Stage VII: The Road Home

by Trinket2018

Summary

The ‘Patriot’ Conspiracy has made their move… but they picked a real bad time to take over the Earth, because the Trust, the Lucian Alliance and the Wraith are all headed their way… and so are our heroes. So it’s back to square one. With cats.

Notes

Follows immediately after *Stage VI: Collision Course*. You really need to read Stages I-thru-VI of the series first, or this will make *no* sense at all. The Reid-whumping was done at the beginning of Stage I, so now it’s just mission!fic (canon-typical violence for Stargate universe trouble magnets), male pregnancy & common-or-garden bigots to deal with. Well, maybe not *just*… Oh, and a couple of space battles.

Dr. Nicholas Rush and Eli Wallace (among others in cameos) are canon, from *‘Stargate Universe’*, used here without any permission whatsoever… and remember, in this AU, *‘Stargate Universe’* didn’t happen. Landry discovered Eli was zed and refused to hire him. In the pilot episode, SGU-1-1-‘Air I’, the *Hammond* arrived in time to destroy attacking Lucian clan Kauket and successfully evacuate all the Icarus Base personnel before the planet blew up.
Guest appearances by more crossover TV shows… sometimes *VERY* brief, blink-and-you-miss-it, so don’t get too excited… include Criminal Minds spinoffs, NCIS spinoffs, ‘Numb3rs’, ‘Person of Interest’ and ‘Pretender’. Victor Fitzgerald (from ‘Without a Trace’), Walter Skinner (‘X-Files’), Pamela Landy (the ‘Jason Bourne’ movies) are also here in brief cameos, without permission.

See the end of the work for more notes.
A Thin Line

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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*~What a sad era when it is easier to smash an atom than a prejudice.~ Albert Einstein*

The morning of the Patriot Coup…

The Tau’ri fleet lingered just beyond the Oort Cloud at the border between System Sol and deep space, waiting to rendezvous with the last of the jumpers.

As soon as O’Neill issued the Red Sea command, at nine-forty-five am Mountain Standard Time, four of their five Earth-based SGC jumpers had been deployed to retrieve personnel. Messages had gone out to SG teams on off-world missions to assemble at the Beta site. Not the current Alpha site, because that would be under direct US jurisdiction, and the plan was *not* to deliberately defy orders from even a ‘provisional’ and illegal government. Meanwhile, the jumpers scooted to pre-arranged locations around the globe to pick up those on the Red Sea list without transponders for whatever reason. All F-302’s were docked in cargo holds. All Red Sea personnel, but for the designated ‘clean-up crews’, were beamed up to the ships from the Ancient Outpost, Area 51, Washington DC, SGC and anywhere else they happened to be. All of this was completed before the full import of the ‘Patriot’ offensive became clear. ZNN news transmissions were being piped to the mess halls of each ship, because people needed to know, however disturbing the news. Shocked family members were being calmed as much as possible, as the Red Sea Protocol was explained to them.

In the event of a major coup at home by forces hostile to HomeWorld Security and its agencies, the protection of staff and their dependents was the first priority. Let my people go.

Securing dangerous advanced technologies from those who could not be trusted with it, was the secondary priority. Make damned sure the Red Sea fell back in place behind them.

And third, ensure the security of the Earth, in spite of their ungrateful treatment of those who were dedicated to their welfare. Turn the other cheek.

The Red Sea protocols were really just an Earth-side version of the Atlantis Trojan anti-invasion plans. Their Trust problems had only got more complicated in the wake of Declassification. They had put a dent in the organization, such as it was, sure, but had failed to root it out entirely. They’d only managed to drive them deeper underground, made them more desperate and reckless. In spite of everything, they had been unable to flush out Baal and Nun, and whoever was currently riding their coat-tails. The goa’uld ‘lords’ wore nifty new people-suits of Trent Kort and Eli David, and wasn’t *that* just an added recipe for disaster. Jack had seen enough red flags to decide the Reid kid was right, and they needed contingencies in place, in case the damn Trust *did* manage a successful coup. He got Carter and McKay both on security, while he and AJ plotted out the rest.

Vice Admiral (retired) AJ Chegwidden was already aboard the *Daedalus*, with Steven Caldwell in command. Colonel Abraham Ellis had the *Apollo*. Colonel Paul Emerson commanded the *Odyssey*. Colonel Kirill Semyonitch Smirnov, in command of the Russian BC-304 *Gagarin*,...
was currently violating his own suspect government’s orders, so he could join the Tau’ri fleet on O’Neill’s orders. Likewise, Captain Han Chu commanded the Chinese deep space carrier *Sun Tzu*. Smirnov and Han both knew the score: however loyal they might want to be to their own governments, the threat to the entire Earth posed by the Wraith, maybe even the Lucians, was greater, and superseded lesser and more local claims on them and their crews. Sam Carter was at the helm of the *George Hammond*, (originally designated *Phoenix*, but renamed in honor of the first SGC commander). The first Asgard battle cruiser they had recovered and repaired after the Asgard mass suicide, the *Valhalla*, was under the command of Major Marks, for the time being. The two newest vessels in the BC-304 fleet, *Gaia* and *Perseus*, were out on patrol at the galactic rim, watching for any signs of the Wraith on approach, and attempting to contact any populations out there to warn them of potential invasion by life-sucking vampire space aliens.

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Jack O’Neill stood at Chief Harriman’s shoulder in the SGC command centre, watching the various monitors. One carried a ZNN feed, one took reports from the teams, another showed assorted security camera views. He had expected them to hit the SGC first of all. They should have already been moving before ZNN broke the very first story. The fact that they hadn’t, revealed a fatal weakness in their plot. They had assumed HomeWorld and the SGC would be unaware, or unprepared for them, as the scope and nature of the threat only slowly emerged.

Too bad for them.

Jack sighed with exasperation. “Henry, come on. We’ve been over this. You agreed when we first discussed Red Sea that we’d need an off-world provisional government until such time as—”

“Yes, and you’ve got the VP, Ray Massey, Francis Maynard, Sam Vidrine, not to mention Richard Woolsey out in Pegasus, and Gordie Pinsent in The Hague for that. I’m staying here, Jack. This is my place.”

“They’ll shoot you down like a dog, Henry. You’re all that will stand between them and the Oval Office.”

“Tell Violet and the kids I love them.”

“Damn it, Henry…”

“And don’t you dare try and kidnap me, Jack. That’s a direct order from your Commander-in-Chief. Lucky I got McKay to give me one of those beam-jammers, hunh? Just remember that for when Atlantis gets back. Whoever the bastard is who takes my chair away from me, he’ll have that at least. Good luck to you all, Jack.”

Jack ground his teeth. “Just don’t forget to destroy—”

“Aw, teach your grandma to suck eggs, General O’Neill. I know the protocol.”

“I hate you a whole lot just now, Henry. Don’t get dead, and we’ll rescue your contrary butt when Atlantis gets back.”

“Yeah, yeah… go on, General. Let my people go.”

Jack signed off and heaved another sigh. “I hope you didn’t vote for that wise-ass, Chief.”

“Um… actually, I did, sir. Sir, report from Area 51.”
“Hey there, Dr. Novak. How goes it?”

“It goes well, General sir,” and the woman gave a hiccup. Vala thought her nervous tick to be an
annoying pain in the butt, but Jack found it endearing. Or maybe the hiccups wasn’t Vala’s
problem with her… Jack gave an inner smirk and waited for the rest of the report.

And, since it would damage his hard-won reputation to let any scientist get a complete report to
him, he interrupted. “So, nothing left there with a crystal or an energy pulse, and McKay’s special
little package is hooked up and armed?”

“Er… yes sir. Armed and ready. *hiccup*.”

“And the personnel left at Area 51? Running around like chickens with their heads cut off?”

“Oh yes, sir. Good description. I also took the precaution of emailing the base beaming logs to
Agent Henrietta Lange, Agents Hotchner and Garrett, and Agent Don Eppes, as you suggested.
That includes untouched back-up copies of logs otherwise tampered with, and security tapes from
the beaming station room. They don’t seem to have thought about those, or maybe they just
assumed they’d have time to clean up later.”

“Good job. Well, you’re the last friendly there, so tell Steven to beam you up. See you on the flip
side, Doctor.” And he switched channels.

The slide show of security views stopped on the street in front of Jack’s Colorado Springs home,
showing a whole fleet of police cars with flashing lights. Yeah, good luck trying to find anyone
home. How odd that they should raid private homes before the SGC or HomeWorld offices.
Obviously, they were still trying to maintain the polite fiction that this was just a routine criminal
investigation. Oh, and by the way, looking for hostages first. Bastards.

“Director Morrow for you, sir.”

“Tom. Ready for lift off?”

“The god-damned bastard. You know who it is, Jack? Hank Landry.”

Jack froze, a shudder going through him.

“That god-damned bastard. I’m his god-damned daughter’s godfather! That fucking bastard!”

“Yeah, that’s what I said. I know you wanted to think he was undercover, trying to help us flush
out the Trust, but… not if he’s sitting in the god-damned Oval Office! You sure I can’t stay behind
and shoot the bastard down like a god-damned dog? You know I can stay underground as long as I
have to. Done it before, can do it again.”

Jack stopped to consider that. It had certain obvious advantages… having eyes and ears of Tom
Morrow’s caliber on Earth being the main one. But he did have other options there.

“No, Tom, I don’t want to take the chance. They had a target on you, and we don’t know how
close they got or who they might have on you. I’ve already got Hayes volunteering for martyrdom,
don’t you be an idiot too.”

“Hayes? Tied himself to the mast?”

“Yeah. Give Caldwell the signal. You got your records ready to blow?”
“Give me a sec… Okay. Ten minute count down. I’ll call Caldwell at five.”

“Sooner if they show up at your door, Tom. They’re at my house right now.”

“Your house, not the SGC? Going for hostages? God-damned fucking bastards.”

“See you upstairs. Bye, Tom.”

More private homes had federal agents marching to their doors. Treating this like the string of unrelated personal crimes they appeared to be. Trying to gather family in the net under the guise of ‘taking them in for questioning’, or maybe even ‘protective custody’, if they were smart. Too bad the houses they were knocking on were all empty. Nobody home.

“Colonel Reynolds for you, sir.”

“Reynolds. What do you have for me?”

“Sir. HomeWorld HQ in DC is secure. All offices vacated, personnel safely situated or sent home, back-ups in hand, and self-destruct ready for ten minute trigger.”

Jack flipped security views till he got to the series for HomeWorld offices in Washington. And yeah, there came the black-suited feds.

“Make it five minutes and haul ass out of there, Eric. The feds are knocking at the door.”

“Acknowledged. Five minute count-down engaged. SG-3 out.”

Aaand… here they came up the lane to Cheyenne Mountain, at long last, Jack thought, watching a cavalcade of black SUV’s speeding up the winding mountain road.

“You got the front door secured, Ferretti?” Jack asked. “Because we’ve got company coming.”

“SG-2 locked and loaded, General. We’ve got the elevators between eleven and fifteen on lock-down and all access sealed. We’ll let you know if they haul up any ordnance that might actually give us a problem.”

“Acknowledged, SG-2.” Jack switched to another channel. “Dr. Lee? What’s your ETA?”

“Well, General…” and the little scientist hesitated. “We’ve moved everything that can be moved, and booby-trapped or sabotaged the rest… I’ve followed the check-list, and—”

“Bill. I’m asking for an ETA. When will you be done?”

“Well, um, right now, General. I was just doing a second check through with Dr. Thibideau—”

“And Carter’s *special* little surprise?”

Dr. Lee sighed heavily. “Do we have to sir? The time and effort it will take to get all of this up and running again when we get back—”

“We’ve got back-ups of everything, Bill, and we sent Atlantis everything in the last data-burst. We can always put together new equipment. But just think of turning over whatever we leave behind to Kavanagh—”

“Oh god! No. I understand sir, it’s just that… okay, okay. I’ve activated the fail-safe. The self-destructs are in place, and can be activated from your location. Do you have the connection,
“Walter?”

“Yes, Dr. Lee.”

“Then…” and there was another heavy sigh, “I guess we’re done.”

“And Daniel’s books? You know what he’ll do to me if any of his books, chicken-scratch rocks or clay doodads are damaged at all.”

“No matter what happens, nothing above level twenty will be damaged. NORAD, its systems, are all on eleven or above. The linguistics, anth/arch departments on eighteen, artifact storage and reference library on sixteen… it’ll all be safe. Even if they do get Peter in here with his sledgehammer.”

“Infirmary on twenty-one?”

“Dr. Lam took what she needed with her, all records and research data, so we purged the infirmary system and it’s set to blow with the rest.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack caught sight of something streaking past the control room door. Something smallish, furry, in a line of grey tabby with an interesting pattern.

“Oh cripes, the cats! These EM thingies won’t actually hurt living creatures, right?”

“What? Oh, no, I shouldn’t think they’d even feel it… maybe some static electricity in the air… cat fur is notorious for—”

“Good, ‘cause it looks like the unattached cats have elected to stick around. Well, yeah, their zeds are here.” Jack contemplated that a moment, then glanced at Walter. “I don’t suppose they expect a sudden influx of zeds to show up here, do they?” When Walter gave him a blank and bewildered look, Jack waved his hand in an erasing gesture. “Never mind. So the EMP won’t hurt ‘em. Good enough.”

Jack hesitated a moment, thinking of one last living creature he should, maybe, be concerned about stranding alone in an abandoned SGC. He wondered if he really cared, but felt like a wuss for not being able to make a decision on this issue well before this. But, honestly, he hadn't expected it to still *be* an issue by the time they had to put out the Red Sea command. He sighed heavily. Danny would expect him to…

“Which just leaves… our *special* Mossad-escape-proof brig cell on twelve?”

Walter checked his list. “There’s a trigger device to blow the lock off her door as soon as everything else is complete.”

“Okay, then,” Jack admitted, giving a curt nod. “Sounds like we’ve done as much damage as we can, for now. Bill, get your team down to the gate room with any stuff that’s left. We’ll gate you through to the Beta Site. Col. Dixon and SG-13 are ready for escort. We’ll rendezvous with your families in two days.”

Jack gave a wave through the window to Dave Dixon as he said this. SG-13 were all down in the gate room, geared up and ready to go.

“*All* of our families, sir?” Dixon winced. “You couldn’t forget a few of the kids behind? I’m sure they’ll be fine…”
“None ‘o that, Colonel,” Jack warned, mock sternly. Dixon, devoted father that he was, had long made a joke of trying to shake all the teenagers in his home. “You know the SGC First Rule. No one gets left behind.”

Dr. Lee led a little flock of scientists into the gate room, burdened down with cases and duffels. Dr. Alain Thibideau peeled off to join him and Walter in the command centre, a faithful tortie at his ankles, tri-color tail waving in the air. Jack gave the nod, and Walter dialed the Beta Site.

Once the familiar kerwoosh and blue flood settled into the spangled event horizon, Jack called down, “You have a go, SG-13 and mission specialists. Godspeed.”

Dixon and a couple of the scientists gave a wave, as they marched up the ramp.

From the looks of the security cameras on NORAD, the feds were having trouble even getting in that far without proper clearance. This month it was the Canadians’ turn in charge of the Crystal Palace, and General St. Laurent was having a particularly good time being dense and francophone with the interlopers.

“Okay, Dr. Thibideau,” said Jack to the young man who had become one of the stars of the SGC civilian scientist cohort, Canadian zed Dr. Alain Thibideau. “You’ve got the Red Sea Master List. Give me the run-down.”

“Gotcha, sir,” Alain shot back, settling easily into Jack’s usual informal command style. The young man had blossomed in his command role. He was no longer intimidated by his own shadow, although he did reach down with one hand to stroke his constant companion, the tortoiseshell cat. “The OWP is on stand-down, locked with password encryption. The platforms are on two-minute self-destruct if unauthorized access is detected. Even with authorization codes, platforms can be boarded, but weapons can’t be engaged without second-level security authorization. Any attempt to bypass will trigger the self-destruct.

“Shield satellites are on full cloak and shield, and set to auto-deploy. Deployment can also be triggered by emergency command. I never asked, sir… who has the emergency deploy codes?”

“Oh, a few very special friends got emails this morning with the codes. I’ve had confirmation from most of them. The Secretary of State is in The Hague right now, and will be sitting out the crisis there, getting lawyers to yell at the World Court. So he’s got a copy. Then there’s the UN Secretary General, the heads of state for Canada, UK, Russia… a couple of people I trust in Washington who won’t be coming with us. Including…” and Jack gave a heavy sigh, still stinging from the sense of betrayal, “General Hank Landry. An old friend of mine. Or, he used to be, the rat-bastard.”

Luckily, the Shield deployment code is all he had sent the rat-bastard. No harm done there. No one in their right mind – or even a very wrong one – would dare do anything to hobble Earth’s one certain protection. All anyone could do with the codes anyway would be deploy the Shield, and protect Earth. And, since Jack had sent the email to Hank’s personal hotmail account, and presumably the rat-bastard would be too busy to check it for some time, he probably didn’t even know yet.

But the revelation of this betrayal did explain one thing that had made Jack scratch his head in perplexity. One thing all the coup target assassinations had in common were that the victims were all either high-profile anti-zed, or easily connected to HWS in some way. With one exception. A minor prison guard (and dishonorably discharged AF captain) currently under investigation by the Department of Justice for abuse and excessive violence. His was just one of dozens of cases they were looking into. Jack had recognized the name immediately, of course, as it had been his flea in Lt. Colonel Paul Davis’ ear that got the DoJ investigating Leonard Burkhart in the first place. But
not too many others would have known to make that connection. Off-hand, Jack could only think of one: his old pal, Hank Landry. The man whose marriage had been destroyed by Burkhart’s machinations. Well, looked like ol’ Hank had taken advantage of the coup to get his belated revenge.

“Go on, Al.”

“Aря 51 is secured. HomeWorld is secured. The Ancient Outpost is secured, and non-Red Sea personnel were evacuated to Nevada, a mile from Area 51, as you specified. Sir, that’s deep inside Nellis Air Force Base, it’s all scrub desert, there’s no roads out there and I don’t think there’s even cell service…”

“No worries, Al. Most of those guys are scientists. If they can’t get a generator running with a coke bottle and a gum wrapper, or make a phone from a tin-can with a string, they deserve to spend a few days wandering the desert. But I can drop a text to someone to go rescue them… in a few hours. They’ll be fine, no worse than a sunburn and bit of dehydration. They should be glad not to be freezing their butts off any longer. And I’m pretty god-damned sure at least three of them are bad guys. Go on.”

Alain Thibideau shrugged. Every HWS scientist did at least a minimum training period at the Outpost, and many stayed, more enamored with the Ancient tech than bothered by the cold and isolation. But some of the staff had cycled through both the SGC and Area 51, and been exiled to the Outpost for cause. Alain knew most of them. He wasn’t especially unhappy about their predicament, so his attempt at protest had been a salve to his conscience only. Better a desert than being stuck in the Antarctic in the middle of a blizzard without power or support.

“SGC is secured, except for final security protocols and evacuation. I’ve heard from the ships, and all lists are complete. All F-302’s accounted for, all but the last jumper and our SGC emergency ‘clean-up crew’ have been evacuated. We’re good to go, General, whenever you give the word.”

“All-righty then.” Jack keyed in the jumper bay. “Col. Coburn, bring ‘er down.” As the last remaining jumper descended into the gate room, Jack switched to SG-2’s channel. “Ferretti. Still tight up there?”

“No sign of hostiles, sir.”

Jack chuckled. “That’s because St. Laurent still has them upstairs, swearing at them in French. Pack it up, Lou, and get your team to the gate room.”

“Acknowledged.”

Minutes later, SG-2 arrived, and dutifully filed into the jumper. Once the last of them were loaded aboard, they’d dial the space gate. Yeah, they had one of those, reclaimed and anchored next to dwarf planet Pluto in the Kuiper Belt, in the outermost orbits of System Sol. The position was *just* far enough that it could register a different dial-in code from Earth’s, with its own unique origin sign. That had been a fairly recent innovation, after the fall of the Midway transfer station. It was an extra entry point for the system that did not bring suspect visitors straight into Earth’s atmosphere. Kinda like a back door emergency exit, and being employed as such right now.

Jack straightened up and looked around the control room, and the gate room below, a little wistful. It seemed a little like defeat. He could suddenly understand Henry Hayes’ position, of wanting to be the last man to stand on the burning deck… but he had responsibilities, two lovers and three babies on the way...
“Okay, Walter. Last man turns out the lights.”

“Yes sir,” the master chief agreed, subdued. The space-gate was dialed, the count-down to the final security protocols was initiated. Jack helped Walter and Alain lug the last of their equipment down to the gate room, along with his case full of very personal records. The Stargate shed its wondrous light on them as they boarded the jumper, hatch closed, and they were lifted through with a wet-sounding squelch.

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Behind them, in the sudden darkness, in the deserted Stargate command centre, a silent count-down reached zero. A carefully directed EM pulse flashed through the lower floors of the SGC. The computer systems locked up, the data storage and servers all fried, the power generators sputtered and sparked out on overload, and, detecting a breach, the shielded Stargate system issued the command to lock. The Iris scissored closed, not just sealing the gate, but capping it, as effectively as the huge cover stones of another age, another culture. It wouldn’t open at all now, until it received the very unique signature created by a man in another galaxy far away.

And on level twelve, there was a small *pop*, and the door of one super-secure brig cell was jarred open…

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Not everyone who had been invited had agreed to join the Red Sea evacuation plan.

O’Neill had called his sentinel experts, Dr. Blair Sandburg and Detective Jim Ellison, into his office for a little chat, early in the process of planning.

“Okay, gentlemen, explain this to me. If the Trust succeeds and takes over the planet, why would you want to be here?”

Behind Jack, something shadowy, huge, grey and shaggy, bristled and growled, pacing restlessly back and forth. The pacing matched that of another unreasonably big animal shape, a black panther that lurked behind Jim and Blair.

The sentinel/guide pair exchanged glances. Blair clung tight to tortie Ruth in his lap.

“I’m a sentinel, General,” Jim replied. “My one over-riding instinct is to Protect the Tribe. I can’t do that from somewhere in space. If the Trust does take over, then zeds everywhere are going to be at risk, and we both know you can’t take them all with you. So you’ll need me here to keep an eye on things. Blair’s tied in to the Blue Jungle network, we can keep a finger on the pulse with that.”

The shadowy *something* behind O’Neill growled, but its hackles began to smooth out as the General tapped his fingers on his desk, admitting the truth. “Okay… on that score, I kinda think I should stay on planet too.”

Blair shook his head. “No, sir. Jim and I can take the lead here on Earth, but if it all goes to shit, you need to be out there, doing your own thing.”

It was difficult not to say too much, but although he was close, a sentinel on the cusp of emerging, dire wolf spirit guide already lurking around him, the General wasn’t quite there yet. It wouldn’t take much to tip him over, if Blair was any judge, and he was. If they did have to call a Red Sea, that would probably be enough… or, you know, when the life-sucking alien vampires got to the solar system.
But Blair had long ago learned that it was no good trying to rush these things. If O’Neill wasn’t ready, he just wouldn’t hear it. But Blair would make sure that the Furalin on the Red Sea list were all supplied with his papers and manuals on the Care and Handling of Sentinels. When Jack blew open, judging by his nebulous friend back there, it was going to be *epic*. And with Daniel Jackson still in another galaxy, Jack was going to need all the zed help he could get.

Jack had encountered a similar resistance from other quarters, where oaths of office, and duty to their country and planet trumped getting their asses to safety, in this particular worst-case scenario.

In the NCIS Los Angeles OSP offices, the Quantico bullpens for the BAU and IRT, and in the DC Hoover Building Cyber Crime labs, almost the same argument was going on as in the more laid back clubhouse of the NCIS New Orleans Resident Unit.

Dwayne Pride sighed as he told his collected team, “It’s an option we have to at least consider.”

“Why they offering this to *us*?” Chris LaSalle demanded. “I can see the BAU and IRT, maybe even Hetty’s group, they’ve all been running HWS ops for months, even before Declassification. But us? Apart from that FUBAR with Gibbs, letting the DiNozzos get snatched… we haven’t been all that involved. I just don’t see us as targets if this Trust thing gets the upper hand.”

It was their Medical Examiner, Loretta Wade, who suggested, “I think it’s probably got more to do with the number of zeds and sentinels on the team.”

Pride nodded. This was the first time it had been stated out loud, even within the team, but they all knew the score.

Sebastian Lund, their forensic guru and now a fully-fledged field agent, and Patton P. ‘Triple P’ Plame, their computer expert and hacker extraordinaire, were both zeds, true. With their wrist brands, it was certainly no secret to anyone. Trip had always taken his black cat, Queenie, wherever he went, riding in stately majesty on his lap as he wheeled around the city of New Orleans. As for Sebastian, he had given up trying to leave his own cat at home. He was a marmalade in orange and cream spots, stripes and swirls he called Spot. That might seem like an unlikely name for a cat, but he was named for the animal pet of Data, the ‘Star Trek: Next Generation’ android character, who had presumably looked up popular pet names, neglecting to specify ‘cat’ in his search. No matter how tight Sebastian locked up his place, Spot always managed to magically appear at his side. Of course, in another life, Queenie manifested as a cheetah, and Spot was a sun bear.

But the NOLA team also sported three sentinels. Now, that *had* been a well-kept secret… mostly because none of the three had been made fully aware of their status until recently. It seemed as if Declassification of the Stargate Project had ripped the cover off a *lot* of secrets.

Pride had known for some time that he was a bit… unusual. But in New Orleans, that kinda went with the territory, and he just kinda went with it. He just had never had a name for it, or an explanation, until recently. He had been a little startled, after the birth of his daughter, when a swamp ‘gater started trailing behind him, a creature few others seemed able to see… at least until Trip and Sebastian joined the team. Pride didn’t count the local characters… drunks, poets, musicians, obeah women and others with a supernatural touch, who would blink, then step aside for the thing. Pride knew his ability to see, hear, smell, taste and touch were out of the normal range… but he certainly wasn’t the only one who kept his talents under wraps. Gibbs, back in the
day, had always pretended it was his *gut*, and Dwayne had followed suit. But he had also learned that there were situations and environments that were a problem for him… unless he had a stabilizing presence nearby. His wife had been one. His daughter was another. For a while, he had taken to bringing his pet beagle Porthos with him wherever he went… until his canine companion died of old age. But by then his team had filled out, and Sebastian and Trip had those soothing and stabilizing qualities in abundance.

Given their jobs, it wouldn’t have come as a surprise to any sentinel expert when Chris and Gregorio had developed… issues, with their senses. So had Sonja Percy, until it made her destabilize to the extent that she had to take medical leave from the team. For whatever reason, Percy had been unwilling to take Dwayne’s advice about sticking close to Sebastian in those situations, and the way she tended to cling to Chris only aggravated her inability to cope with her changes. Now that Dwayne had read the articles on Sebastian and Trip’s website, he understood the problems a whole lot better.

Sentinels. Damn. He had always thought that was a myth. Something the trainers told rookies to put them in their place, at FLETC and any number of other academy, training and boot-camp-like settings. But until he read Dr. Sandburg’s work, he hadn’t really understood… and now it all made sense to him.

Even the damn ‘gater.

Chris had an otter of some kind lurking behind him, Gregorio a raccoon. Dwayne was pretty sure he knew a bunch of others who might have spirit guides trailing them around. Some he had met in Colorado Springs on Gibbs’ DiNozzo op. And with the heads up from the Reid kid, Dwayne made sure his two agents were quickly brought up to speed on their secret super hero identities, and sent an urgent message to Sonja to quit being an idiot and take care of herself.

But until Loretta spoke up, Dwayne had been somewhat reluctant to mention the whole sentinel thing out loud.

“I’m thinkin’ you’re right, Loretta. The HWS has been heavily recruiting those who seem a bit… handier with the senses than most folks. And we already knew they were hiring every zed who would give them a chance to prove they could be trusted. You’ve all read the Gemcity novels, and I reckon that tells us why. No, Sebastian, Trip, you don’t need to say anything. I think we can all pretty well guess. Hail the Furalin, right? But we all know what the Trust can do, and if they get control… it’s gonna be bad, for everyone. Most of NCIS is solid, but we all know Vance has a bee up his butt about zeds… or maybe just Tony DiNozzo, who knows. If he gets the order to shut down zeds in the Agency… there’s not much we’re gonna be able to do about it.”

Except go rogue, no one said, but all of them thought.

“So that’s the situation. We stand pat if we get the worst case, or we go with the HWS. And I gotta say… I wouldn’t say no to a space adventure or two.”

Sebastian practically wiggled in excitement at just the idea… but then he abruptly stopped and looked at his team mates… none of whom would look at him, or Trip. They were the ones, after all, on the firing line if Red Sea needed to be called.

“But…” he began, then swallowed. “But then we would be leaving our posts. I’m a field agent now. I took an oath, to serve and protect. Not just the law, our jurisdiction with the men and women of the Navy and Marines and their dependants, but also my country, and by extension at least, my planet. I can’t do that if I jump ship. No, I’m staying. This was the whole point of going for the training in the first place. And… well… there are plans… the HWS isn’t the only
organization out there with contingency plans, and I’ve kinda committed myself to be a part of that.”

“Whoa, wait…” Gregorio protested. “Are you talking about the Blue Jungle thing? A site for cats, fanfic and sentinel articles? You aren’t saying there’s a secret conspiracy for zeds on that thing, too, are you?” Her words might have expressed her doubts, but the very fact she asked the question meant she had already clued in.

Sebastian and Trip had confidentiality issues on this subject, and it was zed business, no one else’s after all, so they clammed up… but Loretta was a *very* smart lady, wise and able to keep her own counsel… until she deemed it time to open wide the doors.

“Come on, Tammy. Why do you think these two boys are so tech-savvy? Right from the first, the Internet has been a great leveler of classes, ages, creeds, colors, and genders. Where better for zeds to connect socially with others without being outed by their brands? It wouldn’t surprise me at all to find a *lot* of zeds are self-taught hackers and internet gurus… they can work from home, in isolation, from a place of safety, even underground and off-the-grid. The world wide web is one place where any marginalized group can congregate, if they have any kind of access, to commiserate, support and attempt to aid.”

Tammy Gregorio gaped as the implications suddenly became clear to her, and she glanced speculatively at her two team-mates with dawning respect, where before she had held mostly a slightly condescending fondness. “So, what you’re saying… our boys are running a sleeper cell of the revolution? All on a site devoted to advice about the care and feeding of cats? Wow. You go, guys! But… I gotta say, if it was me in your shoes, I’d still say yes to Red Sea.”

Triple P winced and shifted in his chair. Since his crippling injury at the hands of a bunch of zed-bashers (well before Queenie showed up in his life), he had become totally risk-averse. The idea of having a safe escape route away from all the Earth-side madness… well, that appealed to him, greatly. But Sebastian had a point. They were both admins on the Blue Jungle, and they had accepted a duty to their fellow zeds, awake and aware and hailed as the Furalin, or not.

“Damn, Sebastian,” he grumbled. “Did you have to put it like that? Leaving our posts? *‘The Call of Duty’*, zed cop edition? No, you’re right. We gotta stay. I bet the rest of the admins will say the same. I doubt if they’ll get the BAU, IRT, OSP or Cyber to take the out either. No, we stay. At our post.” And, regretfully, he sighed. “But if we have to call our own Red Sea, Bas’, we run like hell. Right?”

Sebastian began to get a stubborn set to his chin, and Trip could only groan.

Dwayne frowned mightily. “There’s no shame to retreating before overwhelming enemy forces, boys. If things do go from bad to worse, especially for zeds, I expect you to do what you have to, to run, and survive. Live to fight another day. Understood?”

Their boss wasn’t altogether sure he had got the agreement he wanted, but a nod of ‘understood’ was the best he thought he would get in the circumstances. He checked with Chris and Gregorio, and both stood a little straighter… all the confirmation Dwayne needed that his team were behind him, and all determined to have each other’s backs.

Just like always.

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One of the final notifications that Red Sea Protocols were going into effect was a dial-out to
another galaxy.

Jack sighed. “Richard, we’re calling Red Sea. Not a lot of details available yet, but we’ve included everything we have in the data-burst. With the gate sealed, they won’t be able to get any communications out to order you to… well, you won’t have to decide what commands you can stomach, anyway. But it means we may have trouble getting through as well, except on sub-space relay, which is restricted and slow as fuck. Sorry about this, but we all knew it was coming. And I’m not sending Carter back, so you’ll have to run the city on your own. Well, you, Sheppard, McKay and Teyla…”

Woolsey gave a sigh just as heavy as O’Neill’s. “Damn. Do you know who it is, at least?”

“Oh yeah… that son-of-a-bitch Landry. He’s the head of the Patriot organization. God knows who all is compromised… seems like he’s talked a lot of stupid people into following his lead, including SecDef, that asshole Fitzgerald at the FBI, Vance at NCIS, and we already knew about Stahl, who came out of hiding just for this. But once we slam shut the door, he’ll have no stargate, no subspace comms, and no way of reaching you to order you to open the doors or come home. So there’s that. We think Hayes is still alive, stashed away in the White House basement, and we’ve got the provisional government with us. Accept no substitutes, Richard.”

“Of course not. We’ll work on coming home as soon as possible…”

“Nah, sit tight for now. Keep an eye on the Wraith. We’ll want to know as soon as they’re on the move. But… you know. Use your best judgement. It’s your play now, and I won’t arm-chair quarterback from another galaxy, when we won’t know the score.”

“Just as well if we hold here, for the time being, I suppose. We have the city star-drive up and running, but the Wormhole drive needs work. The return to Pegasus burned out the major components, and McKay hasn’t had time to replace them yet.”

“Yeah, I remember that briefing. Okay… look, is Daniel or Vala around? Okay to give them your office for a quick goodbye? We got sixteen minutes left in this window, and who knows when we’ll be able to re-establish contact…”

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Of course, there had been one more ‘sticky wicket’ for General Jack O’Neill to consider as the final plans for Red Sea were worked out. He still hadn’t had an answer when they finally had to pull the switch… so he had dealt with it by *not*.

That sticky wicket had a name: Ziva David. And she was still sitting in a brig cell at the SGC. They had kindly arranged to open the brig cell door for her as their final act, but when the Patriot goons arrived, the Israeli spy and trained Kidon assassin would have to make her own deals.

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Once the last jumper docked on the *Daedalus* cargo deck, Vice Admiral (retired) AJ Chegwidden opened a channel to the commanders of the other ships. “Gentlemen, Red Sea protocols have been enacted. All our people are aboard or accounted for. Once General O’Neill and I have a chance to confer with the *legally constituted* provisional government, we’ll give the order to get this rag-tag fleet moving. Next stop will be the Beta Site. Make sure you’re battened down, ready for launch.”

Then AJ joined their VIP guests. Generals Maynard and Vidrine awaited in the *Daedalus* ward
room, along with Vice President Bruce Greenwood, Speaker of the House Raymond Massey, Homeland Director Tom Morrow and Col. Samantha Carter. At Carter’s back was the ever-watchful Master Teal’c of Chulak, charter member of SG-1 and honorary Tau’ri. Lt. Colonel Paul Davis was wandering around somewhere, no doubt harried beyond belief by the logistics he was trying to handle. But at the ward-room table, nobody looked very happy. Morrow had already told them of Hank Landry’s part in the day’s drama, and the sense of betrayal, the depths to which they had been played…

AJ could certainly relate. He had never been one of Landry’s cronies, like Jack, but he had to confess to a brief – very brief – moment of doubt. Was there a chance that Landry might still be playing the Trust? And how sure were they about his daughter, Dr. Carrie Lam?… But no. Lam, at least, was solid, and spitting mad at the estranged father she had never entirely trusted to be there for her.

And that was before the rat-bastard started whole-sale world-wide slaughter in the name of framing his rivals, and staging a fucking illegal military coup against the god-damned United States.

Then O’Neill arrived, traded dark looks with AJ as he sat down, to say, “I don’t suppose another Goa’uld symbiote…”

AJ shook his head. “No, Jack. Just a grade-A power-hungry asshole with delusions of godhood. He’s been in the pocket of the Trust since you had him replaced, as near as we can figure, had his hands in the rogue NID… and he’s got Samuels as his chief of staff.”

Jack winced. Robert Samuels, or… he would always be ‘Sparky’ to Jack.


“The good news,” Tom suggested, “is that at last our enemies have come out of their holes. They’re going to be all lined up, nice and public, in front of TV cameras in the White House press conference auditorium. When Atlantis gets back—”

Jack sighed. “Yeah, yeah. When Atlantis gets back. I have a feeling we’re going to be saying that a lot. I must admit it grates… I don’t suppose we can come up with a plan to take back the planet *before* they get back?”

General Francis Maynard, Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sighed. “Only if we want to make a mess of the place, Jack. Yes, we’ve got plenty of fire power up here with the ships, but extremely limited ground forces. We know they have a beam jammer, at least. So we can’t send in even a surgical strike, not on the White House. That’s just what they’ll be waiting for. Planning for. And they know every trick in our book. It’s their book too.”

Raymond Massey, Speaker of the House, shook his head, “We need to do this in as legal a manner as possible, or we’ll be just as criminal as they are. That means waiting for the evidence to prove us in the right. That’s why we left Secretary of State Pinsent in The Hague, to present our case for us. That’s why we sent what evidence we could out of Area 51 to any authorities we felt we could still trust.”

Okay, Jack could understand that point, he had made it himself, but…

“You want something worth going home to, right, General?” Sam Carter pointed out. “Unless you want to risk those bastards doing a scorched earth just to keep us from getting it back… And that will take the kind of clout Atlantis will give us, with the rest of the world, at least.”
There were nods all around the table. Jack glanced at AJ.

“So we wait for John, Rodney and Daniel to ride in and save our butts?”

Sam grinned. “Don’t forget Cam and Vala, sir, they’re SG-1 too. Not like they don’t have the practice.”

Jack had to shrug and grant her that one. He just wasn’t used to being on the ‘saved’ half of that equation. He felt just a little like Pauline, tied to the train tracks. “Okay. So-o… where do we stand with our evacuees? Just how upset are they with being pretty much kidnapped?”

Sam said, “We’ve been showing them live ZNN feeds. They understand the threat. We’ve had a few incidents, a few threatened divorces, some crying kids, but it’s not actually as bad as we thought it might be. I think the under thirties are all kind of excited to be going into space.”

“That could change really fast if we don’t get them settled pretty quick,” the VP warned. Vice President Bruce Greenwood had started out his career in public life with a stint in the Red Cross, organizing disaster relief all over the world. He would know all about what happened when a refugee situation went south.

“We have plans in place,” AJ assured him. “First stop is the Beta Site. We can off-load the non-combatants there with a sufficient security force of SG teams. We’ve got enough shelters there to accommodate everyone. They were built at the height of the Ori threat, to accommodate all the refugees we relocated, complete with a fully-equipped infirmary. We have sufficient supplies of food for a couple of weeks, at least. We’ll off-load the Peterson F-302 Snakeskinner squadron for added planetary defense, and we’ll get a shield dome over them, soon as. *Odyssey* will be on supply runs to our trading partners. Two jumpers are returning to patrol duty in the Solar System, while the rest of the BC-304s continue diplomatic and intel missions.”

Greenwood frowned. “You’re going on with those? Even with the situation on Earth, and Atlantis due back in a few months’ time? The Wraith… they’re that close?”

Jack and AJ traded glances.

Jack said, “We can’t afford to assume they’re not, Mr. Vice President. Without the Earth Stargate, we’ve lost our communications link with Pegasus.

“You never heard Ronon Dex talk about Sateda. His home world was about at our level of technology, only without ships, OWP or Shield, although they did have some pretty impressive weapons. Twenty million population. And then three hive ships arrived. Just three, to start with, but more and more arrived as word got out – free eats. A week later, twenty million people were dead, or stuffed in Wraith larders. Or worse, turned into runners with tracker chips, play-things for the Wraith. Then there’s Atlantis herself. All that technology, all that power, and she ended up sunk to the bottom of the sea while the Ancients ran for their lives. The Wraith simply over-whelmed them through sheer numbers. And there was *nothing* in the Pegasus Galaxy to stand against them in ten thousand years, nothing to limit their numbers except for food availability. That’s us, by the way. Even with the in-roads we were able to make, the Hoffan plague, the Asuran final solution, Michael’s little projects, the current civil war between hives, and the significant numbers of hives that elected for the retro-virus change… At this time, we don’t actually have *any* solid intel on what the present numbers of hives are, beyond *a lot*. You do the math on that.”

Greenwood nodded, solemnly. “Okay. If you need any help on the diplomatic front… I volunteer.”

Jack grinned. “Thanks, Mr. Vice President. We’ll keep it in mind.”
AJ leaned forward, “What we do need you to do, sir, is to address the fleet and all of our passengers. We do have the legally constituted provisional government of the United States on board, and they need to hear that, from you. Let them know we have a plan, and every hope that we can restore proper, legal order in the near future.”


AJ grinned. “When Atlantis returns.”

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Chapter End Notes

Âuthor Notes: Just as a matter of interest… Canadian actors Raymond Massey, Bruce Greenwood and Gordon Pinsent have all played US Presidents (real *and* fictional) in movies… multiple times. It’s a ‘thing’. We Canadians love the irony. So Keifer as President in *‘Designated Survivor’*? Not a surprise to us. Also: I’m imagining that at some point after *‘Continuum’*, the SGC acquired a few borrowed Atlantis jumpers, and provided a docking silo above the gateroom for them.
Two weeks in, and the Patriot Coup was still working day and night to consolidate their position.

Hank Landry stood at the window of the Oval Office, gazing morosely at the crowds building at the fence of the White House grounds, shaking placards and shouting cute little slogans. There were always protesters, of course. Even under Martial Law they didn’t quite have the nerve to arrest or forcibly evict the people, not when there were so many media trucks and vans perched close by. Somebody was *always* watching, in these times of cell phones and universal worldwide internet access. Their own home-grown fifth estate was out there in force, keeping avid watch, filming, recording, interviewing all the usual suspects. There were groups of civil liberties proponents, of course, unhappy with the suspension of the Constitution, legal experts questioning the authority and legality of their ‘provisional’ government… But there were also a fair number of zed supporters, alarmed at the wave of anti-zed sentiments expressed by the new regime. And the proliferation of pro-zed graffiti springing up everywhere, echoed in the signs out there at the fence, was concerning.

Hank sighed, reflecting that a new President usually got one hundred days to deploy his vision before the sharks started to circle. Hank wasn’t going to be given that long: he figured he’d be lucky to get a whole three weeks. He needed to supply at least a few successes to the watching public, and soon. Maybe even sooner, if his ‘supporters’ smelled blood in the water. He bristled a little at the Nazi references and accusing slogans being shouted to the waiting microphones. Too many were bandying about that phrase ‘Beware the Final Solution’… and so help him, if he heard anyone in his cabinet so much as whisper that guff…

Congress and the Senate, the largest part of them locked out of the loop with either the Patriots or the HomeWorld factions, had been as much taken by surprise by events as anyone else. In the unsettled and stressful confusion of Martial Law, not knowing who to listen to or who to believe, they had elected (pun there) a ‘wait and see’ approach. As for the Supreme Court, they were already growling about civil liberties and the Constitution, challenging justification for the pro-tem leadership, demanding to know when proper elections would be held… With Hayes’ Attorney General locked up in the basement with the others, Hank’s nomination an unpopular little squirt whose main qualification for the job was that he had been main counsel to GlobalTech and personal legal rep to Ms Vivian Gant (AKA Baal), no one at the Department of Justice liked where any of this seemed to be going. Their cooperation, therefore, was... undependable.

There was very little actual information coming from the White House, merely meaningless assurances that all was well in hand, under control, no cause for further alarm, and investigations into the widespread assassinations and ‘disappearances’ were ongoing, under the auspices of the NSA, CIA and FBI. This was news to actual members of those agencies, who couldn’t find anyone who was *officially* involved in any such investigations, unless it was their new bosses sitting on the Cabinet. When asked if any arrests had been made, the answer was vague, with no names mentioned. When asked the status of President Hayes, it was still, “as well as can be expected, and he is under constant medical supervision at this time, unable to take on the responsibilities of his office.” When asked when elections would be held to place a new government, answers were also vague... when President pro-tem Hank Landry was assured that all the perpetrators of the heinous coup were identified and apprehended. There were a few attempts by ‘sources close to the current White House staff’ to imply and accuse a so-called ‘Zed Conspiracy’ for the coup, but these rumours and hints were laughed out of credibility.
Under the virtual press blackout, the American public was coming to their own conclusions, and they weren’t sympathetic to the new regime. The latest polls were showing a trend, not just to dip their popularity (not that it had been high to begin with, tainted by widespread cynical suspicions and doubts), but to fall off a cliff. Very few were buying the ‘HWS did it’, or the ‘zeds are responsible’ arguments. Why the hell would O’Neill bother with a coup, they asked with some justification, when he was almost guaranteed a land-slide win a year next November, just by tossing his hat in the ring?

Presently, Hank held the Big Chair, by virtue of being the meanest son-of-a-bitch in the place, to hold power through fear, if nothing else. But Rafe Dante was riding hard on his tail, and might just be that little bit meaner. And at the moment, the only thing keeping Dante in line was the fact that if they failed, and right now the die might fall either way, whoever held the Oval Office would be the first on the chopping block, taking all the blame for the executions they had carried out to get here. Rafe would wait it out, see if there was any advantage to taking over, before he made his move.

But, another day, another briefing in the Oval Office.

Hank slid back into his metaphorical overalls and suspenders, plastered a wide confident smile on his face, and turned to confront his Cabinet.

“Well, folks, we got a full agenda today. We got two major issues to plan out. First off, what to do about the zed situation, which, God knows why, seems to be something of a hot button with the American Public. I’m thinking our second issue, the fact we plan to take out the Trust, once and for all, will be just the crowd-pleasing distraction we need to hide our tracks on issue one. But before we get into all that, Robert, why don’t you bring us up to speed on our current situation.”

Robert Samuels was actually pretty good at delivering bad news in a way that didn’t look *quite* so bad. Or at least highlighting the silver lining. Born politician, that one.

“We’re making significant progress with opening up the password encryptions on the various HWS systems,” Samuels began. “We’re in the process of recruiting the greatest minds in the world and assigning them to the SGC labs. Colonel Makepeace estimates no more than a week, and we’ll regain control of the Shield, OWP and Stargate. The crystals for beaming tech are almost complete as well, and we should be able to access the OWPs, at least, once we have those installed. But, even if that takes longer than expected, NASA has already retrieved the *Atlantis* shuttle module and prepped it for space.”

Hank nodded. What Samuels, and Makepeace, had told him privately, wasn’t *quite* so rosy a picture, but his Cabinet didn’t have to know that. The shuttle might be ready to go, but the construction of the rocket required to launch it into orbit was still six months out to completion. And a lot of the alien tech still required effems to initiate, if not to operate. Those few with the experience and proven ability were gone, along with the HWS exiles. And Landry was well aware that the Lucian efforts to throw untrained effems at the more dangerous toys never seemed to end well.

“And will we have the necessary… personnel, when we are ready to board the OWPs?” Dante challenged.

Samuels had an impressive poker face, didn’t even blanch at that.

“We have that situation well in hand, sir…”

Hank interrupted, to draw Rafe’s fire. “And that would bring us to the first item on the agenda for
today, if no one has any other questions?”

No one did. No one ever did, apart from Rafe, maybe that twit Bonneville, and Rafe raked the group with his own hard eyes, just daring them to get in his way.

“Then go to it, Bob.”

“Yes, Mr. President,” Samuels was carefully and deliberately deferential. “We have already begun Phase One of our Zed Initiative, since that can be accomplished as a matter of ordinary legal protocol. All zeds currently in the prison system, state and federal, are being prepped to transfer to our designated holding area.

“For security, it’s on a remote island, one of the San Juan islands off Washington State, is under our complete control, virtually inaccessible except from one small harbour, surrounded by deadly rocks and currents. It’s been thoroughly surveyed, blueprints made for future construction, tents and equipment delivered to begin transfers immediately. We’re currently setting it up as a refugee camp. We believe this location is ideal for managing the large numbers of inmates we anticipate, with minimal staff. Like Alcatraz, those waters are far too dangerous and cold for swimmers to survive long. The landing pier is fortified and guarded, as that’s the access point for delivery of food and supplies, as well as more detainees. The rest we’ll leave to the detainees themselves to manage.

“We have been attempting to locate all those pardoned and released by the previous administration… with… indifferent success. The legality of revoking their pardons may be… a grey area, but we expect the anti-zed backlash among the various law enforcement entities to assist us there. However, it seems those pardoned or paroled have all taken measures to… disappear off the grid. Directors Fitzgerald and Vance are looking into that for us. They do have assets experienced in fugitive retrievals.”

Hank lifted an eyebrow at the two directors in question, neither of whom were looking all that comfortable. “How’s that going, by the way, gentlemen?”

Victor Fitzgerald seemed to have swallowed a lemon whole, pips and all. “We’re talking around ten thousand missing zeds, Mr. President, so it’s going *very* slowly, given our limited manpower to begin with. I assume you’ve already been informed, that some of my people are… reluctant to follow direct orders. I have sanctioned them for insubordination and placed them on indefinite suspensions, until they agree to play ball. A few have resigned, instead.”

After his ultimatum to the NYC Missing Person’s Unit to take the lead in tracking down the missing zeds, the entire team had walked out in a case of ‘blue flu’, in support of team lead Jack Malone’s absolute refusal… including Victor’s own son Martin. That pattern had been repeated a dozen times all over the country.

“Frankly, we expected more help than we’ve been getting from the local LEOs across the country. All indications before this were that there was a considerable ‘anti-zed backlash’, as you call it, among law enforcement after Sulfur Springs. But this hasn’t translated to them reporting BLOOs on any paroled zeds in their jurisdictions. That assistance is crucial, considering the numbers we’re dealing with… We’ve been lucky to have just under a thousand turned in to us, so far.

“And those of my own agents who remain on the payroll are not as… effective as I would like.”

In fact, he was pretty damn sure the bastards were stone-walling the search altogether. His oh-so-cooperative Assistant Directors, Jack Fickler, Simon Sifter and John Ironside, were leading the way. Those guys had always been brown-nose supporters of Director Skinner... The units under
their aegis, headquartered in DC and Quantico, including the elite specialty units like IRT, BAU, Cyber and the like, were definitely being protected by these guys, with a wide-eyed ‘oblivious idiot’ act.

“Oh, you want me to suspend their normal operations, catching gangsters, serials and terrorists, tracking amber alert kidnappings, and go outside their normal, *legal*, jurisdictions? Won’t that... you know... look... *bad*?”

And, yeah, it would... so Sifter, Ironside and Fickler were getting away with it.

And their subordinates were taking the bit in their teeth and running with it. Otherwise a sharpshooter and retrieval expert like Ian Edgerton would have found half of the missing zeds by now… and he reported he was on the trail of… oh look, one. And hadn’t caught up to him yet. Of the other FBI go-to man-hunter experts? Luke Alvez kept insisting his work for the BAU was all-consuming. He’d get around to the search when they were case-free. As if that ever happened. And Matt Simmons was still wandering around the world with the IRT, too busy and too far from adequate communications to answer his calls. Or so Jack Garrett claimed. If Victor didn’t know better… and he wasn’t altogether sure he did… he might almost think those three men were actually *aiding* the target zeds to escape into hiding, rather than tracking them down to take them into custody.

He would dearly like to turn it all over to the US Marshall’s Service, but that bastard Sam Gerard had categorically refused. Once pardons or parole were lawfully granted, not his problem anymore, without a signed federal warrant by a sitting higher-court judge, an affidavit to justify and overturn the previous release orders, or brand new charges for every single case. And no, a ‘pro-tem’ president’s word wasn’t enough for him.

“Oh hunh,” Hank nodded, having indeed heard most of this already. “And you, Leon?”

“NCIS is a small agency, sir. We have made this operation a priority, but our personnel is stretched thin as it is, especially with the anti-Trust assignments.”

Leon hadn’t actually had to suspend or can anyone… yet… but mostly because he had been smart enough to not even approach the wrong people. For instance, he had left the entire Los Angeles OSP right out of this mess, and anyone expecting Dwayne Pride to ride the anti-zed band-wagon was doomed to disappointment.

“I can try to find more personnel to assign to the zed retrievals, if that’s what you want, but it will seriously reduce the manpower I have available for the Trust offensive, or our regular case load. Unless the zeds are actually serving, or have served, in the Navy or Marine Corps, or are relatives of military personnel in those branches, or have perpetrated crimes against said groups, I have no mandate to pursue them. Whereas anti-terrorist actions *are* within my purview.”

Leon had carefully rehearsed this speech, and delivered it more than once already, to Samuels and Landry both. But, what the actual fuck, zeds weren’t his mandate, or any of his business. Why should he have to pick up the slack for that bastard Fitzgerald, anyway, if he couldn’t run his own agency? He glanced at his newly-assigned boss, SecNav Ulysses Stahl, to see him frowning and abstracted, not really paying much attention. No support to be expected there, then. What a surprise.

And no one even *hinted* at the serious ground-swell of grass roots resentment for the current ‘government’ and their obvious anti-zed sentiments. The assassinated high-profile people with that bias had been unpopular in the extreme, except by very small groups of their fanatical followers. Their deaths were shrugged off as ‘no loss’ by the average American…
What no one was shrugging off, however, was the wide-spread graffiti campaign going on, pretty much *everywhere*, not only in the States, but all over the World. Painted on every wall, the sides of every freight train car, up on bill boards, were swastikas inside red circles with a slash and a ‘Z’ painted in red overtop, reference to the zed wrist brands. Slogans like ‘Patriot = Nazi’, and ‘Beware the Zed Final Solution’. There was an uneasiness being felt everywhere that their leaders were no longer to be trusted, and that worse still was coming. Just because zeds might be the *first* targets… no longer meant others could consider themselves safe. Dr. Spencer Reid’s essays on serial killer victimology told them that much, and were being published in every newspaper and magazine, and discussed on every TV and radio news program.

Hank Landry contemplated Vance’s arguments. “No, you’re right, Leon. I’d rather have your people working on the Trust Offensive, as you call it. Victor, the zed retrievals are your problem to sort out. Get it done.”

With a glance, Samuels took up the reins again.

“Phase Two, of course, will be re-instating the Zed Registration laws. Since that move may be… unpopular with the public, we plan to wait until we’re riding a wave of approval… for instance, the defeat of a major international terrorist ring. We plan to make the announcement once we have the Trust in our hands. At that point, we will also attempt to make the connection between the Trust and HWS. It might be implied, for instance, that their lack of success taking down Baal and Nun and their organizations was due to collusion on the part of the NID. Which is actually true. We can stretch that, by extension, to blame Hammond and O’Neill. That should also shore up our own credibility, and enable us to justify the zed conspiracy theory. Which, I’ll admit, is pretty thin at the moment.

“Phase Three will begin once we have prepared the necessary basic infrastructure at our holding facility, code-named Bleak House. Eventually, we plan for it to contain all zeds on US soil. Clearing the ground and construction of pre-fab structures has already begun, but we can make do with temporary shelters for now. The Bleak House Island is well big enough to hold the estimated three million zeds in our population. We’re already moving in the prison transfers, and are preparing to take in the recovered parolees, once found. As more sections of the facility are built, we’ll bring in more detainees.

“Because this is obviously an immense undertaking, we have prioritized lists of those zeds we feel should be detained first… the more prominent, influential, educated or talented among them, those with the highest public profile. For the moment, we are making note of those zeds presently in government employ, including any of the alphabet agencies. But we intend to leave them alone, for now. Since these internments might cause a certain amount of… resistance among the general population, we need to move quickly and quietly to take control. Once that is done… out of sight, out of mind.”

Hank lifted an eyebrow as he looked out over his squirming Cabinet members. Just daring one of them to say it… Nobody said “Final Solution”. They thought it, but they didn’t say it. If there were some in the room who shifted uneasily at this plan, they made no effort to object, or even question. Hank hadn’t expected anybody would.

“How soon on that, Bob?”

“As I said, we’ve already begun to move in the prison transfers… about fifty thousand of those, mostly housing them in tents for now, but the Pacific Northwest is cold and wet… we need something a little more secure anyway, certainly before winter hits. Those transfers will be completed by the end of this week. We can take about a hundred thousand in total right now, and
expect to have pre-fab shelters completed by the end of the month, using inmates as a work force. Construction of the structures to accommodate all three million will take almost a year to complete, but we have a schedule to open up housing block by block.”

What Samuels *didn’t* say, of course, was that the planning and design for the island ‘community’ had been adapted from the German construction of work camps and stalags from World War II. Not a good allusion to make right now, all things considered.

“We’re still debating the timetable for arrests. We may not have enough manpower to take everyone at once, hence the priority lists. Either way, justifying mass ‘detainments’ may be… challenging. It’s not illegal to *be* a zed. Not yet, anyway, and I can’t see getting that by either House or the Judiciary in the present climate.”

Fitzgerald shrugged. “Call it protective custody, then. We already have all those alien abductions of zeds to prove they’re at risk.”

Samuels lifted an eyebrow, and made a note.

And then Hank heard it… from pretty much the last person he expected. Although, actually, Vice Admiral Roger Bonneville had been unexpectedly silent up to now, unlike his outspoken and stupid comments in the first Patriot Cabinet meeting.

“Protective Custody my ass! It really is a Final Solution…”

“Pardon me, Roger?” Hank said softly with a deceptively easy-going smile. “You had something to say?”

“Yes, I have something to say!” the man retorted, surprisingly, rising from his seat near the back and going red in the face. Hank hadn’t thought he’d have the guts. “This Bleak House of yours? You won’t even have to build ovens or gas chambers, all you’ll have to do is drop ‘em in the ocean, let the currents and the cold kill ‘em! Now don’t get me wrong, I got no axe to grind here, one way or another… I may not want zeds in my Navy, but to kill ‘em all? That’s three million people!”

Samuels offered soothingly, “We aren’t going to *kill* them, sir…”

Hank gave a feral grin. “No, we’re gonna *sell* ‘em! The Lucians will take all we have. If they balk, there are plenty of other planets out there with caches of Ancient toys needing someone to make ‘em work. Not to mention countless independent entrepreneurs who’ve been collecting Ancient salvage for years, if not centuries… if we approach him the right way, I bet we can even get Harry Maybourne to trade us puddle jumpers for a few zeds. All we need is the Stargate opened for business, or even a hatchway through the Shield.”

“Yeah! The *slavery* business! To *aliens* for God’s sake! The United States of America, leader of the *free* world, built on the principals of justice and freedom and civil liberties, going into the slave trade… *again*!” Bonneville protested.

“Tell you what, Roger,” Hank offered. “You wanted a Secretary Chair in the Cabinet… how’s about we make you SecZed? Secretary of Zed Affairs? You’re so concerned for their welfare, have at it. You can run Bleak House any way you like… a kinder, gentler warden over a bunch of criminal effems. And your first directive is to get that facility built and ready for occupation by year’s end.”

Dante lifted an eyebrow. “‘Occupation’… interesting word choice there, Mr. President.”

Bonneville sat rigid and horrified, still appalled by what this was turning into… but looking
around, he saw zero support from anyone else in the room. They all avoided his eyes. He gulped…
and realised he had one choice here. Yes or no… and No would carry the threat of not being
permitted to leave the White House grounds at all. If he were *lucky*, he’d join the legitimate
government in the basement cells.

With the barest nod, he accepted the appointment as SecZed.

“Wonderful! Congratulations, Roger, on the new appointment. But I think we’ve flogged this one
enough... Let’s leave the zed issue aside for the moment,” Hank suggested, sensing a certain
restless uneasiness in the crowd.

None of them realized just how critical it might be to get all effems out of circulation and corralled,
as soon as humanly possible. It wasn’t just their ability to use Ancient tech that made this a vital
necessity, or the need to block the Trust and Lucians, or even his own lingering prejudice against
them. If Jack O’Neill was right, and they were direct descendants of the Ancients themselves…
who knew what hidden powers they possessed? They had certainly proved amazingly resistant to
being caught, or held, by others. And how exactly did they *do* that? Hank’s gut was telling him
he needed to know, and needed to have those mysterious abilities under his control.

But there was no need to reveal any of that to this crowd. Even with Bonneville successfully
quelled, a few in the ranks were beginning to show signs of balking. Someone whispered, just loud
enough for everyone in the room to hear, although Hank couldn’t tell who actually said it, “Think
‘they ordered me’ will work this time?”

Hank was tempted to shelve the whole zed venture, at least as far as the Cabinet was concerned.
He’d take it off-line, to deal with privately and away from the heat of all this... attention. He didn’t
need to provoke more resistance than he was already facing. Bad enough that Stahl over there was
eying him suspiciously. And kept asking why Senator Aubrey Evans was still sitting in a federal
cell, awaiting trial for treason. As if Hank needed even one more former Trust leader hanging
around. The Senator wasn’t much more than a political hack, now that he’d lost all backing,
financial and political, and therefore of no use to them.

“Go on with the briefing, Bob. Let’s go on to the Trust Offensive. Putting a known terrorist group
out of action, when it’s been running amok for almost a decade, will be just the feather in our cap
we need at this point, to keep the masses from staging a mutiny,” and he sent a smirk to Vice
Admiral Bonneville, remaining thankfully silent this time. “And so far, those bastards still believe
I’m loyal to them, so hopefully, they’ll never see it coming.”

Samuels nodded.

“We have a complete list of Trust and Trust-sympathizers, world-wide, and although we cannot act
directly against those outside our borders, we have CIA teams watching, and waiting to alert the
relevant governments of treasonous enemy actions on their soil. They have less desire to see the
Trust conspiracies in their countries gain the upper hand than we do. I think we can depend on
them to prevent foreign Trust from becoming our rivals and enemies. And when they decide to
move, our teams will be ready to take out any who escape the nets.

“As for our own nests… we already know every member, lab, training, or barracks facility, bolt
hole and asset they have left. The trick will be to coordinate our strikes to get them all at once. We
don’t expect any resistance from any of the civilians, scientists mostly, they’ll play ball with us as
long as we let them keep working on their pet projects. And that will be in our labs, under our
supervision. It’s the leadership, the military and security sweeper assets we need to worry about.
Any warning at all, and they’ll either stage last-ditch battles, or flee and go underground. We may
not get another shot at this.”
“Then we better make it count,” Hank warned. “Baal and Nun?”

“Still at the mansion in the Hamptons. Our number one priority. We have eyes on them, and the property is surrounded, 24/7. At present, they’ve got a full house: Mr. Greer, the remains of his Decima organization, and several former IOA plants: Franklin Murphy and Emile Roget. We think the *Nala* is also still on the grounds.”

Ah yes… the one space-capable craft presently on Earth, happily supplied with the full package of shields, cloak, weapons and transporters… That cargo runabout, small as it might be, was the single most valuable token on the table at the moment. And maybe it couldn’t pierce Carter’s Planetary Shield, but it was still the only game in town if anyone, say a dethroned President pro-tem, should need a quick get-a-way. That was no doubt exactly why Baal and Nun were keeping it in their back forty.

“Okay. Let’s go over the plan.”

Teams trained in SWAT and anti-terrorist actions from the FBI (and still under Fitzgerald’s thumb) and from NCIS, would be directed to raid multiple Trust locations in the US. Their intel on these locations, facilities, including any defenses or security precautions, was complete. Samuels or Makepeace had been the ones to set these up in the first place. It should be child’s play to take them all down, and they had more than enough seasoned agents to deploy, surround and assault each one.

There was no need for a repeat of Waco or Ruby Ridge this time. Prisoners would be taken, if they cooperated, and incarcerated in a special facility, under the ‘Patriot Act’ legislation… oh the irony. There, they would be checked over for goa’uld infestation, either as symbiote controlling the body, or in the belly of a jaffa, and ‘freed’. Landry hadn’t decided what to do with any of them after that, symbiote or human… his preference would have been to just shove them out the stargate to some other planet… maybe habitable, maybe not, or maybe just dump them. Options were unlimited, after all… Hadante seemed a good choice. Or better yet, Atlantis. Or maybe Harry Maybourne’s doorstep. Unhappily, that wasn’t possible at this time. Just as well, because some of these schmucks may yet prove useful to Hank.

There was one specially designated high-security prison to hold these ‘traitors’ to the US. It was helpfully half-empty right now, because all of the zeds had already been moved elsewhere. Those single gender inmates left could easily fill other large holes in the prison populations of other facilities. This facility would include not only Trust members, the sweeper teams, and any political or financial sympathizers (and Hank’s definition of ‘sympathizer’ might be a little looser than most, to include the hapless Aubrey Evans) but also the remaining fugitives who used to belong to Decima, and their boss, Greer.

All that remained was to assemble their forces, arm and equip them, and determine a date and time to strike.

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In a secret lair under the streets of New York City…

“Our latest number appears to belong to NCIS Special Agent Anthony D. DiNozzo Jr.”

Lionel Fusco perked up his head at that. “Agent Tommy? Cool.”

The rest of the team looked at him like he was crazy. Even Bear tilted his head to one side in a “huh?” expression.
“Oh come on. You know. Declassification? The Gemcity stories thinly disguised as fiction? NCIS Very Special Agent Tommy, zed and space cop? Agent Afloat on the Ancient lost city of Atlantis? Come on! My kid loves those stories. Me, I think the first three, the LJ Tibbs and McGregor ones, were pretty lame, okay as procedurals maybe, but garbage at characters and plotting… the zeds-in-space ones are a lot better. Agent Tommy is based on Tony DiNozzo, the real Atlantis NCIS Agent Afloat.”

Sameen Shaw, looking over Harold Finch’s shoulder, pointed something out. “So he’s HWS. His father, Anthony D. DiNozzo Sr., was one of the people assassinated in the Night of the Long Knives. Oh! So was his cousin, Crispin Paddington, who was part of the IOA.”

Jarod, pursuing his own researches, said, “Yes, but DiNozzo was reported missing, with his three-year-old daughter Tali, weeks before that. There’s been no reports of him having been seen since, and there’ve been FBI and Interpol teams scouring the planet for him. According to my sources, he’s of special interest to the BAU and the IRT… neither team are fans of the new administration, or the new FBI director, and the feelings are mutual. The case notes state that the kidnapping was arranged by Eli David, the child’s grandfather. Ex-Director of Mossad, heavily involved with the Trust and Lucian Alliance. It was first suspected DiNozzo was being trafficked off-world as a zed with alien tech experience… then they had intel that he and his daughter were back on Earth, somewhere.”

John eyed his newest partner. “Where do you *get* this stuff?”

Jarod grinned. “Friends in low places.”

Harold sighed. “So the Machine would see no point in passing this information to the usual official sources on the Relevant File, if he’s determined to be at risk somehow. But if the BAU and IRT can’t find him, how can we?”

At this point, Root swept in and supplied, “I don’t think we have to look very hard, Harry. If the remnants of the Trust have DiNozzo and his kid, then all we have to do is find out where the White House special Trust Offensive teams intend to strike. And it looks like most of their forces are going to be concentrated on a property in the Hamptons…”

John and Jarod traded rueful grins. Yeah, they probably knew *exactly* where Root had got *her* intel.

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Gibbs was in his basement, of course, sanding the hell out of a spare piece of wood… too angry, too guilt ridden, perhaps too drunk, to want to risk working on any part of the boat. He had chased everyone away this time… Ducky, Fornell, even Abby, drinking away his three-month suspension for the unauthorized op he had lead in Colorado Springs. He wasn’t sure at this point if Vance would let him come back at all… he wasn’t sure he wanted to go. He sure as hell didn’t like all the anti-zed rhetoric that was coming out of Washington, and his own Agency’s head office. It made his gut itch.

It also got him suspicious… because he was seeing mixed messages under it all. Yeah, zeds in the Agency were being singled out. There were hints that their services might soon be determined to be ‘superfluous to requirements’, the first to be laid off with the next round of budget cuts. But, at the same time, the various regional offices and specialized teams were being restructured slightly, to allow for the assistant and deputy directors, and the leads in smaller Resident Units, to make the final decision on hiring, firing and staff issues. He had taken calls from Tobias, Hetty and Dwayne suggesting that this was not unlike similar moves being made by the Assistant Directors over at the
FBI, to cut off their superior’s legs if it came to a demand that all zeds be ‘terminated’.

Not that Gibbs cared overly much. Someone else’s problem. Privately, he figured Vance throwing in with the so-called ‘provisional government’, would be the final nail in the guy’s coffin. Unelected bastard traitors all, certainly not the ‘Patriots’ they claimed to be. Vance had always been too much of a political player, hedging his bets, riding the fence, all so that he could cling to his chair. It was going to back-fire on him this time, when Atlantis returned and straightened out the whole god-awful mess. And until then… maybe Gibbs didn’t want any part of what Vance and NCIS had become. He knew he wasn’t alone in that.

Yeah, when Atlantis got back… where his son TJ was right now, with his ‘momma Tey’. And, Jesus… a feisty, kick-ass woman who didn’t stand for his shit, had fiery red hair and was a stone looker to boot… yeah, Teyla Emmagan was *exactly* his type. And oh-so-taken, or he might have gone mad and attempted to make her ex-wife number four. Tony had snagged himself a star, that was for sure.

Yeah… Tony… and Tali. God, he was such an ass-hole. Not even bastard, he had degraded significantly, even from that low bench-mark for unacceptable behavior.

He contemplated going upstairs to pull out a full bottle of bourbon, this one getting down to the dregs, when he heard the door upstairs open, and familiar, if rarely heard, footsteps cross the floor to the top of the basement stairs.

Gibbs stood, still and furious.

“You got a lot of nerve, showing up here, Ziva. What makes you think I won’t arrest your ass and turn you in?”

Those exotic black eyes were flat, and her expression impenetrable. But then, Gibbs was pretty damn sure he had never read the woman right, even from the first. He had always been too blinded by seeing a grown-up Kelly in her place, or even a living-breathing Caitlin Todd. She had played into that, being what he wanted, never showing what she really was. But this was a Ziva without any masks… without the need, any more. And it was even more startling than seeing Tony without his layers upon layers of protective coloration.

Ziva descended the stairs slowly, finally arrived at the bottom and sat on the last riser.

“There’s no point arresting me, Gibbs. The… present administration has no use for me, and no grudge or call to keep me in chains. Take me in to Vance if you want, you will see. He’ll just let me go again. I have literally nowhere else on the planet to go.”

“That means you think you can crawl back here? After all you’ve done? You sold Tony into slavery, for all they tell me. To aliens, for God’s sake! And where’s Tali? Where’s your beloved daughter you wanted to see so bad?”

The briefest flash of a spark lit those dark, dark eyes. “I know exactly where Tali is. She’s with my father, right now. He’s been in touch. We have an emergency method of communication…”

“Of course you do.”

“… an internet drop-box for messages. As soon as I escaped the SGC, I made contact. He sent me an invitation, to come meet him. He’s in the Hamptons, somewhere on Long Island. He has Tali and he wants me to join him.”

Gibbs studied her closely. “So?”
“So, I need your help. To get Tali back.”

Gibbs outright laughed in her face. “You gotta be kidding me! After Colorado Springs? After all the lies, all the manipulations, all the times you hung me and my team out to dry so you could obey your Daddy’s orders? Ari? Kate Todd? Rivkin? Israel? Somalia? Military@Home? Christ, Ziva! How gullible do you think I actually am?”

“I followed my father out of duty. You understand duty, Gibbs. You understand sacrifice. I have paid and paid and paid… to serve Israel. I thought that, if nothing else, Aba was loyal to his oaths to Israel, to our country, our people. I may have questioned his methods, his ruthlessness…but not his ultimate goal. To protect our people. And I am a soldier. It is my lot, my training, to obey my superiors without question. To trust that their goals are mine. After losing my mother, my sister, Ari… all I had left was Aba and my dedication to a higher, a greater, purpose. Yes, I lied, manipulated, did everything I could to worm my way into your confidence, into your team… that was the mission, after all. I embraced it, for the good it would do for Israel. Or so I was promised. But as long as my place was secure, I was no threat to any of you. Not you, not McGee, Jenny or Vance…”

“But Tony?”

“Your Wild Card. I badly miscalculated there. I admit, he fooled me, made me believe he was a man-child, a frat-boy, a joke, Agent Meatball. And there were only rare times he showed his true colors… Still, I knew, he never trusted me, never accepted me, never did more than play at being in my sexual thrall. Much as I discounted him as a serious threat to me, I could never be easy around him. Oh, he was the good partner, on the job, always, but… he was always watching me, waiting for me to show the least crack, the least hint that all was not as I took care to seem. So yes, I was definitely a threat to him, and therefore he was a threat to me. Even if it was just the competition to win your favor… It was him or me, Gibbs, from the very first. You knew that. Didn’t you?”

The gleam of anger was there and gone.

“But that’s all gone now. All of it, gone. Because my father has betrayed everything, everyone, even the planet. He kept saying he would have the power to re-order the world. That working with aliens, becoming their cat’s-paw and toady, he was ensuring he retained leadership over the Earth. Then no one would dare attack Israel. I think he even envisaged turning the Lucian Alliance space guns on Syria, Iran, Iraq, the Palestinian colonies… any nation daring to attack us. Maybe even eradicating them altogether. A simple ‘oops’, and they’d all be gone, and only Israel would be left, surrounded by nothing but radioactive craters and hot barren sand, fields turned to glass.”

Gibbs hardened his heart. He’d been fooled too often. “And you don’t want that?” he challenged.

Ziva turned empty, defeated eyes on him. “If the Wraith come, we will all die, Gibbs. I have seen the reports. I have watched the videos. All of Earth is nothing but a buffet to them. And the Lucians cannot, will not, fight them. The Trust, and these… ‘Patriots’, she spat the name like an expletive, “are only leaving the doors wide open for them to swoop in and make all of us their food. And my father is too blind, too swelled up with his ambition and his hunger for power… I had thought his ambition was to lead Israel into a new age of security. But no. As Dr. Reid likes to say, Security is a superstition only. It does not exist, nor do the children of men experience it. And my father’s ambitions have turned to greed and selfishness. He has betrayed me, our entire dead family and their sacrifices, our nation, our people.”

She looked Gibbs square in the eyes, and her own burned now, bright and clear and as honest as he had ever seen. “I want him to burn. I want him dead. But first, I would take that one thing he
desires above all else… the child he will turn into just another pawn and tool in his ceaseless war for power.”

Gibbs studied her, hard, wishing he was a little more sober for this… and he reached, for the first time in a very long while, for those senses he always felt on the edges of his awareness…

Truth. At last, this was the truth.

Devotion, dedication, duty, all soured, the desire of a daughter for her father’s love and approval, long denied… the pain of all her obedience to unpleasant, hateful, even devastating orders… all of it betrayed. All her beloved family given over, claimed and dead, subservient to a man who didn’t appreciate or honor any of it, only demanded more, more, more…

Whatever Ziva had ever felt for her father had all burned to hatred, strong, searing, hot and bright as a firestorm inside her.

“I’d be seven kinds of an idiot to believe you, Ziva,” Gibbs told them both, wearily.

Ziva merely nodded, and waited for the verdict.

“Okay then. Let’s go. But if you cross me this time… I’ll kill you myself.”

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Moonlight glistened off the ocean whitecaps rolling onto the Long Island beaches. A few of the mansions of the rich, powerful or famous were lit up with parties and celebrations… most were dark and empty on this mid-week night. They awaited the weekend, when their workaholic residents would return for some much-needed R&R. This was a sanctuary from the chaos that was New York City, the city that never sleeps.

One such refuge was a little more isolated and apart than the others. No other property had a line of sight on their private cove. Rows and woodlots of trees had been purposely planted and nurtured to provide not just a wind-break, but to obscure them from even their closest, yet still distant, neighbors.

So it wasn’t much of a surprise that the SWAT, FBI and military-armed watch-posts surrounding the property of one B. A. Allworthy had passed notice, either by the locals, or the residents. Surveillance bristled from the posts, but failed to pierce the jamming shell around the mansion and attached patio, pier, boathouse and beachfront. Meticulous records had been kept, however, of who had driven onto the property, and who had left it. There was a priority list with check marks and cross-outs, to report the current occupants to the various team leads. Most were considered high-value targets, serious threats to the national security, known terrorists and enemies of the state.

All true, of course.

But the attention of the assault teams was focused inward, not outward to the surrounding scrub grass, high sand dunes, and plentiful cover. And with the advantage of sentinel senses, John Reese, Jarod and Sameen Shaw had little trouble gaining approach. Root, dressed in dark clothing, her cat-burglar past of benefit on this occasion, had the Machine in her ear, directing her to a blind spot in the wall of surveillance. With these advantages, she didn’t need to be a sentinel herself.

Root announced, “The command to start the offensive will come in a little over an hour. We need to be in and out in that time.”

“Any idea where this space ship is parked?” John asked.

“No,” Harold reported from their base over the ear-wigs, “but I’ve tapped the mansion security network. I have eyes on… Oh good, Mr. Greer is here, and it looks like he has that blond woman and his last, best, elite private Decima squad with him. They’re in the library, going over some kind of map. Just now emerging on the patio… two gentlemen and one woman… I have no ID on the woman yet, but, one of the men is Eli David himself, the other is… a disgraced and fired CIA agent named Trent Kort.”

John groaned at that name.

“Something you’d like to share, Mr. Reese? Another old friend?”

“No one is a friend of Kort, Harold. Believe me.”

“Oh my!” Harold almost yelped.

“What! What is it?” they all demanded.
“Their eyes… they just… flashed! Dear Lord… I do believe those two men are now infested with Goa’uld parasites! If the Declassification data is to be believed, this will make them far stronger, faster and more resilient than a normal human. They may carry a variety of… unusual weapons. A personal shield from one report, vulnerable only to slower moving objects, like a thrown knife… and a hand weapon that can blast you across a room, or fry your brains in your skull. Take care, team!”

Sameen turned her head to one side… “Heads up, guys. We’ve got company on our six. One male, upper fifties but military fit, smells of bourbon, Old Spice and sawdust… one female, wearing eau de cordite. Both armed. Man’s a sniper. I think… I think he’s a sentinel, or was once. Neither of them seem to smell of the same base barracks as our watch post guys… competition?”

Root listened a moment, then said, “Make contact, Sameen. But take care. They’re both lethal and pretty damn twitchy right now. But She says they’re here to help.”

Meanwhile, Harold announced, with a little less alarm in his voice this time, “Oh my. Our two goa’uld and their girlfriend just… disappeared. Just took a step, and… disappeared.”

Jarod said, “That’ll be our cloaked spaceship, then. I suggest we check that out first.”

Nun felt his ire increase as his eyes flashed once more. “You’re the one who put Landry in charge! And now you say we can’t trust him?”

Baal also felt his eyes flare, impatient with this larva he was forced by circumstance to take as his partner. “And you’re the one who recruited him in the first place. I was just trying to recreate an alternate universe time line that would better serve us than this one. But… My dear Lord Nun. Surely you know better… we can’t trust *anyone*, not with the kind of power we just handed Landry. It’s clearly gone to his head, if he isn’t accepting our calls or taking our advice. And remember, he’s left our Triad senator in jail this whole time, when he should have given him amnesty and released him, as a valued ally. So now you see why I think it best to decamp, take our last supporters to a more secure location. One Landry, Samuels and Makepeace know nothing about.”

“And you have such a place?” Nun demanded suspiciously.

“Of course. I always have one or two surprises up my sleeve. I also now have access to the various resources and bolt-holes my host so thoughtfully prepared. But to get to any of them, I need the *Nala*.”

Nun glowered. “You don’t take that ship *anywhere* without me. I don’t trust *you*, my dear Lord Baal.”

Well, Baal thought with an inward sigh, it had been worth a shot. “Very well. Are we then to take everyone? Your Miss Smith here I can understand, she has proved her dependability and usefulness. But the others? I believe Greer and his associates are currently quite occupied, reviewing plans to locate Mr. Finch’s Machine. Or at least, one of its control points. He seems to think he’s found one somewhere on the New York City Underground.”

Nun shrugged. In his view, Greer and Decima had been more trouble than they were worth, so far, and had failed at every assignment they had been given. For instance, it would have been very helpful to have the assistance of the Samaritan system at this stage. Had his jaffa troops failed him to such a degree, he would have found a suicide mission to send them on by now. As he had after
they lost Jorac and the Ancient ship-works there.

“Leave them to it, if it keeps them busy and out of our business. Greer is every bit the power-hungry idiot Landry is. And as little to be trusted, evidently.”

The wary duo paced each other out to the landing spot where the *Nala* awaited, the ever-present Miss Smith tagging after, computer laptop bag slung over her shoulder.

Cheda looked up from his captain’s chair, totally bored, and merely nodded to the two goa’uld, ignoring the human minion on their heels. At this hour he was alone on the *peltak*, the rest of his crew asleep up at the mansion. His cousin and the others of his clan needed their proper rest to be efficient in their jobs, but he was unwilling to leave his ship without at least one person he trusted on board. And he really only trusted himself to that extent. Well, he was presently alone but for the pilot chained to the controls, and two burley ex-Decima guards. They were there to make sure Cheda didn’t take the *Nala* away somewhere. Because none of this lot trusted *him* any more than he trusted *them*.

With a jerk of his head, Baal signaled the guards to retreat, presumably to play sentry at the entry ramp.

Cheda gestured to the viewing monitor at the front of the *peltak*. “You realize we’ve got armed troops all around this property? At least two dozen men, all heavily armed, and I have also detected several transport trucks moving up the main road, also filled with men and armaments. If you decide we need to evacuate, it’ll take at least an hour to warm up the engines from a cold start.”

Since at least some Tau’ri warriors had been positioned around the estate for days now, Cheda felt no special urgency to evacuate immediately. His crew were aware, and were ready to decamp at a moment’s notice. And if they got here first, and he could lift off before the rest of those minions of the goa’uld ‘Lords’ made it out… well. As he had heard his pilot say, too bad so sad.

Tony had been dozing off in his navigator’s seat. Tali was locked up in their quarters for the night, after an afternoon of being whiney and fractious. The weather had been cold and rainy the past few days, keeping them both cooped up inside, and only now showed signs of clearing. Usually their scheduled morning play periods and afternoon naps helped the toddler control the boredom and inactivity of staying in a restricted space for hours on end. But the days of bad weather, unwilling to leave her father’s side but desperate to run and play in the open air, drove the poor wee thing into a temper. Tony could hardly blame her, as he felt very much the same. Hopefully, she was now sound asleep. Maybe their friends in the Blue Jungle could help her find her equilibrium. Lord knows, Tony was getting pretty whiney and impatient himself. After a few… incidents, the Lucian Alliance thugs had realized that a *kormac* collar alone wasn’t enough to keep a zed at their post, so continued to chain their slaves to their vessels as well. Tony’s had a padlock on it that attached to his collar on one end, to the pilot chair on the other. There was just enough play on it to allow him to stand up and take a couple of steps, although not far enough to reach the captain’s chair.

He roused instantly when the goa’uld arrived. He and Cheda had been watching the accumulating troops around their base for almost a week, and the sudden massive influx since the afternoon. There had been a few sitting in various watch-post blinds since the coup, but now they seemed to be gearing up for an all-out attack. Tony wasn’t sure if this was a good thing for him and Tali or not. It tasted just a bit of frying pan into fire, for his comfort.

Baal thought about the news as he watched the monitor. “This is expected. Obviously, Landry is ready to make his move against us. The fool. The Tau’ri prefer to begin their attacks at dawn, but I’m not sure we want to rely on that. Okay, new plan. I’ll use the transport beam to go get my tel’tak…”
“Your tel’tak! You have a tel’tak?” Nun demanded.

“Of course I have a tel’tak. A few surprises up my sleeve, remember? I’ll go get it, it’s not far, as the sub-light engines go, and bring it back here. Cheda, get those engines warmed up, so we can leave, soonest.”

“Wait! Wait,” Nun protested, “You go nowhere without me!”

The two goa’uld trotted down the corridor to the transmat station, perhaps not even aware that the executive assistant was still with them. Which left Tony and Cheda alone on the bridge to begin the pre-launch sequence that would warm up the Ancient engines. Cheda used a Tau’ri radio to alert his cousin to get their clan up and moving. They would be leaving, sooner rather than later… with or without their ‘allies’ would depend upon events.

And then the Machine supplied identities for the two interlopers. Back at base with Glasses and Bear, Lionel Fusco was doing a little happy dance… LJ Tibbs and Officer Lisa, in the flesh? So, okay, he thought both characters in the Gemcity books to be overdone caricatures of people you would hate to actually meet in real life. Tibbs read like a cold-ass functional mute former marine with his messianic complex and abusive head-slaps. Lisa was clearly a psycho bitch to vie with Root herself. But, still…

“So… who are you guys, again?” and “Why should we trust you?” were tossed back and forth.

“So, Eli David’s daughter?” John Reese challenged, after Harold’s little revelation over their comms. “You do realize he isn’t the man you knew anymore?”

Ziva scowled. “What do you mean?”

“He’s been infested by a goa’uld symbiote,” Jarod explained. “We’ve seen the flashing eyes. So has his friend, Trent Kort. You know about those?”

As a matter of fact, Ziva knew about them all too well. She swallowed with some difficulty. Maybe… maybe that explained her Aba’s recent madness? It wasn’t really him, it was a goa’uld controlling him, making him a traitor to everything they both used to believe in?

Gibbs could see her wavering. “Ziva…”

Root touched her ear. “We have to go. There’s not much time. If you’re coming, then get your gear together. We have a location on the spaceship they’ve got under cloak.”

With directions from Harold, the two teams made it to the solid but invisible presence on the lawn, helped by the two large men standing guard on empty-seeming air. Once those two were down and restrained with gags to keep them quiet… Root left her companions to do the strong-arm stuff while she groped until she located an open hatch. Then it was just as easy as walking through an invisible door…

…into a white and sleek corridor, decorated in silver and blue, cold and minimalist. John, Jarod and Sameen led the way, much to the chagrin of Ziva, kept by Root’s amused side. Gibbs, recognizing something in the other three he had quickly grown to trust, watched their six with his hand weapon out and ready. The black wolf-hound, chameleon and falcon with them were just added proof he didn’t bother to mention to Ziva, who obviously couldn’t see the shadowy animals.

John and Sameen were both former military, Jarod learned quickly and never forgot, and Gibbs
was easily able to follow the familiar hand signals as they forged deeper into the ship they had found. Gibbs had to admire the beauty and functionality of the craft. The corridor they followed seemed to be on a stern-to-prow orientation line, with various hatch-ways on either side, outlined in silver. Each door had what appeared to be some kind of biometric control, a thumb-print, at a guess. He was tempted to try a few, to see if they worked for any thumb, or if they were keyed for a single person... or a certain gene sequence... but resisted.

John Reese, on point, made a fist to halt their progress. Even Gibbs and Ziva could hear the voices up ahead, two males, one achingly familiar.

Tony.

And, from that all-too familiar tone of voice, he was playing to the crowd... heard from any number of undercover roles over a wire, voice amused, baiting, just a little over-loud, to ensure that the unknowns close by and listening got all the intel they might need...

“Yeah, Cheda, old buddy, I think you’re toast if Landry’s version of government forces finally break through to us, and catch us on the ground. They need me to run the ship.... What do they need you for, again?”

“You stupid Tau’ri know nothing about the engineering of this ship. My expertise will be invaluable.”

“Which is why you were lying to your ‘Lords’ about needing an engine warm-up? Uh hunh. Well, I got news for you, pal. Didn’t you spend a month on the *Daedalus*, preparing to blow her up? How did that work for you? We’ve got scientists and engineers on this planet who’ve been reverse-engineering and *building* these things... it won’t take them long to figure it out. So there goes your leverage. And we’re back to my being vitally necessary, and you being prison bait.”

The stranger, evidently named ‘Cheda’, said, “Beware letting your status make you think yourself irreplaceable, zed. You may be the strongest zed we know, but this planet has zeds in plenty. There have to be others of your strength or stronger out there.”

“Hunh. I didn’t know it was a competition. Cougar trumps Coyote, Coyote trumps Stag? That kind of thing?” There was a speculative silence, then Tony was heard to say, “So how come it’s just you and me on the *Nala* right now? And Tali asleep in her room, of course. Our two goa’uld lords have beamed somewhere else looking for a tel’tak, with their secretary. The rest of your crew are up at the big house, getting dressed and ready fast as they can. The Trust troops are spread pretty thin right now, guarding the perimeter. The only other security on the property are Greer’s Decima guys, and apart from our two sentries outside the main hatch, they’re all scheming away back at the mansion... but just you to watch me, keep me from pulling a fast one?”

“Even should you slip your leash, you try to get more than a few ship-lengths away from this control device, and the collar will send you into a coma, and then into death. You know this, stupid human.”

“Yeah, yeah, got the instructions the first time... but if I overpower you and take the control, presumably it’s got an unlatch button on there? I unlock the collar, and I’m home free.”

“You think so? Hah. It won’t do anything for you – you’re the prisoner, you’ve been keyed into the device as such, so the most it will do is shock you unconscious for daring to touch it. And after wearing the collar for all these weeks, even if you get out of it, there’s a residual build up in your body. You’ll still be in thrall to the *kormac* effect for some days. Maybe it won’t kill you, but there’s more than enough left for you to pass out so I can pick you up and bring you back. Then
what, zed? Go on. What’s your big plan then?”

“Hunh… I dunno… since you’ve got so complacent you’re not even wearing a weapon anymore, I think I’ll just wait for my friends out in the corridor to come storming in and arrest your sorry ass.”

And that was their cue, they all realized, to storm in and arrest the Lucian Alliance engineer.

Tony regarded his rescue party with a jaundiced glare, for two of them, at least. “Hunh. Gibbs. Ziva. Fancy meeting you here. I see the bruises are healing up quite nicely, ex-Boss. My Teyla go easy on you?”

Gibbs smiled wryly. “Not so you’d notice, no.”

“She left you alive, didn’t she? That’s more than I would have done.”

Standing, Tony took two strides forward, as far as his chain would allow, but far enough. He pulled back and let fly with one solid right to the chin of his former Boss, former mentor, former lover. Gibbs must have seen it coming, but he stood and took it… he deserved it. But the force of it knocked him back on his ass, blinking at the wavering consciousness… then rubbing the place where a bruise was already forming. It would match the one on his butt, no doubt.

He nodded. “Good one, DiNozzo.”

“You had it coming.”

“I did.”

“There’s another few I owe you, for Tali, for Teyla, for TJ… but it’ll have to wait for a better time. And Zee-vah. There’s still a restraining order out on you, remember. You might as well get out right now. Because you put your dirty hands on Tali over my dead body.”

Ziva smirked. “Which would be pretty easy right now, my little hairy butt. Don’t you think? You chained to a console like this? And with some kind of alien collar keeping you docile, like a pet?”

At this patent threat, three sentinels abruptly stood, turned and growled, as one. Ziva blinked, and Gibbs held up a hand. “Behave yourself, Ziver. These guys are sentinels. They’ll tear you to pieces if you touch a zed.”

“It’s okay, Boss… former Boss. Current traitor. Ziva is just flapping her gums.” Tony took hold of the chain and its complicated-looking padlock, gave it a sharp flick, and it fell open and dropped to the deck, Tony smiling manically at his former partner. “Ziva doesn’t really want me or Tali, apart from a little friendly needling. All she wants is her daddy. Did you hear the big news, Ziva? Daddy Eli is currently the host to the goa’uld Nun. Yeah, I know, stupidest name ever, so stupidest name ever, so stupid even I won’t bother trying to make the obvious jokes. Just waaaay too easy. And our old buddy Trent Kort? He’s nothing but a meat suit for the goa’uld Baal, who is actually the one to watch out for. And, unfortunately for all concerned, you just missed them both. They’ve taken a transport beam out of here to fetch a tel’tak space ship Baal has hidden away.”

Jarod, searching the unconscious Cheda, who had been knocked out, rolled to the floor and zip-tied by the ever-efficient Sameen, finally found the dull grey ornate device that looked like a TV remote… “Is this the collar control, Tony?”

“Yeah, sentinel number three. Who are you guys again? Sorry, I think we missed the introductions.
Excuse my manners, but I’ve been locked up in here for a while.”

“I’m John, this is Sameen, Jarod and over there is Root. Call us interested third parties. We’re here to get you out of here. Root, leave the Kidon assassin alone, please.”

Root gave a slightly worrying giggle and the light of madness in her eye was equally unsettling. Something about these two women thrown together seemed guaranteed to bring out all their worst qualities.

Jarod offered the collar remote to Tony, but he shook his head. “The guy wearing the collar can’t touch the controller. It’s a level of security. The things were originally invented for prisoner transport. And watch what buttons you press. One is a pain setting, and I think it’s jacked up pretty high at the moment.”

And, yes, the first button… the wrong one. “Sorry, sorry!” Jarod begged, cringing.

The *Nala* comm came alive, and Greer’s cultured voice broke in on the proceedings. “Lord Baal? Lord Nun? We appear to have visitors encroaching on the property. I have deployed my people. A little extra assistance would be appreciated.”

Tony, still gasping in agony, shook his head. “He can’t hear us.” He glanced up and touched a few controls to focus the monitors. “But he’s right, looks like the Patriots have begun their offensive on the compound. And there’s maybe fifty of them out there. Greer has twenty, maybe, max. There’s another ten or so leftover Trust. Cheda’s got a crew of nine Lucian Alliance guys getting dressed to join us soon, if they can get past the attackers. It’s gonna be a slaughter, on both sides, and it probably won’t take long for whoever’s left to grope their way out here. Doing a fingertip search of the grounds, they’ll eventually bump into us.”

“But you can fly us out of here, right?” John asked.

“Sure. If that’s the best thing to do.”

“What do you mean?” Gibbs demanded. “DiNozzo… what’s running around that gerbil mind of yours?”

“We do get cable ZNN out here, ex-Boss. I know what’s been going on with the Patriot coup. HWS did a bunk and run, they’re out in space right now, trying to re-group and take back the planet. Or they’re waiting on Atlantis to come and sort things out. But either way, the bad guys are sitting in the White House, and I… I find that offensive. Very.”

Sameen, on directions from Tony, had found the quarters with little Tali, and bought her back to the bridge. Just in time for a tiny resonant *pop*, and the collar fell right off. Tony gasped in relief. His daughter dodged all the strange feet in the way and flew into his arms.

“Well. You make what plans you like,” Ziva declared. “If my father has already left, so will I. If he is now a goa’uld, it becomes even more vital to hunt him down and end him, before he can destroy us all. He got in touch with me once while… infested, he will no doubt do so again. And I’ll be ready this time. Thank you for trusting me this one more time, Gibbs. If I find Aba… I may be in touch again.”

Tony could only give Gibbs a sardonic look as the woman practically ran out of the bridge, anything to avoid being so very close to her own daughter. Luckily, Tali hadn’t even noticed her presence, before she was gone.

Jarod and John exchanged glances while Sameen scowled and Root chuckled, shaking her head.
John asked, “What’s your play, DiNozzo?”

“Something I’m *very* good at. I go undercover and infiltrate.”

John frowned. “Convince me.”

“Look, Cheda is right, the effect of that collar is going to linger for a little while, which means I’ll be useless for about a week, and dead weight to you guys. Even with sentinel super powers, you’ve got a bit of an obstacle course to run to get out of here, past Decima, Trust, Lucians and Patriots. I can fly you out beyond the perimeter, and you get Tali to safety for me. But then I come back, sit pat on the *Nala*, and wait for the Patriots to scoop me up. I’m the one zed pilot they have they *know* can operate this thing, which makes me too valuable to mess with. They don’t know the Lucians and Trust were controlling me with the collar, they’ll think I just rolled over, and why shouldn’t I keep rolling over for them? They take me back to their evil overlord lair at the White House, and I do whatever I can to tie them up while we wait for the good guys to come bail us all out. And it’s not like this ship is going very far, not with the Shield in place. *Nala* doesn’t have the necessary codes to get through.”

“Yeah, I see a lot wrong with that plan,” John objected. “First off, they know who and what you are, so your undercover legend is pretty revealing. Then there’s the real leverage the Trust had on you… your daughter. Not like you can fake that for the Patriot gang.”

Tony merely grinned. “Ex-Boss, you got handcuffs on you?”

Gibbs smiled ruefully and reached to the back of his belt, pulling out a set to toss to the best second he’d ever had. Tony clicked one around his wrist, and refastened the chain to the other, a chain he had already shown he could get out of any time he liked. No doubt he could as easily slip out of the handcuff, too.

“Fair enough,” John admitted. It was one of the first things he learned, too, in black ops training, to get out of anything an enemy might try and put on him. “But how far are you willing to go for these guys?”

“They can’t afford to kill me. They need me if they want this ship to fly at all.”

“Until they find another zed who might be easier to handle,” Jarod warned.

Tony shook his head. “Not now. They can try anyone they like, but *Nala* has bonded to me, and Tali. Anyone else touches her, they’ll get nothing but static back. And believe me, these guys won’t think me a threat. They *always* underestimate just what I’m capable of. No one *ever* sees the Wild Card coming.”

John huffed. Glancing at Root, he asked, “She have anything to say about this?”

Root shrugged. “Not a word. But then, I think She can’t get through while we’re on this ship. I haven’t heard a peep from Her since we boarded.”

“Great,” John muttered, realising that he’d lost contact with Harold, too. He ran his fingers through his hair, then decided, “Okay. Get us out of here, and we’ll leave you to it. You got a weapon on you, at least?”

With another manic grin, Tony patted his thigh. “Rule nine, properly observed. Always carry a knife.”

John had to grant him that one. “Good rule.”
Gibbs smirked at that.

“Okay then.”

“Okay then. Grab a seat, everyone. I’m a pretty good driver, but *Nala* has a lot of oomph on her. Ferrari all the way.”

With a thought and a touch on the controls, the little ship did jump to obey the hand on her reins, and in moments, she had lifted, cleared the armies massing inside and outside the property lines, and found the transport SUV Reese and friends had used to get them this far. It was parked behind a clump of low brush bushes, out of sight of the road. *Nala* settled on the dune behind and put down the gangway ramp.

“Sameen, grab the kid, and we’ll be on our way.” Because no matter what, leaving an innocent baby behind in a situation like this…

But that was a problem. Tali wailed at the first attempt to pry her loose from her father.

Tony looked pleadingly to Gibbs. “Ex-Boss? And I’m asking this, knowing what Teyla will do to you if you let anything happen to our baby.”

But Gibbs was no better in Tali’s eyes than these other strangers.

“No Daddy! I don’t wanna go! I stay wif you!”

Tony, and everyone else, was keeping an eye on the monitor, still focussed on the minor war and graphically showing the escalating battle on the mansion grounds. They didn’t have time for this…

“Come on, baby, I need you to go and be safe. You go with these guys. These three are Protectors, just like momma Tey. They’ll protect you, baby.”

“No! I stay wif you!”

It was tempting to just… make his baby sleep… but he could already feel the *kormac* effect overtaking him. At this point, on the hierarchy of the Furalin, Lioness definitely out-ranked Coyote, and Tali was definitely stronger than he was.

“Shit,” he whispered under his breath. “We’re out of time. Go. Seriously, guys, get out of here while you can. I’ve got about five minutes before I’m out like a light, and I still have to get the *Nala* back to start. You got me out of that damn collar, and that was what kept me from kicking the traces before this. But I guess my baby is staying with me after all. Yeah, she’s Daddy’s girl all the way…” and he added softly, under his breath, “it’s probably in the blood,” as he glanced to the exit corridor, where Ziva had disappeared back into the night, on her self-appointed hunt for her own father.

Gibbs looked to be getting stubborn, approaching to try and take Tali, but two cats reared up out of nowhere, unnoticed before now, to object most strongly. Luke and Oma did *not* want Gibbs to take Tali away.

Tony shrugged. “There you have it, Gibbs. The familiars have spoken. This is what has to happen. So clear out, guys. And… thanks for the assist.”

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Baal, Nun and a phlegmatic Miss Smith watched the attack from the cloaked tel’tak, hovering just
above the mansion… Greer, his blonde second, and every last one of their hulking guards, Trust and Decima alike, went down fighting, but down they went. Along with about half the attacking force.

Nun huffed. “Now what?”

For a moment, Baal had no reply.

With a discrete clearing of her throat, Miss Smith finally reminded the Goa’uld lords that she was, indeed, present. “My Lords, you do still have significant assets at your disposal. Or, rather, Eli David and Trent Kort do. And, if General Landry’s plans do not go *entirely* to his liking… we may be able to recoup some losses.”

Baal grinned. “Good points, Miss Smith, thank you.” Every time he addressed her directly, it was with the same wry sardonic tone. “We may have lost this round… Just more proof that, if you want something done, you have to do it yourself. We both have a lot of friends out there who will be willing to fight for us, even die for us, for a price, or a piece of the power pie. Our hosts have even more resources, as yet untapped. There is always some power-hungry or desperate human with a respectable sense of self-preservation, willing to betray the entire race, if it will get them a little farther ahead of their neighbours. We should get in touch with some of the more... dependable, less bright ones. And be careful to use the human voice, and avoid the flashing eyes. They’ll willingly follow humans… maybe not so much alien overlords.”

Although Mr. Greer’s Decima flunkies might be ready to die in the fight, and did, he himself surrendered without any fuss, as did the ice-blonde woman at his side. The Trust sweeper remnants, only too aware of their fate if they were taken alive, fought to the bitter end. They had to be coldly satisfied that at least they managed to take some of Landry’s people with them.

Franklin Murphy and Emile Roget, rooted out of their beds, knelt with hands clasped behind their heads… Former IOA staffers and still clinging to their Trust masters, they were still, at their core, an accountant and a politician with no stomach for blood. The nine Lucian Alliance crew members for the hidden space ship tripped over a set of camouflaged marines, trying to get to their posts, still tugging up pants and trying to tie boot laces on the run. None of them managed to get to their weapons in time. So they were easily taken down.

All the terrorists on the grounds who were still breathing were put in handcuffs and twist-ties, to be loaded on the waiting prison transports. They would be shipped to the special detention facilities set aside for this operation. But there weren’t so many of those. The rest would be placed in black plastic body bags.

Once the mansion and its defenders and residents were properly subdued, the surviving strike force began the search for the space ship they knew was somewhere on the grounds. It took about an hour before someone stumbled into the side of an invisible ship. Then marines swept in, cleared the almost-empty space-craft, and called for orders. The Lucian captain, found still unconscious and bound, was immediately thrown in with all of the others taken that night.

The unconscious pilot and loudly complaining pilot’s daughter were held on the bridge of the spaceship.

They had to wait a few hours, until Tony woke up, to the relief of everyone, particularly his daughter. Then the *Nala*, under cloak, was flown to the White House Rose Garden and landed. Invisible and requiring at least a zed to fly her, the ship really didn’t need more of a guard. She got
one anyway, several secret service agents who could be spared from regular duties, to keep her one and only pilot well away from the controls.

Tony could only smirk at that… Little did the bastards know, he could command his *Nala* from pretty much anywhere now, inside or outside, if he was near enough. Or awake enough. Without the muffling effects of the *kormac* collar, that was a pretty good distance. Like a remote start feature… which was just *sooo* cool.

The failure to grab Baal and Nun might have given Landry pause, but the good news was, he had possession of the *Nala*. And its pilot. And, for assured leverage, his vulnerable little daughter.
Ashes and Dust

Chapter Notes

**Author Notes:** Reference to Stargate Atlantis 5-16-‘Brain Storm’ (Dr. Malcolm Tunney steals one of Rodney’s ideas for a ‘Global Cooling’ application… and something goes *wrong*). And, because it may not be clear who the texters are: Penelope Garcia (Criminal Minds), Meow_Meow. Daniel ‘Krummy’ Krumitz (CSI: Cyber), Krummy42. Raven Ramirez (CSI: Cyber) Ravensclaw_fed. Eric Beale (NCIS: LA), SuperEric. Nell Jones (NCIS: LA), Little_Nell. Sebastian Lund (NCIS: New Orleans), Jedi_Lund. Patton P. ‘Triple P’ Plane (NCIS: New Orleans), PPP_NOLA. Prof. Charlie Eppes (Numb3rs), Numb3rs_Whiz, Prof. Larry Fleinhardt (Numb3rs), Cosmos_Heart. Dr. Blair Sandburg: (The Sentinel) BlairS852. Harold Finch’s Machine (Person of Interest), Aves_Ichthyornis.

Four weeks in, with a (more or less) successful take-down of the Trust, his emergency escape plan parked in the Rose Garden, President pro-tem Landry began to feel more secure as the acknowledged (however grudgingly) defender of the ‘Free World’. Finally, he began to issue edicts and announcements, although still without offering explanations or answering press questions.

The third public press conference from the White House, under the auspices of the now-familiar spokesperson, Colonel Samuels, made much of the fact that the War on Terror could now be declared over, as a victory for the ‘good guys’.

The press gallery was buried in details on how many arrests had been made. Some of those were *very* prominent members of the government, highly placed military and wealthy business figures, not only in this country, but world-wide. Yes, once again, the United States of America had taken the lead in rooting out evil across the planet. No, don’t bother to thank them, it was all part of their responsibility to truth, justice and… well, you get the picture. Vague promises were made that these conspirators threatening freedom and security would soon be shown to have connections to HWS.

After about an hour, even the most excitable of the reporters seemed exhausted and stunned by the relentless onslaught of information. It was all available in the extensive press packets handed out to all.

It was only then that Samuels, with an off-handed ‘Oh, by the way…’ tone, listed a few initiatives about to be enacted. In their ongoing efforts to protect the American people, they would be reinstating the Zed Registration laws. They had already rescinded the spate of paroles and pardons offered to formerly-incarcerated zeds by the previous administration. Confidence was not high that Hayes and the HWS had done a proper review to justify the releases. Unnamed investigators were reported to suspect at least some of those released had been among the assassins used in the coup… exactly who was not yet known. Many zeds known to be HWS sympathizers and therefore assumed to have been part of the attempted coup, would be arrested and held, under the provisions of the Patriot Act. And yes, people were still rolling their eyes at that fine piece of irony…

Various facilities had been made ready to receive captured terrorists, suspects, accused traitors to
the provisional government, and recovered prisoners. Unspecified facilities also stood ready to accept those zeds who had been identified as at high risk of kidnapping and zed-trafficking by aliens. Not incarcerated, not arrested, merely to be taken into protective custody, for their own good.

The message spread like a virus all over the world wide web, the moment the press announcement went out. It was simple, a single screen with a huge, blinking, neon-bright message in the familiar type face and colors of the Blue Jungle website:

*Cheezit the Cops!*

There followed a link, which not everyone could actually access, that provided more information. For now, it listed only the United States as cause for concern. But that there were worrying signs that France, Russia and China might also follow suit, and sooner than later. For those in the US, a list of ‘safe zones’ was provided. It included, not only the states where zed registration and branding had never been allowed, Hawaii, Utah, Oklahoma, Minnesota, North Dakota, Alaska, Louisiana, but a number of towns and municipalities that were deemed safe. There was also advice that the ‘longest undefended border in the world’ was just to the north… and, if all else failed, almost a dozen locations inside the continental US to go, as quickly as possible, with as little baggage as was absolutely necessary.

The ‘Cheezit Alert’ was actually the final stage of a three-stage warning system, going out to a list of website members who were identified as zeds, or with zed dependents. Stage one for preparations had gone out the day of Declassification, since that event was likely to cause just the political and social upheavals that would threaten the guys on the bottom of the order, zeds. Those receiving the alert got a check list of how to prepare, how to put their affairs in order, what to pack in emergency go-bags to leave by the door, what to include and what to leave behind. They were to be ready to run, because when the final alert went out, there might not be a lot of time. Stage two went out the moment Martial Law was declared, since it was obvious zeds were intended to look like the bad guys in the fake ‘coup’ by HomeWorld. Those with families, or in high-risk situations, were advised to disappear at that point, and many did.

The third stage, the Cheezit Alert itself, was the call to evacuate. The recent loosening of the restrictions and persecutions of zeds in their home country was about to be cancelled and rescinded, with only badness to replace it. Maybe it would just be the return of registration laws, or maybe it would include detainment, hit squads and disappearances. The alert, they knew, was to be sent if it were the latter cases, a danger to the life and liberty of zeds, calling for immediate action.

The various administrators of the Blue Jungle all had authorization to throw the switch for the final Cheezit Alert. But in this case, the lever was pulled by another entity altogether. Identified as *Aves_Ichthyornis*, no server ID listed, un-pingable to get a verifiable IP address. None of the other admins would admit to giving them access or admin authorization.

By morning, hundreds of thousands of people had dropped off the grid, all around the US. There were websites, newspaper want-ads and personal column items, which, if you read between the lines, were a first stop in a new Underground Railroad. Small towns all along the forty-ninth parallel, like the village of Norwich in Vermont, stood ready to usher groups of refugees across to a new life. Various protest and action groups of former hippies were re-activated, to reprise their roles during the Viet Nam War, aiding draft dodgers to relocate.

In dozens of states, there were remote communities, pieces of property listed as ‘research
communes’, owned by a company named Audubon Inc. Anyone attempting to trace the
management of ‘AI’, would have their work cut out for them, tracking back through shell
corporations and even foreign companies, some with privacy restrictions that would dead-end any
search. Most of these communities were self-contained and self-sufficient. No, they were definitely
*not* to be confused with compounds, like any number of survivalist, cult or militia facilities,
however similar they might seem in their isolationist tendencies. Because, yes, they were as close
to self-sufficient as could be. They grew their own food, most with their own power generators,
almost none of them having access to telephones, cable, cell towers, or other forms of
communication with the rest of the world.

Or so, at least, it seemed.

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*Signing on *** server: *Aves_Ichthyornis*]*

*Aves_Ichthyornis*: *Cheezit the Cops!*

*Signing on CascadePD server: *BlairS852*]*

*Signing on FBI server: *Krummy42*: *Ravensclaw_fed*: *Meow_Meow*]*

*Signing on NCIS server: *PPP_NOLA*: *Jedi_Lund*: *SuperEric*: *Little_Nell*]*

*PPP_NOLA*: WTF! Who pulled the switch? Aves who? MeowMeow, what gives?

*Meow_Meow*: Enhance your calm, my lovelies, all is as it should be. The alarm is legitimate. AI
has it right. Go to your Cheezit protocols.

*Ravensclaw_fed*: What about Charlie and Larry? I don’t see them here.

*BlairS852*: Don’t worry about them, Rave. They may be out of touch for a while, until they get
somewhere safe enough to surface. Charlie’s FBI brother Don determined he and Larry were at
greater risk from the Patriots, as high-profile scientists to work on their alien tech. They went off-
grid a few weeks ago.

*Meow_Meow*: Good call. That’s what my AI contact is telling me, too.

*Krummy42*: AI, hunh? These those black ops guys you were telling us about? So this is a
credible threat?

*Meow_Meow*: Credible and then some. And the less you know about AI the better.

*PPP_NOLA*: Riiight… and in the meantime, stick close to your sentinel pals.

*SuperEric*: MeowMeow, you got the links I sent for the Audubon Inc. sanctuaries?

*Meow_Meow*: I did. The network is secure, and I ran a test with AI last week. Good job, Eric.
Just let me confirm… Blair, you and Jim are going off-grid to look for any stragglers, right?

*BlairS852*: They had to move all those imprisoned zeds somewhere. We think it’s somewhere
near us. If you get confirmation on a location, let us know.

*Meow_Meow*: Will do. NCIS guys? With Vance breathing down your necks and running with
very much the wrong crowd… you sure you don’t want to run for the hills?

*Jedi_Lund*: Pride’s got our backs, Penelope. Vance doesn’t usually come much further afield
than Quantico these days anyway.

*SuperEric*: Hetty and AD Granger will let us know when we’ve run out of time. Then we’ve got an open invitation to join Hawaii Five-O, and safe transport to Honolulu. What about you FBI guys? Fitzgerald seems to be in even deeper than Vance, from what we’ve heard.

*Meow_Meow*: I’ve been told the Patriots won’t move on alphabet zeds for a while yet… the FBI ADs are running interference for us, for now. Fickler, Sifter and Ironside are doing much as Granger, Pride and Lange. But that could change at any time, so everyone, be ready.

*PPP_NOLA*: BTW, my Queen of all knowing, you seeing the report out of Tokyo this morning? Mob of idiots tried to storm a Buddhist temple offering refuge to zeds, and ran into a wall of three dozen men and women, armed with little more than sticks, who seemed to have eyes in the backs of their heads and reflexes faster than light? Sound like people we know?

*Krummy42*: More than that, Trip. Check BBC World Facepage. They’re running a story on the same thing happening worldwide. Mysterious men and women with some kind of unspecified gnarlly super powers, coming out of the woodwork to protect zeds.

*Little_Nell*: Saw that, and the companion piece of a story told by the Last Satedan, Ronon Dex, on the Great Awakening of Sentinels his people saw just after the first Wraith attack.

*Meow_Meow*: How about that, O Shaman of the Great City?

*BlairS852*: LOL. You don’t really expect me to answer that, do you, gang? Listen, we have enough to do right now to complete our Cheezit protocols. So… catch you guys later.

[Signing off CascadePD server: *BlairS852*]

*PPP_NOLA*: Well dang it. Shaman needs lessons on a graceful exit.

*Meow_Meow*: Yeah, but he’s right. Get to it, my fine furry friends. You’ve all got contact lists and instructions… get the word out, now.

*Krummy42*: Yours is but to command, my Queen.

[Signing off FBI server: *Krummy42*: *Ravensclaw_fed*]
[Signing off NCIS server: *PPP_NOLA*: *Jedi_Lund*: *SuperEric*: *Little_Nell*]

*Meow_Meow*: AI, we got a time-line?

*Aves_Ichthyornis*: Registration laws re-enacted by end of business today, DC time. Hunt for paroled zeds continues, without serious effect. Underground railroad networks being instituted all along the Canadian border, many utilizing the old Vietnam draft dodger and Prohibition rum-runners’ back doors. ‘Bleak House’ holding facility has been located, details being sent to Detective James Ellison. Special Agent in Charge Donald Eppes is undercover, running point on the investigations into the Patriot coup, and all pertinent information is being transmitted to him or his proxies. Probability that *Numb3rs_Whiz* or *Cosmos_Heart* will successfully remain hidden estimated as less than 1 chance in ten. Once captured, it is almost certain they will be taken to the SGC facility under Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Extracting from that location is inadvisable at this time.

*Meow_Meow*: Well damn it all to hell. Okay, just… keep me in the loop, as much as you can, okay?
They found Larry Fleinhardt in the middle of the Mojave Desert. At least one of the Patriot ‘also-ran’ scientists had had enough smarts to turn Larry’s SGC transponder on. It lit up his location like a search light.

As undeniably brilliant as Charles Eppes was, he wasn’t the most worldly of men. He thought a phone call to Chennai in Tamil-Nadu India to one of Amita’s cousins would have been safe enough… it wasn’t. It gave the bad guys the address of a truck stop not ten miles from a known past vacation spot for the Eppes family.

Charlie’s first thought upon having his hands cuffed behind his back was, “Don is going to kill me for being so stupid.” His second was, “Hope they don’t leave my cat behind…”

Protests fell on deaf ears. They weren’t under arrest. Their services were required by the government, ‘Eminent Domain’ cited, and with Martial Law in effect, and a reasonable claim of national, if not world security…

“It sure feels like arrest,” Charlie grumbled.

“No, more like abject slavery,” Larry sighed, from the back of the same black government SUV. A black-and-white cat sat at Charlie’s feet, apparently invisible to the storm troopers who had taken them. “If we were under arrest, legal protocol demands we be allowed a phone call.”

They were taken by a variety of military transports, straight to the front entrance of the Cheyenne Mountain Facility in Colorado Springs. NORAD had been told to vacate, immediately after the Patriots seized power. No security passes were required… the ‘co-opted’ personnel were perfectly free to enter. But, like the Hotel California, they just wouldn’t be allowed to leave.

“Somehow, I expected the lights to be operational, at least,” Larry commented as they were trooped down anonymous corridors.

Temporary lighting was strung on wires and tacked to metal or concrete walls, plugged into what looked suspiciously like car batteries. The dim illumination cast shadows on corners where shining eyes stared out, and fleeting shadows whisked themselves out of the way of soldiers who never seemed to notice their presence. No one seemed to notice tuxedo Pythagoras, either, trotting placidly at Charlie’s heels. There was the distinct reek of burned electrical components and ozone in the air, which probably meant the air conditioning and fresh air systems weren’t working all that well, either.

One of their escorts, a lowly private, glanced warily and resentfully at his superiors, up ahead and out of hearing range. He muttered out of the side of his mouth, “They’ve tried. Every time they get something hooked up, there’s another damn EM pulse, and it all goes dark again. We’ve been living off cold MREs for weeks. Nobody can find the thingy that’s doing it.”

Larry and Charlie traded a smirk. So these idiots thought they could ride into Sam Carter’s back yard and just take over, did they?

They were led to what used to be the main physics lab of the SGC, a large space with walls lined by high-tech looking monitors, currently black and dead. Instead, a dozen or so white boards had
been rolled in and scattered around, each with a team of white-coated people clustered around them. There were a few laptops and notepads scattered on the various tables, along with open books and folders full of printed reports… but the only materials in actual use seemed to be yellow legal pads and pens.

And in the shadowed corners, under tables and behind file cabinets, were watching eyes at ankle level, occasionally flashing from a stray reflection of light.

Charlie, Larry and their escort were met by a slight, tense but contained man with collar-length brown hair, shrewd dark eyes and a long sharp nose.

“Dr. Fleinhardt. Dr. Eppes. I’m sorry our meeting had to be under these circumstances. I’m Dr. Nicholas Rush.” The man had a soft but distinct Scottish burr.

“Professor of Astrophysics, Edinburgh University,” Larry filled in, shaking hands. “You were also involved in the Icarus Project, I believe… What in the world are you doing here?”

The man had to stop dead, and visibly struggled to restrain his broiling emotions, glancing meaningfully at the heavily armed soldiers stationed by the door. “I was kidnapped,” he bit out tightly. “From my wife’s hospital bed-side. She’s undergoing treatment for cancer. Your government has *kindly* brought her here to Colorado, so that she may continue her treatments. I am permitted to see her once a week.”

It was shocking, and Charlie glanced at Larry, appalled. If Don hadn’t insisted that Amita escape to India on the first available plane…

“And I’m not the only one. Almost all of these people were taken from their homes—“

Then the door to the lab banged open again, and an additional contingent of military guards marched in and took up strategic positions on either side. The white-coated personnel all stood and turned to face the door, the whole atmosphere of the place chilling. Anything with fur whisked back out of sight… except for a stubborn Pythagoras, who plopped himself down at Charlie’s feet.

He calmly began to lick his butt in supreme indifference.

A man with unmistakable military bearing strode up, wearing khaki-green fatigues, but with no identifying badges or pins. He was tall, towering over Rush, Larry and Charlie, and used his height to its full intimidating effect. His face looked to be carved in stone, his brush-cut hair iron grey.

Charlie thought he looked familiar…

“Ah, doctors Fleinhardt and Eppes. At last. We’ve been waiting for you to arrive. I’m Colonel Robert Makepeace. I’m temporarily in charge of the SGC.”

“I thought you were the newly appointed head of the Secret Service,” Larry observed, and then Charlie placed him. From General Landry’s first press conference after the coup.

Makepeace fixed cold blue eyes on the cosmologist. “That too. Once we’ve settled a few outstanding issues here, I’m sure another person will be found who can take over here. In the mean time, I’d appreciate it if you’d both get to work. As you can see, we’ve got no shortage of projects that could use your expertise.”

Charlie glanced around the lab, and noted, first, that there wasn’t an open laptop in the place. If there were intermittent EM pulses sweeping through, any electronic equipment would be so much scrap metal and burned plastic. So, instead, like a scene from the fifties, the dozen or so small enclaves of white-coated people flocked around battery-powered lamps trained on white boards
covered with equations.

Charlie just couldn’t help himself. Where there were equations, he never could. In spite of his private determination not to help these bastards, he took a closer look at each collection of numbers…

Numbers… sang to him. They always had. And what these were singing …

“This isn’t astrophysics. It’s not physics at all. It’s large number theory… cryptography.”

“Very good, Dr. Eppes! I can see that you’re going to be well worth your hire. When the traitors at the SGC, Area 51, the Ancient Outpost and HomeWorld Sec decamped, they took key pieces of technology with them. All of their computer systems are locked down with passwords and encryption codes. We’ve been unsuccessful so far in unlocking those codes. Perhaps you, being a mathematician, will have better luck.”

The words ‘over your dead body’ hovered on Charlie’s tongue, but both Larry and Dr. Rush hurried to fill the void.

“Depending on the size of the password sequence…” Rush tried to explain, even as Larry jumped in with, “Random sequence passwords of any length are almost impossible to…”

At least it gave Charlie a chance to grasp the incredible truth.

“You’re not in control of anything, are you? You’re keeping it from the public, but you can’t get into any of the HomeWorld Security systems. You’re bluffing about turning the Weapons Platform on our so-called enemies abroad. I bet you can’t even get a person up to the platform, and if you did, he wouldn’t be able to turn it on, let alone fire it!”

And that only sharpened the knife-edge of that man’s glare.

“You have a fairly accurate grasp of the current state of affairs, Dr. Eppes, yes. I would have you remember, however, that the Planetary Shield and the Orbital Weapons Platforms are all that stand between us and annihilation at the hands of the Wraith, or some other alien enemy. The sooner we gain access, the better.”

The three scientists blinked at the man.

Larry crossed his arms and peered up at the tall man with a kind of wonder. “Excuse my ignorance, but I can’t help but feel you’re being overly optimistic. You are talking about systems designed and built by Doctors Samantha Carter, Rodney McKay, and Radek Zelenka, yes? And programmed by Dr. Miko Kusanagi?”

“Yes, of course I am.”

“And we’re supposed to… do what with them? Besides use them as expensive and highly advanced paper-weights?”

“I know you gentlemen are more intelligent than that. Find the passwords. Break the code. Find a way around the encryptions. Do whatever the hell you have to, but get those systems open and running again. Or you can forget what the sun even looks like.”

Rush glanced at the two Americans and could only shrug fatalistically. It was clear this man would not listen to explanations. Charlie was about to try and set him straight on the odds of being able to find a handful of password codes out of the near-infinite possibilities, when they didn’t even know
the character sets, the length, the encryption methods, even how often the codes might be set to cycle to new ones... and without anything more advanced than an abacus or a slide rule...

Makepeace held up a hand, and the whole room stopped, because he was listening to a transmission coming through on his ear-wig. He made a few hand gestures, and one of his guards brought up a portable ham-radio set in a back-pack affair, placed it on a table. The guard switched to a channel that blared from its tinny speakers. Charlie was irresistibly reminded of World War Two movies, with a squad pinned down behind enemy lines, and the team radio operator cranking a handle to get a charge...

"Is there anyone there? This is Area 51 calling."

"Kavanagh here," said the tall gangly guy in the glasses with the long pony-tail, prominent adam’s apple bobbing up and down his long thin neck, and the look of perpetual disgruntlement. "That you, Horvath? Over."

"Yes of course it’s me, Peter. Cut out the military-speak. You sound ridiculous and even more like a geek."

Makepeace approached the set and keyed the transmitter. "Dr. Horvath, glad you could join us. This is Colonel Makepeace."

"Ah, yes, of course, Colonel... sorry, I... um..."

"I take it you and your team are there at Area 51."

"Yes, we’re down in the Server Room. You were right, Peter, there’s an access port here with some sort of Ancient device tied in. All I have to do is detach it, and I should be able to bypass the encryption coding and release the system. At least we’ll have Area 51 back in business."

"Oooh, that is an extraordinarily bad idea," Larry muttered, hugging himself a little tighter and shaking his head.

Dr. Peter Kavanagh glanced around toward Dr. Rush, as if asking permission. Rush smiled faintly at the younger man, and said, "It’s your team, Peter. Do as you think best."

Peter straightened at the reminder, even as he cast a nervous look at Makepeace. "Right. Of course. I’m Chief Scientist for the SGC." He turned to the transmitter. "Vernon, what does your team have to say?"

"Don’t be ridiculous, Peter," screeched an unpleasant female voice. Larry winced and mouthed a name, ‘Leslie Dietz’. Even Charlie had heard rumors of the notorious Dr. Dietz. If she had any brilliance at all, it was lost in her sexual antics. She had a well-documented propensity to play seduction games with the male members of any team she was on, giving an undeserved bad name to all women in the sciences by playing to the lowest possible cliché. Of course, there were any number of project leaders out there idiot enough not to mind a trouble-maker like that if they thought it would get them laid. Charlie glanced at Makepeace... he didn’t seem the type. Nor did Kavanagh, for completely different reasons. But perhaps the disembodied Dr. Horvath?

Dietz continued, "All we have to do is unplug the damned thing."

"Dr. Claymore? You concur?"

"Er, well, yes. I suppose. It’s not really my field, you understand."
“What do you want us to do, Peter?” Vernon Horvath prodded impatiently.

Makepeace lifted one shaggy eyebrow.

“Go ahead, then,” Kavanagh ordered, trying to sound confident and in control.

Larry groaned and hid his face in his hands.

“Larry?” Charlie asked in a whisper.

Larry whispered back, “Half the people in this room, and all the people on the other end of that radio, were terminated from Project Bluebook by either Carter or McKay at one time or another for being incompetent, careless, or negligent. In the case of the people at Area 51, all three. I believe McKay called them ‘too stupid to live’. And they think they can undo Dr. Carter’s work by *unplugging* it? When it practically has a neon sign on it, flashing ‘for a good time, unplug here’?"

Suddenly, the sound of a siren blared through the transmitter. Monitors all over the SGC lab suddenly flashed on, showing big red digital numbers, counting down in second increments.

“Um,” said Horvath.

“It’s a booby-trap!” exclaimed Oliver Claymore.

“Master of the bleeding obvious,” Rush murmured, almost happily.

“Plug it back in,” recommended the woman with the screechy voice.

“I can’t… it won’t…”

Larry called out, “Dr. Kavanagh, you have to get your team out of there. Give the order to evacuate Area 51, immediately.”

“Hold off on that,” Makepeace commanded and turned on Larry. “What are you talking about, Dr. Fleinhardt?”

“Do you know anything *at all* about Samantha Carter? Or Rodney McKay? About their genius? Sam’s bloody-minded determination? The sun she blew up? Rodney’s work with the CIA? The star system *he* blew up? There is only one reason in the world for any system to display a countdown like that one. Which, maybe you noticed, simultaneously appeared on these systems here, systems that are otherwise quite inert. They set up a booby-trap, and they will have left *just* enough time for people to get out of range before it does whatever they programmed it to do. Every moment you delay is endangering their lives, and everyone else at Area 51.”

Makepeace frowned, considering that. He muttered a few instructions into another radio he had pinned to his fatigues. Then he turned to the transmitter. “Dr. Horvath, you and your team need to disarm that device as soon as possible.”

“Disarm it? But… We don’t even know what the hell it is!”

“That’s not what you said ten minutes ago. Now disarm it. We can’t afford to lose Area 51 due to your incompetence.”

“Vernon, they’ve locked the door on us!” Dietz screeched. “We can’t get out!”

“You’ll get out, Dr. Dietz, just as soon as you defuse that device, whatever it is. I suggest you get
to work.”

The count-down passed inexorably from two hundred, to one hundred, to fifty… the sounds of frantic arguments and recriminations from the trapped scientists jangled everyone’s nerves.

“You have to let them out of there!” Charlie insisted at last, pleading with the acting head of the SGC.

Makepeace turned on him with a grim and implacable look. “I don’t have to do anything, Dr. Eppes, but accomplish my mission here. I suggest you remember that.”

Ticking down to ten, nine… six, five… two, one…

A burst of static echoed into the silent lab. Then nothing.

“My God,” gasped Dr. Malcolm Tunney, an MIT engineering professor. “It’s gone. Area 51 is… gone.”

Every monitor suddenly lit up, showed a satellite photo, and a new crater graced the desert of Nevada. Then the monitors went black and dead once more.

Tears pricked at Charlie’s eyes. How could… how could this be his world now? Monsters running his own country, hired military thugs forcing scientists into slavery, and perpetrating kidnapping, murder… condoning it on the flimsiest pretext of patriotism…

How could this be happening?

In a daze of cold, shivering shock, he sagged to his knees… only to find Pythagoras meowing lowly, and rubbing against his thighs. His hands went to clutch at his fur immediately, and only then could he catch his wheezing breath. Larry stepped closer to rest a consoling hand on his shoulder.

“Oh dear. That did not go well,” commented Dr. Nicholas Rush.

Charlie stared up at him, uncomprehending. The man seemed almost… glad. No, maybe satisfied was the word.

“They were your great hope, weren’t they, Colonel Makepeace? They all three worked for you in Utah, with Peter, I believe. I know they were among the last who were actually working for you of their own free will. Hence your permitting them to get as far as Nevada, out of your sight. Such a shame. Still. It’s lucky we haven’t tried the same thing here.”

There was a wicked light in his dark eyes as he fixed them on Makepeace, and Charlie swallowed. Makepeace merely threw the Scottish scientist a brief annoyed glance, refusing to take the bait.

Kavanagh sat on his stool, stunned.

“Dr. Kavanagh,” Makepeace ordered, and his sharpened voice was like a cracking whip that brought Kavanagh leaping from his stool with wide eyes. “I believe you have work to do. See if you can’t find something for Dr. Fleinhardt and Dr. Eppes to work on. And impress upon them the rewards for good behavior and success, and the… hazards of failure.”

With that, the Colonel swept out of the lab, taking his World War Two surplus radio and security guards with him.
Rush sauntered forward with a little smile, and patted Kavanagh on the back. “Come on, Peter. You need to finish that proof for the Outpost project before Dr. Vail can finish his piece. I’ll see to Dr. Eppes and Dr. Fleinhardt.”

“Yes, yes… I… yes.”

“Poor Dr. Horvath. I believe his over-weaning pride was his down-fall in the end. He always did think he was a match for Dr. Carter. This time he tried a little too hard.”

“Yes, you’re right. It wasn’t my fault at all, was it? Horvath should have known. He really should have.”

“Yes, he should.”

“It’ll be a lesson to him.”

“Well,” Rush granted fairly, “I suppose it *would* have been… if he had survived it.”

“Hardly my fault.”

“Not your fault at all.”

“No, it isn’t. Dr. Rush, why don’t you assign Dr. Eppes and Dr. Fleinhardt to one of the other projects. I’m far too busy to do it myself. I’m the SGC Chief of Science, after all! I really can’t be expected to take care of everything around here!”

Unspoken, but loud in the minds of everyone in the lab, was, “Sam Carter and Rodney McKay both expected exactly that, and more than exceeded expectations.”

“Certainly not. I’ll do my best, Peter.”

“See that you do,” Kavanagh huffed, and stalked off.

Larry helped Charlie to his feet, while the mathematician studied Dr. Rush carefully. Charlie commented, “Like shooting fish in a barrel, isn’t it?”

Rush smiled thinly. “Why Dr. Eppes. I don’t know what you mean.”

“What I don’t understand, is why we’re here at all,” Larry whispered. “If there is an Electro-Magnetic Pulse sweeping through at regular intervals, why not simply move the lab somewhere else, with access to the bare minimum of computers and equipment we’re going to require? If security is an issue, there’s always the facilities at the Air Force Academy, that’s just a few miles away.”

Rush shook his head. “The SGC servers may be fried, but the communication equipment for direct access to the Planetary Shield and Orbital Weapons Platforms is down there too, cables to the satellite dishes on the top of Cheyenne Mountain. Even if we explained to Col. Makepeace the need for more advanced equipment than a slide rule and a piece of chalk on a slate, do you think he’d listen? I think not. I won’t presume to try, and it apparently hasn’t occurred to Peter. Come with me, please. I think you both know Dr. Malcolm Tunney, from MIT? He’s heading up the Stargate Team. It’s been shut down, too. Why don’t you see if you can’t give him a hand with it.”

Rush drifted away to other groups, some cowed and hostile, others nervous and frantic. Charlie noted that the boards for the Stargate project were some of the few with actual physics equations.
Dr. Malcolm Tunney had spent most of his career in the private sector, heading multi-billion-dollar research and development projects. At one time or another, he had farmed various pieces of consulting work to both Charlie and Larry. The relationships had been extremely lucrative. Then, a few years ago, one of Tunney’s more classified projects went badly awry… details on exactly what, or why, were sparse. Since then, he’d been unable to get funding for anything, from anyone. As one wag had whispered, he couldn’t get arrested as an engineer these days. MIT, however, had taken him on, even gave him tenure.

Tunney sighed as he shook hands with both newcomers. “Sorry you got caught in this, Larry, Charlie. It’s a mess, and I don’t think we’re going to get out of here any time soon. And Peter… well. Rumor is, he was working for the Trust, and even they were ready to ship him out… until the coup. Then these ‘Patriot’ guys suddenly needed someone who knew their way around the SGC. That was Peter… and pretty much no one else left on the planet.”

Larry coughed a little. “I can’t help but notice…” he whispered to the other two men, “That this problem requires advanced expertise in astrophysics. More than that, the base-eight alien physics as known to the Ancients. Specifically, the nature and construction of wormholes.”

“Oh yeah,” Tunney agreed, contemplating the boards.

“Which none of us have. What we do have here are an engineer, a cosmologist and a mathematician.”

“Yup.”

Charlie gave a little sigh and said, “And *I* can’t help but notice that most of those other projects are about constructing code breaking algorithms, pure math applications, and engineering a bypass around some very tricky equipment.”

Tunney commented in a neutral tone, “Dr. Rush is an extremely *angry* man right now. And an extraordinarily devious one. It might be a very bad mistake to cross him. He can be every bit as vindictive as Rodney at his worst.”

“Oh,” Charlie said, turning his attention to their boards and picking up a dry erase marker, “I have zero intention of crossing him. I think this particular project is going to take all of my attention for quite a while. Anybody got a basic physics text book?”

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Dr. Spencer Reid and many scientific members of the Atlantis Expedition had been spending a lot of time on the First Furling city, Ilium. Spencer, with his law enforcement credentials to act as ‘security’, was accompanied by, not just the anthropologists and linguists, but the diplomatic corps as well. At Daniel’s urging, Jahar had agreed that some kind of formal treaty between them was a good idea… some kind of mutual protection pact, for either side to come to the aid of the other when called upon. Details were still being discussed, a long way from being ratified, but it all looked very hopeful. Daniel, for one, was thrilled. Woolsey, seeing much potential for getting caught in someone else’s war, was a little less enthusiastic, gaining only knowing smiles from Jahar. The Furling elder was well aware that if anyone was liable to take such advantage, it was far more likely to be the Tau’ri. A somewhat cynical Spencer was inclined to agree with Jahar.

It had been near impossible to pry the scientists loose, driving McKay into something of a froth of impatience, to the giggling amusement of the ever-present Meredith Joy. Spencer finally had to intervene. He suggested a lottery, and a strict rota, only 2 of McKay’s ‘hard’ scientists allowed to leave Atlantis at a time, and given no more than one week each to spend in the Furling playground.

And yes, the degree to which the baby enjoyed her father’s tirades was just a *little* bit worrisome. Oddly, the louder and angrier McKay got, the safer she felt, all warm and cozy in her sling. Spencer had no doubt it was because, the more stressed McKay got over some issue, the more he petted and cradled the baby for reassurance that all was well… although it was not really clear who he was reassuring.

For the zeds on the Furling training schedule, like Spencer himself, separation from Ilium was a little easier to handle. Those meetings actually were better and more efficiently conducted on the Spirit Plane, for those able to reach it. That meant they could include their kindred back in the Milky Way as well. Spencer could remain physically on Atlantis with his family, and still participate.

But the revelations of what an actual working city of the Ancients could do… well, they just kept coming.

Most important of all was the discovery of the matter replication devices. Ilium had hundreds of the things. The only limits for what they were able to produce seemed to be whether or not the city databases held the template instructions for making something, sufficient power, and the necessary raw materials. The last were stored in the lowest parts of Ilium, fed by seawater and mining drones diving into the crust of the planet, along with any waste dumped into the recycle system. Of course, the city needed a minimum power level in order to collect and replicate substances from base elements, such as hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, silicon, iron. Which is why identical hatches on
Atlantis had been shut down, invisible and unknown, from the beginning.

That had Spencer scratching his head. Their city was fully powered now, after the Asuran ZPMs had been obtained and plugged in. Standing on the Command Tower Operations Deck with the rest of the Atlantis executive staff as they reviewed McKay’s ecstatic reports from Ilium, he asked aloud, “Atlantis, do you have these matter replication units?”

“I have many thousands, located in every tower and level,” she replied.

Ignoring the shocked faces all around, Spencer pressed on, “And… why haven’t you told us about them before?”

Her answer: “No one asked.”

Spencer could only shrug. “Okay… fair enough.”

He looked about briefly on the ops deck and focused where he felt the faintest tingle of interest. Approaching a panel in the wall, he reached out and touched… an outline about a foot square suddenly made itself visible. The section of wall slid back to reveal a cube-shaped space behind.

And yes, size of the thing to be replicated must also be a factor.

Using his intuition and glancing down at Bast, he said aloud, as clearly as possible, “A bowl of milk, please, room temperature.”

There was a brief white light, and then a metal bowl appeared with white liquid inside… He took it out, and sniffed cautiously. He nodded, then set it down on the floor for Bast to come do her own sniff-test. Satisfied, she began to delicately lap at the milk, feet tucked neatly under her, tail wrapped next to her body, purring contentedly.

Chuck the ops tech called up plans and maps of the city, highlighted with the locations of identical hatches, now initialized for use by any of the residents. Which started a rush on the first device, for coffee, turkey sandwiches, jammy dodgers, and ‘tea, Earl Grey, hot’.

Yeah, the *’Star Trek’* term ‘replicators’ was accurate… but there were unpleasant associations among the Tau’ri for the word ‘replicator’. Spencer suggested they call the things ‘galley hatches’, since the primary purpose of the first was to deliver lunch and various snacks.

Colonel John Sheppard gave it a moment of thought, then grinned. “Good one, Dr. Reid. I like it. You get to name stuff.”

McKay slid his mate a dirty look, grumbling about unfairness and favoritism.

Dr. Zelenka, reviewing the information from his monitors, warned, “There is a significant power drain with these hatches. I recommend closing down all but, perhaps, the ones in the mess hall and infirmary…”

Spencer nodded, and added, “And restricting use in some way. We didn’t just go through the effort to limit drug smuggling and other controlled substances on the city just to make them universally available. I would think creation of any drugs and medicines should be authorized by medical staff and be limited to the Infirmary hatches.”

“Excellent suggestions, Dr. Zelenka, Dr. Reid, thank you,” Woolsey nodded. “We will close all but a few hatches for now, and for those open, have every new request routed to Dr. Keller for authorization and approval before made widely available. We can review more guidelines later.”
Colonel John Shepard passed a hand over the wall, and Chuck’s displays showed the hatches winking out, and those remaining (including this one in Ops) outlined in warning red.

More schematics lit up with the locations of the main storage facilities, and larger fabrication units for industrial purposes. This made sense, as the galley hatches were obviously limited by size, offering only whatever could be made to fit a box around the size of an average microwave oven.

Spencer leaned over Chuck’s shoulder to study the blueprints. “It seems the same technology is present, on a far larger scale, in manufacturing complexes in the lower under-sea towers.”

None of those areas had been explored yet, beyond the first few floors, most of them still flooded from the ten thousand years Atlantis spent at the bottom of the sea. Even those few floors that were pumped out were filled with silt and sediments, not to mention decaying sea-life, and required heavy-duty clean-up to be rendered livable. With limited manpower and far more urgent priorities, only a few had been cleared so far – like the Aquarium.

“Manufacturing?” John asked, brightening up. “Manufacturing what, for instance?”

Spencer shrugged. “I’d say anything bigger than a bread-box,” he replied, gesturing to the galley hatch still open behind him, then reading off a display that appeared for him. “The factories below the city are evidently geared to churn out larger, or more hazardous, items: drones for the missile silos, furniture, construction materials and replacement parts of all kinds, even jumpers. As long as the city database holds the blueprints, it can be made.”

“ZPMs too?”

Zelenka nodded. “Most certainly. The canisters must be built inert, need to be charged elsewhere, considering how delicate and dangerous the charging procedure is, but the units themselves can be constructed at will.”

The exchange of knowledge and skills was not all one way, of course. If the Furling were in need of anything, it was sufficient people with the technical expertise to keep their cities running. There simply were not enough of them to handle some of the more complex and larger-scale repairs and maintenance Ilium required. And few of them knew enough of the Alteran technology and underlying science to be able to adapt bypasses or work-arounds when something simply could not be replaced or fixed. The small but brilliant Atlantis contingent were past-masters of macgyvering alternative solutions. They had been doing it for years, with their backwards-engineering efforts on alien tech of all kinds. Plugging in naquadah generators, goa’uld crystals or Asgard tech where they lacked some vital piece of Alteran equipment, or needed to over-ride the ATA gene requirement.

It was just as well McKay was able to get his people trained up on Ilium’s larger factory units, because he needed to get at least one of those on Atlantis up and running as soon as possible. The reverse towers under the west pier were identified as the best for the first reclamation and repair. West Tower Five sub levels had already been pumped dry. Crews were working day and night to clean up the sediments and mess left behind by ten thousand years of flooding, just so they could get access to the main manufacturing bays. Then there was the monumental task of repairing the equipment before it could even be hooked up to its own separate ZPM power source…

But this work was vital, of the highest priority, because the alert could come at any moment, that the tenuous situation on Earth had taken a turn for the worse. Not like that was an unlikely or unexpected event… Earth seemed to be the ‘trouble magnet’ of planets, no question. Atlantis had a
fully operational star-dive, which could get them to the Milky Way in two months travel time…
maybe a little less, if they pushed it. But that might not be quick enough.

Because the True Wraith Swarm had finished dicking around out there on the rim of Pegasus, and
had launched into the void between galaxies. It would take them an estimated four months to reach
the outskirts of the Milky Way. Then every life in that galaxy would be at risk, and that was
unacceptable. To anyone, in either of the two galaxies.

They’d need McKay’s ‘Wormhole Drive’ up and running, and soon. The system was still a bit on
the wonky side, useful for emergencies, but, as Sheppard had observed caustically, “ buggy as all
hell for those frequent flyer points…” As had been proved when they used it to return to Pegasus,
and the thing had burned out, explosively, about half-way between galaxies. It had been one of the
things on their high-priority repair lists, of course, ever since. But somehow never managed to get
fixed. The replacement parts either didn’t exist, or were almost impossible to come by.

Or, used to be. If they could just get the Atlantis factories operational, McKay could order up a
whole new unit… with improvements. A lot of them had been drafted by Dr. Radek Zelenka and
Dr. Evgenia Andreeva, to make it far more stable and dependable.

So much to do… so few to do it, and so little time…

Yeah, that was a recipe for disaster.

Tony sat back against the wall of the *Nala* bridge, watching with some amusement as the
scientists mucked about on the controls. Clearly, they had no idea what they were doing. Tony had
never actually met Dr. Peter Kavanagh in person before this, but he sure had heard plenty about
the prickly engineer… prickly even beyond McKay standards. And his temper wasn’t growing any
shorter as one attempt after another totally and inexplicably failed to get the *Nala* to obey
commands. Already he had pitched a hissy of epic proportions to get “someone to take that
screaming brat out of here!”

Without the *kormac* collar impeding, Tony was easily able to get a hot read on everyone around
him. He focused on the Secret Service guys flooding the little ship in particular. Black suits,
narrow ties, ill-concealed weapons holsters and earwigs. They were all bored out of their minds,
impatient of their new ‘provisional’ administration. They were waiting with some glee for the
moment O’Neill and Vice President Greenwood were back at the helm, showing these amateurs
how to get shit done. Until then, they would do their jobs. That was the mandate, and it didn’t
change just because there was some significant doubt about the legality of the take-over. But that
didn’t mean they had to offer any extraordinary assistance or advice.

Tony had been a little shocked to find none of the Secret Service agents knew anything about the
cells in the White House basement, or who the *guests* down there were. Most of them had been
reported as dead… supposedly assassinated by HWS in the attempted coup. Even Hayes was
reported to be at death’s door in a location known only to Landry’s new Secret Service Director…
a formerly cashiered Marine Colonel who, everyone seemed to know, had once been sitting in a jail
cell waiting for execution on charges of treason. The rank and file, from the Assistant Director on
down, were *not* happy about that. Or the black-out on any intel related to their legally elected
Commander in Chief. They’d been told that his security was being attended to by a new elite squad
of Secret Service, specially chosen by the pro-tem President.

The guards on Landry’s bunker were all old buddies and subordinates of Makepeace, drafted from
rogue NID units at one time or another. As his Probie would call them, True Believers, in a more
*aggressive* attitude with respect to aliens and alien tech, and seeing no reason why rule of law should stand in the way. Tony did wonder why Landry and his cohorts bothered keeping any of their prisoners alive. Until the word ‘hostage’ wafted up from several minds. Dangerous as they might be to keep, it would be more dangerous if they had to face O’Neill and Atlantis without significant leverage.

Still, Kavanagh was an asshole. Even his own minions hated his guts, and the three year old getting his goat was a charmer and a pleasure to be around. So when two Secret Service agents were detailed to take his little girl out to play on the White House lawn, and were polite enough to at least make a gesture toward getting his permission first, Tony gave them both a quick scan and judged them adequate caretakers.

Tali needed the exercise, out in the sunshine and fresh air, after two days cooped up, and Tony needed the breather too.

He did get a little worried when the President pro-tem, Hank Landry himself, wandered out on the lawn to play tag with a tiny girl in cinnamon curls. Both of them giggled as they tumbled into a tickle-match. Try as he might, Tony could feel only joy in the Patriot leader… enjoying a welcome and all too rare time-out from the pressure-cooker that was the White House on a *good* day. And Landry wasn’t having many of those.

Okay, so even traitorous murdering bastards might have their good points. Didn’t make him a good guy, or get him a pass on his bad choices… but Tony at least didn’t have to worry about Tali being out there in his company. The very special Agent Afloat was reminded that Landry himself had a daughter… memories of happier, simpler times flooded the man’s mind.

At any rate, until Kavanagh stomped out of the ship and intruded on play time. Yeah, that ass didn’t make many friends, no matter where he went. And that had obviously been the case *before* his ATA gene therapy turned him into a zed.

“Sir. Mr. President. Sir!” he huffed, impatient. “The ship won’t accept any commands. We’ve attempted to patch in work-arounds, but it rejects them. We think it’s because the current pilot has… a stronger ATA gene. The ship has imprinted on him. Or maybe… the kid. She tests out as stronger than her father.”

Landry disentangled himself with a heavy regretful sigh, giving a last grin to shoo the child over to one of the Secret Service agents on guard. Then he stood up, brushed off his impeccably tailored (but now grass-stained) suit, and reluctantly followed Kavanagh inside the ship.

He stood and stared at Tony for a moment, as the agent grinned back.

“Have fun with my kid, Mr. President? She’s a charmer, hunh? For a zed, that is.”

Landry winced… Tony took some comfort in the fact that the man was no longer the unreasoning bigot he had been… just wary, now. Disgruntled that he needed the gene only a zed was certain to carry.

“I’m a father myself, you know, agent. From what I hear, you put yourself at great risk to find her and keep her by your side. I can respect that.”

“If nothing else about me?”

“Let’s not get hasty here. So. The ship will only answer to you, right? Seems like you could take off and leave us all high and dry any time you like.”
Oh, Tony knew what was coming next…

“Yeah, unless you take measures to keep my daughter under lock and key, away from me. Am I right, Mr. President?”

“That’s what common sense is telling me. We’ve got that… holding area, down in the basement. We keep her there, you can stay with her, unless we need to use the ship… I’ll guarantee play time and fresh air for her… but you know I can’t just make it easy for you to run off. You zeds seem to have a God-given talent for escape.”

Especially, Tony acknowledged privately, with so many sentinels around, staffing the Secret Service ranks. A number of them had taken care to be close by whenever the orders had come to guard the ship, the zed pilot, or his daughter. Including the pair out on the lawn with Tali and a calico kitten winding around their ankles. At least one guy standing on the bridge right now, getting the evil eye from Luke, was also a Protector. Tony did *not* glance at the guy. It was a rookie mistake no surviving undercover would ever make.

Tony gave a wide, sunny smile. “Why would I want to escape? When I can just wait for Atlantis to return and kick your murdering traitorous butt out of office? And that’s nothing to what my mate will do when she arrives. She’s what the Pegasus calls a Protector… you may know them by another name… Sentinel? Ring a bell?” Oh, it sure did, with a lot of the black-suited men and women, not only the ones among them with super senses and reflexes. “She’s going to be *seriously* miffed when she gets here, looking to get me and Tali back.”

Oh yeah… miffed and then some. He himself was a little worried about that…

Landry merely shrugged, although Tony knew that information had caused him to start to sweat. Landry knew Teyla, and was not even a little inclined to underestimate her. He took his time, looking around the Ancient ship, then hitching up his pant legs to settle himself in the captain’s chair.

“We’ve had a few… challenges, getting access to some of our stuff. The Orbital Weapons Platforms, for instance. Figure we’re going to need them, should company arrive. But we have nothing, at present, that can get through Carter’s Shield to reach them. Well… apparently, NASA shuttles are automatically keyed to pass, but we’ve got exactly two of those that are space worthy at the moment, and no rockets that can reach escape velocity to get them out of the atmosphere. The first won’t be ready for another six months. So we had a suggestion. What if we use *Nala* here to launch a shuttle? She takes it up, the Shield recognizes it as friendly, hey presto, access to the OWP. What do you think, agent?”

That’s Very Special Agent, asshole, is what Tony thought. He waggled a hand. “Sounds a bit iffy. You need a pilot for *Nala*, for one thing.”

“We’ve got you.” In Landry’s mind was the near-frantic, ‘Please don’t make me underline our leverage, out there playing I-Spy with the Secret Service bad-asses…’

Tony sighed. “Yeah, okay. No need to get nasty about it. Tali stays here, safe and sound, and I go play shuttle bus driver. When do you want to do this?”

“Right now would be good for me.”

Tony sighed. He could only hope McKay and Carter between them had made sure the OWPs were proof against tampering. He was pretty sure they were… Red Sea protocols and all… but even a little doubt might place those awesome honkin’ big space guns in the wrong hands…
The NASA space shuttle *Atlantis* (ha!) was parked on a lot in Austin, Texas, just waiting for them. As a runabout cargo ship, *Nala* actually did have grapples, in the form of a tractor beam that could hold the shuttle, half again her size and vastly heavier, against her undercarriage.

Landry had ordered a military squad to accompany the *Nala* and her pilot, not a sentinel among them, drat it. Kavanagh and three of his minions were also aboard, the minions looking terrified. All three were circles who, like Kavanagh himself, had taken the ATA gene therapy… converted zeds, and notably without cats. Kavanagh had apparently recruited them out of the ranks of the disaffected HWS sciences staff, seriously freaked by the experimental procedure’s unintended side effects. It was Wayne Cartwright all over again.

Once they arrived in Austin, the engineer ordered two to join the *Atlantis* crew, along with a couple of the guards. Kavanagh, one minion to monitor, along with the burliest of the security squad, would remain with Tony on the *Nala* bridge.

The shuttle would attempt to dock with the OWP, but if that didn’t prove to be feasible, then an extra-vehicular activity (EVA) would be required, at the least. Space walk? Oh yeah, that sounded like fun. Not! *Nala* did have transport beams, which might or might not work through the OWP shields, but no air-lock system to allow for a space exit. That would have to be done from the *Atlantis*. The OWP did have a separate EVA air-lock, no doubt to allow for external maintenance and repairs. But no one seemed to know if it could be opened without more unavailable codes.

Tony wondered just how expendable the assigned scientists were. He bet they were wondering the same thing, after the Area 51 disaster. And, yeah, that little cluster fuck had made the national and international news. Landry tried to claim it was hidden HWS sympathizers, but no one was buying that.

Once the shuttle was secured, it was nothing for the *Nala* to swing into action, flying higher and higher. She paused for a moment when the scan-limit of the stand-by Shield had been reached. Kavanagh, in the captain’s chair (as if!) was using a laptop of his own to interface with detection equipment elsewhere.

They inched forward, then a little more, then a little more… it almost felt like edging a needle though a rubber balloon without breaking it… but… it let them through.

Okay, that worked.

“Yes! We can successfully enter the Shield sensor range. It recognizes the shuttle as friendly, and seems to ignore the Ancient ship.”

The comm unit was connected to some kind of mission control somewhere. Tony didn’t recognize the gruff, starchy and tinny voice on the other end.

“Approach OWP and attempt to dock.”

At this point, beyond the Shield detection range, it was safe enough for Tony to release the space shuttle, and let the experienced hands of her astronauts perform the docking maneuver. Watching over his monitors from a moderate distance, he saw the shuttle thrusters pitch and yaw the bigger craft into position… In the end, it looked like plugging something into an electrical socket… in a suit of heavy armor, wearing metal gauntlets, from the back of a giddy stallion. But the OWP was apparently programmed to recognize and accept the shuttle, and to allow access.
So… okay, that worked too.

The two converted ‘mission specialists’ on the *Atlantis* were on comms of their own, and reported that they were able to gain entry to the OWP, without the need to suit up in EVA gear. Tony didn’t imagine the relief in their voices at that.

“Proceed with the mission,” barked Mr. Gruff, completely unnecessarily in Tony’s opinion.

The noises Tony heard over the comms made no sense to him, any more than the jargon the scientists were babbling as they worked. Kavanagh began to look smug. It was irritating as all hell. Luckily, Tony had his extensive experience working with McKay to rein in his reactions.

Besides, the fat lady had yet to launch into song.

One sound there was no difficulty understanding. The sudden loud air-raid siren blared out from the comms, that almost, but didn’t quite, drown out the “Oh shit!” from everyone.

“Abort! Abort! Self-destruct triggered!” yelled one of the mission specialists.

“Negative!” ordered Mr. Gruff. “Deactivate self-destruct! Complete your damned mission!”

“Can’t! It’s on two minute de—“

There was a distinctive sound of a transport beam firing. The OWP had an automatic evacuation protocol in place that would send any passengers aboard to the SGC embarkation deck if the self-destruct was engaged.

Tony checked to make sure there were no longer any life-signs on the OWP, then turned to Kavanagh. “When that thing blows, it’ll take *Atlantis* and us with it, unless we back off, now. Right *now*!”

“Back off! Back off!” Kavanagh yelped.

Mr. Gruff wasn’t done. “Wait a minute, we have another chance to—“

“You want to lose the shuttle, fine, there are more waiting,” said a voice with a Scottish accent… not Carson’s Edinburgh, more Glasgow. And ignoring the protests from the *Atlantis* crew, even now initiating procedures to detach. “But we’ve got one, just *one* space craft that can fly without a rocket booster. You do the math, Colonel Makepeace.”

“Go! Go!” Mr. Gruff capitulated.

You didn’t need to tell Tony twice. There were the guards with him on the *Nala*, plus Kavanagh and his one tech minion, plus the command crew on the *Atlantis*, all at risk if he couldn’t get them all the hell out of Dodge in time.

The reverse docking move seemed more like a wrench out than a controlled pull, but the crew was no doubt in a hurry. Luckily, *Atlantis* was robust enough to take it without damage. The OWP air lock might not be fit for a replay, however… Tony waited a dangerous extra ten seconds longer than he should have, for the shuttle to get clear from the docking hatch so he could catch her in his grapples. Then he pivoted the ship and raced for the atmosphere, fast enough that the heat panels on the bottom of *Atlantis* began to glow. Tony hastily threw up *Nala*’s shield in protection.

Behind them there was a flash of light… but no sound, no flames, no big special effects extravaganza suitable for a *‘Star Wars’* sequel. Tony felt the rocking of *Nala* in the blast
wake. He keyed up the monitors. A crunched collection of shards and bolts sped quickly out from the epicenter. Some slabs of steel, nothing bigger than a snow sled, threatened any satellites that might be in their way.

One of their six OWPs was now no more than debris in space.

Well, that didn’t work so good.

But at least they were alive, to deliver the shuttle and her crew back to Texas. Those who ended up at the SGC wouldn’t have to catch their own ride home. Apparently they had come from there in the first place.

“Well that was a bust,” Mr. Gruff, AKA Colonel Makepeace, groused over comms. “Apparently, all we got was a fragment of the operating system… but maybe that’ll be enough for us to get past the password encryption…”

Geez, Tony hoped not!

Once *Nala* was back on the White House lawn, Tony was escorted to the basement by Landry’s hand-picked escort, and the ‘holding area’ for the Patriot hostages. Yeah, call a spade a spade, and a ‘holding area’ a bunker cell, where Hayes and his loyalists were presently being bored to tears.

Tali gladly squealed and raced for her father’s welcoming hug.

“You got quite the little charmer there, agent DiNozzo,” said the former, but rightful, leader of the free world, chuckling.

“Thank you, Mr. President. I think so, too. She gets it all from my side. By the way, I’m sorry to report that we lost one of our OWPs this afternoon.”

Henry Hayes sighed. “Yeah, we kinda figured that. Those assholes Landry lined up are no match for Carter or McKay. Look, come on over, get something to eat, meet the folks, we can do a sitrep after dinner…”

This was *supposed* to be a super-secret reconnaissance mission, to suss out the situation, before they even attempted to get a handle on what it would take to actually launch a full-scale assault…

Dr. Blair Sandburg had received super-secret encrypted GPS coordinates of an island being used by the Patriots as a government compound for zed prison inmates. They came from all over the country, as well as any of the recently-paroled who had been re-captured and arrested. The actual info came from an internet entity known only as Aves_Ichthyornis, but Meow_Meow, renowned black-hat hacker-turned-FBI, swore it was good.

So yeah, Detective Jim Ellison, former Ranger, Sentinel of the Great City, had decided on reconnaissance first. Find out what was actually going on, what it might take to free those people. Yeah, reconnaissance was good. Super-secret was kind of a necessity.

Yeah, right.

It started with Simon Banks, their Captain on the Cascade Police Department Major Crimes team. Seems he had a cousin, a zed who had been jailed for assault which was actually self-defense…
and his son Daryl had a girlfriend with a father… Then Megan Connor, their Australian exchange officer (exchange, yeah, right, how many years had she stuck around now?) knew of some guys… Seemed like, in the space of a day, there were half a dozen, then a dozen or more who had relatives, friends, acquaintances, who had dropped out of sight from the country’s prison system. People wanted answers. Word was getting around – *fast* – that Jim and Blair might hold the key to getting some.

And complete strangers (or maybe not *complete*, considering *what* they were, rather than *who*) starting arriving in Cascade. They loitered with intent, most of them not even bothering to seem like they might be hiding.

So by nightfall, when Jim had wanted to get under way, not only did he have Simon and Megan tagging along, but as soon as he started driving, there was practically a convoy of vehicles trailing behind him. Jim wasn’t *too* worried… their destination was a tiny port on Fidalgo Island, where they had called ahead to reserve a rental boat. How many of these hangers-on would be able to get a boat of any description to carry them out into the Salish Sea?

Turned out… quite a lot.

Others were waiting in the tiny Fidalgo cove. Men and women with sharp eyes, flaring nostrils, all on high-alert, with smoky, wispy animal shapes lurking in agitation around them. Some were in uniform, military and law enforcement, most not, many in plaid flannel and work boots that may not have been bought in the US…

Blair face-palmed. He ignored Jim’s warning growl, and the black panther suddenly mewing in distress on his heels. He marched to the front of the crowd quickly congregating on the tiny dock and in the marina, as his partner prepared their reserved launch to cast off.

“Okay, come on, guys, you know this isn’t going to work like this. We don’t even know what’s out there, yet, beyond a super-max security facility. It’ll have armed guards on top of armed guards every two feet all around the perimeter. We appreciate the support, we really do, but it’s a little premature. So at least wait until we go take a look! Right?”

Grumbling, unhappy, but recognizing logic when it was shoved in their faces, and more than willing to bow to the wisdom of the Shaman… they backed off.

One woman in a Marine major uniform declared, “Okay, but we’re going to get ourselves organized while we wait. If this turns into an armed assault, we want to be ready.”

“Okay fine,” Blair agreed quickly and easily… too easily, most felt, as even his own sentinel looked at him with deep skepticism.

Simon barked out in laughter, and Megan shook her head. But it was just the four of them who boarded the small launch to take them out into the water. Well, four plus Ruth.

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Pariahville

Chapter Notes

Âuthor Notes: Cameos by Constable Benton Fraser, CPD Detective Stanley Kowalski, Diefenbaker the wolf and Sgt. Bob Fraser from *'Due South'* canon (a Canadian RCMP officer, his wolf partner and the ghost of his dead father, working with the Chicago PD), Cameo by Special CGIS Agent Abigail Borin from *'NCIS’* canon.

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Of course, Blair at least should have expected the small flotilla that met them… everything from large launches, schooners under sail, even kayaks and canoes. And not all of the tall black fins out there were from spirit guides. There seemed to be a whole pod of orcas come to see what was going on in their waters.

One cedar and birch-bark canoe paddled up close, and Simon, piloting their launch, slowed to meet it.

The two men were in plaid flannel, jeans, work boots and wind-breakers. The white wolf was looking sea-sick. The ghost in the vivid red and distinctive dress uniform of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was looking bored. Not sure who, beyond himself, could even see the ghost, Blair tried his best to ignore the presence.

“Benton Fraser, sir,” announced the tall and handsome man in front. “Constable, RCMP, although not here in official capacity. Just a concerned civilian. This is my partner, Detective Stanley Kowalski, Chicago PD. Also here as a private citizen. We stand ready to render whatever assistance may be required, including, but not limited to, political asylum in Canada for any zeds being unfairly incarcerated or treated inhumanely.”

“Appreciated, Constable,” Blair said. Yep, another sentinel, and… unless he missed his guess, not just a zed, but a shaman in his own right. The wolf at his side, living and breathing corporeal being, not spirit guide, was a dead give-away. “But at the moment we’re on reconnaissance, trying to keep a low-profile.”

The Chicago cop snorted. “Nothing more low profile than a canoe… with a Mountie, a cop and a wolf in it.”

That was said with some sarcasm, but the Mountie seemed to take it as straight. Blair got the impression the man didn’t have a lot of humor in him.

Fraser said, “If you want to make a landing on Bleak House Island, you’ll need the canoe. Those waters are very treacherous, too many hidden rocks at any tide, and your launch draws a pretty deep draft as it is. Only safe landing for a craft like that is the pier they have guarded 24/7. With the canoe we can skirt around to the west shore and come in on the sand bar.”

Simon called out, “How do you know all this? You from around here?”

Fraser glanced out to a tall black fin, just sinking below the waves… and a few more canoes and
kayaks holding back. “Not… as such. I do have access to specialized local knowledge, however, and guides who can lead us safely in.”

Jim shrugged. “Okay then. Lead away. You need the GPS coordinates we’ve got?”

“I’ll take it,” the Chicago cop answered quickly, well aware his partner didn’t need it. But Stanley was, to all appearances, definitely a ‘belt *and* suspenders’ kinda guy.

One kayak, paddled deftly and swiftly, approached and swung into lead, taking them through passages and straits, some more narrow than others. Simon had to throttle back the launch so as not to overwhelm and overtake their escorts. He expressed doubt about this, that it would slow them down significantly. But after the fifth course correction around a tell-tale swirl in the deadly currents, he realised that slow was the only safe course to follow.

Until a search-light abruptly cut through the blackness, and a megaphone of some kind ordered them to “Come about! This is the US Coast Guard cutter *Samson*. Shut off your engines. Prepare to be boarded.”

There was a moment of groaning from the launch as Simon geared down. Then a voice from the canoe shouted out, “Abby? That you?”

“Fraser? What the hell, Benny! What are you doing here?”

“Probably the same as you, Special Agent Borin.”

“Yeah, yeah... look, all of you, get your asses over here. We need to discuss a few things, right the hell now!”

A distinctly Chicago accent demanded in a resigned but pissed voice that carried over the water, “Oh, don’t tell me. You used to play hockey with her?”

“Lacrosse, actually, with her Canadian cousin, twice removed by marriage...”

“Oh, of course...”

The captain and crew of the *Samson* made themselves scarce once all the visitors had been ushered below decks to the operations room. Special Agent Abigail Borin of the US Coast Guard Investigative Service was... yes, a sentinel. With a wispy seal shape trailing after her, and a zed junior agent assisting. No, he didn’t have a cat, yet, but he was being given the serious eye by Ruth. The kayak and its passengers remained out in the water, idly sweeping in circles.

Abby spread out maps and cued up a monitor that showed satellite images.

“They sure did pick the right island,” she complained. “That place is all but impregnable.”

Borin pointed out on the map, all the shoals, reefs and dangerous rocks scattered around the edges of the large rocky island. There wouldn’t be enough lighthouses and marker buoys in the world to warn off sea-going craft from that lethal mess. The satellite pictures revealed where part of the forest that covered the island was being cut down. Little colored flags were staked out to outline various acre-square sections with grids marked for future streets, outlining future buildings. So far only two sections were fenced in and showed evidence of construction, the two closest to the tiny cove and harbor. In one, the only one currently populated, just wooden platforms had already been constructed, with tents erected on top. Some pre-fab Quonset-style huts had been moved in, for
communal purposes, holding showers, bathrooms, mess halls, stores, infirmary. The other sections were obviously being prepared for more solid habitation, also pre-fab on wooden platforms, but with walls, roofs, doors, windows. They looked like the dormer buildings of a barracks or work camp. High-walled wire and chain-link fences, no doubt electrified, made narrow corridors between marked sections, with tall fire-watch towers at convenient sight-lines. But the only truly permanent structures were clustered at the pier.

Bleak House Island had a somewhat colorful history. It had originally been bought by an eccentric and reclusive billionaire, a mansion of stone and logs built as a hide-away. Upon his mysterious disappearance, assumed to be a swimming accident of some sort, if not suicide, the property was taken over by a concern that turned it into a holiday resort. The mansion became the main hotel, extensions and cabins added, the pier expanded and the harbour cove dredged deeper for larger landing craft. A lighthouse had been built on a promontory at the mouth of the cove, a round tower three stories tall with a light and watch platform on top. Of course, so remote, very little in the way of infrastructure or resources, so difficult to access, even with the pier and lighthouse… the place soon went into receivership. But it was perfect for turning into an armed camp with ultra-high security. All they really had to do was build fences around the landing and main compound, letting nature, and the lethally cold waters of the Pacific north-west take care of the rest.

“Satellite and heat-sensors tell us there are already over fifty thousand prisoners on that island, with more being brought in every day. With less than five hundred guards. All the guards are holed up at the landing, they don’t even bother to patrol, just post sentries around the pier and headquarters. And of course, there are sentries sent out with the work and construction crews during the day, to clear the forest and build the housing. Those crews are drafted from the prisoners themselves. Apart from that, they leave the prisoners to themselves to organize and run the camp however they want. If it was real criminals in there, it would be chaos… but they’ve settled in pretty well, from what we’ve been able to observe. Even got themselves first aid stations, sports field, an intramural competition running, and something that looks like classes... teaching what, who the hell knows. Everything and anything would be my guess. Not many zeds with access to higher education, but a *lot* of them have always been in the trades, construction, logging… nursing and paramedical… lots of expertise there, I’d guess. There’ve been no attempts to escape… thank God. Because hypothermia alone will kill you in less than half an hour in these waters, this time of year.”

Blair hummed, glancing at Jim. “And… the cats?”

Borin winced. “Yeah, the cats. Every launch they bring in seems to have a dozen or more stowaways. From what we’ve seen, there are hundreds of cats lurking around every marina in the area... and that isn’t normal. Unless, of course... they’re looking for Furalin.

“The CGIS Director is... upset. We’ve got no grounds to investigate or intervene... not officially, anyway. So for now we’re patrolling, as is our mandate, to maintain the border and keep an eye out for suspected smuggling activities. And if we should find anyone trying to swim for shore… well, so far we haven’t, but the potential is there for us to pick them up on a rescue mission. If we get called on the patrols, we’re prepared to say that we’ve had reports of human trafficking and potential corruption among the guards on that island, selling prisoners or hiring them out for a variety of illegal purposes. It’s pretty thin, but… I’m not happy, gentlemen. I’m guessing none of you are, either. But we haven’t got a leg to stand on right now, until those bastards cross a line. And so far... I don’t think they actually have.”

Blair put out a flat hand and wagged it. “Maybe not, but they’re pretty close to it. Kidnapping masquerading as protective custody, for one. Not all of those people are convicts. But they won’t keep to the shady side of the law for long. It’s only a matter of time, and if they find a way to get through the Planetary Shield or open up the Stargate again, all bets are off, and they’ll be selling...
people wholesale.”

Borin nodded, chewing on something sour. “That’s what I figure. But... Geez Louise. Fifty thousand plus! How the *hell* are we supposed to get them out of there? And where do we take them when we do?”

At that moment, Ruth gave a meow and the white wolf gave a whine. Both animals, totally ignoring each other, looked over their shoulders at the island, no longer quite so far in the distance.

Blair cleared his throat and did *not* glance at the Mountie, or his ghost companion in red. “I think we need to land on the island, and have a little look around.”

Borin looked constipated at this. “Only if Ted and I go too, and as many sentinels as you brought with you.”

“And me and Connor,” Simon Banks insisted. “We didn’t come all this way to let you two go find trouble on your own... You’re far too good at it!”

“Too right,” grumbled the Aussie.

The Chicago cop, Kowalski sighed. “We got room enough for everyone in the canoe?”

The Mountie replied regretfully, “Not with the ten cats hiding under the tarp in the back, no.”

“That’s okay,” Borin shrugged. “We’ve got a couple inflatables we can use for a landing.” She pointed on the map. “This is the best place. West end of the island, furthest from the pier, pebble beach and a shoreline we can climb without getting out the grappling hooks.”

The ‘inflatables’ were glorified inner tubes with a rubber floor covered in aluminum plates and one end pointed to indicate it was the front, a straight stern with a plywood piece ready to attach an outboard motor. Two of them were pumped full of air from a compressor in no time, and dragged to the stern of the *Samson* and a diving platform. Which is when a dozen cats emerged out of nowhere to come join the expedition. All but one, a brown tabby who glanced around at Borin’s partner Ted, and decided to hang out at the junior agent’s ankles. Once the canoe and two inflatables were launched, the kayak, that had been holding off, approached once more and took lead.

“Friends of yours, Benny?” Abby asked.

“They said their spirit guides told them their partners were on that island.”

“Oka-ay... fair enough. The level of crazy in the world since Declassification, I guess this counts as pretty damn ordinary.”

They all kept silent as they paddled in to shore, not wanting to attract attention, alert any guards, and sound carried over water all too easily.

In an hour, the kayak, canoe and inflatables slid onto a rocky shore, and a beach of small pebbles. The kayak disgorged a man and woman, who remained silent, along with two cats that had come with. Dozens of other cats, all sizes, breeds and descriptions, all with a *most* distinctive pattern to their coats... jumped from canoe and rubber rafts, getting a jaundiced glare from the white wolf. The canine huffed as it jumped out of the canoe to splash ashore, supremely unimpressed by the cats scooting around him. At least he didn’t show any inclination to chase them, Blair thought. For which the wolf turned his head to glare at him. ‘As if’, he seemed to scoff. The unattached felines swiftly disappeared into the undergrowth of the Pacific Northwest rain-forest, as did the man and
woman from the kayak.

“Yeah,” Kowalski grumbled. “We noticed that. Most of the little ports around here, you can’t move for all the cats, just sitting around, waiting. Nobody seems to think it strange.”

“They chose this location well,” Borin’s partner Ted commented quietly as they began to move up to the barely-there animal trail from the pebble beach. “Very little in the way of special security should be required. Very few would be capable of swimming to the nearest land. Technically, I suppose the island *could be* large enough to support a significant population, but with absolutely no infrastructure or support facilities...”

“Say what?” Connor asked, confused.

Kowalski smirked at the others. “He means no roads, buildings, probably no fresh water sources either, unless they have cisterns to collect rain-water, and they’d need a hell of a lot of those for fifty-thousand-plus. Food and potable water are all gonna have to be shipped in.”

Abigail Borin continued, “The only permanent construction is at the landing pier. They’ve got quite the air-lock gate system set up there, with sentry towers. They’ve been putting up tent cities in the closest meadow since they got here, but this is a pretty wild and hostile place in the winter... they’re gonna need a lot more than a few tents if they intend to move any more people in. Fifty thousand so far, mostly ferried in from Seattle. That’s every zed in the US federal and state prison systems.”

“About that,” Simon growled unhappily. “They just... moved all the zeds here?”

“That’s our information, yeah.”

Kowalski mused, “Problem is... if we really mean to spring them all... some of them may actually deserve to be here. How do we tell? And if we decide to go ahead and let God sort them out... well, fifty thousand. That’s a hell of a jail break. Even if most of the guards are by the pier... well. We’re looking at a helluva fire-fight, bound to be casualties... maybe more than we can handle, and I gotta say... I’m law enforcement myself. Those guards are brothers in blue. Probably got no more say in what they’ve been ordered to do than anyone. And even if we get the rest of it sorted... where do we take them all? *How* do we take them all? By canoe? Shit. Fifty fucking thousand! The logistics are making my head hurt.”

“No kidding,” Simon grumbled.

“That’s what I keep sayin’,” Borin agreed grumpily.

Jim edged closer to Blair. “You’re being pretty quiet, Chief. What aren’t you saying?”

Blair glanced at the phlegmatic Mountie beside him... “Nothing... yet. Give me a chance here, Man. There’s something we haven’t seen yet.”

“Like what?”

“I’ll tell you when I figure it out. Oh, by the way... do you... um... see the guy in red?”

“Tryin’ *not* to, Chief.”

“You *see* him?”

“You *see* me?”
Blair merely nodded, too well aware of all the sentinels around him, listening in. As his friend Spencer was known to comment, no need to volunteer for a psych eval.

The Mountie, the living one, said, “Meet my dad, Sgt. Bob Fraser. Died some years ago.”

Blair nodded. “Good to meet you, sir. Um... mind if I ask... why is your hat brim cut off at the back?”

Sgt. Fraser looked miffed at that. “They did that so my hat would sit straight on my head as I lay in my coffin. It’s a defacement of the uniform in my opinion. They could have just laid it on my chest, but nooo...”

The wolf slowed down, sniffing carefully, then gave an odd “Worl” noise.

Fraser-the-younger glanced down at his companion. “Oh, I shouldn’t think so.”

The wolf gave another sniff, then looked back at the Mountie. “Really? It would be surprising, given the situation...”

The wolf gave a sort of huff. “Okay, so maybe it *would* make sense, but...”

Blair grinned. “Care to enlighten us?”

“Diefenbaker says there are sentinels on this island. A *lot* of them.”

And in five minutes more, there was no doubt the wolf was correct. Because their smallish band was surrounded by silent men and women in prison guard uniforms. But most were accompanied by a human partner in bright orange prison scrubs, who had a feline friend at their ankles...

Without saying a word, without even unholstering their weapons, the guards merely pointed them the way. They led through the forest, into a cleared patch of tree stumps, then to a gate in a high wire and barbed-wire fence that was humming with electricity. One unlocked the gate, and they all trooped through. They had now entered the fortified installation at the tiny sheltered cove on the east side of Bleak House Island.

On the front veranda of the stone-and-log main house, a man in white Navy uniform stood and declared, “Well it’s about time you guys showed up! What the hell am I supposed to *do*?”

Once everyone had been brought into the large front room, introduced and sat down, the ‘Kommandant’, as Blair couldn’t help but think of him, Vice Admiral Roger Bonneville, paced the carpet, near hysterical as he tried to explain himself.

“The bastard made me SecZed! Secretary of Zed Affairs! He’s made me the most hated man in the world! He’s gonna make me the Kamp Kommandant of a death-camp for berd slaves! Not just these guys, fifty thousand, all from the prison system or those who were paroled by Hayes, but all three million American hermies, by the time he’s finished! Soon as he can get a door through the Shield, he’s going into the slavery business! Going to sell them to goddamned aliens! And those he can’t sell? Who the hell needs ovens or gas chambers? All we have to do is dump them in the ocean! I’ll be the most hated man since Hitler, and with reason! What the hell am I supposed to do? I can’t just... ship them someplace else, you have no idea how ruthless those bastards are, Landry, Dante, their pet Samuels, that scary bastard Makepeace... But I only got five hundred guards... if you guys stage some kind of revolt or assault or something, then I can say we were overwhelmed, didn’t stand a chance... yeah, I can get away with that... at least until they send the
next load of zeds... it’ll be women and children next, we already have some, ‘protective custody’, need a day-care and a school... What the hell am I supposed to *do*?"

Blair looked around at the security forces standing guard in the room... and glanced first at Ruth, calmly licking her paws, and Diefenbaker-the-wolf looking bored, and then at the Mountie. “How many are sentinels, do you think?”

“A lot of them,” Jim muttered, and he would have felt uncomfortable, if he didn’t sense that he outranked them all, only Fraser himself at his level.

Fraser-the-younger sighed. “I’d say *all* of them.” It wasn’t sentinel senses telling him that, but it could well be zed or shaman abilities.

Bonneville halted in his tracks, looking confused. “What do you mean, what are you talking about? Sentinels? That old academy myth about super SEALs?”

Blair asked, “How did you choose your guard troops, sir?”

“A lot of ‘em were in the system... already prison guards... but I had to fire a lot of them, and a lot of them quit... not just because this post is too remote and isolated, but it’s a boring post... I got the idea most of them were just plain uncomfortable here. So I started posting on job sites, anyone with military or law enforcement background so I didn’t need to train ‘em... got plenty of takers, but I need more... five hundred guards for fifty thousand plus inmates? How the hell is that supposed to make any sense? Landry is just gonna have to approve the budget for more guards... but if we need to arrange a break-out...”

“I think I can help with your staffing problems, sir.”

Jim yelped, “Chief?” just ahead of the other protests around the room.

“Don’t you get it, Jim? Listen, everyone. The Patriots aren’t going to be in charge forever. Certainly not when O’Neill gets back with the Fleet, or Atlantis arrives. So all we really have to do is stall. Don’t think of this island as a prison... think of it as a sanctuary. Thousands, even hundreds of thousands of zeds, with just sentinels as guardians... safely out of the way. It really will be protective custody. How is DC going to know? Who’s going to tell them? You, Vice Admiral?”

“Hell no!”

“We just left a large number of sentinels on the mainland who were begging for a way to get here and help out. Offer them jobs as guards. Then we don’t have to worry about trying to evacuate this island... just defending it. Let the government that’s trying to screw them over pay for their room and board... And if they come looking for slaves... stonewall. Act dumb. Drag your feet, complain about paperwork, remind the people back in DC that there are already concerns about human trafficking and illegal work being done by convicts... and anyone getting close enough... might be... *persuaded* to go away empty handed.” And with Furalin among them, Blair had no doubt that those guards who were less than zed-friendly had already been driven away by projected discomfort and uneasiness.

“Geez Louise... that’s brilliant,” Agent Borin muttered.

Simon Banks burst out laughing. “That’s our Blair... out-of-the-box obfuscation his specialty. Welcome to the Sandburg Zone, everyone!”

Blair considered the Admiral in his dress-white uniform, his chest heavy with the ribbons and medals won over a long career in defense of his country... “Thank you.”
The man blinked. “For what? I betrayed my country, my Commander in Chief, and the Constitution I swore to uphold... all for a chance at glory and power.”

“Thank you for realizing you’re a human being first, and helping us. But... I’m not sure if this is going to be any help to you when President Hayes is back.”

“Hayes is dead, or as good as…”

“No, no he’s just fine, in a holding cell in the White House basement.”

“You mean... aw hell... of course they lied, the rat-bastards.” Bonneville shrugged, looking unutterably tired, swiping at his reddened eyes, and feeling, to the shaman’s senses... *devastated*.

“I’m not looking for any reprieve here. I’ll take my lumps. I deserve it. If it were me, I’d want the lot of us strung up by our *cohunes*.”

“Then why help us?”

It came out as a whisper, but it felt like a scream of anguish... “I can’t be that guy... that guy who killed millions because some fucker told him to. That can’t... I *can’t* be that guy.”

Blair nodded in understanding. He took a moment before they left to speak to the guard-sentinels standing at the Admiral’s back.

Kowalski was puzzled, lifting an eyebrow to his Mountie partner.

Fraser supplied, “He’s asking them to watch the Admiral carefully.”

“He doesn’t trust the guy? I didn’t get that vibe from him. He seems pretty sincere to me about wanting to keep all the zeds safe.”

“Oh, he is. But... we need him in place to answer any calls from DC.”

“And?”

“Sometime in the very near future, Admiral Bonneville is going to decide eating his gun is a good idea. He’s already thinking about it.”

When it came time to say their goodbyes and leave before dawn light revealed their presence, Blair told the Admiral, “When the time comes, we’ll tell Hayes, O’Neill, everyone, that you weren’t *that guy*.”

“That’s... yeah. Okay. You better go before you’re seen... I don’t know how much surveillance they’ve got on this place.”

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Of course, it wasn’t *quite* that easy. There were any number of relocated residents waiting to have a quiet word with the senior Furalin Shaman. But most were reassured with a promise of a meeting in the Blue Jungle... for those who were ready. And the word would spread fast through the tent city.

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A Place at the Table

Chapter Notes

Author Notes: Reference to Stargate SG-1 episodes 3-14-‘Foothold’ (shape-shifting insects take over the SGC), 4-16-‘2010’ and 5-10-‘2001’ (the advanced benevolent-seeming Aschen race, use zero-population growth to conquer their allies, offer a treaty with Earth), 4-7-‘Watergate’ (Dr. Svetlana Markov runs the clandestine Russian stargate project), 6-15-‘Smoke and Mirrors’ (a plot to frame Jack for Kinsey’s assassination uses one of the shape-shifter’s devices with Jack’s imprint). Reference to Stargate SG-1 episodes 6-8-‘The Other Guys’ & 7-9-‘Avenger 2.0’ (screw-up Dr. Jay Felgar). I know Felgar is unpopular with most SG fans, but Patrick McKenna is a much-loved comedian in Canada, best known for his role on *‘The Red Green Show’* (‘Keep your stick on the ice’, and duct tape is the solution to every problem). Also, some scenes may seem familiar if you read my story *‘Codename: Firestarter’*, because I cribbed shamelessly for the Wraith early encounters with the Milky Way. I think of it as AU of my AU where the Wraith invade…

Pel’k was once First Prime to the dead false god Olokun, and still wore his gold tattoo. But when the false gods fell, he was smart enough to realign… he joined the Free Jaffa Nation. Until he was offered a better deal by one last surviving false god, calling himself Commodus, Lord of the Lucian Alliance clan Naunet. But not to kneel to a goa’uld, never again. This time he would stand as a lord in his own right, an equal.

But it seemed no organization was free of idiots making his life difficult.

He lost all patience with his minions and pounded on the table as he vaulted to his feet.

“Enough! You all have your orders! If we are to win a place as a full clan of the Alliance, we first have to prove ourselves. We are Jaffa of Olokun. There are no better warriors anywhere, and few indeed with anything like our fleet, intact. We have all chafed under the new regime of the Free Jaffa… Free? Hah! Cowards, trading one master for another, eating out of the hands of the Tau’ri… skulking at the corners of this galaxy, afraid to reach out and grab power for themselves. Why be slaves to the Tau’ri when we could be their masters?”

Or, at least, so the Ogdoad of the Lucian Alliance had promised him. Rich rewards, command over millions, not merely freedom but *dominance*… he hungered for it. As earnest of rewards to come, and in recognition of his current strength, he would be awarded the clan name Kauket and a place as a lord, equal to any of the Ogdoad… And all that was needed was to succeed at this, his first task.

It hadn’t seemed so hard. While the Alliance raced to repair and crew as many Gate-Builder ships as they could, Pel’k, and the fleet of conventional Goa’uld salvage he had gathered, remnants of the once-great fleet of the System Lord Olokun, would search the galactic rim of the Milky Way, to battle and destroy any Tau’ri ships or Tau’ri allies they could find.

Two Alliance flunkies, strange humanoid creatures with unsettling faces and fleshy pink tentacles
growing out of their heads, were with him, supposedly to provide intelligence. Pel’k had his doubts about that. They did seem to know where the target ships would be patrolling, however. Word was, they were guarding the rim closest to the Pegasus Galaxy, keeping watch for... well, if you could believe such old women’s tales, for monsters called the Wraith, said to be on their way. Pel’k was pretty sure that story was merely a ruse of the Tau’ri, to win the cooperation of the Free Jaffa and other gullible races. Or even if the Wraith were real, they were still merely a means of coercion, as the Tau’ri had used the Ori. It wouldn’t be the first time they set rivals up for their enemies, as they had done to decimate other Lucian lords. Fools that they were.

Whittling down the Tau’ri fleet and allied support would make it all the easier to take on the greatest prize of all... the First World itself. The Goa’uld System Lords may have failed, but the Asgard had been around then. The Replicators may have failed, but they were destroyed along with their Goa’uld opponents in the last war of the Lords. The Ori may have failed, but... well, no one was too sure what had happened there, in another galaxy far away, or to turn all but three Ori ships of the Crusade around to limp home in disgrace, barely a shot fired. After all, without Asgard support, with only a handful of their own ships, all Earth really had in its defense was Atlantis. Pel’k had heard rumors, of course, but... Atlantis was in another galaxy, a long way away.

With what hidden resources and assets he could scrape together, Pel’k had gathered a fleet of seven ha’taks, thirteen al’kesh, and several squads of support death gliders. An impressive force, surely enough to take on the Tau’ri, one on one, at least. But they had been out here for some days, and all they had managed to find were one Serrakin and one Gadmir ship. The Serrakin had gone down, eventually, to their superior numbers, but they had taken out a ha’tak and five al’kesh with them. As for the alien and unknown Gadmir... The two ha’taks and four al’kesh that had encountered it had all... disappeared. Somehow.

Frustration at being unable to engage with their target enemy, and unsettled by their losses, now down to four ha’taks and four al’kesh, Pel’k was finding it difficult to motivate his fleet to continue their mission. Still trained to obey the gold sigil on his forehead, Pel’k had to wonder if it would be enough to keep his lieutenants in line, and for how long. For now, they were visibly smoothing their ruffled feathers... The less he let them whine and complain, the longer he could keep them at it. But he was already anticipating a revolt attempt, sometime soon.

“Very well. Then, if that is all we have to discuss...”

But a lowly jaffa tech whispered in his second’s ear, and his first lieutenant cleared his throat.

“We have detected a large fleet emerging out of hyperspace, just beyond the Rim, sir.”

“The Tau’ri? The Free Jaffa?”

“No...”

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The Aschen High Advisory Council sat in appalled silence. On the floor of the Chambers, a being that had only *looked* Aschen was divested of a small curious chest-pack device, and his form shimmered into another, quite different. It resembled a seven-foot tall insect standing on two legs, with a chitinous carapace. It hissed and squeaked in its native tongue, and the guard slapped the device back in place, so he morphed back into the shape of one of their fleet captains.

“—dead! All of them!”

“Repeat your message,” one of the guards commanded, nudging him with a toe.
“The Qui'tlix swarms are dead, all of them! Only those few of us in covert infiltration teams remain… the ships appeared out of nowhere, out of the depths of void between galaxies. It is even as the Tau’ri warned. The Wraith are here!”

The Council exchanged wary gazes. “You are certain they are the Wraith?”

“It was the Wraith Queen of Queens herself who questioned our fleet commander. I know, because Our Mind is a Hive Mind, One Mind. It was the Wraith Queen of Queens who attempted to invade his mind, seeking all he knew of humans in this galaxy, and then attempted to feed upon him… such pain! But we are not their food. We are incompatible with them, and so they have destroyed us as useless. Our technology is vastly superior to theirs, but they came and came and came! There is no end to them! Our home world is gone. Our colonies are gone. Only the one ship remains to us, but it is even now under siege, and when it is gone, we drones will die as well. Avenge us! Avenge us, or die yourselves!”

With that, the being screamed, and burst apart, into a scattering of hard shell shards and green ooze, its camouflage device left in a heap in the center of the mess.

The guard reported, “These beings had infested one of our ships, set up a kind of conversion lab, to put our crew in a hibernation of sorts, so they could walk about with these devices, pretending to be us. As far as we know, it was just that one ship infected… but, Councilors, we have lost contact with several ships and two colonies in the past few days. All of them in the fourth sector, the same region of space where we believe these… insect things infiltrated our ship.”

“Contact our Admirals—” one Councilor began, only to have an emergency communication interrupt, a hologram appearing in the center of Chambers.

“I, Admiral Vycodar of the third Fleet, send urgent word to the Council. We are under attack. A fleet of immense numbers has engaged us in the fifth sector. Our ships are vastly superior, but their numbers… I estimate well over a thousand base ships in this engagement alone, with limitless numbers of support and smaller fighter craft. We are overwhelmed. We will hold as long as we can, but we are at best an annoyance. Their target is the colony of Jarro. They have already hit two other of our colonies in this sector, and no one is left. Not one life.

“I believe these to be the Wraith. We were warned. We did not listen. Even if we assemble all the fleets, we are no match for these numbers. If they need to feed upon human or near-human lives, our zero-population colonies hold too few to satisfy even a small number of them. They are headed straight for the heart of the Aschen Federation, and at this rate, they will be there in days. I can only suggest we evacuate. But I know not where we can go that would be safe.”

There were shadows behind and around the Admiral, as the echoes of voices called fearfully for his command. He turned, his eyes widened in horror, and then the transmission ended abruptly. Attempts to re-establish failed.

“I cannot… I cannot believe our technology is so ineffectual! Summon the Fleet. Summon our armies, and our scientists. Everyone must unite to combat this threat!”

“And if the best we can do should fail?”

“Dial Earth, call for their help! They know of this enemy,” cried out one Councilor. “We still have the Tau’ri Ambassador, Joseph Faxon. They will not open their iris to us, but we can send him to their allies, the Tok’ra. Offer anything for their assistance. Returning their Ambassador alive and whole will be an earnest of our good faith. They know this threat. They have Atlantis, and Asgard ships. This is their problem and they must deal with it!”
“And in the meantime?”

The Council had no answers.

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Cira Lanis was… somewhat discontented with events. Indifferent success? Try abject failures! She could feel the window of opportunity closing up on them… rapidly.

Sitting on the throne-like command chair of her main audience chamber, she stared broodingly out of the panoramic viewport window on the second ship-works of the Gate Builders they had found. This one was in a hidden asteroid field, the remnants of a long-dead star system, nothing but debris and burned out planets no one had bothered to name. But for all that, this place was rich in valuable minerals, weapons grade naquadah, trinium… not to mention the half-built and damaged ships, repair platforms, weapons left behind… all there for the plucking.

The news she had been receiving lately, when she got any at all, was not encouraging. She knew that her ‘allies’, temporary as they were even at the best of times, were no happier than she. Pel’k had not reported in for weeks now. He had either met opposition he failed to defeat, or had turned rogue. Either was possible. Other ships they had sent out to the far rim of the galaxy to track down and eliminate the ships of the Tau’ri, had also failed to contact in recent days. She had lost one scout, Commodus another… She wasn’t sure what plots Athena had stewing, but the goa’uld was glaring more and more as days passed.

Even her brother Cheda had ceased transmissions from the Tau’ri First World. While she did not suspect for a moment that he had turned on his family, she did think it probable that those haataka, Baal and Nun, had finally betrayed the Alliance for their own benefit. It was expected. Inevitable. And planned for. They were insignificant, after all, without ships, or support… although the loss of her brother was… perturbing. She was confident he still lived, Baal and Nun were not foolish enough to throw away such potential leverage. Still… it left her own position somewhat precarious, with one fewer trusted lieutenant at her back.

Day by day, their fleet of space-worthy Gate Builder ships grew. All had been fitted with bypasses to weapons, so there was less danger of inadvertent… accidents. But the navigation systems simply would not operate without a zed pilot at the controls. They had finally managed to train a few of their slaves in ship operations, so that was going better… and with *kormac* collars on them, the Alliance could be assured of compliance, if not loyalty.

Better yet, considering the level of unreliability of the alien tech, there were a few more Jaffa recruited to the Alliance banners. Like Pel’k, several former First Primes had grown disillusioned with ‘freedom’, impatient with the politics of ‘democracy’. They were becoming increasingly sentimental over the ‘good old days’ of goa’uld rule. There was none of this bargaining then, compromise was a dirty word, they could just take what they wanted from anyone weaker, and shoot the hell out of what they couldn’t. A number of them had failed to reveal to the Free Jaffa ‘leadership’ the hidden caches of their dead false god’s possessions… so had come with fleets, now their own.

The three Ori battleships made an impressive force all on their own, of course, and the three commanders were growing impatient for the promised retribution they yearned to take on the First World.

Commodus, using the resonating voice of the goa’uld symbiote, that no longer created terror, but did command a degree of wary respect, declared, “We should act now. Every day brings us closer to the day Atlantis returns, and we must have the First World in hand by then, or we stand no hope.
Only with Earth as hostage can we force the Lost City Found to surrender to us.”

Cira glanced at Athena, whose knowledge of the Tau’ri was superior. The blond woman shrugged. “That is true. We will need the leverage, certainly, especially if we need to convince their zeds to cooperate with us in maintaining the city.”

It was not often that any of the Ori captains had anything to say, so when they did, everyone listened. Commander Gabrien offered, “We see no benefit in waiting any longer. Earth may have a Shield, but they do not have access to the formidable weapons McKay has built for them. Wherever the Earth Fleet has gone, they are scattered and well away from the home system. Even should they return, all at once and with their allies, we now have sufficient force in our Alteran ships and goa’uld fleets to resist any force sent against us. Now is our time.”

Athena hummed. “And the Shield?”

Commander Joshual huffed. “We shall test it, see if it is strong enough to keep us out. We have the Might of the Ori behind us, after all.”

None of the three captains actually said, ‘Hallowed be the Ori’, but they thought it, and everyone present heard it. Most only snickered, just one more lot of dead false gods, after all, whether these remnants of the Faith believed it or not.

But Athena could see one more significant problem. “And the Wraith? Whether you like to acknowledge it or not, they are real, they are a threat, and there have been rumors for months now that they are coming here, to this galaxy. Their first and most important goal will be Earth, one of the most densely populated worlds in the Milky Way. And we all know Masen tried to make contact… if he failed, and didn’t just set up shop in Pegasus on his own, then the Wraith now know everything he did about this galaxy. There’s a definite possibility that the reason we’ve lost contact with Pel’k and the others is that they’ve encountered the Wraith.”

Cira shrugged. “And if this is so? Whether the Wraith are real or not, a threat or not, makes little difference to our plans. We want what the First World has, in abundance. We have sufficient force now to take it. We should act. If we then need to defend our acquisition against others, either the Tau’ri Fleet, Atlantis, or these Wraith, then we shall. And, it just occurs to me… if this Shield is all they claim, then hiding behind it on the First World may just be the last safe place in this galaxy. If the Wraith should be the formidable force everyone fears they are.”

The queen of clan Kek saw agreement in the nods around the room.

“Very well then. We gather our forces and prepare for battle.”

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Jack O’Neill clasped arms with Master Bra’tac, grinning at the venerable jaffa warrior. “How goes it, old man?”

“We live free, human. And with you?”

“Ah, so-so. We live free, but we’re expecting visitors any day now. You got your shield up and running? Any problems?”

“As with all SamanthaCarter’s inventions, it works better than hoped, and we have sufficient naquadah to supply back-up generators if the first should fail.”

“Carter will be glad to hear that. What about your patrols on the Rim? Got any word for us yet?”
Bra’tac shook his head. “We have all allies watching their skies. The Tok’ra are still proving elusive. We have respected their request that we leave their new home-world, Egeriash, alone, while they rebuild their own new government. The Lucian Alliance is still hidden, but active on all fronts, using hit-and-run tactics, with increasing numbers of goa’uld salvage and gate-builder ships. We have been unable to locate their new base, and the secondary gate-builder ship-works they use. Worse, they have seduced some of our Free Jaffa to their ranks with their lies. At last report, several rogue jaffa were searching the galactic rim, hoping to find lone Tau’ri craft to attack… *haataka*!”

Jack winced. “That bad, hunh?”

“Too many jaffa have been seduced by Lucian Alliance promises of power. No better than the Goa’uld themselves. We hear daily of more worlds that have fallen for their threats and blandishments, and more that have discovered, to their cost, how little their promises are worth. Other powers hold back, neutral, thinking that eventually, the time will come when the Alliance, flush with its own inflated arrogance, will take on Tau’ri, and then no one will have to worry about them again.”

Jack sighed. “Yeah, well, we should have taken out all of the Lucian Alliance when we realized they were going to be a problem. Unfortunately, we kinda had our hands full with the Ori at the time. But we’ve put a good dent in them lately.”

“The Free Jaffa pledge our support, with the remainder, and with the Wraith. They are coming?”

“You know all about the Super Hive in this galaxy a while ago. We defeated them, but that was just one super hive with support vessels… If they come in full force, as we believe they will… How lucky have we ever been, old friend?”

Bra’tac clapped Jack hard on the back. “Lucky enough to still be alive, human!”

Before they reached the jaffa city, Rak’nor jogged up with several warriors, escorting a small party of Tok’ra. Malek was in the lead. Jack hadn’t seen the guy for years, but at the end, after Jacob Carter’s (and Selmak’s) death, he had been one of the more reasonable on the Tok’ra Council. O’Neill had understood their need to retreat and try and re-build a whole society from the ashes of their millennia-long fight against the goa’uld. Like the Free Jaffa, Jack had left them alone. They had sent support to the Free Jaffa for some offensives against the Lucians, but… Basically, they had told everyone, don’t call us, we’ll call you. Well, it looked like that call had finally come. And not a moment too soon, unless Jack missed his guess.

And there was one more familiar face in the party that made Jack stop and stare.

“Ambassador Faxon?” he gasped. The man looked no different from the last Jack had seen of him, years ago, on an Aschen ship, attempting to negotiate a treaty with aliens who were slowly killing all of their allies with zero population growth, in order to inherit and control their territories. When SG-1 uncovered the plot, the Aschen turned hostile, and the team were barely able to escape… but unable to bring their diplomat with them.

Malek held up a hand, looking grave. “We must meet, Master Bra’tac, General O’Neill. The feared-of day has come. Wraith attack this Galaxy. And they have come in unheard-of numbers.”

“Well gentlemen, this is a case of one step forward, two steps back,” Hank Landry, President pro-temp of the United States of America, sighed as he looked over his advisors. None of them looked
happy, a few were furious, most were terrified. Secretary of Defense Raphael Dante glowered from his front-row seat like a Mafia Don. Hank didn’t know what the spic had to be so concerned about. At worst, he’d be the one taking over if the Patriot team decided he was blowing the whole gig.

The countdown for the return of Atlantis was getting smaller by the day. They were no further ahead in gaining access to the codes required to bypass the Shield, or work the OWPs. While they now had one (count ‘em *one*) spaceship, it was no good for transport to the Orbital Weapons Platforms because it couldn’t bypass the Shield... or at least, not on its own. That sneaky idea, to use the *Nala* as a kind of alternate thruster rocket, to get a refitted NASA shuttle into orbit, had actually worked... to an extent. The shuttle was recognized and allowed to bypass the Shield, even with the *Nala* attached. That had been a risky proposition in itself, but it worked.

Makepeace had then sent up a team of his best people (whatever the hell *that* was supposed to mean) to attempt a boarding of one of the OWPs. The landing team found the platforms locked down tight. Having not yet learned their lesson with Area 51, *someone* had thought it would be a good idea trying to over-ride Carter and McKay’s security precautions. The result was entirely predictable. So now they were down one OWP. The effort had gained *some* data, but enough to justify losing one of the six platforms guarding the planet? Maybe, maybe not.

True, they still had Tony and Tali DiNozzo under lock and key in the White House basement, along with their other primary hostages. The Very Special Agent was the one and *only* person in their possession capable of piloting their one (count ‘em *one*) viable ship... if there was anywhere for that ship to actually go. The DiNozzos made excellent hostages, however. They were favorites with the Atlantis Expedition and HomeWorld. The Agent Afloat, bad ass as he apparently was, wouldn’t do anything to risk his baby being harmed, or being separated from her long-term, so he was tied to whoever held her.

But Hank was beginning to wonder how much of an asset they would be. Sure, they could start playing games and *really* piss off Hayes, O’Neill, John Sheppard and Rodney McKay... but those bastards were vindictive and sneaky sons of bitches, all of them, and who knew what tricks they had up their sleeves.

Hank figured they were already pushing their luck with DiNozzo-the-elder... Samuels had argued for access to the Agent Afloat, and got his science minions to forcibly take a variety of biological samples from the man. Hank wasn’t sure what the Mengele act was supposed to get them, now that they were in control. It’s not like they needed to sneak around anymore to proceed with their zed capture or ATA gene therapy programs. And it’s not like there was any working Ancient tech on the planet at the moment for them to play with. The Ancient Outpost Weapons Chair didn’t count; without a ZPM to plug in, it was a pretty paper-weight, and all indications showed it wouldn’t recognize anyone other than O’Neill or John Sheppard anyway. But that was Robert for you. He planned long term. It was just that his plans were all about the kind of stuff that turned Hank’s stomach.

Somewhere in the time since Jack had given him that blistering heads-up about zeds... Hank had realized his own errors. He had tracked down the guy who had stalked and terrorized his wife way back when, found he had been dishonorably discharged on suspicion of stalking, assault and rape, had become a prison guard and was being investigated for multiple suspicious deaths... yeah, Hank had been led astray by his own insecurities and a very nasty Iago’s voice in his ear. Making sure the bastard’s name went down on the Patriot Coup target assassination list had been deeply satisfying to him.

Which didn’t mean he intended to get all warm-and-cozy with any fuck’ems... maybe they weren’t mistakes after all, but they were still half-breed aliens, in his view. But with ATA genes, they were
*useful* half-breed aliens. Shame they hadn’t been able to track and corral more than a handful of them. The numbers at Bleak House remained at just over fifty thousand. Where the hell were the rest of the estimated three million in the continental United States? Someone had been prepared, and someone had warned them.

There were a few still operating in plain sight Hank knew to leave well alone… The FBI was a little too high-profile to attack directly at this stage. In spite of Fitzgerald’s support, the assistant and deputy directors all seemed to hate the guy’s guts, and were being deliberately and overtly obstructionist in any anti-zed policies Fitzgerald tried to put forward. With the current laws and surprisingly negative public opinion on their side, Landry felt it best to leave them alone for now. As for NCIS… they had about a half dozen registered zeds on their payroll, but he was having to play nice with the minor federal agency, since it was one of only a few that were prepared to play ball with him and his Patriots. Vance seemed willing to play his personal puppet, but Hetty Lange… well, he wanted to stay out of her line of fire, if at all possible. No sense poking either of those bears at this stage.

DiNozzo could run what little they had, at present. If he needed more, there was Eppes and a few other zed scientists, currently of more use to them at the SGC, sorting out that mess. And then there was that Wallace kid Samuels had found… also a zed, also a mathematical genius, and already working on a high priority project for them.

“So what is this about, Mr. President? More bad news?” Dante inquired with admirable calm.

Hank winced. “No. But I made an appointment to see an old friend, and he… requested that everyone be present. I thought it best to agree. I figured you boys would want to be a part of this meeting anyway.”

Well, that got their attention. Uniforms and suits were straightened, ties adjusted around suddenly tight collars. No one asked who. And, dead on the point of fourteen hundred hours, a sputtering hologram resolved on the rug before Hank’s desk. Starting with his back to the Big Chair, the visitor twisted around, blinking, before making one more 360, to check out all of those present.

General Jack O’Neill stood there in casual green fatigues, looking comfortable and at ease in his scruffy way. He smirked at the assembly, his sharp brown eyes cataloguing each one of them in a way that made them all feel like bugs under a microscope. Definitely taking names and remembering faces, and none of them would ever be forgotten.

“Well, if this isn’t a collection of all my *least* favorite people in our nation’s capitol… every one of you dumbass bastards are political pawns, real good at looking out for number one, and not so good at remembering who you *really* work for. And every one of you fell for the first line of sweet double-talk, promising you a piece of the big pie, hunh?” He gave a mocking snort. “Well, fellas, I gotta tell ya, you backed the wrong horse this time. And it’s gonna cost ya.”

When he was done, he turned to Hank and ignored everyone else.

“So, Hank. You finally got the big chair, hunh? Way to go. How long do you think you can keep it?”

Hank knew his friend of old, afternoons in Jack’s back yard over beer, barbeque and a chess set. While Hank had honed his ‘homespun cracker barrel’ persona to perfection, Jack had gone with ‘bug-fuck nuts’, and excelled at the slightly goofy cosmically-giddy dumb-Jack façade. The lounging, casual, slightly bored-seeming image was Jack, just getting warmed up. And there was a set to his mouth… it sent a chill down Hank’s spine, and reminded him how few of those games he had won.
“Cut the crap, Jack. You asked for this meeting, you got it. You’re wasting your own time as much as mine.”

“Uh-hunh. Fair enough. I came, out of the goodness of my heart, to give you jokers a sitrep on the inter-galactic situation, while you’re all sitting here, stuck planet-bound with your thumbs up your asses, blind, deaf and dumb to what’s going on Out There.

“So let’s start with the good news, hunh?

“The Pegasus Galaxy has finally been declared Wraith-free. Not a single True Wraith left anywhere within their borders. Yeah, you might want to take a moment and consider why… but wait for it.

“And… you’ll like this one, Hank… The Atlantis Expedition has made contact with the Furlings. Yeah, the Furlings. One of the Big Four. Guess what, Hank? They’re not little fuzzy Ewoks – I lost that bet. You had money down on a lost race of Unas, right? Big stinky lizards, first hosts of the Goa’uld? Wrong. Know what they really are? Well, I’ll tell you. They’re tall, skinny humanoids, no hair on ‘em anywhere, but their skin… wait for it… is patterned, all over, head to toe, in pink and purple swirls, spots and stripes. Yep, that’s right, zed patterns. And guess what? They’ve got ZZ chromosomes and full ATA complex genes. Yes, boys and girls, the Furlings are the great grandfathers of our zeds. The Ancients got their ATA genes from the Furlings, not the other way around. A fancy bit of gene-splicing done in the labs for something they found useful. But see, the Furbees have a very slow reproductive rate, something the Ancients tried to help them out with… hence the human/Alteran/Furling hybrids we call zeds. So zeds, *not* mutant mistakes, but hybrids deliberately bred from not one but *two* of the Big Four races.

“And anyhoo, turns out the Furlings have been in their home galaxy, Pegasus, all this time, hiding out from the Wraith, since their numbers are so small. Now, with the Wraith threat gone, they’ve finally come out to play. They are in possession of a bunch of cities left behind by the Lanteans… oh yeah, apparently impressive as all hell. They’ve decided to take over watch-duty for Atlantis in Pegasus, so the City can come home to Earth and help us out. And we’re gonna need all we can get.

“Then there’s one more piece of good news. Two of our galactic enemies have bit the dust in the past two weeks. One was those insect guys who had the shape-shifting devices on their chests— you read about them, Hank? Yeah, well, seems their home planet, colonies and entire fleet got taken out. In, like, three days. Not one of them left. So, good news. Oh, and the Aschen are gone too. All of them. Not just the home planet, but all of their colony worlds and ally planets are also deserted. Not one man, woman or child left on something like a hundred star systems. And all this happened inside of two weeks. Not bad work. One, no two, less worries, hunh? Should make us all glad.

“Now for the bad news. And it’s a doozy. It was one fleet took both these empires down, in the space of two weeks. Both had superior tech and impressive war-fleets of their own, but it didn’t do them a lick of good. Not when they were faced with overwhelming numbers. One fleet with *thousands* of ships. Care to guess who they are? Anyone betting Wraith? Well you’d be right.

“There’s millions, maybe even billions of Wraith in that fleet, Hank. We’re pretty sure the Lucians who were sniffing around in Pegasus were captured by their Queen of Queens, and they’ve got, like, these gnarly psychic powers for reading minds, so now the Wraith know where *all* the good eats are here in this galaxy. And they’re on their way. If you’re lucky, Hank, *real* lucky, they’ll stop for snacks along the way before they get to you.

“The Wraith are in the Milky Way Galaxy, gentlemen. Near as we can tell, they brought their
*entire* fleet with them. Every single True Wraith in Pegasus has now come here, and they’re fucking *starving*. They’ve already begun spreading, like the locusts they are. Sounds like fun, doesn’t it? I gotta tell ya, Hank, you picked a real bad time to take over the world.”

There was the sound of a thud, and some tinkle from breaking china as coffee cups hit the floor. But it was all just background, and Hank focused on his old friend.

“You wouldn’t be trying to kid a kidder, would you, Jack?”

“Who, me? Why should I bother? Now, sure, Earth has the biggest human population of any world in this galaxy, and our little blue marble has been an obsession for the Wraith since Sumner got fed on, but why worry about that? There’s a couple of dozen planets between you and the galactic rim, a couple of million people, maybe… That may be enough to slow them down. Which means you’ve got… oh… about two months. Maybe. At the outside. And you’ve got Carter’s Shield, even if you don’t have McKay’s honkin’ big space guns. That should keep them back for a while. At least until Atlantis gets back. Lucky for you, don’t you think? Oh, you might want to do a little review of exactly what’s coming at you, by replaying some of that footage of John Sheppard in their hands. Sparky, you kept a copy for your personal use, right?” and Jack smirked at Samuels, who had gone red in the face.

“Subtle, Jack,” Hank sighed. “So, is this just a heads up, or did you have something you wanted to talk about?”

Jack shrugged. “I thought I’d give you one chance. Just one. To surrender. Let President Henry Hayes out of his cell, along with all the other hostages, and throw yourselves on our mercy. I guarantee you, we’ll be a damn sight more merciful than you jokers are. And more merciful now than later, if this damn stupid coup of yours gets anyone else hurt because you were too damn arrogant and greedy to give up when you had the chance. Oh, and by the way… if you have any plans on the drawing board for zeds, I’d put them on hold. *When* we get back, we’ll be counting each and every one, to make sure no one’s missing. And we expect them *all* to be in pristine shape.”

Dante went to open his mouth, but Hank held a hand to forestall him. “I’ll take it under advisement, Jack. You know I need to consult with my cabinet before I make a decision of this magni- yes, what?” Hank demanded impatiently of an underling who had burst into the Oval Office, whispering into the ear of their temporary Secretary of the Army.

“Sir,” said the acting Chair of the Joint Chiefs, going pale. “I have reports of a space fleet heading into the Solar System.”

“The Wraith?” Hank demanded. Moments earlier he would have said there was a fifty-fifty chance Jack had been bluffing with a pair of twos. But then, Jack habitually creamed him at poker, too.

“No, sir. It’s the Lucian Alliance. They’re demanding our surrender.”

“How the hell did they know we were…”

“Vulnerable?” Jack chortled, “Caught with your pants down around your ankles?” and Jack glanced around the room with a smug smirk. “You know they’ve got moles all over the damned planet, right? Of course you do, you were, temporarily, in league with them, right? Until you figured you could go it alone? I’d get that Shield up if I was you, Hank. Last we heard on the Lucians was they had picked up some new friends. They’ve got the last Ori left in this galaxy, as well as a bunch of Ancient tech they recovered from Altean ship-works. Not to mention a whole bunch of zeds *you* and your buddies sold them to run the ATA tech. So, they have ha’taks, Ancient war-ships, and Ori
battleships… should do a good job softening up the Shield just in time for the Wraith to arrive.

“Good luck, gentlemen – you’re gonna need it. And any time you want us back to deal with this, just let me know. You know my terms. Just have Henry give me a call when you feel ready for retirement. Oh, and…”

Jack fixed the fuming Hank with a direct stare that no longer held even a hint of amusement. It was a look Hank had rarely seen from his old buddy, but usually when people – a lot of people – were about to be very sorry for having underestimated the formidable warrior.

“I know you have Tony DiNozzo and his daughter in your hostage cells. DiNozzo is a grown man and can take care of himself. But Hank, you do anything, *anything* to that little girl, and I will tear your heart out with my bare teeth and eat it raw. You understand me?”

Hank reflected that Samuels had wanted to mess with the kid too… and he was suddenly very glad he had said no. It didn’t matter how far Jack was, or how protected Hank thought he was… There wouldn’t be an army big enough or a shield thick and strong enough to stop Jack O’Neill if he perceived a threat to anyone he considered family, much less a kid.

“Well,” Jack finally eased back, satisfied that his message had been received. “I can see you guys are busy and have a lot to talk over. Good luck with the Lucians.”

And the hologram sputtered and vanished.

Hank sighed. “Well? What are you assholes waiting for? You heard the man. Get the Shield deployed, now!”

Pretty much everyone knew that O’Neill had suspected some of the staff at the Ancient Outpost in Antarctica had been Trust plants. It kinda went without saying. So only about half of them had been airlifted off Earth with the Red Sea personnel. The rest had been stranded in the middle of Nevada, from all accounts. Dr. Jay Felgar smirked at the very thought. Those fuckers deserved it, as far as he was concerned. All of them were rampant zed-o-phobes, and Jay had despised them even before his ATA gene therapy had made him dual-gendered.

So it never occurred to the scientist to worry about enemies on the Beta Site.

Dr. Coombs had called for his help with a stubborn naquadah generator, so after he finished up his lunch and filled his travel mug with coffee, he trotted across the field from the communal mess hall toward the lab main building. It was one of the more permanent structures at the site, just behind the air-field for the jumpers and F-302s. He was a little started that it was actually dark out… he had lost track of time, working on his latest project, when hunger pains had gripped him. As he crossed into the woodlot in a short-cut to the labs, he heard foot-steps behind him, but gave it no thought… until the electric blue sizzle of a zat-blast took him down.

“Dirty zed… you’re my ticket out of here.”

Jangled and without use of his limbs, Jay could only flail away… it was Déjà vu all over again. This is just how he had been jumped when the Trust operatives had abducted him from the streets of Colorado Springs, to dump him in their zed-trafficking operation.

He didn’t even know this guy in airman uniform… the face only vaguely familiar, one he had seen around and ignored totally as none of his business.
Dragged into the back of a jumper, handcuffed to the navigation console, the grim-faced traitor aimed a zat at him and said tersely, “Start it up. On full cloak. I’ll tell you where we’re going once you get us into orbit. And don’t even *think* of refusing, or disobeying me. I’ll shoot you as soon as look at you, and a second zat so soon… you’ll be dead before you hit the deck, and I’ll just go get myself another, more cooperative zed. Get me?”

Well, shit.

It was then that he realized he wasn’t altogether alone in this. His cat, Sam, the feral black alley cat who had been his partner since that New York warehouse on Pier Six, was there at his side, purring reassuringly. As if to say, “Don’t worry, Jay ol’ pal, we’ll get out of this.”

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In the depths of Cheyenne Mountain, the labs of the SGC were bustling with activity. Of course, not a lot of it was productive...

The one monitor that had come alive for the Area 51 fiasco was still up and running. Dr. Rush had got it to pull in a pirate satellite signal. They had it tuned into ZNN, for the latest in misinformation on the ongoing Lucian Alliance attack. And, in the upper right corner was Rush’s count down on the Shield. He was actually quite pleased with that little piece of hacking. Luckily, no one had done anything monumentally stupid recently that would trigger another of the SGC EM pulses, and take them all back to square one. The other science teams had cautiously begun working on laptops again.

Around the Stargate team whiteboard, Larry and Charlie were engaging in a highly advanced version of mathematical naughts and crosses. Of course, there were only a few in the lab who would be able to tell, and they had their own make-work projects going to pretend to work on. As for Dr. Malcolm Tunney, their team lead, he was busily drafting schematics that looked extremely impressive… unless you were an engineer of his caliber, and could see it was actually the plans for a highly complex roller coaster. Tunney had been fascinated by the giant K-Nex set his grandson had got last Christmas, and, all going well, planned to surprise him with these plans at his upcoming birthday.

Dr. Svetlana Markov, kidnapped from Russia in the past month, was frowning and assisting him. Unfortunately, both Makepeace and Kavanagh were well aware of Dr. Markov’s experience with the Stargate. She had been the lead scientist on the Russian Stargate Project, and all along had consulted with the American program, in conjunction with the IOA. For a while she had even been Dr. McKay’s boss, one of the rare people he actually respected as a near-equal. So Makepeace had insisted she be added to Tunney’s team. Taking one look at what they had accomplished after weeks of hard work, Svetlana had fallen in with their direction with great enthusiasm. She’d already come up with a fiendishly inventive way to get the coaster cars to shoot through a helix upside down, so Malcolm was happy with the help.

Of course, Malcolm had his own past history with the infamous McKay… they’d been students together, had been rivals almost their entire careers… and then that one project Tunney had helmed, supposed to be the ultimate solution to Global Warming… well, that had ended in tears before nightfall. It took Tunney’s reputation with it, not to mention his self-confidence. His present job, teaching doctoral programs in engineering and physics at MIT, was a form of hiding out, he freely admitted to himself. He had been intending to come out of this semi-retirement at some point, once the fall-out from his mistakes cleared from the public’s short memory. But then the Patriots had pulled their coup, and Men in Black had shown up in his classroom to ‘take him for a little ride’. He wasn’t *quite* as bitter about that as Dr. Rush, but he was close.
Rush ventured near to take a look at progress for Kavanagh’s afternoon report from the team leads. He stared over Charlie’s shoulder, humming and nodding.

Charlie glanced at him a moment, and then murmured, “I recognize a couple of the algorithms the OWP team are working with. The ones Makepeace’s NASA team pulled before the platform blew up.”

“Really?”

“I don’t suppose you’ve ever come across any of Dr. Spencer Reid’s published papers on mathematics? Most of them are algorithms for geographic profiling, but there’s also some work he’s done on virus vector transmission in large urban populations…”

“No, can’t say I have. It’s a little outside my normal specialty, and I was rather busy with my wife’s illness before I received this… invitation.”

“Ah. Then you wouldn’t have noticed a… certain… application of Dr. Reid’s various proofs.”

Rush sighed, glancing over his shoulder at the monitor count-down.

“And I suppose we can assume the other password algorithms are related?”

“I wouldn’t want to assume anything, but… I’d say that was at least a high probability.”

“How long would you need?”

“An hour. Maybe two. Per system. If your assumption is correct, of course.”

“Any chance of anyone else…”

“I seriously doubt it. Apart from Dr. Reid himself… and I have no doubt both Dr. Carter and Dr. McKay studied his work extensively as soon as they took him into the Stargate program. I’m familiar with it because of my FBI connection, and their applications in law enforcement… Larry and I may be the only people presently on the planet familiar enough with his work to have got this. Of the very few who even have a shot… None of them are in this lab.”

Rush nodded. “McKay probably knew that, the bloody devious bastard. His fail safe, just in case of this very situation. Very well. Worst case. And by that I mean ‘end of the world’ worst case.”

Charlie nodded in perfect agreement, shuddering at the very thought of the destructive power he could be placing in the very worst of wrong hands. “Literally, yeah, I get that. Worst case.”

There was a flurry of activity at the door from the guards, listening in on their private comms, all of them coming to a slightly more diligent attention to their duties…

“Makepeace must be back in the mountain,” Tunney acknowledged. “Just in time for our afternoon update to Kavanagh.”

So it seemed odd to everyone, then, when Makepeace was not actually present for their boring and repetitive reports of nothing found. He did not follow his own previous example by getting in faces and attempting to intimidate them into more effective activity. Whatever he had come to Cheyenne to do, it did not seem to involve the scientists in the lab.

What, then?
Jack’s intel on the Lucians had been dead on, Hank acknowledged with a sigh. Three Ori and a dozen or so Ancient ships of various sizes and designs rounded out a battle fleet of over a hundred vessels: ha’taks and a variety of armed al’keshes and tel’taks, along with several squadrons of death gliders. And at the moment, all of them were firing non-stop on the Planetary Shield. A shower of sparks and fireworks skittered along a milky haze, visible only under the bombardment. For the first day, the attack had focused on the inert Orbital Weapons Platforms, but those shields were as proof from the barrage as the Shield itself. Only those satellites within the Shield umbrella still flew, the rest had been atomized as the first salvo from the Lucian Fleet. This had severely damaged world communications.

Not much loss there. Hank was refusing to take calls from the international community anyway, all of whom demanded to know why he wasn’t using McKay’s space guns to fire back. Chances were good they already realized it was because he couldn’t. And all of them were getting the blanket of blaring communications from the Lucian flag ship, the red-headed female Lucian Leader demanding Earth capitulate immediately and surrender control to her. She was promising to deal generously with any world leaders who cooperated, and ruthlessly with those who held out. She refused to take any message but one: surrender. She wouldn’t listen to fairy tales about the Wraith coming.

Perfect. Just perfect.

Hank’s ‘cabinet’ was ready to bail. Between surrender to the Lucian Alliance and surrender to O’Neill, there wasn’t much wiggle room for any of them. They had come out of the shadows and were now hanging out in full sight of the world, their faces on ZNN, names and titles labeled on teletype beneath their images. He suspected the paper shredders in every one of their offices were going full-bore right now, even as his own personal files were being dealt with. The Patriot bid for power had indeed been ill-timed.

And yes, there had been mistakes made. They should have secured their hostages first, worried about trumping charges later. They should never have given O’Neill, Chegwidden and Morrow time to affect an escape. And they should have made sure they had HomeWorld and the SGC under their control as their first move. Leaving it as late as they did gave their enemies time to re-group and counter, denying them any significant weapons or bargaining chips. Gaining the little runabout *Nala* and its pilot had been a fluke. Too little and too god damned late.

And what only the few in the inner circle had realized was this: even if they wanted to, they could not surrender to the Lucian Alliance hanging over all their heads. The Shield, once deployed, would not shut down without yet another uncrackable code… that only O’Neill’s people held.

Hank stood glowering in the Pentagon War Ready Room, staring at the banks of monitors showing him just how fucked he truly was.

Like the old Crystal Palace at NORAD, the warehouse-sized room was round, a fortified and heavily-shielded bunker built deep under the 5-sided Pentagon. In the center was a raised central deck, and circles of monitor stations on progressively lower platforms, all facing out to the big monitors lining the outer walls. Most showed maps and schematics, more were devoted to the ZNN displays of the attacking Lucian Alliance Fleet and the pyrotechnics exploding against the Shield, while the rest showed various system read-outs, controlled by the various consoles. The
high-ground central deck held a conference table for the Chiefs and Cabinet Secretaries, with the largest chair at the head reserved for the Commander-in-Chief.

In the top corner of the main giant screen, one of Makepeace’s people had thoughtfully provided a count-down clock… to the moment it was estimated the Planetary Shield would fail and let in the space gangsters of the Lucian Alliance. Uniformed men buzzed about him, but as far as Hank could see, none of them accomplished anything. Not, at least, as far as the space attack was concerned.

What they were doing, however, was to mobilize conventional forces to deal with increasing unrest across the country, and the world. Some of the screens revealed mobs of angry and frightened people waving placards in every language known on Earth, and some with scarves over their faces throwing flaming bottles at lines of crowd-control troops. All American embassies had been seeing significant local protests even before the Lucian arrival, so many had been shut down and closed indefinitely.

Mass demonstrations across the US, people congregating everywhere to demand action… all crying out, “Save us!” and all asking where Jack O’Neill was in all this. If there was anyone left on the planet who actually believed in the HomeWorld-led conspiracy and coup, even they didn’t give a damn. They needed a super-hero to save the day for the Earth, and Jack O’Neill was that man. With his trusty side-kicks, SG-1 and AR-1, at his side. The Congress and Senate, who before this had, to a man, been willing to sit back and wait for this to play out as it would, were now impatient for action. Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, were irrelevant concepts when all that mattered in the present situation was effective results.

Hank had secured the *Nala* for his own personal use, and was busily mentally preparing for several worst-case scenarios. All of them required he be able to get off the planet with all due haste. He knew where NASA’s *Atlantis* shuttle was parked in Austin Texas, and that was all he needed to get *Nala* past the Shield. But those Ori ships out in orbit, firing non-stop, had Ori scanners on them. They were capable of detecting even a cloaked Ancient ship, and blowing even a shielded one out of the sky. No escape possible, then, while the Lucian Alliance continued to attack. He had sent Robert Makepeace back to Cheyenne Mountain, a last ditch attempt to get something useful out of the captive scientists. He was hoping for at least an emergency escape route through a re-opened Stargate… but Hank wasn’t optimistic enough to wait for that.

And since no one seemed to be accomplishing much in the War Room, particularly not himself, Hank finally had to swallow the last bitter pill.

So now, surrounded by Secret Service and military guards, President pro-tem Hank Landry used a full convoy of armed vehicles for return to the White House. Hank cast a jaundiced eye at the thousands of noisy and frenetic people making a small riot at the gates and fences, waving those damned home-made, and some exceedingly professional-looking, placards. He proceeded inside to a secured elevator. Dismissing all but a few of his own hand-picked vanguard, he descended to the bunkers in the basement, and the section that had been converted over to cells.

Security had got a bit lax, Hank thought resentfully, considering what a threat some of these people constituted all by themselves. Anthony DiNozzo was a fully trained federal agent, reputed to be ‘scrapy’… whatever that meant. He was plainly dedicated to defending his very small daughter. To say nothing of the Directors of the CIA and FBI, neither of them slouches, and other members of the former JCS, none of whom had reached their rank by being push-overs. Even Henry Hayes had military training. But there they were, in a barred holding area, sitting around a big round table, playing poker. The big winner? The Very Special Agent Afloat, Tony DiNozzo, even now chortling as he raked in a big pot.
“Okay, that’s it,” Hayes protested. “You’re out of the game, kid. You’ve been counting the damn cards.”

“That’s not cheating, sir.”

“The hell it isn’t! I bet Las Vegas already has you on a watch list.”

Tony chuckled, patting his giggling daughter in his lap. “Oh, I got nothing on my probie, Spencer Reid. Now, that guy is *dangerous* with a deck of cards in his hands.”

Which was when he took note of their visitor on the other side of the bars. The rightful *elected* President said casually, “Oh, hey, Landry. You want in? I think we just had an opening at the table.”

Perfect. Just perfect.

“Carter’s Shield is actually performing better than expected,” he began, swallowing his ire and doing his best to project confidence in his well-worn good-ol-boy style. “I’m sure you’ll all be happy to hear that. We’ve got another twenty two days at full bombardment before we need to worry.”

Hayes chewed on a toothpick and nodded even as he dealt the next hand. “That’s certainly good to hear, Hank. Of course, by that time the Wraith will be here, and I imagine they’ll deal with the Lucians for us. Lucky for us, hunh?”

There was no reply, the game having resumed after the deal finished. How the hell did they know that? Some dumb guard with a big mouth, no doubt…

Hank struggled to contain his impatience.

“If I were inclined to take Jack up on his offer and surrender… what kind of deal would we be looking at?”

Henry snorted. “For treason, mounting a coup, subverting law and justice, ordering wholesale murder here and abroad, kidnapping some of the best minds on the planet for virtual slavery in your labs, setting up a full-blown slavery operation on that Bleak House island of yours… endangering the whole fucking planet with your greed and avarice…” and as the President continued on, Landry had to wonder in growing offense, how the hell did he find out all this stuff? Someone on guard duty had loose lips. “… what kind of deal do you expect, Hank?”

“Well, for a start, amnesty on all counts. For me and my cabinet.”

“And side-by-side villas in the south of France as well, I expect? Well no, not France, since I imagine they’re pretty ticked with you right now, too. So are the Russians and the Brits… as a matter of fact, I can’t think of a country in the world where you would be welcomed. Certainly not the US, amnesty or not.”

“Exile then? Off-world?”

“What, trust you out there when we can’t trust you at our backs? Hm.”

“Come on, Henry. The sooner we get the OWP up and running and deal with the Lucians, the better off we’ll all be for the real threat. You really want the Wraith to show up when our Shield has already been weakened?”
The poker game progressed with grunts, taps, the chink of chips hitting the table surface. Each player was so intent on their cards and keeping their tells to a minimum that Hank had no clue what the players were thinking.

“Call,” said FBI Director Walter Skinner.

“Straight flush, nine high,” Tony announced, setting down his hand to groans around the table. Then he turned to glare at the man on the other side of the bars. “What have you done with all those samples Samuels took from me, Landry?”

Hank stiffened. “They’re safe. All other projects have been suspended until we get the SGC operational.”

“Then why take them at all?”

“In the nature of insurance. And also… a little something for a rainy day. In case we didn’t get another chance.”

“Did you take anything… and I mean *anything* from Tali?”

“No. Robert wanted to, but I told him no.” Thank god, too...

As CIA Director Pamela Landy dealt the next hand, Henry collected his cards and said calmly, “All samples will be delivered here to us, immediately, so Tony can deal with them himself. He might feel the need to verify they’re the real deal, and all present and correct, before we take your word on the day of. And then we need full disclosure. And I do mean *full* disclosure. Names of everyone who has ever worked with you, and every one of your allies, Trust, Lucian and Patriot. Every property, full or partial ownership of any businesses, bank and investment accounts buried anywhere, every asset, every act plotted or authorized. From you and your ‘cabinet’. Failure to do so, or if we find any of you *forgot* even a time-share in Hoboken, will result in the deal for that person being null and void. I get all that, delivered to me here, and we’ll think about a smooth and… uneventful transition of power back to the lawfully constituted government of the United States of America.’

“And what happens to us?”

“You’re done. All of you. Exile to a planet of my choosing. I guarantee it will be habitable. More will depend on the level of cooperation we see. We’ll also see about whether we leave you with food, clothing, building and other survival supplies… or a Stargate. Just like Botany Bay. You think you can run a planet better than we can? Go for it. And you can take anyone willing to go with you, although it has to be their choice. After you hand over your reports, I expect you might see a significant increase of willing pioneers ready to join you. Because anyone choosing to remain behind on Earth will face the full force of the law for any and every crime we can charge them with, and I *will* be pushing for maximum penalties for murder, kidnapping, sedition and treason in the face of the enemy.”

“Okay, that last one seems like overkill…”

“Yeah? As of right now, you all know of the Lucian threat hanging over us all. You all know the Wraith are on their way. Holding out on our only viable defense constitutes premeditated collusion and collaboration with the enemy. That’s not gonna do a lot for your approval rating, Mr. President pro-tem. So you know the deal. Understood?”

And, maybe, in the confusion after the Lucians were dust in orbit, there would be an opportunity to
slip away unnoticed in his own private Ancient runabout… if he could keep at least one zed close to him as pilot. Luckily, he knew of a number of them still around the DC area, FBI agents he had left alone. That cute little Ramirez girl in their Cyber Crimes division would do, for a start. There were a number of bolt holes he knew of off-world thanks to his tenure as SGC Commander. Even if they might not be so secret, there was a galaxy of opportunities out there. A play for time was clearly in order, as well as an appearance of capitulation until more favorable circumstances presented themselves.

“Understood. I’ll get those samples turned over, all of them, and I’ll call an emergency cabinet meeting to present the surrender terms.”

When Hank retreated with his entourage, everyone stared at Henry with greater and lesser degrees of skepticism. Only Tony actually snorted.

“Seriously, who is he kidding? He’s got the *Nala*, a list of zeds in the area who didn’t debunk with the rest, and he’s going to make a run for it as soon as the Shield is down and the Lucians are gone. Does anyone seriously not know this?”

At this Tali gave a sputtering raspberry, and everyone laughed in agreement.

“With any luck, he’ll run straight into the Wraith,” Henry grumbled. “Now, are we playing cards here or what?”

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Cira Lanis, queen of clan Kek, lost all patience with her allies and minions and pounded on the arm of her throne chair as she vaulted to her feet. She had no way to know she was echoing the actions of Pel’k, former First Prime of the dead false god Olokun. Which was *not* an auspicious parallel.

“Enough! Did you think this would be *easy*? That Carter’s Shield would be tissue paper for us to tear through? No. But it is weakening, every day, every hour. Our scientists estimate perhaps ten, no more than fifteen days, and we’ll be through them. Then the Earth is ours.”

This was not *quite* true… it would certainly take much longer than that estimate, but the polite exaggeration was necessary. Already many of their ships had needed to retreat, at least temporarily. Some were off on foraging parties for food and other needed supplies. Firing non-stop on Earth’s Shield had seriously stressed all systems, drained power cells, requiring repairs and re-charging to their weapons banks.

“And about that,” Athena said. “I know Earth all too well. They have billions of inhabitants, and all of them are fractious and difficult, every man, woman, zed and child of them. These are descendants of the rebels who kicked out Ra himself, who have had over five thousand years of rule by nothing but their own war-lords and despots, and have developed any number of amazingly effective methods for dealing with those they find too extreme. They will never accept our rule, they can barely tolerate their own leaders. Taking over their own control infrastructures, political, financial, social… Doubtful. Even Baal settled for trying to infiltrate via financial institutions, where he could, and amassing enough wealth to attempt to buy into political influence. As for a more direct military take-over… Our own numbers are barely in the thousands, making military occupation impractical. Even if we divide the planet mass…”

“A significant reduction in the population will make the matter far easier,” the Ori captain, Ezekiar, suggested, a rare participation in any Alliance planning summit. The smile on his face, and those of his fellow Ori, could best be described as gloating. “Bomb all sources of advanced technology and all high-density population centers, and we will easily control the remainder, as slaves in the
fields.”

Cira nodded. “That is truly one source of Earth’s untapped wealth, the slaves it will yield to us, once their power bases are broken. Agreed. Anything else? Very well. Then, if that is all we have to discuss…”

The Goa’uld Commodus, in command of clan Naunet, glowered at the others at the table, but the Goa’uld Athena’s face was suspiciously neutral. Cira’s eyes narrowed, already assessing her chances if Athena or Commodus should choose now to make their play for the leadership. The others gathered at this summit were more negligible threats, but threats all the same. They included, not just the few established Ogdoad clan lords, but gang leaders with any size fleets, like Pel’k, who had been *promised* a clan-lord designation in the hazy future. Most were lone wolves, no matter how cooperative they *claimed* they were, always looking for an edge to take command themselves. They might back her for now, and a later chance of their own at seizing power. But with Commodus behind her, the strongest and most influential of the clan lords after Cira herself, she could count on the Goa’uld’s jaffa too. He supported her, for the moment, more because he had an abiding hatred of Athena and her partner Baal than from any actual loyalty to her. But she’d take that.

Cira spent no time at all assessing the three Ori captains… they had never made any secret of their positions. They cared nothing for anything but revenge against the Tau’ri, and remained with the Alliance only so long as they could promise they would have it. Other than that, they would neither assist nor prevent any jockeying for power among the other Alliance lords. Whenever they were overheard speaking among themselves, almost never with anyone else, it was all about the ‘pagan heathens and heretics’ and how it rankled to have to deal with such. Cira could actually appreciate the position… it rankled just as bad for her to have to throw in with the vile goa’uld and jaffa. But in an enterprise as ambitious as this one, they all needed to deal with unpleasant reality. And Cira needed the support of Commodus, just to hang on to her own Alliance power base.

Would it be enough?

Well, if not, she could always take her own fleet and make for one of her three fall-back bases. One had an ancient ship-works of its own, unknown to the rest of the Alliance. It would be a shame to give up on claiming the First World, but Cira was beginning to think she would be far better off going it alone with just her clan. She could be satisfied with a territory she knew she could keep without having to depend on any uncertain ‘allies’. Much less risky, all around. And if she needed more zeds for her gate-builder salvage at some later date, well, she had been in secret contact with a former Trust holdout. A woman of like mind and similar ambitions, Zoya Irinevna Sokolov, came from the land-mass named Russia. For a price, Zoya would and could supply anything Cira wanted. Motivated by sheer greed, that made Sokolov far more reliable than any temporarily aligned ‘partners’.

But still… with the promise of great reward came great risks. And the planet below offered unlimited rewards, if they could only remain focused on their goals long enough to hang together. Only with their combined might could they hope to succeed… she needed every gun she could get, trained on that shield, if there was any hope of weakening it enough to break through any time within a month. The longer this dragged on, the harder it would be to keep control. The Lucian Alliance would be their own worst enemy, and defeat itself, long before they breached Carter’s Shield. And that would be physically painful to Cira, to turn away on this, the very cusp of glorious success… even to save her own skin.

Still, it was good to have options.
Cira took another glance, and saw her fellow clan leaders and lesser lords all visibly smoothing their ruffled feathers… for now. Even Athena was backing down. For now.

But a minion whispered in Athena’s ear, and she cleared her throat and announced, “We have detected a large fleet heading into the system.”

“Is it Atlantis? Or O’Neill’s fleet?” That was her greatest fear, that O’Neill or the Lost City Found would return before Cira had succeeded in wresting control of the First World. She had to have that leverage to force the Earth supporters to back down and retreat. She was only too aware that Atlantis, or even O’Neill’s ships, could grind them all into dust.

“No milady,” the tech minion answered. “I’ve never seen readings like these before… they seem primitive, organically-grown outer shells… they should be vulnerable to the least of our weapons… but there are thousands of ships, spreading even now to surround the system! Some kind of interference wave is hampering our ship-to-ship comms and scanners, long and short-range. More, we cannot tell.”

Athena winced. “That cannot be good. I suppose it might be the Wraith?”

Other techs around the control room were barking out warnings. The Ori captains were taking messages from their own techs over the comms, and looking pale and worried.

Captain Joshual announced abruptly, “We must return to our ships. We are also reading mass numbers of aliens approaching. With our power channeled exclusively to weapons, we will need to reroute to shields before they arrive if…”

“Yes, yes! Go! Everyone, back to your ships. Commodus, you have most experience with space battles. It will be you who lead us in this fight.”

The Goa’uld nodded, and swept out of the room with his jaffa. The others all decamped as well. And once it was just Clan Kek left in Cira’s flag-ship, she turned to her second, a cousin.

“How many?” she asked shortly.

“Too many.”

Well. It had been nice while it lasted… but dreams would need to be shelved. Survival was the more vital.

“We’re leaving. Tell our other Kek ships. Find us the nearest departure vector.” The second nodded, only too happy to obey this command.

As fast as the Wraith Swarm had deployed, it wasn’t fast enough to close up their net over the entire solar system. There were plentiful avenues for a desperate Clan Kek to make a run for it. But they needed to clear the inner orbits before going to hyperspace, or risk tearing themselves apart in the gravitational stresses. And the tiny, insignificant-seeming one-man flyers deployed from the enemy mother-ships, were plenty fast enough to catch up and circle their prey. Faster and more manoeuvrable than even the death gliders that tried to battle and deflect them.

Not needing their shields for the assault and siege over Earth, the ships of the Alliance were slow to raise them now. And even when they did, they were based on goa’uld or Gate-Builder tech, un-harmonized and adjusted by a genius like McKay. They were terrifyingly ineffective against the Wraith culling beams.

Before Cira’s flag-ship had reached cleared space, their engines cut out. Shouted demands for
explanations over ship comms went unanswered. From her throne she could feel her massive ha’tak shudder and drift to a halt. Out of the massive viewport window, her entire fleet was experiencing the same inexplicable failures.

Her reconditioned Ancient vessels, each carrying two zed slaves as pilots, had done better than the goa’uld tech in evading and counter-measures, as if the Wraith darts and smaller attack ships… avoided them, ignored or perhaps were unable to *see* them… But one by one, they too stopped in mid-space, and seemed to lose control. This could only mean the zed pilots had left the *peltaks*. Left for where? How? Unchallenged by the Lucian crews? Who could know. All that was clear for now was that their best, ablest, most effective weapons and defense were now hanging useless in space.

She cared nothing for the rest of the Lucian Alliance Fleet… she was fairly certain they would all have made the same command decision she had. In the face of the overwhelming odds, they would all have decided to make a run for it. And, if they couldn’t, like her, they were forced to turn and fight like cornered cats. Ha’tak, salvaged Ancient ships and Ori weapons scythed through the primitive Wraith hives, cruisers and darts like butter, and dozens of enemy ships split apart and disintegrated, spilling debris across space. But for every hive, cruiser or support vessel destroyed, there were a hundred more ready to close in.

Cut off by the mysterious interference, she didn’t hear the clamoring shouts of orders or threats, didn’t see ship after ship slide to a stop. She did not see the Wraith beams pierce every Lucian shield, including her own, scooping up crew, and setting down boarding parties. With weapons arrays stressed and under-powered from the attack on the Tau’ri Shield, she didn’t see the old, battered and patch-work Alliance vessels begin to falter, weakening with intermittent power failures. Even in her own ha’tak flag-ship, Cira’s confused scanners could not offer reports of the sudden and rapid dwindling of the number of life-signs…

Nor did she notice that even the ship cats had disappeared, running frantically for the exits.

Å

Dr. Jay Felgar had been looking for a way out since he got here, on this gold-lined goa’uld ha’tak, surrounded by Lucian Alliance thugs. Kidnapped by the Trust traitor, the airman had made him fly the jumper to the Solar System. Finding the Lucian Alliance attacking Earth, Jay had been cheered to find the Shield was doing its job. But once the traitor airman had made contact with the Lucians, the jumper had been ordered to land on the cargo deck of the largest ha’tak in the Lucian fleet. Apparently, it belonged to clan Kek. The airman had gone one way, not to be seen again, while jaffa and human guards took Jay another, throwing him past a force field into a holding pen. For zeds. He had been there ever since.

He had a certain experience, escaping from these things, luckily… and had taken care, after his first adventure, to learn enough of the goa’uld language to be able to fly one, like SG-1’s Dr. Jackson could.

The zeds being kept as slaves here didn’t seem to be able to do much more with their ATAs than open Alteran doors, which explained why they weren’t part of any of the ship crews. Those on the ships mostly had cats with them, he was told… like Sam, partners in crime. The Lucians were far too busy at the moment with their siege to pay any attention to any of them in holding.

Bad enough that the Lucians were attacking Earth – escape so near and yet so far – but now the Wraith had shown up. With all of Lord Cira’s people focussed on defending or running away, Jay had used a newly-discovered ability. He had watched his friend Raven Ramirez use it on Pier Six, along with her FBI pals. Closing his eyes, reaching for Sam in his lap, and then the nearest
susceptible mind… First the force-field on the zed pen came down. Then the two guards within view dropped to the floor.

Opening his eyes, Jay looked around at the startled and hopeful faces around him.

“Guys! Come with me. We’re gonna make a run for it. Now!”

“Why bother?” one man asked, dejected. They were all resigned to ending up as slaves, one way or another, and that was before they were taken by traffickers.

“You stay here, you’re all Wraith food. You want that? Look, guys… Now the Wraith are here, O’Neill will be back. With SG-1. They’ll save us, for sure! And Atlantis is coming. That’s home, for all of us. They’ll take us to Pegasus. We’re not zeds there, we’re Furalin, revered, loved, their wise men, their elders. So come *on*! Take a chance, better than being eaten!”

This was apparently enough to get the small, sad collection off their duffs and following him. They headed for the cargo bay, picking up more and more cats along the way. Jay made straight for the stolen jumper. As far as Jay knew, he was the only zed on the ha’tak who could fly her. Jay didn’t know what had happened to the traitorous airman who abducted him, and didn’t much care. He wasn’t here, was all he cared about.

With Sam at his side, the escaping zeds behind him, Jay *thought* the ramp lowered, and they all piled in. He took the pilot seat, called up the HUD, and began to prep for take-off. Which is when he noticed more and more bright white flashes of light appearing on the cargo deck. There were small escape shuttles entering through the open bay doors, landing, as well. All of them held zeds, looking around desperately. Jay paused in his prep, and joined the growing crowd.

“We’re getting creamed out there! The Wraith culling beams are cutting through every shield, seem to see through every cloak…”

“My ship is already lost,” cried out another. “I saw the Wraith… they ate everyone but me! I barely got to the transmat pad in time!”

“They’ve been sending boarding parties on all of our ships!”

“I… I don’t know how, but I… when one of their soldiers started coming toward me, I just… *thought* him away!”

“You too?”

The whole ha’tak shuddered… and the engines clearly cut out, since the lights flickered, and the low-level hum stilled, leaving an unnatural and unnerving silence behind.

Jay thought about it. He thought about some articles he had read on the Blue Jungle web-site… and he thought about some dreams he had been having lately…

“Okay, this ha’tak has been boarded by the Wraith. We’re *all* Wraith food if we don’t get out, now. There’s about thirty of us… too many for one ship… I can take some of you with me, the rest of you sort yourselves out to these other escape shuttles. I think… I *think* we have more than just influence with Alteran tech. I think we can make the Wraith… I dunno, *not see us*, if we concentrate. So we’re gonna try that, because we don’t have much choice. We make for the Asteroid Belt, and hide out there, if we can.”

“But what then? We’ll still be trapped, just not here!”
“Only until O’Neill and Atlantis get here. SG-1 will save us. It’s what they do. They’ll take care of the Wraith, and then we can all go home.”

“Home? What home? Not Earth!”

“No. Not Earth. Atlantis. That’s home. For all of us. Now, come on! Scramble!”

Even as they all scattered to the jumper and four other shuttles, it seemed like *all* of the ship’s cats ran yowling into the cargo bay.

“Yeah, okay, let ‘em come with. Now let’s *go*!”

Cira Lanis, Queen of Lucian Alliance Clan Kek, heard all too clearly the screams echoing from every corridor of her ha’tak, even as her personal retinue of guards closed ranks to defend her on her throne.

Then they were there, appearing at every door. Staff weapons blasted at the first ranks of bone-masked soldiers, who fell… only to stir and get up again. And behind them, a single grinning lord in black leather… white-faced, white-haired, grinning.

Sheer numbers crushed in close enough to disarm her guards, and grip them by their throats, lifting the largest and burliest of them as if they were dolls. Screams were throttled in their closed throats. Wraith hands were slammed at human chests. One after another, her best, closest guards shrivelled into desiccated mummies, as though aging a hundred years in a second. When they were dropped to the floor, they were dead, falling into dust.

Then Cira was alone, the enemy soldiers drawing back to let their noble approach.

She sat straight and proud. It was all she had left. “I will not bend to you, Wraith,” she declared in defiance.

The Wraith shrugged. “It matters not.” He climbed to her dais, stood before her, and as he reached with his hand outspread, he grinned.

Colonel Robert Makepeace, re-instated Marine thanks to President pro-tem Landry, wasn’t happy about the situation. He had seen the writing on the wall for days now, with the Lucian Alliance Fleet hanging over their heads like a dismal cloud.

Landry was going to fold like a bad poker hand, Bob could see it coming. The going got tough, and the tough… bailed. The Lucians falling to the horrific horde of the Wraith Swarm was guaranteed to make all those damn milk-sop politicos, even the ones in *uniform* for God’s sake, wet their pants and run for mommy… or O’Neill, take your pick.

But no matter what deal the Patriots cut for themselves, Robert knew that he himself would be left out in the cold. This would be his second accusation of treason. Most people never got a chance to betray their country – their world even – more than once. Only friends in strategic places had kept him from being executed the first time, and none of them held any power any longer. The Trust had been totally wiped out by Landry, or as good as, with he and Samuels to help. And the Patriots had all been standing in full view of the media for months, faces seen, complicity in the coup only too obvious.
Landry and his cronies may think they could cut deals for themselves for amnesty. Blackmail on someone in power? Bargaining chips of hidden loot and nasty secrets, too good to pass up? Wouldn’t be the first time. Maybe they would even settle for exile off-world. But Makepeace figured once O’Neill returned, he and Samuels would both be going straight to death row, as traitors to the planet. And nothing would commute that sentence. Not this time.

Unless he made a different deal of his own. And really, he had only one option there, and one advantage to play on. But only until Hayes was released to re-take the Oval Office.

Luckily, Bob knew of a web-site he could use to make contact… with his old boss Nun. His currency? The SGC and a potential ticket off Earth.

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Supply and Demand

Chapter Notes

Author Notes: Reference to Stargate SG-1 episode 10-4-‘Insiders’ (a lot of Baal’s clones are ‘captured’ and taken to the SGC). AU version of SGU-1-1-‘Air I’ (The SGC did use *‘The Last Starfighter’* video game trick to find math talents, but when Landry found out Eli Wallace was zed, refused to hire him.)

When Atlantis fired up its star-drive and lifted from the surface of New Lantea, the Furling city of Quora was hovering in orbit, prepared to land and take over the post. Many of the Athosian farmers and re-located refugees had elected to remain in the Mainland settlement, what had become their home. That would have been a difficult decision, but for the Furling offer to supply an alternate protection for them, along with a replacement Ring of the Ancestors. In fact, many of those homesteaders were, if anything, happier with the arrival of the Furling and their Veralin. There were more than a few volunteers from among the Expedition to remain as well, and work with the Furling and their children in repairing and maintaining their city.

So, yes, it was all good in Pegasus.

All things considered, the Atlantis star-drive made good time for the journey back to the Milky Way, even without the Wormhole Drive, still off-line for repairs. The crew were well satisfied with their progress. They had lost contact with Earth and HWS after Red Sea had been called, but as far as they could tell, the contingency plans had been carried out with amazing success. So the Expedition was confident that no matter what was going on at Home, the Shield and Weapons Platforms were keeping the world safe until they arrived. Still, it had taken all of two months to traverse the empty void between galaxies.

What contact they had with the Home planet was via the Spirit Plane, and that was still a connection that was a closely-held secret by their Furalin. And those information sources had their limits. The Red Sea Protocols had been enacted and were still in effect, they knew that much already from the initial data-burst. They had no doubt O’Neill had the Earth space Fleet hovering in the wings, gathering allies as fast as they could. They knew about the Patriot moves against zeds, about the Cheezit Protocols and Bleak House Island prison-turned-sanctuary, and that zeds in the US were presently either in exile, underground and off-grid, or locked down as secure as anyone could be. They knew that the Lucians had attacked, and fallen to a superior force… yes, the Wraith had reached Earth and were laying siege. But the Shield was holding, so far.

Beyond that… any more definite details of the current political situation Earth-side, beyond the obvious ongoing attack from alien space vampires, were sketchy in the extreme. They knew only as much as Blair and Tony knew, which wasn’t a lot. Oh yes, Tony also knew that Hank Landry had given up the Oval Office, and re-instated Henry Hayes as lawful President. There had been a complete changing of the guard as far as the denizens in the White House basement cells were concerned, and a *much* happier Secret Service. Which *should* have meant that Red Sea had served its purpose, and the systems that had been locked up out of hostile hands were now open for business. That included the SGC, Ancient Outpost in Antarctica, and Orbital Weapons Platforms.
So, when Atlantis reached the outskirts of the Milky Way Galaxy, they took the chance, and stopped, orbiting a star so they could generate an origin sign. John and Rodney stood on the Operations Deck balcony, Woolsey, Dr. Spencer Reid, Col. Cameron Mitchell, Vala Mal Doran and Dr. Daniel Jackson behind them.

Vala and Daniel were both in maternity uniforms, their middles expanding. Vala was especially smug about the fact her tummy was bigger than Daniel’s… she was, after all, carrying twin daughters to Daniel’s one son.

Radek dialed their stargate for Earth… and although it seemed as if a connection had been made, there was no answering green light from their GDO. Only an automated digital signal in dashes and dots, what seemed like Morse, but was another code entirely. One Spencer Reid knew, because he had devised it.

Rodney recognized it too, because he had put it in place. “Jesus, John, the Red Sea Protocols are still in effect. What, they haven’t managed to pry those Patriot bastards out of the SGC by now? Earth’s gate is still sealed.”

John grimaced. “Well… that is why we set up Red Sea in the first place. Okay, shut it down and dial Alpha.”

But it seemed Alpha was deserted, with no replies.

“Okaaay then… Try Beta.” If Alpha was out too, then things were even more screwed than they anticipated.

A tense few moments, and the third gate address connected, the fountain rush of the opening vortex stilling into the shimmering dimpled surface.

“This is Colonel John Sheppard in command of Atlantis. Come in, Beta Site.”

“John! This is Vice Admiral (retired) AJ Chegwidden, in command of Beta Stargate Operations. Welcome back, and congratulations on your mission success. May I assume you’re back in Galaxy Milky Way?”

“On the verges, at least, Admiral Chegwidden. And yes, we were successful in getting the Atlantis star-drive operational and bringing her home. As far as we were able to determine, no True Wraith remain in the Pegasus Galaxy. We have made contact with the Furlings, and they have assured us that they are taking care of Pegasus in our absence. They gave us their blessings to bring Atlantis home.”

“Outstanding!”

“But, sir, when we dialed Earth…”

“Yes, well, a lot’s been happening on our end, too. You got the last data-burst as part of the Red Sea Protocols, correct? Then you know, or can guess most of it, but here’s the 411.

“A military coup was executed against the legal government of the United States. Dr. Reid was correct in his guess that the Trust and their allies were still in operation and ready to make a move in a major coup. These individuals, calling themselves the ‘Patriots’, lead by General Hank Landry and Col. Robert Samuels, aided and abetted by some members of the cabinet and JCS, attempted to frame high ranking members of HomeWorld, NID and the SGC with numerous criminal acts, making it look like *we* were the dangerous conspiracy wishing to overthrow the governments of Earth, rather than them.”
Exact details of the Patriot coup and list of players hadn’t been available, so hadn’t been included in the Red Sea data-burst. Even though this was mostly old news, the Atlantis crew played along, and listened anyway to the re-cap. Much of it they *shouldn’t* have known already.

“The Red Sea Protocols were successfully and completely implemented, however,” Chegwidden continued with his report, “so their aims were largely thwarted. But I guess word got out that Earth was vulnerable, because, two weeks ago, the Lucian Alliance gathered its entire fleet, along with the last remains of the Ori in this galaxy, and attacked. You’ll be glad to know that the Shield is performing far beyond expectations. With the Lucians at their throats, General O’Neill tried to talk Landry and his ‘Patriots’ into surrendering to President Hayes. We were planning to take our fleet to deal with the Lucians. But then the Wraith appeared, and finished them off for us, along with the last three Ori ships.

“The Wraith can’t get past the Shield, with weapons or beams, and have blockaded Earth instead. We have been unable to communicate with Earth since. They have some kind of interference tech they’ve used to cover the solar system and black-out all communications and scans.

“The big problem, and it’s a doozy, is that Hank Landry dragged his feet about surrendering to Hayes, and now, with the planet cut off, we can’t transmit the password codes to unlock the Red Sea protocols on the OWP and stargate. So Earth is out of reach.

“Our Fleet has been busy picking off any Wraith stragglers as they drift away on foraging missions, looking for other planets to supply them with food. So, at the moment, we have something of a stalemate. Earth is safe under the Shield, but the Wraith are just waiting for an opening, and in the meantime, they’re hunting among the smaller populations of the galaxy for food. We’re trying to keep them contained, but we can’t reach Earth through their blockade, and so the SGC, Ancient Outpost and OWP are all still locked down. And that’s where we stand right now.”

“Wow, sir. We knew the Wraith were on their way… they made better time than we anticipated. So, is there a plan in the works yet?”

“Whatever plans we have on the drawing boards are awaiting Atlantis, John. I suggest I contact the Fleet and we establish a conference call to thrash this out. What do you say?”

“I’d like to get underway for Earth in the meantime, Admiral Chegwidden, sir. We’ll give you two hours to gather everyone to the table, and we’ll come out of hyperspace at that time to make contact.”

“Agreed. Godspeed, John. And once again… congratulations everyone.”

Spencer was familiar with the *Daedalus* ward room, of course, and some of the faces at the table thrown up on one of the Atlantis monitors in their own largest conference room. In whispered asides, Teyla and Ronon, and even Carson, helpfully supplied more identifications, leaving it to Atlantis herself to supply the rest. A teletype display at the bottom of the various screens carried names and titles. Even if he had never met most of them, Spencer recognized names and descriptions from the mission reports he had read. The collection was nothing short of impressive, by anyone’s estimation.

First and foremost there was Bra’tac, leader of the Free Jaffa. Numbers and assets reported under his command scrolled along the side of the monitor, listing more than a hundred ha’taks, each holding a full complement of death gliders, each piloted by expert jaffa warriors.
A bland-faced-man identified as Narim of the Tollan was somewhat of a surprise, since Spencer thought they had been exterminated by the goa’uld. Apparently not, only hidden and in exile, rebuilding what looked like a small but powerful collection of highly advanced ships.

The Tok’ra had also emerged from their self-imposed isolation, under the command of a grim-faced leader named Malek. They had amassed quite a few ships from salvage themselves, the remains of half-a-dozen dead false gods, who had fallen with fleets hidden in obscure and distant corners of the galaxy.

Other space-capable races met by the SGC teams at one time or another had also joined the fight. The Serrakin, the Galarans, the Enkarans, the Gadmir, had seen for themselves the devastation the Wraith had already caused in just a few short weeks.

“Yeah, we’ve got a plan, such as it is,” Jack reported from the *Daedalus*, the Earth Fleet flagship. With him were all the Tau’ri ship commanders, including Sam Carter, commander of the *Hammond*, with Teal’c at her side.

“Everyone who has tried to meet the Wraith head on and at full strength has been soundly defeated, overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The Aschen, even the Lanteans… So we’re not going to do that. We’re trying the old Divide and Conquer, chipping away at the outside of their fleet until we get it whittled down to something more manageable. Every one of our ships has superior tech to the Wraith, when taken in limited numbers. So we’ve been attacking the small groups of hives as they leave the Earth Blockade to go hunting food, and we’ve been successful. We’re planning a few hit-and-run raids on the outer fringes of their main force, to draw small groups away for an ambush. But we don’t expect them to fall for that tactic too many times.

“The thing is, there are two strategies they might follow that will be a real problem for us. First, if they decide to scatter, every Hive for itself, we may never be able to track them all. We wouldn’t be able to stop them before they do more damage, or worse, find a hiding hole to hibernate, and ultimately breed. We need to contain them and fight them here and now. Second, if they decided to try the Lucian tactic of firing all weapons on the Shield non-stop, they can eventually wear it away. It’ll take a while, but it can be done. That’s what we have to prevent. Without the Shield, Earth is toast.”

“Well, now that the Patriot conspiracy is a bust,” Rodney advised, “we can get the Stargate open, send people to the Weapons Platforms, and start firing all guns at the Wraith. I guarantee that they’ll run out of power before we do.”

“Yeah, about that…” Jack grimaced. “The Wraith have blocked all communications to Earth. We can’t get a signal through to tell them what they need to do to get the SGC back in business. We were a little too effective in shutting everything down and stripping all ZPMs, naquadah generators, crystals and other tech. At the moment, we can’t get anyone past the blockade to reach Earth, not even the two jumpers we have on reconnaissance patrol. So Earth has no beaming transporters, no crystals, and only one ancient runabout that can get a crew to the OWP to activate the guns, if they only knew how. And if they leave the protection of the Shield, the Wraith will shoot them out of the sky. So we need to get our people through, somehow, with the supplies needed to get everything up and running.”

“Are the jumper cloaks that ineffective against the Wraith?” Radek asked.

“It isn’t that they’re ineffective,” Sam Carter explained, “but the sheer numbers of Wraith make it all but impossible to get through their blockade. At close proximity, the Wraith seem able to… I don’t know, *sense* the presence of anything with Ancient tech.”
Carson glanced around the Atlantis conference table, and ventured, “Are you sure it’s just the tech they sense? Not… the presence of food? We know they are sensitive to energy auras, and can certainly recognize, even influence human emotions if close enough. We also know the ATA gene seems to attract them.”

Carter sighed. “That is… very possible, actually.”

And that’s when Spencer cleared his throat. “I, uh, may have a solution to that.”

Shocked, thrilled silence fell with a near-audible ‘thud’, and everyone turned to the genius profiler. “I’ve been practicing some… uh… Furalin skills that seem effective in… discouraging Wraith attention, rendering us invisible to the Wraith. I’m pretty sure that I can get a jumper and its crew through the blockade successfully. Our jumpers are all recognized as friendly by the Shield programming. As a bonus, I’m familiar with the programming algorithms necessary to enter the proper passwords to open the Stargate and get the OWPs operational. Although my piloting skills are a bit… um… non-existent, actually. And I should probably have at least one more strong Furalin as back-up, just in case.”

Daniel grinned. He held up his hand, to groans from Vala, Jack, Cameron, and even Teal’c. “I think I can help you with that, Dr. Reid. With two Furalin at the controls of a cloaked jumper, we can get past the Wraith Blockade,” Daniel explained. “I may not be strong enough or adept enough to blind the Wraith, but Dr. Reid is. Dr. Reid may not be all that proficient at piloting a jumper, but I am. Together, we’ve got it covered. As another strong ATA carrier, I’m your best shot to get a cloaked jumper to Earth with enough tech to get the SGC, the Ancient Outpost and the OWP up and running again.”

Jack scraped his face with his hands. “God, Daniel… I want to say no. But I have to say yes, don’t I?”

Cameron, his hand on Spencer’s shoulder, muttered, “Yeah, this sounds like a team mission to me.”

Jack mulled it over, and continued, “I don’t see another way around this. Even if we could get a cloaked tel’tok or al’kesh that can get by the Wraith, the Shield would lock them out. We can’t reprogram the thing from the outside to accept new codes, and the folks on Earth are locked out until we can get them access. Shit.”

“Look,” Rodney said, “once Reid and Daniel get through the Shield, it’s a simple procedure to get to the SGC, light it up, open the gate, so we can deliver crystals for beaming, ZedPMs for the Outpost and the SGC, more jumpers… all the Ancient tech they need that might run a little too hot with the Wraith sitting there. All they need to do is be *quiet* for an hour or so.”

“Ha ha,” Daniel sneered.

“Not sure what good the Outpost will do us,” Jack speculated. “It only works for John or me, and there’s less than a hundred drones left to shoot anyway. That’s not going to do us any good.”

“Ah, yes, about that…” Daniel disagreed. “With two fully charged ZPMs plugged in, the Outpost has a matter conversion factory beneath it that can construct more drones… quickly. An almost unlimited number, as long as it can find hydrogen in the water and iron ore in the Earth’s crust.”

“And you know this *how*?” Jack demanded.

“Atlantis told us, Jack,” Daniel supplied, with an innocent blink of big blue eyes.
“Of course she did,” Jack grumbled while the allies all hid smirks, but let the grins of hope spread wide. Bra'tac dared a loud guffaw and slapped Jack hard enough on the back to make him cough and almost bang his forehead on the table before him.

“Wait a minute!” Vala objected, looking a bit grim as she glanced at her lover of too brief a time. “This all depends on a wild-assed guess that the Wraith can’t, in fact, detect a cloaked jumper, no matter who may or may not be on board. Anyone want to give me the odds if that assumption is, in fact, wrong?”

No one wanted to quote her the odds. There weren’t any to quote. Daniel patted her hand consolingly.

“Don’t worry, my love,” he told his anxious mate, “We’re SG-1. Saving the Galaxy is what we do.”

Rodney huffed, even more annoyed by Daniel than usual. “Hardly saving the galaxy, Dr. Jackson. More like making a UPS delivery of technical components.”

“*Vital* components,” Vala huffed right back.

“Okay… granted.”

“So!” Jack barked out, taking back command of the proceedings. “Reid and Daniel make their Fort Apache delivery through enemy lines, the Stargate opens and we send more supplies and personnel from Beta. Getting ZPMs for the SGC and Outpost is priority, and crystals so we can use the platforms we still have at the SGC to beam teams to the OWP and Outpost. Since we need John to command Atlantis, I guess it’ll be me going through to take charge of the Outpost Chair. Meanwhile, the rest of the Fleet will form on Atlantis. General Vidrine, you’ve got experience with space combat tactics and capabilities, so I’m putting you in command of the Fleet. Once we attack from above, and Earth starts firing from below, we can catch the Wraith in a cross-fire, held in a pincer movement.

“I like it. But, at some point, the Wraith *will* scatter, and we need to make sure they’re contained. We can’t let even one hive get away on us. Every single one of those things on the loose means another planet in this galaxy culled to extinction. And that is not going to happen on my watch. Is that understood?”

Everyone agreed, grey-faced at the thought.

“Daniel, get a team together, and take a jumper, cloaked, from Atlantis to our Pluto space gate. Dr. Reid, Dr. McKay will supply you with all you need to shut down the Red Sea lock-out. Soon as you get the Stargate up and running, call out to Beta. I’m leaving AJ in command here. We’ll coordinate through him.”

“Got it, Jack.”

“And… good luck, buddy.”

“Good luck to all of us.”

Jack O’Neill reviewed the telemetry from System Sol even as he prepared to transmit it to Atlantis and their allies, and could only shake his head. It made his gut hurt.

A favorite author had once written as the advice of a fictional military tactician, “If your enemy has superior numbers and is entrenched in an impregnable fortress, see that he stays there.” Good
advice, and that’s just what they needed to do with the Wraith, until they could clear them all out, every last one. And Earth would be safe enough almost indefinitely... as long as the Shield held.

Jack couldn’t help but reflect that the classic military siege only succeeds if the attackers can get someone inside the impregnable fortress to open the gates. Either a traitor on the inside, or a trojan horse. In this case... who on Earth would be insane enough to open the gates to these barbarians?

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Baal was silently furious. It was all going pear-shaped, and every single ally he thought he could count on, through enlightened self-interest if nothing else, had turned on him.

He didn’t count Nun, the worm, who was still too much under Eli David’s influence to see the big picture here... Who knew a human could be strong-willed enough, or perhaps devious enough, to manipulate a symbiote, even a young larva like Nun? But there the idiot was, still mooning over getting Eli’s daughter and granddaughter back, convinced they were valued allies and leverage to have. Fat chance, getting hold of the kid, or getting any appreciable use out of the woman. Baal shook his head... he was all too aware that Trent Kort was trying the same games, but Baal was millennia old... there *were* no tricks he hadn’t learned in the infancy of this world.

As for every other ‘friend’ he thought he had... Athena had bailed on him to ally with the Lucians. The Lucians had decided they were tired of waiting for the Trust to call them in, rightly guessing that was *never* going to happen. Who would give up a plum like Earth if they weren’t forced to? But then the Wraith had shown up... and the Lucians were all Wraith food by now. No loss there. Athena really should have known better.

But Baal had counted on Landry being his pawn for a lot longer, or coming to him when it all went sideways. A figurehead for the Trust in the Oval Office... it had been a dream. And, obviously, no more substantial than a dream, in the end. Landry, once in the Big Chair, the taste of true power on his tongue, had determined he didn’t really need the Trust any more, and had, effectively, rooted out the last of them.

In attacking the Long Island mansion, Landry had not only taken out Cheda Lanis, Greer and his last Decima operatives, but had even glommed onto the last important assets they possessed... the *Nala* and its pilot.

So now it was just Baal, Nun, ‘Miss Smith’, and a few mercenaries who didn’t really care who they served, as long as they promised a way past that horrifying cloud of ravening space vampires over everyone’s heads.

So close... so damned close, and it seemed like suddenly, every alien threat in the universe was targeting him personally. Well, fuck that.

But Baal had lived too long, and been through too many ups and downs on his road to power, not to have a few aces hidden away in his hand.

Once he got off this backward rock, there were any number of hidden assets from his old empire, not all of them turned over to the Free Jaffa or Tok’ra, rooted out by enemies or plundered by his brethren clones... Getting to them was the only issue. And there was still one off-world bolt hole left, absolutely *stuffed* with riches and assets of all kinds, enough that it would have satisfied even Qetesh’s voracious appetites. He was damned sure it was still hidden and safe, because he had himself shot the two jaffa he had sent to set it up, the moment they returned. He had their tel’tak, too, at this very present sitting in the woods on top of Cheyenne Mountain, protected by a shield and cloak. In its holds was the accumulated plunder of decades, added to from Trent Kort’s
caches of ‘emergency assets’, and Nun’s contribution from Eli David’s copious stashes around the world. There was enough in precious gems, gold and naquadah to buy himself an easy life anywhere in the galaxy. In a refrigeration unit, he had frozen biological samples from dozens of high-profile targets, thanks to Colonel Samuels. That slippery operator had raided the SGC and various rogue NID stores, from Colonel Simmons and even as far back as Maybourne, before he turned traitor and threw in with Landry. Among the prizes stashed at his bolt-hole, Baal had a number of useful toys… including the original Baal’s Asgard cloning machine, and the handy nanite machine from Argos, supposedly dismantled for scrap but rescued by Simmons at some point. The clone machine would create a viable fetus, the Argos machine would quick-grow it to adulthood.

Baal had no intentions of cloning himself, this time. That had not proven to be a winning strategy. More like shooting himself in the foot, creating all those rivals for his power, with all his knowledge and experience, not to mention ambition, drive and intelligence, and absolutely no reason to be loyal. No, his most cherished samples included blood from a number of Z-positives and zeds, from those who had passed through his abduction camps at one time or another. And the *piece de resistance*, swabs from Dr. Rodney McKay, smartest man in two galaxies, and the charming and beautiful Colonel Carter. Designer slaves… they would be worth their weight in weapons-grade naquadah anywhere he chose to go. And their first stop would be to the secondary Ancient ship-works, to see if he could score at least one of the surviving ships. He had no doubt he would be able to collect at least a couple of zeds from the SGC on his way out the door.

Of course, even Nun didn’t know any of this. No one did. It was his secret, his insurance and retirement plan. He could have supplied Landry with crystals for beaming at any time since the coup, but why would he bother? He had figured it would all be theirs in short order without giving up his secret advantage.

But that was then, this was now, and circumstances had changed. Survival was looking just a bit bleak, not just for Baal.

Which, actually, was why his tel’tak was currently parked on Cheyenne Mountain. When Landry had caved to President Hayes, surrendering his entire Patriot group, there was one minion unwilling to surrender with them: Colonel Robert Makepeace. The soon-to-be-ex-marine-once-more had considered what deals were likely to include him, and decided he needed an exit plan of his own. And who was left to offer him that exit?

Well, now was the time for eleventh hour desperation plans, if ever there was one.

Nun had tried to recruit some of Eli David’s old Mossad subordinates, but couldn’t control the goa’uld flashing of his eyes in front of them. As true believers to their cause, the survival of Israel, they had refused Nun’s leadership. They’d had to be killed so they wouldn’t betray their former Director.

So Baal had gathered together a squad of minions, twenty highly trained black ops assassins, former associates of Kort’s. These men, mercenary in every sense, would obey his every order instantly, no matter how heinous. They could care less who or what the boss was, as long as he paid well, and screw the rest of the planet. And, oh yes, Baal was the only person in the galaxy who *might* be inclined to give them a way out of this mess that wasn’t a Wraith feeding hand to the chest, or a bullet to the head.

Gullible patsies, every one of them. And the best thing? He was the only game in town, for these men, so they would protect him to the last. How endearing. How priceless.

Now that the Hamptons mansion had been raided, along with every other property, team and
hidden lab they had, they were being hunted on all sides. Baal had needed Makepeace to offer him the only key to the exit, and skedaddled for the SGC with Nun, Miss Smith and his newly-acquired minions.

As they landed, Makepeace was there to meet them, as promised. He was unarmed, also as promised. But…. Not alone.

Baal practically spat in contempt and frustration as he turned on a smug Nun. “Oh, you did *not*!”

“Oh, I did. If there is one human I feel I can rely on, and who deserves to survive this unmitigated disaster, it is this one.”

Of all the last people Baal had wanted to ever see again (an attitude endorsed whole-heartedly by his host), the first would have been O’Neill. Second? Hands down?

Ziva David.

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Makepeace led them through his sentry posts and security gates, into the bowels of Stargate Command, his presence all the authority the group needed. Then he gave them a guided tour of the still minimally operational facility. That really wasn’t necessary. Baal had inside knowledge of all the ways in and out of the Mountain, after he had managed to infiltrate that one time, along with a number of his brethren clones. The upper levels of the NORAD base had been abandoned and emptied by the Patriots. Makepeace had a private personal mercenary staff of twenty, old associates from his rogue NID days. Loyal to him, without question, or they wouldn’t be here. They were all that remained to hold the SGC and the thirty-seven captive civilian scientists.

Baal took over the head of the Conference room table, sending Miss Smith to wrangle up food and coffee. Nun sat with his ‘daughter’ beside him, the woman looking even more stone-faced than ever… the fool kept insisting her lethal skills, knowledge of the Tau’ri and loyalty to him – or whoever wore his face – made her a valuable ally. Baal thought the worm was fooling himself, or listening too closely to that wily weasel Eli. But let him, and his obsessions, make him blind. He was playing patsy to Baal right now, and that’s just how Baal wanted it.

Then one of Makepeace’s men dragged in Dr. Peter Kavanagh, the whiney coward.

“Who the hell are you?” the twitchy so-called scientist demanded in a querulous tone.

“Ah, Dr. Kavanagh. Call me Kort. I am in command of the SGC right now, and that’s all you need to know. Let’s talk about your progress on deactivating the shut-down codes on the Stargate and the Shield.”

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The annoying scientist was eventually removed, his report… disappointing. Smith delivered snacks. Then Makepeace left to check with his men on their duties…

Nun and Baal exchanged glances.

Miss Smith just happened to mention, “All the scientists but one are currently in the main lab. All we need to do is lock one door to seal them in.”

“And the colonel’s men?” Baal prompted.
“The off shift are taken care of, the evidence moved out of sight. Ten are left on sentry duty, including two babysitting the hostage on level thirty-three. And the Colonel himself, of course.”

Baal nodded. “Then we outnumber them two-to-one. Have them finished off. And neatness counts… remove them all to the same hiding place. No need to panic the scientists while we still might have a use for them.”

Miss Smith nodded and left at once to obey the order.

Ziva’s eyes opened a little wider and she snuck an alarmed glance at the goa’uld in her father’s body.

Nun patted her hand. “A necessary precaution, daughter.”

Baal smirked. “They’re a complication, certainly. Don’t need ‘em, don’t want ‘em.”

Ziva’s eyes narrowed. “Might I expect the same treatment?”

Baal grinned. “Of course not, Ziva. Your unquestioning loyalty to your father here is absolutely priceless, to both of us. But if you’re at all worried about it, you can always await us at the tel’tak. It would be useful to have you monitor the scanners, in case we have… visitors.”

And, by the way, keep you out of any dubious situations, in case your dying conscience should give a last gasp. For instance, Baal was not altogether sure she would be willing to agree with his current plan. Sending her up to the mountain-top should be safe enough. Ziva might have picked up some skills with gate-builder tech in Atlantis, but there was no hope she would be able to fly a tel’tak anywhere.

As for Miss Smith? The ex-CIA agent was far too deep in all of their activities to hope for mercy now. She was as committed to their side as any of Kort’s old cohorts. And if Nun believed the woman was still his, body and soul, then Baal would let him. Kort knew a thing or three about Ms Kerry Johnson that would have her switching allegiance as quick as lightning.

Ziva gave a solemn bow of her head. “Papa, I might need you to show me the operation of the ship systems.”

Nun glanced at his ‘partner’, not certain he should leave Baal in sole command of the SGC facility… but it was a reasonable request from a trusted source. It even made a great deal of sense, to have Ziva keep watch in their one certain asset. It would also ensure that Baal wouldn’t be able to fly off anywhere without him.

“Well. Let us go.”

Nun and Ziva left the conference room for the stargate embarkation room, a large enough space to accommodate a goa’uld ring platform. In a clanking of metal and a flash of light, they were gone.

Leaving a grinning Baal to lean back in his chair and survey all he now ruled.

The tel’tak was silent and empty, until the ring platform activated and brought Nun and Ziva to its cargo hold.

Ziva looked around with some interest. Familiar enough with Ancient tech after her sojourn on Atlantis, and Tau’ri tech from the *Daedalus*, here was a different style of technology again. The
gold hieroglyphics were interesting… but mystifying, as she couldn’t decipher any of it. She tamely
followed Eli David’s body to the control room, bridge, control station, *peltak*… whatever it was
called. He smiled at her as he gestured to one of two seats at the console, and sat himself, preparing
to activate the scanning systems.

With a smile of her own, Ziva pulled a zat from hiding and shot Eli in the back.

She had acquired the useful weapon on her exit from the SGC after the Patriot coup had caused the
HWS to decamp. She knew it would come in handy. Small enough to easily conceal on her person,
capable of disarming, killing, *and* eliminating all evidence… yes, *very* useful. She wished she
had had one with her from her first training at Mossad. How much easier many of her missions
would have been… just thinking of Tony in this context…

Ah well. The past is indeed another country.

For now, she pulled out a set of handcuffs, strong enough to hold a goa’uld. She had come well
prepared. She dragged Eli’s body down the tel’tak ramp, and over the meadow to the forest.
Thanks to her reconnaissance for her sniper mission to kill O’Neill, she knew Cheyenne Mountain
like the back of her hand. She already had the best route mapped out to the nearest place to acquire
transportation. And before she had made contact with Makepeace, she had procured a motorbike,
complete with a side-car, and hidden them where she could easily access them.

Would Baal miss the two of them? Would he care? Would he make any effort to hunt them down?
Ziva doubted it. Once he had whatever he wanted at the SGC, he would take his space ship and go,
and never look back. He might even send Ziva a happy blessing for taking care of his ‘partner’ for
him.

But the goa’uld were swift healers, and Nun’s recovery time was short. He began to struggle, and
managed to break Ziva’s hold on him, flopping helpless to the bed of pine needles on the ground.

“Ziva! What is the meaning of this?”

“You are a goa’uld. It is your fault Eli David has turned his back on everything he ever believed,
evry oath he ever took, every cause he devoted his life to, and betrayed the sacrifices made by his
entire family. I plan to have you ripped out of my father’s body, to return him to himself.”

“And how do you propose to do that? The only Tau’ri with the knowledge or ability to remove me
from this host are with HomeWorld Security… and they’ve all gone.”

“They will return.”

“And they consider you, and your father, enemies of all mankind.”

“Because of *you*, demon!”

“And the mutiny on Atlantis? That was you and Eli, not me.”

“That was on IOA orders.”

“You really expect to get away with that excuse? Even if… there’s no time, Ziva! Baal plans to
bring down the Shield, and let in the Wraith! In the chaos, he’ll take his tel’tak and leave this
benighted planet. You want to be Wraith food? Our only chance is to be on that tel’tak and leave
with Baal.”

“Another goa’uld who kills every ally he has. You think he won’t kill you the first chance he gets,
goa’uld? Hah. And if it comes to dying by Baal or the Wraith… what’s the difference? And as for bringing down the Shield… it’s been months, and the SGC systems are all as locked down and out of reach as ever.” Ziva took hold of her prisoner by the cuffs on his wrists and began pulling again. In another half hour, she had reached the bushes where the motorbike and side-car were waiting. She heaved Eli’s body into the side-car, then used the chains she had acquired to wrap him securely in place.

There was a hiccup and a brief jerk in the body, and then the voice was unadulterated human… Eli’s voice. “Daughter, please. This is not the way. Nun is right about Baal’s plans, and he has the means to bring it about. We have another play here… to return to DC for Tali, and find a place to hide until we can escape safely.”

Ziva scowled. “Forget Tali. She is hermaphrodite. Worse, she is a DiNozzo. Forget her. If you want a grandchild so bad, I will give you one. I will give you a dozen, proper human ones. Just… not that one.”

“Alright! Alright… but still, let us return to the tel’tak. Nun will help me fly it, somewhere hidden, remote. We will strand Baal, leave him, and make our own way, as always. Together, my daughter. You and me, together.”

“You and me and the goa’uld, you mean.”

The goa’uld roared. “Tell me what you want! Anything you want. If only we can escape the Wraith and this accursed planet, it will be yours, I swear! You want your father back? Even if he likes it as my host, the power, the strength, the health? I will leave him once we secure another host. But there is no refuge for either of you on Earth, you must know this. Even without the Wraith over our heads, all hands will be against you and Eli. You will be hunted down like animals and slaughtered. I am your only hope!”

Ziva slowed in her headlong rush to prepare the bike for travel. She glanced at the desperate-sounding goa’uld.

“You would leave my father for another host? You can do that and leave him alive and well?”

The goa’uld nodded hurriedly. “Yes! Of course. Tok’ra do it all the time. Only return us to the tel’tak and we will leave… together…”

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Baal knew it wouldn’t take long for the reinstated President Hayes to realize the SGC was under new management, and send *lawful* government agents in. So, the elevators between the ground and level eleven were salted with C-4 and exploded, effectively sealing them off from any efforts to get to them. With no beaming tech on the planet (*Nala* didn’t count, parked on the White House lawn), and only Baal’s tel’tak with the Goa’uld ring transporters, he had the only way out of this place before a full mining team could excavate their way down here.

Because, of course, no one was going anywhere with the Planetary Shield in full force. Baal had already tried to breach it in his tel’tak, and bounced right back, lucky he hadn’t broken the damned ship. After his little briefing with Kavanagh, it was clear that the gold-bricking experts shut up in the SGC lab had no intentions of giving him, Makepeace, or anyone else, the necessary codes to get through the Shield. Even if they could.

The first moment he had read the reports on Carter’s plans for Arthur’s Mantle, Baal had realised it would pose a significant challenge to any covert escape plans. Although they had later gone to the
Atlantean Shield system instead as being the safer and easier option, it was still a block to his – or anyone else’s – escape, at need. Even a moron like Landry realised they would need a way to neutralise part or all of it, if they were to guarantee passage between Earth and space.

Baal’s advice for the proper conduct of a coup, was to make a midnight run at the SGC and HomeWorld to nail down all assets right away, before the rest of the plan was unfurled. In the teeth of that, Landry, and the other milk-sop ‘Patriots’ Baal had reluctantly thrown in with, had preferred to make it look like a legal and justified aboveboard criminal investigation... giving O’Neill and Admiral Chegwidden valuable time to put their own emergency plans in place.

Stalemate. And, Baal had to admit, well played.

But, Nun’s executive assistant, ‘Miss Smith’, had been astute enough to court friendships with both Colonels, Samuels and Makepeace, while they were all ostensibly on the same side. She had discovered that Samuels, while still serving the Trust, had taken advantage of an asset the SGC had dug up and then refused to employ. They had gone looking for major math talents, and utilized an old sci-fi movie trick – “The Last Starfighter”, with a fake video game identifying those with special talents required to ‘save the universe’. Area 51 hacks had put together a mathematical puzzle in the guise of a multi-player internet role playing game.

A number of people excelled… Dr. Charles Eppes’ teaching assistant, Amita Ramanujan, was one, but she was a little too high-profile for their purposes, to be considered for the Stargate Project. Samuels had considered ‘acquiring’ her for the Trust labs… but she was listed as a valued FBI consultant, and so was left alone. She had dropped out of sight entirely after the coup. The Patriots didn’t have any spare resources to hunt her down.

Then one kid had entered the lists, and blown every one of the competition away. An MIT drop-out named Eli Wallace. He had been bright enough to get a scholarship, in spite of his zed status, but hadn’t been able to complete even a BSc degree. A zed, an underachiever and loser, isolated, alone, no significant friends or connections, living in a lower-middle-class suburb with his single-parent nurse mother… His sole remaining relative as near as the profile records compiled on him could find. The woman was HIV positive as a result of her job, and he had left school to care for her. He had been perfect for drafting into the SGC… but Landry had still been in command of the Mountain, saw his gender status, and refused to even consider him.

Perfect as the marginalized and isolated kid was for the Stargate... he was even more perfect for Samuels and the Trust. No one of consequence would even notice if he just… disappeared. So Samuels had him abducted and kept a prisoner at one or other of the Trust labs.

Wallace had been installed in the bowels of the SGC since the coup, working on some of the same problems as the people in the lab many levels above his head. He had got far further alone than any of those teams had together. But what Makepeace had him focus on was the Shield. Wallace had already discovered that the routines to allow new pass codes to be entered for individual ships was frozen as long as the Shield was deployed. Which meant that in order to get away, the whole damn Shield would have to come down. The passwords were the only way to hack into the command sub-routine, to shut down the Shield. There were two places where the Shield controls could be accessed remotely to deliver those passwords and open them to commands – HomeWorld offices in DC, and the SGC. Which is why Makepeace had kept his operations here.

If Baal gave any thought to the fate of the Earth, at the mercy of the entire Wraith Swarm once the Shield collapsed, it only made him smirk in satisfaction. Let ‘em all fall. Kort didn’t so much as make a whisper of complaint at that.

Flanked by his personal guard, Baal descended to level thirty three, and came to the door guarded
by two of Makepeace’s men. The guards stood aside, and one activated the key card to open the door. Baal entered with one of his men, while the other remained outside. He had his orders… and Baal listened with satisfaction at the repeated energy zing of a firing zat…

Sitting dejected in front of a white board was Eli Wallace, a tall, overweight, whey-faced kid with an unruly shock of overly long black hair, in a Grateful Dead T-shirt and grey cargo pants. He was toying with a dry-erase marker, staring at nothing. After Makepeace had discovered him attempting to hack his way out to an open internet line, the Colonel had wisely forbidden him any computers for his work.

“Good morning, Mr. Wallace,” Baal greeted.


“Yes, I am the new commander here, and I wish you to brief me on your progress.” According to Makepeace, this young man had no idea where he was, or who was holding him, or even what, exactly, he was working on. He had been a prisoner, a virtual slave, for several months now, permitted no contact with anyone other than his jailors. “I need those codes you are working on.”

“Yeah well, good luck. Have you any idea how difficult this is going to be? Makepeace wouldn’t even listen when I tried to tell him. An almost infinite number of characters they could be using, an actual infinite number of characters in the code anyway, in any order, and changing on a regular basis… and he won’t even let me have a fucking laptop!”

“Language, Mr. Wallace. What would your mother say?”

That glowering petulant look became outright fury. “And that’s another thing. He said I could see her. He’s been promising me for months. Where is she? Is she okay? Let me speak to her, just speak to her, and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“You know what I want.”

“I can’t get it for you! Can’t! Don’t you understand simple English? Not even don’t want to, although god knows, I’d rather eat my arm off than do any of you jerks a single god-damned favour, and they never did tell me what this stupid code is supposed to do…” Eli Wallace ran out of breath and gulped for more. “One phone call. Is that so much to ask?”

Actually, in this case, it was. When Eli Wallace had been grabbed, Samuels had told his mother that her son had been killed in an accident. Loss of her son tore the woman’s will to live away from her, and she became an easy victim to the diseases attacking her immune-deficient body. She had died over a month ago.

“After I see some sign of progress on this problem, you can call anyone you like.”

Near screaming with frustration, Wallace ran both hands through his already disordered hair. “Okay! Okay. But this time, if I don’t get that call, I stop working. Period. Shoot me if you want, I don’t care anymore. You’re all dirty lying kidnapping bastards, and I don’t believe a word you say anyway. So this time, if I don’t get what I want, you don’t get what you want.”

“Deal.” Baal grinned wide on a smile like a shark.

Wallace took a deep breath, shut his eyes tight, and then stared at the white board.

“That last algorithm Makepeace got me a few weeks back. Password encryption, right?
Changing… no, alternating, evolving. Otherwise even the guy who programmed this thing wouldn’t be able to get in, and whoever he is, he’s genius enough to know that and plan for it. So… a piece of it… I think I recognise it. It’s from a thesis by a mathematician who works for the FBI as a geographic profiler… although that doesn’t make much sense to me… Dr. Spencer Reid. Some of his proofs… Well, parts of it might have an application for large number theory. Password codes. An algorithm for adapting for rapidly-changing conditions… calculating shifting numbers in sequence. Last week’s problem looks like part of his work was used to construct it.”

“Hm,” Baal thought. It would be like Carter to use work done by the second Atlantis Agent Afloat for her password encryption. But, according to Kavanagh, the calculation Wallace referred to was for unlocking the Orbital Weapon Platform systems. While potentially valuable as leverage, it wasn’t the system he really needed to break, with time running out. The rubble of the upper levels of the facility wouldn’t keep troops out for long. “That isn’t the system I need you to break.”

“No, yeah, no. But there’s a similarity there. I think all these password locks are the same only different. They all use parts of Dr. Reid’s work as the foundation of their application. And that’s the key. I just need to find the section of the right proof that pertains to this particular encryption algorithm, and I can get you in. Right?”

“Get me in first. Then you can call. I have other stops to make, and perhaps I upset your concentration. Let my men know when you’re ready. I’ll bring a cell phone, in my hand, when I come to see what you’ve got for me. Agreed?”

“Yeah, okay,” Wallace muttered, slumping demoralized, on his stool.

Eli Wallace had recognized the formulae almost immediately, as soon as he’d seen it. Since the Sulfur Springs cases were blurted all over the TV and internet a year ago, Eli had been fascinated by Dr. Spencer Reid. Zed, genius, FBI agent, hero. As a zed himself, Reid had become everything Eli secretly hoped he could be, one day. So now, after his long captivity, helpless to stop or evade these bastards, he wondered why this felt like defeat. Like betrayal. Like he was making the biggest fucking mistake of his life… a short life, maybe, but it was already crowded with them. So he knew the feeling all too well.

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Makepeace had not made himself popular with the denizens of the SGC labs, and none of them believed his new buddies could be much better. Especially when they had their links to the outside cut off again without warning or explanation. The shouts of protest had fallen on deaf ears, and when guns were raised, the grumbling of the scientists gradually fell.

But the thing about trapping a room full of scientific experts in a lab was… you had a lot of very smart, inventive and ingenious people gathered together, bent on one goal – making you very, *very* sorry for grabbing them in the first place. It was rather like capturing the A-Team and locking them in a fully stocked hardware store with an attached metal and munitions workshop.

It took Rush very little time to re-establish his cable access. He expanded it to other secondary systems he had been quietly and secretly tying into his laptop. The slowly expanding network he had created was shared out to the other laptops in the lab.

News of the capitulation of the Patriot Conspiracy – now called traitors and enemies of the World, the true perpetrators of all the crimes they had tried to ascribe to the members of HomeWorld – came as no surprise to anyone. Hayes held a news conference with his released cabinet and the freed members of the Joint Chiefs… about half of them prominent and well-known figures the public had previously been told were assassinated by O’Neill and his conspirators.
According to the press conference briefing, General Jack O’Neill was at large, in command of the Earth Fleet, and was preparing to take on the Wraith. He had gathered an even greater fleet of allies together to help, and had been busy protecting lesser, more vulnerable planets from Wraith attack, trusting to Carter’s Shield to keep them safe while they waited for Atlantis to arrive. The members of the Patriot Conspiracy were all under arrest, pending trial for their crimes. Only three significant conspirators were still at large…

A groan went up from the SGC lab inmates. “Trent Kort, Eli David and Colonel Makepeace,” they all guessed.

… but they knew the traitors were holed up at Stargate Command in Colorado Springs, and troops were already deployed to dig them out and arrest them as well.

“They must have an escape plan,” Svetlana Markov guessed. She had realized after one angry flash of Goa’uld eyes, and barked out orders in those unsettling bifurcated voices, that they were not dealing with a rogue ex-CIA agent and rogue ex-Mossad Director, but with two Goa’ulds. Having encountered their like before, and once was too often in her view.

“Escape?” Larry demanded, incredulous. “The Stargate is still down, the only space ship they’ve got is under guard in Washington, and there’s a Wraith Fleet all around us. What kind of escape could they have?”


Rush considered this. “Alright. That makes sense. But even with shields and a cloak to get it by the Wraith, how’re they going to get through the Planetary Shield?” He took over a laptop to tap up the SGC internal security camera system – one of those systems still partially intact he had carefully gained access to. “They’ve been here stuck with the rest of us in the SGC since yesterday, but they haven’t pestered us at all. So where’ve they been, and what’re they up to?”

Larry hummed as the security cameras cycled through. “Not Asgard beams, because they don’t have crystals… If they’ve got a Goa’uld tel’tak, they’ve got transporter rings to get them out of here any time they like. But the ship would have to be close… parked on top of the mountain for example.”

A glum and demoralized Kavanagh, at long last sensing that he was *persona non grata* with, well, *everyone*, and likely on the list to be arrested as a Patriot conspirator, eavesdropped on this exchange. He was the only one in the room with actual SGC work experience. That was, after all, the reason he was here in the first place. “If you’ve got the security cameras, why don’t you call up the heat detectors? That’ll locate the Goa’ulds and their men.”

While everyone else bristled with suspicion, Rush merely smiled thinly and offered the laptop. Kavanagh quickly called up the internal heat sensors, and… “There. That must be them and their storm troopers. That one’s a goa’uld, they run a little hotter than humans, see the added glow around the neck? Sitting in the Commanding Officer’s office on twenty-eight. Those five patrolling on twenty seven and eight, they’re human. So are the five guys posted outside the lab. And those guys on thirty three… human too, seven, eight, nine… eleven people down there. The other goa’uld must be someplace else, he’s not anywhere in the SGC.”

“What else is on thirty three, Peter?” Rush asked.

“Not much… the servers are in that section. But the computers are all down, fried by the EM pulses.”
“But there are still communications links to satellites in orbit, correct?” Svetlana guessed. “Direct dedicated access, either cable or wireless, to dishes with connections to certain critical HomeWorld systems? If he has his codes he can feed it directly into one of the systems he wants to access. Like the Shield.”

“Cable, not wireless, too much interference… Well, yes, that’s how we intended to gain access once we… wait… you mean he would… *shut the Shield down*?” Peter yelped in horror, glancing over his shoulder at the lab monitors, now displaying ZNN scenes of the Wraith Swarm in orbit.

Svetlana regarded the pitiful man with contempt. “The Goa’uld are *exactly* the kind of madmen who would do that, yes. They’d leave us all at the mercy of the Wraith, if they thought it would save their own skins. And while you may deserve such a fate, Peter, the rest of us do not.”

“B-b-but they can’t! Right? They can’t. Carter and McKay’s password encryptions are fool-proof.” Kavanagh clung to that fact with dread in his heart.

Rush and Charlie traded looks.

“There may be a way to break in,” Charlie suggested, “But it would take a mathematical genius, and I would have thought all the math talent they could beg, borrow or steal was in here already. Unless you know of someone else, Peter?”

“Me! Why would I know?”

Rush was about out of patience with the obtuse scientist. “Well, Peter, you’re the only one of us who has been permitted beyond this floor, for months now. And some of the help you’ve been giving us definitely did not come from your own brain.”

“Well, of course, Makepeace has other contractors working on the maths…”

“What other contractors?”

“I don’t know! He’s talked about a kid, Eli something…”

Dr. Malcolm Tunney, MIT engineering professor, groaned. “You wouldn’t be talking about Eli Wallace, would you?”

“I think that’s the name. Why?”

Dr. Rush stiffened. He had heard that name. At one point in the Icarus Project, while they wrestled with power requirements for dialing the ninth chevron on the Stargate, that name had come up as potential additional help in the math department. Why hadn’t he been hired? Rush wasn’t sure he knew the particulars, just that the man had been rejected almost as soon as his name was mentioned.

“Oh, Guys? If Makepeace has Eli stuck in the basement…” Tunney gave a nervous swallow, and continued, “He’s every bit as brilliant as you are, Charlie. He’s zed, got through two years at MIT on full scholarship before his mother became ill, and he had to quit school to go help her. If the Goa’ulds have him working on this, and there’s a solution out there for him to find… we could all be in big trouble.”

~ Some people will always be volunteers to explore, and it is, in my mind, a privilege. ~ Julie
End Notes

One more Stage to go… hopefully by next week. A Christmas present for those of you who have read and enjoyed this series, and hung in there through the long wait for the big finale.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!