Gibbs unfastened the button on Tony's pants and then he slipped his finger inside to tickle the skin just above where Tony's tightly curled nest of hair began. Tony cried out and twisted and found the ropes, but in the end, he yielded. And until he gave up and lay panting and quiet, Gibbs kept right on teasing.

Gibbs had his own form of sadism.

Only when Tony ached with need and lay still with exhaustion did Gibbs open his pants. Tony dug his heels into the bed and lifted his ass so Gibbs could pull his pants and underwear off, and then he collapsed down. He was worn and horny and he was not going to find any relief until Gibbs finished playing, and that was exactly the way Tony liked it.

Gibbs never gave in to his own needs—he was always thinking about someone else. So when Tony could tempt his lover into playing, he always enjoyed giving himself to Gibbs. Light touches teased him, and Tony twitched as he tried to fight down any unmanly giggles. Gibbs kept on until Tony couldn't control it. His muscles jerked and he laughed as he twisted in his bonds.

Gibbs pinned him down and kept right on tickling until Tony was gasping for air, and just then he swallowed Tony's cock.

Tony damn near levitated off the bed with a scream, but Gibbs was sitting on his legs. So Tony was trapped and careening toward orgasm when suddenly Gibbs stopped sucking his cock.

Tony cried out.
“Problem, Tony?” Gibbs asked in an entirely too amused voice. Tony could only fist the rope that held him and gasp for air that smelled faintly of salt and sweat as it came through the linen shirt. Unable to form words, Tony didn’t answer, and Gibbs chuckled again.

Then fingers were sliding into Tony’s hole—slick and hot. Gibbs prepped him fast and then lifted Tony’s legs. Eager to help them get to the main event, Tony hooked his legs over Gibbs’ shoulders and held on as Gibbs lifted his ass into the air. Slick ran down Tony’s ass and slid under, following the line of his ass crack. Gibbs pushed another finger in, forcing Tony’s muscles to open up, and Tony moaned in need.

Then Tony felt something far thicker than fingers pressing against his hole. “God, yes,” he begged softly. Gibbs thrust in while Tony got a chorus of “yes” and “please going. Soon, the heat reached critical mass and Tony’s whole body became one giant nerve that carried shivers from one end of him to the other while Gibbs pounded into him.

Gibbs grabbed Tony’s cock, and Tony found some last reserve of energy in order to dig his heels into the mattress and thrust up. His cock slid into that firm, calloused hand that was so conveniently slick with lotion, and Tony’s whole body turned to fire. His muscles tightened and he cried out even as he felt Gibbs slam into him a few more times.

Then Gibbs came with his usual grunt, and Tony could feel the piece of the world fit into perfect order. He panted as Gibbs laid down next to him. They were both radiating heat, but Tony still loved the feel of Gibbs’ palm resting against his stomach. While the sun slowly sank and the room grew dark, they lay like that. Gibbs hadn’t untied Tony or lifted the shirt from off his face, and Tony understood Gibbs well enough to know that he needed the control—he needed to know that he had one person who would always yield to him.

Now that Tony hosted Jo, he understood. She was opinionated and pushy and arrogant. Of course, she was also loyal and loving and so proud of the world she saw growing around her. Hosting wasn’t always easy because you couldn’t walk away and slam the door when you were time-sharing your body. And Samas spent more time in Gibbs than Jo spent in Tony. Today must have been difficult.

Only after it had gotten dark did Gibbs start to stir. “We should get dinner,” he said.

“Or you could order us up some dinner,” Tony suggested. He wasn’t opposed to staying tied to their bed. When Tony was having a hard day, sometimes Gibbs would keep him here all day. Gibbs shifted and then he was pressing another kiss to Tony’s lips. Only after that did he lift the shirt up so that a rush of cool air swept across Tony’s face.

“I do like the look of you like this,” Gibbs said as he traced figures against Tony’s bare side.

“And I like it when you look at me like you like it,” Tony said.

For a long time, Gibbs was silent. Clearly today had bothered him a lot. “You know,” Gibbs finally said, “part of me understands Michael more every day.”

“Michael?” Tony couldn’t figure out which Michael Gibbs meant.

“The Wraith Michael,” Gibbs clarified. Tony had not seen that one coming because Gibbs and Samas were both very opposed to the Michael experiment, even more so after the procedure nearly led to the colonel getting turned into a bug.

“Oh?” Tony asked, trying for a neutral tone.
“He didn’t want to be a guide. He was terrified of being out in front and leading the way, and I am starting to have more sympathy for him. I don’t know where Samas’ plan is leading.”

Tony knew just how few people Gibbs would have entrusted with that bit of doubt. “I trust the two of you to make the best future possible,” Tony said softly. It was the only reassurance he had since he didn’t know either.

Gibbs snorted. Yeah, only time would tell if this plan would lead to a better future for all of them. Tony was still hoping they could find some weapon against the Ori and protect both Earth and Atlantis, but he sure wasn’t going to count on it.

"Oh, Sheppard knows about us,” Gibbs announced.

"About us having sex? Yep. I think he figured that out sometime around week one,” Tony said with a laugh. It was hard to imagine the city empty enough to have sexual games down the corridors. These days you’d run into kids or grandmothers or some merchant pushing a cart of fruit, but back in those early days, the city had been a big empty playground.

"He knows about the Turi,” Gibbs corrected him.

Suspicion pushed aside some of the post-sex haze. "He knows what about the Turi?"

"He knows everything about the Turi,” Gibbs said. “He was a lot more reasonable about it than I expected.”

“And you’re telling me this now?” Tony demanded. Adreneline rushed through his veins, but Gibbs still had him tied down to the bed so he couldn’t even move.

“Yep,” Gibbs said smugly.

“Bastard,” Tony accused him. He’d planned this.

Gibbs kissed the side of Tony’s neck. “Yep,” he agreed.
John walked point, allowing Rodney to complain. It was like background noise at this point. “Am I the only one who thinks this is going to backfire? Elizabeth is not going to take this lying down.”

Teyla sighed. “It is our responsibility to provide good council, Rodney. Do you feel it is in Atlantis’ best interest to go through the gate to M7R-227?”

“Well, no.” Rodney fell silent. John barely kept his own opinion to himself. He knew he’d put Rodney in a tough spot when he’d asked Rodney to use his powers as a subcaptain to veto Elizabeth’s desire to travel through the gate, but he didn’t trust people who were technologically advanced. He’d thought he’d be the last council member to lead a veto of Elizabeth’s decisions, but walking through a gate to meet people who claimed to be Ancients… that just didn’t sound tactically smart.

“Then we shall insist that she not go,” Teyla said firmly.

“Exactly,” John said. “She can wait until Kitsune and Teldy check out the planet or she can let us go, but we are not letting her walk into an unknown situation. I can’t believe she even thought that was going to happen.”

“And I would veto our team going on that mission,” Teyla said.

“What?” John stopped and turned around to glare at her.

Ronon passed him with a laugh. “More than one woman has you by the short hairs now,” he said.

John glared at him. “Teyla, we’re the first contact team. If someone goes, it should be us.”

She closed the distance between them and rested her hand on his shoulder. “Three of the six council members for Atlantis are on our team. When Gibbs and Samas accompany us, that means the majority of the ruling council is all in one place at one time. I have every faith in our abilities, but I do not trust a people with such power and technology when they have failed to provide assistance to any planet that I know of.”

“How?” John stopped and turned around to glare at her.

Ronon passed him with a laugh. “More than one woman has you by the short hairs now,” he said.

John glared at him. “Teyla, we’re the first contact team. If someone goes, it should be us.”

She closed the distance between them and rested her hand on his shoulder. “Three of the six council members for Atlantis are on our team. When Gibbs and Samas accompany us, that means the majority of the ruling council is all in one place at one time. I have every faith in our abilities, but I do not trust a people with such power and technology when they have failed to provide assistance to any planet that I know of.”

“Exactly,” Rodney said. “They aren’t exactly killing themselves to help out with the Wraith. But back to my point, Elizabeth is going to make us all pay. Well, except for Kitsune who doesn’t really seem to care about much.”

“Elizabeth could ask her to help with dock repairs,” John said. The Travelers had a bad habit of getting seriously disoriented and nauseated when they spent time under the open sky. Apparently they were too accustomed to the small spaces on board a ship. They’d even turned down the offer to have their own tower and claimed a series of rooms under the two largest towers. Some had views of the ocean and other rooms were windowless, and apparently that’s exactly how the Travelers preferred their housing. Seven hundred Travelers were crammed into half the space the rest of the city used, and they were perfectly happy.

“Kitsune would send one of her people,” Rodney said. “The rest of us have to actually worry about what Elizabeth is going to do.”

“Once she thinks about it, she’ll realize that the risk is too much,” John said firmly. Considering how angry Elizabeth was right now, he definitely had to hope for that because otherwise he was going to have a really hard time working with her. She had some romantic idea about the Ancients, and that
was blinding her to the danger. She really resented the rest of them vetoing her plan to meet these descendants of a break-away group of Ancients who chose to not ascend.

And it hadn’t improved her mood when General O’Neill had congratulated the council on their first official veto.

Teyla smiled at “The whole point of a council is to help each other when we encounter, what is it that you called it John? A blind spot?”

John cringed. Yeah, he shouldn’t have said that in front of Elizabeth. “Let’s just focus on the mission, okay?” John suggested. He turned and headed after Ronon, leaving Teyla to cover Rodney. Rodney could keep complaining to her. John got it. Elizabeth had been the first person to really trust Rodney and to ask for him to join her team. It was hard for him to take a stand against her, even when she was trying to make horrible tactical decisions against the recommendations of her military commander.

And it really annoyed John that he’d needed to get the other council members to back him up on a question of security. Without the council and the new leadership contract the Travelers insisted on, John wasn’t sure he could have convinced Elizabeth to stay behind, and that bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

Suddenly Ronon held up his hand, and John brought up his weapon. Behind him, he could hear Rodney’s faltering steps, probably because Teyla was pulling him off the path. Around them, the woods were silent, and John realized they were too silent. Nothing moved. John scanned the area, but he couldn’t find any sign of a threat.

Ronon moved slowly toward the side of the path, but then he threw himself into the cover of a tree. John dived for cover before he even knew what he was hiding from. Unfortunately, the trees were too damn narrow to provide any real cover and whoever was attacking them had projectile weapons.

John opened fire, covering Ronon as he dashed back and took shelter near John. “If we make a stand here, we can take them,” Ronon shouted over the weapons fire. Ah, the arrogance of youth. John glanced back and saw Teyla and Rodney headed for the gate at top speed. That sounded like a better plan.

“Negative! We don't how many we're up against!” John caught a glimpse of movement, and he opened fire. Unfortunately, that let to many, many movements, and John was starting to get the feeling they were seriously outnumbered. “Rodney, dial the damned Gate. Don't wait for us!”

Rodney yelled something, but between the bullets and adrenaline-fueled rush in John’s head, he couldn’t hear it. Knowing Rodney, he was making sarcastic comments about taking his time. Ronon fired into the trees, and John sent off another round of bullets, even if he had no idea what he was shooting at.

When John saw the flash of light that marked the opening of the gate, he signaled Ronon. Knowing that Ronon wouldn’t move until he did, John turned and ran for the gate. Behind him, Ronon’s blaster fired and went silent. John glanced back to see Ronon barreling toward him. Okay. This was actually going to turn out okay. John was almost at the gate when he felt like he hit a force field. His head snapped forward and then back and his feet went out from under him. He would have said it was a force field, only Ronon got right through and vanished through the gate a second before the wormhole closed.

Leaving John.
The force of the impact had knocked the P90 out of John’s hands, the second he looked around for it, he knew he was in deep shit. Genii soldiers closed in on him, weapons drawn. John clenched his fists but didn’t move as they closed in around him.

John mentally counted off the enemy—ten soldiers, all male, with a wide range of weapons, which suggested that these were not regular troops. When John saw their leader, suddenly everything made more sense.

Kolya sauntered over. The bastard was actually sauntering, and when John saw the weapon in Koyla’s hand, he realized the bastard had basically used a harpoon to drag John back from the gate. Smiling, Koyla offered an unctuous, “It’s good to see you again, Colonel.”

“Kolya.” John was practically gritting his teeth to keep from saying a whole lot to the slimy bastard. And the slimy bastard just smiled more. “Imagine my surprise at finding the head of Atlantis’ security wandering around the woods.”

“Imagine my surprise to see you’re not in a Genii prison cell for conspiring against your leaders,” John shot back. One of the soldiers armed his weapon with a ominous sounding click that reminded him of the cocking of a handgun.

Kolya reached out, and John had to hold himself still. Rather than the violence John expected, Kolya detached two hooks from the back of John’s tac vest. “Get him up and secure him.”

Kolya stood, and then the soldiers were on John, pulling his arms behind his back and tying him. “What’s the matter, Kolya? Feeling a little impotent now that you’re out in the cold and Ladon is in charge?” John taunted.

One of the soldiers pulled a black bag over John’s head. He had to give Kolya points for training his men to do a thorough job because one of them was searching John for weapons, and the frisking was getting personal. John was quickly stripped of every hidden blade.

“I mean, to be outmaneuvered by your own scientist, that has to sting,” John pointed out. “But on the good side, if you call Ladon up, you can probably make a pretty nice deal for me.” No one was answering, and John was starting to get the feeling that Kolya might have walked away. It was hard to tell because there were too many Genii soldiers moving around, and they were all working silently. They’d definitely trained for this. The gate whooshed to life, and then hands shoved John forward.

“Okay, okay. Use your words,” John complained as they herded him toward the gate and a whole new planet. If John went through the event horizon, Atlantis’ odds of finding him went down to about zero. John tried to drag his feet, but one good punch to his kidneys and he stumbled forward… and came out of the wormhole on a planet that was much cooler and darker. It was either night on this world or they were inside. It was hard to tell.

Anonymous hands shoved John along. The efficiency and silence of the group was bothering him more than the kidnapping itself. John was almost getting used to be tied up. However, the very silence suggested serious training and a long period of working together. John was almost sure these were Kolya’s elite troops, the ones that Ladon said had all been on the planet with Cowen and one nuclear explosion.

“So, you guys were Cowen’s right? It must suck, letting your leader get killed.” John wasn’t even surprised at the punch to his gut. “Hey! Ladon is not going to want you damaging the goods. After all, Atlantis and the Genii have an alliance. We even have Travelers in the city now, and they’re a
little crazy. I see the family resemblance between you guys and Larrin.”

“Down here,” one of them said, and then John was half stumbling and half getting dragged down a set of stairs.

“I’m fairly breakable, you know,” John warned them, but no one was answering. It was really annoying him how they ignored his quips. He heard the sound of a heavy metal lock and the creaking of hinges, so that didn’t leave much to the imagination. Someone untied him, and then one of his guard gave him a hard push to the back at the same time as the hood was pulled away.

Before John could get his bearings, the jail door slammed behind him. John shouted after the guards, but they walked away leaving John locked in a fair sized cell decorated with rust and a thousand years of dust. John yelled a few insults aimed at Kolya as he paced the edges of his prison.

“Dammit. I should have killed him,” John complained.

“You're wasting your breath,” one of the walls answered.

“Didn't know I had company down here,” John said. The wall had an opening, but most of it was solid metal, which blocked his view. The voice sounded like someone who was either ancient or who had given up on talking a while back. Neither was a pleasant thought.

“There is no escape,” the old man answered. There was a weariness in that voice that made John want to retreat. He was having his own panic issues, and he really didn’t need any more pessimism. So John went for cocky.

“Yeah, well, prisons are like that. Never stopped me before. How long you been down here?” He went up onto his toes to try and see the man in the other cell, but he was hiding in the shadows.

“Many years.” A chain jangled when the guy moved.

This was not looking good. John really hoped that Kolya had taken him for trade because this was clearly where Kolya kept his long term prisoners. “How many is many? Five? Ten?” John prayed for the guy to say “two.”

After a moment’s hesitation, his fellow prisoner said in an utterly defeated tone of voice, “It no longer matters.”

Well, shit. John had seen prisoners of war reach the point of absolute despair, and it usually involved years of deprivation or pretty serious torture. John had the world’s shortest panic attack. He would not give up. He would not let Kolya take away Atlantis and Rodney and everything good in his life. Besides, Kolya had to have a plan besides torturing John for fun.

“That many, huh? What did you do to get here?” John wanted to get the guy talking. If he’d been here that long, he’d know things. He’d know when guards changed or who was careless or which guards might be bribed to carry a message to Atlantis. Okay, that last one might be wishful thinking, but John would take optimism over giving up any day of the week.

“I merely allowed myself to be captured alive,” the man answered.

“Same here.” Something in the man’s voice pulled on John’s sympathy. Even if he couldn’t see the guy, he could imagine the faces of other POWs he’d run into. He could imagine their haunted expressions and withered limbs. Afghanistan had given John an education he’d never wanted. But he hadn’t left people behind then, and he wouldn’t now. “Look, I've got people looking for me. When
they find me, maybe we can both, uh ...” John’s voice trailed off as he watched Genii guards march into the room.

That hadn’t taken long. If they were trying to soften him up with anticipation of the tortures that might be coming, they really should have let him stew longer.

The guard with the big gun pointed it at John while his buddy unlocked the cell door. “Move!” he ordered John.

John chose to stand still. “Where are we moving to?”

The guard cocked the gun, and John went for cocky. “I kinda like it here,” he said.

The guard fired and the back of John’s neck was peppered with rock fragments. “Ow!”

“Commander Kolya insists.”

“Oh, he insists? Well, why didn’t you just say so?” John said with as much sarcasm as he could. Right now, anger was fueling the sarcasm pretty effectively. John stepped out of the cell, eyed up his guard and swung on the meathead who looked like the weak link. For a half-second, John thought he had a chance, and then something sharp and hot hit him in the back and waves of pain flowed through him. John slid off into unconsciousness without a single curse.

John started coming to when he felt the straps around his wrists. He hated the feeling of being bound. Rodney had made an off-handed comment about bondage once, and John’s balls had tried to take up space as internal organs. Even Rodney had gotten that hint. The feeling of bindings made John edgy and angry, and right now, he was channeling all of that hate toward Kolya.

The bastard walked over, smug smile in place. “It’s been some time,” he said like they were drinking buddies.

John considered and discarded a dozen different retorts before going with, “You must have really missed me to go through all this trouble. Nice harpoon, by the way.”

“To capture an extraordinary soldier takes extraordinary measures.” Kolya had the nerve to smile as if he could offer John a few compliments and get forgiven for the whiplash and kidnapping and a really uncomfortable seat in front of what looked like a television camera from the 1950s. For some reason, Kolya creeped John out a whole lot more than Larrin. Logically that didn’t make sense because she had more technology at her disposal, and she’d been playing with a knife, and she was all kinds of crazy. Even Kitsune admitted that. But despite that, Kolya definitely won on the creepy front.

“I’ll take that as a compliment and ignore the uncomfortable subtext,” John said.

“It is a complement, Colonel. Understand that this is not personal. As soon as my goal is achieved, you’ll be returned to Atlantis.”

And pigs flew. “That simple, huh? What do you want?” John asked. They might as well get this started. John really hoped that Ronon had a Turi when he showed up, and he could bring Gibbs and Samas. They could all use Kolya’s head as a soccer ball. It was a nice fantasy.


“Who?”
Kolya tilted his head as though considering whether or not to answer.

“No one is going to give themselves up for me. They know I’d kick their ass if they tried.” John said. Maybe Kolya wanted one of the Travelers, but Kitsune would laugh in Kolya’s face if he tried to blackmail her using John. And people from Earth understood that it was John’s job to stand between them and danger, so they would never take a deal. Hopefully everyone on Atlantis understood that it would kill John to know he’d lived at the cost of someone else’s life. John’s thoughts tried to turn to Rodney, to the pain of leaving his lover behind to grieve, but John ruthlessly blocked off that emotion. He was going to get out of this.

“Oh, I think you underestimate your importance to other people. After all, you’re their Ancestor returned in the flesh. You’re their messiah, aren’t you Sheppard?”

“That’s crap and you know it. The only people who think that are superstitious fools,” John silently added, ‘and Teyla,’ but he was not going to say that out loud. Teyla might think he was a de-ascended Ancient, but she had no trouble kicking his ass when he said something to offend her beliefs.

“And the Genii.” Kolya raised an eyebrow daring John to disagree. The fact was John didn’t know what went on behind the bunker doors on the Genii homeworld. “My people are the cultural center of this galaxy, and we will reclaim our place as soon as I have Radim back under my control.”

“Ladon?” John asked. This was getting strange. What the hell were they doing capturing him if they were after Ladon? Clearly Kolya had taken one too many hits to the head as a child if that’s the sort of logic he had rolling around up there.

John started to say something, but Kolya ordered one of the soldiers to gag John. Before John could protest, he had something soft shoved in his mouth and a white cloth tied tightly over the bottom half of his face so he couldn’t spit it out.

“Set up the cameras,” Kolya ordered. Soldiers rushed to follow Kolya’s orders, and John could only watch with impotent rage.

“We’ve dialed Atlantis,” one of the technicians said, and Kolya ran a hand over his hair before stepping in front of the camera.

The technician signaled, and Kolya looked into the camera and said, “Doctor Weir, if you're receiving this, please respond.”

Great. John got an audience for his torture session. He would really rather do it in private where he could break down without forcing Rodney to watch. Rodney and Tony and Abby and all the civilians on Atlantis deserved to be shielded from this sort of crap, but they were too smart so they’d find a way to hack into the feed even if Elizabeth and Lorne had the good sense to get them out of the room.

“I do know you're there, Doctor. It is pointless not to answer.”

There was another long pause and John kept his fingers crossed that Elizabeth was smart enough to keep her mouth shut. Unfortunately, after a second her voice came over the static of the radio.

“This is Doctor Weir.”

Kolya had his back to John, but John could just imagine his smug expression. Shit. He really needed to talk to Elizabeth about letting military people handle security. Lorne should have tackled her to keep her away from the radio. “Oh, good. I wanted to be certain you were there to see this,” Kolya
said before stepping to the side so that John was right in front of the camera. John stared straight ahead.

Rodney’s voice came over the radio, and it almost broke through the emotional defenses John had put up. “What have you done to him?” Rodney demanded.

“Nothing whatsoever, Doctor McKay,” Kolya said with a chuckle.

“Okay, let me rephrase that. What are you planning to do?” Rodney demanded. John knew that tone of voice. That was Rodney one step from breaking down into a major rant and threatening to throw someone off the end of a pier if they didn’t stop showing off their stupidity.

“It's quite simple. I'd like to make a trade,” Kolya said.

Elizabeth spoke next. “Before we continue this conversation another second, I want to speak with Sheppard.”

“We'll rephrase that,” Rodney said in the same clipped tone. “We would like him to be able to speak to us.”

“Very well.” A signal toward the guard, and the gag was removed.

Knowing he had only one shot at this, John yelled, “On my command authority, whatever he asks, don't do it, even...” And that’s as far as he got before the guard was shoving the gag back in. While John was getting manhandled, Kolya kept right on.

“Well, as you can see, he's his usual charming self,” he told the camera.

“Explain your terms, Kolya,” Elizabeth said. John didn’t believe for a minute that she would give in, even if she could—it wasn’t like Atlantis had any control over Ladon Radim. However, that tone of voice made him hope that she had some devious political plan to stab Kolya in the back. He wouldn’t mind seeing that.

“I have heard the familiar voices of yourself and Doctor McKay, but there is one person I know is there who has yet to speak. Ladon Radim is with you, is he not?”

“Why would Ladon be here?”

“To preserve his precious alliance with you, Doctor, so that the Genii might remain in the favor of Atlantis. My sources have already confirmed this, so there's no point in denying the fact,” Kolya said. John felt like he’d been hit with ice water. No. She couldn’t even consider doing it. If Kolya got control of the Genii empire with all their spies, the danger to Atlantis would increase exponentially. “Turn him over to me, and Colonel Sheppard will be released immediately,” Kolya said. John snorted through his nose since that was his only way of offering his opinion on that.

“I'll need time to consider your offer,” Elizabeth said, always the politician.

“Allow me to help expedite your decision,” Kolya said in that same unctuous voice. He turned and John tilted his head to see what he was looking at. Guard were walking in, and John realized that he was seeing a Wraith about the same time that Elizabeth said in a shocked voice, “Oh my God.”
Rodney was shouting, but John couldn’t hear the words. Horror washed through him as he watched the Wraith shuffle forward. No. It could not end this way. Absolutely not.

“Let’s be clear, Doctor McKay. No-one does,” Kolya said, although John had no idea what he was responding to.

“Don’t do this,” Weir said. He voice had a note of pleading, and normally John would have been quick to tell her to avoid showing her soft underbelly, but he was having trouble thinking about anything other than the Wraith moving toward him. The guards had to pull a lock of some sort off his feeding hand, and now John could only hear the sound of his blood rushing through his head. He was going to die here. Voice swirled around him, but John stared at the face of his tattooed killer. This was the end.

The guard released the Wraith’s hand and it slammed into John’s chest. The monster snarled as John’s whole body turned to fire. His memory brought up the image of Colonel Sumner, aging years each passing second. John couldn’t get air in his lungs and his chest felt like it was cracking open, and suddenly it was over. The guard used an electrical prod to drive the Wraith back, and John could only slump against his bonds.

He had no idea how old he was, but every joint, every muscle, every bone ached. He felt ancient, and he closed his eyes at the idea that Rodney had watched that, helpless on the other side of a wormhole.

“You just crossed a line, Kolya,” Elizabeth said.

“We’ve found that a minimum of three hours between feeding sessions is crucial to ensure the body has sufficient time to recover from the trauma,” Kolya said, and in those words John heard a promise that he was going to have to endure this again and again until he died. “That’s the time you have to decide. Three hours.”

Kolya signaled to the technician and the light on the camera went dead. Kolya chuckled as he turned around, and John could barely lift his head enough to glare at him. “Not as argumentative now, are you?” Kolya asked, clearly amused by his own joke. “Get him back to his cell. Get him some water and we’ll do this again in three hours.” With that, Kolya walked away, and John was left to the not-so-tender mercies of the guard.
John leaned against the wall and wished he had a mirror. John knew that sometimes Rodney felt like people judged him—that they thought he wasn’t worth John’s loyalty. O’Neill had a bad habit of making a few unkind comments. Rodney was going to have a chance to prove what a good guy he was by changing John’s diapers and cutting his meat for him.

His neighbor interrupted his brooding. “They called you Sheppard.”

“Yeah. That's my name. Pleased to meet you.” John should focus on forming an alliance with the only other person here who had as much reason to hate Kolya as he did. At least John wouldn’t be stuck down here for years like the other poor sap.

“You're in pain,” his neighbor said.

“Well, I just got fed on by a Wraith, what do you think?” John asked. He meant to snap, but it came out sounding more weary than anger.

“I would not know.”

“Hopefully, you'll never have to find out. I didn't think anything could hurt that much.” That wasn’t exactly the truth. It hurt more watching friends die. And now John had condemned Rodney to that very horror. John had to get out. He had to. Something in his chest refused to lie down for Kolya.

“You're still alive,” John’s roommate said without much sympathy.

“Yeah, well ... I don't know how many years the darned thing took off my life, but I'll tell you this: if Kolya's men hadn't have pulled that damned thing off, I'd be dust in a flak jacket.” John rubbed his chest as the memory of the pain made his nerves sing with pain.

“What is the difference. The Wraith must feed in order to live. For Wraith, hunger burns like a fire.”

John narrowed his eyes. He’d heard of people who worshipped the damn vampires, but this guy… he sounded like he had sympathy for the monster. That wasn’t a Wraith worshipper. They believed the Wraith were gods. Getting to his feet hurt like hell, but John pulled himself up. Moving slowly, he headed toward the barred window.

“Tell me, Sheppard, if you found yourself burning alive, would you settle for just one drop of water?”
Yeah, that was not subtle.

“Or would you take more?”

John’s stomach started to churn unhappily as a thought occurred to him. He’d never introduced himself, never heard a guard use his name in front of his neighbor. But there was one person who had heard it—one person who would sympathize with a starving Wraith. “Where’d you hear them call me Sheppard?”

The shadowy figure stepped into the light, and John sucked in a breath as he came face to face with the Wraith that had stolen years of his life. “Just before I started to feed,” the Wraith said.

John stepped back. “You. It was you.”

The Wraith tilted his head to the side, and John felt a physical revulsion roll through him. This monster had taken years of his life, had stolen his future, and probably condemned him to exile on Earth. “Excuse me if I don’t actually care about your hunger.”

“I am a prisoner to my needs, just as you are. I can no more choose to stop eating than you can choose to stop breathing.”

John retreated to the far side of his cell. His day just kept getting worse, and the Wraith just watched him, those nose slits on its face occasionally opening. It did have to breathe, and it did have to feed—and as far as John was concerned, that was the best reason for exterminating them all as a species. The very existence of a monster that could only live if other sentient life form died…it was an abomination that John could feel in every cell of his body.

“You are strong. You will recover,” the Wraith offered. Maybe that was Wraith comfort. Who knew. The very fact that John had only the cold comfort of a Wraith and not his friends started a slow simmering rage in his chest that forced him to his feet. As much as John didn’t want his team to be in this cell with him, he’d grown used to having them around.

He’d gone from being the loner who wanted to stay in the Antarctic to someone who needed Rodney’s complaints and Teyla’s calm observations and Sama’s irreverence and Ronon’s grunts. He didn’t want to die with his only comfort the words of a Wraith. The anger forced him into motion, and John started pacing.

“Your anger will only weaken you,” the Wraith warned him.

Imagine that. The Wraith was scared that his dinner was going to be less filling. Well John had enough fury in his heart to survive a little pacing. “I don’t think so.” John exchanged curt words with the monster, but his mind was spinning as he plotted a thousand escapes, and considered a thousand ways that the Genii could thwart each one.

The Wraith finally bellowed about the unfairness of not being allowed to kill John, and John turned on it. “This might come as a surprise to you, but I’m not really in the mood for conversation. So why don’t you just do me a favor and shut the hell up!”

The Wraith slammed that metal gauntlet covering its feeding hand on the bars, and then it grew quiet and studied John. “These are your last hours, Sheppard. If you wish to spend them in silence, then so be it.”

No. John did not accept that. He would get home to his people. And with the new ruling council, he might be able to find a way to stay on Atlantis. John still hadn’t seen a mirror, so the Wraith may have stolen too many years for John to remain military commander, but if Kitsune requested it,
maybe he could be a liason officer to the Travelers. It would allow him to stay in Atlantis with Rodney.

Or he could take a job with Tony. With all the new Travelers, Tony was overwhelmed with the amount of neighborhood policing he had to do. He’d talked to a couple of folk who’d gotten discharged for disabilities, but none had chosen to come back. John wouldn’t mind taking a job as Tony’s second. He could totter around like an old man and check on whatever trouble the kids were getting into.

And Rodney would still love him. That was the one reality John believed. So there was no way these were his last hours. “No. I'm getting out of here. I've got a life to go back to and I'm damned well going back to it.”

“You're sure of that?” The Wraith sounded amused.

“Yeah. I've got friends. And they're gonna come for me.” And that was John’s only hope because he wasn’t strong enough to get himself out of this. He slowly sank down to the ground.

“I hope you continue to believe that the next time I feed,” the Wraith said.

John hoped the others showed up before that happened. He didn’t know how long he could last, but he figured that three hours’ of rest wouldn’t change the final outcome. John was going to die without help. He closed his eyes and tried to find some calm corner of his mind where he could wait for his team.

The next feeding came and went, and other than the fact that John felt even worse, nothing changed. There was no cavalry riding to his rescue. The whine of Ronon’s blaster didn’t interrupt Kolya’s arrogant announcements. There was only John and the Wraith and a lot more pain. By the time the guards dropped him back in his cell, John could barely drag himself to the wall before he collapsed.

“Where are your friends?” The Wraith asked.

Great. Now he got to be mentally tortured here, too. John hoped that Abby got Rodney out of the command tower and away from the video feed. Rodney didn’t need to live with images of John’s torture in his head. “They’ll be here,” John said.

“You still believe that.”

John did. He wasn’t sure if he could hold on long enough. He was starting to think they might recover his body, but they would come. “They just need more time.”

“No-one has ever left this place alive.”

No one. Earlier Kolya had mentioned that they had discovered that the human body required three hours to recover. John wondered how many of Kolya’s enemies had died in these rooms. The Wraith’s earlier comment about being here too many years to count took on a whole new meaning. John grimaced. He was actually beginning to feel a little sympathy.

“Yeah, well, I'm going to,” John said firmly.

“Kolya will kill you before your friends have a chance to reach these cells.”

There were a lot of fortifications on the upper levels. Blast doors and thick concrete walls would necessitate heavy ordinance and a lot of time, so the Wraith was probably right about that. However, war college had talked about the one-way nature of most traps. If something was designed to hold
you in, it would probably do a crappy job of keeping someone out and vice versa. Of course John’s
problem was that he was in a cell that was designed to keep him in and that cell was in a bunker
designed to keep a rescue party out. However, if they weren’t in their cells…

John studied the Wraith. Bastard looked stronger now. “How well do you know the layout of this
place?”

“Well enough to know what your people would be up against.”

John started to walk over to the Wraith and groaned as every muscle screamed in pain. However,
pain meant he was still alive, and that meant he had a chance. True, his life as Atlantis’ commander
was over, but John had reinvented himself too often to give up easily. “What about us? Do you
know enough about this place to get us out?” John asked.

“You and me?”

John was a little proud. He’d managed to shock the bastard. “What, are they going to let you go after
I'm dead?”

“No.”

John leaned forward. “Then what've you got to lose?”

“My life.”

It was such a human thing to say that John was taken aback for a second. “Oh, yeah, you've got a
great one down here,” he pointed out.

The Wraith snarled.

“Listen, it makes sense. We have a common goal,” John said in his best ‘listen to me’ voice. This
was the voice that had gotten Betty Ann to let him feel her up in ninth grade. This was the voice
John used to convince Rodney to go for training runs. This was the voice he used to convince
Elizabeth and Samas to avoid killing each other that whole first year when things had been so rough.

Unfortunatley, Wraith were not as easily persuaded. The Wraith pulled away from the barred
window. “As I said before, there is no escape.” The thing sounded angry that John had even dared
suggesting otherwise.

0 0 0 0

Guide drew back from the bars as an old memory rose up in front of him. Perhaps it was the hunger
that had dulled his senses before, but this John Sheppard reminded him of Melik so much that the
resemblance was almost painful. Not in the physical appearance, of course. Melik had been a heavy
man with hair so pale it resembled the Wraith.

Guide remembered Melik as he spoke so eloquently of the evil the others performed. The Alterans
had made the Wraith, plucked them from the ranks of their human experiments and used their
superior knowledge to add iratus DNA in an attempt to create immortality.

Even though Guide was lucky enough to have been part of the second stage--born to a Wraith queen
rather than designed by the Alterans directly, Guide remembered the deformed souls who had too much of the iratus or too little. He remembered the wails of the lost and the cold detachment of their captors.

And he remembered Melik who was also called Guide.

The man had argued eloquently—argued for the extermination of all test subjects as the most humane course of action. Most of the subjects in question agreed with him. Life had been a torment, and death a wished-for blessing.

Guide studied this human and tried to decide why his senses had dredged up that memory. Perhaps it was some subconscious warning, not that Guide needed one. He had no doubt that John Sheppard would kill him given the opportunity.

Or perhaps it was something else. Melik had become an unwitting and even unwilling ally. Could his senses be suggesting the same of John Sheppard? Guide had long ago come to terms with his own death. It teased at his senses. He had not the strength of even a human, and when the soldiers grabbed his arms, he was as helpless as an infant.

It brought up unpleasant memories of those days when the Alterans and their machines had controlled him with equal efficiency, and perhaps that was why Melik came to mind now.

John Sheppard sank to the ground with a pained whine. He had appeared rather unimpressed by Guide's insistence that their torture was equal, but he had been willing to engage in conversation. The guards were unwilling to even speak, acting as if Guide were not a thinking creature.

It would be amusing if the silence in his head were not so great. His mind could encompass ideas that would not fit within the human brain. At least that had been true before hunger began to gnaw away at Guide's very thoughts and mind. Perhaps that is why John Sheppard reminded him of Melik—perhaps he was losing track of reality. Wraith physiology might be superior, but it still had its limitations. Guide could no longer regenerate his cells. Part of that was the lack of the enzymes that only a human body could generate. A lesser need was for actual food. The Wraith stomach atrophied when not in use, but one of their most closely held secrets was that they needed calories and protein like any creature.

Most Wraith of Guide's age resented this similarity with the humans; they disliked reminders that they had been engineered out of their own prey. Younger Wraith had learned the distaste of food from their elders, choosing instead to ingest the nutrient rich pulp produced by their ships.

However, as long as Guide did not have the enzyme that came from feeding directly from humans, his body could not use the proteins and other elements already present in his system. He had stores of the nutrients he needed; that was not a problem. But an error in genetic engineering that the Alterians could not repair meant that Guide could not use any of the available fuel without human enzymes.

"Why do you fight death so hard, Sheppard?" Guide asked.

"Seems like the thing to do."

"Death would relieve the pain."

Sheppard looked up at him, every motion clearly requiring great effort. He would not survive long and then Guide would be alone again. "Why don't you die?"

"Death is not so easy for a Wraith," Guide said, tacitly admitting that he would have chosen death over this imprisonment. Sheppard smelled of confusion as he studied Guide. Like most humans, his
ignorance of Wraith was almost painful. The Alterians had considered them monsters unworthy of even death.

"After we help each other get out of here, I could help you with that," Sheppard said.

"I think it is more likely that I will drink the last of your life," Guide said. The fire of hunger was so great that he could think of little else, but he found himself angry that the guards had put him in a position to feed on this one.

"Dream on," Sheppard said, but he had little fire in his words. His hope was failing him. Again, Guide was forced to remember Melik and his abject despair when the first of the Wraith queens broke out of their prisons.

Guide turned away from the bars. He could not look at Sheppard any longer. Melik had chosen his fate, but Sheppard was one more prisoner taken by these guards and denied his fate. It was not proper to think of them as the same. It dishonored the memory of Melik, and Guide did appreciate the irony in that. No doubt Melik would prefer his contributions be forgotten. Given how many of the old ones were dying, he might get his wish soon enough. Even Guide's own queen was younger than him, born during the great wars. Another queen might have killed him to ensure her superiority, but his queen had valued one who took the name of Guide and wore it proudly. He walked where others would not.

Of course, that had been his downfall.

Lost in melancholy, Guide silently cursed his capture, his faulty dart, his bad luck, and the universe in general. His cell stunk of anger hormones by the time the guards appeared again, but like most humans, they were nose-blind to his complaints.

When they took Sheppard out of his cell, he looked over, anticipation staining the air around him for a moment, but Guide looked away. He would not fall for false hope. The sharp scent of despair that filled the air caused Guide's own emotions to veer toward despondency. The guards dragged them both out of the cells and back toward the Exiled One. At one point Guide had thought of the human as the Ambitious One, but no longer. It made Guide's own defeat even more bitter to know that others had defeated one that was strong enough to hold him.

The guard dragged Sheppard into the room with the Exiled One first. "More games, Kolya?" Sheppard asked with a dry sort of bravado. "I'm starting to think you have a Wraith kink. Maybe you should let it feed on you."

The guards shoved Sheppard into the chair and began to fasten the restraints.

"I do what must be done," the Exiled One said. His words were equally dry of emotion. He feared he had lost this battle, and even now he worried about how to regain the ground that Sheppard stole from him simply by refusing to cower.

Guide did admire this human named Sheppard. He had strength to him that humans and Alterans alike lacked. Wraith would defend their brothers to the end. Every Wraith he knew would offer up his life force for a comrade or a queen. They faced death without shrinking from the unknown. But Alterans... the very idea of death had terrified them so much that they sought any escape. They were vermin scurrying to the corners at the first sign of danger.

Humans were little better.

Most humans. Those who faced death with anger and purpose were allowed the privilege of dying
with a weapon in hand, but so few humans had such strength of character. Most wept and offered up the lives of others, just like the Alterans who had spawned their weak race.

It was the iratus bug that had taught Wraith the strength of the hive and the beauty of the web that connected all Wraith one to another. But this human—this John Sheppard—was taking victory in death. He strengthened his hive mates, if humans could be said to have such things, by refusing to plead and beg. The Exiled One would not defeat this one.

Guide liked that. He disliked that he could only sate his own hunger by taking the life that animated John Sheppard.

The Exiled One spoke through the primitive transmitter. “He still has years ahead of him, Doctor Weir. My offer stands.”

The human female answered. “So does my answer.”

Guide listened to little else until the time came for him to play his part. The Exiled One turned and told Guide, “Take your fill.”

Guide growled out his hunger and his anger before slamming his hand down onto Sheppard’s chest. As he fed, Sheppard’s life filling him with strength. Part of Guide wished to drink his fill, but he slowed to taste the life that entered him. That caused Sheppard even more pain, but his eyes were still defiant, still victorious. Focusing on the energy that filled him, Guide recognized it.

Alteran.

This one had the blood of the enemy in him. So that was why John Sheppard reminded him of Melik who was known as Guide. And it might also win them their freedom. A human could not recover from such a feeding, but an Alteran might. Guide pushed a small amount of life force back into Sheppard before he pulled his hand away.

"Who told you to stop?" the Exiled One demanded.

Guide could not give this one orders. He could be led, but not pushed, not by Guide. “He is near death. Shall I finish him?” Guide asked. He rarely asked the universe for favors, but he did so now. Was it not true that the strength of an Alteran and the strength of a Wraith together could reshape the universe? Melik had proved that and now another Alteran repeat the feat.

Guide didn’t look at Sheppard—he did not signal to this human monster in front of him just how much he wished to keep this one alive. Guide only hoped that the small spark of life he’d returned was enough to strengthen Sheppard for the task ahead.

For a time, the Exiled One stared at him, and then it turned to the guard. “Get it out of here,” he ordered. Guide felt human hands grab him, and he feigned weakness he did not feel. He had the force of an Alteran running through him. Even now the human enzymes rushed to all the parts of Guide’s body, unlocking the chemical pathways that allowed food to be digested and processed, cells to be regenerated, life to be restored. As the guards dragged him away, he heard the Exiled One say, “Now it’s two hours.”

Two hours.

That is how long Sheppard had to recover, that is assuming that he still had his dreams of defiance and escape.
Todd the Guide, who is not yet Todd

Gibbs could feel Samas' fury rolling under his skin. Part of that was the sheer number of Turi who stood in the overcrowded space with them. Ronon and Helik, Hew and Belli, Kyli and Sonta—they all leaked the sort of aggressive anticipation unique to Turi. Tony normally stayed in control of Jo's more blood thirsty instincts, but right now, the young queen smelled dangerous enough to make Goa'uld flee. The other Turi shifted nervously, the anger of the young queen driving them to action.

But crowded into the back of a jumper with marines, none of them could act.

Gibbs pointed out the front of the jumper at a clearing. "Land there," Gibbs said.

"Dr. Weir is not going to like this," Lorne complained softly, but he guided the puddle jumper to the clearly just beyond the line of trees. The fact that Lorne was taking his orders suggested that he assumed Samas was in charge, but Samas was far more skilled with political battles than physical ones. This was Gibbs' area of expertise.

"She has handled Ladon well, but this is a threat to our council and our people. If Ladon dislikes our handling of Kolya, he can take it up with us," Gibbs said firmly. When Ladon had asked them to leave Kolya, Samas had immediately scented the bitter schemes and fears. Ladon probably hoped the Kolya would escape so he would not have to deal with the political fallout of an assassination. However neither Samas nor Gibbs cared much for Genii politics.

Lorne settled the puddle jumper and opened the back. Helik led the group of five Turi out the back. Five of Samas' children were about to tear through the Genii forces, and Samas sent up flare of pride. He had his world back. His children were strong, and the world would not attack them or theirs. Kolya would pay, and if Samas had to sacrifice a child to medically strengthen Sheppard, he would. He would not allow Sheppard to die.

The Turi vanished into the trees and Lorne took off again. McKay had a lock on Sheppard's subcutaneous transmitter, and Lorne raced toward the location. Ronon and Teyla were both with them as were eight of Lorne's top marines. Back on Atlantis, two dozen troops were ready to come through the gate, and Kitsune was so angry she had promised to bring in not just her ship, but call other Travelers to hunt Kolya down.

"There! There!" Rodney said as the signal grew stronger. Lorne flew the puddle jumper so low that the tips of the trees brushed against the underside. "We need to get closer," Rodney said.

"I need room to put the jumper down," Lorne said, his voice tight with aggravation. "We're landing hard, brace yourself."

Gibbs grabbed the side of the seat, and they were about four feet above the ground when Lorne just dropped the jumper. The hard landing engaged the emergency protocols allowed the back ramp to slam down to the ground and they all rushed out into the damp morning air.

Unsurprisingly, Ronon took point. Tony stayed close to Teyla, and the marines scrambled out behind them. As much as Gibbs wanted to be in the front, he chose instead to stay close to Rodney. If they saved the colonel and lost Rodney, that would not be a win. Lorne left a lieutenant and two marines with the cloaked puddle jumper, and he took the rear.

They ran through the woods, senses alert, but Gibbs couldn't spot any enemy. The first hint of trouble came when he heard Tony yelling, "Stop, stop!" That command was quickly reinforced by
Sheppard's shouts, "Don't fire! Hold your fire!"

Gibbs put his hand on Rodney's arm to hold him back as they came into an open area. Sheppard was there looking as young as ever, and he was holding out his hand to stop Ronon from firing on a Wraith. More significantly, the clearing was flooded with Wraith scent--brother, admiration, acceptance of death, surprise. The emotions swirled around them.

Rodney was oblivious to everything except Sheppard. "You! You look younger than you did before!" The words came out almost confrontational, but Sheppard gave him a fond look. He seemed to have dismissed the Wraith as a threat.

Gibbs was not so willing to forget that this creature had fed on Sheppard, and the marines around them clearly weren't either. They all had weapons drawn. Samas slid forward and he blasted the air with his own scents, one modified so the Wraith could understand. Anger, brother, protect, leader.

The Wraith swung around and his yellowed eyes moved right to Gibbs and Samas. "Interesting," he said. "I had said there was much you did not understand about Wraith, Sheppard, but perhaps the opposite is also true."

Unfortunately, Jo chose that moment to reinforce Samas' message, blasting the air with her own challenge and her own message of protecting her family. The Wraith glanced over, but turned his attention back to Samas and Gibbs almost immediately. The air shifted as his scent spoke of amusement and youth. Samas was tempted to agree. Jo was acting impetuously.

“How is this possible?” Teyla asked as she moved to John, reaching up to touch him reverently.

“Don’t ask me,” Sheppard said.

It was the Wraith who answered. “The gift of life is reserved only for our most devout worshippers.” He paused and that scent of brother-accept-defend grew stronger before he added, “and our brothers.”

“Yeah, we’re all learning new things today,” Sheppard said, and from the expression on his face it was pretty clear he didn’t really want to.

“But we’re still going to kill it, right?” Ronon asked.

Sheppard studied the Wraith for a long time. “We had a deal, right?” he asked the creature.

The Wraith sent out pheromones that sang of brother-brother-admiration. "I had not actually expected you to keep your word."

Before Sheppard could answer, Samas and Gibbs stepped forward. This was their first chance to communicate with a willing Wraith. The one called Michael had never been truly willing. "You think little of humans then," Samas said, and he colored his scent with disagreement and disapproval. He would have this one know that humans had an ally in the Turi. Turi might fight and even eat each other, but the Wraith destroyed those whose memories were unique and used their strength to force weakness on others. It was an abomination, and Samas allowed a little of that disapproval to leech into his scent.

It was difficult using Wraith scent markers. The unfamiliar chemicals made Samas edgy, even if his work with the Wraith interfaces gave him some limited fluency.

The Wraith showed its teeth. "I see I have misunderstood much." And that came with a scent of curiosity and interest that Samas found unexpected. In Wraith, most pleasant scents were associated
with known pathways and established fact. Wraith were not fond of change.

"Why are we talking to this thing instead of shooting it?" Ronon demanded. Samas sent out the more familiar Turi scent markers, ordering Ronon to stand down. Between that and Sheppard's hand on his arm, Ronon was well under control.

"He helped me get out of the cells," Sheppard said.

"It helped itself," Ronon disagreed, but he sounded more disgruntled than actively homicidal. Had it not been for Ronon's near frantic need to get to his taskmaster, Samas would have sent Ronon with the other Turi where he was more likely to work out some of that anger on Kolya and his guard.

Sheppard said firmly, "No, we made an agreement."


"Is that your name or the name you offer Sheppard?" Samas asked.

The Wraith shifted his attention from Samas to Sheppard and back. "I offer Sheppard the proper title of one who would choose such a path," the Wraith said, but then he tilted his head forward. "And I offer my own name."

"What name? What's his name?" Lorne asked. Samas imagined that from his point of view, the conversation was very confusing. Gibbs added to that his own belief that Lorne was like the Wraith--uncomfortable with change.

"His name is Guide," Samas said. "However, our leader already has a name." Samas sent out the scent to mark Sheppard as leader of the flock. He was a shepherd.

The Wraith grinned, showing his sharp teeth. "I had not thought humans so literal."

"Some are," Samas said.

"Hey, would someone like to share with the class?" Sheppard asked. He had confiscated Ronon's weapon and now he took a step closer to the Wraith. Rodney looked near panic, and Ronon was ready to take the Wraith on with a knife, but Sheppard smelled more of confusion than aggression, and Samas was sure the Wraith could tell that.

"He offers you the name 'Guide,'" Samas said, "but I have explained that you are a shepherd, a leader of the people. He also gives his own name as 'Guide.'"

"Is this like the other Wraith being named bad-ass flyer of attack darts?" Sheppard asked. That was a horrible misrepresentation of Michael's true Wraith name, but Samas suspected Sheppard already knew that.

"Similar, yes," Samas agreed.

"We rarely offer such an honor to humans," Guide said.

"We don't want it," Ronon snapped. The Wraith looked at him, and his scent shifted. One who faced death with anger. Samas realized the Wraith was offering Ronon his own name.

Samas shifted his chemicals and offered his name. Wise one who tempers others. Since his first days on Earth after being taken from the pool of onac where he was spawned, that was the name he had
taken. Samas the wise. Shamash the god who spoke to Gilgamesh. He tempered the strong emotions of others, strengthening them into weapons to use against his enemies.

Perhaps Samas had let too many of those memories slide to the forefront as he formed the chemical markers because the Wraith drew in a breath and his shock filled the air. Queen. The admiration, the surprise all filled the air. The Wraith looked back at Sheppard, and now the scent shifted. Queen's Guide. Queen's Shepherd.

Samas figured if any of the IOC heard a report on this, the politicians would order Sheppard back to Earth and kill Samas.

Sheppard looked from the Wraith to Samas and back again. He most likely knew they were communicating, but he had no way to understand their words. The chemicals were so nuanced that Samas suspected that even Jo was missing more than she understood, especially since the Wraith seemed to be tightly projecting the chemicals toward Samas.

"Okay, we're all going to keep our word, so it's time to get this show on the road." Sheppard raised Ronon's weapon and fired. The Wraith collapsed and Ronon was at Sheppard's side in a heartbeat.

"You stunned him," Ronon said accusingly.

"We had a deal. We're going to find a world with Wraith and drop him off there," Sheppard said firmly. Samas could smell the unease, but Lorne stepped forward. "Whalen, Cooper head back to the jumper for a stretcher. Johnson, Balinski, you'll help load the Wraith. Dr. McKay, any suggestions for planets?" And with that, men were moving. Doubt vanished under the need to take action.

"Crap!" Sheppard suddenly exclaimed. "Kolya. Where is he?" Sheppard looked around as though expecting to see Kolya, but then he grabbed a radio off the ground. "Kolya, I know you're running for it, you coward," he said into the mouthpiece.

The radio crackled and then Kyli answered. The Satetean woman had such a small, feminine voice, but she was a tall, well-muscled woman with a temper like a polar bear. "Commander Sheppard, Kolya is never going to run again," she said.

Sheppard blew out a long breath. "Good job," he offered.

"Thank you, sir." The smugness in her voice made Samas suspect that when Ladon and his troops came through, they were going to get a very visceral reminder of how brutal Turi could be when their home was threatened, and John Sheppard was part of their home.

Lorne touched his own radio. "Gate team Charlie, make your way to Atlantis. We have a delivery to make, so please inform Dr. Weir that we will be a couple of minutes late.

Hew answered. He was the oldest of the Sateteans, a warrior who had been pierced through the stomach with a metal rod during the final battle for Sateta. The others respected him because, like Ronon, he had never fled and never obeyed an order to back down. But his injury had left him near death and saved him from the Wraith. Now he was one of the few Satetean officers still alive. The other officers had fled Sateta before the final battle, and those individuals had a suspiciously high mortality rate now that the Turi nation was established.

"We will hold the gate until you are safely through and then head home," Hew answered.

Lorne narrowed his eyes and shot Samas a frustrated look. Samas raised his eyebrow and waited. If Lorne wanted to be second in command, he would have to enforce his authority. When Samas didn't react, Lorne triggered his radio again.
"Negative, Charlie company. Bug out immediately. We are secure and we will follow."

There was a pause, but then Hew responded. "Affirmative. We're dialing out now."

Sheppard slapped Lorne on the arm and gave him a sympathetic look. "Get Hew and his crew on the training schedule."

"If they'll listen to the order to show up," Lorne complained softly. The soldiers with the stretcher came through and set it next to the Wraith.

"They'll listen," Samas said firmly. "Earth military commands the Atlantis forces, Major Lorne. Remind them of that." Gibbs silently suggested they pull in the team that had been part of Colonel Sheppard's rescue during his time on Earth. The covert ops team used parkour and gymnastics moves that would both impress the Turi warriors and remind them that humans had impressive fighting forces too. They should also see the Russian special forces and the new Ranger unit Atlantis had just inherited. "Gibbs has a few suggestions for handling them," Samas told Lorne.

Lorne grinned. "Good. I would feel guilty about siccing the gunny on them, but they deserve it."

By now, the soldiers had the Wraith on the stretcher, and they were headed back toward the puddle jumper.

"Are we seriously going to give that thing a ride to a new planet?" Rodney demanded. "He tried to eat you!"

John slung his arm over Rodney's shoulder. "But he didn't. He gave the life back. Besides, he and I agreed that next time we meet, all bets are off."

Teyla moved to Rodney's other side, and Ronon fell in next to Sheppard. "This is unprecedented. I did not realize the Wraith could return the life they stole," Teyla said. She sounded unsure, which was not common for Teyla.

Samas held himself back from the team gathering. They were quickly approaching the time when Samas would have to separate for good. He was too old and too large to continue using a human host.

Gibbs felt a soft sort of grief over that loss, and Samas agreed. They were a good team. However, someone had to be a Turi guide and lead the people into unknown waters. The humans had Sheppard, and Samas trusted him to lead well. It was time for Samas to prove to his children that their home was in the water and not in hosts. The best way to do that was to create his nest and let his body form the hanging sack that would allow him to spawn far more children than he could presently. It meant that Samas would lose his human team, he would know of them only through the songs of his children.

Gibbs suggested that Jo was likely to bring tales directly. Onac queens were solitary—violently so—when it came to other queens, but Jo had never totally separated from Samas. She would still tempt Samas to bite her tail and tease her when they were in the water together. More than once Samas with his larger form had an easy opportunity for a kill strike, and no onac queen would ever put itself in a position to be second to another queen.

But Jo was not onac. She was Turi. In her heart, Samas would always be the queen, and she was happy to serve. It had changed their relationship, and maybe Samas would not be completely alone in the water.

Gibbs was certain Samas would not be alone. Jo's spawn sister might have lost her life in the water,
but Jo had younger sisters who were learning. One might kill an equal queen, but one adored the ranking queen above you. Samas was the ranking queen. She would never be hunted and never be alone.

In front of them, the Atlantis team walked, their shoulders close enough to brush against, and Gibbs agreed with Samas. It was time to allow the team to unite without a fifth member. Now that Ronon didn't have to keep the secret of the Turi from Sheppard, he had stopped avoiding missions, and Samas trusted that Ronon would teach an entire generation of Turi and protect Sheppard.

Samas would worry that Ronon would shift the song too much toward aggression, only Radek's Turi sang of scientific discoveries and the danger of experimenting with ZPM. They were close to being able to recharge the empty crystals, and Radek had leaned heavily on his Turi to help him with the long hours and impossibly complex math. The beauty of the math translated into stunning song.

Jonas' Turi sang of the crystalline systems and the data all strung together in prisms and flashes of light. Gibbs had even curbed his tongue when Abby had challenged and won, and her Turi spun tales of people, of data strung together with personalities. She had her own battles as she commanded Rodney's department, the third of the ruling triad of Rodney, Radek, and her. The men knew the science, but she knew how to scare the shit out of the other scientists. Gibbs mused that she was the drill sergeant of the department. Nyan loved the mysteries of the universe, and his Turi sang of lost cultures and hidden languages. They sought the patterns in the whale song and were the first to sink deep into the blackness of the ocean to find what lay beneath.

Miko's Turi loved the line of a curve, the mathematical precision in either a snowflake or the structural underpinnings of the north tower. She saw beauty in places where neither Gibbs nor Samas saw any. She was so quiet, but her images so powerful that several of the young queens would spin in the water and proclaim their frustration when they were not allowed to challenge for her. That had surprised even Samas, but then Turi were not onac. They certainly were not Goa'uld. Turi wanted Miko's quiet strength.

And when the others songs would grow quiet for a moment, there was always the song from Jo's chosen--picked up and repeated by thousands of voices. He sang of death, of being willing to die to save the waters, to protect the ones who protected them. He sang of Sheppard's strength and the way his mind would meet the Turi's with no fear. He sang of victory over a virus that threatened to take their Sheppard. The young Turi would swim toward that song, eager to hear it over and over. Perhaps it was because Jo showed such a preference for the one who sang, but the younger Turi loved the tale.

Samas silently assured Gibbs that their world was so beautiful that Samas would be happy singing in waters rich with story. The might miss each other, but they had accomplished more than Samas had ever expected.

Gibbs thought back to who he had been when they met, and he had to agree. He'd been such an angry man, determined to die. Now he had a family, a lover, a home worth fighting to protect and a mission. Without Samas, he would have lost all that.

Samas watched as they secured the Wraith before everyone started getting back into the puddle jumper. Samas’ biggest concern was how this Wraith might react to the knowledge that the humans had a queen of sorts. But he had very little control over that, and it was likely they would never see this Guide again. So Samas had only one piece to move into place now before he could call his plan for Atlantis a success.
Teyla watched the gathering with great interest. Little more than a year ago, they had gathered to celebrate the return of John, and then she had looked out over the assemblage and had been able to see a clear line between those from Earth and those from Pegasus. Tony had been the only one dressed in local clothing, and the Earth clothing was fussy and decorated with artificial bits that appeared to have no place on clothing. Elizabeth had worn a dress covered in pieces that glittered caught the eye of most of the room. She clearly had no concerns about making herself a target.

But of course Earthers did not think that way.

Elizabeth had chosen another striking dress for this event, but she was one of the few Earth civilians to do so. Tony wore Athsian leather pants in a soft brown with a linen shirt that made many women look to him, even as he looked to Sams and Gibbs.

Sams had chosen to attend to save Gibbs from wearing the military uniform, and he wore a dark brown outfit with hints of a burgundy leather that was striking without being over flashy. Abby had a long skirt of soft black flax and one of her Earth shirts decorated with skulls. She stood next to Major Lorne in his dress uniform, and few would doubt that they were together. Teyla would have to speak to them about a commitment ceremony. Earth traditions around holidays had eclipsed Athsian celebrations, but she could encourage her culture in other ways.

Take Radek, for example. He wore the trimmed white shirt of a man officially courting a woman. Teyla did not see Selana, but then she was early in her pregnancy, and the smell of food sometimes disgusted her.

“You folks throw a good party.” The voice came from behind, and Teyla turned to see General O’Neill.

She smiled at him. “We have much to celebrate.”

“Yeah, I don’t think McKay agrees.” O’Neill nodded over to the corner. Rodney looked handsome in a high-necked Hoffan jacket and dark pants, but he appeared angry as he poked at the air. Teyla understood that he believed the Earth scientists had won their competition only because the others had taken too many risks, but Teyla wondered if part of his failure lay in the fact that he felt no real need to learn to recharge a ZPM using Earth equipment. The city could recharge as many empty ZPMs as they found, and there were always other projects requiring attention.

“He will congratulate the other team after he finishes impugning their abilities,” she said with certainty. If nothing else, she would remind him to.

O’Neill snorted. For a second, he looked around the room, and she wondered if he could see what she did. Those from Earth or those who had been sent from other places in the Milky Way were beginning to adopt more customs and mannerisms from the Pegasus galaxy. Clothing was the most obvious shift, but not the only one.

“So, the IOC is talking about confirming the new council structure this month,” O’Neill said.

“I had heard.”

“That will make you one of the most powerful people out here,” he said mildly enough.

She gave him an amused look. “Were the Wraith to attack, they would not give any thought to my
titles. To be on the council is a duty and an obligation, not a bauble to desire for its own sake. In fact, I doubt a single member of the council cares much for power.” Teyla glanced toward Elizabeth. Not for power’s own sake, anyway. On Earth, Elizabeth had been excluded from power often enough that she did fear the new power structure, even as she acknowledged that with Atlantis becoming stronger, the council was the best way to prevent the IOC from replacing her. Teyla was not sure how to help Elizabeth understand that none of them would usurp her authority.

Having to veto her so early in the process had made Elizabeth overly cautious of the council, but time would make it clear that they did still respect Elizabeth as their leader.

She had been very firm with Ladon Radim when Kolya had taken John, and when he returned, upset at the slaughter of Kolya and his troops, she had given no excuses. She had stood firmly beside their Turi members. And she had then privately asked them to refrain from the sort of mutilation they had used on Kolya. Elizabeth wasn’t sure that any Turi believed in a human right to remain intact after death or a family’s right to bury all the pieces of a loved one, but she suspected they would attempt to avoid that sort of excess again simply to keep the peace.

Teyla preferred to avoid such shows of anger. Perhaps she should speak to Samas about how excess could be perceived as lack of self control.

“So, do you think this council is going to work?” O’Neill came right out and asked. The party flowed around them, but O’Neill was clearly not making small talk.

“Yes,” she said. Nothing more.

O’Neill studied her for a second before nodding. “Good job vetoing Elizabeth’s off-world trip, by the way.

“We would not lose her to an unknown enemy,” Teyla said. She did not know O’Neill well, but this conversation did make her uncomfortable, especially since John had made it clear that his loyalty ultimately belonged to this general. Teyla suspected that would change if O’Neill prove to be an enemy of Atlantis, but for now, he had considerable power. John and many others on the city put their trust in this man.

She turned and stared at him. “Are you opposed to a council?”

“Personally? Nope,” he said with a shrug. “As the representative of the military of the United States of America, I am vehemently opposed.”

Ah. There was the rub. “And what is the United States of America likely to do?”

O’Neill gave a wry grin. “Damn little. You’re the best life boat out here, and our politicians don’t want to lose their access. But that doesn’t mean that they aren’t pushing behind the scenes. Some of the IOC members were very concerned about you vetoing Elizabeth as quickly as you did.”

“The timing was unfortunate,” Teyla agreed.

“But other IOC members are absolutely gleeful. They do like the idea of limiting the power either Elizabeth or Sheppard hold.”

Telya looked over to John. His dress uniform was quite striking, but he chose to stand in the most shaded corner of the room. He wandered the maze of tables, seemingly fascinated by food whenever someone attempted to engage him in conversation for too long.

“He’s not really one for a power grab, is he?” O’Neill asked with amusement in his voice.
“No,” Teyla agreed. He was a leader, but he did not gather power to him. If he did, the city would find itself in far more conflict as power shifted toward Samas. Teyla worried that Elizabeth would handle it badly when she learned the truth, but she agreed that the Turi children needed to remain a secret from Earth.

“Is Kitsune going to grab for power? Her people have control of three Ancient battleships now.”

And that was one more piece of Samas’ scheme. The Travelers had purchased the Orion from the people of Taranis, so Earth had no access to any command codes and Traveler captains and seconds were aboard at all times. Kitsune’s warship, the Van Helsing, was running at near full capacity and the Orion was flyable, even if it would not last long in a battle. The third ship was in pieces, retrieved from a shipyard, the location of which the Travelers had not yet shared. The Amphiaraus would be ready in a few months, and the Travelers had agreed to let Atlantis use all three in return for living quarters for several thousand people and a monthly quota of food and access to repair facilities. Teyla imagined that Rodney could unlock the command codes given some time, but she could not imagine why he would. He had no love for Earth, and Atlantis was his home.

However, control was not the sort of power Travelers sought. “I do not believe they want the city, General. Their culture is one of survival through avoidance of conflict.”

“So, we should just trust that all of you are good enough people to share power with?” O’Neill asked.

Teyla was caught between amusement and annoyance. So often she found those of Earth had this attitude. “You should trust that this is our galaxy. Atlantis is on one of our planets. The Ancient war ships were found by those of Pegasus. You have no claim to that which is not yours. Rather, you should trust that we are willing to share with our brothers of Earth since that is the reasonable and civilized course of action.” She gave him a sharp look.

“I’m making Daniel have this conversation next time,” he said with a shrug. She did understand that General O’Neill had to answer to his own superiors. Those from Earth had such strict social structures to fit within. And perhaps this was time for another issue.

“Samas feels as secure here as he has any place since being removed from his home waters,” she observed. From the way O’Neill immediately narrowed his eyes, he understood that this was not small talk either. Teyla missed her own people’s tradition of sharing tea and getting to know one another before engaging in direct negotiation.

“Good for him,” O’Neill said while sounding as if he wished to avoid the whole conversation.

“Igigi live in the waters. Hosting is not natural for them, but the other council members fear that if he leaves, it will unbalance the power in the city.”

“If he leaves? Where would he go?” O’Neill was clearly on full alert now.

“To the waters. To explore. To hunt his own food and sing of his adventures,” Teyla said calmly. O’Neill was definitely looking at her strangely.

“And… but… or…” he let his voice trail off, and she understood that as a request for more succinct information.

“Earth controls three seats on the council, including the head of the council. For there to be fewer than three to represent other cultures would be unacceptable.”

“Since Samas is one of a kind, it’s going to be hard to find another. Trust me, you don’t want
goa’uld or tok’ra on the council. They’re just… unpleasant,” he finished after a long pause that made it clear he would prefer to use far less diplomatic words.

“Samas represents the Turi,” Teyla said. “They find me an unacceptable representative because I am one who speaks more for families rather than for warriors.”

“Turi. The Satedans who live in Atlantis,” O’Neill said as though checking his information. “So, you want a Turi representative? Ronon? I don’t have anything against him, but he’s a little young.”

Teyla smiled. “He is. I believe the Turi could be better described as those who believe in a path of honor above all, even above family. It is why they find me a less than suitable representative. Were you to move to Atlantis, I believe they would happily take you into their number and might even ask that you speak for them on council matters.”

“Wait.” O’Neill frowned. “How would that keep more balance on the council because I’m definitely from Earth.”

“But if you lived here, would you not place a high priority on Atlantis’ needs? We have nothing against Earth or those from Earth. The concern is only that there is a balance of people who place Pegasus galaxy’s interest in the forefront of the debate. The Turi wish for their voice to be heard.”

“And who might the Turi ask to voice that opinion?” O’Neill asked without hiding his suspicions.

Teyla smiled. “I suspect they may ask either Hew or Tony to take that role.”

“Tony DiNozzo?” O’Neill blurted out loudly enough to catch the attention of several people around them.

“He has a reputation for solving problems among the people without resorting to a blind enforcement of Earth law. He is fair, well respected as an Arbiter of conflicts, and he is the chosen consort of Samas, which implies a certain faith in his abilities that carries weight among the Turi. He is also rather famous for his stands against the poor leadership of the other military commanders you have sent.”


Teyla nodded. “The other choice would be Hew. He was an officer who never stood down during the fight against the Wraith. He nearly died, but he never betrayed his honor and that makes the others look to him.”

“So, Samas doesn’t get an automatic seat at the table. Whoever the Turi choose would represent them.” O’Neill sounded thoughtful.

“Exactly,” Teyla agreed. She would have to discuss this with Elizabeth quickly. She had not expected this opportunity to plant the correct seeds to come up so quickly, and now the danger was that Elizabeth would see this as an attack on Samas’ position, especially if word of it came through O’Neill.

“I might like that idea,” O’Neill said.

Teyla smiled. She suspected that he would like it less if he knew that the Turi representative would carry one of Samas’ children. Several Turi had even carried symbiotes with memories from O’Neill himself. It gave the general a certain level of acceptance that other military leaders would not receive.

“Yeah, I might like that a lot,” O’Neill repeated.
John tried to keep his eyes from glazing over as the French representative from the IOC tried to talk military budgets at him. John might have said ‘with him,’ only the upshot seemed to be the IOC member telling him how wasteful John’s men were with ammunition.

This was hell.

Keeping a tight smile on his face, John pretended that he was using the entire IOC for target practice using live ammunition.

“You can see the problem,” the guy finished. Actually John couldn’t, but that was because he hadn’t been listening.

“Colonel Sheppard!” another voice called out. Crap. Ambassador Shen, and now John was going to be trapped between them. He started edging backwards, but the woman was closing fast. “Ah, Colonel Sheppard, I had hoped to speak with you.” She gave the French representative a stiff smile. “Ambassador LaPierre,” she greeted him.

LaPierre. That was his name. John tried to mentally file that way, but the fact was that he would probably forget before the night was over.

“Ambassador Shen,” the man said with an equally plastic smile. John was quickly remembering why he preferred the Pegasus galaxy.

Since Elizabeth had ordered him to play nice and avoid intentionally pissing off any IOC members, John plastered the most helpful look he could manage on his face and turned to face her. “Representative Shen, I hope you’re enjoying Atlantis,” he offered, praying she would complain about something short and then let him escape.

The smile she offered him looked very genuine, so either she hadn’t noticed his dislike or she was a better actor than he was. “Very much so. You have progressed significantly in the last year.”

“We’ve had help,” John said. Shen moved to get between John and LaPierre. The man looked furious for one second, and then he gave John a polite nod and moved on to torture someone else with his discussion of budgets.

Shen gave a small laugh. “You are unlike most American military commanders I have worked with.”

“They’d agree with you.” John shrugged. It was true, especially since most military commanders thought they were right and John was wrong. After working in General O’Neill’s office in Washington, John had figured out that entirely too many officers were political animals who had earned promotions based on their ability to do paperwork rather than through field work the way he and General O’Neill had worked up the ladder.

“I’m sure they would. However, I find your lack of arrogance far easier to work with.”

“Oh, I’m exceptionally arrogant, I just don’t assume that everything that goes right is because of me.”

Shen laughed again, and this was getting awkward. “And I had thought rumors of your charm were exaggerated.”

They were. John was falling back on the advice of the life coach his father had hired all those years
ago when he was trying to avoid having John labelled ‘emotionally disabled.’ When all else failed, you insulted yourself. John didn’t understand the rule, he just used it around people he didn’t know well.

Shen gave him a thoughtful look. “You have done an admirable job, Colonel.” She gave a small smile and tilted her head forward in a gesture that almost suggested a bow without actually bowing. John had the distinct feeling that she wanted something. Badly. “This new governmental treaty would elevate your position, would it not?”

And that was it. John was starting to hate the whole council idea, not because it was a bad idea but because everyone had to jump in with an opinion about it. “Representative Shen, if you have any concerns, you really should address them with Dr. Weir.”

“Perhaps I prefer to find out how the military commander of Atlantis sees these agreements. Do you have concerns regarding the number of civilians under your protection?”

John laughed and looked around the room. Most of the people were civilians—enough that the officers’ dress uniforms stood out from the crowd, but John suspected very few of these civilians needed any protection. These were the sorts of civilians who would blow you up as you slept if you annoyed them. “Our people don’t need as much protecting as you might think.”

Shen nodded as though agreeing with him. “But the Travelers… that will be many new families that you must provide for.”

“Travelers take care of their own, and they are the only group that, as a whole, can handle Rodney without blinking an eye. I’ve seen fifteen-year-olds get into screaming matches with him over energy consumptions numbers, and they turn around and damn near worship the ground he walks on after he proves them wrong.” John gave her another fake smile and prayed she’d go away. Maybe she’d go bug Rodney. He liked screaming at stupid people.

“But surely you are concerned about security, about a posting which has grown far beyond the original mission.”

John shrugged. “Not really.”

“And the fact that you are now essentially in command of almost two thousand people doesn’t leave you any room for doubt?”

“I’m not in command of anyone except the four hundred or so members of the military,” John said firmly. He was tired of half the IOC assuming he was trying to grab power and the other half thinking he was incompetent. John had no illusions how fast the IOC would demand his removal if General O’Neill weren’t running interference. “I follow Dr. Weir’s orders. I am here to support and protect the civilian population, and I am under Dr. Weir in the chain of command. Period.”

She tilted her head. “I can see that I have upset you. That was not my intent.”

John doubted that. He also suspected that he should run for the hills. This woman had an agenda that he didn’t understand. “Look. Someone brought tuttleroot soup,” John said loudly.

Unfortunately Shen ignored his outburst and no one else seemed likely to come to John’s rescue. “I was more curious about whether you had any concerns that Dr. Weir has ignored,” Shen said.

“If I had concerns, I would take them to Dr. Weir.” John made eye contact with Samas across the room and sent him a mental SOS. He could see Samas whisper something to Tony before starting across the room.
Shen gave a little hum. “Of course. Were you to have concerns, the IOC leadership committee would wish for you to know you could bring them to us.”

“Gunny, Samas,” John greeted Samas loudly as he came close.

“Colonel,” the softer tones of Samas answered, “Representative Shen.” Samas managed to sound actually pleasant.

“Representative Shen, I think you met Gunnery Sergeant Gibbs during the tour earlier, but I’d like you to meet Samas, our Igigi scientist who is responsible for some of our best reverse engineering, including the modified darts and the BSUs. He has one of our council seats as well.”

Samas quirked an eyebrow at John. “We met at the welcoming ceremony,” he said softly. John cringed. Right. He’d been there for that. Sort of. He’d been trying hard to make himself one with the wall.

“Of course,” Shen said warmly. That was weird. “The Americans have shown some concern over having you on the council.”

“Americans sometimes have trouble separating the Goa’uld, the Tok’ra, and the Igigi,” Samas said.

Shen gave John a sympathetic look. “Yes, they often do,” she said. John wasn’t sure if she was insulting him or consoling him for having to work with idiotic Americans.

“Funny enough, most of the Americans around here have no trouble telling the difference,” John said in defense of his people. He sounded aggravated, even to his own ears. It was definitely time to cut this conversation short before he said something that Elizabeth would be forced to kill him for.

“Samas, Gibbs and I need to um go talk to General O’Neill.” Smooth. Real smooth. That hadn’t sounded like an escape attempt—not at all. Today was one of those days that John knew he was an idiot.

“Of course not,” Samas said, but before John could make his getaway, he added, “after answering Representative Shen’s questions.”

John glared at him, but as usual, it did no good. Whether it was Gibbs or Samas, their immunity to any sort of disapproval really annoyed John.

“We were only having a conversation,” Shen said in casual tone as if it didn’t matter. If it hadn’t mattered, she wouldn’t have followed him out here.

“Of course,” Samas said, “and I would not want to distract you from a conversation of how different the Americans on this base are. I suppose that is inevitable when all the soldiers train under Gibbs, myself and Teyla Emmagan—two aliens and one who sympathizes with an alien point of view enough to offer himself as a temporary host. And of course we have a large number of soldiers who are not from Earth at all.”

“And then there is the question of Colonel Sheppard’s humanity,” Shen said.

John gritted his teeth. He absolutely could not have a discussion about all the Ancient shit without saying a hundred different things that Elizabeth absolutely didn’t want him to say.

“Colonel Sheppard is human. I can smell that,” Samas promised, “but he is much more open than… say Colonel Ellis.”

Shen took a deep breath and seemed to think about that for a time. “Yes, Colonel Ellis’ arrogance
could have done a lot of damage.”

“He never would have allowed the Travelers to move into the city,” Samas agreed.

John interrupted. “Actually, Dr. Weir is in charge of diplomatic relations. Colonel Ellis would have deferred to her.”

They both gave him pitying looks. Great.

“Yes,” Shen agreed while maintaining an expression that made John feel like an idiot. John was starting to hate how much she agreed with everything. “That has opened new possibilities.”

“Atlantis is full of possibilities,” Samas agreed. Now John knew they were having some sort of secret conversation—he just wasn’t sure what they were really saying.

Shen raised an eyebrow. “Is it?”

“The people who come here are very open to possibility, which is something not all the people are prepared to handle. Some of the SGC soldiers have gone back to Earth rather than train with a symbiote.”

“They failed to adapt,” Shen summarized.

“They did. Atlantis is developing her own culture, and adaption is near the top of the list.”

“Developing. An interesting word.”

“A specific one,” Samas said firmly. John looked back and forth between them. He’d watched Elizabeth play politics, but he’d never seen this sort of strange half-conversation.

Shen half-turned away and raised her fingers to trace one of the engravings embedded into the wall of the city. “I find Atlantis endlessly fascinating. I imagine my brother would be even more enthralled with the art and beauty of this place.”

“Is he a scientist?”

“No.” She pursed her lips for a moment. “My parents were not pleased when he chose to pursue his art.”

Samas nodded. “I often wish the Americans would send artists and families. A new world should have more than soldiers and scientists.”

She turned and gave him a long look. “I thought that is what the Hoff and Travelers provided.”

“It’s a big city, Representative Shen,” Samas said.

John almost kicked himself when he finally caught on to what they were talking about. Immigrants. Representative Shen was trying to find out if Atlantis would allow immigrants from earth. If this was the political leverage to get China to agree to the new council, then Elizabeth definitely should be in on the conversation. “I think this is something you should speak to Dr. Weir about,” John said firmly. He pressed his lips together and gave Samas a long, hard look.

Shen quickly ducked her head into another of not-really bows. “Of course. Dr. Weir would be the best person to consult.” She held out her hand toward Samas, and he moved forward a step to shake it. “I am very honored to have met you, Ambassador Samas.”
“Ambassador Shen,” Samas said warmly. He smiled and waited as she wandered off through the crowd.

“Samas?” John demanded in a whisper.

The asshole had the nerve to grin at him. “The Chinese are worried. They want to send more people here in case Earth falls. She’s trying to judge how open you might be to the possibility. After all, it’s no good fighting on her end if she thinks you and Weir will block her from here.”

John blinked at him. “What? How did…” John sighed. “This is another of those things like when you just knew the Genii would ally themselves with us, right?”

Samas shrugged. “I suspected. During the briefing she smelled alternately of hope and despair. When she brought up her brother, she just confirmed that she’s looking to place immigrants, not extra positions for Chinese military or scientific personnel.”

John understood that he was bad with people, but sometimes it amazed him just how much he missed. “You got all that out of a short conversation?”

“Politics is not your strength, John. Perhaps Elizabeth, Teyla, and I should handle this.”

“Please,” John said, and he could admit that it sounded a little like he was begging. If it came down to sheer politicking—him versus Shen—John would put his money on Shen. She could cheat a Genii out of his last nuke. However, no one out politicked Elizabeth, Samas and Teyla.

Hopefully. If the IOC didn’t ratify the new constitution, they were going to have one huge mess on their hands, and it was the sort of mess that John couldn’t shoot.

Abby squeezed Evan’s hand, and he squeezed it back. It was their secret signal. Every squeeze meant they were really bored and they wished they could sneak out and go have wild sex on some balcony. Abby squeezed again.

Evan turned and gave her one of his shy smiles. He leaned close and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek before whispering in her ear, “My pants are not going to hide the bulge if you don’t stop doing that.”


Evan smiled so that the corners of his eyes crinkled up. “Imp,” he said as he shifted to leave a little distance between them, but he didn’t let go of her hand. Evan was like that—all spit and polish and shine, but then when you looked under the surface, there was the insecurity, the certainty that he didn’t quite fit in, that he wasn’t quite good enough.

Abby hated that the SGC had exiled him to some mining planet for almost a year. It had made him question his ability to lead.

But that’s why he needed her—to tell him how perfect he was. Abby let go of his hand and curled both her hands around his arm. He smiled at her, and she rested her chin on his shoulder. “I should go rescue Rodney before he makes Sam too angry.” She looked over at Rodney, red faced and
waving his hands as he talked to Carter.

Evan looked over. “Too late,” he said.

Abby didn’t think so. Sam was frustrated, but she didn’t look ready to kill anyone yet. Maybe Abby would let Rodney get it all out of his system. Sam really had cut a few corners, and there was a chance she could have blown up her lab and even the planet she’d put the lab on, but that was science. If Atlantis was in danger, Rodney would take risks that big. Absolutely. He’d set off a nuclear explosion above the city and then turned the shield into a cloak. Abby could count a million ways that might have gone wrong and killed everyone, including her boys. She didn’t like thinking about that story much.

“Hey, it’s Hew!” Abby waved at the man, and after a brief hesitation, he waved back. “We should go talk to him.”

Evan was lodging some sort of protest, but Abby dragged him across the room. “Hew! Hew!” Abby waved again and then they were pushing past the last knot of people. “It’s a great party? I mean, it needs louder music, but the food is amazing, and it’s so cool to see everyone dressed up. That is an amazing outfit.” He had on a form fitting jacket with detailed embroidery down the sleeves. It looked a little like an old-fashioned military jacket, but a really cool steampunky version of it.

“It’s different to see such a gathering. I’m used to…” He stopped. Abby felt a flash of guilt that she had reminded him of his past. He was like Ronon, all focused on being a loner, only more so. Maybe it was because he was older and he had lost his children to the Wraith, but he reminded her of her silver-haired fox.

“Just don’t get too close to the politicians from Earth,” Evan said softly.

“Politicians are the same everywhere,” Hew said sadly. “Why is it that such great people can have such poor leaders?”

“Because good people don’t want power, and sometimes they forget and leave it laying around where other people can pick it up,” Abby said.

Hew graced her with a small smile that made his pockmarked and scarred face look kinder. “You are wise beyond your years.”

“That’s because I’ve had to deal with too many politicians. You should see the woman I escaped from before coming here. She tried telling me I couldn’t do my job unless I dressed like everyone else.”

“But you were not in the military, were you?” Hew asked, clearly confused.

“Exactly!” Abby said loudly. The crowd was so loud already that her voice was lost in the general din. “I can be different and be just as good.”

Evan wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close enough to kiss her temple. It amused Abby that he seemed so shy and vanilla in public and then he could totally get his kink on in private. It was like there was a secret Evan just for her. And she understood that he didn’t want to fly his freak flag, and she got why because if she ever met the elderly Mrs. Lorne she was going to have a thing or two to say to that woman. Raising someone to believe in finding his own path and then denigrating him and cutting him off for choosing a path of his own… that was a special sort of shitty. Abby was going to introduce Evan to her parents, and they would tell him that he was perfect no matter what he did.
Abby could feel the unease between two of her favorite people, so she poked right at the center of the problem. “So, are you two doing better with coordinating your teams in the field?” she asked. She put on her best innocent face as she looked at them both.

Evan turned a brilliant shade of red, and Hew got a wary expression. Hew spoke first. “I realize that Earth techniques have much to be said for them.”

“And I can respect that you hesitate to leave ranking officers to take dangerous positions,” Evan said.

Hew’s smile turned more genuine. “No doubt training together will help us reach some compromise. In the field is not a place to question chain of command, and I am military enough to know that. Sometimes I just forget my military manners.”

“You were a lot of years on your own. I’m not sure I would be fit to fight if I had endured what you have,” Evan said.

Abby smiled at her man. That was kind of an awesome thing to say, and she could feel the ice melt between the two men. “I don’t think you give yourself enough credit, Major,” Hew said. “If you would excuse me, I had hoped to speak to some of these politicians of yours to get a feel for their true natures.” With a bow, Hew excused himself.

Evan watched him go. “I really hope that after talking to some of these politicians, he doesn’t run for the hills,” he said softly.

Abby slid her hand down and took Evan’s before giving it a big squeeze.

Tony leaned against the window and watched the milling crowds. Close to a hundred of the Travelers were here. They had shown more interest than anyone in understanding Earth politics. Tony suspected Samas’ warnings had something to do with that. In addition, Ladon Radim wandered through the crowd, dividing his time between small talk with members of the IOC and looking longingly at Elizabeth. Tony suspected he was starting to regret burning that bridge.

The Dagans had chosen to stay in their library. They had no interest in Earth politics as long as they got to keep John in the city. The Hoff had basically the same opinion. However, plenty of Turi were here. The Turi understood the differences between Earth culture and Atlantis culture, and it made them uneasy to have so much Earth power standing on their territory.

Jo felt the same, but Tony was tightly controlling her stress hormones. She didn’t need to aggravate any of the Turi into some stupid act of violence.

Samas and Gibbs moved to the spot next to Tony and leaned against the window. “Everything okay?”

“Too many politicians, too little space,” Tony said.

Gibbs snorted. For a time they stood shoulder to shoulder and watched the crowd.

“This reminds me of running a security detail on some diplomatic dinner.”

“Do you expect to have a body drop into the middle of the lobby?” Gibbs asked.
Tony remembered that case. God, that had been a lifetime ago. The world had looked so different back then. But change was life.

Jo shifted at the thought of change, and Gibbs caught that moment of discomfort. He wrapped his fingers around Tony’s wrist. “It’ll be okay,” Gibbs said firmly.

Tony nodded. “We know Samas is physically uncomfortable, but we’ve gotten used to having you around.” Jo shifted her scent toward love-team-family, and Samas echoed the feeling back. Gibbs and Samas might have been loners when Tony met them, but now they had family and that would not change if Samas returned to the water full time. However, Tony would miss him.

Getting stories from Jo wasn’t the same as reaching out and touching Gibbs and Samas and feeling the emotions rush through their skin. It wasn’t the same as having Samas chase him through the halls and their mock fights. Tony adored Gibbs with all his heart, but he adored Samas too.

“He’s afraid that every time he joins he risks doing more damage,” Gibbs said softly.

“I get it,” Tony said. One day Jo would have to make the same decision, but luckily, Tony would be long dead and in his grave by then.

Jo gave a flare of horror at the thought, and Gibbs chuckled. “Youth has such a skewed view of the world. Samas is getting everything he wanted—everything he survived centuries hiding in the water in order to get.”

That was true, but because of their touch, Tony also knew that Samas grieved for what he was giving up. He hadn’t expected to fall in love with his host culture, but he had. Tony wished there was some way he could have both, but as a host himself, he knew the importance of the Turi remembering that the water was their home. They couldn’t want things in the host culture—that was the path of the goa’uld. So this love for a host would be the queens’ secret. The price a queen would pay for coming back to the same host over and over was a deep sense of loss when the hosting had to end, either because of the need to return to the waters or because of the death of the host.

Jo felt a renewed determination that her younger sisters would not host in Miko, not until they were old enough to understand the sacrifice required. Samas agreed, and sent a feeling of pride across their connection.

Jo might be young, but she was a worthy queen, a worthy ambassador.

“Oh, Teyla spoke to O’Neill about having a Turi ambassador as opposed to giving me a seat at the council automatically,” Gibbs said.

“How did he take it?” Tony’s stomach did a little flip. He’d expected more time with Samas before they could arrange a transfer of power to Jo. Well, most people would assume that Tony had the power, but the Turi would know the different.

“Better than I thought. Teyla is a shrewd politician.”

Tony gave a laugh and leaned into Gibbs until he could put his head on Gibbs’ shoulder. “If Teyla catches you calling her a politician, she’s going to wait until Samas is out swimming and kick your ass with the bantos rods,” he warned.

Gibbs slipped his hand around Tony’s waist, and the amount of skin-to-skin contact made Tony’s head spin a little. He almost felt like he was swimming, his long body pressed up against Samas’. Usually when he had this strange sort of disassociation, Tony would struggling to regain his sense of self. This time he closed his eyes and imagined himself and Gibbs, Jo and Samas, all together in one space, their bodies pressed together until one flowed into another. It was such an intimate moment.
that the politics fell away and the party fell away, and they had only love.

This is what the goa’uld had sacrificed. Tony knew without a doubt that it wasn’t worth it. But that was okay because Samas had forged a new path for their people, and the Turi would always know what it was to love. That was Samas’ gift to his children.

Fin

.

.

.

That is the end of this cycle. The city is now its own government with its own power and food supplies, its own army and its own battleships. Yes, there is more to come because this is the universe that is absolutely unwilling to end.

If you enjoyed the alien culture and world building (and m/m relationships), you can support my writing career by checking out Claimings, Tails, and other Alien Artifacts (http://www.amazon.com/Claimings-Tails-Other-Alien-Artifacts-ebook/dp/B00B7T18UY/) or the sequel Assimilation, Love, and Other Human Oddities (http://www.amazon.com/Assimilation-Love-Other-Human-Oddities-ebook/dp/B00NUGAI14/)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!