Shattering Occam's Razor

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Shattering Occam's Razor

by Todeswind

Summary

This story is a companion piece to my story, God's Eye, told from the perspective of SG-1 as they find themselves coping with all manner of supernatural complications to their war with the Goa'uld.
Chapter 1

This story starts at the End of God's Eye chapter 18

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God help him, Jack had kind of liked the Warden and his retinue. Sure they were arrogant, sure they were planning to kill him or turn him into their personal finger-puppet, but they’d been kinda’ nice to spend time with. He’d never consent to it without the protection of an Asgard warship behind him but the experience had not been entirely unpleasant. Without the anxiety of weapons or warfare, it felt a bit like dealing with the Russians back in the Cold War. Just a good old-fashioned stare down with a dangerous SOB who wanted you dead.

And like the Cold War, as much as he’d enjoyed it while it lasted, he was glad to have seen it end before it came to blows. He let out a breath that he didn’t realize he’d been holding as the event horizon of the Stargate closed with a wirr-hoosh of de-energized plasma as the last of their unwelcome guests left the premises. Those servants and slaves who’d chosen to defect were shepherded into temporary accommodations by marines as the Asgard ally of Earth said his goodbyes.

“A third party?” Jack asked, inquiring into the what had inspired such fear Ammit. Goa’uld with Unas hosts weren’t exactly the sort of thing one expected to run and hide. Skulk, prowl, charge – perhaps even stalk, but never flee, one never expected them to flee.

“Ammit’s Ailurphobic nature is not without cause – though I doubt the Furling would be able to penetrate this base’s defenses.” Thor tilted his head. “Though for the Köttr such barriers may prove insufficient - he is quite determined to see the Soul Eater undone.”

“You mean there are Furlings on Earth?” Daniel asked eagerly. “For how long? Where?”

“The Furlings are everywhere, provided that you know what to look for.” Thor replied. “The wise do not look.”

Daniel muttered to himself about possible explanations for supernatural phenomenon as Jack knelt down to get eye to eye with the little Norse god. “Ok buddy – you think it’s a bad idea to look for them? Then it’s a bad idea. I’ll take your word for it.”

“It is no accident that my people value your achievements.” The tiny man smiled. “It was good to
have been of service, friend O’Neill. It pleases me to have been able to serve the terms of our treaty, if only this once.”

Thor’s black eyes stared up at the Colonel, reflecting the dim florescent lights. Naked and frail, the man looked nothing like one would expect from the ruler who’d inspired the Norse pantheon. The man looked more likely to appear on a lunch pail from Roswell than on the carvings of a Norse warship.

“Yeah, about that.” Jack scratched the back of his head. “I thought the whole ‘protected planets’ treaty was a bluff – something you can’t actually enforce.”

“It is – mostly.” Thor admitted. “At least while the war in my home galaxy continues. Our resources continue to be necessary for preserving our own survival.”

It was not the first time that Thor had referred to the domestic threat keeping him from helping Earth in their fight with the Goa’uld. The Asgard were fighting something scarier than the Goa’uld and, judging by Thor’s reticence to talk about it, the war was not going in their favor. An enemy capable of going toe to toe with the Asgard - that was a thing of nightmares.

“Then what were you doing in our neck of the woods?” O’Neill queried, pointing at his chest. “Because as much as I love your visits, and I do, you only tend to pop by to tell us that something is – well – going to hell. And things going to hell just make me all ornery. And you know how much I hate getting all ornery.”

“I was resolving… a family matter.” The tiny grey man replied. “My father requested my presence.”

“Your, father?” The Colonel replied, trying to imagine a younger Thor and failing miserably – though not nearly as much as he struggled to comprehend how one would actually produce an infant Asgard. The Norse gods worried little for their own modesty, and he could see no visible orifices or genitals that might result in baby Asgardians. He elected not to ask the questions burning in the forefront of his mind.

Thankfully Daniel had some more practical questions for the Norse deity. He was always good at asking questions. “In Norse lore Thor was the son of Odin the All-father of the Asgard,” Daniel interjected. “He was the king of the Norse pantheon.”

“In a matter of speaking.” The grey man replied, choosing his words with even more care than usual.
“The term father is applicable though we do not share genetic kinship. An explanation beyond that would prove… problematic. Certain details are not mine to share.”

“I’m sorry, Supreme Commander, but I was under the impression that you lead the Asgard,” Daniel queried.

“I do, as does he.” Thor replied. “As I said, there are details that are not mine to share.”

Translation: State secrets stupid – stop asking. Jack sighed as Daniel opened his mouth to ask the same question in a slightly different way. Danny boy was the nicest guy on the planet, but there were some things he just didn’t get. Need to know information? Top of the list of things Daniel could never quite get his head around.

It was easy to keep your idealism in the Stargate program. Things were pretty black and white against the snakes. Kill the slithery goons so they don’t make the planet go ‘boom’ or turn us all into slaves, it had a way of keeping soldiers on the side of the angels. Jack was happy to be living on the right side of black and white for SG-1 but his job hadn’t always been so generous. One did not get to the rank of Colonel without being forced to wear a black hat in the name of his nation – one did not serve through a prolonged tour of Vietnam without making choices they would later come to regret.

Thor was a man who had clearly lived his entire life making ‘least worst’ choices and deserved to have his privacy respected, Daniel’s curiosity about his family dynamics be damned.

“Keep it in the family, I guess.” The Colonel spoke over his bespectacled companion. “Trust me, difficult families I get. I’ve got cousin that always causes hell at family gatherings and never pays for his share of the beer. We rag on him behind his back, but none of us would bring it up around someone who wasn’t invited to the reunion.”

Thor blinked twice.

“So,” Jack clapped his hands together, changing the subject. “What about our big, honkin’ space-ship.”

A space ship, earth finally had a space ship. Three years of going around the galaxy trying to secure weapons for the defense of the planet and it had finally resulted in something that even those infuriating bean counters back in D.C. were going to have to accept as a reasonable justification for the expense of the program. No more memos about ‘considering more practical alternatives to extra
planetary expenditures.’ The look of frustration on Senator Kinsey’s face would warm the cockles of his heart for years to come. Nothing was going to please him more than taking that smug, opportunistic slime-ball down a peg. Head of the appropriations committee – more like head up his ass.

The Warden’s flagship… no they couldn’t keep calling it that. The old girl deserved a new name for her new purpose. And Jack knew just the right one to call her.

Enterprise – come hell or high water he was going to re-name that ship the Enterprise. The higher ups had to know that he had the right to do that, didn’t they? After all he had been the one to secure its surrender. It would be a sin not to name the ship after the Enterprise.

“The ship is in orbit behind your moon. I have teleported a cargo ship to the Earth’s surface in the base above us so that you may use the ships rings to reach it.” Thor rose a finger, waggling it in warning. “But know this O’Neill. The terms of the protected planets treaty do not allow me to search it for dangers beyond those that I’ve already disabled or remove that which I have not. Tread lightly, O’Neill - I do not trust the machinations of Dre’su’den.”

“He’s a snake.” O’Neill chuffed in amusement. “What’s to trust?”


“See-ya,” O’Neill waved at the disappearing form of the Asguardian his body was subsumed by a pillar of light. “Drop by any time.”

He hated it when the Asgard left – having the little guy around was like a guarantee that Earth was safe. Every second the Norse nugget was around would be one more that Jack knew without a doubt in his mind that the world would keep on spinning without somebody coming by to blow it to hell.

A thought popped into the Colonel’s head. “I’m not a GI.”

“Huh?” Daniel looked over.

“GI’s are in the Army.” Colonel O’Neil said the thought that had been nagging at the back of his mind for the past three hours. “I’m Airforce.”
“I do not understand. What is the point of that line of inquiry O’Neill?” Replied his ever-stoic Jaffa companion.

“The skull, it called me a geriatric GI Joe in fluent English. Hell, it told him that he should ‘watch another movie’ when we were back on the ship.” The Colonel replied, looking to Daniel Jackson for confirmation. “The Warden kept cussing it out as though he’d understood that was being said. Hell, he wasn’t even waiting for the skull to say things back to him in Snake when we spoke – he just replied as quick as if he’d been carrying on a conversation in his native tongue.”

“Should that be a surprise?” Daniel Jackson asked. “We’ve run into Goa’uld who’ve learned English before. They have a talent for emulating our language.”

“They do not, however, pretend to be unaware of the vernacular.” Teal’c replied, raising his brow in consternation. “He appeared wholly unaware of the flaw in his pretense and equally capable of understanding the totality of the Colonel’s intentional use of vernacular speech.”

Hell, Teal’c regularly struggled with idiomatic turns of phrase and he’d been living with native speakers for more than two years. For some border world Goa’uld to have mastered the English language enough to understand English without difficulty stretched the boundaries of credibility. The other Gods in his retinue had been nothing but broken sentences and misspoken words.

“He’s been here,” O’Neill replied. “The arrogant son of a bitch has been on Earth – recently. ‘Tell me about this pizza’ - my butt.”

“He never took off his mask, either.” The doctor replied, agreeing with the colonel. “Even after he made such a big deal about sharing a meal with us. He wasn’t hiding it from us, he was dangling in front of our faces to show off how much he knew.”

“Do you think it was an intentional threat, O’Neill? An implicit show of how much he knew and how little his surrender matters to him in the long run?” The Jaffa considered the matter.

“One of the other SG teams? You think he took them as host?” O’Neill shuddered.

“Not unless you have a Hok’tar on your staff.” The self-professed Tok’ra replied. “You’d remember him, he’d be the one who could breathe fire without the aid of technology.”
“Yyyyyeeeesssss – one would tend to remember that.” O’Neill clicked his teeth on the “t”s of “that,” popping air out of his mouth. None of the MIA SG operatives had that specific talent listed on their dossiers.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.” Dr. Jackson held out his hand. “Dr. Daniel Jackson.”

The Tok’ra reached out and shook it. “Kanan – a pleasure to meet you all, though I wish it were under less complicated circumstances.”

“Hok’tar…” Daniel repeated the word slowly. “I’m not familiar with that word. Advanced… human?”

“It is a word that has not been used in centuries.” Teal’c replied. “The thing of Jaffa legends before the fall of the Great Nightmare. A human host capable of wielding great power – I had assumed them things of myth.”

“I thought the same about Dragons, this morning.” Jack replied.

“What?” Daniel blinked.

“Didn’t I mention the Dragons?” The Colonel cleared his throat.

“No – I would have remembered that.” The scholar replied in a voice of concern. “Why are we talking about Dragons?”

“There were like ten of them on the bridge – dead. I mean the ship was just lousy with dead Dragons.” Jack shrugged.

“Dragons? Big, scaly, fire-breathing lizards?” Daniel replied.

“I don’t know about breathing fire, but yeah to the rest.” The Colonel said, realizing precisely how stupid it sounded as he turned to the Tok’ra. “Back me up here.”
“We were forced to take a detour through the realm of the Great Dragon in order to escape Apophis. We were boarded in the escape.” The Tok’ra shuddered in unpleasant memory. “It is not something I about which I prefer to think.”

“Dragons?” The scholar repeated in continuing incredulity.

“They are a predatory species which live within the realm of the Furlings.” The Tok’ra replied. “They do not commonly choose to leave their home dimension.”

“So they’re extra dimensional dragons.” Daniel replied in a voice of confusion as he turned to Jack. “Is it bad that that sounds less crazy to me than about half the things we do in this job?”

“Considering that both of us have died before, I keep my skepticism to a minimum.” Jack replied in a voice of biting sarcasm. “You know me, Mr. Open-minded.”

“How does a Goa’uld ship end up in a dimension of Dragons?” Daniel looked to the Tok’ra.

“They do not.” Replied the creature. “It’s suicidal to even try to do so. The Furlings forbade us entry and they are the kindest kingdoms of those who dwell in the lands of Sun and Snow. No sane Goa’uld would even consider entering the beyond.”

“Then how – ” Daniel started.

“He’s insane.” The Tok’ra replied. “Dre’su’den – he’s totally and completely insane. You see it in the oldest of the Goa’uld. There comes a point when even the healing effects of a sarcophagus cannot sufficiently undo the ravages of time – and Heka is older than any living Goa’uld other than perhaps Lord Yu. His mind is crumbling, he doesn’t even remember how he’s supposed to act and is clearly using host memories to supplant those which are missing.”

“You’re telling me that one of the most dangerous powers of the galaxy is going senile?” Jack jibed. “So what – we just wait for him to keel over?”

“Goa’uld do not die of old age.” Replied the Tok’ra. “It’s not in their nature. A weak System Lord is quickly on the wrong side of a staff weapon.”
“I’m not really seeing the down side of old age making the crazy coot put his life in danger.” Jack shrugged. “What with the ‘giving us a ship’ and being downright decent about it.”

“Do not mistake madness for kindness.” The Tok’ra replied. “Heka was the keeper of forbidden knowledge for the Goa’uld, responsible for keeping track of that knowledge which the Supreme System Lord Ra decided was too dangerous to allow in lesser hands. All of it – and he has gone weak enough in the head that he’s actually using it. I watched him violate every known strategic arms limitation treaty in the space of six hours, he’s willing to invoke pacts with horrific consequences in a matter of moments just because he can.”

“How much worse could he be than Sokar?” Jack snorted, thinking back to Netu.

“Much.” The Tok’ra let loose a harsh laugh. “If you think the System Lords are bad now, wait till a substantial portion of the galaxy has been conquered by a man who carries on prolonged conversations with the voices in his head.”

“You think that he is planning to become Supreme System Lord with the forbidden knowledge from before the Fall?” Teal’c replied in a voice trembling with dark implication.

“At this point I wouldn’t put anything past that man.” The Tok’ra shuddered. “Ancestors help us – he’s insane. He doesn’t plan anything he just sort of stumbles his way through fatal danger as though it was all some sort of amusing game. He takes gambles that make no sense. He fights when he should talk, runs when he should fight, and talks when any sane man would start shooting. It was like traveling with a point of quantum improbability. He is utterly and irredeemably mad.”

“He’s a snake.” The Colonel replied. “They’re all nuttier than a fruitcake.”

“The System Lords are greedy, arrogant, bitter, and cruel – but practical. The Warden is none of these things, at least not visibly so. In passing he is actually quite pleasant, but do not mistake that for genuine kindness.” The Tok’ra replied. “In the entire history of the Goa’uld Empire, I’ve never met someone more cunning or dangerous.”

“Not a fan, I take it.” Jack replied caustically.

“I think that it is in the collective interest of all sentient beings in the universe to see to it that the warden is killed before he can do any more damage than he already has.” Kanan shuddered.
“You two seemed pretty ‘buddy-buddy’ when he was here.” Jack replied.

“He decided that I was useful – freeing me from captivity on a whim to get that spirit access to Sokar’s database. In the aftermath of Netu’s destruction, he publically declared that I was his personal Tok’ra to his entire court.” Kanan’s face scrunched up in apparent confusion as he struggled to work through that memory. “Once his army surrounded me on all sides, it wasn’t as though I could just kill him. I had to live long enough to get word back to the Tok’ra – appeasing the madman was simply the most practical means to that end.”

“Well isn’t that just special.” The Colonel replied.

Kanan’s next rant about the dangers of the Lord Warden was silenced by a loud yawn. “Pardon me, Colonel, but I haven’t slept in far too long. There is only so long a man can live in a mix of panic and adrenaline before it becomes necessary to rest and recuperate. I believe there was talk of a cell somewhere with a bed and blankets?”

“Yes, by all means.” Jack smiled back at the alien. “Please enjoy the hospitality of our brig. I’ll bring the old man by to verify that you are whom you claim once he’s done with the munchkins in that cut rate house of mouse.”

“Big honking space guns, Danny boy.” Jack said to his squad mate as marines led the alien away. “Big honking space guns. Today is going to be one heck of a day.”

“Indeed,” Echoed the Jaffa. “Major Carter will be most pleased by the arrival of so much Goa’uld technology.”

Jack clapped his hands together, grinning ear to ear. “Well, come on boys – time to get permission from the General to pick up our prize.”

Unbeknownst to Jack, a shadowy shape slinking through the bases’ ventilation shafts grinned back - stalking it’s long anticipated prey, smacking it’s chops in the hunger of millennia.
Chapter 2

It was no accident that Sam was a workaholic, she’d always found it easier to focus on fixing the problems she could than to deal with the feeling she couldn’t. When it came to her own family, things were just too messy for her liking. There were too many old feuds and feelings to sort through.

Samantha Carter loved her family very much – though it would be an outright lie to say that dealing with them had ever been easy for her. She’d considered her father, Jacob, to be an outright antagonist for the better part of two decades for his role in the death of her mother. Too busy to pick her up from the airport, Deb Carter’s fatal car accident in the Taxi had been a wedge between the Major General and his children.

It had been a point of unity between Samantha and Mark, even after she joined the Air Force – a decision that Mark hadn’t ever been able to wrap his head around. For her brother, the Air Force and the Major General were one and the same. Her choice to forgive Jacob after his blending with the Tok’ra Selmak had not been well received by her sibling, nor could she really blame him for it.

“I’m not at liberty to disclose that.” Isn’t exactly something that goes a long way to convincing ones brother that it was time to move past the death of their mother. Words were exchanged in the heat of anger – words that she regretted.

It had taken the mutual apologies of both Sam and her father to re-open a dialogue with her younger brother, who’d consented to try and make their relationship work for the benefit of her nephew David and niece Lisa. It hadn’t really been fair for her to let Jacob pull the “They should know their grandfather” card but it had worked.

The three of them had thus opted for the neutral territory of “make the kids happy” in which to operate. So long as they kept choosing activities that kept David and Lisa happy, they were just too busy to get on each other’s nerves with old arguments. Samantha hadn’t been thrilled about spending an afternoon at Chuck E. Cheese, but it had been one of the places the Air Force was able to secure covertly for Selmak’s safety.

It was uncomfortable for the three of them, but they were talking – that’s more than could be said in years. Things were better in the Carter family. The family gatherings still made Carter uncomfortable, but now her discomfort was rooted in something altogether more frustrating than the clear-cut morality of blaming her father ever had been.

Carter loved her niece and nephew, and they loved her back. She loved their little nonsense stories, their strange games with no obvious rules to speak of, and the genuine wonder in their eyes every
time she explained how some simple machine worked. They watched her shine a flashlight through a glass prism as though she were some sort of sorcerer, marveling in the way the light had shone over their tiny fingers.

When she was with them, when she was Auntie Sammie, Samantha Carter felt the doors opening on a whole mess of thoughts and feelings she’d kept buried since joining the Air Force. Joining the Military as a woman is a difficult road to tread. Sam’s entire career had been one long exercise in having to prove that she deserved to be ‘one of the guys’ – it hadn’t been enough to just be as good as her peers, she’d needed to be better. Any sign of weakness, any overt display of femininity, and she knew that it would be used against her.

Even her chosen nickname, ‘Sam,’ had been a conscious choice to separate herself from her gender. Samantha Carter was an Officer first and a woman second – if at all. But when she was with her niece and nephew, the image of a little girl with her mommy Samantha’s eyes or her Daddy’s nose couldn’t help but crop up in her mind.

The child she would probably never have.

It wasn’t that Sam wanted to be a mom, but there was something painful about knowing that her option to be one was effectively mutually exclusive from her duties at the Stargate program. Even if she found a guy she wanted to have a kid with, the effectively two years she’d be unfit for combat duty on an SG team would cripple her ability to serve the program. And after growing up with Jacob’s style of parenting, she didn’t think she’d be able to put a child through being raised by a parent who’d never be around.

So every time she met them she had a wonderful time with Mark’s kids for the time it lasted, then spent a silent ride away reminding herself of all the good she was doing through the Stargate program. She was doing work that needed to be done, work that nobody else could do.

The melancholy never lasted long. Samantha Carter’s reputation for brilliance had been well earned. Though she’d never admit it, she was perfectly aware that the number of astrophysicists cleverer than she was could be counted on one hand. Fewer still who would be able or even willing to operate under the conditions that she regularly worked within.

There were millions of capable mothers in the world. There would only ever be one Samantha Carter. As long as she made sure that the third rock from the sun kept on spinning, there were plenty of great mothers who’d make sure that their kids grew up strong.

She slowed her car at the gates to NORAD, letting the car idle. “I’m glad we did this.” Sam smiled,
turning to her father after handing her ID to the base guard. “After what happened on Netu, I needed to see them.”

“Yeah,” Jacob replied, snorting. “But god are those kids just little balls of energy, even with Selmak giving me a boost I have trouble keeping up with them. They were just off the walls.”

“It’s your own fault.” Sam smiled as the guard handed her back the laminate and waved her through. “Mark told you not to give them all that sugar.”

Jacob lowered his head momentarily, indicating that he was allowing his symbiote to speak.

“That was my fault,” Ground out the silibant tones of Selmak. “I’m afraid that I just can’t resist the urge to spoil grandchildren. A parent’s duty is to teach their child, a grandparents duty is to spoil them.”

The major snorted, looking back at the Tok’ra. “And what is the duty of an Aunt?”

“To corrupt the child, of course” The Tok’ra lowered his head, showing that it was back to Jacob. “Selmak is really very convincing when it comes to parenting, and considering how many centuries the old man has got on me – I find it hard to argue.”

His head lowered again. “Hard but not impossible, I assure you. Your father is a stubborn man when he gets it into his head that he ought to be.”

The major laughed.

Her route to the motor pool, however, was blocked by a group of MP’s and what appeared to be a van from Animal Control. Sam rolled down her window, addressing the square jawed man who approached her. “What’s going on?”

He peered into her car, saluting them both upon realizing whom he was addressing. “There’s been an animal attack ma’am – mountain lion or something. Airman First Class Andrews must have startled it while it was rooting around for food. He didn’t make it. The poor bastard looks like someone ran him through a food processor.”
“Is it common for a Mountain Lion to stray this close to humans?” Sam looked to her father in confusion. “I thought they mostly chose prey out in the wild.”

“It only takes one ma’am.” The MP shrugged. “The guys from animal control are figuring that it’s rabid. We’re advising everyone on base to keep their eyes peeled and their side arms loaded till we put a bullet in fucking bastard… err… pardon my language ma’am.”

“I’ll overlook it this time Airman.” Sam replied, nodding conciliatorily. When someone killed a member of the Air Force, it hurt them all. He could have dropped an f-bomb every third word and Sam wouldn't have even pretended to care. The Lion was going to die at the hands of an entire base worth of pissed off airmen using weapons declared “necessary” by the armory.

She almost felt sorry for the Lion – almost.

“Any worry that it got into the base?” Jacob asked, pointing to the open grate next to the corpse.”

“No Sir, not unless its lighter than air.” The MP replied. “The whole reason Andrews was in there was to install pressure sensors – you know, the ceramic tiles they use to tell if anything bigger than a rat is walking around. There’s a margin of error on those things, but not enough for a Mountain Lion.”

“Can we get by?” Sam asked, pointing to the Animal Control van blocking her path.

“Yes ma’am.” The MP replied, yelling to his subordinates. “Davis – get that thing out of the way. We’re blocking traffic.”

“Strange.” Selmak muttered after they’d passed the temporary obstruction of the Van. “I am continually amazed that you choose to live on a planet so rife with predators.”

“It’s home.” Sam replied. “And Lion attacks aren’t that common.”

“Child, do you realize how dangerous your world really is in the scheme of the universe?” Selmak laughed, a sing-song sound that echoed with the vocal distortion of his species. “There are more alpha-level predators on this little rock than on any other planet colonized. Even before the rebellions, many Goa’uld simply chose to leave the planet with their slaves in tow rather than deal with the constant irritation of protecting their herds.”
“Seriously?” Sam asked, shifting the car into park after coasting to a stop next to fifteen identical model cars to the one she’d borrowed. “Which Goa’uld?”

“Olukun and Kai come to mind, but they were far from the only ones.” Selmak laughed again. “Basically any of the pantheon that tried to set up in Australia. Dirawong and Birrahgnoolo spend too much time just trying to keep their share of the humans from dying of thirst and snake bites that they ended up just giving up in disgust to leave things in the hands of Julunggul… who actually did a pretty decent job of it with the help of Mangar-kunjer-kunja.”

“The Goa’uld were in Australia?” It really ought to have been obvious to her, but there was something just wrong about imagining some would be god trying to establish their divinity in the outback.

“They were everywhere Sammie.” Jacob tousled his daughter’s hair. “Actually the ones in Australia were downright decent, as Goa’uld go. There aren’t many of them left though – they died in The War.”

“Which war?” Sam signed her name into the motor pool’s log book, making sure to write down the mileage next to her signature. The last thing she needed was to end up with the next guy expensing his miles on her account.

“There is only one war as far as the Goa’uld are concerned.” Jacob replied. “The war with – ”

Jacob’s eyes flashed once and he stopped speaking.

“Dad?” Sam asked as her father continued to stare at the wall.

The general cleared his throat. “Sorry Sammie, my room mate wanted to have a private word with me.”

“About?”

“Discretion. Sometimes its hard for me to remember which memories are mine to share and which are his.” Her father scratched the back of his neck apologetically. “I was getting too close to sharing

...
Selmak’s private thoughts without his permission. If that story is going to be told, it is his to say.”

Sam nodded, “And is he going to explain what you were talking about?”

Jacob lowered his head. “He is not.”

His head bobbed again, “Sorry Sammie.”

This wasn’t over – Sam thought to herself – she would find out to what war her father had been alluding. “Another time then.”

“Perhaps.” Selmak replied in a tone suggesting a definite never as they walked out from the motor pool and across the tarmac of Norad’s helicopter landing pads. “Thought I suspect we will have more pressing matters to deal with… Imminently.”

“Like what?” Sam asked.

“Well… that for one.” Jacob replied as a goa’uld cargo ship shimmered into view on one of the empty landing pads, shimmering in a comfortingly familiar glow of teleportation energy.

“Huh – that’s new.” Sam watched an utterly bemused Master Sergeant actually spit out half a cup of coffee. He shouted to every airman in sight, demanding that one of them tell him just what the hell was going on as he tried to mop up the mess of brown liquid off the front of his BDUs.

“That’s Asgard tech,” Jacob replied in confusion. “Why would the Asgard be leaving you a Goa’uld cargo ship?”

“This is why I don’t like leaving the base.” Sam waved at the cargo ship. “Something like this happens and I have to rush to get back into the loop.”

She grabbed a passing airman. “I need your radio.”

The confused mechanic nodded, reflexively reacting to her tone of command in spite of her not being
in uniform. “Yes Ma’am.”

“Put your fingers in your ears.” She said, taking his radio from him and tuning it to the gate room frequency. “If you don’t you’re going to have to be detained and debriefed, which might take a couple days.”

The airman sighed, plugging his ears and starting to hum as Sam spoke over the secure radio. “This is Major Carter. Can someone please tell me why I’m staring at a cargo ship on one of our landing pads?”

“Uh, yes ma’am.” Replied the voice of Master Sergeant Siler. “At least I think I can. It was part of the terms of surrender to Colonel O’Neill from the System Lord Dre’su’den. We got a mothership and everything inside”

Sam looked from the radio, to her father, and back. “I’m sorry Master Sergeant – did you just say Colonel O’Neill won us a mother ship?”

“Yes Ma’am.” Siler replied.

“I thought he was in Minnesota – at that cabin he’s always going on about?” Jacob asked. “Shouldn’t he be somewhere drinking heavily and yelling a at a Canadian for not hitting the puck hard enough?”

“Apparently not any more.” Sam replied before pressing down to activate the radio. “To clarify, the cargo ship is ours?”

“Uh, yes Ma’am – to the best of my knowledge.” Siler replied. “General Hammond says to assist on behalf of the Stargate program, SG-3 is en-route.”

“Rodger.” Major Carter replied. “I can see Colonel Makepeace.”

The four-man team was decked out in full combat gear, Major Castleman, Lt. Johnson and Lt. Stevens following close behind.
The Master Sergeant, apparently having received orders from in the base, was bellowing as only a Master Sergeant could. “Clear out! The general wants everyone to out – all you boys to the mess hall for debrief. None of you are to say a thing to each other till you get there and have permission from the Colonel to have an opinion.”

As the enlisted men cleared out from the landing pads, Sam saluted the Colonel, snapping her heels together smartly. She might not be in BDUs but she was still an Officer. “Colonel, sir – It appears the Asgard left us a present.”

The angular jawed Colonel smiled. “So it would seem Major Carter. Am I to assume you’re our backup?” He nodded to her Tok’ra father.

“It would be wise to have me check for sabotage. The Goa’uld are averse to sharing.” Selmak replied.

“I’m not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.” The Colonel replied, nodding respectfully to her father. Jacob Carter may no longer have been considered a member of the US armed forces due to his status as a Tok’ra – but once you had two stars on your lapel you never stopped being a General to servicemen who’d been under you. “Good to see you again sir.”

“Good to see you too Colonel.” Jacob replied pleasantly. “After you Colonel.”

“Ok boys, bag it and tag it. This ought to be a boring mission but ought to hasn’t ever worked out before.” He pointed to the cargo ship’s doors. “Standard breaching positions. Castelman I want you on the door controls. Johnson, you aim high while Stevens goes low. No grenades, we need it intact. Carters I want the two of you behind us till we know that the area is safe – neither of you are in body armor, but just in case something goes wrong…” He pointed to the Lieutenants “… give them your side arms.”

Sam took the baretta M-9, checking that it was loaded as she thanked Lt. Johnson. The two Carters moved into cover, watching SG-3 move into position.

The door, apparently unlocked, proved no barrier to Major Castleman. The team entered the cargo ship one by one, checking the corners before declaring. “Room 1 clear for entry, no hostiles.”

Another five minutes passed as SG-3 fiddled with the controls to the cargo room, then another. Ten turned to fifteen, fifteen turned to twenty, and a furious Colonel Makepeace stuck his head out of the
cargo ship. “Major Carter – Castleman could use a hand. Apparently the control crystal fractured and we can’t get into the back room.”

“Roger Colonel.” Sam replied, making her way into the cockpit of the cargo ship, Jacob close in tow. It was larger than the ships she was used to, though it followed the same footprint of all cargo ships – cockpit in the front, cargo hold in the rear behind a single door.

“Geeze,” Carter whistled when she got through the door and had a look at the exposed control crystals. “You weren’t kidding. That’s a master control crystal.”

Goa’uld technology ran on a mix of crystalline command systems and interlaced naquadah circuitry that emulated most of the functions one would expect from a modern microprocessor. “Most” because there were some odd irregularities to how crystals functioned, they were more a collection of self-contained computers than a single continuous device. Each gem was mono-tasked with a specific function for the ship and capable of operating independently provided that it had power. It provided Goa’uld ships with the ability to conduct rapid repairs, switching out defective crystals damaged in battle rather than having to put their ships in dry dock to fix malfunctioning systems.

It also meant that Goa’uld ships were heavily reliant upon accessing the crystalline computers made only by the Goa’uld System Lords, preventing underlings and Jaffa from rebelling against their masters. So when a master control crystal broke – it was a huge problem.

“Can you fix it, Major?” Colonel Makepeace asked.

“No.” Selmak replied. “But she doesn’t need to. Not while we’re on the ground.”

The Tok’ra reached around the control panel of the main airlock, unlatching it and pulling a long, purple crystal from it. Jacob smiled, “Just remember to plug it back in if you’re planning on leaving the atmosphere.”

Sam accepted the crystal from her father, slipping it into place and twisting clockwise. It glowed bright, activating the command panel once she slammed the plate back into place. She tapped the “open” rune, activating the inner airlock.

The hatch opened, exposing the lightless interior of the cargo bay. Sam pulled a pen-light from her pocket, shining it into the darkness. When shape moved, startled by the light the Major shouted in equal surprise, “Holy Hannah!”
The Major raised his MP-5 in response, startled by the piercing blue eyes in the dark. “What the hell is that?”

Carter reached out and shoved his gun downward. “Colonel! You’re scaring her.”

“Huh?” The Colonel squinted into the darkness as the shape registered in his mind. “Oh Jesus… I nearly shot her…”

“Get back,” Major carter waved the soldiers away. “Just get back.”

The lights in the cargo bay flickered, revealing its occupant – a little girl. She looked to about fourteen, developed but not quite fully grown. Poking her head out from around a cargo container, she was about as non-threatening as someone could get.

“Come here,” Carter crouched down, getting eye to eye with the little girl. “Come on, we won’t hurt you. You’re safe.”

The humanoid sniffed the air, licking her lips nervously.

“My name is Sam – Sam Carter.” She smiled, tapping her chest above her heart. “Come on, sweetie, you’ll be fine. Come here.”

The girl inched slowly walking in Sam’s direction. She was whispering a mess of growls and clicks, clearly a language but not one Sam understood. Sam kept on speaking softly to her, “You’re safe. I mean you no harm. Just come on, come with me.”

Once she got in arms reach of Sam, she reached out and grabbed her – holding her arms with surprising strength for someone of her slight frame. The girl leaned in, sniffing heavily at Sam’s hair and face.

Colonel Makepeace pulled off his jacket and reached over to cover the naked girl with it, stopping when the girl lashed out at him – hissing angrily. The Colonel stared her in the eyes. “I’m not your enemy. I’m just trying to give you my coat.”
The girl relaxed somewhat, responding more to the man’s tone than his words. She continued to make chuffing noises to assert her dominance, but consented to having the coat draped over her. It was more of a dress than a coat on her – the arms hung down to the floor.

Sam helped her fasten the buttons, continuing to talk to her softly, “It’s ok sweetie. You’re ok. You’re with friends,” as she rolled up the sleeves to let her move her arms.

“Someone needs to call Dr. Fraiser,” Colonel Makepeace activated her radio. “I’ve got a new patient for her.”
Chapter 3

Teal’c found himself unable to reach a state of Kelno’reem. He’d been sitting in his quarters, inhaling incense and basking in the warmth of candlelight, as a creeping terror gnawed at the back of his mind. Were the legends true?

Apophis’ trip to the first world had been a daring one – the first hunt for a potential Hok’tar host on the first world in millennia. It was dangerous – if Hok’tar or one of the fiend races were to stumble upon them it could mean their undoing. Such a failure had been Bra’tac’s suggested plan– take Apophis far enough from the gate that when the monsters of the first world grew agitated, they would be able to slay the entire retinue - freeing the universe of his tainted master.

Apophis hadn’t dared linger for more than a few minutes once he realized the gate was within a military structure, choosing to gamble that the honor of bringing back any host from the first world would outweigh the potential losses of staying.

That being said – the plan did ultimately bring the wrath of the Tau’ri upon Apophis, just not as Teal’c had expected. When Teal’c realized that O’Neill was a warrior of the first world, he thought it was an answer to his prayers. He freed the Tau’ri warriors and pledged himself to their cause, hoping beyond hope that he’d just secured himself the hordes of Hok’tar he knew had been sitting in wait on the nightmarish abyss of the Tau’ri home world.

It was why he’d abandoned his wife and son. It seemed kinder to leave them absent his company than it would to bring them to their probable doom along with him. All things considered, he’d expected to die at the hands of the fabled Hok’tar warriors dedicated to the eradication of Jaffa. It was the most desperate of gambles.

He’d secured powerful allies to be sure but the first world’s might had not been what Teal’c was expecting. After growing up listening to the tales of battle and adventure on the planet of monsters and Hok’tar, he’d been grossly disappointed to discover that there were no monsters and mages to be found. The Tau’ri did not believe in powers beyond their ken. In spite of the mysteries and wonders of the galaxy they’d seen so far – mysteries that left them in awe and confusion – they insisted upon dismissing the spiritual elements of reality in favor of more temporal explanations.

He’d resigned himself to the fact that the horrors of the first world, like so many other tales of the Goa’uld, were just another in a litany of lies they told their followers to cow them into submission. The Tau’ri told each other the same tales of monsters and sorcery that the Goa’uld fed their slaves, but laughed them off as the barbarism and foolish superstitions of the uneducated. Whatever truth there had once been to the horrors of the Tau’ri seemed to have long since passed into the distant annuls of history.
Or so he’d thought.

The Sidhe were real. Perhaps not as the beasts of true nightmare described to him as a child, but there really were Kingdoms of Sun and Snow. What else had been true among the lies of the Goa’uld? Had the betrayal been true as well? Had the pantheons truly been tossed from grace? Could one truly summon the demons of Summer and winter with whispers and will?

Not for the first time a creeping sliver of doubt entered his mind, a fear that he'd hoped quelled half a century ago. The fear that betraying Apophis had been a mistake was not one that Teal'c regularly allowed to take root. His former master had been a monster - all Goa'uld were monstrous and unworthy of worship. They were utterly evil - but were they a necessary evil? According to the System Lords the only thing standing between creation and oblivion was their helping hand. Was the only thing standing between the Jaffa and a horrible death beneath the boots of Sidhe warriors the protection of their Goa'uld overlords?

The Goa’uld were meager and petty gods, but had Apophis actually fulfilled at least part of his claims to be protecting the souls of his slaves? He knew that his doubts would sound insane to the Tau'ri warriors, striking fear in their hearts that he'd gone mad or would chose to defect to his former masters. An unfortunate byproduct of their monotheistic histories, he’d learned to accommodate their oddities.

He shivered, rubbing at his shoulder with his hand as he exhaled deeply through his nostrils. “Peace” – he told himself – “There is no cause for alarm. Not yet.”

Teal’c was a Jaffa - a born polytheist. Rejecting the a single Goa’uld or the entire pantheon was not a statement of atheism, it was a choice to abandon specific gods. To men who’d grown up with a single power in the universe, the idea that one might disobey a god without rejecting his place as a god was impossible. But Teal’c knew the truth - goodhood was a measure of power and worth. The worthy could ascend and the unworthy could be torn from atop the mountain.

"The Goa’uld are false gods." Teal'c mumbled. "I will not allow myself to fall into doubt - not after undoing the divinity of so many."

There was a soft tap at the door, the familiar sound of two soft knocks followed by a hard rap soon after. Teal’c spoke. “You may enter Daniel Jackson.”

“How did you know it was me?” Asked the bespectacled man as he cracked open the door and looked around at the candles. “Oh! I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to interrupt.”
“You interrupt nothing, Daniel Jackson.” Teal’c replied, standing up and bowing to his friend. “Kelno’reem is beyond me at the moment. Your presence is welcome.”

“Ah – good. Well, not good that you’re having trouble finding Kelno’reem, but I was hoping to pick your brain a little bit.” The man stumbled over his words. He had a frustrating habit of meandering around in his speech before actually reaching his point. “Because I’m a bit confused – when I was researching into the Furlings and their potential connections to Heliopolis you neglected to mention that the Goa’uld had actually met them.”

“Indeed I did not, Daniel Jackson.” Teal’c replied, leaning over to blow out the circle of candles one by one. “Your memory does not fail you.”

“Well – no – that much I got.” The Doctor snorted in amusement. “What I was wondering had more to do with why you chose not to mention that you knew about them.”

“We’ve never spoken of them because you were too terrified to admit they could be real,” the uncharitable voice of Teal’c’s subconscious said in his head even as he spoke the words. “I knew of the Furlings and the Kingdoms of Sun and Snow – I did not know that the two were the same.

“But you know, don’t you? What that skull thing was that the Lord Warden had translating for him – you know what it is.” Daniel held up a photo of the System Lord, tapping where he’d circled part of it with a red felt-tipped marker.

“I have my suspicions.” Teal’c replied, feeling distinctly absurd for saying what he was about to say. “Jaffa legends speak of such a beast - spirits from a land beyond our own. I thought them just the ramblings of old men, tales to instill proper behaviour in the young through fear.”

”Really?” The Doctor's interest peaked at the mention of Jaffa legend. "I'd be interested to hear them.”

"I know not what manner of creature that was - but believe I know the true name of it's species. It is a forbidden word, taught only to those well versed enough in their dangers not to actually use it. The Goa'uld fear them above all else - more than the Asgard or any other enemy of their kind.” Teal’c leaned in close to his team mate, whispering the word he feared too greatly to speak it at more than a whisper. "Aes Shíde - the Fair Folk of Winter and Summer.”
Daniel Jackson paused for a moment before repeating the word in utter incredulity. "Aes Shíde?"

"Do not say it so loud!" Teal'c hissed through clenched teeth, looking around the room in fear - half expecting eyes to stare back at them from the shadows.

"Teal'c... do the words Daoine Shíde and Daoine Síth mean something to you?" Daniel replied, apparently biting his lower lip to hold back a fit of laughter.

"I fail to see what is so amusing Daniel Jackson." Teal'c replied, frustrated at his companion's inability to grasp the severity of the situation. "Dre'su'den has found a way to ally himself with the ancient enemy of the Goa'uld."

Daniel Jackson cleared his throat, squelching his laughter somewhat as he spoke. "Teal'c - are you telling me that the Goa'uld are afraid of fairies?"

"The fair folk are no laughing matter Daniel Jackson." Teal'c replied. "They are powerful, strong enough that they were able to defeat the Goa'uld utterly in the Great War."

"I'm sorry - I realize this is very serious." Doctor Jackson took off his glasses to wipe tears of mirth from his eyes. "But fairies? It's just - oh God - I was not ready for that one."

Another man knocked at the frame of Teal'c's door before the head of Colonel O'Neill poked it's way into the room. His commanding officer looked from Daniel's continuing giggles to Teal'c's severe expression before saying, "Well - I came by to tell you that SG-3 and SG-4 were nearly done with their sweep of our new toy and that Sam seems to have picked up a stray but it seems that I'm interrupting something far more fun than whatever I was hoping to talk about. Am I interrupting something?"

"Doctor Jackson was asking me about my knowledge of the beast traveling with the Goa'uld." The Jaffa replied, shaking his head at Dr. Jackson's continuing laughter. "It was perhaps in error to inform him."

"Daniel? Would you like to share with the class?" O'Neill queried.

"Fairies Jack - they're fairies." Daniel replied once he was able to speak between giggles.
"As in wings, sparkly trails, and wands?" The Colonel replied in incredulity.

"As in the Goa'uld's greatest fear is fairies!" Daniel replied, taking altogether too much pleasure in the situation.

"Huh... " O'Neill replied, apparently unsure what to say to that revelation. "Neat."

"It makes sense actually. Grimm's fairy tales and the old legends of Fairies are a lot nastier than their modern interpretations. They were a lot less Tinkerbell and a lot more terror." The Archeologist tapped his finger on his arm. "I'd assumed they were just stories but then again I wouldn't have believed that Aliens built the pyramids not that long ago."

"They are a cruel and bloodthirsty race," Teal'c interjected. "Nightmares given flesh."

"You know, just once I would like to find out that a nice legend about powerful creatures was true." Colonel O'Neill lamented. "It's always 'kill this' or 'enslave that."

"But this is good right? There is something out there that is capable of going toe to toe with the Goa'uld." The doctor replied.

"Indeed not, Daniel Jackson." Teal'c shivered. "If the legends are true then we are all in very great danger."

"Oh good," The Colonel replied dryly. "I was worried we might be out of a job for a minute there. So tell us, what new danger lies ahead."

"The Queens of Summer and Winter command an Empire that spans the entire Galaxy, a secret place that can open up into the material world wherever they wish for it to do so." Teal'c swallowed, looking around the room to make doubly sure that they were alone. "They are possessed of powerful sorcery and weapons greater than even then Asgard - but are willing to raze entire planets on a whim."

"So - not the sort that we should try to send an ambassador to speak with?" Asked the Colonel.
Teal'c shook his head emphatically. "Even talking with one of their ilk is potentially fatal. They wield words as a warrior might brandish a blade. One cannot win a battle of words with the Children of Sun and Snow"

"Sorry, Teal'c - do you mean that the Furlings have a way of going between planets other than the Stargate?" The doctor asked.

"Indeed." Replied Teal'c. "Goa'uld ships and cities are covered in wards to prevent incursion from unfriendly armies to prevent a warrior of Sun or Snow from sinking a blade in the Goa'uld Lord's back while he sleeps."

"Wait - you're telling me that there's a reason for the Snakehead ships to have all that damn writing on the walls beyond stroking the ego of whichever jerk is in charge?" O'Neill squinted his eyes, opening his jaw slightly in incredulity. "Seriously? They're anti-fairy force-fields?"

"The concept of protective wards are hardly new, Jack." Daniel replied. "Presumably there is some sort of underlying technology in play beyond the words themselves - I mean it's not really magic, but I could see them incorporating some special precaution against an enemy with a technology they can't replicate but can thwart."

"It is with that aim that all Jaffa armies are trained, Doctor Jackson." Teal'c nodded. "It is no accident that we continue to wear the ceremonial armor and wield the staff weapons of our forefathers. A strike from a Goa'uld staff is enough to unmake a warrior of the Demon Queens - or so they say."

"Humm." The Colonel chewed his lip in thought, nodding his head once. "The snakes are smarter than I gave them credit."

"Jack?" Daniel Jackson queried.

"We've been operating under the assumption that the Jaffa haven't adopted the tactics of modern warfare because the Goa'uld choose to keep their slaves unsophisticated enough that they don't have to modernize. It's one of the reasons we've been able to win as much as we have, the only time Jaffa normally see a modern army on the battlefield is after they've pulverized it into submission with orbital bombardment. A staff weapon is basically useless against a sniper rifle." Jack clicked his tongue against his teeth. "But if the SOB you're fighting can just appear in front of you, he doesn't need to use a sniper rifle. Heck, I don't even know if a rifle would be particularly useful."
"Indeed." Teal'c replied. "If the legends are true, the creatures of Sun and Snow are especially fond of using their own teeth and claws to seek a man's heart's blood."

Daniel gagged a bit. "Well, that's a special kind of awful."

"Fear not Daniel Jackson, for though I know little of their true nature, the weaknesses of the monsters are known by even the youngest of Jaffa children. We carry their bane with us at all times," Teal'c pulled an ingot from his pocket and handed it to the Doctor. "We will not be caught unaware."

The doctor rolled the ingot between his fingers for a moment before it clicked in his head. "You're kidding me right?"

"I make no attempt at Humor, Daniel Jackson. To even touch the demonbane causes their ilk great pain - a wound from it will cause a horrible death." Teal'c's grin grew predatory, thousands of years of Jaffa instinct thundering in his ears at the prospect of unmaking the ancient foe of the Jaffa. As much as the Jaffa feared the Shide, any Jaffa warrior worth his salt dreamed of killing the beasts.

"Daniel?" The Colonel prompted.

"Jack." The doctor replied.

The Colonel stared at the doctor for a moment, waiting for an explanation. Daniel Jackson, realizing the meaning of his superior officer's crossed arms and sigh of exasperation, spoke. "Oh, uh - it's iron. The old Germanic and Celtic legends about fairies said that they're especially weak to iron - which I guess explains a lot about Goa'uld technology. Basically everything is made out of a ferrous combination of Naquadah."

"... Are you seriously telling me that the kryptonite to this new big bad is cheap, easily accessible and already weaponized?" The Colonel smirked. "Why can't all our enemies be this considerate?"

"Do not be lulled into complacency. Individual warriors of Demon Queens can fell entire armies." Teal'c did his best to impress upon his compatriots just how serious the situation was. "Their involvement was instrumental in repelling the Goa'uld from your world."
"Do tell." The Colonel turned to Teal'c, arching his brow in curiosity.

"O'Neil, did you not think it strange that a world of primitives was able to repel an entire armada of Goa'uld warships united beneath a Supreme System Lord?" Teal'c was once again reminded of how little his allies really knew of the history of their world - of how much they'd lost. "You have seen the havoc that a single System Lord may unleash upon a planet with but one Ha'tak. Ra had access to millions."

"I'd assumed that the infighting of the Goa'uld was what kept them away." Dr. Jackson replied.

"For a planet that shamed the King of Gods by defeating him in battle? Hardly." Teal'c shook his head. "No, Daniel Jackson, the Goa'uld abandoned Tau'ri for one reason and one reason alone - they did not believe they could win another conflict with the planet."

"They didn't believe that they could beat warriors using bronze age weaponry?" Daniel replied, apparently realizing how absurd that sounded. "Oh! The didn't believe that they could beat their allies."

"In part - Earth was once home to a number of apparently now extinct species who had been a thorn in the System Lord's side for millennia before that." Teal'c shrugged. "Though I see no sign that they've continued to survive into modernity."

"Species such as?" O'Neil queried.

"The Hok'tar - wizards in the modern tongue. Powerful humans possessed of abilities beyond those of a normal man." Teal'c replied. "And various near-human creatures which the Jaffa did their best to purge."

"Wizards..." The Colonel sighed deeply. "Well sure why the heck not - we're already dealing with fairy armies, why not add in Merlin for kicks."

"There are certainly plenty of historic accounts to support the possibility that someone with unusual powers might have existed in the past, Jack." Daniel cleaned his glasses with the front of his shirt. "It's not that impossible to believe that someone with abilities beyond a bronze age person's ability to explain would have been explained away as magic."

"Daniel, do not make me go in to the General and tell him that the only reason we haven't been bombed into the stone age is that the Snakes have an overwhelming fear of an ancient agreement"
between Wizards and Fairies to kick them in the balls." The Colonel pleaded.

"If it makes you feel any better I could be the one to do it." The Archeologist proposed.

The Colonel shook his head, gritting his teeth and squinting his eyes. "No, Daniel, it has to be me - it's my job. But you two are coming with me so I don't end up getting looked over by Doctor Frasier once this is all over."

Daniel's reply was cut off with the sound of an alert klaxon, "Warning, intruder in the infirmary. Warning intruder in the infirmary..." The voice of Siler shouted over the intercom.

"Are not the former slaves of Dre'su'den undergoing medical examinations?" Teal'c queried as he reached for the staff weapon laying on his bed.

"Sam!" Colonel O'Neill barked in alarm as he looked over his shoulder. "She took the girl to Dr. Frasier!"

The three said nary a word as they charged in the direction of their fourth team member, determined to protect her.
Chapter 4

As the Chief Medical Officer of Stargate Command, Dr. Fraiser was, for all intents and purposes, the one and only person who could reasonably claim to the the planet’s greatest expert on xenobiology, offworld maladies and extraterrestrial triage. In three years she’d seen a range of infections, viruses, and injuries that would probably make her famous once her case files were declassified and disseminated to her peers.

For all her attempts to run a sophisticated surgery, the truth was that so much of what she encountered in her practice was either undocumented or impossible to properly treat within as short a time frame as she was allowed to operate within. Try as she might to keep the SG teams isolated by quarantine procedures and inoculations, there would always be situations beyond her ability to properly prepare.

The sudden and unexpected arrival of fifty emancipated Goa’uld slaves, for example, was not something she was immediately ready to handle. She was understaffed at the moment, with only SG-6 offworld running an extremely low risk mission on P3X-118 it hadn’t seemed especially pressing to have the full contingent of doctors and nurses on call for a Sunday morning.

She should really know better by now. Stargate Command always found a way to keep a doctor busy.

“No, no we do not drink that!” Janet pulled the glass of bright blue liquid from the woman’s hands. “That’s for sterilizing surgical instruments.”

The young woman pouted, crossing her arms over an extremely bare, tattoo covered chest. Janet wished her command of the Goa’uld language was better - so far all she’d managed to suss out of the girl was that she had no intention of putting on the surgical robe she’d been provided. Well, that and the fact that she was utterly disgusted at those refugees who’d chosen to leave the protection of their “god.”

They’d been forced to isolate her from the other refugees upon discovering that she wasn’t “defecting” so much as she’d decided to become Earth’s first “pro-goa’uld missionary.” Nothing good would come of letting her guilt trip the defectors or interfere with the already herculean task of administering medical treatment to people who still believed that disease was caused by foul odors.

On the bright side, the concept of indoor plumbing was not totally alien to this group of refugees. Stargate Command hadn’t always been so lucky when it came to picking up strays. On a particularly bad week, she’d been forced to teach some remarkably primitive humans about why the bedpan was
preferable to the corner via mime.

“Ok, just sit down on the bed for me.” Janet coaxed the woman into a sitting position. “Kree mok. Just wait, ok? Wait.” The Doctor held up her gloved hands placatingly. “Your tests are negative for anything invasive and I gave you the inoculation, but I can’t just have you wandering around the base like that.”

The dark skinned woman replied in her native tongue, smiling in a relatively friendly manner as she let loose the incomprehensible string of syllables. She shifted on the bed, crossing her legs in such a way that made the silver bells jingle from where they hung on an elaborate lacework of gold chains looped through scandalous piercings.

“Just, please, put on the dress.” Janet sighed, pulling the privacy curtain in front of her bed. “It’s too early and too cold to be dealing with this malarkey.”

She’d have to see about having an airwoman assigned to escort the priestess around base. The staff of the SGC had extensive background checks and psychological tests to ensure that their servicemen behaved themselves, but men were still men, the military was still an old boy’s club and a naked woman wandering around a military base would soon be the focus of unwanted attention.

She put the priestess’ chart on her desk and sat down to compose an email to Dr. Jackson about putting together some sort of generic primer that they could use for these sorts of situations, when a knock came at the door.

“Come in.” Janet looked over her shoulder as the door opened, revealing Major Carter and a teenage girl Janet had never seen before. The teenager was wearing a coat much too large for her, with “Colonel Makepeace” velcroed upon it’s front.

“Captain Frasier,” Sam beamed at her. “Sorry to bother you, but apparently Thor left us one more for you to have a look at.”

“Yes, of course - the one you found on the cargo ship.” Janet nodded, standing up and concealing her yawn behind the back of her hand. “Oh, excuse me. It’s been a long day.” She waved the pair over to an open bed. “We can take care of this in a moment.”

Samantha led the teenage girl over to the bed. It took a bit of effort to coax the alien into letting go of the Major, and even more to climb up onto the bed. She hissed and howled in a language even
stranger than the Goa’uld tongue, examining her with cat-like golden eyes.

“That is interesting.” Janet said, watching the way her penlight flared off the girl’s eyes. The girl hissed in irritation, baring a mouth with highly pronounced canines. “There are a number of distinctly non-human biological oddities to her.”

“But is she ok?” The Major asked in a voice of sincere concern.

“I don’t know. I need her to take off the jacket so that I can examine her.” Janet reached for the girl’s buttons, flinching back as the snarling girl growled at her - baring her fangs. “Woah!”

Sam reached out to hold the girl’s hand, whispering soothing noises at her. “It’s ok sweetie, she wants to help. She just wants to help.”

The girl’s growl reduced to a low purr, as she eyed Janet suspiciously - clutching her coat shut with the hand not linked with the Major. She spoke again in her guttural tongue, clearly pleading with Sam not to be here talking with Janet.

“Major, could you please remove your shirt.” Janet asked on an impulse.

“What?” Sam looked up in confusion.

“She clearly trusts you. Perhaps if you demonstrate that there’s nothing to fear, then I’ll be able to proceed.” Janet clarified. “She doesn’t seem to speak Goa’uld, so I’m not sure how else we’re going to get her to understand what we’re doing.”

The Major looked at the clearly terrified girl, exhaled sharply from her nostrils and nodded. She let go of the girl’s hand and undid the buttons of her shirt - exposing the floral print bra underneath. She put the shirt down on the bed and smiled at the girl as Janet pretended to examine Sam, putting the stethoscope up to her chest and gently pressing on the majors torso to check for injuries.

Sam kept eye contact with the girl as Janet completed her examination, continuing to speak with her. “See - nothing to worry about. Janet is a friend.”
The teenager, wary but apparently placated, allowed Janet to remove the coat and examine her body. The doctor gasped in horror at the mess of cruel scars and burns across the young girl’s body. Having been beaten and likely tortured at some point left a haphazard pattern of scars up and down her entire body, some old enough that they’d probably been done to her as an infant.

Tears welled in Janet’s eyes as she reached out to the two most recent injuries, a pair of nasty looking gashes along the girl’s back. Some sick son of a bitch had actually flensed a teenage girl then cauterized the wounds to prevent her from bleeding out. “Oh sweetheart… who did this to you?”

“I had no idea it was this bad,” Sam blanched, clearly horrified. “I didn’t get a good look at her in the ship. If I’d realized her injuries were recent enough not to have totally healed over…”

“Then you’d have done the same thing and taken her straight to me.” Janet cut in over Sam’s worried voice, plastering a fake smile across her face and talking in the happiest voice she could manage. “For now the best thing you can do for her is to not get her agitated. We don’t want her to reopen those wounds.”

“Why are you talking like that?” Sam queried.

“Because she can’t understand what we’re saying but she can understand how we say it. So, for the moment you and I are just thrilled and not worried in the slightest about these clearly infected sections of skin. If I’m going to treat her I need her to be calm.” Janet continued her chipper tone. “So get happy. That’s an order Major.”

“It’s very hard to be happy while I’m this angry Captain.” Sam said through a forced smile.

“Just imagine that you’re shooting the one who did this to her.” Janet replied. “That perks me up whenever I think about Nirrti.”

The wounds were bad. Not bad enough that they’d need to be debrided, but bad enough that she’d want to get the girl on a cycle of topical antibiotics - assuming, of course, that she was human. “I’m going to need to take a blood sample so that I can determine the best course of treatment and decide if both she, and you, need to be kept in quarantine.”

“Me?” Sam replied.
“Yes, you.” Dr. Fraiser answered. “If she’s carrying anything infectious, you’ve almost certainly been exposed by now. So both of you need to get tested.”

Janet pulled a hypodermic needle from the table but froze at the horrible growl from the teenage girl at the sight of the surgical tool. Electing to go with what had worked so far, she looked at the Major. “You first, Major.”

Sam winced slightly as the needle pierced her skin, crimson liquid filling the glass phial. The teenager watched this with rapt attention, sniffing at the air. Janet held up the blood sample for the girl to see as she marked it with a felt tipped marker. After tossing the needle into a biohazard disposal and getting sterile one from the cabinet, she then took a sample from her own arm and, once again, marked it with a felt-tipped marker in plain view of the teenager. Once again she disposed of the needle and found a sterile one.

The girl was fascinated, tilting her head left and right to watch the phials as Janet held them out to her. “See, there’s nothing to it.”

She let the girl hold the phials, distracting her as she drew blood from her arm. The teenager hardly seemed to notice as she filled a container with her vial fluids. Surprisingly warm to the touch, the glass container of the girl’s blood slipped easily into Janet’s centrifuge as she disposed of the needle.

It was when Sam shouted “Doctor!” that Janet realized something was wrong, but by the time she turned on her heel it was already too late. The teenager had removed the rubber stoppers from both phials and drank their contents in a single gulp.

Janet swore, rooting around in her cabinet for a monogastric as something impossible happened. The girl changed before her very eyes. Convulsing upon the table, the teenager’s leg’s lengthened, her hair grew fairer, and her features grew kinder. Whereas she’d been exotic looking and wild only moments ago, she took on an all too familiar aspect. By the time Janet got over to the bed to check her vitals, her eyes had shifted from golden to blue and her fangs had become pearly white teeth.

“What was that?” Sam, asked, looking from the teenager, to Janet, and back.

“I have no idea.” Janet replied, shining her pen-light into an all too human set of blue eyes. “If I had to guess, I’d say that she used our blood to affect some sort of metamorphosis.”

“Holy Hannah,” Sam’s eyes bugged. “I - I don’t even - “

The priestess of Dre’su’den moved from where she’d apparently been peeking around the curtain as
the teenager’s eyes closed. The process apparently causing the girl to pass out in exhaustion. Paying no heed to Janet’s cry of, “Wait!” the priestess rushed over to the girl and chatted animatedly in Goa’uld.

“Get out of here,” Janet fumed, walking around the table to forcibly eject the priestess if need be - only to have Sam reach out her arm and stop her.

“Captain, she claims to know what’s happening.” Sam interjected.

“Don’t tell me. It’s the will of Dre’su’den?” Janet asked.

“No.” Sam bit her lip. “Ugh - my Goa’uld is nowhere near as good as Daniel’s. I think she’s calling it ‘blood sorcery.’”

Janet arched an eyebrow incredulously.

“No, hear me out on this Janet.” Sam said. “The Goa’uld always call their technology sorcery or magic. Something clearly just happened. I want to know what she knows about this.”

“I’m not having some voodoo bimbo doll out new age nonsense.” Janet replied angrily as she took another sample of Sams’ blood.

“She seems to think that the girl just offered us some sort of really important thing.” Sam shook her head. “I don’t know what but she’s convinced that it’s a good omen - ” the major paused, her shock wearing off enough for her to actually break eye contact examine the priestess’ garb rather than her words, “Janet who is this woman?”

“A priestess of one of the Goa’uld who surrendered to us,” Janet replied, somewhat enjoying the look of utter bafflement on the Major’s face.

“Why is she naked?” Sam asked.

“Because the Lord Warden is an insecure man-child, I’d suppose.” Janet replied. “Clothing is apparently against the rules for his clergy.”
The Major’s lip curled in disgust as she turned to Janet. “That’s barbaric.”

The priestess jingled with the twilking song of silver bells as she shifted on her feet, stretching out the pattern of tattoos and piercings as she said some sort of sing-song prayer in celebration of the event. It felt distinctly less holy and distinctly more burlesque than that for which Janet would have cared.

Sam, suddenly ashamed of her own state of relative disrobe, grabbed her shirt off the bed and hurriedly buttoned it back up. “I swear - no matter what I do, where I go in the galaxy, there is always some male jerk in power determined to turn women into objects.”

“I’m right there with you,” Janet raised her hands placatingly before covering the naked teen with a blanket to keep her warm.

The priestess just smiled at the two of them, apparently happy to just be part of things. Just as Janet was considering the possibility of asking Sam to broach the subject of pants to her patient, the voice of Siler came over the intercom repeating the phrase “Warning, intruder in the Infirmary.” over and over again as klaxon wailed.

Janet, suddenly aware that neither she nor Major carter was currently armed, looked over in horror as an utterly unfamiliar face burst through the door. The massive man grabbed a book stack full of medical reference books, toppling it over to serve as a barricade. Dark skinned and furious, he swore angrily in Russian as he fitted a magazine into his Kalashnikov.

He stopped his vulgar tirade upon realizing that he wasn’t alone in the room, raising a hand from the trigger of his gun in a gesture of good-will. He spoke calmly, his deep voice flavored with the oddities of a Soviet educated speaker of English. “I mean you no harm, da? I’m just here to help with your problem - then I can go.”

The Marines would be here soon, Janet told herself. Just stay calm and the marines would be here to save them.

“I am not your enemy,” He over pronounced the final world, adding an “eh” sound where none belonged as he looked around the room, searching for another exit. He would find none, Janet knew all too well that the only exit would be through the door behind him. “But I find myself very much interested in becoming your friend.”
He arched an eyebrow in interest at the Goa’uld priestess, asking “Is this some sort of Air Force thing I’m not aware of? Because if it is, I now understand how you won the Cold War. The Russian military does not have even half as entertaining a set of uniforms.”

Janet’s eye twitched in irritation but she said nothing.

“You didn’t have that gun loaded when you came in, did you?” Sam asked, addressing the invader.

“Nyet.” The man admitted. “I did not think guns would be necessary or that I would be discovered. I’m not usually noticed while doing my job.”

“I don’t know who you are or why you’re here, but your only hope is to surrender.” Major Carter moved, putting herself between the Russian and the bedridden teen. “Your best case scenario at this point is to surrender before this escalates and someone dies.”

“Da, perhaps.” The man smiled roguishly. “Perhaps I die - but I think not. Things have a way of working out in my favor.”

The Russian man’s infectious optimism about facing the entirety of Cheyenne Mountain's security forces was deeply unnerving. Was the man actually unhinged? “Please don’t hurt my patients. They’ve done nothing to you.”

The man waved it off as though he weren’t a gun toting madman who’d snuck into a secure facility. “I do not harm the innocent. It is not my mission.”

“What is your mission?” Janet asked, slowly edging towards her desk. Perhaps if she got a sedative out of the top drawer she’d be able to disable him?

“I am obeying the will of the one true God, if you believe in such things. Angels and the like...” The man chewed his lip nervously as the sound of boots thundered down the hallway. The Marines were breaching wards of the infirmary one by one, looking for the intruder. “I felt the call, so here I am.”

Janet froze as he shot her a look and spat out a forceful string of commands, “You will stay away from that cabinet, da? I do not want to hurt you, but I can not let myself be allowed to fail. It is too
important that I accomplish my mission. So stop.”

The Priestess stopped smiling, apparently realising the very real danger she was in. She couldn’t possibly recognize the kalashnikov, but the saber strapped to the man’s back was all too familiar. She said something distinctly uncharitable, shifting her posture slightly into a fighting stance.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to tell us what God wants you to do?” Sam queried acerbically.

“I would, but he is not so clear as to outright say.” He chambered a round as the sounds of Marines grew ever closer. “It’s more of a ‘be here till it becomes obvious why I sent you’ sort of thing. All things considered, I find his methods unnecessarily obtuse.”

“You don’t have to do this.” Sam said, as the door shook behind the man’s book-shelf blockade from the force of Marines hitting it with a battering ram. “Surrender to me and I promise that you’ll be well treated.”

The man lowered his rifle and started to say, “Da, I do not wish to spill the blood of the innocent. I surr-” when the priestess, seeing that the surrendering man’s guard was down, sprung across the room with alarming speed - lashing out at the man’s face with her fists. The astonished Russian batted away the woman’s punches, only to have her grab his arm by the wrist and use it as a fulcrum to spun up and over the man’s shoulders - wrapping her legs around his head.

Entirely unprepared for the naked woman’s furious assault, the man hardly had time to yell “Chto?” before the woman smacked beneath his ears with the blade of her palms hard enough to render him unconscious. He collapsed into a heap as she rolled back, landing with cat-like grace. She’d lost a couple piercings in the process, leaving the spots where she’d previously had them to bleed freely.

The marines broke through the door, storming into the room as the priestess kicked the unconscious russian for good measure.

Janet sighed, wiping her brow with her sleeve as she turned to the priestess. “Thanks.”

The priestess said something in Goa’uld that sounded like it might have been “you’re welcome,” as Sam pulled the Kalashnikov and Saber from the man’s unconscious body - ordering the Marines to take him to the brig. She pulled the magazine from the gun and removed the remaining bullet from the chamber, whistling softly. “That was a close one.”

“Carter!” Shouted Colonel O’Neill as he squeezed past the Marines and their prisoner. “Are you
“Yes sir.” The Major replied, nodding to her other two team-mates as they entered. “The priestess dealt with the Russian.”

“Russian?” The Colonel said the word like the foulest of epithets. “That guy was a Russian?”

“Is not Russia one of the major powers of this planet O’Neill?” Teal’c queried. “One the SGC goes to great pains to ensure remains unaware of the Stargate?”

“Ohhh yeah.” Colonel O’Neill snarled in fury. “And when I find who let the cat out of the bag, I’m gonna have words with them. Strong words. Am I right Daniel?”

He looked over when his companion did not reply, “Daniel?”

“Uh huh…” Doctor Jackson replied, eyes focused upon the sword casing in Sam’s hands. “Sure Jack.”

“Daniel?” The Colonel sighed.

“Yes Jack?” Daniel Jackson looked up.

“You’re doing it again.” The Colonel shook his head in exasperation.

“Doing what?” The archeologist asked.

“Leaving the world of the living to enter the land of all things dusty and long dead. It’s that thing you always do before talking my ear off about some ancient doodad.” The Colonel rolled his eyes.

“Oh,” Daniel blushed. “It’s just - that sword is very interesting. May I see it?”
“Sure.” Sam handed it over. “It was his.”

“Fascinating.” Daniel examined the elaborate sword case, tugging experimentally at the hilt. The blade stayed firmly in place. “Huh - it’s stuck shut. I wonder why he’d bother bringing a sword that he couldn’t use?”

The Colonel snorted. “He’s Russian, Daniel, who the hell knows why they do anything?”
You're brooding," Commented Kanan's host Ban as Kanan idly tapped their finger upon the desk. "I'm thinking," Kanan replied. "There's a difference."

"We're in a room that's easily nicer than any house I've ever lived in, and you're wasting our time sitting on this chair, staring at the wall." Ban snorted. "And they called this place a prison."

Kanan actually doubted that the room they'd led him to was actually part of the building's prison structure. He knew enough of the Tau'ri's language to recognize the words "Distinguished Visitor" on the placard next to the door. More likely the Tau'ri had decided that it was as easy to confine him to a comfortable room as it would have been to confine him to any cell.

Most cells he'd seen did not include a refrigerated machine full of drinks.

"Don't grow complacent Ban. We're not staying." Kanan pulled a glass bottle from the machine and fiddled with the metal fastening over the top. It's crinkling metal stood fast against his thumb, digging in to the flesh before popping off. He suspected that there was a simpler way of removing the bit of metal, unagumented humans would not be able to negotiate that particular feat of strength.

Ban whistled their lips in enjoyment after taking a swig of the beverage. It was sweet, with a bit of fizz to it that Kanan usually associated with alcohol – though it had neither the bite or burn of anything alcoholic. "You sure about that?"

"Most decidedly." Kanan was not overly fond of the people of the First World. He had nothing against them, to be sure – not like some Tok'ra, but he found them so infuriatingly hurried in their thinking. Humans were short lived compared to the other species of the galaxy – even among the slave races of the Goa'uld. They would, at best, live some four score and ten years before expiring. Little more than a blip upon history and yet they insisted upon seeing the work of generations happen in mere moments.

He did not resent them for that – he pitied them. They were so limited in their vision of what could be that they limited their choices to what would bring them the greatest benefit in their life time, often at the sacrifice of a greater benefit beyond their simple person.

Perspective was one of the burdens one bore as a host to a Tok'ra. You were shown the memories of dozens, perhaps hundreds of lives before your own. You felt their struggles and passions as though they were your own, and you learned caution from their failings. The Tok'ra would have to incrementally introduce their host to such memories, of course. It could be overwhelming to be exposed to one's insignificance.

This was not to say that the Tok'ra were greater than their hosts, merely more seasoned. The oldest and wisest of mankind would be a child in the eyes of a Tok'ra. The youngest of their number could comfortably measure their age in centuries. Supposedly the Hok'tar had greater wisdom than their moral compatriots, but he only knew of the Hok'tar in the vaugest of terms. The Mother of All did not split away from her bloodline to form the Tok'ra till long after the Goa'uld abandoned the first world to the monsters and she'd been stingy in sharing the memories of the Great War.

The humans of the First World lacked perspective even by the standards of their own world. They were a primitive empire at the height of their power, conquerors of all enemies who'd been put in front of them. But they were young, so very young. They charged headlong into situations they
knew nothing about and simply forced their way through them because it wouldn't even begin to occur to them to do it any other way. That they were possessed of a near religious conviction in their own moral obligation to involve themselves in ensuring the free will of the other races in the galaxy did little to ameliorate that gung-ho attitude.

The very room they were in exemplified the problems of the First World. It was an ugly gray space, boxy and utilitarian. The furniture was all mass produced, interchangeable blocks of processed wood and metal fastened together as cheaply as could be managed. It fulfilled its function, but would likely only last a few years before basic use destroyed it and forced them to make a replacement. It was a temporary solution to a permanent problem, solved with the simplest and most readily available items rather than taking the time and resources to resolve the matter properly.

They were allies in a war of which they only understood the surface. The Goa'uld were not gods, not true gods like some of the powers in the universe, but they did fulfill various necessary functions that could not easily be replaced without prior planning. One could not simply destroy the bureaucracy of the System Lords without leaving some duty of the System Lords unattended and risk unleashing one of the Unspeakable.

It had been a nightmare locating and controlling the strongholds of Ra after his demise. They'd been forced to leak the locations of numerous fortress worlds and cache of forbidden knowledge to the System Lords simply to avoid risking that they end up monitored and unguarded in his absence. Ra had been wise enough to bind the unspeakable in magics that would persist after his death, but Kanan doubted all the Goa'uld shared his wisdom.

Planning for the destruction of a System Lord required centuries of planning just to locate his secret places and hidden runes, let alone to be able to bind those creatures who he kept in submission. One did not just kill a Goa'uld else they risked dooming entire planets to those whose names should never be spoken.

Every choice, every action, every single moment of a Tok'ra's life from birth till death was taken with the utter and absolute conviction that they would never speak aloud of the Unspeakable. There was no need. Egeria had gifted them with the knowledge in their genetic memory so that nothing ever need be spoke aloud.

It was infuriating. The destruction of the Goa'uld and the consignment of the Unspeakable to oblivion was the sincere goal of the Tok'ra, but their allies in the former were entirely oblivious to the latter. And there was no way to explain the specific dangers of the Unspeakable without risking that the humans of the First World might actually summon one of them. The very purpose of the Tok'ra's hidden war upon the Unspeakable was to leave them unspeakable. Forgotten monsters could only exert a limited degree of power upon the galaxy.

He couldn't even blame their haste. Absent the knowledge of the Unspeakable, the glacial pace of the Tok'ra would seem like pointless dithering. But the Unspeakable were very real, very dangerous, and a hazard to all life in the galaxy if allowed to run free. If the people of the First World were allowed to continue their pattern of haphazardly slaying the pantheons they might well doom all life in the process.

"Come on, they're not that bad." Ban laughed. "All you need to do is direct them to better targets. Ba'al, Quetesh – the ones who don't have a cache of …" Ban choked as Kanan forced his vocal chords to restrict.

"Don't you dare. Not here, not while someone might be listening." Kanan thought at his host. "If you must refer to them, do so without words. Even speaking about them gives them greater hold in the material realms. The Unspeakable cannot be killed, but they can be forgotten."
"I hate it when you do that." Ban replied in irritation. "It doesn't exactly scream 'free will' to me."

"Better to harm you than to destroy the secret." Kanan shuddered. "We must never relive the folly of Thoth."

Kanan put the spent bottle on the room's modest table, turning idly to the door as it opened. He was expecting the dark-skinned man in the uniform of the first world's military who'd visited twice since he arrived with a plate of satisfying, if uninventive, food and a large bottle of water. He was instead greeted instead by the balding figure of Selmak's most recent host – a first world native if memory served. He would have been indistinguishable from any native of the First World if not for the sword strapped to his waist.

"Kanan I presume," Spoke Selmak in the language of the Tok'ra. "Have you spoken to mother recently?"

"I have the pleasure." Replied Kanan in kind, recognizing the password. "Only in my dreams."

"It is good to see you Kanan. I thought your part of the plan was to kill Heka and take his place when he got to Delmak." Selmak queried, "How did he elude you?"

"He deviated from the route, taking a ring transport rather than the supplicant's path." Kanan replied sourly. "My team was ready to stun him and slay the Jaffa when we got the message that he'd already made it to the throne room. I could not allow their meeting to continue and risk Sokar gaining spellwork from Heka. I sent my team back off world and attempted to end their pact."

"A shame, after the upheaval of Sokar's death none of the System Lords would have questioned Heka's self-imposed exile. We could easily have raided his libraries to find the knowledge we lack." Access to the private library of Heka wouldn't have been a boon – it would have been a coup. The god of magic had, for all intents and purposes, invented the sorcery of the Goa'uld back in the times before Thoth's Folly and the Great War. The Rw within the library reportedly contained all number of forbidden and impossible things, not the least of which was a supposed map of all the fortress worlds upon which the Unspeakable were trapped. They were not easily located or reached – invariably they would be placed upon worlds without easy access to either the gate network or the intricate paths of the Furling Empire. "He does not seem to have been overly offended by your attempt on his life though."

"The Corruption has taken hold of his mind." Kanan replied. "We have no way of knowing how old Heka even is and he's been practically living out of his Sarcophagus for the better part of a Millennium. The man has actively started dealing with the Queen of Winter."

"Heka?" Selmak replied, incredulous.

"It seems impossible but I assure you it is true." Kanan replied. "He who forcibly took the Winter Lady at the Battle of Djer's Lament has been not only seen in her mother's company, but her employ."

"And the Furling Queen's Offspring tolerates this?" Selmak queried.

"She would not openly defy her Queen. Not while he's useful." Kanan shook his head. "No – there is some greater plan in the works. And I like it not one bit."

A loud klaxon sounded, echoing though the hollowed mountain as a voice spoke monotonously in the language of the first world. Kanan flinched, "What is that?"

"It's nothing," Replied Selmak's host. "SG-6 is going on a mission ahead of schedule. Their time
table got moved up in light of today's events. The General wants to finish all planned missions for this week so that next week's schedule can focus around their new ship."

"That ship is doubtlessly a trap." Kanan sighed. "You know as well as I that the Goa'uld do not provide anything out of the good of their hearts."

"Obviously, but I can not guess what game he is playing at. He legally provided them with the ship under the term of the Protected Planets Treaty in such a way that it can't be a ploy to force war with the Asgard." Selmak mused, "It just leaves too many unanswered questions."

"Questions like, 'when are we getting out of the room you've had us in for hours?' and 'Why the hell did it take you so long to visit?'" Jibed Ban. "I mean, I understand the need for deliberation but how long can it take to confer with the High Council?"

"The Council was using more relay stations that they usually do. They've apparently enacted full containment protocols on data flows." Selmak's host replied. "The Goa'uld have gone into all-out civil war. We've lost even general S.A. into the galaxy at large. By all accounts Heka's system has just disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Kanan blinked. "How does a system disappear?"

"The gates no longer connect to anything, our probes aren't transmitting, and the ship we tried to send to that sector of space somehow finds itself light-years off course whenever it attempts to exit hyperspace within one of Heka's holdings." The host replied. "I don't mean a little bit off course either, I mean that the laws of physics have just decided not to apply to his system."

"What could do that?" Asked Kanan, his mind racing to the obvious choice. "The Queens have great power over the immaterial but their ability to act in our world is limited by their bargains. That is the rule. What could Dre'su'den offer them that would be valuable enough to merit protecting an entire star system?"

"I dare not guess." Selmak replied. "If he has, in truth, acquired a Hok'tar with the consent of the Furlings to use it as they were once used, we have really no way of knowing what he can offer her."

"That's absurd – he most decidedly has a Hok'tar host but there is no way that the Queens would ever consent to removing the limitations upon our kind. They do not forgive." Nor should they, not for the crime of aiding the Unspeakable. "The Winter Queen has found a new toy, nothing more. He is as trapped by their curse as any."

"I would not presume to know the mind of a Furling." Selmak politely disagreed. "But I know that they do not easily abandon power and they are prone to cruel jokes that tear the galaxy asunder. Or have you forgotten mother's mistake?"

Kanan chewed his lip in irritation. Periodically a Goa'uld was foolish or desperate enough to summon a Furling in an effort to forge a bargain. It never ended well for the Goa'uld.

Egeria has been one such fool. She'd summoned the Lady of Summer and bargained with her for the "knowledge most dangerous for a Goa'uld to gain" in exchange for artifacts of the Gate Builders. The Summer Lady took the artifacts and granted her knowledge both great and terrible to behold. Egeria had been hoping to get spells or weapons, she was given a knowledge altogether more terrible. Introspection, the Summer Lady forced the Goa'uld Queen to behold the sum total of her life's action in concert with the suffering she inflicted upon the world around her. Forced to absorb the magnitude of her own cruelty, Egeria formed the Tok'ra.
Suffice it to say, the Tok'ra's feelings about the Furlings were mixed at best. Their very existence was the byproduct of a Furling curse upon their mother, and none of them were ever entirely convinced that a Furling wasn't about to swoop down and rob them all of their introspection in some equally capricious joke. Better to just avoid them entirely.

Selmak opened his mouth as though he were about to say something, stopping to look at a patch of shadow behind Kanan. "Kanan. Is there a lamp behind me?"

"No." Replied Kanan, pointing up at the ceiling. "Only the overhead lamp."

"That's very bad."Selmak replied in a voice of forced calm. "We need to run. We need to run now."

"Why?" Kanan asked his elder in confusion.

"Because that shadow isn't being cast by anything in this room." Selmak replied, reaching for the door handle.

He shouted as the shadow detached from the wall, rocketing across the room with a feline roar. The light fixture flickered with the expenditure of ambient magic as the predator smacked Selmak over the bed with back-handed swipe of its massive paw. He fell to the ground, knocked unconscious. Kanan screamed as he caught a glimpse of golden eyes and a white patch across the creature's belly as the Malk's shadow spread out across the room, seeming to consume every surface within it.

The guards at the door burst in at Kanan's scream, only to have the beast grab them in its claws and toss them to the ground, savaging them with his great, fanged maw. The door slammed shut, moved by some unseen power – trapping Kanan in the room with the leonine monster.

His eyes darted to the soldier's waist, hoping beyond hope that he would be able to reach the man's steel blade before the Furling managed to gut him. An act that amused the creature greatly. It spoke, its voice forming words in the language of the Tok'ra with an abrupt harshness incongruous with its feline continence, "You are welcome to try, child of the Fool Queen, but I assure you I am faster. And it would be a shame to force me to kill you before I have learned what I wish to know of you."

"Cat Sith." Kanan spoke the predator's name with almost reverent fear. The Furling Cat Sith was why Goa'uld feared the dark, a fear that nature alone had never granted them.

"I am he," Purred the nightmare. "And you are one who reeks of my ancient prey."

"I was with the Devourer for a time, yes. But I am no ally of the monster." The feud between Ammit and Cat Sith was beyond legendary. The great Malk had killed whole armies for a chance to kill the goddess only to find himself bested by the woman's guile, time and time again. "How are you even here? I thought the Furlings could not enter a place uninvited."

"This is no residence. It has no threshold to bar me." Cat Sith smiled a Cheshire grin. "Tell me child. And answer truthfully. I will kill you if you do not. Do you fear me?"

"Yes." Replied Kanan.

"Good." Replied the Malk, turning amused golden eyes to the door as soldiers of the first world beat against it – trying to force their way in to the room. "Do you know why I am here in this room?"

"To kill me." Kanan replied.

"No." Replied the Malk.
"You're not here to kill me?" Kanan blinked. "Then why?"

"I am here to protect you." Replied the Malk.

"What?" Kanan blinked in confusion.

"The Lord Warden has bargained with the Queen for protection for his people. I am here to ensure that preventable harm does not befall those who he has deemed to be under his protection." Cat Sith snarled. "As he has publicly claimed you as one of his own, you are now under my protection. And a very lucky thing that is, dear prey that you are that you will have my help."

"Why?" Kanan's voice cracked in fear.

"Because someone is coming to kill you all." Cat Sith purred. "And he'll very likely succeed even with me helping you."
Chapter 6

Daniel Jackson was something at a loss when it came to the blade in front of him. He’d done everything in his arsenal of archeologist’s bag of tricks to cajole the sword from its scabbard and he was no closer to dislodging the blade than when he’d started the process. It was old – ancient even by the standards of the artefacts and trinkets to which he was accustomed to encountering in his line of work. That wasn’t strange in and of itself. No, what was odd was that the blade had no logical reason for being that old. It was a cavalry saber that seemed more in keeping with the early days of the French Legion’s early operations in Algeria, but what few tests he’d run on the sliver of exposed metal peeking up from the scabbard seemed more in keeping with early roman iron.

Stranger still were the obvious signs of continued use. The leather of the handle was worn and cured with oil to make it pliable beneath a man’s fingers. There were nicks and scrapes along the scabbard and hilt which seemed to be the result of battle. This was not some historical curio taken with its bearer for sentimental reasons, it was a functional weapon.

Why was a black Russian with a Colonial French North-African cavalry saber forged from pre-Christian iron keeping it in such good repair if the damn thing couldn’t be extricated from its hilt? There wasn’t a trick lever or button keeping it in place, he’d checked. And it wasn’t a simple matter of lubricating the blade either, he’d tried. A few hours of gently applying oil to the scabbard’s edge had left him with a doubtlessly well-oiled blade that had no logical reason for refusing be pulled from its sword-case.

He’d seen trick blades before of virtually every type conceivable. No Archeologist worth his salt didn’t go through an adolescent period of fixation upon ancient arms and armories – actively tracking down the strangest and most exotic tips and tricks the old world used to conceal deadly secrets. But even with his voluminous knowledge of weapons, Daniel Jackson was utterly flummoxed.

“Try tapping it on the edge of the table.” Chimed an amused voice from the door of Daniel’s office. “It always seems to work when I do it with a jar.”

Daniel rolled his eyes in exasperation and pulled off the plastic gloves he’d been using to handle the blade. “Jack, this is a historical treasure, not some disobedient condiment.”

“Your historical treasure was carried around by a man who tripped every flag when we ran his fingerprints.” Jack tapped his finger on the blade’s hilt twice before rubbing his thumb over its leather. “There are at least fifty active investigations going on in Colorado alone where his prints showed up on the scenes of unsolved crimes and he’s been a person of interest in at least two federal cases. The FBI and DOJ are already calling us up to demand we give this guy over to them – not to mention the library of Congress for God alone knows what reason. And that’s just what we’ve found in the past two hours.”
“What is he accused of?” Daniel blinked.

“I have no idea, and frankly they don’t seem to know either. This guy has no name, no passport, no social security number, no driver’s license, no money, and near as we can tell just got on the base by just wandering in.” The Colonel scowled, a muscle twitching above his left eye in near apoplectic rage. “Five hundred cameras, at least thirty check points, two doors requiring key cards, an entire mountain worth of security and yet a Russian built like a linebacker kitted out in the best weaponry the former USSR has to offer manages to just walk right in to the “most secure” base on the planet earth.”

“I’m sure it was more complex than – “ Daniel flinched as Jack cut him off.

“It was exactly as simple as that.” He slapped the table in frustration, knocking a stack of papers to the ground. Daniel swore and reached down to collect his notes, glaring at Jack as the man just continued into his tirade oblivious to the archeologist’s frustration. “I watched the tapes. Two hours it took him to walk in, walk across base, enter NORAD, and navigate his way into our infirmary. Somehow whenever he walked into that room was the exact moment where nobody was paying attention to what he was doing or was actively engaged in something that would prevent them from stopping him. It’s like we got invaded by Mr. Magoo. He wasn’t noticed till he started trying to get into the gate room, and even then only because he asked permission for someone to let him into the gate-room. Forty SFs missed him. I counted. They were all so busy looking for that god damn lion that an armed Russian might as well have been invisible.”

“Jack-“ Daniel made a second attempt only to be bull rushed by the Colonel as his rant started picking up steam.

“It’s insanity.” He tossed his hands to the sky, curling his fingers before pulling at his greying hair. “Basically the only thing we train these kids to do is keep out the Russians. It’s like rule one of day one before all the other days. Don’t give anything to the Russians. Don’t tell them where you live. Don’t tell them what hours you work. Don’t let them in to what is supposedly the most secure facility in the entire world.”

“Jack!” Daniel pushed a clay artifact to the side of his desk as the Colonel punched the corner, pulverizing the point where it had been only moments ago.

“It just chaps my ass that when he says that ‘god guided his hand’ in that ridiculous ‘Moose unt Squirrel’ voice like he’s spouting off a company line that even he has trouble believing that I can’t even find a hole in it without making us look like idiots. He didn’t even break stride, just kept walking through like he owned the place right up till he walked into Hammond’s office and asked what the big ring was.”
“So he’s just crazy?” Daniel queried, tapping the stack against the table edge to even out the corners. “Just some lunatic who got lucky?”

Jack scoffed. “Daniel, the day I believe that a Russian who found his way into NORAD just “got lucky” is the day you take my butt to a home to spend the rest of my days eating Jell-O and discussing the finer points of Matlock.”

“Didn’t you spend an hour eating Jell-O yesterday in the DFAC?” Daniel picked up the blade, wrapping it in brown paper to ensure it didn’t get scuffed. “Specifically because they had “more blue” out there than usual and someone had to make sure it didn’t go to waste?”

“Missing the point Daniel.” The Colonel shook his head. “You mark my words, that Russian is here for a reason to do with the Stargate. And I don’t think that even he believes that line he is spouting about being here on a mission from God. Get this – he’s an avowed atheist on a divine mission.”

Daniel pinched the bridge of his nose, pushing his wide glasses up on to his forehead as he massaged his eyelids. His lips scrunched up involuntarily as he tried to process the sheer absurdity of the situation. “He’s on a mission for a god he doesn’t believe in?”

“And we have a winner!” Colonel O’Neill sighed heavily. “I mean really. If you’re going to go with a cover story, go with a cover story that we’re going to believe for cripes sake.”

“Jack… not to put too fine of a point on it, but what if he is here on a mission from God.” Daniel raised his open palm placating as Jack inhaled in preparation of another tirade. “No, Jack – hear me out. We’ve seen extraterrestrial origins for basically every pantheon on Earth. We just found out that Dragons and Fairies have some basis in real world phenomenon. Is it so absurd that someone might be given a mission from “god” that sends them to find the Stargate?”

“What? You think there is a snake somewhere in Russia?” The Colonel blinked a couple of times. “I mean – I think we’d have noticed a Goa’uld setting up shop in St. Petersburg by now. The eyes would be a hint.”

“It wouldn’t have to be a Goa’uld. There well may be other beings who’ve interacted with the planet that we don’t know about.” Daniel offered. “We know that we’ve been visited by at least the Asgard, Goa’uld, and Furlings. Who’s to say that there haven’t been others?”
“I thought the Asgard were supposed to be stopping that from happening?” Jack whined, crossing his arms in frustration.

“Not exactly Jack. It’s a specific treaty to prevent Goa’uld incursion. And they don’t even have the manpower to enforce that.” Daniel put the wrapped blade into a steel safe, closed the door, and spun the lock – checking the handle twice to make sure the lock actuated. “The Furlings weren’t, and as far as we know have never been, stopped from coming to Earth. They may be dozens of extraterrestrial races on Earth masquerading as Gods even as we speak and we’d have no way of knowing they were even here.”

“And what? They’re going full on Men In Black on us? Hiding in plain sight?” Jack snorted. “I think we’d have noticed by now.”

“Then your lack of attention to your own people’s history is regrettable Colonel O’Neill – for they have never pretended to be anything other than what they are.” The gravely rumble of the Jaffa Teal’c was tinted with the merest hint of disapproval. “For your people’s legends on their presence and actions are most extensive.”

“Teal’c!” Daniel smiled, glad to see his team mate. “I wasn’t expecting you for another twenty minutes.”

“My apologies Doctor Jackson. My duties in securing the Priestess of Heka within her quarters were terminated early.” The dark skinned man’s lip curled in obvious disgust. “I found myself unable to be in her presence for more than was strictly mandatory.”

“Not a fan?” Colonel O’Neill said in an approving tone that was anything but a question.

“No.” The curt syllable was nearly a growl. “The woman is most disagreeable. She had the audacity to tell me that her god would approve of my decision to turn my back on Apophis.”

The Colonel paused, blinking a few times before squinting in confusion. “Run that one by me again.”

“The Warden has apparently forbidden his priesthood from interfering in the worship – or lack of worship – from his followers. There are no Shol’va in the realms of Heka.” Teal’c sighed. “The Jaffa are only judged by right and righteous action. Apophis was an unworthy god against whom Jaffa should rebel. Thus, I am validated in my crusade. She is… pleased by my worship of the Lord
“Worship my butt.” Jack snorted. “I’ve never met anyone more dedicated to the downfall of the Goa’uld than you are.”

“My intentions seem only of peripheral relevance to her interpretation of scripture.” Teal’c sighed. “I have spoken with her god. She has not. She is quite determined to transcribe my account of our meeting to ensure that it is added to their holy scriptures. It is most annoying.”

“You got added to her religion?” Jack snorted, a bit too amused at Teal’c’s frustration than was strictly necessary.

“No, Colonel O’Neill – we all are now important figures within the faith of Nekheb.” Teal’c replied in one of the most amusing examples of “turnabout being fair play” that Daniel could remember. “Witnesses to the coming of the Trickster God.”

“But how?” Jack sputtered, obviously horrified at being added to Goa’uld scripture.

Daniel sighed, Jack wasn’t dumb by any measure but he sometimes lacked perspective. “Jack – As far as she is concerned the Lord Warden is a god. The Goa’uld with him are his pantheon. The Tok’ra are demons. We are a legendary race of mortals who strike out into the stars to literally kill gods. You and I are the mortal men who killed the King of all Gods. It stands to reason that we’d work our way into some part of the mythology.”

“Well, when you put it that way.” Jack’s chest puffed out a bit. “We have done some pretty neat stuff for a story. I’d have paid a lot more attention in Sunday school if there were passages on nuking a spaceship over Abydos.”

“It is illogical. The Goa’uld do not develop their histories to make their rivals look powerful, only those who they consider to be within their sphere of influence.” The Jaffa shook his head. “There is more at play than we are aware. Of that I am certain.”

Daniel held his tongue, it wouldn’t do any good to disagree with the Jaffa. Teal’c was likely correct that the Warden had some greater design on the priestess’ presence, but Daniel suspected that their guest’s motivations were likely as advertised. A meal between gods and demons had taken place under the watchful eyes of a rival pantheon in the fortress of mortal god-slayers. Entire religions had been formed around mythologies less founded in fact.
What few interactions he’d been privy to with the people of Nekheb indicated a complex theology and mythology that was only in its early nascence. Heka had re-invented himself within the past three days as a new member of the Goa’uld pantheon, a protector and warrior figure rather than his previous image of the Sorceror King sequestered within his tower. It was an almost entire rejection of his previous personality and motivations, up to and including the wholesale destruction of millennia of previous scripture. The priesthood of the “Lord Warden” likely didn’t know what they were supposed to do in order to please their newborn god. They had to be recording his every word for posterity in the hopes of generating holy books and guiding their flock – a fact exacerbated by the god’s apparently schizophrenic personality and wholesale disregard of apparently lethal danger.

“I liked it better when our biggest worry was tracking down that narcissus child.” Jack pinched the bridge of his nose tightly. “Find kid. Save kid. Maybe kill some snakes along the way. You know – simple.”

“Tracking down the location to which the Harsesis Child of Amonet has been spirited has proved to be anything but simple, Colonel O’Neill. Keb is most well-hidden.” Replied the Jaffa warrior.

“Yeah, yeah.” Jack pouted. “And you just know whatever it was that the Narcissus – “

“– Harsesis –“ Corrected Daniel.

“– Harsesis, Narcissus it’s all snake to me.” Jack shot back before continuing. “And we’re talking about a Baby right? How much of a change could a baby make?”

“A baby with all the knowledge of the Goa’uld, Jack.” Daniel sighed, tired of having the same conversation over and over again. At least once a week since they’d started seeking out the child of Sha’re they’d had to have this same talk. “It could mean the first real breakthrough we’ve had since going through the Stargate. A human who can give us everything they know, insight into how they think, why they act as they act, he may only be a baby now but as he grows up he could be vital to how we defeat the Goa’uld.”

“Daniel wont…” Jack trailed off, looking at the wall.

“Colonel O’Neill. Is all well?” Queried Teal’c.

“I could have sworn… “ The colonel looked at the lights around the room, counting them off on his
“Jaaccckk?” Daniel elongated the syllables of the Colonel’s name, the implied question of “what are you doing right now?” implied in his tone.

“It’s nothing – I just. Don’t worry about it.” The Colonel shook his head. “I’m just on edge.”

“You seemed most perplexed only moments ago Colonel O’Neill.” The Jaffa looked around the room.

“It’s nothing, really. Just a shadow.” Jack replied, shaking his head and pointing at a flickering lamp in the corner of the room. “That lamp over there must have done something to our shadows. One of Daniel’s African statues or something, it gave me the creeps. I thought there was someone else in here for a second.”

“There are only two other occupants of this room other than yourself Colonel.” He paused as a fourth person poked their head in the door. “A correction – “

“Yes, Teal’c – I can see that.” Replied the Colonel in exasperation. Teal’c could be frustratingly literal at times. “Major?”

“Sir,” Replied Samantha Carter as she entered Daniel’s office. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Not at all Major – we were just… ruminating on our most recent Russian visitor. “ Jack replied sarcastically. “Any word on our new ship?”

“We sent up a team of Marines with the rings on the cargo ship. They’re conducting a room to room search of the vessel but it looks like the Lord Warden kept his word.” Sam replied, smiling. “And you’ll be pleased to know they did find the dragons you were talking about.”

“I told you. Big honking space guns, lots of dead dragons.” The Colonel replied. “It’s going to take some bleach and a whole lot of elbow grease to get rid of that rotting dragon smell.”

“Yes sir.” Sam smiled, placing a set of glossy 6 by 8 photos of dead dragons on Daniel’s desk. The
mutilated monster’s bodies were disgorged and rent to shreds, huge hunks cut out of their bodies with a blade. But even mutilated, the corpses managed to look intimidating.

“Yeesh,” Jack whistled. “I do not envy old Dressing for having to fight off a horde of these suckers. Those claws have to be eight inches long.”

“Huh.” Daniel replied reaching in to his pocket. He pulled a handful of crumpled up bills out, counted them and handed them over to the Major. “I guess Captain Smith isn’t walking away with this one after all.”

“You bet on if I was lying or not about dragons?” Jack replied, scandalized, chewing his lip as he estimated the value of the stack. “Are those twenties?”

“No, Colonel O’Neill. The existence of Dragons was most convincingly satisfied by Asgard Thor.” Teal’c bowed conciliatorily. “The bet was, in fact, over the number of dragon corpses to be discovered on the ship.”

“Ah – well… that’s better then.” Jack replied, somewhat mollified. “How many were found?”

“Four.” Replied Sam. “Badly mutilated, but clearly Dragons.”

“Only Four?” Replied Jack in confusion. “No…. no, no, no-ho-ho! There were more than four just in line of sight to me.”

“Sir. The Marines were exhaustive in their search. There are only four dragon corpses on that ship.” Sam replied. “Maybe Thor did some house cleaning? Took most of the bodies? He seems to have taken all the human corpses.”

“And what? Leave four corpses just for laughs?” Jack replied.

“Maybe he wanted us to believe you.” Replied Daniel, shrugging his shoulders. “I mean … dragons are real isn’t exactly the easiest sell for us to make.”

“Your leadership seems most disinclined to accept the dangers presented by the Furlings.” Teal’c
replied. “Physical evidence of another such power may well have been his intent.”

“Sir, are you worried that the Asgard are deceiving us? They’ve been straightforward in their dealings with us thus far.” Sam arched an eyebrow.

“No,” Jack waved away the implication. “No, I trust Thor. It’s the Warden that bugs me. He outright stated that the ship was a trap. I just haven’t figured out how it ends up being a trap.”

“We’ll be careful sir, but we won’t know what we can learn from it till we let our people examine its systems. Even if it’s been booby trapped so that we can’t use them, we could gain valuable insights into their technology.” Sam replied. “With your permission, I would like to take a team of scientists onboard to examine their systems.”

“Oh! Me too.” Daniel pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“Daniel?” Jack replied, the “why” implicit in his tone.

“Jack, it’s an intact mother ship with all its internal databases. They’re doubtlessly encrypted but there have to be millennia worth of Goa’uld historical records in there.” Daniel was practically salivating at the prospect. A single Goa’uld data crystal was capable of containing hundreds of Exabytes – more than any historian could comb over in their entire lifetime. They’d only been able to obtain incomplete or damaged records thus far. An undamaged database was of incalculable value.

“Very well, Daniel – go forth and nerd at your leisure.” Jack nodded to Carter. “You have a go Major. Make sure to take SG-4 with you when you go. Marines or no Marines, something about this is bugging me.”

“Yes sir.” Sam replied.

As Daniel started packing his bag of reference materials to take with him on the ship Jack leaned across the desk and asked, “Out of curiosity – what was your bet?”

“Mine?” Daniel looked up from the moleskin notebook he was flipping through. “I decided to go with the bet nobody else was willing to take.”
“Which was?” Jack inquired.

“Dr. Jackson bet that we would encounter living dragons on the ship.” Teal’c replied. “Several of them.”

“I was wrong.” Daniel replied, as he picked up a photo and rubbed his thumb along the curve of a dragon’s fang. “And for once Jack, I am very, very pleased to be wrong.”

Jack smiled and lead Teal’c out of Daniel’s office. Had Daniel been looking up from the photo, he just might have caught the sight of a tall shadow leaning out where no shadow had a right to be. Daniel might have noticed its greedy glowing eyes. And Daniel might have noticed the faint glow around his safe that burned the shadow as it tried to touch the dial, sending the hissing shape back from whence it came.
Janet couldn’t fathom why anyone would ever hurt a child. Every time she saw it, and she’d seen it far too often in her line of work than she cared to, it made her blood boil. She didn’t see it as often now that she was in the military as she had when she’d been doing her residency – the underground SGC complex beneath NORAD had a different clientele than the Emergency Room. Airmen returning from an off world mission were more likely to have broken a bone or taken a staff blast than they were to be bringing back an injured child.

But it still happened. Cassandra had been the first. A little girl, Janet’s adoptive daughter – one of the Goa’uld had killed her entire planet and turned the child into a weapon. Turning a child into a bomb, was there no depth to Goa’uld depravity? They’d been able to save the girl but she would never be able to travel though the Stargate. She would have to live out her life as a child on Earth.

Janet had adopted the girl almost by default. They’d done some early inquiries into giving her to a married couple after they’d saved Cassie, but those potential parents with the required clearance lacked the resources to raise a child and those with the resources locally lacked the appropriate clearances. Given that Cassandra was intimately aware of the most well-kept secret on the planet Earth, the latter was entirely inacceptable to the SGC. Given that Janet and SG-1 had become the de-facto adoptive family, they weren’t about to stand for the former.

So it was that Cassandra had, in effect, gained not two but five parents. Well, four parents and an incorrigible Uncle. Colonel O’Neill seemed quite determined to ‘corrupt’ the child with candy, soda, bad television, and video games. He had at least demonstrated the common sense to ask Janet for permission prior to giving a puppy to Casandra and telling her that it was mandatory for Earth children to have a dog but she suspected that Daniel might have played a hand in that query. She loved Cassandra like one of her own and was loved in kind by her.

Suffice it to say, when it came to abandoned children finding their way to Earth – Janet was predisposed to the maternal. It was a pity Cassie couldn’t come too close to the Stargate; she might have had better luck in communicating with their shape-shifting guest.

For lack of a better name, Janet had taken to calling the girl “Jane” as in “Jane Doe.” Jane was not one of the Refugees. Jane was not even capable of speaking their language. Jane, as it transpired, was not strictly human.

Or rather, she hadn’t been strictly human.

It was baffling actually. The initial phial of blood taken from the girl was as inhuman as one could
imagine. Genetic structure, cellular make up, protein strands, and even the basic structure of her genetic code - none of them was even the ball park of how human biology ought to work. She didn’t even have DNA; she had a triple helix that seemed to have a metallic element to it. Tests done post metamorphoses, however, were almost indistinguishable from any human wandering the base. She appeared to be a normal, healthy human child with few – if any deviations from what one might expect from a girl of her age.

If Janet hadn’t taken the girl’s blood and watched her transformation, she would have said it was impossible to accomplish. People didn’t just change species at a whim. Then again, the girl hadn’t been people – not in the strictest sense – when this had all started.

Jane still largely spoke in that strange, guttural language of snarls and screeches, but she seemed to understand have a basic understanding of English words and phrases. She’d gotten as far as “yes,” “no,” and “Janet” at least. She was clearly very smart and eager to learn. And, much to Janet’s relief, Jane had proved much more cooperative with regards to clothing herself than the priestess had been. She’d outright refused to wear shoes – but at least had consented to placing thick wool socks over her feet.

The USAF T-shirt was a bit too large, and the sweat-pants a bit baggy but they were would be more than adequate till Janet had time to get the girl proper clothing. She’d put in a requisition with supply to order Jane outfits when they got clothing for the rest of the refugees. Janet would probably be able to find some clothing at the Base’s second hand shop on her way home, come to think of it. She’d been meaning to check it for a new coat for her dress uniform and to buy rank insignia for a member of her staff who was due to promote that week.

Jane sat cross legged on her bunk, rubbing a thin length of gold chain between her fingers with apparent glee. “It must have fallen off the priestess when she’d taken down the Russian intruder,” Janet mused to herself, sighing heavily. “I suppose I’ll have to take it back to her at some point.”

“My.” Replied Jane in her staccato English, clutching the chain to her breast defensively.

“No, sweetheart. You just found it.” Janet replied patiently. “It belongs to – actually I don’t know the name of the woman it belongs to. The refugees just kept calling her ‘the anointed.’ But I know that isn’t yours. It has to go back to the person who owns it.”

“She leave. It stay.” The girl replied firmly. “Mine.”

Why did it not surprise the doctor in the slightest that the most complex phrase that a teenage girl managed to muster in a language she didn’t speak were in defiance of an authority figure telling her
to do something she didn’t want to do? Language barriers be damned, teenagers managed to be teenagers.

“I tell you what. I’ll trade you.” Janet replied, rolling her eyes. “I’ll give you something better.”

“Better?” The girl tilted her head to the side, chewing the side of her lip before looking down at the chain. “Have better?”

“Yes,” Janet reached into her desk and pulled out a foil wrapped package. Jane watched the doctor unwrap the brown bar in curiosity, flinching in surprise as Janet broke off a hunk of it with a loud snap. Janet held up the chunk beneath her nostrils, inhaling the scent and making noises of obvious enjoyment. She then placed the piece of chocolate in her mouth and bit down with a satisfying crunch.

Jane lowered her hands slightly, still running the chain between her fingers, but clearly interested in whatever it was that Janet derived such great pleasure from doing. “What?”

“Chocolate.” Janet replied, breaking off another piece and offering it. “Here, try a bite.”

The girl hesitated, looking at the chocolate and back at the necklace. Janet placed the chocolate in the girl’s other hand. “Not a trade. Just try – ok? Then we trade if you want. Only if you want.”

“If want…” Jane replied, sniffing at the chocolate tentatively before putting it in her mouth. She chewed for a few moments, her face scrunched up in obvious enjoyment, before virtually thrusting the length of gold chain into Janet’s hands and pulling the bar of dark chocolate to her chest protectively.

Janet snorted with laughter as Jane declared, “Mine,” with as much, if not more, ferocity as she had for the golden chain. “I thought you might trade me,” Janet replied, pocketing the chain. “Call it a hunch.”

“Am I interrupting anything?” Asked Samantha Carter, as she entered the room.

“Not at all major.” Janet smiled. “Just introducing our guest to the joys of chocolate.”
Sam smiled, flashing pearly white teeth between pink lips, “I can think of worse ways to introduce her to Earth cuisine. Any word on what she did when she drank our blood?”

“Well, I’ll have to wait for the final results of the full DNA test a few days from now but based off of her blood type and physical characteristics – but my preliminary tests give me a working hypothesis.” Janet replied, not quite entirely sure how to broach the subject. How exactly does one broach the subject to a coworker that there is a very real possibility that they have just accidentally conceived a teenage child as a result of an alien mishap – with a member of the same sex no less? “She seems to have combined the two samples of genetic material to form a single genetically viable model for how to become one of our species.”

“So she’s what? Part you and part me?” Sam blinked. “Holy Hannah.”

“Yes – that was my thought as well.” Janet smiled morosely.

It was painfully obvious to the casual observer that Jane was a relative of both Samantha Carter and Janet Frasier. She had Sam's lean form and blue eyes, with the caramel touch to her skin and the strong cheek bones of Janet. She still had the same sinewy muscle as before the change, not an ounce of excess fat to her, but now there were curves to her form which hadn't previously been part of her – an extra bit of awkward hip that Janet recognized for her own adolescence. She would break hearts when she got older, Janet was sure of that.

“How is this even possible?” Sam’s eyes bulged in shock. “I didn’t think children could just choose to have a different set of parents.”

“I didn’t think that choosing a species was an option either.” Janet replied. “We know literally nothing about how her species works. This could be how they actually raise their young, abandoning them for another species to bond with and raise. Some birds will actually lay eggs in the nests of other species for that reason. Until we teach her more English we won’t know.”

“It could just as easily be a defensive tactic. Something to make her more empathetic to us so that we won’t do her harm.” Sam shook her head. “We’re making too many leaps of logic.”

“Regardless, she seems harmless.” Janet replied. “And she no longer needs to remain under medical observation, assuming that her quarters are ready?”

“We got her a room separate from the other refugees. I’d imagine that she’s eager to sleep in a real
bed by now.” Sam flashed a smile of pearly white teeth at Jane, who replied with her own grin. A miniature imitation of the major’s own, Jane was a picture of teenage glee at being in Sam’s presence. She took the major’s outstretched hand and hopped from her perch on the bed.

“Go home? Go Sam home?” Jane asked eagerly, pocketing the foil wrapper briefly before realizing what she had done and offering the paper to Janet. The girl had an insufferable habit of hoarding the shiny paper her food was wrapped in.

“Sorry. Forgot.” She replied bashfully as Janet took the wrapper. “Pretty.”

“You can have pretty things that aren't garbage.” Janet affirmed, gently. “Things that you're allowed to keep. Things that are yours.”

“Mine?” Jane smiled. The girl had learned that word all too well.

“Yes,” Janet sighed. “All yours.”

“Good.” Jane replied.

“I'm sure that I've got it from here Doc.” Sam laughed as the girl tugged at her arm, eager to leave the room she'd been trapped in for the past day. “I've got a meal waiting for her.”

“Nothing too adventurous. We don't know what affect a change in diet is going to have on her from whatever it was she was previously eating. Rice, chicken, bananas – don't go crazy with it.” Janet chided.

“Says the woman feeding her chocolate by the pound.” Sam jibed as she walked out the door.

“I'll have you know that Chocolate was medicinal!” Janet cupped her hands around her mouth in an intentionally exaggerated display of making herself heard as the door clicked shut behind the two departing females.

“Never a dull moment,” Janet sighed as a klaxon sounded over the base PA system. An unexpected activation of the gate so soon after SG-6 departed? Janet had been working for the SGC for far too
long to think it was a coincidence.

She didn't wait for her suspicions to be confirmed when she before she left the observation room and made way for the medical isolation chamber next to the gate room. Her instincts proved correct as a second message sounded, “SG-6 incoming. Casualties reported. Medical to the gate-room.”

The walk to the gate room would take her five minutes, meaning that she'd likely be there a full two minutes after the on-call medics. She knew they were entirely capable of operating in her absence, but she disliked the idea of even a minute passing where she was not able to administer care to the wounded.

By the time she reached the isolation chamber, the medics had already strapped two members of SG-6 onto gurneys with thick bits of foam in place to prevent their heads from excess motion. Janet felt her heart stop at the sight of them. Something had savaged these Airmen. They were missing thick chunks of their chest and arms. Still sizzling circular patches were burned into their faces in a strange pattern of concentric circles as though someone had hit them with a branding iron only moments ago, the puss filled puckers continuously boiling as though a flame were burning beneath the skin.

She took charge immediately, yelling directions to her staff for the proper medical care of SG-6 once they got them into surgery. She was already running through the checklist of necessary care for the litany of injuries inflicted on them as she went – trying to figure out which of the two airmen she'd be able to save. Sergeant Miller seemed the most far gone. She was just barely managing to stay conscious as they wheeled her along. Major Peterson was in clear agony, but his wounds seemed to have largely stopped bleeding. He would have to be her second priority in terms of care. His wounds would be agonizing and likely scar badly if not given immediate care, but he would live.

“What happened? What did this to these people?” Janet asked Colonel Callan. The man's normally smiling face was ashen, a sunken quality to his eyes that Janet had never seen before. His skin was waxy, sweat beading down his chin. From the way he was favoring his right side Janet supposed that he had a couple of cracked ribs that he was ignoring till he was sure his people would be healed.

He wiped the sweat on his face, smearing it with the dirt and dried blood on the back of his hand. “The natives from P3X-118 waited till we got far enough from the gate that we couldn't radio back then they struck. They came down on us with overwhelming force.”

He shuddered as they reached the infirmary, shepherded in by the base SFs. His eyes were glassier than she remembered them, unfocused – clearly looking at something other than the grey backdrop of the base surgery. “There were too many of them. Thousands, legions of them – there was an unstoppable army of screeching nightmares riding creatures too terrible to describe. Fleshy beasts with lidless eyes and too many limbs, only the weakest of them died when we shot them. There was no way to stop them from killing us.”
“How did you get away?” Janet asked softly, aware that the man was in shock as the infirmary doors closed behind them.

“Get away?” The man blinked in confusion, looking Janet in the eyes with his own – the hollow glassy texture to them finally registering in Janet's voluminous memory of medical conditions. They were the eyes of a corpse. “Doc – you don't get away what lives on the other side. SG-6, all of us, we’ve been dead for quite some time now.”

“Security!” Janet shouted, turning to see the fourth member of SG-6, Lt Harper, looming over the immobile bodies of the infirmary's SFs. She held a device of obvious alien origins in her left hand, an organic looking pistol that pulsed with green energy. It emanated an odor that left a greasy taste at the back of Janet's throat as though she'd recently been sick.

Callan pointed his own pistol at Janet, pulling the trigger and hitting the Doctor with a direct blast of rippling energy. He was as surprised as Janet when her attempt to block the blast by raising her arms in an x over her face actually managed to deflect the blast.

“Run!” Janet screamed to her staff, making a break for the alarm on the wall next to the door. If she could just warn the base they'd send more SFs and Marines. They were on high-alert thanks to the Russian, their response time would be even better than usual.

“Take them all – emulating corpses will only get us so far.” The not-colonel grabbed Janet by the arm as she tried to muscle past him, shooting two medics with his own pulsing organic pistol. Shuddering pulses of rippling air struck them, dropping them to the ground as their bodies just ceased to operate. His grip was resolute, steadfast against her best attempts to free herself from him.

“Help!” Janet screamed as Callan clamped his hand over her mouth, muffling her screams. “Somebody! Anybody!”

“Why is she able to resist?” The not-harper asked the not-colonel.

“There are old protections on this world.” The not-colonel winced as Janet bit his hand, but did not let her go even after Janet took a chunk out of his palm. He pulled something from his belt and stabbed her in the shoulder with it. Janet swore as she felt her body going limp – a sedative of some sort. Not enough to knock her out, but more than enough to paralyze her. “It is to be expected. No matter – once we have established a beachhead the others may come.”
The not-Peterson reached into a pocket of his BDUs, removing a fleshy mass from it. Janet screamed behind the not-colonel's grip at the sight of it.

It was a horrid thing, a putrid, purple, shimmering bit of carapace with teeth and eyes in places that nothing should have either. It smelled of rotting eggs and hummed a discordant note that raised the hair on the back of Janet's neck. Janet didn't know what the hell it was, but it needed to be killed – immediately.

She prayed for the thing to drown as the not-Peterson filled a tall tub, one of the ones they used to treat hypothermia, with water from a wall spigot and tossed the mewling nightmare into it. The water foamed and frothed with a bubbling, poisonous mass of colors and shapes as the thing scream-sang in languages too terrible to repeat.

Shapes began to emerge from the water. First one, then two, then more – man sized masses of chitin and muscle rising from the fetid waters. They were awful things, hunched and inhuman. How many were there? Twenty? Thirty? How many more had been secreted into the base waiting to be unleashed from other pocket sized nightmares?

The not-colonel looked up at the clock. “We don't have much time – their leaders will suspect something is amiss if we do not act quickly. Start with the guards.”

“And what do we do with her?” Asked Sergeant Miller as she stood up from the gurney, mustering an ease that no woman should have been able to muster with a bit of intestine hanging out from her side. Though her injuries were real, she had apparently feigned any pain.

“Her protections are weak. I can touch her without pain. The treatment will work on her as well as it should for the rest.” He chuckled darkly. “Though I do not envy her for having to be awake for it.”

They all laughed. Dark purpose in every inch of their mirth as a towering spire of carapace and bone rose from the tub, shimmering purple under the flickering lights of the infirmary.
Chapter 8

Colonel Makepeace was deeply regretting the actions leading up to SG-3 having been assigned to sweeping the newly acquired Goa’uld mothership now sitting on the dark side of the moon. Not because of the potential perils associated with being the initial boarding party on a possibly dangerous and hostile vessel, he was entirely comfortable with danger, but because upon completing their room to room search of the ship he was now essentially trapped onboard the Goa’uld vessel until further notice. He was part of one of the most elite and dangerous marine units on Earth, and he’d been relegated to babysitting duty.

There wasn’t much to do other than sit and wait around while the eggheads busied themselves with god alone knew what. Robert Makepeace hated waiting. He’d hated it when he’d been in OCS, he’d hated it when he’d been on his first “deployment” – a period of six months spent on an LPD without so much as a port call – and he would still hate it till the day he died. Desert storm had provided a brief respite to the endless waiting that had plagued his career up to this point, but by and large his job as a marine thus far had been to be the most dangerous man available to wait.

At least on an LPD you could work out or watch ship’s TV in the interim. On the mothership? They were essentially trapped standing within shouting distance of the scientists just in case one of them did some damn fool thing. And if there was anything you could be sure about the civilians attached to the SGC, it was that one of them was going to do some damn fool thing. For some of the smartest people on the planet they consistently managed to do some of the dumbest things a human being could achieve.

“Sir, do you know exactly what Dr. Rothman is doing with that probe he keeps plugging in to the wall?” Major Warren asked, sincerely baffled by the bespectacled man’s antics. The doctor had spent the past four hours trying to troubleshoot his equipment. Nothing seemed to work on the ship, at least nothing of any note. “Because at this point I think he owes it dinner and a movie at the very least.”

“Son – I don’t even want to guess as to what these people are doing.” Robert shrugged, waving vaguely at the deck above him. “I’m sure that Lt. Johnson would be willing to trade places with you if you’re too bored.”

“Sir, respectfully request that you never suggest that again.” Major Warren shuddered, shaking his head emphatically before rubbing the dark flesh of his head with the lighter skin of his palm. “I don’t think I can handle quite that much – Felger. I don’t think I’m every going to stop hearing that high pitched noise he started making once he saw the dragons.”

Robert sighed. He wasn’t overly familiar with the scientists attached to Stargate command, the operational and research elements of the SGC were largely divorced from each other, but the duo of Coombs and Felger were quickly become his least favorite two. They had an unfortunate
combination of verbal diarrhea, bizarre references and over educated absence of basic social skills that just left him feeling a near uncontrollable urge to punch one or both of them in the mouth. That they had just unleashed two men who he sincerely believed to be concealing felt wizard’s capes within their packs onto a ship where there were actual dragons had done nothing to make either of them less irritating.

He pulled a cigar out of his pocket and sliced off the tip with his knife, placing it between his lips and taking a long drag before blowing out a stream of smoke. He rolled his eyes as Dr. Rothman turned on him, sputtering in disgust at the man smoking next to him.

“You can’t do that! We’re in a space ship, what if it sets off the oxygen or the internal fire systems or something!” The doctor whinged. “There are any one of a hundred things that could go wrong by introducing something like that into a pressurized environment.”

The colonel raised an eyebrow, pulling the cigar from between his lips and pointing with the hand holding it to a burning brazier full of smoldering coals not ten feet down the hall.

“You still shouldn’t do that, it’s bad for your lungs and who knows what it will do to my asthma.” The doctor continued in irritation, still poking his probe into the wall.

“Don’t worry doc, I go smokeless.” Replied Major Warren as he pulled a round metal container of chew from his pocket, whipping the tin several times in a well-practiced gesture to pack the tobacco in the front. The doctor made a series of scandalized noises of protest as the Major placed a generous portion at the front of his lip, masticating the material with obvious joy.

Robert excused himself on the pretense of checking the corridor for any new dangers as the doctor’s shrill protests hit fever pitch. The academic’s scandalized screeching faded away as the bulkhead doors closed with a hissing clang of metal on metal. He massaged at the bridge of this nose, exhaling a long stream of smoke to calm his nerves and re-center.

A Saudi man deeply intoxicated for likely the first time in his life had once blown complex shapes for Robert’s amusement when he’d been on a port call in Bahrain. The colonel hadn’t understood a word the Saudi had said, but the man’s skill for blowing rings of smoke had always stuck with him. He’d been envious of the man’s capacity to make shapes and forms with the gases. Over the years he’d tried to make the smoke from his cigar turn into a ring, but the best he’d been able to manage was a slightly more wide plume of smoke.

“Don’t know why I bother,” Robert muttered as he let loose another plume of smoke, chewing at the end of his cigar. The wide beam of his flashlight shone down the darkened corridor, casting strange
shadows along the hieroglyphs and dark green stone statues lining the halls. There were dark pockets in the walls where staff blasts had burst stone and thick pools of gold where intense heat must have scourged the precious metals and jewels from the walls. The colonel chuckled when it occurred to him that it may well have been dragon fire which burned it away. Absurd, but no less real for its absurdity.

Yet another danger of legend turning out to be all too real – just perfect.

Earth wasn’t ready for this – all of this. They were mere mortals tossed into a galaxy of predators and threats that weren’t just beyond their power to defeat, more and more they seemed beyond their ability to even remotely anticipate. Even the diseases of the far reaches of the Galaxy carried impossible capacity for destruction.

He scratched the back of his hand, rubbing at a bit of flesh on the back of his right hand. It was a nervous twitch, a coping mechanism as the base Chaplain referred to it. He was subconsciously checking his knuckles for the tiny bony spurs he’d felt growing the first time he’d gone to the Land of Light and been exposed to the Touched. It was normal, the chaplain had assured him, for someone who’d been exposed to a debilitating illness to be afraid of catching it again.

But the Chaplain didn’t really understand, not truly. The illness that had taken them in the Land of Darkness – the monsters it had reshaped them into – wasn’t a reality of modern medicine on Earth. It certainly wasn’t the brain parasite he’d claimed to have temporarily contracted to explain away the near-magical effects by which one reverted to a primordial state in the Land of Darkness. He’d been reformed into something more base, more primitive – a snap shot of the brutal creatures that men had been before the times of fire and the wheel.

He got memories of it sometimes, flashes of his time as one of the Touched. They weren’t distinct, flashes of color, feeling, and sounds would occasionally play in his mind – blissfully vague. But there were some memories that stayed with a man, even as flashes of color and flavor. He’d been made into something violent, something terrible. And he wasn’t ever sure if it was something that hadn’t just been living inside of him the entire time just waiting to surface. He wasn’t ever quite convinced that it couldn’t come to consume him all over again.

And that was just the start of it. Hathor had managed to compromise the security of an entire base with little more than a pretty face and a few whispers, bending all men on base, to her whims. He’d disappeared entirely from his home. They’d all disappeared, serving the Goa’uld unquestioningly as she’d prepared to turn them all into Jaffa slaves. He’d walked away from the woman who loved him and the children he bore with her. Hathor could have asked him to kill this entire family to prove his loyalty to her and he would have done so without so much as a whisper of protest.

How the base had even been allowed to stay open months after the Hathor incident was astonishing
to him. They’d set the base to auto-destruct two times as a precautionary measure in the last month prior to the arrival of Senator Kinsey. It was standard procedure for the SGC to set a bomb to destroy NORAD. Any oversight agency worth its salt should have been questioning that. The program was prohibitively expensive, near guaranteed to be lethal to its participants, and repeatedly put the planet in danger of invasion or plagues.

When the Senator had come to shut down the program and bury the gate it had almost been a relief. But it was just a band-aid, the illusion of safety rather than actually having it. They’d met not one race capable of snuffing out the tiny blue ball the human race lived on, but several. The Asgard, the Tollan, the Nox, the Tok’ra, the Ohnes, the you could call them what you liked but they all represented the same thing – physical proof of the pathetically inadequate military power that the US could bring to bear in galaxy. America had fired the most dangerous weapons in their arsenal at the invasion force sent by Apophis and they hadn’t managed to even inconvenience them. It was sheer dumb luck that SG-1’s decision to go AWOL managed to intercept and defeat the invading Goa’uld motherships. Dumb luck that saved both the planet and the Stargate Command, but dumb luck none the less.

Humanity needed something more tangible than the luck of SG-1 if they were going survive as a species. This ship was a decent start – provided they could manage to cannibalize enough of it to start producing their own ships.

“Penny for your thoughts, sir?” Asked a woman’s voice from behind him, starting him. The cigar fell from Robert’s mouth to the ground as he spun round, pointing the flashlight on the end of his weapon at a BDU clad female. The Major from SG-1, Samatha Carter.

“Major Carter, I see you’ve found your way to our new clubhouse. Am I to assume that Doctor Jackson is here as well?” Queried the Colonel.

“Yes sir. He’s with SG-4 on the bridge. But as you’re the ranking officer on the ship I wanted to check in with you before we start turning things on.” She tapped her radio. “I would have messaged you but there seems to be something interfering with our comms, some sort of electrical disturbance that’s making them go haywire.”

“Yeah, the geeks – err, no offense Major.” Robert stuttered, feeling awkward for having potentially slighted the astrophysicist.

“None taken,” Major Carter replied, her eyes twinkling with mirth. “I’ve met Felger, after all.”

“Heh,” Robert replied. “But they’ve all been complaining about the same thing. The computers and
other instruments we’ve brought on this ship start acting screwy the moment they start trying to use them and it’s only been getting worse.”

He held up his digital watch. It was a nice one, a diver’s watch with a digital display. “Even my damn watch is going screwy. I don’t know what time it is supposed to be, but I’m willing to wager that we’re not at 84:50 on FEB 30 1749.”

“I wonder.” The major rummaged in her pack, pulling out a strange looking box with various dials and buttons. It warbled as she manipulate them, pointing the device around the corridor. Her face scrunched up in confusion as she poked its tip towards the walls, waving it in the air. “That – that doesn’t make any sense.”

“What?” Queried the Colonel, peering at the seemingly alien series of numbers on the box.

She pulled a compass out from her pack and showed it to the colonel. The little red arrow spun in a frenzy, hopping about as though attempting to flee the tiny plastic dome. “There are pockets of electromagnetic activity in this ship, but they don’t seem to be emanating from anything in particular. Every system onboard other than basic life support and the ring transporters is operating on minimal power, there shouldn’t be anything causing this sort of anomalous field variance. It definitely shouldn’t be causing the sorts of irregularities with our equipment.”

“Goa’uld booby trap?” The Colonel grunted in irritation.

“The Warden basically bragged that the ship was a trap – so it’s likely.” Major Carter shrugged. “I really won’t be able to get you an answer on why the radios aren’t working properly till we can examine the ship in greater detail. I’m sure my father would be willing to help when he gets finished with debriefing the other Tok’ra.”

“Good.” Replied Robert with feigned sincerity. Jacob carter gave him the creeps. The man shared his body with a Tok’ra, one of the supposedly good Goa’uld they’d aligned themselves with. For all their talk of being better than their genetic cousins, the Tok’ra had been more than happy to capture SG-1 and SG-3 for an indefinite period because they were “security risks.” The general’s decision to blend with Selmak had been essentially the bargaining chip for their freedom when they’d been taken as prisoners of war by the aliens.

He remained skeptical of their claims that they “shared” the host body. How could you possibly know if they were telling the truth or just substantially kinder liars than the Goa’uld? They had access to all the memories and experience of their hosts, after all. It would be simple enough for such a creature to take those memories and use them to manipulate the relatives of their host to their own
And fundamentally, it sat wrong with the Colonel that a General was suddenly a member of another nation’s military – let alone another species’ military. The knowledge that Jacob Carter must have been privy to over the years was terrifying. Weapons, tactics, secret programs, lord alone knew how many of the defenses of America had been compromised. Jacob hadn’t been out of his active duty role for more than a few months due to the cancer. Christ, did the man know where the nukes were?

The major, oblivious to the Colonel’s internal disputes, continued to ramble about how the ionic variances in something or other were causing some sort of polarity – it all blended together for him into an incoherent patois of technical jargon. He might well have been better off back in the room with Dr. Rothman and the Major listening to the finer points on why one shouldn’t chew tobacco when the Major said a sentence that gave him pause. “Repeat that again major, I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

Major Carter nodded, rubbing the back of her hand on her BDUs to wipe away a bit of oil that was leaking from her instrument. The device was sputtering and sparking from where something had gone wrong inside of it. “I said that whatever is causing the interference is probably what is dissolving the dragon corpses.”

“The corpses are dissolving?” That didn’t bode well. Any disease or contagion capable of dissolving a six hundred pound lizard would do terrible things to a man, and they hadn’t exactly been maintaining full biohazard containment procedures since getting onboard the ship.

“Yes sir.” Carter nodded in affirmation, her demeanor too calm for the declaration that something was dissolving flesh. “But I don’t think that it is anything to worry about. My father warned me that it would happen. It’s apparently just the natural decomposition cycle from the creatures that live in the Furling’s pocket of subspace.”

“Furlings?” Yet another race for Robert to worry about – this one complete with dragons.

“They were apparently the contemporaries of the race who built the Stargate. According to Selmak they live in pockets of subspace separate from hyperspace and almost never leave subspace to enter the physical world.” The major powered down the instrument as its display started showing randomly flashing symbols, seemingly having given up the machine as a lost cause. She eyed her other instruments before shaking her head slowly, seemingly having thought better of testing her luck with the strange energies floating round the ship. “It takes a lot for them to maintain a physical form, both power and concentration. It’s just a matter of time before there is no indication that they ever existed. They apparently cease to exist on even a subatomic level.”
They both jumped as the voice of Daniel Jackson echoed out from seemingly all sides. “It’s quite fascinating really. It’s probably why nobody has been able to prove that they exist in spite of generations worth of lore on their deeds.”

“Did… did he just reply to you?” Robert blinked, looking up and down the corridor for where the doctor might be hiding.

“Don’t bother Colonel, I’m nowhere near you.” The doctor chuckled, obviously enjoying the spectacle. “Apparently our friend the Lord Warden was a fan of micro-managing his subjects. The whole ship is kitted out with secret cameras and listening devices that get near total coverage of every space on the ship.”

“Why?” Asked the Colonel. If there was one thing he knew for sure about ship life, it was that one did not want total situation awareness of the private lives of your subordinates. You learned more than you would care to know.

“I’d imagine it was part of the whole ‘pretending to be a god’ thing.” The doctor went quiet for a moment. “Yeah, I just checked the usage logs. He pretty much just listened to the prayers of his followers and replied to those which met his interests best.”

“Thus maintaining the illusion of omniscience.” Replied the Major, letting out a long whistle. “That’s almost elegant in how manipulative it is.”

“Dre’su’den has been around for millennia, and it wasn’t by being stupid.” Daniel replied, “He had the presence of mind to delete large sections of the database on this ship before he left it. It’s like someone went through it line by line and redacted all the important parts from it with a sharpie.”

“Do you want me to try to recover it?” Queried the Major, perking up at the idea of a task she could complete without her now useless bag of devices.

“No – well, actually, yes but not right now. Right now, there is something more, well, weird for us to deal with that I think both of you should see.” One of the dark green stone statues stood up, turning on its hind legs and moving with a sinewy grace that no statue ought to have been able to manage. It opened its robes, showing a thin piece of glass in its abdomen that flickered twice before displaying an image of the moon’s surface.

The moon, stark, dark, and pockmarked with a galaxy’s worth of craters, glowed with a holographic
The Colonel most decidedly did not and said as much, frustration apparent in each syllable. “Does this have a point, Doctor Jackson.”

“Oh.. Oh!” Major Carter exclaimed in surprise, “But – that’s not possible!”

“Does one of you want to start speaking in plain English already?” Sighed the Colonel.

“Daniel, can you zoom in on them for us?” Major Carter pointed her finger at a tiny blotch of terrain at the pyramid’s base.

“Give me just a second,” The doctor replied, pausing between each word in apparent concentration. The sound of the chiming keystrokes of a Goa’uld computer echoing across the PA. “That should just about… yes – there!”

With the doctor’s exclamation the map zoomed in to the tiny red blotches, revealing the shapes of men standing around the outside of the ship. They stood six inches tall on the monitor, their monochrome holographic renderings displaying them with astonishing detail. They were men, broad in shoulder and wearing some sort of skirted armor covered in thick studs. They each were wrapped in thick capes and plumed helmets as they congregated around the ship’s primary entry bulkhead, attempting to pry it open with their bare hands. More alarmingly, they seemed to be succeeding. The doors were already parted by an inch and seemed to be giving way with every passing moment.

Colonel Makepeace’s stomach dropped as the absurdity of what he was looking at hit him. “Are those… Roman Legionnaires?”
Chapter 9

The Colonel had elected not to be with the first wave of nerds heading to the pyramid on the moon after hearing that Dr Felger was already on the ship. He would have to head up there eventually, but there was no rush for him to go there right now. For the moment, he was occupying himself with the task of caring for the child who’d come from the Goa’uld transport. The child suffered from an apparently severe case of separation anxiety, and had only stopped having a tantrum when Carter left her company because he stayed to keep her occupied in the Major’s absence.

He didn’t mind saying with her till she felt more comfortable being on her own. The kid, by all accounts had been through some serious shit in the past day. He’d been in enough war zones to get a sense for when people shouldn’t be left alone, and the kid really shouldn’t be left alone. She was possessive in the extreme, devouring her food as though she weren’t sure if there would ever be another opportunity to eat. In the time since Carter left she’d taken every item that had any sort of glass or metal and put them together in a pile on her bed, wrapping them in the blankets and shoving them under the bed frame before sitting atop the bare mattress, cross legged.

Jack just played along, handing her things she pointed at and suggesting that they double wrap the more fragile items in towels. The kid wasn’t hurting anything, and if bundling her world up and pushing it under the bed helped the kid feel more in control of the world she was living in – then who was he to judge? There wasn’t any one best way to cope with trauma.

And really, as troubling as this behavior was, it was only really a minor aberration from kids just being kids. Which, in part, was why Jack had excused himself to the restroom to center himself. Because for a moment, if only just for a moment, Jack had felt like he was back in his old life playing with Charlie.

“Snap out of it Jack.” The Colonel looked at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror, taking deep breaths and counting to three. “You’re fine – this is just a feeling and it will pass.”

Jack O’Neill had always wanted to be a father as far back as he could remember. It hadn’t always been a conscious thought at the forefront of his mind, but the white picket fence and 2.5 children had just sort of been a foregone conclusion in his life. Even before he’d joined the military it hadn’t even really been a consideration for him that he wouldn’t have kids at some point.

Sara had wanted kids as much as he. She was a good woman, a good partner, and a good mother. Jack, for all his faults, had been a good father as well. He hadn’t been present as much as he would have liked, but between his salary as an officer and the benefits the military paid for dependents, Sara and he had been able to carve out their little niche of Winter Park Colorado and make a proper hope to raise a child.

He’d missed most of Sara’s pregnancy while he was in turkey. He was simultaneously ashamed and deeply relieved was how events had played out. Ashamed that he had not been able to be present for
his ex-wife’s time of need and deeply grateful that he’d not had to deal with the more confusing and hormonal aspects of a pregnancy. A deployment was about the only socially acceptable way for a man to leave for seven months and just show up for the birth and end up looking like a hero. They’d been seven months’ worth of back-breaking labor, but it had been of the physical rather than emotional variety.

He was better equipped for the latter. Perhaps if he’d been a bit more comfortable in dealing with that sort of work Sara wouldn’t have left him after their child died playing with Jack’s gun.

To this day, he still wasn’t 100% sure how Charlie got ahold of the firearm. Perhaps he had been careless with the weapon and forgotten to put it back in the safe. Perhaps Charlie had just watched his father input the code so many times that he knew it by memory. All he knew for certain was that Charlie had pulled the gun from his closet and decided that he should play with it.

Jack didn’t think about using that same gun on himself as much as he had three years ago when he’d agreed to join the suicide mission to Abydos, but he still had his moments when the darkness felt like it might overtake him. It was weird how the idea of pointing that gun at the back of his head and just pulling the trigger didn’t alarm him in those moments, instead it comforted him. It felt good to know that if it truly became too much to bear, he would be able to just make it all go away.

He wouldn’t though. Not even in the moments where it felt like the best option, his team would never forgive him for abandoning them. He had a role in life, a purpose that was greater than who he had been doing things on a grand scale. It was the sort of job that nobody who valued their life would ever actually choose to do, fighting enemies who were near guaranteed to kill entire population of Earth someday. Jack didn’t have a death wish – not most days any more – but he was at peace with the idea of dying in service to something greater than himself.

Charlie wouldn’t have wanted his old man to die doing something as foolish as committing suicide for no reason. Heroes only got to die when they took out the bad guy as well – and even then, they were supposed to come back at the end. He splashed cold water over his face, exhaling and turning around to come face to face with the strange little girl.

“Oh, uh hi there.” Jack was relieved that he hadn’t needed to use the bathroom for anything more serious than a moment of privacy. Wherever she came from must not have had the same social taboos for using the toilet – assuming that she had even the remotest ideal what the washroom even was. Oh hell – was he going to have to teach this kid where to pee?

“You left.” The girl stated in a staccato statement of fact, her thin arms crossed over the air force logo of her shirt. “No play.”
“I just needed a moment kiddo.” Jack ruffled her hair affectionately. “Nothing to worry about.”

The child pouted, batting his hand away from her head and pushing her long blonde hair back from her eyes. She made a growling noise that was more of a squeak than a proper growl, and said something in a guttural language that Jack didn’t understand.

“Sorry kiddo. No offense meant.” Jack lifted his hands, palms up. “I can leave if you want me to.”

She shook her head, grabbing Jack about the waist. “No leave.”

“Calm down kiddo. I’m not going anywhere.” Jack walked the girl back into the main room, her arms still firmly attached to his waist as they moved. She was surprisingly strong, he would likely have had trouble removing her without her cooperation. “You’re getting good at English.”

“I listen.” The little girl replied, curling up on the sofa next to him and nuzzling her cheek into his chest – cat like. “Not hard.”

“Most people take more than a day to learn a language.” Jack pulled a remote from the table in front of them, instinctively lifting his left arm as the girl blurred into motion. He held the black plastic rectangle at arms-length as the girl tried to reach past him, eager to add whatever it was to her collection.

“Mine!” The girl smiled, greedily eying the multicolored buttons and shiny sony sticker.

“Woah there, kiddo, I need this.” Jack chuckled.

“Need more.” The girl replied, a stern look on her young features.

“But with this I can do a magic trick.” Jack replied, wiggling the fingers on his left hand as he made a “woo-ooh-ooh” noise.

The girl flinched, unsure. “Magic?”
She tilted her head, seemingly a little nervous as she sniffed the air around Jack. Her eyes bulged in recognition, “You… you wizard?”

“No but I play one on TV.” Jack replied.

She narrowed her eyes in confusion. The joke was apparently lost on her. She actually sounded afraid as she said. “You magic?”

“Magic.” Jack replied, adopting a tone of stone faced seriousness as he pointed the remote to the TV. “With this I can make entire worlds appear on that little box.”

She inhaled in shock, staring as the television turned on watching the changing colors and sounds in amazement. He pointed to the remote and talked her through the process of changing channels, how to turn the volume up, how to turn the volume down and how to turn it on and off. The little girl was outright enthralled by the machine, and seemed astonished when he handed the remote over to her.

“Mine?” Jack was sure that it was a question rather than a statement. She actually seemed afraid to accept the item now that she knew what it did, as though the power of it might overwhelm her if she weren’t careful.

“Yours.” Jack replied.

“What want?” The girl replied, nervously looking at the bundle of items under her bed as though afraid of how much she’d have to part with.

“Nothing.” Jack replied, snorting in amusement.

The idea of not paying him for the arcane power being offered seemed more frightening to her than whatever payment she’d been planning to offer, her lip started to quiver and he thought she might be about to cry.

“Hey there – no, none of that.” Jack lifted her chin with his thumb and finger. “You’re a guest, right? It would be rude for me to ask for a guest to pay for hospitality.”
“Guest.” The word seemed to calm the girl even as she spoke it. “Jack wizard guest.”

“Jack Colonel guest. But you can just call me Jack seeing as how we’re friends.” Jack smiled at her and pointed to two buttons on the remote. “Now press the one and the three. I want to see what movie is playing.”

She pressed the buttons he pointed to, laughing excitedly as the “magic” box obeyed her command. Jack smiled, “You see? You can do it as well as I can.”

Jack bit back the stream of swear words that popped into his head when the movie in question turned out to be a film about Dennis Quaid’s character befriending an animated creature voiced by Sean Connery. A film in which Sean Connery played a creature not unlike the winged monsters who’d likely been responsible for the little girl’s injuries. The little girl’s eyes were nearly popping out of her skull as she watched Dennis Quaid sitting in a dragon’s mouth with a blade pressed upward, ready to slay the beast if it bit down.

“It’s ok!” Jack reached out to comfort the girl but she slapped his hand away, shaking in fear as she watched the knight fighting for his very life. “No, seriously – wait. Look, just wait. They’re friends.”

She replied in her guttural language with something that sounded incredulous.

“No really, wait and see.” Jack continued, pointing to the screen as Dennis Quaid got spat out from the beast’s mouth and started talking with the dragon. “They become friends and go on adventures together. They’re mean now, but they become friends. Good friends. Like you and Jack. We’re friends.”

“Friends.” The girl replied, watching as the dragon spat the man on the ground and chose to let the knight live. She watched with keen attention as the dragon and knight hatched a plan to fleece the kingdom for their wealth. “No fight dragon?”

“Friends don’t fight.” Jack made a crossing motion over his heart. “I swear. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

And just like that, she didn’t seem afraid anymore. Kids were like that though, they would be terrified of some bogeyman one second and determined to befriend it the next once they realized it was an option to have it on your side. As she continued to watch the movie, Jack realized that her reactions were not just in response to the tone of what was being said – she seemed to have a firm
grasp of the actual words being used. She even laughed at a couple of puns that wouldn’t make sense on their own.

“You understand a lot more than you can say, can’t you Kiddo?” Jack queried politely.


“You didn’t used to talk?” Jack replied, incredulously.

“Words have meaning. I used few, with much meaning. You use many with little meaning.” She shook her head. “Small words are difficult. Hard to pick right ones. Father better at little words.”

“Your father?” Jack asked. “Was he with you on the ship?”

“Father, brothers, sisters – all dead.” She shivered. “I followed when they went. We all did. When the bad ones came, I was too slow. They cut me, so I ran. I was scared. I hid.”


“She’s good at that.” Jack agreed, mentally cursing the Lord Warden for taking a ship full of slaves into a section of space he doubtless had known was fraught with peril.

“Should have stayed – fought.” The girl hugged her knees to her chest as she put her head in Jack’s lap. Wet tears dripped onto Jack’s leg, staining his uniform. “Not run like coward.”

“Kid, what you did was smart. You don’t fight a battle that you can’t win.” Jack patted her arm gently. “I’ve run from more fights than I can count. I run so that I can live. You can’t beat the bad guy if you’re dead.”

She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, snifffing loudly. “Still should have helped.”
“Your parents want you alive, kid. No parent is ever sad that their child survived.” Jack insisted, thinking of his own boy. “Trust me.”

“Grandfather will be angry.” The girl replied in a voice that was just above a whisper.

Jack very much doubted that “Grandfather” was even alive for it to be a problem, but elected not to voice that sentiment. “Your grandpa won’t be angry. And if he’s angry, then he’s a capital “J” jerk and not worth your time.”

“But he is very big, and I am very small.” She continued in that same quiet tone.

“Then he’s a very big jerk.” Jack replied. “I tell you what, your grandfather shows up here and has a problem with you living – I’ll protect you from him as long as you’re our guest.”

There was a long moment of silence from the girl as the only sounds in the room came from the movie on TV before she asked. “Promise?”

“Promise.” Jack replied.

“Swear on the magic?” She held up the remote in a grave tone that sounded comical coming from the child.

“I swear on all my magic that I won’t let your grandfather do anything to you that you won’t want him to.” Jack replied flippantly. “Scout’s honor.”

He felt an odd tingle running up his spine as he said that, the same tingle he’d felt every time he spoke the Commissioning Oath as an Officer. It was a promise that he knew he’d keep. Strange to feel such conviction for something that he was sure would never come to fruition, but he’d grown accustomed to trusting his gut. It hadn’t lead him astray so far.

He helped her clean her face with a tissue, wiping away the tears and snot. “Now, seeing as how you understand me, I think we should have a proper introduction, don’t you?”
The girl nodded once, still rubbing at her face with her sleeves even though there weren’t any more tears to wipe away.

“Good.” Jack smiled. “So, how about this. I’ll give you my name if you give me yours? Does that sound fair?”

The girl hesitated for a moment before saying. “True name?”

“Sure – friends don’t lie.” Jack smiled. “I’ve already promised to protect you from your Grandfather, seems like we’re the sort of friend who get to know each other.”

“Like Bowen and Draco?” She pointed to the screen.


There was a long moment before the girl lowered her head, and shook it. “Can’t.”

“Sure, you can.” Jack gave the girl a playful shove. “I’ll show you. My name is Colonel Jonathan J. O’Neill. That’s O’Neill with two ‘l’s but everyone calls me “Jack.” The “J” at the center doesn’t stand for anything, by the way, it got added to my birth certificate as a typo and I’ve just been running with it since then. Now you go.”

“Can’t.” She shook her head, seemingly scandalized.

“I thought we were friends? Like Bowen and Draco.” Jack chided her in a voice of mild reproof.

“Want to – but can’t.” She looked genuinely ashamed. “I am nǐōng Sárkány. No true name.”

“You don’t have a name?” Jack replied. “What did your parents call you?”

“Not use names. Family is nǐōng Sárkány. Have no true names.” She replied, in obvious embarrassment. “Unworthy.”
Well, that was downright chilling. Jack had encountered basically every combination of prejudice imaginable even before joining the Stargate program. The thought that an entire family could lose the right to even name their children because of some social faux pas committed by an ancestor sounded altogether too plausible.

“Well, you’re not kneey sarkiee here.” Jack replied even as the child said “nīðing Sǎrkány” in an effort to correct him. “Yeah, that – you’re not that here. Here, while you’re our guest, you’re considered an equal. And equals get to have names.”

“But I am nīðing Sǎrkány.” Insisted the girl, horrified at the idea. “I have not earned it. Grandfather will –”

“Kid, as far as I’m concerned your Grandfather and anyone else who has a problem with a kid having a name is more than welcome to hit the bricks.” Jack replied firmly. “So you’re leaving here with a name. You can use it, keep it, or toss it away forever when you leave here, but as long as you’re under our roof you’re an equal not this nīðing Sǎrkány that you’re ashamed of being. Consider it part of our hospitality.”

There was another long pause as she chewed her lower lip, clearly locked in deep thought. She cleared her throat before asking. “What name?”

“What name do you want?” Jack asked. “It’s your name after all.”

“Not sure…” Replied the girl, seemingly genuinely confused by the prospect. “Never considered. Kiddo?”

“Kiddo is more of a nickname than a real name.” Jack replied. “How about Mary.”

The girl make a gagging sound that got a chuckle out of Jack. “Not a fan of that one, eh? How about Emily?”

“Emily.” The girl spoke the name as though she were trying to taste its very meaning. “I like Emily.” She looked up hopefully. “Does Emily get three names like Jack?”

“Emily Bowen Draco.” She said without even a second’s pause.

“You’re naming yourself after the characters from the movie?” Jack replied in deadpan monotone. Give a pre-teen the chance to name themselves whatever they want and of course they picked the two coolest names they knew. If her pop-culture knowledge was greater than twenty minutes long she might have ended up being Neo Skywalker-Durden.

She nodded. “My name is Emily Bowen Draco.”

“Good for you.” Jack tousled her hair. Emily did not stop him this time, choosing instead to cuddle up to him so that they could finish watching the movie.
Chapter 10

Aisha was not sure what to make of this new world to which her god had brought her. It was as different from the Nekheb as one could hope to manage. The palace of the Tau’ri warriors was unassuming - there was little in the way of color or decoration. Those few ornamentations the Tau’ri allowed themselves were purely practical. Brightly colored lines along the walls and ceiling were maps from specific parts of the fortress to others, markers to allow one to traverse the otherwise identical tunnels. There were portraits along the walls in certain locations, showing the same five or six faces with a cluster of increasingly smaller portraits below them. Presumably the grey haired smiling man whose portrait was always the largest must be the most important, but exactly why he was important and why the smallest photos were different in each grouping of portraits eluded her. She would learn eventually, she would have no choice really. She couldn’t expect to convert them if she didn’t understand their culture.

She knew she was already making mistakes. It was obvious, for example, that these people had a taboo regarding nudity. They’d made several attempts to clothe her that she’d been forced to reject. Sure would gladly have covered herself, but how was she to express her own religious requirements for an appropriate garment without a proper command of their language.

A priestess of Nekheb was not permitted to wear any garment woven from cotton or wool, anything that combined fabrics of multiple types, or bear a mark other than the mark of her god. Everything they’d given her this far was saturated with the crest of the Tau’ri warrior classes or covered in their blocky script. Even were she permitted to wear their words she would not have done so for fear that it would interfere with the wards tattooed upon her flesh.

Her job as a priestess was to protect her flock from the predators that might try to drag them from the path to enlightenment. Usually this consisted of comforting the sick and the bereaved, counseling couples through marital spats, and guiding the young to good choices, but in the days before the fall, the clergy had a secondary - altogether more dangerous - role. It was the duty of the clergy to battle the evil spirits and monsters.

She ran a finger across her tattooed flesh, thinking of the legends that had spurred her to become a priestess. They had been warrior women of supreme regard. Though they had no magic of their own, it was said that spells rolled off them like water over an oilskin. Perhaps in this time of reborn legends she would get to earn a story of her own someday.

She ran a finger across pages they’d left her. The Tau’ri were extravagant hosts. They’d left her no fewer than two reams of paper in her room bound together with twisting metal binding. They were even marked with thin blue lines to guide one’s script. A minor fortune in paper, and they gave it freely to a guest.
She was trying to determine the best words to encapsulate the role of these curious warriors of the first world within her god’s master plan. Were they an example? Were they a test? The Lord Warden was a man who’d destroyed Netu and defied the King of Dragons. He would not come to the first world and break bread with the people of the first world if there was not purpose behind it. Her hand twitched, hovering over the still blank page.

When the Demon King Thor showed her the recording of her God’s surrender, he had believed it would shake her faith. He believed it would prove her god’s lack of divinity, but did nothing of the sort. The Asgard were powerful demons, they had slain gods before. The Lord Warden was willing to face his own death gladly, as long as his faithful were spared the Demon’s doom. The Demon King then became the instrument of her Lord’s safe passage and the inquisitor who tested the mettle of his faithful. Thor, serving the whims of a Goa’uld System Lord - how many other gods could claim to have twisted the Demon King’s laws on him as the Warden had done?

Perhaps that had even been the Warden’s plan from the start. He was a deity of impossible plots and curious twists, the twice born sorcerer king. Whatever came of giving his flagship to the Tau’ri, Aisha knew for certain it would come out in her lord’s favor. Perhaps the wild warriors of the Tau’ri could be tamed with time.

The Tau’ri warriors were quickly becoming the thing of legends. They were roaming wizard warriors who sought out the oppressed and slew their unworthy gods. Wild, impossible tales were told in secret of how they’d stolen the First Prime of Apophis from under his very nose and taken his tribute to their secret world. They were like ghosts, appearing on a world to slay Jaffa before disappearing back to their impossible address. It was said that no matter what weapon of the gods was thrown through the God’s Eye it would never touch Tau’ri soil. It was said that any warrior foolish enough to travel to the Tau’ri home world without permission would disappear in the space between worlds. It was even said that it was the Tau’ri, not Apophis, who slew Ra - King of the Gods.

Her god had engaged the Tau’ri as equals. He broke fast with them. The Lord Warden's actions were confusing, to be sure, but never had they been without some deeper plan at work. And it only made sense for a god who measured value not by worship but by great action to be drawn to the Tau’ri. But how to encapsulate that properly? Surely it would occur to her eventually?

She picked up the writing implement she’d been given and put down the writing implement frustratedly before she dared touch ink to paper. It had been hours and she still hadn’t been able even begin to tell all that she’d seen. How did one find the proper words to express a meeting between Gods and Demons on an impossible planet? This was work for a senior scribe - not a priestess. It was her role to recite her lord’s truth, not to record it. But someone needed to, and she was the only true believer on this world.

She sighed, giving up on the page entirely and walking the washroom. Yet another curious opulence
of the Tau’ri, they were almost systematically wasteful with water. Her quarters included not one, but three distinct water sources. There was a wash basin at about waist height, a seat above a pool of water, and a cubicle with a spigot that sprayed out a fountain of water.

The chamber pot, at least, she recognized. An unassuming metal container lined with a non-porous fabric, she found the lever to open and close its top to be highly practical. She had not yet had a servant arrive to empty it, but given how recently she’d arrived it was to be expected that the Tau’ri nightsoil attendant had not yet added her to his route.

She bathed herself using the washbasin, a rag, and the bar of what seemed to be some sort of soap - though it smelled of no animal fat she’d yet encountered. It created a pleasing lather that smelled vaguely of lavender and mint. She was astonished by just how much filth and grime had accumulated in the past day. The white cloth was stained near black by the time she finished, her skin nearly a whole shade lighter. She marveled at her own reflection, she’d never had a mirror of her own. Those would have been against the vow of poverty she’d taken. She’d spent most of her adult life relying on her fellow priestesses to see to her grooming on her behalf. Other than the occasional distorted reflection in the palace’s gilded walls, she couldn’t recall having seen her own reflection. She’d certainly never had time to consider it.

There was already a hint of stubble along her scalp. Black pin-pricks edging out from tattooed flesh. She patted it warily. While she had kept her head shaved bald in imitation of Heka since she was nine, she was letting it grow out for the first time in sixteen years. The Lord Warden had been furious that his head was shaved, rejecting the most striking aspect of his former incarnation. It stood to reason that he would expect for his priestesses to follow his example. She couldn’t help but feel self-conscious regardless.

Her baldness had been something she prided herself in having. It was a symbol of devotion reserved for those dedicated enough to maintain it or affluent enough to be able to keep a servant that could properly groom them. It felt unnatural to be growing hair. She felt ugly and scraggly with even this little bit protruding out from her like some commoner.

She shook away that thought. The Lord Warden wasn’t interested in class, or appearance - only action mattered. Good people were people who did good things.

But what was good anymore? The old rules were broken, discarded by the new covenant between men, Jaffa, the clergy, and the gods. How did one find guidance in a world where the gods marked mortal men as their equals? Aisha believed it was through a life of service to others. All those who were marked by the Warden were those who’d lived a life of service. Ul’tak lived a life as a warrior willing to die for his god and his people. Mummiah was the head priestess, one whose life was spent in poverty and service to the spiritual needs of his people. Amun, the man who the Lord Warden marked as his equal, was a slave - a eunuch - and he was rewarded for a life, and ultimately death, in the service of his master.
She poked her head out from the washroom at the sound of a door opening. The tiny woman wearing the white coat from earlier had entered her room, flanked by two tall women with dark skin. She was smiling jovially and speaking in what Aisha had come to recognize was a friendly tone. The woman was carrying a stack of shirts and pants that, disappointingly, were still covered in Tau’ri script.

Did these people have no clothing without writing on it?

She walked out from the washroom, replying to the woman’s calm tones with her own language. “No, these are not going to work either. They still have the same problem. I appreciate that you’re trying to make me presentable to your people, but I can not wear that.”

She walked closer to the woman, vaguely aware that her guard's bodies were tenser than they’d been a second ago. They weren’t quite poised to attack, but they were more on edge than made sense for his interaction. The short woman had never shown any discomfort at being in Aisha’s presence before, even after she’d disabled the dark-skinned man. She’d never called for additional guards to supervise her.

It was also apparent to her that one of the dark women was concealing something. She wasn’t sure precisely what, but the posture basically broadcast some sort of stabbing weapon. Aisha gave no immediate signs that she noticed the danger, choosing to reach for the clothing as a delaying tactic. It put the smaller woman between her and the person holding the weapon.

Her eyes bulged as she took the pile of the clothing from the smaller woman, inadvertently brushing the woman’s finger. As she touched the woman her skin and clothing rippled, peeling back around her and revealing a chitinous horror some two feet taller than the diminutive woman had been. It warbled out some sort of command to the dark skinned women, pulling back from Aisha in horror.

It batted at a circular disk on its chest, warbling angrily as the two women reached for her. She punched hard into the chin of the closest, breaking the woman’s Jaw and knocking her to the ground. She reverted into one of the purple armored things, clutching a distended purple maw. The second woman stabbed at Aisha, a long white tube tipped with a shiny metal needle in her hand. She dodged the blow, using the woman’s momentum to propel the weapon into her own leg and depressing the handle extending out from it to inject the vitriol therein. The second woman reverted into yet another horror, staggering drunkenly as whatever poison had been in its weapon took effect.

The horror that once had been the small woman tried to grab Aisha in a bear hug only to find itself upended with her feet in the small of its back and her hands twisting its arms at odd angles. Aisha pulled at the thing’s wrists, attempting to break them, only for the creature’s arms to shatter. The
hieroglyphs on her hands glowed a brilliant green as the mutilated horror screeched in agony, its vital fluids spraying across the floor.

She grabbed the drugged horror by the throat, marveling at the glowing symbols on her arm as she ripped out the creature’s larynx as easily as if she’d been kneading dough. The beast’s heavy chitin simply dissolved under the complex spell work weaved into her flesh.

The third creature stood up, screeching at her in its alien language with his broken maw, raising a weapon of the Tau’ri at her. It barked loudly, flashing as she tossed herself to the ground. Fragments of wall and furniture were tossed into the air as the Tau’ri sorcery ripped through the air. Aisha’s bare skin bled as she crawled across broken glass and stone, pulling herself from where the creature was aiming.

Nine times the weapon barked. Nine times before it gave a hollow click that Aisha guessed was her chance. She rushed the creature as it was trying to press a metal bar into the Tau’ri weapon, driving her fist through where she presumed the creature’s heart to be. It pierced one side of the beast and exited the other, slaying it.

Called by either the beast’s screams or the weapon’s barking, warriors of the Tau’ri rushed into her room - jabbering in their curious tongue, this time in a tone Aisha did not mistake for friendly. Luckily they seemed to be mostly concerned about the chitinous horrors, not her. They spoke angrily into the grey boxes on their shoulders, shoving her out into the hallway in an effort to separate her from the corpses.

So it was that Aisha, naked, sweaty, still glowing slightly and covered in dark purple blood, came face to face with a bewildered an older Tau’ri man carrying a laundry basket. He blinked twice, looking her up and down before speaking a practiced phrase of exasperation.

“Oh for crying out loud.”

It was not, in retrospect, the first impression she’d hoped to make on the Tau’ri to whom her god surrendered.
Chapter 11

Jacob Carter's head hurt. It hurt a lot. It hurt badly enough that it took him a second to realize that he wasn't in Stargate Command any more. He was in a wooded thicket at the edge of a crystal clear river leading to a wide, deep pool of water that danced with shimmering multicolored motes of light. Bright specks of red, green, blue and all the colors between flitted across a shimmering pool of crystal clear water.

He vaguely recognized the foliage as coniferous, the landscape more in keeping with the northern extremes of Canada than the area surrounding NORAD. Selmak was curiously silent, his presence dull at the back of his mind as though the Tok’ra were in a deep slumber. That was troubling- if the Tok’ra were so engrossed in the act of healing Jacobs’s body that he was not even able to direct an errant thought to his host, then something had been drastically injured when the creature tackled him.

“It” was a Furling. Jacob was certain of that much, though precisely what it being a Furling implied was not a matter that he entirely understood. Selmak seldom thought of them, and when he chose to it was with an ever present edge of anxiety. The Furlings apparently tolerated the Tok’ra because their very existence was part of a cruel prank inflicted upon the System Lords, but they were a galactic power - possibly even intergalactic - who’d been able to crush the System Lords at the height of their power. A fact that only became more terrifying in light of their macabre sense of humor, the Furlings were the unquestioned equals of the Gate Builders.

That alone troubled him. That the Furlings had a seemingly magical ability to travel between worlds at a whim troubled him far more - they had an ability to manipulate physical matter and energy fields that the Tok’ra were unable to understand, let alone match. They’d made some minor strides, of course. Their crystalline architecture served as a barrier and weapon against any would-be Furling aggressor. The crystal walls had curious properties, rendering the powers of Furling and Hok’tar near useless. The exclusive use of the Ring Transports as a point of entry allowed them to set up a constant scan for the natural camouflage of the Furlings. Any Furling attempting to sneak into a Tok’ra stronghold would quickly find themselves the victim of a Tok’ra staff blast in a space that naturally neutralized their otherworldly powers.

He paused his troubled musing, and took a moment to enjoy the brief privacy as Selmak tended to his wounds. He hadn't had much privacy since they'd merged. He'd shared moments that he'd never even considered when first agreeing to merge with the symbiote. He didn't regret the decision - not at all - but there were days he wished that pooping was not a group activity.

Jacob stood up and brushed the front of his Tok’ra uniform, uncomfortably aware of the fact that he was unarmed. There was something odd about how the lights grazed across the water. He could definitely hear the buzzing thrum of insect wings in the air, but they didn’t move the way that he would have expected a firefly to move. They were rhythmic in their movements - if he didn’t know any better, he could swear that they were dancing.
He edged closer to the lake, curious to get a better look. His eyebrows shot up in surprise when he realized that each mote contained a tiny person, with the vague outline of a naked humanoid visible in each mote of light. Stranger still, as he got within earshot of their tiny voices, it was apparent that they were singing in Gaelic. He couldn’t understand a word of it, but he was desperate to hear them better - irrationally so.

Inch by inch his feet dragged him closer to the song, muttering a poor imitation of the intoxicating words. He wanted to say something that beautiful, to be part of the dancing fairy lights. Even as it occurred to him that this was strange, that he hated dancing, he felt the need to dance with the little people along that cool water. They were happy things, they sang and chirped as they stayed just out of his reach. He couldn’t think of anything that seemed as happy and welcoming as the little people did.

He stepped into the pool and felt a cool rush of water in his boots, the thick leather of his shoes plodding through the thick clay beneath the pool. It was slow going though the muck, he had to struggle through the sodden earth to get closer to the lights. But as he got closer to the lights they seemed to twirl just out of reach, their voices echoing with miniscule laughter as they went. When their mocking felt almost too much to bear Jacob felt soft hands on his shoulders as a woman’s voice caressed his ear.

“They will not dance with you brother, but I will.” She spoke in a sultry whisper as fresh as a winter’s morning. “Dance with me.”

He turned to face the most beautiful woman he’d seen in years. She was as clearly not human as she was abundantly all woman. Shimmering dark-green hair festooned with pale blue and yellow flowers was tied into a thick braid down her back, contrasting to pale blue-green. Clad in only the illusion of clothing, the soaking-wet white cotton shirt only served to accentuate her womanly curves and dark-green areolae. She pressed her loveliness up to Jacob, hands wandering over his arms and chest.

She nibbled his earlobe whispering sweet nothings to him and his body reacted immediately. He wanted her in an immediate, primal and visceral way that he hadn’t wanted a woman before. Jacob hadn’t been with a woman, not in a long time. He hadn’t met the right one and he had always been a picky man even when his choices had been few. His philosophy was better no woman at all than the wrong one. He kept rejecting women as too fat, too thin, too young, too old, too foolish or for any number of other perceived failings but right now all of the reasons he’d given himself for not wanting to explore that aspect of himself felt distant and foolish.

Here there was a willing woman and a lonely man.
Her lips met his and his body felt on fire, lust thrumming through his very core. He was a man, she was a woman and he would have her. He didn’t feel old, he didn’t feel lonely, he didn’t feel regret - he just felt the woman wriggling beneath him.

It wasn’t till the water had enveloped them both and his lungs were throbbing with pain than Jacob realized that he couldn't breathe. He fought to get his head above water but his body wasn’t responding right - as much as he was trying to pull himself to the surface he couldn’t bear to pull his lips away from hers. He was as certain pulling away from her would kill him as he was of the inevitability of suffocation.

Flecks of white danced across his vision as hypoxia began to set in, an irrational giddiness filling him as the inevitability of his demise hit him - matched only by the obvious elation in the woman’s eyes as she watched his struggles through the crystalline water. Her elation turned to panic, however, as a familiar presence returned to the forefront of Jacob's mind and an altogether familiar sensation washed over him. The illusionary lust purged itself from his body as his muscles responded to the Tok’ra’s will. His eyes were glowing pits of hatred as the symbiote wrapped Jacob’s hands around the woman’s throat, twisting hard to the left.

Selmak hated the woman. He hated her for what her people had done to his mother. He hated how the only reason for his birth was her guilt and shame. He hated that his purpose in life had been chosen for him before he’d even been born as part of some sort of cruel, cosmic joke. She and her kind were the reason that his existence was an eternity of fear and pain. She and her kind had created him to hunt his own blood - blood that he hated and refused to acknowledge, but blood of his blood regardless. These were the monsters who’d weaponized empathy and inflicted it upon the Tok’ra. Countless worlds, millions dead, thousands of friends, family, children and wives - all of them were dead, all because the Furlings thought it was funny to start a civil war. Selmak and all the Tok’ra would spend their lives embroiled in an impossible, unwinnable war - because their death and suffering was funny.

Selmak wasn’t laughing.

The furling died in astonished horror as the Tok’ra snapped her neck. She sunk down into the mire, still looking up at Jacob with a glassy-eyed expression of terror and betrayal. Crimson red blood seeped out from her torn flesh, staining the perfect clarity of the pool.

Selmak stood up, gasping in a sharp hiss of air as they broke the surface. The tiny, glowing men who’d felt inescapable only moments ago buzzed across the water’s surface excitedly chittering in a gossipy little him, chirping in gleeful bloodlust. They cupped their hands to lap up the blood soaked water, glowing brighter with each sip. They were hateful, spiteful things. Jacob couldn’t imagine why he’d found them so intoxicating only moments ago.
“I was not awake to mitigate their effects upon us. Once I repaired the damage to your spine, I was able to resolve their illusions.” The Tok’ra replied sagely, the wrath that had subsumed his entire being apparently tucked back into whatever corner Selmak normally hid it in. “Their kind is not easily able to trick my own. Only the strongest among them can fool a Tok’ra.”

“So what was ‘it’ … ‘she’? Doing here?” Jacob plodded back to shore, trying to forget the woman’s dead eyes. They wouldn’t trouble him long. She wasn’t the first person he’d killed, though she was the first who he’d killed with his own bare hands.

“That predator was guarding this entry to Furling territory.” Selmak replied succinctly, a twinge of panic in his voice. “If we find another I will be able to mitigate the situation somewhat but I can only promise limited capacity inside of the Kingdoms of Sun and Snow.”

“The thing that attacked us tossed us into the other side?” Jacob groaned, realizing the gravity of it slowly as he sifted through Selmak’s memories. “You mean we can't get back - don't you?”

The Kingdoms of Sun and Snow were near impossible to reach. Opening a way between the planes of reality required either specialized tools or the genetic predisposition to be able to manipulate the barrier between the physical world and the pocket of reality that the Furlings occupied. Jacob had neither and Selmak’s working knowledge of how to achieve a hole in the barrier was little better.

“Damn it.” Jacob shivered as he reached the shore, the cool forest air piercing how wet clothing. “Why do that? Why not just kill us?”

“He likely wasn't allowed. NORAD has an insanely powerful threshold and wards, applied by someone who was clearly an expert in their craft. A Furling would not be able to enter if he intended to do any harm.” Selmak considered the matter. “He would be able to defend himself but wouldn't be able to injure anyone who didn't try to do him bodily harm- at least not directly.”

“But he’s within his rights to just toss us to a freaking siren?” Jacob took off his boot to pour out the water inside.

“A nymph actually. But essentially yes. I suspect that in his mind this was a fair way of disabling us without ‘harming’ us.” Selmak gave Jacob the mental impression of a shrug. “Stranding us in unforgiving wilderness is probably the best possible outcome of being at a Furling’s mercy.”

“That’s insane.” Jacob griped, pulling river weeds out from the front of his shirt. A frog leapt out,
chirruping frustratedly at being manhandled. “Even if he wasn’t ‘allowed’ who was there to witness it?”

“Furlings are physically unable to break their laws. They’re more conceptual beings than we are - they are unable to break their law, violate a promise given, or speak anything that they themselves do not believe to be factually accurate.” Selmak replied. “They’re consequently some of the most duplicitous, hateful, and vile creatures to ever exist.”


“Given their utter hatred of the Goa’uld do you not believe that we would have allied ourselves with the Furlings if such an outcome were remotely plausible?” Selmak chuckled. “Only a madman would ally themselves with the Furlings or the Nox.”

“The Nox?” Jacob queried, only vaguely familiar with the name of the race. “Another species from the lands of Sun and Snow?”

“No. The Nox are very much part of our Galaxy.” Jacob felt an odd shiver up his spine as Selmak adjusted himself within Jacob’s body - an evolutionary tick Jacob knew to be an extreme fear response. Selmak had reflexively released Jacob’s spinal column in instinctual preparation to flee to another host.

“We’re stranded in some godforsaken wilderness in another dimension and it’s something that isn’t even here that’s giving you the willies?” Carter blinked, realizing that when he tried to access the memories relating to the Nox Selmak put up a barrier between them. He just got a hazy feeling of absolute dread. “Selmak?”

“Jacob… there are certain questions that you must never ask me. I do not block the memories from you because I do not trust you but because there are some things that no man should ever be forced to witness. I ask you to trust my judgement and my character, do not ask of the Nox.” Selmak shivered again. “You do not want to see.”

Jacob gulped. The last time he’d forced Selmak to share one of his ‘worst’ memories, he’d been granted visions of one of Moloch’s great festivals. He’d watched women tossing their own screaming infant children into red-hot brass ovens, cheering as the mewling infants howled their last and the cavorting crowds were stained with the clouds of human ashes. Worshippers of rival gods were passed around the festival to sate the urges of Moloch’s faithful, used and abused till the crowd tired of them and they too found their way into the ovens. He watched the hateful faces of Moloch’s worshippers curved up into twisted smiles as they delighted in the way the roasting bodies danced -
writhing on the hot coals as their flesh boiled away from the bone and added more grease to the fire.

As terrible as that had been, Selmak had not been terrified by it in the way the Nox terrified him. Jacob changed the subject as much to stop thinking about Moloch as anything else.

“What happened to Kanan and Ban?” Jacob put his still sodden boot back over his foot. “Are they getting drowned in some other pool?”

Selmak paused for a moment to consider it before continuing out loud. “No. We were just collateral damage. The Furling had to have been there for Kanan. There isn’t another reason I can think of for it to have been lurking in that specific room.”

“I don’t understand. How would it have known where to find him? Even he seemed surprised to have ended up at the SGC.” Jacob shivered in the cool air of dull twilight. “It shouldn’t have been possible to pass security without being noticed.”

"It didn't if you recall - I noticed it.” Selmak replied in a dry sarcastic tone. The bitter feeling broadcasting from the Tok’ra was a mix of frustration and fear - Selmak wasn't sure what to do next.

Jacob probably should have found that terrifying but it was honestly refreshing to be on even footing with the Tok’ra for once. Selmak had lived a dozen lifetimes before Jacob had even been born. It gave the symbiote great knowledge to draw from, but could often leave the Tok’ra with a feeling of absolute seniority in all things.

It was foolish really, but Jacob was often irritated at just how young Selmak felt he was. Not because Jacob believed his short life was equivalent to Selmak’s innumerable experiences but because he was used to being the voice of wisdom in any exchange. He'd been a General - the man who thousands of Airmen considered the supreme authority at his command. And he was barely an infant to the mind sharing his body.

He knew Egeria hadn’t shared any more than the bare minimum required for the Tok’ra to accomplish their mission of destroying the Goa’uld. Though she had, by all accounts, been knowledgeable in the forbidden machines and sciences of the ancient Goa’uld Empire, the Tok’ra didn’t even know where her Throne world had been hidden after she started their war with Ra. Nor did they know how it still remained undiscovered.

“So what do we do now?” Jacob bit his lip, shivering only slightly. Selmak was suppressing the
worst of the cold. He’d probably have suffered some minor frostbite without a symbiote, but as it stood the weather was only mildly irritating. “Staying put doesn’t feel like a great idea.”

“I agree, but moving is likely no less perilous. The physical geography of the Lands of Sun and Snow is inconstant. We know there is a path back to Stargate Command where we are. We know nothing of the lands surrounding us - certainly not if there is another point of entry for Earth, let alone the SGC.” Selmak replied. “If we depart this place before discovering a way to open the barrier, we risk never being able to return.”

Jacob flinched as a distant keening howl of something in the near distance growled, a half dozen closer hunting cries echoing after it. He looked back to the pool, once crystaline now seemingly boiling with dark red blood. “Selmak, something tells me that we’re not going to live long enough to make that mistake if we stay.”

Selmak didn’t disagree as Jacob took off running through the thick underbrush, his attention apparently focused - as Jacob’s was - on the dozens of angry howls echoing through the forest. Something hungry was on the hunt, and neither Jacob nor Selmak was going to make themselves easy prey for it.
Chapter 12

The Furling was furious. Not at Kanan, which was at least some comfort under the circumstances, but furious enough to make Kanan worry just how accurate his genetic memories of the Furlings were regarding their ability to lie. Cat Sith seemed likely to murder him on principle just for having seen the Furling Lord so vexed.

Exactly what had barred the Furling noble from accessing the Kingdoms of Sun and Snow after tossing Selmak through the portal was unclear, but the gateway slammed shut in violent bust of blue and purple sparks - frying the Furling’s whiskers as he tried to drag Kanan into the shutting portal. He screeched a meowling cry that couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than the vilest of curse words, clawing at the empty air with his talons. His claws ripped open shimmering pockets of air that allowed small glimpses into the other world, only for those pockets to sear shut with the same perverse lightning.

Kanan didn’t dare speak or move for fear that he would draw the creature’s ire upon him. He sat on the bed, trying not to allow the scent of fresh rot upon the dead bodies turn his stomach. The crimson of their blood stained most of the walls and ceiling, congealing with the vague touches of frost where the beast walked. Somehow, Cat Sith’s massive paws made no imprint though they ought to have tracked blood everywhere by now.

Curse the Warden - curse his black heart, would Kanan never be free of the man? The man had schemes upon schemes and Kanan felt like he was only now beginning to understand the degree of depth to which the Goa’uld Lord had invested into whatever endgame the Warden was building towards. He’d had no shortage of time to consider them while the Furling tried and failed to open a portal to the other side. It was time that he used to consider and reconsider the events of the past few days with his host.

There were too many convenient coincidences for the Warden’s actions to be mere chance. Every action the man had taken felt impossibly calculated in retrospect, regardless of how insane it felt while one was living through it. It was terrifying really, Kanan couldn’t be sure how much of the Warden’s plans were ad hoc and how many were pre-planned schemes but all seemed to be working in the Warden’s long term favor. So either he was abundantly lucky or had a frankly terrifying spy network and no will to live. Given that he was staring at a favored killer of the Winter Court, the latter seemed entirely plausible.

Had he known that Kanan was coming for him? It was oddly fortuitous that “Heka” had changed routes at the last minute rather than walking into Kanan’s ambush. He’d spent a long time working his way into Baal’s hierarchy to position himself properly to take out the ancient God of Magic. The Semitic deity was well positioned to prove a rival power for Sokar, especially with the acquisition of Heka’s repositories of knowledge. And with a little careful nudging, the Tok’ra could set things in motion to ensure that the armies of Baal, Sokar and Chronos would be embroiled in a war for control.
of Nekheb – weakening all of them.

But that implied a reliable intelligence source on the Tok’ra, meaning that either the Furlings had breached Tok’ra warding or that one of their own was a double agent on the Warden’s behalf. He wasn’t sure which possibility was less appealing. Especially given that any source capable of providing information on his plans to assassinate Heka would have plausibly been informed of the separate plan to destroy Netu. It was all speculation, but it was disturbingly plausible.

And, given the Warden’s apparent senility, it would be difficult to plan responses around him. Heka had always been a tinkerer. Even back in the early days of the Goa’uld Empire, before their prolonged use of the Sarcophagus started to rot their minds, he’d been at the edge of his sanity. If ever there was going to be a System Lord who would try something dangerous in order to restore their former powers, it would have been Heka. Well… him or Thoth.

He blinked in surprise when he realized that Cat Sith’s most recent comment had been directed at him. “Sorry,” He apologized. “I didn’t catch that.”

“We need to move – quickly.” Replied the Furling. “There are powers at play that were not supposed to be here.”

“Powers other than the ones who is coming to kill me?” Kanan replied, unintentionally allowing an edge of his caustic mood to seep into his speech.

“You would do well to keep a civil tongue in your lips child.” Snarled the massive feline as he lapped at the pooling blood on the floor, wetting his muzzle as he carved strange symbols in the dead guards faces with an outstretched talon. Frost stretched out from the symbols he carved, turning the flesh of the bodies blueish and cracking their flesh. Their wounds froze over as the corpses rose, crimson icicles hanging from their frostbitten skin. “Or I will gladly remind you of exactly why the race of mortal man fears what lurks in the shadows.”

“What have you done?” Ban asked, horrified as the eyes of the resurrected guards shattered - exposing glowing motes of blue light within the frozen orbs.

“The Slaugh Sidhe are never far from the restless dead, they flock to the scenes of mortal transgressions and carnage.” Cat Sith’s maw turned up in a terrifying feline grin. “We have an… understanding…”
The two possessed creatures stared at Cat Sith expectantly, a murderous edge to their barely relaxed posture.

“Friends, I have a task for you. There is someone who has placed wards and a threshold above those placed by the Summer Queen. You are to find those responsible and correct this arrogance.” The predatory creature’s tail swished irritatedly, slapping the now frozen pool of blood. “In exchange you may do whatever pleases you with those responsible.”

The Slaugh Sidhe hissed something close to language, making chittering gripes with their frozen tongues. Cat Sith’s eyes narrowed, “I am no fool. You will settle for the price I have offered - no more - or I shall cast you back to the nothing.”

The two Slaugh hissed in disappointed accession.

One of the Slaugh opened it’s lips, speaking in a voice of honeyed nightmares. Kanan couldn’t understand a word of what it said, but it made Cat Sith cackle in amusement. “No. Lamentably you may do no harm to those under mine own protection nor to the armies of this fortress, except to defend your own lives.”

The other Slaugh made a similar keening intonation. The Furling just continued to grin. “I leave that to your discretion. Suffice it to say, I expect you to leave an impression.”

The two possessed corpses grinned, their frozen faces cracking as their cheeks dimpled. Frozen shards of pinkish blue skin broke off and fell to the ground to melt in the still pooling blood. They picked up the weapons of the Tau’ri discarded by the men they were possessing and turned to the door. Their skin rippled with a translucent blue Aura as they simply walked through the door.

“Well that isn’t unsettling or anything.” Ban spoke in deadpan horror.

“We don’t have the luxury of “comfortable” allies. I am unable to open a path to the Nevernever while the wards are active.” The Furling griped. “We must rely upon those resources at easily at hand.”

“The warriors of the first world are going to slay those monstrosities on sight, you know.” Interjected Kanan.
“They’ll certainly try.” Grinned the Furling Lord in apparently gleeful anticipation of the carnage to come.

Kanan briefly found himself wondering if he might not have been better off staying with the Warden’s retinue. Kanan understood the Goa’uld.

“Come child, we must make our own way.” The Furling growled moving towards a wall in the exact opposite direction from the door. Kanan flinched, briefly considering his chances of making it out the door before the feline had the opportunity to catch him. If he could lock the door behind him perhaps it would delay the creature long enough to reach safety. But if the creature was to be believed, something far worse than the Hunter of Frost was coming to kill him.

Fighting every instinct in his body, Kanan stood up and followed the furling into the shadows in the corner of the room - taking care not to slip on the frozen blood. There was no reason for the shadows to cast on the space into which the Furling walked, there was no apparent source for them given their seeming direct exposure to light. Nor was there a logical reason for the shadows to continue far past where the room should have stopped. Kanan followed the Furling into the darkness, walking into the inky nothing that seeped out from the wall. His feet continued to find open ground long after he should have found nothing, one step after the other into impossible geometry.

By the time he mustered the courage to look behind him there was no room, only the shadows and the Furling ahead of him. Ban’s thoughts were troubled as he directed a question at Kanan, “I thought couldn’t take us to the lands of Sun and Snow.”

“He did,” Agreed Kanan mentally.

“Then where in the thirteen hells are we?” Ban asked, a twinge of fear in his voice as there was a rustling shiver of shadow that brushed past Kanan’s leg in the darkness. Kanan gasped in fear as the black tendril wrapped briefly around his leg before disappearing into the distant shadow. He yelped in shock as two pinpricks of orange light regarded him from the either.

“Do not linger!” Scolded Cat Sith, a furious roar in his throat as the pin pricks disappeared back into the shapeless nothing. “We do not want the attention of the others.”

“Others?” Kanan gulped.

“I am not the only creature who lurks in Shadow.” The Furling admitted as it turned on the spot,
pointing a paw behind Kanan. “Now I need you to open the door.”

“What door?” Kanan replied in confusion as he turned around, only to find himself in yet another of the drab grey rooms of the Tau’ri base. A supply cupboard of some sort by the looks of it, there was as bright yellow bucket with a mop in it and a tall shelf covered in brightly colored cleaning solvents. “Egeria’s blood! How?”

“There are spaces between spaces if one knows where to look.” Replied the Furling. “Now, quickly, open the door. I would do it myself but … well.” It raised a taloned paw that looked poorly suited to twist the knob.

“Oh, yes.” Kanan replied, opening the door and standing to the side as the large cat walked out of the closet. It walked carefully, stepping over the metal strip along the floor that delineated where the corridor ended and the closet began.

It was suspiciously bereft of people. A fortress of this size, even as secure as that of the Tau’ri, ought to have had a multitude of people going about the day to day business of a military. The admittedly brief time that Kanan spent walking the spaces of the SGC had been typified by dozens of men and women in blue jumpsuits and camouflage fatigues wandering hither and thither piled high with papers and folders. There weren’t even apparent signs of guards in this corridor.

“Where is everyone?” Ban asked in confusion.

“Not here.” Cat Sith hissed, “Now stop drawing attention to us or they will gladly correct that error.”

Kanan’s eyes widened in horror as they rounded a corner and Cat Sith tackled him into an alcove, holding his massive paw over the Tok’ra’s mouth to keep him from yelling in surprise. The two of them disappeared from view, wrapped in the shadows extending from the Furling’s body.

A cadre of chitinous creatures strode down the hallway, holding the weapons of the Tau’ri as they pushed cart down the hall with a woman upon it. She was apparently unconscious and purple chitinous biotech was attached to her body at odd intervals. There was a greasy taste in the back of his throat as they passed him, their chitin clicking on the stone floor as they walked.

Cat Sith’s eyes widened in shock as the creatures passed him, but not nearly as wide as Kanan’s did. He recognized the creatures from Egeria’s memories - Stragoth. They were one of the species Chronos reportedly had under lock and key on the prison planet of Pibotaglinasjo - a planet that had been removed from the gate network when the Goa’uld were forced to retreat after it fell to the Unspeakable in the early days of the ancient conflict before the Folly of Thoth. They were a lesser
servitor race of the enemy, a byblow’s byblow in the hierarchy of the Unspeakables, condemned to
the prison world by Chronos when he’d used one of Ra’s ancient weapons to destabilize subspace to
prevent access to either the Kingdom of Sun and Snow, Hyperspace, or the Gate Network in the
solar system of Pibotagilnasjo. For thousands of years the Titan had garrisoned a fleet of star ships
above the planet to prevent anything from escaping and to ensure that the subspace weapon’s effects
continued to isolate the planet.

Either by arcane sorcery of the Unspeakable or their own technological advancement, the inmates of
Pibotagilnasjo had gained access to the gate network. The quarantine had failed. The inmates of
Pibotagilnasjo were loose. Even Egeria had been unsure which of the ancient forces slumbered on
the nightmare world of Pibotagilnasjo. He had to live through today - the Tok’ra needed to know of
this danger to the galaxy.

The Furling let loose a growl that might have been a feline set of swear words once the Stragoth
were out of earshot. “Bitch of a Leananside - she must have known. I thought that it was his
presence that brought the Russian, not this. Very well. This changes nothing in the immediate but we
must move quickly if we are to correct this issue before your escape. Mine own Queen would not
approve of them gaining control of this edifice.”

“Where are you taking me?” Kanan’s footsteps, careful though they were, sounded thunderous to him
in the otherwise silent corridor.

“Worm, we are 16 stories deep below the spine of the earth. One enemy is knocking at the gates as
another festers within. I cannot take you outside this fortress’ wards else I expose you to the one who
would see you dead. I cannot keep you here else you fall prey to whatever force the Stragoth have
bound to them in order to subvert the will of the Summer Queen. Their sorceries are potent, and they
are prepared for the forces of Summer and Winter. Look how they adopt the ferromantic weapons of
the Tau’ri rather than using their own technologies!” Cat Sith shook his head. “No - I cannot
reasonably say that I will be able to bring you to safety.”

He paused for a moment, his lip curling in disgust at an admission of his own limitation. "Don't
mistake my meaning. I would of course survive, even if you died. But I would fail in my bargain -
and the consequences of your early death would be publicly embarrassing for me."

"Oh good." Kanan replied caustically. "I'm glad to know the only thing saving me from a painful
death is your desire to save face."

"It is." Agreed Cat Sith. "Any sane person would call your situation a lost cause. So we are going to
the patron saint of those with nowhere else to turn. The deal of last resort for fools and the
desperate."

“That is not an answer.” Kanan growled as they reached a broad set of unguarded double doors
beneath a placard that said “Stockade” in the language of the Tau’ri.
“We are visiting a specialist in lost causes and impossible wars, Worm.” The feline purred, pushing the double doors inward in spite of an impressive array of locks that Kanan was convinced had been locked when the Furling’s paw met the wooden barrier. It swung inward, exposing a small room lined with cells.

They were simple things, utilitarian facilities equipped with a bed, washing facilities, a work station and monitoring cameras. Kanan noted that the red lights on each camera suspiciously turned off as soon as Cat Sith moved into their field of view. The cells were mostly unoccupied, though a disturbing number of them seemed to have signs that their occupants had been forcibly removed. Bedding was tossed asunder in several of the cells, with splatters of blood where someone’s face had met the bars of their cell. There were smudges of crimson where someone had been dragged out of the stockade.

In fact there was only a single occupant of the Tau’ri prison. A dark skinned figure wearing a slightly ripped T-Shirt and jeans. Kanan wasn’t sure why, but being in the man’s presence made him deeply uncomfortable - it was different from being in the presence of a Re’tu but still disturbing. The man’s brow quirked in surprise as he regarded the Furling. “I’ll admit, this I was not expecting.”

“Sir Knight.” Crowed the Furling Lord, obviously enjoying the man’s incarceration. “Have I come at a bad time?”

“Da.” Replied the man as he took several steps back to ensure the thick iron bars were protecting him from the Furling. “I find that any time that I cross paths with a Lord of Sidhe ends up being a bad time. But given that you are not a terrifying crab person who is here to drag a screaming and bleeding man to his presumptive doom I am willing to concede that this is an upgrade from my last visitor.”

“You wound me, Sir Knight.” Growled Cat Sith, smiling in a mocking Cheshire grin.

“Not yet, but give it time. I’m sure the moment will arise.” Replied the man in his thick accent. “Now, you have not yet murdered me so I assume you want something unreasonably difficult for a seemingly worthwhile price that will turn out to be a colossal nightmare for me and a giant boon for you, in the long run at least.”

The Cat’s tail twitched eagerly as the man sighed in exasperation. “Very well, what are you terms?”

“I am going to let you out of this cell then help you find your sword and in exchange you will continue your duties as a Knight of the Cross and protect the innocent.” Cat Sith continued his terrifying cheshire grin. “I will, in exchange, agree to a truce between us for the next twenty four
hours - provided that you take no actions to harm those to whom I am sworn to give aid.”

“это пиздец” The man pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is going to be a remarkably bad day isn’t it?”

“Probably.” Conceded the Furling.

“Whose your friend?” He gestured to Kanan. As Kanan felt another ripple of discomfort run through his spine he wondered what manner of beast was this for the Furling to seek it out as a “deal of last resort.” He didn’t like being in the man’s gaze, it felt like he was an insect beneath a magnifying glass. At any moment the holder might change the focus and burn him to ash.

“You would consider him an innocent.” Replied Cat Sith. “Now, do you want out of this cell or do you intend to wait for a more ‘divine’ exit? Your ‘crab people’ are busying themselves while we bicker.”

The man nodded, grinning. “This will be fun. I am a big man with a sword, you are a large cat, we will kill monster people. It will be like cartoon with Castle Greyskull.”

“We have an accord?” Cat Sith’s eyes flashed eagerly.

“Da.” The man cracked his fingers. “We have an accord.”
Chapter 13

Dr. Jay Felger freaking loved his job.

Seriously? How cool was this? He got to be on a spaceship designed by ancient alien gods hidden on the dark side of the moon as they literally looted dragon corpses. He was like living a movie! It was precisely the sort of stuff Coombs was always prattling on about in his repeated, flailed pitches to get Jay to join the weekly Dungeons and Dragons game in the SGC Cafeteria. The only difference was that that was real.

It baffled him that not everyone could see just how awesome their jobs were. Here they were on a spaceship and everyone was treating it like they were visiting their aunt in New Jersey. The Marine who'd accompanied him wore a glassy eyed look as Felger explained the various uses for the machines he was prodding and manipulating as he worked. Not that Jay was discouraged, he just needed to make sure to keep going and the Lieutenants would understand the importance of what they were looking at… well eventually anyway. LT Johnson seemed particularly dull even by Marine standards.

He was seemingly struggling to even keep his eyes open as Jay tried to explain just how exciting the power relay was. Well, at least till he explained exactly what it leads to.

“Run that last part by me again.” LT Johnson repeated. “It powers what?”

A whole sentence, with grammar even? Jay smiled. He knew he had the LT eating out of the palm of his hand. When in doubt, the prospect of some new and interesting method of making enemies go boom could catch a Jarhead’s attention. He would eventually have to pair it with an actual way of causing the degree of carnage Johnson was imagining. However, the militaristic nature of the Goa’uld essentially meant that weapons of great violence were a given.

“It powers the defenses to a vault of some sort. This room was the private chambers of the ‘Lord Warden.’ I’m pretty sure that it is an armory of some sort.” Jay repeated, moving the crystal in his palm to a socket in the now exposed wall. It shifted from red to green, shimmering with white light. “Well, that or some sort of treasure I suppose. They went to a lot of trouble to keep this room off any printed maps of diagrams of the ship. Even the ship’s main database doesn’t have any record of it.”

“There is a hidden room?” Asked LT Johnson. “Hell, shouldn’t Thor have found it?”

“The Goa’uld hid this room behind so many different types of jamming, dampening, and cloaking that I honestly don’t even think the Asgard were going to find it if they didn’t know what to look for.” Jay shrugged. Honestly it had just been dumb luck that he noticed the power drain, but he wasn’t about to admit that when the Marine asked, “How did you find it then?”

“Because my dear fellow, I am not just an explorer.” Jay smiled what he hoped was a roguish grin. “I am a man of science!”

The effect was less cinematic that he’d hoped. As he stood and tried to make an elaborate, and appropriately theatrical, gesticulation he tapped two crystals together that seemed to have been best left separated. He screamed in what he would insist later was most decidedly not a high pitched girly sound, hopping on one foot as he sucked the tips of his burned fingers.

The lights flickered in the room, before dying entirely. His marine companion sighed in exasperation as the furious voice of Simon Coombs echoed out of the darkness. “Felger! What did you do.”
“I didn’t do anything.” Jay protested.

“Really Felger?” Replied the grating voice of Coombs. “Because this feels like significantly more than ‘nothing.’

A beam of light cut across the shadows, followed by the portly shape of Dr. Simon Coombs. His stringy hair was disheveled, giving him a near ghoulish appearance in the semi-luminescence outside the cone of blinging white pointed into Jay’s face.

“Hey! Get that out of my face already.” Jay protested as Coombs addressed the marine.

“What did blockhead over here decide to do?” Coombs ignored Jay’s sputtering protestations.

“Dr Felger was attempting to open a secret room. It didn’t work.” Replied the Marine in unamused staccato.

“Felger!” Coombs screeched, flailing his flashlight in irritation. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? You knocked out the power to this entire level of the ship. There are no doors. No lights. No more oxygen. If we don’t get this fixed, and fast, we’re going to asphyxiate.”

“What?” The Marine replied in a tone that sounded very much like he was weighting the relative cost benefit equation of how much oxygen it would cost him to fire a bullet directly at Jay versus the amount of oxygen Jay would breathe in the time it took for their collective rescue.

“Hold on! Hold on.” Jay raised his hands placatingly. “It’s not as bad as all that.”

“It’s exactly as bad as that!” Coombs screeched, tossing his hat on the ground and stomping on it. “It’s 100% that.”

“Oh, My. God. Felger! This is low, even for you.” Coombs poked his finger into Jay’s chest, punctuating what Simon seemed to believe was a biting point. “You did this in purpose, didn’t you? Just so that you could spend time with Major Carter.”

“I would never!” Protested Jay, even as he wondered if his subconscious might very well have done that very thing.

“Wouldn’t you? I can hardly recognize you from the shade of brown your nose turns anyone from SG-1 is around.” Coombs replied caustically, his voice turning into a mocking parrotlike imitation of Felger. “Oh, Colonel O’Neill, tell me about the time you defeated Ra. Major carter your work has had deep influence on my research and guided the course of my life.”

Jay grimaced. “Bite me Coombs – at least my heroes are real. Shouldn’t you be at a Star Wars convention somewhere dressed as a Klingon warrior?”

“It’s Star Trek. You know that it’s Star Trek – even a heathen like you should recognize the name of Roddenberry’s Altar to human advancement! How you can even begin to call yourself a scientist while rejecting one of its patron saints is beyond me.” Coombs unkempt hair waved as his body shook with nerdly rage. His rant was cut short, however, by the sudden ejaculation of static sound from the Marine’s radio. Someone was trying to reach him.
Oh, thank god.” The lieutenant exclaimed reaching for his radio as the voice of Colonel Makepeace crackled out across Coombs’ rant. “Sir?”

“Johnson –” The voice crackled into the room. “We need you down here – “The recording cut out, loud static cutting of the Colonels sentence before dulling back to clarity. “- breached the ship. Re-enforcements are coming from the SGC but we’re getting hammered –”Another loud crackle of static. “– They won’t die! Get here now!”

There was the unmistakable sound of gunfire echoing as the Colonel spoke, mirrored by a distant sound of battle on the lower levels of the ship, gunfire and screams of incomprehensible rage.

“Oh no.” Felger swallowed nervously. “That’s, uh, bad – right?”

“No! You don’t say.” Coombs replied, shaking out his trodden hat and placing it back upon his head. “Someone shooting can have so many other meanings.”

“I need to back up my Fire Team.” The Marine’s teeth were gritted in a grimace of rage. “Get me down there now.”

“I – I can’t. I don’t even know what I did in the first place.” Jay swallowed.

“They’re losing without me Felger.” The lieutenant didn’t shout. Dangerous men managed to be terrifying without ever needing to raise their voice. “I will be getting to them.”

“W-what about the ring transporters? Even if I shut down the bulkheads here the rings should work down on the lower levels.” Jay smiled widely. “Yeah! We can just use the rings.”

“And how exactly is he going to do that without power, hum?” Coombs waggled his fingers exaggeratedly, making a silly voice as he said. “Shall you magic them like the warden.”

“I just knocked out power for this level.” Jay replied. “There is a hangar on this level with a personal transport ship for the Goa’uld Lord. It will have a ring transporter on it and the ship should have its own independent power supply.”


“Cool, so when do we get guns?” Jay queried.

The Marine paused, “We who?”

“Me – well Coombs and me. You’re going to need backup.” Jay smiled, eager to finally be part of the action for once in his life. This was his chance to stand up with his heroes and fight the bad guys.

“Backup? We haven’t even passed the pistol qualification.” Coombs exclaimed.

“I might as well have. I’ve practiced for this like a billion hours.” Jay interjected over the excited fellow doctor.

“Yeah, in Half Life not in real life.” Coombs shook his head furiously. “We are not backup.”

“There is no we.” Said the Marine in a tone that brokered no debate. “I’m going to go help my team stall till the SGC can send us some backup. Until they get here and we can get this under control, the two of you are going to stay here and wait for me to come back.”

“But –”Jay tried to say only for the Marine to fix him with a glare. He sighed, disappointed. “Ok… I get it…”
“Honestly Felger, what were you thinking?” Coombs chided as the Marine ran into the distance. “You were ready to commit suicide just to impress Major Carter. It’s time to accept your place in the whole order here man. You aren’t backup, you’re cannon fodder. You’re like a redshirt’s redshirt.”

“Not more Star Trek.” Felger groaned as he adjusted the lamp on his vest to give him a better view of the crystals he’d fried. “Next you’re going to be telling me that I have to reset the tachyon emitter or something to get this ship up and running. Or is it something about phase variance? It’s always one of those two things, isn’t it?”

“You mark my words Felger, there will come a day where you wish that you had my width and breadth of culture.” Coombs snorted derisively.

Yeah, when hell freezes over.” Jay turned to Coombs to let off another biting retort, only for his fingers to bump yet another unwise combination of crystals. He swore loudly, shaking his hand in pain – briefly blinded as every light on the entire deck activated simultaneously. He looked angrily at Coombs. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

“No.” Coombs replied in a tone that couldn’t help but seem insincere. “Well…Only a little.”

“Wait. Did you touch anything?” Jay pointed to a display along the wall that he hadn’t noticed before.

“No. Unlike some people I have the common sense not to just go prodding around willy nilly before I actually know that the system I’m screwing with actually does.” Coombs replied. “Why?”

“Because that display wasn’t here before.” Jay replied, practically giddy at the prospect. “Which means, my dear doctor, that I have succeeded in finding the way to open the Warden’s secret treasure room.”

“Indiana Jones, you are not.” Coombs replied, though his interest was obviously piqued. “It’s probably booby trapped.”

“It definitely was.” Jay agreed. “But I already found them.”

“Some of them or all of them.” Coombs asked in a voice of obvious doubt.

“All of them. I’m positive.” Jay replied. “At least 95% positive.”

“What about the other 5%?” Coombs queried. “You know, the percent where some Goa’uld mega-weapon worth of face melt makes us go kaboom?”

“I’m well over the acceptable margin of error here Coombs.” Honestly, Dr. Coombs could be such an insufferable worry wart sometimes. He was always convinced that Jay’s plans were going to turn out to be catastrophic failures before they’d even started. And it wasn’t like he was right that often for Pete’s sake. “You need to learn to just go with the adventure sometimes.”

“You’ll pardon me if my idea of “adventure” involves being on the receiving end of fewer alien made mega weapons than yours does.” Coombs put himself between Jay and the panel. “Now I’m putting my foot down here Felger. We are not touching anything else until the Lieutenant gets back.”

“Coombs for all we know there is a weapon behind that door that can save Earth. We have an obligation as men of science to find out all that we can.” Jay tried to push by Coombs only for the other doctor to push him away. “Come on Coombs! For science!”

“No, no, no, no. We are not going to do something else dumb.” Coombs held up his finger
warningly. “I’m not saying never – but until we’re sure that whatever intruder is on the ship is dealt with we’re going to stay put.”

“Fine,” Jay replied in a feigned voice of defeat. “Do you have a deck of cards or something, you know, to pass the time.”

“Oh, yeah.” Simon looked down at his breast pocket. “I’m sure that I’ve got – oh, wait! No!”

His sentence ended abruptly as Jay used the split-second distraction to slip past him and press the holographic hieroglyph he knew meant “open.” Coombs screeched “Felger” in a tone that he was pretty sure should have only been audible to dogs. Jay wasn’t interested in the man’s vitriolic curses against his name and sanity. He was only interested in what was behind that door.

The gold inlaid obsidian surface of the wall shifted, opening inward and exposing a vault within. Hundreds of hieroglyphs along the walls and ceiling glowed a violent shade of deepest crimson. A fluid seeped out from them that Jay was sure was just condensation but couldn’t help but remind him of blood in the dull red light. At the center of the room, chained to a tall post of obsidian, was a woman. She was not a pretty woman. Her dark skin and unkempt hair was dirty and there were twigs and brambles caught in both her hair and shirt that had been there so long that they seemed to have taken root.

“Well don’t just stand there with your mouth open Coombs, man up!” Jay spoke authoritatively. “There is a woman who needs our help.”

“Jay, we don’t know anything about her.” Coombs hissed, though he did follow Felger into the room. It was surprisingly barren other than the post, the woman, and a tile pattern built around two wide interlaced silver circles with interlocking pentagrams between them. It looked like something straight out of a Jack Chick comic – the kind that he’d mocked in college. “She could be anyone.”

“She’s a prisoner of the Goa’uld – which makes freeing her our responsibility. We’re the good guys, remember? The Goa’uld are the bad guys. Why bother being good guys if you can’t free a damsel in the villain’s lair.” Jay waggled his eyebrows as he tried to pick the wrist bindings on the woman. They were rough things, made of iron with rows of cruel points sticking out from them and digging into the woman’s wrists. Dark blood stained the woman’s arms and dripped down to the floor. If Jay had been paying closer attention he might have noticed the symbols around him pulsing in time with each drip upon the stone floor.

It took a lot of effort, and ruined a couple of the thin dental tools he carried with him to manipulate fine crystal, but between the reluctant Simon Coombs and Jay Felger – the manacles were removed from the woman’s wrists. They shouldered the woman between them, dragging her limp form across the floor. She stirred back to life as they passed the first circle, taking short, shallow breaths. As they crossed the second circle her eyes opened and she regarded the two men with astonished curiosity. Once they’d left the strange, glowing room she seemed to be able to stand under her own power.

She staggered forward, testing her weight upon her legs uneasily. It didn’t seem like she’d been using them much lately. She teetered about like a newborn faun, unsure of herself.

“Hey, are you ok.” Jay reached out to catch the woman as she stumbled, bracing her against his arm to help her right herself. She replied to him in a language he didn’t recognize, speaking in harsh tones – though their harshness seemed directed in a different direction than at him.

Annoyed at his apparent incomprehension she rolled her eyes and continued to speak in her confusing language. Jay didn’t mind though, he was busy reeling at the implications of just who the woman was. “Coombs do you realize what this woman is?”
“Other than heavy?” Coombs wheezed, winded from the exertion of having lifted the woman into the room. “No Felger, I do not. I do not know the political importance of some random woman in a secret Goa’uld fallout bunker with twigs in her hair.”

“Coombs – this woman is a Nox.” Jay smiled brightly as the woman’s tirade broke, apparently recognizing the word “Nox” in his speech pattern. Jay pointed to her and said, “Yes, we know the nox. Nox are friends with us. We’re very friendly with the Nox – just love them to death. They’re really close with some good friends of ours.”

“Colonel O’Neill threatened to shoot you last week.” Coombs interjected.

“Only as a joke!” Jay replied hastily. “We have our little jokes, the Colonel and I. So many of them.”

“Oye.” Coombs rested his palm in his hand. “Fleger, stop lying to the woman who neither knows what SG-1 is nor cares. This is just embarrassing.”

Jay ingored Coombs, and pointed to his heart. “I’m Jay.”

“Jay” Repeated the woman.

“Good! Good.” Jay clapped excitedly, pointing to Coombs. “This is Coombs.”

“Coombs” Repeated the woman.

“Perfect. So, Jay, Coombs, and you are?” He pointed to each of them in turn, pointing to her and waiting.

“Jay. Coombs.” There was a pregnant pause before she spoke again her eyes flashing an all too familiar shade of glowing gold. “My name is Druana and I am your new God.”

Jay sighed, turning to his companion. “You’re going to lord this over me, aren’t you.”

“Forever.” Coombs agreed.
Jacob’s feet hurt from trying to make his way through the brambles and bric-a-brac within the seemingly endless forest of the Furling kingdom. He was not accustomed to long marches, even in the time when he’d been a young man in the Airforce he’d had relatively limited experience with long distance hiking through the wilderness. Selmak was more accustomed to roughing it than he was, but even the Tok’ra tended to have supplies and resources with him when he traveled. There was a small pouch of flint, tinder, and some emergency rations that Selmak and Jacob kept with them just in case of an emergency, but it was sitting in his quarters back at the SGC next to the ruck sack full of clothing and a Zat gun that Selmak deeply wished he had with him right now.

If they lived through this Jacob wasn’t ever taking that damn pouch off again, never mind that Selmak and Jacob both disliked how it chafed against their leg. Jacob paused in the woods at a distant flicker of firelight, “Crap. There is someone out there.”

“Well, I’ll pass.” Jacob gagged a bit at that thought. Selmak and he had mutually come to the agreement that there was no reason for them to walk into any cave covered in that many cobwebs. Nothing good was going to be in that cave. In the furling realms things that were beautiful were just waiting for the opportunity to kill you and the ugly ones weren’t going to wait around for an opportunity to present itself.

“Indeed.” Selmak replied mentally, the symbiote’s sense of deep disquiet resonating in Jacob’s mind. The symbiote was feeling as lost and terrified as Jacob. Selmak literally did not know what they faced in the Furling kingdoms. For all the Tok’ra’s warnings about the Furlings, their actual intelligence on the Furlings was essentially an instinctual and primal horror at having to even be around them. “But I don’t think that we can afford to walk around this one unless we want to walk down and back to that cave. There Is no safer path.”

“I’ll pass.” Jacob gagged a bit at that thought. Selmak and he had mutually come to the agreement that there was no reason for them to walk into any cave covered in that many cobwebs. Nothing good was going to be in that cave. In the furling realms things that were beautiful were just waiting for the opportunity to kill you and the ugly ones weren’t going to wait around for an opportunity to present itself.

“The point still stands, Jacob.” The symbiote’s voice was a strained. It had been a while since either of them slept. “We can’t keep avoiding every camp we see. Eventually we’re going to have to interact with someone if only to avoid starvation.

General Carter couldn’t really argue against that logic, reluctant though he was to interact with another resident of this place. Jacob wasn’t entirely sure how long they’d been in the forest. It was difficult to gauge time considering that day and night seemed to be factors of geography rather than chronology. But, assuming that his watch was still reliable, a fact he couldn’t be any surer of than any other element of this horrible place, it had been two days since he’d last had anything resembling a meal. His meager diet of raw songbird eggs and some sort of green tuber Selmak assured him was edible had proven enough to sustain him but not enough to fight back the painful stabs of starvation in his belly.
He was delirious and he knew it. It was hard to focus for long on anything other than just how hungry he was. He ran his dry tongue over chapped lips, considering his options before deciding that he didn’t really have a better alternative. “I don’t like this.”

“They are Furlings. They will not be able to resist a bargain.” Selmak regurgitated his second-hand knowledge with surprising confidence. “It will not be a price we wish to pay, but it will be a bargain.”

“Sheesh, I can’t spend the rest of my life wrestling monsters to the ground and beating them to death. It’s exhausting.” Jacob shook his head, looking down at the red stains along his hands. There had been at least twelve attacks on his person since they’d entered the forest. Some were just beasts, unthinking creatures that seemed drawn to attack him like a moth drawn to a flame. Two had been humanoid creatures, like the woman who’d tried to draw him into the lake. Well – sort of like her, they’d been squat creatures. Ugly things with smooshed in faces, they’d seemed like part of the trees around him till they leapt out and tried to stab him with long stone knives. They were clumsy, however, and no match for his symbiote enhanced strength. He hadn’t wanted to kill them, but he was terrified that they’d report him to something bigger and more dangerous if he didn’t.

He felt immense shame at the when he’d first seen their little broken bodies on the ground when the fight ended. Winning a fight to the death against what appeared to be little more than children wasn’t a victory he wanted to be able to claim. It was a sensation greatly tempered greatly by Selmak’s revelation that the stone knives were coated in virulent and almost certainly fatal neurotoxins.

Jacob approached the camp cautiously, keeping an eye out for traps or more of the forest’s monsters. He caught glimpses of a single figure in the flickering light of the campfire. They were smaller than Jacob, cloaked in green and sitting in front of what looked tantalizingly like a cook pot full of stew. His suspicious was confirmed as the woman sliced potatoes into the wide pot above the flames.

He made sure to stay a good ten meters from the woman when he announced his presence. “Hey there! Hello.”

The figure looked around at him in mild surprise, looking him up and down briefly. Jacob knew that he didn’t exactly make a great impression at the moment. His Tok’ra uniform was stained red with blood that had run down his front, giving the scaled patch over his shoulder the distinct impression that he’d freshly torn it from some great, scaly beast. He couldn’t quite catch the face of the cloaked figure, but there was a brief pause before a woman’s voice echoed across the empty space with a distinctly American twang.

“You have got to be kidding me. I mean, I’ve had fairies try to sneak into my camp before. I’ve seen costumes, I’ve seen spells, I’ve even had them try to put glamors upon themselves to look like a friend or relative.” She pushed the hood of her cloak back, exposing golden-brown hair tied back...
into a pony-tail. She wasn’t happy, but Jacob would have described her as more confused than angry. “I mean, it’s not the worst attempt I’ve seen yet but it’s up there.”

“I’m half human if that helps.” Jacob laughed, holding his hands up. “Now, can I please come closer to your fire? I’m very hungry and that stew smells amazing from where I’m standing.”

“I don’t know. Can you?” The woman rolled her eyes, looking back to her stew pot as she adjusted the copper bangles on her wrist. Taking that as a tacit permission Jacob approached her slowly, keeping his hands in the air so as not to spook her.

“So did you just miss the entry level “how to be a Fairy” class that they give at orientation?” The woman snorted, her lip quirking up as Jacob walked towards her. Her expression turned to one of utter disbelief as Jacob crossed the trench that she’d dug in the fine brown dirt around her camp-site. He took care not to disturb the trench as he passed over it, noting idly that it formed a circle around the place where the woman had built her fire.

There was an immediate shift in the woman’s mood when he crossed that threshold. She was no longer idly amused by his presence. While she hadn’t stopped putting food into the pot, she seemed more focused on the knife she was using to cut her food than she had previously been in the act of cooking. “That’s a neat trick. I’d like to know how you pulled it off.”

“No real trick to it.” Jacob replied, sitting down on the ground across from the woman and enjoying the warmth of her fire. “You know, put one foot in front of the other.”

“You’re not a fairy, are you?” The woman was scrupulously avoiding making direct eye contact with Jacob as she pulled what looked very much like a wand from within her cloak.

“Nope.” Jacob replied. “100% red blooded American man. Well, close enough to 100% anyway.”

“That would be the human half, I assume.” The woman replied in deadpan monotone. “It’s the other 50% that I’m more worried about.”

“I assure you that we mean you no harm.” Jacob’s eyes flashed. “We have nothing to gain from such an action.”

To her credit she didn’t flinch when Selmak took over, which is more than Jacob could say when
he’d first encountered a Tok’ra. “That isn’t an answer to my question.”

“I am Selmak of the Tok’ra, though I suspect that will hold little meaning to you. My people were banished from the first world of men long before Egeria’s war began. I am of the bloodline who begat Ra, Zeus, and many of the other so called “gods” of the old pantheons.” The Tok’ra supplied. There was a brief moment of pride in his proclamation of his bloodline, overwhelmed by a greater moment of shame for having felt that pride.

“And that would make you the god of what exactly?” The woman’s expressionless deadpan would likely have amused Jacob were he not convinced that she was capable of inflicting terrible violence upon them. Selmak believed the woman to be a Hok’tar, one of the advanced humans of the first world. “Advanced human” Jacob wasn’t sure about but given the ACDC T—shirt just barely visible within the woman’s cloak paired with a set of Levis, he was quite convinced that she was from Earth.

“Other than being a cosmic pain in my ass? Not much.” Jacob interjected. “The Tok’ra are actually waging a civil war against the Goa’uld Pantheons to remove them from power and free their enslaved worshippers across the Empire.”

“Jesus! How long have you been in the Nevernever exactly?” The woman’s brow arched. “Because I’ve got some good news for you, Greece and Egypt have been liberated for quite a while now.”

“The First World was the first to rebel. Other planets have not been so lucky.” Selmak replied. “The other realms of the old Gods are still governed as the kingdoms of old.”

There was a brief pause before the woman pinched the bridge of her nose in apparent pain. “I take back what I said before. This has to be the worst attempt I’ve ever seen. You’re not even trying to hide the fact that you’re not human and you’re pairing it with the most insane backstory I’ve ever heard.”

“I speak only truth.” Selmak replied abruptly. “And seek nothing more than a meal and safe passage back to the First World.”

“Directly to Colorado Springs, Colorado, if possible.” Jacob interjected.

“You want me to take you to Colorado?” The woman asked as she returned her knife to its sheath. She still kept the wand in her other hand as she ladled out two bowls of soup. Jacob’s mouth watered
at the sight of them. “Why?”

“I need to go back there.” Jacob replied. “Immediately.”

She continued to stare at Jacob expectantly till he finally said. “I’m a General with the Air Force. I got tossed into this forest by something called ‘Cat Sith.’”

“Don’t say his name!” The woman’s impassive mask broke into an expression of actual horror. “This is the Nevernever! People are listening…. Worse than people as well.”

“Sorry. But he was the one who stranded me here. I’m worried what is happening there without me there to help.” Jacob shook his head. “If you can help me get back you need to help me.”

“And what, pray tell, do I get in trade for this?” Spoke the woman, but there was no real heart in it. Jacob was convinced that she would help him.

“Other than the gratitude of a Two Star General with the United States Air Force?” Jacob smiled. “I have a lot of resources at my disposal. What do you need? Because I need to get back to NORAD ASAP.”

The woman nearly knocked over the cook-pot as she stood up and screeched. “NORAD?”

“Yes.” Jacob replied.

“The winter court is abducting high-ranking US Military personnel and stranding them in the Nevernever? From NORAD? As in, “we keep track of the Nukes” NORAD?” The idea seemed to horrify her beyond her ability to conceal her emotions. “Why?”

“He didn’t exactly stop to explain things.” Jacob replied. “He pounced, I went down and there’s all she wrote.”

There was another long pause before the woman spoke. “I need you to stare into my eyes.”
“Sure…” Jacob arched an eyebrow in confusion before Selmak spoke aloud, as much for the woman’s benefit as Jacob’s. “She wishes to see your soul to know if we are lying. She believes that I have possibly possessed you and made you believe those things – she is wrong but it is the sort of thing that many different parasites would do. It will not be pleasant.”

“Any more unpleasant than seeing your memories?” Jacob queried, thinking back to the things that the Tok’ra had shown him from Goa’uld ceremonies. Moloch’s reveries were not the worst thing Selmak had witnessed.

“Unlikely.” Selmak replied aloud, his eyes flashing as he looked up to stare into the woman’s gaze. Their eyes met and suddenly Jacob was transported elsewhere. He was not alone. Draped across his neck and shoulders was an elegant serpent with a skin pattern like white marble ending in the curious frilled head of the Goa’uld symbiotes. He knew in an instant that it was the Tok’ra, Selmak.

He tried to speak to the serpent, but found himself unable to make works, only to experience the rush of images washing over him. He witnessed glimpses of the woman’s life. He saw vague memories of what might have once been parents, insignificant wisps of forgotten memories from those who’d left her life in infancy. He caught fragments of the lonely life of a foster child, never quite staying in one place for long enough to belong until finally someone adopted her. He saw a happy family, an adoptive father and brother on a farm – until he saw those feelings of familial love for her brother shape into something different, but no less pure. He saw the feeling of betrayal as her adoptive father became a monster, doing terrible things to her in the pursuit of power.

He was having difficulty understanding the specifics, the woman’s conflicting emotions displayed a myriad of conflicting images of the same scene. Some showing her supplication to her adoptive father, some showing her begging and pleading not to do what he demanded. And then the world erupted into fire. Her adoptive father, dead. Her brother turned lover, the source of the flames – a beacon of rage who wished her dead as he had brought death upon her father. And then fear. He saw images of a woman who grew up in hiding, beholden to the debt she’d incurred in order to flee the righteous wroth of her lover and a shadowy cabal of cloaked men with glimmering blades.

He felt her shame, and her hope, and her fear and her guilt. Decades of guilt. Decades of loneliness in which she hadn’t allowed herself another’s touch for fear that she might bring the doom upon them that she brought upon her first love. Decades in which she feared to be alone with any man for fear that she might become victim to mesmerism or mind magics. He felt the love she had for the Summer Court of the Furlings, paired with the absolute terror she had of what she owed them. It was a debt she might never be able to repay – a fate worse than death if it ever were called to task.

He snapped back to his body, keenly aware that Selmak’s visions within the woman’s mind had been different from his own. He would have to compare notes with the Tok’ra later when they had a moment. The woman was not fairing as well for having seen the inside of his and Selmak’s heads. She stood stock still, just shivering as a white glow shimmered across her eyes, her lip quivering as
she muttered in what sounded vaguely like the Goa’uld language. When she snapped back into reality, there were tears in her eyes. “I’ll help you.”

“I’ll owe you one.” Jacob replied.

“No. You won’t.” The woman shivered wiping her eyes with her sleeves. “I want to help. This is for me – not you.” She cleared her throat. “But I don’t know how to get to Colorado. I can get you to Earth, no problem, but getting you to a place that specific means that I’d have to ask for a route. Which means I’d have to trade for it. And if the one who you claim is responsible for sending you here is responsible, then he will have ensured that the cost of that information will be too much for us to afford, at least temporarily.”

“It’s a step ahead of where I was.” Jacob replied. “How close can you get me?”

“Chicago.” Replied the woman. “There are Air Force bases in Illinois, right?”

“Scott AFB is four hours outside of the city, but I shouldn’t have to go that far to get a secure telephone. The Great Lakes Naval Station is inside the city.” Jacob smiled, pleased that something was finally going his way. “I’m Jacob Carter by the way. General Jacob Carter.”

“Elaine.” Replied the woman, not supplying a last name as she handed him a bowl. “Eat up. We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

“You don’t say.” Joked Jacob as he dug into his bowl of stew, with the plastic spoon she offered. “I’m looking forward to getting out of here and back to safety.”

“Don’t get too excited about it General.” The woman’s lip quirked in a sad smile. “The closest exit I know of leads into Fuller Park. I don’t know if I would describe that as safety.”

Jacob sighed. “Fucking Chicago. Anything else I should know?”

“I also don’t have any money.” Elaine admitted. “I don’t exactly use cash out here and credit cards require an address. So we’re hoofing it unless you know how to hotwire a car.” Jacob smiled and pulled his wallet out of a pocket in his vest, flashing a thick stack of green bills inside along with an array of plastic cards – expense cards with an unlimited credit withdrawal courtesy of the SGC. “I’ve got us covered.”
“Jesus, Daddy Warbucks, where were you going if the kitty hadn’t tossed you into the Nevernever? That looks like the set dressing for a rap video about making it rain.” Elaine eyed the money in astonishment. “Those are hundreds, aren’t they?”

“I don’t get to see my Grandchildren that often. When I do get to see them I like to spoil them.” Jacob smiled at the memory of Mark’s kids. “I was going to buy them new gear for soccer this year.”

There was a flash of what might have been envy for the childhood she’d never gotten to have, just a brief twitch of the eye but Selmak caught it.

“Is that all?” Jacob spoke between bites, it really was quite a good stew.

“We’re almost definitely going to end up in Vampire territory. The Red Court is actively on the war path for any wizard they can get their hands on and I’m technically a fugitive so even the vampires do attack us we can’t risk drawing too much attention to us or the Wizard secret police will drag me off for an impromptu decapitation.” Elaine shrugged.

Jacob’s wasn’t sure if it was his own ager or a sympathetic combination of his anger paired with Selmak’s that triggered an involuntary eye flash, but neither one of them very much liked the idea of an American being dragged off for summary execution. “Wizard Secret Police?”

“I honestly don’t know much about them. I’ve spent most of my life fleeing from them. I was only a teenager when I “broke” their laws.” Elaine explained, her face looking very much like the scared child from Jacob’s earlier vision as she made finger quotes around the word “broke.” “There are only a couple of laws in the Wizard government. Seven to be exact. If you violate any of them, to any degree, there is only one penalty – death. I had someone control my mind and force me to break the laws, but the Council isn’t really interested in extenuating circumstances.”

“The council would wish to execute me on sight as well if it makes you feel any better.” Selmak offered. “The Tok’ra rebellion happened long after our expulsion from the first world. I doubt they know the difference between one of the System Lords and one of my brethren.”

“Yeah, that sounds like them.” Elaine agreed.

“You’re telling me that there is a secret government operating on US soil and actively murdering US citizens?” Jacob’s voice wasn’t loud. He was too angry to shout. “And they were willing to execute
a child?"

Elaine passed Jacob another bowl of soup, a sad little smile on her face. “You know. I wonder if the reason that the Wizards are so determined to keep the mortals out of things isn’t to avoid that exact facial expression.”

“I won’t let them kill you Elaine.” Jacob replied. “Not a US Citizen. Not while I still draw breath.”

Elaine laughed, it was an honest sound like silver bells. “I’m sure they’d be glad to arrange for just that General. But for the moment I’m more worried about the South Side of Chicago than the Wardens.”

“The what?” Jacob paused.

“The Wardens.” Elaine replied. “They’re like the Wizard equivalent to James bond crossed with the terminator. They wear grey Cloaks over their head and shoulders.”

“Of course. I should have realized immediately.” Selmak Interjected mentally at Jacob. “That’s why he picked the title of Lord Warden as his new moniker. He’s rubbing the it in the White Council’s nose that they not only failed to kill him but he now is using their powers to ascend up the ladder of godhood. Considering that it was Wizards of the first Merlin’s Council who coordinated the joint effort between the magical peoples to repel the Goa’uld it’s a thematically appropriate choice. Heka DESPISED the Merlin.”

“How much should we assume he knows about Earth?” Jacob thought back to Selmak. “The Politics, the shifting loyalties between governments and so on? Do I need to start having nightmares about an Iranian-Goa’uld arms sharing agreement, an Iraqi Stargate Program, or a North Korean space fleet?”

“Presumably he knows everything that a contemporary resident of the first world would know.” Selmak replied mentally, shifting uncomfortably in Jacob’s skull. “I see no reason to assume that he would not capitalize upon that knowledge.”

“There aren’t many of them and they don’t know that I’m alive.” Elaine supplied, apparently taking Jacob’s silence for worry rather than introspection. He suspected that she hadn’t confessed her fugitive status to many people. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”
Jacob put down his second empty bowl. “Elaine, I stopped believing that things were just going to go right about twenty years ago. The worst that can go wrong is a good jumping off point for where things will actually go.”

Elaine smiled, stood up and messed up the circle with her toe. “Coming?”

“Don’t we need to put out the fire?” Jacob pointed to the still bubbling pot.

“Did you think that I cooked ten gallons of stew for myself?” Elaine chuckled as she opened a rip in the air that looked out on a dingy alleyway in the dead of night. “No, the others will get it when they get back. War is hungry work.”
Chapter 15

Sam’s ears rang with the constant gunfire echoing through the tight corridors of the pyramid ship. The mask on her face, a breathing apparatus of Goa’uld make, was the only thing keeping her from asphyxiating as the ship’s interior was exposed to the cruel vacuum of space. The near pitch black of the moon’s surface was highlighted in staccato bursts as weapons fire brought a brief respite of illumination to the inky void.

The hull still glowed from where their attackers had burned their way through, casting a hateful red glow where molten metal spread across the floor. They must have brought some sort of advanced plasma weaponry to generate the requisite heat to burn through the re-enforced hull of a Goa’uld mothership. The structures were hardened to prevent damage from staff weapons or debris. They had melted more a five-foot-thick slab of re-enforced alien composite materials for their point of ingress in a time period that Sam wouldn’t have believed possible without the use of a mothership’s main weapons, and done so with close enough proximity to the discharge of the plasma apparatus that Sam would have expected them to have been fried or irradiated by the discharge.

By all accounts it shouldn’t have been possible. But Sam had seen many impossible things since joining the SGC. The advanced races of the galaxy treated physics as more of a polite suggestion than a strict law, and supplemented the practical with the unlikely whenever possible. Skepticism was a luxury for people not defending an alien pyramid from space Romans on the moon. Doctor Daniel Jackson and LT Johnson barely had time to take position in the corridor before their attackers were upon them.

She fired at the closest Roman, retreated back behind Daniel, covered his retreat, and so on as they followed the Colonel’s plan. Kill as many of the boarders as they could manage on their way to the ring room, meet up with the re-enforcements Colonel Makepeace had radioed for, and assault the enemy with superior firepower when they were at their weakest.

“Fire in the hole,” Shouted Colonel Makepeace as he tossed a metal ball down the corridor and at the face of an approaching Roman. Sam ducked back behind her pillar, taking the chance to catch her breath as a cloud of debris and metal shards showered the man’s boiled leather armor. When she turned back the Legionary was bloody but still standing. His skin and armor rippled briefly, blistering into black scales as the man clutched at gaping wounds across his body. He fell to his knees, holding at the seeping wounds across his flesh to keep the shimmering ruby blood within his body.

His compatriots formed moved around him, planting black shields and long spears between their wounded comrade and their attackers. They were highly disciplined, as Carter and the Marines opened fire upon them they showed no fear even as bullets ripped through their shields and into their bodies. Carter watched hot led pierced men’s faces and bodies, dropping them to the ground but there always seemed to be a man to take the place of the man she shot.
At first, Sam felt bad for how outmatched the Romans seemed to be. Their spears and shields provided them with little protection against modern weaponry, as long as Carter and Daniel continued to tactically retreat with SG-3 in the direction of the central ring room they would be sufficiently thin the herd so that when SG teams 5 and 6 arrived the boarders would be easy pickings. Or so she’d though till one of the Romans she shot was replaced by a roman wearing torn armor and a bullet ridden shield, a man she was certain had been wounded by the grenade. His wounds had healed over, angry pink flesh meeting patches of thick scales where his wounds had been when the shrapnel hit.

“Sam!” Daniel shouted over the raging projectile fire. “They’re not going down!”

“Oh no,” Sam groaned as she shot a Roman through the head and he just staggered, reaching up to clutch his headwound.

“I’m running low on Ammo here.” LT Johnson snarled, slapping another magazine into his rifle as he covered Major Warren’s retreat.

“Major Carter, I could really use a clever idea here!” Colonel Makepeace tossed another grenade stalling the shield wall and forcing the rank behind it to climb over their wounded brethren. Carter flinched at the reptilian eyes in the darkness, flashing back with every burst of her weapon. They were looking less and less like men with every wound they took, seeming more and more like what would happen if an Unas and a human were ever to produce a viable infant.

Carter’s magazine clicked – she was out of ammunition for her rifle. Furious and cursing her luck she reached down and pulled the alien pistol from where it was holstered at her hip, letting the cobra head it snap to attention with an angry zip-hiss of electricity. She squeezed the firing mechanism, sending four bolts of lightning zipping down the corridor. They did not, as a zat-weapons normally did, cascade across the man she fired them at. No, their collision caused something Sam hadn’t ever seen before. The bolts ripped through the man’s shield and armor, causing them to evaporate into smoke as they ripped through his form. Where they touched his skin spidery patters of blue lightning spread out, thick pustules of sickly liquid bursting from under scaly skin. He howled in agony as his body expanded like she’d started to inflate him like a balloon, right up till his body erupted into a shower of meat and ruby-red blood.

The Romans did not take the death of their compatriot well.

Colonel Makepeace didn’t even need to bother yelling “retreat” as a confusing stream of glowing projectiles streamed down the corridor. Balls of swirling lightning, torrents of acid, black gouts of flame, and any number of other noxious and caustic weapons followed Sam as she grabbed Daniel,
Ducking down into a large antechamber off the main corridor to the ring room. The tile he’d been standing on shattered as a huge spur of bone coated in orange liquid landed on it. Purple smoke rose from the smoldering rubble, sending yellow sparks in every direction.

She kicked the bulkhead controls to slam down the door behind her, separating her allies from their pursuers.

“Dr. Jackson is there some sort of a Legend about Roman Legionaries that I don’t know about?” The Colonel wheezed as he tried to catch his breath. “Because I’ll admit I wasn’t the best student, but I feel like that was something that I would have found worth remembering.”

“I actually think they’re cavalry.” Daniel gasped in reply, pulling out his canteen and drinking its contents before discarding it. “Their standard wasn’t right for legionnaires.”

“Their what?” The Colonel looked to the other Marines as though hoping one of them would translate what was just said to them.

“Their standard bearer wasn’t carrying the Aquila, they were carrying a Dacian cavalry standard.” Daniel replied. “It wasn’t right for them to be Legionnaires.”

“Daniel is there some sort of a Legend about Roman Cavalry that I don’t know about?” The Colonel asked between clenched teeth while Sam ripped the crystal from the door controls, sealing a bulkhead between themselves and the Romans. “Because I feel like even as a Goa’uld trick, that one should have made the history books.”

“I think it did.” Daniel pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I think that they’re dragons.”

“Dragons?” Colonel Makepeace replied in frustrated deadpan. “I seem to recall the ones upstairs being less bipedal.”

“Dragon lore is extensive – some just describe them as being unthinking monsters but others, especially the Eastern mythologies, describe them as beings of powerful magics.” Daniel pulled his Zat gun from his hip, activating it. “And considering that they’re currently trying to burn through the bulkhead with their fire breath, I’m going to go out on a limb and say ‘Dragon’ given that the Lord Warden literally told us that Dragons were going to come and try to murder us for having this ship.”
“Dragons.” The Colonel rolled his eyes as checked his magazine, accounting for how many rounds he had left. “It figures that the snake would be honest about how his gift was going to get us killed.”

The door to the ring room was starting to glow at the edges, molten hot sparks were spitting out from where the bulkhead met the ground. Sam swallowed, trying to do the math on what combination of biological or technological advances would be required to manifest the abilities the Romans had shown.

“Do we retreat to the SGC? Let them know what we’ve found.” LT Johnson asked, a slightly hopeful note in his voice at the thought of retreat coming in to his voice as he adjusted his breathing apparatus.

“Stow that Marine. We still have people on this ship, we don’t leave till they leave. We’ve got three Zat guns between us. Teal’c is bringing more. We have them at a bottle-neck.” Colonel Makepeace shook his head. “I’m not giving up this ship to anyone, not before we’ve gotten what we need. Bullets don’t kill these things but I’m damn sure they more than tickle. That should give us time to Zat anyone who gets too friendly. They really don’t seem to like Zats.”

“It must have something to do with the trans-phasic properties of Zat weaponry.” Sam considered what she knew about the Furlings. “Dragons must be like the Furlings or the Retou, they’re manifesting on this dimensional plane. That must require a tremendous amount of energy. Given that Zat weaponry disrupts the bonds between electrons their effects upon any creature who isn’t native to this dimension’s laws of physics must be catastrophic. Once the phase state of any individual particle is disrupted it causes a cascade effect.” Sam wondered if the Zat weaponry’s effects upon dragons was an ancillary benefit discovered after the weapon had been designed or if it had been the weapon’s intended purpose from the start.

The sparks that had been spitting under the door stilled, a sudden and terrifying quiet coming from the other side of the bulkhead after the sudden clash of heavy feet coming to attention as spears were brought up against shields. There was a sudden and haunting quiet from outside the room as the sound of a man’s shoes clacking upon the ground echoed down the corridor. They came closer, step by step, a hitched and labored pace to them as though the man making them was walking with a slight limp. The slight drag-thump of the man’s walk was somehow more foreboding than the ravenous cries of the dragons had ever been.

And then a word was spoken.

It was not a complex word, astonishingly simple really. Two syllables spoken in the imperative.
“Open.”

The Door burst inwards, knocking Sam off her feet as it ripped itself from the wall and few inwards. She fell backward tail over teakettle, scrambling to pick her Zat back up off the ground as a man entered the room. She raised her weapon to fire at the man only for another imperative to ring across the room.

“Stop.”

And just like that Sam stopped. She stopped moving, she was barely breathing, even her eyes were struggling to move as she willed them to examine her companions. They were all trapped in similar predicaments, twitching as they attempted to fight the overpowering sense of stillness.

“Remove their weapons.” Spoke the man. There wasn’t the same resonance to this sentence, the immediate and immutable fact of what had been spoken wasn’t there, but there was a regal sense of command in the man’s cultured gravely rumble.

He shambled into Sam’s line of vision as the Dragon soldiers entered the ring-room. The rage that had filled their very being when they’d chased Sam and her allies was replaced with a combination of reverence and terror for the man who now stood before her. He was tall, of an obviously muscular build and clearly knew how to use that muscle. In contrast to the others, he was wearing a light grey three-piece suit that wouldn’t have looked out of place in an executive board room accented with a white silk shirt and a bright green tie.

He had likely once been handsome, in a severe and rugged sort of way. The esthetic as marred, however, by the seeping red wounds covering half his body. One of his hands was bandaged, having been cut and mangled to a degree that she could discern which fingers were missing even though the swaddling. Someone had gored the man and lit him on fire, recently. He examined her through the eye that was not swollen shut and dripping ruby-red blood, thin trails of smoke coming from his dimples as he smiled at Sam with a mouth full of very sharp teeth. Paired with the red stains on his silk shirt where his wounds had seeped into the fabric and it gave the man a sharkish appearance.

He looked her up and down with a sort of predatory masculine appreciation as he pulled the weapon from her fingers, even as her body vibrated with the effort of trying to pull the trigger. “You will find me to be more capable prey than the scion you dispatched.”

Sam’s jaw twitched as she tried to speak, furious that her muscles were betraying her. The man tutted, clicking his tongue against his teeth. “Now, you will speak to me, and speak truly. If you lie to me –“ He reached down Sam’s collar, pulling her dog tags from her shirt and reading them. “-
Samatha Carter, such a pretty name – If you lie to me, I will know it, and you will regret it.”

Sam’s eyes bulged at the sudden sense of immense pressure as the man spoke her name. There was a sense of pressure from all sides that briefly gave her the sensation that it might crush her. Telekinesis, yet another impossible ability demonstrated by the so-called dragons. The man continued, letting go of her dog tags and looking at each of the SG team members in turn. “The same extends to each of you. You will speak and I will listen.”

He looked at the Colonel, taking in the man’s rank as he walked over and pulled out the man’s dogtags. “Colonel Makepeace. How long until your re-enforcements arrive?”

The Colonel’s mouth twitched as he fought the urge to speak. The man in the suit spoke again in the imperative. “Speak.”

“Two response teams are coming. They were on call to suit up and teleport in within twenty minutes of a distress call I sent ten minutes ago.” The words rolled out of the Colonel’s mouth, seemingly against his will.

“Do they know that I am here?” Asked the man.

The Colonel’s lips twitched again, sweat beading across his brow as he fought the urge to speak. Sam was pretty sure he’d ruptured a blood vessel in his eye from the strain. The man smiled his sharkish grin, a mildly pleased lilt in his speech as he said. “My, you are the strong willed one. Mortals are rarely able to resist me even once. I am almost impressed.”

The Colonel stared daggers at the man, willing him to die.

“I do not wish to cause you any more harm than is necessary to such an interesting specimen of mankind. Fortunately, you are only as strong as the weakest link in your chain. And you have brought men with you who lack your experience and fortitude of will.” The man looked to the marine lieutenant. “Do they know I’m here?”

“Jesus man, I’m not evens sure what the fuck you are – let alone who are.” The words poured out from the junior officer’s lips at break neck speeds, he couldn’t seem to get the words out fast enough. “We told them everything we knew about you which was essentially “you’re here” and “you’re attacking.”
“Are they going to bring the Goa’uld who owns this vessel with them from?” Asked the man. “Your patron.”

“No.” Replied the Lieutenant, genuine surprise in his voice.

“Where is your patron god.” Repeated the man, a twinge of the imperative in his voice. “Tell me where the Goa’uld is so that I might liberate his skull from his neck.”

“I don’t know.” Replied the Lieutenant.

Anger was in the man’s voice, the vocalization of which felt like a knife stabbing into Sam’s ear. “Do not lie. This is a Goa’uld ship. You are onboard it, where is the Goa’uld?”

“He isn’t here.” Sam shouted, willing her mouth to move. The man turned around to face her, an amused look on his injured face. Sam looked him dead in the eye. “He isn’t even in this Solar System. He left through the Stargate.”

“To where?” Asked the man, fury in his voice.

“I don’t know.” Replied Sam, “I honestly don’t know. I wasn’t there when the gate was used.”

“Who was?” Asked the man.

Sam’s eye twitched, it was a slight motion but it was apparently enough for the man to turn to Daniel and ask his question again. “What planet did the Goa’uld go to.”


“Nekheb…” The man’s face betrayed no emotion. A saurian aspect of stillness in him as he froze in place, contemplating that fact. “You are certain of that?”

“Yes.” Replied Daniel.
There was another pause as the man examined Doctor Jackson. “You are less ridiculous in those fatigues than I would have imagined when I met you five years ago. It was amusing to see men dismiss truth so emphatically even as it was spoken from the mouths of babes.”

“You have been honest with me so I will reward you in kind.” He snapped his fingers, and the Stargate team members suddenly found themselves able to move again. “Remember that that which has been given can be taken away.”

Sam fell to the ground as her legs gave out under her, falling to the ground. She looked around the room, thrilled to just be able to move her neck again. The men who had been dressed like romans, the ones that the man referred to as “scions,” had filled up the room. While a small contingent of them had taken place in a protective perimeter to prevent Sam, Daniel, and the Marines from escaping, the majority were pawing through the contents of the stargate team member’s backpacks. They removed each of the items in turn, speaking to each other in a guttural grunting language that Sam recognized from earlier that day.

It was the same language spoken by the little girl she’d found in the cargo-bay. They seemed to be engaged in a debate over what constituted appropriate clothing. They seemed to have realized the anachronistic nature of their garb and were attempting to correct it. There was not an accord in how to achieve this goal, however. Some seemed to have shifted their clothing into something closer to the man’s suit while others were changing their appearance to resemble the Stargate Team fatigues. A few more indecisive scions had tried to combine the two esthetics with limited success, their skin and clothing kept rippling as they communally tried to generate a more perfect camouflage. The Colonel’s lip curled in disgust as one of the Scions shifted his appearance in imitation of the Colonel, including the rank insignias.

“Colonel?” Asked the man.

“What do you want?” Asked the Colonel, the Marine’s tone appending a litany of swear words to the end of his sentence.

“I want you to use your radio to tell your leadership precisely how many soldiers are up here. I want you to inform them of precisely how hard they are to kill. I want you to inform them that I have taken you hostage for safe passage.” The man smiled. “And I want you to inform them that I will soon arrive to negotiate. You have my word that I will arrive alone and unarmed.”

“Negotiate?” Asked the Colonel incredulously.
“Taws not I who fired upon you when first my scions entered this vessel.” The man replied. “I will speak my terms and your people will come to an accord with my terms.”

“And if they don’t” Asked Doctor Jackson.

“Then when next I return I will be neither alone nor unarmed.” Replied the man.
Chapter 16

“You’re dripping on the floor.” Jack said, handing the purple ichor soaked priestess a towel from his laundry hamper for lack of a better course of action to take. She took the towel and wiped at the purple fluid, removing most of it – minus a purple residue that stained her light chocolate skin. The fluid sizzled across her tattoos, shimmering green where it touched. Given just how much of her there were tattoos on, it was actually a bit of a light show.

The woman in front of Jack was extremely naked, a fact that was exacerbated by how little she seemed to be bothered by being naked in the middle of the passageway. There was no amount of trying to maintain eye contact that was going to allow Jack even the pretense of respecting her apparently absent concept of modesty. He knew that as the ranking Officer present for… whatever the hell it was that had happened in the priestess’ quarters, he was going to have to conduct the preliminary incident inquiry. But he wasn’t going to be able to focus on anything until the woman had some damn pants on.

“She’s pretty.” Spoke the small voice of Emily, reminding Jack that the child had accompanied him when he’d gone to do his laundry. She pointed to the priestess, seemingly entranced by the woman’s many glimmering piercings – a fair number of which were attached to places that Jack was a little embarrassed to even think about on a woman he hadn’t bought dinner for. “Mine?”

“You can’t own people.” Jack grumbled, rooting in his laundry for something that wasn’t a uniform item and pulling out a ratty pair of black nylon gym shorts and a polyester shirt so old you couldn’t even make out the Bass Pro logo on it any more. Emily watched the exchange, muttering in her guttural native language something that sounded less than impresses by her inability to own the priestess.

To his surprise, she took them – shimmying up into the gym shorts in a way that was practically pornographic in spite of the fact that she was actually putting on clothing and putting her arms through the sleeves of her shirt. She did not button the front, leaving the loose bits of shirt to hang over her breasts and expose her midriff.

“For crying out loud,” Jack put down the hamper and walked over to her – doing the buttons so that she wouldn’t give some passer by a show if she turned too quickly. She said something that might have been a snake version of “thank you” to which he replied, “You’re welcome.” As he turned to the SFs who’d rushed into the Priestess’ room only moments prior.

The senior ranking SF looked at the priestess warily, speaking to the Colonel slowly and deliberately in a friendly tone while smiling – too deliberately for his convivial tone to be honest. “Sir, you need to back away from that woman.”
“Airman?” The Colonel replied, taking a step back to put himself between the SF and the priestess.

“Sir there are… things… in that room. I don’t know what they are. She’s covered in their blood.” The SF spoke slowly. “They were disguised as Doctor Frasier and two members of the SGC when they showed us their IDs. I don’t know what they are or how many of them there are walking around this base but we have to assume that they came here with the Goa’uld prisoners. They’re the only ones outside of the SGC who would have had prolonged time alone with the doctor.”

Jack walked over to the door, gently holding Emily’s hand in his and keeping her behind him as he poked his head in to look at the “things” in question. Three chitinous monsters were gored in the space, body parts spread about the room in ways that had left patterns of neon-purple ichor across the room. He clapped his hand over Emily’s eyes as she looked into the room and started screaming in her growling, guttural native tongue. He cursed himself for having let the kid see that. Alien gore or not, kids didn’t need to see that degree of death.

“Understood.” The Colonel replied to the SF, remembering how adamantly the recent defectors from the Warden’s cadre had been to remove the priestess from their presence. Perhaps they were afraid that she would blow their cover – the tattoos across her body seemed to have technological properties to them that affected the purple shelled species greatly. “Take her down to the stockade, I’ll get the General to put the base in lockdown till we can parse out who is a shapeshifter.”

“Roger.” The SF replied, nodding in assent before his head exploded. Jack flinched as Emily screamed, her voice like a siren as a group of Marines opened fire down the corridor, trying to kill them. Jack dragged Emily into an alcove, furious that he was without a weapon. He reached out to the dead SF’s shoulder, grabbing him by his combat webbing and dragging him across the ground. Emily kept screaming, grabbing Jack so hard around the waist that he was having trouble breathing. He reached past her, smashing his hand over the red button on the wall warning of a base incursion.

Nothing happened.

Jack blinked. That was bad. There were only a couple of people who would have the authority to cancel that legitimately – at least two of whom had to be compromised in order to disable the system. One of whom had to be General Hammond. These things had either tortured, compromised, or snaked General Hammond into giving them the codes to disable the alarms.

Time for plan B.

He kissed the top of her head even as bullets cracked the wall near where they hid. “It’s going to be ok Emily.” He said in a calmer voice than he felt as he yanked the SF’s weapon out from under his
body, turning it to automatic fire and pulling himself from her embrace so that he could move. “I promised to protect you, and I mean it.”

“Protect.” Emily said in a particularly small voice, as though unconvinced of his capacity though not his sincerity.

Jack looked across the corridor to where the other SF and Priestess were hunkered down. The SF, to his credit, was managing to stay relatively calm in spite of having seen his fellow watch-stander die. He’d already slain one of the faux-marines, exposing it’s chitinous purple form in death. He fired into the face of another, hoping against hope that it was a shapeshifter as he had otherwise have slain a man he’d known for two years. Jack flinched, realizing that he wasn’t going to know if anyone on base was a friendly any more. If these things actually managed to get off base they would be a nightmare.

He would have to tell someone if he lived. A prospect that felt increasingly unlikely as the “not-marines” received reinforcements in the form of chitinous purple soldiers carrying Earth weapons, they were not cloaked by whatever technology concealed their fellows. There was an exit in the opposite direction from the approaching shape-shifters, but it would require that Jack and the others expose themselves out of cover for thirty feet before they hit the elevator. Even assuming that the elevator was on their floor, it would be suicide to try to reach it.

He swore as a bullet tore through the stomach of the remaining SF, piercing the man’s belly and exiting through his back to spill out the man’s innards. He dropped to his knees, clutching his wound. Their attackers took advantage of his suddenly exposed form and ripped through him with another ten bullets. The priestess pulled the dead man’s pistol from his holster, pressing her finger pointlessly against the trigger – either unaware of or unable to operate the Beretta’s safety. Jack’s eye twitched, wanting very much to grab the gun from her hands. A weapon in untrained hands was potentially as dangerous to an ally as an enemy.

He shoved Emily back into the corner as she tried to get a better look at the action. “Stay down!”

The invading force was getting harder and harder to keep suppressed. They had a tactically superior position and greater numbers. Even if someone were to arrive who weren’t some sort of shapeshifting crustacean they’d been hard pressed to tell who they were supposed to be assisting. He needed a distraction and he needed it fast. He ducked back into the alcove, taking stock of his available resources. He had a gun that was easily a quarter to a halfway through its magazine already, a three-inch pocket knife, and not a whole heck of a lot else to play with.

He was out of good choices so he made a bad one, ducking out of cover to grab a flash-bang grenade from the SF’s belt and fling it down the passageway. He dropped to the ground behind the dead man’s body – hoping against hope that they corpse would provide some obstruction to the
attackers as she shoved his fingers in his ears and slammed shut his eyelids. His ears rang with the explosion as he stood up, grabbing the wrist of Emily and the now blinded priestess of Nekheb and rushing them towards the elevator.

The crab-men must have had sensitive eyes, they fired wildly while screeching a warbling cry of pain. Bullets soared down the hallway at random, grazing the meat of Jack’s thigh and shoulder. The priestess cried out in pain as one penetrated her arm, blood seeping out and down to just get absorbed into the strange pattern of tattoos covering her.

Jack pulled his access card from his pocket and swiped it through the elevator door’s control mechanism only to feel his heart sink as it flashed red twice and displayed an error message, “Unable to comply. Access to this level has been terminated.” Someone – likely the same someone who’d tampered with the alarms – had disabled his access to the elevators.

“No, no, no, no! Not now.” Jack swiped his card again, firing at the regrouping crab-people. There was a second crack of gunfire as the Priestess fired her stolen pistol with her uninjured arm. Her shots were wildly inaccurate, the idea that she would have to actually aim the weapon seemed alien to her. She also didn’t seem to have a good grasp of ammo scarcity – she just kept pulling the trigger till she was entirely out of ammunition.

Jack kept swiping his card and the elevator kept displaying the same error.

The elevator wasn’t coming.

They were going to die.

It was at roughly that moment that Jack accepted his inevitable demise that the corridor exploded into flames. Emily’s puffed out her cheeks like a chipmunk, parting her lips and blowing hard in a whistling pucker that directed a gout of black fire tipped with plumes of emerald. The fiery torrent spun in geometric patterns that no fire ought to have obeyed, spreading out into a searing latticework of pain that gouged across the floor and ceiling of the corridor. The crab men screamed and retreated as the fire impacted their front lines, exploding in a corona of shimmering black that collapsed inward, crushing their bodies.

The concrete and steel lining the corridor’s ceiling in front of the Priestess’ room collapsed on the crab men – crushing them under rubble and exposing the level above them. Jack’s brief moment of panic that someone from the level above might have been caught in the collapse subsided when he remembered that they were on level 12 of the SGC. The only items housed on level 11 were the checkpoint from the main elevator leading to NORAD and the water purification plant for the SGC –
a fact re-enforced by the sudden rush of water from a cracked storage tank.

“Where the hell did that come from kiddo?” Jack blinked, looking from Emily to the Priestess. The Priestess was thrilled, grinning from ear to ear. Jack wasn’t entirely sure if that was a byproduct of not dying or of having witnessed something that she was doubtlessly interpreting as a miracle. There was going to be a passage about this in that woman’s damnable holy book, he just knew it.

She grinned back toothily bobbing back and forth on her heels as she cozied up to the Colonel. “Jack mine. I keep. Friends fight together. Bad guys hurt friend.”

“Lets keep that to a minimum kiddo – I don’t think the base can handle much more of that kind of help.” Jack squinted up the sudden ramp of rubble, trying to judge how stable the debris was. They needed to reach level 11 to leave the SGC but it wouldn’t do him any good if the whole thing collapsed in on them while they were climbing. He looked at Emily’s and the Priestess’ feet – wishing he had proper shoes to give them. Not all of the rubble had broken cleanly and there were bits of exposed rebar and damaged pipes – all of which would be hard to traverse without shoes.

“What the hell is going on down there?” Asked a furious man’s voice as a beam of light cast down from the darkness of the level above. “Colonel O’Neill? Is that you? Who was shooting?”

“Siler?” Jack asked, holding his hand up to his face. “Get that damn light out of my face.”

“Sorry sir.” Siler replied, lowering the flashlight and giving the Colonel a better look at the man addressing him. Master Sergeant Sylvester Siler was above them, holding a flashlight in one hand and a pistol in the other. Two SFs stood on either side of him. “We heard the gunfire and came to investigate – who was shooting? Other than you, I mean.”

“I’ll explain once you get me up there.” Jack replied. “And I mean only me. I’m declaring a Foothold situation Siler. Code word Benedict.”

Siler blanched. “Sir are you sure.”

“Do I look like a man who is unclear in his motivations Master Sargent?” Jack asked, wiping the dust from his front. “Do it, and have the duty officer pass the word to all levels above us. Whoever these guys are they can’t be allowed to leave the base.”
Foothold was a last resort code word, the term used for when a hostile alien force had penetrated far enough into the SGC that they’d managed to compromise the facility. Once declared it could not be invalidated except by senior leadership outside of the SGC – specifically that of the NID. They would be tasked with coming to the SGC, purging the threat, and ensuring that lingering forces did not continue to compromise America’s security after the threat has been removed from the SGC. It was not a term to be invoked lightly.

It took a while for Jack and his female companions to safely scale the rubble and reach level 11 by which time Siler and the SF’s had executed the necessary procedures for shutting down power to the elevator and locking off access to the lower levels of the base. It wouldn’t prevent access to every escape hatch, but hopefully NORAD’s standard security would be able to monitor and secure those routes till the cavalry arrived. Most notably, it would cut off access to the generators on level 5 of the SGC – rendering all outgoing gate traffic inoperable. They would have lights and ventilation, but that was about it. Even the phones would be cut off in short order. The emergency battery on level 23 would delay the effects of a total shutoff, but only for about six hours.

Jack took the secure telephone offered to him by Siler and dialed in a telephone number he’d been forced to learn by heart a year ago, just in case something like this were to befall the SGC. It rang three times, a chirruping beep that felt distastefully chipper to Jack given the circumstances. A man answered the telephone after the third ring, his voice worried. “National Institute of Defense special programs department. How may I help you?”

Jack recognized the voice immediately. “Colonel Maybourne, this is Jack O’Neill.”

“Jack?” The NID Colonel replied in a voice of grave concern. “You’re calling me? On this line?”

“Foothold.” Jack replied.

There was a long pause. “You realize the severity of what you’re saying?”

“You realize the impossibility that I would elect to speak to you for this long if I didn’t?” Jack replied. “They’ve gotten access to our armory and seem to be able to shape-shift. How quickly can you get here?”

“We already have a response team on call in Colorado.” Colonel Harry Maybourne replied. “We can be there in one, maybe two hours at the most.”
“You’re already in – were you planning on doing this?” Jack asked in indignation.

“Colonel, you played host to four different Goa’uld in the past 24 hours.” Harry replied. “Yes, we had a team prepared to respond if they managed to leave something that compromised the base.”

“And the best you could manage was a two-hour ETA?” Jack snorted. “What, are they union?”

“The SGC does not allow the NID a permanent footprint on base.” Maybourne replied, “because you specifically prevented them from having one” remaining implied rather than outright stated. “We couldn’t sent them till the orders were cut and funding was allocated for our per-diem.”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this Harry, but I’m seriously regretting the fact that you’re not closer than that.” Jack replied, realizing with horror that he actually meant it. “We need you here ASAP.”

“That might be the scariest thing you’ve told me.” Colonel Maybourne replied.

“Harry.” Replied Jack as a wailing sound started seeping through the rubble and the distant rumble of gunfire echoed up through the SGC’s lower levels. “I don’t think we’ve even started on scary yet.”
Chapter 17

Janet Frasier woke with a jolt of nervous energy, struggling against the confines of chitinous purple material. She ripped drunkenly at her face, tearing a leathery mess of crustacean-like nodules from her mouth and lips, retching at the taste of dark brown ichor. She could barely see in the near total dark of the room, only catching glimpses of the space around her. There were dozens of people suspended in harnesses from the ceiling. The softly rising and falling chest of those closest to her gave the doctor hope that her fellow prisoners were alive, though their macabre prison of rotting meat was less encouraging.

Janet kicked against her bonds, only managing to sway gently back and forth for her trouble. She kicked harder, using the momentum to carry her to the nearest prisoner. She overshot her mark the first time, hitting him harder than she meant to and knocking the wind out of herself. Not hard enough to wake him up apparently – whatever cocktail of drugs or alien technology had to be potent. She took a moment to catch her breath before trying again, impacting against his side with less force and managing to grab a hold of the man’s belt.

She didn’t dare try to pull him out of the mask – anesthesia was a dangerous proposition even when the process didn’t involve alien technology and Janet wasn’t going to risk pulling him out till she understood the potential consequences of having done so. Given that she was no longer under its influence, however, she’d be damned if she was going to just hang in the air like an idiot.

She groped through the man’s pockets, pulling out the contents in search of something to help her current predicament. “Come on, have a knife, come on.”

The marine had to have a knife in his pocket. Marines always had a knife on them. After trying six different pockets however, Janet conceded that at least some Marines were content to obey the Air Force’s prohibition on carrying knives with them into the SGC unless specifically authorized. Not that this individual seemed overly bothered by regulations, Janet gagged as she realized she’d stuck her finger into an improvised spittoon that the man had made out of a plastic bottle and placed in his pocket.

She wiped off the water against the man’s leg and smiled, feeling the plastic hilt of a knife near the man’s boot. Not in his pockets then, he’d elected to strap the knife to his leg. She debloused the man’s boot, reaching up to grab the weapon. She let go of the man going back to dangling in place as she sawed at the thick, meaty vines suspending her from the ceiling. They were putrid, fusty things. As her knife sawed though the thick purple fat she sliced through glowing green cysts of liquid that made her gag. The closest scent she could remember to this was back at med school when she’d been given her first cadaver.

She stopped sawing through her bonds at the sound of a woman retching to her right. A dark-
skinned SF was ripping her chitinous gag from her face, swearing profusely in a thick New Jersey accent. It had been a while since Janet heard that many different grammatical uses of the F-word.

“Quiet!” Janet hissed. “We don’t want them to hear us.”

“Doc?” Replied the SF as a second SF showed signs of waking up. “Doc what’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Janet replied, reaching out to rip the gag from the second SF and tilting abruptly as the rope of flesh she’d been sawing through gave way midway through. The doctor dangled at an awkward angle from the remaining rope, holding herself up by the second SF’s harness.

“Doc?” Asked the first SF again.

“I’m fine. We’re going to be fine. Just, stay quiet and we’ll figure out what to do next.” Janet replied, though she had little to no confidence that either was true. “I just need to – ”

Janet didn’t get the chance to say what she needed to accomplish. The fleshy bonds seemed to have been designed to work in pairs. Without the second rope of flesh, her harness was ill equipped to elevate her mass. With a sound of ripping tendon Janet found herself on the floor, groaning with the impact of her chitinous harness hitting the ground.

“Doc!” The SF said in a voice of worry. “You ok?”

“I’m fine,” Janet replied as best she could, though the wind had been completely knocked out of her in the fall. She stood up uneasily, prying the chitinous harness from her to let it clatter to the ground and reaching for the light-switch only to pull her hand back when her finger touched a chitinous tumor growing over the box. She wiped the slime off her hand on her pant leg, jumping in surprise as another body hit the floor followed quickly by a second. It would seem that the first SF had her own knife, and had seen fit to cut down the second SF.

Janet was once again treated to a litany of creative swear words as the women removed their chitinous bonds and pulled flashlights out of their body armor to survey their surroundings. Janet was less inclined to quiet them as she began to understand the gravity of their situation. There were dozens of bodies suspended from the ceiling. How was that even possible? Janet looked at her watch – she’d only been unconscious for half a day. She looked out the window of the storage room they sat within and swallowed as she realized that she could see the outlines of more feet dangling down in the next room.
Had the entire command been captured?

“Turn off those lights!” Janet hissed, motion from the next room catching her eye. Someone was walking in to the next room, likely someone unfriendly.

The next room was bathed in light as a quartet of men walked in. Two purple armored alien looking warriors holding weapons that Janet knew they had to have plundered from the SGC, and two people Janet recognized all too well. General Hammond and Lieutenant Baker, both of whom looked far too friendly with the armed aliens.

“General Hammond?” Asked the second SF. There was genuine hurt in her voice. “He betrayed us?”

“Not unless there are two of them,” The First SF pointed upward, indicating a portly body hanging from the ceiling. General Hammond, a not insubstantial man, was one of the bodies suspended from the ceiling.

“Then who the eff is that?” Asked the second SF. “And how do we kick his ass?”

“You’re unarmed, don’t be stupid.” Janet hissed. “Be quiet, I’m trying to listen.”

Janet could just barely hear the not-Hammond speaking with the aliens. She couldn’t make heads or tails of the grumbling groans of the armed guards, but Hammond’s proxy was speaking in plain English. And boy was he mad. “I don’t want your excuses, I want a way out of this facility. Unless we can get word back this will have been all for nothing.”

The creatures warbled in reply.

“Colonization is a secondary concern at this point.” Replied not-Hammond. “We have drawn the attention of the true enemy. The Patriarchs must be informed and supply lines must be established, this is the first world. The Furlings are tied to it. Conquer it and their empire crumbles.”

Another warble was said in reply, though Janet was certain it had been eager and perhaps a bit afraid.
“Yes.” Agreed Hammond’s proxy. “I believe that we will have to do so. Our orders were to only provide token resistance if our ploy was discovered, but this world is too important. I will be reprimanded, but it must be so.”

“Sir, we aren’t going to be able to resupply unless we get the gate up and running but we aren’t going to be able to get the gate running without either more troops to fight our way out or better weapons to overcome the defenses of the first world.” Lieutenant Baker shook his head. “We were kitted out to infiltrate an army of primitives, not battle a Sidhe death squad. The ones who are ambushing our forces are no mere spirits, they were weapons of Winter. Our wards are being eroded by magics unlike any I’ve ever seen. They are not of Sidhe or Mortal make. Powerful forces are at work here.”

“Then we must have weapons to match theirs.” Replied the not-Hammond. “We are only without one path to power. Some paths can never be closed.”

The guards warbled rapidly, talking over each other in their hurry to convey meaning.

“I know the dangers.” The not-Hammond growled angrily. “But we cannot fail. Not when we have been given this opportunity.”

“I volunteer.” Lieutenant Baker put his hand on the not-Hammond’s shoulder. “It was my squad that failed to slay the interlopers. It should not fall on another.”

The warbling creatures slapped their chest in salute as Hammond turned to the baker proxy. “You know what must come next.”

“I serve the masters.” Replied Baker, bowing his head as Hammond removed a purple dagger and cut baker from stem to stem in one practiced motion, twisting his arm to ensure that the man’s bowels were speared on the knife and wrapped around his arm. The not-Hammond’s face curved up into a horrible rictus, his face seemingly not designed for whatever emotions were going through the man’s mind as he spoke – well Janet wasn’t sure if words was the appropriate way of describing what Hammond spoke.

If music had an equal and opposite force, it would have been what came out of Hammond’s lips. It was harsh and atonal, neither rhythmic nor organized. It was like vocalized static, and it literally hurt to listen. Janet clapped her hands over her ears, feeling something wet against her hands as she did so. When the noise stopped and she pulled back her hands she was unsurprised to find that they were stained with blood. She was certain that her ear drums weren’t ruptured as she could still hear, but there weren’t a whole lot of happy reasons for that sort of reaction.
When she looked back into the room the disemboweled organs had grown and extended into a thick pupae, dripping with orange phlegm and pulsing rhythmically. It spread, diving down the middle and spreading out into a hole of swirling green light that couldn’t help but remind Janet of the stargate. A few moments later the portal disgorged a group of pink crustacean-like insect beings. The creature’s hovered, fluttering on tiny bat-like wings as their faceless heads tilted round the room, observing the space with a fluttering mass of convulsing antennae. The stood silently in front of the portal, opening and closing their pincers.

“I need weapons. Powerful weapons, and I am willing to pay for them.” Hammond spoke. “You know who we are. You know the cause for which we fight.”

The insects fluttered on their bat-wings, indicating neither interest nor approval. The not Hammond, apparently emboldened by not having been outright slain by those to whom he spoke, continued. “We are besieged by the Sidhe and their allies. I need something that will give me the ability to counter that.”

The insects continued their silent vigil, their claws clicking till one of them pointed to a medical gurney in the room’s center. Hammond nodded, getting on to the gurney as he spoke to his men. “No matter what happens, do not interfere.”

The aliens looked at each other, seemingly as nervous about the insects as Janet was, backed away, seemingly afraid that they might get caught up in whatever was about to happen. Janet and the second sf slapped their hands over the first SF’s mouth as she started to scream, using her fist to muffle the woman’s horror as the insects began their perverse surgery. Janet was too terrified to look away as the most twisted medical procedure she’d ever seen in her life took place. The insects started their process by cracking open the not-Hammond’s cranium and pulling out his brain, placing it in a cylindrical jar that they then set up on the ground before beginning their work on the not-Hammond’s body. Whatever power had been keeping up the illusion of Hammond’s form was disrupted by that action, though not enough to prevent the screams coming from the jar from echoing with the Texan general’s tones. The pretender howled impotently, his cruel surgeons apparently concerned only with their work and not the man’s pain. They systematically dismembered the man’s body, removing all of the organs, muscle fibers, and bones in turn, fretting over them with their claws and examining them with long proboscises before attaching odd machines to them and implanting pulsing bits of fungi from their pockets.

Apparently dissatisfied with the materials they had to work with, one of the insects pulled a woman down from the ceiling. She kicked and screamed in her brief moment of consciousness before she too was dismembered, leaving her to scream from a different glass cylinder from the first. The insects pulled the bones from her meat, seeming to prefer them to the ones the man had started out with, chewing them and using them to form a paste that they secreted, spreading it across the man’s rib cage and forming thick plates of bone.
They mixed and matched from the two bodies, adding in their own technologies as was required, rebuilding the man from the ground up. By the time they were done he was nine feet tall and his carapace was barely recognizable beneath thick, black fungi. A set of terrible jaws were in his mouth, bearing a mismatched set of the woman’s teeth and thick, knife-like tusks the insects pulled from the seemingly bottomless bags they carried. Two sets of eyes looked out from the man’s face, inhuman and human both contorted into excruciating agony.

As they put the man’s brain back into his new body it contorted, unused to its new musculature. The twisted haemonculus of a man curled into a ball, sobbing piteously at the pain of his rebirth. Though not as piteously as the woman’s sobs from within the cylinder as the insects lifted it to show her what remained of her meat.

“I’ve paid your price.” Spoke the man, his voice a twisting mix of alien speech and Hammond’s Texas lilt. “Now give us the weapons.”

The insects made a chittering sound that might have been mistaken for laughter before pointing at the man.

“No!” The man replied. “It’s not enough. We need more. Please help us.”

The insects continued their terrible laughter as they went back through the portal, closing it behind them. It was not till the screaming stopped that Janet realized that they’d taken the cylinder containing the woman’s brain with them when they’d left. Those monsters had taken her with them.

“Whores of Yuggoth!” The haemonculus swore, smashing his fist into the table. It crumpled under his fist with a force beyond what seemed possible from his frame. He blinked all four sets of eyes, smiling his misshapen maw as he reached out to grab one of the guard’s fire-arms. It crushed beneath his fingers, steel shredding like paper under his now razor-sharp claws. He began to laugh, a cruel and twisting sound. “Glorious whores of Yuggoth!”

The guard warbled, perplexed by his superior’s actions.

“No – I will head to the front lines and face this problem head on. The surgery wasn’t just their price, it was their payment.” He shook his head. “We must hurry. I do not know how long the body they made me will last. We must secure victory before we reach the limits of this experimental form.”

The three aliens left the room, guards nervously following their master.
Janet took her hand from the SF’s mouth. Idly aware that she was bleeding from where the woman’s teeth broke through the skin. Screw anesthesia, Janet had to get these people down from where they were hanging as soon as was possible before they ended up being loose parts for making more of those awful things. “We need to get everyone down, now.”

“Doc you don’t gotta tell me twice.” Replied the second SF. “That was some seriously effed up stuff.”

The first SF didn’t even bother to swear.

Janet was briefly speculating on the possibility that there might be a ladder in the supply closet when a blue glow started filling the room accompanied with an abrupt chill of frigid air and rattling breath. She turned on her heel to face yet another nightmare. Two incorporeal, frozen corpses rose through the floor – ghastly apparitions of death and vengeance. They looked from Janet to the two SFs, sniffing the air before growling in apparent disappointment that they hadn’t found whatever they were looking to find.

“Where is it?” They spoke in unison, growling an approximation to human speech that made Janet’s spine crawl as their eyes glowed. It was not any language that Janet had ever heard spoken, though she understood its meaning plain as day. “Where are the things we must kill.”

“They left.” Janet pointed out the door. “They came and they left.”

The creatures grinned, a near erotic lust in the cracked and frozen orbs of their eyes as they flew from the room, passing through the door as they went. The first SF stood up, walked over to the door and put her hand on it to re-assure herself that it was, in fact, solid. She ran her fingers over the patch of ice, looked up at the hanging collection of chiton covered prisoners, and looked back to the second SF. “I don’t care how much of a bonus they end up offering me to re-enlist. Ghosts is where I draw the line. Just give me my damn DD-214, debrief me, and let me work at a Dennys or something.”

“That wasn’t a ghost.” The other SF replied. “It couldn’t have been.”

“Puta, did you not see those nametags?” Interjected the first. “I know those guys. I know a ghost when I see it. And that was a fucking ghost!”

“Whatever they were, they weren’t friends of the ones who put us here. For now I’m ok with just
accepting that they’re not our enemies.” Janet replied, choosing not to think about just how “ghostly” the two men had appeared to her. Doubtlessly Samantha Carter would end up explaining away the mythos of them, but for the moment she was perfectly happy to have something that scary heading for the monsters who’d sacrificed a woman’s life on a whim. She noticed that many of the hanging figures had begun to stir in their harnesses and would soon need to come down. “For now, help me move that shelf. I think we can use it to get up there.”
Chapter 18

Teal’c’s fingers wrapped around the haft of his staff weapon, finding purchase in the small grooves that wrapped up and down the naquadah-laced metal. He found great comfort in that feeling, as much now as when he’d believed that the staff was actually infused with the might of his god. Staff Weapons, he now knew, were not divine instruments. They were merely tools, given power through the mechanisms and secret workings of the universe within which they lived. It was a power, to be certain, but nothing of divine or infernal origin.

Major Samantha Carter had taught him the science behind the weapon as best she could, though without her width and breadth of the physical sciences Teal’c had only been able to follow the gist of what she’d explained to him. He had endeavored to educated himself in the specifics of the Tau’ri understanding of natural laws since reaching the first world in the hopes that he might be able to operate on a level playing field to his compatriots, but there was only so much study that one could do while living an active lifestyle. He could not hope to match the many thousands upon thousands of hours that Major Carter had invested into learning the intricacies of the physical world. She had a way of wrapping math and logic into a sorcery as potent as any Goa’uld ritual that he had ever witnessed or participated in.

Somehow, she had managed to master the intricacies of the celestial realms without ever believing in them. The unknowable was, in the Majors opinion, something to be dissected and documented until the divine became the mundane. She had an amazing affinity for compressing the impossible into a pithy phrase and an equation.

He envied her education. Though he was wise in the ways of warfare, Teal’c was comparatively illiterate in so many matters that the Tau’ri took for granted. He’d found himself watching programs intended for small children simply because he could understand them without a greater foundation in the Tau’ri culture. It was somewhat embarrassing to know that the programming he chose to watch was considered infantile by his peers, but he found great joy in the complex plays and drama the Tau’ri wove for their children. His mentor Bra’tac would have agreed with Teal’c, he suspected, that men of the moral caliber of Mr. Rogers were worthy of consideration. A man of such serenity could command a warrior’s heart.

He knew that he could defeat any one of the Tau’ri warriors with whom he stood in single combat, were such an action required, but it bothered him to know that any one of them had been educated in art and philosophy to a degree that he would never entirely be able to catch up. For all their pride in being “just folks,” their basic education was more encompassing than most priests and scholars of Chulak. None of them seemed to have noticed his deficiencies thus far, as he had elected to only speak when he felt certain that he could express himself without fear of appearing foolish, but it was impossible not to regularly feel like a fool given the cultural divide between Teal’c and his adopted world.
He still felt like a stranger just leaving the subterranean parts of the SGC to let the sun touch his face above ground. The very nature of his birth meant that he was a secret of the American government, something to be spirited away and kept behind locked doors. Every moment that he was not under lock and key was a moment in which the fragile illusion of isolation might be shattered and the Tau’ri would have to face the existence of a greater universe beyond themselves.

Teal’c had not questioned the wisdom of this in public – he had, after all, sworn his oath of loyalty to the Americans – but it had always seemed amazingly odd to him that the Americans were so fearful of allowing the world to know the Goa’uld lay in the stars. Colonel O’Neill had implied that the other great nations of Tau’ri would object to their rival controlling an object as potent as the Stargate, suggesting that they might go so far as to invade America or attack it with atomic weapons. But given the existential threat of the Goa’uld, such rivalries couldn’t help but feel petty and insignificant to Teal’c.

Colonel O’Neill’s abject hatred of the Russians, however, was enough for Teal’c to quell those fears. O’Neill was a worthy warrior, and the only people he talked about with the same vitriol as he spoke of the Russians were the Goa’uld. A warrior of substance did not express vitriol without cause, and a warrior’s ally accepted the warrior’s enemies as his own. Perhaps it was just a product of his cultural illiteracy. He hoped that too would correct with time.

In matters of war, however, Teal’c expertise was supreme. And the Tau’ri of the SGC, for all their education in the arts and sciences, were willing to defer to his expertise in matters of Goa’uld warfare. He looked to the two SG combat response teams standing outside the Goa’uld transport, just past the check-point manned by a heavily armed SF brigade.

SG-6 and SG-7 held different mandates than his own team. SG-6 was a primarily tasked with search and rescue, while SG-7 was a combat medical response team. Effectively their job was entering the most dangerous situations possible and rescue the diplomatic and exploration teams when some local threat prevented them from being able to escape on their own. It was a reactionary rather than proactive position, but it was utterly vital given the fluid nature of Stargate Command’s operations. Extraction teams regularly saw as much combat, if not more, than the actual aggressor squads like SG-3.

Aggressor squads had the luxury of planning their assaults in advance, choosing targets with minimized risk. The CSAR missions didn’t allow for that, situations requiring their involvement were ones in which the enemy had chosen the time and place to their own advantage. It required men who would choose to throw themselves into overwhelming odds to fulfil that most Tau’ri of sentiments “nobody gets left behind.”

That sense of loyalty to one’s comrades in arms, even to just ensuring the recovery of their bodies for proper funeral rites, was perhaps the most admirable quality of Tau’ri warriors. Too often in war Teal’c had been forced to abandon his fellow Jaffa to the mercies of rival armies or to leave honored
warriors just to rot on the battlefield for lack of an opportunity to ensure proper burial. Apophis’ only concern for the deceased had been ensuring that they were quickly replaced with Jaffa capable of continuing whatever damnable conflict the false god started most recently.

While he had great respect for their mission, the Jaffa warrior was not overly familiar with either team, only vaguely recognizing the Air Force personnel from what few encounters he’d had with them on base. Teal’c hadn’t ever exactly been a social butterfly and the Tau’ri external to SG-1 seemed to be intimidated by the presence of a Jaffa. He was, however, familiar with the instant expression of deference on their faces as he provided them with a brief overview of Goa’uld mothership security and invasion tactics. These were men who respected their own limitations and were eager to learn the requisite information to correct their ignorance.

The Colonel in charge of SG-7’s lip curled, not overly liking Teal’c’s answer to his question. “Teal’c is there really no way of teleporting on to the ship without opening ourselves to attack?”

“There is no such method.” Teal’c replied. “Once we have materialized within the ship we will have only seconds to target any potential threats. If our allies aboard the ship have not established a defensive perimeter around our point of entry it will be remarkably difficult to assault a mothership without incurring casualties.”

“That’s not ideal.” The Colonel griped.

“The Goa’uld do not wish for it to be ideal.” Teal’c replied. “Teleportation is for their personal convenience, not for ease of access for a would-be invader.”

Admittedly, few enough ships maintained a serviceable watch schedule to properly guard the ring transporters well enough to actually keep that defense serviceable. In an ideal world several guards would be posted around the ring transporters, ready to fire on any unwanted intruders. However as the Goa’uld preferred that all able bodied Jaffa be in their immediate proximity to fight off a would-be assassin, defense of positions outside the immediate vicinity of their pathetic excuse for a god was not part of the Goa’uld model for defense. Even as recently as a century ago that would not have been the case, but few Goa’uld remained with the magical strength to maintain the ships wards sufficiently to prevent incursion from Furlings or Demons – neither of whom required ring transporters to assault a ship.

In the heyday of the Goa’uld Empire, the Jaffa hadn’t even needed to patrol the interior of their warships. The warding upon the ship’s walls were more than sufficient to repel all but the most potent of invaders. A disobedient slave or summoned spirit would quickly find out just how malevolent the System Lord’s spell work could get.
Teal’c never quite found the right words to articulate those nuances in English and the Jaffa language’s vocabulary was woefully insufficient to explain half the necessary concepts. There were likely words that could express his meaning properly in English. Given that he had no verbalization from which to start, however, even if he asked Dr. Daniel Jackson or one of the anthropologists for assistance in finding the proper words there wouldn’t be a concept to translate from, just an idea to be articulated. Perhaps once he’d finished studying the grammar textbook sitting in his quarters he’d finally have the words he needed.

“We’ll have to just face in all directions and hope that we shoot them before they shoot us.” The Colonel in charge of SG-6 replied. “It’s not perfect but they’re taking fire. We can’t leave them to whoever is attacking the ship.”

“Incoming!” Shouted one of the SF’s guarding the Goa’uld transport. The SFs manner their posts, pointing carbines and heavy weaponry towards the ship’s interior where a sudden beam of light shone from within. Teal’c and the SG teams took cover behind the sand bags the SF’s had stacked around the ship, taking aim at the door and waiting for whoever it was to exit the door.

Slowly, deliberately, a single figure exited the ship. Wooden sole shoes clicked against Goa’uld deck plates as a man made his way out from the cargo-hold and in to the light of day. A tall man in a grey, three-piece suit walked to the ship’s door, his hands hung lazily to his side as though he hadn’t a care in the world. Though he was visibly wounded he walked without any apparent care for his injuries, his eyes moving back and forth as though the swollen flesh covering half his face were no impediment to their use. For a man as clearly mauled as the gentleman appeared to be, he walked with none of the limping or pained exertions Teal’c would have expected from someone with recent 4th degree burns. Either the man was inordinately tough, or all was not as it seemed.

He entirely disregarded the collected SF’s demands that he “stay put or they shoot.” The man looked from person to person within the crowd before his gaze fell upon Teal’c. The symbiote within his belly churned under the man’s gaze, burrowing painfully into the back of the womb within his belly. A shiver ran through his spine as the man’s burned face curved up into a pleased smile.

“Finally,” The man spoke in a cultured voice that ran with an undertone of smoke and honey. “A sign of progress.”

He walked forward towards Teal’c, continuing to disregard the SFs. They shouted louder, demanding that the gentleman say still. They warned him that he was getting too close. They warned him that they were going to shoot. They warned him that it was his last chance, still he ignored them.

It was not till they opened fire upon the Gentleman that Teal’c truly got a sense for how outmatched the warriors of the Tau’ri were for this threat. The man stopped walking after the first weapon impacted with his chest, raising an eyebrow in curiosity at the rip in his suit. He pulled the flattened
bullet from his flesh, examining the pattern before dropping it to the ground. He stood still with his arms crossed, impatiently tapping his foot as the collected forces of the Tau’ri expended their ammunition upon him, tearing great holes into his previously immaculate suit.

He waited until they’d expended their ammunition, giving it a few moments for some brave men to try tossing grenades as well. The gentleman stood with a bored expression in his now tattered and shredded finery, looking to the Jaffa warrior before saying. “Are you quite finished yet? I appreciate that we must go through the motions for the sake of propriety but you have to see that you are entirely outmatched.”

He snapped the fingers of his uninjured hand, and the tattered fabrics of his clothing wove themselves back together as a small pile of flattened projectiles clattered to the cement beneath his feet. “I have come to parley. If you continue to force violence into this matter, I will return in kind. You would not like the consequences of that action. Your people have been detained but not harmed. I see no reason to do them any more harm than is necessary for me to address the grievance that has been inflicted upon me and mine.”

“Who are you?” Asked the colonel in charge of SG-7.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “I am not here to speak to some mortal dog. I am here to speak to the chosen of your patron. If your chattel speaks without permission again, I will be forced to correct that behavior. Is that understood?”

“Chattel?” The colonel growled. “Listen asshole…”

“Sleep.” The man commanded, not even looking at the colonel. The man fell bonelessly to the ground, his snoring form dropping to the concrete. He looked back to Teal’c. “Your patron allows too many liberties.”

“The Tau’ri serve no master beyond the will of their own heart.” Teal’c replied.

“And does the will of their heart have a name?” The gentleman replied in a voice of exasperation. “Set? Anubis? Sokar? I know that it was not the forces of Yu, he would not betray our alliance in so gauche a fashion.”

“You misunderstand.” Teal’c replied. “The Tau’ri serve no god. Nor do I.”
The man rolled his eyes. “Jaffa, I am not a fool, do not treat me as one. A Goa’uld intruded into my realm using powers that they have not wielded since before the Folly of Thoth, attacked my brood, and sought shelter on this world. I found the aggressor’s vessel in Earth’s skies, full of warriors bearing the colors of America. And now, I find American warriors in the company of a Jaffa – the client race of the Fallen Pantheon – in possession of the very ship that invaded my realm.”

“It was a price paid to allow safe passage to the Goa’uld through the Chappa’ai of the Tau’ri.” Teal’c replied. “We serve no Goa’uld. We are enemies of the System Lords.”

“Speak the truth.” The man commanded, his voice reverberating with a tone of overpowering will. It made Teal’c teeth rattle, agitating his molars.

Teal’c raised his eyebrow in mild reproach. “I already have.”

The Gentleman blinked, clearly not accustomed to realizing that he had been wrong. His brow furrowed in thought. “In truth – the Goa’uld who has wronged me is not here?”

“I speak in truth.” Teal’c replied. “Heka and his retinue have long since departed. Supreme Commander Thor forced their retreat under pain of death.”

“Ah, the spellweaver.” The Gentleman replied, seemingly mollified. “Yes, the invasion did reek of arrogance and desperation. Very well, if there is no patron god with whom I might parlay, then I would speak with the mortal who has been marked by Thor Odinson as Chosen.”

“Chosen?” Teal’c queried.

“The warrior who the Asgard come to first. The warrior who has earned his respect. The one who Thor Odinson has elected as proxy for your armies.” The gentleman replied. “I will deign to parley with a mortal who has been so marked.”

“There is such a man.” Teal’c replied, catching the worried look in the eyes of SG-6’s colonel. Colonel O’Neill’s reputation was not one of diplomatic tact.

“Good, I will see him now.” The man replied, idly twisting his finger to telekinetically snap the arm of an SF who’d been reaching for a knife. Teal’c resisted the urge to shudder. This man, whoever he was, held immense power.
“I will request his presence, but only if you give your word that you will do no harm to your hostages till you’ve concluded negotiating terms with the Colonel.” Teal’c replied.

“I have no need to injure them. Not yet.” Replied the man. “They have failed to harm anything of value, though not for lack of trying. And I am eager to see what sort of man has caught the attention of the Norse Pantheon.”

“To whom shall I tell him he is to be addressing?” Teal’c inquired. “And what titles shall he use.”

“I am Ferrovax. I have no need of titles.” The man replied.

Teal’c wasn’t sure if he wanted to run away, faint or both. Ferrovax was the dragon. Not “a” dragon, he was “the” Dragon. He was the serpent from which all lesser dragons spawned. When the great Folly of Thoth came to pass, no faction involved in the conflict had dared to instigate anything with the ancient serpent of the stars. None of them had been foolish enough. Heka apparently had.

And now he was at the gates of the SGC, making demands. All things considered, it was probably wisest to let the Colonel handle this negotiation. Teal’c did not want to address the King of Dragons for a second longer than was strictly necessary for fear the primordial elemental force might take offense to his presence. Teal’c was not one to shy away from danger, but a leaf cannot overwhelm the wind.

However, before Teal’c had an opportunity to call for the Colonel, the warrior from Minnesota’s voice spoke from the secure radios of the SG-teams. A single word, “Foothold.”

The colonel from SG-6 swore profusely, “You have got to be kidding me.”
Chapter 19

There were few things as certain in Dr. Simon Coombs life that he would call “destiny.” As a man of science, he was averse to making sweeping predictions about what would happen in the future without sufficient evidence to support them. Simon was not a man of violence, he’d barely been able to dissect lab animals as part of his undergraduate training. He hadn’t even been able to bring himself to be mean to people in either Baldur’s Gate or Fallout 2. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to steal in Daggerfall because it made him feel too guilty. It had taken him six different goes at the pistol qualification before he’d been able to come close to passing because he found the very idea that he was holding something that gave him absolute power over life and death to be terrifying. It bore repeating that even with his improved comfort level, he “came close” to passing. He had not yet passed.

Suffice it to say that any man building a predictive model based around Simon’s life thus far would have relegated the probability that he would do violence to his fellow man as being a statistically negligible factor.

None of that changed the immutable fact that Simon was going to kill Jay Felger if they lived through this – possibly just maim him if outright murder proved logistically impractical. Perhaps he’d do both, he wasn’t married to any one plan. But the series of moronic decisions that his co-worker had chosen to do in order to get them to this point ought to merit some degree of permanent and painful corrective behavior adjustment.

Felger belonged in a lab. He belonged in a highly supervised laboratory environment with a protective layer of bureaucratic limitations between him and his funding to delay his process enough that his interns and co-workers were given the opportunity to sanity check his processes. Dr. Felger was one of those men unfortunate enough to understand the possibilities of his actions but unburdened by the sense of cause and effect that prevented one from releasing an alien with delusions of godhood from a prison that looked like it belonged in an early Dungeons and Dragons module.

Simon understood how someone with Jay’s knowledge base truly was vital for the analysis of Goa’uld technology, there were fewer than a dozen scientists with even half Dr. Felger’s knowledge base of weaponized plasma or Goa’uld power generators and only four of them had passed the medical exams necessary to go on off world missions. That three of the four were currently onboard the Goa’uld mothership had required just short of an act of God – though a lesser pantheon of Goa’uld Lords dropping the most powerful weapons system ever owned by the American military had apparently sufficed. Even in context with just how important it was for them to be there, Simon was pretty sure that leaving Jay to his own devices was going to prove as – if not more – dangerous than whatever was attacking the ship.

He sent Jay a spiteful glare, willing the man to die in a fire as he growled under his breath. “You see!
You see what you did? All that we had to do was stay put and don’t touch anything. That requires literally no effort.”

“I know Coombs.” Jay hissed back.

“That woman is a Goa’uld. We are currently prisoners of a Gou’uld.” Simon growled.

“I know Coombs.” Dr. Felger rounded on Simon, his eyes bulging slightly as he shushed his fellow scientist. “Complaining about it isn’t going to make things better. We just have to think… what would Colonel O’Neill do in this situation?”

“You want me to shoot you?” Simon replied acerbically, Felger’s hero worship really could be tiring.

“No – not, I mean, there has to be something that we can do to fix this.” Jay bemoaned, watching their new “god” Druana. The possessed Nox had largely ignored the two scientists except to send them vitriolic glances when they got too loud, focusing instead upon meddling with the Goa’uld ship’s main computers. She seemed to be trying to gain control of the ship, a task at which she was failing woefully. As far as demonstrations of divine power went, it was pretty sub-par.

“Oh great, I guess we try just asking her to get back in the glowing nightmare prison and just shut the door behind her.” Simon snorted, rolling his eyes.

“You think that would work?” Jay replied in mild confusion, looking from the door to the Goa’uld and back. “It seemed pretty crummy in there.”

“No I don’t think it would work you – ” Simon let out a deep breath and counted down from thirty in his head. “No Jay, I don’t think that we’re going to be able to just talk this genie back into the bottle.”

“Hey, don’t get mad at me just because you haven’t thought of a better solution.” Jay shrugged.

“That was… that was my idea!” Simon gritted his teeth.

“Potato, potato.” Jay replied, pronouncing the word slightly the second time from the first. “Stay
constructive Coombs. That’s what SG-1 does, and they haven’t lost yet.”

Simon’s pinched the bridge of his nose, resisting the urge to scream and choosing instead to focus on what the Goa’uld was doing. Druana had started re-sequencing the command codes in order to get around some of the ship’s safe guards in a way he hadn’t seen done before. No, it was more than that, she was actually writing an entirely new operating system to superimpose over the existing one that had been gutted when the Goa’uld had scuttled the ship on the moon’s surface. That actually was exiting, possibly even worth the near lethal danger they were in provided that he was able to get back to the SGC once this all ended. Goa’uld coding was non-binary, meaning that its construction wasn’t always intuitive to the human mind. This was probably the first example he could remember of an academic actually getting the chance to watch a Goa’uld computer system constructed from the ground up.

She didn’t seem overly frustrated by the task, so either she was particularly gifted in computer programming or the construction of this sort of system was something held within the collective genetic knowledge of the Goa’uld. It was a shame that the Goa’uld were universally evil, Simon thought. He could have achieved incredible things were such an intellect put to constructive purposes.

There was a shuddering whirr of energy across the holographic display in front of her shimmered from orange to blue, her newly constructed operating system taking control of the mothership. She paused for a moment to read various messages and warnings that she now had access to before devolving into a metallic screeching combination of words that Simon was entirely certain constituted the Goa’uld equivalent to swear words. Her eyes glowed bright enough to light up the room as she went from system readout to system readout, assessing the damages done.

“That doesn’t sound good.” Jay swallowed.

“It’s not.” Simon agreed, reading the messages as best he could from across the room. His Goa’uld wasn’t great, but he got the gist. “Thor scuttled the heck out of this ship. They disabled every weapons and propulsion system so that you’d have to manually enable each of them.”

“Why would they do that?” Asked Dr. Felger in surprise. “I thought they were our allies.”

“If I had to make a guess, I’d say it was so that we didn’t accidentally blow up the moon. They have some nasty weapons on these ships.” Simon replied. “We have literally no idea what these things do and are wandering the ship just poking stuff in the hope that it works. Turning off the multi-megaton death cannons feels like a decent idea.”
“Asgard?” Growled the metallic hiss of the Goa’uld goddess from across the room. “This was done by the Asgard?”

“Oh… crap…” Simon winced, realizing that it was probably not the best idea to reference the ancient enemy of their captor. He yelled in shock as the Goa’uld twisted her hand and lifted him into the air through apparent telekinesis. His toes dragged across the floor as she pulled him towards her, lifting him so that he could meet her eye to eye. He looked down, afraid to meet her gaze.

“Clever little thing.” The Goa’uld purred, pushing a tendril of moss covered dreadlocks out of her face as she ran her finger across Simon’s chin. “You know not to gaze upon your betters.”

“Hey! Hey, hey, hey.” Jay yelled as he scurried across the room to try and pull Simon back to the ground. “There’s no need for that. We’re complying! We’re complying!”

“Funny creatures.” The woman smiled, exposing a mouth full of bone white teeth set in blackened gums that stank of rotting plant matter. “Tell me of the Asgard, and I will not punish you.”

“Thor! Thor was the one who gave the ship to us.” Jay spoke before Simon could even try to tell him not to. “We got it as part of the protected planet’s treaty when Heka surrendered to us.”

The woman’s eyes flashed, a worried expression crossing her face. “This planet is protected?”

“Yes, the Tau’ri joined the protected planet’s treaty.” Jay continued, nodding emphatically. “The System Lords added us this year. Yu and Chronos came to Earth to sign it.”

There was a long pause before the Goa’uld spoke, “Tau’ri? The first world? I am on the first world?” In a tone that implied much but revealed little.

“Well, its moon but yeah – you’re near Earth.” Simon replied, realizing the implication of that question. The Goa’uld were afraid of the Asgard. By all accounts an Asgard warship could annihilate a Goa’uld fleet without too much trouble. Emphasizing Thor’s connection to the American government was definitely in Simon’s best interest.

The possessed Nox’s rage smoldered as she turned back to the computer, caressing several keys before exposing an image of SGC personnel bound and guarded by a cadre of men whose skin rippled and shifted as they changed form. She fiddled with the life-signs detector, scrolling across
reams of data before letting loose another metallic sound that Simon was certain signified swear words.

“Major Carter!” Jay shouted in worry, “They’ve taken her. We have to do something!”

“These are not allies of your world?” Queried the Goa’uld.

“No – I don’t know who they are, but they attacked and captured our best warriors.” Jay replied. “We need to help them. To help her, please let us go.”

“No, the brood would not deign to deal with lessers.” She let go of Simon, dropping him unceremoniously to the floor. “Sorcerous bastard. He left me behind to be consumed by the creatures of this world. He knew. That bastard Heka knew the Asgard wouldn’t see through the warding he set on my cell till his armistice ran out.”

Simon did his best to blend in with the floor rather than draw more attention to himself, but found himself once again the focus of the Goa’uld’s attention. “Tell me, this ship, was it a place of great battle before it was surrendered to you? Was there much death in this place? Much suffering?”

“Yes…” Simon replied, a shiver running down his spine and the near sexual eagerness in the possessed nox’s voice. “I mean, there was a lot of blood in the halls but we never found any bodies other than the dragons.”

“Good. Very good.” The Goa’uld cackled, her eyes glowing. “Then you two shall be the first witnesses to my glory and to the divinity of my power. I will re-take this ship from the brood, and cast them into the pyre from which they came. I will rescue your ‘Carter’ and show you the power of a true god. You will have your help, and you will speak of your new god’s divinity to all those who would listen.”

One death obsessed snake with delusions of godhood and two scientists against an army of shape-shifting warriors capable of disabling the world’s most capable soldiers. Perfect, she was insane in addition to being telekinetic, Simon thought to himself. This day just kept getting better.

The Goa’uld raised her hands to the sky. Inky tendrils of power washing out across the room from her, the whole world shifting to a shade of azure in an instant. Simon shivered, a cloying cold washing across him as he exhaled and watched his breath turn to steam. He reached out to grab a book that fell from his pockets only for his fingers to pass through the solid object entirely. He yelped
in shock, scrambling from the item as though he’d been scalded.

“Mortal, the material has only partial relevance to where we now stand.” Druana chuckled. “The place between is unnerving for those who have not experienced it before. Do not stray too far or I cannot take responsibility for what happened to you.”

Simon stood up, his eyes trying to focus on the space around him. They were still in the ship, or something that resembled it, but there was something off about it. The physical landmarks were different somehow, though he was certain that nothing had moved in the room after she’d cast out the dark-light. It felt different, like an echo of the room they’d been in – an impression of what the space had represented in the past.

Very quickly, however, he became less interested in the geography as a grey humanoid form phased through the wall. The details were obscure, the proportions slightly off, as though he were looking at a badly molded plastic doll of a human. It had no real features, just gaping eye-sockets within a skull-like face, and a wide, empty mouth that hung open as though the lower jaw’s tendons had stretched out like old rubber bands.

It moved forward with a shuffling grace, as though it had no weight and only needed to touch the ground to propel itself forward with its toes. It came at them, it’s rattling breath the shadowy echo of the scream it had once been. It approached Simon, mindless and graceful as a hungry jellyfish.

“Jay, what the hell is that!” Simon screeched, pulling himself up with the help of the fellow scientist’s outstretched arm even as his mind ran through a litany of horror movies that might have fit the bill.

Druana was unimpressed by the creature, stepping in its path. “Begone wraith. I have no time for you. This chattel is mine, and I would not part with it so easily.”

The creature let loose a hollow rattle, reaching out to slash at Druana with its insubstantial fingers. She caught the creature’s arms before reaching it to the creature’s chest and pulling a glowing mote from the creature’s center. A cloud of something that looked like steam poured out from the creature, light kindling within it to play shadowy images across the vapor. The images grew dimmer until there was nothing left of the creature but a sagging outline of what the creature had once been and a colorless lump upon the ground.

Jay opened his mouth as though he were about to ask a question, but only managed to make a an incoherent screech of fear and incomprehension as exactly what he’d just witnessed. He managed another two high-pitched yelps before forming, “What?”
“Do not fear the wraith, they are echoes of longing and not to be tolerated. They hunger for life and in the spaces between, those who are whole and hale are a feast.” Druana chuckled as she painted glowing symbols in the air. They were neither goa’uld nor English, and followed a non-liner progression of movements through three-dimensional space that would have been impossible on any page.

The ground rippled as the glowing forms of men and women started to enter the room, passing through the walls, floor, and ceiling. They were nervous, chittering in fear and speaking animatedly in Goa’uld. They resembled Jaffa warriors and human slaves, each of them bearing wounds and injuries that Simon was quite certain had been enough to slay them all. Their wounds were terrifying but their expressions of fear and yearning were more distressing to Simon in a way that he could not quite put his finger on.

Simon was a man of science. Presented sufficient evidence he was willing to re-assess his perspective. As evidence went, this was anecdotal but highly persuasive evidence that ghosts were real. This could easily be an illusion, there were numerous Goa’uld technologies which were able to replicated any individual aspect of what he was witnessing, but something instinctual, primal and entirely unscientific in the back of Simon’s mind had him convinced that the opposite was true.

He was staring at what might be the first reliable account of experience with the supernatural. There was apparently a life after death and it was awful. Was this it? Just wandering around terrified and injured until something put you out of your misery? That was more terrifying that any afterlife he’d ever imagined.

Druana was not bothered by the sudden appearance of the ghosts, nor troubled by their metaphysical implications. She addressed the collective spirits in her metallic rattle. “Children of the System Lords, heed me. You have been unable to pass on because your god has abandoned this place. The wards remain even though there are no priests or gods to give your last rites and send your Ka’s heart to be weighed. If no one comes to release you, you will be as damned as the Wraith I just unmade. You will live as much of eternity as you can endure, hungering and mindless until the bitter end. But worry not, for I will set you free.”

The spirits listened, their dead eyed faces and hollow rasping breaths focused on Druana’s words. There was a horrible eagerness to them, they were desperate for the release she offered. The Goa’uld smiled wickedly, “This ship has been taken by those of the brood of serpents. Slay them and I will perform the last rites to free you. Salvation or damnation, your choice.”

The spirits rattled their assent, flitting down through the floor towards where the SG teams were imprisoned. Jay watched them leave before looking at the Goa’uld and asking. “What were those?” In a voice of abject horror.
Druana’s acerbic laughter echoed with the metallic tone of the Goa’uld. “I forget how young the race of men still is. How little you understand of death.”

“What does death have to do with anything?” Jay blinked, a very real possibility for what the things they’d just seen running through the doctor’s mind even as he rejected it as lunacy. There were no such things as ghosts after all.

“Dear child, we are in the space between what is and what is inevitable. The land that only the Nox have mastered thus far, though our elders are too weak to use it to its full potential.” Druana’s smile widened. “We are in the land of the dead.”

“I don’t believe in ghost stories.” Simon lied, fear infecting every syllable of his voice.

“You might as well start.” Druana winked as power coalesced around her fingers again. “Given that you’re in one.”
Harry Maybourne was worried.

It was not an unusual state of affairs for the man, given the programs he was part of and the secrets he kept, there was generally something worth being worried about in his life. But as of late, a number of failsafe programs had been activated, none of which had transpired to be over reactions to the relevant threat category. Actions were transpiring that defied previous expectations, threats to the USA arising in avenues that seemed contrary to any degree of rational sense.

It was as though the world started falling apart in the days leading up to Halloween. Something had happened, something of global significance that set a number of non-state actors into motion with a ferocity not previously observed. But try as he might, Harry had not been able to a clear answer from anyone as to what exactly had transpired to toss the world into an uproar. A watershed event capable of motivating that many people to action should have been blatant, the sort of thing that even the civilian media ought to have caught wind.

But nobody had. By all accounts the week leading up to Halloween had been like any previous October Harry’s life, and none of the requests for information he’d submitted to the NID’s intelligence components had been able to provide him with a satisfactory causal event. For some reason the person or persons responsible for the sudden uptick in global violence were choosing to keep their own counsel – which was baffling in and of itself.

The “how” and “when” of a conflict was often difficult to determine from those participating in violent conflict. “Why” was generally a foregone conclusion. People just tended to tell you why they were going to war. They might lie. They might even not actually understand their true reason and provide an incorrect one. But utter silence on their motivation? That was… unprecedented.

His NID SOUTHCOM counterpart had gone dark recently after reporting unusual patterns in activity within the cartels. Money was being exchanged for weapons in unprecedented quantities, directed to the purchase of Soviet surplus gear from the Balkans. The cartels were arming themselves, and not with the sort of arsenal that one associated with drug runners. They were investing in real weapons, the sort of things that could win wars as opposed to just fighting them. There were even early rumbling that they were trying to obtain WMDs. Criminal enterprises known to be part the major cartels had openly started conflicts across the globe, but nobody quite seemed sure why or with whom they were engaged.

The former Soviet countries had seemingly similar activity, with early reports suggesting that some of the smaller garrisons around Arkhangelsk were deploying their forces in a defensive posture around seemingly irrelevant asset. They were protecting areas without any clear benefit to the Russian government, often to its apparent detriment. A sudden re-deployment of forces was confusing; a sudden re-deployment of forces in a way that left them weak to NATO assets was baffling. Stranger still, not all elements of the Russian government seemed to have been properly inbriefed on the circumstances requiring their actions. It might have been mistaken for a power grab were the Prime Minister not clearly as clueless as anyone else in the government about the Russian President’s seemingly schizophrenic actions.

More troubling that even the bloodshed and horror worldwide, was the irrefutable fact that someone in the United States government was doing their damndest to cover it up. He’d spent enough of his adult life sanitizing the dirty little secrets of the US government to recognize when someone else was
getting sloppy. That wouldn’t be abnormal in and of itself, but the NID didn’t know who was doing it – meaning that there was either an intelligence agency operating outside the remit of their oversight agencies or that some private interest was operating with enough resources to hide themselves from the NID’s substantial resources. Neither of which particularly appealed to Harry in the long run.

And then there were the weird reports. Bodies were showing up that made no logical sense, skeletons that were clearly humanoid but not human, bodies that dissolved into nothing once they were cut open by the coroner, bodies that just got back up and walked out of the morgue. He would have dismissed it all as the impossible ravings of madmen if there hadn’t been so many similar reports filed at the same time that all followed the same basic narrative.

“Humanoid but definitely not human.” Had the Goa’uld or some other race been able to infiltrate the cartels? The Russians? Neither was appealing. The timing of this was all too close to be coincidental. Something was happening, something that could destabilize the world if it was allowed to take root. His lip curled, the petty squabbles of Earth might well damn her to alien rule if someone like the NID didn’t start demanding that sanity be applied to how Earth approached the galaxy.

The SGC had tried their way. They’d tried using the kid gloves with every species they met. They’d tried politely asking for technology and surviving on what scraps the Asgard and Tok’ra deigned to give them. They’d tried their best to protect the world while operating under the false premise that they could apply the “we’ll beat them eventually, we don’t need to be mean” approach to technology and development born of the sort of arrogance that could only come from the mistaken impression that they were, and would always remain, the preeminent superpower on Earth.

They’d tried, and sure as shooting they’d failed. They’d failed about as catastrophically as it was possible to fail.

And here he was, looking at an apparent loss of the most dangerous artefact in the world. An alien artefact which, for reasons entirely beyond him the Air Force had come to the conclusion was best located in NORTHCOM NORAD of all places. He sort of understood it when the device had been a matter of pure scientific curiosity, but given that it was effectively a portal that enemy combatants attempted to breach with startling regularity he couldn’t help but feel like it should have been re-located to an area of less prominence for the American military’s ability to coordinate its defenses. What damn good would it do the country to hide the Stargate from the Russians if their “protected” location effectively surrendered major military assets to an alien invasion.

It was just utter madness that the US government had ever allowed the Stargate program to get to the point where “nuke NORAD” was considered a viable strategy for anything short than outright apocalyptic horror.

The NID had been lobbying for greater control of the Stargate program to avoid this precise sort of foolishness. A foothold situation virtually guaranteed massive bloodshed to retake the Cheyenne Mountain Complex. For all he knew they’d managed to dig in and would be situated beneath 2,000 feet of solid granite. God help them all if this menace had managed to seal the blast doors, or the NID re-enforcements would find themselves on the wrong side of 25-ton blast doors outside of a fortified bunker that had been designed to survive blasts in the tens of megatons.

With its own independent heat, water, supplies, and power plant, an alien invader could feasibly build up an unstoppable offensive from within the complex. It would take months of uninterrupted excavation enough of the mountain to be able to mount a credible offensive against a proper foothold. That was the whole point of the nuclear bomb the SGC kept ensuring that any potential foothold situation would be brought to an abrupt end. It was blatant foolishness to supply a potential enemy with that sort of beachhead.
It was the opinion of the NID leadership – one that Maybourne shared entirely - that the Air Force was overly reliant on a tactical nuclear weapon as a first line of defense, given that the upper level of the facility contained the senior leadership of one of the largest Joint Commands in the military. As far as Harry was concerned, anyone unlucky enough to get a posting at NORTHCOM NORAD should be getting front line combat pay commensurate with the daily threat of total nuclear annihilation.

But the NID was a civilian agency, and the military was loath to bow to the demands of a civilian agency. They would most certainly not bow to the whims of an oversight agency whose members were viewed as “the enemy” for demanding that they exercise some of the most basic of safety and operational security concerns. Honestly, how was detaining the second in command of an alien dictator who’d just declared war on the United States an unreasonable request? Even recruits in the US military who’d been born US citizens went through a basic screening and qualification process before they were issued weapons. The man had killed the symbiote infected Kawalsky, earning his parole, but even that could have been staged or an opportunistic act.

The Jaffa’s sincerity was apparent now but the man had been functionally no different from any other defector. He should have been detained. Specialists should have been assigned to ask him questions and verify his story. It was just basic operational security. And Colonel O’Neill should not have been given the latitude he was provided in that decision-making process. He had not been capable of impartiality with regards to the disposition of such a valuable intelligence asset.

And here they were, three years after the NID had started making wild suggestions like “move the stargate to a dedicated facility that isn’t in Cheyanne Mountain,” “Stop using atomics as a primary method of defense in a populated section of Colorado,” and “start actually taking technology that we find on alien worlds and bring it home. We can relocate the fifty people who it currently provides protection.” Three years of being ignored and, just as Harry freaking knew would happen, the NIDs strike team was going to have to bail out the SGC.

The myopic leadership of Stargate Command wasn’t going to doom the planet, not if Harry could do anything about it. The men around him were all Americans, men who’d been hired by the NID specifically for the purpose of responding to issues relating to the programs that America needed corrected in quiet. The NID saw them as a balance to the Pentagon Standby Strike teams, and equipped and trained them with the intention of being able to go toe to toe with any threat they might find. They were made up of ex-special forces, service men who’d become sick of the limitations put upon them by the rules of engagement.

They still had their uses.

Their van slowed as they approached the parking lot of the Cheyanne Complex, a wall of people between them and the building. Someone, probably one of O’Neill’s, had issued the evacuation order for the complex. It would limit the potential collateral casualties, but there was a literal army of people who worked for NORTHCOM NORAD. Once evacuated, they had to go somewhere.

Confused and scared looking service members clustered around their NCOs and Petty Officers, taking head counts to ensure that they’d all managed to make it out of the building. Clustered groups of humanity so thick that the NID vehicles couldn’t hope to pass through them. Harry gritted his teeth and opened the door, muttering darkly under his breath as he adjusted the strap on his carbine. He’d known this would be an obstacle, but there was a pointed difference between realizing just how many people worked out of the mountain and coming face to face with a uniformed Woodstock imitation.

He lead his men through the crowd, shoving their way past them with determined looks on their face.
They passed through with minimal effort, the near murderous glint in their eyes more than enough to discourage most curiosity. The SF’s challenged their entry at the gates, but it was a cursory gesture at best. The base security was scared, the sudden appearance of heavily armed men wearing full combat gear and American flags on their shoulders and identifying themselves as the “hostage response team” was exactly the sort of thing that they’d welcome given the distant thrum of gunfire beneath the earth.

Base security had clearly been ill prepared to mount defenses against the lower levels, yet another issue the NID had been repeatedly reporting for three years. It wasn’t entirely clear who was running the SF’s on the upper levels, nor was it clear which direction they expected an attack to come from.

“Christ this is a Charlie Foxtrot,” Groaned Maxwell Davis, an ex-Navy Seal with a scar running across his left cheek up from a disfigured lip where an Iraqi soldier had slit his mouth from the inside. “Half these kids wanted these orders to avoid combat. They’re greener than the damn grass.”

“They’re not our primary concern. We’re here to make sure they aren’t relevant to this situation. Hammond’s people will be leading the defense on the lower levels.” Harry sighed, pointedly not correcting the Maxwell. “We can expect a more practical force from the SGC.”

Maxwell grunted, clearly unimpressed at the SGC’s potential. The man was an arrogant ass, convinced that the only fighting force worth a damn were the Navy Seals and that among them really only he counted as a proper fighter. His unspoken opinion seemed to be that any skirmish in which he was not an immediate participant hadn’t been properly fought. He had an irritating habit of backing that opinion up with action, making him the perfect candidate to lead the NID answer to a Pentagon Strike Team.

“Look, I’d never say it to his face because the man is smug enough already but Colonel O’Neill is a good leader and a hell of a fighter. So stow your opinions till this is over.” Colonel Maybourne replied, more heat in his voice than he’d intended. Competent though he may be, the former Seal’s outright dismissal of any “Chairforce” capacity to fight grew quickly tiresome, as did his insistence upon referring to Harry as a “tech.”

Maxwell arched a brow in a petulant gesture as though to say “yeah right” and “I didn’t need to say a damn thing for you to know what I meant.” His blonde eyebrow receded into hair that was far too long for a proper military haircut as the smile lines showed in his cheeks. Harry felt his own eye twitch, as he took a series of calming breaths.

The man was really worse than O’Neill. O’Neill at least had some degree of humility. “Just lead the way.”

“You heard the man.” He replied to the NID strike team as he patted his chest, running a finger over the pocket Harry knew contained a tin of dip tobacco. Tapping his finger twice over the round bump to confirm that it was there to the man’s satisfaction, Maxwell then issued a series of curt orders to his team as they breached NORAD, ready for a fight.
Chapter 21

Jacob Carter felt the immediate bite of a Chicago Autumn, cool air frigid against his soaking clothes. The rough spun wool and leather only seemed to distribute the biting whip of afternoon air rather than mitigating it in any measurable way. His feet trembled in his boots as he stepped through the rip between worlds, following his guide into a dingy alleyway.

Elaine pulled the cloak from her shoulders, stashing it in a bright nylon backpack as she pulled a length of chain from inside it. She wrapped the chain around her arm, letting the excess hang loose. Its tip sizzled ominously and smelled vaguely of ozone. There was a look of caution in her eye, the carefully emotionless mask of readiness that Jacob knew could only mean that she was genuinely worried about her immediate safety.

Is this not a district of one of the most developed cities of the First World? Queried Selmak, the symbiote's voice more curious than worried. Odd that she is so troubled in its heart.

"Not exactly." Jacob thought back to his mental co-habitant. "Fuller Park is one of the worst neighborhoods in the city by almost every metric. I would be hesitant to drive through here, and we're on foot."

Are not the streets policed? Selmak replied in mild confusion. The symbiote's experience with the home world of Humans had been highly structured thus far, the military wasn't going to risk its alliance with the Tok'ra by putting Tok'ra representatives in undue danger.

So the locations chosen for the Tok'ra's visits were scrupulously screened, designed to not only provide the greatest degree of defensibility but to cast Earth in the most positive light possible. And while the Tok'ra could access all of Jacob's memories to learn of Earth's less admirable qualities, it had been Jacob's experience thus far that Selmak preferred to live things for himself.

Consequently, there were certain gaps in the Tok'ra's knowledge of some of the more nuanced specifics of life as a Tau'ri - the live and vibrant criminal culture of Chicago's inner cities for example. Jacob wasn't an expert in the subject by any measure, but he knew enough to realize that he was the wrong age, income bracket, profession and ethnicity to not irritate someone living here just by virtue of his very presence. He thought back to the symbiote, "Cops come here rarely if at all unless they're forced to be here. Certain elements of the locals tend to object to their presence. It interferes with business."

Business? Selmak queried internally, sorting through Jacob's memories before sighing disappointedly. Ah, drugs and prostitution. Charming.
"We're going to need to take a cab." Elaine chewed her lip in thought, pouting in a way that Jacob was entirely too old to find enticing - or so he assured himself firmly. "But we're at least four blocks from anywhere that a cab is going to stop for a fare."

"Can we call a cab?" Jacob suggested. "Get them to pick us up?"

"Be my guest." Elaine arched an eyebrow and pointed to the pay phone at the end of the alley. The heavy metal container of the telephone on the right had been pried open as though with a crowbar, its innards spilling down to the street from where someone ripped out the coin repository from it. The telephone on the right had not been successfully pried open, but had instead been smashed soundly - the cracked remains of what might once have been a telephone head set poking out from key pad. Someone clearly hadn't been thrilled about the news they'd gotten at some point. Both were riddled with small holes, presumably damage from a drive by shooting.

"Ah," Jacob swallowed. He did not want to stand on the street corner and risk drawing undue attention to himself, and “blood soaked balding man” had a way of drawing attention. "I suppose you have a better plan?"

Elaine shrugged, "We walk a couple blocks then I hail a cab."

"I said better plan." Jacob replied, not thrilled about a nighttime jaunt through inner city Chicago.

“Calm down gramps.” The mousy haired woman giggled, following Jacobs line of thought. “Nobody’s going to see us.” She snapped her fingers and shimmered out of view, without even the blurry outline that Jacob would have associated with a cloaking device of Goa’uld make to hint at her presence. He couldn’t even see her footprints on the ground any more.

Jacob whistled, long and low. “You’re going to have to teach me that trick sometime.”

“It would do you little good.” Selmak interjected mentally. “The talent for using those abilities is genetic. Some Goa’uld have attempted to force the genetics of humans to allow for its use… the results are rarely pleasant.”

“Can’t blame a guy for trying.” Jacob thought back to his Tok’ra companion. “That sort of thing would be damn useful.”
“Power comes at a price.” Selmak replied. “Always.”

Elaine, unaware of his internal dialogue, extended her spellwork to extend the envelope of sorcery around the both of them. Jacob felt like the world took on a bluish tint through whatever it was that she was doing to make them both invisible. It was unnerving to see someone just casually manipulate the laws of physics with that much ease. He wasn’t even entirely comfortable when Sammy managed to do that under a patina of physics and alien technology. To do it by just waving your hands? That was just freaky.

Jacob followed Elaine out of the alley and into the street. Walking through downtown Chicago while invisible was an experience in and of itself. One does not realize how much of walking through a crowd is an unwritten social contract not to run into each other till one is forced to circumnavigate a city street without anyone else able to see you. Fuller park wasn’t exactly teeming with life as the day bled away into twilight, it was too dangerous, but even the minimal presence on the streets presented a surprising impediment to safe travel.

Jacob swore and just barely dodged a messenger bike tearing along the street, it’s rider clearly eager to out of the neighborhood. He’d flipped a decidedly inappropriate gesture at the man’s back before he realized the futility of flipping off someone who could neither see, nor apparently hear him. Elaine managed to only giggle a bit at his frustration, biting back the sarcastic jibe he just knew was at the tip of her tongue. The woman’s soul had been awash with sarcastic wit that he was in no mood for at the moment.

O’Neill’s inevitable cavalcade of Bewitched references was going to be bad enough once this was all over. Using witchcraft to safely navigate the streets Chicago was going to haunt him, he just knew it. Jacob turned at the keening whistle of a train, loaded with cargo and heading north past the park from which the neighborhood got its name. He could see a baseball diamond and some tennis courts, but they had a dinginess to them that felt incongruous to their manicured lawns. He could hear the distant sounds of shouting, but they were shouts of excitement rather than anything to be worried about. The dull thud of a basketball being dribbled and squeaking of shoes on wet stone hinting at a basketball game out of his field of view.

Several dogs took a degree of interest in Jacob and his companion to a degree that their owners found baffling in a way that had Jacob wondering how many times his own dogs had been barking at a concealed practitioner of magic rather than the nothing he had perceived it to be. When voiced to Elaine, the witch found that proposition greatly amusing. “You’re not far off gramps. Dogs are smart. If it’s not some big nasty that uses veils or illusions to hide themselves it’s probably one of the little folk or something equally benign.”

“Little folk?” Jacob queried.
“Fairies. The little kind. Sprites, brownies, really any of the wildfae too small to draw significant attention from the Winter or Summer courts. You’ve probably had them around you for most of your life.” Elaine smiled, looking around her. “They’re mostly benign, but they’re still fairies and not to be trifled with.”

Jacob thought back to the cruel little sprites that had taken such joy in the letting of blood when first he’d entered the world of the Furlings. Not to be trifled with indeed. “Is there anything that can be done to make sure they stay away from you?”

“There are things that you can do.” Elaine considered the statement. “But I would advise against it. Warding against the little people is something that they’ll notice, and probably take as a personal slight. They’re probably not going to be able to do anything about it, but they’ll know how to find someone who can.”

“So just hope they’re benevolent?” Jacob asked incredulously.

“Gramps, they’re like an inch tall and they have a memory span of moments.” Elaine chuckled. “They’re not exactly a fighting force. Just treat them decent if you run into them and leave them be otherwise, they don’t have much of a reason to involve themselves in the affairs of “the big people.” Even vanilla mortals are like Godzilla level out of their class. They’re mostly happy to go unnoticed.”

“I still don’t like it.” Jacob replied. “It’s a huge potential threat to be dealing with on a day to day basis and nobody knows about it.”

“Says the man who apparently has a rebellious ancient god living in his head.” Replied Elaine.

“The Tok’ra are not gods.” Asserted Selmak angrily, taking over Jacob’s vocal chords without bothering to go through the traditional head nod. Jacob wasn’t overly surprised at the rudeness. Selmak was extremely nervous standing next to the Hok’tar – they had a reputation for seeming random and capricious solutions to the presence of a Goa’uld. It was part of why Selmak had been intentionally minimizing his presence, there was no benefit to drawing unnecessary attention to his inhuman nature.

“Sorry, the rebellious not god in his head.” The mousy haired woman snorted. “I mean seriously, the fact that the US military is putting some sort of whatever you are into the heads of our military leaders to fight a war against the old gods on other planets kinda trumps ‘Cobbs will secretly fix your
shoes’ on the ‘people should be worrying about this’ scale.”

“Shoes?” Jacob asked, arching an eyebrow.

“It’s a whole thing. You can occasionally hire the more specialized Fae to complete tasks but they’re weird about it. You tell someone that they’re doing it and they have to stop.” She held up a finger to silence Jacob before he had a chance to reply. “And before you ask, no, I don’t know why. That’s just the rule for some reason. You negotiate some sort of payment in advance, you keep paying it at the rate you agreed, and they complete the task.”

“You’re telling me I could have hired cobbs back in Officer Candidate school to have my room prepped and inspection ready every time our instructor came to check on it?” Jacob briefly amused himself at the idea of a perpetually and impossibly clean room, as well as a perpetually befuddled Master Sergeant trying to determine how, exactly, the candidates were actually managing to meet his standards without apparently trying. “That would have been useful.”

“Trust me, it’s better to not owe things to fairies. Even the little ones.” She shuddered, clearing thinking of her own entanglements with the Furlings.

“It would be wise to listen to this one’s advice.” Selmak agreed. “She is bound in chains of debt that I imagine we’ve scarcely even begun to understand.”

As they crossed 47th street and started heading West, Jacob was struck with the distinct impression that he was being watched. He paused, holding out a hand to stop his companion as he looked over his shoulder. His sight, enhanced by the Tok’ra to see further than a human would normally have been able in the growing darkness, caught a shape rising from beneath the overpass to the East, something too big to be a man. “There’s something coming from under the bridge.”

Elaine’s eye’s bugged. “From under the bridge. You’re certain of that?”

“Yep, and it’s huge.” Jacob tilted his head, trying to get a good look at it. There was a hazy aspect to it, as though the features beneath the thing’s wide brimmed hat and long, leather jacket were being viewed through an unfocused lens. It tilted its head back, as though sniffing at the air, before turning its face down the street and looking directly at where Elaine and Jacob were standing. “Oh, no. I think it can smell us.”

“Damn it.” Elaine’s voice hitched up a half octave as she sped up her pace, not quite running but
getting as near as she seemed to dare without breaking her concentration on the spell enveloping the pair. “I was worried something like this would happen.”

“What is it?” Jacob asked, matching the woman’s speed and regretting his lack of weapons.

“A troll.” The witch replied, cutting right and running across the street into a large parking lot full of shipping containers. “A creature of Winter.”

“Trolls! Oh good, all we need is a goat and we’re set to go.” Jacob replied sarcastically as he followed Elaine, all too aware that the massive man’s thunderous footsteps were charging after them at a break-neck pace.

“Christ I’d kill for a gruff right now.” Elaine agreed, adrenaline seemingly having robbed her of the ability to register Jacob’s jibe. “Jacob, that thing is actually casting a half decent illusion. Do you know how few Trolls have the brains required to actually do that? It’s either very old or very capable – and if it’s come to the mortal world then it’s here to breed or to hunt mortals, and I’m not especially eager to find out which.”

“So, what? Do we sprint till daylight?” Jacob snarled. “Because I don’t know about you but I’m not going to be able to keep up this pace for another twelve hours.”

“We just need to be able to get to an area populate enough that he can’t attack without drawing attention.” Elaine huffed as they ran through the stacks of cargo containers. “We’re going to have to hop the fence, but there is a bottling plant south of West 49th street. There are armed guards and cops round the clock, he’s not going to want to draw the attention of that man mortals.”

“Why do you know so much about Chicago’s geography?” Huffed Jacob, his age slowing him even with the aid of Tok’ra enhanced stamina.

“My boss has a thing about it for some reason.” Elaine huffed, swearing in irritation. “I’ve got to drop the illusion. If I keep this up I’m not going to have an juice in the tank to slow him down.”

“Hell.” Jacob groaned, forcing his legs to move faster in spite of his fatigue as the roaring cry of the troll echoed through the containers. Apparently it had caught sight of the two of them as soon as Elaine had stopped hiding them.
“Just keep running, just keep – oh no!” Elaine dropped down, dragging Jacob to the pavement as a massive shape soared through the air, slicing past where Jacob’s head had been only seconds ago. The seemingly impossibly large projectile flew past them, smashing down in a loud display of sparks and tearing metal.

The troll had tossed a shipping container at them, trapping them in the corridor of shipping containers with only one exit, directly past the troll. Elaine uncoiled the chain from her arm, snapping it like a whip. “This is bad. Stay behind me.”

“Like hell.” Jacob growled, ripping a long iron bar off the side of the crumpled container and spinning it like a club. “I’m a damn General. I’m not hiding from something that gets its ass kicked by goats.”

“Christ gramps.” Elaine sighed, “You’re worse than my ex.”

“I’m sure that I’m prettier too.” Jacob replied, eliciting a snort from the witch.

“You might be at that, gramps.” Elaine licked her lips nervously as the troll advanced.

It was huge, larger than it had even seemed when Jacob had first seen it. The magics it had been using to hide its form had apparently also served to mask its true size. It stood an easy fifteen feet tall, with hairy grey limbs protruding from a bulbous hairy body. Its huge belly stuck out, draping down over what Jacob presumed to be a loincloth. He wouldn’t have called the material used for either the creature’s loincloth or coat to be leather. Leather was cured and treated. The Troll seemed instead to have just skinned its still-bloody prey and sewn the bloody skins into clothing without bothering to let it dry. Consequently, they had a pungent odor to them, a rotting musk that was nearly as unpleasant to smell as the Troll’s face was to look at.

Its nose was enormous, taking up easily half the creature’s face, and what little of the face was not consumed by the broad proboscis was barely visible beneath thick hair. Beady little eyes stared hatefully beneath a thick brow ridge, accented by the white reflections of long jagged tusks. He had apparently flung the container one handed, given that his other hand held a long club.

On closer observation Jacob realized that it was, in fact, a tree that the troll had ripped up at the root. Though, given that it was half as thick as Jacob’s torso, he had no doubt it would prove an effective weapon. It sniffed the air and smiled, exposing the rotting where tusk met gum. It spoke, its voice surprisingly midwestern for creature of Norse legend. “First I kill you. Then I have your woman. Then I maybe eat her too.”
Elaine’s face went a few shades whiter than her already pale completion as the troll’s loincloth stirred, hinting at how terrifyingly male it was beneath the blood-soaked rotting garment. “Oh, to hell with that.”

She swung the chain out, grinning as the troll held up his arm to block it. The thick iron chain wrapped around his wrist and began to smoke before she spoke a word and lighting arced down the length of it, making the troll’s muscled body convulse in pain. The creature foamed at the mouth, its piggy little eyes bulging in hatred as he smashed down his club in her direction.

She yelped and jumped back, maintaining her hold on the chain. As she moved back the red hot links of chain tightened around the troll’s arm, cutting into the creatures flesh with an ease that didn’t seem possible. It ripped through flesh and bone, mauling the arm as she pulled away from him.

“It’s the iron.” Selmak assured Jacob. “It hurts Furlings in a way they cannot protect themselves from.”

“Well then, I think it’s time to give this man an object lesson in manners.” Jacob grinned, taking advantage of the Troll’s overswing to get in close with his makeshift club and bash the thing in the face. The creature howled as the iron rod struck its eye, swearing and spitting up purplish-black blood.

Jacob dodged another swing from the creature, but he was too slow prevent the creature’s next swing. The tree struck Elaine hard, bouncing the diminutive woman off a shipping container with enough force that he actually heard the woman’s arm pop out of its socket. Without consciously thinking what he was doing, he interposed himself between Elaine and the troll in the hopes that he might at least deflect the beast’s next blow.

The creature’s club rocketed down at Jacob’s head with enough force to spit it open, then froze within an inch of his head. Jacob opened his eye tentatively, lowering his arm from the reflexive gesture of defense as he realized the troll seemed to be struggling against some impossible force. Its bloodied face was contorted into an expression of confusion as it did it’s best to strike Jacob with the club. It swung at Jacob again and again, putting more and more effort into the swing each time, but no matter how hard it tried, it couldn’t hit him. Not just didn’t, it physically could not swing its weapon at Jacob.

Elaine pulled herself to her feet, her lamed arm hanging next to her. “Something you want to tell me Gramps?”
“I’m as lost as you are.” Jacob replied, shifting to the left as the troll attempted to strike Elaine again only to find the attack barred by whatever force protected the General. “Trolls haven’t come up much in my day do day life admin.”

“Well don’t stop now.” Elaine smiled, looking out at the street. “Apparently Chicago’s Finest have seen fit to notice us.”

Jacob nearly whooped for joy as the blue and red lights of a squad car flashed from the street, a voice echoing over the loudspeaker declaring to “Stop, Chicago PD!”

The Troll, frustrated that his quarry had protection beyond what he’d been expecting and apparently unwilling to tussle with the cops, kneeled down on his stubby grey legs and propelled himself over the stack of cargo containers. His purple-black blood spattered across Jacob’s already bloodstained tunic as the Troll flew off into the distance, howling and gibbering in fury of having been robbed of his prey.

“I’ve got to go gramps.” Elaine winced, popping her own shoulder back into place with a wet squelch against the container. “I can’t afford to end up in the system, not here. There are too many people that I can’t afford noticing me. Good luck!”

“Wait!” Jacob turned to the woman as she vanished into thin air, leaving him alone in the wreckage of their battle with the troll. “You can’t just leave!”

But Elaine seemed to have done very much that. It was as the uniformed officers approached him with weapons drawn that Jacob realized exactly how much blood was covering the front of his alien tunic and exactly how much damage had been inflicted on the shipping facility. He raised his hands to the sky, doing his best to look non-threatening as he asked the officers. “I don’t suppose you’ll believe me and let me go if I say that this is classified, will you?”

“Absolutely fucking not.” Replied the closest officer as he pulled a set of cuffs from his bet.

“Worth a shot.” Replied Jacob. “Can I have my phone call?”

The cop shook his head in exasperation. “Bro, you can figure that out with the spook squad once I pass you off to SI. I’m not going anywhere near the paperwork necessary to make whatever it is that I just saw keep me from losing my pension.”
Chapter 22

Daniel Jackson hadn’t quite decided if it was comforting or terrifying that their captors were allowing them effective freedom of movement – not even having bothered to restrain them. Any attempt to leave the room resulted in a hissing gaggle of “scions” interceding to prevent such an action, but their human prisoners were largely considered beneath notice now that their leader was no longer onboard the ship.

His fear that they might take retribution for their fallen comrade was apparently misplaced. The members of SG4, SG3, and SG1 were, by and large ignored. The ten of them just sort of stood in an awkward circle feeling naked without their weapons.

Now their captors they weren’t under the direct supervision of their leader, they seemed to consider the human prisoners to be a near tertiary concern behind jabbering with each other in their guttural hissing speech and making sure that they were properly dressed.

Their captors were no longer garbed as Roman Cavalry, having abandoned that illusion for an imitation of the Stargate uniforms. The man who’d chosen to mirror his image to that of the Colonel, the man Daniel presumed to be second in command after the one who’d gone to negotiate, had impressed his will upon the other scions – snarling and berating those who’d chosen to garb themselves in more modern suits or halfway garb themselves in part-suit part-BDUs until they conformed with his own appearance. Daniel noticed that none of the other scions had chosen to match the silver oak leaves upon the man’s shoulders, choosing the garments of lower ranking individuals.

They were remarkably literal in their imitation of the Stargate team members, replicating the entire uniforms and patches. They understood the conceptual goal of looking like members of an SG team, but seemed to lack context for why they were dressed up like them. They had, for example, chosen to retain the gladius strapped to their hips and the long iron spears in spite of discarding the pretense of requiring shields. Daniel couldn’t help but wonder if the blades were even real or just another illusion to cover the reptilian bodies he’d seen when they’d been fired upon.

There was a not insubstantial part of Doctor Jackson that was just utterly thrilled to discover that dragons actually exist. They were apparently a species of trans-dimensional aliens, but they existed. Daniel’s inner eleven year old was going to be dining out on that fact for the foreseeable future. “Amazing, I mean, simply amazing.”

“Doctor Jackson, you’ll pardon me if I don’t share your starry eyed optimism while we’re captives.” Replied Colonel Makepeace. The man had not stopped eying the pile of weapons just beyond the scions since they’d been able to move again. Trying to force his way past the scions would have been outright suicidal, but the man was a Marine.
“Colonel, we are in a first contact situation with a species that is able to manipulate their actual physical form at will.” Daniel pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, considering the matter. “A species who very well might be the inspiration behind the myths of Dragons on Earth.”

“Oh, great.” LT Johnson “So we just got our asses kicked by Mushu and his minions.”

The Colonel spared his junior officer a scathing look. “Mushu?”

“You know, from the movie – Eddie Murpy plays a dragon.” Replied the Lieutenant. “My kids watched that thing on a loop ever since they got the VHS.”

“Mushu?” The Colonel replied, an amused lilt cracking through his stern tone of command. “They named the dragon Mushu?”

“It’s Mulan sir. Disney went for a theme.” The Lieutenant replied. “Your kids didn’t end up on the Mulan bandwagon? I’ve been hearing “I’ll make a man out of you” in my sleep. I can’t get them to stop watching it.”

“Aladdin.” Replied the Colonel. “I’ve been trapped listening to Aladdin for the past year and a half. Not even the first one. The straight to VHS sequel. I can’t get my five year old to watch anything else. At this point I’m praying for anything to catch his attention that saves me from that damn parrot.”

“I wasn’t a fan of Mulan.” Daniel replied. “They took a lot of liberties with the original source material. Hua Mulan is one of the more interesting figures of Chinese Mythology and honestly it’s sort of painful to see her legend get compressed and a Disney makeover.”

“Hua Mulan is a formidable warrior. Many have died to her blade, many more will die.” Replied a gravely reptilian voice, the serpentine tongue of the Scion who’d chosen to dress as a Colonel just barely managing to approximate human speech. “She is worthy of a true name and her place in the pantheon.”

Daniel almost jumped out of his skin as he turned to face the scion. He hadn’t even realized that the faux-colonel had moved from his position in the center of the crowd of scions, let alone that the faux-colonel was breathing down his neck. The fax-colonel got an apparent inordinate degree of joy from Daniel’s discomfort. “You are Daniel Jackson – you are known.”
Daniel felt like a live wire was running up his spine as the faux-colonel spoke his name. The sensation made his teeth clatter together as his eyes bulged behind his glasses. He shook off the abrupt sensation and spoke back to the faux-colonel as though he hadn’t felt the jolt. “I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage. I don’t know your name.”

The man’s lip quirked in something that seemed to approximate amusement, but there was artificialness to it – as though he were just imitating amusement rather than actually feeling it. “I am nőding Sárkány. I have not yet earned a name, so I must do without. I am he who leads this brood. If you must have a title for me, you may call me the First Nameless.”

“I don’t suppose you have a nickname or something?” Jibed Major Garcia, the second in command of SG-4. Daniel liked the guy, but sincerely hoped that Colonel O’Neill didn’t have too much crossover with him. He could only handle so much snark at once.

“I am without a name.” Replied the faux-colonel, he paused for a moment as though struggling to articulate his specific point. “Your forgiveness, I find mortal words to be insufficient.”

“Can you all speak English?” Daniel queried, realizing that the attention of the Scions was entirely directed upon their conversation.

“Speaking mortal words is difficult. Your meaning is limited.” Replied the faux-colonel. “Few can slow themselves enough to speak with such imprecision. We understand your meanings – you speak as children.”

“Why do I get a name then?” Daniel replied to the faux-colonel. Looking at the other members of Stargate Command. “Do they get names as well.”

“Many use names – they have not earned them.” Replied the faux-colonel. “You are a godslayer, you slew him and stole what was his. You permanently killed a true god over a confluence and many pretenders to power after. Your name is both earned and known.” He pointed to Major Carter and Colonel Makepeace. “They have slain pretenders – I can taste it upon them. Their names are unknown but not undeserved.”

“Daniel, is he saying what I think he’s saying?” Major carter blinked in surprise. “Because it sounded to me like we have higher social status than he does.”
“It is known.” Replied the faux-colonel.

“I don’t suppose that it is known well enough for us to let us go?” Colonel Makepeace sighed in frustration.

“You have names but I have duty.” Replied the faux-colonel, smiling widely as tendrils of smoke came from his nostrils and the edges of his smile. “But I am pleased to be guarding one who deserves a name. If you attempt to flee and I slay you, it will earn me my own.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier just to kill us and say we were trying to escape.” Asked the junior Lieutenant from SG-4. His superior officer snarled an admonition and grabbed the front of his shirt as the officer protested, “Hey! I’m just saying! It would be easier.”

“You will not soon earn a name.” Declared the faux-colonel as he shook his head in disgust. “You are our prisoners taken in battle, not our prey. You fought with honor and lost. Grandfather accepted you as ransom. You are beholden to the laws, and protected by them. I do not imagine that you will be so foolish as to require that we punish you, not with three named among you. It is known.”

“Do those laws include feeding prisoners?” Colonel Makepeace’s eyes narrowed. “Because unless you’re looking to starve someone with a name, you’re going to have to let us have our packs back.”

“You do not hunger.” Replied the faux-colonel.

“Bull shit I do not.” Rejoined the Colonel. “It’s been hours since I last ate.”

“And yet you do not hunger.” The faux-colonel shook his head. “You wish to have access to your bag so that you might use the weapon within it.” He smiled. “I am not a fool, named one. And my sense of smell works perfectly well. I can smell sulfur and charcoal within your pack. I do not smell food.”

The Colonel’s face was scrupulously emotionless as he replied. “My men will have food.”

The faux-colonel smiled. “You care for your brood. Wise.” He spoke in the harsh tones of his native language and the scions went through the packs of the Earth warriors, removing all items of food and piling them together. Daniel noticed that they did not apparently seem to be able to recognize the brown MRE pouches as food, discarding them with the other contents of the bag.
“Do you mind if I ask you questions, First Nameless?” Daniel asked before the Colonel had further opportunity to antagonize their captor.

“We are without other amusements, named one.” Replied the faux-colonel. “But know that I may only answer your questions if I am permitted to ask one in kind. Information is valuable, and must be exchanged for information of equal value.”

“Why are you here on this ship?” Daniel queried.

The faux-colonel smiled wide, exposing a mouth full of jagged teeth. “Because Grandfather asked me to be. Why do you have a ship of the brood of serpents?”

“Because he gave it to us.” Replied Daniel, recognizing the game almost immediately. Medieval legends were rife with stories of mythical creatures engaging the hero in word games. Those who were wise and quick witted were often rewarded. Those whose tongues slipped foolishly were punished. But Daniel felt confident that a game of words was worth the risk given how little they knew of the dragons. “Who is your grandfather?”

“Grandfather is he who precedes all from the Brood, the father of fathers.” Replied the faux-colonel. “Why do I taste death’s kiss upon you?”

“Because I have died.” Daniel smiled. “It didn’t take. How did you learn my name?”

“Because you spoke it to me before it had been yet earned.” The faux-colonel tilted his head, raising a finger to silence Daniel’s next question. “A moment, named one. I believe that our game is going to have to wait until after.”

“After what?” Daniel blinked, following the unnaturally yellow eyes of the faux-colonel as they stared in the direction of the door the scions forced their way through to enter the ring room. He could hear a distant sound of wailing cries, a garbled mess of morose sobs and screams that sent shivers up Daniel’s body as an unnatural wave of cold descended upon the ring room.

The scions growled, turning their attention away from the Stargate team members and towards glowing shapes in the distance. There were translucent shapes moving along the corridor, flickering images like holograms. Daniel couldn’t quite see them, but he got the distinct impression that they could see him. He was unaccountably convinced that they did not care for him either, though he had
no actual evidence to back up that supposition.

His breath fogged as he exhaled, shivering in the sudden cold. “What is that?”

“The shades of what was.” Growled the faux-colonel, turning to the crowd and snarling a curt series of commands. His compatriots looked at him in surprise and he hissed off an angry growl that apparently meant something to the effect of “yes, I really just said that” after which the members of Stargate Command abruptly found themselves being forcibly re-armed with their confiscated arsenal, including the Zat-weapons which had proven to be entirely effective at dispatching scions.

Colonel Makepeace stared at the weapon in his hands in bafflement. “You’re kidding right?”

“Take weapons.” Growled the faux-colonel as he shoved a zat-gun into Daniel’s hand. “Will not kill shades, but might slow them.”

“What possible reason could you have to think we aren’t just going to turn these on you?” Asked Major Carter as she activated her own Zat-weapon.

“Self-preservation.” Replied the faux-colonel as the lights flickered and died, illuminating the space with only the green light coming from the corridor as the horde of flickering figures continued to float inexorably towards the ring-room.

Major Carter looked back at the ring transporter, biting her lip in worry. “Was that main power cutting out?”

“Shades do not belong.” Replied the faux Colonel. “They prevent the orderly procession of what is.”

The major exhaled abruptly. “You mean that whatever those thing are, they’re jamming our ability to use the ring transporters to escape them?”

“Not intentionally, but indubitably.” Replied the faux-colonel as he looked longingly at the rings. “Retreat would have been wise.”

Sam handed her Zat to Colonel Makepeace. “Sir, if you can keep those things off of me I’m sure I
can get the rings working. I just need time.”

“Are you going to kill us if we go through them?” Queried the Colonel.

“You are our prisoners.” Replied the faux-colonel as the howling crowd of translucent figures got close enough for Daniel to make out their mangled and burned bodies. They all looked as though they’d been savaged by some great beast, bloody entrails and great hunks having been ripped from them. The man’s skin rippled, his illusion seeming to struggle against the discomfort he felt. “But this one suspects that Grandfather will tolerate us keeping you prisoner away from his ship.”

“Yes or no. Will you try to kill us.” The Colonel snarled. “You want my help? I want a straight answer.”

The faux-colonel bristled at the directness of the demand, clenching its teeth together as it spoke. “We will not attempt to earn our names at the expense of yours Colonel. We will not slay one who is beholden to us in a mutual attempt at survival.”

“We have other men on this ship.” Replied the Colonel. “I will not abandon them.”

“You will not be given a choice, named one.” Replied the faux-colonel as the faces of the translucent people became distinct. Once they were close enough to get a proper view of the scions, the translucent figures howled unnaturally, their apparently humanoid forms shifting and changing into monstrous parodies of men and women. Their previously languid gait belying the apparent speed with which they could move. The translucent horde was upon them in a flash, horrid parodies of mangled bodies slashing out at scions with mangled hands and cracked nails.

Before Daniel had even really properly had a chance to register the macabre image of the mangled men and women descending upon him, he found himself lifted in the air by an eviscerated little girl. She couldn’t have been more than ten or twelve, but she’d grabbed Daniel by the throat and was choking him to death with her blood covered fingers. Her eyes bulged, hatred within them that Daniel couldn’t have ever imagined on one so young.

He gasped for breath, the awful, rotting stank of her overpowering him with every pathetic breath he took. He kicked her in the chest, only for his foot to pass through her and come back out, dripping with a clear, viscous fluid as though he’d just kicked a bowl of pudding rather than a little girl. He suddenly dropped from the girl’s grip as a blade severed the girl’s arms at the wrist. The mangled little girl turned to her attacker only to incinerate in a gout of fire from the faux-colonel’s mouth.
He lifted Daniel to his feet, shoving the Zat back into the Doctor’s hand as he issued orders to the Scions around them. They were engaged with the enemy, some as men, and still others as winged lizards the size of bears. Daniel fired his zat at the translucent monsters, and was gratified to discover that it hurt them even if it seemed incapable of killing them outright.

“What the hell are these things!” Screamed the Lieutenant from SG-4 as he emptied what remained of his magazine into the belly of a shimmering man who seemed no more affected by it than by a bee’s sting.

“I could be mistaken – but I’m pretty sure they’re the ghosts of the crew.” Replied Daniel Jackson as he fired his Zat at another spirit, freezing it in place long enough for the faux-colonel to incinerate it with dragon-fire.

“Ghosts aren’t real.” Snarled the furious Colonel Makepeace as he smashed the butt of his gun into the face of reasonably convincing evidence to the contrary, only to have the rifle ripped from his hands. He pulled the K-bar from his waist, stabbing it into the ghost’s belly and ripping sideways. Clear fluid spilled out from the beast, startling it for long enough for one of the lizard-form scions to grab it in its jaws and rip the spirit’s head from its shoulders.

“I don’t think they overly care if we believe in them Colonel.” Daniel ran through his head, trying to remember what ghost lore might potentially be applicable. Ghosts hadn’t ever been a field of study into which he’d bothered to delve on anything other than the most superficial level. He had previously dismissed any actual “ghost prevention” lore as a mix of spirituality and nonsense. That was unlikely to continue, provided that he survived the encounter. “And given that we’re standing on an alien spaceship surrounded by Dragons, I’m willing to take the logical leap on this one.”

“God damn it. I don’t suppose we have a plan for this sort of thing, First Nameless?” Interjected the Colonel as he fired his side-arm impotently at a ghost.

“Don’t die. Keep not dying till the named one allows our escape.” Replied the faux-colonel, gesturing to where two dragons stood around Major Carter, protecting her as she fiddled with the machinery on the ring device.

The Colonel swore angrily. “I was afraid it would be something like that.”

“Simple strategy is best strategy.” Replied the faux-colonel as dozens upon dozens of translucent figures piled into the throne room, seemingly obsessed with doing grievous harm to the scions. “The named one’s ritual prowess is known.”
“How many of these things are there?” Daniel couldn’t see any end to horde of glowing forms pouring from the corridor. There seemed to be hundreds of them.

“Not sure. The brood likely killed many.” The faux-colonel replied, bisecting a spirit with his blade. The weapon shimmered with baleful light, flickering orange as it went through the target.

“Wait, these are people that you killed?” Daniel groaned. “Oh crap… they invaded your territory. Of course these are people you killed. No wonder they want revenge.”

Colonel Makepeace made a hissing noise through his teeth as he winced, closing his eyes in apparently physical pain as he articulated the thought aloud. “You’re telling me that we’re being attacked by the horde of vengeful spirits rightfully angry that they were devoured by a freaking brood of dragons.”


The Colonel swore again. “Why couldn’t I just have stayed on base like Colonel O’Neill had the sense to do?”
“Just go to the ship.” Jack O’Neill snarled, loading another magazine into his rifle as he took cover behind the thick stone column at the edge of the ramp of rubble leading down from level 11. He clenched his teeth as a thunderous storm of bullets tore through the air next to him, keenly aware that the armor piercing rounds were more than capable of rendering his flesh to pulp. “All I had to do was go to the ship and I’d have a layer of force fields and big honking space guns between me and whatever these things are. But noooo. I just had to stay on base.”

He pulled a grenade from the combat webbing that Master Sergeant Siler had been so generous as to provide him and lobbed it down the chasm. The metallic warbling screams of the invading army accompanied a sudden downturn in the incoming fire. Colonel O’Neill’s heart thundered in his ears, the constant sounds of gunfire having since rendered all other sounds to a tinny whine.

Guns are loud. Not loud in the sense that they seem in movies. They're so loud that one feels the noise in one’s very marrow when an assault weapons sounds off the rattling clatter of an automatic weapon emptying its magazine. In the confined space of the SCG’s upper levels, the noise was hellish.

Those SFs could be actually allowed to witness the innards of the SGC had been mustered on the 11th level to prevent further incursion into US territory, and an evacuation order had been issued for NORAD under the auspices of an active shooter incident. Security on the upper levels would be on guard expecting a dangerous incursion by a collection of armed men, but Jack couldn’t allow this fight to spill out to the upper levels. At best it would represent a compromise of Stargate’s security and at worst it would get a lot of good men killed by threats they were ill prepared to face.

Jack could just catch glimpses of his allies in the near dark, brief bursts of muzzle flares illuminating the scared faces of Stargate Command’s SFs. They were kids, barely old enough to drink. Some of them didn’t even look that old. The SCG had stationed its more blooded warriors closer to the gate, appointing more junior personnel to secure the upper levels under the assumption that any combat would happen in or around the gate room. Now the fate of the world might well be resting on the shoulders of men who’d never even been old enough to vote in a presidential election.

Christ they seemed young. There was a shout of pain and a man fell to the ground – grasping at the red stain coming from his shoulder. Jack put the SF from his mind. The kid would survive, he would probably lose the use of his left arm unless they got him immediate medical attention, but he would survive. Battle necessitated a brutal and often souless calculus of need, saving the man's arm was less important than saving the base.

He could just barely see the aliens moving in the darkness of the 12th level corridor. They moved clumsily in their heavy armor, footsteps loud against the tile floor. Jack smiled as he fired into the
darkness, enjoying the wet, crunching splatter-squelch of bullets penetrating alien carapace. “Another one down.”

“Sir, how many of them are there?” Siler asked, firing at a concealed alien.

“Siler - I have no idea what they are, let alone how many are in their little crustacean club.” Jack replied to the Master Sergeant. “You want to count bodies once we’re done killing them, be my guest.”

“I look forward to it sir.” Replied Siler.

“That’s… unusually cold blooded for you Master Sergeant.” Jack blinked.

“They killed my Airmen sir.” Replied Siler. “I can’t promise that I won’t dance on their graves.”

Jack nodded. The man was Senior Enlisted. In a very real way he served as a surrogate parent for the young men and women of the SGC’s Enlisted ranks. It was his job to care for hundreds of Airmen, as well as ensuring good order discipline. He would know intimate details of his Airmen’s lives and families. Whatever rage Jack felt, he could be certain that Siler felt it tenfold.

“Good man, Siler. Good man.” Replied Jack.

This stopped here. Jack was not going to let these things get one more damn inch of US territory. But he couldn’t realistically do that while he was still worried about collateral damage.

“Siler, I want you to get the civilians out of here.” He turned around to the priestess of Heka, pointing to Emily and hoping that she got the message. “Get her out of here. This is a bad place. Go!”

“Yes Sir.” Replied the Master Sergeant. Siler continued to fire into the lower levels as he backed away from the hole in the floor. He grabbed the little girl by the arm and tried to lead her away from the room. Emily was not so easily moved. She held fast against the grown man’s attempts to pull her away from danger, contemptuously shaking off his grasp.
She wriggled out from the man’s grip, her body shifting into a serpentine black mass of scales and smoke as she tore herself from the confused Master Sergeant’s grip. There was a predatory howl loud enough for Jack to hear it over the sounds of battle as a horse-sized creature that Jack could only possibly describe as a dragon pounced directly towards a chitinious soldier crowning the ridge.

Whatever the attacker had been anticipating on reaching the top of the hill, dragons had not been part of it. It made a wet sound of absolute panic, screaming a piteous retreat as it realized that death was imminent. The purple alien didn’t even think to fire at the dragon, instinctually raising its arms in a protective gesture over its face as the full weight of the reptilian creature smashed down upon it.

A truly horrific sound emanated from the beast’s jaws as it ripped out the creature’s belly with a loud snicker-snack of gnashing fangs, glowing purple and green viscera staining the obsidian scales of the creature. It ignored the torrent of bullets ripping through its flesh, armor piercing rounds apparently causing little more than inconvenience for the beast. The fanged monster opened its bloodied jaws and roared in leonine fury.

Great gouts of flame burst from the creature’s nostrils as it bellowed. “No. Hurt. Jack!”

The priestess, long since having been robbed of her Beretta by the SGC, let out a maniac’s laugh, stripped entirely naked, and chased the dragon’s fiery charge into the lower levels. Her many gold bangles and piercings jingled merrily as she tossed herself into the fray after the howling beast of legend, screaming what Jack presumed were divine proclamations of doom in her native tongue.

The Colonel’s eye twitched as he took in the absolute absurdity of how his day was unfolding. “Yes, run after the dragon unarmed, you Goa’uld worshipping nudist loonie!”

“Sir…. Who the hell were those women?” Queried Siler, the dour Master Sergeant, in a voice that Jack might have reserved for verifying that he wasn’t going insane.

“Our backup apparently… Every damn time I think that this job can’t get any weirder.” Jack groaned. “Ok boys and girls, it looks like we’ve got an opening and I’m not about to lose the forward momentum. I want fire team alpha to hold this point and don’t give up an inch. The rest of you, follow the stripper and the dragon.”

The security forces of the SGC, to their credit, accepted the apparent presence of a dragon with minimal explanation necessary. In fairness if the dark lord Lucifer had shown up on their doorstep and offered to fight off an invasion of America, Jack would at least have considered accepting the man’s assistance. And damn if the invaders weren’t reacting as though they’d been attacked by an actual demon. Jack couldn’t quite decide which prospect was less pleasant, the dragon’s jaws or the
The education of priestesses in Heka’s clergy was a whole lot fewer sermons and a whole lot more hand to hand combat than Jack would have presumed. She was a regular Jacqueline Chan. And honestly, a raging dragon was extremely effective, as far as distractions went. The invaders couldn’t focus fire upon the dragon or the priestess without opening themselves up to covering fire from US forces, nor could they lay down suppressing fire on the Americans without risking themselves in close combat.

The threat to whom the Aliens directed the majority of their attention, Emily, while not immune to bullets seemed to heal at a rate that rendered them effectively irrelevant. Even Zat weaponry seemed to just annoy her rather than actually doing her significant harm. Dragons were apparently as tough as advertised.

The SFs were not similarly immune. Jack’s blood boiled as he watched the back of a man’s head shatter, brains and viscera splattering out and across the hall. He drew a bead on the son of a bitch who’d shot the SF and repaid the favor, dispatching the alien with a three round burst and killing the son of a bitch next to him second burst just for kicks. These things had invaded the SGC, his home, his family and had the audacity to kill men in his chain of command? To hell with that.

He was a US God damned Air Force Officer, and he was going to put boot to ass of every stinking alien bastard who had the audacity to think that they could invade the United States of Freaking America without earning a bullet in the brain pan for their troubles.

They killed waves of the aliens, but somehow there always seemed to be more of the damn things. It was actually getting difficult to navigate the space just by virtue of the sheer mechanics of navigating the eviscerated remains of charred aliens. Jack was reasonably certain that the corridors of level 12 were permanently going to be stained purple No amount of Fabuloso was ever going to get that stink out either.

And then suddenly, there didn't seem to be any more of them coming. Impossible though it felt only minutes ago, they were winning. They actually outnumbered the aliens.

They killed more and more, flooding the space with alien blood. Emily bit down on the last invader attacking the 11th level, grabbing it by the neck and shaking hard. The creature’s body snapped in half from the force, legs flying down the hall independent of the body to which they’d once been attached. She sat in the center of the purple gore, squatting cat-like with a reptilian grin of satisfaction on her face as her forked tongue tasted the air. Her barbed tail whipped back and forth across the ground, scattering dismembered alien limbs gleefully.

“Jesus, kid.” Jack looked up at the dragon, scratching at the back of his head. “I mean I know that someone your age tends to go through growth spurts, but you’re taking it a bit more literally than most.”
“Mine.” Growled Emily, affectionately pressing her long snout up against Jack. The dragon nuzzled its gore-soaked maw against Jack’s chest, staining his shirt purple. It made a rasping sound that was almost a purr, muttering in the snarling native language of Emily’s people. Jack scratched the top of her head instinctively, massaging the soft flesh beneath the curling horns jutting from her head.

“Yeah, I like you to kiddo.” Jack sighed. “I won’t like the psychological evaluation that I’m certain will be mandatory after I file the incident report for whatever the hell is actually happening today. But I like you too.”

“Jack, mine. Mountain, mine. No others get.” Emily crushed the skull of an invader beneath her talon covered front-paw as though to emphasize the point. “Mine.”

“Kid, there are a bunch of very important people who are going to dispute that.” Jack sighed. “And I keep telling you kiddo. You can’t own people. People own themselves.”


“Yeah ok, yours.” Jack shook his head in resignation. It was probably best to let Daniel be the one to negotiate terms with NORAD’s apparently self-styled landlord. Especially given how reluctant she was to share with the purple guys. “We’re definitely your friends.”

“Mine.” She repeated as though the matter were settled before turning on her heel with suprising grace for something so large. She directed her attention to the gore-stained, naked body of Heka’s priestess and, god help him Jack heard it actually let loose a girlish giggle as it sauntered over to the priestess. Jack wasn’t great at the Goa’uld language, but he was positive the priestess was enjoying a similar exchange to the one Jack had just endured.

The Priestess, however, just seemed to generally accept the dragon’s pronouncement of ownership, bowing her head and replying deferentially in the language of the Goa’uld. Jack shook his head. “Crazy as a loon – both of them.”

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose as he realized that the dragon had two long bloody marks where something had cut off what he was damn sure had once been wings. No wonder the little girl had been found with scars along her back, someone had clipped her wings. Someone he was certain had glowing eyes and a metallic voice. Heka… that bastard booby trapped his ship with an injured dragon.
“The prick actually told us that he was attacked by dragons.” Jack sighed. “Thor confirmed it. We have seriously got to start stop assuming that anything is a legend anymore.”

Doors began to crack open along the corridor, the unarmed inhabitants of the enlisted berthing now chancing the possibility that it was safe to emerge. Several men in PTUs and sleeping clothes even dared to exit their rooms with knives far exceeding the maximum permitted length for one to have on base. One of the men closest to Colonel O’Neil looked from the carnage, to the dragon, and back to his superior officer before asking. “Sir… please tell me that this isn’t going to result in a safety stand down. Because I don’t even want to imagine the combination of briefs we’re going to have to sit through if it does.”

“Just grab a gun Airman.” Jack snorted. “We’re taking back the base.”

“Roger.” Replied the airman, “Can I do it in PTUs?”

Colonel O’Neill sighed, in moments of extreme stress men defaulted to the simplest questions in an effort to just keep their world in order. The boy was a new airman, probably no older than nineteen, and he seemed in reasonably good health under the circumstances. Judging by the red stains across his shirt, someone in his berthing hadn’t been as lucky as he had been. The kid didn’t want to face the complete carnage around him, but he could deal with wearing the proper uniform of the day. Jack nodded, speaking directly. “Kid, you’re properly dressed. Grab a gun from the Master Sergeant, and hold this position. We’re going to advance. Can you do that.”

The kid snapped to attention. “Sir yes, sir.”

“Good man.” Jack looked to the Master Sergeant at the service elevator. “Siler, we got a way down from here?”

“No sir.” The man shook his head. “The elevator to the lower levels is dead. We already killed the power to prevent them from being able to move freely.”

Jack turned to Emily and pointed to the floor. “Hey kiddo. You think you can open this jar of pickles for me? We need to get down so that we can liberate the lower levels from these guys.”

The Dragon grinned, flames licking from the edge of her fanged maw. “Mine!”
Jack's predatory grin matched the dragon's.
"Stop doing that!" Kanan hissed in surprise as the Furling appeared from the shadows from behind him yet again, whispering words in his ear without warning. It had nearly been enough of a shock for him to revert to using the metallic voice of a symbiote host – under the circumstances and suspicious origins of their new companion, Ban had suggested that discretion would be the better part of valor. Kanan found himself agreeing wholeheartedly. Regardless of his apprehension for the Tau'ri's feelings regarding the revelation of Kanan's status as Tok'ra, Kanan scrambled reflexively up from where he'd been hiding and instinctually put the large man between himself and the Furling - glad for the barrier between him and his terrifying savoir.

The dark-skinned man held some sort of power or authority that the Furling treated with caution, though certainly not with any degree of respect, and Kanan was grateful for any degree of stability in the chaos of his current situation. Sanya was without weapons or armor, but the man seemed to be largely untroubled by the situation unfolding around him. There was a serenity to the man, a clear sense of purpose that felt unburdened by the blind panic playing in both the mind of Kanan and his host. His expression was serious but never worried, as though victory against their long odds was a foregone conclusion.

The Furling licked at his paw, running a rough tongue over fur stained with the glowing blood of the Stragoth. An action Kanan was certain had to be purely to intimidate the Furlings companions, there was no way that the blood of the Stragoth tasted anything other than foul. It purred through the grooming, cat's eyes quivering in amusement at Kanan's overt disgust. "The sentries were insufficient and their mortal devices of scrying have been disabled."

Sanya nodded, "And the patrols?"

"One is never without danger, but mine own power of illusion is more than sufficient to conceal the approach of two mere mortals." Cat Sith purred, flexing the claws from his ichor soaked paws. The razor like protrusions shredded concrete as he kneaded at the ground reflexively, reveling in the recent violence.

"Good. I do not like the idea of fighting before having properly armed myself." The dark skinned man replied.

"Your disability is noted." Cat Sith pried a bit of carapace from his maw with the littlest of his talons, licking the place where it had once been affixed between his fangs.

"We passed five different armories." Kanan interjected, patting the Zat'nik'tel strapped to his belt. "And you've already availed yourself of items from three of them."

The dark skinned man shrugged in his newly acquired combat weapon, holding the massive, belt-fed automatic weapon tight to his chest. The box of high-caliber ammunition rattled within it, large projectiles shifting about. "I have made do."

"Made do?" Kanan sighed. "What, is there a nuclear device concealed." Kanan stopped speaking as he considered the Tok'ra intelligence reports elaborating upon what constituted the Tau'ri concept of a measured response or appropriate "prevention" measure for invasion. "Oh blood of Egeria, we're activating nuclear device aren't we?"

"Nyet." The large man snorted as he poked his head around the corner and advanced down the corridor, sweeping his weapon from left to right over the eviscerated bodies lining the hallway lined
with offices. "I am not yet ready for facing the afterlife, if such a thing exists. I have many things to do and dying would get in the way. There is a new James Bond movie I am looking forward to next month and I am eager to see exactly how they misrepresent Russia."

"James Bond?" Kanan queried, taking care not to step into the bubbling ichor bleeding out from an eviscerated Stragoth warrior.

"A mortal tale of a Spy with preternatural capacity for both sex and violence who bothers neither with the pretense of pseudonyms or any vestiges of anonymity." Cat Sith walked along the wall next to Sanya in outright defiance of gravity in order to avoid the steel grating along the ground, stepping carefully around the metal pipes and sparking wires as he did so. Circumnavigating a space covered in as much steel as the Tau'ri favored proved ineffective. The furling purred in ecstasy, hissing with what might have been laughter. "He gives his true name to any who ask and then proceeds to murder his way across the mortal realm without any regard for long term consequences."

"He is fighting SPECTRE and Blowfeld." Replied the dark skinned man in his heavy accent as he jiggled the handle of a nondescript office, rolling his eyes in irritation when the lock clicked prohibiting entry. He said something in his native tongue and kicked forward with his freshly pilfered black combat boots, busting the door inward. He continued his defense of "James Bond" as he huffed with exertion. "Violence is occasionally necessary to defeat a greater evil."

"It is not the violence that amuses me, Knight. It is the suicidal lack of self-preservation. Though I do not expect one of your order to have any vested interest in surviving the lunacy of your own adventures." The predatory Feline's tail flicked up and down, trailing after the great Malk as he jumped sideways, landing on the ground in apparent reversion to the normal laws of gravity before hopping up on the table at the rooms center to sit directly on top of a pile of old looking books and scrolls.

"The Sidhe understand what they wish to understand and little else." Replied the man jovially as he rubbed at his chin looking around the room. "Now where did they put it?"

"The safe." Replied the Furling. "The blade is ancient, and this is where the Scholar keeps his artefacts."

"You are certain?" Queried Sanya.

"As certain as I can be without having previously had cause to enter this room." The Malk replied dismissively. "I'm well informed, not clairvoyant."

"It's probably in the safe." Supplied Kanan, pointing to the heavy metal container. "Assuming that it is of value."

"Incalculable value." The dark skinned man ran his fingers across the dial, considering it. "This scholar, is he a man with many things on his mind?"

"Doctor Jackson is reputed to be a man of great learning." Kanan supplied. "His knowledge of Goa'uld dialects and the esoterica of human histories are without compare."

"So he is a man regularly overburdened with ideas." The massive man nodded, looking around the room and observing the various stacks of books and artefacts before his gaze fell upon a tiny pamphlet wedged between a volume describing the fall of Ancient Rome and a paperback written in what appeared to be the script of Lord Yu's domain. He picked the pamphlet, taking care to remove the plastic package from its back, and started thumbing through the pages. "Yes. a man regularly overwhelmed. He is a man too busy with his profession to be bothered with mundane details."
He flipped through the pages, skimming through with a pleased expression on his face as he pulled a plastic packet from the back of it, eyeing the seal of blue tape along it with boisterous confidence. "Let us see if he is a man too overwhelmed to change his combination from the default."

He spun the lock, deftly navigating to three numbers before pulling down on the handle. The safe's door made a loud clanking grind of metal on metal as it swung outward, exposing a cache of ivory and gold within - those artefacts too valuable and easily pocketed to just leave out in the open for fear they might be pilfered. Somewhat precariously balanced between a jeweled cross and a tribal mask vaguely reminiscent of those favored by Olokun's Jaffa, was a long saber housed in a modest scabbard.

Kanan had to actually grab the table to keep himself from falling over at the sight of it. It was beyond overwhelming to just glimpse it. His host, Ban, had to take over entirely as Kanan's symbiote body started spasming wildly in the presence of that thing. Kanan was vaguely aware of him addressing the Tau'ri, demanding that he shut the safe immediately. The Tau'ri, unfamiliar with the native tongue of Ban’s people, held him off with one arm as he plucked the blade from the safe and held it firmly in his hand.

The presence of it was overwhelming, a song that resonated in the very fiber of his being as Kanan forced himself to face the weight of it. It was like touching an electric current directly, the sheer magnitude of it wasn’t something that could be just ignored or overcome. But there was something to it – something more than just the pain. A memory, part of the genetic memory of the Goa’uld that he’d not accessed before – a part of it that he very much suspected hadn’t even been intended to be included by Egeria by virtue of how deeply it had been rooted in his subconscious mind. That alone was chilling, whatever this man’s blade represented was connected to something so great and terrible that Egeria had chosen to scourge it from the memories of her children.

He focused on the memory, driving himself to the pocket of thoughts and feelings. They were just the vague whispers of memory, shreds of memory too disparate for Egeria to remove them entirely. Likely, they were thoughts and feelings that Egeria hadn’t even consciously realized were part of her. But the mother of the Tok’ra had words seared into her very being, a primordial fear heading back more generations than Kanan cared to count. Words, only words, but they had been enough to render him into inaction. “Thou shalt have no gods before me.”

“I am no god, false, weak or otherwise.” Kanan hissed under the weight of the psychic pressure weighing down upon him, and in an instant, it was gone as though it had never been. The strange imposition of memory and will receding to be replaced with an utter serenity the likes of which Kanan hadn’t felt since he’d been left to swim in his spawning pool. A psychic attack then, Kanan reasoned, some sort of power linked to whatever had spoken those words in the time before Egeria spawned her brood. The blade held some sort of link with one of the greater powers, a jealous one capable of imbuing a weapon with protective magics.

What powers remained that were capable of creating such things? Few of the Goa’uld, certainly, but there were rival powers from even before the fall of the pantheons. Quetzalcoatl and his lickspittles might, but that damnable pantheon was steeped in blood and suffering. They weren’t capable of subtlety. Vampires had been their idea of a “measured response.” Various members of the Hindu
pantheon, those who’d not been born of the Goa’uld, were still in positions of power – some were even still actively meddling in the affairs of the Tau’ri, but this just felt wrong for them. The Kami and Oni who’d been brought to heel by Amaterasu in times of old might but the pantheon of the Goa’uld sun goddess had always been greatly limited by geography, she’d been too fond of founding places of power to limit the outward reaching ambitions of her subordinates. And if the creatures that had finally chased away Mangar-kunjer-kunja had started taking on acolytes then the Stragoth were the least of Kanan’s worries.

And then a thought occurred to him. The Semitic Pantheons had been ejected most unceremoniously from the first world under circumstances that none of them seemed particularly willing to discuss, even with the other dispossessed pantheons. They’d retained power well after the Egyptian and Greek pantheons - well, other than Ammit but that lunatic held her holdings until long disaster struck, and slaughtered her way across the first world until even she had to admit defeat. The pantheons of Ba’al and Marduk had not been initially forced to flee their First World holdings but something, reportedly the same power that had stolen men and manpower from Ra before the Fall of Thoth, had defeated them utterly and cast them from the first world in shame. Was this perhaps that same power, still in action?

He had no cause to suspect that power or powers, and yet he was entirely convinced there was merit to the supposition. Yet another wisp of memory from his mother, a memory she’d been unable to purge. Why had Egeria shared so little with her children? How were they to fight her war when they still only understood so little of the wars that had come before their struggle to free the galaxy from the oppression of the Goa’uld. Was this power yet another monster they’d one day have to trap in the depths of some Goa’uld prison world to fester and forget?

“Are you well, Kanan?” Ban willed the question to Kanan, genuine panic in his voice. The poor man had felt every moment of pain and worry that his symbiote had undergone, they would both need to spend time alone to process the trauma. Later, of course, but it would have to be done.

“I am.” Kanan replied to his host mentally. “If I may?”

“Of course,” Ban replied, relaxing his control of their shared body. Kanan relaxed their shared hands from where they clenched the man’s bulging bicep, holding his empty hands in the air. The man’s skin was already visibly bruising as he glared at Kanan.

“Am I to consider this a violation of our agreement Cat Sith?” The man glared at Kanan, his focus squarely upon the Tok’ra’s eyes. Kanan supposed they must have been glowing in his moment of panic.

“As I told you before, Knight. You would consider him an innocent, one of the innocents that I allowed you freedom to protect. I would consider it a most grievously rude breach of our agreement were you to harm an innocent.” The Furling purred. “Especially one that I am pledged to protect.”
“You neglected to mention that he was not human.” The man replied, not letting go of Kanan’s shirt front. “And that he would attack me.”

“The first was irrelevant and the second… unexpected. Not altogether unpleasant, but entirely unexpected.” The predatory feline admitted in something bordering on approval.

“I was unprepared for that thing you pulled out of the safe.” Kanan replied, only realizing after speaking that he’d instinctually reverted to the metallic voice of the Tok’ra. “Its presence is alarming until one has prostrated one’s self to the power that commands it.”

“Yes, it is very loud sometimes.” The man agreed. “And very opinionated.”

“What is it?” Kanan queried, eyeing the blade nervously. “What empowers it?”

“It is the will of God, if one believes in such things.” The man shrugged. “It is a tool. I use it to protect the innocent, the power that guides it allows it to be used for that. It could be from God, or a god, or gods, or aliens or any number of other possible sources. I very well may be insane, and this is all just some sort of elaborate hallucination. For the moment, I’m going to just make sure that I am as good of a man as I can be under the circumstances.”

Cat Sith got a fit of the giggles, rasping hisses escaping his grinning maw as he muttered, “Ah yes, the Atheist warrior of the White God. The man who questions the very validity of the divine even as the divine uses him as its instrument. I swear sometimes it seems that your patron must have been born of Winter, so perfect are his japes.”

The Tok’ra massaged his forehead with the palm of his hand. “It is deeply troubling to me that you are not the most insane man I have followed around this week.”

“Me or the gravity defying murder cat?” Joked the man as he belted the scabbard to his combat webbing and pulled the blade from its sheath to bathe Dr. Jackson’s office in brilliant, white light. Kanan felt his body going into another set of spasms that he warded away by thinking “I am not a god,” on a loop as loud as he could will that idea.

“Either, both – you’re still collectively less crazy than the Lord Warden.” Kanan replied, “Though under the circumstances, kowtowing to the whims of an insane god who thinks I’m his pet might be preferable. Nekheb is a fortress world on which Heka lived in luxury for millennia. If I’d gone with
the Warden at least I wouldn’t be in the middle of a war-zone.”

“Not… quite.” Chortled the Furling. “You would find the disposition of the Lord Warden’s holdings most unpleasant at present.”

“I don’t want to know, do I?” Kanan exhaled slowly. “And even if I did, you’d charge me for that information.”

The Malk said nothing in reply. Kanan interpreted that as response enough, but apparently the large Tau’ri saw something in the Malk’s inaction that Kanan had missed. He addressed the hunter. “Would you charge such a fee for paltry knowledge to one who is under your protection and winter’s hospitality?”

The Malk’s expression grew less smug, but he continued his silence.

“I ask you again Lord of Winter. You have not answered my question.” The man smiled at the Malk’s look of utter contempt.

The Malk’s simmering rage was a fearsome thing to behold, but he still said nothing.

“Thrice I ask and done Cat Sith. Would you charge a guest for a simple answer and shame Winter’s hospitality?” Queried the Knight.

“No.” The Furling replied, his hair standing on end as he spoke in a voice of total contempt. It was like listening to the grinding of iron on slate, a gnashing wet hatred. “I would not so shame winter. At present it would be considered inappropriate for me to charge for knowledge that will soon be unavoidable.”

“So, tell him and me, why he would not wish to be there.” The Knight replied, seemingly oblivious to the murder in Cat Sith’s eyes. “I am quite interested.”

The Furling seemed to be searching for a way to avoid answering his question but, finding none, replied in curt tones – addressing Kanan directly and apparently enjoying Kanan’s inability to conceal discomfort at being beneath Cat Sith’s gaze. “You do not wish to be there, little worm, because the Winter and Summer Queens are aiding the Lord Warden in waging war on the armies of Chronos by relocating the battlefield to a place more fitting for such combat – a place you and your
ilk call the Outer Night.”

Kanan blanched. The Outer Night, that was a memory that Egeria had left entirely intact to ensure none of her children were foolish enough to trespass upon the realm of shadows. “I’ll stay here with you two and the Stragoth, thank you very much.”

“You see, things are looking up already.” The massive man slapped Kannan on the back and shoved his belt-fed machine gun into Kanan’s hands. “Now please avoid shooting me when you use this on the terrifying crab people. I believe the Americans could use some assistance and as the one who sounds the most like Robocop it seems fitting you should have the big gun.”

This really was shaping up to be an astonishingly strange week for Kanan.
Chapter 25

If Aisha had ever held a moment’s doubt that her god put her on the First World for a purpose, it had long since left her. Blood of Apep, she hadn’t just come to document and bring the word of Nekheb’s god. She had been sent to demonstrate the fire and fury of her god’s might with her own flesh and blood if such a thing was necessary.

The god of Nekheb had said that he was not worshiped through word and prayer, but through great deeds. Many great deeds had already been done this day. And many more were to come.

Blood thundered in her ears as she felt the ensorcelled marks along her flesh ripple with ambient magic. Small sparks flashed from the gold piercings along her body, shimmering static arcs dancing along the delicate decorative chains. She’d been forced to cast aside the garments provided to her by the demon Thor’s Chosen warrior to protect them for precisely that reason. In the priestess’ judgement, the Tau’ri taboo on nudity was subordinate to an invasion of crustacean monsters and it appeared they agreed.

The Tau’ri warriors regarded her with interest but it was admiration rather than suspicion in their eyes. Even the lust of the younger men seemed tempered with a healthy appreciation of Aisha’s lethality. She regarded the Chosen of Thor, staring at the seasoned man’s stern expression. His brown eyes smoldered with a flickering hatred acerbic enough pass for one of the gods, sending shivers down Aisha’s spine. She could feel the innate strength that allowed a man to truly slay the divine and the diabolic with only his own mind and mortal sorceries to his name.

The rumors of Tau’ri attacks on the pantheons had seemed wild fantasies at first. The First World was a story one told to scare children, a place so terrible that the divine beings had left it to rot in its own festering violence. It had lived up to its reputation thus far – given the day to day dangers of this world it was really no wonder that it had bred warriors of such caliber. Even in the face of absurd violence, they maintained a degree of decorum and discipline that would have been worthy of a Jaffa.

The Tau’ri man next to Thor’s Chosen, the older one with the bits of glass in front of his eyes, seemed to be the Chosen’s immediate subordinate. The Chosen issued directives to the man with the glass over his eyes, who in turn directed the collective of Tau’ri warriors around them to various tasks in support of the Chosen’s attempt to recover the Tau’ri fortress in which they stood. The Dragon had conveyed some, though not all, of the Chosen’s intent in their brief conversation. She’d mostly understood declarations of territory, property, and intended violence upon those below.

The brood of Ferrovax was not renowned for their conversational nature with “lesser” beings, they found mortals to be petty and ephemeral things concerned with trivial vagaries. A matter that was further complicated by the tongue of the Gods, which had only limited crossover with the preferred
lexicon of the great Wyrm's. But she understood enough to realized that she'd been correct in her
initial assessment of the whelping's spell. It was a pact between the dragon and the mortals of the
mountain, an exchange of aegis for aegis. In exchange for allowing the beast dominion over the
mountain and those who reside within it, the priests who traded blood with the dragon would be
granted long life and vitality so that they might ensure an orderly procession of events within the
dragon's dominion. It was a practice that effectively only retained popularity within the Celestial
Bureaucracy of Lord Yu given that Yu was essentially the only Goa'uld who still remained able to
negotiate with the great Wyrm's on even footing.

The whelping was an infant by the standards of its race. It was barely large enough to fill the
corridor of the Tau'ri fortress, and its magical powers were insufficient to heal the ensorcelled
wounds across its back. The great dragons were larger than most warships and held enough power to
destroy entire fleets of warships when the mood took them, which was part of the reason mortals
enacted pacts with the creatures to begin with. Though they were capricious and materialistic,
dragons detested sharing their territory with any sort of lesser predator. Well, frankly they just
detested sharing at all. The whelping had decided that Aisha fell within the purview of "hers" which
at least meant she wasn't going to find herself down the gullet of a dragon in the imminent future.

The dragon child's meaning had been largely lost upon her. The beast struggled with mortal concepts
like language or time, and conveyed meaning in short bursts of possessive declarations as a result.
The Goa'uld language seemed easier for the dragon than that of the Tau'ri had been, but it still
seemed to limit the child's ability to express herself beyond "you are mine" and "do not betray me."
She wasn't inclined to dispute either under the circumstances.

The great lizard was currently engaged in the process of burrowing down through to the level
beneath them. The Tau'ri fortress seemed to have been built sturdier the deeper one went within it,
while the level above them had been separated by several feet of stone and rebar, the dragon had
already gouged out five feet of sheer rock and they hadn't managed to pierce the barrier. Let no man
be foolish enough to accuse the Tau'ri of insufficiently protecting themselves from a would-be
invader, there were cities with less of a barrier to protect them.

The whelp occasionally emerged from her burrow, snorting up powdered stone shaking herself free
of debris. The warriors of the Tau'ri had, in surprisingly short order, delegated some of their more
junior warriors to the task of brushing her clean of dust when she emerged. They brushed across her
with mops and brooms, prying the rocks and debris from between her thick scales. The dragon
seemed to enjoy the process of greatly, flipping on her belly to ensure that they removed all of the
larger detritus before going back to kick out more stone with her diamond sharp talons.

She scrubbed away the purple blood from her body with a soft towel that had been offered to her by
the man wearing glass lenses, a man she'd surmised to be the equivalent to a first prime to Thor's
Chosen. The man identified himself as Master Sergeant Siler, though when she attempted to address
him by his apparent first name he'd quickly corrected her by pointing to himself and just saying
"Siler" as the Tau'ri all got a fit of the giggles. She quickly corrected her use of his apparent first
name, deciding that it was overly familiar to use it rather than the family name of Siler.
The man had made some overtures as part of a well-intentioned campaign to get Aisha to wear clothing, but Aisha demurred. Any garment she accepted would just end up soaked in ichor or burned away from magical discharges from her tattoos. It was a waste of time and perfectly serviceable garments. The man was not easily dissuaded from his intent to clothe her, but eventually just gave up on the attempt in disgust given the array of more pressing concerns.

Many men and women became casualties or fatalities as a result of the conflagration between the Tau’ri warriors and the crustaceans. And while at least some of the living were trained in triage, their current capacity for healing the wounded was greatly limited. Aisha was not a healer within her own people’s traditions, and she hadn’t even the faintest clue how to help the methods of healing favored by the Tau’ri. Men and women were administering treatment to their charges with strange implements and arcane fluids whose purposes she didn’t even begin to guess.

What she could do, however, was comfort the living and see to the souls of the dead. The largest point of triage was a communal space just adjacent to the main corridor. There were several tables lined with green felt that had been turned into makeshift operating tables and a number of chairs positioned around altars topped with black boxes built around a glass panel. Those still capable of sitting were perched atop the metal chairs before the altar. Those less lucky were either on the felt tables or lying next to them as treatment was attempted.

She was immediately drawn to the sobs of a young man clutching the hand of his fellow warrior as a healer did her best to keep the fellow warrior alive. He sat next to his friends, shaking with fear and confusion. The young man had skin like a shadow that stood out in stark contrast to the pale skin and ginger hair of his wounded compatriot, especially given that the already pale skin had gone deathly white from blood loss. The dark man still held baby fat in his cheeks, having just barely reached manhood. A fact that was punctuated by the way he was pleading with his friend to live. She didn’t have to speak his language to understand his meaning.

The boy was pleading with the universe not to take his friend, and Aisha knew quite well that the universe had no intention of listening to him. The fair-haired boy had taken a wound to the abdomen. Based off of the smell, the wound had ruptured his bowels. He was not long for this world, no matter what the young woman trying to heal him did – he would die. The man begged with tears in his eyes as his friend’s face clouded over into stillness, taking the first steps of his final journey to Duat.

He broke down completely as the healer stopped trying to heal the corpse and moved on to another wounded man, stripping off her purple gloves and dropping them on the bloodstained table. They were unapologetic sobs of agony, the sort of emotional pain that couldn’t be suppressed or diverted – they could only be endured. Aisha had spent enough of her life comforting the living to recognize that pain, it was the sort of hurt one could only feel when one had been only exposed to death in its rawest form in the most limited capacity imaginable. But this was a grown man – surely he’d lost someone, hadn’t he?
There was scarcely a soul on Nekheb who hadn’t lost several siblings or cousins by the time they reached puberty, let alone into adulthood. How could a child of the First World, the mythical home of nightmares, have reached majority without experiencing death? People always dealt with grief to different degrees, but unless these two men had been lovers it stretched the bounds of credibility. Perhaps they had been lovers, Aisha knew basically nothing of the dynamics of romance on the First World. Maybe the Tau’ri had adopted a similar culture of fraternal love to the warriors of the Hellenic Pantheons. Perhaps the boy had just been lucky enough to have avoided death’s sting. The universe was too large and too amazing to ever conform to Aisha’s expectations.

But while she couldn’t necessarily understand the man’s pain, she could at least share in his grieving process. She leaned down to hug the man as he was blinded by tears, letting him sob into her bosom until he’d sobbed himself into exhaustion and stained her chest wet with tears. She kissed his forehead and wiped the tears from his eyes, cooing softly as whispering words of comfort to him. “It will be alright. The gods provide for us, even as they take from us. You will find meaning in this even as it brings you pain.”

The man sniffled, rubbing at his eyes with the sleeve of his uniform before stiffening as though someone had run an electric current through him as he realized how close he was to Aisha’s naked flesh. He practically fell over himself as he stood up, trying to put space between himself and the naked woman before him. He knocked over the chair in the process, stumbling across it as he repeated what sounded like the most emphatic apologies imaginable – to the uproarious amusement of the other warriors in the room. They whooped and cat-called the man who’d been held by Aisha only moments prior, whistling and clapping as the man’s already dark skin flushed with embarrassment.

One of the men cat calling the loudest walked over to the blushing man and gestured lewdly at the priestess. Aisha gave the men cat-calling her the most withering glare in her arsenal, snarling in fury as she grabbed the hand making the lewd gesture and twisted it, putting the main on the floor in agony as she put her foot in his armpit to pin him in that position of pain. “You arrogant little children, are you actually so puerile as to be unable deal with a woman respectfully unless she’s been wrapped in seven different layers of preventative barriers to block view of her body? I am not some bit of flesh for you to congratulate your compatriot for having been given access. I am here to help his pain, not feed whatever sexually misinformed pathos you are currently indulging. Do we have an accord?”

The man jabbered animatedly in his language, in what didn’t particularly sound like an apology to Aisha. She looked to the nearest woman, arching her brow in question – implying rather than actually saying “Was that an insult?”

The woman met her gaze and shook her head once, snorting dismissively. Ah, an insult then, Aisha wasn’t going to let him go if she’d been insulted. She twisted the man’s hand harder, earning a scream from him that brought Siler in from the hall. He looked from Aisha, to the man she had
pinned to the ground, and back. Aisha shrugged. “He was rude.”

Siler asked a quick question to the man on the ground, to which the man sputtered out an answer that was a bit too quick to be honest under the circumstances. The dark man interrupted the other man’s lie almost immediately, repeating the words spoken by the man currently pinned by Aisha in a much more respectful tone than the man had done. They had been about as bad as Aisha suspected judging by Siler’s expression. He let loose on the man, snarling with a degree of vitriol worthy of a god’s fury.

He spoke a curt request to Aisha, pointing down to the man on the ground. Aisha let the man go and was briefly treated to a front row seat to what was presumably the chewing out of a lifetime. She didn’t know much of the Tau’ri language, but she was quite certain that “fucking moron” and “court-martial” were the most vitriolic of insults one could muster based off of the emphasis put behind them. The last one in particular seemed to put the fear of the gods’ wrath in the man’s heart. The man started spouting an endless torrent of apologies to Aisha, only stopping when Siler dismissed him – though, expelled him from the room was perhaps a more accurate description.

The seasoned warrior watched the man scurry away with contempt, turning to the dead man on the table. Siler’s lip curled up in anger, his hate for the invading forces a tangible presence in the room as he pulled a pair of silver tags from the man’s neck and pocketed them. He balled his fist, turning to Aisha and shaking his head as he shouted out into the corridor, summoning yet another man that Aisha hadn’t previously seen.

Another man in uninform walked in to the communal space, a sad expression upon the new man’s otherwise kind face. He carried a leather-bound tome in one hand and a small gold icon attached to a length of gold chain in the other. There was a similar icon of intersecting lines stitched above the man’s heart. Whatever the man had been summoned to say or do, however, was lost when the man caught sight of Aisha and his brain seemed to briefly cease functioning entirely.

He went a bit cross-eyed as he sputtered out half-words, trying to reconcile the tattooed flesh, pierced body, and freshly growing stubble of the woman in front of him with the Tau’ri expectations of modesty. Once he’d reconciled himself to the fact that the woman before him wasn’t a hallucination, he literally removed the shirt from his own back in an effort to clothe her. There was a brief but awkward moment as he attempted to wrestle her into his blouse that ended in her putting it back on him and buttoning it shut before grabbing by the ear and holding him out to Siler. “I am being remarkably measured with these interruptions. But your people will stop trying to touch me without my permission.”

Siler gave an emphatic apology, putting himself between the man and Aisha and returning the man’s discarded book and pendant to him. There was a brief exchange between them in which Siler seemed to convey at least some of why Aisha was disrobed to the other man. It was at least enough
that he stopped trying to force clothing upon her, though he made no attempt to cover his disapproval for her state of disrobe.

He held out a meaty paw, speaking with a long drawl that seemed to lean each word up against the next as he spoke. There was a measured lethargy to his manner of speaking, he used words sparingly but luxuriated in those few he actually chose to employ. She felt an immediate rush of power as she shook the man’s hand, energy rippling across her tattoos as they reacted to the belief flowing around him. She arched an eyebrow quizzically, realizing that this man was a practitioner of the local cult. What god had already found purchase within the ranks of the god slayers? She didn’t recognize his choice of iconography, but he held himself with level of dignity that she found fitting of his station.

She steepled her fingers in prayer and gestured to the dead man in invitation. “Shall we send the child to Duat? I would welcome the guidance of your patron in seeing to his journey.”

The priest, eager for familiar ground in the face of such a peculiar woman, immediately took her meaning. He wrapped the chain around his hand and dangled it above the boy’s chest, flipping open the leather-bound tome to start reading from it. Aisha, cupped her hands around the man’s fist, speaking her own prayers of guidance to the dead. Her tattoos, still empowered from the blood of the crustaceans, glowed green and sent sparks of static light across Asiha’s body. Her power intermingled with the ambient energies of faith projected by the priest, bolts of static arcing from her many piercings to the dangling icon of the Tau’ri’s patron god. The spiritually conductive icon cast bright light across the room, empowered by their shared prayer to guide any remaining shades to judgement.

The man’s drawl took on a fevered tone as his icon glowed with divine light, his eyes bulging with astonishment as he spoke prayer after prayer after prayer. Once their prayers had finished Aisha wrapped the still glowing icon’s chain around the man’s clenched fist, resting the icon atop his quivering knuckles and kissing it gently as she bowed to him once again. The man clutched his book and the icon against his heart, a mix of wonder and fear in his eyes before he made a gesture of warding in front of himself that was quickly mirrored by Siler.

While the ritual had been admittedly showy, the degree of fascination felt like an overreaction. But perhaps her religion was just showier than most. In fact, the entire room seemed to have decided that her prayer was very much worthy of interest.

“Well woman, you came here to get their attention.” Aisha smiled, looking at the gaping faces of the Tau’ri. “Now let’s work on getting their faith.”
Chapter 26

Jacob Carter held the paper cup filled with coffee between his hands, enjoying the sense of warmth emanating from the cup as he sipped from it. The coffee was instant and flavored with powdered creamer, but it felt like days since he’d last been able to eat or drink any real food. He was wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt from the 9th District Police Department’s lost and found box, which meant he was somewhat less formally dressed than he would have cared for under the circumstances. His pants were bright pink and said “Juicy” and his lime green shirt bore an image of Macho Man Randy Savage riding the Kool-aid Man above the caption “Oh, Yeaahh!”

But he was at least out of the cold and in no imminent threat of death by Troll. Elaine had been nowhere to be seen since the cops arrived, apparently her fear of the White Council extended to any authority figure she might come across. Really, he was more annoyed that she hadn’t taken him with her than that she’d decided to flee the authorities. Jacob would rather have avoided the Chicago PD entirely.

Cops asked questions that he couldn’t easily answer without drawing attention to himself. And drawing attention to himself risked exposing the Stargate Program. So, for the moment, Jacob was sitting and waiting for Colonel Davis to get return his call.

He was seated in an interrogation room straight out of central casting. Flickering lights, dingy walls, a single camera filming him at all times, he might have been amused by the cliché under other circumstances. But he needed to get back to Colorado, to his daughter. And come hell or high water he would get there.

Selmak was largely confused by the impediment to their travel, the concept of a civilian police authority having the ability to impede a military commander entire alien to him. “But are they not subordinate to the authority of your ruling body? Does not the need of your mission supersede the immediate concerns of law and order?”

“Well yes,” Jacob replied mentally, explaining things to Selmak for the fifth time. “And if they knew that it would probably be a relevant concern. We haven’t disclosed the Stargate program to our own people. There are a number of nations who would react poorly if it became known.”

“Are they not civilized enough to see the evil of the Goa’uld? How they must be defeated if your species is to be free?” Selmak fretted. “Would this process not be easier for all involved if your planet’s entire resources were able to be directed towards the construction of ships and defenses against the Goa’uld?”
“Selmak, we still don’t have a unified world anything.” Jacob reminded the Tok’ra. “If we don’t disclose the Stargate program very carefully we could be looking at another world war, which would leave more open to Goa’uld invasion than ever.”

“Blood of Egeria, it’s lucky for you that the Furlings converge on this planet twice a year or I fear you’d have wiped yourself out long ago.” Selmak sighed. “How much longer must we maintain this interminable boredom? They’ve been staring at us for nearly an hour.”

“They” happened to be the two cops sitting on the other side of the reflective glass of the interrogation room. A normal human wouldn’t have been able to see them, a Tok’ra host was not as limited. The two of them were drinking coffee and chatting idly, seemingly waiting for him to show some sign of discomfort before they commenced their interrogation. He smirked as the slightly portly man, rubbed at the bridge of his eyes muttering to the tiny blonde standing next to him in insolent boredom.

The woman, a pretty waif of a cop who looked slightly younger than his daughter – though not so young that he felt comfortable referring to her as a girl – was his apparent superior. She’d silenced similar outbursts several times already, apparently possessed of greater patience than her subordinate. Jacob sipped at his coffee, smacking his lips exaggeratedly to show how much he was enjoying his private moment of quiet.

Selmak sighed, a wave of patronizing tolerance in the symbote’s mental voice as he spoke. “Jacob… are we gaining anything through this contest of wits? I appreciate your justice system is at times ponderous, but there are Furlings in the SGC. I don’t believe the police officer intends to budge.”

“No, I don’t think she is either.” Jacob replied mentally, he knew that police officers held a number of the same entrenched institutional issues as the military. Chicago P.D. in particular had come under fire for various allegations of rampant sexism as of late. For the blonde police officer to command the respect of the physically larger and more senior officer, it was damn near guaranteed that she’d had to repeatedly prove that she was as capable as her male counterparts. If she was even half as stubborn as Sam, Jacob could be there for a week before she gave him the satisfaction of making the first move.

The General stood up from his chair and walking up to the mirrored glass. He rapped upon it, pointing to both of the cops in turn – looking them directly in the eyes before speaking aloud. “I don’t suppose that either you or the big guy has gotten a response from the Air Force yet? I’m due for a decent change of pants. These are warm, but not overly dignified.”

The cops looked at each other, exchanging words in rapid succession. Jacob cupped his hand over his ear, pointing from the one of them to the other before looking down at the speaker on the wall. “If you insist on having both of you sit on that side of the glass, you’re going to have to hit the button. I
know that you can hear me, but this is going to be pretty one sided if I have to do this through charades.”

The two cops continued their discussion, making no move to either enter the room or activate the speaker. Jacob rubbed his forehead with his middle and ring fingers, a splitting stress headache hitting him before Selmak cured it entirely. “Look, do you need me to describe the two of you for you to believe that I’m not taking a wild shot in the dark? I’m looking at two cops in plainclothes, one small blonde woman and one overweight man with a bad haircut. I can tell you exactly what you’re wearing if you need that too, but I’ve got better places to be.”

The Blonde rolled her eyes, disinterested in Jacob’s attempt to give her guff. She flipped a switch on the wall, speaking into a metal box. Her voice echoed out of the speakers in the room, a tinny quality to the audio that was positively Goa’uld like. “How long have you been able to see us?”

“The entire time.” Jacob replied, making eye contact with bad-haircut as he spoke. “Watched chuckles pick his nose about five times while he thought nobody was looking.”

The man, who’d actually been rubbing his nostrils when Jacob started talking, abruptly dropped his hands to his sides and said something to the woman that didn’t get through the speaker. She rolled her eyes as she took her thumb off the switch, her lips curved in a sarcastic arch as she had a private aside to her partner before tapping the switch again, “We’ll talk, face to face. I can’t hear you particularly well though this, and I’m sure you have one heck of a story.”

The cops exited through a back door to the interrogation room and Jacob was once again forced to wait as the cops walked out and around. The interrogation room was old, and lacked an adjoining door between the interrogation room and the observation area. Jacob was reasonably certain that they hadn’t hurried either. He’d eyeballed the distance between the two rooms, it shouldn’t have taken more than two minutes and they took at least five.

Jacob sat down at the chair facing away from the door, picking up the paper cup and raising it in greeting as the officers entered. “Welcome, I’m afraid I don’t have much in the way of refreshments to offer you to fine, upstanding officers. But I’ve been a bit occupied for most of the night.”

“I’d imagine.” Agreed the blonde officer as she sat down across from Jacob. Her partner chose to continue to stand, walking around to loom over Jacob from behind. He didn’t say anything or make any sort of hostile gestures, but the position was an intentional move to set Jacob off base. “Considering that you showed up to the precinct covered in blood, dressed like an extra from Dune, and in the center of - what is it now Stallings? One million?”
“Three,” Replied Stallings, rubbing his thumb over a bristly walrus of a moustache.

“Wow – Three?” She smiled in mock surprise, theatrically holding up her fingers as she laid out a number of photographs on the table. Evidence photos recently pulled from a digital camera, presumably taken from the scene where he’d been picked up. “Three million dollars’ worth of property damage. Even for Chicago that’s a lot.”

“Would you believe that it wasn’t me?” Jacob sighed, scratching at the back of his head. There really was no credible way to say “I didn’t do it” while maintaining plausible deniability.

“Oh – I’m all ears Jacob. You don’t mind if I call you Jacob do you?” She replied, a hint of incredulity to her tone. “Because I wasn’t sure if you wanted to call me “General” or not.”

“Lady, I’m a General in the United States Air Force.” Jacob replied in irritation, “When you use the number I gave you to…”

“We used the numbers you gave us.” Replied the man behind Jacob. “Both of them. The first number didn’t get anyone to pick up. The second number got the duty officer – he said he was busy and would call us back when he got the chance.”

“First number didn’t get anyone at all. We didn’t even get a ring off of it.” She clicked her tongue. “Apparently somebody decided to leave the phone off the hook.”

“Crying shame… but when we get high ranking military officials out of Fuller Park there generally tend to be communication issues like this.” The woman sighed exaggeratedly. “Sad really, isn’t it Stallings?”

“Tragic, Murph.” The man replied. “For the system to fail like that for someone so important.”

“Is this woman perhaps a relation to Colonel O’Neill? There is a striking resemblance in her approach to authority.” Selmak murmered in the back of Jacob’s mind. “They are oddly incredulous of your rank.”

“They’re cops Selmak, they pull in eight to ten perps a day who claim to be the King of France. A certain amount of skepticism is part of the gig.” Jacob replied mentally, his own discomfort hitting the redline. If the cops hadn’t been able to reach either the SGC’s service duty officer or the watch
floor Colonel Davis ran, things had to have spiraled out of control at the SGC. Someone was always, always on call to answer the phone in case someone in the command had an accident or was arrested in the inevitable, weekly off base DUI. Not manning the phone was the sort of thing people were NJPed for leaving unattended. For a call to that watch floor to have been shelved could only mean that something catastrophic to have happened at the SGC worthy of not returning that call.

The blonde officer continued to speak over Jacob’s mental repartee. “We even called the front desk number you gave us for NORAD just to see. Nobody picked up there either. Apparently, nobody is working at Cheyanne Mountain this evening. They’ve all got the day off.”

Stallings let out a long, low whistle. “Lucky, I’ve never know a base to let everybody stop working at once. That’s one of those once in a lifetime deals I guess. Downright fortuitous for them wouldn’t you say, Lt. Murphy?”

“Downright impossible, I’d say.” Replied the Lieutenant, the cold edge of her blue eyes crystalizing into an arctic glare. “And downright abysmal for you, “General.” Because there are too many parts of your story that just don’t add up for me.”

“I am a – ” Jacob started, only to have the Lieutenant cut across him mid-sentence.

“You are a royal pain in my ass, is what you are.” She tapped the photograph of Jacob’s blood-soaked clothing. “That’s a lot of blood Jake. Too much for it to be an accident, and it’s not exactly hunting season in Fuller Park. Where did the blood come from?”

“That’s a matter of national security.” Jacob replied.


She tapped on a picture of a shipping container, pointing to the outline of a massive fist. “Or is it big grey men I should be worrying about?”

“Large grey men…” Jacob replied, keeping his voice neutral as he looked from Stallings to Murphy and came to a realization. Neither of them was keeping notes. There were no apparent recording devices in the room. There hadn’t even been an attempt to verify that he was Mirandized, or to establish the identity of the individuals interrogating him. Even under the UCMJ, that wouldn’t have been acceptable.
So, either these cops were dirty as hell, or this wasn’t an official interrogation. Anything they got out of him was going to be inadmissible in any court of law. Jacob arched an eyebrow, looking from Stallings to Murphy and back. They weren’t even trying to line up Jacob as a suspect, but if that was the case then it pretty much meant that they already had someone in mind as the perp – someone, or something.

“Well, well, well… this is most unexpected.” Selmak purred mentally. “I had presumed your government willfully ignorant of the predatory megafauna that still dwell on the First World.”

“But then why interrogate me at all if they don’t think it was me?” Jacob replied mentally.

“To get an honest answer – that’s why they showed you the photos of the blood. It was the blood of a Furling, it will dissolve back into the Lands of Sun and Snow after only hours.” The To’kra spoke in a tone of mild approval. “They have no evidence to suggest anything other than trespassing… which is not, I presume, an offense worthy of more serious incarceration.”

Jacob laughed out loud, picking up the picture of the bloody garment and examining it idly. “You aren’t here to interrogate me.”

“I’m not?” Replied the Lieutenant, leaning back in her chair. “What am I doing then?”

“This is a personal project for you – whatever this is. You’re not even close to being legal in this interrogation. A blind idiot who accidentally managed to pass the bar exam on a drunken bet could see the holes in your case and get the evidence tossed out. Evidence that you’d have to be an idiot to be entirely neglecting to document. You’re not an idiot – I hope – so that means that this is off the books. So, I assume that as far as your paperwork is concerned I’ve already been officially discharged and am just “choosing to linger in the station?” Jacob looked to the man behind him. “Or is this a “clerical error” that you were hoping I would overlook when you didn’t charge me with anything and told me I was free to go?”

“Honest misunderstanding – happens at the best of times.” The man replied, his moustache twitching in irritation.

“It isn’t.” Jacob agreed mentally. “But I’m more interested in why at the moment.”

He stood up from the table, and pointed to the door, his eyes meeting the blonde Lieutenant’s. “So, I could walk out that door and there isn’t a damn thing you could do about it, is there?”
The Lieutenant stood up and put herself between Jacob and the door as he started walking out. “Jacob – General Carter, please – don’t.”

Jacob stopped at the genuine worry in the Lieutenant’s voice. She held her small hand in front of the General’s broad chest, her expressing aging her by at least ten years. “I need to know, General. I need to know what happened so that I can stop it from happening again. I have a specialist coming who deals with this sort of thing, but I need to be able to tell him what he’s looking for. I think I know, but I can’t send him in blind. It could get him killed.”

Jacob met her gaze, seeing his daughter’s pride reflected in the Lieutenant’s own demeanor. It was hurting her to ask for help, to need to ask for help. “How much do you already know?”

“Look, Jacob. We’re with SI – Special Investigations. We get the cases that the City needs dealt with discretely, the sort that get worded very carefully on official reports so that we don’t get sent to the rubber rooms.” She shrugged. “You remember the video a couple months back, the one with the big wolf? Everyone said it was a evidence of a werewolf before it disappeared? That was me in it.”

Jacob did remember the video, and the subsequent purge order directly from POTUS to scrub all existing footage of it that had been transferred to classified devices. He’d assumed it was part of an experimental weapons program that got out of control, but he’d also assumed that aliens and fairies were figments of the imagination at the time. “If one looked at it in the right light – the perp almost looked like a Troll.”

“Almost looked like a Troll?” Murphy replied, looking at the photographs of wrecked shipping containers. “Did it almost look like one Troll or more than one? Was there anything that almost looked like anything else?”

“I’m beginning to suspect that the secrecy maintained by the SGC has not been quite so effective at keeping the world ignorant of as they’d hoped.” Selmak mused, enjoying Jacob’s frustration. “You’re being quite candid with ‘State Secrets,’ host mine.”

“There is a freaking Troll trying to eat people in Chicago. Call me crazy but I’m on team people.” Jacob replied mentally to his host. “If they want to kill that thing, I’m not going to slow them down.”

“Jacob?” The Lieutenant seemed worried at the General’s glazed over expression.
“No.” Jacob ignored her apparent worry. It wasn’t like he was going to be able to explain the nuances of the symbiote-host relationship without violating national security policy. “It was just the one thing that looked almost like a Troll.”

“The patrol said you were standing over somebody. Protecting them, were they a friend that I should be worried about? Someone the almost Troll might have taken?” The Lieutenant’s tone was justifiably worried given how hungry the troll had looked. It would have happily killed and eaten him.

Jacob swore as he realized that the Troll hadn’t been there for him. There was no plausible combination of factors which would have allowed the Furling to anticipate Jacob’s presence in Chicago when Jacob hadn’t known that Jacob would be in Chicago. That mean that the Troll had already been in Chicago, hunting. No wonder they were willing to risk a lawsuit. “How many has it taken?”

“Six, that we know of.” Stallings pulled out photos of six young women. Pretty, black, young, and poor – the perfect combination to go missing in Fuller Park. “We only find parts of the bodies. He picks the bones clean – about the only thing we end up with is teeth marks.”

Selmak’s anger flared uncontrollably at the thought of a Furling eating children. The Tok’ra’s normally pristine control over his own bodily functions and impulses eroded from their endless, sleepless sojourn in the Land of Sun and Snow. Without meaning to, the symbiote actually vocalized his anger, eyes flaring. “Unacceptable – the Furlings cannot be permitted free reign over the poor and dispossessed.”

Lieutenant Murphy jumped back as though she’d been scalded, hand resting on her firearm. “What in the hell?”

Jacob took back control as quickly as he could, already it was knowing too late to put the genie back in the bottle as he chastised the Tok’ra mentally. “Four centuries of immaculate covert ops, and today is the day you choose to pull a rookie mistake? Today? Seriously?”

“I apologize Jacob… but it’s eating children while they’re still alive. Trolls don’t like to cook their meat.” Selmak shuddered along Jacobs spine and he felt the tug of on of Selmak’s more private memories. The kind the Tok’ra chose not to share. “It is a sore subject for me…”

“Lieutenant – I’m not going to hurt you.” Jacob spoke slowly to the clearly spooked officer, cognizant that her equally spooked and equally armed partner was behind him. “I’m not your enemy.”
“Aren’t you?” Queried the Lieutenant. She hadn’t drawn her gun, but she wasn’t removing her hand either. “Are you even human?”

“What I am is free to go and walking out that door, Lieutenant. Which is precisely what I intend to do.” Jacob spoke slowly and directly as he walked around the Lieutenant, intentionally giving her as much space as possible between them.

She did not accommodate, placing herself between Jacob and the door. “I need you to explain what that was or we’re going to have a problem. And I’m going to need a better answer than “State Secrets” on that one.”

It was when Jacob started weighing the relative merits of taking the gun versus just forcing his way past the Lieutenant, that he was rescued from the situation by the one man he never thought he would be glad to see. The door swung inward and Jacob came face to face with Illinois Senator Robert Kinsey, flanked by the Superintendent of the Chicago Police Department, the Mayor of Chicago, and several men who couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than a lawyer. The Lieutenant moved her hand from her weapon entirely as the Superintendent addressed her abruptly. “Lieutenant, why is this man still in custody?”

To Jacob’s surprise it was he, not the Lieutenant, who spoke in her defense. “I was giving a voluntary statement on what I witnessed to help them catch the perpetrator.” He met the Lieutenant’s eyes. “Because I agree that he needs to be caught.”

The woman nodded near imperceptibly, the meagerest of concessions that her pride would allow. “General Carter was a material witness for a related case. He was answering my questions while we verified his identity.”

“Well, Lieutenant, consider his identity verified.” Senator Kinsey’s caustic annoyance on Jacob’s behalf was an odd experience. “We’ll be going now.”

“I have a couple more…” The Lieutenant started only for the Senator to silence her.

“Lieutenant, the General has been more than accommodating to you in your investigation, but he has pressing matters requiring his attention. These men will serve as the point of contact for the immediate future.” He gestured to the phalanx of lawyers in irritation. “Anything else you want from him that can’t be answered by them can wait until after Uncle Sam gets what he needs.”
“But…” She didn’t even get the whole sentence out before the Senator had Jacob out the door with a protective wall of lawyers between them. The Senator’s protective detail met them in the hall, openly armed Marines rather than his standard civilian protective detail. One of the senator’s aides walked up with a cardboard box filled with plastic bags, Jacob’s Tok’ra clothing and any other evidence that had been taken as part of the case.

Jacob winced – the Lieutenant and her partner were going to be furious when they found out their evidence had been seized under the auspices of protecting national security. When this all settled he would have to apologize to them. Given that they already knew enough about what was really going on to require a debriefing and monitoring to determine the depth of the Furling incursion into Chicago, there wouldn’t be any lack of opportunity. The Senator hurried Jacob out the door, the marines forcing their way through the crowd.

Jacob shivered as they left the building, his T-shirt didn’t even provide the illusion of a protection against the cold. He shuddered, envying the thick coat of the man facing in the opposite direction, his back to the street – a tall man with a long leather duster. He was disheveled looking, a length of hair on his face that was too much to call stubble and too little to call a proper beard that complimented the stained T-shirt and sweatpants tucked into cowboy boots nicely to create an air of “schlub – chic.” His expression was caught somewhere between astonished at the sudden military invasion of the 9th Precinct and furious that he’d been told to move his horrible half-ruined jalopy of a Volkswagen beetle away from the Senator’s Limousine by the Marine standing next to a military Humvee.

He blinked several times upon catching sight of Jacob’s ridiculous get-up, seemingly dumbfounded that he’d managed to find someone even worse dressed as Jacob followed the senator into the Limousine along with part of the protective detail. As the Limousine pulled away from the precinct he watched the blonde cop walk out and meet the borderline vagrant on the sidewalk, the two of them chatting animatedly and gesturing towards the departing limousine. Jacob didn’t envy the woman’s job – lord only knew what that lunatic was complaining about.

He looked at the marines and their body armor. These guys were kitted out for Desert Storm not downtown Chicago. “Jesus, how bad are things on base?” Jacob had earned some odd looks from the marines due to his attire, but none of them said a word. For that many marines to let his choice of dress pass without comment, something was deeply, deeply wrong. “And why are you here?”

“I live here General – I was here for a fundraiser when I got the call from Colonel Davis requesting that I bail you out of jail on behalf of the SGC because I was the only person with a program read in currently in Illinois and everyone else with a need to know was dealing with the situation on base.” The Senator’s face grew deadly serious. “It’s a foothold General, and by all accounts we’re losing.”
Jacob leaned back on the leather chair, hopelessly aware of how far he was from Colorado. “Well… shit.”
“What is a Foothold?” Queried Ferrovax. He addressed the question to Teal’c rather than to the Tau’ri, seemingly having decided that the Jaffa was a passable interlocutor. He ignored the mortal warriors entirely, entirely disinterested in their continued posturing.

Teal’c lips stayed closed, his face a stern mask of silence as he considered his options. The Tau’ri were obsessed with secrecy and lines of appropriate communication, the idea of having both the right and necessity to information a near religious prescription within their forces. They compartmentalized information to only those who required it and punished anyone who deviated from those lines of communication with the force of an angry god. His oath to guard the secrets of the Tau’ri prohibited him for answering the Dragon’s question but his oath of service meant that he would soon have to aid in the defense of the mountain from the forces that advanced upon it – an impossible task while he was interacting with Ferrovax.

“Jaffa, you can tell me the truth, or I can make you tell me the truth. I would prefer to remain civil if possible.” Ferrovax pulled a flattened bullet from his shirt pocket, rolling the bit of metal between his fingers before casting it upon the ground. He pulled a small box from the same pocket, opened it, and pulled a wriggling green thing from within it. It screeched and snarled as he removed the creature, the animal’s bulk seemingly too immense for the tiny container.

The fist sized furry thing screeched and snarled as he bit down on its head, chewing wetly as the animal’s bones crunched beneath his teeth. He devoured the entire wriggling mess bite by bite, licking the blood from his fingers as he continued to address Teal’c with idle boredom – picking a bit of green fur from between his teeth with the nail of his pinky finger. “I cannot negotiate with men who are not being honest with me.”

Teal’c met the gaze of SG-7’s commanding officer. The Colonel met his gaze and shrugged, clearly as lost in what to do as the former First Prime of Apophis. The SOPs for both hostage negotiation and Foothold situations weren’t adequate to account for appeasing the Father of all Dragons – and every moment they spent choosing not to answer his question was a second lost in re-taking the base.

From what Teal’c remembered of the legends of Ferrovax, the Father of Dragons was dangerous and violent but not prone to deception. If he gave his word, he meant it. Teal’c addressed Ferrovax in what he hoped was a calm and steady voice. “I will answer your question only after you have promised that your forces will not harm their hostages.”

“I will promise that they will not act, except in self-defense. More than that would-be foolishness.” Ferrovax waved his uninjured hand dismissively as though the question’s answer ought to have been self-evident. “They are mortals and of no consequence. I would not waste energy harming them without cause. You have my promise – the word of the King of Dragons.”
Teal’c nodded, the word of the dragon would have to be enough. “Something has come though the Chappa’ai. Something that is winning. We must defend ourselves against this threat.”

The dragon frowned, furrowing his brow in thought. “Am I to assume that the chosen of Thor Odinson will be at the heart of battle? And that I will have to enter the heart of battle to reach him?”

“It is likely.” Teal’c nodded. Colonel O’Neill was drawn to battle to a degree that often left Teal’c somewhat sad that he’d not remained a Jaffa after Hathor forcibly tried to turn the ageing warrior into a Jaffa. As a Tau’ri, O’Neill was reaching the end of his prime. As a Jaffa, he would be at the cusp of youth – capable of leading men into battle for another century before even slowing down. He understood the human aversion to holding the Goa’uld larvae but it still seemed a shame to have only a few more decades with his human companion.

The dragon rolled his eyes skyward, narrowing his gaze and glaring at the clouds. There was a long, low growl from his throat as his eyes glowed red and focused on something in the middle distance. “Ah… yes. I should have guessed. It would seem that my presence was arranged and if my peer has seen fit to organize an audience, I’m interested to discover why he has chosen to do so.” His eyes ceased to glow as he turned back to the Jaffa, “Very well, Jaffa, I will go to him if it is impractical for him to come to me. I am curious to see what it is that has caught the interest of Thor Odinson, his bloodthirst isn’t generally sated except by the most fool hearted warriors. Am I correct in the assumption that you and this gaggle of mortals are eager to join the melee? Do I have your invitation to assist you in reaching it?”

“We are warriors.” Teal’c’s brow arched, what else could they possibly wish to do?

Ferrovax chuckled, a hearty flicker of smoke simmered from his nostrils as cheery sparks played behind his ferocious grin. He closed his eyes and waved his hand across the crowd, a shimmering wave of heat playing along his arm as he did so. Teal’c felt the air temperature rise as power thrummed through the space around them, angry jagged symbols interposing themselves upon the pavement in oblong fang-like protrusions of asymmetrical script. The spun out on the ground from the Dragon’s feet, molten rock hissing and spitting as the hangar and runway suffered the force of Ferrovax’s will.

The Dragon’s eyes blazed as he spoke a word that made Teal’c’s teeth vibrate with the sheer force of its imposed will. “Move.”

But unlike the words he’d spoken before, this word did not impose themselves upon the world around him. His eyes flashed with rage as he poured greater and greater energy into the glowing symbols, spreading them out and up the walls and ceiling has his face contorted into abject fury – his
limbs elongating and flickering with serpentine, sinewy black scales. Electronic devices reacted violently to whatever it was that Ferrovax was doing, forcing Teal’c to cover his head to protect himself from the shattering glass shrapnel from lightbulbs and computer monitors. Teal’c worried that he might roast alive under the pressure when the heat suddenly ceased, the symbols that had been carving themselves upon the hangar growing cold as a sudden rush of October air subsumed the open space of the hangar.

“What the hell was that?” Screamed someone from the flight line as the sounds of firefighting vehicles sounded from across the wide tarmac. The Colonel from SG-7 swore in frustration, it wasn’t like they were going to be able to explain away the hangar suddenly setting on fire for no reason. This was going to enter the rumor mill within hours.

Teal’c briefly had a vision of the constantly stressed looking woman from public relations who sat in a small office down the hall from General Hammond. He had never had cause to interact with her directly, but from what he understood her primary function was to draft factually accurate lies to provide plausible explanations for the activities of the SGC. She was the third officer appointed to that position since Teal’c came to Earth and he suspected that there would be a forth in the imminent future.

Dragon fire dripped reflexively from the great dragon’s mouth as his rage rendered it more difficult to maintain his illusion. Molten runnels of fire shimmered down his immaculate suit as Ferrovax’s voice trembled with barely contained rage as he spoke. “She dares to bar me! She casts spells in blood to prevent my entry? I should have devoured that ungrateful whelp’s egg rather than saving the spawn of Siriothrax. Foolish child.”

The dragon’s fury was horrific as his body rippled, the illusion of his human form breaking down under the sheer ferocity of his open hatred. He spoke the word again, his eyes blazing a second time, but upon the second invocation of the word “move” the symbols flared and Teal’c was briefly blinded by the sudden shining blaze of dragonfire. He winced as the flames engulfed him, whisking the SG teams and Jaffa into the open air. Nine blazing comets in the shapes of men soared out and into the sky. Blazing effigies of mortal warriors whooped and caterwauled in confusion and excitement as they realized that the dragon’s spell, though uncomfortable, did them no lasting harm.

“I effing live for shit like this!” Howled one of the medics from SG-7, loud enough for Teal’c to hear it over the collective gasps and screams from the firefighters as they got close enough to the now burning hangar to see the now airborne dragon at the blazing heart of the human comets. The firetruck veered promptly to the left as a multi-story reptile broke through the hangar doors and took to the sky, leading his ensorcelled charges through the airspace of the Cheyenne Mountain complex.

A group of military helicopters that seemed on the verge of landing took back to the sky, their previous goal entirely forgotten as the titanic lizard let out its keening call. Teal’c was quite certain that the pilots would allow their aircraft to run out of fuel and crash before they would willingly let
either the dragon or the blazing men out of their field of view. Motes of green starlight fell from
benath Ferrovax’s wings as he soared across the open air, propelling the areal titan forward at speeds
that any Goa’uld fighter craft would have been glad to match.

The helecopters followed them for as long as they were able, rotating blades struggling to keep up
the pace. They couldn’t hope to match the speed of the great dragons beating wings, however. There
would soon be faster aircraft launched to intercept the unidentified flying object within Cheyanne
Mountian’s airspace, but Teal’c doubted they’d reach the dragon in time. He was just too fast.

Teal’c had dreamed of flying as a boy – the impossible wishes of a child. He’d wanted to just stretch
out his arms and will himself to take to the stars, far away from the shame of his father’s defeat. He
laughed with joy as he reached in front of himself, holding out his balled fists and letting the wind
rush past him as he’d always dreamed. It was the same purity of joy he’d felt when he held his son
for the first time, an unbridled glee at having been given an experience in life that he’d never
believed would be his to claim.

It was all too soon before the blazing comets traveled their brilliant journey across the evening
starlight and reached the familiar entrance to the Cheyanne mountain complex. Teal’c braced himself
for impact, bending his knees as the fire flung him down to the earth. Though the ground shook and
the stone pavement crumpled beneath his fiery descent, the molten collision with the ground was as
gentle as a falling feather. The great serpent that bore them through the air landed most gracefully of
them all, his leather shoes not even making a sound as he reverted back to his mortal illusion.

“Jesus Christ! Have we just totally given up on even the illusion of a cover story? How in the hell are
we supposed to spin that into something that’s even remotely plausible?” Groaned a grating voice
that was all too familiar to Teal’c. The Jaffa warrior’s teeth clenched as he laid eyes upon the Tau’ri
warrior who he liked least. How such a sniveling excuse for a man managed to earn equivalent rank
to O’Neill was a matter of great frustration to Teal’c that no Tau’ri had yet been adequately able to
answer. That he was not allowed to challenge the man to ritual combat just compounded the
irritation.

“Sorry Harry, we got the call at an odd moment and had to find the fastest way over. Under the
circumstances, stealth was less of a priority.” Colonel King jibed. Teal’c arched a brow at the
apparent comradery between the two Tau’ri warriors.

“King? I should have known it was you.” The man walked up to still smoking SG team members
warily, his eyes focused on the man with the fancy suit and glowing eyes as he greeted the remaining
Colonel and Jaffa. “Colonel Mikita. Teal’c… I don’t suppose any of you are going to explain what
exactly the hell is going on here? Because other than limiting the on base personnel to SFs the only
thing I know at this point is that O’Neill though that things were bad enough to ask me to be here.”
“Indeed.” Teal’c’s blood ran cold at the implication. Colonel O’Neill despised Harry Mayborne nearly to the degree he hated the Goa’uld. The NID had tried to take control of the SGC several times before, and had used their political connections to bully the SGC into compliance with their mandate of securing Earth’s safety at any cost. They’d nearly been able to incarcerate Teal’c for the rest of his natural life, forcing the warrior to live out his existence in isolation. It had only been the timely arrival of a Goa’uld invader that had allowed Teal’c to demonstrate his skills and earn the right to fight alongside Colonel O’Neill and his team of warriors.

He would only have called for the NID Colonel in the most dire of need.

“Yeah… that scared me too. But we get here and find this.” He pointed to the doors of the Cheyenne complex. There was a pulsing barrier of purple membrane across the threshold, glutinous fleshy material pulsing with glowing energies. The SFs and a group of black clad warriors with weaponry similar to that worn by Colonel Mayborne were trying to force their way through it as pulsing tendrils of alien flesh crawled up and out of the ground. “It’s all around the whole mountain, down as deep as we can dig, and it’s growing. Worse, the stuff just seems to be getting harder and thicker over time. We can’t get through to the teams inside until we get past this barrier. We should have tanks here within the hour.”

“If you wait that long it will likely already be too late.” Ferrovax spoke matter of fact as he walked across the parking lot, flinging the SF that tried to stop him up and into the tree-tops. The man screamed in horror as he flew through the air, grabbing on to the conifer’s branches and pulling himself up onto one of the sturdier branches.

“Stop right now!” Snarled Colonel Mayborne pointing his pistol at the back of Ferrovax’s head. “I don’t know what you are, but I will ventilate you if you make another move.”

Ferrovax let out a long, exhausted sigh. “Will all the chattel be this obstreperous? I’m trying to be tolerant of these outbursts by my patience really is wearing thin.”

“Mayborn, stop! You’re just going to hurt someone from the ricochet.” Colonel King all but slapped the gun down, “I don’t know why bullets don’t work on him, but if the M249 didn’t phase him your 9mm isn’t going to be worth a damn.”

“King? What is wrong with you?” Mayborne backed away from the Colonel of SG-7, a sudden look of worry on his face. “Oh, no – he’s gotten to you, hasn’t he?”

“He hasn’t gotten to anyone, Harold.” Colonel Mikita pinched the bridge of his nose. “But I get why you think so under the circumstances. Look, we have two, independent players at the moment. Mr.
Ferrovax is apparently a shape shifting dragon who can make people fly with his mind. Unless Godzilla’s mafia jedi uncle decided to invade the base while pretending not to invade it and re-enact E.T. by way of the fantastic four, I’m just going to go with trusting the bulletproof super being at his word when he tells me that he means me no harm. He claims to be the King of Dragons, and so far he’s been more than able to support that supposition.”

Mayborne blinked several times before holstering his pistol. “The oversight committee is going to have us all sectioned when we file this after-action report.”

“Assuming there’s still a planet left when we’re done, I’ll let them.” Colonel King Snorted. “I need a vacation and I’m out of leave.”

Ferrovax hadn’t waited for the Tau’ri to stop talking before he continued walking towards the barrier. Sniffing at the air around it in disgust. “That is of Stragoth make.”

“The Stragoth were slain by the forces of Chronos in the last great war.” Teal’c spoke fearfully, the pulsing purple carapace growing up through the ground horrifyingly reminiscent of his father’s ghost stories and tall tales. “It was his duty to unmake them.”

“It would seem he was delinquent. The servants of Mother Hydra are very much alive.” Ferrovax’s nostrils flared. “Though I am unsure how they reached this planet.”

“Do the works of the Stragoth not have a legendary weakness to dragon-fire?” Teal’c queried eagerly, hoping to make a second childhood dream come true.

Ferrovax grinned, the spark-lights in his mouth beginning to glow. “Indeed, they do, Jaffa. Indeed, they do.”
Chapter 28

Sam snarled angrily as one of the shimmering green figures grabbed her from behind. The crystal she’d been manipulating sparked in its housing, high voltage electrical current burning her fingers painfully as she let go of the purple gem. It danced in the socket, golden fragments of reflective metal flashing bright as it reacted violently to having been placed in the incorrect place. She should have been wearing gloves for this – but there was a rather limited supply to work with under the circumstances.

The horrifically mutilated specter’s fingers smelled of rot and sickness, dripping wet and gelatinous as they snatched her into the air. She stabbed it with her k-bar knife, driving the iron blade into the creature’s eye. It dropped her to the ground, pawing at the blade before the snicker-snack of a dragon’s maw tore the specter in half. It hovered in confusion as its legs kicked limply along the ground before a torrent of fire dissolved the gelatinous specter into vaporous steam.

“Apologies, named one.” Growled the dragon between bursts of white-hot flame. “I was too slow to stop that one.”

“Just keep them busy – I nearly fried the whole system that time.” Sam wiped the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve, looking at the now molten remnant of her knife. “This is harder than it looks.”

“Named one,” The dragon bowed its head as smashed a specter beneath it’s claws, razor sharp talons rendering shimmering green flesh to ribbons.

Sam kneeled back next to the panel she’d been working on, reaching towards the still dancing crystal before pulling back her fingers as another jolt of electricity sparked painfully against her fingers. There was no way that she was going to be able to safely handle this with just her fingers. She unzipped her BDU’s and grabbed the front of her shirt, tearing it just above her midriff. The soft cotton tore as she yanked off a wide strip and wrapped it around her hand to allow her to grab the errant stone.

“This is not good engineering.” Sam growled as she manipulated the internal components of the Goa’uld teleportation platform. The Goa’uld had an infuriating lack of safety measures or redundant components in their design. Their crystal components were easily swapped if, and when, they broke but unless one had the proper components immediately at hand there was remarkably little in the way of back-up systems.

For an Empire in which all but a vast minority of the population were slaves, the ability to scuttle any
technology with minimal effort in a situation requiring emergency destruction procedures and evacuation made perfect sense. In the event of a slave rebellion or Jaffa mutiny a Goa’uld Lord could just destroy anything important enough to make a ship remotely useful as he made his escape – knowing that when he returned it would require minimal effort to restore functionality. Given the non-linear processing capacity of the Goa’uld systems, it meant that it was a living hell to force their systems to do something when one component of a Goa’uld machine wasn’t operating at full capacity.

The way that the Goa’uld programmed their systems would get someone burned as a witch if they proposed doing it with a modern processor. Rather than just having a single underlying binary language that all components operated off of, each individual component operated on a proprietary coding language that wasn’t guaranteed to even operate on the same core mathematical concepts. Any ad-hoc modifications to Goa’uld systems required that the person manipulating them understand the fundamental complexities of forcing base 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, and 13 mathematical systems to operate with each other while ensuring their coding languages were even capable of speaking to each other. All of which was in addition to making sure that the physical components were capable of being forced to fit the slots designed for entirely different crystal systems and that they weren’t encrypted in a way that prevented their use external to the port they’d initially been designed to use.

It was as much an art as a science. There was a certain amount of it where she felt like once she understood how an individual crystal was supposed to think, it just became a matter of trying to find a similar “idea” on the Goa’uld logic board to interpose with the idea she was trying to create. At a certain point it sort of felt like the application of theoretical math to create technological poetry. Sam was probably one of three people on Earth capable of making the changes she was making to the teleportation platform, and probably the only one crazy enough to actually use it after having made those changes.

The purple crystal wedged into the larger housing as she shoved it sideways, glowing furiously as it processed a data-load normally given to a much larger crystal. It was one of the heartier processors in the Goa’uld arsenal, while it looked dangerous she knew it would last a few centuries operating like that before it gave out. Sam yelped in shock as a specter’s severed head fell in front of her, the gristy maw of a spectral child screaming in frozen horror.

She reflexively stabbed it with the large crystal she’d taken out of the machine, the large green protrusion of stone that had previously sat where the purple one now did. The sharpened stone pierced the child’s face, red energy coruscating from where it penetrated the gelatinous surface of the spectral head. Angry red bolts of lightning consumed the specter from the inside, destroying the specter even as the crystal blackened and turned to dust.

Sam’s face crinkled up in disgust as Daniel Jackson kneeled next to her, eying the space where the spectral face had been. “Ugh… That’s just creepy.”
“Extremely.” Sam agreed as she fiddled with the tiny display inside the rings, trying to figure out how to get it to re-connect with the transport ship in. “I can’t get us to Colorado.”

“We’re trapped?” Daniel groaned, firing at a specter with his Zat.

“I can get us off, but I can’t get us to Colorado. The planet has rotated too much for me to connect to the transport. I’ve got a connection… I just don’t know to what.” Sam shook her head. “It could be to anywhere.”

There was a horrific howl from the entrance to the ring-room as gigantic spectral figure forced themselves through the doors. Ten feet tall and bleeding thick, black blood from every orifice, horrific parodies shambling, headless Jaffa Warriors waded through dragon-fire as though it weren’t an obstacle. The serpentine illusion of symbiotes made from pure shadow protruded from their bellies, lashing out at scions with purple jets of shimmering light. The dragons howled in agony as the purple beams hit them, hateful energies ripping through their flesh and bone.

“That’s feeling like an increasingly more manageable problem set over time, Sam!” Daniel flinched as a purple beam shot towards the two of them, holding up his hand reflexively to ward away the deadly energy. One of Sam’s draconic bodyguards leapt in front of the beam, its body crumpling into a pulpy mess of burning offal as it breathed white-hot flames into the spectral Jaffa, aiming for the black serpent. The serpent, apparently weaker than the rest of the specter, immolated entirely – killing the Jaffa host specter. The serpentine dragon’s victorious grin of battle remained upon it’s lips even as its eyes clouded over into death.

“Named one, the necromancer guiding these specters is approaching.” The First Nameless took the position of the fallen scion, riding astride one of his subordinates in dragon form. “I can feel the wards of this place accepting him as master. If we do not depart before they accept him entirely he will be able to use the true defenses against us, and I do not have Grandfather’s presence to ward off the Necromantic energies.”

“Everybody ashore who’s going ashore.” Sam slapped the final commands into the ring transporter’s control crystals as something occurred to her. “Oh no – we’ve got a problem.”

“Just one?” Daniel joked.

Sam shook her head. “Daniel – someone has to stay behind and manually activate the rings.”
Daniel winced. “Crap.”

“I will stay.” Spoke the second dragon who’d been guarding Sam as he reverted into human form.

“You will die.” Said the First Nameless. It was not spoke as an admonition or a warning, more of a statement of fact.

“I will have a name.” The nőing Sárkány grinned, clasping the arm of the First Nameless and bowing his head.

“Farewell, named one.” Replied the First Nameless, nodding to the doomed scion in apparent permission. The first nameless screeched a command to the scions in his draconic language, calling for them to retreat towards the ring platform. The dragons blacked towards the rings, spear wielding human scions riding atop their dragon-from brethren alongside SG team members, laying down a wall of Zat blasts and dragon fire towards the shambling ghostly hordes.

Sam insisted upon staying till the last wave, given that she was the only one who’d be able to troubleshoot the rings if they broke again. Colonel Makepeace grudgingly agreed with her, on the condition that he left when she did. Daniel insisted upon staying as well, and given that he was a civilian the Colonel’s threat of court martial fell on deaf ears.

Sam’s blood pressure rose as the spectral attackers grew bolder, the waning forces of the scions increasingly less able to fight off their attackers as groups were ferried down to the Earth’s surface. It was not till the third group departed that she started to get worried. The final group would not have the wall of dragon-fire protecting them, the final ring of scions would have to revert to human form in order to fit within the rings.

The nameless dragon who’d volunteered to stay behind crooned a merry song as the moment of truth approached, his warbling cries of victory increasingly joyous as he reverted into dragon form in opposition to every other scion. Sam stepped on the platform with the human form scions, an unaccountable feeling of sadness overcoming her as the rings lifted up from the floor. The Scion’s breath was brighter than any she’d yet seen, his song of glory warbling out from his nostrils as he did what he could to delay the inevitable.

The last thing she saw before the pillar of light was the scion kicking its back claw into the control crystals, shattering them so that the ghostly hordes could not follow them to the surface even as the spectral hordes began to rip the flesh from his bones. He continued to sing his warbling song even as one of the spectral Jaffa ripped the right eye from his face.
“Jesus Christ,” Colonel Makepeace swore as they appeared on another ring platform. His face was ashen white, “I mean, just Jesus Christ.”

“Named one.” The First Nameless turned to Daniel. “You must choose.”

Daniel tilted his head in interest. “Choose what, exactly.”

“His name was earned. You have witnessed.” Spoke the First Nameless, the surrounding scions echoing his statement with varying murmurs of “He is known,” and “A name is earned” in varying degrees of difficulty with the English language.

Dr. Jackson removed his glasses, rubbing them nervously with the front of his shirt. “Am I the appropriate authority for this? It seems like naming is a big deal in your culture.”

The First Nameless’ voice rumbled with something bordering on anger at Daniel’s hesitation. A forked tongue flickered out from his lips as he spoke again. “You have witnessed. You are named. You are known. You must choose. Do not disrespect what has been earned.”

Sam put her hand on Daniel’s shoulder, cautioning him not to speak as she addressed the First Nameless. “He’s not trying to disrespect your fallen, he wants to make sure that we give the full respect and dignity to the honored dead. Is there a specific convention to what kind of name he gives? Names are important.”

The First Nameless seemed appeased by that reasoning as he said. “A name is earned by action. One must witness and speak it.”

“So, we name him based off of what he did to get the name?” Daniel nodded, considering the matter.

“He died fighting with a song on his lips. Give him a singer’s name.” Colonel Makepeace replied, a grudging respect in his tone. “The tough bastard can have my last name if he needs one.”

“Plácido Makepeace?” Daniel suggested. “He seemed pretty calm about it all at the end.”
“The calm one, peace bringer! Yes… it is sufficient.” The Nameless one crowed with delight. “He is known!”

“He is known!” Cried the scions in victorious reply, crooning out the same draconic song that Plácido had sung as he died.

“Where are we?” Sam asked, looking at the area surrounding the platform. They were in tall, crumbling ruins at the heart of a wild forest. Birds sung a cheery song that, while pleasant, didn’t resemble anything Sam could recall having heard in person. A centipede scuttled along the wall. It was large enough that deserved its own postal address, if not a social security number.

Daniel squinted at the carvings along the wall, chewing his lip in thought. “Uh… we’re in China, unless I’m very much mistaken. I’m pretty sure that this is a guardhouse along the Great Wall.”

“China?” Sam blinked, “I thought the great wall was made after the Goa’uld left Egypt.”

“It was…” Daniel replied, rubbing at his chin. “We’ve been operating on the assumption that all the Goa’uld left Earth at the same time – when Ra did. We know that they’ve been raiding Earth periodically for slaves, but this is the first indication of Goa’uld building infrastructure in recent history. If I’m right about the part of wall we’re in, this is as recent as 200 B.C. That’s 1800 years after when the gate got buried at Giza.”

“The Old Gods did not just leave after Thoth’s Folly and the Terms.” The First Nameless laughed. “They were made to leave.”

Sam turned to the First Nameless, a horrifying thought occurring to her. “Are… are there still Goa’uld on Earth? More like Setesh?”

“Not many, only those without the resources, willpower, or connections to get safe passage.” The First Nameless chuckled. “Few, weak, nameless even among their kin.”

“So – what happens now?” Colonel Makepeace shook the Zat in his hand. “Because I’m not going to disarm myself willingly.”

The First Nameless rolled his eyes exaggeratedly and hissed a single word in the draconic language, tearing the Zat from the Colonel’s grip along with all the other Zats to fall beneath the growling bulk
of dragon form scions. Human form scions recovered the pistols, holstering them on leather harnesses that shimmered into place as part of their illusionary form. “You are without choice.”

“So - what? We’re your prisoners again? This is getting really boring.” Makepeace shook his head. “Why do you even want to take us prisoner? You know who we are. You clearly know that we’re not affiliated with the Goa’uld. What is the end game here?”

The first Nameless paused for a moment before saying, “An answer for an answer? The knowledge you seek is not without value.”

“Fine.” Makepeace sighed. “Why are you taking us prisoner? You don’t seem to care that we killed your man. You don’t seem to want us dead. Why are you bothering with this pretense?”

“You are of value. Grandfather would exchange you for one of greater value.” The First Nameless shrugged. “Even as nameless her value is without compare. The heir of Siriothrax must be recovered.”

“The girl.” Sam blinked. “You want her. She’s a scion.”

The dragons burst into raucous laughter as the First Nameless grinned toothily, “No, Named One. She is nameless, but she is no Scion. She is if the pure strain, an heir apparent to Ferrovax himself.”

“You’re trading us for royalty?” Daniel whistled. “No wonder you came in guns blazing. You realize that we probably would just have given her back if you had asked nicely?”

“Grandfather does not ask, he commands.” The First Nameless nodded. “Now I will ask my question, and you will give me an answer.”

“Fine.” The Colonel replied, his posture relaxing. Sam couldn’t blame him – it wasn’t as though the SGC would deny the child’s right to return to her family and the SGC was generally willing to grant alien powers substantial latitude providing that the hadn’t done any actual harm to US citizens.

The First Nameless pointed at Sam. “I did not smell the magic while the vessels wards were there to distract me, but I fear that now recognize the scent of a claim of the true blood. Has my cousin bound herself by blood to the land and people? Has she claimed the mountain’s heart?”
“Do you mean when she drank my blood?” Sam queried, blinking in surprise as the Scions let out collected sounds of horror and amazement. The jabbered animatedly in the draconic speech, eagerly gossiping at this development.

The First Nameless let out a crooning sound of amusement as he turned to Colonel Makepeace. “I apologize, named one. I must correct my answer, for it was spoken in ignorance. You are no longer our prisoners. We were in error to claim you the first time. Your weapons will be returned, and I will arrange an appropriate wergild with my cousin for having wronged you.”

“What?” Colonel Makepeace blinked.

“He’s going to pay us for having taken us hostage.” Daniel responded. “What I can’t understand is why?”

“You are citizens of my cousin’s dominion. We would not have attacked knowing a blood claimed priestess had already taken claim of the ship.” He nodded to Sam. “We have overstepped our duty, Named One. I beg your forgiveness. With your permission we will return you to my cousin. I would not knowingly offend one of the true blood by named ones in her service.”

“Does anyone want to tell me what the hell is happening?” Colonel Makepeace groaned exasperatedly as his weapon was returned for the second time that day.

“Apparently the Dragon back at the SGC drinking my blood marked me as being important within Dragon culture and the SGC as being under her protection. Because they came here to rescue her and because I’m already protected by her, they can’t take us as prisoners of war for a prisoner exchange.” She turned to the First Nameless. “So, they’re just going to… take us home? Just like that?”

“Of course, named one.” The dragon nodded, waving its hand to open up a wide tear in the open air. “Now, if you would do me the honor of riding on my back. I will take you home.”

“Wait – what about the people we left on the ship?” Sam shook her head. “We can’t abandon them.”

“Named one.” The First Nameless tutted in a wounded tone. “Don’t tell me that you think Grandfather is so crass as to leave his own family’s property in disarray. One does not steal from a Dragon.”
Chapter 29

Jay Felger was long past the point of trying to reconcile what was going on around him within the logical precepts of math and physics and was actively trying to figure out how the supernatural fit within the physical laws of the word as he knew them. Either Druana was an extreme method actor with access to a combination of technologies so far beyond his ability to even begin to understand how and why they did what they did, or she was actually summoning the tortured spirits of the angry dead. About the point where one watches the spectral remnants of a ten-year-old girl turn into a spectral amalgam of teeth and terror, pierce the veil between a dimension of shadow and the world of the living, and charge into the flaming maw of an angry dragon, one tended to re-assess their previous opinions on the relative validity of Atheism.

Jay found himself wishing that the little silver cross his mother had given him for his first communion was around his neck, not back in his dresser drawer in Colorado. Jay found himself looking up at the ceiling and sending a little prayer to St. Jude as he muttered, “I swear if you get me out of this I’ll go to every single mass that they offer on base.”

“What?” Coombs hissed, jumping abruptly almost on top of Felger as one of the ice-cold apparitions flitted past him. A woman with a grossly mangled face grinned at the two of them through badly mangled teeth, her eyes unfocused as she ran her fingers through where Coomb’s arm had been with a mournful groan. He howled again as a crimson bold of lighting ripped through the offending spirit, rendering it into transparent ectoplasm.

The spirits had been growing increasingly bold in their approaches towards the two men since they’d lost their prey, the SG teams and dragons using Major Carter’s brilliance to evade Druana’s army of the dead. She’d been standing in front of the rings in contemplation, muttering to herself in two different languages that Jay didn’t understand. Her eye’s glowed at odd intervals as she chatted with herself, her voice alternating between the metallic rumble of the Goa’uld and a hissing screech that felt more unnerving.

She idly twirled a black dagger between her fingers as she continued her conversation with herself, the black stone giving off strange patterns of green light that she curved and molded between her fingers. He wasn’t quite sure how she’d pulled the weapon out of thin air, but the consequences of the dagger were horrific to say the least.

She stood atop a pile of white bones, dragon bones without even a scrap of flesh upon them. The spirits had held down the writhing monster as she’d touched it with the blade, then they’d fed upon his rotting flesh as the green light rendered him down to boiling fluid. Not stabbed, she’d touched him with the blade.

Jay needed to get away from this woman, fast. But he wasn’t entirely sure how. He didn’t even quite
understand how he’d been dragged into the shadow world, and he was entirely at a loss for how to pull himself out of the blue-white mirror image of the real-world. He wished Major Carter was with them, she’d know how to get them out of this jam.

“We’ve got to do something.” Jay whispered to Coombs.

“Haven’t you already done enough?” Coombs replied, his voice a furious whisper. “We were fine until you decided that what we really needed to do was start opening doors without backup.”

“We’re explorers Coombs. We explore.” Jay replied. “And her guard is down so if we act fast, we can fix this.”

“What part, of literally any of that actually sounded like a good idea to you?” Simon Coombs growled through clenched teeth Durana tossed another bolt of crimson at a spirit without looking, destroying the apparition as it tried to bite Jay’s ankle. “Because your version of “guard down” does not correspond to any definition of it I’ve ever seen. She is the literal opposite of unguarded and I am not going to try to backstab an angry necromancer with a magical death knife who is actively talking with someone who isn’t here.”

“We’re soldiers Coombs. It’s time for us to act like it.” Jay replied, trying to figure out the best way to disarm her while Coombs went in for the kill.

Coombs face contorted in utter befuddlement as he made a noise like an angry kettle for a second. “You’re a physicist not a fighter. You’re a contracted physicist and engineer whose prior job experience consists of giving lectures at MIT. You are not a soldier and you are most definitely not a member of the Ghostbusters, so unless you’ve been hiding a proton pack up your butt that I don’t know about I’m not going to anger the Keymaster.”

“The what?” Jay blinked in confusion.

“Really? You haven’t watched Star Trek or Ghostbusters?” Coombs groaned in frustration. “What do you even do during your free time?”

“I hand make dolls and dioramas.” Jay replied, thankfully having the good sense to omit the subject matter in his addled state. Coombs just wouldn’t understand the skill required to replicate and re-enact SG-1’s missions with entirely accurate scale dolls. Historical re-enactment wasn’t just an art for the distant past. “And I watch a lot of documentaries about old airplanes.”
Coombs pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation. “Unbelievable, I’m going to die in a way that validates nearly thirty years of playing dungeons and dragons trapped next to a man that wouldn’t be able to tell a Tefling from a Twi’lek.”

“Cease.” Druana spoke, snapping her fingers as Jay felt his jaw slam shut compulsively. Simeon’s eyes bulged in a way that let him know that he had been similarly affected. She crooked her finger and Jay found himself lifted up into the air and outright levitated over to the rings. She dropped Jay and Simon to the ground in front of her, putting them within the rings.

She waved her hand at the exposed control components of the ring transporter, green illumination from her blade making the crystalline components glow in horrifying iridescence as the world shimmered around Druana. She cut the black stone across the open air, slicing through the blue patina that surrounded them, dragging them back into the familiar colors and odors of the Pyramid ship. Jay gasped a breath that he didn’t even realize he’d been holding – realizing for the first time that he hadn’t felt the need to breathe while they’d been in the blue place. His eyes bulged in sudden shock as his heart thundered in his ear, the motion of its beat feeling alien to him after having been absent its rhythm. Had he been dead?

Frost cracked and broke off his skin as the rush of ambient moisture from the open air met the shadow touched flesh recently liberated from the blue place. He shivered as the ice casing his skin cracked and shed to the ground, ripping the hair from his arms. Simon swore loudly hopping up and down as he stood up, shaking the frost out of his long hair. “Cold, cold, cold!”

Jay stood up on shaky legs, his muscles responding to him groggily as though they’d been in use for days, not minutes. The blue place had taken its toll upon his body. Jay’s jaw ached as he tried to say something clever but only managed to get out, “Ouch” before Druana had begun to speak. The Goau’ld reached down and pulled the fragmented crystals crushing them in her hand as she let the multicolored sand run between her fingers.

Her eye’s flashed as she began speaking in the harsh tones of the Goa’uld. “The woman fought through my spell. How?”

“I don’t know.” Jay replied, his eyes fixed on that terrible knife. There was no reflection to it, no light, just endless pitch-black darkness. Inky black lines ran up the woman’s arm where it touched the blade, horrible darkness spreading across her spidery veins and earthy skin.

“It should not have been possible, and yet she achieved it. You will tell me how she managed that, and why the Dragons aided her.” Her voice rumbled with barely contained rage as the faces of spirits started shimmering into view, brought forth from the blue place of frost. She pointed to Simon, “You
will tell me, or he will die.”

“Wait – wait!” Jay raised his hands, putting himself between Druana and Simon as the two scientists stood at the platform’s center. Simon cowered behind Jay as he turned, keeping his eyes on Druana as she circled the now dead rings. “I don’t know how she did it, not exactly, but I do know who did it. And if there was ever going to be someone to accomplish the impossible, it would be her.”

“Heka’s ring transports are keyed. Without a Kara’kesh to guide them, they shouldn’t have connected to any rings that weren’t keyed into his network, and I felt them depart towards the planet.” Her lips quirked up in amusement. “Not for any mere human anyway… but she wasn’t just some mere human, was she? She was different. Special?”

“She’s the most special woman in the world.” Jay replied in breathless fear, aware that the hungering ghosts were starting to cast their gazes upon him, and that Druana was no longer casting lightning to keep them in check. He clarified hurriedly, “Human woman, that is… not a god. Not special like you. Definitely just human.”

“Please stop trying to make things better.” Simon clutched Jay’s shoulder, squeezing with firm but insistent pressure. “Please.”

“Not a goddess, but touched by them. I could taste bloodstone upon the air.” She spoke in the hissing screech of a voice, untouched by the metallic noises of the Goa’uld. Her eyes weren’t glowing any more, but there was a spitefulness to them that somehow left Jay even more terrified than the glow. “There was magic in her. She stunk of power and the will to use it.”

Coombs screeched. “You know what, just let her stab me. I don’t know if I can handle two both of you mooning about how great Major Carter is.”

Jay looked at Simon in surprise. “Really?”

“Of course not!” Dr. Coombs sqwaked in irritation. “I was exaggerating for dramatic effect. You stay right where you are.”


“I am your Lady and Mistress Druana, conqueror of Death, Goddess of the Forbidden Paths.” Druana snarled, flipping back into the metallic tones of the Goa’uld.
“Yeah… but do you want us to call you all of that at once? Do you have like a nickname or title we
can call you?” Jay turned to Simon hopefully. “Because, I lost track of that at Conqueror of Death.”

Simon shrugged, “I mean, it is king of a mouthful.” He flinched at Druana’s glare. “Which… which
I love! But, uh, it takes a while to say. And we humans aren’t as clever as you are. I mean, the two of
us are pretty smart and we’re having trouble, and you can’t rely on always having the smart slaves.
Probably don’t even want them, smart slaves are a recipe for trouble.”

Druana closed her eyes for a moment, muttering to herself, before opening them. “You many call me
Lady Druana.”

“Lady Druana.” Jay replied in what he hoped was a placating tone. “I don’t know what you want,
but you don’t need to use that on Simon. We’re cooperating.”

“Than you shall cooperate in replicating Major Carter’s work so that I might follow her.” Druana
growled.

Jay’s blood ran cold. Betray Major Carter? Never! He clenched his teeth, steeling himself for what
he’d have to do. “No.”

“What?” Druana growled, green sparks spitting from the blade as octopus like tendrils of green light
writhed around it.

“I don’t know what she did. I don’t know how she did it. And even if I did know and could replicate
it, I wouldn’t. Not for you, not for anyone.” Jay swallowed the fear welling in his throat as he felt
Simon’s hand on his shoulder grow rigid. He looked back at his fellow scientist, making eye contact
with the other scientist.

Simon looked back at him, exhaled through his nostrils, and nodded. “We… we’re not going to help
you. Not at the cost of our friends. Not at the cost of our world.”

Druana laughed, harshly and entirely without mirth. The boiling mass of hungering ghosts spun
around the room, gnashing teeth and howling anger anticipating the kill to come. There was an utter
madness to them that seemed beyond the limits of bloodlust. Druana purred in amusement at Jay’s
insouciance. “Fools - If you will not help me in life, then you will be forced to serve me in death. I
will bind your souls to my will and purpose.”
Jay hadn’t considered that, and didn’t like the idea of being bound to the whims of an angry space Necromancer. But short of appealing to a Goa’uld’s sense of reason he wasn’t quite sure what he could actually do about it. “I can’t help you. I don’t understand what she did. I don’t even entirely understand why she needed to do it. Just because I’m a scientist doesn’t mean that the right type of scientist for this. I’m an engineer, but that just means that I have a vague grounding in the relevant sciences and technologies used for this. Major Carter is a freaking savant when it comes to this stuff. I can’t just make things happen.”

“Yeah.” Simon agreed. “It’s not like I can just snap my fingers and make this thing work.”

He lifted his hand up, holding thumb and forefinger up as he twitched his wrist and snapped them together loudly. Though obviously intended to demonstrate the absurdity of the idea, upon touching forefinger to palm, the rings surrounding them kicked into life. Druana howled in rage, unleashing the torrent of spirits upon them only for bounce off the pillar of light as the two scientists were whisked away.

Simon continued to look at his hand in amazement as they re-materialized in the cargo-bay of a Goa’uld transport ship. Jay joined in his amazed examination, looking from Simon’s face, to the hand, and back before saying. “Nice one.”

“Thanks…” Simon replied, though it was more of a question than an answer as neither one of them had the remotest clue what was going on. They clutched each other fearfully as the cargo bay door opened abruptly and a bearded man with glasses poked his head in. Doctor Rothman, archeologist and peer of Doctor Daniel Jackson, was a welcome sight for weary eyes.

The nebbishy archeologist squinted into the dark cargo hold, speaking through a phlegmy cough. “Good! I wasn’t sure if it worked…. What… What are you… Why are you hugging?”

The two scientists abruptly parted from each other, brushing off the front of their uniforms. Jay, eager to change the subject, spoke over Rothman’s next question. “Where are we? We have to get off the ship! We need to get to safety.”

“Mission accomplished. I took off before they started repelling boarders. I’ve been floating in orbit with this thing cloaked, waiting for someone to tell me what to do next.” Dr. Rothman sneezed loudly before taking a puff from his inhaler. “I saw that you guys needed help, and I figured here was better than there, so I lined up over the ship and turned on the rings.”
“Wait… how… how did you know that we needed to be rescued?” Simon blinked.

“You’re welcome.” Rothman laughed dryly as he walked into the cockpit of the cargo ship, pointing to a crystalline orb attached to the command console of the transport ship. Hundreds of windows floated around an exaggerated video feed piped in directly from the room they’d just escaped. Distanced from her by a ship’s armored hull and the void of space, Jay was able to find the image of an irate dark-skinned Goa’uld-Nox slashing at sprits in impotent rage to be comical, but only just so.

“I turned off the sound.” Rothman waved at the display. “She started getting loud.”

“How long have you been able to use the rings?” Simon asked, an irritated note to his voice that Jay couldn’t quite place.


“And you left things down to the wire like that?” Simon’s fists balled in impotent rage. “Were you waiting for dramatic effect?”

“Hey…. That’s right!” Jay nodded emphatically. “And why didn’t you rescue Major Carter?”

“What am I, psychic?” He jiggled his radio. “I was waiting for someone to give me the all clear, when they didn’t I turned on the computer and activated the surveillance system that Doctor Jackson found on the cargo ship. And I found you in the middle of…. Whatever those things were.”

You could have rescued us way earlier.” Coombs insisted as he reached down to the ground and pulled up a compartment. Jay joined him, pointing to a green crystal. “That one.”

“You’re sure?” Simon pointed to a slightly lighter green crystal.

Jay nodded, certain of himself. “Yep. I use one in my plasma rifle prototype. Pull that one and it can’t receive incoming rings.”

Coombs pointed the crystal at Rothman, “We were standing at knife point for like five minutes on
the pad!

“I’m an Archeologist, I don’t know how this crap works. I’m not pulling stuff out. Before I turned on a freaking teleporter, I read the manual.” Rothman pointed to the raised silver hieroglyphs above the door. “It took me a couple minutes to translate prehistoric tech support, so sue me.”

“Wait… what’s she doing?” Simon pointed at the display as Druana flew from tiny screen to tiny screen, moving with impossible speed through the distant Ha’tak, her spirit army flitting about each image.

Rothman shrugged, “Unless I miss my guess… I think they’re fixing the ship.”

Jay whistled out a long, low tune. “Jeeze, how long do you think it’s going to take her?”

“Not long.” Simon replied, his voice hitching with worry. “Not long at all.”

Jay looked up as the hulking form of the pyramid loomed up from the moon’s surface, the Ha’tak taking to the stars. He swallowed nervously. “Uh… we’re cloaked right.”

Rothman shook his head. “I… I had to turn it off to activate the rings. I didn’t know how to turn it back on.”

“That button! That button right there.” Simon paratactically jumped over Rothman to activate the cloaking device, jumping into the pilot’s seat and flying the transport away at break-neck speeds.

“Do you know how to fly this thing?” Rothman asked in genuine curiosity.

“Space is empty and full of places we weren’t only seconds ago. I can get us to one of those without crashing.” Simon replied immediately. “After that, I’m not making any promises.”

“She’s insane Coombs.” Jay replied, looking at the madwoman as she sat on the bridge, holding court in her sea of spectral crewmen – laughing manically as she commanded a warship. As Jay considered the horrific damage that one could cause with even a single blast from the Ha’tak’s main guns, a terrible idea occurred to him. It didn’t take a deeply creative mind to imagine the horrible
army a woman with Druana’s abilities could raise if she turned those weapons on even a single major metropolitan area. One blast into Beijing and she’d be nearly unstoppable. “We can’t let her get away Simon. I can’t let her get away. I let her out, she’s my responsibility.”

“Well Jay, we’re in an unarmed transport ship that none of us entirely know how to use. I think we’ve reached the limits of our actual ability to do anything.” Simon sighed, “I think it’s time to let this one go.”

Jay shook his head, grinning from ear to ear. “No, we’re going to do this. We’re going to take her down.”

“I’m not loving this idea.” Rothman replied nervously.

“It’s ok Rothman.” Jay nodded. “I have a plan.”

“God damn it Felger.” Coombs groaned.
Kanan wasn’t sure exactly when his life had entirely ceased to be in his control, but he’d reached the point where the presence of Cath Sith had actually become a comforting enough that when he turned around to speak with the Furling only to find open air, his first reaction was disappointment – followed immediately by panic as he ducked into cover. Cat Sith only seemed to move with that degree of alacrity when there was killing to be done.

It was actually slightly infuriating when he turned to warn Sanya, only to find the dark skinned Tau’ri to already be in the process of aiming his borrowed weapon down the corridor. The Tau’ri carbine barked twice, sending hot lead into the heads of two Stragoth retreating towards the stairs – presumably to resupply from the secondary armory they’d snuck past two levels up.

Kanan grimaced at the purple stains across the wide “21” marking the stairwell. The Stragoth truly smelled foul once you pierced their carapace. Apparently having been sired by the Unspeakable made one literally rotten on the inside. He hissed to Sanya, “Where are we going?”

“This way I think, da? It feels right.” The armed Tau’ri nodded confidently, seemingly choosing a direction at random.

“You’ve been saying that for hours now. And the only thing we’ve found have been more Stragoth.” Kanan griped, keenly aware that Cat Sith was still hiding somewhere. He abruptly got the answer to “where” when they turned around the bend to find the Furling batting at a severed head with one paw, sitting at the center of a circle of purple gore with a pleased look on his face. “That’s seven more to my count Knight.”

“They don’t count if we don’t see each other do them.” The Tau’ri shook his head. “It prevents cheating.”

“I cannot lie, Sir Knight.” Cat Sith purred in amusement. “And you count is not so much lower than mine that you cannot reach me in good measure.”

“But I can, Lord Sidhe.” The Tau’ri warrior chuckled.

“Sir Knight, do you intend to lie?” The Furling stretched out his front paws, stretching his claws along the pavement as he raked the surface. He shredded the concrete as he drew his paws inward, leaving deep claw marks in the stone.
“I would not be robbed of my victory’s meaning by implications of having cheated. If we must witness each other’s kills for them to count, your number will be entirely accurate for both, regardless of how I might bend the truth. I am… aligning the rules to conform with conditions that favor my victory.” The Knight whipped his carbine up to waist height and depressed the trigger, finishing off a half-dead Stragoth that had been raising a pistol with its remaining arm. “You see? That one counted.”

“Such behavior is unbecoming of a Knight.” Cat Sith crooned. “I approve entirely.”

“If you two are done with your competitive murdering, I would very much like to return to aimlessly wandering the mountain full of nameless horrors from before the fall of the Pantheon.” Ban spoke, rolling their shared eyes at Kanan’s frustration.

“Now is not the time for you to be making jokes, Ban.” Kanan thought at his host, annoyed at the man’s interruption in a way that immediately made him ashamed for having thought it. He had been railroading the course of their body without consulting his host for most of the day.

Ban didn’t mind really, and Kanan knew it, mostly because Ban rarely felt it was either necessary or appropriate to interfere with an actual combat situation. But every once in a while, the man’s odd sense of humor bubbled up at the most inappropriate times.

“Dear demon, we’re not done until there aren’t any creatures left to murder. I would have thought that was obvious.” Cat Sith purred, bounding forward to disappear into the shadows once more.

The jovial Tau’ri clapped Kanan on the back with a friendly pat that almost knocked Kanan over, “That is a remarkably horrifying animal. I think, perhaps, under different circumstances he would very gladly be trying to kill us.”

“You don’t say.” Kanan sighed, falling into step behind the Tau’ri warrior. His eyes, once again, strayed to the scabbard on the man’s belt and the enchanted blade he knew was within it. Given the momentary lull in competitive murder, he finally asked the question that had been burning on the tip of his tongue since they’d been in Doctor Jackson’s office. “Sanya… what is that sword?”

“Esperacchius? It is my blade.” He ejected the now empty magazine on his weapon, pursing his lips in annoyance before inserting a replacement.
“Well… obviously. But what is special about that blade? Why does the Furling treat you as he does?” Kanan licked his lips nervously. “Why does the nightmare turn to you to destroy the Stragoth.”

Sanya arched an eyebrow. “I am one of the Three Knights of the Cross. We carry blades that have been blessed by the Pope, and God himself – if you believe in such things – to wield weapons imbued with nails from the crucifixion.”

Kanan blinked in surprise. There weren’t many of the pantheon who’d managed to evade Mab’s wrath in the Terms, and fewer still who felt the sort to leave behind weapons of power on the First World by choice. “Which god and the crucifixion of whom precisely?”

Sanya actually stopped walking and turned around to Kanan. “Do you not know of Christianity?”

“I’m vaguely aware that it’s one of the more popular cults on this world,” Kanan shrugged. “But neither my people nor the Goa’uld have lived on Earth for two millennia.”

“Wait… you’re an alien?” The man all but shouted. “As in space ships, lasers, and teleportation – alien?”

“Yes…” Kanan replied, not entirely sure what to do in this situation. Given the man’s willingness to slay the Stragoth without even questioning it, he’d just assumed that the man was already aware of the greater galaxy. But, given the array of predatory megafauna on the First World, perhaps that was just how people born on the first world reacted to invaders. Kill it first, find out why it showed up later. “As are the Stragoth.”

“Aliens.” The man repeated the word, rolling it around on his tongue – a deeply satisfied look on his face as he smiled. “Da, that does make much more sense. Technologically advanced aliens. It resolves many of the irregularities in how these creatures manifest themselves.” He frowned for a second. “I should probably keep this one from Michael… Shiro would understand but I don’t think he would take it well. He does so value the opinions of the creatures - these aliens.”

“Michael?” Kanan queried.

“A friend from work.” Sanya waved his question away as they approached the entrance of the gymnasium, grabbing Kana by his shirt-front and tossing him out of the line of fire as bullets ripped down the corridor. Sanya poked his nose out from the corner for only a second, pulling back as
another salvo tried to end him.

“More Stragoth?” Kanan asked as the incoming fire continued unabated.

“I think not.” Replied the Tau’ri warrior. “They don’t feel right. The Stragoth put me on edge. I think, perhaps, these are just scared humans.”

“Well I’d get them to stop shooting.” Kanan looked at every shadow around them nervously. “If they keep doing that the Furling will interpret it as freedom to act. And unless I remember incorrectly, you never specified that you were competing for Stragoth kills.”

Sanya’s lip curled in disgust briefly before he poked his head around the corner between salvoes to shout. “Stop – we are not your enemies. We’re not bug people.”

“Bullshit.” An angry man’s voice replied. “How can I know that? These damn things can look like anyone who works here.”

“Do you have an overabundance of Black Russians working on base with whom I might be mistaken?” Sanya queried.

There was a brief silence as the man seemed to consider that statement. “They might have taken you from the stockade.”

“These things are capable of crossing the void of space to snatch bodies, but they are dumb enough to break someone out of a military jail in a base that does not exist, clone him, arm his copy, and sent his doppleganger to speak with people who have no possible reason to trust him in the even that it actually even is him?” Sanya whistled. “Da, they are criminal masterminds without compare.”

“Fuck off Ivan! Even if you’re just an escaped prisoner, what possible reason do I have to believe you? A Russian Spy isn’t getting by me.” The balding man shouted out from the gym door, shoving his glasses up his nose as he did so.

“I don’t suppose that a Tok’ra’s vote of approval will factor into this in any way?” Kanan queried.
“General Carter? Is that you?” The man asked eagerly.

“What? No… no, it’s Kanan.” Replied the Tok’ra.

“Who?” Queried the man.

“Oh for the… there is more than one Tok’ra in the galaxy.” Kanan griped. “I’m the other Tok’ra.”

“The one who came with an entire entourage of Goa’uld.” The man snorted derisively. “Yeah. I’m really going to take you at your word.”

“Sir, if I were a Goa’uld, why would this be my plan? What is my possible end goal? What could I hope to gain wandering around a facility that hates me, with an ally who can’t legally be here?”

Kanan’s metallic rumble echoed across to the gymnasium. “I know the Goa’uld are needlessly evil, but they always want to get something. What do I get out of this? Why wouldn’t I have jumped into another host and gotten the hell out of this nightmare? Do the Goa’uld strike you as the type to stay in a battle that is not theirs to fight?”

There was another long pause as Kanan caught the whispered mumbles between the man who’d been speaking and another Tau’ri in the room. When the man replied again, it was with a sigh of relief in his voice. “Ok, I’m going to trust you. Come towards us - slowly. And leave your weapons outside.”

“Nyet, I will not do this.” Replied the Russian man as the echoing screams of crustaceans and echos of gunfire rumbled from above and below. “I will not disarm myself. Not with these creatures everywhere. Would you leave yourself helpless if you were in my position?”

The man swore and replied. “Fine, you know what, just… get in here before I change my mind.”

The man was a bespectacled Tau’ri in a blue jumpsuit, his stitched name plate identifying him as “Norman Davis.” Kanan actually recognized the man from the room overlooking the stargate, it had been he who’d declared the status of the gate’s chevrons over the loudspeaker as one of the Tau’ri combat teams departed the planet. The man frankly looked like hell. Kanan doubted that he’d slept in at least a day, and the three Tau’ri warriors with him didn’t look much better. Their hands shook from adrenaline, and judging by the piles of purple blooded bodies in the hall, they’d had a hell of a time protecting their holdfast.
It was frankly a horrible position from a tactical standpoint, there were too many potential avenues of attack and only one point of retreat for the defenders, but moving to another position was obviously unviable. There was no way for them to move - not without abandoning the people they were protecting. Kanan winced as he realized that they’d managed to find the recently liberated former slaves of the Lord Warden.

Slaves who all stopped huddling in family clusters upon seeing Kanan, throwing themselves to his feet and begging him for forgiveness for having walked from their god’s light. They prostrated themselves before him, to forswear all other gods if just “The great Demon Xin” would protect them from this terror.

Egeria’s blood - they actually thought that Kanan was there to punish their wickedness. And why wouldn’t they? The Lord Warden had publicly declared the Tok’ra to be his ally and confidant.

“Old friends?” Queried Sonya as a woman tried to actually sell her infant son to “the demon Xin” if he would save the rest of her family.

“It’s not what it looks like.” Kanan insisted as a young woman ripped open her shirtfront and tried to place Kanan’s hand upon her chest. He pulled back his hand as though he’d been scalded and spoke placatingly in the Goa’uld language. He help up his palm in an open gesture of placation and the crowl flinched back as though he’d threatened them with a Kara’kesh. “Stop! Stop - I am not here to punish you. I am owned no tithe of flesh or souls. Calm yourselves.”

“You put that hand down right now or you get a new hole in your head.” Spoke the blue-jumpsuited man as he raised his rifle.

“I’m unarmed!” Kanan dropped his hand, reverting to English. “They’re just scared. They think I can do magic, so they’re over… is that a healing device?” Kanan stopped talking as a little boy of about ten walked up to him and unwrapped a cloth bundle, showing him the hand-held medical tool of the Goa’uld. He blinked in confusion as he addressed the child. “Where did you get a healing device.”

The boy’s father looked caught between horror that the child had it and blind panic that the boy was revealing this to Kanan as the child addressed him with substantially less fear than Kanan would have expected from a Goa’uld slave. “The Lord Warden said we were equals. He had the ritual to mark us that way… so when the dragons came and started killing people I grabbed this because I wanted to try and heal people. I’d hoped that he might let me help my brother. The grey man healed him first, but he let me keep it when dad told us we were coming here. I’m sorry. I didn’t know it would cause this. I didn’t know the Warden would be mad.”
Kanan’s heart broke and he spoke in curt English. “I’m going to explain to this child that he isn’t responsible for dooming this base. The child is holding a healing device. It has no potential offensive applications. Please don’t shoot me.”

The Stargate Airman nodded once, “Yeah… ok.”

Kanan hadn’t even waited for the Airman to stop speaking before he’d kneeled in front of the child so that he could be eye to eye with him. “Child… you didn’t cause this. The Warden didn’t do this because he was angry at you.”

“Are… are you sure.” The child whispered nervously. “I told the Grey man that I thought Heka was a bad man. I like the Warden, but he used to be bad. Dad told me that he can hear when people say things like that, and that bad things happen to them.”

“Child the Goa’uld are evil, but they aren’t omnipotent.” Kanan reached out and took the healing device. “And the Warden can’t touch you here. I promise that you will be safe. You all have my word.”

Kanan put the device over his hand and looked at them, as he made it glow - healing a cut on the boy’s cheek. “You will be safe.”

“You’re not too bad with kids Orko.” Sanya clapped him on the shoulder.

“Orko?” The man in the blue jumpsuit queried.

“Glowing eyes and magic.” Replied the black man. “I am big man with sword like He-Man. It is thematic, you understand Mr. Davis.”

“Master Sergeant, not “Mister.” Corrected the Tau’ri, his last worries about Kanan being a Goa’uld seemingly placated by Kanan’s kind treatment of the child. “And I go by Walter.”

“Walter, da.” He replied, sounding more like “vaulter” as he said it. “Well Walter, I am feeling like we will soon be needed by the big ring. I am certain of it, in fact.”
“I’m not abandoning these people.” Walter replied instantly. “And I’m not letting you go. We have enough to deal with without letting the two of you travel freely.”

“I believe we have reached the limits of productivity to which we might indulge this line of inquiry.” Purred the invisible furling predator as the air rippled around Kanan and Sanya, shadows subsuming them as Walter’s eyes bulged in shock. The Tau’ri warrior advanced on where the two men had been standing, waving his hand through the air in confusion as Kanan watched him from a corridor of darkness that seemed to be sandwiched just on the wall of the gymnasium and the adjoining room next door.

“That is a very neat trick,” Sanya addressed the furling as it walked down the path of shadow, leading them along the narrow path. “One wonders why we fought our way through so much of the base if this were an option.”

“To kill the Stragoth, of course.” Replied Cat Sith, as though it were a contemptuously foolish question to even ask. “But given that the one who barred my use of the Nevernever has reached us, I am disinclined to force a confrontation. I am secure in my own safety against it, but I cannot guarantee your own. Especially now that my agents have found it to rectify this situation.”

There was a screeching howl of a hunting beast as he said this, met soon after by the rasping jabbering screech of the ghostly creatures summoned by Cat Sith. Kanan’s blood ran cold, he recognized that hunting roar. He had heard it by the millions in the realm of Ferrovax. Suddenly the interference in Cat Sith’s intended escape made sense. A dragon – it had been a dragon that had interfered with Cat Sith’s magics and prevented him from escaping the mountain’s heart. He could only hope that the spectral monstrosities of Winter were enough to slay the beast and allow his escape.

Kanan smiled as the roar of a hunter became a piteous yelp of pain. At least one thing was going right today. The Slaugh Sidhe were horrific monsters, but at least they were on his side.
Chapter 31

Aisha wiped the sweat from her lip with the back of her hand as she caught her breath behind one of the larger pillars next to the Colonel as they waited for the dragon to burn through the bunker doors blocking them from progressing further past the demons assaulting the Tau’ri fortress. The Stragoth seemed to have realized that they were losing the war of attrition, choosing to pull their forces back to mount a final defense of the Chappa’ai.

So while they’d been able to progress down several levels virtually uncontested by the monsters that had come through the gate, it could only mean that there was a concentrated force of the monsters protecting their only escape route.

She could not fathom, however, why these creatures hadn’t opened a path to the spirit world. They were operating very much as mortals were forced to interact with the world. They were clearly not wholly born of the mortal world, given how her tattoos were able to damage them, but demons were supposedly able to cross between worlds with ease.

Surely they ought to have been able to escape without the use of the Chappa’ai, so why were they defending it so fervently? What did they hope to bring through it that they couldn’t achieve through the twisting paths of the spirit realm?

There were supposedly creatures so malevolent and horrific that they’d been banished from the Lands of Sun and Snow, creatures for whom even touching the land would mean their doom. It was said that even looking upon such a monster would drive a mortal man to madness, but such horrors had been trapped by the gods in times long since forgotten.

Admittedly, Aisha’s knowledge of demonology was not fantastic. Texts dealing with the specific nature and dangers of the diabolic forces in the universe were largely purview of the Scribes rather than the clergy. It was her duty to protect and guide the flock to her Lord’s light, not to know the intimate details of demons and monsters.

She understood ritual magics to a degree, and could manipulate them in the service of her god. All living creatures held some potential for magic even if they were not as blessed as the Hok’tar or Hok’unas, and the ritual magics bound to her flesh allowed her act in the service of her deity.

Admittedly, before today, it had been purely a theoretical capacity. She had been educated in ritual magic since the age of eight, but hadn’t ever actually been given cause to use it prior to her time on the first world. It was supremely edifying to see the rituals operating for their intended purpose. Generations of priestesses before her had been forced to trust in faith alone to verify the merit of their order.

There had even been some rumbles of dissent and dissatisfaction following the death of Ra and the defiance of the Shol’va Teal’c. Even the faithful were beginning to doubt in the divinity of their lord
and master Heka. Fewer Jaffa were seeking entrance into the inner circle of those bound in blood to their god Heka, fewer families were giving over their children to the clergy. There was a cancer of doubt on Nekheb. A faithlessness born of the acts of unworthy gods.

But now, thanks to the Lord Warden’s divine actions, even the faithless could see the truth of their god’s might. Even the least among his clergy had been blessed by his touch as she brought his faith to the First World. Aisha licked her lips and accepted the canteen handed to her by the Colonel as he continued to speak to her in the language of the First World. There was a glib comfort in how he addressed her that was convivial even through the language barrier.

He seemed to be facing the demonic horrors of ages long past with the sort of annoyed frustration she would have mostly associated with delayed housewives having difficulty getting to the bakery early enough to get bread fresh from the oven.

He, and the man she knew as Siler were both angry at the intrusion into their homeland, but there was a glibness to their treatment of the demonic horrors they faced and the presence of a Draconic warrior that continued to astonish her. They were fighting demons with weapons forged by mortal hands. Their holy man traveled with them, giving last rites to the dying, but otherwise providing little magic from his god in their service. It was as though the Tau’ri were determined to match the fervor of the gods through sheer force of will.

More curious still, they didn’t seem to be doing a half-bad job of it. Heaven help the galaxy if these men were to be elevated to the ranks of the Jaffa, they would become an unstoppable army. The Colonel by himself was a lethal weapon worthy of every one of the forbidden tales she’d learned of the Tau’ri. Were she not already married to the Lord Warden, as all Priestesses were, Aisha would have found the Colonel to be a more than adequate match. The man had tamed a dragon.

She drank deeply from the canteen and passed it to one of the younger Tau’ri, a boy who might have been mistaken for one of Yu’s servants. He took it from her eagerly, nodding in thanks as he made eye contact with her to speak the Tau’ri words of thanks.

Aisha was especially fond of the boy, he seemed scrupulously disinterested in her state of disrobe and was one of the few young Tau’ri she’d met capable of stringing together a sentence in the presence of a disrobed female. He seemed a likely candidate for conversion when this all calmed down.

Her ears perked up when she realized that he was speaking in a derivative tongue of Yu’s people. He was swearing vitriologically, cursing their current situation, but he was speaking a language she at least partially understood. More pressingly, she could speak it with at least some degree of competence. Education in the major languages of any territory that Heka had hoped to conquer was compulsory for the clergy, given the immediate need for religious education of conquered populations.

“I do not suspect that is anatomically possible.” Aisha interrupted the boy’s irritated mutterings as she
took back the canteen from him. “At least not without a degree of flexibility I have yet to witness in person.”

“You speak Chinese?” The boy asked excitedly before speaking animatedly in the Tau’ri tongue to the Colonel – apparently repeating the fact that he could operate as interlocutor between them judging by the Colonel’s relieved sigh and somewhat sarcastic interjection. They were robbed of the opportunity to explore their newfound ability to communicate, however, as a new set of horrors unleashed themselves upon the Tau’ri war party.

The Dragon screamed in unexpected pain as two figures phased through the floor and attacked it from seemingly nowhere. Horrible spectral beings made from rotten flesh and frost that could only vaguely be described as human, the monsters seemed pathologically determined to slay the dragon.

The black scaled creature was a hearty beast, it’s ensorcelled flesh healing nearly as fast as the jagged ice talons tipping the spectral soldier’s fingers could rip into it as they fed gory bits of dragon flesh into their gaping maws.

The weapons of the Tau’ri seemed to disrupt the creatures, though not doing them any sort of lasting damage. The spectral horrors rippled as projectiles passed through them. Their flesh melted and moved out of the way of the lightning fast iron, never letting the substance touch them. Dragon fire proved significantly more potent, forcing the spirits to scatter to avoid it.

The wingless whelp was limited in her ability to use that fire to do more than harry the spirits, however, given the densely packed Tau’ri warriors within the corridor. Dragon fire would immolate mortal men just as surely as the spectral horrors.

The horrors gleefully took advantage of this, maiming Tau’ri warriors. They seemed to be specifically trying to inflict pain rather than actually slay their opponents, choosing crippling pain over killing blows wherever practical. When she reached out to grab the spectral horror as its talons raked down towards her bare belly, she was fully prepared for the creature’s arms to phase through her hands as they had done on the three victims before her.

It came as a pleasant surprise when not only was she able to grasp the creature’s arm, but doing so caused black smoke to come from the beast’s flesh.

The spectral horror kicked her hard, freeing itself and flying across the room from her as inky-black smoke poured from open wounds where her hands had grasped its arms. The specter hissed in confusion, slashing across a woman’s throat to spray her blood over his wounds, healing them with her dying blood.

The colonel pulled a flare from his combat webbing, lighting it before driving the burning rod into eye of a spectral horror. It stabbed into the rotting skull of the spectral horror, burning through the back of the cancerous flesh of the horror and spraying black smoke from it’s ruptured skull.
The dragon slashed across the horror with razor-sharp talons, shattering the thick layer of ice along the horror’s back as Siler drove an iron blade into the creature’s midsection. The creature phased into smoke as the iron weapon touched it, shimmering to the other end of the room as the second spectral horror grabbed Siler by the leg – flinging the warrior against a wall.

The veteran slammed hard against the wall. His arm bent angrily on impact, red staining his shirt as an obvious break jutted up through his clothing. The creature went for the kill, only to hiss and fly back as Aisha interposed herself between the spectral horror and Siler. Her eyes narrowed at the creature as it stopped inches from her grasp, hissing furiously as it turned to smoke to avoid the snicker-snack of the dragon’s jaws.

They did want to touch her… they probably couldn’t touch her, much like the other demons. She looked over at the Tau’ri holy man, just to be sure, and realized that they were avoiding the other holy man with equal fervor. They stayed far away from the dangling chain hanging from the man’s fist as he chanted holy words. The demons they’d fought so far had been creatures of flesh and bone.

These creatures, however, were beasts of spirit. Ghosts, they had to be ghosts! Angry spirits brought by the diabolic nature of what was transpiring that had been whipped into a frenzy by chaos of battle and unable to find their way into the afterlife. These were not creatures to be defeated by force and guile, they were lost souls who needed spiritual aid.

Aishia took a blade from a dead Tau’ri warrior and sliced her palm, smearing her own hearts blood on the ground to form a circle as she sat upon the floor and did something she’d done a thousand times before. Aisha started to pray.

The spectral horrors lost their minds. The shimmered and howled, attacking the perimeter of her circle, but as beings of the spirit realms they could not cross the threshold of her circle. They flung the eviscerated corpses of Tau’ri at in fury as the danced around the dragon, slicing at its flanks as they shimmered around the corridor. Whatever spells bound them to the mortal realms were forcing them to attack the dragon even as they clearly wished to flee Aisha’s chanting.

The Tau’ri holy man caught on quite quickly to Aisha’s exorcism, chanting from his own holy book with a distinctly competitive furor. The spectral beings slashed in desperation at the dragon as Aisha neared the end of her prayer, compelled to slay the dragon before they were forced from this plane of reality.

The Dragon’s ability to heal was not infinite, and she was struggling to keep the specters away from her vital areas as Aisha felt a shudder of power go through her – a divine touch that she’d never felt before. In a moment of absolute clarity, she felt herself become one with the god to which she was praying. Tears ran down her face beyond her ability to understand or control as her vision blurred.
Aisha had believed in the divinity of the Lord Warden, as she had believed in Heka before him, but her prayers had never been answered so immediately and viscerally before. Her eyes glazed over as a vision overtook her and she felt herself leaving her body.

She was aware of herself as her soul seemed to leave her mortal form, hovering above the scene of the spectral monsters attacking the dragon as though she were watching a moment frozen in time from a holographic display.

She looked up to see the most beautiful woman she could possibly imagine. A perfectly feminine vision of human perfection moving through a sea of endless starlight. The woman’s toga fluttered as she sailed through the stars on glowing wings.

Aisha continued to cry as the woman reached down to cup her face, kissing Aisha’s forehead and whispering a song into Asiha’s ear. It was a lilting tune, soft and pure, as the woman’s name echoed endlessly through the void of stars.

Aisha’s soul returned to her form in an instant, and she invoked power in the name of the divine being her god had sent to protect her divine mandate. “Lash compels thee to leave.”

Her flesh burned as she spoke the words, white hot agony overpowering her rational mind as she was blinded by the purity and brilliance of the white glow that shone from her ritual markings. She screamed as the tattoos covering her body shifted and moved beneath her skin, the naquadah laced ink forcing itself into entirely new patterns. Pain beyond pain purified her as she felt the sulfurous divinity overpowering the ritual magics she’d been previously blessed with.

The light impacted with the spirits like the cleansing fire of an atomic warhead, their flesh ripping away from them in an instant as they were torn apart by the tidal forces of her pure faith. They left shimmering outlines of soot against the walls behind them, their bodies vaporized by the immediate wave of pure power she had invoked. The blue specters of ice that had been binding animating the corpses dissolved into ectoplasm as their bodies rendered into ash – banished to whatever afterlife would take them.

She continued to see visions as the agony overcame her. She saw her lord standing victorious over the slain form of an unworthy god in a place of great evil. But not her lord as she’d known him – her lord ascended.

She looked into his eyes and saw eternity, the eternity that he would one-day rule. Her body confused with the simple ecstasy of normalcy as the pain left her and she found herself once again able to stand. Her legs wobbled like a newborn calf as the Tau’ri Colonel helped her up from the ground. Her eyes bulged as she realized that she was now able to understand him as he spoke to her.
“Could you at least do one thing that I can write up in a report without sounding totally off my rocker?” The Colonel snorted. “I appreciate the chutzpah, but I’m going to be peeing in a cup every day for the rest of my life.”

“Is that a Tau’ri religious rite?” Aisha asked, the Tau’ri words flowing easily from her lips. Her forehead tingled where the being had kissed her and she realized that giving her the power to banish the specters had not been the only favor that the Lord Warden’s messenger had graced her with.

There was a brief moment of silence before the Tau’ri Colonel spoke in deadpan irritation, his eye twitching in pain as he addressed the priestess. “You speak English?”

“I… I just learned it.” Aisha offered somewhat weakly, not entirely sure how to express the magnitude of the religious experience she’d just gone through. She didn’t want him to believe that she’d been pretending not to speak their language but couldn’t think of any plausible explanation for her sudden fluency other than being a quick study. “I didn’t speak it when I came here.”

“And the Chinese?” The Colonel queried in irritation. “You just picked that up on the go as well?”

“What?” Aisha blinked in confusion. “The dominion of Lord Yu is the single largest monocultural population in the galaxy. Why wouldn’t I speak the primary language of the galaxy’s largest culture?”

“Ask a stupid question…” The Colonel winced, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do I want to know what those things were?”

“Ghosts, obviously.” Aisha nodded to the Tau’ri holy man. “Your clergyman and I banished them.”

The Colonel rolled his eyes skyward, glaring at the ceiling. “Of course, you did – why wouldn’t we add exorcism to the list of things that can’t possibly be happening today.”

“The Lord’s Prayer did seem to harm those creatures.” Interjected the Tau’ri clergyman as he looked at Aisha’s altered scheme of tattoos appraisingly. His brow rose in curiosity at the new patterns along her body, “I recognize those symbols. Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, heck there are even some Gnostic sigils… those… those are bible verses!”

Aisha looked down at the patterns along her body. The familiar patterns of hieroglyphs were gone,
her still angry and irritated flesh was now marked with intricate symbols and sigils that were entirely alien to her, all of which had been structured around an elaborate pentagram sitting within a circle on her belly beneath her breasts.

She touched her forehead with her fingers, somewhat fearfully, before lowering her hand and examining its back. Her hands were now marked with Ankhs wrapped with serpents – though curiously not of the Goa’uld variety.

“Do… do you know how to read them?” Aisha asked hopefully.

“Some… yes.” The holy man nodded. “But I don’t know these verses, I’ve never seen them before.”

“She gave them to me.” Aisha was still crying, and quite sure she wouldn’t be able to stop for a while yet. “The Angel gave them to me.”

“Lord Almighty.” The holy man spoke in reverent tones as the Colonel gnashed his teeth, petting the dragon’s head as it nuzzled against his chest – purring softly. The Colonel did not elect to continue participating in the spirited discussion of Aisha’s experience with the holy messenger of her god that struck up between her and the Holy man, extricating himself from the two of them to go back to protecting the dragon as she melted through the bunker doors.

She did catch the words “sectioned” and “impossible” as he readied himself for their assault upon the demonic hordes.

Aisha felt her lord’s blessing coursing through her as the dragon’s fire heated the door, convinced now more than ever of their inevitable victory. She did not yet know her Lord’s exact purpose for her, but it was guaranteed that she had earned her Lord’s favor more than any other who served in his name.

She was the chosen of Lash’s will, and would serve the Lady’s glory in the service of the Lord Warden Almighty.
Robert Kinsey prided himself on being a fair and balanced man, his campaigns had been run on a platform of fighting government waste and ensuring appropriate oversight. Robert hated war. The very idea that the American government would unilaterally involve itself in military action without running that action through the appropriate congressional approvals was offensive to him through every fiber of his being. He’d lost far too many of his friends to a pointless and unwinnable war.

He had been lucky enough to avoid getting drafted during Vietnam, but only just barely. He joined college when he was told that college students wouldn’t be drafted. He got married when he was told that it was married men who wouldn’t be drafted. He fathered his first child when he found out that only couples with children wouldn’t get drafted. There were some who would consider him a coward for not having chosen to fight, but Robert believed that there was almost always a non-violent solution to any given problem if one had the fortitude and the faith to seek it out.

So when he’d been selected for the Senate Appropriations Committee and noticed a quite substantial sum disappearing into a DoD black site, he’d known that he wouldn’t be able to turn a blind eye to it. It was potentially political suicide for him to investigate it to the degree that he’d forced the issue. Rocking the boat was largely accepted when the President was from an opposing party, but strongly frowned upon when a Senator started raising allegations of inappropriate use of the military against a fellow Democrat. Robert was seasoned enough, however, to know the right people at the right time to eventually discover the truth.

His hardline stance against organized crime had earned him enough support from both the Republican opposition and his own party that he’d been able to withstand the President’s attempts to sweep project Bluebook under the rug. He’d received several pointed threats, one of which he was reasonably certain had actually been orchestrated by the Marcone crime syndicate, but he refused let the corruption of the military industrial complex intimidate him from doing what was right. The President had eventually caved to his demands, not out of any sense of decency or loyalty, but out of sheer necessity.

The president’s indiscretions with an intern had become a matter of public record, and he wouldn’t be able to survive the coming impeachment hearings without the support of Kinsey’s voting bloc. Given the already politically tenuous situation of the Democratic party, Kinsey had immediately and unambiguously demanded the shutdown of the program once the reality of it had been revealed to him.

The President had put the entire planet in danger by authorizing an unconstitutional war against an extraterrestrial menace they couldn’t even understand, let alone conquer. The fallout of having dated an intern would be nothing in comparison to that revelation. If knowledge of the Stargate program became public, it would have effectively meant the death of the Democratic party’s political power after a scandal that would have put the Iran Contra incident to shame.
That SG-1 managed to save the planet from the President’s incompetence and justify forcing Robert’s silence within the auspices of preserving National Security in the face of an imminent threat did not make the Stargate program any less of an illegal and immoral use of American Military power.

There were young men and women being sent to die in some godforsaken scrap of the galaxy as part of a war than never should have been started to begin with. Robert didn’t even have the legal authority to bring it up in an open session without being tried for treason – assuming he wasn’t just disappeared for daring to air the President’s dirty laundry.

If not for a quite substantial political backing and the services of the NID Robert was convinced someone would likely have killed him already. There were more than a few criminal syndicates and government groups that might as well be criminal syndicates who’d lost, and would continue to lose, power and influence thanks to Robert’s work.

Earth was in danger. That wasn’t in question. And while Robert had hoped that shutting down the gate would be sufficient protection to discourage the Goa’uld from attacking Earth, it was apparent that his initial conclusion had been erroneous. And as much as he now recognized the necessity of operating the Stargate, the gate needed to be taken from the military.

Hammond’s people meant well, but they were a military organization that approached problems with military solutions. Negotiation would be subordinated by conquest and violence simply by virtue of the fact that members of the military were trained to end solutions through violence. That wasn’t a condemnation of the military, it was just a recognition of their purpose. They were going to antagonize and attack because that was the way that militaries solved problems.

They were currently trying to resolve a global problem, no an intergalactic problem, using only the resources of the United States government and the mindset of the United States Airforce. This wasn’t an American issue. This was a human problem.

It was unfortunate that Robert’s introduction to the Airmen of the SGC had been under the unfortunate circumstances the President had forced him into. General Hammond’s people were quite remarkable, but they were dealing with elements so far beyond the scope of any reasonable degree of control given the secrecy of their program.

The Stargate needed to be studied and utilized by the scientific community at large, not just secreted in some corner of the darkest parts of the government’s black ops. Some of the worst failings of the SGC could have been resolved by a basic obedience to simple CDC procedures or biological containment protocols that, while alien to the Airforce, would have been pure common sense if
they’d been able to allow NASA free reign over the Stargate.

In an ideal world America would have already reached out to their allies and pooled their resources. For that matter, they should have started sharing information with the Chinese or the Russians. It was illogical not to make them aware of the imminent threat to human survival. The petty rivalries of nations and borders only benefitted the irrational sense of nationalist jingoism that allowed for the mess that was the SGC in the first place. Cold War era logic would doom Earth if they allowed it to hamstring the world powers from facing the Goa’uld.

He would not allow the religious fervor with which some Americans would doggedly defend any actions taken by the military, no matter how illegal, to cloud his own judgement. He was a proud American, but he was a god-fearing man. All men were equal in the kingdom of heaven, and he would not allow nationalism to overpower the Truth of the Lord. Robert did what he could to correct the disastrous course taken by the President, to the limits of what his political capitol would allow, but he was rarely given things on platter as he had been given them today.

It was unclear exactly what was going wrong at the SGC, but it was bad enough that Colonel O’Neill had electively chosen to involve the NID to remove the threat. That was all the leverage that Kinsey would need to force the President to allow the NID to insert personnel into whatever remained of the SGC once the dust settled. The conclusion of the impeachment hearings and the continuing Election Cycle meant that the Democrats couldn’t afford to lose Kinsey and the other conservatives within the party. He took some comfort in knowing that the Vice President, and current Democratic Candidate, was amenable to the idea of correcting the oversight issues for the SGC.

That assumed, of course, that the SGC hadn’t doomed the planet already. Judging by the state of NORAD at the moment, that felt like anything but a guarantee, Robert mused as he poured two generous helpings of brandy into crystal glasses and handed one to General Jacob Carter. The man looked battered to hell twice over, and didn’t turn down the alcohol when it was offered to him.

They were sitting in Robert’s office in his penthouse facility in the River North part of Chicago. It wasn’t “his” technically, it was owned by the NID, but he was able to use it on a theoretically indefinite basis. Generally speaking, it just served as a convenient location for secure conversations. The NID owned the three levels below the Penthouse and the had gotten the upper level’s back offices properly certified to conduct classified briefings and connect to the enclaved networks used by the DoD to transmit protected information. Given the current FPCON Delta, it had been the closest location to which he could safely transport an asset as important as General Carter.

It was also the only place that he could be absolutely certain every gun monitoring the Tok’ra was held by NID personnel. Robert believed the Tok’ra’s claim that they were different from the Goa’uld, but he didn’t trust in it unconditionally. He was uncomfortable with the idea of General Carter’s mental union with the alien to begin with. The General knew too many military secrets of
the United States and its allies, and presumably so now did the Tok’ra. Until he could be certain that Earth wasn’t being conquered by the Tok’ra, he preferred to keep General Carter in line of sight.

That was no reason not to be civil about it, however. “Are you comfortable General? Or am I supposed to refer to you as Selmak now?”

“Both host and Symbiote are in partnership,” Replied the alien within General Carter’s body. “It is customary to address us as distinct beings based off of context rather than as a single being.”

“There’s two of us.” Joked the General as he held up the glass in a toast. “And both of us aren’t thrilled about you keeping us here. We need to get back to the SGC.”

“All travel to the Cheyanne Complex has been put on hold by order of the President, General. I couldn’t take you there even if I wanted to. There are orders to shoot anything trying to break quarantine.” Senator Kinsey sat down in the chair opposite General Carter, picking up the remote and turning on the news. The news had already picked up the story, or rather the cover story currently being used to keep the situation under wraps.

The “truth” being reported to the news outlets was that there had been a major leak of tetrachloroethylene in NORAD, resulting in an active shooter situation. The base had been evacuated but one or more personnel were currently reacting violently to their vivid hallucinations. Assuming that aliens didn’t start invading Colorado Springs, it would probably serve as a plausible cover story for the inevitable deaths.

Kinsey’s eye twitched at the idea of more American service members dying in secret to protect the President’s image. More secrets, more lies, and all in the service of an unconstitutional war. “You may not believe me General, but I have nothing but respect for what you and the SGC do.”

“I’m sure the SGC felt all the relevant respect when you tried to get them shut down.” General Carter replied, wincing as he moved in his chair-agitating what the NID medic insisted were cracked ribs requiring treatment. The General had waved off the medic’s concerns, insisting the Selmak was more than capable of resolving the issue.

“General, we were spending billions of taxpayer dollars on a war that was – is – being hidden from the American Taxpayer. I won’t apologize for fighting that.” Kinsey flipped from one news channel to the next, this time getting a view from a helicopter as it tried to approach the base only to get chased away by military helicopters for approaching USAF airspace. “That doesn’t mean that I don’t appreciate how remarkable your daughter’s achievements truly are.”
The channel flickered as an image began to superimpose itself over the channel briefly. Kinsey thought it was an oddity of the feed from the chopper at first, and flipped to another channel. But every single channel he flipped to started to get more and more of the flickering interference.

“Did you cheap out on the cable as well?” Queried the General as a voice started to come from the television, a garbled mess of sound a first before Kinsey became convinced it was a man’s voice. There was something causing a disruption on every channel.

“Do you have a radio?” Asked the alien inside of General carter, “One that can transmit?”

“Give him one.” Kinsey pointed to one of the NID security guards by the door. The man passed his radio to the general without comment, pulling the earpiece out without saying a word. Kinsey turned up the volume, trying to make out the words. “Do you think it’s the SGC?”

“I am familiar with the sort of interference, but it is… unusual for it to be used.” Replied the alien as he tinkered with the side of the radio, cracking it open and examining the circuit board. “May I have that remote as well?”

“Oh sure.” Robert reluctantly handed him the remote.

“It’s a Goa’uld video link, I suspect.” Selmak replied. “But it would not be read properly by your devices. It’s not a binary signal. It would appear to be interference, static and noise rather than a specific signal.”

He cracked open the remote and started pulling out components one by one. General Carter looked up from Selmak’s continuing work. “Do you have a soldering iron around here somewhere?”

Robert made eye contact with his guards and they departed without him needing to explicitly make the request. They would bring tools.

“What are you doing exactly?” Kinsey asked, trying to make out the text scrolling along the bottom of the newsfeed as the reporters continued their coverage of the incident. The channel was apologizing for technical difficulties. This would do little to help with the hysteria.
“Goa’uld communication technology is more advanced than Human technology, but wide band audio is relatively easy to adapt with your more primitive technology. If they’re sending out full spectrum distress transmissions they should be monitoring for any Goa’uld signals – even short-range radio.” The alien replied, apparently satisfied with the parts he’d removed from the remote. “We should be able to contact them.”

“Do we want to contact them?” Robert asked nervously. “What if it’s the Goa’uld?”

“The Goa’uld don’t send open transmissions.” Carter shook his head. “And even if they do, we need to know what they’re saying.”

The NID guard came back with a tool kit that Selmak opened, removing a soldering iron from it and returning to his tinkering with the radio as the unclear image on the TV shimmered and was replaced with three very familiar faces from the SGC’s dossier of known operatives. Their voices were still a garbled mess, but the three SGC scientists were entirely visible on the TV now as their picture flickered in and out of view on the television, broadcasting the image of a Goa’uld cargo-ship cockpit to the entire planet.

“I thought you said that they couldn’t be read by Earth technology?” Robert asked.

“Not unless you’re actually trying to have it show up.” Carter growled in irritation as Selmak’s hand motions became more frenzied. The picture faded out of view as the phrase “Emergency” and “Mayday” made their way through the garbled mess of unclear images.

General Carter practically smashed the handset in his frenzy to transmit once Selmak finished and the audio link clearly formed. The clear voice of a man speaking in English echoed from it. “This is Dr Felger. We are in need of immediate assistance. I repeat, S.O.S.”

“Felger, get off this channel!” The General shouted into the radio.

“General Carter?” Replied the eager voice of the scientist. “Is that you?”

“Who else would it be?” Jacob replied in annoyance.

“General, we lost the ship. There was a Goa’uld in the brig. She got loose and has control of the ship.” Felger replied. “We’ve got a plan to stop her though.”
“Felger you’re transmitting a wide band transmission.” Carter interjected. “You need to get off this channel immediately. You’re broadcasting live to the entire planet.”

“The entire solar system Sir.” Replied Felger. “It’s part of the plan.”

“What plan?” Carter snarled.

“You’re breaking up Sir. Do you want me to use the rings? Should I bring you up here? I could use help.” Replied Dr Felger. “I think I’ve got a fix on your position.”

“No. Do not do that.” Furiously rebuked the General. “Do not bring me up there.”

“Yes sir… I’ll bring you up.” Replied the eager voice.

“No! Felger, I said don’t. Do not!” The General screamed into the radio as the naquadah rings smashed through the penthouse ceiling from orbit, spiriting both the General and Senator to God alone knew where.
Colonel O’Neill gagged at the stench of level 28, the deepest level of the Cheyenne Mountain complex. A sickly smell of rotting plant matter overpowered him as the dragon-fire melted through the blast doors, exposing an alien landscape beyond. Purple flesh and chiton covered nearly every surface in sight, dangling down from the ceiling and dripping putrefied liquid. His feet slid along the slippery flesh as he breached the entrance along with Emily, just barely keeping from falling to the ground as Siler reached out to offer a steady hand. How the priestess managed to tolerate walking upon the writing mass of fleshy tendrils was beyond him.

Alien bodies were pinned to the walls, crucified forms hanging from long protrusions of calcified bone. Their spit carapaces glowed in the near dark, metallic blood shimmering along their organs as alien bowels mingled with the fleshy material lining every surface.

He’d seen some terrible things before, Saddam’s war crimes in Iraq and the things that the Narco’s did in South America, but this was something entirely different. Near as Jack could tell, these creatures had elected to crucify themselves.

“This place is unholy.” Spoke the goa’uld worshipping priestess in a voice of reverent horror. “Touched by the works of the enemies of the goa’uld.”

“Enemies of the goa’uld isn’t exactly a novel state of business around here.” Jack interjected.

The woman shrugged. “Do you dispute that this is an evil work of evil creatures?”

“No… no I don’t suppose that I do.” He could see dozens of hanging bodies pinned to the wall, only the closest of which appeared to still be alive. The pitiful creature hung from the wall, warbling a sad song as its life’s blood dripped from the protrusions through its hands and feet. Mass suicide by crucifixion and disembowelment was not the battle strategy he’d been expecting.

“Sir… Sir! Look out!” Master Sergeant Siler unleashed a tirade of profanity the Colonel found to be entirely appropriate as one of the tendrils forming a carpet along the floor whipped up and sliced open the remaining creature, grabbing its bowels and feeding them to a priapic mess of chitin topped with a serrated beak.

He shot the wall on reflex when an eye opened and stared at him, mewling at him with a tiny fanged maw. The floor and ceiling rumbled angrily as he did so, writhing in pain. The Colonel’s eyes
widened in horror as the tendrils whipped into action, razor sharp fangs and teeth coming out of them in misshapen amalgams of flesh and bone wrapped in chitin.

He just barely managed to yell out a warning before the opening Emily had made slammed shut, a toothy sphincter of flesh smashing down around an Airman’s body before spewing out acid from porous green flesh. The boy barely had a chance to scream before he split in half as the fangs started to spin – flinging acid and gore in all directions.

There were screams from the army on the other side of the fleshy barrier, the sounds of gunfire and pain accompanied by the squelching sounds of writhing tentacles attacking Airmen. How far had this fleshy creep gotten into the base?

The hall rapidly began to contract inward, flesh constricting down into acidic coils that burned brightly as Emily tried and failed to burn through them. Jack grabbed the Priestess by the hand and fled in the opposite direction yelping in surprise as Emily grabbed him gently in her Jaws and lifted the two of them onto her back, grabbing Siler in a second whip of her jaws.

The crucified Aliens’ eyes glowed red, their disemboweled forms warbling in horrifying unison as he grasped Emily’s neck for dear life. Their songs grew distorted and mocking as they dissolved in the acid, mocking the Colonel as he realized that they were being herded into the gate room.

It was a supposition immediately supported by reality as they breached the gate room to discover the creature at the center of the horrific amalgam of alien bodies. The multi-armed monstrosity screeched through a distended maw, glaring hatefully though four mismatched eyes as it opened and closed its mismatched arms.

It looked more like an elongated centipede of flesh than a proper man, its fellows having melted and been devoured by the seemingly endless tentacles dangling out from the alien’s chitin.

It wasn’t standing on the organic masses like O’Neill and his companions. It was the organic mass. The vitriolic tentacles held the impossible bulk aloft, devouring his compatriots and digesting them into the body that was consuming the base.

It laughed, a shrill and spiteful sound before speaking in a mix of plain English from his great maw and the chittering alien language from the bodies liquifying within his fanged feelers. “You are too late. We have become something greater than what you could ever hope to conquer.”
“I dunno,” Jack replied, hopping down from Emily and looking at the gate-room. “A little bleach, a couple coats of paint, I’m sure it will be back to normal. What do you think Siler?”

“Already planning the working party Sir.” Replied the Master Sergeant as he helped the priestess to the ground. The fleshy writhed and fled her bare feet as she touched the ground.

“The demon cannot defeat the warriors of the First World.” Spoke the Goa’uld priestess defiantly. As she picked up steam in her invective the ground that had been previously fleeing her feet started sizzling and turning char black as the tattoos on her flesh glowed brightly. “They have slain gods more great and terrible than you are ever capable of being, demon. And I walk with the Lady’s blessing. I shall fear you not.”

“Mine!” Emily snarled, flames flickering from her nostrils. What the kid lacked in vocabulary she more than made up in theatrics as energy shimmered around her, sending shivers of power up Jack’s spine. Jack would not have been happy to be on the other side of that saurian glare, but the bulky alien’s misshapen mouth cracked in an ecstatic look of glee.

“You!” The digesting bodies warbled in various tones of confusion, pain, glee, and lament as the massive creature giggled girlishly. “It was you! And you shall be no more.”

The dissolving bodies rushed out from the creature’s tendrils, half dissolved aliens moving their bleeding bodies across the room with surprising grace considering that most of them were missing at least some of their limbs. Jack and Siler backed into the protective circle of light coming from the Priestess’ glowing tattoos as she screamed out prayers like invective, her eyes rolling into the back of her head as she worked herself into a religious fervor.

The already mutilated aliens were little match for automatic weapons, but there were a lot of the zombie bugs. The light from the priestess hurt, and might well kill the creatures, but they didn’t seem overly concerned with individual survival. They crawled and stumbled over their dead compatriots, warble yelling as they tried to kill the humans.

Emily might have done a better job of killing the creatures, but she was somewhat occupied at the moment. The massive alien was wrestling the dragon across the ground, strangling her with two of it’s arms while it slashed at her slides with its remaining arms. She tried to burn him, but wasn’t strong enough or fast enough to do more than singe him as she desperately to immolate him.

Her white-hot flames, bubbled and burned wherever they hit – lighting his carapace like tallow where they touched, but his grip was just too strong for her to get a good angle on him. The monster cackled as Emily’s eyes bulged as she struggled to breathe. “Beautiful whores of Yuggoth, you have
given me all that I could ever hope for.”

Emily howled piteously as bonds of flesh wrapped around her, teeth and bone binding her to the writhing ground as the alien stood over her. The alien warble sang, holding it’s arms aloft as purple lighting dances down from its hands and coruscated over the dragon. Emily wailed in distress, howling “O’Neill” in a piteous appeal to the one who’d promised her safety.

O’Neill crushed alien carapace beneath the butt of his weapon, crushing the acid-weakened alien skull into pulp as he forced his way through the crowd of alien bodies that was coming towards him – pulling the knife from his combat webbing.

He beat, slashed, shot, and stomped his way through them – fighting his way to the child he’d promised to save. Two-ton lizard or not, he’d promised to protect that kid and he’d be damned if he was a liar. Jack didn’t care that the alien was massive. Jack didn’t care that it was probably capable of breaking him in half without a second thought.

This was the thing that had come into his home and killed his people – he wasn’t letting it have even one more.

“Hey ugly!” He shouted at the creature, waiting for it to turn and face him before punctuating the insult with. “Catch!”

Jack wasn’t the best throw in the world. He’d been reluctant to play baseball after Charlie’s death. But in a pinch, he had a halfway-decent fast ball. He wasn’t going to be even remotely good enough to hit the pros but he could hit the broad-side of a barn when he was facing it. So when the massive alien turned to face him and opened its mouth, he was more than capable of throwing the incendiary grenade down the creature’s gullet.

Fire erupted from the alien’s suddenly ruptured throat, white phosphorous reacting violently to its metallic purple blood. It staggered back from the dragon, flinging O’Neill across the room with a back-handed swipe of it’s arm. Jack huffed in shock as he hit the wall, greatful for the cushion of flesh. He would likely have died hitting concrete that hard.

As it was, he was reasonably certain he’d cracked a couple ribs given how hard his body was protesting him standing back up. He tried to push himself to his feet, only for tendrils of flesh to whip up from the ground and bind him to the ground like Emily. He bit the tentacle that was trying to wrap around his neck, digging into it’s putrid meat and breaking the bone at its core. The tendril screeched and let him go, failing in pain.
The creature kicked the priestess out of the gate room, willing the flesh in the hall to slam shut to seal the priestess from his work. It would only delay her – Jack could already see the meat barring her entry cracking and blackening under the strange light of her tattoos – but only he and Siler remained able to act.

Of course, it would be now that Jack ran out of ammunition. He made eye contact with Siler for only a second before realizing that the Master Sergeant was similarly unable to act. Two unarmed Airmen against a monster that wrestled a dragon into submission.

Jack grabbed his gun from where it dropped, joining Siler in unleashing a torrent of bullets on the bleeding alien, only for the thing to stand up and look at them with it’s mismatched eyes and laugh from an entirely new and altogether more unsettling mouth that had formed where the previous one burned away. There was a charred rip of flesh running from the creature’s broken maw, down its throat and to its belly that was growing shark-like rows of teeth even as Jack watched.

“That is just not right.” Jack hissed in disgust. “I’ve seen some disgusting things but you… you are a special kind of awful.”

“You have seen nothing. You know nothing.” The creature’s now sideways mouth moved sinuously, a long pink tongue tipped with a barbed stinger licking it’s bleeding lips from eye to belly. “You are gnats, fools who have not yet realized your insignificance. But you will see, you will know. All too soon, you will know.”

“If this is your species method of teaching, I would like to lodge a formal complain with the PTA.” Jack snarked, hoping to distract the creature long enough for Emily to free herself. He could see hints of her struggling against the bonds placed upon her.

“The Gate.” The creature grinned, it’s eyes focused upon the ring beyond Jack.

“Yeah – there are a whole lot more like it.” Jack waggled his eyebrows. “And you don’t have enough power to use it. So even if I don’t stop you, there is a whole planet of hurt just waiting to come down on you.”

“Not the Ring of Eden. The Gate.” The creature crooned in near ecstasy. “He knows the Gate. He is the Gate. He is the key and the guardian of the Gate. This shall be our first colony and He will guide the way to the Breaking.”
The way that the multitude of eyes rolled in their sockets along the walls, floor, and ceiling did little to diminish the just utter creepiness of that statement as the monstrous alien raised his arms aloft and spoke in the horrible warbling language of his people. An angular, amorphous shape formed above his hands, a jutting glyph that caused Jack sincerely plain to look at directly. He squinted as it glowed with that same purple lighting as the alien had cast from its hands before.

“And now I have bound the thresholds of Sun and Serpent – and lo they are broken.” It growled in utter glee, shattering the symbol in it’s razor-sharp talons. The mountain shook as he did so, the very earth quaking around them in reaction to the waving talons. Jack dropped to his knees as a wave of sensation rocked through him as a sense of loss washed over him.

Something was gone – something important and powerful that he hadn’t even known had been there to begin with. He couldn’t place the feeling exactly – there was a sense of loss as though he were walking through a battlefield. There was the same sense of ruination that one felt in walking through the wreckage of a war-torn building, the shattered memory of families and love that might once have lived in a place having been burned away with bullets and bombs.

And as unsettling as O’Neill found its absence to be, the alien found it to be near orgasmic. His skin moved independently of any logical muscle movements, jiggling the hard chitin covering his important parts. The mountain shook and rumbled in the continuing earthquake and even the face of possibly being buried alive, the creature just laughed.

The creature held out his hand to the Stargate as he sliced a talon through the open air, cutting through the emptiness as though it were a knife along paper. His cut in the open air exposed a scene of floating rocks hovering through space – an inhospitable vision of impossible starscape. “See my victory, O’Neill and weep. For though I leave here, I leave with the knowledge to bring about the end that ought to have been.”

His monologue proved to be somewhat premature as out of the star-flecked impossible landscape came an entire cadre of men and women riding dragons, a cold-blooded cavalry headed by the most beautiful sight Jack could remember in recent memory as Sam Carter and Daniel Jackson barreled through the portal the creature had opened, letting go of the necks of their dragons as the beasts charged the creature in a dog-pile furious talons and fire. They rolled around on the ground as the terrain continued to quake violently.

“You know what – Not the miracle I was hoping for, but I’ll take it.” Jack sighed as the alien struggled to fight off the sudden influx of angry dragons, turning to address his suddenly arrived team-mates. “Making friends, are we?”
“Sir, what is that?” Major Carter queried in disgust, looking around the room at the array of horrors.

“That is a Foothold situation, major… or two Foothold situations if those dragons aren’t friendly.” Jack queried in worry. “They… are they friendly?”

“They’re not trying to kill us.” Interjected Colonel Makepeace. “That’s an improvement from a couple hours ago.”

“Oh… crap, you lost my ship, didn’t you?” Jack groaned.

“Its still there… its just a bit… haunted at the moment.” Daniel replied lamely.

“Haunted.” Jack interjected.

“I’m reasonably certain that its just a post mortem trans dimensional phenomenon of the interphase interactions between conscious thought and the potential relativistic interpolations of colliding alternate realities.” Major Carter interjected. “Given the ease with which neurological stimulus can be used to consciously or sub-consciously manipulate the pockets of subspace within which these dragons reside and store their excess matter when they’re shifting between shapes, it stands to reason that there is some retentive capacity for intellectual transfer through a not entirely materialistic medium for interaction with the real world.”

“Is that still something that I can fix with an old priest and a young priest?” Jack queried.

“I was thinking using a polarized wave to purge the exotic particles allowing the complex trans-dimensional subspace hyper-matter from coalescing.” The Major shrugged. “It’s worth a try anyway.”

“Possessed… talk about a lemon.” Jack sighed, watching with glee as the dragons attacked the alien en masse.

Mountains shuddering motion abruptly stopped, and Jack felt a rush of that same protection he’d felt leaving before as the fleshy barrier blocking the priestess from entry imploded inward, revealing a tall man in smart grey suit followed closely by the Jaffa Warrior Teal’c.

The roiling mess of dragons leapt away from the gored alien as the man walked into the room. He
was suddenly treated to the odd image of dragons shifting into human form and falling to their knees. Oh good – something scary enough to cow an army of dragons.

The gored alien stood and faced the man flexing its talons. “The Gate will open.”

“Your rudeness will cease.” Replied the man as he twisted his hand, telekinetically ripping the alien’s head from his shoulders before the man spat a mote of fire upon the alien’s body. The tiny spark flared upon touching the alien’s flesh, burning the creature to cinders in seconds. He snapped his unbandaged fingers, and in a flash of blinding flame all the damage of battle and invasion was gone. No flesh, no bodies, no bullet holes – it was as though there had never even been a battle to begin with.

“That is a neat trick.” Jack interjected. “I’d love to know how you did it.”

The man froze as Jack spoke, turning to face him in shock as his skin rippled – hinting at the inhuman creature beneath as rage overtook him. His mouth moved soundlessly for a few moments before speaking in a voice of barely controlled contempt. “O’Neill… How many times will I have to kill you before I am finally rid of you?”

“Oh for crying out loud!”
Chapter 34

Simon was not a remotely competent pilot, but he was a very motivated learner in light of the massive alien warship that had risen from the dark side of the moon. The sensor image of the Goa’uld mothership was distorted, the glowing hieroglyphs along its surface seemed to be actively interfering with his image of it as he flew the ship down into the Earth’s atmosphere so that they could effectively use the planet itself as a signal booster.

Simon hadn’t entirely understood Felger’s diatribe on subspace wave forms interacting with radio waves in trans-phase variance – that wasn’t his realm of expertise – but his idea of “get someone to help who isn’t us” resonated with him in a way few of the man’s other plans ever had.

When he’d managed to contact General Carter and his blended Tok’ra symbiote, even though a distorted half-conversation, Simon had nearly cried with relief. They were so far out of their depth on this one that he was convinced they were going to die.

When the warbled “… do that…” had been uttered, they’d already been in the process of getting in place for the exfiltration.

He’d navigated the ship towards the signal as best he was able while Felger activated the subspace locating beacon, apparently there was a way to detect the originating point of direct radio interference of subspace particle. Felger tinkered with the rings as he spoke with the general, modifying them to allow the rapid insertion they’d need to conduct in order to exfiltrate the Tok’ra onto the cargo ship. It was risky.

While Felger assured both Rothman and Simon that there would be no immediate danger to the person being ringed up, the rings themselves would be disabled without re-inserting the green crystal. The very same crystal that would allow Druana to teleport onto the cargo ship at will. But, if it was what the General wanted – they’d do it.

If only to get someone more senior than Felger onboard, they’d do it.

When the rings finally materialized back onto the cargo ship, however, it became readily apparent that something had been lost in translation as General Carter and his Goa’uld symbiote fought each other for control of their shared mouth and lips in order to properly chew out the doctor for his blithering incompetence. A combined 460+ years of military experience in disciplining subordinates as the General seemed determined to straighten his hand with enough force to turn it into a literal blade as he jabbed the flattened blade of his fingers and palm into Felger’s chest with one hand and grabbed him by the nape of his neck with the other. His voice was a rumbling screech of near
incoherent rage as his eye’s blazed like the noon-day sun, “Doctor Felger what is your major malfunction?”

“I uh – what?” Stammered the doctor before he was cut off by the general.

“No – stop talking, you’re done talking. You’re done even so much as thinking. If you don’t shut up right now I’m going to shove my foot up your ass and start wearing you like an autistic flip-flop.” The General’s eye was twitching. “You broadcast on every channel. Not some channels, not military specific communications channels, you broadcast to every channel on the planet.”

“More, it’s part of the…” Felger tried to speak again only to get the knife-hand pointed directly between his eyes, silencing him again.

“What part of ‘no more talking’ was unclear to you, now stop using air that this ship’s oxygen reclamation worked harder to produce than you wasted on creating long term thoughts and listen to me.” The Tok’ra snarled. “Because not only have you managed to successfully abduct a US General and a sitting Senator against their will, you’ve endangered the entire Stargate programs secrecy and for what? If the next words out of your mouth don’t explain to me in five words or less why I shouldn’t save the US government the trouble of putting you on trial and just shoot you where you stand, I am going toal personally ensure that General Hammond fires you for being more jacked up than a left-handed football bat.”

“Uh… I… Uh…” Felger babbled, to Simon’s immense amusement.

“Whole words Felger.” The General snarled.

“A Gou’uld stole the mothership!” Felger yelped, looking around for support from his fellow scientists. “That… that was five words, right?”

The General relaxed his grip on Felger, his voice reverting from the Goa’uld reverberation to a normal angry tone. “What?”

“The mothership had a Goa’uld hidden on it. She retook the ship, chased off the SG-teams, and took us hostage. We escaped, just barely, but she’s insane even by Goa’uld standards.” Felger swallowed nervously.
General Carter closed his eyes and counted back from ten, clearly resisting the urge to throttle the man. “Ok, we just need to ring back to Colorado and we can get help from the SGC before this goes too far.”

“We can’t.” Felger flinched at the General’s expression. “I mean physically we can’t. We could only use the rings once without the primary control crystal. They’re burned out.”

“We’re trapped on this thing with a Goa’uld warship looking for us.” Interjected the other man, an older man with grey hair and a murderous expression on his face. “Why in God’s name didn’t you just teleport to Colorado and use a secure phone to call someone and let them know what was going on?”

“Someone had to pilot the ship for the transmission to work.” Felger replied. “Otherwise they wouldn’t know.”

“Who?” The man was nearly as angry as the general.

“The Asgard.” The man grinned eagerly. “We just need to stay cloaked and the Asgard will hear that someone is breaking the treaty and save us.”

“The protected planets treaty is a bluff. The Asgard can’t actually enforce it.” Replied the General in a tone of agonized resignation. “And if you did what I think you did, there is no cloaking system in the galaxy that could conceal us.”

“But… but we’re cloaked.” Fegler replied.

“Felger, you just geolocated a handheld radio with the sensors on a cargo ship. You don’t think that a Goa’uld mothership can find the ship sending out an SOS on a galactic scale?” The General walked up to Simon’s chair, nodding to him. “Up.”

Simon vacated the seat gladly, happy to have someone else responsible for navigating the transport. The older man who’d been ringed up with the general grabbed Simons shirt, a frenzied look in his eyes as he spoke. “You need to get me off of this ship. Fix the rings, put me in an escape pod but get me off this ship, now.”

“The rings are broken and there aren’t any escape pods on this transport. Our only hope is to catch
her attention and try to draw her into following us.” The man spoke calmly as he flipped the switches to deactivate the cloaking device.

“But – a cargo ship isn’t fast enough to outrun a mothership forever. The engines will burn out.” Simon swallowed nervously.

“No – but we don’t have to outrun her forever, just to the nearest Stargate in Olokun’s territory. He won’t tolerate an intrusion from a rival military.” The General replied calmly. “Or they catch us and kill us. Either way they’ll hopefully do it outside the system.”

Simon didn’t really like either of those plans. “Do you have an idea that doesn’t probably kill us?”

“No… but it looks like we should be able to annoy her enough to follow us.” He let out a low whistle as he manipulated the ship’s controls. “Heka didn’t give a damn about strategic arms limitations apparently. This thing is armed.”

“You’re going to attack a Goa’uld mothership with a cargo freighter?” Doctor Rothman hissed. “Are you insane – we can’t win that!”

“No but I feel reasonably confident we can piss her off.” Replied the General.

“General, you will land this craft immediately!” Interjected the older man. “We can get the Army to launch naquadah enhanced Nukes that ship and destroy it.”

“Senator, that is Heka’s personal flagship built in the time before Thoth’s folly. I wouldn’t be able to take it out if I had an entire fleet of warships, nuking it would just waste a couple billion dollars of taxpayer money.” The General shook his head. “I’m sorry but we’re in this one for the long haul.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work, General.” Simon interjected. “She’s not going to follow anyone.”

“The Goa’uld are too petty to let insults pass them by.” Selmak disagreed. “She’ll follow.”

“Not without a hyperdrive, she won’t.” Felger replied. “The Asgard removed the hyperdrive systems from that ship before we got it. Her only route out of our star system is through the gate. She has to
“invade, or she’ll be stuck on the moon.”

“Of course, she does.” The General’s eye twiched as he fired on the mothership, small munitions impacting with the mothership’s shields as he overflew the ship and took off towards Saturn. The weapons didn’t do any significant damage, but they did catch the attention of the larger ship – drawing it away from earth.

“General, I’m not asking, you will turn this ship around immediately.” The Senator demanded as the Ha’tak started opening fire on the cargo ship, massive balls of orange energy just barely missing the tiny vessel.

“Senator, with all due respect you can blow it out your ass.” Replied the General. “If we delay that mothership for even a few hours we can give Earth time to resolve their foothold situation and start preparations for fighting off a Goa’uld invasion.”

The ship shook with the glancing impact of a Ha’tak energy weapon as billowing smoke came from the rear compartment of the cargo ship. Felger and Simon made eye contact only briefly before the two of them ran back into the cargo bay to discover that it was on fire. They grabbed the goa’uld equivalent to a fire-extinguisher, a compressed cylinder of chemicals to blast oxygen from the air shaped like a rearing cobra, and did their best to stop the blaze of molten crystals.

Fire was the greatest possible enemy of any spacecraft. If you didn’t stop a fire quickly it would not only deprive you of vital systems, it would also deprive you of the oxygen necessary to survive long enough to fix them. On a ship as large as a Goa’uld mothership there were many redundant environmental systems, meaning that open fires were viable without risking life and limb, but in a contained system like a cargo ship, loosing oxygen in any one compartment could doom the crew in short order.

The crystal computers favored by the Goa’uld were resistant to fires, but not immune. Some of the more finnicky components often had some sort of liquid medium suspended within them. Generally, this was something non-reactive, but a few of the more esoteric components were essentially crystalline claymores when exposed to extreme heat.

Simon wasn’t well versed enough in the construction of Goa’uld transports to talk through the minutiae of their construction, but he was very confident that the placement of the particular crystal that exploded within the burning panel could be considered a “design flaw” as it burst, flinging razor sharp shards out and around the cargo bay. He fell down, clutching at a long gash in his side where a four-inch-long bit of crystal jutted from his side.
Felger continued fighting the fire, extinguishing it as Simon screamed, “Do I pull it out or leave it in?!” again and again till Doctor Rotham helped him back into the cockpit, laying him on the ground and examining the wound with a grave expression.

“Oye, that’s not good.” Rothman’s lip curled. “That looks like it hurts.”

“Of course, it hurts.” Simon hissed as there was another sound of exploding crystals in the cargo bay followed by Felger’s shout of “I’m ok!” that did little to improve Simon’s mood. “It’s inside me!”

“There is a first aide kit under the panel to your right.” Spoke the General to the Senator as he navigated towards Sol’s asteroid belt. “Pull it out.”

“I’m not even remotely qualified to give medical care.” Hedged the Senator before the general interrupted him.

“Kinsey shut up and grab the first aid kit or so help me I will fly us into the next blast.” The General snarled.

The Senator grabbed the kit and walked over to doctor Rothman, who pressed the jewel at the center of a scarab beetle shaped case and exposed a mess of odd tools. The Dr Rothman looked at the strange implements in confusion. “What do I do with these?”

“Pull out the crystal. When you do take the orange pack and sprinkle it with the green one over the wound. It should stabilize him and seal the wound till we can get him back to Doctor Fraiser.” Replied the General as there was another explosion from within the engine room, followed by a sputtering hiss of breaking machinery.

“Oh no.” Felger whined from within the cargo bay as the ship’s engines sputtered, then died, stranding them dead in the water as Rothman ripped the crystal from Simon’s belly. It was nearly as painful an experience as when the two packets got sprinkled on the seeping chest wound, the alien medicine curing without any care for personal comfort.

“Incoming!” The general screamed as warning klaxons screeched from the cargo ship’s systems blared, heralding the Ha’tak blast that would kill them. He closed his eyes as the brilliant light enveloped them, wedging them together as he prayed for something – anything to come save them.
He kept them wedged closed, waiting for the agony of burning alive within the pile of molten slag that would soon be the cargo ship. And he kept waiting, longer and longer, till he dared to open his eyes and realize that he wasn’t onboard the cargo ship any more. He was in an open space, laying on the cold ground as a figure stood over him.

He looked back at his reflection in the wide black eyes of a tiny grey man, an Asgard. “Thor… Son of a bitch… Felger’s plan worked.”

The creature blinked, looking at the collected humans with an inscrutable expression before asking. “What has transpired here?”

“There was a hidden Goa’uld on the ship you gave us, they circumvented the protected planet’s treaty and used you to lay a trap, Thor.” The words poured out of Felger’s mouth rapidly, his insufferable grin likely mirroring the sense of self satisfaction at having been proven correct in his choice of methods.

“Ah – Thor… yes he would miss something that obvious.” The little man nodded. “No, I cannot permit the Goa’uld to take this world. What is the name of the Goa’uld who commands that vessel?”

He pointed out the window at the pyramid ship, apparently unconcerned to have his own ship in close proximity to the Goa’uld war machine.

“Druana.” Supplied Simon, surprised that they were interacting with an Asgard.

“Ah, not an error at all then.” Replied the Asgard. “Thor was limited in his action by design… no wonder Father summoned me. Games upon games, as it always is with him.”

“Aren’t… aren’t you Thor.” Felger queried in confusion.

“No.” Replied the Asgard dismissively, turning from the humans and waving his hand. There was a sudden flash of light as a holographic image of Druana atop her throne met them. The startled woman’s face contorted into a look of utter contempt at the sight of the humans and Asgard.

“Asgard – away with you. You have no right to interfere in my business.” Druana’s hologram spoke, “Those mortals were mine to do with as I will.”
“You are violating the protected planets treaty with your presence, Goa’uld. You will vacate immediately, or you will be fired upon.” Replied the Asgard dryly.

“I am no System Lord, Asgard. I have signed no treaty and am bound by no rules.” Replied the Goa’uld.

“What a remarkably coincidence.” Replied the Asgard. “I am not a member of the Asgard High Command’s military structure, and am thus not bound to theirs either. So if I decide to destroy you it won’t be a violation of the terms you’re trying to circumvent.”

“This is unacceptable!” Hissed the Goa’uld. “You cannot dismiss the obligations of your people so easily!”

“I would happily agree to hold off until a conclave of the System Lords can convene to take responsibility for you and your ship.” Replied the Asgard in a voice of mirthful contempt. “I’m quite certain they’d adore to have an opportunity to get ahold of you, Druana. I am confident that Lord Yu and Amaterasu would be most aggrieved to hear that the Asgard wish for your demise – especially that they won’t be present to watch your end.”

Druana’s eyes flashed with fury as she held up her hand and flung a blast of black energy towards the Asgard. As the holographic black light collided with the grey man Druana’s hologram disappeared entirely. In a matter of seconds, the Ha’tak shimmered and disappeared, coils of black-green energy seemingly devouring the ship and leaving behind only stars. It was gone faster than Simon could blink.

“Did… did you kill her?” Asked the Senator hopefully.

“No. She has traveled to realms into which I am unable to follow.” He blinked twice, looking at the Senator with the same impassive expression. “She will not return. Not while she believes the Asgard linger.”

“Then on behalf of American People, allow me to extend you my most heartfelt thanks for having interceded on our behalf.” The Senator reached out his hand to the Asgard in greeting. “I am Senator Robert Kinsey of Earth, and you are?”

“I am Loki Odinson.” The little man placed his hand in the Senator’s. “Exile of Asgard.”
Chapter 35

The pocket of subspace that Sam passed through to travel between China and the SGC had been a study in impossible events combined with the sheer immutable fact that she had participated in their execution. One could not breathe in space. One could not walk through a pocked of subspace.

Once could not do any one of a thousand things that were now simple facts of reality for her. It would probably take longer than she had the luxury of living in her lifetime to fully document and understand the combination of phenomenon required to explain what had happened to her.

Entire disciplines of theoretical physics and biology could have been devoted to the mass to volume shifts required for the dragons to shift between human form and their dragon shapes. Were they just reshaping their bodies from some malleable materials or were they, as she suspected, restructuring subspace matter to fill and contain the mass not required at any given moment? These were the questions that would keep her busy for years to come.

The universe was full of unanswered and unanswerable questions. One could only take the information provided to them and do their best to answer them empirically based off the evidence provided. For example, Sam knew empirically that the leader of the dragons was able to manipulate the minds and bodies of people proximate to the sound of his voice.

Did he achieve this through telepathy? Telekinesis? Was it manipulation of air pressure? She wouldn’t be able to know the exact methods used to achieve it without further study – anything she provided wouldn’t be a functionally useful hypothesis unless she had the ability to study it and eliminate faulty suppositions.

The simple reality of these new creatures defied any current understanding she could provide for their interactions with physics and biology as she understood them, which in turn meant that her understanding of both physics and biology would have to adapt to the new reality. For example, she would have to adapt to the reality that the weapons she had available to her were woefully inadequate to resolve her current situation.

Samantha Carter reflexively placed her hand on the Zat weapon on her belt more out of habit than out of any belief that the weapon would be of any use against the elder Dragon. Her last experience in even trying to fight the man effectively proved her inability to defeat him, but the habits she’d been inculcated into weren’t rooted in logic and she found the cool alien metal beneath her fingers to be comforting as the besuited man’s apoplectic rage rose the temperature of the room around them.

The scions were quite literally quaking in their boots as they dropped to the ground, pressing their bellies to the floor and trying to make themselves as small and non-threatening as possible. They slid back with inhuman grace, crawling up the walls like geckoes – lizard eyes quivering with fear. Even
the First Nameless had been reduced to a quivering cretin in the presence of the man’s horrific spite.

“Have we met?” Queried Colonel O’Neill. “Because I’m generally accustomed to remembering people who’ve killed me. It tends to leave an impression.”

“I have slain thee time and time again.” The man seemed to grow with every word, the roiling serpentine body concealed beneath his human flesh seemingly at the verge of just ripping through the flesh-mask concealing his true form. “As a man, as a prophet, as a warrior, and even as one of the Knights Three – You are such an affront to the orderly procession that The Six of Moros became Seven to prohibit your infernal meddling in the involatility of entropy.”

“Gee, you’re going to make me blush – and I don’t even know what to call you.” Replied the Colonel. “Is your name Michael? You seem like a Michael?”

“Ah, the humor. I do always enjoy these moments of mirth.” Replied the man. “They provide a nice distraction from the sheer monotony of your interference in my work. You cross between time and reality without a care, shredding causality without fear of paradox.”

“I know thee better than any child or lover, Fisherman. We have been enemies since before your birth, trapped in a war that you scarcely even begin to understand. You are an affront to the orderly procession of reality, a violation of my purpose.”

“Come on – that was one time.” Protested the Colonel. “And we came back without changing too much. We went out of our way not to meddle with 1969.”

“Your early meddling was not your only meddling. In this or any other existence.” Snarled Ferrovax before something occurred to him. “We… it can’t be. Can it?”

He blinked for a second before his head whipped around to Daniel, examining him with new interest. He hissed in something bordering horror as he looked to each of the human member of SG-1 in turn. “The Scholar… unascended? Then she must be the Architect!”

“Oh, oh!” Sam exclaimed in shock as the elder dragon’s frustrations became apparent to her. “You’re angry because of stuff that we – or a version of us – did to you in the past?”

“Past, present, and undoubtedly future.” Growled the man.
“We’re a fun bunch.” Jibed the Colonel.

“I have finally found you before you’ve had the chance to ripen.” His rumbling laughter could have curdled milk, so sour was it in its vitriol as he looked skyward. “Do you heart that meddler! I have found your puppets before your plans could come to fruition! I wonder – If I remove the pieces in the present will the misfortunes of the past be purged as quickly as they were brought down upon me and mine!”

“But… couldn’t you just interacting in the present divert us from that happening?” Sam blinked in surprise. “And wouldn’t stopping it risk paradox?”

“Paradox is an over-rated threat for the Immortal.” Ferrovax grinned wolfishly. “And the only things that erasing you from history would bring me is joy.”

Teal’c interposed himself between the Colonel and the man. “Lord Ferrovax, you are a guest come to bargain.”

“I came to deliver terms Jaffa, and I am no longer bound by any Threshold to bar my vengeance upon any in my path. And my terms are the unconditional surrender and death of those who’ve wronged me.” His grin was positively demonic as his serrated teeth protruded from his lips as he commanded. “Stop,” as he had done before on the ship.

Once again Sam found herself entirely unable to move, or even breathe without difficulty. Confusingly, O’Neill appeared entirely unaffected. He stared around the room at the frozen men and women, backing away from Ferrovax as he raised his knife protectively. Sam noted that he was backing towards Mayborne and the NID mercenaries – putting the other Colonel’s men in the line of fire rather than anyone in the SGC.

“Strong willed as always, Fisherman.” The man rumbled with glee. “But you are finally at an end. Vengeance will be – ”

“Mine!” Shouted a little girl’s voice as the child Sam had saved from the Goa’uld cargo ship shoved herself in front of the besuited man. She was obviously terrified, as terrified as any of the other scions were of the man, but she was standing resolutely between Jack and her patriarch with a determined look on her face. She pointed to each of the humans in the room in turn, repeating the word over and over again, “Mine, mine, mine, mine…” on and one she went, going through them all before pointing at the stargate and then to the ground, as though she were laying claim to the mountain itself.
before pointing at the draconic patriarch. “Not yours.”

The nameless scions chittered excitedly in the draconic language, jabbering like basso budgerigars. “It is not done.” Murmured the voice of the First Nameless behind her. “Such things are not done.”

The man raised his hand as though to slap her only for Colonel O’Neill to shove himself in front of her and grab the other man by the wrist. His eyes were steel as he looked at the dragon patriarch. “You don’t touch the kid.”

Ferrovax was no more physically limited by the Colonel’s grip than he might have been by a fly, but there was something about the physical act of O’Neill’s grasp that froze him in place. He sniffed the Colonel twice before his lip curled back in disgust as he turned to the child, “You have claimed allegiance to him and pledged to protect his territory.”

“Yes.” She replied softly. “No other path.”

“You were my heir apparent – your paths were endless.” Replied the man.

“There is no place in the stars for one who cannot fly.” Spoke the little girl.

“You are a Dragon – no injury can lame you.” Dismissed the man as he flung O’Neill to the ground. “Show me.”

The girl turned around, pulling up her shirt to expose the injuries to her back. The man placed his palm gently upon her, his paw roiling and reverting to a lizard like state as it glowed with orange flames. He illuminated the scars, making them glow with purple vitriol as he examined the scars.

“Who did this?” The man’s voice was suddenly without rage or malice. It was as though he’d entirely forgotten about his purported vendetta with the Colonel. The little girl shook her head, as though too afraid to speak.

So entirely distracted was Ferrovax that his hold over the other humans and Teal’c was dropped and Sam found herself able to move again. She ran over to Colonel O’Neill, helping her superior officer back to his feet with the aid of Doctor Jackson.
“Are you alright, Sir?” She asked, wincing at the bruises already forming where the man landed on his arm.

“Just peachy.” Replied the Colonel. “I had him just where I wanted him.”

“Hopefully caring for his granddaughter is enough of a distraction that he stops trying to murder us.” Daniel provided.

“He doesn’t strike me as the paternal type.” Replied the Colonel. “Or the forgiving sort.”

“I’m with the Doctor.” Interjected Colonel Mayborne. “I don’t have anything that can hurt that guy with us. And as much as I like seeing Jack taken down a peg, I don’t like the optics of him being killed while I’m here to save him.”

“Worried about your FITREP Mayborne?” Colonel O’Neill jibed. “It’s a while yet till you’re up for General, and it hasn’t started snowing in hell yet.”

“It’s at least a bit frosty down there, Jack.” Replied Colonel Mayborne. “You called me for help, after all.”

“Turns out that I had things under control.” Replied the Colonel.

“Clearly.” Replied Mayborne as the Dragon’s insistent voice echoed with the tone of command once again.

“Is there a particular reason that we’re not shooting him?” Queried the man who appeared to be leading Mayborne’s mercenaries. “Because I very much want to shoot him.”

“You want to waste the ammunition, be my guest. Teal’c and two SG teams put enough bullets in him to take out Vietnam and didn’t even damage his suit.” Replied Mayborne. “I’m inclined to see if Doctor Jackson can talk this situation down. He’s done more with less.”

“I have no idea what the cultural grounding of the Dragons is to know how to make this better.” Disagreed Daniel. “They seem to be entirely focused on the idea of naming rituals. So if she maybe
did something worthy of earning a name she might be able to request our safety… but I don’t know enough about what “worthiness” constitutes to even begin to suggest that.”

“She has a name.” Replied Jack.

“No, Jack, the Scions were pretty explicit that she was nameless.” Replied Daniel. “Naming ceremonies are such a big deal that they actually have an appointed position whose sole duty is to decide when someone has earned a name.”

“That’s great, but she has a name.” The Colonel Shrugged. “I got tired to saying ‘hey you.’ Emily sounded good to her, so we went with that.”

“Jack… tell me you didn’t.” Daniel cringed.

“She was a little girl, not a puppy. I wasn’t going to just talk about her in the third person forever.” Jack shook his head. “She needed a name.”

“TELL ME.” The man spoke again in the imperative, his will so present that it was a physical weight upon Sam even though it wasn’t being directed at her. If she had known even an inkling of what brought the injuries upon the little girl she wouldn’t have been able to keep that secret within her. She would have screamed it from the mountain tops.

The girl screeched her answer, words spilling from her in the Draconic language like water. She chittered and hissed without any ability to stop, presumably telling him every secret she had to offer. The man listened to every word before murmuring vengefully, “Heka has betrayed his pact. He uses weapons of the fall against us.”

He pulled back his hand from the wound, as though afraid to touch it, his draconic eyes simmering with alien emotion as he purred in a sound that reminded Sam of stone being ground into sand. When he spoke again it was a confused declarative. “She will never fly.”

The Scions grew silent, seemingly too horrified by the prospect to even gossip. The man shook his head disappointedly. “Siriothrax’s child, nameless forever – a true blood cast aside.”

“Not nameless.” Replied the little girl firmly.
“What?” The man growled the interrogative as though it were invective.

“A named one has chosen. One who is known and worthy.” Replied the little girl. “Emily Bowen Draco! I fought. I claimed. I won.”

“What would dare name the Blood?” Replied Ferrovax contemptuously. “Who would be so bold?”

“Me apparently.” Replied O’Neill exhaustedly. “I wasn’t going to just keep calling her kid.”

“O’Neill.” The man shook with apoplectic hatred.

“He is known. He is worthy.” Replied Emily firmly. “A name was given. A place claimed. It is my right.”

“A name is given by a name earned in infamy.” Agreed the elder dragon. “And like the one who provided it to you, are worthy in infamy alone.”

“But I am worthy.” Asserted the child firmly. “I will never fly, but I am worthy.”

“You know the price of what you do?” Queried the elder dragon. “And take it freely?”

“I do.” Replied the little girl calmly.

“Very well then, Emily Bowen Draco. You are named and worthy.” Replied the elder dragon as he bend down and kissed her softly on the forehead. “May your name live on forever.”

And then – before Sam even had the chance to scream out a warning - the man’s mangled hand whipped to life, forming into a horrible claw as he used it to slit the little girl from her belly to her throat, spilling her organs to the ground in front of her as he shoved her to the ground. “You die with a name child – take solace in that.”

Sam scrambled across the room, firing her Zat fruitlessly at the man in an vain attempt to save the kid. She felt like the room was moving in slow motion as she took in the soldiers, marines, airmen,
and Teal’c all firing their weapons impotently into the man as he towered over the mangled child. They all knew that their weapons weren’t going to do anything more than irritate the man, but they weren’t going to just allow him to kill an unarmed child in front of them.

He raised his hand again to strike the killing blow only for his hand to fall to the ground, sliced off at the wrist as a brilliant light filled the room – emanating from a formless shadow-person.

“Nyet! That will be quite enough of that, da?”

The shadow from Ferovaxe’s body leapt up, the boiling absence of light coalescing into a huge man’s form wielding a cavalry sabre. As though summoned by the very act of cruelty against a child, the Russian man who’d assaulted her in the medical wing was suddenly – inexplicably – standing between the injured child and Ferrovax, grinning with wild abandon as his body flared with sliver light cloaking the appearance of a second, smaller, shadow figure that melted into the Tok’ra that came on base with Heka’s retinue.

“Knight!” Hissed the collective of scions.

“Dragons.” Replied the massive Russian. “Now, how about you fuck off back to the Nevernever before I chop you into tiny pieces.”
Chapter 36

In retrospect Kanan would probably have preferred the role of playing the “pet Tok’ra” in the court to standing at the center of an army of angry dragons after injuring their leader – especially considering that their leader was apparently Ferrovax, one of the most powerful entities in this or any other galaxy. Even if he was doing so behind the massive Tau’ri warrior and under the auspices of that horrific blade.

As he was wont to do when the blade was in use, Cat Sith was nowhere to be seen but was likely waiting for a proper moment to engage in his favorite hobby – murder.

“Knight!” The man snarled as his flesh knit together, growing him a new hand with pitiful ease. The burns covering his body disappeared in an instant, as though they hadn’t ever been, “I will unmake you if you interfere in my family business.”

“You are killing a little girl.” The dark-skinned man replied. “I think you have already made it my business.”

“Yeah, what the Russki said.” Interjected Colonel O’Neill. “Fuck off Ferry!”

“You have no power here, Knight.” Replied Ferrovax. “I am not a fool like the one who fell to your fellow Knight, I will not be easy prey as to let you strike me uncontested.”

“I am here for a reason, Dragon.” Replied the Tau’ri as sliver flames flickers over his body, forcing the scions to retreat from where it touched – hissing in pain as it touched them. “A purpose. You stand between me and my goal. If you believe that the forces that guide me will allow your victory, then stay. But I act with purpose – my actions are right. And so far, my luck has not failed me. I wonder, do you believe that you can touch the light that guides me without feeling it’s heat.”

“I am not some mere beast to be bested and cast aside.” Snarled the King of Dragons. “She is mine to do with as I wish.”

“She is her own.” Replied the man. “And I will die before I let you kill her.”

“So be it.” Spoke Ferrovax as he advanced upon the Knight, only for the silver flames to cast him aside as they shimmered and coalesced around him. The spectral image of thousands of eyes opened
and closed around him, examining every direction at once as a telekinetic burst of light impacted with the Elder Dragon.

The Dragons howled as the eyes widened, the light echoing with an iridescent song of purity as it met their scaly skin. Ferrovax snarled in hatred, flames licking out from his mouth as he spoke a single word. “Metatron.”

When the Tau’ri next spoke his voice echoed, reverberation with a force that felt entirely alien to how the man had ever spoke before. “YOU WILL LEAVE.”

“She is mine.” Disputed the Dragon.

“YOU WILL LEAVE.” Repeated the Tau’ri warrior in that same voice of unnatural command.

“Mine!” The dragon snarled, speaking the word as though it were some inviolate word of prayer.

“NO LONGER.” Replied the Tau’ri. “LEAVE.”

The Dragon snarled and snapped, but in a wave of his hand was gone. He and the scions, disappearing in a puff of smoke and flame as though they had never even been. Kanan only then realized that the little girl was holding his hand as her eyes glassed over into death. He looked into the pitiful child’s face, his heart aching for her as he realized that she could be made whole. His hands shook as he pulled out the Goa’uld healing device and willed it to life.

He apologized to the child profusely as he shoved the disemboweled organs back into her chest. She writhed with agony as he did so, but there was no other way. The Tau’ri held her down as he did so, keeping her thrashing form down with their combined weight. She was unnaturally strong for her size, almost able to fling away the Tau’ri even with the aid of the Jaffa warrior, but the dark-skilled Tau’ri warrior glowing with silver light placed a finger upon her head and she was suddenly still.

Kanan shoved the girl’s organs back into the child with the aid of Selmak’s host’s daughter, and activated the hand device. He felt the rush of power as he did so, the addictive feeling of cold wriggling up his spine as he repurposed the energies of life to heal her. It was slow work, agonizing to the patient under these circumstances, but he wasn’t going to let a little girl die in agony in front of him if it was preventable. And it was preventable.
The minutes dragged along, his rough-shod surgery using the hand device fighting the inordinate degree of blood loss from being disemboweled. Her natural healing was assisting, but Ferrovax had managed to more or less liquefy the major parts of her body. Lungs, bowels, stomach, and heart – they were all torn to shreds when Kanan and the blonde woman shoved them back into the little girl’s chest. She was crying profusely at the sight of the little girl’s pain, her hands trembling as she helped in Kanan’s desperate gambit to save the child’s life.

It was only by virtue of whatever ability the dark-skinned Tau’ri was able to bring by touching the girl’s forehead that she wasn’t killing herself by thrashing in agony. All of them should have been panicking. This was the sort of situation that put people into the red-zone of stress, especially for a child. But there was a distinct sense of serenity and unity of purpose to the collected people as they acted to save the child.

The goal of saving her subordinated all other feelings they might have had in an outright miraculous state of rational action under the circumstances. Kanan didn’t need to tell the Tau’ri and Jaffa to do anything, they just seemed to intuit how to move and restrain the child so that he was able to do his work. They were immediately and flawlessly executing what they needed to do in order to save the child’s life.=

An eternity passed, and Kanan deactivated the hand device, finally convinced that he’d healed all that he was able. He sat back on the floor, utterly exhausted, breathing heavily from the exertion of having used the device for that long. The little girl’s chest rose and fell steadily in a deep, deep sleep. There would always be a scar down the front of her chest, but she would survive. Colonel O’Neill draped his coat over the girl to conceal her modesty as he picked up the child, cradling her in his arms as Sam placed a soft kiss on the girl’s forehead. “Mayborne – I want to take her to medical. Can you and Makepeace handle this?”

“You’re leaving me in charge?” The man, apparently Mayborne, queried.

“I want my team with me – too many things have been appearing and disappearing whenever they like.” Replied the Colonel. “I know you’re not a dragon or a crab creature – and you’re damn sure not a Russian.”

“That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said about me, Jack.” Replied the other man.

“Don’t get used to it.” The Colonel walked away with the sleeping girl cradled in his arms, followed by the other team members of SG-1. They walked through the door and into the hallway.

And then yet another impossible thing happened, in a day of so many impossible things. The
Chappa’ai began to dial of its own volition. Seven distinct glyphs in a row dialed themselves into the gate, seven glyphs that Kanan recognized from memory. The Gate was dialing Nekheb, the crown world of Heka’s realm. The blue pool of energy burst forth from the gate, falling down into a scintillating pool of vertically hanging circular light.

The Dark-skinned man ceased to glow as he inserted his sword back into its scabbard and started to walk towards the Chappa’ai. The man called Mayborne stood between him and the gate, holding up his fire-arm to the other warrior as he shook his head. “Son, I don’t want to have to hurt you, but I can’t let you through that gate.”

The man smiled in amused surprise. “You have seen the creatures that flee in front of me, and still you chose to be between me and my goal?”

“O’Neill isn’t here, so someone had to be the obstreperous one. Its sort of a theme.” He cocked his weapon. “And I’m willing to bet that you’re a whole lot less bulletproof than he was. That was a neat trick with the light, but if you were able to use it on me, you already would have.”

“Perhaps.” Agreed the dark-skinned man. “But you will not be using that on me.”

“And why would that be?” Mayborne queried derisively as his black-clad soldiers surrounded the man.

“Because of the claw wounds.” Replied the man calmly as Mayborne suddenly found himself airborne as a furry horror burst out of the shadows. The man screamed horrifically as he soared through the air, crashing into the wall. The other warriors tried to open fire on the blurring form of Cat Sith, but as quickly as he appeared the Furling Lord disappeared into the shadows, only to burst from them again in a roiling mass of claws and teeth.

He was toying with them. If he’d wanted them dead, they would already be decorating the room with their blood. But for some reason he’d elected not to kill them, going for crippling or humiliating injuries instead as the Knight calmly walked up the walkway and through the Chappa’ai, translocating across the galaxy as the portal disappeared as inexplicably as it had appeared.

Kanan held up his arms defensively as the Furling’s final pounce was aimed at him, lamely trying to shield himself as he was caught beneath the Furlings paws and dragged down into the world of shadows in which the Furling Lord stalked his prey. The feline monster purred with amusement as Kanan stopped screaming, sitting up on his hind legs and licking his paw innocently. “You have nothing to fear from me in the immediate, remember? I am here to save you from the one who came to do you harm. We must hurry, Tok’ra, now that the wards and threshold are no more he will come
for this place. You must be gone before he arrives. We have avoided the lesser perils.”

“What could possibly be greater peril than what I’ve already faced?” Kannan blanched.

“It is best that you never learn.” Replied the Furling. “However, should you elect to gain the relevant education, you are welcome to stay.”

“No – I’ll go with you.” Replied an exhausted Kanan. “Where are we going, exactly?”

“To where you can be kept safe.” Replied the Furling. “To your people.”

“You know the location of the Tok’ra homeworld?” That was troubling. They’d gone to a great deal of trouble to ensure that the crystalline structure of their construction not only barred access to the lands of Sun and Snow, but they were also theoretically supposed to block beings of spirit from being able to scry their location. “They’re warded!”

“Child – think ye not that even the blind can find a wall?” Replied the Furling sarcastically. “Even invisible barriers are found through trial and error, and the little folk are everywhere to make those errors.”

Well… that pretty much blew one of the major elements of the Tok’ra’s anti-furling protections to Netu and back. Yet another thing to disclose in his debrief – thank the blood the Tok’ra had access to advanced lie-detection technology, or he would not have believed his own recollections of what he’d seen and lived. “How will we get there?”

“I would have thought that was obvious.” Replied the Furling as they walked out of the shadow and into a snow-covered forest of pristine wilderness. “We will make the journey through Winter.”

“Dare I ask how long the journey will take?” Kanan queried as the shadows parted entirely, stranding the two of them within the lands of Sun and Snow. Well, within the lands of Snow at least, it remained to be seen if they would tread upon the lands of sun.

The furling grinned cruelly. “It shouldn’t take longer than Eight months.”
Why hadn’t he just gone to Nekheb?
Jay Felger was drunk. He wasn’t usually drunk at all, let alone drunk on a Tuesday, but he didn’t have much else to do nowadays. The SGC had been stood down pending review, with only limited operations allowed until a full determination of the necessary oversight measures to avoid another Foothold situation could be implemented.

SG teams were still allowed to travel off world, but the NID would now have a permanent presence within the SGC under the leadership of Colonel Mayborne. Felger wasn’t looking forward to letting the civilian agency’s “practicality assessment” with regards to his research projects. He was already facing enough barriers to making a working plasma cannon without adding red tape to the list.

Felger, along with the other scientists who’d been on the disastrous Lunar expedition, had been suspended for their violations of the official secrets act. They’d determined at yesterday’s hearings that he wouldn’t lose his clearances or his program access, saving the planet has some perks, but he was going unpaid for at least another week.

It could be worse, he supposed. One hundred and twenty days had passed quickly, and only seven remained before he’d get back into the SGC to have a look at his Lab and figure out how many of his projects were able to be salvaged.

Honestly the worst part of being on a four-month suspension was the boredom. Due to the nature of his work and the ongoing investigations, his travel radius had been severely limited. Anything greater than a hundred miles and he had to be escorted to ensure that he wasn’t going to flee or turn into an alien space crab creature.

It made a lot of sense, but Jay was running out of things to do. So tonight he’d decided to break from his normal habits and do something crazy. In this case, he’d walked the block to the local sports bar and gotten just utterly smashed. He didn’t like alcohol. He didn’t like the taste. He didn’t like the feeling of being drunk. He didn’t like being around drunk people. But for tonight, he just didn’t want to have to feel a thousand different ideas running through his head knowing that he wouldn’t be able to even legally talk about them for another seven days.

He stumbled back towards his house, wondering if he was on the verge of blacking out, and wondering if he would remember wondering if he was on the verge of a blackout. Realistically he knew that the couple of shots he had probably weren’t enough to erase the memories of that night, but he was also drunk and couldn’t reliably trust in his ability to do math.

Though, he supposed, his own math was probably more reliable than most sober people’s math might have been. He tried, and failed to insert his key into the door of his apartment several times before the door opened inward. It took his drunken mind a few moments to realize that someone opening the door from inside his apartment was not only strange, it was impossible.
He yelped in shock and grabbed the nearest thing he could reach, holding up the doll of Samantha Carter like a club as he shouted. “Who are you and why are you in my house.”

The woman snorted in amusement at Jay’s attempt to intimidate her, smiling politely as she held out her hand. “Now Jay, there is no need for that. I want to be friends.”

“I don’t generally make friends with people who break into my house.” Jay replied, internally adding ‘even if they are beautiful with dark hair, long legs, and clever eyes.’ He must have slurred that somewhat, because it made her giggle.

“Daddy he’s just like you said he would be.” She led the drunken Jay to his coffee table, sitting the inebriate Felger down in his favorite chair and putting him face to face with the other person who’d invaded his home. He was a man of average height and build, with strong and handsome features who appeared to be middle aged.

The man spoke in a slight British accent, idly playing with the thin brown tie that hung around his neck. “Jay Felger, you are a remarkable man.”

“Thanks?” Jay replied in confusion, looking at the man’s daughter as she sat down next to her father, curling up against him lovingly. “I – uh, why are you in my house.”

“I’m something of a collector of remarkable people. Those of great intelligence and ambition.” The man replied, rolling a silver coin between his fingers as he did so. For some reason Jay found himself unable to take his eyes from it. “I find people with talents and help them to reach their full potential.”

“You want to be my life coach?” Jay snorted. “I’ve heard of going for the hard sell, but this is ridiculous.”

“Boy – I see your ambition, your longing, your need to belong. You want to be a hero, but have never been taken seriously no matter how hard you try.” The man spoke in a knowing voice as his shadow flickered across the wall in a way that didn’t feel quite right. “So, answer me one question. If you tell me no, I promise to leave. But if you say yes – I would like to give you the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“Look, I’m not really a God guy, so if this is a religious thing I’ve got to just let you know right now, there isn’t much about the world that has me on ‘team God’ at the moment.” Jay belched.
“Oh, I do like this one.” The man’s daughter purred.

“Not yet, pet.” The man chided his daughter before turning to Jay. “You will find us very much aligned on that point, Mr. Felger. I’m not much of a ‘team God’ man either. My question is much more pointed. Do you want to be strong?”

“What?” Jay blinked.

“Do you want to be strong?” Replied the man. “Do you want to have the opportunity to do all the things you’ve been ridiculed for trying to do before? Do you want to make women see you as you’ve never been seen? Do you want to be as powerful as you’ve ever dreamed?”

“Yes,” Jay replied slowly, nervous for reasons he couldn’t quite place. It was a simple enough question, so why was he feeling his heart thunder in his ears. “I want that. I want all of that.”

The man placed the silver coin on the coffee table and pushed it towards Jay. “Then take it.”

The silver coinage felt unusually heavy as he lifted it between his fingers and made eye contact with the man, wondering how a coin was going to make him strong. He must have been drunker than he thought he was, because he could have sworn that the man now had two sets of eyes.

He blinked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he tried to sober up enough to ask a coherent question, but when he opened them again, he was alone in the room again, with only the silver coin to affirm that either the man or his daughter had ever been there.

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