While the US government hunts for Hydra in their ranks, all SGC operations are stalled. But the Ori's armies are still coming and Earth isn't any closer to coming up with anything that can stop them. Frustrated, Daniel takes a vacation, makes a few friends and accidentally uncovers a clue to what could be an Ancient weapon. Against protocol, against orders, he and his gathered knights errant (because they refuse to let him go on his own) set out on a desperate quest.

But unlike medieval stories, their goal is neither fame, fortune, nor a beautiful princess. Instead, their quest is a race against time to find a way to save Earth.
more this story started to gradually form in my head. I'm blurring the timelines of the two
cannons a little bit here based on what I have or haven't seen yet:

It takes place some point after season 10 of Stargate: SG1, but doesn't include anything that
happened in Ark of Truth as I haven't seen it yet. It is also not compliant with the end of
SGA season 5 (I'm thinking sometime after 'The Prodigal'). I haven't seen any SGU, so that
won't exist in this story at all.

For the Marvel portion of this crossover, I'm staying strictly within cannon of the MCU up
until the end of The Winter Soldier. Now, while I'm going by MCU cannon, any character
history or information that hasn't yet been explained or given as solid fact in the MCU, I'm
supplementing with info from the comics wiki. Likewise, my characterization of the Hulk is
influenced by Earth's Mightiest Heros where he's clearly an intelligent rage monster even if
I have kept him mostly non-verbal the way he's been so far in the MCU.

The only thing I've taken from season two of Agents of Shield is their set-up. In other
words, what's up with Fitz, Simmons, Ward, ect and what new faces are hanging around the
place, and a few other tidbits learned from the first episode of the season. So basically it's
AU to season 2.

**Warnings:** Er, dodgy scifi/comicbook science? Violence... basically anything that happened
over the course of either the SG1 or MCU timeline could be mentioned. If you've watched
the show, seen the movies, you should know what those triggers are.

And lastly, the obligatory **Disclaimer:** I own a computer and an imagination. And a
coffeemaker. I do not, however, own Stargate or Marvel.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

Somewhere behind him, Hulk heard the buzz of flying army machines. Hulk pushed trees aside as he ran from them, just wanting to get away. Hulk didn't understand what had changed. He remembered Others: the metal man, the bright blue shield man, the woman with long red hair, the flying thunder man and the arrow man. He didn't see them for very long, but he remembered feeling things other than anger when he looked at them. They'd smiled at Hulk. They'd smashed things with Hulk.

Friends, a small voice from deep within Hulk supplied. Friends. Hulk liked the word friends.

He heard a high-pitched whine and ducked as a missile sailed over his head. It hit the ground and exploded, sending dirt and half a splintered tree flying into the air. Hulk caught the broken tree and whirled around, throwing it towards the nearest flying machine. The machine swerved out of the way, but couldn't stop the tree from clipping its tail, sending it spinning. The other machines had to move out of its way.

Hulk turned and ran again, needing to get away. He was angry. He clenched his fists as his body burned up with his anger. He wanted to smash the puny, annoying machines that were hunting him, but somewhere inside him a voice was yelling at him not to stop, to just run. So Hulk ran. He didn't want to make the Little Man sad; Hulk didn't like it when the Little Man inside him was sad. It made Hulk restless, made him want to smash things. And that made the Little Man sadder.

Something caught his attention and Hulk veered to the left. Two missiles sailed into the trees behind him and he heard them explode and tear up another piece of the forest.

The Little Man had been happy for a while and the Hulk had felt less angry. Hulk wasn't sure how much time had passed in that while, but he had felt fear from the Little Man and then sadness. He'd growled from within his darkness, because Hulk could feel but he couldn't see. And then the Little Man had been frightened and desperate and Hulk had felt danger. So Hulk had roared out in anger and opened his eyes to see the flying machines chasing him.

Where had the warm happiness gone? Where were friends?

Hulk was confused. Hulk hated being confused.

Another whine pierced through the air and then Hulk felt fire sear across his back as the impact made him stagger forward. He roared, anger colouring his vision, silencing all the little voices telling him to run, just run. He grabbed a tree and ripped it from the ground, hefting it easily over his shoulder as he turned to face the on-coming machines. There were five of them and Hulk watched as one fired two more missiles. Hulk swung the tree and one of the missiles impacted with it, shattering the wood and sending splinters in all directions. Hulk barely felt the splinters as they peppered his skin. The tree was burning now.

A different machine had flown lower and Hulk heard the sharp rhythm of bullet fire. Stings like a dozen metal bees rained over his arm. He took a step back and growled. Then he threw the burning tree at the flying machine.

He heard shouting and watched as the tree hit the machine across the front. Hulk heard glass shatter and people yell. He grinned. Then he picked up a large rock from the ground and threw it at
another machine, aiming for the spinning propeller. The rock hit its target and the propeller slowed, the machine tilting to one side. The machines around it scattered to the sides to avoid it.

Satisfied, Hulk turned and ran.

Up ahead, he saw something sparkling from between the trees. Water. Good, Hulk was thirsty. Maybe he could use it to hide too.

Hulk ran ahead, pushing trees aside and feeling as roots and bushes were crushed beneath his feet. At last he came out of the trees and into a clearing. There was a lake in the centre of it and a small wooden house on the other side – the lake was too small for Hulk to hide in, but the water looked clear. Hulk knelt down at its bank and cupped his hand to bring some to his mouth. The water was cool and refreshing as it poured down his throat. He managed a second mouthful before the flying machines were once again too close.

He turned just in time to watch them appear over top of the trees. Hulk saw smoke come out of the sides of the one on his left and then heard the familiar whine... Hulk threw himself forward, into the water. The lake wasn't deep, but it was deep enough to cover him. He swam forward, letting the water cool him down. He felt the water shudder as missiles flew into it. Then a sharp fire exploded on his shoulder and Hulk screamed, sending waves out across the lake. Hulk grit his teeth and propelled himself to the right, altering his direction, but still moving forward.

It didn't take him long to reach the other side of the lake. There Hulk came crashing out of the water. He turned and roared into the sky, at the two machines hovering in the air above him. He saw the other two had landed and men were pouring out, with their things meant to hurt Hulk. The two machines in the air circled him carefully. He glared up at them and growled.

There was a loud bang and suddenly fire exploded along Hulk's side. He roared in pain and glared at the puny human soldiers on the ground. Behind the big guns, he saw a familiar face staring at him.

“Ross,” he growled, angry, so unbelievably angry, at the man for making the Little Man afraid again. Hulk wondered if he'd done anything to friends and that made him angrier.

Then came a second bang, but it didn't hit Hulk. Instead it flew past him.

The wooden house exploded.

Hulk turned to run away from the weapons, but the flying machines were in his way. There was a brief whine and then four points of fire hit Hulk. He staggered back as pain flared up along his torso and left shoulder. Hulk roared, glaring up at the flying machines. They were lower now. Hulk bent his knees and leapt into the air, grabbing one of them by the tail. The second quickly flew away. Small sharp bursts of staccato fire peppered his shoulders and upper arms, but Hulk didn't let go. He hit the ground still holding the flying machine's tail and tore it off. He threw the bigger part of the machine into the lake and its tail at the guns on the other side.

He turned to run.

“Cassie! Cassie, can you hear me? Cassandra Fraiser don't you dare die on me! Just hold on, I'm on my way!”

Hulk paused and looked to the wooden house. There was a man there now, trying with all his puny strength to lift away chunks of debris. Not far from him, fire burned. Hulk could see him hurrying desperately, but he was small.
What he wouldn't give for his Kevlar vest and gloves right now. It was an odd thing to think when all he could see was debris in front of him, but the wood kept slipping in his hands and he couldn't get a good grip on it. Around him he smelt gunpower and burning wood. He felt heat from the fire. It was spreading towards him. He needed to work faster.

Daniel was used to missions going from milk-run to FUBAR in the blink of an eye. But this wasn't a mission. This was middle of nowhere Minnesota. He'd been gathering herbs and wild mushrooms for stew.

He'd froze. For long, precious minutes, shock and disbelief had froze him to the spot when he'd heard the distinct, unforgettable sound of missile-fire. He hadn't even registered the strangeness of the roars that followed the explosions at first: it was all so wrong. Scrambling through his pockets, he finally found his binoculars. Helicopters. He saw helicopters above the trees: US military.

They were heading towards the cabin. And he was nearly a mile away.

“Cassie,” he whispered, his eyes widening in horror.

Terror finally granted him the ability to move. He dropped the bag of herbs and ran. Years of running full-tilt over uneven terrain made his steps sure as he automatically side-stepped or leaped over obstacles.

He vaguely remembered taking a call from a panicked Cassie, remembered telling her to take the shotgun and get down into the cold cellar. There might've been a panicked call to Jack, telling him to move his elderly ass back to the cabin. He wasn't even sure he'd made sense. He didn't care; nothing else made sense.

This was Minnesota. There weren't any Goa'uld or Ori in Minnesota. It was supposed to be safe.

Daniel managed to get another plank loose and pushed it aside. The cold cellar was still far below. He glanced to his left: the fire was spreading. He had to work faster. Couldn't think about the moment the rocket had hit the cabin. Couldn't let his breath leave him like that again; couldn't let himself freeze again. Shock wasn't going to help anyone. Cassie was counting on him.

He pulled another plank loose.

A shadow fell over him. Daniel grabbed for the knife in his belt and swung around. The large green giant the army had been chasing stood above him, looking angry and remarkably unharmed by the missiles Daniel had seen impacting him. The giant saw Daniel's knife and scoffed.

“Yeah, probably wouldn't have helped me against the soldiers armed with rocket launchers either,” he muttered under his breath. His eyes slipped towards the flames that were inching closer. “And normally I'd be happy to make friends, but I've got a friend trapped under here so unless you're going to help, you should probably-”

The green giant brushed past him (he looked familiar, Daniel knew he did, but his brain wasn't
supplying information past the mental image of Cassie trembling in fear in the dark beneath the destroyed cabin). Daniel turned and watched in amazement as the giant grabbed an armful of debris and tossed it to the side as easily as a pile of leaves. It only took two armfuls for Daniel to see the opening to the cold cellar.

“Cassie!” he called and ran forward.

“Uncle Daniel?” he heard followed by a bought of coughing. Smoke inhalation, his mind supplied. He was going to need oxygen. Hopefully the soldiers had a medic with them. He couldn't remembered what Jack had in his truck's first aid kit.

Daniel slipped on a loose floorboard as he scrambled to get to the opening to the cellar. Cassie wasn't climbing out on her own. That wasn't good. He could barely make out her form when he stared down into the glorified hole in the ground that counted as Jack's cold cellar.

“Cassie, how are you?” he called down. “Can you move?”

He heard a strangled sob and then “Something fell on my leg and my arm hurts... I think. I can't move it. I-I'm cold, I can't...”

Shock. “Hold on, Cassie, I'm coming down.”

He didn't dare look at how close the fire had gotten; the heat was beating on his skin enough to remind him of the fires in Sokar's prison. Daniel quickly climbed down the ladder steps into the cellar. He was half-way down when he heard automatic weapon's fire. He grit his teeth.

A staff weapon. He really, really wished he had a staff weapon right now. Or the Odyssey. Actually, he'd prefer the Odyssey: it had medical facilities.

He jumped down the last couple of steps and crouched next to Cassie.

“Uncle Daniel!” she sobbed with relief and held her hand out.

Daniel squeezed it. “We don't have much time, the blast set the cabin on fire. So, I'm sorry, but this won't be gentle.”

Cassie took a deep breath and he could see her nod in the darkness. “I understand.”

There was a familiar high-pitched squeal from above them. Rocket-launcher, Daniel's mind automatically supplied. There was the blast of an impact and a roar as the earth around them shook. Daniel threw himself over Cassie and felt as some small debris hit his back. He grit his teeth.

“Who are they?” Cassie whispered, fear making her voice shake.

“United States Army,” Daniel said bitterly.

She snorted. “Of course it's the army; only the army employs idiots who fire haphazardly on civilian targets.”

Daniel maneuvered to the side and slipped an arm around her back as he braced himself. “Okay, on three: one, two, three!” He heard Cassie suppress a scream as she helped him drag her to her feet. Once upright he have her a few seconds to recover.

“Is that air force snobbery I hear?” he asked her as he tried to get look at the injury on her arm – there was something sticking out of it. It wasn't a long something, so he decided to leave it until he
could get a better look at it.

She chuckled in-between wheezing breaths. “I come by it honestly.”

“I'm sure your mother would be proud.” He took a deep breath. “Okay, there's only one way to do this. Grab onto my shoulders with your arms and my hips with your legs and hold on. It's going to hurt, but I'm going to need my arms to climb up that ladder.”

It wasn't easy and he was fairly certain Jack would've told him he only managed out of sheer stubbornness. The stair ladder up wasn't very tall, but Cassie was heavy and her hold rigid with fear and pain. He could hear her gasping and whimpering into his ear the entire way up and the closer they got to the top, the worse the air became as smoke from the fire reached them. Daniel ignored the burn in his muscles, ignored the sweat that poured down his brow and into his eyes.

Ignored the roaring and weapon's fire outside.

Why was the giant still there?!

Eventually he dragged them both out into burning heat and thick smoke. Exhausted, he collapsed onto his side as soon as he could, but he couldn't stop. No time to rest, the fire was almost licking at them now. He dragged himself to his knees and put an arm around Cassie.

“C'mon Cassie, we've got to move!”

Cassie cried out in pain as the movements aggravated her wounds, but she grit her teeth and leaned on him. Daniel took as much of her weight as he could as they made their way through the uneven rubble. He nearly stumbled once when the piece of flooring he stepped on broke under his weight, but he regained his footing and continued on. He felt the fire behind him, but didn't dare look back. Only forward, always forward.

They found solid ground and Daniel didn't stop. He hauled them further away from the house, only stopping when they reached the well. It wouldn't provide much cover, but the trees wouldn't be much protection from missiles either. He collapsed onto the ground beside her and panted.

In the background, he heard the sharp staccato of automatic weapon's fire and a furious roar.

“Oh my god, is that the Hulk?!” Cassie whispered incredulously, her voice raspy from the smoke.

Daniel looked up to where the green giant was straining against some invisible force. He was standing between two wheeled contraptions with flat panels and some sort of satellite behind them. The Hulk... right, New York, the Chittauri... Daniel had read about that. Once they'd been allowed to know about it – no, there was no point in dwelling on something that didn't matter right now.

“He helped defend New York, didn't he?” Daniel asked instead.

Cassie nodded. “Yeah, he's a hero. One of the Avengers, I thought.”

“So why the hell is the army hunting him? No, you know what, I don't actually care why they're hunting him.” Suddenly, Daniel was furious. He'd worked with enough military people to know that you didn't just ignore civilians. Daniel himself had risked his life more than once to save civilians caught in the crossfire.

He turned to Cassie and quickly inspected her wounds, using his knife to tear away the fabric of her shirt. “The Hulk helped me get to you. I-I don't think I would've been able to clear it all on my own...” He took a deep breath. Later. “They were shooting rocket launchers at him and instead of
“running, he stopped and cleared the rubble for me so that I could get to you.”

“And they took advantage of that in order to trap him,” said Cassie. Daniel looked up from examining her arm and saw the anger he’d thought he heard burning in her eyes.

“Yes.”

“Then go.” Daniel blinked, surprised. Cassie coughed and then forced a small smile onto her face. “You have to help him, Uncle Daniel. I’ll be fine. Go.”

Daniel paused, looking back to the wound on her shoulder. There was a wooden shard embedded in her upper arm: it wasn't large, but it looked like it was in deep. An infection waiting to happen, but Daniel knew better than to take it out. He pulled his cellphone out of his pocket, amazed it was still there, and placed it in her hand.

“Call Jack, make sure they're sending an ambulance,” he said. “I'm going to get the first aid kit out of the car.”

“Daniel-”

“Cassie, right now the Hulk is fine. You, however, are bleeding. Besides, what exactly do you figure I'm going to be able to do unarmed right now?”

“According to Uncle Jack, that's never stopped you bef-” A coughing fit interrupted Cassie's words.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “I'll be right back,” he told her and ran for his car.

It'd been far enough away from the cabin that it didn't get caught in the explosion, but he was going to have to move it further away from the fire. As he ran to the car, he noticed the fire had completely overwhelmed the space above the cellar. He shivered. He’d come so close to losing another person.

Somehow, he still had his car keys in his pocket which made opening the trunk easier. The first thing that caught his eye was the large white box in the corner of the trunk. It was supposed to be a surprise for this evening; he'd forgotten to move it into the cold cellar. Too late now. He grabbed the first aid kit and a bottle of water and ran back to Cassie.

He looked back to the Hulk. The soldiers had stopped shooting at him, but he was still trapped between the two... sonic beams? Sam would probably know. There was movement by one of the helicopters and Daniel saw several soldiers hauling out what looked like long metal rods. One of them sparked.

He cursed under his breath just like Skaara had taught him (except Skaara never cursed under his breath unless his father or sister were around).

He knelt next to Cassie trying very hard not to think about car batteries. Or Jaffa pain sticks.

“Daniel? Daniel, what are they doing?”

Apparently, Cassie had noticed them too. Her eyes were wide, her face was pale and she trembling. Dammit, this was going to give her enough nightmares already. She didn't need more nightmares. He wished he could just bundle her up into the car and drive away...

The car. Huh, maybe he did have a weapon after all.
He didn't pause, couldn't afford to, as he routed through the kit for painkillers. Bottle in hand, he took Cassie's hand and shook two pills onto it. He was prone to migraines, so at least these were the good, prescription-only kind of painkillers.

“Swallow,” he ordered, opening the bottle of water and placing it next to her.

This part, this was second nature. Disinfectant, cotton swabs, gauze, wait for Cassie to swallow down the pain killers.

“Sorry, this'll probably hurt,” he said just before pouring the iodine solution over her wound.

Cassie screamed.

Behind them, the Hulk roared in pain.

Daniel grit his teeth and used a cotton swab to dab at some of the new blood that began to pour from the wound. It took him three seconds to assess and realize he wasn't going to be able to wrap the wound. At least they didn't need to race across any countryside.

“This is the best I'll be able to do until Sam or professional help gets here,” he said. Then he met her eyes. “Are you sure you'll be okay?”

She nodded. “I-I'll be fine. Go.”

He took a deep breath. “Call Jack.”

And then he was off, racing towards the car. The Hulk roared again and Daniel let the anger and pain in the sound fuel his own anger. There was no hesitation, no second-guessing, no thought for an actual plan. He threw himself into the driver's seat and started the motor.

The wheels screeched as he floored the pedal and turned towards the commotion. He aimed for the farthest one, the one with less soldiers surrounding it, less people to stop him. If anyone tried shooting at the car, they missed.

Daniel didn't. And he didn't take his foot off the gas pedal until the front of his car had hit the strange satellite sonic projector beam thing and knocked it to the side. The airbag burst out from the steering wheel and Daniel pushed it to the side as he scrambled out of the car.

Keep moving, don't stand still, don't make yourself a target.

The Hulk roared. The ground shook. Daniel made it out of the car in time to watch as the Hulk straightened, the second projector thing a pile of smashed rubble at his feet. Daniel grinned.

“Well, that must be pretty satisfying,” he said.

The Hulk whirled around to look at him. Slowly, a toothy grin spread across his face. Then he backhanded the soldiers trying to sneak up on him with the metal rods, sending them flying through the air.

Daniel stepped away from the car and wobbled as his head spun. Okay, so maybe he wasn't as unscathed by everything as he'd though. Dammit, he really didn't need his adrenalin to crash just yet. He looked to Cassie and nearly stumbled with relief as he saw a familiar truck pull up next to the well.

A shadow fell over him. This time he didn't reach for his knife. Instead, he looked up to the Hulk
and smiled.

“Thank you for helping me save Cassie,” he said, his eyes darted to where the soldiers were regrouping, gathering their weapons.

A stern-looking man with a bushy blond mustache was glaring at Daniel. Daniel's eyes narrowed at him. He saw the stars on his lapels: a general, two, maybe three star. Probably didn't expect a civilian to give him trouble. He looked back up to the Hulk.

“We'll take it from here,” he said. “You should go.” He held his hand out. “I'm Doctor Daniel Jackson. If you're ever around Colorado Springs and need help, come find me.”

The Hulk blinked, looking confused. Whatever he would've done in response was lost in the sound of weapon's fire. Daniel automatically ducked down, covering his face with his arm, but the bullets were all aimed at the Hulk. The green giant growled angrily, eyes flashing. A bullet hit the ground just in front of Daniel. That got him moving.

He kept down as he made his way along the side of the car and along the trunk. The trunk. A flash of inspiration hit Daniel and in moments he had the trunk open and was rooting in its depths. He pulled out a canvas bag and eyed his stash of bottled water. There were four left; he grabbed three and threw them into the bottom of the bag. Then he took the white box and shoved it as gently as he could into the bag.

He waited until the gunfire had momentarily ceased. The Hulk roared and Daniel ran out from behind the car. “Hulk!”

The Hulk whirled angrily to Daniel as the man stepped towards him, holding out the canvas bag. It looked so small compared to the Hulk's massive bulk, but it was all Daniel had.

“Here, I don't know how much this'll do, but it's better than nothing.” The Hulk frowned and stepped towards Daniel, carefully accepting the bag. Daniel pointed past the cabin. “South-west from here there's some hills and a cave system. It'll be more difficult for them to track you there.”

The Hulk looked in the direction Daniel pointed, then looked back to Daniel.

“Th'nk you,” he grunted and then took off at a run that shook the ground. Then, with a mighty leap, he jumped over Cassie, Sam and the truck, landing at the treeline. He didn't look back even once before disappearing into the forest.

For several moments, the clearing was silent. Then the general began yelling out orders for pursuit. Daniel pushed himself away from the car. Now the adrenalin was definitely leaving him – he swayed for a moment and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he opened his eyes there was a seething mad general standing less than a step in front of him, glaring with all his years of intimidation and authority behind him.

As if any of that could compare with a goa'uld or their First Prime.

“What did you tell him?” the general demanded. Daniel glanced to his insignia: yup, three star. Pity. It would've been nice if Jack had out-ranked him.

Daniel raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him and crossed his arms. “I thanked him for saving my niece's life.”

The man bristled. “You pointed him somewhere! That-that thing is a monster and a danger to others so long as it's loose. It's my job to find it and make sure it's no longer a threat and you had
better not try standing in my way.”

“Or you'll do what? Court-martial me? Because I'm starting to wonder who the threat here really is. In fact, I seem to be coming back to the point where the Hulk saved my niece's life while you and your men didn't appear to care that there were civilians in the area.”

“Son, this is a military operation; we don't have time to watch out for civilians.”

Daniel's thin tendrils of patience snapped.

“My name is Doctor Daniel Jackson. I am a high-ranking civilian consultant with the US Air Force and I've worked worked with both the air force, marines and navy. Believe me, I am fully aware of what a military operation entails and SOP is to first of all clear the area of any potential civilian casualties when at all possible. That cabin was hit with a surface weapon which means you were already on the ground when you fired on it. There is no reason why you couldn't have sent one of your men to make sure it was clear – something you should have known was a possibility given that you arrived in helicopters and therefore during your initial assessment of the area would've noticed the car parked near the cabin indicating the presence of people.”

The general growled and his hand shot forward, grabbing Daniel by the front of his shirt.

“I don't care who the hell you think you are. You work for the military? Good. That's better than good. I can have you run out faster than you can say 'hallelujah' if you don't tell me where you sent the Hulk right now. I know people outside the military too, important people. Your name, your reputation will be mud by the time I'm done with you.”

Daniel snorted. Was he seriously threatening his reputation outside the military?

“Daniel, I see you're making friends as per usual.”

Daniel looked to the left and tried not to make his relief to the three-star general in front of him too obvious. One glance was all it took to realize that the clipped tone of voice wasn't just his imagination. Though outwardly calm, Daniel could tell that Jack was splitting mad right now.

“Heya Jack,” he said with false cheer. “In my defense, this vacation definitely wasn't my idea.”

Jack snorted with amusement, but his eyes bore into the army general. “General Ross, I assume you have a good reason for threatening an important government asset? One that you wouldn't mind repeating to the president and Joint Chief's?”

Daniel felt Ross stiffen. After a moment's pause he let go of Daniel and took a step back. “Who are you?” he asked with narrow, calculating eyes.

“Lieutenant General Jack O'Neill, USAF.” Jack's eyes darted to the side and he nodded slightly. “Now, General, I suggest you and your men lay down your weapons and surrender peacefully.”

Ross' eyes flashed. “You are in no position to give me orders! This operation is under army jurisdiction.”

Which was when SG-3, SG-9 and SG-12 made their presence known by loudly arming their weapons and coming out from their hiding spots in the trees. Ross grit his teeth, but after a few tense minutes, barked the order to surrender. Less than five minutes later, after Jack gave the order to SG-12 to see if they could fish out any survivors from the helicopter in his lake, the medical evac chopper flew in over the treetops.
“So, what was that you gave the big green guy?” Jack asked casually as the two of them made their way back to Cassie and Sam.

“Hm, oh that was supposed to be desert,” Daniel answered. “I had intended it to be a surprise.”

“What? You gave him our desert?!”

“Jack, he’d just helped save Cassie’s life: the least I could do was send him off with some food and water.”

“Yeah, but desert?”

“It was all I had, sorry.”

A few moments passed in silence as Jack stewed in annoyance.

“Was it pie?”

Daniel rolled his eyes.

Bruce sipped his coffee, trying to appear as casual, nonchalant as possible while he waited for the waitress to bring him his food. It was yet another out-of-the-way diner in the middle of nowhere that looked about as old and lifeless as most of its patrons. This one was clean at least, even if the greenery surrounding him was obviously plastic and the burgundy faux-leather seats were faded, the material cracked in quite a few visible places. There were scratch marks on the wooden table he was seated at that Bruce wasn't even going to try and identify. The place smelt of bacon grease and stale cigarette smoke despite the no-smoking sign just inside the entrance.

He didn't look up when the bell above the door jingled.

Someone entered the diner with light, confident steps accompanied with the slight creek of leather. In a place where workboots seemed to be the continual, undying trend, that was odd. Bruce wasn’t even surprised when the newcomer slid into the booth across from him.

Bruce sighed and looked up at the grinning face of his companion.

“You are a difficult man to track down, Brusselsprout,” said Tony, his designer sunglasses, charcoal, impeccably tailored suit, and bright red silk tie looking about as inconspicuous as a golden retriever at a cat show.

“That was the idea yes,” Bruce replied. “And yet you managed, which means I clearly wasn't doing a good enough job of it.”

“Oh trust me it wasn't you, it was totally me. And JARVIS. If I hadn't had JARVIS scouring everything I could think of I wouldn't have managed it. When you go off-grid you sure do it in style.” He looked around. “Or lack of. You know, I think this place might actually be older than Capsicle.”

Bruce leveled an even look at Tony and resisted the urge to sigh. “Tony, after SHIELD fell apart, the deals Fury had in place to protect me did too. Which means Ross is free to come after me and he will bury anyone who tries to stand in his way and protect me, including Stark Industries, and
you have too many people, families, depending on you to risk playing his game.”

He took a deep breath to calm himself. His ever-simmering anger was controlled, but closer to erupting than ever these days. “We've been through all this, you said you understood. So why are you here?”

There was glimmer in Tony's eyes that Bruce wasn't entirely sure he trusted. It was part mischievous, part malicious and a whole lot of amused. That didn't bode well for someone. Tony reached into his jacket and pulled out a Starkpad. He typed on it while he spoke.

“Seems the Hulk managed to make a friend out in Minnesota.”

“A friend in Minnesota...” Yes, Bruce remembered waking up in Minnesota. It had been rather memorable. “Is that where I got the chocolate cake from?”

Tony paused. Blinked. Looked up. “Chocolate cake?”

“Uh, yes, I woke up in a large cave in the middle of the forest. I could remember Ross finding me and then... well, nothing. And sitting next to me there was a canvas bag from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science with three bottles of water and a giant chocolate cake.”

“Was it good chocolate cake?”

“Oh excellent, one of the best I've ever had. Moist, with a chocolate mocha mousse filling and dark chocolate ganache: it was exquisite. Also not something I would've expected to find myself with in the middle of a forest.”

“Well, as thank-you-for-saving-my-deceased-friend's-adopted-daughter presents go, that's not bad.”

“What?”

“Yup, Lieutenant General – sorry, Brigadier General – Ross reeeaaally screwed up this time.”

“Brigadier General– Ross was demoted?!” Bruce took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. He liked Tony most of the time, he really did, but sometimes the man could be positively infuriating. “Tony, start from the beginning. What happened exactly?”

Tony smiled, looking over his glasses at Bruce. “Ross blew up an air force general's cabin while his adopted sort-of niece was inside. Then Hulk lost his chance to escape in order to clear debris away so that a close friend of said general could rescue her. At no point during this whole thing did Ross do anything to help, or order anyone else to help. I mention this because it's important, kept getting repeated at his hearing.”

Tony turned his tablet around to face Bruce. It showed a picture of a man: sun-bleached hair, tanned skin, blue eyes, thick glasses and a pleasant, though slightly shy smile. He didn't exactly look familiar, but when Bruce looked at the face he felt...

“Picture's about ten years old, but this is... uh, Bruce?”

Bruce looked up slowly. Odd, it seemed to take more effort than it should to move his head. He blinked at Tony's wide-eyed expression. He saw him clearly, but it felt as though he was seeing him clearly twice. Tony's hand shot out and fumbled with the napkin holder. The frantic look in his friend's eyes had him glancing at the shiny silver side Tony and turned to face him.

Green eyes.
His reflection was distorted, but the bright green eyes staring back at him were perfectly clear. Bruce’s eyes widened and then he closed them, taking several deep calming breaths as he pushed the Other Guy back, trying not to think of how terrifying it was that the Hulk had managed to sneak up on him like that. Bruce always felt the Other Guy when he came out.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to the smell of food being set before him and the sounds of Tony charming the elderly waitress and her bubble-gum pink hair. After she'd left, Tony's eyes became concerned.

“Everything alright there, Big Guy?”

Bruce nodded. “Yes, I don't really know what that was about to be honest. I didn't even notice the Other Guy coming out. And he didn't feel particularly angry the way he usually does... although he has felt closer to the surface ever since I left New York... Maybe he simply recognized Daniel?”

There was a pause as Bruce picked up his utensils (he was hungry, after all). “Uh, Bruce? You realize I never told you the guy's name was Daniel?”

Bruce froze and swallowed. “Is his name Daniel?”

“Uh, well, yeah: Doctor Daniel Jackson, a civilian consultant for the US Air Force. And an important one at that. As in, the guy knew exactly which hoops to jump through and which people to file his complaint against Ross with. From what I've been able to figure out he works for some sort of classified project at Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado Springs as a language specialist. Three days after this happened, he and his buddy – as in the three-star general whose cabin Ross blew up – were up in arms over this. Then the Russian and Chinese ambassadors somehow got involved, and to top it all off, the President apparently loves the guy. Ross didn't stand a chance. I mean, it's not a court-martial, but considering how untouchable the guy usually is, it's way more than a slap on the wrist.”

Bruce smiled. It felt like a long time since he’d had reason to smile. “And the Hulkbusters?”

“Disbanded for good.” Tony grinned. “I'd say Big Green did pretty good for himself. Come back to New York with me, I'll show you the full report. No, actually, scratch that. I have a better idea. We can make popcorn and watch the hacked feed of the hearing itself. Seriously, it was brilliant. Jackson was brilliant, talked circles around Ross. And he did it without pissing off half the room like I usually do. It was like a cautionary tale: never start a verbal argument with a linguist. I was actually a little bit in awe.”

Bruce's smile widened. “I think that sounds like a great idea, Tony. Thank you.”

“For once, it's not me you have to thank.”
Thank you so much for the comments/kudos! I'm happy to know there are people out there interested in reading this story. :)

Sorry for the wait. Parts 2 and 3 grew longer than I'd anticipated, but I hate rushing beginnings. Having said that, part 2 probably won't be up until Friday partially due to its length (20 pages... yeah, I don't know how that happened either) and partially due to my work schedule.

I should also warn you all that I tend to add tags to a story as I go on. Sometimes it's because I don't want to spoil things and sometimes it's because I never know what tags I'll need in the beginning. Having said that I do promise to warn in an author's note if I'm adding something that could be triggery. Just keep in mind what all of the characters have been through and that any of that could be referenced, but I don't plan on making any of it a focus. If you have any specific questions, just ask.

THREADS

No one took any notice of her as she walked through the halls: long blonde hair tied into a perfect tight bun that fit just beneath her hat, minimal make-up (enough to accentuate, not enough to be noticeable), air force uniform with a gold leaf on her shoulder completed with a regulation-length pencil skirt, sheer nylons and sensible one and a half inch heels. She walked with her head held high, confidently and with the regular gait of a soldier, but quiet – a seasoned soldier would probably take one look and guess special ops. They wouldn't be too far off the mark either.

That was image the Black Widow carefully presented to those she passed by in the halls of the Pentagon. However, it was what they didn't see that was important.

In her left hand she held a briefcase full of reports that, while real enough and probably important to someone, were of no actual significance to her mission and there was certainly no one waiting for them inside this building. The sleeves of her uniform jacket were just long enough to cover the widow's bites she wore underneath. The last button could be also be easily torn off and act as a short-distance surveillance device. Her eyeglasses contained a hidden camera and communicator – it didn't have much of a range, but it didn't need to.

Her mark was a General Markham. Or rather, his office was. Hydra hadn't lost all their military backing, they had evidence of that, but they needed to figure out who those backers were. Their only potential ally, General Talbot, was treating all former SHIELD agents as the enemy, including her, despite having been one of the people to expose the threat in the first place.

Oh well, her methods were more interesting anyway.

Then she heard voices coming from a door on her right. Loud voices. An argument? They were muffled behind a door, but the emotions were obvious. The word 'Hydra' had Natasha tripping over
nothing in particular – oops clumsy moment – and then pausing as she checked the heel of her shoe, nudging it as though to make sure it hadn't come loose. Just in case someone was watching the cameras. Meanwhile, she ran her other hand over the last button, pressing it lightly to turn on the recording.

“-until this Hydra mess is sorted out!”

“Jack, I know Hydra's a problem! But you and I both know that it's not the biggest problem we have right now. The SGC has obligations to our allies and this is breaking those obligations!”

“It doesn't matter! Orders are orders, Daniel, you've been working for the Air Force long enough to know that! Everything stays grounded until Hydra is rooted out completely.”

“Hydra won't matter if the Ori get this far!”

There were a few moments of silence. Natasha let go of her shoe. She straightened her blazer, running her hands over the front of it, tearing off the last button with the flick of a finger and letting it fall to the ground. She adjusted her glasses as she continued down the hallway, activating the nearly-invisible listening device in her ear.

“-still have time-”

“No Jack, we don't! According to the our latest intell, they're planning a large-scale assault and they're planning it soon. And right now, we're in no shape to fight back. Sam's working on her idea, but she's not sure she can make it viable quickly enough. The chair-”

“Enough! Daniel, I know exactly where we stand with this. I've seen every single, dismal report-”

“Yes, but have you actually read them?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I have. For once. And a dyson vacuum doesn't suck this much, but I'm under orders just as much as you are. Do you think I haven't fought it?”

A sigh. “I know, Jack, but... Is there anything I can do? I know I'm not exactly the Joint Chiefs' greatest friend right now after that whole Hulk thing, but what if I talked to them? I could go in front of the IOA, the Pentagon, anyone. I'll do anything. We need to do something. It's not just... morale is horrible at the SGC. It was bad after New York, but now? Now it's worse.”

“Look, I'll talk to Hammond and see what he says.”

“Okay. I'm actually meeting him for dinner tomorrow so I'll bring it up then.”

“Still going to New York next week?”

A deep breath. “Yeah. I-I have to. Cassie's going to fly up to spend the weekend with me. We'll go to the museum together on Friday.”

“Good. That's... good. Wish I could go too, but well the president wants me here in case they uncover Hydra ties somewhere. Or something. Don't worry, the SGC has good people; they'll pull through.”

“No, they have pulled through. They've done amazing things. They should've been allowed to continue to do amazing things – the things they trained for – instead of getting sidelined in the name of maintaining secrecy. And right now, they're angry, betrayed, frustrated. If the SGC were a ship, I'd call it the Bounty.”
“Great. Well, at least I'll know who to blame if that mutiny ever happens. Hope you at least get
yourself an eyepatch and a parrot. Or would that be a camel, since it's you?”

“You're hilarious, Jack.”

The conversation continued as Natasha slipped into General Markham's office, but not for long.
The two men left for lunch together just as she was logging into Markham's computer. On her way
out, she picked up the dropped button. No one paid her anymore attention as she was leaving than
they had when she'd arrived. Mission accomplished.

She walked down the steps from the Pentagon and hailed a cab, asking it to take her to a little
Italian restaurant she knew of. It wasn't far and less than ten minutes later, she was paying the
cabbie and getting out at her destination. Once out of the cab, she made a show of checking her
watch, looking around and then checking her cellphone messages until the cab had driven away.
Only then did she walk under the restaurant's canopy and used its shadow to slip into the alley
beside it.

The backpack she'd hidden there last night was still stuffed behind a stack of plywood. It took her a
matter of minutes to pull her hair out of its bun and clip on a bright pink hair streak, slip in a fake
nose ring and change her blazer, pencil skirt and sensible heels for a Washington U sweatshirt,
grungy, torn jeans and converse sneakers. She stuffed the uniform into the backpack, along with
the glasses and hefted it over her shoulder. Then she walked out the other side of the alley,
slouching slightly as she walked to the busstop on the corner.

Two minutes later, she boarded a city bus.

An hour and forty-three minutes after she'd walked into the Pentagon, the Black Widow was sitting
in front of a Starbucks with a veritable tub of coffee in front of her as she used her tablet to tap into
their wifi.

A few minutes later a purple nike gym bag was thrown onto the ground next to her backpack. “Hey
long time no see,” said a familiar voice.

Natasha looked up and smiled in surprise at the blond man standing in front of her table. “Oh my
god, it's good to see you!” she exclaimed with a bubbly smile and stood to hug the newcomer.
“How's it going?”

“Not bad, nothing to write home about, but you know,” he replied smoothly, his shrug a bit stiff
(probably due to the kevlar vest underneath the black t-shirt and leather jacket). His jeans weren't
quite as grungy as hers, but they had a well-worn look to them.

In other words, she hadn't been followed.

She gestured to the other chair. “Have a seat.”

“Hang on, let me get a coffee first.”

While Natasha waited for Clint to get himself coffee and a sandwich (he'd been staking out the
Pentagon since early this morning in case she needed back up so was probably quite hungry), she
casually scanned the street for anything suspicious.

“So, how did things go on your end?” Clint asked after he'd sat down with coffee and a ham and
swiss sandwich.

Natasha shrugged. “I have the information, but from what I've seen so far, I think Markham's a
bust. No idea how he managed to make general, but it wasn't Hydra.”

“Damn, well one name crossed off the list, I guess.”

“Hm. I did, however, come across something else that was interesting.”

“Oh?”

Natasha dug into the front pocket of her backpack and pulled out an mp3 player. She pretended to fiddle with it for a few moments, while she slipped the button recorder into a slot at the bottom. She handed it over to Clint, who took it and immediately put the headphones on and began. She watched his reactions while she watched their surroundings out of the corner of her eye.

When the conversation finished, Clint stopped the playback and took off the headphones. He looked thoughtful while Natasha put them back into her bag.

“You're definitely right,” he finally said when she was done. “That was interesting. I gotta say, something that's potentially a bigger threat than Hydra doesn't sound good. Also, can't say I've ever heard of the military using the acronym SGC... could stand for anything.”

She nodded. “Same as IOA.”

“International something something, or maybe Internal... 'A' cold stand for 'association' or 'administration' maybe?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you know who either of them are?”

“The plaque on the office door said Leutenent General Jack O'Neill.”

“And this Daniel guy?”

“We have just under a week to figure it out.”

Clint's eyebrows rose. “Does this mean we're going to New York?”

“Unless you have something better to do?”

“Nope.”

“Mac says everything's working fine as far as he can see, and Trip has swept it for every type of surveillance devices they could think of and then some,” May continued.

Coulson nodded thoughtfully. “And Skye tells me it's clear of any sort of radio signals.”

“Which means...?” May raised an eyebrow at him.

The corners of Coulson's mouth twitched slightly. “Which means we have ourselves a quinjet.”

“But at what cost?”
Coulson took a deep breath, his face sliding back into its habitual neutral expression. “At a cost the agents involved were willing to pay. That all of us are willing to pay.”

“Was it worth it?”

“Yes. Or rather, we'll have to make it worth it. That's our job now; to make sure that every person who sacrifices their lives... any part of themselves for SHIELD doesn't die in vain.”

May nodded, her posture relaxing slightly even as her expression stayed just as severe. “I had to ask.”

Coulson nodded. “I know. You wouldn't be much of a second if you didn't.” He took a deep breath and adjusted his tie. “Well, shall we go take a look at what Skye has for us?”

May inclined her head and stepped aside. “After you,” she said with a slight smirk.

Downstairs in the main room, they found Skye sitting crosslegged on top of the large conference table, furiously typing. She looked up when she heard them coming down the stairs and smiled. The others were sprawled around the room in various states of relaxation, Lance and Mac with their usual beers in hand. Coulson nearly rolled his eyes at their poorly-hidden attempts to appear uninterested in Skye's report.

“Heya boss man, that didn't take you nearly as long as I thought it would,” Skye called to him.

“Does that mean you're not ready to present your findings?” he asked.

“Wouldn't have called you if I wasn't.”

“Good, then what do you have?”

Skye bit her lip and hesitated for a moment. “Okay, so before I start I should probably mention that I'm not actually sure what I've found. Suspicious, super-secretive: yes, definitely. Evil and affiliated with Hydra: maybe, maybe not.”

“Why don't you start from the beginning, Skye,” May prompted her.

“And the rest of you might as well stop pretending you're not listening to every word and pull up closer,” said Coulson.

Skye waited for the others to come in closer before bringing her research up onto the projector.

“Okay, so as you all know I've been scouring any and all military communications, databases, reports, etcetera for any evidence of Hydra activity. Well, I came across a couple of references for something called Project Blue Book, which you know, sounds totally innocuous.”

“Which means it's probably anything but,” Lance added.

Skye's lips quirked. “Exactly. Anyway, I did some digging and saw it referred to in a few other places – sometimes also called the SGC. And this is where this whole thing gets really weird and confusing.” She brought up a few other files, opened the reports for them to see. “Because the more I read about this project, the less I understand. It's almost like it's written in code and you need a cipher or maybe a legend to understand it. Like here–” She highlighted a section of the text. “-it's referring to something called 'naquadah'. I have no idea what that is. A few of the reports mention mines so I guess that means it's a mineral or a metal or rock or something-.”
“Could be a code word for 'diamond' or 'gold,'” May suggested.

Skye nodded. “That's sort of what I'm thinking. And that's one example. A lot of the reports are like that. Or here they're talking about the 'people from the Land of Light', also referred to as P3X-797.”

“I see what you mean,” said Coulson, his eyes skimming what he could see of the reports on the projection screen. “It's like they're written specifically for people who know what's going on. Or who possess the cipher to decode it with. There were a few operations SHIELD handled that way.”

“Really?” Trip asked.

Coulson smiled thinly. “There weren't many, but some yes. It's useful for misdirecting people who go snooping where they shouldn't.”

“Yeah, well, as the person doing the snooping here, it's damn frustrating,” said Skye. “Anyway, I decided to try it from a different angle and from what I've managed to figure out, whatever this Project Blue Book is, it's got ties to Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado Springs.”

May raised an eyebrow in surprise. “The air force base?”

“NORAD?” Trip said at almost the same time. “This is affiliated with NORAD?!”

Skye paused. “Uh, same complex as NORAD, but I didn't find any evidence to suggest they were in any way connected other than sharing space.”

“I think there was supposed to be an old missile silo underneath NORAD,” said Coulson thoughtfully. “They could be using that space for the project.”

“That... would make a lot of sense actually,” said Skye. “Cause this Project Blue Book/SGC thing? It gets weirder.”

“Great,” said Lance. “I just love it when the weird things get weirder.”

Skye brought up a few more reports. “I hacked my way in through government channels and found a few funding reports.” She brought them up. “Whatever's going on down there has been eating money; like huge chunks of the military and Department of Defense's budget has been going towards this thing.”

Trip whistled in awe. “Jesus, girl, this thing's gotta be big for the government to pour that much money into it. What is this, research? Weapon's development?”

“I have no idea, but the number of civilians associated with it is ridiculous – and super random. I found a list of people from medical experts and biologists to physicists, engineers and even a whole bunch of archaeologists and linguists. Also, oddly enough, a handful of diplomats.”

Coulson blinked. “That is an odd mixture. Any clues at all what they're doing down there?”

Skye shook her head. “They're building or developing something that's for sure. Something that's taking a lot of power. Here, check out the power drain from this place.”

“Well, it definitely looks like something that deserves a closer look,” said May carefully. “Skye, do you have a possible in for us?”

Skye grinned. “Now that is a question I can answer.” She closed the document windows on the
projector and replaced them with a personal file, complete with ID photo. “Meet Doctor Daniel Jackson, double PhD in archaeology and linguistics and civilian consultant with the SGC. Was hired on to the project eleven years ago and has been with it ever since with three note-worthy gaps in his record.”

“Gaps?” Colson asked. “What sort of gaps?”

Skye's grin widened. “He was dead.”

“He was dead,” Colson dead-panned back at her.

“Say what?” said Trip. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” said Skye. “According to his record, Doctor Jackson has been declared dead not once, not twice, but three times.”

“Guess you're not so special anymore, Director Coulson,” Lance drawled.

“I suppose not,” said Coulson with a thoughtful frown. “I know everyone jokes about so-called 'military intelligence', but that's a bit much.”

“That's what I thought,” Skye agreed. She winced slightly. “Unfortunately his file is heavily redacted and really well protected. I had to pull back when I realized I was about to get caught in a tracer program, so I don't really have any details... But, I thought I recognized the name, so I did a basic google search.”

Skye's fingers flew over the keyboard and a few seconds later the projection screen showed a webpage. It was simple, obviously put together by an amateur. May's eyebrows raised at it in surprise. Coulson blinked.

“He's a conspiracy theorist?” he asked.

Skye shook her head. “Not him personally, but his work is used by conspiracy theorists. As far as I can tell he doesn't personally have anything to do with any of the sites I found and only a few had any relevant information about him – I think, like, maybe one or two had made the top-secret government job connection. In his Phd thesis he theorized that Egyptian culture was actually a lot older than we think. Also, he talked about, uh-” She consulted her notes. “cross-culture pollination and how disparate cultures that never would've had any contact nonetheless developed similarities. He doesn't actually mention aliens himself, but the consensus is that it would've been the next step in his thought process. He got laughed out of the archaeological community for it and hasn't published anything since.”

“That we know of,” Coulson added.

Skye paused. “Right, sure, that we know of.”

“Disenfranchised, with crazy theories and a knowledge of languages and ancient myths...” Trip began. “He sure sounds like the kinda guy Hydra would be looking to recruit.”

Coulson looked to Skye. Skye nodded to the room at large. “Yeah, on paper he looks like the perfect candidate for Hydra... except for one huge blip. Remember that thing with the Hulk a few months ago? The one where Ross got demoted and the Hulkbusters disbanded because he fired on a civilian target and didn't give a shit?”

Everyone nodded.
“That was Jackson?” May asked.

“That was Jackson. I mean, could he be just pissed that his friend's adopted daughter nearly got killed, but tactically it would've been a really bad move on Hydra's part.”

“Agreed,” said Coulson. “Hulk on the run keeps at least one of the Avengers out of the picture. According to a source of mine, Bruce Banner is now back living in Stark Tower.”

“So, other than making our heads explode, is there a reason we're learning about this Jackson guy?” Lance asked.

“I'm not sure that breaking into Cheyenne Mountain is really all that feasible at the moment,” said Coulson.

Skye smiled brightly. “Well then it's a good thing he's not in Colorado Springs right now. According to his credit card statement, he's in Washington this week.”

“It'll be risky,” said Coulson thoughtfully. “He had some pretty heavy-hitting political allies in his case against Ross. I'm not sure I want to stir that hornet's nest just yet.”

“You've got something more, don't you?” May asked Skye.


“Why Friday?” asked Coulson.

“It's the anniversary of his parents' death. He's going to be in either one of two places: the cemetery where they're buried, or the museum where they died.”

Sam paused in front of the guest room and went over what he wanted to say once more in his head. He felt slightly ridiculous bracing himself as if for battle when the closest thing to a weapon he had were the hot rum toddies his mom had made, and the person he was about to face was a close friend. But only slightly ridiculous, because said friend was Steve Rogers, Captain America himself. And Steve Rogers was one stubborn son-of-a-bitch.

“Hey,” he said when he walked into the room.

Steve turned away from the window (not exactly a hardship, since the neighbour's yard didn't exactly make for picturesque viewing unless you were into scrap-pile chic) and smiled at the mugs Sam was holding. He shook his head.

“Your mother is an amazing woman,” he said.

“Yeah, well, in case you haven't noticed she's pretty much adopted you,” Sam drawled as he handed him one of the mugs, snickering at the way Steve's ears turned pink in embarrassment.

Steve tried to hide a pleased little smile by taking a drink of his hot toddy, but Sam saw it anyway. He grinned. Then cleared his throat.

“Speaking of my mom, she's worried about you.” It was cowardly, but Sam wasn't above using
slightly under-handed methods if it meant ensuring the well-being of his friends. Besides, it wasn't completely false.

Steve frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you've been pushing yourself too hard. You need to take a break, man.”

And, yup, there it was: that flash of stubborn pride. “I'm fine,” came the clipped reply.

“Yeah, you're really not. Look, I get that you really want to find Bucky, I do. But we've looked through every damn city, town and hamlet between Washington and New York and spent the last two weeks scouring Brooklyn in case he wanted to find something he recognized. And we've got nothing. We don't even know that we're on the right side of the Canadian boarder or that the Winter Soldier got enough of his memories back to remember Brooklyn as home. Hell, for all we know, he had an extraction plan that somehow didn't fall through and he's now back in Russia or something!”

Steve's eyes flashed with pain, his lips turning downwards unhappily. “Sam, if this is-”

Sam raised a palm out to stop him. “I'm not saying we should stop. I told you I'd go wherever you did and I meant it. I'm not abandoning your mission anymore than you are. Just... I'm just suggesting a break.”

Steve opened his mouth to protest.

“One day,” Sam cut him off again. “That's all I'm saying. Let's take one day to relax, clear our heads, recharge and then plan our attack from there.”

Steve didn't look thrilled about the idea, but at least he'd stopped protesting. For the moment.

Deciding to press his advantage while he could, Sam pulled the leaflet he'd found sitting on top of the newspaper pile in the livingroom out of his back pocket and showed it to Steve.

“Look, the Met's got a special exhibition on right now featuring art of the Ancient World or something. Apparently they're celebrating the fifty year anniversary of the crown jewel of their Egyptian collection. You like art, right?”

Steve reluctantly took the pamphlet from Sam. “I was an art student before the war,” he agreed as he looked it over.

Sam fought to keep the triumphant grin off his face. “So what do you say? Tomorrow's Friday. We take the day off, meander around the Met, maybe catch a movie or go to the zoo or whatever we feel like afterwards and then we can spend the weekend figuring out a plan. Or however long it takes us.”

He watched Steve hesitate, obviously tempted, but possibly feeling guilty about it.

“Sometimes stepping away from a problem for a short time and coming back to it with fresh eyes makes it easier to see the solution,” he said. “Besides, my mom won't worry as much if she thinks you're taking care of yourself and taking a break when you need it.”

Steve rolled his eyes and shot Sam an unamused look. “Sam, you and I both know you're just shamelessly using your mom to get me to say 'yes' to this.”

Sam shrugged. “Is it working?”
Steve watched him for a few moments and then finally huffed in a mixture of amusement and frustration. “Yes, alright, fine, let's go to the museum tomorrow.”

Sam grinned. “Good, then I haven't used my mom's name in vain after all.”

Steve smiled and Sam couldn't help but notice how much more relaxed he looked already as he took another sip of his hot toddy.

Daniel stood on the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue and stared at the long stairway that led to the imposing stone building of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It wasn't like he hadn't visited the museum since his parents' death, but he'd always managed to avoid most of the Egyptian wing (it often involved 'getting lost' or quietly wandering away from the school group he was with). Just knowing that was his main destination today made his palms sweat and the building before him tower in a way that had his mind flashing back to memories of Ra's hat'ak.

He snorted softly to himself. He was being ridiculous, he knew he was.

He squeezed the cellphone in his pocket. It had Cassie's message on it, the one telling him that she was running about half an hour late, and his reply, saying he'd wait for her inside.

Well, he'd have to walk up those stairs first.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he squared his shoulders, pictured himself wearing his kevlar vest and combat boots, and marched up the stairs. The stairs were longer than the ramp at the SGC, but it wasn't like the doors at the end literally led to another world. It was just a building, after all.

And the ghosts that haunted it only existed in his own mind.
Act I, pt ii

Chapter Notes

Yes, I know, it's not Friday. Sorry, I apparently underestimated just how long it would take me to edit this chapter... I have a feeling I may have been half-asleep while writing parts of it. Anyway, hopefully it was worth the wait. Part 3 will definitely be up tomorrow. In the meantime, thank you so much for all the comments and kudos on part 1. :)

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WEAVING

Natasha had waited for her mark on the staircase leading to the museum. She’d dyed her hair back to its customary red, but added a pair of large black plastic hipster glasses. With brown boots, pale-wash skinny jeans, a white lace tunic top and fitted tweed blazer, she was just another arts student as she sat on the steps reading a large tome about unveiling the mysteries of the pharaohs.

The book was a last-minute touch, because Doctor Daniel Jackson was an Egyptologist and she might need an excuse to create conversation.

The last several chapters had also been hollowed out and contained a small handgun.

She saw him approach the museum with obvious unease – having guessed why he was here, that hardly surprised her. She also saw him check his phone and hesitate, before squaring his shoulders as though preparing for battle and marching up the staircase. To his credit, once he'd forced himself to move he didn't slow until he disappeared into the building.

Casually, she checked her watch and then closed the tome she'd been pretending to read. She reached up to 'adjust' her glasses.

“This is Widow,” she whispered. “Target spotted, I'm going in.”

“Roger that, Widow,” came the faint reply.

She noticed him in line to pay for admission and walked on, having purchased hers online the night before. Grabbing a pamphlet, she showed her ticket to the attendant and headed straight for the Egyptian art wing. She quickly found an intricate mural by the entrance she could pretend to be fascinated with.

Her eyes darted to the side every few seconds, towards the exhibit's entrance. Natasha waited.

A little less than ten minutes later, Daniel Jackson finally walked into the wing and paused. She noticed his adam's apple move as he swallowed heavily. Just like on the steps, saw him steel himself, as though this was the most difficult journey he would ever make. And for all she knew, perhaps it was.

Unlike on the steps, he didn't rush through the wing, but rather took his time perusing the artwork,
examining the artifacts (and frowning at a few of the description cards). He was enjoying himself, she realized after a while. Or forcing himself to, at any rate; his movements were just a little too stiff, his eyes just a little too preoccupied with not looking ahead. His curiosity, his fascination, however, looked genuine.

Natasha followed him carefully, his leisurely pace allowing her to appear to be casually examining the displays. Her plan was to eventually draw him into conversation – she would get a read on him and adapt her plan from there. She already knew he was unhappy with his current job, and today he would be even more emotionally vulnerable. It was perfect timing. However, he'd also been the recipient of several civil service awards both from the Department of Defence, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the President himself. And he received hazard pay in addition to earning a paycheque equivalent to the military's most high-profile civilian scientists.

Natasha knew she needed to be careful not to underestimate him.

Doctor Jackson moved around someone already standing and staring with a puzzled sort of expression in front of a glass case containing an ornate sceptre. Natasha blinked, startled momentarily at the familiar face. She pursed her lips in annoyance and walked a little less casually towards him.

“Sam, what are you doing here?” she said, noting that, to his credit, he only jumped slightly.

Wide-eyed, Sam Wilson blinked down at her in surprise. “Jesus, Natasha, I could ask you the same thing. At least I was just minding my own business instead of sneaking up on people.”

Natasha smirked. “I'm following a lead,” she said. “Is Steve here?”

“Yeah, yeah, he's here somewhere,” said Sam, waving his hand vaguely towards somewhere behind him. “And you had better not be telling me you're here because you're expecting trouble, 'cause let me tell you, it was not easy for me to convince him to take a day off. I even had to use my mother as blackmail material and if she ever finds out I did that, then she will not be happy.”

He paused, considered.

“Actually, nevermind, she might be really happy. She freaking loves Steve.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. “You took Steve to meet your mother?”

He rolled his eyes. “You're hilarious. Seriously though, she is the sweetest most wonderful person in the world and she would fucking murder me if she found out I was in New York and staying in a hotel. Like, there would be blood and guts and possibly even tar and feathers.”

“She sounds lovely,” Natasha chuckled. Then she grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the sceptre. “Walk with me, you can be my cover.”

Sam allowed her to pull him away. “Hydra at the Met, though? Seriously?”

“Not sure if he's Hydra... In fact, I'm mostly convinced he's not. Just someone we believe deserves a closer look.”

“Aah. So who is he?”

“A high-ranking civilian consultant who works at Cheyenne Mountain.”

“Oh? I've heard rumours about that place.”
“Really?”

“Yep. Like weird, freaky science experiment rumours. Knew a guy who'd been stationed there as a guard for a few months. He didn't really know anything specific, but man did he have some bizarre stories to tell.”

“Hmm.”

They rounded the corner and Natasha froze, cursing under her breath. Because there was Steve Rogers. Talking to Doctor Daniel Jackson. Wonderful.

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The moment Steve had walked into the museum, he'd found himself relaxing, his eyes widening in awe at the grandeur of the large stone building. He remembered coming here as a child for the first time with his mother – it had been his birthday present when he'd turned eleven, no, twelve. And just like then, it was like stepping into another world. A world where the present didn't matter, where the only thing that mattered was the past.

Steve had always loved to draw, but this was where he'd fallen in love with art.

He should have done this sooner, he realized as he and Sam meandered their way through the Egyptian art exhibit, going in no particular direction. Hydra, the twenty-first century, SHIELD, they had no place within these walls. Even now, Steve often felt like a relic as he stumbled his way through this world he wasn't sure he would ever be comfortable in. But here, here there were true relics. The people who'd crafted the artwork he saw before him had long turned to dust, their names faded from existence even as their creations endured.

Would his shield have a place in this museum one day? A thousand years from now, would hundreds of people look at it, admire it for its beautiful yet simple design. Would they read the tiny display card that told them it had once been created by Howard Stark for the man that was known as Captain America? Would they even bother putting the name Steve Rogers on the card?

Oddly enough, he found it comforting to think of himself as just a part of history when faced with evidence of just how vast that history was. He was nothing more than flotsam bobbing upon the surface of the flowing river. Flotsam with a shield.

He hadn't really noticed when he'd wandered away from Sam. One moment he'd simply turned around to point out something about the chariot on display and realized his friend wasn't beside him. He blinked and looked around, but Sam was nowhere in sight.

Steve shrugged to himself. They'd run into each other again eventually.

It was then that he noticed the man standing at the entrance to a large exhibit across from him. He was just standing in the doorway, steadying himself with one hand clutching the corner of the wall, and trembling as he stared ahead into the room. Though completely out of place, Steve recognized that stance, could almost hear the man's madly-beating heart and, as he got closer, could definitely hear his quiet, too-quick breaths.

Steve placed a gentle hand on the man's shoulder. “Sir?” he asked quietly, careful not to spook him. “Are you alright?”
The man startled anyway, his muscles tensing, his weight automatically shifting slightly forward, ready to defend himself or run. Battle-ready. Was this man a soldier?

Steve took his hand off the man's shoulder and held both his hands palms out to show he was unarmed and didn't mean any harm. The other man was tall, though not as tall as Steve, and muscular beneath the grey button-up shirt he was wearing. Blue eyes blinked up at him warily from behind simple, wire-rim glasses as the man assessed his situation, reminded himself where he was and what was real.

Steve smiled at him and waited patiently for him to push away the images, memories, he'd been trapped in. Finally, the man closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose as he took several deep breath.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I just got caught up there – I thought I could do it alone.” He chuckled bitterly and opened his eyes. The pain in them was old, haunting. “Thank you. I'm fine now.”

He wasn’t. “Are you sure?” Steve asked softly. “I know what it's like to see horrible things when I close my eyes.”

The man's eyes shifted to Steve, suddenly sharp, focused and intelligent as they took him in for probably the first time.

“You're a soldier,” he finally said.

Steve shrugged. “I was in the army.”

The man nodded and looked away, towards the room he'd been standing in front of. “I know that feeling too, but this... this is different.”

“Uncle Daniel!”

Both men startled at the sudden voice that broke the silence of the exhibit. Steve looked up to see a young blonde woman with a giant hiking backpack hurrying towards them, ignoring the disapproving looks cast towards her for breaking the sacred silence of the museum. She stalked up to the man Steve had been speaking to and glared at him.

“I was only running a little late because of the airport buses,” she said. “I told you to wait for me.”

“Sorry, Cassie, I just thought that maybe... I mean, it's been so long.” He sighed. “I didn't think it would hit me so hard.”

The woman's eyes softened. “You don't have to do it alone, Uncle Daniel. That's why I'm here.”

She stepped forward and embraced him. And after a moment's hesitation, the man – Daniel – hugged her back. Looking over his shoulder, the woman caught Steve's eye and mouthed 'thank you' to him. Steve smiled and nodded before stepping back, understanding he was no longer needed.

He turned back to the chariot display and blinked at an amused-looking Sam. And standing next to him... Natasha? Steve nodded a greeting to her.

“So, what was that about?” Sam asked him when he'd made his way over to them.

Steve shrugged. “I'm not entirely sure,” he replied. “I noticed the guy standing there. Seemed like he was nearly hyperventilating, so I went over to see if I could help.”
Sam's eyebrows rose. “PTSD? Weird place to get flashbacks, but it's not like those ever play by any rules.”

“His parents died in that room,” said Natasha in the same tone of voice she'd use for the weather forecast. Steve and Sam both looked to her with wide eyes. She looked back evenly. “Crushed to death when one of the stones of the archway they were assembling for the exhibit fell on top of them. He saw it happen.”

“Fuck,” said Sam quietly.

Steve silently agreed with his sentiment and, even though he would never be able to swear out loud in mixed company the way most of his new friends did, he thought Sam summed it up quite nicely. He turned and glanced to where the young woman was talking to Daniel softly. She held her hand out to him with a smile and Steve breathed a sign of relief when Daniel smiled back and took it.

They walked into the room together.

“So how exactly do you know about random guy's parents?” he heard Sam ask Natasha.

Steve turned back and raised an eyebrow at her. “Is he why you're here?” he asked her. “Not that it isn't great to see you again, but I didn't think the Met was where you'd spend your downtime.”

The corners of Natasha's lips quirked. “He caught my attention. Doctor Daniel Jackson, archaeologist, linguist, Egyptologist and civilian consultant for the air force, stationed at Cheyenne Mountain. Fairly high profile too, with extremely good relations with both the Russian and Chinese governments – or their representatives in any case.”

Steve froze, the worries and tension that had evaporated the moment he'd stepped into the museum returning to him in a wave that threatened him with dizziness.

“You think he's Hydra?”

Natasha pursed her lips for a long moment before answering. “No. No, I don't think he's Hydra. But I do think he's involved in something that merits investigating.”

He let out the breath he was holding. He nodded. “Okay, well then let's go take a look.”

Skye's plan hitched on the theory that museum security wasn't too clever and wouldn't care about one person hanging out all day. The same two people hanging out in one exhibit room for hours on end would get noticed quickly, so she and Trip had decided to split up. Trip was wandering around the museum, while she had sat herself down in the corner of the room with her laptop. As her cover – and to pass the time – she was creating a three-dimensional graphic design of the arch in front of her and using some of the drawing around her to build a CGI model. Not that she entirely knew how to do more than a rudimentary design, but if anyone asked she was a film studies student using the exhibit as inspiration for a project.

It was as good of a cover as any and pretending to be a history or archaeology student would last about the three seconds it took for someone to realize she knew absolutely nothing about Ancient Egyptians except that they'd built pyramids. And a Sphinx.
When she saw Doctor Jackson enter the room, she immediately texted Trip. Then Coulson, who was with May staking out the cemetery.

She looked back up and realized he wasn't alone. Damn, that wasn't part of the plan. They'd hoped to grab him on his way out of either the museum or cemetery. The blonde girl with him was holding his hand and talking to him quietly, engaging him in conversation. It really should have occurred to them that he'd bring someone for moral support. Slowly, steadily they made their way across the room, not paying attention to anything else.

A few minutes later another group of people walked in. Skye felt the difference immediately. Their gaits were casual, but she couldn't help but notice the way each of them scanned the room when they entered. Their gazes didn't linger on anything, but she knew they had to have seen her. She looked back to her laptop and pretended to bury herself back into her work. Those three did not give her a good feeling. The big blond and the dark-skinned man moved like soldiers, like SHIELD agents. The smaller redhead... Skye could swear she felt her eyes watching her even though she wasn't even looking in her direction.

She didn't dare look up again until she heard footsteps coming towards her and felt a warm body settle next to her on the ground. Trip smiled and gave her a little wave.

“What's up, girlfriend?” he said. “How's that project coming?”

“I seem to have hit a snag,” she said.

“Okay, let me see.” He leaned over to look at her laptop screen, close enough that they could whisper without being overheard.

Skye brought up a blank notepad on screen. ’He's not alone’ she typed.

Trip's eyes darted upwards, pretending to examine the arch, but taking in the people standing in front of it at the same time. Skye glanced up just as the big blond man walked up to Jackson and his friend.

“Shit,” she heard Trip whisper quietly. He spoke so quietly that even right next to him she had to strain to hear the words. “We've got bigger problems. Not a hundred percent sure about the others, but that big blond is definitely Steve Rogers.”

Skye's head snapped to Trip. “What?” she whispered, forgetting her cover for a second. Cursing inwardly, she looked back to her laptop. She typed: ‘What's Captain America doing at the met?’

Trip shrugged and then pulled away from her and got his phone out. This changed things.

Daniel stared at the arch. It was made of stone, ordinary stone. Thousand-year-old stone, yes, but still just stone. The museum lights illuminated it, allowing the faint, weather-worn carvings to be seen clearly, but it still just ordinary stone. It wasn't as tall as he remembered it, but then he'd been eight the last time he'd seen it. No, that wasn't true, the Gamekeeper had shown it to him on repeat when he'd been much older than that.

These simple stones were the cause of so much grief. In his memories, they'd always loomed menacingly. But now they were just simple stones.

His throat seized up, words of thanks buried within the jumble of emotions he felt: sadness, relief,
appreciation for their simple beauty. He squeezed Cassie's hand instead and she squeezed back. Looking at the arch now, he could see it for what it was and it was beautiful. The pyramids told the story of the pharaohs, and of a people who worshipped their leaders as deities. This arch, however, told a much simpler story, the story of a forgotten town and their much-beloved city-god, whose temple the arch was from.

He felt movement to his right as someone came to stand beside him.

“That's impressive-looking,” a voice said quietly and Daniel recognized it as the blond soldier's. “What is it?”

It took Daniel a few moments, but he somehow found his voice.

“It's the entrance arch from a temple,” said Daniel. “Dated to about the sixteenth century BC, it's the last remaining evidence of an Ancient Egyptian town. In fact the only reason it was found was because it's made of limestone. The rest of the town had probably been made of traditional mudbrick, which had been destroyed over time by the elements, crumbled to dust and then buried by sandstorms. It was an incredible find. This was the only complete part of the temple that remained, the rest of it was broken up and in ruins, although enough of the structure remained to determine what it had once been.”

He remembered his parent's excitement. Remembered his father lifting his mother into the air and spinning her, both their faces lit up with delight and laughter. And then their more quiet excitement as they'd taken him by the hand and shown him what they'd found, patiently explained what these giant rocks really were, what they meant. Until he'd understood even with his child's mind that these rocks weren't just rocks, that they were a portal into another time, practically another world.

Daniel found himself smiling. He'd forgotten that.

“I wonder what it says on the sides,” someone else said.

Daniel blinked and took a step forward, leaning over to get a better look at the hieroglyphs carved into the temple arch.

“Home of the great – no, glorious – Ra, beloved protector. May he ride in eternal glory.”

There was a pause and then, “Woah, you can read that?!”

Daniel looked over at short-haired African-American man standing next to the blond. He, too, looked very much like a soldier. Daniel shrugged. “I'm an Egyptologist.”

Next to him, a petite redhead frowned at the display card. “That's not what it says here,” she said.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Don't tell me, they translated it as 'May he live forever', didn't they? Probably used Budge too.”

Beside him, Cassie giggled. “You and Budge: what do you have against the poor man?”

“He's a hack! Doesn't know the first thing about language and then he tries to translate something as complex as hieroglyphs and gets half of it completely wrong, prompting the rest of the archaeological community to create erroneous translations for years!”

Cassie's giggles dissolved into quiet laughter. “I'm sure he did the best he could, Uncle Daniel,” she said. “He just wasn't the genius you are.”
“I’ve worked with a few geniuses in my time,” the blond man said with a chuckle. “And it seems to me that they never understand why everyone else doesn’t see things the way they do, not realizing that they’re geniuses precisely because they see the world differently.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow at him and the blond man chuckled, his eyes filled with amusement. He held a hand out to Daniel.

“I’m Steve,” he said and then pointed behind him. “And my friends, Sam and Natasha.”

Daniel smiled back. “Daniel,” he said shaking his hand. “And this is my niece, Cassandra.”

Cassie mock-glared at him and then turned to the blond with a bright smile. “Call me Cassie.”

“Nice to meet you, miss.”

The museum shook.

“Oh my god, what was that?” asked Cassie, her eyes wide. “Earthquake?”

“Doesn’t feel like one,” Daniel answered automatically, already moving out of the room.

He knew the others were following him. Well, it was likely second-nature to the soldiers. Out in the main corridor of the Egyptian art exhibition, people were silent, looking around uncertainly.

The second time the museum shook, they heard the accompanying explosion. Steve and his friends raced past him towards the front of the museum. People around him screamed and began to rush out.

“Everyone calm down!” he yelled, his voice loud and filled with all the military authority he’d learnt from Jack. It stopped most of them in their tracks. “This building is made of solid stone, it’s sturdy and it’s like a maze. No matter what's going on out there, this is the safest place for you to be. Understand?”

He looked around, watching as pure panic calmed in most of their eyes and logic won. In the far corner he saw a Chinese family whispering amongst themselves, their expressions panicked. He walked over to them and smiled, bowed slightly and then repeated what he'd just said in Mandarin. Their faces brightened instantly and they bowed back, thanking him. He noticed some people moving further into the museum and urged the family to follow them.

He turned to Cassie. “Stay here,” he told her.

She crossed her arms and gave her an unamused, unimpressed look that was so purely Janet it made his heart pang. “Yeah, not happening,” she said.

“Cassie--”

“--Just go, I'll be right behind you.”

Deciding he didn't have time to argue a lost cause, Daniel turned and rushed towards the front, crouching beside the exit and carefully looking around the corner. Inside the vast entrance hall, he saw about a dozen burly men dressed in bright blue armour that looked like it had been designed by someone who'd tried to fuse medieval knights together with traditional Japanese ninjas, but didn't really know much about either.

Then again, the P-90s weren't exactly historically accurate either, so maybe that wasn't the point.
The sound of gunshots and shouting echoed within the cavernous space, creating a deafening din. There was a loud crash followed by a chorus of screams as the glass in the ticket booths shattered and crashed to the ground. Daniel scanned the area, taking in every detail. He caught a glimpse of civilians cowering behind statues and pillars. A white-haired woman lay motionless on the ground, her cane haphazardly thrown mere inches away from her outstretched hand and, though he couldn't see her wounds, he saw the blood that was gradually spreading along the marble tiles.

He also saw Steve, Sam and Natasha. Sam had somehow managed to get hold of a handgun and was firing into the fray from behind an overturned table. Natasha and Steve, on the other hand, seemed to have just jumped in. He watched them for a few moments, mesmerized by the fluidity of their movements. Steve's movements reminded him of Teal'c: raw power controlled, tamed by a force of will that could cut through the fiercest opponents. Natasha was a whirlwind of motion as she twisted herself like a deadly acrobat, taking down her opponents using all four limbs and a taser weapon attached to her wrists.

If not for the steady stream of ridiculously-dressed thugs, they would've likely taken care of the situation within minutes.

Daniel took a deep breath and assessed the situation. He was unarmed and Steve, Sam and Natasha clearly didn't need his help. But they couldn't go on forever. Eventually, one of the thugs might get lucky. But if he broke position to run in to help, he'd have to run across quite a bit of uncovered ground with no Kevlar vest.

What would Jack do, he wondered? Or Teal'c for that matter...

Look for any advantage, the element of surprise. But how could he surprise armoured thugs that were armed to the teeth? First of all, he needed a weapon. The archaeologist in him cried out in horror at the mere thought of using one of the many weapons on display throughout the museum. It would be sacrilege! And yet the past wasn't worth more than present human lives.

He would still have to somehow lay an ambush and... wait.

Daniel cursed his own absent-mindedness. Hadn't he just told all those people that the museum was like a maze?

Daniel patted himself down until he'd found the small visitor's map he'd grabbed absent-mindedly from beside the ticket booth and unfolded it. It took him about thirty seconds to figure out his best path. He backed away from the lobby and then turned and ran back the way he'd come.

“Uncle Daniel, what are you doing?” Cassie asked as she ran after him.

“Going around to cut them off at the antiquities exhibit,” he answered. “Steve, Sam and Natasha are amazing, but they won't be able to hold that lobby on their own for much longer. Those blue ninja knight guys had a clear path to the Egyptian wing, but didn't take it, which means whatever they're here for isn't in there.”

“Oh god, this is one of those infamous Daniel Jackson plans I keep hearing about, isn't it?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Don't worry, I'm not going to try talking them out of it until I can do it at gunpoint.”

“Good.”

They ran around corners, down corridors that hadn't seen sprinters in a very long time – if ever. At one point, Daniel realized there were more footsteps following him than just Cassie's and he turned
to see two more people behind them: a dark-skinned man and a long-haired young woman. They weren't in hideous blue costumes, though, so he dismissed them as people who wanted to help.

As they approached the antiquities wing, he slowed down, pausing at every bend to listen for the clang of armour (he really hoped no one ever invented silent armour). It wasn't until they were facing a beautifully preserved statue of Athena that he finally heard anything. Bringing a hand up, he motioned for the people following him to stop and crouch down. Straining his ears, he could hear heavy bootfalls coming closer and – sure enough – the familiar clang of armour, albeit a bit less metallic than Jaffa armour Did they make it out of plastic?

“Daniel?” Cassie whispered behind him. “Shouldn't you be calling the SGC?”

Daniel shrugged. Yeah, he probably should have, but it was too late now. He'd deal with Jack's fit later.

“No time,” he said, looking back to meet Cassie's eyes. She was gritting her teeth, her face pale, but determined. Then he looked past her to where the two who'd followed them were crouching down and also waiting. They met his eyes evenly and he couldn't help but be impressed by their calm – he wondered if maybe this wasn't the first time they'd done something like this.

He nodded to them. They nodded back.

Then he turned and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, bracing himself as the footsteps came closer. As soon as Daniel saw the tip of gun, he was in motion. He grabbed the barrel of the gun in his left hand and threw a punch with his right. The blue-clad ninja-knight stepped backwards to avoid the hit. Daniel still managed to clip him on the jaw, which threw him off-balance enough for Daniel to step in, discover the plastic-looking armour had some good hand-holds, and flip the man onto his back while wrenching the gun out of his hand. As the man fell, Daniel used the momentum to spin around towards the two ninja-knights further down the corridor.

The gun was already armed. He shouldered it and fired. First shot: the ninja-knight on the right went down with a scream of pain. Second shot: the ninja-knight ducked down at the last moment and the bullet hit the wall harmlessly.

He didn't take a third, instead diving out of the way as the man he hadn't hit emptied his clip at him. Daniel scrambled until he was safely behind the bend. The man he'd gotten his gun from was sprawled out not far from them; he was breathing, but unconscious. Daniel took a deep breath. When the gunfire stopped, he peeked quickly around the corner.

And found himself staring into the muzzle of a gun. Daniel leaped behind the corner again. The ninja-knight followed after him, but those precious bare inches were all Daniel needed. He shot three bullets into the armoured torso, happy to note that it wasn't bullet-proof – at least not at close range. The man's body jerked as each bullet hit and he staggered backwards before falling heavily into the statue behind him.

“No!” Daniel cried in horror as he watched the white marble Goddess of Wisdom topple over and land on the tile floors with a crash. An arm went flying as pieces broke apart.

Daniel ran forward to see the damage for himself.

And then froze, staring down at the pieces that now remained of the beautiful Athena. He blinked, cocking his head to the side to see if the change in angle would make what he was seeing change.

that something Ancient Romans did?”

“No,” he replied absently. “They didn't have any technology capable of that.”

Actually, he was fairly certain no one in the twenty-first century had the technology capable of creating a hollow marble statue. Not out of real marble in any case.

He handed his gun to the dark-skinned man. “Here, take this,” he said absently before kneeling in front of the shards of statue.

Behind him he heard whispering, but didn't pay any attention. Somewhere in the distance he heard gunfire, but it wasn't coming closer so that was okay. No, not okay, but there was a buzzing in his mind as his thoughts whirled excitedly like a flock of humming birds. This wasn't an archaeological marvel he was staring at: this was an impossibility, something that physically shouldn't have been able to exist.

He carefully picked up one of the larger shards that had been part of Athena's back and ran a hand over it. It certainly felt like marble. He turned it over. The underside was perfectly smooth and so shiny he wondered if it had been perhaps coated with something. He set the piece aside and grabbed another. Moving it revealed a different sort of stone, darker, perfectly smoothed down with straight edges: two tablets of identical shape and size.

Daniel picked the tablets up reverently and stared at them. The letters were perfectly proportioned and cut into the stone with even, precise lines.

“Cassie, do you have any extra room in your backpack?” he finally asked. He looked up, taking note that the woman who'd joined them earlier was now armed with the P-90 from one of the fallen ninja-knights and the dark-skinned man wasn't with them anymore.

Cassie raised an eyebrow at him. “Maybe. Are you seriously planning to steal those from the museum?”

He shrugged. “It's not like they knew they were here. Besides, it'll save me time wading through bureaucracy later.”

She rolled her eyes even as she shrugged the bag off her shoulders.

It had happened so fast, Clint wasn't quite sure where the first of them had come from. One minute he was watching tourists taking pictures of the front of the Met, the next there were dozens of smurf-blue minions in armour running up the steps. There were screams as civilians moved out of their way. Clint caught sight of weapons in their hands and cursed, quickly notching an arrow into his bow.

Armoured smurfs with assault rifles was exactly what this day needed.

He was aiming for the minions at the front when a loud bang echoed from the street below him. Seconds later, part of the facade of one of the side wings exploded, rocking the building. Clint followed the trajectory of strike and found three minions with what looked like modified rocket launchers. The second minion fired.
Clint shifted his aim and fired an arrow into the back of the neck of the third minion. The other two followed seconds later.

The comm in his ear flared to life. “Hawkeye, this is Widow. What's going on out there?”

“Evil armoured smurfs,” Clint replied. “I've taken out the guys with the modified rocket launchers, but you've got about two to three dozen incoming and armed. Are you maintaining cover?”

“Negative. I'm engaging the enemy.”

Clint shifted his aim back to the front of the Met. The doors had been thrown open and a batch of minions had already made their way inside. He aimed and fired into the group at the entrance. He didn't have enough arrows to take them all down, but he could take out enough to help Natasha. He managed two arrows before the minions realized they were under attack. His rooftop perch was hidden enough from the streets by several trees, so he wasn't concerned that they'd be able to spot him too quickly, but he would have to move eventually.

He continued firing arrows, trusting Natasha to hold her own inside.

The armour was a bit tricky, as long as he hit it straight-on, his arrows pierced right through, but if they hit at any sort of angle, they just slid along harmlessly. The need for even more careful aiming than usual was slowing him down and more were getting into the museum than he was happy with.

“Black Widow, what's your situation?” he asked into the comm.

“We've managed to stop most of them in the lobby, but they're starting to break away into the exhibits.”

He smirked. “Bet they weren't expecting the Black Widow,” he said.

“They weren't expecting Captain America either.”

Hawkeye let loose another arrow and then paused, blinked. “Were you expecting Captain America?”

“No. He says 'hi' by the way.”

“Cool.” He noticed movement down below as someone new stepped into view, the armour a darker shade of blue and more elaborate for no visibly practical reason. The parking lot, he suddenly realized: they were coming from the parking lot. Did they take an evil villain tour bus? “Uh, I think I've finally got eyes on evil villain Papa Smurf.”

“Acknowledged. I'm going to take down the minions inside the museum. Steve and Sam are coming out to help with the ones outside.”

“Roger that, Widow. I'll cover them.”

A shrill alarm suddenly went off inside the museum, the thick stone walls muffling much of the noise but not all of it. As he notched another arrow, Clint wondered why someone hadn't done that sooner. And then the doors were thrown open from the inside and the front row of minions fell under an unexpected onslaught of bullets. He caught a glimpse of two, dark-skinned shooters just before a bright blue blur shot out from behind them and plowed into the minion huddle. When it stopped in the middle of the remaining group and started throwing punches, he realized it was Steve Rogers holding what looked like the breastplate off one of the armors.
Hawkeye aimed and fired an arrow at one of the minions unknowingly aiming their weapons at Captain America. The minion went down and he notched another arrow.

A single gunshot sounded from behind him.

Hawkeye whirled around, arrow automatically pointed at the only standing target, but instinct made him pause. Laying on the ground unmoving, was a bright blue armoured figure. But what stayed his movements was the man in a black business suit, white shirt and plain grey tie. And a face that should've been impossible.

The man was holding a handgun, but wasn't pointing it at him. Clint felt himself trembling, his ears suddenly buzzing with white noise and his eyes becoming unfocused even as he could make out every single, familiar feature.

“Hello, Hawkeye,” said Phil Coulson with a slight smile. “It's been a while.”

The alarm was irritating, but she tuned it out as she slunk through the maze that was the museum. Natasha had spent two days studying the floor plans, but hadn't actually expected to need the knowledge like this. Her Widow's Bites were getting quite the work-out as she'd given Sam her gun and submachine guns weren't really her style.

She just hoped they managed to find Daniel Jackson again after this was all over.

Natasha paused at the edge of the next corridor, hearing voices up ahead. A quick peek using a compact purse mirror revealed two more minions. Natasha grinned inwardly and slipped the compact back into the pocket of her pants – she'd lost the blazer at the very beginning of the fight. Silently as only the Black Widow could, Natasha stalked up to the garishly blue minions from behind.

They never heard her coming. At two feet away from them, she brought both arms up and fired a Widow Bite into each of them. From experience she now knew the armour was only semi-conductive, which meant she needed to knock them out the old fashion way. Cutting power to the Bites just before making contact herself, Natasha pounced onto the minion on her left and wrapped her thighs around his neck, using her body weight to pull him off-balance and send them crashing to the ground. Tumbling with the movement, she threw him face-down onto the tile floor and let go, pulling his helmet off with a sharp tug and throwing it at the second minion. It hit the second minion in the head, making him stagger and trip over his own feet, which were already unsteady from the electric shock of the Widow Bites.

A well-placed hit to the back of the head had the minion beneath her stilling and then she was on her feet again. A bullet breezed by her ear and she heard glass shatter as it hit a display case somewhere down the corridor. She dived under a spray of bullets, turning the dive into a forward tumble and nimbly springing to her feet right in front of him. The minion was much too slow to react and she kicked out at his knee with all her strength, feeling the pop through the armour as the joint dislocated.

The minion went down with a scream. Natasha grabbed the gun from his hands as he fell and used the butt of it to knock him out.

After half a moment's hesitation, she decided to keep the gun after all and continued onward. She
passed a room full of large display cases and noticed several people crouching behind them. She caught a glimpse of jeans and a t-shirt and, next to them, the edge of a frilly pink sundress. Good, that meant word had somehow gotten round for non-combatants to hide. She moved on without showing she'd seen them, aware the museum was full of security cameras and she had no idea who was watching them.

Over the continuous blaring of the alarm, Natasha just managed to hear a single gunshot.

She ran quietly but quickly to the next bend, where she flattened herself to the wall and listened. She waited the span of three breaths and then spun around the corner, gun drawn, her mind automatically finding a target. The target was small, female and dressed in black combat attire. SHIELD-issue black combat attire: Natasha would recognize it anywhere. The woman's handgun was aimed at Natasha, her face blank, but eyes widening slightly in recognition.

“May,” said Natasha, voice flat, surprise schooled out of her expression.

“Romanov,” the Asian woman replied with an equally flat tone.

For several moments, neither of them moved, each clearly assessing their opponent and looking for any weaknesses to exploit while trying to figure out whether or not they trusted the other. Just then the Agent Melinda May's eyes slid to the side. With barely a glance, her arm moved to point down another corridor and she fired. There was a cry of pain followed by a thud.

May's eyes turned back to Natasha. “I'm with Coulson,” she said.

Natasha raised an eyebrow at her.

The mastermind behind the attack was easily distinguishable by his even gaudier outfit (although it was at least a better colour) and the elaborate, gold-coloured headpiece that looked like a rather lopsided crown. There were even gemstones. He also had the biggest gun. One size larger than a rocket-launcher, it had a rounded end where several vials of red liquid were visible behind a clear panel. It thankfully wasn't bright blue, but metallic grey

The villain hefted it easily over his shoulder and aimed at the front of the museum. Moments later a thin steam began to waft out of a small opening just above the vial chamber as the weapon hummed to life. The villain grinned, all teeth and maliciousness.

A repulsor blast hit the back end of the weapon and the blue-armoured villain fell to the ground with a scream as the weapon blew apart and the ignited, the flames quickly turning a curious green colour when the vials shattered.

Iron Man hovered above the burning blue armour – or rather the blue armour that curiously didn't seem to be burning at all as fire burned around it.

“JARVIS,” said Tony Stark inside his suit, once he'd determined that the fumes from whatever was burning in the vials wouldn't be dangerous to the EMTs. “Remind me later to grab some of this armour to analyze in the lab.”

“Very good, sir.”
Suddenly dull clangs echoed against the armour Tony rolled his eyes and lifted his arms, palms out towards the three bright blue minions who'd been paying attention and noticed their leader go down. He shot a repulsor blast out of each hand, taking down the first two immediately. The third went down before he'd had a chance to aim.

He blinked at the familiar arrow sticking out of the armour

“Sir, there appears to be someone engaging the combatants on the steps. I believe it might be Steve Rogers.”

Tony looked up the steps in time to watch as a large blond dressed in jeans and holding something so bright blue it could only have been part of the armour the minions were wearing, vault over the iron handrail and kick an armoured minion square in the chest with both legs. The minion staggered back several steps and tripped over another minion, sending both of them tumbling down.

“Huh, I think you're right, JARVIS,” said Tony quietly.

He fired his repulsors and flew above the fight. There were a few minions still trying to fight their way into the museum, but two figures knelt just inside the doorway and steadfastly denied them entry with the minions' own weapons. Bright blue armour littered the steps, some of it completely still and some of it moaning and dragging itself out of the way. Tony activated his external speakers.

“Ehem, attention all bright blue minions – and seriously, what is with that colour? Anyway, your leader is down and my armour is bullet-proof. So, I can just sit here and take potshots at you while Captain America down there beats you into submission... or you can all surrender.”

No more than five seconds passed in silence before the first gun fell to the ground, followed by a rain of clacking as the rest of the minions dropped their weapons and held up their hands in surrender.

“Good choice,” said Iron Man. Then he turned to the police cars waiting along Fifth Avenue. “They're all yours guys.”

Once the police had everything in hand, he landed next to Steve Rogers. The super soldier was looking considerably less than super, leaning heavily on the railing and breathing carefully. The side of his face was blossoming into a pretty impressive-looking bruise and blood ran from what looked like a bullet wound on his left shoulder and a graze along his left side. Blood was also soaking his right thigh, although Tony couldn't see what the wound itself looked like.

Tony lifted his facemask. “So, Rogers, long time no see,” he said. “You've looked better.”

Steve Rogers chuckled tiredly. “I'm sure I have, thanks Stark. And thanks for coming to help.”

“No problem, Cap, anytime.” He paused and looked pointedly at an arrow sticking out of one of the injured minions beside the doors, the back of his mind doggedly echoing the words 'Iron Man yes, Tony Stark no'. “So, was there an assembly invitation or something that I missed?”

Steve Rogers cocked his head. “How did you find out what was going on?”

“ Heard it on the news. Or, well, JARVIS saw it on the news and then turned my music off and showed it to me, which is really the same thing in the end, so whatever. Also, where's your shield?”

Rogers shook his head ruefully. “That was more of an invitation than any of us got. Left my shield
back at Sam's. We were supposed to be taking the day off to relax.”

“Sam? Who's Sam?”

Just then they were interrupted by a paramedic, who insisted on looking at Rogers' injuries.

Tony hung around, keeping a careful eye out in case he was needed – purposefully hovering close to the ambulance tending to Rogers in case he needed to run interference. He'd read any and all files on Captain America he could find in his father's things. Painkillers didn't work on the good captain any more than alcohol did. The bullet wound on his shoulder had an exit wound, but when his jeans were cut away around his thigh to reveal another bullet wound, it was quickly clear that bullet would have to be dug out.

Tony cringed at the thought and looked away, towards the museum. There were EMTs anxiously waiting just outside the doors to be given the all-clear to enter. He knew a few had already gone inside to take care of the injured in the museum's lobby. There was a quiet huddle of civilians with thin grey blankets standing at the bottom of the steps, being looked over by paramedics.

Suddenly, two paramedics burst out of the front doors with a stretcher. They ran down the stairs and bee-lined it to the ambulance next to Steve's. They moved with practised efficiency, not a single move wasted as they loaded the stretcher, containing an older man with tanned, deeply wrinkled skin and white hair, onto a gurney and packed it into the ambulance. Then one of the paramedics raced to the front and Tony heard the driver's side door slam shut.

The second paramedic, a young woman with blonde hair pulled back into a pony tail, leaned out of the ambulance.

“Does his wife want to come with him to the hospital?” she called out.

Tony looked over to where a worried-looking woman in her sixties stood staring at the ambulance. There were tears in her eyes as she absently fiddled with the camera around her neck. A much younger man stood next to her and spoke in a calm voice. Tony couldn't understand the words, but the language sounded German-esque. Dutch, maybe?

Finally, the woman nodded stiffly and answered the younger man. He looked back to the paramedic.

“Yes, she says she'd like that,” he said. He then said something more to the woman, beckoning her towards the ambulance.

She turned to the man abruptly and embraced him, clearly surprising him. Tony heard the words ‘duizendmaal dank’ among a burst of other, less intelligible words. She pulled away quickly and ran to the ambulance, taking the paramedic's hand as she climbed into the vehicle. The door shut with a resounding bang. The siren sprang to life and the ambulance sped off towards the hospital.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony saw Rogers lean out of the ambulance, earning himself a disapproving huff from the paramedic taping up his shoulder (they clearly had plans to take him to the hospital).

“Daniel?” he called out.

The man who'd been translating for the Dutch woman blinked from where he'd been standing and watching the ambulance drive away and leaned over. “Oh, hey, Steve,” he said coming towards them. He frowned. “Good to see you're still alive and mostly in one piece.”
Rogers grinned. “It'll take a bit more than some blue armoured guys to take me out.”

“Well, they did have P-90s and, as my friend Jack keeps telling me, humans aren't bullet-proof.”

Suddenly, a harried-looking police officer ran up to Daniel. “I'm sorry, sir, I know this isn't your job, but one of the museum visitors said they'd seen you speaking Chinese earlier. We're having a bit of communication problems...”

“Mandarin or Cantonese?” Daniel asked.

“Er... I don't know?”

“Okay, well, I'll do what I can.”

“Thank you, if you could just follow me then, sir.”

Tony watched the man and the police officer hurry off towards the museum. Daniel stopped for a moment beside a pair of young women and spoke briefly to the one with long blonde hair and a large backpack. He was about to ask Rogers who this Daniel was, when a voice interrupted him.

“Well, this has sure turned into one hell of a reunion,” it said, coming from behind him.

He turned to look at Clint's grinning face. The archer was holding onto the bicep of a slim man wearing a black suit and tie. Tony completely forgot about Daniel in favour of gapping.

“Hey Cap,” Clint continued. He nodded to Tony. “Stark.” Then he pulled the other man a bit closer. “Speaking of reunions, look who I ran into.”

Tony looked to Rogers, feeling slightly appeased that Captain America looked just as shocked by this little development as he was. Phil Coulson nodded to both of them.

“It's good to see both of you again,” he said evenly. “It's been a while.”

“Uh, yeah, it has been a while,” Tony agreed. “A while during which you were supposed to be dead. You look surprisingly good for a corpse. Less decomposition than I would've expected for one.”

“I get that a lot.”

“So Fury lied to us,” said Captain Rogers and wow, thought Tony, there was enough ice in that tone to recreate the iceberg Cap had been stuck inside of for seventy years.

“Not entirely...” Coulson's eyes slid to the paramedic tending to Captain America. “And perhaps we should discuss this somewhere else.”

Tony nodded. That was probably a good idea. And he felt like he'd need something to drink for this conversation.

“You're not dead.”

Tony didn't jump only because the Iron Man suit was too heavy for it. Natasha came up next to him, ignoring him entirely in favour of pinning Coulson with a sharp stare. It wasn't a glare and there wasn't even any sort of accusation in it. But it was steady, piercing and intense and Tony was really glad he wasn't the one it was being aimed at.

“Hello, Natasha,” said Coulson. “I see you met up with May.”
“Yes. Apparently we were after the same target.”
That had Coulson blinking in surprise. “We were?”
“Yes. And I don't think he's Hydra.”
“But not sure.”
Natasha hesitated for a moment. “No, not entirely.”
Tony threw his hands up. “Okay, so for those of us who came late to this spy party – namely me – what the hell are you talking about?”
“Daniel, the man who was just here, they think he's involved in something suspicious,” Rogers answered with a sigh.
Tony turned to him, noting how tired and world-weary the other man suddenly looked. “This Daniel have a last name?” he asked.
Tony blinked. Damn, now that he thought of it, the man had looked familiar. He looked back towards the museum and noticed that Daniel was back outside again talking to the young woman from before. She looked too young to be a girlfriend; maybe this was the niece. According to the file she was in her early twenties and had long, blonde hair.
Not bothering to say anything to the others, Tony began to cross the street towards them, calling Happy as he went. There were now two others with the young woman, the long-haired brunette having been joined by a tall, dark-skinned man. The way they kept looking towards the group he'd just left told him everything he needed to know about them.
“You're with Coulson, aren't you?” he said when he got to them.
“What, I don't know what you're–” the woman began to protest.
“Sure whatever,” he cut her off before turning to Daniel. “Doctor Daniel Jackson? I'm Tony Stark. Heard you were here from my friends over there.”
Daniel Jackson's eyes widened in surprise, but he shook Tony's proffered hand and smiled politely. “It's a pleasure to meet you Mister Stark. This is my niece, Cassie.”
Bingo. Tony grinned, genuinely pleased he'd hit the mark on that one. “I know it's been a long day for you and you probably already have a hotel in town and all that, but you should totally ditch that plan and join us at Stark Tower. There'll be pizza, beer, awesome company... I can have someone pick up your stuff from your hotel and everything.”
“Er, that's very generous of you Mister Stark– ”
“– Tony, please. I've got plenty of guest rooms, the best view of the city and someone who'll really, really want to meet you.”
Daniel opened his mouth to reply, but Cassie nudged him before he could say anything. They exchanged a brief conversation consisting of several significant looks, including a rather odd shift of eyes towards Cassie's backpack. Finally Daniel sighed and turned back to Tony.
“Thank you Mister Stark, we would love to take you up on that offer.”
“Fantastic, then it's settled. I've already called my chauffeur to bring the car around. It'll be a full house tonight so I'll just head on over first to get everything set up.”

“And by that you mean, tell other people to get everything set up,” said Daniel with a bemused look.

“Well, naturally. That's what being insanely rich is all about.”

“I wouldn't know.”

In the end, Daniel had realized that leaving with Tony Stark's friends – he'd put two and two together and quickly realized he was talking about the Avengers here – was the easiest way to avoid anyone searching Cassie's backpack. Yes, Skye had seen him and Cassie hide the tablets there, but she hadn't told anyone about it yet. He doubted she'd keep completely silent, but he'd cross that bridge (or blow it up) when it came to it.

Maybe he'd even have enough time to figure out what the tablets were.

As promised, Stark's chauffeur showed up in a long black stretch limo and they all piled into it (except for Steve and Sam, who went to the hospital). Daniel hadn't actually seen Stark Tower in person yet and he had to admit it looked quite impressive and very futuristic. The garage they were driven into looked ordinary enough and the row of cars that would've made Sam salivate, were still just regular cars, no jet blasters or hover bases to be seen.

It was rather difficult to be impressed by a Ferrari when you'd driven a space ship, after all.

An elevator door opened for them and they got into the spacious elevator.

“Welcome to Stark Tower,” said a smooth voice with an English accent over the loud speaker. “Mister Stark is waiting for you on the common floor.”

The doors closed and the elevator began to rise.

“Hello JARVIS,” said the bland-looking man in a suit who'd been introduced as Phil Coulson.

“Agent Coulson, it's good to see you alive.”

The man gave a small smile. “Thank you, JARVIS.”

The elevator doors opened shortly and they all walked out. Tony Stark was standing in the lobby holding a glass of amber liquid, a meek-looking man with floppy black curls standing next to him.

“Oh good, glad you could all make it,” said Tony with a wide grin. “Now, important introductions first: Doctor Daniel Jackson, meet Doctor Bruce Banner.”

The man next to Tony stepped forward, towards Daniel, looking slightly nervous.

“It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Doctor Jackson.”

Daniel blinked. He wracked his brain for a moment, until he placed the name. His eyes widened and he stepped forward, holding out a hand in greeting.
“You're the Hulk,” he said, awed that such a powerful creature could be contained in such an ordinary-looking man. He smiled widely. “It's an honour to meet you, Doctor Banner.”

Bruce Banner stared down at the offered hand for a moment before shaking his head in bemusement and grasping it with his own. Green flashed in his eyes and Daniel was vaguely aware of the others around him stiffening.

“Most people don't feel quite so honoured when they realize who I am,” he said with a hint of bitterness.

Daniel shrugged. “Maybe it's because I met the Hulk first.”

Bruce Banner blinked and then shook his head, chuckling. “Somehow, I don't think that's it. But it's probably why the Other Guy likes you.”

“Other Guy? Is he like an alternate personality or an extension of your own self?”

Tony grinned as he took a sip of his scotch, glad to have found someone else who wasn't afraid of Bruce.
Act I, pt iii

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the comments and kudos on the last part! I will be replying to comments, but I wanted to get this part edited and posted first. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TAPESTRY

Tony herded everyone into the living room. It was a large open room with a bar in one corner, a large-screen TV dominating one wall and the promised spectacular view filling up the entire length of another. Couches and armchairs of various sizes littered the room, tastefully arranged so that a small group could have an intimate conversation or a large group could relax and chat. The large coffee table in the centre of the seating area was simple and sturdy, yet elegant, and made of dark wood.

Pizza arrived ten minutes later while they were comparing stories about events at the museum.

“So do we even know who this guy was?” Tony asked as he grabbed a slice of pizza. “I sort of didn't let him monologue before I shot up his fancy-looking gun so I actually have no idea.”

“Someone who couldn't decide whether he wanted to be a ninja or a knight,” Daniel suggested before biting into his own pizza.

“I was thinking Evil Papa Smurf,” said Clint, looking thoughtful from where he was perched on the back of a leather loveseat. “But I can see that too.”

“Does it matter?” Natasha asked with a raised eyebrow up at him from the same loveseat.

Clint shrugged. “Probably not. Guy was pretty lame anyway.”

“And colourblind,” Tony added. “Though, granted, the armor does look interesting. Brucie you'll help me analyze it later, right?”

Bruce blinked at him. “Uh, sure. I could do that.”

“Cool!”

Someone's cellphone went off. Daniel started and then patted his pockets down before taking out a Blackberry. He looked at the caller ID and groaned.

“Uncle Jack?” Cassie asked, biting her lip to keep from laughing.

“Yeah,” said Daniel. He sighed and answered the phone. “Hi Ja–“

He pulled the phone away from his ear and the rest of the room faintly heard the words ‘-the hell have you been?’. Daniel rolled his eyes and put the phone back to his ear as soon as there was a
pause in shouting.

“Jack, relax. Yes, we were at the Met when the strange blue guys attacked; no it had nothing to do with me. I'm sure the NYPD are investigating. I'm fine. Cassie's fine. We're fine... No I'm not just saying that... Yes, I'm sure Jack, the paramedics looked me over and said I was good to go... Oh for--”

He pulled the cellphone away from his ear and thrust it at Cassie. “Here, you tell him we're fine!”

Cassie giggled and took the phone. “Hi Uncle Jack. Yeah, I'm alright and so's Daniel and yes, the EMTs really did check him out. He's gonna have some bruises from leaping out of the way of a bunch of bullets, but otherwise he really is fine.”

She put a finger over the speaker and looked to Daniel. “He says he's in shock,” she said quietly. Daniel glared at the phone.

She returned back to the conversation with a grin. “You should've seen him, Uncle Jack, he totally busted out some special ops moves back there. Disarmed one of the guys, took his gun and then shot down another. Then he had to jump out of the way of the third guy's bullets, but he managed to take him out afterwards too. It was terrifying, but pretty cool. You taught him well.”

Next to her, Daniel's face took on a slightly pink hue that had the rest of the room chuckling. Skye turned to Coulson. “She's right, it actually was pretty cool,” she whispered.

Next to her, Trip nodded. “Knew how to use that gun like a pro.”

Coulson acknowledged the information with a tilt of his head, his face not betraying any of his thoughts.

Cassie handed the phone back to Daniel, who said good-bye to his friend and hung up. “Well, that could've gone worse,” he said as he pocketed the phone. Then he yawned and sighed. “Thank you for dinner and for getting us out of the way of reporters and everything, but we should probably head back to our hotel now.”

“I'm all for that,” said Cassie. “I wrote my last exam yesterday afternoon and then flew up from Nevada this morning... I'm beat.”

“Hey, hey, what's this about leaving?” Tony exclaimed. “Remember the part where I mentioned guest rooms and how I have a lot of them? Seriously, stay here tonight. I've got soap, towels, spare toothbrushes. You name it, I've got it and if I don't have it, then JARVIS can get it for you.”

Daniel looked to Cassie, who held her hands up. “Hey, your call. I went to the museum direct from the airport; all my stuff's in my bag.”

Daniel turned to Tony. “Then thank you, we'll happily take you up on that offer and make it an early night. It's been a bit of a long week.”

Tony grinned. “Excellent! JARVIS will show you to your rooms.”

“JARVIS?”

“I will be happy to assist you when you are ready to retire, Doctor Jackson.”

Daniel's head snapped up. “Oh, you're the voice from the elevator.”
“Indeed. I am a fully functional AI and I maintain and oversee building operations.”

“An AI?” Daniel's eyes widened, the tiredness vanishing from his face as he stood up. “Fully functional: does that mean you have the capacity for independent thought or just that you control all aspects of the house's systems?”

“Both statements are correct, Doctor Jackson, however fully-functional refers to the way my programming mimics human mental pathways, allowing for the capacity to learn and adapt to new information independent of the initial programming.”

Tony stared at the archaeologist. “Uh, you realize the guy who made him is right here? If you have any questions about JARVIS you could just ask me.”

Daniel frowned, his look disapproving. “But if JARVIS is right here and fully capable of answering questions about himself. It would be rude of me to ask someone else as though he weren't.”

Tony gaped, while a few people snickered. Even Coulson's eyes shone with amusement.

Meanwhile, Cassie stood up with an exasperated sigh and retrieved her backpack from the hallway. Hefting it over her shoulder, she then linked her arms with one of Daniel's. “Goodnight everyone,” she said before linking her arms with Daniel and dragging him away towards a newly lit-up corridor. They disappeared from sight just as Daniel was starting to ask JARVIS about whether independent thought meant being able to create opinions on music, movies and books, whether he was able to enjoy such things.

“JARVIS, there's no need to lock them in or anything, but let us know if either of them come back down to this floor,” said Tony once their voices became too faint to hear.

“Understood, sir. And sir, if I may, I do not believe Doctor Jackson is ruthless enough to be Hydra.”

“Hydra?!” said Bruce. He turned to stare at the others. “You think he's Hydra?!”

His eyes flashed green and the last word carried an echo of a second, deeper voice. Bruce immediately closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. The others watched him warily. Tony was the only one not disturbed by the scene. Instead of watching Bruce, he turned cold eyes on his fellow Avengers and Coulson's team.

“Daniel is Hulk's friend,” he said quietly. “So you'd better have some really solid evidence to support that accusation.”

The young woman with Coulson swallowed (she had an unusual, airy name... Skye, that was it, her name was Skye). Her eyes darting nervously towards Bruce before she steeled herself and met Tony's eyes. “He's the perfect candidate for Hydra recruitment. Orphaned at a young age, brilliant, a loner, never married, no family connections except for a crazy grandfather who's disappeared off the face of the earth, and looked down upon by everyone in his chosen profession because of his, uh, unorthodox theories. Unorthodox, slightly out-of-this-world theories.”

Tony winced. “Well, when you put it that way, it does sound a bit suspicious. And I know he's got government and military connections 'cause he pulled those strings to get the Hulkbusters disbanded.”

“He's certainly involved with something,” Natasha admitted. “But I don't think it's Hydra.”
“For what it's worth, he doesn't act like an evil Nazi,” said Clint with a shrug.

“He could be a very good actor,” said Coulson.

“He gave the Hulk cake.”

All eyes turned to Bruce at his soft words.

“He gave the Hulk cake,” said the Asian woman sitting next to Coulson. Tony thought her name was May... something May. “And that's relevant how, exactly?”

Bruce smiled. “I don't remember any of it myself, but I have read the report. The Hulk helped Daniel Jackson save Cassie and then Daniel Jackson helped save the Hulk. What isn't in the report is that before the Hulk left, he gave him a bag with three bottles of water and a giant chocolate cake. I'm assuming he had them in his car. It was with me when I woke up in a cave.”

“Basic human kindness,” said a new voice and they all turned to the sight of Steve Rogers.

He looked tired, worn, his left cheek sporting a deep purple bruise and there were bandages peeking out from behind a navy blue t-shirt. He was leaning on a crutch, an African-American man Tony assumed was the mysterious Sam hovering just behind him. He moved carefully, like someone in a lot of pain even though none of it showed on his face.

Tony winced, knowing the super soldier might heal faster than anyone else, but his pain threshold wasn't any higher than the average human's. Rogers carefully lowered himself down into the spot recently vacated by Daniel and leaned his crutch against the side. Natasha leaned over and pushed a box still containing some pizza slices in his direction.

“So, Agent, you and your people had better have a really good story here,” said Tony, turning his attention back to Coulson. “And don't think we've forgotten about how you've been pretending to be dead for the past, what, two years?”

The corner of Coulson's mouth twitched. “It's Director now, actually.”

Tony blinked.

“So the rumours are true then,” said Natasha with a smirk.

“That depends on the rumours.”

“Agent Coulson,” Steve Rogers cut in, his voice low and tone easy, but his eyes held an edge of steel. “I may not have seen any of your evidence against Daniel Jackson, but I did spend some time with him in the museum and he seems like someone who tries to help people, not hurt them. And before you start accusing anyone of being Hydra, maybe you should start by explainin' why we should be trusting you. Modern technology has come a long way: how do we know you're really Phil Coulson?”

Rogers' jaw visibly tightened. “You coulda been brainwashed for all we know.”

Coulson looked Rogers in the eye. “I suppose you don't.”

“Why didn't you tell us you were alive?” Clint asked.

Coulson's eyes flicked over to the archer, before returning to Rogers. “Fury's orders.”

Rogers nodded.
“But Fury's dead and you're apparently the new director, which means you get to make the – alright, what is that look for Capsicle?” Tony glared at Rogers, having seen the startled expression that passed over his face. He thought back over what he'd just said. “Wait. Son of a – Fury's not dead?! That man's an over-inflated, one-eyed cockroach is what he is.”

Rogers winced. “Er, sorry, I figured you'd know. I mean, I thought Maria would've told you.”

“Maria? As in Maria Hill?! That former S.H.I.E.L.D deputy-director that's currently on my payroll? You have got to be kidding me!” Tony glowered at Coulson. “Did she know you were alive? Oh, what am I saying, of course she did.”

He stood up, suddenly needing to do go build something, or blow it up, or build something he could blow up. Or – ooh analyse.

“Hey Green, wanna go take apart some garishly blue armour and see what makes it tick? Well, metaphorically tick, 'cause there aren't any actual mechanisms in it anywhere and therefore no literal ticking.”

Bruce was stone-faced when he unfolded his legs and stood up. “I think that's a good idea,” he said.

Coulson sighed as he watched them leave. “Well, that could've gone worse,” he said. Then he turned to Natasha. “I realize I owe you all an explanation and I will tell you what I can of it in a moment – and please keep in mind when I do that even I don't know all the details. I am, however, curious as to why you seem so convinced Daniel isn't Hydra. I'm assuming you have something we don't.”

Natasha nodded and looked thoughtful for a moment.

“I overheard a conversation between him and Lieutenant General Jack O'Neill,” she said. “He mentioned that morale at the SGC was bad because of New York. It sounded like they had the means to help and weren't allowed to because it would mean exposing the project. His exact words were: 'side-lined in the name of maintaining secrecy'.”

“I've heard the recording of the conversation,” Clint pipped up. “He did not sound happy about it.”

Natasha nodded. “He also mentioned a threat bigger than Hydra.”

Steve's eyes widened. “Something worse than Hydra?” he said. “And something the government, apparently, knows about.”

“Yes. Daniel Jackson said that something called the Ori were preparing a large-scale attack and that right now, we have no way to defend ourselves.”

A moment of stunned silence filled the room.

“Well, that's not good,” said Coulson.

It was just past midnight and Daniel couldn't sleep.

Part of him was exhausted: mentally, physically exhausted. It had been a long day. The other,
unfortunately much louder, part of him was tugging at the bit to get started on that tablet. He'd only needed a glimpse to recognize the familiar lines of Ancient script. And to realize that it wasn't normal Ancient writing. A new dialect? Or perhaps a code? Someone had hidden the tablets inside a statue of all things: had they intended to come back for them? Had they been hidden from someone or for someone?

He turned over and sighed. Just outside his bedroom, the tablets were burning a hole through Cassie's sweater, which they were still wrapped in, calling to him like sirens in the night. Forget beautiful, inhuman enchantresses from Greek myths, these tablets were a far more seductive temptation. They were a mystery waiting to be solved.

But he needed sleep. Needed to be rested. What if Jack magically managed to convince someone that the alien armada was a problem that needed a solution sooner not later? Miracles could happen. And he was tired. So, so tired. He needed to sleep...

Daniel gave up.

A short while later he slid out of his guest suite wearing a pair of jeans and a borrowed bath robe, sweater-wrapped tablets held securely under one arm along with a blank, lined notebook he'd found in the suite's desk drawer.

He made his way down into the communal living room, blinking when the lights turned on automatically as he entered. Shaking his head in amusement, he walked over to the kitchen, this time expecting the lights to turn on and grinning when they did.

“Thanks, JARVIS,” he said. “I'm assuming that's you.”

“Indeed it is, Daniel Jackson.” Daniel smiled. The AI sounded amused. “May I inquire as to what you are doing up so late?”

“Couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd get started on this project I picked up at the museum.”

Checking the coffee pot, Daniel made a triumphant sound when he found it still had coffee in it. A quick check of the cupboards above the pot and he had a mug. The coffee was not only the same amazing blend Tony had served him earlier, but it was still warm. Which meant that either he wasn't the only person who couldn't sleep, or the machine had one hell of an amazing thermos.

Daniel hummed happily to himself as he took a sip of his coffee and moved back out into the living room. He stood in front of the coffee table thoughtfully for a moment.

“JARVIS? I don't suppose that somewhere in these endless corridors of rooms there's something like a conference room – with, like, whiteboards and stuff – that Tony wouldn't mind me using?”

“There is indeed a briefing room just down the hall and, given that sir seldom uses it himself, I do not believe he would mind if you were to use it.”

“Great! Thank you, JARVIS.”

“My pleasure, Daniel Jackson. If you would follow me.”
Tony yawned as he wandered blearily into the kitchen. His mug made a dull clunk when he placed it on the counter, exhaustion and alcohol making his movements clumsy. He reached for the coffeepot and frowned. It felt lighter than it should have. Sure enough, there was only half a cup inside. He could've sworn there'd been more in there the last time he'd come up for some. Bruce maybe? Except Bruce was still in his lab and he had a kettle there (Pepper had no problem with Bruce having a kettle, but she wouldn't allow Tony to keep a coffeemaker in his lab: it was so unfair).

“JARVIS, where'd all the coffee go?” he asked as he stared forlornly into his half-empty mug.

“Daniel Jackson helped himself to some earlier. He's currently working on a translation in the Avenger's briefing room. Perhaps you might like to go check on him.”

Tony blinked. “Translation of what?”

“I am not certain. Daniel Jackson seems to be in possession of two stone tablets. I took the liberty of scanning them and they appear to be a minimum of three thousand years old, however I am unfamiliar with the language and the script is not found in any of my databases.”

Tony gulped down the coffee he had and put the mug down on the first available surface before going to check on Daniel.

The briefing room was something Tony had built on the theory of 'it could come in handy', but the room had yet to be used by anyone except Pepper when she'd been planning last year's Maria Stark Foundation Charity Gala. So walking into the room to find half the whiteboards lining the walls covered in print – some of it was English, some of it could've been Klingon for all Tony could tell – came as a bit of a shock. An open notebook lay on the table, next to an abandoned coffee mug and a bright red sweater that was laid out flat with two rectangular stone tablets on top of it.

A blown-up holographic projection of the tablets hovered in the air above them. And wow, JARVIS apparently really liked the guy if he'd decided to be this helpful. Or, Tony thought as he walked over to get a closer look at the lettering from the original tablet, he was curious about this tablet and the language that his encyclopedia of languages couldn't identify.

Daniel was working at one of the whiteboards, carefully copying a line of the unknown script onto the board, leaving room beneath each line for, presumably, an English translation.

“JARVIS, how long has he been at this?” Tony asked quietly.

“Daniel Jackson began work at 12:42, sir,” came the equally-quiet reply.

Not that it appeared to matter, because Daniel didn't seem at all aware that he wasn't alone anymore, his eyes intent on the translation he was working on. Tony wondered if this was how he looked when he was absorbed in calculations. Tony glanced at the digital clock on the wall. It read 5:56. He blinked. Okay, he hadn't realized it was that late, er, early.

Tony cleared his throat. “So, Daniel, you've been busy I see.”

“Not now Cam,” Daniel replied absently. “I'll eat something later.”

Tony's eyebrows rose and he blinked. That reply had sounded automatic; in fact, Daniel hadn't even paused in his work to think about it. Tony grinned. It seemed that he and Doctor Daniel Jackson were cut from the same mould... only from different sides of it. Tony walked over and leaned against the whiteboard next to Daniel, careful not to smudge any of the writing.
“Sorry, Daniel, 'fraid I'm not Cam,” he said with a cheerful grin. “On the plus side, I'm totally not here to drag you away and force you to do so-called healthy things like eating and/or sleeping.”

Daniel blinked and looked over to Tony, looking confused for a moment. Then he looked to the marker in his hand and up at the ceiling.

“I was wondering why my office was so bright,” he said, sounding befuddled, like he couldn't quite remember how he'd gotten where he was. “Smelt wrong too...”

He trailed off, his gaze falling back to Tony again. He blinked once, twice, and then his eyes widened slightly in realization. “Oh, you're a scientist, right?”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Engineer, technically, but—“

“That means you know some physics right?”

Tony's eyes narrowed. “Yes, I know some physics, I'm a gen—“

“Good, I need you to take a look at this part over here.”

Daniel grabbed him by the arm and didn't seem to notice Tony's sputtered a protest against the manhandling. He stopped in front of a different section of the whiteboard. This section had already been translated into English.

“I've translated it as much as I could, but technical jargon can be a bit tricky, because it develops differently than the rest of the language and knowledge of the specific field in question becomes important.” Daniel let go of Tony and indicated a section in the text. “For instance, this part here talks about energy, but I can't quite tell if it's talking about energy in the form of electricity or some other sort of outside source, or an inner core that creates the energy.”

“Woah, woah, hang on!” Tony waved his arms in front of him to make Daniel stop. It worked. “Daniel, buddy, I thought you were translating a couple of three-thousand-year-old tablets?”

Daniel blinked. “I am. Wait, how do you know about – oh right, of course, Skye probably told you.” He took a deep breath, not noticing Tony's surprised expression. “Yes, this is from those tablets. And... well, I think it's describing an engine.”

“An engine?! Tony stepped up closer to the whiteboard and began reading.

“Or possibly a power source... I'm not an engineer so I'm not entirely sure.”

“JARVIS, bring up a blank project template. I don't think this is an engine exactly... are you sure this part here is accurate?”

Daniel took a closer look at where Tony indicated. “Hmm... like I said, jargon can be difficult; is there something else that would make more sense?”

“You know I'm not even sure.”

Fifteen minutes later, Bruce shuffled into the room, having been attracted by the light spilling out into the hallway. Daniel was at one end of the room working on some sort of translation and Tony was on the other, reading over a translation it looked like Daniel had already made, a holographic display to his left. He kept looking between the translation and the holographic contraption he had started building.
“Hello, what's going on here?” Bruce called to them.

Daniel ignored him completely, but Tony looked up with a grin. “Brussel Sprout, come over and take a look at this. Daniel translated it from a couple of tablets he apparently found at the Met. It's fascinating... and I'm trying to figure out if it's even possible.”

“What is it?” Bruce asked, walking over to Tony's side to take a look.

“It's describing an energy source, I think, and then possibly a type of device that uses said energy source.” He paused and grinned at Bruce. “Sadly it's all theory, but the math... the math would be beautiful. Like, mind-blowingly beautiful. Seriously, take a look at this. I think it's talking about folding space, or folding space molecules... and over here, there's a bit about pulling energy from emptiness...”

Bruce put his glasses on and began to examine the translation. “Emptiness? You mean like empty space?”

Tony froze, his eyes widening comically. “Daniel said technical jargon can be difficult to translate correctly.” He looked at Bruce. “You're thinking it's supposed to be 'vacuum' instead of 'emptiness', aren't you?”

Bruce nodded as he continued to read. “That's certainly one possibility.”

Cassie had been puzzled to find Daniel missing from his 'guest room' (apparently Tony Stark's idea of a room was very different to everyone else's definition of a room). Then she'd noticed that her sweater and the tablets were missing and was no longer quite so surprised.

“JARVIS, do you know where my uncle is?” she asked.

Following the AI's instructions led her to what looked like a conference room. That had, apparently, been taken over by a trio of mad scientists. Well, two mad scientists and a mad archaeologist.

She'd heard Tony and Doctor Banner arguing from the hallway about whether or not something was possible – whatever they were arguing about was clearly light years away from the material covered in her third year physics course that she didn't even bother trying to follow the conversation. Besides, they were arguing in half-sentences and short, cut-off phrases. Daniel was quietly working on a translation, oblivious to the noise.

She shook her head in amusement. Scientists.

Well, at least she knew one way to get their attention.

“JARVIS, is there a coffee machine nearby?” she asked.

“Indeed, there is one in the kitchen, Miss Fraiser.”

“Uhg, can't you just call me Cassie?” she asked as she turned to leave.

“I'm afraid that is against my programming, Miss Fraiser.”
“You know I'll bet you do a lot of things that are against your programming. Like World of Warcraft, for instance. Pretty sure Tony didn't input that into your programming, but I definitely heard you tell Uncle Daniel that you play in what passes for your spare time.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“Oh huh, sure you don't.”

Just then the elevator on the other end of the hallway pinged. She turned in time to watch the doors open. Steve stepped out and she caught a glimpse of Sam in the elevator before the doors closed.

“Good morning, Steve,” she called to him.

He looked to her and smiled before limping towards her. “Good morning, Cassie,” he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Should you be walking on that leg? I heard you got shot. Tony said they were going to have to dig the bullet out. In fact, I'm pretty sure you shouldn't even be out of hospital yet.”

Steve blinked at her, looking surprised. “It's mostly healed already. Still twinges a bit, but I'll be fine by tomorrow. Super-serum.” He added the last as an after-thought.

Cassie gaped at him. “Wait what? My mother was a doctor, I know that bullet wounds take longer to heal than that. A lot longer. How could you possibly be fine by tomorrow – oh.” She stopped as something suddenly occurred to her and she felt at once stupid and excited. “I don't know why I didn't make the connection sooner: you're Captain America, aren't you?”

His features settled into a sort of half-smile. “Yes, I am.” He frowned. “You mean the others didn't tell you?”

“They probably figured we already knew. Which is probably a fair call, except that while Daniel is a genius, he can also be fairly oblivious when it comes to things that are less than two thousand years old.” She grinned. “You're way too young for him, Steve.”

Steve chuckled. Just then the voices from the conference room grew in volume again and Steve glanced up at the sound, looking worried.

“Don't worry,” said Cassie. “They're busy arguing the science of something Daniel translated. Trust me, you're not getting anywhere near that without ammunition.”

“Ammunition?” Steve asked, looking amused.

The ammunition worked, because the moment Steve, Cassie and the aroma of freshly-brewed coffee entered the room, it went miraculously silent. Until Tony nearly tripped over himself in his rush to get around the long conference table. Even Daniel surfaced momentarily from his work in order to hurry over to grab a mug of hot, caffeinated gold.

“So, what exactly are you three working on?” Steve asked as he sipped his own coffee. “Loudly, I might add.”

“Hmm... the language on the tablet is a derivative of Latin, but it was written in code, which is why it didn't look familiar,” Daniel answered. “Took me a while, but once I realized the conjugation looked almost Greek, the rest of it was just a matter of working out how much of it had been altered and how much was technical jargon... It's fascinating really, how simple and elegant the code is and how it's been weaved subtly into the original language almost creating a
“—Which is fascinating, I'm sure,” Tony interrupted. “But the really interesting part is this bit here where it's describing some sort of machine. At first we were thinking it's a vehicle of some sort, but I'm pretty sure it's not. Whatever it is, it looks like it's, uh, trying to destabilize its molecules and make them vibrate out of sync with the molecules around it.”

“You know, I'm not sure that 'vibrate' is an appropriate description of what its doing,” Bruce pointed out.

Tony threw his hands up. “Well how would you describe it then?!”

Bruce looked thoughtful for a moment. “More like phasing out of sync.”

“Which means what exactly?” Coulson asked from the doorway. They all turned at his sudden appearance, his expression giving nothing away about how long he'd stood there.

Tony opened his mouth to reply.

“Do mean shifting out of phase through solid matter or into another dimension?” Daniel suddenly asked.

Tony closed his mouth. He and Bruce looked to each other and then to Daniel.

“That's... a very good question,” said Tony. “And not one I would expect from a non-physics major.”

Daniel shrugged. “I work around physicists and engineers; some of it was bound to sink in eventually.”

Bruce's expression was suspicious, but he nodded slowly anyway. “We don't really have enough data to know for sure either way, although I'd personally been thinking of an invisibility cloak.”

“Creating an invisibility cloak wouldn't require the kind of power they're talking about here,” said Tony dismissively. This had clearly been one of the things they'd been arguing about.

“You know, it's not entirely clear according to the translated text that the power source is meant to power the device in question.”

“Then why would it even be here?”

“Uh, you know it is just a rough translation, guys...” Daniel tried to interject, but was ignored as Tony and Bruce launched into another discussion full of half-sentences and cut-off phrases. He wondered if this was how Jack had felt back in the early days of the team when he and Sam had started brainstorming.

He sighed and walked over to the tablet again to take another look at the original text. Even in code, sometimes the original text held clues and nuances that a translation, no matter how accurate, missed. He skipped the formal introduction and went straight to the description of technology. He read it over again, carefully reading each sentence in its original Ancient under his breath.

Half-way down, he frowned and double-backed in the text to study the structure of the sentences. Oh. When he looked at it as a whole, including the brief, formal introduction, it read like an official document. And the technologies described... no, not just described, listed. Not only that, but the last sentenced seemed to be cut off, as though there was meant to be more to the list. But
A short while later he stepped back when a loud yawn interrupted his concentration. He scanned the room and blinked, realizing there were suddenly a lot more people milling about, mostly sitting around the long table. Tony and Bruce had moved away from his original translation and seemed to be having fun debating science over crude marker drawings of what Daniel assumed were their theories of the device described in the tablet. And there was food on the table. On cue, Daniel's stomach growled.

Steve looked up from where he and Cassie were hunched over a laptop with Clint looking on in amusement. He grinned at Daniel.

“Come on over and help yourself, Daniel,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Daniel and wandered over to refill his coffee mug and grabbed a danish from what looked like a severely-depleted pile. “I see they've moved to trying to construct the device.”

Steve chuckled. “Yup, not that I have any idea what they're talking about.”

“None of us do, Cap, so don't worry: it's not just you,” said Clint absently, wincing at something Cassie was doing on-screen. Daniel leaned over and saw they were playing a computer game: one of those empire-building ones.

He gulped down the rest of his coffee and finished his danish. After a short pause, he grabbed a second.

He placed a hand on Cassie's shoulder to get her attention. “I'm going to go grab a shower,” he told her once she'd looked up.

“Okay, Uncle Daniel,” she said. “Maybe you should try and take a nap too.”

He shrugged. “Not a bad idea. I'll try.”

He doubted it would work, there were too many thoughts buzzing around inside his head, the elation of discovery infusing his veins. He was tired, yes, but he also felt more invigorated, more awake, than he had in months.

He managed to make it out of the conference room before the giddiness overtook him completely. The tablet wasn't just a document: it was an inventory, he was sure of it. Figuring out why only two pages had been left behind had taken him a bit longer despite the answer staring him in the face the entire time. Running down both tablets were decorative symbols and he'd thought they were mere decorations. Which was why he hadn't paid them any attention.

Once he had though, it had taken him only minutes to realize what he was looking at: a gate address.

The first thing he did when he made it to his guest suite, wasn't take a shower. Instead he paused in front of the nightstand, where he'd placed the Target bag containing the 'present' Cassie had brought him from Sam. It was fairly large, but not particularly heavy. The package was wrapped with military precision in sandy brown wrapping paper covered in little cartoon pyramids and Sphinxes and tied with bright red ribbon. Daniel grinned, wondering where Sam had managed to find the wrapping paper.

Carefully, he untied the ribbon and unwrapped the gift. After a quick search, he found a pair of scissors in a desk in the suite’s main room. He opened the box and instantly was assaulted by the
aroma of chocolate and walnuts. Delighted, he immediately grabbed a cookie and popped half of it in his mouth. He wondered when Sam had found the time to bake.

However, that wasn't the main present. Underneath the cookies, he found an Egyptian puzzle box. It was one he'd given Sam for Christmas several years ago. Well, he supposed this answered the question of whether or not she'd managed to solve it...

First, he studied it from all sides. Then he popped the rest of the cookie into his mouth and began to fiddle with it. It'd been a while since he'd solved a puzzle box, but he managed to figure it out eventually. Inside was exactly what he needed; Sam had certainly out-done herself.

He turned on the Asgard anti-surveillence device and picked up his cellphone. His first call was to the mountain. Vala picked up on the second ring.

“Hello, Vala mal Doran here. Please tell me you have something to help relieve my boredom.”

Daniel chuckled. “Sorry, I'm afraid not. Although, you're welcome to some of my excitement; I have way too much of it.”

“Daniel! We heard about the masoleum blowing up. Are you alright?”

Daniel sighed. “First of all, it was a museum, not a masoleum, and second, it didn't blow up, it was attacked. By a bunch of guys with even less fashion sense than the Goa'uld.”

“Oh, so not only unfashionable, but also insane. I mean, honestly, who makes it their goal in life to be less fashionable than the Goa'uld? Crazy people, that's who. I'm glad you weren't blown up.”

“Thank you, Vala, I am too. Listen, I struck out in Washington. Any news on your end?”

“We got more words of doom and gloom from the Tok'ra. Apparently they got a look at the armada: at least five ships, but it looked like they may have run into some supply problems so their departure's been delayed. The Tok'ra aren't sure for how long, though.”

“Well, that's almost good news, I suppose. I... may have found something, but I'm not sure how much help it'll be.” It required gate travel, after all.

“Then keep working at it. If anyone can do it, you can. Go Daniel, ra, ra. And don't forget that you promised to bring me back a t-shirt.”

He shook his head. “Sure. Maybe I'll even manage to get the Avengers to sign it.”

“Oooh, that would be lovely. Just remember: kidnapping is bad. At least that's what Cameron keeps telling me.”

“Ehem, well, yes kidnapping is bad. I definitely won't be doing any of that.” He paused. “Listen I should go. I'll see you in five days.”

“Oh, well yes, alright then. I'll see you when you get back. Just don't forget the souvenirs.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Bye, Vala.”

“Bye, Daniel.”

He heard her hang up before he'd managed to find the right button on his phone. Then he sent a quick text to Sam: Thanks for the cookies. :(
He ran a hand through his hair as put his phone down and turned off the anti-surveillance device, closing the box after he was done. He noticed his suitcase had been delivered from his hotel room at some point in the morning (Tony had insisted last night he could have someone get it for him and since Daniel didn't actually have anything classified inside he gave Tony his key). The idea of a shower and fresh clothes was definitely appealing right now, so he was glad he'd said 'yes'.

His phone was ringing when he got out of the shower. He grimaced and answered.

“Hey, Jack,” he said.

“Daniel, what's this I hear about you and Cassie not spending the night in your hotel?’”

Daniel's eyes narrowed. “Are you having someone follow us, Jack?” he asked slowly. He was supposed to be on vacation.

“What? No. I mean, they're not following you... I just thought I'd have someone go check up on you after what happened at the museum. For all we know you were the target of that so-called heist.”

“You mean, other than the fact that no one was looking for me, that the bad guys never went anywhere near the Egyptian wing – which would've been the obvious placed to look for me given the date – and that they didn't look military or like anyone with the connections to know why I should be a potential target in the first place?”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“Besides, I have a tracking chip embedded in my shoulder so don't tell me you don't know exactly where I am right now. And even if I didn't, whoever you sent to 'check up' on me could've just followed whoever Tony sent this morning to pick up my suitcase from the hotel. So what you're really asking is why are Cassie and I staying at Stark Tower?”

“I thought it was called Avenger's Tower now?”

“Not officially.”

“But the St-rk was never replaced; there's just a big 'A' there, which stands for neither 'Tony', nor 'Stark', nor, uh... 'Industries'.”

Daniel pinched the bridge of his nose. “Jack, why are you calling?”

“Look Daniel, I don't know how you managed to get yourself into Tony Stark's good graces–“

“–He's friends with the Hulk. You know, big green guy who saved Cassie's life.”

“He's just a bit memorable, yes.”

“Well, apparently making friends with the Hulk makes you a friend of the Avengers. I met Doctor Bruce Banner, by the way, he's a really interesting guy: quiet, polite... pretty much the complete opposite of the Hulk in every way. I like him.”

“You like everyone, Daniel.”

“That's not true and you know it,” Daniel snapped into the phone. “Just because I like giving people the benefit of the doubt when I first meet them doesn't mean I continue to like them all. The names Kinsley, Maybourne and Woolsey come to mind, not to mention the more obvious ones like Apophis, and Anubis, although I think 'dislike' is much too mild a word for those two.”
“Woollsley's not too bad.”

“He’s also never accused you of helping the people who murdered your wife.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. He could hear Jack taking a deep breath.

“Right, well, either way you need to be careful. The Avengers were affiliated with SHIELD, after all. In fact, three of them – including Captain America – are former SHIELD agents. For all we know—“

“—Jack, you did not just accuse Captain America of being Hydra. He and Black Widow were among the group of people who exposed Hydra's presence inside SHIELD, not to mention taking out those helicarriers. I've read the reports, Jack, and yes, we would've taken those helicarriers out before they could've been used as the global threat Hydra wanted to use them as, but not before hundreds, if not thousands, of people were dead!”

Daniel took a deep breath. Reading the reports had been a horrific experience. The extent of the damage caused by the helicarriers going down into the Potomac was minimal compared to the number of lives Hydra had planned to take. It didn't matter that he knew the Apollo could've blasted both helicarriers from orbit without so much as breaking a proverbial sweat, the very thought of what Hydra had accomplished and how close they'd been to achieving their goals made his blood freeze.

Thank god for Captain America. Wait. Daniel blinked, vaguely aware that Jack was talking in the background.

“Jack?”

“What?!” Jack snapped, sounding annoyed. Had he figured out Daniel had been ignoring him?

“What's Captain America's real name?”

There was a pause during which he could picture Jack glaring at him through the phone. “Steve Rogers.”

“Oh. Huh, I think I met him yesterday: he was at the museum.”

“Great Daniel, good for you.”

“Actually, I also found these Ancient tablets—“

“—It's a museum, I'm pretty sure there are supposed to ancient tablets at a museum. Not that I ever looked for them. I sort of skipped ahead to the armour and swords – and the dinosaurs. Dinosaurs are cool.”

“No, listen Jack, that's not what I mean.”

“No, Daniel, you listen. The Avengers are a grey area. We don't know what they are outside of SHIELD yet. And until we figure out whether or not Hydra managed to infiltrate the SGC, you need to stay away from anyone suspect.”

“Jack, Hydra has not infiltrated the SGC! Do you know how I know that? Because if Hydra had infiltrated the SGC they wouldn't have needed those goddamned helicarriers! If anyone involved is suspect it's the IOA. The World Council leader was Hydra, remember, and the IOA caved to him really easily when he asked them to let the Council and SHIELD deal with the New York crisis and
the Chitauri invasion.”

“The helicarriers could've been a distraction...”

“Distraction for what? They'd been lying patiently in wait for decades as they slowly grew and infiltrated their people into the right places. Exposing themselves too early wouldn't have been to their benefit at all. I may not be some great tactician, but even I can see that.”

“Right. I'll follow up with the IOA later. Always love giving those guys a hard time. I'll try talking to the President again and see if I can't get some of the restrictions lifted or eased off or something, but Daniel, I'm serious. It really doesn't matter what you or I think: the Avengers, and Tony Stark in particular, are a bit of a grey area with the government. Everyone involved is walking a fine line and you have enemies who'd love to use something like this to bury you, get you kicked out of the program... or worse.”

Daniel frowned. “Why Tony Stark in particular?”

“He's unpredictable, brilliant and has this thing for sticking his nose where it shouldn't be. Now I have every confidence in Carter and her teams' security, but the NID and the Trust have managed to hack us before.”

Daniel winced and then closed his eyes, his night of insomnia catching up to him with a bone-deep exhaustion. “So, you're saying that if Tony managed to hack the SGC someone would try and make it look like I helped him.”

Which would be treason. For him and anyone who could be accused of helping him. At least anyone affiliated with the SGC. That included Jack. Thankfully, Daniel had a reputation of going against orders and causing trouble all on his own, which meant that keeping Jack out of it would be easy enough so long as he didn't actually tell him anything.

“Thanks for the reminder, Jack. I can't just leave without causing suspicion, but I'll think about it. I should go, though. Didn't get much sleep last night.”

“Daniel, you're supposed to be on vacation! Don't make me call Cassie and tell her to make sure you eat and sleep.”

Daniel chuckled. “Don't worry, I ate both dinner last night and breakfast this morning. Was just too wired to sleep in-between.”

“Well, food is good, but make sure you sleep too.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Yes, mother. I was actually about to take a nap.”

“Good, then I'll leave you to it while I go make the IOA sweat a little.”

“Have fun with that.”

“Youbetcha, Dannyboy. Talk to you later.”

“Bye, Jack.”

He hung up and stared at the phone, taking a deep breath before placing it down carefully. He ran a hand through his hair. His plane left for Colorado Springs in four days. He had four days to come up with a plan. It would be difficult, but not impossible. Save maybe Sam, no one knew the project better than he did. But his friends, his team – with the exception of Vala – were all career military.
He couldn't let them risk everything along with him. Sam had already done it once before, but she was busy. Earth needed her working on the shield more than he needed her as backup.

Daniel sat down and clenched his fist. The danger was too great and, as usual, no one was listening. He had a lead now, which might turn out to be nothing but held a potential for reward that made it worth following up on. He had to do something.

And it looked like he would have to do it alone.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. Well, it looked like that nap wasn't going to happen after all.

Chapter End Notes

Here you've come to the end of Act I, thanks for reading! There will be a short interlude published when I'm about half-way done writing Act II, which I'm hoping will be in two, maybe three weeks...
Cameron Mitchell sighed as he dissected the casserole on his plate, idly trying to guess the cafeteria's mystery meat of the day. A tray banged onto the table across from him and he looked up to greet Vala, the other half of his currently much-diminished team. Not that having a full team would've accomplished much at the moment, other than having five bored people mulling about the base instead of two. Okay, three bored people mulling about the base – Sam and Daniel would've probably found something 'interesting' to do.

With orders against any gate travel the SGC was less 'SG' at the moment and more just 'C' and not even very much of that.

His eyes strayed down to Vala's tray and he blinked. “Hey Vala, you decide to skip the actual food part?” he asked.

“Hmm?” Vala looked to him in confusion before following his gaze to the three slices of pie sitting on her tray. “Oh, you mean the pie? Well, I've been told that it's apparently traditional on this planet to drown your depression in either alcohol or copious amounts of sugary things. Unfortunately they won't let me have alcohol on base, so I've had to go with sugary substances and I like pie better than ice cream.”

She cut off a piece of blueberry pie and looked at it contemplatively for a moment. “Besides, there's a fruit-like substance in here and according to Daniel that counts.”

Cameron rolled his eyes. “I'm pretty sure Jackson ain't the one you should be takin' advice on nutrition from.”

Vala popped the piece of pie in her mouth and shrugged. Cameron decided to give mystery meat a try and took a bite. Pork, he decided: it was probably pork. Probably. They sat in silence for a few moments, long enough for the subdued atmosphere around them to become properly suffocating.

“We should go visit your parents,” said Vala suddenly.

Cameron choked on some noodles. “Pardon me?”

Vala had another piece of pie on her fork and pointed it at Cameron. “Well, it's not like we're doing anything useful around here and your mom makes much better pie.”

“You want to go visit my folks so that my mom can make you pie?”

She shrugged. “I like your mother. Although admittedly because she tells me funny stories about you and makes me pie.”

Cameron groaned. “No, Vala, we can't go visit my folks. There could be an emergency here, we might be needed.”

Vala raised an incredulous eyebrow at him. “Needed for what? To break up gambling rings?”

Cameron opened his mouth and then closed it with a sigh, knowing full well he had nothing to say to that. Tension on base had been steadily growing, folks getting restless – everyone knew there
were a thousand things that needed doing and that list was only growing the longer the gate stayed silent. It wasn't quite a protest, but people were certainly becoming less subtle about their non-regulation activities.

“Maybe Jackson will get himself into trouble again and he'll need us to bail him out,” he finally answered.

Vala seemed to consider that for a moment. “Alright, fine, I concede that Daniel does seem incredibly good at finding trouble in places there shouldn't be any.”

“Like museums,” Cameron grumbled.

He nearly jumped at the unexpected movement next to him as chairs were pulled out and Colonel Pettrelli and Lieutenant Colonel Donovan, the team leaders of SG3 and SG9 slid in next to him and Vala.

“So, what's the scoop?” Pettrelli asked without any sort of preamble.

“The scoop on what?” Cameron asked carefully.

“C'mon, we've all been waitin' to find out,” said Donovan. His eyes slid over the room suspiciously before he leaned in closer to Cameron. “What's SG1 planning?”

“Uh...you think we're plannin' something?”

“Of course: it's traditional, right? The earth's in danger, brass and politicians aren't helping, so SG1 does something monumentally stupid, goes against orders, and ends up saving the world.”

“Right, of course.”

“Well, before we do anything, we'll have to wait for Daniel to come back,” said Vala, a spark of excitement in her eyes that hadn't been there moments before.

The other two team leaders nodded solemnly. “Right, of course, Jackson,” said Pettrelli. “Makes sense.” Then he clapped Cameron on the back. “Well, whatever happens, we've got your backs. Anything you need, just let us know.”

“Uh, okay. Thanks guys.”

Donovan smiled and then the two of them took their trays and went to sit with their respective teams. Vala looked to Cameron. “What exactly do they expect us to do?”

Cameron shook his head. “I have no idea.”

“But we are going to do something, right?”

“Sounds like. I mean, like they said, we're SG1. Maybe Jackson'll have some ideas from talking to all those politicians when he gets back.”

Vala raised an eyebrow at him in a very clear 'and when do you expect these flying pigs to arrive' gesture. Cameron grimaced.

“Or maybe he'll be annoyed and pissed off enough to feel like screwing orders and kicking some serious Ori butt,” he allowed.

“Well I talked to him yesterday and he said he thought he might have something, but he wasn't sure
what.”

“I'm gonna hope it's a big honkin' space gun then.”

“Ooh, if it is can we use it to blow up those stuffy, useless politicians?”

“Vala.”

Vala blinked. “What?” she asked, popped a piece of pie into her mouth. “We could always just blame those hydrant people everyone seems to be so worried about.”

Cameron let his fork drop into the middle of his casserole and cradled his head in his hands. He couldn't wait for Daniel to get back.

Chapter End Notes

Well, as promised I'm done writing parts 1 and 2 of Act II, so here's the short interlude. Thank you everyone on your tremendous support on this story so far: every comment and kudo makes me smile. :)

ATTENTION: This story will likely change titles when I post Act II. I honestly hate coming up with titles for my stories: by far my least favourite part of the writing process. But every story needs one in order to be posted. Usually I just wrack my brain until something somewhat suitable pops into my brain, but with this story I just couldn't come up with anything I liked and the one I've ended up using has always felt a bit awkward and too clunky. I suddenly had an epiphany the other day while bored at work and was rather annoyed at myself until I realized I actually could change the title of the story. So yeah, watch out for the title change.
Thanks everyone for the comments and kudos you've left on this story! It makes me happy to see that people are enjoying it. :) As you may have noticed, the title of the story has changed.

And now on to Act II! This is probably the least exciting act of the story, but necessary nonetheless. I set up a bunch of stuff for later and explain a bunch of other stuff... However, in my head I've dubbed parts 1 and 2 "Conversations around a kitchen table" (although the second one isn't actually at a kitchen table), so you're getting both parts at once.

GEARS

“I smell chocolate and walnuts,” Daniel declared with a pleased smile as he entered the kitchen.

“And meatballs, tomato sauce and pasta, I hope,” said Sam, raising an eyebrow as he looked up from the stove, where he was standing over a large saucepan.

“Yeah, yeah, that too,” Daniel waved him off as he bee-lined towards Cassie who was busy dropping balls of cookie dough onto a large cookie sheet and then flattening them with the bottom of a glass.

“This is for after lunch, Uncle Daniel,” said Cassie when he came to look over her shoulder.

“But I'm on vacation,” he whined.

“And coffee and chocolate are still not a food group.”

Daniel huffed and poured himself some still-steaming coffee before going to join Steve, Natasha and Clint at the spacious kitchen table. “Some days, I think you take after your mother a little too much.”

“My mom managed to intimidate ex-black ops Jack O'Neill and Uncle Murray, so good. I can only hope to do the same thing with my medical degree... once I have it and all.”

“I almost feel sorry for the poor marines already. Except that, well, they're marines.”

Sam burst out laughing. Daniel's eyes twinkled mischievously as he looked around the table. Natasha looked amused – in a way that reminded him of Teal'c as he'd been ten years ago – and Steve and Clint were chuckling.

“Your mom was a military doctor?” Sam asked Cassie.

“Air force,” she answered with a nod. “Doctor Janet Fraiser: she was the CMO at the base where Daniel works.”
Sam's eyebrows rose in surprise. “Janet Fraiser? As in five foot nothing spitfire with brown hair and a look that made generals freeze before weeping in jealousy?”

“Yep, that sounds like Janet,” Daniel answered, turning around in his seat. “You knew her?”

Sam smiled. “Yeah, I did my field medic training under her. Man, she was a slave-driver, but I sure learned a lot from her. The things she drilled into me stayed with me, and saved both my life and my patients’ lives more times than I can count.”

Daniel smiled. “Yeah, she was amazing like that.”

Suddenly, Sam frowned, looking between the two of them. “Was?” he asked carefully.

Daniel glanced to Cassie, took in her still hands and tense shoulders. He waited, wondering if she would answer or leave it to him.

“KIA,” Cassie finally whispered. She swallowed. “A couple of years ago. D-Daniel was there, he could probably tell you what happened.”

“She was in the field?”

“Emergency medical evac,” Daniel supplied, but refused to go on. Not here, not in front of Cassie. He knew that in some way she took comfort in knowing that thanks to Janet's sacrifice, there was a little girl in the world who would have the chance to know her father, but that didn't make the grief easier to bear. And she'd seen far too much of it for someone so young.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” said Sam softly. “She was a wonderful person, one of the best.”

Daniel looked down into the dark depths of his coffee cup. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cassie nod curtly and then hurry over to the oven when a timer went off. He took a deep drink of his coffee, savouring the hot bitter liquid on his tongue, let it wash away the sting of his own grief. Composed, he turned back to the rest of the table. The others looked back in a mixture of sympathy and understanding. He sighed, trying to think of some way to move the conversation onto a happier note.

Bruce did it for him when he walked into the kitchen. “You know, I think this is the first time this kitchen has smelt this good since I've lived here,” he said.

“And that is a sin,” said Sam. “An inexcusable sin, because this kitchen is awesome. Us mere mortals only dream of cooking in a kitchen like this.”

“Must've cost a fortune too,” Cassie added from where she was placing oven-fresh cookies onto a cooling rack. “Why bother when you're not going to use it?”

Bruce shrugged. “Tony never gets anything less than the best even if he's not using it.”

“He was probably secretly hoping one of us cooked,” said Natasha.

Clint snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that. I don't have the patience to read recepies, Natasha burns water and Steve grew up in the depression. The only one of us with any hope of being able to cook is Bruce.”

“Well, you're not altogether wrong,” said Bruce, looking amused. “I have learned quite a few dishes over the course of my travels, but it's not something I consider a hobby.”
“Hm, if we're still here tonight, I can make some mujadarra for dinner,” said Daniel thoughtfully.

“If?” said Clint. “You think that after handing Stark a brand new mysterious science project to play with he's going to just let you walk away? You'll be lucky if he lets you go home after your vacation's over.”

Daniel chuckled. “Well then I suppose I should go out and get supplies.”

“If there is something you require, I will be happy to arrange for it to be delivered to the tower.”

“Thanks, JARVIS,” said Daniel, looking in the direction of where he guessed at least one of the security cameras in the room was located. “But I was taught that gathering ingredients was just as much of a part of preparing the dish as the cooking itself. Besides, I have to go find some souvenirs anyway.”

“I understand, Daniel Jackson.”

Cassie put her now-empty bowl into the dishwasher. “Daniel doesn't cook often, but when he does it's totally worth it.”

“Looking forward to it,” said Sam. “Just to warn you though, super soldier over there's got a black hole in his stomach.”

Steve's face took on a slightly pink hue. “It's the serum,” he said.

Daniel nodded. “Ah, so you are Captain America. I thought so.”

Steve nodded.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to find Cassie grinning down at him. “You figured it out all on your own, I'm impressed.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Don't you start. Just because I spent my childhood with my nose in historical texts and learning dead languages doesn't mean I don't know people who read comic books.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh, like who?”

Daniel smirked. “Jack.”

Her eyes widened. “Really? As in he read comic books in general or Captain America comic books specifically?”

“Um, not sure how many other comic books he might've read, but he definitely had a large Captain America collection, which he then gave to his son. Which he then gave to Murray to give to his son, Ryac.”

“Wow, that's quite the, uh, journey those comic books have made. Do you know if Murray read them?”

Daniel shrugged. “If I'd come across Murray reading them by candlelight in his room at the base, I'm sure I would've been sworn to secrecy.”

Cassie giggled. “I think I've figured out what I'm going to get him for Christmas.”

“Whatever it is, you should get Steve to sign it for you,” said Clint.
Cassie's eyes lit up and she looked to Steve. “Oooh, would you please?”

Steve smiled. “Sure, no problem.”

“So, out of curiosity, just how accurate are the comic books?” Daniel asked. “I mean, obviously I'm not expecting most of them to be given how many of them there are, but I think I remember Jack saying that the first ones were published while you were still alive.”

Steve nodded. “I saw the first few editions after they came out.” He shrugged. “They got the basics right. I was a skinny, sickly kid from Brooklyn who tried to lie his way into the army because I wanted to help protect my country same as everyone else. Then I got lucky because Abraham Erskin saw me and offered me the chance. Still don't know how he knew, but he'd somehow figured out what I'd been up to, lying on my recruitment papers and all. I was injected with the super serum, Erskin was assassinated and then I spent nearly a year as a dancing monkey on a war bonds tour.”

“Sorry, you must get sick of repeating the story,” said Daniel quietly.

Steve gave him a sort of half-smile. “A little bit. The Jeffersonian did a pretty good job with their exhibit.”

“Hm, I'll have to go see it next time I'm in Washington.”

“Weren't you just in Washington?” Cassie asked him.

“Yes, and yes, I did go to the Jeffersonian, but Jack wasn't with me so I got to skip all the twentieth century military exhibits.”

The oven timer beeped and Cassie just shook her head as she went to swap a sheet of baked cookies for a sheet of unbaked ones. Daniel looked to Steve apologetically.

“Sorry, it's not that I don't think your contribution to history wasn't important or significant–”

Steve waved his apologies away. “Cassie already explained it to me. I'm less than two thousand years old, therefore that apparently makes me too young for you.” His eyes twinkled in amusement. “Quite frankly I spend enough time feeling too old in this century, so being 'too young' is a nice change.”

Daniel chuckled. “Fair enough. So you'll forgive me then for asking why there aren't more super soldiers out there. Given that it was a military-funded project in the first place, I would've expected it to have continued once they'd managed a successful experiment.”

“Oh they did,” Bruce answered him. “But no one's been able to recreate the results. The Hulk is actually the result of that research.”

“Huh, a bit of an extreme result though.”

“And yet, believe it or not, one of the more successful ones.”

Daniel's eyebrows rose. “Really?”

Bruce shrugged. “Well I haven't died because my DNA has destabilized nor have I suddenly regressed and developed genetic abnormalities and defects, so yes, marginally successful.”

“The Hulk is also significantly less of a monster than the Abomination,” Natasha added quietly.
"Yeah, but Emil Blonsky wasn't exactly the paragon of sanity before he was injected with the serum," Clint pointed out.

Daniel frowned. "But our science and understanding of genetics in particular has come a long way since the 1940s."

Bruce shrugged. "It's widely believed in the scientific community that Doctor Abraham Erskin did some last-minute adjustments to the formula the night before the experiment, but never wrote them down. You have to remember that, while constrained by the technology of his day, Erskin was leagues beyond everyone else in his field and had an intuitive understanding of genetics that most scientists today can't boast."

Daniel nodded thoughtfully.

"Erskin said the serum was designed to enhance a person's qualities: good became great and bad became evil," Steve added quietly.

Daniel frowned. "That doesn't sound very scientific. I mean, aren't 'good' and 'evil' defined by human culture and understanding in the first place? For instance, to early Christians demons were messengers, middle-men between Heaven and the earthly realm and in the Middle Ages that definition changed to mean the dark and malevolent creatures of Hell."

"I-I'm not sure..." said Steve, looking taken aback. "I know that other than me, the Red Skull was the only other successful super soldier and he was nothing less than pure evil."

"Then the serum is like a weapon: hand a bad man a gun and he'll kill people, hand a good man a gun and he'll protect them. Your goal from the start was to fight for your country, to protect people. His was to create the perfect Aryan race and the serum made him stronger, faster and maybe smarter than any human: the highest point of human evolution that he could conceive of. I don't think you really need a genius to figure out what was going to happen to the two of you."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Natasha nod thoughtfully. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," she said.

Daniel hoped his internal flinch wasn't noticeable. He took a breath and let it out.

"That doesn't really change the fact that Red Skull and Steve are the only two successful super soldiers in existence," Bruce pointed out.

"Three," Natasha corrected him quietly.

Daniel saw her exchange looks with Steve, saw raw grief flash across his face for a moment, before it was smothered beneath a neutral facade. He looked away, to where Cassie was carefully beginning to arrange a mountain of cookies onto a large red ceramic platter. He considered the problem as he watched her move the cookies one by one with a spatula.

"Yeah, three," Steve agreed quietly. "Although the Winter Soldier was Zola's masterpiece. He might not have been created with the same serum."

Natasha acknowledged his point with a nod of her head.

"The Winter Soldier?" Bruce asked.

"We'll explain later," Steve told him.
“What if you've been going about it the wrong way?” Daniel suddenly asked, his head still turned towards Cassie although his eyes not really seeing her. “What if it wasn't Erskin's formula that made the difference?”

There was a moment of silence. “What do you mean?” Bruce asked with a puzzled frown.

“It was just Erskin's formula and Howard Stark's vita rays,” said Steve with an equally puzzled frown.

Daniel turned around and looked Steve in the eyes. “And you,” he said simply.

He turned to Bruce. “What if Erskin got lucky in choosing Steve, not entirely realizing he'd hit a sort of genetic jackpot? I mean, the man died right after the experiment so we really have no idea whether any subsequent attempts would've been successful even for him.”

“A genetic anomaly,” Bruce breathed, understanding lightening his face.

“Are there any samples of Steve's blood from before the serum?” Natasha asked after a moment's pause.

Bruce shook his head. “No. That's been one of the biggest hampers on the research all along, that we have no way of comparing how exactly the serum changed his blood. There are some odd genetic markers in his DNA now, but it's difficult to tell whether they were there before or not. Admittedly, when Betty and I had been conducting our research on the serum with the blood samples we had, we just generally assumed that anything unusual was a result of the serum itself...”

Bruce trailed off, although it was clear his mind was still busy processing. Clint began to grin after a few moments of silence.

“I think you might've just blown his mind, Doctor Jackson,” he said.

Natasha's lips quirked slightly, but then she looked to Daniel with a curious expression. “Do you have any idea of what sort of genetic anomaly we're talking about here?”

Daniel shrugged. “Sorry. I'm good at brainstorming and throwing out ideas, but this is generally the part where I sit back and let the experts in the field take over.”

“It sounds like a pretty good guess though,” said Clint. “What do you think, Cap?”

Steve looked like he'd bitten into a lemon. “I'm not entirely sure.”

Sam suddenly appeared with a stack of pasta plates. “Whatever,” he said, placing them down in front of Steve with a clear gesture to distribute them. “Me, I'm not entirely sure I want more super soldiers running around the world. And I'm pretty sure we've got bigger problems than unlocking the secrets of the super soldier formula. Hey JARVIS, could you let the others know lunch is being served?”

“Of course, Mister Wilson, it will be my pleasure.”

“Thanks man.”

“You're very welcome.”

Daniel smiled at the amusement in the AI's voice as he took the utensils Cassie set in front of him.
and began to distribute them. Several minutes later, Phil Coulson, Skye and May entered the kitchen, a disgruntled-looking Tony Stark trailing behind them. He stopped just inside the kitchen and blinked.

“It smells like food in here,” he said.

“That's what a kitchen's supposed to smell like,” said Sam dryly. “Now stop gaping and find a seat.”

“Are we going to all fit?” Coulson asked, eyeing the table warily. It was a large table, true enough, but it didn't look nearly large enough to fit them all.

“There's a dining room just down the hall,” said Tony, looking at the table with a similar look of distrust.

“We'll just get Captain America to squish up and there'll be plenty of room for everyone,” said Sam.

Steve rolled his eyes.

“No, seriously though,” Sam continued. “I've seen that dining room: it's all crystal chandelier, fancy wooden table with gold trim and paintings on the wall. I feel like I need to be wearing a suit and tie just to walk into the damn room and I am not wearing a suit and tie for spaghetti and meatballs! We're eating in here.”

Tony raised an eyebrow in amusement and then went to find a sliver of room at the kitchen table. Lunch was a loud, boisterous affair with light-hearted conversation. And a few thrown meatballs, but that was quickly put a stop to by Natasha, who stared both Clint and Tony down until they popped the meatballs they were holding into their mouths and picked up their forks again. Bruce and Daniel ignored them as they compared stories of their travels around the world.

When the last of them (Steve) had finally finished eating – he'd learned to stop feeling embarrassed by how much he consumed and so was able to easily roll his eyes at Tony's comments. Especially once Cassie told Tony to knock it off and threatened to withhold cookies if he didn't.

“So, Daniel, you seem to have spent a lot of time in the desert,” Steve heard Coulson say when they'd sat back down after having cleared the table.

“Yes, I have,” Daniel answered. A small, wistful smile appeared on his face and Steve felt his own heart echo the longing in the other man's eyes. “Some of the happiest times of my life were spent in the desert. It's beautiful.”

On the other side of the table, Tony shivered. “I only like sand when there's a beach attached,” he said before taking a long drink of his coffee.

Daniel shrugged.

“Is that where you died?” Coulson asked.

Tony sprayed coffee all over Bruce, causing enough commotion that likely no one but Steve heard Cassie's soft gasp as she paled, her eyes widening in horror. Daniel froze momentarily, but quickly shrugged off his surprise and looked to Coulson with narrowed eyes.

“Where I died?” he repeated. “I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I do have a pulse.”
Coulson smiled blandly at him, his eyes sharp. “And yet you were declared dead by the military.”

“Obviously, that was done in error.”

“And you didn't notice for an entire year?”

Steve looked to Natasha and saw her watching Daniel carefully. “I was out of the country and didn't notice until I got back.”

“Hm. And the second time?”

“Second time?” Tony asked, his voice still a little hoarse from his coughing fit. “What exactly are you saying: that he's a zombie with pulse-control issues? Also, like you can talk: you're still officially dead.”

Steve heard Clint snort and out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed Natasha's lips quirk in amusement. Coulson's expression didn't change, his eyes still locked on Daniel. Who was meeting his eyes straight-on, the friendly, mild-mannered man gone and replaced with a hardness Steve recognized. Now he looked like a soldier, someone hardened by experience. Beside him, Cassie was pale and visibly shaking with nerves, but clearly trying to keep a brave face on. Her hands weren't visible, but one of them was angled forward just enough for him to be able to imagine it clutching her uncle's for support.

“What I'm saying is that most people don't get more than one funeral, let alone three,” said Coulson.

“And I don't see how that's any business of yours,” said Daniel.

Now Coulson's lips curled into a bland smile that didn't reach his eyes. “I tend to make things my business.”

Daniel looked at him for a moment and then his gaze swept over to Skye next to him and May, who hadn't sat down again, but was leaning against the kitchen counter just out of his line of sight. Steve wondered if this was his subtle way of pointing out that he was aware of what they were doing. Daniel's gaze returned to Coulson, his eyes sharper than before.

“You weren't at the museum by accident,” he said, and it wasn't a question. “Who are you?”

“Phil Coulson, I believe we've already been introduced.”

“No, that's your name.” Daniel paused for a moment. “Who are you? If you were NID this charade wouldn't be necessary. The Trust wouldn't be bothered playing games like this. The CIA generally stays out of our way and we're on pretty good terms with the Russians these days, although I suppose you can never be completely sure.”

“We're not Russian. We're SHIELD.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow at the response.

“What's Project Blue Book?” Skye suddenly asked.

“Classified,” Daniel snapped, his expression darkening. His gaze swept around the table. “So was all of this an elaborate set-up? Were all of you at the Met just to get to me?”

Clint sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Nat and I were, although not with these guys,” he
said, gesturing vaguely towards Coulson and his people. “Steve and Sam were honestly just taking
the day off to go to the museum, and Tony and Bruce didn't even know any of us were in town.”

Daniel nodded and some of the tension left his shoulders, although he was clearly still on his guard.
Steve sympathized with him; he remembered vividly what it had been like when the Triskellion
gone from being a safe haven to enemy territory within the blink of an eye.

“We know you work on Project Blue Book,” said Coulson calmly.

“Yeah, I figured as much,” said Daniel dryly. “You wouldn't be asking me otherwise.”

“We know about the SGC,” Skye tried again.

Daniel looked at her and then smirked. “No, you don't. You wouldn't be asking me if you did.” His
face smoothed out and he looked back to Coulson. “You may have looked at what you could find
of the personnel roster and decided that the head geek was a weak link you could exploit, but I've
been intimidated and questioned by people far more terrifying than you are. So unless you plan to
go through with the threat of those knives May's holding, we're done here.”

“Hey, uh, yeah that's not going to happen,” Tony interjected. He glared at Coulson. “Agent, I like
you, but I've gotten really good at ejecting unwanted SHIELD agents and since that whole
Washington kerfuffle, I've added a few extra features to my security. Daniel is my guest.” A beat
passed. “Also, Bruce's eyes are turning green.”

All eyes were instantly on Doctor Banner, whose eyes were indeed glowing bright green – and
several green veins stood out prominently on his neck.

“Dammit,” he said though clenched teeth before standing and rushing out of the room.

“Is he okay?” Daniel asked, sounding worried.

“Yeah, he's fine,” said Tony. “The Other Guy's been pretty close to the surface ever since Bruce
had to go back on the run after SHIELD fell and Ross was able to start coming after him again.
Bruce'll get it under control again, it just takes time.”

Daniel nodded. “And the Hulk's understandably afraid that if he gets comfortable in safety again,
that it'll just be snatched away from him. It's probably his way of keeping an eye on you to make
sure you're here and safe.”

Tony stared at him. “I hadn't thought of it like that.”

Daniel shrugged. “It's a perfectly natural response.”

isn't it?”

“The world's always in danger,” he answered. “Too many hotheads with weapons that do too much
damage.”

“True, but that's not what I meant.” She paused and Steve could watch her assessing Daniel. Daniel
looked back at her calmly, waiting. Steve was certain he forgot to breathe for a few moments. And
then Natasha blinked and in the split-second it took for her eyes to open and close, her demeanor
changed. Her face became blank, her eyes just a little duller, everything about her just a little
sharper.
She became Natasha Romanov, deadly assassin. For most people, this would be getting into character, but Steve knew that for her, this was the truth. It was everything else that was the mask.

“I was looking for something in the Pentagon last week and overheard an interesting conversation,” she said. “What are the Ori?”

Daniel blinked. “Classified,” he said after a pause, sounding much less hostile than he had when speaking to Coulson. In fact, he almost sounded regretful. Beside him, Cassie looked confused.

So it seemed she knew something about the project Daniel and her mother had been working on, but not nearly everything. Or maybe nothing current. Although, if Daniel had really had several funerals, then she'd probably been to them. Steve suddenly felt bad for having been a part of dredging up those memories for her.

“You know we specialize in saving the world,” said Clint softly. “If the world's in danger, we want to help save it. It's what we do.”

Daniel took a deep breath. “Thank you. I – let me think about it.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe I'll go get my shopping done this afternoon. There are a few things I need to consider.”

“And souvenirs to buy,” Cassie added.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Yes, God forbid I forget to bring Vala her souvenirs.”

Cassie giggled, although there was a slight hysterical edge to it. Steve smiled at her reassuringly. Whatever was going on, she at least was a civilian, blameless except by association. And Daniel... Daniel at least hadn't lied to them. Steve could respect that; he'd run covert missions both during the war and in the twenty-first century. Perhaps not in this case, not when so much seemed to be at stake, but then again he also didn't know any details.

“Well, then I guess I'll see you all later,” Daniel said as he stood.

“Yeah, later man,” said Sam. “I'll be looking forward to that, uh, mujapiri or whatever it was called.”

“Mujadarra,” Daniel corrected with an amused smile. “It's an Egyptian green lentil dish. A worker on one of the digs I was on once showed me how to make it.”

“Green lentils?” Tony asked. He made a face. “That sounds healthy. I'm not sure I want to be a part of that.”

“We promise there'll be more cookies,” said Cassie.

Tony grinned. “My hero.”

No one said a word until they heard the elevator doors close.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked.

“Doctor Jackson and Cassandra Fraiser are both currently on their way to their rooms, sir.”

May walked up to the table to stand beside Coulson. “Are we really just going to let them go?”

“Yes,” Steve answered her. “We are.”
“He's testing us,” Natasha added, sounding like she approved.

“Yeah, we might've saved New York, but he hasn't really got any reason to trust us,” said Clint.

“But what if he contacts his superiors?” Skye asked. “He's gotta know a few people who'd love to know where we are.”

Coulson nodded. “It's why I sent Trip back to the quinjet this morning. Just in case we need to call for an extraction.”

“I'd say he's got good cause not to trust you,” said Tony with narrowed eyes aimed at Couslon. “Right now I sort of trust him more than I trust you, but then again I know all about the bugs you planted in his room. Also, were you planning on telling us about the tablet?”

“Sir, if I may interrupt: Doctor Jackson took a call earlier today from an individual he called 'Jack.'”

“That'll probably be Lieutenant General Jack O'Neill,” said Natasha.

“Again,” Clint added.

“I take it you recorded the conversation, JARVIS?” Coulson asked.

“Indeed, Director Coulson, I did. Regrettably, however, I was unable to discern most of the caller's side of the conversation.”

That was when Bruce walked back into the kitchen. He looked around the table, his expression darkening at the empty seats. “Where's Daniel?” he asked.

“Don't worry, he and Cassie went out to do some shopping,” Steve assured him.

“Alone?”

“Yes, alone,” Coulson confirmed. “It's an act of faith on our part, to prove that we can be trusted.”

“Well, as alone as anyone can be in the middle of downtown Manhattan with hundreds of video cameras JARVIS can hack into and monitor,” said Tony. “You'll let us know if our friend Danny does anything strange, right J?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Excellent! Have a seat Brucie, and J, hit us with that phone conversation.”
MOVEMENT

Natasha reclined casually on the couch, reading Harry Potter. It was an effective way to keep an eye on Coulson and his newest agent, Skye, who had each claimed themselves a large padded armchair and were tapping away at their laptops. Agent May was in the gym with Steve and Sam, and Clint had vanished. He was probably napping somewhere.

The elevator chimed from down the hall. Natasha turned the page. Across from her, Director Coulson barely twitched. Skye froze and looked up, craning her neck towards the hallway, from where they could hear footsteps approaching along with the rustling of shopping bags.

“Welcome back, Doctor Jackson,” Coulson called to him without taking his eyes off the screen.

She heard Daniel pause in front of the kitchen door and finally looked up. He was holding a large canvas bag in one hand that looked like it was stuffed to the brim with groceries – Natasha could see tomatoes gleaming orange-red on the top of the pile – and several regular white plastic bags in the other printed with logos she couldn't make out because of the creases and waves in the bag.

“Thank you, Director Coulson,” said Daniel. “Hello, Skye, Natasha.”

Natasha nodded to him in greeting, before turning back to her book. She'd perfected the art of reading while watching someone a long time ago.

“Your niece isn't with you?” she heard Coulson ask.

“No, she got a text from a university friend who lives in New York. Turns out she's leaving to go visit her grandparents in Portland tomorrow, so they decided to meet up for dinner and drinks this evening.”

“That's convenient.”

“Hm, yes actually it is. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm just going to put the food into the kitchen.”

Natasha hid her smile. Whether or not the story was real didn't entirely matter; Daniel had convinced Cassie to stay away from the tower for the evening, which meant that either he didn't want to put her in danger by revealing classified information around her, or else he wanted to keep her out of the line of fire when he refused to. Either way, he clearly wasn't concerned for his own safety. Knowing he had a tracker chip embedded beneath his skin, it made sense, because the Air Force could find him anywhere. Having Cassie out of the tower also gave her the freedom to call 'Uncle Jack' should he need her to. Natasha wondered if they'd worked something out. Was Daniel going to call her or send her a text letting her know if things went smoothly?

It was a simple strategy, but if the Avengers or SHIELD wanted to go after Cassie they'd be doing so in public, with witnesses. Natasha enjoyed being right, and Doctor Daniel Jackson was turning out to be quite the interesting person indeed.

After ten minutes of movement in the kitchen, Daniel emerged again and headed up to his room to deposit the rest of his purchases.
A few minutes later, a freshly-showered Sam came out of the elevator. Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. “Give up already?” she asked him, idly turning a page.

“Yeah, I think I'm done trying to keep up with a super soldier for the day,” he said as he eased himself into the armchair next to Natasha's couch. “Also, there's something really weird about watching you read a children's book.”

“It was in Stark's library and I remember Clint saying once that I should read it.”

“And? What do you think?”

“There are too many children in it.”

Sam laughed. “Well, yeah, that's sort of the point.”

Steve and Agent May came down from the gym an hour later, smiling and relaxed. Even Coulson raised an eyebrow at the easy camaraderie that seemed to have suddenly sprung up between them as they headed into the kitchen for water (and probably food, in Steve's case). Daniel had already come back down again and was in the kitchen, creating a plethora of delicious smells. Sam and Skye had joined him and the sounds of pots and pans were accompanied by occasional laughter.

The elevator dinged just as the other end of the couch dipped under Steve's weight, glass of orange juice in one hand a plate containing a sandwich in the other. Natasha frowned, listening closely as the sound of wheels and sharp, precise taps of two sets of high heels exited the elevator. She closed her book and set it onto the end table beside her as she slid her legs around to sit upright.

If Pepper Potts was at all surprised by the amount of people in her living room, she didn't show it. Beside her, Maria Hill looked equally unsurprised, although her eyes widened when she noticed Agent May relaxing by the kitchen doorway, and then scanned the room until she found Coulson's back.

Pepper's eyes scanned the group and smiled pleasantly. “Hello, I didn't know Tony had anyone over,” she said, the question clear in her voice. Her smile became a bit more genuine when she saw Natasha. “It's good to see you again, Natasha.”

Natasha smiled. “It's good to see you too, Pepper. We were a bit unexpected by everyone, including each other. We just happened to meet at the Met yesterday before it was attacked.”

Pepper frowned slightly. “So are we,” Steve readily agreed. “It would've been a shame for anything to have been damaged.” Pepper's eyes snapped to the blond and he stood with a friendly smile and walked around the coffee table to hold out his hand in greeting. “Steve Rogers, ma'am.”

Her eyes widened slightly in recognition. “It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Captain,” she said with a warm smile as she shook his hand.

“You as well, Ms. Potts.” He let go of her hand and stepped away. “Maria, I'm glad you're doing well,” he then said with a nod to the former deputy-director.

“Hello Steve,” Maria Hill said with a quirk of her lips. “What exactly were you doing at the museum yesterday?”

Steve shrugged. “Attempting to take a day off. Apparently, Sam's mom thought we needed one.”
“Ah, that's right, he has family in Harlem, doesn't he?”

“Yes he does.”

Maria Hill nodded and then looked to the back of Coulson's head. “And I suppose I should congratulate you on your promotion, Director.”

As though waiting for his cue, Coulson smoothly stood up and turned to the two women with a polite smile. “Thank you, Maria. I hear the military's finally stopped hounding you.”

“Yes, they have.”

The suitcase Pepper had been pulling behind her clattered to the ground. “Phil?” she said, shock written across her face.

After the emotional reunion, after Pepper had introduced herself to the people in the kitchen and left to find Tony – no doubt to give him a piece of her mind about failing to mention Coulson's not-quite-dead status and the team of super heroes and spies staying at the tower – Maria Hill grabbed Coulson and dragged him to the side of the room. It was far enough from the kitchen to not be overheard, but still within Natasha and Steve's hearing.

“I didn't think involving the Avengers was a part of your plan?” she said calmly. It wasn't quite a demand.

Coulson shrugged. “It was a last-minute decision,” he said. “Romanov and I happened to be after the same target and then Cap made first contact with him without even realizing it. I could've pulled back, but then we would've lost the target.”

Hill frowned. “And where's the target now?”

“In the kitchen making dinner.”

Hill blinked and then frowned. “Your target is in Stark's kitchen making dinner.”

“Some sort of Egyptian green lentil dish, apparently.”

Hill brought a hand up to rub at one of her temples. “Does this target know he's a target?”

“He's guessed as much.”

“Great. And naturally, he's probably a security risk Stark didn't bother telling me about.”

“Tony has JARVIS monitoring him and he's probably not dangerous so long as we don't provoke him,” said Natasha.

Hill looked at her wryly. “I really wish that was as comforting as it sounds like it should be.” She shook her head and looked between them. “Who's the target?”

“An Air Force civilian consultant named Doctor Daniel Jackson,” Coulson replied smoothly, but Natasha had known him long enough to detect the glint of speculation in his eyes as he watched Maria Hill's reactions. “We're investigating him and the project he's working on for possible ties to Hydra.” He paused and then, almost casually, asked: “Have you ever heard of Project Blue Book?”

Hill's reaction was instantaneous. Her eyes snapped up to Coulson's and she paled. “Leave Project Blue Book alone, Coulson.”
Coulson exchanged a look with Agent May. “So you've heard of it.”

“Yes, and no I don't know a lot of particulars.” Hill paused and looked around. “Fury knew more, but he kept the information close to his chest. I asked him once and he said they were dealing with things that didn't concern SHIELD and he was happy to leave them to it, because he had enough problems of his own. I do know that they take their security very seriously. There've been rumours about people disappearing after getting their hands on leaked information about the project.”

Natasha looked to Steve, who looked back with a worried expression.

“I've heard those rumours too,” Coulson agreed. “We're trying to figure out if the project has any ties to Hydra.”

“I... I suppose it's possible. Like I said, I don't know exactly what they're up to down there, but I do know it's multi-disciplinary in a way no other US military project has ever been and in recent years they've come to agreements of co-operation with foreign governments, including the Russians and Chinese. They've also been snatching experts and scientists from all over the world, to the point that SHIELD had been having a difficult time recruiting recently. It's probably at least partially how Hydra managed to get so many of their own people into SHIELD.”

“Really?” Coulson blinked in surprise. “I wasn't aware we were having recruitment issues.”

Hill shrugged. “It wasn't a major cause for concern yet, but slightly unsettling for the future.”

“Hm, well I had one of my insiders look into potential links between Project Blue Book and Hydra and they came up with nothing. In fact, they said they had to stop asking around because they were afraid they were actually bringing the project to the attention of Hydra's higher ups.”

“Just be careful, Phil,” she said. Then she smirked. “And good luck, Director.”

“Thank you.”

Maria Hill was half-way to the elevator when she turned around again. “Oh, and tell Mockingbird to look me up once she'd done with her assignment; we haven't done a martini and spa night in a while.”

Coulson made a pained face. “And that right there was more information than I wanted to know. I'll be sure to pass on the message.”

Daniel insisted on dinner first.

It wasn't a stalling technique as such. Nor did he truly need more time to gather his thoughts. Yes, part of him was still unsure of the wisdom of betraying the SGC (for he was nothing if not honest and he couldn't bring himself to call this anything less than a betrayal to all those who had lived and breathed and bled with him beneath the mountain), but another part of him couldn't think of a better way. And he wasn't going to give them the whole truth, only what was necessary. He would go through with his plans alone if he had to – in fact it would probably be easier – but there was at least one of them whose help he suspected he might need.

He sat at a table – this time the one in the dining room, because Pepper Potts was a very persuasive
woman who didn't take foolishness lightly – with a group of people who would no doubt react strongly to what he had to tell them. And dinner was not the place for strife; his Abydonian family had taught him that. Though he'd been with them for only a year, he held dear the lessons they'd taught him.

Kasuf's number one rule was that any arguments, any grievances were left behind when they sat down to share food and drink. Only when the food had been cleared away were they allowed to once again be taken out. Sha're had also embraced that rule and Daniel attempted to do the same whenever he could.

People were always so much happier after a good, warm-hearted meal.

And so he waited until food and dishes from dinner had been cleared away and stacked into the dishwasher and the mound of pastries he'd purchased at a little middle-eastern bakery were set out onto the table along with coffee, tea and wine. Even then, he waited until a sizable dent had been made into the pastries and Pepper Potts – having most likely sensed the underlying anxious tension – yawned loudly and declared she was going to head off to bed early.

Daniel followed her out and detoured into the kitchen, where he re-filled his coffee, needing the bitter warmth and caffeine infusion to give him strength. Then he grabbed the Target bag he'd placed next to the doorway and took out the item inside.

“What's that?” Clint asked when Daniel walked into the dining room with it.

Daniel held it up. “An Egyptian puzzle box,” he said and then placed his coffee cup down and began to solve it. A few minutes passed, during which the Avengers watched him intently.

“I'm developing a new appreciation for the Ancient Egyptians,” said Skye. “That's like the ancient equivalent of an electronic lock.”

“Yeah, an electronic lock that needs a secret handshake to open,” Sam added.

“I could probably build an electronic lock like that,” said Tony thoughtfully.

Finally, Daniel got it open and took out the small device inside. It was made of dark metal and looked a bit like a high-tech mushroom. Tony practically surged out of his seat to get a closer look.

“That had better not be a bomb,” said Agent May as she eyed the device.

Daniel chuckled. “No, it's not.” He looked up. “JARVIS, I'm sorry, but I can't risk this conversation being recorded in any way. This isn't going to harm you or anyone else and we'll still be able to hear you. All anyone has to do to talk to you is go into the hall.”

“Understood, Doctor Jackson.”

Daniel pressed down and a row of small red lights came on.

“Daniel, what is it?” Steve asked, looking at the device warily. His tone wasn't hostile, but it was firm, unwilling to back down until he had an answer.

“It's an anti-surveillance device,” said Daniel. “Basically we're now in a bubble that no one, whether in person, or via electronics, can see or hear into. I mean, they can physically see us if they're for instance, standing out in the hall, but they wouldn't be able to read lips or emotions.”

Coulson raised an eyebrow. “That's handy. And it doesn't disrupt the surveillance?”
“No, any microphones and/or cameras in the room are still working just fine. They just won't be able to pick up anything.”

“No kidding,” said Steve. “Does it work for phone taps?”

Daniel thought about that for a moment. “I don't see why not... although I'm not a hundred percent sure it's been tested for that.”

A thoughtful silence followed. Tony was the first to break. “Okay, Dannyboy, we gave you time, now what's the big secret?” he asked, doing a very bad job of pretending to be asking only out of boredom. Daniel winced at the nickname.

“Wait,” Sam interrupted whatever Daniel was going to answer. He met Daniel's eyes seriously. “Just so we're all clear about this: we're talking treason here, right? I know a bit about how some of these confidentiality agreements work and by telling us, you're committing treason, right?”

Daniel paused and then nodded slowly. “Yes, after this is all over and they find out I've told you I could be arrested and then executed for treason.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Tony and Skye seemed to be the only ones shocked by the news, the others nodding at the news in grim, unhappy silence.

“They won't seriously execute you if you end up saving the world, will they?!” said Skye, her eyes wide. Daniel smiled at her; he almost remembered being that young.

Daniel shrugged noncommitally. “No I don't think they'll actually execute me, not if my actions end up saving the world...” His lips quirked into a wry smile. “Generals don't like looking like idiots and tend to be willing to retrospectively bend rules or impose slap-on-the-wrist punishments if they want to cover up how much you've upstaged them.”

“Better to ask forgiveness than permission,” said Steve with a nod. “They did the same thing after I saved the 107th: cut orders for the mission and then suddenly promoted me to a full captain despite the fact that I was completely unqualified.”

Sam blinked and looked at his friend. “You weren't a captain?”

Steve looked to him in amusement. “Captain America was a stage name. How exactly do you think I managed to get the field experience to become an officer while prancing on stage selling war bonds? I'd only barely made it through boot-camp when I was injected.”

Sam opened his mouth to protest and then closed it. “Huh. I'd never thought about it like that. Wow. I guess it's real lucky you were hiding a tactical genius under that serum-enhanced physic.”

Steve shrugged. Daniel chuckled.

“Either way, I'll manage,” he said. “I've made a few enemies over the years, but I have allies as well and I've been with the program since pretty much the beginning. I may not be indispensable, but I don't think I'm someone they can afford to just throw away either. Besides, it's not like you're going to just let it go, is it?”

Skye had the decency to look chagrined. She looked to Coulson, who cooling stated “No, we're not.”
Daniel nodded and he placed his coffee cup down on the table before folding his hands over each other and leaning on them as he looked around the table, his face determined and brooking no place for argument.

“You should know that there's still a big 'if' in front of 'saving the world' at this point. I don't entirely know what I've found yet. I mean, whatever it is, it'll no doubt be a remarkable find, but whether or not it'll hold the key to saving Earth is another matter entirely.”

“But you have an idea of what you've found,” said Bruce, his eyes sharp.

Daniel grinned. “Probably more than you do to be honest.”

Tony scoffed. “I highly doubt that.”

“So you haven't found a rough description of a device that takes power from the exact zero point of space then? A theoretically endless supply of energy?”

Tony froze, his eyes slowly narrowing. “Theoretically, yes. Your friends seem to be keeping you well-informed.”

“Well, I've sort of had front-row seats to a lot of their discoveries. Also, it helps that one of my closest friends is the former head of R&D at Area 51.”

“Area 51,” said Clint. “Area 51 is actually a thing?!”

“I have clearly not been digging deep enough into government records,” said Tony.

Steve sighed. “What exactly is Area 51?”

“It's the Holy Grail of all conspiracy theorists,” Skye answered him, her eyes wide and becoming more excited by the second. “Where all the top-secret projects and experiments the military doesn't want anyone to know about hide. Where they have alien corpses and half-dissected alien spaceships and weird mutant strains of killer bees and illegal cloning programs and...”

Skye trailed off as she noticed the way everyone was looking at her.

“Someone was definitely an X-Files fan,” Clint muttered.

“After everything you've seen at SHIELD, should you really be getting this excited about Area 51?” Coulson asked, not bothering to hide his amusement.

“Er, no, probably not.” Skye looked sheepish for a moment. “But it's Area 51! Do you realize how many people I've known over the years who would give their firstborn just for confirmation that it exists?”

Daniel cleared his throat. “So, for the record, Area 51 is tech only, so sorry but no alien corpses. Or mutant killer bees. And no alien spaceships either.” He waited for a beat. “I'm pretty sure they moved those elsewhere. There might be pieces of alien spaceships, but nothing recognizable.”

“You are enjoying this way too much,” Tony grumbled.

Daniel grinned. “Yeah, just a bit.”

Then he sighed, the grin sliding from his face. He brought a hand up to rub at his temple. There was a dull throbbing starting up behind his eyes: between lack of sleep and stress, it was difficult to tell which was the exact cause. Probably a combination of both. He tried to remember if he'd
brought his Goa'uld hand device-strength pain killers with him.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was getting a bit ahead of myself there.” He took a deep breath and looked back to his avid audience. “Okay, so this is a bit out of order, but I know you'll want to know so I might as well start with it. New York: the Chitauri Attack.”

The group stiffened.

“What about it?” Tony growled out.

“We could've helped. We weren't given the option.”

“What?!”

“You were sidelined in the name of secrecy,” Natasha whispered.

Daniel froze. “Yes, how do you know?” He frowned. “In fact, I think those might've been my exact words.”

“They were.” She tilted her head to the side as she watched him. “I told you I overheard a conversation.”

“I thought that door was sound-proof...”

“It wasn't when I walked by.”

“Ookay... I'll have to let Jack know that the next time I see him... assuming he gives me the chance. Yes, that's pretty much exactly what happened. The IOA – that's the International Oversight Advisory Committee – gave in to the World Council's demands to take the lead on the situation because, well, mostly because they're really just a bunch of bureaucratic cowards and were too afraid to deal with the aftermath of the world finding out about our project. They and the Pentagon ordered the base into lockdown, blackout conditions. I'm not even sure what bullshit lie they fed to the general, or if they even bothered. Now, while lockdown isn't exactly an everyday occurrence, it happens often enough that everyone's just learnt to go about their business unless an order from the general tells them otherwise.”

He took a deep breath.

“We were in lockdown for just over twelve hours. Then lockdown was lifted and people started to head home... and they heard the news. Believe me, no one was happy. Especially once the rumour about the nuclear bomb the World Council had decided to use spread around the base. See we have... experimental aircraft that could've flown circles around those Chitauri and blasted the big whale things out of the sky. Not to mention that we've got the world's foremost expert on wormhole physics on staff.”

“And we had the Avengers,” said Coulson, for once unable to keep the shock off his face. “Six extraordinary individuals, but still only six against an army.”

Daniel nodded.

“The world's foremost expert on wormhole physics?” Bruce asked.

“Doctor Colonel Samantha Carter,” Daniel answered and then added dismissively, “You may have heard Cassie refer to her as Aunt Sam.”
“That name does sound familiar...” said Tony.

“I consulted her work heavily when I was studying wormholes,” said Bruce. “Although she was wrong about a wormhole only letting in matter in one direction.”

Daniel shrugged. “Yeah, she's got theories on why that worked for Tony with the Chitauri's wormhole.”

“I'll bet she does,” Clint interrupted. “Can we get back to the topic though? Like this Project Blue Book thing or the SGC or whatever it's actually called?”

Daniel's lips quirked. “Project Blue Book is sort of an umbrella name for the entire project. The SGC is where the project initially started, but it's since expanded and there are a number of facilities and side-projects associated with it now. For instance, Area 51 isn't a part of Project Blue Book, except for certain areas and specific research projects. We also have several engineering sites dedicated to working on our experimental aircraft and... other facilities, including a few things we've contracted out to civilian research and development companies.”

Tony frowned. “You don't have anything at Stark Industries,” he said, although it sounded like a question.

“You don't work with the US military anymore.”

“Ah. Right.”

“Anyway, I just want you to know that I believe in this project. I think it's the most amazing thing the human race has ever done.”

“If it's so great, why is the IOA so intent on keeping it secret?” Steve asked.

Daniel sighed, pausing to think of the best way to describe it. “One of our earliest detractors was Senator Kinsley—"

“—Met him,” said Tony. “Hated him. He was an ass... and then he disappeared. Wait. Did you guys have anything to do with that?”

“Uh, sort of. I mean, we didn't have him killed – that was partially his own fault – but if he hadn't been involved with the project he wouldn't have died. Anyway, he once called the project Pandora's Box and it sort of is. At the time we weren't quite as big and hadn't really expanded into as much of the non-weapons research, making us a huge drain on resources that someone like Kinsley couldn't see any viable use for. And starting up the project came with dangerous consequences.”

“Like the Ori,” said Natasha.

Daniel nodded. “Like the Ori.” He took a deep breath. “The Ori are gods. Or rather, they have set themselves up as gods. What they actually are is a very advanced race of aliens that had managed to evolve to the point where they could leave this universe and ascend to a higher plane of existence in non-corporeal form. They're not the only ones that have done so, but they discovered that they gained power through belief, through faith and so they set themselves up as gods. When we came into contact with them, their first question was if we believed in the Ori. We – sorry, no I answered that no, we'd never even heard of them.”

Daniel smiled bitterly. “So they gathered their followers, commanded them to build ships, and launched a crusade. Their followers, the people we're facing all come from Medieval-level societies, but the weapons and technology they've been given is so far beyond us that nothing we,
or our allies, have been able to throw at them has managed to do anything significant. We've managed to slow them down, destroyed a few of their ships, but the damages we've taken have been high. And now we have confirmation that they're on their way to Earth with at least five ships and the SGC has been stalled ever since SHIELD fell and Hydra was exposed.”

“They want to root out any Hydra infiltration,” said Steve. “But they're choosing one threat over another.”

“Exactly!” Daniel couldn't take it anymore, he shoved his chair backwards almost violently as he stood, running a hand through his hair as he began to pace.

“The problem is that when it comes down to it, Hydra almost doesn't matter. They're an insignificant threat at this point. It's not that we don't have any weapons, any means to defend ourselves, but what we have won't be enough. Sam and her team are working on something that could work as a defence, but it's not finished yet and we have no idea how long-term it'll work for when they do get it to work.”

“Not to mention that even if Hydra has infiltrated you, it's not like they're going to work against you on this,” Natasha added.

“Can't take over the world if someone bigger and badder has already taken it over,” said Sam. “Damn.”

“Hang on, if they haven't made it to Earth yet, how do you know how big of a threat they are?” Skye asked.

“They've been taking their time getting here and we've watched as planet after planet has fallen to them.”

“Yeah, but how?!” said Tony.

Daniel put his hands into his pockets and rocked backwards onto his heels. “Ever heard of a show called Wormhole X-treme?”

“Yup, love that show,” said Clint.

“I've seen it,” said Skye.

“I think I've seen parts of it,” said Tony. “That's the one with the people walking through wormholes to other planets right?”

“Yeah, my mom loved that show,” said Sam. “Was really sad when it went off the air. She cried when Doctor– hang on.”

“Daniel, exactly what does SGC stand for?” Coulson asked shrewdly.

Daniel grinned. “Stargate Command. Martin Lloyd, the guy who came up with the idea for Wormhole X-treme and wrote the original scripts, is actually from another planet.”

“You're shitting me,” said Clint, gaping. “You're fucking shitting me. That thing is real?!”

“Yup,” Daniel agreed, popping the 'p'. “Or possibly no, possibly you've just been watching waay too much sci-fi; it's all just make-believe you know.”

They were all silent, until Agent May smirked. “That's quite the clever cover,” she said. “I'm
impressed."

“So am I,” said Coulson. “Hiding in plain sight and setting up something that makes any conspiracy theorists that get close and start talking look like fools.”

“To be fair, it wasn't our idea,” said Daniel with a shrug. “The thing with Marty is... complicated.”

“How would it even work?” Tony asked, his eyes wide and unfocused, lost inside his own head.

“We actually have no idea.” Tony blinked and his eyes focused back to Daniel. “We know what it does, how to fix it, how to use the gate technology and even how to change some of its base programming, but how it actually works, we have no idea. I don't think that physics has been invented yet.”

Tony's jaw dropped. Bruce snorted softly in amusement. “I think you'll have him drooling here in a second.”

“Ah, well I remember one race we encountered who Sam told me had been amused when they found out we still used quantum physics.”

All eyes turned to Tony to watch his expression go blank. “Still use quantum physics? Still use quantum physics?!” And then his eyes shone with excitement, with the same sort of glee that a child would show if they'd been told it was official Eat Nothing But Candy Day. “Right, where's that dotted line? Show me the dotted line. I'll sign over my soul, my firstborn, whatever it takes. Well, except for Pepper's shoe collection. I do have some sense of self-preservation, after all.”

Daniel laughed. “So, I take it we can start planning?”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Are you telling us you don't have a plan yet?”

“Ah, well, yes I do have a plan, but I wasn't sure if I'd have to do it alone or not.”

“Daniel, we're not going to let you do this alone,” said Steve.

“We're all sort of attached to the world staying the way it is, free of pretend alien gods,” Clint added. “Well, except for Thor, because we like Thor. He can stay.”

An hour later, Daniel sent a text to Cassie, telling her all was going well. When she got back to the tower, the group was still in the dining room, trying to convince Tony why he needed to stay behind on Earth where he'd likely be needed more than gallivanting through space. She smiled and bid them goodnight, leaving them to their planning.

The next day, Daniel and Cassie moved back to their hotel to keep the NID and the military from getting too suspicious and spent the rest of Daniel's vacation enjoying themselves around the city. When Daniel left for Colorado Springs, Cassie saw him off at the airport and then went back to her hotel. The next afternoon she signed out and walked out the front lobby. She slid into the waiting limo.

“So, they did it?” she asked Tony, who looked up from his tablet.

“Went off without a hitch according to Coulson,” he said.

“Good... that's good.”

Cassie looked out the window and watched as New York streets sped by, silently hoping that
Daniel managed to get out of this one alive.

Chapter End Notes

Thank for reading! I'm sure most of you can guess what's coming up in part 3... Which should be up by Saturday at the latest. :)

CLOCKWORK

The apartment wasn't large, but it was full, teetering on the edge between efficiently-used space and overcrowded. Every available surface was covered in books and nick knacks – of the sort that most people would call souvenirs and knowledgeable eyes would recognize as treasures.

It looked like a well-lived home.

It felt abandoned. The colours were muted as only narrow stripes of sunlight managed to peek in through the heavy drapes across the windows, light almost reflecting off the edge of the empty fish tank that sat on top a shorter bookcases. The air smelt stale, held suspended in time by a stillness so complete it meant the inhabitants had been absent for long enough that the dust had settled some time ago.

There was a comfortable-looking couch and matching armchair in the living room facing a small television and a coffee table that looked like it had come from an auction house. The walls were lined with bookshelves that parted only to wrap around an electric fireplace. Above the mantel hung a grainy blown-up photograph of a lonely pyramid in the midst of a desert, its tip pointing up towards a bright blue sky – and if one looked closely, they would notice how the fluffy white clouds hid three spherical shapes. A person with enough imagination might just call them moons. They would think of it as an amusing bit of photoshop. The photograph’s owner would just smile and nod.

In the kitchen stood a large, solid wood table that would've easily seated an entire family had the surface not been cluttered with papers, books and empty mugs. Very little light made it into the kitchen, turning it into a dark, forbidding cave.

The stillness was momentarily broken by a low metallic hum and a sudden light spilling out from the deep blackness beneath the kitchen table. If anyone had been in the apartment, they would've seen a column of wavering light appear out of thin air and then disappear mere moments later, leaving behind an innocuous-looking paper bag.

It was swallowed up by the shadows, the apartment darkening further as the meagre light from outside gradually dimmed. The only disturbance to the quiet was a muted thud as something fell to the ground in the apartment above: a sign that life existed beyond the apartment.

Until there came the hint of a whisper from the bedroom along with a sliver of fresh air, noticeable only for its rarity. A well-trained eye would've then noticed how some of the shadows grew and, perhaps, may even have caught movement within their depths.

However, with methodical efficiency, any eyes that might have been watching were snuffed out, listening ears made deaf. So they couldn't see the two figures that eventually crept out from the shadows and settled silently on the couches, where they remained, motionless, as the stillness settled around them.
Daniel paid the cab driver and then adjusted the strap of his leather satchel before heading into his apartment building, wheeling his suitcase behind him. He couldn't suppress the yawn while he waited for the elevator and tried to remember why he'd decided it was a good idea to book a flight that brought him home so late.

He let himself into his apartment, cringing as the smell of warm stale air his his nose, and turned the light on. He abandoned his suitcase next to the door, eager to open all the apartment's windows as wide as they would go.

Two steps later, he froze, taking in the two people silently lounging on his couch. Both calmly watched him back.

“Uh...” he began. He hadn't expected them so soon, dammit. The Asgard anti-surveillance device was still buried deep within his suitcase and he didn't trust the NID, the IOA, the Joint Chiefs or the Trust (he supposed Hydra was a possibility now too) to have not taken advantage of his absence to bug his apartment. His eyes scanned the room frantically, trying to see if he noticed anything out of place – not that anyone who knew what they were doing would be that clumsy, but it never hurt to check for the obvious first.

“We got them all.”

Daniel's eyes snapped back to the couch. Natasha was looking at him with steady eyes, the side of her mouth quirked in amusement. “The bugs, we got them all.”

“There were a lot of them,” Steve added. “A couple different makes too: you're apparently a popular guy, Daniel.”

Daniel groaned. “Great, that's just great. I'm just going to go and assume they all magically appeared while I was away and if there's any evidence to the contrary, I don't want to know.”

Steve nodded. “Fair enough. If it helps, the only cameras were in the living room and kitchen.”

Daniel snorted. “So you mean my stalkers had some respect for my privacy? Though I'm not exactly sure what they expected me to be doing in my kitchen that they needed to set up cameras to catch.”

“Maybe they really wanted to know the secret ingredient to your pasta sauce,” said Natasha.

“Then they should've bugged Jack's place, because my pasta sauce comes from the organic store next to my dry cleaners.”

He shook his head and then decided to continue with his original goal of opening all the windows in the apartment. The fresh air felt lovely as it began to circulate, slowly chasing out the stuffiness. When he came back to the main area, it was to find Steve examining one of his mezzo-American sculptures while Natasha brewed coffee.

“You guys hungry?” Daniel asked. “I could order pizza.”


Steve coughed and his cheeks took on a slightly pink hue. “I'm fine,” he said. “We ate before we came.”
Daniel shrugged. “Well, I'm hungry and there's no food in the fridge, so I may as well order an extra large pizza. It's better value anyway. And I highly doubt you've been able to eat the way you'd like to on the journey down: attractive young blond who looks like either a body-builder or a marine and eats twice his weight in food would be a bit memorable with wait staff at restaurants.”

Steve's blush deepened. “We ordered at drive-thrus,” he muttered.

Daniel chuckled as he grabbed the menu from the top of his fridge and dialled the delivery number. Once he'd placed his order and put the menu back, he caught sight of something under his kitchen table. He pushed one of the chairs to the side and crouched down to grab the nondescript paper bag he found. It crinkled in his hand, the smell of chocolate and walnuts wafting out when he opened it.

Daniel smiled and stood, placing the bag onto the table as he carefully piled the cookies next to it to see what Sam had managed to get him this time. He'd talked to her the night after leaving Stark Tower and explained his plans, because he'd needed her help with some of the logistics. She hadn't exactly been happy about it, but Daniel knew that was at least partially because she couldn't come with him. And partially because of the regulations they were breaking: she would always be an army brat at heart and no matter how good the reason, going against orders would never sit well with her.

“What's that?” he heard Steve ask.

Daniel looked up. “Chocolate walnut cookies,” he said.

“You keep cookies under the table?” Natasha asked with a raised eyebrow.

Daniel chuckled. “Ah, well, I didn't put them there.” He took a small stack of cookies and handed it to Steve. “Here, have some.” He then took one for himself and bit into it, savouring the gooey chocolate heaven with added nutty crunch.

Taking away the cookies revealed a red plastic bag. Daniel took it out and looked inside. He grinned and immediately put the bag down in order to grab his cellphone and text Sam.

*Sam you're spoiling me with all these cookies. Seriously, where do you find the time to bake them? Thank you! :)*

Sam's reply arrived only moments later.

*Lol, you're welcome! They're from my emergency freezer stash. Good luck tomorrow.*

*Thanks. You too.*

He put the phone down and looked back to Steve and Natasha, who were examining the wristband that had been in the red bag. “This isn't a cookie,” Natasha commented.

“Admittedly the cookies were a disguise.” Daniel held his hand out for the wristband. Natasha hesitated for a moment before handing it over to him. “*This*—“ he said as he slipped it into place around his wrist, “—is going to help one of you sneak into Cheyenne Mountain with me tomorrow morning.”

He could see the questions on the tip of their tongues but instead of answering, he simply turned the device on. By the way they both jumped after it activated, he assumed it had worked.
“Daniel, are you there?” Steve asked, stepping forward and carefully waving his hand in Daniel's direction.

Natasha wasn't nearly as careful when she stepped forward, crowding right in front of Daniel. Her hand went through him and Daniel resisted the urge to backpedal. He'd done this before – twice – he knew nothing they did could hurt him until he turned the device off. Natasha walked forward, arms slightly outstretched, sharp eyes looking into every hidden corner, into every shadow, ears listening for the slightest noise, the shallowest breath. He was getting a second glimpse of the Black Widow, Daniel realized.

He also realized that people walking through you never stopped being weird.

Steve took several steps backwards and seemed to do the same although he held his arms out a bit further, as though preparing to grapple. He slowly made his way to the edge of the kitchen and then turned to meet Natasha's eyes. Daniel suddenly felt incredibly glad to have them as allies rather than enemies. Neither spoke a word as they began circling the room, meeting in the middle.

Daniel waited until Steve had just walked past him to turn off the device. First he glanced to his feet to make sure nothing unexpected had come back with him, but the floor was clear. He felt the displacement of air as Steve whirled around.

“Woah,” he exclaimed in surprise.

Daniel looked up and smiled at the shocked expression on Steve's face. There was something immensely satisfying about surprising Captain America.

“That's a pretty impressive cloak,” said Natasha, not bothering to hide the sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

Daniel grinned. “It's not really a cloak,” he said. “It phases you into a parallel dimension, but one that's only slightly out of phase with ours. So you can see into this dimension, but you're just enough out of phase with it that nothing in this dimension can touch you and nothing you do can affect it.”

“Now that sounds like something I'd expect to find in the future,” said Steve with a wide, excited grin.

Natasha snorted. “Fury would offer his second eye in exchange for a couple of these.”

“Assuming Tony didn't beat him to it,” Steve added.

Daniel laughed. “I think I could solve that problem. Fury could have the wristbands and Tony could play with the device that shifts you into a parallel dimension without the need for them.”

“Seriously?” said Steve.

“Yep,” said Daniel. “Actually, there's probably any number of things we could distract Tony with so that'd hardly be a problem. And most labs have their own coffeemakers, so we'd probably never see him again. And that's assuming we could get him away from the gate in the first place.”

Steve laughed and even Natasha let her lips form a small smile. They both disappeared into Daniel's bedroom when the pizza arrived.
“Nice digs,” said Clint as he walked up the ramp of the Bus, bow in one hand and a quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder.

“Thank you, it was gift from Fury,” said Coulson blandly. “And I've had Mac rig all the ventilation shafts with electric grates, so don't even try it.”

Clint grinned. “Aw, you're such a spoilsport.”

Coulson managed not to roll his eyes, but Clint could tell the temptation was there. Mission accomplished. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and rolled his neck as he adjusted the quiver on his back. There was a figure in the shadows: Melinda May.

“The others not back yet?” Coulson asked.

“We were going to just meet up here,” said Clint with a shrug. He noticed others coming out from the labs and from down the corridors. “And hey, I don't think I've met some of these people. They all yours?”

A lean man with a brown beard snorted. “Uh, I'm not,” he said and Clint made note of the British accent.

“So you keep saying,” said Skye from where she was leaning against the railing. “And yet you're still here.” The man glared at her, but she ignored him, instead waving to Clint with a smile. “Hey Clint, you guys get here okay?”

“Hey Skye! Yeah, got in this morning. Didn’t look like there was anyone following us, so we did some hiking, scoped out the mountain and bought supplies.”

Bootfalls coming up the ramp behind him had him turning around. It was Sam, looking relaxed... and slightly drunk if the slight tilt in his posture was any indication. Clint snickered.

“Hey, flyboy, how was the reunions with your buddies?” he called down.

“It was good to see them again,” said Sam. “They weren’t much help, mind you, but Wettlaufer might be in training for Daniel's project, ’cause he said he was in some sort of special training that was super exciting and that I should come back to the service, that he'd put a good word in for me and it would be awesome and sort of a lot scary. And Heston's getting married. To a woman. Whose name is... Irene or Iris or something...” He looked thoughtful for a moment and then his eyes lit up. “Heather! Her name's Heather!”

“Good job, man,” said Clint. “Why don't you come sit down and one of Coulson's minions will get you some water. Pretty sure the last thing you'll wanna be tomorrow is hungover.”

An hour later, Sam was much more sober and Cap finally came climbing up the ramp.

“About time!” Clint called to him from the steps he and Sam had settled onto. “What took you guys so long? Also, where’d you leave Natasha?”

“Sorry, Daniel ordered pizza and we sort of lost track of time,” said Steve. “And I have no idea where Natasha is.”

“What do you mean you have no idea where Natasha is?” said Sam. “Did you guys get attacked?”
“Naw, we're both fine.”

Clint's eyes narrowed. Something wasn't right. Steve wasn't nearly this nonchalant when one of them went missing. He was the worst sort of mother hen when it came to his team. Something brushed against his ear.

“Boo.”

Clint jumped away instinctively, startled by the sudden appearance of someone at his back. Unfortunately, he misjudged the width of the step below him and slipped on the smooth metal with a squawk, waving his arms for balance, before crashing to the ground in an undignified heap. There was a moment of stunned silence before the Bus erupted with laughter. Clint groaned and stayed where he was for a moment.

Suddenly there was an amused-looking face framed with red hair looking down at him. She was joined by a worried-looking Steve.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I'm good Cap. Nothing bruised or broken but my dignity. Well, there might be a few bruises, but nothing serious.” Then he turned to Natasha. “How the fuck did you get there?”

Natasha smirked and brought her hand up to touch a button on the weird wristband thing she was wearing. And then she was gone.

Clint shot up, his arm reaching out to grab her... but all he caught was air. He scanned the area. A hand came to rest on his shoulder and he looked up into Steve's laughing eyes.

“Don't bother looking, you won't find her,” he said.

“Wow, that's amazing!” said Skye. “I didn't think anyone had a personal cloaking device like that.”

“Neither did I,” said Coulson, unable to keep the stunned look entirely off his face.

“Yeah, except I'm not getting any heat signatures,” said a deep voice. Clint looked up to the large bald engineer. Mac was holding a tablet in his hands and poking at it.

“Because she's not in this dimension,” said Steve. “According to Daniel, the device phases you out of this dimension into another one that's so close to this one that you can see it, but no one can see you or touch you.”

Suddenly Natasha appeared beside Steve again. “This is how Steve's breaking into the mountain,” she said.

“Steve? Why Steve?” Sam asked, eyeing the wristband with excitement.

“Because the two of us are our close-quarters combat specialists and, of the two of us, which one would you rather being flying down from the quinjet?”

Sam made a face. “Yeah, okay, good point.”

“Uh, do you mind if I take a look at it?” Mac asked and Clint had to grin at the man's awed expression.

Steve shrugged. “Sure, I guess. Just remember we're gonna need it in one piece and working for tomorrow morning.”
“Oh, yeah, for sure. I'll just run some scans and maybe take a peek at the gears and wiring. Maybe build it a shrine to it while I'm at it…”

Natasha undid the wristband's clasp and handed it to Mac, who took it with such delicate care that it might as well have been made of crystal.

“Hey Fitz, buddy, wanna help me with some scans?” he called up towards the lab. A young man with curly hair came to the lab door just as Mac walked in, still holding the wristband reverently in front of him. They disappeared into the depths of the lab.

“He'll probably be up all night with that,” Coulson commented.

“It's just a glimpse too,” said Steve and they all turned to him. “According to Daniel it's sort of what his friend Sam's working on right now as part of Earth's defence. She's trying to alter the scope of a device that does something similar and create a pocket dimension big enough to cover the entire planet.”

Clint stared up at Steve.

“That's insane,” said Skye with bulging eyes.

“If it works it'll be even more insane,” said Coulson. “Also quite brilliant.”

“Until one of the alien space ships decides to fly through the planet,” said Natasha. “Then it'll be mass panic.”

The sun hadn't even begun to peek over the horizon when Steve snuck into Daniel's apartment again. This time the climb was easier because he knew where he was going. The bedroom was empty when he climbed in through the window, but he could hear a shower running further down the hall.

He considered waiting for Daniel in his bedroom, but then decided he didn't want to give the man too much of a shock first thing in the morning. So instead he left the window open to announce his presence and went into the kitchen to make coffee. It had just finished brewing when Daniel shuffled in, dressed but bleary-eyed.

Steve handed him a mug of coffee.

“Aah, a considerate home invader,” said Daniel, inhaling the coffee's aroma with a happy smile. “You can stay.”

Steve laughed and took a sip of his own coffee, savouring the warmth. He watched as Daniel demonstrated Tony Stark-levels of heat tolerance and took mere minutes to gulp down his coffee. He drank his second cup much more slowly, enjoying the taste.

“You gonna have food with your breakfast?” Steve asked.

“No food, remember,” said Daniel, waving a hand towards his empty fridge (the few condiments Steve had spied there yesterday wouldn't have made a meal even for the most creative cook). “There's a little bakery I can drive by and pick up something to eat. I should also get some power
bars... can't quite remember what was left of my stash at the office. Chocolate too, probably.”

Steve blinked. “Chocolate?”

Daniel nodded, his expression completely serious. “It doubles as a potential thing to trade with locals for real food, or as a peace offering.” He shrugged. “I've learnt that the oddest things come in handy when you least expect them to. Extra lighters are useful too.”

Steve nodded, trying to maintain a semblance of professionalism despite the child inside his mind – the one who'd been too sick to join the other children in their games, who'd spent days in bed with nothing to do but draw and read, and dream – bouncing with excitement as he finally got his wish, his own fantastic adventure. Not that becoming Captain America hadn't been an adventure, but the best thing for the longest time had been his ability to run without his heart and lungs squeezing in protest, to be able to breathe even on hot, muggy days, to be able to see colours (the artist in him had delighted in the spectacular palate he hadn't realized existed). Then there had been the War Bonds tour, which had made him feel empty and hollow – a fraud.

And then there'd been the war, and no matter what books and movies tried to say, there was nothing glamorous about war. He'd done what had been asked of him, done his duty. He'd never thought of himself as a hero.

Waking up in the future should've been an adventure; it was the sort of thing science fiction novels were made of, after all. But the excitement had been muted by grief, by realizing that he had no one to share the adventure with. Not at first, anyway. Now he had a team, friends, and he was going to another planet in order to save the world. It was like a medieval quest and a science fiction novel thrown into one story.

“You know, it's okay to be both excited and nervous.”

Steve started from his thoughts and looked up to Daniel, who was looking at him over his coffee mug with an amused smile. There was as much understanding in the smile as there was amusement, however.

“I suppose that's a normal reaction,” said Steve sheepishly.

Daniel grinned. “Oh yeah. This might be just another day at the office for me, but I still remember that first time I went through... and really the first year of missions once the SGC actually got going for real. I think it's even worse for the hard scientists who understand what the Gate does. Just remember not to breath in before going through and to walk normally.”

Steve nodded. “I'll try and remember that.”

Daniel finished his coffee and placed the mug next to the sink. “So, we should probably get going. It's Saturday, so there won't be as many people at the base, but we should still aim to get there before the day shift does.”

“Why exactly is your vacation ending on a Saturday?” Steve asked.

Daniel just shrugged. “I like working on the weekends. There's less distractions and it's a great time to catch up on stuff. Which admittedly won't be nearly as bad as if the last two weeks had been full of missions, but I'm sure there'll be a bunch of reports and such for me to look through...” He trailed off, his eyes going unfocused, stunned, as though suddenly realizing those reports might never get looked at, the work on his desk never finished.

Steve gulped down the last bit of his coffee and placed the mug next to Daniel's. The clink of china
on the countertop, seemed to shake Daniel out of his stupor and he headed for the door, where he picked up his satchel and went over its contents one, last time.

“Oh!” he suddenly exclaimed and ran off into his bedroom. He came back with a familiar-looking device. “Here, you take the anti-surveillance device. I suddenly realized that I have no idea if my car's bugged and I'm not taking the chance that it's the NID, who could actually call ahead to the base and have me detained. Also, after you and Natasha left last night, I remembered the Reetou Detectors, which are scanners set up at the entrance to the Gateroom and the SGC itself that can detect lifeforms moving in closely parallel dimensions. Now, I have no idea if this'll actually work, but it's the best I can think of. Otherwise, we'll just have to knock out the guards and run straight to the Gateroom before someone figures out what's going on and puts the base on lockdown.”

Steve took the device. “I take it these detectors were installed as a result of however you managed to get your hands on these wristbands?”

Daniel laughed. “Nope, actually that was a completely different mission. I can tell you on the way to the mountain if you like.”

As planned, Daniel stopped at the bakery on their way to the base, arriving just as it was opening. Steve stayed in the car, a dark grey blanket draped over his shoulders to hide his uniform from the sight of curious on-lookers. Not that there were many of those this early on a Saturday morning, but it only took one person to recognize Captain America for it to be all over the internet within minutes.

Daniel came back with a large paper bag of buns and pastries and a second, smaller plastic bag he threw onto the backseat next to his leather satchel. He handed the paper bag to Steve, silently indicated that he should help himself as he ate his own danish.

As they approached Cheyenne Mountain, Steve began to feel the familiar thrum of anticipation in his veins. His limbs felt like they were vibrating with the desire for movement, for action. He tried to calm himself by looking out the window – there was certainly a lot to look at, enough to make Steve want to take out his sketchbook.

“You have a beautiful drive to work,” he said into the silence.

Daniel snorted. “Trust me, you get far less appreciative of the view after the first time you have to navigate a snowstorm along this road.”

Steve chuckled. “I suppose.”

A few minutes later Daniel cleared his throat. “You should probably turn the armband on now,” he said. “That bend up ahead is where the first CCTV cameras are located to monitor incoming traffic.”

“You know, I don't even think SHIELD had as much security as you guys do,” said Steve, shaking his head. He reached for the controls on the wristband. “Well, I guess I'll see you in your office, Daniel.”

“Good luck, Steve.”

“You too.”

The most remarkable about the wristband was how the only indication it had done anything was a slight tingling sensation that enveloped the area around the band for a few seconds. And yet he'd phased into a parallel dimension. He looked up, wondering if the quinjet was in position yet. A
glance at the clock told him that no, probably not, since they weren't due to take off for another twenty minutes and they would've let him know if they'd been compromised.

Daniel flashed his ID at the security guard by the front gate, asking the young man about his wife as he signed the ledger. Steve grinned as the soldier suddenly stood a little straighter, proudly answering that his wife was recovering just fine and their daughter, Julie, was healthy as any newborn could be and looked just like her mother. Daniel congratulated him and then drove off to park.

Steve made note of the cameras on the door and watched as Daniel walked through the metal detector at the security checkpoint inside. The guards stationed here seemed less friendly and Daniel was polite, but not personable. One of them raised an eyebrow at the contents of the red plastic bag.

“My stash ran dry,” said Daniel with a shrug and the guard merely rolled his eyes, muttering something rather uncomplimentary about scientists. Steve couldn't tell if Daniel had heard him.

After getting through the scan, Daniel veered away from the wall of elevators most people were heading and down a short hallway that a second set of elevators.

“Doctor Jackson!”

Steve turned to watch a woman quickly walked towards them, her long straight dark hair tied into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. She smiled at Daniel.

“Thought it was you,” she said. “Welcome back, I hear your vacation got a bit exciting.”

“Thanks,” said Daniel with a friendly smile. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.” He paused and smirked. “So, who won the pool on that one?”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about.” A sly smile edged its way across her face. “But Lieutenant Avery looked a little too happy the day after your misadventure.”

“Of course it was SG-3.”

“Well, if it helps, there were a lot of marines moping around the place that day, so he kinda stuck out.”

“I'm so sorry to disappoint. Next time I'll ask the Avengers to be less efficient because my own marines want a chance to play dashing knights. And before you even say it, yes, the paramedics checked me out at the scene, gave me a clean bill of health except for some mild bruising, so no I don't need to come see you in the infirmary where you can poke and prod at me.”

“And the nurses were so looking forward to seeing you again. I'm pretty sure I saw Nurse Clark polishing her favourite needle.”

Steve chuckled as Daniel shivered.

“Well, you're due for your antihistamine shot, so tough luck; you'll be seeing me anyway,” she said.

“Sure thing, Doctor Lam.”

The doctor was eyeing Daniel suspiciously when the elevator door opened. Daniel smiled
innocently as he motioned to her to precede him.

To yet another security checkpoint. This one had two guards: one sitting at a desk with a ledger which Daniel signed into and a second standing next to him, visibly armed with a semi-automatic rifle. It seemed too simple, until Steve's sharp eyes took in the thick rubber mat just in front of the desk. It had SGC printed on it, with a bouquet of international flags below it and some sort of symbol arched above it. At least it looked like it was supposed to be a symbol even if Steve didn't recognize it: an inverted 'V' with a circle at its tip.

It was an odd place for a welcome mat. Steve was guessing a weight sensor. He looked to either side of the short corridor... yup, motion sensors. They were well-hidden and an untrained eye probably wouldn't have found them at all.

Once he'd signed in, Daniel walked with the doctor into another elevator and they began to head down. And down. Steve looked at the keypad and whistled. None of the floors were labelled, but there sure were a lot of them. Finally, the elevator door opened and Steve followed the other two into a military grey corridor that could've easily been a corridor in any military facility. Oddly enough, the only security here seemed to be a single armed guard stationed by the elevator doors, beside a phone hanging on the wall.

Daniel nodded a greeting to the guard and then paused to look up at the ceiling for a few moments, before looking to the side walls. Steve frowned and looked up. There was a row of small blue boxes stuck to the ceiling in a straight line. They had to be the Reetou detectors, as Daniel had called them. The corridor was also full of security cameras, but that wasn't exactly a surprise.

Steve took a deep breath. This was the first real hurdle. He looked at the device in his hand, double-checking that it was on. Then his muscles tensed and he ran forward, through the miniscule gap between Daniel and Doctor Lam, not knocking them over only because his body moved through them. He ran to the end of the corridor and turned, not daring to breathe as he waited for an alarm to go off, for the guard to raise her gun and aim it at him, for the phone next to her to ring.

The phone stayed silent. The alarms all stayed off. After a few minutes, Steve allowed himself to breathe again.

And realized that Daniel wasn't walking towards him. He cursed under his breath and hurried back. It took him several minutes (and one detour he was glad no one would ever find out about) to find Daniel inside the men's locker room lacing up a pair of combat boots.

They got waylaid a few times on their way to Daniel's office and Steve suddenly understood why the man had refused to specify an exact time for the group on the quinjet. There was another elevator ride and several stretches of corridors involved before Daniel finally swiped his keycard at an office door.

“Daniel!!”

Steve instinctively jumped out of the way as a figure streaked past him and launched herself onto Daniel's back. Daniel cried out in surprise and staggered under the sudden weight. It took him a moment of flailing before he regained his balance. He sighed in resignation.

“Hello, Vala,” he said, his tone flat. “What are you doing up this early on a Saturday?”

“Oh just wanted to welcome you back,” said the woman, whose arms were clasped around Daniel's shoulders while the rest of her dangled off of him like an army-green cape. Her dark hair was tied
“And Cameron wanted to come see the souvenirs you brought him,” Vala added cheerfully.

“Woah there, you keep me out of this, Vala,” a male voice said from behind Steve, making him jump.

He cursed under his breath. The wristband device was throwing him off-balance, because nothing around him felt right. He might've been able to see the parallel dimension everyone else was in, but he couldn't feel anything. He suspected this was the real reason Natasha had left this part of the mission to him.

“Hey Cam,” Daniel greeted the man.

“Heya Daniel. Nice to see you back in one piece.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “You realize that was never actually in any doubt.”

“Daniel, with you it's always in doubt.”

Steve grinned as he followed them into Daniel's office. The office wasn't a small space, but like Daniel's apartment, every single available inch had been crammed with stuff, including the large wooden worktable in the centre. Mostly books – some looked new, but many looked old, some very old, nearly ancient – but there was also a stack of scrolls, a portable chalkboard, and a plethora of artifacts including bowls, elaborately-decorated knives, figurines and a human skull made from black stone. The metal filing cabinet beside the door had a coffeemaker and several mugs sitting on top of it. In the middle of the semi-organized chaos, the computer desk looked almost out-of-place as the only sign of the modern world.

He looked back to the still-bickering trio just as Daniel reached into his satchel and took out a plain white plastic bag, handing it over his shoulder to Vala. Vala's eyes lit up and she finally let go of Daniel and slid off his back as she grabbed the package.

“Ooh, thank you!” she said, happily taking out a familiar 'I Love NY' t-shirt.

Daniel rolled his shoulders before throwing Cameron a similar white plastic bag.

“Thanks Daniel,” said Cameron with a grin before leaning against the worktable behind him. He waited for a beat. “So, what's the plan?”

Daniel froze. “What do you mean?” he asked carefully. “Plan for what?”

Cameron shrugs. “Vala said you told her you thought you might've found something.”

“ Might have, yes, but does how 'might have' turn into a plan exactly?”

“Cause you're you and we're SG1,” said Vala matter-of-factly. “And that means we're supposed to have some sort of crazy plan to save the world.”

“Can't be a full, card-carrying member of SG1 'till I've gone against orders to save the world,” Cameron agreed with a grin. “So, is there a plan?”

Daniel couldn't stop the smile that inched its way across his face. Jack, Sam and Teal'c weren't able
to help, but he should've known better than to consider Cameron and Vala as anything less than dedicated.

“There's a plan,” he admitted. Then he frowned. “But it's more than just going against orders. This is going to get us in serious trouble if you come along with me.”

“Daniel, do you have any idea what the scientists are working on right now?” said Vala, looking pained. “Well I do. Because I was actually bored enough to go down to the science labs and find out. I even let Doctor Lee help me create a World of Warcraft avatar.”

Daniel chuckled and looked to Cameron. The other man simply shrugged. “Look, someone's gotta do something and if we don't then we'll be dead after the Ori get here anyway. If the army wants to throw us in jail or execute us or whatever after, then at least everyone else will be alive.”

Daniel took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “It's a long shot,” he warned them. “I'm not entirely sure what we'll find... but if we find what I think we might, then it'll be worth it.”

Cameron just shrugged. “Sometimes, to win the game you've just gotta throw that Hail Mary and pray it works out.”

“Okay then,” Daniel considered his friends. “Steve, you might want to join us for this part.”

Cameron jumped as Captain America suddenly materialized next to him out of thin air.

“Guys, this is Steve. Steve, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cameron Mitchell and Vala Mal Doran.”

“Nice to meet you folks,” said Steve with a nod.

Cam was staring at Steve in awe – until he noticed the familiar wristband. He turned accusing eyes towards Daniel. Vala continued to eye Steve appreciatively. Steve watched her out of the corner of his eyes, looking increasingly uncomfortable.

“Jackson, I'm hurt,” he said. “You've been talking to Sam about this and didn't think to come to us?!?”

“Sorry, wasn't sure if I could trust the SGC's phone lines.” Which was also true.

“Yeah, but–“

“Shut up, Cameron,” said Vala, snapping her eyes away from Steve's biceps (Steve's relief was obvious). “The plan, Daniel?”

“Uh, I'll have to explain most of it on the move, 'cause we've gotta go. So if you're coming, you'd better get your gear.”

Cameron hesitated for a moment and then sighed. “Aw, what the hell, this is what we do all the time too. Okay, so I take it we're headed for the Gateroom?”

“Yup.”

“And this is gonna be a bit more than a day-trip.”

“Definitely.”

“Good thing we had so much time on our hands, then. We'll meet you in the Gateroom in fifteen.”
Daniel blinked as Cam and Vala rushed out of his office. He shook his head and then looked to Steve. “Well, I guess our group just got bigger.”

Steve smiled. “They look like good people.”

“They are good people,” Daniel replied. He made a face. “Well, most of the time Vala's good people. Watch out for her, though, she's a con-artist and thief at heart.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

“Good. And we should probably get going.”

Steve nodded to him and turned his wristband back on. Daniel grabbed his backpack from under his desk, where it sat ready with the basics. Given the amount of books and other tools of his trade he often carried with him on missions, it wasn't entirely unusual for him to keep his bag in his office and he was glad he'd decided to stash it here months ago. Now he threw in the notebook and some papers from his satchel, along with a few books, upended a box of power bars and stuffed in the bag of chocolate.

He exited his office and walked right into Doctor Lam, who immediately grabbed his arm and began rolling up his sleeve. In his surprise, Daniel didn't think to stop her.

“D-Doctor Lam—” he stuttered.

“I don't usually do house calls, Daniel, but if you're not going to come to me then I guess I have to come to you,” she said as she reached into the pocket of her labcoat and took out a needle. She met his eyes. “You're not going to defeat the Ori by sneezing all over them.”

His eyes widened as she slid the needle into his veins and emptied its contents. She took it out, wiped the puncture wound with an antiseptic wipe and then reached into her other pocket and took out a small bag.

“Extra bandages, morphine and antibiotics, just in case,” she said, handing it to him. “Good luck.”

Without another word, she turned and walked away, back towards the elevator that would take her to the infirmary. Daniel stared after her as she left, before shaking himself out of his stupor. He clutched the bag in his hand for a moment as panic gave way to warmth with the realization that he wasn't alone. He'd known the SGC wasn't happy with what was happening, but he'd forgotten that just because the people around him were military, didn't mean they weren't willing to help someone else go against orders.

Daniel stuffed the bag of medical supplies into his backpack and headed for the stairs. Clearly there were people who were already aware of what he was up to, so there was little point of trying to be stealthy when time was ticking away. Director Coulson said his plane had cloaking abilities, but Daniel couldn't be certain the Apollo's sensor's wouldn't see through them (not that Coulson knew about the Apollo, because Daniel hadn't come close to telling them all the SGC's secrets).

Daniel's first stop was his locker, where he took two minutes to put on his combat uniform. Cam walked into the room and threw him a handgun and a zat. He held up another zat.

“Got one for Steve too,” he said. “I'm assuming he's around somewhere?”

“I hope so,” said Daniel just before Steve materialized at the locker room entrance, where he'd clearly been watching the hallway. He caught the zat easily and examined it curiously, startling as it opened.
“It’s a weapon,” said Daniel in amusement. “We’ll show you how to use it later. Think you and Cameron can get rid of the guards, while I go up and get the roof open?”

Steve attacked the zat to his belt and took the shield off his back. “Sure, no problem,” he said.

“Don’t worry, Daniel, we’ve got this,” said Cam, looking really excited by the prospect.

Daniel took a deep breath and headed up to the control room. He greeted the guards at the door, who greeted him back... until they noticed he was decked out in his field gear. But even then they weren’t expecting the zat blasts. He didn’t hesitate, striding into the control room and zatting the staff inside before they’d realized he was there.

“Doctor Jackson?”

Daniel whirled around at the voice behind him. Siler immediately put his hands up in surrender.

“Just wanted to remind you to take a GDO, sir,” he continued when he realized he wasn’t going to get instantly shot. “And good luck.”

Daniel smiled. “Thank you, we’re probably going to need it. And, I’m sorry.”

The corner of Siler’s mouth twitched. “Occupational hazard, sir.”

He crumbled to the ground as the zat blast hit him. Daniel crossed the room to the safe where the GDOs were kept and found it suspiciously unlocked. He looked to Siler’s still form and wondered if this was why the sergeant had been here in the first place. Deciding he didn’t have time to dwell on the matter, Daniel quickly took three GDOs and then closed and locked the safe. No point in getting anyone in trouble if he didn’t have to.

Daniel crossed to the control panels and entered the commands exactly as Sam had told him. After a few moments, he felt the roof above him shudder. Running to the window, Daniel looked up to see the ceiling slowly sliding apart and smiled. Then he carefully pushed the young lieutenant in front of the dialling computer out of his chair and carefully lowered him to the ground before taking his place. He entered his command code and dialled a gate address.

Steve's first impression of the Stargate was that it was large. And beautiful, in its own way, as it towered over the rest of the room. Clint had shown them several episodes of Wormhole Extreme, but this giant stone ring looked nothing like the one from the show. Suddenly, the room rumbled and the ceiling began to slide apart, slowly covering the stone ring in daylight.

He activated his comm. “Black Widow, Falcon, Hawkeye, this is Cap,” he said. “Plan is proceeding without a hitch. We’re in the Gateroom and the roof is opening.”

“Roger that, Cap, we have a visual on the roof and are preparing to disembark.” Steve released a breath at Natasha’s voice.

“Hey, Steve,” Cam said from beside him. Steve turned to him and noticed he was looking up towards the control room window. Through the glass they could see Daniel sitting at the controls. “I’m going to assume here that you’ve got friends joining us?”

“Yes, there’s three more.”
Steve whirled around as the Stargate came to life. It didn't look quite the same as it had on the television show, but the mechanical sound of stone moving against stone was very similar.

“And did Daniel warn you about the gate's backwash?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Ahh, good then.” The plan was for Sam to wait until the wormhole had activated before flying in.

Vala ran into the room only moments before the final chevron was dialled. With a loud 'whoosh' the wormhole formed in what looked like a large splash of water. The wormhole itself looked like a calm rippling pool of the bluest water Steve had ever seen. Steve wished he could sit down with a canvas and some paints.

“Okay, that is one, cool-ass rabbit hole!” Sam exclaimed as he deposited Clint and Natasha onto the ground before landing himself.

“Sure is,” Steve agreed with a grin.

“Hey, I'm with the Air Force, why didn't I get wings?” Cameron protested, eyeing Sam's wings with envy.

“Dude, your day-job includes travelling to other planets,” said Clint. Steve nodded in agreement.

“You do not get to complain.”

“And you were an F-302 pilot before that,” Daniel added as he joined them. He nodded a greeting to Sam, Natasha and Clint. Then he met Steve's eyes and must've noticed the unspoken question in them. “Those are the, uh, experimental aircraft... that might have the ability to leave the atmosphere.”

Sam and Clint goggled. Natasha looked mildly impressed. Steve's grinned widened – that sounded much neater than a flying car.

“Anyway, everyone good to go?” Cameron asked.

Steve nodded along with everyone else. Beside him, Natasha tapped her comm.

“Black Widow here, we're in and heading out,” she said.

“Well then, everyone remember the basic rules of gate travel,” said Cameron as he lead the way up the metal ramp. “Breathe normally, don't hold your breath before entering the wormhole, walk don't run – unless of course you're being shot at, or chased by vicious man-eating lion-things, or running away from meteor showers, volcanic lava, ex--“

His words got swallowed by the vertical pond with a quiet slurp. Vala walked calmly after him. Daniel looked back to give the four Avengers a reassuring smile before he, too, was swallowed by the wormhole. Clint and Natasha exchanged looks and then marched right into the wormhole without a single hesitation.

Steve heard Sam retracting his wings and looked at him. Sam smirked. “Well, here goes nothing, man,” he said. “See ya on the other side.”

Steve looked into the rippling blue wormhole and tried not to think about how much it reminded him of the ocean.
He walked into the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay: was way too exhausted to edit when I got home from work on Saturday. But thanks so much for the comments and kudos on the last two parts. My goal is to get Act III up sometime around Christmas - given that I have six hour train rides to and from my mother’s for Christmas this should be doable. =D
Second Interlude

Chapter Notes

Figured I'd take a few moments out of my 'Ten Thousand and One Things to Do Before Heading to my Mom's for Christmas' frenzy (I have two days to get everything done in between working both days...), in order to post the next update. Act 3 should be up sometime between Boxing Day and New Year's Day. So to those of you who are celebrating something at this time of year: Happy Holidays! To everyone else, enjoy the update. It should clarify a few things from the last part of Act 2. :)

Jack hung up his phone and immediately wished he was in his office. New technology was wonderful, and cellphones oh-so-handy, but there was something to be said for good old fashion receivers that you could slam down. Therapeutic even. Pressing a button just didn't do anything to satisfy that instant desire for violence; throwing cellphones got expensive real fast.

Jack sighed and ran a hand through his hair as he paced his living room floor. General Landry had been furious. Not only had he been called into the SGC on his weekend off (actually, Jack had absolutely no sympathy for that given how often his weekends had been interrupted while at the SGC), but he'd never been Daniel's biggest fan and now the archaeologist had gone and disobeyed direct orders. He and SG-1 had also made the rest of the base look like fools, which was most likely a large part of Landry's anger. Jack should've seen this coming.

If he was completely honest with himself, he had. He'd noticed the signs, seen Daniel's growing frustration. He should've realized when Daniel left Stark Tower and gone back to his hotel, that he was giving up too easily.

Once again, Jack resisted the impulse to throw his phone at the wall and dialled Area 51 instead. It rang six times.

“Hello.”

“Good morning Carter,” he said, putting all his effort into sounding chipper instead of pissed off.

“Good morning, General.”

By the sound of her voice, he hadn't succeeded.

“So I don't suppose you know where Daniel is right now?” he asked.

There was a pause. “It's Saturday... isn't he supposed to be in Colorado Springs? I think he was planning to be back at the mountain today.”

The fact that Sam Carter knew it was Saturday was suspicious at best, but not enough to call her out on.

“Oh he was in Colorado Springs all right. And showed up to work bright and early this morning
too. And then he and SG1 decided to take a little unauthorized field trip through the stargate. With a group of civilians in tow.”

“With civilians, sir?”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “An interesting part to focus on, Carter. Yes, they smuggled civilians into the base: the Avengers in fact.”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone. “I thought the NID was watching the Avengers?”

Jack snorted. “Oh, they were. Unfortunately, they were paying too much attention to Stark and his fancy press conferences to realize no one had seen Captain America in three or four days.”

“Daniel had Captain America with him?! Wow. You must be pretty jealous, sir.”

And he was, he really was. But he wasn't about to admit it out loud.

“Uh uh, you're not changing the subject that easily, Colonel. Landry's not actually sure how Daniel managed to get Captain America into the base, but he got the rest of them in by opening the Gateroom ceiling. I'm kinda curious as to how he knew to do that.”

“Oh, probably from the mission reports, sir. I mean, you're aware that he read all of SG1’s mission reports from his year with the Ancients, right? Remember, we had to open the Gateroom ceiling that time when the gate had been rigged to blow.”

Of course. Sometimes Jack forgot that Daniel's smarts extended beyond languages. Funny how he always told everyone else to listen to and not underestimate Daniel, and yet he never failed to be the first guilty one at the party. Like he'd assumed there wasn't anything Daniel could do with the gate was shut down.

“Right, with Jonas.” So much had happened that year. So much had happened every year since he'd joined SG1. He sighed. “So you're saying you didn't talk to Daniel while he was in New York?”

The pause that followed was likely pregnant with twins. “Well, yes, I did talk to him sir. What with the anniversary of his parents' deaths and then the attack on the Met, I wanted to make sure he was alright. And Cassie was with him.”

“Hmmm.”

Oh she knew what Daniel had been up to alright and Jack knew that if he pushed, she would eventually cave. He was her superior officer and the military mindset was too ingrained in her to allow her to directly lie to a superior officer. Side-step sure, Carter could side-step and talk around the truth with the best of them. The problem was that once the truth was acknowledged, he'd have no choice but to act on it, which would mean arresting her and holding an enquiry, taking her away from her work on the phase shield bubble thing she was working on.

No one could afford to take Carter away from her work. Doctor Lee and the others were all really smart, but Carter was the head brain for a reason. Bureaucracy would just have to wait.

“So, how's the shield coming?” he asked instead and he could practically feel the relief from the other end of the phone.

“The shield isn't the problem, sir. I've already built it once before in that alternate universe. The problem is the power requirement. In the alternate universe, the SGC had managed to reroute
energy from the entire US power grid into the generator to make it work. If you'll recall I'd suggested setting up something similar several years ago, but the Joint Chiefs thought it was unnecessary and would draw too much attention to the project.”

Jack vaguely remembered that. “Right sure... and why can't we do that now?”

“It would take too much time. My alternate had calculated the approximate power requirements before she'd figured out how to make the shield work and the government and SGC had started setting up the power reroute years in advance.”

“And I take it it'll take more than a couple naquadah generators to make this work?”

“A lot more. Maybe a couple of ZPMs would do the job.”

“And we've got all of one of those, which we need for the Antarctic outpost.”

“Exactly, sir.”

“Great. I just love these odds.”

“We've had worse, sir.”

“Have we?”

“Well... they did just get better. Sir.”

Jack snorted. Of all the cheeky things to say... “Just get that shield working, Carter. We need it pronto if the info from the Tok'ra is any indication. Any resources you need, just take them. I'm giving you express permission to by-pass any and all requisition procedures.”

“Anything, sir?”

“Yes, Colonel, anything you need, it's yours. I'll make sure the guys at Area 51 know that. You have top priority except for anything that's needed for defence.”

“Understood sir. Thank you sir.”

“Bye Carter.”

He hung up and then stared at the phone, wondering how worried he should be at the barely-hidden glee in her voice. He was fairly certain he could trust her not to blow up anything too important – not when so much was at stake anyway.

He shook his head and dialled a second number. This time the phone only rang once. He wondered if his call had been expected.

“Heya, Uncle Jack!”

“Cassie, how was your flight?”

An uncertain pause. “I actually cancelled my flight last night. Decided to stay in New York a bit longer, see more of the city, you know. Plus I got offered a summer internship at Stark Industries and I'd have been stupid to say no to that.”

Jack pursed his lips unhappily. No one had been paying attention to Cassie either: they really should have. This whole thing was turning into one miss-step after another.
“So you knew Daniel was up to something.”

“What do you mean, Uncle Jack?”

“Don't you 'Uncle Jack' me!” he snapped. “Changing plans like this isn't like you and I highly doubt this internship was something you'd applied for months ago; your Aunt Sam would've been all over that. No, this has Daniel Jackson sneakiness written all over it. Especially with Tony Stark's sudden decision to release details about the new Starkpad a whole month early in that press conference this morning. Which happened to come right after his press conference last night about Stark Industry's donation to the Met, all of which Tony Stark actually showed up for in person. If Daniel thinks he's fooling anyone, he's dumber than those rocks he likes to play with!”

Cassie chuckled. “Daniel didn't need to fool you for good, Uncle Jack. He just needed to keep you and the NID off his trail until he could get to the SGC. He learnt military tactics from you after all, especially the bit about crossing bridges.”

“And I can't help but notice that you're no longer denying knowing about it,” said Jack wryly. “Pretty sure your aunt knew about it too.”

“You wish you were there with them,” said Cassie and, for a moment, Jack felt equally proud at the perceptive young woman she had grown up to be, and appalled that she saw through him so easily. “But you know why he couldn't tell you of all people, Uncle Jack. The SGC needs you here on Earth both now to co-ordinate defence and in the future as the Head of Homeworld Security. It's the same reason why Tony Stark had to stay behind: because if the worst case happens and the Ori get this far, then he'll be needed to protect people as Iron Man.”

Jack sighed. “He told you about the Ori.”

“Not a lot, but given that I was at the big 'Ding Dong, the Snakes are Dead' party, I knew it wasn’t the Goa'uld who were the threat.”

“Right. That was a great party.”

“Sure was.”

“You're sure about staying in New York?”

“Uncle Jack, Colorado Springs is going to be the Ori's first target, so actually, yes, I'm pretty sure about staying in New York. I have a Hulk for a bodyguard, how could I possibly be safer?”

“If you had a Jaffa as a bodyguard,” Jack muttered, annoyed.

Cassie laughed. “Okay point, but Uncle Teal'c isn't on Earth right now, so that's not an option. Besides, if he was he'd be with SG1 in the thick of things and I'm really not sure that's safer.”

“Yeah, whatever. You take care, Cassie and if anyone tries to hurt you or... gets too frisky or something, then just let me know and I'll eject them into space. Or something.”

“Good-bye, Uncle Jack.”

“Stay safe, kiddo.”

“You too. And good luck.”

They were gonna need it, thought Jack as he hung up. His phone started ringing again almost
immediately: it was General Vidrine. Fantastic.
Happy New Year everyone!

Sadly I ended up with a lot less time to write than I thought I would over the Christmas holidays - coupled with a rather major plumbing disaster (burst pipe in the bathroom at 4 am the day before I was due to leave for my mom's) means that Act 3 isn't done yet. However, I did promise an update, so here's the first part of Act 3 for now. Expect parts 2 and 3 next week. :)

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**LOVE**

If someone had asked Steve to describe the trip through the wormhole, he wouldn't have had the words. Perhaps he might've managed an impressionist painting to express how one step managed to feel like a single step and simultaneously carry the left-over sensation of having his body torn apart into its component cells and then thrown through space. There was a single, agonizing millisecond of all-encompassing cold that made him gasp and stumble as he exited.

Just ahead, he saw Sam righting himself, his journey through also not having been entirely smooth. If Clint and Natasha had lost their footing, it wasn't obvious as they calmly followed Daniel and his team, who were hurrying on towards a large mushroom-shaped stone dais at the foot of a long set of cracked and overgrown stone stairs.

Steve paused before following them and looked out, eager to get a look at this new world. A whole other planet. Except that it looked a lot like a beach; it was full of smooth, brown sand and a few rocks. Not a single seashell littered the shore, not a single brush of algae floated upon the water.

He looked up, towards the horizon. And gasped.

Really, he didn't know how he hadn't noticed sooner. Just wasn't used to looking up, he guessed. From now on, he was always looking up. When he'd imagined alien planets, he'd imaged odd-coloured plants and odd-looking creatures and maybe an extra moon or sun, but he'd never imagined a sky like this. He would never forget this sky. His fingers already itched and he just knew that no matter where they ended up spending the night, he wouldn't lay down to sleep until he'd sketched the tableau in front of him.

It was daytime, although the sun appeared to be hidden behind streaks of cloud that littered the sky in a myriad of shades from almost-white to dark gray. Two pale moons hung in the gaps between the clouds, round white ghosts in the daylight. And intruding into the rest of the sky... was another planet. It looked terrifyingly close, like it was about to come crashing into them close. He'd seen pictures of Earth from space, but this planet looked nothing like them: there were no bright blue oceans, no indications of any landmasses at all. This planet had streaks of beiges and browns, with white cloud-like streaks whirling amongst them.

The wormhole disengaged with a quiet, mechanical swish and a slight displacement of air. Steve
barely registered it as he stared up at the sky. He knew it was impossible, but he felt as though the planet was inching its way closer the more he stared at it.

“I'm really kicking myself now,” he heard Sam say from beside him. “Can't believe I didn't think to bring my camera, 'cause that's just...”

“Wow,” said Steve. “I don't think there's really a better word than just 'wow'.”

“Yeah, wow's good.”

“Hey guys, hurry up and get on over here!”

They both looked down to the bottom of the steps, where Colonel Mitchell was motioning them forward. Steve exchanged a glance with Sam and hurried to join them. Clint and Natasha were standing in front of the odd stone dais next to Daniel.

“Daniel, how exactly did you decide to gate here?” Steve heard Vala ask as he approached. “Not that I have any idea where here is, so it wasn't one of our missions.”

Daniel shrugged. “This is Oannes, Nem's planet. It was the first address I thought of.”

“Woah, Nem?” Mitchell exclaimed. “You mean the fish guy, who kidnapped you and made the rest of the SG1 think you were dead?! And you thought this was a great place to revisit, why exactly?”

“Unless we attack, I'm reasonably sure Nem will leave us alone,” said Daniel calmly. “He only took me because I demonstrated a basic knowledge of Mesopotamian and he wanted to find out what happened to his mate.”

“Why did he think you would know?” Vala asked.

“Because she had been on Earth fighting against the Goa'uld in Mesopotamia. And he sort of figured if I knew Mesopotamian, I might know the history and therefore her story.”

“Oh. And did you?”

“Eventually.”

Steve came to stand next to Daniel and blinked in amazement at the dais. Now that he could see it from the front, he realized it had symbols carved into it in a circle surrounding a large glass half-sphere. And then Daniel reached out and pressed down onto one of the symbols and Steve's eyes widened as the symbol depressed and lit up. At the top of the steps, the inner circle of the Stargate began to spin.

“Wow, okay, that's – what are you doing?” Clint asked, his eyes darting from the dais – or, well, controlling device he supposed – and the moving gate.

“Look, I'll explain later,” said Daniel. “This gate address is logged in the SGC's computer systems as the last address dialled, which means they can track us here. And I want to be long gone by the time they muster up a team to follow us. Assuming they get the orders to do so.”

“Is there a reason they wouldn't?” Natasha asked.

Daniel shrugged. “Because for anyone familiar with gate travel, this is obvious. You can figure out the last dialled address from the DHD crystals, but that takes time and the SGC is still under orders
forbidding the use of the Stargate. Jack will know right away that we didn't stay on whatever planet we gated to – especially since it's this one. Official death number two, in case you were wondering.”

He pressed down on the half-sphere with his entire hand and a wormhole formed with a side-ways splash of silent water.

“Alright, let's move out,” said Mitchell.

“Uh, Daniel?” Clint suddenly asked. Steve stopped at the tone of Clint's voice and turned around to see the archer looking out over the ocean.

“Yes?” Daniel asked.

Clint pointed out into the open sea. “Is that your fishy friend?”

Daniel followed Clint's gaze and smiled slightly. Steve looked as well, almost instantly spotting the dark shape bobbing in the water. From the distance, it was difficult to see any of its features clearly, but he could just barely make out the blue-ish skin and hairless head with what were possibly tentacles growing out like a squiggly beard. When Daniel waved at it, the hand that waved back was definitely webbed.

“Yeah, that's Nem,” said Daniel quietly. Then he took a deep breath and turned around, heading back towards the gate.

“So, what happened to his mate?” Steve asked as they walked up the steps.

Daniel's face darkened. “Nothing good.”

Steve stumbled again as he stepped through the Stargate, although this time it was due to the blinding wind that swept leaves and rain into his face and pushed him backwards with its force. To his left, he heard Clint shriek in surprise at the sudden onslaught. He was fairly certain none of their uniforms were waterproof enough to withstand this weather.

“Dammit, Jackson, where's that DHD?!” Mitchell yelled somewhere ahead of him.

“I think it's in the middle of that clump of trees!” Daniel yelled back.

“Not helpful! In case you hadn't noticed, we're surrounded by clumps of trees and I can barely see any-ow, shit!”

Steve managed to peer through the deluge of water being poured over them and saw the outline of what was probably Colonel Mitchell hopping on one leg as he leaned against some sort of stone statue (although it was rather tall and straight, so maybe it was a decorative column... it was difficult to tell in the rain) and rubbed his shin. Vala walked up to him.

“You alright?” she asked loudly enough to be heard over the wind.

“Yup, just dandy. Having warm fuzzy feelings towards the MALPs right about now.”

She nodded as though in agreement.

“Is everyone clear of the gate?” Daniel yelled.

After they'd all called off one by one that they were clear, the gate began to light up, the sound barely audible over the wind. When the wormhole whooshed into being, the wavy blue light was
like a beacon in the storm, beckoning them forward. They gladly answered.

And staggered out on the other side, their waterlogged clothing heavy and clinging to their skin uncomfortably. Their boots squished and squeaked as they stumbled down a set of stone stairs – these much smoother and less weather-worn than those on the beach planet. Smooth tile floor met them at the bottom.

Natasha brushed wet hair out of her eyes and looked around. They were inside a room, probably part of a much bigger complex if the multitude of corridors branching off were any indication. Her eyes darted around, watching for movement and taking note of every corner and hiding place, even as she paused at the bottom of the steps to wring as much water out of her hair as she could. There was no furniture that she could see, no rugs, no paintings, nothing that would indicate anyone had ever been here. What surfaces there were, were covered in a thick layer of dust. The building was at least warm for which she was grateful.

“Uh, sorry everyone,” said Daniel after he'd come through. Natasha turned just as the wormhole vanished behind him, wondering how it knew to do that. He grimaced. “I'd forgotten about the wicked monsoon season on that planet. On the plus side, it'll make it that much more difficult for anyone following behind us.”

Natasha nodded. Setting up equipment in that storm would not be easy.

“What is this place?” Clint asked, seemingly unbothered by his wet clothes as he leapt onto a ledge and peeked through the ornate grating in the wall.

“An abandoned Goa'uld pleasure palace,” said Daniel. He shrugged. “Sorry, these aren't the most exciting planets to visit, but I'm trying to pick ones that wouldn't have attracted the attention of the Ori.”

“No, we get that,” Sam told him. “Don't exactly want to come across the evil dudes before we're ready for them. Though I would've expected a pleasure palace to look a bit more comfortable and inviting...”

“The Goa'uld wouldn't have left anything valuable behind,” Vala scoffed. She was frowning. “This looks like a slightly different design to the ones I've been to. Qetesh enjoyed them enough, although it involved being around the other System Lords, so she didn't generally go often.”

Natasha frowned. “Who are the Goa'uld?” she asked. The name didn't sound familiar.

“Parasitic aliens that used to rule over this galaxy by setting themselves up as gods in order to enslave the human populations,” Daniel answered. “You'd be amazed at how many Earth gods were actually Goa'uld.”

Natasha watched as Daniel went to the stone dais. Once there he paused and bit his lip. “Actually, this is probably a good place for a crash course in gate travel. So you're not stuck in case we ever get divided.”

He stood back and waved his arms to encase the dais. “This is a DHD, which is an acronym for Dial Home Device – you can thank Jack O'Neill for that one by the way. It's like the keypad for a phone: enter an address and it'll connect you to the gate you've dialled. Each address has seven chevrons...”

It didn't take him long to go over basic gate operations and he showed them the address to Earth. Then he cursed and dug his hand into his pocket, pulling out several small devices. He threw one to
Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell, who caught it and then nodded approvingly before tucking it away into his flack vest. Daniel tucked a second into his own pocket and then looked to them thoughtfully with the third. After a moment he handed it to Steve.

“Here,” he said. “I'll let you guys decide who wants to keep this. It's called a GDO. See we installed an iris on the Earth Stargate to prevent any unwanted visitors from coming through. It's basically a metal barrier that covers the event horizon of any in-coming wormhole and prevents anything from materializing on our end of the gate.”

“Basically, you go splat... only without the disgusting splatter mark,” Mitchell added helpfully.

“Efficient,” said Natasha and then nodded towards the device Steve was holding. “I'm assuming this sends a signal ahead to let the base know you're friendly?”

Daniel nodded. “Yeah, but you have to input a code. I'll give you SG1's code, which may or may not be active after today, but I'd like to think they'd let us come back even if only to arrest us.”

“If they choose not to, then we'll at least never know,” Clint pointed out. Natasha looked up meet his eyes over the top of the DHD. He shrugged at her. “It's not a bad way to go, all things considered.”

She let the corner of her lips quirk slightly in amusement. Yes, there were certainly worse ways to die.

“You'll know before you walk through the gate,” said Daniel, as he looked between the two of them uncomfortably. “If the iris is down, the little light here will shine red. Once the iris has opened, a signal is sent through the gate and the light will turn green.”

“Green for go, sounds simple enough,” Sam commented.

Daniel nodded. “Good. I'm thinking one more pit-stop before we stop for the day and dry off.”

“Just so long as you don't hit the winter season on the next stop,” said Clint. Off to the left, Natasha saw Steve wincing.

Daniel looked apologetic. “Can't promise anything, sorry. I don't really know anything about the seasons on this next planet.”

They stood by and watched as he dialled the next planet. Once the wormhole formed, they squelched their way up the steps and walked through.

Sam felt very proud of himself for not stumbling this time as he exited the gate. Even that weird antsy feeling he'd gotten the first time had gone. He knew that sometime later tonight it would hit him that after spending his entire life on the same planet (as people generally did), he'd suddenly travelled to four different planets within the course of less than an hour. And it would be five by the time they were done. Crazy: it was absolutely insane.

And really, really cool. Cooler than Star Trek.

There might not have been any strange plants and animals on these planets, or little green men in flying saucers, but that purple sky he was looking at sort of made up for it.

“Hey, does this white gravel road lead to anywhere interesting?” Clint asked. “I mean it sure looks like civilization to me.”
Daniel paused to look into the distance and Sam studied the look on his face. Wherever they were, the archaeologist clearly had mixed feelings about the place. There was pain in his eyes – grief – but there was also wistfulness and a strange sort of serenity. It was a really beautiful place – out of the corner of his eyes he could see Steve's hand twitching in that way it did when he wanted to forget everything and just drag his sketchbook out and draw what was in front of him. The white gravel road they were standing on led into a forest in the distance and behind them, he could hear the gentle lapping of waves against the shore.

“It leads to a temple,” Daniel finally answered. “This planet is a rumour, a legend of the Jaffa warriors; a place where they travelled to find their final resting place. It's where I first met an Ancient named Oma Desala.”

“Shit,” he heard the air force colonel swear under his breath. “What exactly is this, the Daniel Jackson tour of painful memories? Jesus, this is Kheb isn't it?”

“Kheb?!” Vala gasped, clearly startled. She looked around with wide eyes, before glaring at Daniel and hissing between her teeth: “You never said you'd been to Kheb!”

Daniel blinked and looked at her. “It was before your time. Jack, Sam, Teal'c and I came here to find Sha're's child.”

Vala blinked and frowned. “Your wife had a child? I've heard of you having a child.”

“I let Oma take him. I... I couldn't care for him.”

“Why?” Vala looked genuinely puzzled, and from everything Sam had observed about Daniel, he didn't seem like the type of man to abandon a child or walk away from the hardship of raising one.

Daniel took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “He was a harcesis,” he said quietly.

Vala's eyes widened and for a moment, she looked truly stunned. “A harcesis... Apophis and Ammunet had a harcesis. That's...”

“Yeah.”

Sam exchanged looks with Steve and the other Avengers. That was the second mention of a wife, but according to all official records, Daniel Jackson had never married. Unless... aw man, he supposed marriage certificates from other planets didn't get registered on Earth, did they? There was a story there, he instinctively knew. And just as instinctively, he knew by the grief in Daniel's eyes it was a tragedy.

Daniel broke the spell of silence that had descended on the group himself with a shake of his head before walking over to the DHD to dial their final destination for the day. He'd spent long hours in his hotel room trying to figure out the best, safest planets to gate to, wracked his brain for the best choices to bunk for the night. Because the their end goal was a planet that was a complete unknown and Daniel wasn't sure that going there directly with a group of people who knew next to nothing about the Milky Way and gate travel was such a great idea. He'd given them a brief explanation on PX8 499, but that barely touched the surface.

Before they moved on, they needed to get their bearings and the rest of his team needed to know the plan. Really, the choice of where to settle down for the night was obvious once he'd thought of it. So he dialled the gate and then ran ahead of the group, making sure to be the first one through.

The other end of the wormhole revealed a forest with a rough dirt path leading away from the gate. The area looked deserted except for chirping, rustling and buzzing of the forest. But Daniel knew
better than to be fooled by appearances. He walked forward slowly, taking care not to make any sudden movements. Behind him, he heard the others exit the wormhole one by one. When he reached the centre of the clearing, he made a point of unhooking his zat from his belt and unholstering his handgun. He dropped both to the ground.

“Uh, what's he doing?” he heard someone whisper. He thought it might've been Sam.

Daniel ignored them as he spread his arms wide to show to his invisible observers that he wasn't holding any weapons.

“I'm Daniel,” he called out into the trees. “I'm here to see your leader; I'm his friend.” He paused. “Te a Zo Chaka ka nay Daniel.”

Around him the forest was silent for several agonizing moments. Then several trees rustled and four large, armed unas slid to the ground. Daniel let out the breath he was holding.

Several hours later, they were comfortably seated at a simple yet sturdy wooden table laden with what looked like a small feast and Clint couldn't help his fidgeting as he waited for Daniel to join them. He was willing to let the archaeologist keep his secrets about the first three planets they'd visited, but this one needed a story pronto.

Clint hadn't known there was anyone in the trees, until they'd dropped out of them. His jaw had followed, because these aliens were big and mean-looking and looked like they would lumber along not sneak. The clothes they were wearing looked like they could've come from the American Wild West right down to the shot guns a few of them carried. He couldn't help but wonder if Daniel had known the guards would be there.

“They're Unas,” Cam said quietly to the Avengers as they watched the archaeologist stumble through a conversation with one of the aliens. “Daniel's the most fluent in the language of anyone on base. He's usually the one who handles any negotiations with them.”

“But if this is somewhere that you guys negotiate with often, then wouldn't this be one of the first places the SGC will look?” Steve asked.

Cam snorted. “Cap, it'd take them months to get through all the places where Daniel handles negotiations. There are people who won't talk to anyone else but Daniel. The guy's pulled off miracles – point in case here actually. The reason we're here, I think, is because their leader is Daniel's friend first, ally of Earth second.”

Their leader was an especially large specimen, who was waiting for them at the edge of the village and smiled widely, exclaiming “Dannel!” loudly before darting forward and enveloping Daniel in a bear-hug. When he finally pulled back it was to grab an amused-looking Daniel by the arm and drag him further into the village.

The reactions they'd received walking through the village were... varied. Interestingly enough, the unas seemed curious and even excited to see them – a lot of them seemed to recognize Daniel, or at least the symbol on his uniform. Many of them were shy, hesitant about their interest; they looked up from the corner of their eyes, hunched in on themselves as though attempting to look smaller, to avoid notice. The humans, however, looked at them with expressions ranging from curiosity to contempt. And anger. Hatred.

Hawkeye gripped his bow tighter and looked to Black Widow, catching her eye. She blinked at
him in acknowledgement and then casually inched her way towards Daniel.

First they were taken to a small hut, where they were given some dry clothes and a clothesline where they could hang their wet clothes to dry. Then they got the grand tour of what looked like a new construction in the village, which seemed to include a school and a sports field. Loud shots rang through the air, startling the group. It turned out to be nothing more than a group of young men (all human) doing target practise. Which was just too much for Clint to resist. Notching an arrow from where he stood, he carefully aimed and let his arrow fly. It, of course, hit dead centre. He spent the next hour gathering a small crowd as he showed off. It didn't escape his notice that the crowd started off as all-human and only gradually began to contain some unas. Not that they hadn't been watching, but it had taken them a while to come closer.

Clint could spend hours on the range and likely would've stayed longer had one of his arrows not been interrupted half-way to the target by a round flat spinning object.

“Aw, come on, no fair Cap,” he complained loudly before turning to find Steve surrounded by children and grinning mischievously.

His group had small humans as well as small unas. A dozen or so faces watched in amazement as the shield ricocheted off trees and the wall of a house and then sailed smoothly into Cap's waiting hand. A dozen or so voices cheered.

“Who said anything about fair?” Steve called back.

The sky was beginning to fall to twilight when Daniel's unas friend, Chaka, showed them to a small cottage and presented them with the feast. Then he nudged Daniel out the door again, looking endearingly eager to show him something. Like a pitbull puppy: all happy smiles full of strong, sharp teeth.

“Okay, do you guys realize it's actually only about three in the afternoon?” Sam broke the silence, staring at his watch in amazement. “I thought it felt a bit early for dinner.”

“Yes, gate-lag can be a real bitch,” said Cam. “It's like jet-lag on steroids. Can't remember how often we leave a planet in the morning on a bright warm sunny day only to arrive back and realize it's the middle of the night and snowing. And that's not even going into how weird it is to get used to a planet with a different cycle, like thirty-hour days.”

“How long are your missions usually?” Sam asked.

Cam shrugged. “Depends on whether we find anything useful. SG1's a first contact team, so our missions are shorter ones, anywhere from one day to a week. Our job is to scope out a planet and assess if there's anything worth sending a long-term team in for. Trust me, some missions are really boring.”

“Especially when they're for Daniel,” Vala added. “There's never anything to do when you're stuck on a planet while he translates rocks. Come to think of it, the science ones aren't much better.”

Just then Cam stood and went to the window, nudging the linen drape to the side and peeking out. After a few moments of observation, he let it go and retook his seat.

“Something the matter?” Steve asked.

Cam sighed. “Not really, but I figured I should warn you about working with Daniel.”
Clint felt as Natasha and Steve both froze at that. “Warn us?” Natasha asked carefully. There was a deep undercurrent of ‘explain now or else’ in her voice.

“No, don't get me wrong, Daniel's awesome and he's been doing this for longer than just about anyone...” Cam trailed off. Then he shrugged. “But you should know a few things about him. First of all, he really is just as smart as everyone says he is. And he's usually right. Secondly, he's more or less the best diplomat in the galaxy, and his instinct about people are generally excellent. But he's got the self-preservation instincts of an alcoholic lemming.”

Clint blinked. “Wow, so not even just a regular lemming, but an alcoholic one.”

Cam and Vala both nodded solemnly.

“And he's a trouble-magnet,” Cam added.

“Oh, so that museum attack was his fault?” Sam asked after a pause. “You couldn't have told us that before we agreed to follow him through a wormhole.”

Vala rolled her eyes. “We didn't exactly invite you along.”

The door opened and they fell silent. Daniel walked in, looking happy.

“So, what did Chaka want?” Cam asked him.

“Oh?” Daniel looked up at him and blinked. “Oh, he wanted to introduce me to his wife. At least I think that's what the word 'zoka' roughly translates as.”

“He got married? Good for him.”

“Yeah, whatever, we can get back to that,” Clint dismissed. He really didn't care about some alien's love life. “More to the point what's up with this planet?”

“You noticed it too?” Steve asked. “The children didn't seem as bad, but the adults seemed to have a really hard time mixing.”

“Okay so it wasn't just me they were staring at?” said Sam. “Cause I couldn't help but notice how disgustingly white this entire village is, so I was figuring maybe the planet's super segregated.”

“It wasn't just you,” Daniel assured him. “Up until a few years ago, this village used to practise slavery. It'll take a while for their society to integrate and see each other as equal.”

Clint's first instinct was to demand how Daniel could be friends with a former slaver, but then he paused and thought about what he'd seen in the village. How the humans had been angry to see them – resentful.

“The unas were the slaves, weren't they?” he said carefully.

Daniel nodded. “Chaka led the rebellion and caused the unas to rise up against their slavers. And then he brokered peace with the humans.”

“But he wasn't a slave,” said Natasha. “He's different than the rest.”

The corner of Daniel's mouth quirked. “No, I met Chaka on another planet, then the slavers caught him and Jack and I went after him. Turned out he did more rescuing than we did in the end and then decided to stay here instead of going home in order to lead the rebellion.”
“Cool,” said Sam with a nod. “I like these unas a bit more now. I mean makes sense it's going to take a while for them to get over it.”

“It's going to take a while from both sides. The humans were originally brought here from Earth by the Goa’uld and they were the slaves with the unas as their keepers. Then the humans rebelled and the situation reversed, with the unas being kept as slaves. It'll be rough for a while.”

“So, did you help Chaka with his rebellion?” Sam asked.

Daniel shook his head, looking amused. “No, we had to get back to Earth. I did give him the my staff weapon though.”

“So, how exactly did you and Chaka meet that you became such good friends?” Steve asked, looking curious.

Cam snickered. “Good question,” he said. “It's the type of Daniel Jackson story that legends are made of.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “It is not. I was just in the right place – or wrong place, really – at the right time.”

“Uh, yeah, no, anyone else in your place would've been bludgeoned with a rock and eaten,” said Cam.

“How do you know all this?” Vala asked, amazed. “You've been with SG1 for as long as I have and I've even known Daniel longer, so why don't I know all these things?”

“'Cause I read through all the old mission reports.”

“Oh. Why in the world would you want to do that? Reports are boring. And they don't include the time Daniel and I had sex.”

Steve choked on the thick green liquid he was drinking.

“Mostly because that never happened,” Daniel retorted automatically.

“Aaanyway,” Sam interrupted them. “So, we setting out in the morning?”

Daniel nodded. “Yes. I figured after everything, getting an early night and some time to just talk might be a good idea since we have absolutely no idea what we might find at the gate address we're heading to. I showed you the address for Earth, but that's not going to be of any use to you if you happen to get stuck without a GDO. So I'll give you two other address for allies of ours who have GDOs and can get you to Earth. Unfortunately, the Alpha site's been abandoned, which would've been the best option since they could've easily verified who you are.”

“I feel like you're trying to tell us that this whole going boldly where no human has been before is actually really terrifying,” said Clint, thinking of the monsoon they'd accidentally walked into.

“Well, for all we know it's an Ori stronghold,” said Cam.

“Or it could've become a volcano planet,” said Vala.

“Or it froze over at some point,” Daniel suggested.

“Awesome,” said Clint. “You guys ever think of doing a comedy act? You could be the Doom Trio.”
Daniel laughed. “You laugh, but those are all things we’ve actually encountered.”

“Really?” said Vala. “I was actually joking with the volcano planet.”

“Well, it wasn’t actually SG1 that was involved. I was with SG3 helping to evacuate the population out of the area before the volcano erupted. Then the gate malfunctioned, which was just great. We had all the villagers and their livestock ready and standing in front of the gate while getting covered in volcanic ash and the Stargate refused to connect to earth.”

“What did you do with the villagers?” Steve asked.

“We relocated them to a planet with a similar atmosphere and rich soil. There was already a settlement there, but they were happy to take in the refugees. Not only were they bringing with them seeds for a new kind of grain that was more resilient to drought-like conditions, but the settlement was small enough that inter-marriage had become a problem so they were happy for the infusion of new blood.”

“That’s impressive for a military operation,” said Natasha.

“It wasn’t easy, trust me,” said Daniel dryly. “I can’t count the number of arguments I’ve had over the years with various generals, politicians and bureaucrats to keep the program from becoming exclusively about weapons hunting.”

“I tried to help too,” said Vala.

Daniel scowled at her. “That wasn’t called helping.”

“But it was true. That politician only wanted to throw his weight around to make up for the small size of his penis.”

Clint burst out laughing.

Daniel groaned and cradled his head in his hands. “I am not having this conversation.”

“Did you actually say that?” Clint asked Vala.

She blinked at him. “Of course I did.”

“Ah man, you are my kind of crazy.”

She grinned and raised her glass to him. In fact all of SG1 were the Avenger’s sort of crazy. Daniel’s plans of an early night fell through the moment Vala discovered that one of the bottles on the table had paint-stripper levels of alcohol. At one point in time, Steve had gone and gotten his sketchbook from his bag and pauses in conversation were punctuated by the steady sound of his charcoal on paper.
Third Interlude

Chapter Notes

As an apology for not sticking to my own timetable, here's a bonus interlude for you. Well, technically speaking this one isn't really a bonus as it was planned (and pre-written) for the end of Act 3. So, actually it'll be the Fourth Interlude that'll be the bonus and this one's just a bit early. Anyway, based on quite a few of the comments after the last interlude, I'm guessing this is something a lot of you were hoping for and I had a ton of fun writing it. So, enjoy!

Head-throbbing drumbeats and screaming guitars blared through hidden speakers, the music so loud it nearly drowned out the high-pitched grinding squeal of the circular saw. Sparks flew out from the circular saw as it shaved away an edge of gold-coloured metal being held down by large metal arms. Excess metal clattered to the ground and the giant arms lifted the sheet of metal they were holding, turned it, readjusted it, then set it back down and resumed cutting along some pre-programmed, invisible line.

Tony Stark ignored the arms and their cutting in favour of concentrating on the small welding torch in his hands and the tiny metallic pieces he was holding in place with tongs. Finally, he leaned back and took his hands away from the joint he was working on, putting the tongs down before shutting off the welding torch. He flipped up the protective visor and leaned in to examine his work up close.

He put down the welding torch. “JARVIS, how's the cutting going?” he asked.

The music's volume lowered from eardrum piercing to merely loud.

“Is it approximately 73.4% complete. Estimated time to completion: 12.86 minutes. Sir–”

“Good, and how are those calculations coming along?”

“The calculations you requested were completed one hour and seven minutes ago.”

Tony threw his hands up in exasperation. “Then why didn't you tell me?!”

“I did, sir. Three times.”

Tony blinked. “Oh. You're sure?”

“Positive, sir. Now, perhaps I could bring your attention to–”

“–Then what are you waiting for?” He slipped off the protective visor and tossed it haphazardly onto the workstation. “Bring it up on the screen, chop, chop! I want to see how this material stands up now that we've managed to get rid of that fuck-awful blue colour.”

A holographic screen popped into existence on Tony's left, just far enough away that he had to turn
his wheeled chair around to properly see the display. His face twisted in annoyance as he reached out to grab at the screen – presumably to pull it forward.

Movement in the corner of his eyes caught his attention. He frowned and glanced towards the centre of the lab. And froze. Blinked.

“JARVIS, I hate to state the obvious, but there's a person in my lab. Why is there a person in my lab?” He paused. “No, even better: I have the best security, well, anywhere, so how is there a person in my lab?”

Tony swivelled his chair around to face the unknown person. It was a woman; she had short, blonde hair and wearing a long white labcoat and combat boots. However instead of staring around in awe, or greedily taking in whatever prototypes or scraps of blueprints he happened to have lying around, she was crouched in front of DUM-E, waving her hand slowly in front of the bot and watching with obvious fascination as Tony's bot's head/arm followed the movement.

“DUM-E, you useless bot, you're supposed to evict strangers not beg for treats!” Tony yelled at the bot. “Seriously, it's the community college for you, first thing in the morning.”

The woman looked up and grinned at Tony. “His optic sensors are really something!” she said. “They must be light-sensitive instead of just infra-red and motion-active.”

Tony blinked at her. “Of course they're light-sensitive. Why wouldn't they be?” His eyes narrowed as she stood and he saw that she was wearing what looked like standard military-issue BDUs under the labcoat. “How did you get in here exactly?”

“Sir, I feel I should point out–”

“–Not now, JARVIS. Who are you?”

“Actually before I answer that question, I think maybe you should listen to your AI,” said the woman with an impish grin.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Ookay. JARVIS?”

“As I was trying to tell you, sir, my sensors are not picking up a detectable presence.”

“What? Are they malfunctioning?”

“No, sir. I have run a full system diagnostic and everything seems to be working at maximum efficiency. Cameras have visual confirmation of the presence, however neither heat nor motion sensors are registering anything.”

Tony blinked. “How is that–” he began, looking at the woman closely for any hidden devices. The blonde met his eyes and smirked just before she stepped forward and walked right through DUM-E. Tony felt his mouth go slack as he gaped. There had been no distortion, no blurring, nothing whatsoever to indicate she'd passed through solid matter.

And Tony certainly didn't have any projectors in that part of the floor.

He sat up, eyes scanning every inch of the woman for any signs that she was anything less than a physical presence. “Okay, you have my attention,” he said.

She smiled. “Oh good,” she said. “I'm Colonel Doctor Samantha Carter.”
Tony froze, mind whirling at the name. The answer came to him shortly and he snapped his fingers at his moment of epiphany. “Daniel's friend: the one who works at Area 51!”

He leapt out of his chair and walked up to her, reaching out to run his fingers over the edges of the projection. Only when he was this close could he see a slight fuzziness around the edges, a sort of soft edge that took away from the solidness of the image. He pressed in, amazed at how little his fingers disrupted the image even from up close. The contrast of solid matter to projection made the projection all the more obvious, but it didn't break up around the disruption.

“Where are you projecting this hologram from?” he asked. This didn't look like his work; he'd never bothered with a full range of the colour spectrum for his holograms, hadn't felt the need for it.

He heard her clear her throat and looked up. She raised an eyebrow at him. Tony blinked and then looked down, noticing just where his hand was on the hologram. He quickly pulled his hand away and took a few steps back, shoving his hands into his pockets against further temptation.

“Er, right, sorry,” he mumbled.

“We're projecting the image from orbit,” Sam Carter finally answered him. “This is something a couple of our scientists have been working on for a while.” She shrugged mischievously. “I sort of convinced them to let me hijack it for a little while. Figured it'd be a better way to get your attention than an e-mail.”

“Wow, it's like you know me,” he said.

She grinned. “Daniel said you were a bit like me.”

Tony grinned back. “Oh he did, did he? Well consider my attention gotten, now you didn't just pop by to say 'hi', did you?”

“Daniel said he told you about the Ori.”

The grin slid off Tony's face. “Yes, the big bad alien armada heading right for Earth. He said you were in charge of creating some sort of weapon to defend Earth with?”

“Not quite. It's not a weapon I'm building: what I'm trying to do is create a dimensional bubble large enough to encompass the entire planet in order to shift it out of phase and into its own pocket dimension. We'd be still be able to keep an eye on their movements, but they wouldn't be able to see or touch us.”

Tony felt the excitement building up in his veins, felt his fingers twitch as he imagined the schematics for such a device.

“And you're having trouble getting it to work?” he asked.

“Oh no, the phase-shifting device works just fine on a smaller scale,” she said, much too dismissively for Tony's taste (only he was allowed to be that dismissive when it came to making brilliant creations work). “According to all the scenarios I've run, the calibrations I've made to it should allow it to work on a larger scale, but the problem I'm running into is that—“

“...the power requirements for something like that would be massive,” Tony finished as his mind rushed ahead. He snapped his finger and pointed at her. “The arc reactor. You want the arc reactor.”
"I need 700 gigawatts of power. Short of re-routing all power from seventy percent of the country..." she sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "If I had more time I could probably build something. Maybe. But from what little I know about the arch reactor, I think it should work. I mean, we might need more than one--"

"--One should be fine, we'll just make it bigger," said Tony. He narrowed his eyes at her. "But you know I'm not going to just hand over arch reactor specs to anyone, even if it is to save the world."

"Give me your cell number and I'll text you the GPS co-ordinates."

Tony blinked. "GPS – wait, are you..." He broke out in a grin and rattled off the number. "How exactly did you get permission for this? From what we overheard when Daniel was here, the military doesn't exactly want me on-board with anything."

The colonel looked sheepish for a moment. "Well, I didn't specifically get permission to bring you into the project... but I did get blanket permission to request any and all resources I might need to get this done before the Ori get here."

"So I'm a resource now?" Tony asked, amused.

She shrugged. "Daniel would say that people are one of the best resources."

"Then who are we to argue with Daniel Jackson?"

"JARVIS, are you sure this is the right place?" Tony asked as he flew over the desert. "I mean, I know according to every single rumour ever Area 51's supposed to be in the middle of nowhere, but I'm pretty sure we passed 'middle of nowhere' ten miles ago."

"Sir, we are approaching the GPS co-ordinates. Sensors are picking up faint energy readings and radio activity."

"Show it to me, J."

A screen helpfully popped up on the HUD, displaying the readings. Tony hummed thoughtfully as he skimmed through the numbers. It wouldn't have been enough to catch anyone's attention if they weren't looking for it, but there was definitely something more in that area than just sand and cacti. He wondered what sort of shielding they were using, because the readings he was getting looked like they were for some sort of small bunker, not a large research facility.

He landed on the exact spot with as loud a thud as he could manage without actually crashing to the ground, crouching down and stabilizing himself with one arm. The HUD's motion sensors picked up minute movements at ground-level: cameras, probably. Well, whatever, he'd been invited, so let them get a good look. After a few moments, he raised his faceplate and took in the area with his naked eyes.

There wasn't much to see. Unless you really liked sand.

Needless to say, Tony wasn't particularly surprised when a large box started to rise up out of the desert in front of him. He was slightly impressed with how silently it managed to move despite the no-doubt powerful machinery at work, but that was hardly surprising. When it stopped moving it
looked like a tall metal booth with a cap made of dirt and sand (Tony saw plexiglas keeping at least some of the dirt in place, but he couldn't help but wonder how the sand wasn't flying off with the motion). Doors on the front slid open and two armed military guards stepped out.

Tony tensed, but relaxed moments later when Colonel Doctor Sam Carter barrelled past them as though she barely noticed them.

“Doctor Stark,” she greeted with a smile. “I'm glad you made it. Sorry for the delay; we had to confirm it really was you.”

“That's perfectly understandable,” he answered back, wordlessly giving the command to dismantle the suit. The blonde watched with interest as the Iron Man's parts flew away from his body and then reassembled beside him.

“How fast does it go?” she asked.

“I've clocked its maximum speed at about Mach 3.6, but it starts getting a bit shaky in the air after 3.3.”

“Really?”

She looked covetously at the suit, her eyes shining with excitement. Tony smirked. Well, looked like the good little astrophysicist had a thing for speed. He had a feeling they were going to get along just fine.

“So, I think you said you had some science to show me?” he said. “And, call me Tony,” he said, holding out his hand. “I only make people I don't like call me Doctor Stark.”

She smiled as she shook it. “In that case, I'm Sam. And I'll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Tony laughed.
HOPE

Chaka walked them to the Stargate with a female unas who had to be his wife. Natasha wasn't afraid to admit she was impressed by the scary-looking alien. And he was scary-looking. Not as big as the Hulk, but he had a wildness in his eyes, a barely-contained presence that said he could tear you apart with his bare hands if he chose to. It had not surprised her to learn he had grown up in a cave. Well, maybe a little, but it somehow seemed fitting. That he'd grown up knowing freedom was obvious: Chaka held his head higher than most of his fellow unas and with a confidence that not only spoke of leadership, but also of someone who'd never had to bow before a master. At least not for long enough to have been broken into it.

He'd gone from primitive cave-dweller, to captured slave, to leader of a revolution, to peacekeeper and leader of a mixed settlement. And, according to Daniel, most of that had happened while he was still rather young. Daniel was clearly proud of his friend.

Natasha, however, was glad to be leaving the settlement. By silent agreement, she, Steve and Clint had agreed to take watch shifts, not entirely sure the former slavers could be trusted. The hostility and fear being levelled at them had them all on edge. Colonel Cameron Mitchell seemed to be of the same opinion as he'd woken up an hour before her shift was due to end and took over. Sam was the one watching instead of Steve when she woke up.

As soon as they'd entered the forest path, Natasha noticed Chaka relax, yet look somehow sharper, more alert than before. He never stopped his conversation with Daniel that appeared to be half in Unas and half in English. His wife looked at both of them in what appeared to be bemusement. And then, finally, the stargate blocked their path – for once not looming above them, but rather nestled into the scenery like it was trying to blend in. Daniel entered the address on the DHD and a watery splash appeared inside the giant stone circle. The man had been doing this for over twelve years, she had to keep reminding herself every time she saw how entirely unaffected he was by the spectacle.

Twelve years of travelling to other planets and meeting aliens. Natasha didn't think she'd lived anything close to a boring life, but there was something so fantastical, so impossible about that that it hadn't hit her until she'd been woken up in the morning by a completely foreign sound coming from outside. It had turned out to be a bird nearly the size of a chicken with brown, blue and green speckled feathers and a long tail that fanned out behind it as it flew away. It was beautiful, its voice several octaves higher than she would've expected from such a large bird.

Daniel had known exactly what it was and immediately began explaining how the locals used them to tell the shifting seasons, because they migrated south just before winter would hit and then fly back when spring had arrived for good.

For once, she wasn't the one with the most field experience or training. It was... disconcerting.

Colonel Cameron Mitchell walked up to the stargate first and then paused for a moment before turning around.
“Okay, we have no idea what's on the other side of the stargate, so I'm going to go first and make sure it's—”

“– alright, because otherwise we'll just turn around and go back to Earth to face Jack and the air force's firing squad empty-handed?” Daniel interrupted, barrelling past her and everyone else. He glared at Mitchell. “I don't think so. If there's something waiting for us on the other side, we have greater strength in numbers.”

Mitchell gave him an exasperated look, but didn't say anything as Daniel turned to wave and call something (probably good-bye) to Chaka.

“Unless it's a meteor shower,” said Vala quietly as she watched Daniel slip into the wormhole.

“But aren't you explorers?” Steve asked, frowning with confusion at the colonel. “I mean, don't you usually go places and not know what to expect?”

“Well, yeah, all the time,” said Mitchell with a shrug. “But usually, we've sent a MALP ahead and gotten some pictures and stats back which gives us some idea of what's on the other side. We don't usually go completely blind like this.”

“Ah.” Steve nodded and slipped his shield off his back before looking around to meet everyone's eyes. Natasha nodded to him when he met hers. The risk wasn't any greater than any of her regular missions, possibly less.

“Hey man, this sort of feels like we're hunting for the Holy Grail,” Sam quipped. He held his hand out as though he were holding a sword. “Onward for Camelot!”

“I'll bring the Holy Hand Grenade,” said Clint with a grin.

Mitchell snorted. “Been there, done that,” he said just before he turned and walked into the wormhole.

Clint and Sam exchanged baffled looks.

“Wait, what?!” Sam exclaimed and then both of them followed the colonel.

Natasha rolled her eyes.

“What the hell do you mean you've been- woah!”

Clint was already kneeling at the edge of the platform, his bow in one hand, the other reaching for an arrow as his eyes looked sharply at what lay before him.

This stargate stood on a large platform made of gleaming white stone with several stepped going down into a bright green grassy field. A grassy field that was full of people. They looked human, their clothes made of brightly-coloured, light-weight material that flowed in the breeze. And they all looked young. Clint notched an arrow absently even as his eyes swept the crowd of people and realized the oldest looked maybe eighteen, if he squinted.

And in their midst stood Daniel, weaponless and glaring up at them in disapproval.
“Put down your weapons,” he called to them. “Unless you make a habit of threatening children?”

“No, we don't,” said Steve resolutely. “Clint, Natasha, stand down.”

Clint relaxed and slipped the arrow out of its notch and then back into the quiver on his back. To his left, he noticed Cam and Vala had already brought their weapons down, although they didn't remove them like Daniel had.

“Children can be dangerous too,” said Natasha, but Clint could tell she was saying it mostly as a matter of protocol, because she'd holstered her handgun and relaxed.

“Yes, but in this case we hoping to make friends with their parents, which is going to be somewhat problematic if they find out we pointed weapons at their children,” said Daniel pointedly.

Clint stood and glanced to Cam, who was watching Daniel like a hawk even as he was obviously scanning the area. Once weapons were no longer pointing at them, the children relaxed, looking instantly less skittish and more curious. Many of them were still hanging back, but they were watching them.

“Howdy,” Cam called out with a wide, friendly smile as he stepped down from the platform.

The children blinked and exchanged looks with each other before looking to Daniel. Who was busy speaking to the older ones... or at least attempting to. There seemed to be a rather lot of hand gestures and thoughtful frowning as the children looked like they were trying to follow his words. And then Daniel would pause while they hesitantly replied and do some frowning of his own.

“Howdy,” Cam called out with a wide, friendly smile as he stepped down from the platform.

The children blinked and exchanged looks with each other before looking to Daniel. Who was busy speaking to the older ones... or at least attempting to. There seemed to be a rather lot of hand gestures and thoughtful frowning as the children looked like they were trying to follow his words. And then Daniel would pause while they hesitantly replied and do some frowning of his own.

“Daniel, you doing okay over there?” Cam called to him after a few minutes.

Daniel half-waved over his shoulder. “They're speaking in a dialect of Ancient and I'm having a bit of trouble understanding some of the expressions.”

“But that's good right?” Vala asked as she came down the steps next to Cam. “That they're speaking any sort of Ancient at all?”

Daniel turned and grinned. “Oh, yes, that's very good. And if you look to the town, you'll notice that tall tower looks familiar too.”

At the other end of the field, framed from the east by a tall mountain range that disappeared into the clouds, was a town. The buildings were white with brightly-painted roofs. Towering above the town was a single tower, a silver four-sided monolith with a large windowed area at the top, just before the building began to narrow to a gleaming point.

Cam whistled in appreciation. “Wow, looks like the main tower on Atlantis.”

The response to the name 'Atlantis' was instantaneous. Suddenly, the children were looking at each other with shining eyes and gathering even closer to Daniel, talking excitedly. Daniel's eyes lit up at this response and he turned all his attention back to the ones he'd been attempting to communicate with. The word 'Atlantis' got thrown around a few times.

Clint felt silent steps beside him and cocked his head to the side to acknowledge Natasha's presence.

“Atlantis?” she whispered.

“I know,” he said. “Think they could've covered up finding the actual city, or do you figure it's
some sort of alien thing that just happens to be called Atlantis?"

“Well, it apparently has a tower.”

“Maybe it's a very skinny spaceship?”

Natasha snorted softly. Then she stiffened.

Clint's hand tightened around his bow when he noticed the procession approaching from the city. In front ran several more kids – they must’ve sent earlier to get the adults (that's the sort of things kids did, right?). Three taller people ran on their heels, one trailing vibrant fushia shirts behind her. Quite a bit behind them he saw a man with a long white beard looking like he was running at full-tilt, though not at the same speed the younger ones could.

“Uh, Daniel, I think you've got those parents coming up!” Clint called.

“Thanks!” he called back. “I think I'm finally getting the hang of this dialect.”

“It sounds related to Latin,” said Natasha quietly.

Clint glanced to her. She was frowning, eyes watching the approaching people even as her head was tilted to one side as she listened to Daniel and the children.

“Can you understand any of it?” Clint asked.

Natasha shook her head. “Maybe with enough time. And less children.”

Clint chuckled.

He and Natasha waited behind as Steve and Sam went down to join Cam and Vala, although they all let Daniel take the lead in speaking with the adults when they arrived. The three younger ones who arrived first seemed just as excited as Daniel. The older man joined them a short while later, red-faced and wheezing, though his eyes shone with equal excitement.

Daniel seemed to have a much easier time understanding the older man. When it became clear none of them were any danger to anyone but their own vocal chords, Clint and Natasha descended the steps to join the others.

“Does he do this a lot?” Natasha asked, having picked up Daniel's weapons from where he'd dropped them.

“Yeah, it's not often the 'Hi, I'm Daniel Jackson, peaceful explorer' spiel fails,” Cam said. He looked over. “Although when it does, it's at least memorable.”

“Yes, being burned to death certainly was memorable,” said Vala with a matter-of-fact nod.

Clint looked to her. “Burned to death. You were burned to death.”

“You look less, uh, crispy than I would've expected someone who'd burned to death to look,” Sam added with an equally incredulous look.

Vala shrugged. “Oh, I wasn't in my own body. And the priors made me all better anyway, because they wanted to take us to meet the great, all-powerful Orici or some nonsense.”

Sam blinked. “Was it just me, or did that do absolutely nothing to clarify the burning to death part?”
“No, definitely not just you,” said Steve. “I can heal from a lot of things, but I don't even think I could heal from burning to death. Mostly because of the, well, 'to death' part.”

“Oh, it's not that impressive,” said Vala dismissively. “Even a sarcophagus can do that.”

Steve looked puzzled. He turned to Sam and opened his mouth.

“Oh no Cap, a sarcophagus is not some new age fancy hospital thing.” Sam said before he could ask. “Unless she's been going to some very different hospitals than I have.”

“A sarcophagus is a Goa'uld healing slash regeneration device,” said Cam. “I've never seen or used one, but I know Daniel there's seen more of them than he'd like to remember.”

Vala cocked her head to the side and slowly turned to Cam. “Cameron, you've really read through those files thoroughly, haven't you? I don't think I really knew what an SG1 fanboy you were before joining.”

The tips of Cam's ears turned pink. “Shut up, Vala.” He frowned. “And how do you know what a fanboy is anyway?”

Suddenly, Daniel was standing in front of them vibrating with excitement, his face lit up with glee.

“Okay, I think there's definitely something here,” he said. He turned to the side and raised his hand to indicate the four adults. “Hektor here is the town's Head Archivist and Keeper of History – I can't quite tell if that's one title or two, but you get the idea – and Mauffid, Diados and Len are his students. The town's name is Aeneid and this is where it gets interesting, because while the name clearly links it to Earth at a later historical period, the design of the tower is clearly Ancient. Unless, of course, the name of the epic poem comes from the name of the town, but I don't suppose we'll have the opportunity to figure that out.”

“Jackson, the point,” said Cam.

Daniel blinked. “Uh, right. Aeneid was founded by the Ancients about ten thousand years ago. Well, not this Aeneid that you see there, but I'll get to that in a minute. Anyway, the Ancients founded a small town and built a temple in the forest not far away from it. From what Hektor and his colleagues have been able to figure out over the years, they Ancients inhabited the settlement for quite a few years before something changed approximately four thousand years ago and they brought new people from far away to live here with them. And then, three thousand years ago, the Ancients – otherwise known as 'the Founders' – gathered the citizens in the village and bade them farewell before vanishing in a flash of blinding white light. But just before disappearing, they told the villagers about the temple in the forest. Their exact words were: 'Within the temple lies the means to victory should peace ever be threatened'.”

Daniel gestured to the village. “That tower was build by the town's citizens about a hundred years ago, after one of their archaeological teams uncovered some mentions of Atlantis within the city's archives. They also found a picture which they based the tower's design on. Apparently it's become quite the fairy tale around here: the fantastic city the Founders had come from.”

“The means to victory sounds good to me,” said Cam. “I take it your friend can take you to the temple.”

Daniel nodded. “Oh yes, definitely, but apparently it's pretty far away and it's nearly mid-day. Besides, I'd like to take a look at some of the research Hektor's people have done on this temple. Might save us time in the long run and I'd like Hektor to take a look at the tablets, see if maybe he
has anything similar to them.”

Clint blinked and then looked up to the sky to check the position of the sun... nope, suns.

“This is starting to get a disorientating,” he muttered.

“Shit, I really hope my biological clock is going to be so confused by all this it won't realize it's supposed to be jet-lagged or gate-lagged or whatever,” said Sam.

Daniel looked at them both in amusement. “I'm sure Hektor could find someone to show you the city if you'd like.”

“I'd love to paint this view,” said Steve quietly.

Daniel laughed. “You know, I can also ask if they have an art gallery or something like it in the town.”

Steve's eyes lit up. “That would really be swell, thank you.”

They were met in front of the village by a tall, severe-looking woman who glared angrily at Hektor and his three students. Her tone was frosty when she spoke, eyes narrowing as she took in SG1 and the Avengers.

“If I'm understanding correctly, she's the head of the town's police force and she's not happy that she wasn't the first one informed about the gate activating,” Daniel translated softly. “I guess the kids just ran straight for Hektor and she only found out third-hand or something.”

Sam winced. “Okay, yeah, she's got reason to be pissed.”

They quickly drew a crowd and Clint was sort of glad they didn't have Tony with them. He didn't think these people would be all that impressed with his brand of loud show-boating. Daniel – when it finally came time for him to speak and present their request – and his quiet, unassuming but firm way seemed to make more of an impression.

In the end, the head of security relented and allowed them into the city. They were accompanied by police officers everywhere they went, but Clint figured that was fair enough really. Turned out the town did have an art gallery of sorts as well as extensive training grounds and a sports field where they played an odd sort of sport that was almost soccer except for the large poles the players carried and used for everything from controlling the ball to vaulting over other players.

It was a fun sport to watch even if none of them understood the rules. Daniel wasn't around to translate for them, having disappeared along with Hektor and his students as soon as they were given the okay to proceed.

It was an interesting experience; unsettling perhaps was a better word. It had been a very long time since Clint had been anywhere without at least a basic knowledge of how to communicate with the locals, even if all he knew was how to say 'hello', 'thank you' and 'do you speak English'. It made him feel like a novice all over again. Natasha was having a slightly better time with her knowledge of Latin, but only slightly.

“Okay, seriously, do you understand a word anyone around here is saying?” he asked at one point as he sat down next to Cam and Steve, both of whom were watching the game with nearly identical analytic expressions, apparently still trying to figure out the rules.

“Hell no, that's what we keep Jackson around for,” Cam answered, his eyes never leaving the field.
“Vala’s picked up a bit of Ancient, but apparently the dialect ’round these parts is just way too thick for her.”

“Then you look way too relaxed for someone who has no idea what's going on around him. I mean, you get that these guys could be plotting our assassination and we'd have no idea.”

Cam looked to him with an amused smile, though his eyes were serious. “Yeah, they could be.” He shrugged. “I guess you just get used to not really knowing what's going on. I've definitely gotten a lot better at reading body language since joining SG1 and these guys around us just look like they're having fun. And that historian guy back there was genuinely excited to meet us. He an' Daniel are probably going to spend the night bonding over exciting book stuff and pickin' each other's brains. That'll give us one ally in this place should something go sideways.”

“Yeah, but he's just one guy.”

Cam shrugged. “One guy who seems to be respected by the folks 'round here and knows the city real well. Sides, 's not like we can just pack it up and go home, plus we'll need someone to show us this temple of theirs.”

Steve had looked over at some point while Cam was talking. “They seem to want to know more about this temple too, so at the very least we should have until Daniel figures it out,” he said with a nod. “And by then we'll be in the middle of a forest without all these civilians around.”

“Yeah,” said Clint grudgingly. “There's too many kids here for my taste.”

Steve chuckled. “I like it: it's peaceful, but full of life.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Of course you like it,” he muttered.

Just then a young girl walked up to them with a tray of glasses full of some sort of bright purple liquid. They thanked her and inspected the beverage. It was thicker than water and smelled sweetly – some sort of juice perhaps? Or maybe it was alien sodapop. Clint took a sip. It wasn't quite as sweet as he would've expected it to be based on the smell, with an almost nutty flavour. He took a second sip and swirled it around his mouth for a moment before swallowing. He could get used to this drink, he decided.

He sat back with a shrug, and began watching the game in earnest as he sipped his bright purple drink, eyes scanning the area every once in a while out of habit.

There was a clink of china as something was placed beside him. Daniel looked up and blinked at the dim lighting in the room. A glance at the window showed it was far beyond simply night; the air held a stillness that only happened when the night was beginning to approach dawn. He blinked again, suddenly aware of the soreness in his eyes – the sort that came from staring at pages for too long. His head felt fuzzy, his limbs sore.

God, he was getting too old for this.

A soft herbal smell met his nose and he looked back to the table. Beside him now sat a plate with simple blue ceramic mug and a little pot of the pink-ish paste that Hektor had told him was used by the citizens of Aeneid as a sweetener. It was made from the sap of a local tree and gave everything
a slight floral smell and flavour. It was pleasant, though Daniel wouldn't want it anywhere near his
coffee.

There was movement out of the corner of his eye and he looked up to see Dion, Hektor's wife,
draping a woven blanket over her husband's softly snoring form. The old man was slumped over a
book, his left hand still clutching an old, tattered scroll, though the pen had fallen out of his other
hand and rolled off towards the edge of the desk. After she'd arranged the blanket across his
shoulders, Dion gently carded a hand through his hair, smiling fondly.

“He is too old for such late nights,” she said softly. “And too foolish to remember.”

Daniel winced. They'd gotten a bit carried away, both high on the endorphins of potential
discovery.

“Sorry,” he said, keeping his voice quiet.

Dion snorted. “Don't bother, I know very well who I married all those years ago. Besides, it was
nice to see him looking so full of energy... so young. It's been a while since anything has captured
his mind like this.”

She spoke in the local dialect, a rounded lilt to her words, the phrasing jumbling the Ancient
language it had clearly originated from. Hektor, as a historian and expert on the Founders, spoke
proper Ancient, though he often forgot himself and switched to his native dialect when excited. As
a result, Daniel had heard it enough to have gotten a fair handle on it. Now that it no longer
confused him, he could admit it was rather pleasant-sounding. He wondered whether it was simply
the result of evolution of the language, or something carried over from the Earth culture the
citizens of Aeneid had originally come from.

“He has a remarkable mind,” he said with a small smile. “I can only hope to be as sharp as him
after my hair has gone white.”

She laughed. “Like Hektor, I doubt you will allow your hair and your bones to tell you what to do.
But perhaps you should lay down for a short while anyway. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes, you're right, I probably should.” He sighed. “There's just so much here, so
much to go through.”

“Then that will give a reason to come back after peace has been won.”

Daniel smiled wistfully. It wouldn't be up to him to decide: the only place he might be going after
the Ori were defeated was in front of a firing squad. “I hope so,” was all he said.

He picked up the delicate wooden paddle-shaped spoon provided with the sweetener paste and
scooped up a bit, letting it drop into the warm liquid – a mixture of herbs and fruit juices that
wasn't quite tea and wasn't quite juice that Daniel found both soothing and refreshing. He watched
as the paste dissolved quickly and then put the spoon down and took a sip.

“Thank you,” he said, gesturing with the cup.

“You're welcome,” said Dion as she made to leave.

Daniel took another sip and looked thoughtfully at Hektor. “Should we move him to somewhere
more comfortable?”

Dion had reached the doorway by then. “No,” she said, looking over her shoulder to answer him.
Even in the dim light Daniel could see the impish twinkle in her eyes. “I have brought him a blanket so that he will not be cold, but ignoring sense was his own decision. If he will fall asleep at his desk because of his own foolishness, then he can deal with the consequences in the morning. Perhaps he will remember the backache and stiff neck and come to bed next time.”

Daniel chuckled. “You aren't as sweet as you seem, Dion.”

She grinned. “Why thank you, Daniel. And goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

The world was shaking. Slowly, the desert in front of Daniel's eyes turned into darkness, but before he wonder about the black nothingness, it began to brighten. He felt a pressure on his shoulder and heard words – recognizing his own name among them – and slowly realized the world wasn't shaking. Someone was shaking him.

Daniel groaned in protest and swatted at the annoyance. He heard his groan echoed from somewhere across the room. He blinked his eyes open and Vala's face swarm blearily into view. She was grinning. That was not a good sign given that he knew for a fact she was not a morning person.

“Come on, Daniel, rise and shine!” she exclaimed much too exuberantly. “Adventures and temples await! Oh and congratulations on making it to a horizontal surface last night.”

Daniel ignored her as he forced his body to sit up despite its protests. He looked to the side where Hektor was trying to massage a crick in his neck. Daniel winced in sympathy; he'd slept slumped over his desk more times than he could possibly count and that particular crick was an old friend of his.

“Good morning, Hektor,” he called to the older man. He didn't quite manage to catch the mumbled response, but he assumed it was also some sort of greeting.

Then he yawned into his fist and stretched, feeling his back pop. The small couch he'd found at the back of the study was surprisingly comfortable, but not designed for someone of his size. Vala passed him his glasses and the world came into focus – the Ancients might have fixed his vision when they descended him, but they didn't stop the natural aging process.

“How are you guys doing?” he asked her, suddenly realizing he had no idea what the rest of his team had been up to.

“Well, Captain America has been up since the crack of dawn,” she answered. “The rest of us are up now too and having breakfast. Hektor's wife makes this amazing tea.”

“Yes, she does. Wait, you guys were staying here?”

Vala rolled her eyes. “Yes, Dion found us yesterday evening and asked us to stay the night – well, gestured mostly. You probably haven't noticed, but it's a rather large house.”

He had actually. “According to Hektor, it's the official residence of the Keeper of History.”

“Pays to like history around here then.”
Daniel snorted. “Even more interestingly, did you notice the statue out in front of the building?”

Vala paused thoughtfully. “The white one of the woman, right? We saw a few others like it around town.”

“Hmm... that's interesting. Because it's a statue of Athena and looks an awful lot like the one that got knocked over at the museum, where I got the tablets from. But what makes it really interesting, is that the inscription on the book she's holding is in Latin.”

Vala raised an eyebrow. “What does it say?”

“Translated: the Path to Victory. Which would make sense given that Athena was the goddess of wisdom and war, except that she was a Greek goddess so you would expect the inscription to be in Ancient Greek...”

“Hmm. That is interesting.”

“Ah, Daniel, it is good that your friends are up!”

Hektor's voice from across the room startled them as it pierced through the silence in the study. Daniel looked over to find the older man looking stiff, but wide awake now, his eyes shining with renewed enthusiasm. “We should get ready as well. There is a long day ahead and much to discover.”

Daniel grinned back at him. “Yes, and we should probably help gather books and supplies we'll need.”

“Bah, that's what apprentices are for! Now come, I will show you the bathing rooms.”

In general, the Avengers were not a group of people who enjoyed surprises. They dealt with them on a daily basis, but they didn't like them. Unless, as Clint would say, they involved candy. Which missions never did. Well, except for that one time.

Discovering that the friendly, Renaissance-esque people they'd spent the past day getting to know meant for them to travel deep into the forest in a large, motorized hovercraft didn't count as the biggest surprise they'd ever received, but it was certainly the last thing they'd expected.

Daniel's eyes had widened in pleased surprise before he rushed off to the vehicle to examine it. Dion was already there, her fingers brushing over the controls as she read the readouts carefully. Cameron Mitchell, meanwhile, simply whistled in appreciation and wished he had the Ancient gene as he ambled up with a much slower pace, part of him grinning at the truly shocked looks on the Avengers' faces. While he hadn't exactly expected something like this, it didn't entirely surprise him either.

“So, do ya think this is a leftover from the Ancients?” he called up to Daniel. It was a bit of a redundant question given that the design was acutely familiar: it looked a bit like large, topless puddlejumpers.

After a few moments, Daniel leaned over the side of the craft. “Definitely. Dion says there are four others like it, although they all seem to be set to an autopilot. There's two that will only go to and
from the temple, one that travels to a nearby quarry and the fourth to the stargate. It seems they have a basic understanding of how to operate them, and know how to fix them up to a point, but no knowledge of their programming, so they can't change the settings.”

“Well, at least it means we won't be walking all day,” Vala commented before climbing into the hovercraft.

It was a valid point and no one was really willing to argue in favour of walking for miles through the forest. Hektor's apprentices had been up bright and early preparing the hovercraft for the journey along with Dion – who it turned out was a hovercraft operator by trade. It was how she and Hektor had met, in fact. Whether by design, or a lack of understanding on how to improve it, the hovercraft's speed wasn't much more than a steady run, but it made for a smooth journey. Dion told the group, via Daniel, that she could steer the vehicle to take several different paths to the temple, though if she strayed too far off course, the hovercraft would automatically adjust their heading. She took them down what she said was her favourite path, which had them hovering just above the surface of a large river, giant leafy trees forming a lush green canopy over their heads.

Just over an hour into their journey, Steve finally gave in and took out his sketchbook.

“You know, I think this has to be the most relaxing mission I've ever been on,” he said.

Clint groaned. “Okay now you've totally jinxed us. Thanks Cap.”

Beside him, Natasha's lips quirked. Then she leaned back and looked over her shoulder at the passing scenery. She agreed with Steve, it was rather relaxing. Missions weren't meant to be relaxing, though, and it was making her anxious. She turned away from the forest and riverbed and scanned the hovercraft.

Daniel, Hektor and Hektor's apprentices say at the very back, all clustered around a small table cluttered with maps and papers. They were alternatively silent and speaking loudly a mile a minute with expressive hand gestures (she couldn't quite tell how much of that was necessary for communication and how much was simply them). It was amusing to watch in any case. Dion was, of course, at the control panel. Just in front of what could possibly be loosely termed a cockpit, sat two guards with sharp-looking spears. Natasha wondered idly whether they'd ever had call to use them.

At about mid-day they had lunch. Three hours later, they suddenly found themselves bathed in sunlight as the hovercraft exited the forest and they caught their first glimpse of the temple.

It was sitting in the middle of a valley, fields of lush green grass surrounding it on all sides except for a bright field of flowers to its right. The closer they came, the more apparent it became that that field of flowers wasn't really nature's doing so much as a carefully cultivated garden. The fields were full of grazing animals: sheep and cows and something that looked almost like a cross between a goat and a deer, only with a blueish-green stripe of fur on its back. When she looked further up the valley, just past the temple, she saw a series of huts with red and orange roofs.

“Hey Daniel, does it look familiar to you?” Mitchell called to the back of the vehicle. He, Clint and Vala had paused in their game of cards.

Daniel looked thoughtful. “No, not really. At least not from here.”

The temple itself was beautiful in its simplicity. It was round, with three short, stubby towers along its perimeter and a large central tower that climbed to a flattened point. It wasn't as tall as the tower in the town, but still tall enough to be impressive. Its lines were crisp and clean, the edges slightly
embellished in places, but not overtly ornamental. It didn't show a single sign of its age other than a distinct lack of activity.

It struck Natasha that it didn't really look abandoned. More like it was laying dormant.

She heard Daniel's footsteps as he approached to get a closer look and looked up. He stared out at the temple in awe, delight dancing in his eyes. She decided this was a good sign.

“Do you think you'll find what you're looking for here?” she asked him. They hadn't had much of a chance to find out what he'd discovered since they'd parted yesterday.

Daniel didn't look away from the temple.

“I think so…” He trailed, looking thoughtful for a moment. “I don't really believe in fate per say... but, somehow, I just know there's something waiting for us here. I just don't know what it is yet.”

Natasha nodded. She didn't believe in fate either, but she'd come too far to start doubting their self-appointed mission now.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'll see you all tomorrow with part 3. =D
Act III, pt iii

Chapter Notes

Aaand by 'tomorrow' I obviously meant 'Sunday'... Thanks to everyone who commented and/or left kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FAITH

The temple was definitely of Ancient design: the walls smoothed down and every visible panel so perfectly aligned with its neighbours that the entire building was no doubt airtight. Or at least it had been before an archaeological team a hundred years ago had managed to break down the front door by crashing one of the topless puddlejumpers into it. Daniel frowned disapprovingly at the destruction before walking up the wooden bridge that crossed over what remained of the bottom portion of the massive entrance doors. The crash still hadn't managed to fully destroy the doors and there was over a metre high left intact at the bottom – hence the bridge.

Daniel carefully examined the door's remains as he crossed the bridge. They were nearly as high as the high ceiled room beyond them (about twenty feet or so) and wide enough to fit a small plane. Without the doors in the way, the topless puddlejumpers would've been able to make their way through and still leave room for people to walk beside them. They were thick doors as well, enough for him to be sure there had to be a mechanism to open them, because not even Captain America would've been able to do so by hand. Inside they were greeted by a wide open space, a hall that curved along what looked like nearly an entire quarter of the temple's perimeter and would've fit an entire football field. It was illuminated with sunlight that streamed in through a series of long skylights.

Two large planters divided the space into thirds, each with trees growing inside it, and a series of benches jutted out from the walls. Otherwise the space impressive in its size, yet void of any extraneous decorations. It looked clean and elegant, the classic Alteran love of minimalism coupled with crisp geometric shapes apparent in its design. It felt functional.

At either end, the large room ended with a solid wall. Daniel was too far away to see whether there was anything there, such as a door or a transport. Directly opposite him, however, was a double-door that was being held open with a heavy stone slab. A wide window above it revealed a second floor. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that hole had been carved into a section of it.

He heard someone behind him whistle in appreciation. He didn't bother finding out who, turning instead to Hektor, who was watching him with understanding in his eyes.

“Was there anything else in here when the doors were open?” he asked him.

Hektor shook his head. “No, everything was left as it was. There was nothing in the main room. Except for the planters. The plants that had been there were, of course, very much dead. A later team planted the ones you see now. And then thirty-five years ago, Keeper of History Altus used one of the transportation platforms in order to gain access to the upper stories through the
Daniel frowned. “Why hadn't anyone before him tried?” he asked. Surely going through a window would be the obvious way to get inside.

Hektor chuckled. “Oh they'd tried alright, but Altus was especially clever and managed to modify a tool usually used to mine white roman stone in order to get them open.”

“I see. I'm assuming that door that's propped open is – or was rather – his doing then?”

“Hmm... oh yes, that stone has laid in that spot since the day his expedition placed it there.”

Daniel nodded slowly as he swallowed the sudden apprehension. Intellectually, he'd always known this was a long shot, but suddenly his leap of faith felt a little less like it had a steady landing site at the end. This temple was a work-in-progress: generations of scholars had dedicated their lives to figuring it out. How could he possibly hope to make it tell him its secrets within a few days? True, he came armed with knowledge the people of Aeneid were missing in their search, but would it be enough?

Daniel took a deep breath to calm himself. Panicking wouldn't help anything.

“What's in the upper levels?” he asked Hektor.

“Curiously enough, mostly living quarters, it seems,” Hektor answered. “We've never managed to figure out exactly how many people at once lived within the temple walls, however the upper levels would comfortably house at least two hundred.”

“Can we take a look?”

Hektor paused for a moment before shrugging. “I suppose it doesn't entirely matter where we begin our search.”

After calling back to his apprentices to begin setting up a workstation, he motioned for Daniel to follow him. Daniel did so eagerly, vaguely aware of being followed by the rest of his team. A quick glance just in front of the doorway confirmed that Vala, Steve, Sam and Natasha were right behind them.

The double doors led into a foyer. The ceiling here was higher than in the main room they'd just exited, with skylights above the entire area. Staircases connected each floor along both sides in a way that reminded Daniel of Atlantis. To his right, Daniel spied a box with long crystals jutting out of the wall and recognized it as a door mechanism.

However, the crowning glory of the foyer was a painting drawn onto a large centre column. It was probably about five feet wide and four feet tall, the colours so vivid it could've been freshly painted, each brush stroke done with the precision of a photograph and the emotion of one who'd been there in person and felt their breath catch in awe at the sight. The sky was so bright, Daniel almost expected to hear birds, the gently bobbing ocean so perfectly rendered, he expected to smell salt.

Behind him, he heard a gasp.

They all stood in silence for a few minutes, just staring at the painting. Then Natasha came to stand next to him. “That central tower looks like the one in the town,” she pointed out quietly.

Daniel nodded. This explained where they learnt about the tower all right. He walked up closer to it.
and then noticed the inscription at the bottom of the frame, done in a very thin line in the same
colour as the rest of the frame: 'In memory of our home and to those who fell defending it.'.
Daniel's eyes widened and he quickly looked back to the rest of the painting, thoughts swirling in
his head.

When he looked back to Hektor, there was a twinkle of delight – and pride – in the older man's
eyes. Daniel grinned. “It's magnificent,” he said. “But how did you know it was Atlantis?”

Hektor raised an eyebrow. “We recovered some additional plans and reading materials that named
it. Our Founders used some rather unusual tools, but we have managed to figure out how to use
some of them over the years.”

Daniel could imagine the sorts of unusual tools the Ancients had left behind.

Hektor cleared his throat. “Come, we should continue on.”

He led them up the set of stairs on the right and then began walking along the corridor at a steady
pace, speaking all the while about the trials of his predecessors. Many of the rooms on the upper
levels were open, though scratches on the walls indicated it had been done by force and the
archaeologist in Daniel cringed at the damage. He did, however, also note that some of the rooms
were full of personal items: nick knacks, clothes, data pads... Obviously, the Ancients living here
hadn't exactly had time to pack before they ascended.

He fired question after question at Hektor, though the scholar's answers didn't quite engage him the
way he knew they normally would. Even as he listened, his eyes kept straying towards Steve. The
super soldier was looking at everything with wide, excited eyes and moving carefully – like a
rather self-conscious bull that had inexplicably found himself in a china shop and was now trying
very, very hard not to break anything. It was actually rather endearing, if entirely unhelpful.

As they reached the last of what Daniel was thinking of as the residential levels, he saw Steve
approach another wall panel, similar to the ones downstairs. He frowned as he looked at it from all
angles, bending over to get a better look at the crystals. All without touching it. Daniel rolled his
eyes.

“Steve,” he called in amusement. “I know this place is nearly ten thousand years old, but the
Ancients built things to last – as evidenced by the fact that that front door is still at least partially
intact after having a hovercraft crash into it. Not even you are going to break anything just by
touching it.”

Steve's ears reddened. “Right, sorry. I just didn't want to take the chance.”

Daniel grinned. “No, no, that's fine and believe me, it's very much appreciated. I'm just saying: if
you want to touch, go ahead.”

Steve grinned back. And turned back to the wall panel.

“Daniel?” Vala asked with a speculative look on her face. Daniel motioned for her to be silent for a
moment, his eyes still glued to Steve. He didn't dare breathe as he watched him reach out to touch
the crystals.

Several things happened at once.

Steve touched one of the crystals and the entire panel lit up. Beside the panel, two parts of the wall
slid open to reveal what looked like a closet with a display screen at the back. Several people
gasped. Daniel grabbed onto Vala's arm and squeezed, suddenly dizzy with relief as a weight he
hadn't dared fully acknowledge carrying was lifted from his shoulders.

“Daniel, did you know?” he heard Vala whisper.

He blinked and looked to her. “I guessed,” he said, feeling suddenly giddy and out of breath. “I'd hoped.”

Vala's eyes widened as she realized what he meant. “You are incredibly lucky the universe really likes you some days,” she said.

Daniel snorted. “Except that most days the universe really hates me.”

It was then that he became aware of the commotion in front of the transporter. Steve looked panicked, holding his hands as far away from the panel as he could, red-faced and stuttering apologies while Hektor was demanding to know what he'd done (not that Steve could understand him). Sam seemed to be trying to calm everyone down even as he was freaking out himself and Natasha looked like she was silently laughing at them all even as she eyed the transporter carefully.

Daniel winced and hurried to step between Steve and Hektor. First he turned to Hektor.

“I'm sorry, I'll explain in a second,” he told the scholar. “Steve doesn't actually know what he did and why that happened.”

Hektor's eyes quickly turned speculative. “But you do,” he stated, the lack of question in his voice speaking for itself. “This isn't surprising to you.”

“Not entirely... I've seen the technology used by your Founders in many places. Look, I promise I'll explain, just give me a minute.”

Then he turned to Steve.

“Steve–“

“–Daniel I swear all I did was touch it! I have no idea why it did that or what it is or how I could–“

Daniel grabbed the super soldier by the arms. “Steve, calm down!”

Steve went silent, wide eyes staring down at Daniel imploringly. In that moment it suddenly struck Daniel just how young the other man was: the same age as many of the new recruits Daniel had helped Cam train several months ago, and younger than some. To think he'd already gone through as many hardships that he had... Daniel shook his head. What an odd expression that was: as if heartbreak and trauma got easier with age.

He met his eyes, trying to project calm and confidence. “Steve, trust me, no one is blaming you for anything. This is a good thing, a very good thing, and I'm sorry I didn't warn you this could happen. To you specifically. But, well, this entire plan has more or less hinged on a theory and I didn't want to put that kind of burden onto your shoulders.”

Steve's eyes narrowed. “Warned me about what?” he asked.

Daniel let go of him and took a step back, running a hand through his hair. “The Ancients – or Alterans as they called themselves – designed their technology so that only they could operate it. To do that they tied it to a specific gene in their DNA that is unique to them. Now some of their technology can be operated without the gene, but it has to be activated by someone with the gene. The exact history isn't entirely clear to us, but we believe the Ancients evolved from a race of
humans that existed on Earth before we did. Unfortunately, a plague forced those living in the
Milky Way to Ascend to a higher plane of existence. We've found traces of them throughout the
Milky Way, although mostly small research facilities or labs and a few ruins. Ten thousand years
ago, those living in the Pegasus Galaxy were forced to flee their home there and return to Earth.”

He paused and glanced at the other two Avengers before looking back to Steve. They were all
listening intently.

“While they lived on Earth, they intermarried, and that gene got passed on into the human
population. We're speculating that only a small percentage of the Earth's population has the gene.
But the thing is that it's not just a leftover reminder of the Ancients, the ATA gene is also a higher
stage of evolution. From the few samples of Ancient DNA we've managed to obtain over the years,
our geneticists have discovered that everything ties back to the gene. For the most part, other than
activating Ancient technology, the gene doesn't really do anything, but it does carry an
evolutionary potential.”

“The super serum,” said Natasha and Daniel could see her putting things together in her mind. “At
Stark's, you suggested that maybe it wasn't Erskine's serum that made the difference, but
something in Steve's blood. This is what you were thinking of, wasn't it? This Ancient gene?”

Daniel smiled and nodded. “Yes. We only discovered the Ancient gene by accident, because we
had someone who could activate the technology and it was a matter of figuring out what made
them different from everyone else.”

He looked to the transporter and caught sight of the display. He froze.

“Oh my god,” he said. He turned to Hektor, excitement thrumming through his veins. “Hektor it
goes up to the top of the tower!”

Hektor blinked at him and then his lips quirked in amusement. “I don't understand your language,
Daniel.”

Daniel blinked, shook his head and continued on in Ancient. “Sorry. That small room that looks
like a closet is a transporter and it'll take us up to the top of the tower.”

Hektor's eyes widened. Then he grinned. “Well, then what are we waiting for?” he said as he
grabbed Daniel by the arm and hurried them both into the transporter.

“C'mon Steve, hurry up!” Daniel called after them.

It was a tight fit, but they all managed to squeeze inside. Daniel then touched the top of the tower
on the display and the doors closed. Five seconds later they re-opened to a scene that was no
longer a simple corridor.

“Woah, that was fast,” said Sam. “I didn't even realize we'd moved.”

The room looked very different to what they'd seen in the rest of the temple. The walls were
covered in windows, making it look like there was nothing but four pillars between them and the
rest of world – or at least had the windows been kept clean it would've no doubt given that effect.
Instead of the grey metal look preferred by the Ancients, everything was a brownish colour. There
was one round central counsel, most of which was covered in a large glass dome.

Daniel stepped into the room and took it all in in a daze. This was a dream. It had to be. This wasn't
what he'd set out to find at all. Why was it here?
“Daniel,” he heard Vala say. “This doesn't look Ancient.”

“It’s not,” he said and walked towards the centre of the room.

“These pillars have writing on them,” Steve commented. He pointed at one. “That looks like the writing that was on the tablets you found at the museum.”

Vala went up to the second one. “That's Asgard,” she said. “But I don't recognize the other two. Daniel?”

She looked like she had a feeling she knew what he was going to say. With a shaky hand he pointed to the one to Steve's right. “That's Nox.” And then to the last pillar. “And that's Furling. The Four Great Races... this was a meeting place.”

He walked up to the central counsel. It had been years, but he still remembered Ernest showing him how to turn it on. The glass dome lit up and a holographic display appeared above them like a faint cloud full of small clusters of spheres.

“Elements of the Periodic Table,” Daniel explained gesturing up at the clusters. “The only truly universal language.”

He turned to Hektor, feeling his own awe mirrored in Hektor's face. “Your planet was more important than you realized,” he said.

He explained about the Four Races. Behind him, he heard Vala tell the others.

Clint looked up and grinned. “Hey, I see they finally let you leave!” he called to Cap as the man stepped out of the fancy alien elevator and headed towards them.

Steve pulled a face. “I don't actually think they were paying attention to me by the time I told them I was coming down here to eat.”

“Don't know why you bothered staying up there that long in the first place,” Cam commented before taking another bite of the panzerotti-type thing that had come from the food supplies Hektor's apprentices had packed for the trip. There were three more crates on the hovercraft, identical to the one sitting next to the large pieces of door rubble they were using in place of actual chairs.

Steve shrugged. “Thought I might be more useful up there than out here.”

“Did they find anything else?” Natasha asked.

“Like a death ray or something that could actually be useful in defending Earth?” Clint added.

“I'm not sure...” Steve sighed. “No, I don't think so. Not that I could understand a word of what any of them were saying.”

“I just hope Daniel hasn't forgotten why we're here in the first place,” Vala muttered from the stone she was sitting on.

Clint blinked and turned to stare at her. “Is that actually a possibility?!”
She shrugged. “With Daniel you never know, but probably not. Wouldn't be the first time a
mission sends us travelling from planet to planet, so he might just be making sure there isn't a clue
to a more final destination for this quest of ours.”

“Are we going to have to drag them all out of there to make sure they sleep?” Sam asked.

“Definitely,” Vala and Cam answered at once.

“Probably kicking and screaming,” Cam added.

Clint exchanged looks with Natasha, who just smirked. “I'll take care of it. I've had to wrangle
Tony Stark before. Can't imagine an archaeologist being any worse.”

“Now that just shows your lack of imagination,” Cam drawled.

Natasha's answering grin was downright evil. “On the contrary, I have a very good imagination.”

Vala chuckled. “I like her,” she told Cam.

Clint looked at Vala. “You worry me,” he said with a straight face.

“I should.”

They ate in companionable silence until the alien elevator opened again, spitting out Hektor, Daniel
and the three apprentices, all chatting loudly amongst themselves. Hektor's wife followed behind
them with a bemused look on her face. She looked over to SG1 and the Avengers and winked at
them.

Clint grinned back and shook his head. “Or we could just let the expert handle it,” he said.

“Daniel!” Vala suddenly called, waving the archaeologist over.

Daniel said a few words to his fellow scholars and then began to walk towards them. There was a
spring in his step and he was beaming from ear to ear, eyes alight.

“Hey guys,” he said. “Hope you didn't get too bored down here.”

Cam snorted. “Do you actually care if we were bored?”

Daniel shrugged. “No, not really.”

“You sure look happy,” Sam commented with a smile. “That mean you found something
interesting?”

Impossibly, Daniel actually managed to beam even more at that. “Oh yes. That room is amazing.
The last time I saw one of these it was mostly in ruins and I only really managed to glance at it
before we had to leave. Plus, I didn't have the knowledge of the various cultures that I have now.
The technology in that room isn't Ancient and it clearly isn't Asgard, which means that we're
getting a glimpse of either Nox or Furling tech. Or possibly something else entirely. I think I could
honestly spend the next ten years studying that room up there.”

“Does it have anything to do with what we came here to find?” Cam asked.

Daniel grimaced, his enthusiasm dimming somewhat. “Admittedly no, not really. I mean, it does
provide us with some important information, not the least of which is that this planet was obviously
important not just to the Ancients, but to the other three races as well. Which still doesn't explain
the size of this facility or what's in the part we haven't managed to get into yet.”

“Facility?” Natasha interrupted. “You're not calling it a temple anymore?”

Daniel shook his head. “No, although I confess that might've been my mistranslation there. Or rather a cultural difference I didn't recognize immediately. Hektor and his people know this place as a 'temple' and thus their interpretation of what a temple is can basically be summed up as 'big, old, mysterious building', which differs from what we think of as a temple. It's one of the reasons why understanding a culture is key to doing accurate translations of their language. Either way, I'm thinking this place was probably more of a research outpost or something.”

“Do you have any idea what's in the other part of the facility?” Steve asked, his face serious, thoughtful.

Daniel shook his head. “Not entirely. I have my theories, but nothing concrete. There's certainly nothing in the Meeting Room to indicate what's there.”

“So what are you thinking then?” Cam asked. “I mean, do you think it's worth sticking around to find out?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Daniel said immediately. “If I'm right about the tablet and it's an inventory, then at the very least we should be able to find some of the things on said list, such as the ZPMs. It's not entirely unreasonable to think we'd be able to find one here regardless. This is definitely one of the largest Ancient outposts we've found so far in the Milky Way; possibly larger than the one in Antarctica, especially if it happens to expand underground in any way.”

“Woah, hang on there!” Clint exclaimed as Daniel's words penetrated his brain. “Antarctica? There's an alien outpost in Antarctica?!”

Daniel blinked at him. “Uh yeah, quite a large one. It's where a lot of our information about the Ancients comes from actually.”

“How long has it been there?” Natasha asked.

“Uh, about 7 million years, give or take a century or five. It'd been encased in ice when we found it, which makes getting an accurate date difficult, but we do believe it was built before the area froze up the way it is today.”

Clint whistled. “Wow, that makes it older than pretty much most human civilization.”

“Yup. This place might end up being bigger, but the Antarctic outpost's definitely older. For all we know this one might've even replaced it. Except for the Meeting Room: Antarctica doesn't have one of those.”

“Okay, so this place is big, that's great,” said Cam. “And ZPMs are always awesome, but any idea yet what this 'Path to Victory' thing might be?”

Daniel shook his head. “No, not yet, but I do--” He cut himself off and pursed his lips, looking unsure for a moment. “I have nothing to confirm this just yet, but I have a feeling that...”

Cam made an annoyed sound as Daniel trailed off. “You have a feeling that what, Jackson?”

Daniel shot him a glare. “Look I've talked to Hektor. He's read through all the earliest historical entries for this town, including the Stargate logs from when the Founders were still living here – in fact it was what he'd specialized in during his initial apprenticeship. But he's never read anything
about other races coming through the gate, or about strangers coming to meet with the Founders.”

Clint exchanged looks with Natasha and then Steve. Okay, good, they looked just as confused as he did. Also, Asgard? Thor's people had friends who had a lab or something on Earth and he never said anything about it? Not, Clint had to concede, that he'd been given a whole lot of reason to trust SHELID with something like that.

Meanwhile, it's was Vala's turn to make a frustrated noise. “Daniel, what's your point? That the Asgard are capable of stealth? You know they had ships right? Not to mention beaming technology.”

“Yes, but to our knowledge the Nox do not,” Daniel quickly replied. “The Asgard database had incredibly sparse information on the Furling, so they're still a huge unknown, but it does briefly mention the Nox and it didn't mention space travel. Which doesn't, I suppose, mean that ten thousand years ago they didn't have ships – I mean, for all we know ten thousand years ago the Nox were a violent savage race–“

“–Woah, okay now I know you're nuts!” Cam exclaimed. “The Nox, violent? Aren't they like tech-savvy hippies.”

Daniel's dry look could've given Coulson a run for his money. “Most of human civilization evolved within that time-frame. Ten thousand years is definitely enough time for the Nox to go from violent to pacifist.”

“Yeah, okay fine.”

“What exactly do Thor's people have to do with anything?” Steve suddenly asked into the ensuing silence. Daniel frowned at him in confusion. “I mean, I might not have known him for very long, but why would he have needed to use that bridge thing if he'd known about the stargate? Wouldn't that have been an easier way to get home?”

Daniel's eyes widened in sudden comprehension. “Aah, you mean the Asgardians not the Asgard.” He waved away any protests with one hand. “Sorry, I know Asgard versus Asgardian sounds like semantics, but it's how those of us at the mountain decided to refer to them to avoid unnecessary confusion. They're really not the same thing at all. Well, mostly.”

He paused for a moment, looking like he was gathering his thoughts. Clint raised an eyebrow. “So are you saying there's, like, a second Thor out there?” he joked.

“Yes! Actually, yes, that's exactly what I'm saying! Or at least there was a second Thor. The Asgard are gone now unfortunately, but one of them was once called Thor.”

Daniel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He ran a hand through his hair.

“Okay, so first of all you have to understand that a lot of this is just speculation on our part. No one at the SGC has managed to talk to the Thor you know and the database we inherited from the Asgard doesn't mention him or the Asgardians at all. However, based on some of Shield's notes and the research of Doctor Jane Foster that Sam managed to snag from that internet info dump you did before it was taken down, it looked like her theory was that Asgardian mode of transportation was a sophisticated variation of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge. Some of the math she did... well, let's just say it looked familiar. To Sam, I mean. It just looked like a bunch of numbers to me.”

He looked down as the others chuckled.

“Sam thinks your Thor actually comes from an alternate dimension. A dimension where the
Asgardians managed to fix their cloning problem – or maybe found a way to live a very long time without the cloning. Either way, there was a big difference somewhere in their evolution as a species which meant their appearance remained the same. The Asgard Thor I knew didn’t look anything like the Asgardian Thor you know. A lot more... alien you could say.”

“And because your Thor first showed up a couple months after the Asgard committed mass suicide, he got to avoid the joys of Entropic Cascade Failure,” Cam drawled.

“That's insane,” said Sam incredulously. “You realize that right?”

Clint looked at him. “More insane than a huge viking god alien who can fly and call lightening from the sky with his hammer?”

Sam made a face. “Yeah, okay, point.”

“Other dimensions?” Steve asked, his eyes wide. “That exists? For real?”

“Oh yes,” said Daniel. “We have undeniable proof of that.”

“Reed Richards will be happy to hear his theories aren’t complete crack,” Clint commented. “Not that he ever thought they were.”

“Thor does call Earth the realm of Midgard, not the planet of Midgard,” said Natasha thoughtfully. “I always thought he was just being poetic...”

“You think maybe he’s not?” asked Clint.

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “Maybe it's just what all Asgardians call it and so he does the same. We'd have to ask him.”

“Woah, as fascinating as this is,” Cam suddenly said loudly, looking annoyed with Daniel. “Jackson, you were talking about the temple, facility, whatever thing. I think you said you had a point with the Nox story and their lack of spaceships. At least I really hope you did.”

Daniel blinked at his team leader. “Oh, right, yes I did have a point. I think this planet has to have a second stargate.” He paused. “In fact, I'd go so far as to theorize that it's probably within this very facility. I mean, even if it doesn't extend underground, there's certainly room enough for it in that part we haven't explored yet.”

Cam blinked. Vala nodded thoughtfully. “It would have to be disconnected from the main network,” she said.

“Wouldn't be the first time we've seen that,” said Daniel. “Well, okay, once; we've seen it once. But that means it can be done. Either way, we need to get into the rest of the facility.”

They found the second stargate the next morning.

Turned out there was a panel with door controls on one of the far walls of the vast main room which blocked access to the rest of the building. The display lit up when Steve touched it and then it took Daniel mere moments to figure out how to open the door itself.
The corridors they found on the other side were definitely more than just reminiscent of Atlantis; here Daniel could've easily tricked himself into thinking he was back inside the Ancient city. Most of the doors along the network corridors opened easily, revealing labs and offices and a fairly large medical bay. A few remained stubbornly shut, but none of them could tell whether it was because of added security on the doors themselves or due to malfunction in the mechanisms.

Hektor and his apprentices were absolutely beside themselves with excitement. The old man looked positively drunk with it. Not even Natasha managed to avoid becoming infected with it as she peeked into each room before slinking inside.

“Man, Stark is going to be sooo jealous he missed out on this,” she heard Clint say as he sauntered after her into the room she'd decided to explore. “I mean all this alien tech just waiting for someone to figure it out...”

Natasha smirked as she looked over the contents of the shelves that ran along the wall. “I'd love to see the look on his face when he realizes he needs Cap to make any of it work.”

“Plus Daniel to translate.”

“Exactly.”

Clint snickered and walked further into the room, picking up a flat object off a table in the corner and turning it over in his hands. “Hey, this sort of looks like a tablet.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow before turning and walking over to take a look. “Hm, it does. You should show it to Daniel; it might have important information on it.”

“Or it might have an alien version of War and Peace.”

“Well you wouldn't be able to tell the difference either way.”

They found Daniel, Hektor and Steve two rooms behind, with Cam standing just outside the door. He nodded to them as they passed. They found Steve standing just on the other side of the door, arms crossed in front of him, quite consciously not touching anything.

“I thought they wanted to touch everything,” said Clint with amusement.

Steve shook his head. “Door panels are one thing, but until we know what any of these gadgets lying around do, that would be dangerous.” He swallowed. “Apparently they've lost quite a few people thanks to being impatient.”

“You mean you could accidentally activate a bomb or something?” Clint asked with a frown. “I mean, you'd think a bomb wouldn't be quite that easy to detonate. There's usually safeties and stuff on those things.”

“Usually, but you could also activate a device that turns people into time bombs, or accidentally unleash nanobots that kill anyone without the ATA gene...” Daniel said loudly as he walked over to them. “Those are all things we've encountered in one way or another, by the way. The Ancients were scientists as much as they were anything else – maybe even more than they were anything else – but their idea of 'safety protocols' leaves a lot to be desired.”

Natasha's eyebrows rose. “They did a lot of biological experimentation then?”

“A bit, yes. I mean, okay, most of the more dangerous stuff was found on Atlantis where the Ancients had been in the middle of a war, so it's hardly a surprise that there was a lot of weapons
“On Atlantis,” said Steve. “You mean the Lost City? The one that sunk into the ocean thousands of years ago?”

Daniel’s eyes twinkled as he answered. “Ten thousand years ago to be precise. And yes, that’s the one, although it’s not so lost anymore.”

Clint’s eyes were boggling. “Okay, how the hell did you manage to keep an entire city being found a secret? Like, seriously, there’s some stuff it shouldn’t be possible to cover up.”

Daniel shrugged. “Ah, well...“

They all looked up at the sound of running from down the hall. Cam stepped aside as Vala and Sam careened into the doorway, eyes lit up.

“Daniel!” Vala exclaimed. “We found a transporter!”

“And, man, there is definitely an underground to this place and it looks huge!” Sam added with a grin.

Daniel called something over his shoulder to Hektor before running out the door. The old man dropped everything and ran after them at a much slower pace.

Cam sighed. “I don't suppose there's any point in tell you guys to be careful?” he called after them.

Natasha smirked as she came up beside him. “I think you're a little late for that,” she said.

He made an annoyed face. “Yeah, figured.”

He and Natasha found the rest of the group clustered around a closed transporter. A quick survey of the group revealed one, important feature.

“Uh, where's Jackson?” Cam asked, already knowing the answer, but needing for someone to confirm it anyway because, for some reason, he just didn't want to believe that the archaeologist would be that stupid.

Clint turned to them. “Oh, he, Steve and Vala already went down ahead,” he said.

And yes, apparently he was that stupid. Although, at least he hadn't gone alone. Cam activated his radio.

“Jackson, this is Mitchell, do you copy?” he said. He waited five seconds. “Jackson, do you read?”

The radio cracked. “This is Daniel, I read you. Don’t worry, we arrived safe and sound in what appears to be a storage bay of some sort.”

A storage bay, full of unknown things in boxes, some of which could no doubt explode in their faces. That was just wonderful. He ran a hand over the wall panel and the doors opened.

“Jackson, don't touch anything until I get there!”

Sam and Hektor slipped into the transporter with him. “What exactly do you figure you'll be able to do better than him?” Sam asked him with amusement. “I mean without having this ATA gene and not being able to read any of the labels...”
Cam glared at him. “Trouble magnet, remember?”

“Aah, right.”

The doors opened. The room looked oddly ordinary and, well, exactly like one would expect a small warehouse to look. One that hadn't been used in a while anyway. There were several large crates stacked off to the side, an open one full of crystals, and some odd metal pieces that looked like they were possibly spare parts. However most of the large room was empty, except for a couple of large, equally empty metal shelving units.

“Steve, I think this is it,” he heard Daniel say from the other side of one such unit. Cam cursed under his breath and headed over to them. “Try touching here and think 'open'. Using Ancient tech is partially about intent.”

“Just like the Unforgivables,” Vala added.

There was a pause. “The what?” asked Steve.

“The Unforgivables. You know, like in Harry Potter. Haven't you seen the movies?”

“Oh, no. I'll add it to the list.”

“You do that. Although the books are better.”

Cam rounded the shelving unit in time to see the look Daniel gave her.

“When did you read the Harry Potter books?” he asked her.

Vala shrugged. “It's been a very boring couple of months. Lieutenant Coleman lent them to me. Also that Fifty Shades of Grey book: it was quite interesting.” Her expression turned sly. “You're getting ten feet of rope for your birthday by the way.”

Daniel just nodded. “It'll go with the fedora and bull-whip.”

Cam stopped in his tracks. “Jackson, do I want to know why you own a bull-whip?”

Daniel looked to him and blinked. “It was a part of the Indiana Jones costume I wore to Jack's Halloween party three years ago.”

“Right. Of course.” He had vague recollections of that costume. Even vaguer recollections of that party. He may or may not have ended the night wearing someone else's grass skirt.

Captain America's face brightened. “Oh! I saw Indiana Jones! Those were swell movies.”

“Really?” said Daniel. “Have you seen The Mummy yet?”

“Oh, no, I don't think so.”

Daniel nodded. “Not as culturally significant as Indiana Jones, of course, but a lot of fun and with about the same amount of attention paid to historical and archaeological accuracy. Anyway, the wall panel please.”

“Oh yeah, sorry.”

Before Cam had a chance to protest, Cap had pushed at a rectangular outline in the wall. There was a low hiss and then the entire panel slid out of the wall, revealing a storage tray. Nestled inside the
white padded container lay four faintly-glowing canisters.

Cam froze, barely believing his eyes. “Holy shit,” he said quietly.

The Avengers clearly caught onto SG1's sudden mood shift and were looking between the three members and the golden canisters.

“What are they?” Steve finally asked.

“ZPMs,” Daniel breathed, not bothering to hide the awe in his voice. And then, as though a switch had been flipped, the manic energy was back. Reaching out, he grabbed Steve and him pulled along to the next wall panel. “Quick, quick try the next one!”

All in all, they managed to count twelve ZPMs and, in panels lining the adjacent wall, several dozen brand new drones.

“Okay, I gotta say, this is beyond cool,” Cam finally admitted once they'd stood back to look over their bounty. “Can't see how the SGC can complain about this.”

“Except that ZPMs alone won't save Earth from the Ori,” Vala pointed out.

Meanwhile, Steve had gone over to a door at the far side of the storage area. He stared it for a few moments before shrugging and running his hand over it. The door slid open without problem and he grinned. He had to admit, it was sort of nice being able to do this. Especially when Daniel assured him that this wasn't just another side-effect of the serum. No, even sickly little Stevie Rogers would've been able to do this; it was a part of him, not Captain America.

Cautiously, he walked into what looked like a really big hanger. Workstations lined one wall and there were some very space-age looking control panels around the centre of the room. And at the far end, there was a podium.

Steve stuck his head back into the storage room.

“Hey Daniel,” he called. “I found your second stargate!”

Outside, the sun was starting to go down by the time anyone even thought about quitting for the day. Clint and Natasha spent the afternoon scouring the labs and offices for anything that looked like it could possibly shed light on what the facility was for. They managed to find several more Ancient tablets and Clint discovered a small laser weapon (which didn't actually help, but Clint was too delighted with it to care).

“Come on, Daniel, you haven't eaten since breakfast,” said Cam gently, having come to find his teammate long after everyone else had left. “It's time to call it a day.”

Daniel's response was to scowl harder at the diagram on the back of the transporter. Specifically, at the large darkened section at the bottom right corner. It was the only portion of the facility that wasn't labelled. It didn't even appear on many of the transporter diagrams, but on the few it did it was darkened and unmarked.

“There's something down there,” he whispered. “Possibly whatever's mentioned on the tablet,
because I'm sure it's describing more than just a ZPM and Sam agreed with me. It's just... I don't
know how to get to that part. Maybe there's a passkey or a code or even a secret entrance, but
without accessing the systems we have no way figuring it out.”

He sighed tiredly and closed his eyes, bringing a hand up to rub at them. Cam laid a hand on his
shoulder and squeezed. Daniel appreciated the gesture, but was too wound-up to give into the
slight comfort it provided.

“Don't worry, Jackson, you'll figure it out. Maybe you just need to sleep on it.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said automatically.

He knew without looking that Cam would know he didn't believe the words. Daniel felt frustrated,
the frustration exhausting him far more than staring at Ancient script would have. To have come
so far, to have found the place he was looking for, only to realize he didn't have the expertise
needed to complete the mission... It was disheartening.

He wished Sam was here.

But he knew why she couldn't be here and he understood, agreed with it even. Just as he still didn't
entirely regret leaving Tony Stark behind on Earth. Sure, the man was a genius, but he didn't know
Ancient technology and didn't have the ATA gene – probably. Oh yeah, sure, no doubt he would've
eventually managed to figure the tech out, possibly build himself his own interface into his Iron
Man suit.

But they didn't have the time to wait for eventually.

The Ori were on their way to Earth. For all any of them knew, they were already there. Maybe the
Earth would be conquered tonight while they slept. Maybe it had already been conquered.

Daniel opened his eyes. No one had thought the Goa'uld could be defeated either, but their empire
had fallen. If Earth had already been conquered when they arrived, they would just have to win it
back.

He nodded to Cameron and then both of them got into the transporter to head back up.

Steve was just coming back from his morning jog when the rest of the makeshift camp was
beginning to stir. He nodded to Clint who'd taken the dawn watch.

“You had breakfast yet?” he asked him.

“Nah, I'm good for now,” he said. Then he held up a tin mug. “Though I won't say no to more
coffee. Daniel made some before he headed back down to the gateroom.”

“Daniel's up already?” Steve asked with a frown.

Clint shrugged. “Said he couldn't sleep. I made sure he had his radio with him.”

Steve nodded. He'd head down himself after he'd grabbed some food to see if Daniel needed help.
First, though, he poured coffee into the tin mug and brought it out to Clint, who smiled at him
gratefully before looking out into the peaceful sunny morning. It had rained a bit overnight and the
leftover moisture gave the air a clean, fresh feel as the first rays of sunlight reflected off leftover raindrops.

Steve's sketchbook was filling rapidly during the bits of downtime they had.

He grabbed a couple of MREs out of his pack and sat down onto a relatively flat piece of masonry to eat. One by one his teammates woke up and joined him. He couldn't help chuckle at the exasperated look that crossed Colonel Mitchell's face when he noticed Daniel was missing again.

He didn't remain missing for long, however.

They were all nearly done breakfast and in the middle of discussing their plans for the day, when the doors at the far end opened and Daniel burst through. Even from a distance they could tell by the determination in his stride that something had happened. The dejection that had clung to him the night before was gone.

The Avengers and SG1 were on their feet before he'd reached them.

“Daniel?” Vala asked.

“Everyone get your stuff together, we're moving out,” Daniel announced. “I'm going to go tell Hektor.”

Cam grabbed his arm to stop him before he ran off. “Woah, steady there, Daniel,” he said with a worried frown. “Is there a problem? You find something dangerous down there?”

Daniel paused and took a deep breath. “No, sorry, I didn't mean to scare anyone. There's no problem as such, except that I'm an archaeologist and a linguist, not a computer programmer or engineer. I'm an expert on Ancient culture, but what we need is an expert on Ancient tech and there's no point in pretending they're the same things, or that I could somehow miraculously transform into an astrophysicist overnight.”

“So, we're what, giving up?” Sam asked, his expression somewhere between outraged and disbelieving. “After all this?”

Daniel blinked. “What? No, of course we're not giving up. I'm not the expert we need right now, so what we need to do is go get the experts we do need.”

Mitchell frowned. “And how exactly do you figure we're going to do that?”

Daniel stared at him. “With the, uh, stargate down in the basement?”

A little over an hour later, the Avengers and SG1 were standing in front of the gate.

“Do you think the SGC is going to happy to see us?” Vala asked no one in particular.

“Probably,” Cam answered her anyway. He ran a hand through his hair. “Well, once we present them with souvenirs. But damn, I sure didn't think we'd be going back to Earth so soon.”

Daniel frowned and looked back to them. “Earth? Uh, we're not going back to Earth, guys.”

Cameron threw his arms up in exasperation. “Then I give, where the hell are you planning on finding experts on Ancient tech. Or did you find something new while the rest of us were still sleeping? Like maybe alien Yellow Pages?”

Daniel grinned. “I managed to pry off one of the sides of the podium the gate is sitting on. Turns
out this particular gate comes with a built-in long distance plan.”

Cam frowned. “What do you mean?” he asked as Daniel began pressing the chevrons on the dialling computer.

The outer circle of the gate began to spin.

“There’s a ZPM attached to this gate.”

As they watched, the gate continued to spin and one by one, the chevrons lit up. All seven of them. Then there was a pause – as though the gate itself was taking a deep breath – before the now-familiar wormhole kawooshed into existence. Daniel took out his GDO and sent out SG1’s code.

He tapped his radio. “Hello, this is Daniel Jackson of SG1, do you read?”

For a few moments the room was entirely silent. And then his radio crackled to life.

“Hello Doctor Jackson, this is Atlantis. We read you loud and clear.”

Chapter End Notes

So, this last scene was one of those ‘Oh my god I totally have to write that’ bits that I’ve had in my head since I started planning this story. As a result this chapter became really exciting to write, because it was basically all leading up to that scene.

I will mention this again when I post Act IV, but thanks to my fudged Stargate timeline, this story takes place after Atlantis season 5 episodes ‘First Contact’ and 'The Lost Tribe' (the ones where Daniel visits Atlantis), but will be mostly AU to the end of the season - which is why Atlantis is still in the Pegasus galaxy. Partially this is because that's how far I've gotten in SGA, but also simply because that timeline works for this story quite nicely.

You will also notice my Thor/Thor explanation nicely side-steps the Marvel celestial universe by shoving all of it into an alternate universe... So I'm not entirely ignoring it, just making it so that I don't have to pay it any mind. From what I've gathered alternate universes are totally cannon in Marvel - Reed Richards visits one every Tuesday if I'm not mistaken - and they're definitely cannon in SG-1. Sorry guys, as much as I loved Guardians of the Galaxy, someone else will have to write the Thanos/Ori bitchslap fest.

Anyway, thanks for reading! =D
Fourth Interlude

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter and/or left kudos! I'm happy that you all seem to be as excited for me to take this story to Atlantis as I am to take it to Atlantis. And in other news, this story is probably going to be an act longer than I'd originally projected (shocking, I know).

Anyway, onwards to the next interlude (and no, this isn't the bonus one, that one's still to come).

Jean-clad legs crossed at the ankle resting atop the round wooden kitchen table, Darcy Lewis idly flipped through a bright glossy magazine as she ate a sugary, cream-filled pastry. A steaming mug of coffee depicting the Eiffel Tower sat on the table beside her legs and a large paper bag sat further away, smelling of freshly-baked sugary goods. There were ear buds in her ears and her head bobbed along ever so slightly to the music.

A crackly buzzer sounded. Darcy turned a page.

It sounded again. Darcy frowned and looked up, pulling one of the ear buds out of her ears. She looked around, leaning her head backwards to look into what little she could see of the hallway.

The buzzer sounded for a third time. Darcy groaned and hung her head backwards for a moment before slipping her legs off the top of the table and tossing the magazine down, barely missing the coffee cup.

"I'll get it!" she called out as she walked out of the small kitchen and into the narrow hallway, not sure that anyone upstairs was even paying attention. She opened the door and leaned against the door frame. The mailman looked like he'd been about to leave.

"Oh, sorry luv, I didn't fink anyone was 'ome," he apologized, the tiny curls covering his head bobbing as he swung around. His eyes instinctively zeroed in on her cleavage, before quickly darting back up to her face.

Darcy didn't miss the movement. She grinned lazily. “Yeah, Jane doesn't do mornings unless the world is ending,” she drawled. “And Thor doesn't get the whole doorbell thing. Like why would you announce yourself before you walk in when you can just announce your presence loudly after you've walked in?”

“Uh, yeah, right....” the man said, looking awkward. He consulted the tablet in his head. “I 'ave a package for a Ms. Jane Foster?”

“Oooh, fun times.” Darcy held out a hand. “I'll take it.”

The mailman looked unsure. “And you are?”
“Her assistant.”

The man looked her up and down. Darcy rolled her eyes. “She's a scientist; were you expecting a suit and tie?”

“Er... alright, just sign 'ere then, yeah?”

Darcy took his tablet and plucked the stylus out of the side, signing on the line he showed her. Forging Jane's signature was second nature to her now – made things easier in the long run. She wasn't even sure that Jane knew Darcy signed things for her, but she'd never complained about not having to sign things... The mailman then took back his tablet and handed her a large soft parcel wrapped in a grey plastic bag.

Darcy let the door slam shut behind her, more interested in the package than being quiet. She turned it over in her hands and read the shipping label.

“Darcy, was there someone at the door?” she heard Jane call from upstairs.

“Did you or Blond Thunder order anything from Amazon?” Darcy called back.

There was no answer as Darcy entered the kitchen, heading straight for the cutlery drawer where she knew she would find the scissors. She cut a slit into the plastic packaging and then tore it apart the rest of the way. She pulled the contents out and ran a hand over the soft surface. She unfolded it slightly and grinned.

“Darcy!” Jane exclaimed as she came rushing into the kitchen, hair sticking out in all directions, and looking frazzled. “Wait, don't open it! We didn't order anything!”

Her eyes widened when she saw the open packaging. Thor walked in sedately behind her and instantly the small kitchen felt even smaller.

“Geez, relax Jane,” said Darcy. She pulled out the shipping manifest. “Apparently it's for your anniversary.”

Jane paused, blinked. “Oh. It's our anniversary? Already?”

Darcy shrugged. “Beats me. I suppose it depends on when you're counting as the start of your relationship.”

“An anniversary?” Thor asked. His face burst into a beaming smile. “Splendid! That requires celebration, for the day my lady Jane felt fit to bestow her love upon me was truly a momentous day! I shall fell a stout boar for the occasion!”

Jane paled, quickly turning to Thor and grabbed his arms before he could bound off on his boar-felling quest. “Uh, Thor, honey no that's okay. I really don't need a boar and we wouldn't have anywhere to roast it or whatever it is you do with a boar. Instead you can, uh, go forth and order pizza. I like pizza and you like pizza, so it'll be perfect. It's a Midgardian tradition. Definitely.”

Darcy snickered as she watched Thor process this information. The poor thunder god looked slightly disappointed at having had his hunt thwarted, but thankfully seemed to be listening to Jane.

“Very well,” he said. “Pizza is indeed a delicacy worthy of the gods. As I am on Midgard, I shall do my best to uphold the finest of Midgardian traditions. And one day, I shall take you, fairest Jane, into the lofty walls of Asgard and throw a feast worthy of your beauty.”
“I'll be looking forward to it,” said Jane, sounding relieved.

Darcy pulled out the shipping manifest printout to see if it provided any clues as to the sender. She raised an eyebrow at the quality of the paper: since when did Amazon spring for anything other than cheap printer paper? A misshapen black dot at the bottom corner caught her attention. For all intents and purposes it looked a lot like a printer error, but if she squinted she could just barely make out the shape of an eagle.

She rolled her eyes. Well, whoever sent this, she at least approved of their sense of humour. Straightening the paper out as she went, Darcy walked over to the sink and turned the water on, letting it run for a few minutes to get it as cold as possible (Coulson had said ice water, but that felt like too much effort). Then she carefully ran the paper under the water, letting the stream drench it completely before pulling it out again. The paper had stiffened and turned nearly translucent, the original printout unreadable due to the thick dark grey letters that materialized over top.

She turned off the tap and shook the paper off. She heard floorboards creek as Thor and Jane walked around the kitchen table to come take a look. When she'd finished reading the message she handed it over her shoulder to Jane and went over to the hutch. It was an ancient-looking piece of furniture made of dark stained wood that was probably pretending to be mahogany (and failing badly). It had come with the house and Jane didn't care enough to replace it. Sitting on its top shelf was a large blue and white ceramic jar labelled 'Rice' in big block letters. Darcy pulled it down and took the lid off.

Inside, there really was rice. In fact, it was probably the best-stocked container in the entire kitchen. Darcy slipped her hand into the rice and routed around until she found what she was looking for. With a triumphant noise, she pulled out a small, black flip-phone and blew over it to dislodge some of the more stubbornly-clinging rice grains.

She hit speedial three. The phone rang twice.

“Coulson.”

“Heya Secret Agent Man,” said Darcy brightly. “What's with all the bird monikers?”

There was a pause. “Hello Darcy. I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Well you've got Hawkeye and now I'm playing messenger for some Mockingbird.”

“What does it say?”

“Seriously, was Fury secretly an avid birdwatcher or something, 'cause that would just be, well mostly weird. I would've taken him for a lizard watcher myse–“

“Darcy. The message, please.”

“Yeah, yeah, chill Son of Coul, I was getting to that,” she said with a grin. “She says sorry, she couldn't derail the search and now Hydra's going after some guy named Jack O'Neill.”

There was a pause. “Is it an assassination?”

“Nope, detain and question apparently.”

“Does she give a date?”

“Uh...” Darcy looked over to Jane and Thor. Jane looked back down at the the message and then
looked back up and shook her head. “Nope, sorry, no dice on the date. You know this guy?”

“Not personally... he's a three-star general with the air force and, apparently, the head of Homeworld Security.”

Darcy blinked. “I'm sorry, did you just say Hom- world Security? This about the Chitauri Invasion?”

“Yes, I did and no, it isn't. Ask Jane to set up her big telescopes to do a sweep of the Solar System. Oh, and check for bugs in the imaging program. I'd be curious to hear if you find anything.”

“Okie dokie. We'll call Selvig and get on that. By the way, I call dibs on any hot aliens we find.”

“In the interest in maintaining intergalactic peace I'm going to have to deny that request.”

Darcy gasped dramatically. “Coulson you're wounding me here! Don't you think intergalactic peace would be way easier to maintain if the person greeting the aliens was a beautiful young woman with impressive endowments rather than some stuffy suit surrounded by muscled gorillas packing double their bodyweight in firepower?”

“No comment.”

“You totally know I'm right.”

“Thank you for delivering the message, Darcy.”

“No problemo, Secret Agent Man.”

“Goodbye, Darcy.”

The phone went dead and Darcy blinked before rolling her eyes. “Would it seriously kill him to have a conversation like a normal person?” she asked the room at large.

“He's the director of SHIELD,” Jane pointed out with a small smile as she shuffled her way over to the coffeemaker. “That makes him 'not normal' by definition. Being legally dead probably helps.”

“Trufax.” Suddenly Darcy became aware of the gaping absence in the room. “Uh, where's Thor?”

Jane winced. “He went to get that celebratory pizza.”

Darcy's eyes widened. “Woah, seriously?! It's like...” She looked over at the digital display on the oven. “...okay one o'clock in the afternoon, not actually crazytime for pizza. But is he, like, planning to spend all day celebrating?!”

Jane shrugged. “Probably.”

She leaned against the counter as she took her first sip of coffee. Her eyes closed in bliss and she moaned softly. Darcy giggled. Jane's eyes flew open.

“Oh, hey I almost forgot,” she said. “What was in the package anyway?”

Darcy grinned widely and reached for the soft bundle. “Oh it's the perfect gift for Thor's girlfriend,” she said as she tore off the rest of the packaging and let it unravel. “A soft, cozy Captain America fleece blanket.”

Jane stared at the red, white and blue blanket. She blinked once. “It really does look soft and cozy,”
she finally said.

Moments later their eyes met and they promptly dissolved into giggles.

Chapter End Notes

Figured it was about time for these guys to show up. Poor Thor, he keeps getting neglected in my Avengers stories and it's not on purpose, I swear, 'cause I really do love the big lug.
Fifth Interlude

Chapter Notes

As promised, here you have the Bonus Interlude! Which somehow managed to become nearly twice as long as the longest previous interlude... I have the first two parts of Act 4 written, but no promises on a posting timeline, because Act 4's turning into a monster. I decided to expand the Atlantis bit into two parts instead of just one and it still ended up over 40 pages long! I'm not even going to try and guess how long part 3 will end up.

I am not, have never been, and obviously never will be a scientist, but I nevertheless apologize in advance for the dodgy science. At least I haven't yet had anyone reverse the polarity of the neutron flow, right? Right.

Anyway, by popular demand, I bring you more Tony and Sam - with a side of Siler. ;)

Tony had been expecting the call. He just hadn't expected it to come while he was holding a soldering iron. Which he nearly dropped when the phone in his pocket buzzed seconds before AC/DC started blaring from his pants. Thankfully he managed to refrain from dropping it on top of Sargent Siler's head. Because that would've been a real shame; he liked Siler even if he stubbornly refused to call him Tony.

“Shit, dammit,” he cursed, fumbling with the iron. By the time he'd managed to pass it down to Siler, his phone had gone silent.

The sargent set the soldering iron down on the nearby workstation and came back to grip the ladder Tony was standing on. “Do you need to return the call, sir?” he asked politely.

Tony looked at the digital clock hanging on the far wall and shrugged. “Nah, it's probably Pepper: she'll call back in a bit. You could get me some coffee though. I definitely need coffee, even crap military coffee.”

There was barely a pause before he nodded and then turned towards the door. Tony gaped after him. The guy was an engineer for fuck's sake and here was Tony demanding he get him coffee and the guy barely blinked! He could give Coulson a run for his stoic money.

Siler stuck his head out of the door. “Airman!” he called into the hallway. “Get us a carafe of coffee from the mess!”

Tony's ears just made out the muffled 'Yes, sir' that followed the order and then Siler was turning back to them.

“That's what we have enlisted men for, sir,” he told Tony. Then he turned to Sam – who was biting her lip in amusement. “Ma'am, if it's alright with you, I'd like to go check on the progress of the back-up palladium core.”
“Yes, of course, go ahead Sargent,” she said.

Siler nodded to her and then to Tony, and then he was out the door, closing it softly behind him. Tony threw his arms up.

“And I've seen lock-down situations due to alien invasions, technological invasions, viruses, not to mention all the bizarre requests he's gotten over the years thanks to things we've found on the other side of the gate. But I've never seen Siler ever be anything other than calm and competent. Or in pain, since he sort of tends to get injured a lot.”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at Tony. “And, no, you can't have him.”

Tony didn't even bother denying that he'd been spending the past two hours putting together the most enticing employment package imaginable to lure the engineer to the Stark Industries R&D department.

“Pretty sure that's up to him,” said Tony lightly. “And I can be very persuasive when I want to be. So can my HR department.”

Sam smirked. “Siler's been with the SGC for nearly the entire time it's been in operation, bar a few temporary transfers to Area 51 and a couple other projects. I can guarantee you that nothing you can offer him will come even close to comparing. It's like the ultimate engineering playground. I mean, Siler's had to build everything from the trinium barrier for the 'gate, to mobile platforms, containment units for nanobots, wooden plows and freshwater wells, to helping with spaceship repairs.”

Tony opened his mouth to protest... and then closed it, frowning.

“I've heard rumours that he's even refused promotions that would take him out of the SGC,” Sam added softly. “And no CO's been willing to push it, because he's too much of an asset.”

Tony sighed. Yeah, okay, so the guy was built from the same engineering mould Tony was.

Without the genius part, of course. He definitely hadn't missed the spark of excitement in his eyes when Sam had introduced Tony and explained what they'd be doing. Sam had let Tony explain what he'd need to create the device that would then create the core for the arc reactor (there'd been no point in Tony creating one in his own lab because they'd need a much bigger one than even the one powering Avengers Tower). Then Tony had handed him a USB with the designs, stood back and waited for the inevitable barrage of questions that usually came from the labcoats he worked with – not that Siler wore a lab coat, which was actually another point in his favour now that Tony had thought of it – but they never came. No, Sargent Siler had thought about the instructions for a moment, then asked one clarifying question about the structural integrity the input ducts would be required to maintain and the force that would be generated within the main chamber itself.

Then he'd said, “I think I understand. I'll get right on it, sir, ma'am.”
And then he'd left Tony blinking after him as he disappeared down into the depths of Area 51's white-washed hallways. Three hours later, he'd called down to request that Tony come down to verify their progress. Sure, he hadn't gotten it completely perfect and Tony did some tweaking here and there, especially around the pressurized intake valve, but it was close enough that Tony felt fairly confident in leaving the project in the Sargent's hands.

It was amazing just how smoothly a project went when he didn't have to babysit every single step of it personally. Now that they'd relocated from Sam's lab to the main area where they'd be building the reactor, he'd gotten the pleasure of working with the other engineer directly and realized that, oh yes, the other man was a tinkerer all right. He'd even modified bits of Tony's plans when he didn't have the right materials on-site and Tony couldn't find anything wrong with the modifications no matter how hard he'd tried.

Tony was having so much fun it was easy to forget about the big bad alien armada that was the reason for the whole engineering fun-fest.

His phone buzzed and AC/DC sounded out of his pocket again. This time he was ready for it and snatched it out, sighing at the screen. Yup, it was Pepper. Steeling himself, he answered the call, automatically putting it on speakerphone.

“Hey Pep–”

“Tony, where the hell are you?! You promised me you'd be at this investor's meeting and now Jarvis is telling me you're not only not in the Tower, but not even in New York. I don't care if aliens are about to attack, this is important!”

Tony winced. “You know, someone could make the argument about your skewed priorities...”

“Tony...”

He looked over at Sam, who gave him a sympathetic smile. Which gave him an idea. “Okay, look, if the investors give you a hard time, then tell them I'm helping the Air Force with something.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Tony, you actually expect me to believe you took on an Air Force contract without discussing it with me? Or that you took on an Air Force contract period for that matter.”

“Ah, well, there's not really a contract per say...”

“Then what is it?”

“Well, I'm building them a giant arc reactor to power the dimensional phase shift device that they're planning to use to save the world.”

Stunned silence followed, and then a sigh. “Tony, you're building the Air Force an arc reactor for free?”

“Er...” In his excitement to get a look at Sam's dimensional phase shifting device along with a glimpse at the legendary Area 51, money hadn't even entered his head. Funny, that was usually the first thing he'd snap out at SHIELD. Damn, Sam was good. “Yes? I mean, it's to save the world, so ultimately the paycheque is not watching everyone die which is a good thing, right?”

“Excuse me, if I may,” Sam suddenly cut in. Tony looked up to find she'd circled her work station and was standing only several feet away from him, her hands clasped behind her back and a pleasant smile on her face. “My name is Colonel Samantha Carter. I requested Doctor Stark's
assistance in this matter on the recommendation of my friend and teammate, Doctor Daniel Jackson. In exchange I have added both of your names to what we call the Alpha Site Designation List.”

“What's the Alpha Site Designation List?” Pepper asked, trepidation clear in her voice.

“It's a list of people- well, you can think of it as the passenger list for the lifeboat. Should the worst happen.”

Pepper's sharp intake of breath came in clear through the phone's speaker and Tony felt the world shift side-ways. A lifeboat list... of course the Air Force had a lifeboat list. A list of people that likely wasn't long enough, not by a long shot. He wondered how they'd chosen those people. Did they do a lottery? Did they pick out all their own people? Were their families on the list or would they have to leave their children behind, their spouses? And what was the lifeboat? An underground bunker? A spaceship? A – no, he realized.

“The stargate,” he whispered, closing his eyes. “You're planning to send them through the stargate to another planet. To...”

“To rebuild, to survive, to make sure humanity – Earth – doesn't completely die,” Sam finished.

Tony opened his eyes and looked at her. He didn't want to know, but he had to ask. “Have you ever...?”


“Oh god.”

There was a knock at the door and a kid who looked barely old enough to drive walked in carrying a tray containing a carafe and several mugs (he probably wasn't on the list). Sam thanked him and told him to leave it on the work station. When the door shut behind him, Tony managed to pull himself together and swallowed down the sudden fear.

Suddenly, the aliens weren't millions of light years away happily flying through some distant part of space; they were breathing down his neck, threatening everyone and everything he cared about.

He took a deep breath. “Pepper, you'll have to run the investor's meeting without me. Make my excuses, whatever. And then you know how we have the basement levels re-enforced in case of, well, in case of emergency? I need you to pack the levels with emergency supplies: food, water, blankets, whatever you think is best.”

“You can get Cassie to do it,” Sam suggested. “She was raised by air force people; she'll know what to get together.”

“Right, yeah, she might be tired of playing lab assistant to Bruce by now,” he said. “And you know what, give everyone the day off tomorrow – no, the next two days. Tell them it's a reward for the successful launch of the new Starkphone or something. Tell them to spend it with their families. In fact, make it an order: they are to spend the next two days with their families or partners or hell their cats and dogs if that's who they've got.”

He could hear Pepper take a deep breath. “Alright Tony, I'll see what I can do. It was nice to meet you, Colonel Carter.”

“You as well and Ms. Potts, I'd recommend you pack a small case just in case. Nothing fancy, and definitely nothing frivolous. If the worst should happen, you'll be needing hiking books and a good
pair of jeans more than high heels and a skirt where you'll be going.”

“I... yes, of course. I'll do it as soon as I get back to the penthouse.”

“It was nice to meet you, Pepper.”

“Pep, I'll call you when I get a chance,” said Tony. “I-” He swallowed.

“Anthony Edward Stark don't you dare! This is not good-bye. I'll pack you a case tonight too and if the worst should happen, I'll see you in... Colorado I think it was.”

Tony chuckled. “Yeah, it was Colorado. Okay then, good luck and I'll see you in either New York or Colorado.”

“Good luck, Tony. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go make your excuses to the investors. Again.”

Pepper hung up and Tony took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He turned to Sam.

“So, as far as a suggestion for payment goes, that was a pretty good one,” he said. His eyes hardened. “And now that you've told my girlfriend about it, I expect you to keep it. I mean, I'll probably be here 'till the bitter end right beside you trying to save the world, but Pepper? If this lifeboat of yours leaves, I expect her to be on it.”

Sam's eyes twinkled. “Oh don't worry, she will,” she said cheekily. “Both your names were added to the list about two years ago.”

Tony blinked. “Son of a bitch,” he said. “That was... that was downright underhanded. I'm so proud.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh please, you're not even close to being the one who taught me.”

He grinned. “Now then, I guess that means we can get back to work! But with coffee, because I definitely didn't miss the coffee that came in with that enlisted man – I'm a new fan of enlisted men... enlisted people? Enlistees? Whatever. Where's Siler anyway?”

He headed directly for the carafe, happily pouring himself a mug of dark liquid he knew would taste much worse than it smelled, but held enough caffeine to keep an elephant awake (Sam told him it was Area 51's special brew – there was even a small roastery on-site run by a co-op of biologists, physicists and the occasional air force officer).

He ignored the snickering coming from the computer console and turned to the Iron Man suit standing in the corner of the room.

“Alright, J, hit me: how are those calculations going?”

There was a pause and then Jarvis came over the speaker: “I apologize, sir, I'm afraid I'm having a bit of difficulty calculating the conversion from the arc reactor into the device. All projections indicate the energy generated by the device itself as incompatible with that of the arc reactor, which has a 75% chance of resulting in a system overload with a 60% chance of explosion.”

Tony cringed. “Okay that's not good. Jarvis, bring it up on screen.”

Tony hurried over to where Sam was already standing in front of the mass of computer screens set up in the corner of the room. There was a whiteboard next to it where Tony had drawn a diagram
for Siler earlier. Jarvis' calculations were already up on the farthest left-most screen and the two scientists scrolled through them.

“Damn,” Sam finally said, running a hand through her hair. “Okay, this could be a problem.”

“It's fixable though,” Tony rushed to assure her. “I mean, it's just a matter of figuring out the exact energy ratio we need to balance out the arc reactor and compensate for the energy created by the phase shift device.”

“Yes, I realize it's doable,” Sam snapped. “It's matter of whether or not we can get it done in time. We still have to finish assembling the pressurized chamber we need to create the vibranium in. Unless you want to forget the vibranium and just go with the back-up palladium core.”

Tony thought about it for a moment, ran a few calculations, before shaking his head. “No, at this level of output it'd burn out too fast. The palladium is a good thing to have on hand just in case, but we definitely need the vibranium core.”

“Then it's down to a lack of manpower.”

Tony frowned. “I'd have thought you'd have, like, hundreds of scientists working in here.”

“We do, but they're all running diagnostics or upgrades on a dozen other defence projects. Once they're finished, then yes we'll have more help, but for now it's us and Siler's engineering staff.”

Tony's frown deepened. Other defence projects? What sort of defence projects would rate higher than this dimensional phase shift device?

The door opened just as Tony was about to ask and Siler stepped into the room.

“How's does it look?” Sam asked him.

“The palladium core will be ready by eighteen hundred, ma'am,” Siler answered promptly. “Doesn't look like there should be any complications. And we just got word that Doctors Lee and Kavanaugh have finished calibrating the ion cannons and should be heading back within the hour.”

Sam let out a breath. “Okay, that's good, we could use the help,” she said. “We've run into a snag with the energy calculations...”

Worry flashed through Siler's eyes. “Are we still proceeding with the project?”

Her eyes widened. “What? Oh, yes, yes of course we are. We've come too far at this point and it can work. We just have to figure out how to make it work.”

“It'll work,” said Tony. “Jarvis, keep at those calculations. Try everything you can think of.”

Sam rubbed a hand across her face and took a deep breath. “Damn I wish we had more time.”

“We might, ma'am,” said Siler. “We don't actually know when the Ori ships will be arriving.”

Sam smiled wryly at him. “Which means we might have days, or we might have hours... Okay, no, probably not hours. The Tok'ra's information has given us at least another day, but that's all we know for sure.”

“The Tok'ra?” Tony asked. “Who or what are the Tok'ra?”

Sam waved him off. “Sorry, it's really way too complicated to go into now. If we survive this I'll
“Tell you.” She took a deep breath. “Which means we really need to get back to work. And I need to report our problem to the general.”

“Why?” Tony demanded. “We’re going to figure it out, so why would you report it to anyone?”

“Because if the Pentagon needs to have all the information available to them if they’re going to order an evacuation to the Alpha Site. You know, that lifeboat we just talked about?”

“Ah, right.”

Then she nodded to both of them and walked off towards the landline phone in the corner of the room – and really, why the hell did Area 51 of all places still have landlines? She dialled the first two numbers before pausing and slamming the receiver back down and running back to the computer station. She practically threw herself into the desk chair, rolled over to the next computer over and began typing. Tony walked around the desk to get a look at the screen.

“Personnel records?” he said with a raised eyebrow.

Sam nodded absently. “Right now, we've got all our people running ragged trying to come up with a defensive plan; there's a dozen of them working hard on a multi-phase ion wave cannon on the other end of the base. I could pull one or two of them to this project and that might help, but what if their absence means that the cannon doesn't get completed?”

Tony blinked. A multi-phase ion wave cannon... that sounded kinda cool. “Do you think they'll manage to get it completed?”

Sam winced. “Well... no, probably not. It requires melding Tollan ion cannon technology with Asgard photon beams which aren't technologies that were ever meant to work together in the first place and we've only barely gotten a hand on how the ion cannon works...”

“Wait, woah, Asgard technology? You have Asgard tech?! Where the hell did you get Asgard tech from and why did SHIELD and therefore by extension me not know about this?”

Sam blinked, paused. “Oh, right, you're thinking of the Asgardians.” She waved him off before she continued typing. “Later. It's an even longer story- Aha!”

Grinning triumphantly, she reached over for the phone (another landline) sitting at the corner of the desk and started dialling.

“So, who are you calling then?” Tony asked. “Another genius friend of yours? 'Cause Jarvis is working on it. I mean, I made him, so he's almost as smart as me; he'll figure it out.”

“I'm sure he is, Tony and no offence meant Jarvis, but sometimes a computer just can't replace human creativity and leaps of imagination.”

“I take no offence at that remark, Colonel. Indeed, I often find myself perplexed at the more creative of sir's ideas and I must agree that I am not capable of such leaps of imagination.”

“Hey, my creative ideas are always brilliant!”

“If you say so, sir.”

Sam giggled.

“So, who are you calling anyway?”
“A mathematical genius who's not directly affiliated with the project, but has security clearance and has helped us out before. I just hope she'll be willing to do it again.”

That caught Tony's interest. “A mathematical genius? What sort of mathematical genius?”

Sam grinned at him impishly as the phone connected. They heard it ring over the speakerphone.

“The sort who calculates part of the Einstein-Rosen bridge on a Monday night using her daughter's finger paints.”

The ringing stopped as the phone was picked up. There was some interference as someone apparently fumbled with the receiver. Then there were a few moments of silence.

“Hello,” said a small, quiet voice.

Sam bit her lip. “Uh, hi, is this Madison?”

“Uh huh. Who are you?”

“Hi Madison, my name is Sam. I'm a friend of your mom's... is she there?”

“Ye-es.”

There were a few moments of silence during which Tony contemplated strangling the kid over the phone. Sam, thankfully seemed to have more patience.

“Could you get her for me, honey?” she asked.

And then there was another, muffled voice in the background and more movement and a hurried, whispered exchange of voices.

“Hello, I'm so sorry about that.”

Sam let out a breath of relief. “Hi, Jeannie, it's Sam Carter.”

“Oh no, what's he done now?”

Tony blinked. That was usually the sort of thing people asked about him, but he was certain he didn't know any Jeannie Millers who used finger paint to write mathematical equations. He was sure he'd remember that sort of thing.

“Uh, as far as I know Rodney's fine; he hasn't done anything–“

“--As far as you know? What do you mean as far as you know? Colonel, the last time you people called me it was to tell me my brother was dying and then I travelled all the way to the Pegasus Galaxy in order to watch one of the greatest scientific minds of our time reduced to the state of a toddler! So is my brother okay or isn't he?”

Tony knew he should be objecting to the 'greatest minds of our time', but his brain had gotten stuck at 'travelled all the way to the Pegasus Galaxy' and didn't entirely seem willing to move past that. Holy shit, Daniel had really been holding out on them. Then again, he never would've gotten him to stay on Earth if he'd told them there was an option to travel to another galaxy...

Sam, meanwhile, had taken a deep breath.

“Jeannie, I'm sorry, we haven't had any real contact with Atlantis since we were ordered into
blackout conditions after the whole Hydra debacle in Washington. Their last, brief communique was over a month ago and at that point everyone was fine, including Rodney.”

There was the sound of a deep breath being taken. “Okay, good. That’s, well, not great, but I guess no news is better than bad news. So what can I help you with, Sam?”

Tony didn't hear the rest of their conversation, because that was when Siler approached him with a tablet to ask him about the arc reactor's casing. Apparently, they had a small supply of a metal called trinium, which was a metal they mined off-world, and he wanted to know if it would harm the rest of the reactor. When Sam joined, she seemed thrilled with the idea and so off Siler went to give his team instructions while Tony and Sam finished putting together the device they'd use to create the vibranium core.

He'd never, ever tell Pepper, but possible end of the world notwithstanding, this was actually a lot of fun. He just hoped Jarvis managed to hack Area 51's computer system while he worked on those calculations, because he desperately wanted to read those reports.

Also, he was incredibly curious to see whether finger-paint woman would manage to solve the energy transfer problem before Jarvis.
WHEEL

It was a quiet morning on Atlantis as bright sunlight streamed into the control room, bathing the stargate in a halo of light. It was a marked contrast to the flashes of light that had illuminated it overnight thanks to a rather spectacular thunderstorm that had ushered in the beginning of what this planet considered to be autumn. The waves had been so high that the on-duty medical staff had been giving out doses of sea-sickness medication throughout the night and had been happy that the worse injury had been a broken wrist. And so very few people in the control room were actually admiring the haloed stargate, their fingers flying over control panels as their eyes instead analyzed the readings they were getting on the display screens, trying to figure out what damage had been done.

They all paused and looked up when the stargate began to spin.

Chuck activated his comm. “Control room to Colonel Sheppard,” he said.

Two chevrons encoded.

“Sheppard here. What is it?”

“We have an incoming wormhole, sir.”

“Woolsey coming back early?”

“I don't know, sir.”

“On my way.”

Colonel Sheppard walked in, tailed by Ronon, just as he gate had finished dialling. Chuck activated the shield and then watched as the wormhole opened with its usual splash of bright blue light. He stared at the readout.

“So, what have we got?” Sheppard asked as he came to stand behind him.

“It-it's from the Milky Way, sir.”
The disbelief in the man's voice made the colonel look down. “The SGC?” he asked hopefully.

Chuck shook his head. “No sir, the address is unknown.”

“Sir, we're receiving an incoming transmission,” said Amelia Banks at the next counsel. She looked up at Sheppard, barely-hidden surprise on her face. “I'm confirming SG-1’s IDC.”

Sheppard blinked in surprise, exchanging looks with the people in the room. He nodded to the woman. “Put it through.”

“Hello, this is Daniel Jackson of SG1, do you read?”

“Hello Doctor Jackson, this is Atlantis. We read you loud and clear.”

“Oh Colonel Sheppard, hello. We've found some, uh, Ancient devices, and we were wondering if Rodney could take a look at them. Permission to enter the city?”

Sheppard frowned, his eyes narrowing. The voice sounded like Daniel Jackson alright, but that didn't mean it was. “Didn't know the SGC allowing gate travel again?” he drawled.

There was a pause. “Uh, well, they're not really. We're... not entirely on a sanctioned mission. We do come bearing gifts though.”

He perked up. “Is it coffee? 'Cause right now, coffee's worth more than gold around here.”

He heard Daniel chuckle. “Nope, sorry, but you're not getting my field rations of coffee. I will defend them with my life. However, I do think this might just be worth more than even coffee.”

Sheppard nodded, wishing he'd taken the time to get to know the archaeologist well enough to be able to subtly tell whether or not this was actually him. He shook his head. He supposed he was just going to have to take that risk.

“Alright, now you've got me curious, Doc,” he said. “Permission to come through granted; we're taking the shield down.”

He made a cutting motion to Banks and watched as she cut off communications. “Call McKay,” he then told her. “Tell him to drop whatever he's working on and get up here immediately.”

He then walked out from behind the main control panel and caught the eyes of the security personnel stationed around the control room, carefully watching what was going on.

“Eyes sharp, people,” he announced. “But don't make it too obvious. This could be Doctor Jackson, or not. Might even be some left-over Goa'uld wearin' his body.” He looked back towards Ronon. “Stay back in case I need you for back-up.”

Ronon nodded.

He finally turned to Chuck and nodded. A few moments later, the familiar shimmer of the shield appeared for a second before it winked out of existence. And then Daniel Jackson stepped through the gate. The first thing he did was look around, but John could tell he wasn't actually paying any attention to the officers stationed around the room. No, it looked more like he was just taking in his surroundings, looking around at an old friend he was happy to see again. His eyes crinkled with happiness for a short while, before he finally turned his gaze towards John and his expression grew serious again.
John felt himself relax.

“Colonel Sheppard, long time no see,” Daniel greeted him.

“Yeah, good to see you again Doctor Jackson,” John answered, returning his smile. Meanwhile, he noticed the rest of SG1 wander in through the wormhole out of the corner of his eye, along with a few others...

John froze, taking in the tall, imposing, larger-than-life figure wearing red, white and blue.

“That’s–”

“–Okay this had better be damn important,” Rodney’s voice suddenly burst into the control room, followed by the man himself making an appearance at the top of the stairs. “I was busy recalibrating the internal sensors ’cause they got thrown out of whack in the storm last night and we all remember what happened the last time the internal sensors got screwed up, right? I somehow don’t think we want emergency protocols to get triggered the next time someone takes a hot shower. Although at least this time I won’t be stuck in the biology labs so it’ll all get taken care of a lot faster – oh, hey Daniel, when did you arrive?”

Daniel smiled. “Hey Rodney, we just got here.” He gestured behind him. “We brought you presents. In return for which I hope you’ll be willing to give us a hand cracking a couple Ancient databases.”

Rodney’s eyes had lit up excitedly. “Presents? You brought me presents? Oooh, is it coffee? ’Cause I’d be willing to do quite a lot for coffee right about now.”

John grabbed him by the upper arm. “Rodney,” he hissed into his ear. “He brought Captain America with him.”

Rodney’s annoyed scowl turned confused. He glanced to the others behind Daniel, sweeping through them to single out a semi-familiar figure who was staring up at the stained glass windows of the upper floor in awe. He looked back to John.

“Uh, yeah sure, I can see that,” he said.

John sighed. Clearly the scientist wasn't getting it. “It's Captain America,” he tried again.

Rodney blinked. “And I’m Canadian. Your point? Oh wait, that’s right: you read his comic books and fanboyed all over them and now you get to meet your hero in person. That’s great. Congratulations or something. Just don’t drool all over him. Now let go of me so I can go see my presents.”

“I do not drool,” John felt the need to point out as he glared at his sometimes-friend (obviously not at this moment). He let go of him and Rodney walked over to Daniel, who was also looking around, but with a confused frown.

“You know I was almost expecting Woolsey to deny our request without confirmation from the SGC,” he said carefully. “Where is he anyway?”

John shrugged. “He was on a diplomatic mission to discuss trade for food with one of the farming settlements we’ve come across and then got stuck there when the mother of all storms decided to hit us last night.”

“Ah please, it wasn't that bad,” said Rodney dismissively. “Temporarily knocked out a couple of
systems, no big. We're mostly just running maintenance right now to make sure nothing got fried by lightening. And re-calibrating the internal sensors, but that's stuff I could do in my sleep with both hands tied behind my back. The storm when the Genii attacked? *That* was the mother and grandmother of all storms.”

John gave Rodney a look, remembering just how twitchy and panicky the scientist had been throughout the night. Then he turned back to Daniel with a grin and clapped his hands together, rubbing them excitedly. “So what've you got for me?”

Daniel smirked and turned to Captain America – who, now that John was paying attention again, was carrying a large crate. “Steve?” he said innocently and John's brain stalled for a moment at the use of Captain America's real name.

The blond's expression didn't change. Instead he stepped forward and placed the crate he was holding gently on the ground. Daniel bent over and unlatched the lid, pulling it up to reveal four glowing crystals sitting atop of what looked like a pile of white drones.

He thought he heard Rodney gasp, but was too busy gaping to check.

Holy shit, SG1 had brought them ZPMs.

The moment Steve had heard Atlantis responding, his mouth had widened into an excited grin. Atlantis, The Lost City, the dream of every adventurer, and it hardly mattered that someone had found it before him, because he was apparently going to see it for his own eyes. He felt a pang of sorrow as his thoughts fleetingly turned to Bucky, wishing his friend was here to share this adventure just like he'd shared every adventure with him when they were children.

“Dude, Atlantis is on another *planet*?” he heard Clint mutter beside him.

“Explains how they were able to keep it quiet,” Sam answered him.

“Yeah, no kidding.”

Steve looked to the side and noticed Cameron and Vala watching them with knowing smiles. When Cam noticed him looking, he shrugged.

“Hey, Atlantis is just as cool as it sounds,” he said. Then frowned. “Except for the wraith.”

“The wraith?” Steve asked.

Cam never got the chance to answer as then they were being given permission to come through. So he picked up the crate they’d loaded up with drones and four of the glowing ZPMs and followed Daniel through the gate.

The trip felt different this time – Steve couldn't exactly pin-point *how* it was different, but he walked out the other side feeling like he'd somehow been stretched thinner than before, the cold felt sharper. He didn't stumble, but it was close. He had to take a deep breath to shake off the deep-down coldness that felt too much like ice.

Then he looked around and his breath caught for an entirely different reason. Whatever he'd ever
imagined Atlantis to look like, this wasn't it. Daniel didn't even have to tell him that the same people – the Ancients – who'd designed the temple, had designed Atlantis as well. It was obvious in every line, every smooth polished surface. He felt eyes on him from all around, but he ignored them. Steve didn't think he would ever get used to the attention Captain America brought with him, but he'd gotten fairly good at gritting his teeth and ignoring it.

The room they were in wasn't large, but it felt grand. A main entrance from the Stargate, it was clearly meant to impress. Large staircases leading up to a smaller second level gave the illusion of even more space as well as giving a welcoming feel. There were about half a dozen soldier lined up along the railing of the second level, and what looked like it could be a control room behind a glass wall. He also caught a glimpse of an office in the back corner.

Sun beat down on him from behind and he turned around. Behind the gate was another staircase leading to an alcove bathed in light from the windows that surrounded it from every angle. Towards the top, the windows became smaller, pieced together between metal frames like shards of gleaming light. Through the windows he could see bright blue sky.

“So, Atlantis is not only no longer lost, but also no longer sunk,” Sam said quietly, bringing Steve out of his musings.

“Yeah, looks like,” he said quietly back.

He looked back to Daniel, who was now speaking with two men at the bottom of the stairs. They were both wearing military-style BDUs, but of a different design to those the personnel at the SGC had worn. Daniel looked back and met his eyes.

“Steve?” he said.

Steve took that as his cue and stepped forward with the crate, carefully setting it down in front of the two men from Atlantis. He eyed their uniforms more closely as Daniel bent down to open the crate. The taller of the two men had a playful twinkle in his eyes and slightly shaggy hair that would've only just passed regulations. The military insignia on his shoulder identified him as a Lieutenant Colonel, though Steve frowned in confusion at the US flag stitched onto the uniform beneath the insignia. Then he looked to the other man and took in the lack of rank insignia and the Canadian flag stitched onto the same spot.

He looked up at the security detail standing guard around the room and was amazed to pick out US flags, along with more Canadian flags and even two Russian flags. They also seemed to be gathering a crowd of on-lookers that looked to be a mixture of civilian and military. Steve caught sight of a few Chinese flags, several German flags and a British one among the group.

“This place is international,” he breathed, feeling even more awed than before.

“Yup, we've got a complement of 279 people representing 23 different countries from around the world, both civilian and military.”

Steve looked back to the colonel who'd spoken. Standing next to him, Daniel smiled at Steve and then looked to the other Avengers, all of whom had come closer (except for Natasha who seemed to locked in a staring contest with a large, fierce-looking man with dreadlocks standing about half-way up the stairs) before gesturing to the colonel.

“This is Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard, head of Atlantis' military contingent,” he said and then gestured to the other man, the one with the Canadian flag. “And this is Doctor Rodney McKay, Head of the Science Department and that man in the back with the apparent death wish is Ronon
Ronon raised a hand and waved at them without breaking eye contact with Natasha.

Sheppard looked over his shoulder with a perplexed look on his face. “Ronon, what are you doing?”

“Nothin’,” the tall man with dreadlocks replied.

“Dude, don't even think about it,” said Clint, amusement evident in his voice. “She'll break you in half.”

His face slowly slid into a smirk. “That a challenge?” he asked.

Natasha smirked back. “Would you like it to be?” she drawled, her eyes never wavering.

Ronon's eyes sparkled with delight and his grin was full of teeth. “I'll be in the training room tonight at seven.”

“I'll find you.”

“Good.”

Finally, Ronon turned away and nodded to the others before stuffing his hands into his pockets and bounding up the stairs and out of sight. Steve sighed and shook his head.

“Please remember we're guests here and leave him mostly in one piece,” he said.

Natasha looked over to him with a pleased smile. “No promises, Cap.”

Colonel Sheppard cleared his throat. “Er, so who exactly did Ronon just challenge?” he asked, looking slightly worried.

Steve heard Daniel chuckle before pointing to each of the group in sequence. “That would be Ms. Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow. Next to her we've got Clint Barton, Sam Wilson, Captain Steve Rogers and, of course Vala and Cam you already know.”

Sheppard shook Natasha and Clint's hands and then grinned widely at Sam.

“Hey, good to see you again, Sam,” he said.

Sam grinned back. “Yeah, you too, you crazy son-of-a-bitch,” he said. “How the hell did you end up here?”

“Believe it or not, I nearly crashed a helicopter with a three-star general inside.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “You crashing helicopters: no, really?” He looked over to Steve. “You know I swear this guy spent more time crashing helicopters than flying 'em.”

“Hey! I'll have you know this time totally wasn't my fault!” He paused thoughtfully and then pointed to the Canadian beside him. “Actually, it was his fault.”

“W-what?!” Doctor McKay stuttered. “It was not! Carson was the one in the chair!”

“Yeah, but he wouldn't have been in the chair if it weren't for you, ergo, it's your fault.”
He was only supposed to make the drone float a bit, not shoot out at your helicopter! How was I supposed to know he was that incompetent?"

Daniel cleared his throat. "You know it did all work out and Jack wasn't even hurt, so it really doesn't matter," he said. "Besides, if the drone hadn't attacked the helicopter, then Jack would've never invited John into the base with him and none of us would've known that he has the ATA gene."

That got Steve's attention. "You have the Ancient gene?" he asked. Logically he knew there had to be more people like him with this special gene – Daniel had said as much when he'd told them about it – but it was still exciting to actually meet one of those people in person.

"Next to Jack, John's one of the strongest carriers we've ever encountered," said Daniel.

"Wow."

"Of course we have no idea where exactly you fall in strength..."

Colonel Sheppard's eyes widened. "Wait, whoa." He looked at Steve in astonishment. "You have the ATA gene?"

"Apparently."

Sheppard grinned and stuck a hand out. "Well, if you have any questions about how to use any of the stuff on base just let me know," he said as Steve shook his hand. "It's a real honour to meet you. I've been reading your comic books since I was a kid."

Steve chuckled. "Weren't my comic books. Most of the stories were completely made up by the writers. They just slapped my face onto it."

Beside him, Doctor McKay rolled his eyes. "If you're done with the hero worship, can you get someone to help me with this?"

"Oh, I can carry it for you, Doctor;" said Steve quickly.

Colonel Sheppard immediately waved him off. "Don't be ridiculous, you're guests and we've got dozens of marines cooling their heels just waiting for something to do. 'Sides, Doc'll need to look you over first. SOP for anyone arriving on base."

Steve bit his lip to stop his immediate protest that he couldn't get sick. He glanced at his team. Sam seemed to be taking it in stride, but Natasha and Clint didn't look one bit happy. He sighed.

Suddenly, Daniel cleared his throat. "Actually, Colonel, would you mind if we take a look outside first?"

Sheppard blinked and then grinned a decidedly lopsided grin. "I think that could be arranged, Doc." He made a motion with his head. "Follow me."

He led them up the stairs and past the control room. A set of large doors slid open before him and he stepped aside and beckoned them to go ahead. Natasha went first and from right behind her, Steve just barely managed to hear a quiet sound of surprise.

There was a slight breeze that smelt of saltwater and faintly of fish. Steve stepped up to the balcony's railing and stared out in amazement. The painting they'd seen of Atlantis had been beautiful, but had barely done the city justice. They were in a tower and on all sides he could see
the elegant, fine lines of the city's other towers climbing towards the sky, though he could see none as tall as the one they were in. Tony would love this place, he knew. It was a pinnacle of modern architecture with its metal and glass and straight lines.

It lacked the true artistry and nostalgia of Manhattan, but didn't feel barren and lifeless like some of the newer constructs and skyscraper cities he'd seen. Perhaps because it was cleaner, quieter, without the smog that always clung to New York City like a second skin. Or perhaps it was the bright blue ocean that sparkled merrily as far as the eye could see.

His fingers itched for a paintbrush.

Colonel Sheppard cleared his throat and Steve turned to look at him. Sheppard grinned proudly. “Guess I really should've said this sooner, but welcome to the Pegasus Galaxy.”

The Pegasus Galaxy. Holy Mother of God, they were in the Pegasus Galaxy, Clint thought as he sat next to Sam on a bed in the infirmary waiting for the others to be done with Doctor Keller, who looked way too young to be heading a medical team in another galaxy. She was currently taking a sample of Steve's blood, smiling widely as she chatted away.

Clint hadn't wanted to give her a blood sample; she wasn't SHIELD or Bruce and it went against everything he'd been trained for. It left evidence of his presence. Natasha's glare had made the doctor shrink away for a moment, before she'd managed to gather herself.

“Look, we won't be running tests on the blood or anything,” she tried to reason with him. Her lips quirked into a small smile. “And no paternity tests, I promise.”

Clint snorted in amusement, though didn't budge an inch in his resolve.

She sighed. “It's just that we need a baseline sample of your blood and DNA in case something happens to you, so that we have something for comparison.”

He frowned. “We're only going to be here for, like, a day or two: we're not going to be going on missions.”

“That doesn't mean you can't contract something from someone else. Just because we test everyone as soon as they come through the gate doesn't mean we catch everything. We try, but we are in another galaxy and sometimes that means that we don't know what's possible and some of those possible things are really, really weird.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “I deal with weird all the time.”

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. Needle still in hand, she crossed her arms.

“Colonel Sheppard once came back from a mission carrying an organism made of energy that fed on emotions of despair and had the ability to affect a person's subconsciousness, especially while they were dreaming. One of our people died as a result of whatever they'd been dreaming.”

Clint shuddered. That creature wouldn't even have to try very hard with him; he had vivid nightmares without any outside influence.
“Rodney – er, Doctor McKay – once got infected by an organism that grew inside his skull, pushing against the part of his brain that controls memory and causing him to slowly lose himself and his memories.”

Clint blinked. “Inside his skull? He had an organism growing inside his skull?”

“You, all along the upper part of his brain – looked like something between a plant and an insect. The effect was a bit like developing alzheimers, except that it took just over a month for him to lose most of his memory and cognitive functions. Oh, and I got infected with a virus that essentially tried to use my body as the central vessel to grow a wraith ship around.”

He gaped. “Grow a ship: how do you grow a – no you know what, I don't want to know.” He straightened his left arm and held it out towards her. “This galaxy is clearly weird beyond my wildest imagination.”

Keller smiled brightly as she inserted the needle into his vein. No one else had protested having to give a blood sample after that. Not even Natasha.

By the time they were done, nearly an hour had passed and Colonel Sheppard was back to give them a tour of the city. By this point, Clint had already decided Atlantis was cool and the tour did nothing to dissuade him. Especially the jumper bay.

“So they're like the Enterprise shuttles,” Clint commented as he looked at the funny-shaped vessels.

“Sort of, except that they're designed for gate travel,” Sheppard responded.

“That's why they're such an odd shape,” said Steve, nodding in comprehension.

“Yup. Here in the Pegasus Galaxy, the Ancients set up a series of space gates along with the regular planet-based gates you'll find in the Milky Way.”

“Space gates?” Sam asked.

“Stargates that are in orbit around planets instead of on the ground.”

“Huh, cool.”

“Yeah, they really are.” Sheppard paused. “You know, while the geeks are pouring over Daniel's puzzle later, I could take you guys up in one. Cap, you've got the ATA gene; I could show you how to fly it.”

The colonel was practically bouncing on his feet in excitement at his own suggestion. Clint saw Steve try to keep the feeling of dread off his face.

“Er, that sounds swell,” Cap said carefully. “But the last time I flew a plane I crashed it into the Atlantic ocean.”

“Don't worry, these babies are fully submersible.”

“Oh. Well, in that case...” Cap grinned. “I definitely want to fly a spaceship that can also swim.”

Sheppard grinned.
SG1, the Avengers, Colonel Sheppard and Ronon were all sitting around a table in the commissary when suddenly the lights flickered for a moment, before coming back brighter than before. Sheppard stopped eating immediately and looked up.

“I thought he said there weren't going to be any problems,” he grumbled before hitting his communicator. “Sheppard to McKay: what the hell was that?”

No answer.

The Avengers exchanged looks, shifting automatically in their seats so that they could be up and running at a moment's notice. Sheppard sighed.

“Rodney, do you read?” he tried again.

Another pause and then: “McKay here! That was just a minor fluctuation; we have everything under control. Now, if you don't mind, I'm busy!”

Natasha bit her lip to keep from smiling as she imagined those exact words coming from another genius' mouth. Across the table from her, Clint didn't bother trying not to smile. From further down, she heard Colonel Sheppard sigh in exasperation.

“What sort of minor fluctuation?” he asked, his tone pointed and words pronounced slightly slower than usual for emphasis. “Does this have to do with the storm?”

“What? No, of course not. We finished with the internal sensors over an hour ago; I've got some minions running the last diagnostics on the long-range scanners. Everything's fine.”

Clint snorted. “He actually calls his lab assistants, minions?”

Daniel chuckled, looking amused. “They're not actually lab assistants. Every single member of the research team is among the best and brightest in their field with at least one PhD a piece. Of course, Rodney's the head of the department and a long-standing member with the SGC program itself, but they're still technically all his peers.”

“Wouldn't know it by talking to him,” Ronon chimed in with a straight face, although amusement danced in his eyes.

Meanwhile, Sheppard tapped his comm again. “Rodney, if the storm's damage is fixed then why are we getting power fluctuations?”

“Just a minute, I've just got to double-check these readings.”

Sheppard's eyes narrowed. Around them, people had stopped eating in favour of listening in on the conversation.

“Rodney...”

“Two. Minutes.”

Sheppard grumbled something under his breath and looked at his watch. Then he picked up his fork again and began stabbing at the bright green leafy vegetables on his plate. Two minutes passed mostly in silence, except for Steve asking Ronon how he was supposed to eat the odd pink spindly fruit he'd picked up at the canteen. Natasha listened carefully to the explanation as she'd
picked one up herself (it had sharp-looking, three inch spikes growing out of it from all sides and Natasha figured that any fruit that developed that sort of defence had to be pure ambrosia inside).

Just over two minutes later, Doctor McKay's voice came on over the internal speaker system.

“Ehem, attention Atlantis, this is Doctor Rodney McKay. I'd just like to announce that thanks to my efforts and – oh okay, fine, and SG-1's I suppose... and possibly Captain America and his groupies might have helped too... Anyway, the point is that for the first time in ten thousand years, Atlantis is now running on full power!”

There was a beat and then the entire commissary exploded in loud cheers and applause.

“Okay, fine, and Zelenka helped too. Happy now?”

Sheppard rolled his eyes.

“Groupies?” Sam asked amid the applause, looking outraged. “Oh no, no, he did not just call us Captain America groupies. I'll take friends, comrades, posse – hell, I'll even take side-kick – but I draw a line in big, bold permanent marker at being called a groupie!”

Steve snickered through his blush.

“Aw, don't worry Sam,” said Clint. “Being Steve's groupie isn't so bad. It means you get to console all the poor heart-broken girls he's always attracting and somehow never really notices.”

Sam looked to Clint thoughtfully. “Does that happen often?”

Natasha pulled out the long knife from her thigh holster to tackle the pink spindly fruit. “Getting the fossil here to go on a date is like asking Stark to go undercover.”

Steve's blush darkened even as he rolled his eyes. “Very funny Natasha,” he said. “And for the record, I was frozen, not fossilized.”

“Yeah Nat, lay off him.” Clint drawled. Natasha glanced over to him and took note of the sparkle of mirth in his eyes. “He's not a total dinosaur anymore. He even knows what Twitter is.”

“Well, he's doing better than me then,” said Sheppard, looking confused. “What's Twitter?”

Clint gasped in mock horror. “How to you, genuine twenty-first century man, not know what Twitter is?”

“I've been in another galaxy for most of four years.”

“It's some sort of online messaging site, I think,” Daniel answered him. “You publish status updates on it or something.” He shrugged. “Cassie keeps telling me I need to sign up for an account, but given that most of the time my status would be 'doing classified things', I haven't really bothered looking into it.”

Vala raised an eyebrow at him as she stole a slice of fried fruit off his plate. “I have a Twitter account,” she said.

Daniel and Colonel Mitchell both looked over at her.

“Does the Pentagon know you have a Twitter account?” Mitchell asked carefully.

Vala shrugged. “Well, considering even the president's following it, I should think so.”
Out of the corner of her eye, Natasha noticed Doctor Rodney McKay walk into the commissary next to a small man with wild hair and glasses. They were arguing with each other as they walked, kept up the debate/argument (it was hard to tell which it was) as they lined up to get their food, and barely paused for breath as they made their way down the buffet line, picking up food along the way.

“Wait, seriously?!” Clint suddenly exclaimed, dragging Natasha's attention back to the conversation at the table. He turned to her moments later, an incredulous expression on his face. “Did you know?”

She blinked at him, keeping her expression carefully neutral. She had no idea what he was asking her, but knew that if she stayed enigmatically silent, he would tell her without prompting. Sure enough, a breath later he was rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, no, I don't buy it,” he told her. “You're good, but there's no way you knew Vala was from another planet.”

Natasha blinked again. Oh. No, she definitely hadn't known that. Interesting. She looked to Daniel.

“Does the air force often let people from other planets work for them as people instead of lab rats?” she asked.

Daniel smiled. “It's sort of tradition with SG1,” he said. “One of our original members is an alien. And, no, they don't often employ people from other planets, but there have been a few over the years. The assistant head of the Anthro-archaeology department at the SGC is one. He was the second non-Earthling to join our ranks. Trust me, we've had to fight more than once with the NID and the Pentagon to keep them out of the labs. Thankfully we've been lucky with generals who are willing to go to bat for us on this.”

Natasha nodded. She was certain Bruce would be glad to hear that. It was another point in favour of the SGC.

And then there came the loud scraping sound of a chair being pulled out as Doctor Rodney McKay finally joined them, his tray laden with food and a satisfied smile on his face. He barely graced the table with a nod before digging into the food before him with an appetite that looked like it could rival Steve's.

“So... Rodney,” Sheppard began. “I don't suppose you'd like to explain why you didn't tell me you were going to be hooking up the ZPMs?”

McKay paused just before taking another bite of the red stew Natasha hadn't the courage to try and gave Sheppard a look that clearly doubted his intelligence.

“SG1 just brought us four ZPMs,” he said. “What the hell did you think I was going to do with them? Give them to the botanists as a centrepiece to some lovely flower arrangements?” He shoved a spoon-full of stew into his mouth and talked as he continued to eat. “Seriously, we've been looking for ZPMs for years and now that we finally have them you expected me to put them into storage? Are you nuts?!”

Sheppard glared at him. “Rodney, you know the rules: whenever anyone's about to work with anything that has the potential to blow them or the rest of us up, they have to contact whoever's on duty.”

“Hello, Science Department Head here! I am one of those people on duty and Zelenka was
McKay waved him off. “Power systems resetting. Completely normal, nothing to worry about.”

“If we get a surge or something that overloads the systems and makes everything crash, I'm going to hold you responsible.”

McKay's spoon clattered down onto his half-empty plate. “A surge or something?!” he exclaimed indignantly. “Colonel I know that not everyone's as brilliant as me – in fact pretty much no one is – but none of my staff are quite that incompetent! I selected them after all.”

Beside her Clint frowned and then leaned in closer to say softly: “You know, I can't quite decide if that was a backhanded compliment or a side-ways insult.”

Sheppard eventually threw his arms up and gave up the argument. McKay smugly finished his meal in silence. As soon as he was finished, he shoved his tray to the side and immediately looked to Daniel.

“Okay, so you had something for me to look at?” he said expectantly.

Daniel's eyebrows rose up in surprise. “And here I was thinking I might have to blackmail you.”

McKay snorted. “Please, you have nothing to blackmail me with. Besides, if you got this mysterious something in the same place you found the ZPMs, then of course I want to see it.”

“Aah, right.” Daniel dug into the satchel he was carrying and pulled out several of the alien tablets they'd found. “Now keep in mind that we found these all over the place and since I can't seem to figure out how to get into them, they could have anything from nursery rhymes to nanobot blueprints.”

“Well, at least it'll be easy to tell the difference,” Mitchell commented.

“Yes, yes, your wit is astounding,” McKay dismissed the remark dryly. He looked the tablets over for a moment, checking the backs of a few. “Okay, so this should work with the interface I have to my laptop... which is down in the lab. I should also be able to hook the interface up to one of the other computers easy.”

Shoving the tablets under one arm, he picked up his empty tray with the other and hurried off without another word. Daniel stared at his empty space for a moment before turning to the rest of them.

“Well, I guess that means I know what I'm doing with my afternoon,” he said, shaking his head in amusement. He smiled at them. “I'll see you guys later.”

“Have fun,” Mitchell called after him.

With Daniel and McKay both gone, Sheppard turned to the rest of them. “So, about those puddlejumper lessons...”

“Yes,” said Clint. “I don't even care if I can't fly the thing, but totally yes.”
Steve and Sam exchanged excited grins.

Sheppard grinned. “Cool.” He looked at his watch and grimaced. “Just give me about an hour to greet Woolsey, the esteemed leader of this expedition, and let him know what's going on. I'll send someone down to prep the jumpers for us in the meantime.”

“Can we watch?” Sam asked.

Sheppard's gaze snapped to him sharply for a moment, but then he shrugged. “Sure. Ronon, you got a few minutes to take them down?”

Ronon's eyes scanned them. When he met Natasha's eyes, he smirked. “Yeah, I got a few minutes. We can take the scenic route around the training room so that they know where they are in case someone wants to use them.”

Natasha smirked back. “That would be useful,” she said.

Though he wasn't entirely predictable, she was getting used to Rogers' moves, the way he thought. She was looking forward to the challenge of someone new, ruthless, and hopefully fighting with a style she'd never seen before. With any luck, he'd be good enough to play with for a bit – stretch the fight out enough to make it a real workout.

Sheppard looked between them nervously. “Yeah, okay, you do that and I'll, uh, see you in an hour.”

John was half-way down the stairs when Woolsey stepped out of the wormhole, closely followed by Carson, Teyla and Major Lorne's team.

“Welcome back,” he called out.

“Thank you, Colonel Sheppard,” Woolsey answered with that bland smile of his. He looked happy as he looked around the gateroom, so John took that to mean negotiations had gone well. “I see you weathered the storm.”

“Yeah, she held up just fine. Rodney and his team had to do some minor calibrations and run a bunch of diagnostics and stuff first thing in the morning, but that was it.”

He noticed Teyla was looking around with a frown on her face.

“So, negotiations were a success?” he asked for the sake of being polite.

“Yes, indeed they were, Colonel,” Woolsey replied. “In three months we should be collecting twenty sacks of tava grain and ten sacks of yelsi.”

John frowned. “Yelsi?”

“It's a root vegetable,” Carson answered. “Highly nutritious and high in potassium and vitamins A and C, and actually rather tasty when prepared properly.” He smiled impishly. “The locals also distill a rather potent alcohol out of it.”

Woolsey cleared his throat. “Yes, well, given that our priority is ensuring we don't starve, I don't think we'll be using them for that.”
John looked down to hide his smile. He was fairly certain by the twinkle in the doctor's eyes that he'd already negotiated his way to a few bottles. Meanwhile, Teyla was still frowning.

“John, there seems to be something... different about this room,” she said.

Which was when Major Lorne came up to the group also frowning. “Hey, is it just me, or is it brighter in here?” he asked.

Teyla's eyes widened. “Yes, I believe you are right, Major. It is definitely brighter in here than usual.”

John blinked and looked around himself. Huh, he hadn't even noticed. His one consolation was that Woolsey quite clearly couldn't tell the difference even after the others had pointed it out.

“Did something other than the storm happen while we were away?” the man asked.

“Uh, yeah you could say that... We got some guests from the Milky Way this morning.”

“I thought the Daedalus wasn't due to arrive in the Solar System for another couple of days?” Carson asked. His eyes widened. “Did something happen to make them turn back? Or has the crisis passed and the SGC is using the gate again?”

“Nope, the SGC still isn't using the gate and the Daedalus is still on its way to Earth as far as we know...”

“It's SG1, isn't it?” said Woolsey flatly.

“Well, Colonel Carter and Teal'c aren't with them, but yeah, it's SG1. And friends.”

Woolsey's left eyebrow rose. “And friends?” He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do you mean to tell me that you went against our standing orders regarding gate travel to Earth and let SG1, who you had to know were going against their own orders, and a quantity of unknown people into Atlantis?”

John stamped down on the automatic flare of annoyance and shrugged instead. “They weren't coming from Earth. Besides, Doctor Jackson said they were bringing gifts and since none of them are Greek I figured it couldn't hurt.”

“Oh, was it coffee?” Major Lorne asked eagerly. Woolsey perked up at that suggestion.

John chuckled. “No, Doctor Jackson says he's prepared to defend his coffee stash with his life.”

“Smart man,” said Carson, exchanging an amused look with Teyla.

“Besides Jackson totally managed to trump the coffee; he and SG1 apparently found themselves an Ancient base, complete with a stash of drones and ZPMs.” He paused for emphasis, taking in the expressions of dawning comprehension. “They showed up with Captain America carrying about a dozen drones and four ZPMs. Rodney just finished installing them.”

Woolsey looked speechless.

Teyla smiled. “John, that's wonderful news!” she said.

“Wait,” Major Lorne said just as Woolsey looked like he was recovering his voice. “Did you say Captain America carried it in?”
John's grin slowly widened. “I sure did. Didn't take you for a comics nerd though.”

Lorne shrugged. “I'm not really, but my granddad was a Captain America fan. He took me to see the exhibit at the Jeffersonian when I was eleven and, well, let's just say it was memorable. I mean, I've read some of the World War II-era comics my granddad had, but that's about it.”

“This captain is some sort of hero?” Teyla asked, looking between them in confusion.

“He's the hero,” John explained. “Story goes he was a scrawny, sickly kid who hated bullies and got beat up a lot, ’cause he wanted to defend other people but wasn't strong enough to do it. Then an army scientist named Erskine decided to give him a chance and they injected him with an experimental serum that transformed him into the peak of human perfection. He's faster, stronger and more durable than any regular human. He can't get sick and he says it takes him something like two days to fully recover from a bullet wound. During World War II he led a strike force to take down bases and research stations run by Hydra, which was an evil Nazi group led by the Red Skull. And he's got this shield made of vibranium—“

“Colonel, you're gushing,” Woolsey interrupted dryly. He turned to Teyla. “Captain America was a national icon during the last world war on Earth, largely used for propaganda, to drum up support for the war effort. Although, unlike most propaganda icons, he also happened to be a real man who eventually fought in the war and became known in the field as a brilliant tactician, credited with the supposed destruction of the enemy's scientific division known as Hydra. Most importantly, however, he took down a plane full of explosives that would have destroyed several major cities in the United States, causing the deaths of millions of people, by crashing it into the ocean. Until two years ago it was believed he died in the crash.”

Teyla's eyebrows rose. “Well, yes, that would seem to be the logical conclusion,” she said. “How did he survive?”

“The Super Serum,” said John, grinning madly. “He crashed into the Arctic and when the water around him turned to ice, the serum kept him alive in it for seventy years 'till someone found and defrosted him.”

John watched as Teyla's eyes softened. “That must be difficult for him. Seventy years is a long time. However, I must confess, this... Super Serum sounds impressive.”

“Aye it is that, although it's definitely created more pain and suffering than it's worth,” said Carson darkly.

“You've studied the Super Serum, Doc?” Lorne asked, looking surprised.

“Only in passing. It's rather difficult to study human genetics and genetic anomalies without coming across mention of Abraham Erskine, although I mostly studied his earlier work. Captain America was the only successful attempt at creating the so-called Super Soldier, but that doesn't mean others haven't attempted it and most of the results have been truly horrific.”

He shook his head sadly. “Medical research should never come at such a price,” he added softly, a haunted look in his eyes.

“Speaking of genetics,” John drawled into the silence. “Interestingly enough, turns out, Captain America has the ATA gene.”

Carson's eyes snapped back up immediately. “Really?”

“Yup. I was going to take him and the Avengers up in one of the puddlejumpers.” He paused and
looked to Woolsey. “Unless you have any objections?”

He'd already ignored protocol once today, so letting Woolsey feel like he wasn't completely stepping all over it was probably a good idea. The man might've eased up a bit since coming to Atlantis and realizing that protocol only worked so far in real-life situations, but he was still a bureaucrat at heart.

Woolsey, for his part, seemed to consider the request. Eventually he nodded. “Very well, it isn't like they could learn anything they don't already know at this point. But please send SG1 to my office. As the one in charge, I believe I'm due an explanation.”

Daniel ignored the conversation behind him as he led the way to their destination. He had one, last theory to check and it was one he both looked forward to and dreaded. On the one hand he hated being manipulated, but on the other if being a pawn meant possibly saving the world... He could feel the sweat gathering in his palms. There was always the chance he was wrong, but he doubted it.

He took a deep breath, letting the sounds of Vala, Teyla, Sam and Steve's voices wash over him and calm his nerves. There was excitement beneath the nerves, part of him looking forward to possibly seeing an old friend again, daring to be hopeful about the future that had, until recently, looked so bleak.

He thought back to his conversation with Woolsey. The man had honestly surprised him; it seemed the Pegasus Galaxy had finally taught him that protocol and rules were all well and good, but they didn't always work the way they were supposed to in practise. Woolsey was still reserving judgement on actively helping them (waiting to find out what Rodney and Zelenka managed get from the tablets) but that was understandable and much better than simply dialling Earth and informing them of SG1's whereabouts like he probably should have.

Finally, he arrived at his destination. The doors slid apart to let him enter and he heard the others follow him in.

Teyla came to stand next to him as he stared at the empty podium in the centre of the room. “Daniel, you believe the learning interface will have the answers you seek?” she asked him gently.

“I think so,” he answered. “It did last time.”

And then he stepped onto the raised control panel in front of the podium. A familiar hologram immediately materialized in its centre and Daniel smiled.

“This is the Atlantis Systems Learning Interface, please state your question,” the dark-haired woman on the podium said in a flat, uniform voice.

“Please tell me everything you can about the town and Alteran facility called Aeneid,” said Daniel.

There was a pause.

“The facility called Aeneid was built 9,932 years ago by former citizens of Atlantis as a research facility dedicated to creating a weapon capable of overcoming the overwhelming presence of the
Wraith that had resulted in the abandonment of Atlantis. They believed that given time and peace, they could come up with a solution to the problem which would then enable them to return to Atlantis and reclaim the Pegasus Galaxy once again. However, they soon realized it would not be an easy or straightforward task so they asked their allies for help. 8,753 years ago, Aeneid officially became the first Meeting Place of the Four Great Races, where they gathered to discuss solutions to problems that faced the Milky Way, including the potential spread of the Wraith.”

She went silent and Daniel sighed. Ah, well, it confirmed some of what he had already more or less figured out, although it didn't answer all his questions by any stretch of the imagination.

“Daniel?” he heard Vala ask. He looked down to where she was standing beside the raised platform, frowning at the holographic projection. Beside her, he saw Steve sporting a similar frown. “Didn't you say that Aeneid was founded after Atlantis had been sunk?”


“How can the computer know what happened nearly nine thousand years ago if it had been abandoned ten thousand years ago?” Steve asked, looking nervous.

Daniel's smile widened. “Oh, it can't,” he told them cheerfully before turning back to the ‘projection’.

“It's good to see you again, Morgan. And thank you. For the information and for...” He bit his lip thoughtfully. “And for everything else. Because I've seen a lot of strange and wonderful things in my time at the SGC, but there's only so much co-incidence I'll believe in. I mean, Minnesota's got a lot of forested area and yet the Hulk managed to run straight to Jack's cabin. And then the right computer hacker coming across just the right file to get curious, doors that are supposed to be sound-proof suddenly being not so soundproof, a museum flier conveniently sitting on top of a pile of newspapers, evil villains who decide to attack at the exact moment that most of the Avengers are in a museum with me, and a statue that really shouldn't have overbalanced so easily crashing to the floor and shattering to reveal exactly what we needed.”

He resisted the urge to fidget as he looked into the blank eyes that stared straight ahead at nothing. “It's all too much to just be co-incidence, so thank you.”

For a moment nothing happened and then, from one moment to the next, the image seemed to change, become more substantial. The woman blinked and turned her head towards him. She smiled.

“It's good to see again as well, Daniel,” she said. “And you're welcome for the information, but as for the rest... it is not me you have to thank.”

Daniel frowned.

“You are very welcome, Good Son.”

Daniel froze, the frown disappearing as he felt his eyes widen. He looked to Morgan, who was looking back at him with a fond, encouraging smile. Around him, the world had disappeared, become transparent, insubstantial next to the maelstrom in his head that seemed to have neither rhyme nor reason. A hurricane of thought and sound that muffled everything but his own existence. He wanted to turn around, to run, to embrace the voice, but fear stayed his movements. Not fear of the unknown, no. Daniel wasn't afraid of the voice, not afraid of what he would find behind him.

He was terrified that the voice was only in his mind, something conjured by his imagination. That
when he turned around, there would be no one there.

He turned around and the whirlwind of sound stopped. It hadn't disappeared, but rather he found himself standing within the eye of its storm, the dull roar still alive, but no longer deafening. He was fairly certain the small gasp he heard came from his lips. His hands shook and his legs barely held him up as he stumbled down a few steps from the control panel.

The two men were framed with golden light as they stood at the edge of the room, watching him in amusement, nearly identical serene smiles on their faces.

“Good Father,” Daniel said softly, as though saying the words too loudly would cause them to vanish. “Skaara. I... I think I tried to save you and I failed.”

He raised a hand to reach towards them. Kasuf moved forward and grasped it in his barely-felt grip that was warm, but insubstantial – nothing like the dry, firm touch Daniel remembered.

“Good Son you did save us,” he said. “Perhaps not that day, not against Anubis, but it was not in your powers to interfere. Instead, Oma Desala gave us the chance at another life as she had given you.”

Skaara stepped forward and laid a gentle touch on Daniel's shoulder. “My brother you gave us a gift worth more than our lives. You gave us freedom.”

Daniel could feel his eyes burning and with that feeling came the realization that this was real, this was actually happening. “You did most of it yourselves,” he whispered.

Kasuf shook his head. “But we would not have if not for you and O'Neill. You showed us that we had a choice, gave us the courage to rise up against our oppressive false god.”

“You think it is not worth it because we did not have long to enjoy it,” Skaara continued. “But, brother, if you hadn't come to us then we might have been dead now anyway: a mining accident, a sandstorm, or perhaps for the amusement of a cruel and merciless god. My sister may still have caught his eye and been taken from us and would now be suffering, trapped, as that vile being used her body as it wished.”

Sha're. It was the mention of his wife that broke the dam and Daniel felt the first tear begin to fall down his cheek. He hadn't expected this. He'd expected a lot, but not this.

“I thought you weren't allowed to interfere,” he whispered.

“Ah, but we didn't,” said Kasuf, a small, almost mischievous smile on his face – the smile Sha're had inherited. “We merely pushed a few small things into place. You – all of you – made your own decisions. Even that silly little man that wished to be a god; he was going to attack that museum, but he would have done it two days earlier had it not been for a mysterious malfunction in his weapon.”

“Your world is a very strange place, Danyel,” Skaara added. “Beautiful, yes, but strange with so many people... No wonder you liked the peace of Abydos.”

Daniel's heart clenched at the Abydonian pronunciation of his name. He chuckled, though it came out sounding almost like a sob. “It wasn't the peace of Abydos that I craved, but the family you so freely gave me. I owe you so much more than I could ever repay.”

Kasuf shook his head. “Good Son, family means never owing anything, never having anything that needs repaying.”
“You made my sister happy even if for only a short time,” Skaara added. “That was all you needed to do.”


“Your journey is not yet done, Good Son, but when it is, then join us. You will always be welcome.”

“When you are once more ready to join us, we will all welcome you back,” came a voice from behind him.

Daniel turned to see that Morgan had stepped down from the pedestal, her form now carried the same halo of golden light as Kasuf and Skaara's did. He took a deep breath and nodded.

“Thank you,” he told her. “I still have a lot I have to do, but one day I know I'll be ready. That one day I'll grow tired of constantly fighting, arguing... one day I'll be happy to leave it to someone else and join you.”

Morgan smiled. “Then we shall look forward to that day. I am not the only one who'd treasured your friendship even if you do not remember it now.”

He found himself speechless for a moment, the lump in his throat felt impossibly big, too big to allow words. He managed to swallow it down.

“How is Oma?” he asked in a whisper.

“Still fighting, but I believe she may be slowly gaining an upper hand. And... it is possible that some of the others are considering joining her, to cast Anubis out from our ranks once and for all.”

“Good, that's good news.”

“It means you may encounter him again,” she warned.

The corner of Daniel's mouth twitched. “Yes, but the Milky Way will be a very different place than it was when he left. He'll have a much more difficult time gaining power. And we'll be ready for him.”

She nodded. “Then fare thee well, Daniel Jackson. Until we meet again.”

“Yes, farewell, Morgan Le Fay,” said Daniel softly. “Till we meet again.”

He turned to Kasuf and Skaara. The golden light that shone from them had grown more pronounced, nearly overwhelming their forms.

“It was good to see you again,” he told them. “I wish you could stay.”

“I, too, wish I could stay by your side, brother,” said Skaara with a regretful smile. “But we cannot.”

“We wish you luck and courage,” said Kasuf. “Go forth with my blessing, Good Son, and may your path be clear.”

Daniel smiled through his tears. “Thank you. For everything... Good Father, my brother, you will always have my love.”

They smiled at him. “And you will always have ours.”
And then the light glowed even brighter until it shone through their very beings and their images dissolved within it. Tentacles of light reached for him and Daniel reached back, closing his eyes at the embrace that seemed to envelope him from all sides. He felt their warmth, their love, surrounding him like the softest cocoon.

And then all too soon, the cocoon unravelled and he was left bereft and cold. Alone. His legs gave way beneath him and he fell to his knees.

He barely heard the doors sliding open and shouts of surprise as a pair of warm arms wrapped around his shoulders and held him. Another hand carded gently through his hair and he looked up into Teyla's eyes, warm and full of sympathy as she smiled at him sadly. He reached up and squeezed one of the arms holding him, recognizing Vala's grip instantly.

None of them said anything for a very long time, both women allowing him time to grieve in peace and glaring at anyone who dared approach.

Sam had to swallow around the lump in his own throat. He wasn't exactly happy to hear he was right, that the story of Daniel's wife was a tragedy, although he hadn't come close to guessing just how big of a tragedy it had truly been. Part of him was still trying to figure out what had just happened. From the moment the hologram had come to life, to the moment she and the two others had turned into glowing, tentacled balls of light, only parts of it had made sense. He wanted to join Teyla and Vala by Daniel's side, but one look at Steve made him stay where he was. Though there'd been no real explanation, what little had been said told enough of a story.

And it had clearly hit Steve a little too close to home. He reached out and touched his friend's shoulder, squeezing it to remind him he wasn't alone either. Steve looked over at him and smiled slightly, his eyes wet with unshed tears.

It was almost amusing watching the two tentacled balls of light that had been Daniel's father and brother-in-law use the door to leave, startling Clint and the others who'd been about to come in, but he didn't feel like laughing. The others picked up on the mood inside the room immediately, even Colonel Sheppard, who began to run over to Teyla and Vala to see if Daniel was hurt, but was glaring away by both.

“Okay, what the hell happened in here?” Cam demanded quietly, having taken one look at the huddle around Daniel and walked over to Sam and Steve instead.

“Seems we've all been the subject of some divine intervention,” Sam answered him.

Everyone in the control room leapt to attention when the stargate began a dialling sequence, eyes immediately scanning readouts and hands flying over display screens.

“Do we know where it's coming from yet?” Woolsey asked as soon as he'd ran out of his office. He paused, did a quick mental search.

“No sir... it's not,” said Amelia Banks. She frowned “The wormhole's out-going.”

“What?! Who's dialling it then? One of the puddlejumpers?”

“Sir, I have no idea.”
"The puddlejumpers all scan as powered-down, sir," Chuck added.

"Well, then shut down the dialling sequence!"

"I'm trying, but it's like whoever's dialling the gate is by-passing the main controls."

Woolsey paused for a moment. "Then activate the energy shield."

"Yes, sir."

The Stargate's event horizon activated with its usual dramatic flare, the energy shield shimmering slightly when it settled.

"Sir, we're getting anomalous energy readings approaching the control room," Chuck announced. His eyebrows rose as he stared at the display screen. "They're consistent with ascended Ancients."

Just then, the doors to the control room slid open with a soft hiss and two glowing white beings of light floated into the vast room. They didn't rush, but neither did they pause on their way to the gate, completely unconcerned by the security teams that had immediate pointed their armed weapons at them. Of course, no doubt even the security teams knew their weapons were no better than nerf guns at the moment. The energy shield didn't pose any sort of obstacle and they neatly slid through it and into the wormhole.

The gate shut off behind them. The room was silent for a very long moment.

"Where did that gate dial out to?" Woolsey finally asked in a strangled voice.

Amelia glanced down at her read-outs and paused. "I-Sir, according to the readings, the systems are identifying the gate address as Abydos."

Chapter End Notes

So to those of you who cried deus ex machina... you were actually sort of right. Man, it was sure difficult not to give too much away head of time. ;)

Act IV, pt ii

Chapter Notes

I said 'ish' right? Sorry for taking longer than expected to update: turned out this chapter needed more edits and rewriting than I'd thought it did and for some reason I couldn't concentrate enough on the story to make them. I'll try to be much faster with the next chapter.

Thank you for the comments and kudos! I realize I haven't replied to everyone yet, but I will do that as soon as I've finished posting. I'd also like to send out a thanks to my sister (even though she'll never read it) for her help with the biology blurb in this chapter. I do so love being able to just ask people about stuff instead of researching a topic from scratch - especially when I have no background for it. :)

SPINNING

The doors slid open and Steve stepped out onto the balcony. Salty ocean air blew into his face and he felt the rest of the tension from his shoulders melt away as he walked over to lean against the railing. He felt like he could spend years living here and yet the view would never fail to take his breath away.

He clutched his sketchbook to his side, a familiar security blanket. Nightmares had driven him from his bed at nearly four in the morning (by his watch: he wasn't quite sure what that translated to in Atlantis time) and he'd spent several hours sketching the city from one of the piers. He was fairly certain it was the east pier given the dazzling sunrise he'd witnessed just over an hour ago. But he was on another planet, so who knew.

Daniel might've known. And Steve could've asked him when he'd run into him in the hallway only minutes ago, but that would've led to conversation. He'd seen the grief reflected in Daniel's eyes on Kheb at the mention of his wife and her son (not his son, hers), but knowing that his grief was so similar to Steve's own had reopened freshly-scarred wounds inside Steve. One look at Daniel this morning and he knew that both of them were feeling too raw, too blistered by their re-opened wounds to risk conversation. They would talk and share memories eventually, but not just yet.

Leaning against the railing, Steve took in the sight of Atlantis gleaming nearly white in the bright, early morning sun. He sighed. God how he wished he could've shown this to Peggy. And Falsworth, though not an artist himself, had loved art nearly as much as Steve. And Bucky... well, he wouldn't have actually cared about the symmetry in the elegant lines, but he would've listened to Steve go on about them anyway, over the moon at being on another planet – in another galaxy no less.

Maybe one day he'd manage to find the Winter Soldier and bring his friend back home in some form or other. But would the Winter Soldier be able to see the beauty of this place or were such human reactions so deeply buried beneath the programming that had turned him into the deadliest assassin in the world?
Steve let his eyes wander: the frantic desire to lose himself in his sketchbook – in watching images take shape before his eyes – was gone now and he was content to just look. He'd sketch it later. Remembering details was both the curse and the blessing of having an eidetic memory.

Something clattered to the ground and Steve startled, immediately shifting so that he was balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to jump into action.

“Shit!” came a soft exclamation.

Steve blinked, relaxing as he saw a figure at the far end of the balcony and cursing internally that he hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings. Dressed in the standard-issue Atlantis uniform, the man was picking up several fallen paintbrushes and the small plastic cup they'd probably been resting in. Steve took note of the American flag on his shoulder and, when he'd straightened, the rank and insignia of major.

The major glanced over to Steve and he winced. “Uh, sorry,” he said with an apologetic smile. “Didn't mean to disturb you.”

Steve smiled wryly. “Don't worry about it,” he said. “I must've been more distracted than I'd realized if I hadn't noticed you there. Didn't mean to intrude on your balcony.”

The other man waved him off as he replaced the cup and paintbrushes onto the small stand attached to the side of his easel. “Not at all. The balconies are an Atlantis tradition; pretty sure everyone's got their favourite. It's where we go to stand and stare out at the city and the sea. This place gets intense, you know, so it's nice to come out and decompress, organize your thoughts, or not think at all. Sometimes you get your balcony to yourself and sometimes you don't. Just the way it is.”

Steve smiled and looked at the painting. “And some people come out to paint the scenery,” he commented lightly.

The soldier laughed. “Pretty sure that's just me,” he said. “I must've been more distracted than I'd realized if I hadn't noticed you there. Didn't mean to intrude on your balcony.”

Steve stepped forward and shook his hand. “Major Evan Lorne, I'm Colonel Sheppard's second-in-command.”

The other man's lips quirked, but he refrained from the usual 'I know' that a lot of people replied with.

“It's an honour, sir,” he said instead. “So, was that you I noticed on the east pier when I got up here?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered with a wince. “Was having a bit of trouble sleeping.”

“Ah,” Major Lorne said in a tone of voice that spoke of many sleepless nights of his own. “That's another thing the balconies are good for. Better than a shrink sometimes – not that we've had one of those since Kate Heightmeyer died just over a year ago.”

Steve nodded, relaxing further at the easy acceptance from the other man. “Yeah, I imagine living here isn't easy. I thought we had it bad during the war. Couldn't imagine it could get any worse than the Red Skull and Hydra... boy was I wrong.”

Major Lorne chuckled and looked out at the sea, his eyes taking on a haunted, bitter edge. “Yeah, the wraith are bad, but they're not human which is both better and worse. Makes them more like monsters, but also scarier. Plus, it's not all bad in the Pegasus Galaxy. There are some pretty
amazing things here too.”

Steve nodded. He'd heard a lot of stories from Colonel Sheppard during their puddlejumper ride yesterday and Teyla had happily shared many stories of her own. He couldn't imagine living in fear the way her people did and yet she still managed to be genuinely kind and warm.

He shook his head.

“It's beautiful, by the way,” he said. “You're really talented.”

Lorne blinked and glanced at his painting in surprise. “Oh, uh, thanks. I've been working on and off on that one for over a year now. Not a lot of off-time around this place that doesn't get interrupted by some emergency or other.”

“Still, it's a bit of an unusual hobby for a soldier. Not that there's anything wrong with it, of course, but it's just... unusual.”

Lorne grimaced and rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. “Uh, yeah... my mom's an art teacher and she taught me to draw and paint when I was a kid and I loved it. But my granddad, he was in the army: World War Two vet and career military. I used to listen to him talk. He didn't really talk a whole lot about some parts of the war, but he'd talk about his unit, about the guys he headed out to battle with and some of the crazy things they'd get up to. And then about the later years when he was doing movements against the Russian commies and, well, I loved his stories. Decided when I was ten that I wanted to join the army just like him.”

He paused for a moment.

“My granddad was a fan of yours. Owned all the early releases of the comic books – actually I'm pretty sure they're still boxed up in my mom's attic. Probably worth a small fortune now. I've read some of them, but I was never much of a reader. The only thing I'd ever sit still for was art. And action movies.”

Steve grinned. He loved what his years in the ice had done to movies. Sure, there was an innocence that had been lost along the way, but the special effects were real swell. And the computer animation... He'd watched Avatar five times, delighted with the colours and movements that looked so vivid and seemed so real.

Lorne returned his grin, looking more comfortable suddenly as he continued with his story.

“Anyway, as a kid I was really confused, 'cause I couldn't decide if I wanted to be an artist or a soldier.” He shrugged. “I was eleven; it was a big deal. Anyway, that summer my granddad went to some sort of World War Two veteran's reunion in Washington and took me with him. Took me 'round to all the sights, including the Jeffersonian so he could show me the Captain America exhibit. I think it's bigger now, but I remember there were these sketches on display and a painting of the Brooklyn bridge with a small plaque that said they were down by Steve Rogers. I still remember the excitement I felt when I read it and found out Cap-I mean, you were an artist. It was the moment I realized that, hey, maybe I didn't need to choose. If Captain America could be both an artist and a soldier, then so could I.”

He rubbed the back of his head again and smiled apologetically at him. “Sorry, you must get stories like that all the time.”

Steve felt slightly stunned. “I-yeah, I do.” He shook his head. “Never imagined I'd become an icon. All I'd wanted to do was serve my country, not become famous. But... of all the stories I've heard
from people since I woke up, I think yours might be my favourite.” He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice when he spoke. “Everyone remembers Captain America, but not everyone looks past that to Steve Rogers. They forget the little things, like how I was an artist.”

Lorne raised an eyebrow. “Was an artist?” he asked, pointedly looking at his sketchbook.

Steve laughed. “Alright, am an artist then. And, as an artist, I just couldn't resist drawin' this city.”

“Yeah, she's a beauty alright.”

“That your only painting of her?”

“Nah, I've got two other canvasses in my quarters. One day I hope I'll be able to give one to my mom, but who knows if that'll ever happen. Hey, you wanna come see them? I drew one of them back on Atlantis’ original planet.”

Steve frowned. “Original planet?”

Lorne blinked. “Yeah... Atlantis has a star drive. It's basically like a giant space ship when the shields are up at full capacity.”

Steve gaped at him. Then he looked back out at the city. Slowly, a wide, excited grin spread across his face.

John spread marmalade over his toast, grinning as he and Clint rehashed Ronon and Natasha's epic fight from yesterday evening. Watching the Satedan thoroughly taken down by the petite redhead had been nothing short of amazing. Oh, he hadn't gone down easily, but once the Black Widow had stopped playing with him, the conclusion became inevitable. He was fairly certain he'd never seen anyone move the way she had, like the deadly mixture of a martial artist and a dancer. Next to her even Ronon looked big and clumsy and Ronon never looked anything less than graceful.

He hadn't even looked upset afterwards. Instead, Ronon's eyes had looked oddly intense, his grin feral, like he'd enjoyed the battle and the challenge to care that he'd been taken down by a superior opponent.

A tray slammed down next to them and Sam collapsed into a chair. John raised an eyebrow at him.

“You okay?” he asked.

Sam glared at him, looking exhausted. “No, I am not okay,” he groused. “I got woken up at 7:30 am Earth time by a peppy energetic supersoldier and his enthusiastic grin asking me if I want to go for a morning run. And me, half-sleep and stupid, I said 'yes'. Now I have no idea who the hell Major Lorne is, but he and I are going to have words. 'Cause telling Steve where to find the Atlantis running course is not cool, especially since, being such a nice guy, he's inclined to share and by that I don't mean soothe your ego. No, no, by that I mean run circles around you like a demented, over-caffienated greyhound puppy while you plod around at a more normal person speed that should actually be sort of impressive by anyone's standards except for the supersoldier freak you're running with! And now I'm pretty sure my legs are broken beyond repair and probably about to fall off.”

John snickered into his tea.
“You know, there's a reason why the rest of us never agree to go running with him,” said Clint. “You're the only shmuk who ever says 'yes'. Which you do, but the way, every single time.”

Sam sighed and stabbed some scrambled eggs with his fork. “Yeah, not sure if that makes me an idiot or a masochist” he answered. “So where is everyone else anyway?”

Clint shrugged. “Not a clue.”

They ate in silence, Vala and Mitchell joining them before long. They were of the opinion that Daniel had probably gotten lost somewhere in the labs with Doctor McKay and wouldn't resurface until someone dragged him away. It was a good enough theory as any.

Steve Rogers eventually walked in with Teyla, who was holding Torren and smiling warmly up at the blond man. Almost immediately they were surrounded by several Atlantis staff, all eager to get a glimpse of the baby and talk to Teyla. And to Steve, who didn't seem to realize Teyla's child was really just an excuse to approach them. John watched in amusement as the man got sucked into conversation with several marines and a Chinese nuclear physicist. It was clearly a two-sided conversation, however, so John decided to leave it be.

Suddenly, Clint whistled under his breath. “Woah, someone had a good night,” he said, looking towards the door.

John looked over to watch as Natasha Romanoff sauntered into the room. Her movements were casual, though probably still capable of being deadly at a moment's notice, but there was a looseness in the sway of her hips, a languid ease in her stance that felt... different than yesterday. John frowned, trying to figure out how it was different when Ronon walked in. Hands in his pockets as usual, he seemed to look like he was trying harder than usual to look casual, and there was an odd spring in his steps.

He and the Black Widow smirked at each other when they passed, Ronon's eyes lingering on her ass as she walked away from him towards the table. The truth hit John like a freight truck.

“Good morning,” said Ms. Romanov with a smile.

“Not as good as yours,” said Clint with a leer.

“Don't be vulgar,” she admonished gently. “Steve might hear you.”

“Yeah, god forbid we shock Captain America,” Sam muttered sarcastically, but John didn't miss the amusement in the other man's eyes. “There's probably a special place in hell for people who talk about unwholesome things in front of Captain America.”

John chuckled. “The guy was in the army,” he said, partially out of curiosity to see how serious they were being. “And during World War II when there was less political correctness and no women in the ranks.”

“And segregation,” Sam added.

“The Howling Commandos weren't segregated,” Romanov pointed out.

Sam pointed at her using his fork. “And that's totally a point in Captain all-American Whiteboy's favour.”

“Don't worry,” said Clint, looking to John. “Steve may look like the poster child for all that is good, innocent and pure, but he can swear like sailor when the situation calls for it. He usually does
it in French or German, of course, but I've heard him swear in English too. He still forgets himself sometimes and says or does things aren't exactly politically correct anymore, but when he says he hates bullying he means it all-around, indiscriminately.”

“He might not love everything about the twenty-first century yet—” Sam started.

“—We're working working on that,” Clint added.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Yeah, good luck with that. Anyway, get the guy talking about social changes and he'll talk your head off about how great it all is with no segregation, woman considered equals, hell gays getting married. He thinks it's all fucking amazing.”

John shrugged. “Well, it kinda is if you're comparing it to seventy years ago.”

“The SHIELD psychiatrists were afraid of his forties sensibilities,” said Romanov.

Clint snorted. “The SHIELD psychiatrists fucked up big time.”

John was about to ask Clint to clarify when an alarm sounded and the doors at the far end of the mess hall slid shut. Almost immediately he saw the closest person run their hand over the crystal mechanism. It didn't open.

“Goddammit,” he said between gritted teeth as he leaped out of his chair and dashed to the doors.

People stepped aside to let him through so that he could run his hand over the door. It didn't help.

“Want me to see if I can slide them open manually?” he heard from behind him.

He turned to find Steve looking at him calmly. There was worry in his eyes, but also a focus John hadn't seen in the man before. He shook his head.

“Not yet, let's see if we can figure out what this is first,” he said, tapping his comm. “Rodney, this is Sheppard, what the hell's going on?”

The response came almost immediately.

“McKay here and I don't know. I'm with Daniel in my lab, so give me a minute to figure it out.”

“You have one minute, Rodney.”

“Any idea what it could be?” Sam asked as he came up to him.

John shrugged, trying to look nonchalant despite the tension now coiling through his body. He wanted to take Steve up on his offer and just charge out into the fray, but after five years on Atlantis he knew better. Also, it was a big city and he had no idea where the fray was.

“Usually the city only goes into automatic lock-down if there's a biological or chemical breech somewhere,” he replied instead.

“Right, fair enough, then we'll stay right here and wait for your boy to tell us what's going on and whether or not it's going to make our skin melt.”

John looked at Sam in amusement. “Don't let McKay here you call him that.”

A minute passed and then another one. Finally, John couldn't take it anymore. He tapped his comm.
“McKay, it's been over over minute, what've you got?”

There was a pause and then Rodney's voice came on through the comm.

“Just hang on, I've almost got... I'm reading a biological breech on level 28 of the South Tower, but the system glitched when it tried to seal off just the tower, so it looks the city sealed everything off automatically to compensate. I'm trying to fix it... okay, got it! Turning off city-wide lockdown now.”

Seconds later, the crystals lit up again and John sprinted out the door towards the science labs, vaguely aware of the sounds of people following him.

“Lieutenant Colonel Sheppard, this is Woolsey, where are you?”

John tapped his comm. “I'm heading to the science labs to see if McKay's figured out what's going on yet. He says the system's reading a biological breech on level 28 of the South Tower.”

“That's one of the areas that was powered up yesterday, isn't it?”

“Yup.”

“Very well, keep me posted as soon as you know.”

“Understood. Sheppard out.”

The hallways were an organized mess of people, all hurrying with a calm purpose that impressed Sam. He saw fear and worry reflected on many of the faces they passed, but no one hesitated even slightly in their steps, determinedly heading towards their stations. A single glance told him most of the people he was passing were civilians.

Sam fell into step beside Steve, instantly noticing the change that had come over his friend. This was Captain America he was running beside, even if his shield was still on his back. Up ahead he heard John Sheppard radio someone and order a security team go to the South Tower and wait for instructions.

He managed to squeeze himself into the elevator with John, Steve and Clint. Ronon took one look into the elevator and told John he'd meet up with the security teams at the South Tower. Natasha decided to join him. A shorter stretch of corridor later and they were bursting into what looked like a lab. A Japanese woman looked up when they entered, and then paid them no mind as the computer in front of her claimed her attention once more. Daniel raised a hand and gave them a small wave in greeting.

In the centre of the room, Doctor McKay sat on a high chair in front of a bank of computer screens, typing furiously.

“When do you know what it is yet, Rodney?” John demanded.

“No, not yet,” McKay snapped.

“And why not? You've been at it for at least ten minutes.”
“Because the internal sensors in that area are a bit off due to, oh I don't know, maybe the fact that
they haven't been used in about ten thousand years!”

“And what are you doing about it?”

“I thought I'd use the time to reprogram the alarm system to play the Macarena- obviously I'm
trying to fix it, Colonel! Zelenka headed down already to see if he can get a better reading of what's
going on inside the tower from an access point closer to the tower itself.”

“Has whatever this is been isolated inside the tower?”

“I have no idea and won't know until I can get the sensors up and running properly, so shut up and
let me work!”

John made a small noise of exasperation, but stepped back to give the scientist some room.

“Colonel Sheppard, this is Major Lorne. We're in position. Please come in.”

John tapped his ear-piece and walked towards the doorway.

“Lorne, this is Sheppard, what's the situation down there?”

“The tower seems to be completely sealed off and none of the transporters into the tower are
working. I have my men doing a perimeter sweep to double-check for any other entrances.
According to Doctor Iva Zb-or-o- er, one of the biologists, Lieutenant Forbes and Captain
Schwaben were supposed to meet her here to investigate the tower, but she was running late, so she
thinks they must've went on without her.”

“Uh, I didn't think we'd made up parties to investigate the rest of the city yet...”

There was a pause. “No, sir, we haven't yet.”

“Any luck contacting them?”

“No sir, they're not responding to communications, but Zelenka says there's quite a bit of
interference from something inside the tower so it could be disrupting communications.”

Sam exchanged a look with Steve. This would've been the sort of thing Daniel had warned them
about back at the Aeneid base. Meanwhile, Sheppard ran a hand through his hair and let out an
annoyed breath.

“Okay, okay, then just sit tight for now and keep me posted if anything changes.” He turned to
Mckay. “Rodney–”

“I heard, and I'm still working on it.” He tapped his comm. “Zelenka, this is McKay, what have
you got?”

“Zelenka here. Not much I'm afraid. Although I am picking up strong electro-magnetic readings
from inside the tower that could be interfering with internal sensors. So maybe there is nothing
wrong with sensors after all.”

“Which would be just my luck,” McKay mumbled. “Okay, I think I've cleared up the signal as
much as I can. Transferring the program into a scanner now... and I'm heading down to meet you.
Don't do anything until I get there!”

“Yes, yes, Zelenka out.”
Science geek or not, Doctor McKay wasted no time in rushing out of the lab.

“Doctor McKay!” the Japanese woman called out to him just as he reached the doorway.

McKay stopped and rolled his eyes. “What?!" he demanded. “Can't it wait?"

“I am picking up some sort of organic substances moving very fast inside the tower.”

“Organic substances... we have organic substances?” Doctor McKay hurried over to her workstation and looked over her shoulder at the screen, completely oblivious to how the woman's cheeks pinkened. “Huh. Okay, that's interesting. Apparently you're not entirely stupid. See if you can identify those readings, match them up with anything from the database. Let me know if you get something.”

“Hai, Doctor.”

And then McKay was a whirlwind of movement again as he raced out of the lab, scanner in one hand as he headed for the elevator.

“Alright, what's interesting Rodney?” John asked once they were in the elevator.

“Hm? Oh apparently the sensors in the West tower are picking up organic fast-moving organic substances in the South tower from somewhere around level 28, which is where the contagion originated from.”

“So, whatever this thing is, it might be alive?”

“Well, technically speaking, even microorganisms are alive. But in this case it mostly means whatever's moving around up there is organic in nature, not necessarily alive as such.”

“Would the scanners detect microorganisms as lifeforms or are we thinking there's some sort of monster in the tower?” John asked.

The look on Doctor McKay's face was nothing short of scathing. “Just because you insist on acting like Captain Kirk doesn't mean we're stuck on an episode of Star Trek.”

“Hey, you're a science geek, aren't you supposed think Star Trek is the greatest thing ever?” Clint joked.

The glare was transferred to Clint. “I'm also Canadian. Do I seem polite to you?"

“Hm, good point. You know I could slip into the tower through the air ducts and get a scope of the situation from there. I'm really good with air ducts.”

McKay threw his arms up as much as he could within the confined space of the elevator. “Yes, of course, because the possible biological contagion is going to naturally avoid all that lovely air duct space.”

The elevator doors opened and the scientist barrelled.

“Zelenka, please tell me you have something intelligent to say before the levels of stupidity force me to hurl myself off the nearest pier,” he barked.

There was a crowd of military personnel milling around waiting in front of a set of double doors. Ronon and Natasha stood on one side, next to a small man with fly-away curly hair and round wire-rim glasses. He turned to them as they approached and blinked at McKay.
“Well, I have managed to isolate electromagnetic readings, but they are behaving, uh, erratically,” he said with a strong accent that sounded almost Russian, but clearly wasn't. They came closer and Sam noticed a small Czech flag on his shoulder.

Ah, the land of beer and world-class hockey players, Sam thought.

“Here, let me take a look at that,” the Canadian scientist said as he grabbed the man's tablet from his hand. The short Czech muttered something under his breath and stepped aside. “Okay, that's weird. The scanners are showing wide-spread organic compounds too.”

Zelenka's eyebrows rose comically. “Wide-spread as in many little ones or one very, very big one?”

“It's not registering as strong enough to be one big one...”

“But nano-bots would not register at all, yes?”

“Exactly. Also, because they're not actually alive.”

“So, whatever we've got it's bigger than a nanobot and smaller than the abominable snow monster?” John asked. “That leaves a lot in the middle, Rodney. Any chance you can narrow that down a bit?”

McKay shook his head. “Not with this electromagnetic interference. Even I can't clear this up any more than it already is.” He pulled another, smaller scanner out of his back pocket and fiddled with it for a moment. “Okay, so good news, the lifesigns detector isn't showing anything, which means that whatever's up there, it's not actually alive so you can trash the monster theory.”

John took a deep breath and exchanged a look with Ronon and then a soldier who'd approached him as soon as he'd arrived (the man had also exchanged greetings with Steve, which made Sam think this was the mysterious Major Lorne).

“Well, then I guess we should get hazmat suits and head in,” he said.

Just then Steve stepped forward and Sam felt like kicking him before the entirely predictable words left his mouth.

“I can go in,” he said. “The serum makes me invulnerable to disease and biological contagions don't effect me for as long as they would an ordinary man. I'll go in and scope it out.”

“Uh, thanks for the offer, Cap,” said John, looking nervous. “And that's well and good for Earth, but this is the Pegasus Galaxy and I don't particularly want to go down in history as the guy who got Captain America killed by alien flu. Or caused you to be mutated into a bug or something.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam noticed Doctor McKay tapping his earpiece again and conferring with Zelenka. The two of them seemed to be having an intense whispered conversation. Suddenly McKay turned to them.

“Okay, okay, so the hazmat suit shouldn't be necessary,” he interrupted the stare-down. “According to Kusa..., Kusa...” He snapped his fingers several times.

“Kusanagi,” Zelenka supplied.

“Right, yes, her. Anyway, it seems whatever got out on level 28 is small, but not small enough to be a virus – in fact it's probably no smaller than your average insect and probably not any bigger than a house cat. On the other hand, there's still that electromagnetic interference that we don't
“So, in other words, proceed with caution,” said John with a roll of his eyes. “What else is new?” He then looked to the Avengers. “You guys can, uh, tag along if you want... Actually Cap, if you wouldn't mind covering Rodney that'd be great.”

Steve's eyes glanced towards Doctor McKay and he nodded. “Understood,” he said as he took his shield off his back.

McKay eyed Steve and the shield for a moment before snorting. “Just my luck whatever's up there will be attracted to colourful shiny things,” he muttered.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Then that means it'll aim for me and leave you alone.”

The Canadian seemed to perk up at this. “Oh, good point: you can be my personal decoy while I'm being brilliant and saving all our lives.”

“I'll stay back here in case you need me,” Sam told John as he cursed himself for leaving his firearms in his room. “And let me know if you find your missing people.”

John blinked once. “Medic, right. Yeah, that sounds good. Alright then, Rodney can you unlock this door?”

A few moments later, the doors slid open and the group swept into the tower, the marines fanning out behind them automatically. There was a transporter to the right and a tall, circular staircase going up the centre of the tower. John carefully walked over to the elevator and ran a hand in front of it. The crystals didn't light up.

“Rodney?”

McKay hurried over to the panel and pulled it apart expertly before examining at the array of wires and crystals inside. “It's fixable, but it'll take a while,” he finally said.

John nodded. “Get Zelenka on it.”

McKay nodded. “Radek!” he called out and Sam stepped out of the way as the Czech hurried past him.

“Clint,” said John. “You and Major Lorne get on that elevator as soon as Zelenka has it fixed and take it to level 28 with Sam. If Forbes and Schwauben are still alive, that's probably where they'll be. The rest of us will take the stairs. Fan out in teams of two and check each level; radio in if you find anything, but don't touch. Rodney, Cap and I are going to head straight to level 28. Keep an eye out for our people and the comms open. Let's go.”

Sam watched as the majority of the group headed up the stairs, with John in the lead and McKay right behind him, watching the scanner in his hands as he hustled up the stairs. It said something about Atlantis and its day-to-day operations that even the non-military scientists looked relatively calm in the face of this emergency (even if he could hear McKay complaining loudly about idiotic military grunts who should've known better than to investigate this tower in the first place).

Their footsteps became quieter as they climbed higher and Sam almost regretted staying behind, even though he intellectually knew he wouldn't have been much help to them without a weapon. So instead he walked over to where Clint and Major Lorne were standing beside Doctor Zelenka, who was talking to himself – or possibly the alien circuits – as he worked.
“How's it looking, Doc?” Major Lorne asked.

“It is, as Rodney said, fixable, but it will take me few minutes,” the man responded without looking away from the crystals.

A few moments of silence followed. Then they heard faint gun shots from far above them. Their heads snapped upwards and Lorne tapped his comm.

“Colonel Sheppard, this Lorne, what's your status?”

A moment's pause and then a staticy voice came over the comm.

“*Sheppard here. We're pinned down by... little glowing tennis balls of light or some-ow! Shi-”*

The comm cut out and Lorne exchanged a worried glance with Zelenka.

“Hurry up with that transporter,” Lorne told the scientist before tapping his earpiece several times. “Colonel, please respond. What's going on? Do you need back up?”

Meanwhile Zelenka shot the major an irritated look and got back to fiddling with the transporter. “Jo, jo, makám, makám,” he mumbled to himself. “Copak to vypadá, že dělám? Jen to tady... ježkovy vočí, ktery debil to tady tak zavonačil?”

Sam shook his head and exchanged an amused look with Clint, raising an eyebrow in question. Clint shook his head: apparently Czech wasn't a language he spoke, or at least not nearly well enough to understand the scientist's mumblings. They both looked back to Major Lorne when they heard static come on over his comm.

“...Sheppard here... glowing balls of light... damn fast... causing electromagnetic interference. Found... Forbes dead, Schauben looks like he's breathing... Looks like the transporter is clear... wait for Zelenka to repair...sh... Ow, goddammit! Be careful of... weapons n-AAAH!”

The scream of pain that cut off the transmission put them all instantly on edge.

“Zelenka?” Lorne barked, stalking back over to the transporter.

“Yes, yes, just a moment! I just have to... no tak ješe kousek, ješe kousek... no tak... Aha, no konečne!” The panel in his hands lit up. “I have it!”

The transporter doors slid open and Sam, Clint and Major Lorne instantly hurried inside, the major immediately touching the back display screen. The doors slid shut after them.

“*Sheppard, this is Lorne,”* Lorne said into his comm. “*Zelenka fixed the transporter; we're on our way up.”*

They didn't get a reply.

Clint notched an arrow into his bow. Sam took a deep breath and crouched down, ready to head for the injured soldier.

The transporter stopped and the doors slid open, the sounds of gunfire (and was that a laser he was hearing?) instantly assaulted his ears. Major Lorne cautiously stepped out, his P-90 leading the way as he automatically squinted against the bright silver light that bathed the room. Sam peeked around the doors to assess the situation and had to squint as well.

Instead of the corridors he'd been expecting, he was greeted with the sight of a large room,
approximately the size of a high school gymnasium. The ceiling and surrounding walls were smooth and painted a dark metallic blue colour with several silver lines running up the walls and across the ceiling width-wise, visually dividing the room into four quarters. In the centre of the room was a round glowing ball sitting on top of a hexagonal pedestal with what looked like glass panels running down each of its sides and glowing orange-yellow.

Mckay had one of the panels open and was hunched over as he rooted inside while Steve stood over him and held his shield out to protect them both from the mass of silvery objects that were zooming around so quickly they looked like they had tails trailing behind them, like miniaturized comets.

Above him, Major Lorne opened fire as he stepped further into the room.

“Shit,” he heard Clint curse under his breath. “Fucking stop moving you assholes.”

Sam tore his eyes away from the hypnotizing movements and scanned the room. It didn't take him long to spot the downed soldiers. One of them had his mouth open, silently screaming as a burned and bloody cavity in his chest smouldered. That was probably Forbes. A second body lay closer to the corner of the room and Sam could see burn marks along the blonde woman's arms which had clearly gone through her uniform, and a single, bloody burn just above her temple. Her hair was singed, but she looked like she was still breathing.

John was slumped over by the stairwell, looking singed but not in any read danger. Next to him, Ronon was down on one knee and carefully aiming with a practised eye and a strange-looking gun with a really long barrel. Looked like something Sam would expect to find in a futuristic western movie. He fired it and a shot of bright orange plasma enveloped several of the small silvery objects.

Okay, that thing was cool.

Sam took a deep breath and ran towards the blonde woman, staying as low as he could while keeping his head up to watch for flying silver objects. He dropped to his knees once he reached her and checked her pulse. Behind him, he heard Clint whoop in victory, but only glanced up for long enough the make sure he didn't need to duck. Her pulse was weak, but definitely there and a closer look at the wound on her head showed that the damage was thankfully only skin-deep.

Sam noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and looked up, his muscles tensing. He relaxed slightly when he saw Natasha heading towards him in a crouch.

“Need some help moving her into the transporter?” she asked Sam.

“Yeah, that'd be great actually,” he admitted. “Was just trying to figure out how I was going to get her out of here. How's Sheppard doing?”

“Still conscious, but barely,” she answered as she grabbed the woman's legs. Sam grabbed her under her arms after a glance towards the others, they hurried towards the transporter. “McKay managed to turn down the power those things were generating, but Sheppard got hit by a couple of them at once, which scrambled his senses.”

“Yeah, 'cause that's what the guy needs: brain damage.”

Natasha smirked at him as they entered the transporter and Sam hit the display to take them down. The doors slid shut, blocking out the sounds of gunfire.
“So, why aren't you in the thick of things?” he asked, curious. Natasha was usually up for any challenge.

She looked annoyed for a moment. “The widow's bites are useless against the electricity those things are generating; they weren't having any effect at all and the bullets only slightly more. Everyone's basically just stalling until McKay manages to shut the device down.”

“I see.”

The transporter doors slid open and they shuffled out.

“Doctor Zelenka, could you call for a medical team?” Sam called out to the Czech scientist who was standing at the bottom of the staircase looking worried.

“Already done,” Zelenka answered. “They are on their way.”

“Good. Then we'll head back up. Sheppard's down, but he's closer to the staircase, so we'll go up that way.”

Half-way up the stairs the shooting stopped. By the time Sam and Natasha made it to the top, Steve had stepped away from McKay and the initial wary, disbelieving shock that always came at the end of a battle had faded. Sam knelt to check John's pulse, happy to note the Colonel was awake enough to look up at him, even if his glassy eyes didn't seem to recognize him.

He looked back up when he heard Clint cackle. The archer had bent over to pick up one of the small, silvery objects that been terrorizing them. It shimmered slightly in his hand and when Sam looked down at one laying on the ground by John's feet, he realized the round, silver objects were slightly smaller than a tennis ball and covered in long, silky hair.

“Well, what do you know?” said Clint gleefully. “Looks like we're in an episode of Star Trek after all.”

“It's a training room,” Doctor McKay announced when he swept into the infirmary later on.

Clint looked up from flirting with the pretty Polish nurse who'd been bandaging up the burn on his left thigh.

“A training room?” John Sheppard asked in disbelief, sounding more lucid than he had since he'd gone down.

“Well, a prototype anyway,” McKay added with a shrug. “I thought the interface looked familiar, so I went to Janus' lab and, sure enough, I found a copy of the blueprints in one of the computers. Not his design, I don't think, but it looks like he was trying to debug it.”

“He didn't do a very good job of it,” Ronon grumbled from where he was leaning against the wall, his left arm almost entirely wrapped in bandages and another one on his left hip peeking out from under his vest.

“Obviously he hadn't finished when the Lanteans decided to leave the city,” Rodney snapped. “Also, it certainly didn't help that the morons who decided to activate it managed to turn it on at
the most advanced level settings and ramped the power up to way past the safety limits! This would be why we put together teams of scientists and soldiers when exploring new parts of the city.”

“I'm pretty sure all three of them were new to the city,” John pointed out tiredly, although the look on his face clearly stated he wasn't entirely sure he bought the excuse himself. Clint didn't think he was any more impressed with them than McKay was.

“And so they what, didn't read any of the mission reports or city logs before transferring in?! I thought Stargate Command made a point of only sending people who were at least somewhat intelligent!”

“Rodney, relax, Woolsey's already made the announcement telling people not to go exploring until the sections have been cleared,” said John, sounding tired and looking like he was trying not to move his head too much.

“Hang on,” Clint interrupted, already tired of the bickering. “Are you saying we got our asses handed to us by the Silver Death-Tribbles Training Program?”

John's face went blank. “No, we are not calling it that. You are not allowed to name things, ever.”

“Hey!” Clint exclaimed, feeling very offended. He was at least better at it than Stark.

“Actually, Silver Death-Tribbles doesn't sound bad, although it looks a bit like someone crossed them with Cousin It,” said McKay thoughtfully.

“Nope, no, absolutely not.”

McKay rolled his eyes. “Or we could call them Silver Tribbles of Death instead and STDs for short.”

John made a face. “I think my headache's getting worse.”

“Anyway, I'm going back to the lab to see what Daniel's managed to get through while I've been fixing other people's stupid mistakes.”

Without another word, the scientist turned and walked back out of the infirmary. Clint blinked as he watched him go.

Steve was already sitting down when Woolsey walked into the conference room at a brisk pace, taking the seat at the centre of the rounded conference area. He smiled and greeted everyone until his eyes found Sheppard sitting slumped in a chair, his hair more mused than usual and eyes slightly glassy.

“Should you even be here?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Sure I should,” the colonel replied, a slight slur to his voice. “I'm perfectly fine.”

“He's really not,” Carson said from across the room. “But I've allowed him to attend the meeting on the condition that just as soon as it's over, he's to head straight back down to the infirmary and lie down.”
“I see,” said Woolsey, both men expertly ignoring John's protests.

Doctor McKay and Daniel were the last to show up – this hardly surprised anyone, not even Steve.

Doctor McKay sat down next to Doctor Keller with a small smile to her and Carson (the Scot had refused to let Steve call him anything else, steamrolling over his objections with a jovial determination that reminded him so much of Dum Dum it made his heart hurt), while Daniel apologized to the room for being late and sat down into the remaining seat between Rodney and Steve. He nodded to Steve and then to the rest of his team, leaning back to wave at the rest of the Avengers, who were leaning against the back wall. They'd decided to let Steve speak – mostly because none of them felt like dealing with the bureaucracy – but had still wanted to watch. Ronon had joined them, leaning against the wall next to Natasha.

He sure hoped Natasha and Ronon didn't think they were being subtle. The way he kept glancing at her and she refused to glance back was really obvious. That, and he'd seen her creeping out of quarters that he knew weren't her assigned guest ones on his way from the South Pier that morning.

“Ehem, well, if we're all here then I suppose we should get started,” said Woolsey. “For those of you, whom I haven't yet had the pleasure of meeting, my name is Richard Woolsey and I am the expedition leader here on Atlantis.”

Steve wasn't quite sure what to think of the man. He almost reminded him of Coulson, except that his beneign appearance wasn't a carefully-constructed mask: he really was someone who fought with words and back room politics instead of weapons. And he couldn't quite clear his mind from the overheard remark Daniel had made to General O'Neill about how he'd accused him of conspiring with the people who'd killed his wife. Honestly he'd expected a much more sinister-looking face to the name. But Steve prided himself on at least trying to be a fair man and he couldn't deny that so far Richard Woolsey had been fair by them, giving them a chance to convince him to help them despite not having many resources of their own to give.

After spending the better part of a day talking to the people of Atlantis, he felt humbled. And amazed beyond words. The loss of contact with Earth was hurting them, he could tell, but they struggled on together with determination and an abject refusal to quit.

He'd never loved his USO costume, but never had Steve felt the stars and stripes motif on his uniform more gaudy than here, surrounded in a sea of international flags.

“Now then,” Woolsey continued, “I have spoken with SG1 and specifically Doctor Jackson at length so I believe I have an idea of what it is you're asking for, but if you could please clarify your request for the room so that everyone's aware.”

Next to him, Daniel straightened. “Of course, Mister Woolsey. Well, in a nutshell, we came here hoping to borrow one of your scientists to accompany us back to the Milky Way to take a look at what we'd found. Steve here has the ATA gene, but no knowledge of Ancient technology. I have an extensive knowledge of Ancient language and culture, but only a limited knowledge the technology and the gene therapy, as we know, doesn't work on me. Rodney has been very helpful in unlocking the tablets we found, but there's an entire section of the complex we discovered that we'll require someone with technological expertise to access, not to mention make work.”

Woolsey nodded. “Thank you, Doctor Jackson.” Then he looked to the rest of the room. “Now, I understand there have been several projects on the go since SG1's arrival. Doctor Beckett, would you and Doctor Keller like to start?”

The two doctors looked at each other and shrugged.
“Och aye, why not?” said Carson as he and Doctor Keller stood and walked up to the large computer screen they set up behind them earlier. “‘Tis likely the least important bit of the lot.”

“But still very cool,” Doctor Keller added with a grin.

“Undeniably. Would you like to start my dear?”

“Oh yeah, sure.” Doctor Keller beamed at them. “Now, as you all know, Captain Rogers is the only survivor of Doctor Abraham Erskine's Super Soldier serum, which people have been trying to re-create for years with no success. And just to be clear here, neither Carson nor I have ever actually studied any of the research in-depth – although Carson has a bit of a better understanding of it than I do – so a lot of what we're saying is largely theoretical.”

Carson nodded. “When I was working on the gene therapy I consulted some of Abraham Erskine's earlier notes from when he'd still been working at the University of Berlin, before the war turned his entire focus to the Super Soldier Serum.”

“Exactly,” Keller continued. “One of the main problems most researchers have run into is the lack of samples of Captain Rogers pre-serum, making it difficult to ascertain what exactly had been there before the serum and how the serum had then changed it. Knowing he has the ATA gene puts a bit of a new spin on things, because it means we could rule that out as a product of the serum.”

“Excuse me,” Woolsey interrupted. “I'm sorry to interrupt, but how can you be sure the ATA gene wasn't a product of the Super Soldier Serum?”

“Well, canna be one hundred percent certain o' course,” Carson answered. “But it is incredibly unlikely. The gene therapy I created is essentially a virus that disseminates cloned ATA genes throughout the human body, where they then replicate. Without knowledge of the ATA gene, or a healthy specimen of one to begin with, the chances of the serum having created the gene within the body as part of the serum treatment are minuscule to none.”

Woolsey nodded. “I understand, thank you, Doctor. Please, do continue.”

Steve let out the breath he was holding. Daniel had hold him the Ancient gene inside him wasn't likely to have been created by the serum, but to have the doctor confirm it was reassuring. It was... nice to know that not everything special about him had come out of a bottle – even if this little special thing wasn't anything he could've used before now.

Carson stepped back and motioned to Doctor Keller.

“Right, anyway, with Captain Roger's permission, we took a look at a few samples of his blood to analyze...” Doctor Keller stepped back and pressed a button on the tiny remote in her hand. The screen behind her lit up to show a picture that looked artistically intriguing, but entirely uninformative to Steve. She pointed to an area on the picture. “Here we can see the ATA gene and here we have an additional enzyme that doesn't seem to be actively doing anything. Neither Colonel Sheppard nor General O'Neill have shown this enzyme in their DNA, which is what made us think this was a product of the serum.”

“The biggest problem with the Super Soldier Serum has always been its inherent instability,” Carson took over the explanation. “What we think the ATA gene has done in Steve Rogers' blood is activate the creation of this enzyme, which from what we can tell seems to be stabilizing it and thus allowing it to function the way Doctor Erskine intended.”

John raised his hand. “Hang on, Doc, does that mean I could become a super soldier too?” he
asked.

Doctor McKay groaned. “Oh god, 'cause what we really need is for Captain Kirk to go Conan.”

John rolled his eyes. “You know, I don't actually have a woman on every planet.”

“No, because sometimes they start shooting at us before you've have a chance to seduce anyone!” McKay groused.

“Gentlemen, please!” Woolsey glared at both of them. “After the Wraith have been dealt with, then you can try and get the doctors researching the Super Soldier Serum.”

“Besides of which, we have already seen a sort of 'super serum,'” Teyla added pointedly. “It was called the wraith enzyme.”

Both John and Doctor McKay flinched at her words.

“Aye, we did and we'll not be looking to repeat that experience again,” Carson added. “However, I don't think research into the serum would be entirely unwarranted, especially if we combine it with ATA gene research.”

Woolsey frowned. “What do you mean, Doctor?”

“Well, I’ve certainly no interest in creating stronger soldiers, but if we could get it to work in a slightly diluted version and in conjunction with the gene therapy, then it could potentially open up a whole new way of treating genetic disorders and chronic diseases. Severe asthma, weak or badly functioning organs, type one diabetes, possibly even diseases such as Huntington's could potentially be cured in the same way Steven's here were after his serum treatment.”

A hush fell upon the room. Steve stared at the screen.

“Whatever you need,” he suddenly found himself saying. He met Carson's surprised eyes. “I know you're busy with your own problems now, but after – if you want to do this – I'll provide you with any samples you want. Just ask. And Tony has access to most of the Project Rebirth files; I'm pretty sure I could convince him to share...” He swallowed, realizing he was starting to babble. “Carson, I've read some of the files on what happened with the serum research after Erskine died and... well, I can't say I'm all that comfortable with that part of his and my legacy. But this is the first time I've heard anyone say that the serum could be used for more than just creating soldiers.”

He smiled crookedly. “That's a legacy I wouldn't mind being part of.”

Carson smiled warmly at him. “Nor would I, lad, nor would I. 'T would be a lovely thing to create something wonderful as that.”

“Yeah, yeah, that's wonderful, great really I happy for both of you,” Doctor McKay suddenly interrupted. “Can we get on to the important part of this meeting? I mean, you're here for hard science help, not the squishy voodoo stuff.”

“Rodney!” John protested, sounding annoyed rather than outraged or surprised.

“Hey, this is important too!” Doctor Keller declared angrily.

Beside her, Carson grinned. “Och now you've done it, lad: no nookie for you tonight.”

Doctor McKay blinked and straightened, suddenly looking interested. “Nookie?” he asked. “What
do you mean nookie? That was on the table... since when was that on the table?"

“Well, it's not anymore,” Doctor Keller proclaimed, sitting down with a huff.

“Wait, no, no if you're not finished then you should continue, 'cause I'm sure the absolutely amazing scientific discoveries can wait for a few more minutes...”

Doctor Keller looked like she was having a hard time keeping a straight face. Steve heard Woolsey sigh. “Did you have anything else to add, Doctor Carson?” he asked.

Carson shook his head, still looking amused. “No, we actually were done.”

“Very well. I agree with your assessment and it certainly sounds like something worth pursuing in the future. However, to Doctor McKay's point, that isn't really the topic at hand. So perhaps, Doctor Jackson, you could give a slight overview of what it is that you've found?”

“Yes, of course, thank you Mister Woolsey,” Daniel answered. He cleared his throat. “I won't bore you with particulars, but in essence what we managed to find was an Ancient research station. Now we didn't get a chance to thoroughly investigate it, being on a time limit and all, but I think I can safely say that it's quite a bit bigger than the one in Antarctica, although possibly not bigger than Atlantis itself. However, from the data we managed to gather, we did ascertain that it was built after the fall of Atlantis by its survivors. In fact, according to Morgan, its purpose was to continue the Ancient's research into finding a way to defeat the wraith.”

John straightened suddenly from his slump. “Woah, hang on, seriously? I thought the Ancients just sort of gave up on the Pegasus Galaxy when they left?”

Daniel shrugged. “Apparently not. And whatever was being done at the base, it was important, because not only did we find evidence of research – and yes, Rodney I'll let you take over on that in a second – but the base also had its own stargate, separate from the one by the town which we used to arrive on the planet, and powered by a ZPM. In addition – or perhaps even more significantly – was the discovery of a Meeting Place of the Four Great Races, which we found completely intact.”

“That's impressive,” Woolsey agreed. “Now, I was given to understand that you brought some Ancient tablets for Doctor McKay to look at?”

“Yes, we did. Many of the core systems were locked to us, so we took what tablets we could find to bring with us hoping that when Rodney unlocked them it would give us a better idea of what's in the portion of the base we couldn't access.”

“And did you have any luck with this, Doctor McKay?”

“Of course I did. I'm me and quite frankly even Zelenka could've done this with both hands tied behind his back,” said Doctor McKay dismissively. “Most of it was boring. I think there was some poetry on one of the tablets and a cookbook or something on another, which I sent on to the soft science departments so they could geekgasm over them. And Daniel went nuts over the log we found.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “It was the log belonging to the last station commander and, yes, it's quite fascinating.”

“Whatsoever. Anyway, thankfully there was some actually useful stuff in there too. One of the tablets contained technical specs for the vehicle Daniel said the townspeople use to get to and from the temple. It's sort of like a planet-side puddlejumper and I definitely want one.”
John nodded in what looked like agreement. “Anything else?”

Steve couldn't see Doctor McKay very well from where he was sitting, but the excitement in his voice was unmistakable.

“Well, the last tablet contained specs I've definitely never seen before. In fact, it looks very different from anything we've seen on anywhere on the Ancient database. Which, of course, could be accounted for by two things. One, we still haven't managed to get through the entire database yet, and two, if Daniel's right then this is newer Ancient tech than anything on Atlantis.”

“So, basically we've got the upgraded version of Atlantis,” said Cam, looking smug.

Rodney snorted. “Not that you can actually use any of it without our help. You have exactly one person with the ATA gene and he's a relic from a time when microwave ovens were the height of technology!”

Steve blinked. “Actually, microwaves came after my time,” he said.

“Really?” said Carson with an eggagerated look of shock. “Blimey, you're practically from the Dark Ages then, aren't you?”

Steve grinned. “I'm a decent plumber,” he said. “But it's true, the only technology I know how to fix is motorbikes and tanks.”


He shrugged. “They were easier to steal during the war than jeeps. Only one gun instead of the three or more you got in a jeep. Sure, it packed a whollop of a punch, but if you could get past it, you were home free. And the krauts inside could only come out at you one at a time too... so, yeah, easier.”

He could see John grinning. Behind him, he heard Ronon ask what a tank was and Clint answering. He foresaw requests of tank-steeling stories in his future.

Woolsey cleared his throat. “Excuse me, could we get back to the topic at hand please?” He swept a level gaze over the room. “Doctor Mckay, are you able to make a guess based on the specs you found as to what might be hidden in the portion of the Ancient outpost in question?”

Doctor McKay rubbed his hands together, his whole body vibrating with excitement. “Now, keep in mind that we don't actually know whether these specs were purely theoretical or not – I mean, yes, based on the notes that accompanied them I don't think they were just someone's way of passing the time. And then, of course, there's the obvious hope that Daniel's glowy family isn't having us on in the most elaborate and poorly-timed practical joke in the history of forever..”

He paused. “But, if I'm reading the specs correctly, which let's face it as the smartest man in two galaxies I probably am, and if the Ancients did indeed build what the specs are showing... then, well.”

He grinned excitedly at the room.

“Then I think we might have ourselves a ship.”
And here you finally have the conclusion to Act IV. Sorry for the slight wait - I had been hoping to have this chapter out on the weekend, but I've just been so tired this week that it made it difficult to concentrate on editing. I'm more than ready for spring to get here (I say as I look out the window and watch the snow fall, white and fluffy and completely evil).

Thanks for the comments and kudos guys, I really appreciate them! And thanks to those of you who pointed out my mistake: yes, Major Lorne is definitely air force, not a marine. I've already gone and corrected that.

TIME

If felt like a very long time had passed since they'd last been inside Atlantis' gateroom, but it had actually been less than forty-eight hours. Steve, Clint and Natasha arrived as a group, walking into the bright, sunlit area to see that the mixed air force and marine squad Woolsey was sending with them was already there and doing last-minute checks. Major Lorne looked up and nodded to them as they descended the stairs.

“Excited to be going back to Earth?” Steve asked him with a smile.

Lorne shrugged. “I might be if it felt more like vacation and less like another day at the ranch.”

“Even the space ship?”

Lorne opened his mouth to reply and then closed it, frowning. “Well, it's not like there haven't been space ships before, and I do kinda fly the jumpers all the time, but being designated as the pilot of a potential space ship is new. It's usually Sheppard that gets those gigs.”

“Woah, hang on there,” Clint suddenly interjected. “What do you mean there've been space ships before? Oh wait, those wraith have ships, right?”

“Also, the city flies,” Steve added.

Clint gaped. “The city flies? As in through space? That's-that's just... whoa, Stark is going to be so ridiculously jealous.”

“You mean more jealous than when he finds out we can use the technology and he can't?” Natasha asked with a small quirk of her lips.

“Oh I can't wait to rub that in his face,” Clint grinned gleefully. “Screw the Iron Man suit; I can pilot space ships with my mind!”

Woolsey hadn't exactly been thrilled with the idea when Daniel suggested injecting the rest of SG-
I and the Avengers with the gene therapy, but Atlantis could barely spare the one combat unit he'd already offered to send with them. Not to mention their head scientist.

“You know, I'm pretty sure Woolsey's main reason to agreeing to any of this is because he plans to convince the SGC to let him keep the ship on Atlantis afterwards,” Daniel had told Steve after the meeting. “There've been rumbles from Atlantis for years that they should have a ship of their own stationed at the city so that they don't have to rely on ships travelling from the Milky Way.”

Steve had blinked and looked at Daniel. “Ships travelling from the Milky Way...? Daniel, does Earth actually have space ships of its own?”

Daniel had looked uncomfortable for a moment. “Er, yes. We have a small fleet now with more being constructed. And even more designs on the drawing boards – thanks to the Asgard Legacy Core we have specs for some pretty advanced stuff. Or at least we will once our scientists manage to translate and understand it. I've been helping with a lot of the translating, but, well, like with the tablet, there's only so much I can translate accurately without the necessary scientific background. Sam's been keeping an eye on the project, though, and from what she's said it looks like they're pretty much re-writing physics as we know it.”

Doctor McKay had interrupted them then. “You!” he said, pointing to Steve. “You're coming with me. I'm going to pawn you off on someone less busy than me so they can show you the chair. Just make sure you don't actually shoot anything down. I mean, you can fire the drones and get them to fly around and dance pirouettes or whatever, but stay away from property damage.”

Steve bristled at the tone of voice, but Daniel had placed a calming hand on his arm. “Look on the bright side,” he'd said quietly. “If Rodney's going to pawn you off on someone else then at least it means you won't have to deal with him.”

That had been a bright side all right. Doctors Zelenka and Kusanagi were very nice people – a bit strange in the way that all scientists were a bit strange – but very nice. And the chair was really swell. He still preferred his shield, but that wasn't exactly an option against a space ship.

It hadn't really hit him until then that there would be space ships in this fight. That ten-year-old inside of him was bouncing around and cheering with excitement.

The gene treatment had worked for all of them except Mitchell, and so Clint, Natasha and Vala had spent their evening learning to fly puddlejumpers. Carson had taken Sam around the infirmary to teach him about Ancient medical tech.

The transporter doors opened again and Sam's voice reached Steve's ears, punctuated by Carson's Scottish brogue as they went over their mental inventories out loud to make sure they had everything. It was strange seeing the Doctor in a military flak vest and army boots. Steve noted the 9-mil holstered at his hip, which looked as odd on him as he imagined it would on Bruce. Then again, Bruce had an entire Hulk to protect him, so really a handgun was a relatively benign weapon for Carson to carry.

“Good morning,” Carson called out jovially when he and Sam reached the top of the stairs and began to descend.

“Morning, Doc,” Lorne called back with a smile. Then he half-turned to his unit. “Holland, take the Doc's bag!”

“Yes, sir,” a young lieutenant answered and quickly rushed over to take the large bag Carson was carrying. He offered to take Sam's as well, but Sam waved him off.
Steve smiled. “Good morning, Carson, Sam,” he said. “You two ready to head out?”

“Oh hell yes!” said Sam with a grin. “But I only remember about half of what I learnt yesterday, so none of you better get hurt.”

Carson chuckled. “We're as ready as we'll ever be, I suppose.”

Carson had volunteered for the mission on his own and, though Steve hadn't given it much thought before, he was glad for the Doctor's presence. Sam was trained as a medic, which was helpful some of the time, but rushing an injured person to a hospital wouldn't exactly be an option out in the middle of space if they got hurt more seriously.

It had been when Woolsey looked like he'd mostly caved to their reasoning for letting Doctor McKay go with the Avengers and SG1 back to the Milky Way that Carson had suddenly looked at their group with an alarmed look on his face.

“Now wait a minute there,” he'd said with wide eyes. “You're sending Daniel Jackson and Rodney McKay on the same mission?!” He scanned the room and his eyes narrowed in thought, before nodding resolutely. “You're going to need a doctor then; I'm coming with ye.”

And that had been that, because Atlantis already had a doctor and he was therefore extraneous anyway. Woolsey had made a few token protests and then assigned them the marine unit to join Major Lorne's team. Colonel Sheppard had been incredibly annoyed he couldn't lead the mission, but neither Woolsey nor either of the doctors were willing to budge.

Two of the marines were Russian and both seemed happy to speak to Natasha in their native language. Clint stood silent next to her, though Steve was well aware that the archer spoke Russian fluently. Suddenly, Clint grinned and nudged Natasha.

“Hey, so I see you've left him alive, head intact and all,” he said.

Natasha looked to him with a frown and then turned to follow his gaze up to the command centre. Sure enough, Ronon was there, just to the left of Woolsey, his hands in his pockets, looking as casual as he could. He nodded to Natasha in greeting. Natasha nodded back and then turned to Clint.

“Don't be ridiculous,” she said. “I might try to come back one day. It would be a pity to kill him while he's still useful.”

“You should come back and we send you against the Genii,” said one of the Russian marines with a smirk.

“Da, that would be good,” said the second one. “They will not be expecting Czernu Vdovu.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at the name, but it was Clint who asked: “Who are the Genii?”

Steve turned away and tuned out the reply, because that was when Mitchell and Vala walked in.

“Well hey, y'all ready to go?” said Mitchell loudly with a wide smile. Next to him, Vala scanned the crowd and sighed.

“Well no, we're missing Daniel and that obnoxious annoying man from Canada,” said Vala. She frowned. “That's the one with the maple leaf, right?”

“Yeah,” said Mitchell, looking at his watch. “Jackson's got exactly two minutes to get his butt
down here and drag McKay with him.”

A little over three minutes later, the transporter opened again, letting out a loud stream of noise as Doctor McKay and Doctor Zelenka exited, both talking a mile a minute as they hurried out, although McKay seemed to be the loudest. Behind them, Daniel, Teyla and Doctor Keller exited at a much slower pace, obviously amused.

“And you'll have to make sure to run diagnostics on the internal sensors in those areas and make sure the door panels all work—” McKay was telling Zelenka.

Zelenka rolled his eyes. “—Yes, yes of course and I will make sure no one touches anything until we know what it does. I was here the first time, I know about the dangers. We check everything with database.”

“And Janus' lab: I think Janus might've kept records – or possibly stolen them – for things he was interested in, so if you can't find anything in the Ancient database, then check the files in his lab.”

“Ah, yes, good point. I will remember that.”

“Good, you should. Oh and make sure—”

“Rodney!” Zelenka placed a hand on McKay's shoulder when the other scientist went silent. The look in his eyes was somewhere between exasperation and amusement – but mostly exasperation. “I will take care of her while you are gone. I promise.”

McKay twitched nervously. “Of course you will. Just... don't blow anything up.”

Zelenka threw his hands up, although Steve wasn't sure that it wasn't partially in jest. “No, I leave that to undisputed master.”

“Hey, I usually stop things from blowing up!”

“Yes, you do... and sometimes you blow up solar systems!”

“...it was only five sixths of a solar system. And it was uninhabited.”

Steve blinked as he felt Clint side up next to him.

“Uh, did that guy just say that McKay there once blew up a solar system?”

“I'm pretty sure he did,” said Steve.

“Wow, that just... wow.” Clint paused for a moment. “I keep thinking it would be hilarious to shut McKay up in a room with Stark and then stand back and watch, but now I'm wondering if that might just be the most monumentally bad idea ever.”

“I'll bring the popcorn,” said Natasha, seemingly unconcerned.

“I'll bring my Kevlar vest,” said Sam. “And possibly a brick wall to hide behind.”

“Might want to make it cement,” said Clint. “Bricks fall apart too easily.”

“Woolsey to Major Lorne, are you and your team ready for departure?” they heard come over Lorne's comm.

Lorne tapped his comm. “My team and the marines are, sir. Let me just double-check with the
“Others.” He turned to them. “Looks like we're all here. Everyone got everything they need?”

“Oh!” McKay exclaimed and threw his backpack onto the ground. He unzipped it and began rummaging through. “Shit, I hope I didn't forget them...”

Doctor Keller went over to his side and touched his shoulder lightly. “Rodney, what are you looking for?”

“Presents! We're going to Earth, so I was thinking I'd take some time to go to Vancouver and I've been collecting stuff during missions, since according to Madison visitors have to bring presents. And, you know, why would I waste time and money on generic, mass-produced garbage when I can totally be the cool uncle who brings souvenirs from another galaxy. Even if she won't be allowed to know what a cool uncle I am until the program goes public, but it still makes me, uh, secretly cool.”

Lorne ran a hand through his hair. “Sometimes your priorities astound me McKay,” he said even as the corner of his lips twitched.

“You're taking visiting etiquette lessons from a four-year-old?” Doctor Keller asked, not even bothering to hide her fondly amused smile.

“She's six!” McKay exclaimed indignantly. “Or possibly seven. I'm not actually sure when her birthday is.”

Keller bit her bottom lip. “So, what did you get her?”

“I got her a doll... Aha!”

He carefully pulled out a cloth-wrapped package and unwrapped it to show her. Steve leaned over to get a look at the beautifully hand-carved face made out of a rather dark wood, hair that looked a lot like real hair (horse hair, Steve guessed... or whatever equivalent the planet in question had), and a dress made out of blue and purple-dyed fabric.

“She's a little girl and little girls like dolls right?” He looked unsure of himself as he looked up at Keller. “I suppose I could get her a chemistry set to go with it, but I'm not sure that Jeannie would let her play with the bunsen burner.”

“Oh, I'm pretty sure toy chemistry sets don't come with bunsen burners,” said Clint.

McKay's glare was scathing. “Who said anything about a toy? Why would I waste money on a toy? You can't do anything properly with those!”

“Rodney, she's six,” said Keller with a roll of her eyes.

McKay looked up at her in confusion. “So? I was eleven when I built my first atomic bomb—oh my god I got her a dumb-kid toy. She's going to hate me for getting her a dumb-kid toy!”

It looked like only sheer force of will was stopping Doctor Keller from bursting into laughter.

“The doll is perfect, Rodney.” She finally said before she bent over and pecked him on the cheek. “She's going to love it.”

The scientist stilled and then looked up. “You think so?”

“Positive.”
“Oh, good, then that’s great.” He quickly wrapped the doll back up in the cloth and carefully put it back into his bag before proceeding to pack it back up. “I got Jeannie a pendant made out of some shiny rocks that kind of reminded me of amethyst only more pink and then I figured I should get something for what’s-his-name that she married and since he’s an English major I got him this cool looking quill with ink that the locals of M4P 559 make out of lizard blood. It’s got this really neat greenish colour and glows in the dark.”

Keller frowned. “Isn’t he vegetarian?”

“So?”

“So you just said the ink has lizard blood in it...”

“It’s ink: you don’t eat it!”

Keller shook her head with fond amusement, standing as McKay stood up and hoisted his pack over his shoulder. Steve had to admit he was impressed with how easily he managed it. The pack certainly didn’t look light. But he’d realized yesterday that beneath the bluster and whining, McKay was much braver and sturdier than he seemed. He’d babbled and whined as they’d climbed the stairs to the ‘training room', but hadn’t backed down or even slowed. Even seeing what the silvery flying objects had done to Lieutenant Forbes hadn’t made him turn away, only pause for a moment as his eyes widened in horror.

Steve could wish he was a nicer person, but the people of Atlantis had clearly gotten past his obnoxious exterior (for the most part), so maybe he wasn’t quite as bad as he seemed. He’d made that mistake with Tony, so he was determined to give Rodney McKay a fair chance.

“Woolsey, this is Lorne,” he heard from behind him, all exasperation gone from the major’s voice. “We’re good to go.”

“Very well, beginning dialling sequence.”

Steve turned away as Keller kissed McKay soundly, looking instead towards the command centre, where John had joined Ronon. He blinked and then looked to the upper level. It looked like half the city had come to see them off. There were a few cat-calls from the crowd.

“Good luck, Rodney,” he heard Keller whisper a moment later.

“I, uh, thanks... you-you too.”

He heard Clint and Sam snicker. He bit back a smile of his own.

The stargate came to life and Steve noticed with interest that the dialling sequence looked very different to the ones they’d seen in the Milky Way. Lights ran the perimeter of the circle, making it look more digitized and less clunky – although now that he thought of it, so had the one inside the Ancient research facility, but somehow it was more obvious here. It was yet another amazing thing inside this amazing city.

The wormhole opened with the same splash of watery backwash and then settled into a shimmery blue portal.

“Major Lorne, SG-1, Avengers, you have a go,” said Woolsey’s voice over the PA system. “Godspeed... and good luck.”

At the SGC they’d been thieves, hijackers, and the only send-off they’d had was a tiny voice from
far away that only Natasha, Clint and Sam could hear coupled with the blaring intruder alarm. The
people of Atlantis seemed determined to make up for that as dozens of voices wished them good
luck in over a dozen different languages – some he recognized and many he didn't. Steve grinned
up at them, his throat tightening.

One day he would bring Bucky here, he vowed.

Steve wasn't sure he'd ever get used the bone-deep cold he felt when he came out of the wormhole:
it clung to him like half-forgotten memories of ice in the dark of night. But he took only a second to
shake the feeling back into his limbs before he continued moving, knowing there were more people
coming behind him. His eyes swept the familiar room and then he froze, automatically shifting his
stance, as something behind one of the consoles moved.

There was a chorus of clacks as safeties were turned off. Steve reached for his shield.

A figure suddenly leapt to its feet and the soldiers immediately raised their guns.

“No, wait, put down your guns!” he heard Daniel cry out in the same moment he, too, recognized
the figure.

“What?” he heard Mitchell re-enforce the order. “This kid's here with the local archaeologist, his
apprentice or something.”

Safeties were snapped back on and the tension relaxed marginally. Not much though, because
whatever the apprentice was telling Daniel was spoken with words that sounded rushed, jumbled
together and breathy with barely-controlled panic. Daniel listened carefully, his eyes widening in
horror.

Finally, he turned to them. “Someone came to get Hektor yesterday,” he said tightly. “A prior came
through the planet's main gate.”

“Shit,” Mitchell cursed softly. “Do you think it's a coincidence?”

Daniel looked at him gravely. “I'm not sure I believe in coincidence.”

“Adria.” Vala breathed the name as though it were at once something precious and a curse. “She
must've somehow known we'd been here and told the priors the address.”

“Which means they're after the Ancient outpost,” said Lorne.

Daniel nodded. “Probably.” He turned back to the boy and asked him a question Steve didn't
understand. He nodded. “Okay, so Dion is apparently still here ready to transport us back- oh!” He
turned to McKay. “Rodney, maybe you should take a look at the hovercrafts and see if you can
turn off the autopilot!”

Doctor McKay perked up. “Hovercrafts?”

It turned out that, yes, McKay could turn off the autopilot on the hovercrafts – muttering excitedly
all the while about slimmer crystal matrices and a new user interface that was not actually an
improvement. Dion watched his movements like a hawk, clearly unhappy with letting anyone root
through her vehicle. She put her foot down when it came to steering, categorically refusing to let
anyone else touch the controls.

They ended up leaving Major Lorne and part of the combat behind to guard the outpost and Doctor
McKay, whose priority was hacking into the outpost's computer system.
The journey to the village went by much faster than the original one to the temple thanks to Rodney's fiddling with the controls. And yet it still seemed to drag, fraught with anxious tension. Daniel held onto the railing with a white-knuckled grip, his teeth grinding together with fury. And guilt. Maybe the Priors would've found this planet regardless, but there was no doubt in his mind that this time they were here because of him.

More people might've already died, each new death a strike against his soul.

At least Dion seemed to be having fun. He could only see her back, but despite that he could tell she was grinning as she flew them along the river again, managing the twists and bends with ease despite the speed increase. There was also the occasional whoop and wild laughter.

Finally, the village's tower came into view, peeking over the dense forest and growing taller the closer they came. The resemblance to Atlantis was even more pronounced now, with the rest of the village hidden out of sight behind the remaining miles of foliage, allowing for the illusion that just on the other side they would find an Ancient city. Daniel's heart clenched; he really wished it was Atlantis they were heading towards.

The village was quiet as they approached. Dion manoeuvred the hovercraft around to the side, where a wide street had been built – probably for the very crafts she was piloting. It was Daniel's first real glance at the city streets. He was surprised to find that Athena's statues really were everywhere, all looking virtually the same except that some were holding a sword in their left hand and some a shield. The closer they got to the town's centre, the more people he noticed about, all walking in groups, all talking in hushed voices.

Finally, the streets gave way to the town square and the tower. The crowd of people stepped aside to let the vehicle through and Dion carefully negotiated the streets and then set down next to the tower. There was no sign of the Prior.

They didn't get the chance to ask what had happened before the Tower door was swung open and the woman Daniel recognized as the town's head of security (the literal translation of her title was Head Protector) was striding out towards them, Hektor following at her heels.

“Daniel!” the scholar called out. “You're back!”

Daniel walked forward, nodding to the Head Protector, who nodded back and then scanned the rest of his group with narrowed eyes. He then turned to Hektor. “Yes, we just returned. Hektor, what happened?”

It was the Head Protector who answered.

“A man with skin that did not look quite alive arrived through the Stargate yesterday. He wore a white robe and spoke about his gods, the Ori. I recognized the name as the ones you told us about and I told him we did not need new gods. He smiled and said he would give us a day to consider it and then he left.” She pursed her lips in disgust. “I thought then that perhaps you had spoken in bias, that anger coloured your thoughts. But this morning, all four of the guards that had been with me by the Stargate did not report for duty. They had fallen ill: their bodies weak and burning like fire. Two of them have wives and one of them two sons and a daughter, and they too had fallen ill. Since this morning we have had twenty-five more suddenly become sick.”
She paused to watch Daniel for a moment. “You do not look surprised.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, seeking refuge in the momentary darkness – away from the sheer helplessness that threatened to overwhelm him. “No,” he said after a while. He opened his eyes. “I’ve seen this before. When he comes today, he will offer to cure your people if you will agree to worship the Ori. If you do not agree, then he might say he will come back tomorrow and then perhaps the next day…”

The Protector took a deep breath. “And if we continue to refuse?”

Daniel chuckled bitterly. “Just how long could you stand to watch your people suffer and die before you and your council finally give in? There have been those who refused until the bitter end, but the Priors have no compassion, no sense of honour. The Ori have never cared for any life they do not benefit from. They may allow the illness to ravage you, or they may send their armies to overwhelm you and slaughter your people.”

From around him, he heard gasps and suddenly realized they had an audience. He looked around at the horrified, frightened faces – mothers holding tightly to their children; friends, siblings, lovers holding tightly to each other. More than a few faces held tears.

Daniel swallowed, an impossible lump had lodged itself in his throat. “I'm sorry,” he whispered. “It's my fault they came here. I didn't think- I was just so desperate to find something, anything to fight them with... it didn't occur to me that they would follow us here.”

“No.”

Daniel's head snapped back to the Head Protector, at the sharpness of her tone. Her eyes were hard, determined, with anger simmering just around the edges where it couldn't yet cloud her judgement. It was a look so familiar, it filled him with as much relief as it did guilt.

“No,” she repeated, her tone lower, though no less intense. “This is the evil you came here to fight. You told us of it and we listened, but we had not expected it to touch us. That was foolish. And now the battle has become ours as well. Hektor has told me some of what happened at the temple. He said you journeyed to Atlantis itself to find help, because what you search for is buried deep within.”

This time the gasps sounded surprised and the hushed whispers that followed the mention of Atlantis were excited and hopeful. Daniel forced himself not to wince.

Instead he nodded. “Yes, I hope that what is buried deep within the temple can help us stop the Ori and their followers in their tracks.”

She nodded. “I shall speak to the council.”

“We brought a doctor back from Atlantis,” said Daniel before she could turn away. “I'll speak to him about the illness. Would it be possible for him to take a look at the patients?”

“Of course. We are thankful for his help.” She gestured behind her. “Phoneas will show him the way.”

An older guard with broad shoulders and deep scars running down his right arm nodded and stepped forward, long dark pony-tail swinging behind him as he walked. Daniel nodded to him.

“Thank you,” he said. “If you will allow me, I will now explain everything to my companions.”
The Head Protector nodded and then strode back to the Tower. Daniel sighed and turned to the rest of his group.

“This place seriously needs to come with subtitles,” said Sam before he'd even started. “I mean, I got the general gist of 'not good', 'really not good', and 'still not good, but hopeful'. Oh, and the part where Atlantis is like a rockstar around here.”

“Yeah, that sums most of it up pretty well actually,” Daniel conceded, before launching into the translation of what he'd just been told.

Carson had indeed heard of the Ori plague and had even read through all the reports while he'd been on Earth. He grabbed his kit as soon as Daniel finished speaking.

“Well, what are we waiting for then?” he said. “I'm not the SGC, but I can surely do something to help these people.”

“I'll come with you,” said Vala.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I didna know ye were a medic.”

“I'm not.” Vala's smile turned sly. She reached into one of the pockets of her flak vest and pulled out what looked like an elaborate piece of golden jewellery with a large reddish-orange stone in the centre of it. She held it up.

Carson looked slightly confused and Daniel remembered that he'd only been recruited for the Atlantis project, which meant he probably hadn't come into contact with a lot of Goa'uld artifacts.

“The hand device?” Cam said with surprise. “You went back for the Goa'uld hand device? That's what took you so long to get to the Gateroom?!”

She shrugged. “If either of you had gotten injured you'd have been happy I had it.”

“Um, what is that exactly?” Steve asked.

“It's a healing device,” Daniel answered. “It can actually heal pretty severe injuries almost instantaneously, but because the Goa'uld wanted to keep them as a purview of 'the gods' its use is tied to the traces of naquada deposited in a host's body from the parasite. Those trace elements never get absorbed into the body, which is why Vala, as a former host, can use one of those.”

Vala nodded and then turned to Carson. “I've done it before and the device can't cure the plague, but it can ease some of the symptoms for a little bit. Might give the worst off ones a bit longer.”

Carson nodded. “I'll take it, lass,” he said. “Even if all it does is buy someone an hour, that's an hour longer for me to come up with a cure.”

“I'll come with you for at least a bit to translate,” said Daniel.

“Uh, what about me?” Sam asked.

Carson considered him for a moment and then shook his head. “No son, you haven't come into contact with it directly yet and haven't been given any of the vaccinations the SGC has for its off-world teams. Best you stay away from the infected for now.”

Sam nodded. “Yell if you need me, though, Doc, got it?”

“Aye, will do.”
Phoneas took them to a large white-washed building painted all over with delicate little purple flowers. Daniel paused for a moment to look at them. Up close it was obvious that each one was painted a little differently, as though by a different hand – some clearly by talented artists, but others looked rough, simple.

“They called Resipis blossoms,” Phoneas told him.

“Resipis... possibly from the Latin word resipsco, which means to awaken, revive...” Daniel cocked his head thoughtfully and then looked to the guard. “Spring flowers?”

Phoneas smiled widely. “Yes. They bloom from vines that grow on the trees we harvest sweet syrup from and are the brightest flower to bloom after the first thaw. They are also used by the healers to help wounds heal.” He pointed to the single flower carved into a plaque just above the door. “They are our healer's symbol: a blessing to them and to those they heal.”

“Who painted them?” Daniel asked.

“Everyone.”

Phoneas walked past the door and then turned the corner around the building. Daniel followed him and saw that the flowers continued to wrap around the building, but there was still empty space towards the back. Part-way down he stopped and pointed upwards, to a flower just above his head. It was a simple outline coloured in with bright purple paint and attached to a small string of green vine with a couple leaves.

“This one is mine,” said Phoneas. “When my wife carried my second child her pregnancy was difficult and she grew very weak. Too weak, the healers worried, to give birth and live herself. I painted the flower to bless the healer's hands and bless her with strength to remain with me; I could do nothing else.”

He turned to Daniel and grinned. “Now my son is eleven and drives my wife crazy at least once a day.”

Daniel grinned, looking back to the flowers: they were beautiful. “I'm glad your blessing worked. I'm assuming they don't always.”

“Sometimes no blessing is strong enough.”

The little purple flowers covered the entrance hall inside the building as well. Here, it became more obvious that the building was a hospital, with rows of seats taking up most of the back and a reception desk at the far end. While Phoneas explained to the young man seated at the desk what they were doing here, Daniel explained the flowers to Carson and Vala. Carson was enchanted by the idea.

And then they were being led down a wide hall into the heart of the building. After the hovercraft, they really shouldn't have been surprised by more Ancient technology, but the equipment inside the treatment room they were taken to still surprised Daniel.

Carson grinned widely. “Oh, now this is grand,” he said, looking relieved. “I think I can get some real work done with this.”

Daniel stayed for about an hour translating for Carson while he settled in with the Aeneid doctors and nurses. During this time, he noticed there were several people standing by the machines but not joining in the regular hubbub of the room. He eventually approached a young woman standing by the large, Ancient scanner. She looked young: small and slender with long dark hair, the last
vestiges of baby fat filling her cheeks. She was watching him, Carson and Vala with bored curiosity.

“Hello,” he said. “I'm Daniel.”

She blinked at him and smiled shyly. “Hello, Daniel. My name is Calys.”

He smiled warmly at her. “Nice to meet you, Calys. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'm curious. You and several of the others are just standing here by the machines. I was wondering what it is you do.”

“Oh, we are Operators,” she said, pride evident in her voice. “The machines left behind by the Founders cannot be used by all the citizens, so everyone is tested on their fifteenth birthday. Those who can use them then go into special training and when we finish school we choose if we want to work in the hospital, in the fields, with the guards or operate one of the floating waggons. My father is a doctor and I wanted to help people like he does, so I chose the hospital.”

Daniel stared at her. He suddenly felt incredibly stupid. Of course some of the people here would have the Ancient gene. Hektor told him the Founders had lived here for centuries and intermarried with the human population. Puddlejumpers required the ATA gene to operate, so why wouldn't the hovercrafts?

“Do you know why you can use the Founder's machinery?” he asked, curious.

She frowned. “No,” she said and then thought for a moment. “Some people just can... often it follows in a family. My grandfather operated the floating waggons and my older brother works in the city archives, but my mother did not have the ability.”

Daniel blinked. Okay, so the ATA gene could be recessive – possibly for several generations. Carson would be very interested in that. Actually, it was interesting that no one in the town had made the connection, or that the Ancients hadn't told the townspeople about the gene...

Holy shit. That's probably why the Ancients brought humans here from Earth in the first place: to make sure that whatever was in the temple wasn't forgotten. And they brought them here early enough that they could inter-breed and leave behind people capable of using the technology. The Ancients had already been planning to ascend an entire millennium before they actually did. Why wait so long?

“Daniel?”

He shook himself out of his stupor and looked back down to Calys' worried face. He smiled at her.

“Sorry, that's actually really interesting.” She looked a bit sceptical about that. He chuckled. “Although, I do know where this ability of yours comes from.”

That got her attention. “You do?”

“Yes. The Ancients – sorry the Founders – built their machines so that only they could operate them using a tiny little part inside their blood.” It wasn't the best explanation, but given that she likely didn't know what DNA was in the first place, it was the easiest. “It was something only the Founders had. So if you have it, then that means that one of the Founders is your ancestor from thousands of years ago.”

Calys' eyes were huge and awed. “I'm related to the Founders?”
Daniel nodded with a playful grin. “Very distantly, but yes you are. See, before the Founders came here, they lived on Earth, which is where we come from. So some of our people have that same tiny part inside them.” He jerked his thumb in Carson's direction. “Doctor Beckett is one of them.”

Calys met his eyes and grinned. Their conversation ended when Carson called him over to help translate what he was doing to the two Aeneid doctors. He left not long afterwards, needing to get back to the others.

Just as he left the hospital, his radio crackled to life. “McKay to SG1, do you read?”

Daniel's hand immediately went to answer. “Hey Rodney, this is Daniel. Any luck?”

“I don't need luck, Doctor Jackson. I managed to get past the door locks – they were a bit tricky, but nothing I couldn't figure out. And there are two ways to get down to the lowest level: the door you found in the gateroom leads to an upper platform overlooking the hanger and the elevator takes you down to the hanger floor.”

Daniel grinned. “Hanger? So it really is a ship?”

There was an impatient sigh on the other end, which didn't fool Daniel one bit. “Yes, yes, there's a ship. She's... definitely of a different construction than any of the other Ancient ships we've found to date. Smaller too. Of course, I'm guessing from the records I've managed to find in their systems that this was intended as a prototype, which might explain the size.”

Just then another voice cut in on their conversation. “McKay, this is Mitchell: is she space-worthy?”

“I don't know, Colonel, I haven't had the chance to examine her from inside yet. Just thought you might want to know that while you've been messing around with the locals, I've found what we were looking for.”

“That's awesome, Rodney,” Daniel cut back in before Cam could start arguing with the scientist. He'd learnt on his last trip to Atlantis that the trick to getting along with Rodney was to roll his eyes at half of what he said and just move on.

“Of course it is. Oh, and one more thing, there are these weird statues on either side of the hanger. I mean, they're not ugly or anything, just really out-of-place. And they're giving off faint energy readings.”

Daniel stopped where he stood, his eyes widening. “Rodney, what do the statues look like?” he asked desperately, spinning around to see if he could see... yes, there was one on the corner.

“Uh, well they look like they could be made of marble – like one of those Ancient Greek or Roman statues every museum has a ton of – and they're both women. Actually, they look like they might be the same woman. Anyway, she's got a helmet on her head and she's, like, wearing some sort of toga or something, but she's got an open book in her right hand and in her left one of them's holding a round shield and the other's holding a sword... Oh my god, didn't you say you found the tablets inside a marble statue of some Greek goddess or something?”

“Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom, specifically martial wisdom.”

“Okay, yeah, this could totally be a goddess of war and wisdom.”

Daniel looked up at the statue in front of him. “Is there any way for you to tell if the ones in the hanger are hollow?”
There was a pause.

“Jackson, what exactly are you thinking?” Cam's voice came over the comm, sounding wary.

“I could try and re-calibrate the hand-scanner to get a density readout, but it'll take time...” came Rodney's reluctant reply.

“I'm not sure, Cam,” said Daniel slowly. “But these statues around town really do look a lot like the one that shattered inside the MET. Although the ship definitely takes priority, Rodney, so don't worry about the statues for now. I'll ask Hektor about them.”

“Uh, head's up, guys, the gate's just activated.”

At Sam's warning, Daniel took off towards the Tower.

“This is Mitchell, everyone get out of sight. We don't want to make it obvious that we're here.”

A chorus of various agreements followed, but Daniel knew it wouldn't matter. The Prior would likely know they weren't visible to the human eye. Daniel's recollections of own time as a Prior were hazy – which wasn't terribly surprising given that he'd also been sharing his body with Merlin at the time – but he remembered a vague sense of power, a gentle humming that filled every pore of his body and made him able to see past regular sight, into the depth of things. He remembered looking at one elderly woman and seeing the dark spots that covered her lungs as she lay in bed, remembered reaching down and pulling at those dark spots with that well of power he could feel surrounding him, and knitting the tissue up as the spots disappeared. He also remembered the heady feeling of all that power surging through him and how apart from the rest of the world it made him feel.

How it had made him feel like he was no longer human.

The Head Protector was striding across the town square when he reached it, Hektor huffing beside her. She was carrying a helmet under her arm and had a slightly curved sword tied to her waist. Two guards followed them with a slight clink of metal from their chainmail skirts and larger shoulder armour. It was only now that Daniel realized how much more delicate the Head Protector's armour looked. She was wearing the same full chest plate, but her metal shoulder pads were shaped better to fit her body and were fitted over top of two thick leather strips that crossed just below her collarbone where a golden disk held them together – a sign of her office perhaps? The armour fit her perfectly; it must've been custom-made to fit her.

“Head Protector,” he addressed her when he caught up to the group. “What has your council–”

“...We will not abandon our past or our pride to these heartless scavengers,” she interrupted him, her expression fierce as she looked only ahead. “We will give you the time you need.”

Daniel's steps didn't falter, but it was close as relief swept through his body. “Thank you. Doctor Beckett is already working with your doctors to find a cure.”

She nodded in acknowledgement.

The Prior was nearly at the town when her group reached him. Daniel had slipped out of sight as they were nearing the edge of town and weaved his way through the gathering throng of people until he finally managed to find Cam and Steve hiding behind an ornamental wall. It was just within ear-shot of the ensuing confrontation.

“About time you got here, Jackson,” Cam mumbled as Daniel crouched beside him.
Daniel ignored him in favour of listening to the conversation between the Head Protector and the Prior, making sure to open his comm so that he could translate for everyone.

“Okay, so she's angry that he's come back and he's saying that he promised he would,” Daniel began in a low voice, his eyebrows rising in surprise as the Head Protector spoke in Ancient – she hadn't with him. “He's asking her if they've reconsidered. If they've, uh, chosen to turn away from evil and are ready to worship the all-mighty Ori. And she's – ouch, she's really mad – she's saying that evil arrived with him.” He paused for a moment, blinking at what the woman was saying. “Huh, okay, that's interesting and, I mean, tragic obviously. She's saying that her wife fell sick overnight and their doctors don't know if they can help her and isn't the only one; more are succumbing to the illness by the hour. This illness is an evil that wasn't here before he came.”

There was a pause in the conversation as the Prior seemed to absorb her words. Then his eyes left hers and swept the village.

“Damn, he knows we're here,” Daniel continued as the Prior finally began speaking again. “He's, well, basically telling her he knows we're here and sort of insinuating that she's been listening to, uh... unholy whisperers and been thus influenced by messengers of chaos.”

“I can live with being a messenger of chaos,” came a barely-audible murmur over the comm. It sounded like Clint.

“Yeah,” Daniel heard Steve agree under his breath.

Daniel watched as the Head Protector stood silent for several moments. He recognized the signs of someone struggling with their anger, forcing it to heel instead of lashing out the way it wanted to no matter how satisfying that would be. Her voice, when she finally spoke was low and dangerous.

“She's saying she's not a fool to be influenced by whisperers. She has eyes and a mind of her own, that she's capable of judging the truth for herself. And that any gods or beings that would seek, uh, entrance/welcome with such evil, dishonourable means will never find a place in Aeneid or its people. And now she's telling him to get lost... and the Prior is promising that her people will regret turning away the open arms of the Ori.”

The Prior turned and began making his way towards the gate. No one moved until the stargate had activated and the Prior had walked through. When the wormhole disappeared, the town finally let go the breath they were holding.

The Head Protector turned on her heel and strode back to the town. Daniel, Steve and Cam stood as she approached.

“Daniel, ask her if there's anything we can do to help,” Steve said, his voice low. Daniel looked to him and took in his stiff posture: jaw clenched tightly as his eyes glared murderously at the silent gate.

He nodded and hurried over to ask. The Head Protector considered his request for a moment and then suggested they could help move food and supplies into the large protective cellars that existed beneath the city.

“We are not going to be surprised by the Ori's followers again,” she declared.

Daniel frowned. “Wait, what about the temple?” he asked.

She paused and scowled at him. “What do you mean?”
“Well, the temple is further away and we've now managed to open most of it and it's definitely big enough, not to mention better fortified than the town.”

The Head Protector was thoughtful for a moment. “There is also a river and fields and forests. The transportation platforms could not move everyone very quickly, but we could at least move the children and those who cannot fight.”

“You might be able to do it more quickly than you think. How many platforms do you have?”

Her left eyebrow rose. “Four that work, but only two go to the temple.”

“What do you mean four that work?”

“There are three others we cannot repair.”

“Hm, give me a minute to talk to Cam.”

An hour later a hovercraft loaded with food and Natasha was heading towards the temple. Lorne had been warned ahead of time and told to ask Rodney to show Natasha how to turn off the autopilot. Daniel was kept busy running between the hospital, the Tower and everyone else translating so that everything ran smoothly.

Eventually Dion found him and dragged him off to a bench, where Hektor was already sitting, and handed him a stuffed flatbread and a flask of fruity liquid. Then she hurried off again. The smell of spiced meat hit his nose and Daniel's stomach growled in response. He took a large bite of the flatbread and savoured the taste. The meat was spiced with something that tasted almost nutty, but with a sharpness that reminded him of horseradish.

The two of them ate in silence, Daniel's eyes aimlessly observing the intersection in front of them. In the centre there grew a bramble of bushes covered in tiny blue berries atop a grassy mound. And in between bushes, stood yet another statue of Athena.

“Why are there so many of those statues in the town?” he asked Hektor.

“Statues?” Hektor looked up. “Ah, the warrior statues. They were found inside the temple, loaded onto one of the transportation platforms. We still do not know why the Founders had so many of them, but they were there, so the Town Council agreed to move them into the town. Oh!”

Hektor's eyes suddenly widened and the old man leapt to his feet. “By my ancestor's memories, how could I have forgotten?” He whirled around. “Daniel, have you examined the statues closely? Oh, what am I saying: of course not? You would have said something if you had. Here, follow me.”

Daniel blinked at Hektor's back and then gathered their glasses and the stiff cloths their flatbreads had been wrapped in before quickly following. Hektor lead him to a low fence which had a large, leafy tree overhanging it, partially hiding a statue with its long branches. Hektor beckoned Daniel over to the fence.

“On the other side is the schoolyard,” Hektor explained, his body practically vibrating with excitement. “As a boy I often climbed this tree. It was always a challenge to see how far you could climb before an adult saw you. I am now too old to climb it, but it should be sturdy enough to hold you. Go on.”

Daniel had never climbed trees as a child. Even as a part of SG1 he very rarely climbed trees. And yet he now did so with only slight hesitation. It was a very good climbing tree, with large, easily-
accessible branches. He felt ridiculous, but Hektor was clearly excited to show him something and he was certainly curious to find out what it was. Finally, he pulled himself up to sit on a thick branch just above Athena’s head.

From this angle he could see over her shoulder, directly onto the pages of the book she was holding. Daniel’s eyes widened. The book had writing on its pages. Daniel reached out carefully to steady himself on the statue's shoulder as he leaned over to get a better look.

That wasn't Latin. Or Greek. There were exactly eight lines of script running across the pages: two in Ancient, two in Asgard, two in Nox and two in Furling.

*Hidden from sight, Victory is the sword that protects. When wisdom fails, lay down the sword and instead take up the shield.*

“I thought the scripts had looked familiar, but I could not remember where I'd seen them,” said Hektor. “It has been so long since I was climbing trees.”

Daniel looked down at him. “This is amazing,” he said. “Low level energy readings... Rodney said they were giving off low level energy readings!”

He scrambled down as quickly as he could, nearly falling as his feet missed the fence, although he managed to catch himself in time. He ran towards the Tower, where he knew Steve was helping with moving supplies into one of the cellars.

“Steve!” he called out as he approached.

Steve paused and set down a box of jars next to the open hatch at the base of the tower. “Daniel?” he asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Come with me, there's something I need you to try.”

Steve frowned in confusion, but followed Daniel to the centre of the town square, where two of the statues stood proudly upon a large, elaborately-carved marble pedestal. One held a sword, the other a shield and both gleamed white beneath the late afternoon sun.

“Okay, so this is mostly a hunch, but I think these might actually be some sort of devices,” Daniel began. “I'd like you to try and activate them.”

Steve stared at the statues for a moment. “That's- isn't it a bad idea to try an activate Ancient technology without knowing what it does?”

“Ah... well, yes, it is, but there's actually an inscription written inside the book that you can't see from this angle and based on it, I don't think they're dangerous. Might even have something to do with this ship we've found.”

Steve blinked and then shrugged. “Okay, I'll give it a try. Anywhere in particular you want me to be touchin' for this?”

“Uh, try the book.”

“Okay.”

Steve reached out a hand to the statue with the sword – the one at the MET had also been holding a sword – and closed his eyes to concentrate. After a few moments, a faint blue light began to glow from inside the book and then there was a soft hiss. Steve's eyes flew open. Daniel took a step
forward, his eyes widening. Both men stared as Athena's toga pulled apart to reveal a hollow core.

And two marble tablets.

Daniel reached out with shaking hands and carefully picked one up to examine. “It's the same,” he whispered. “This is exactly the same tablet that was inside the statue at the MET.”

He looked up to meet Steve's eyes. The Captain looked stunned. Then, without a single word, walked over to the second statue and placed his hand on its book. Just like with the first one, a faint blue light glowed inside the book. A few moments later, the shield lit up bright red.

They were still trying to figure out what the shield was supposed to be doing when Daniel's radio crackled to life.

“SG1 this is McKay, what the hell are you guys doing?!”

Daniel exchanged a look with Steve.

“McKay, this is Mitchell. What are you talking about? Over.”

“I picked up a sudden energy spike about fifteen minutes ago and while I was trying to figure out what was going on, one of the statues in the hanger started glowing and giving off the exact same energy reading! From what I can tell, it's sending out some sort of subspace beacon.”

Daniel winced and activated his radio. “Uh hi, this is Daniel. Sorry, that was us. I had Steve try to activate the statues to see what they did.”

“Jesus Jackson, you tryin' to get yourself killed more than usual?! Turn the damn things off.”

Daniel rolled his eyes at Cam's hysterics. “You know, it's not like the Ori don't already know how to find this place.”

“Yeah, but we don't want them findin' it sooner!”

“Okay as much time as I don't have to be listening to you two yammer on, given that I have an entire ship to get flight-worthy on my own, but I don't think the Ori will be able to detect this signal. It's using a very odd frequency and the only reason I found it is because this ship seems to have sensors on board specifically designed to detect it.”

“Oh, that's interesting,” said Daniel. “Because the statues originally came from the temple.”

“You know what, that's great and all, but turn that beacon off anyway.”

“We're on it.” He looked over to see Steve already reaching up to turn it off. “So how's that ship looking anyway, Rodney?”

“If I have no more interruptions then I think she should be ready by tomorrow... maybe early afternoon so that I can get some sleep before we attempt to actually fly her.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel saw the red light disappear from the shield. “Sounds good, Rodney.”
The sun was preparing to set for the day when SG1 and the Avengers stood in front of the Stargate again. Cam watched Daniel dial the address.

“So, you're sure about going?” Daniel looked over his shoulder to ask him. Again.

He rolled his eyes and valiantly resisted the urge to strangle the archaeologist.

“Yes, Daniel, I'm sure,” he said. “Look, you've said it yourself: I'm the best man for the job. It has to be a familiar face that goes through, and you're needed here to translate and Vala's still working with Beckett tryin' ta keep people alive. Besides, I'll be next to useless on the ship without the gene!”

“Yes, but you are the highest-ranking officer.”

Cam snorted. As if that had ever mattered. “Yeah, and as you've also pointed out, this ain't a military operation. The only reason anyone's been looking at me to lead is out of courtesy – not that that's anything unusual. I mean, the Avengers don't fit into the ranking system in the first place and you don't out-rank me only because you're a civilian! Seriously Daniel, my feelings aren't getting hurt here. In fact I'm volunteering.”

Daniel ducked his head in what looked like embarrassment, but Cam caught the small smile tugging at his mouth. He grinned and bounded up the steps to the gate where he turned and raised a hand to wave at the group that had come to see him off.

“Well, good luck guys,” he said. “And hopefully I'll see y'all tomorrow at the rendezvous coordinates.”

Putting their well-wishes behind him, Cam turned and walked through the gate.

On the other side, he was greeted by staff weapons. Cam calmly raised his hands in surrender and grinned at the jaffa guards.

“Hey, whoa, relax there guys!” he said. “I'm Colonel Cameron Mitchell of SG1. I'm looking for Teal'c of Chulak. He around?”
Sixth Interlude

Chapter Notes

Hello and welcome to the next installment! =D As always, thank to everyone who commented or left kudos on the story. I'm thrilled to hear that you're enjoying it!

Anyway, before we get to the actual story, I just wanted to mention where I stand with Agents of SHIELD season 2 since I've been asked by a few people. Having finally caught up with the series, I've decided to stay with my original plan. So the story will include the initial cast ect set-up we got from the first episode and then continue to be AU from there. I think AoS is doing some neat things, but they directly contradict something I'd been planning to do with this story and would really complicate things besides. Anyone who's following the show might've noticed my slight mention of one of the newer characters on the show, but to be fair I'd encountered this character before in EMH.
Well, on to the next interlude!

Cassie stood on the sidelines and watched in awe as Pepper Potts took instant control of the press conference and weaved a lovely tapestry out of words and pleasant smiles, all without stumbling or losing her place as the press searched for holes and missed stitches. It was like magic.

Because it was perfectly logical for Stark Industries to want to reward their employees for all their hard work in preparation for the highly-successful launch of the newest Starkphone by giving them two days off with pay. A flash of perfect teeth and every person in the country no doubt wished they worked for Stark Industries. Oh, but of course, SI wasn't becoming complacent and there were new, exciting things in the works. Unfortunately Mister Stark was away working on something she wasn't able to speak to just yet (Cassie snickered at her choice of words, but agreed with Pepper that not mentioning that Tony was working with the air force was a wise choice – especially given they weren't entirely certain the air force knew that Tony Stark was working for the air force), but here was the head developer of the new in-home monitoring system the company was working on.

The thin, balding man in his mid-thirties that replaced Pepper on the podium was much less put-together and stammered during his presentation, eyeing the press gathered before him as though they were a pack of wild dogs. Hungry wild dogs. Cassie winced, feeling sorry for him.

“Well, that went well,” said Pepper as she came to stand next to Cassie. There was a hint of tension around her eyes, but it was barely noticeable beneath the satisfied smile.

“That was amazing,” Cassie told her. “Unfortunately, this guy looks like he's going to get eaten alive.”

“Hm, yes, it's unfortunate that Tony can't be here: he's good at giving the press both a show and just enough relevant information to make them think they got something out of him.”

Cassie was thoughtful for a moment. “You know, I can't help but wonder how Uncle Daniel would
be at something like this.” She sighed. “Not that we'll likely ever find out.”

Pepper reached down and squeezed her hand, smiling encouragingly. “Don't worry, they'll make it back.”

Cassie looked up in surprise. “No, that's not what I– oh, wait, that's right. You weren't there for that conversation.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She'd been trying very hard not to think about it. “You know they're going against orders, right?”

Pepper nodded. “Yes, but Daniel's not military, so it's not like they can court-martial him...”

“But he did sign a confidentiality agreement.” Pepper's eyes widened. “Even they save the world thanks to Daniel, he could still, theoretically be tried for treason.”

A hand flew to her mouth in horror. “But surely, they wouldn't... not if he's a hero.”

Cassie smiled bitterly. “He's already a hero many times over, Ms Potts. All of SG1 is. But he's also vocal and persistent and has made some powerful enemies over the years, people who want the focus of the SGC to be on military acquisitions. Luckily he's managed to persuade, or inspire, enough support for the historical and humanitarian aspects of the project to keep it alive, but without him that portion will probably be discontinued or at least severely diminished.”

Pepper's eyes narrowed. “I only know a little about this SGC project, but I know enough to not feel entirely comfortable with the thought of the military in complete control of it.”

Cassie nodded and then turned to watch the scientist at the podium. He wasn't sweating quite so badly anymore as he explained his research, although his eyes still watched the journalists warily. She scanned the journalists and then froze when she found one looking back. The woman was pretty with long wavy blonde hair and a calculating expression on her face. She also didn't seem to be at all interested in the new in-home monitoring system, although she turned her attention back to the podium after a moment.

“Who's that?” Cassie asked Pepper quietly.

“Christine Everhart from Vanity Fair. I'd tell you not to worry about her, but she's actually pretty clever with a good instinct for a story. She was the one who brought Tony's attention to his weapons being sold on the black market a couple of years ago...”

Pepper fell silent and Cassie looked up at her. The CEO of Stark Industries was biting her lip thoughtfully. “Cassie,” she finally said after a long pause, during which Ms Everhart had looked back to them with a raised eyebrow. “How exactly is it that you know so much about a classified government project?”

Cassie blinked. “My mother worked on it as CMO and I was, uh, directly involved with one – no, two – of their missions...” She trailed off, her eyes suddenly widening. Not thinking, she grabbed Pepper's hand. “Oh my god, I've never signed the confidentiality agreement! When it happened I was too young to legally sign anything and later I guess it just never occurred to anyone to change that – or maybe they wanted to keep my name off the books as much as possible to protect me...”

“To protect you?” Pepper frowned. “Cassie, I don't want you to do anything if it's going to put you in danger.”

She shook her head. “I'm already in danger. And quite frankly it's a miracle no one's made the connection and come after me before.”
Her eyes slid towards the reporter, who wasn't even trying to pretend she wasn't watching them closely anymore. Cassie wondered if the woman could read lips.

“Do you think she can be trusted?”

Pepper shrugged. “As much as any reporter can,” she said. “But I suppose I would trust her to tell the truth, to dig for the truth and wait until she had the big picture before she published unsubstantiated rumours. She also doesn't seem like the type to cave easily to political pressure.”

Cassie nodded. “Okay, because this truth is going to be dangerous.”

Christine Everhart certainly seemed to have an avid sixth sense for a story. She lingered after the press conference broke up and her fellow reporters had begun to rush off to their respective newsrooms, pretending to organize the contents of her satchel. After the room had nearly emptied, she slung the leather satchel over her shoulder and began to walk slowly towards Pepper, who was talking to her media relations coordinator and the scientist who'd presented in Tony’s stead.

Cassie intercepted her before she’d reached the podium.

“Ms Everhart?” she said politely.

The reporter stopped and turned to her, blue eyes looking her up and down curiously. “Yes?”

Cassie stuck her hand out and smiled, trying her best to imitate her uncle. “My name is Cassandra Fraiser. Ms Potts tells me you're an investigative reporter who's not afraid of political pressure.”

One perfectly plucked eyebrow rose in surprise. “Oh she does, does she?” The reporter looked back to Pepper for a moment before apparently coming to a decision. She turned to face Cassie fully and shook her hand with a firm, precise grip. “Well, political pressure just means that there's something someone wants to keep secret.”

Cassie cocked her head at the comment. “And you don't think that some things are kept secret for a reason?”

The woman grinned, and her smile was all teeth. “Kid, everyone keeps secrets for a reason; won't stop me from digging for them. This is a free, democratic country and people have a right to know what the people in power want to kept hidden. Sure, sometimes the reasons are benevolent, but the people who benefit the most from secrets are usually the ones keeping them.”

“What if it was something so big, so... amazing and terrifying that it could change the world. What if the reason it's being kept secret is because those in charge are afraid of what will happen should everyone learn the truth? Because the truth could change the world for the better, or for the worse.”

Christine Everhart was looking at her thoughtfully. “Does it have something to do with why Mister Stark isn't here?”

Cassie blinked. She hadn't expected that question. “Uh, not really. I mean, yes, I guess at the moment that's where he is, but it's not something he's directly involved in.”

“But this isn't all rhetorical then?”

“No.” Cassie took a deep breath. “Pepper says I can trust you at least as far as being fair to the truth. Can I?”

“Of course,” she huffed. “What is this about: some sort of scam, a government conspiracy?”
“I have a story to tell you. Apparently there's a television station that has exclusive footage and such and is waiting for the go-ahead from the government to play it, but no print journalist has this information.” She met the woman's wide eyes. “Well, my aunt said that one did once, but he never made it to the presses. Died in a hit and run.”

The journalist’s eyes widened even more, a hint of fear appearing for a moment, before flinty determination took its place.

Cassie smiled sadly. “Look, I know some of the people involved and while they would never do anything like that, there are others on the sidelines who wouldn't think twice. I can give you the story of the century, but you need to be aware there's risk. And that the truth really is every bit as amazing as it is absolutely terrifying.”

She fell silent and waited as Christine Everhart stared at her, eyes narrowed in thought.

“What are you getting out of this?” she finally asked.

“Let's just say that right now someone I care about is risking their life to save all of us and even if they succeed and survive, there's still a chance they'll be condemned for doing it. And I can't be there with him to help protect him, but maybe if I do this I can make it so that the Powers That Be of the government and military can't just shove everything he's done under a convenient rug.”

Christine Everhart smirked. “You want to get public opinion on your side? Makes sense. Fair warning though, I don't play sides. If I investigate your friend then I won't go easy on him.”

Cassie grinned. “It would defeat the purpose if you did, Ms Everhart. My uncle doesn't need you to sing his praises. He's no saint, but I think his actions will speak for themselves.”

“We'll see. And call me Christine.”

Once Pepper was finished giving her staff directions, she led Cassie and Christine to the private elevator, which took them to the Avenger's common floor. They were silent on the way up and had Cassie not been deeply contemplating the best approach to the subject, she might've wondered at the tension between the other two women. The doors opened too soon. Cassie still had no idea how to make Christine believe her.

She wrung her hands nervously and then froze as a metaphorical lightbulb lit up inside her mind.

She raised her hands and stared at them

“JARVIS,” she then said, looking up to the ceiling. “Could you please ask Bruce to come up to the living room and bring a blood kit with him?”

“Of course, Ms Fraiser.” There was a pause and then: “Doctor Banner says he will be up momentarily.”

“While we wait for him, I'll just go make us some coffee,” said Pepper. She turned to Christine with a pleasantly bland smile. “Would you like some, Ms Everhart?”

“Yes, please, I'd love some coffee Ms Potts.”

Ten minutes later Bruce rushed out of the elevator carrying a large first aid kit.

“Alright, what happened? Is it a toxin or...” He trailed off at the sight of three women calmly sitting around the living room drinking coffee. He blinked and looked to Cassie. “JARVIS said you wanted a blood kit.”
Cassie eyed the duffle-sized first aid kit sheepishly. “I literally meant just the blood kit.”

“Oh. Why?”

She placed her coffee cup down onto the side table beside the large armchair. “Because in a few minutes I'll need you to draw a sample of my blood. As proof.”

Bruce looked at her oddly and then nodded slowly. Across from her, where she was leaning against the corner of the sofa, Pepper's eyes widened. Christine, meanwhile, was closely watching everyone's expressions.

Cassie smiled and looked at the reporter. “Christine, this is Doctor Bruce Banner. Doctor Banner, this is Christine Everhart of Vanity Fair.”

Bruce's eyebrow rose in surprise, but he walked over to shake the blonde woman's hand in greeting. Cassie could practically see the wheels spinning in Christine's mind as she tried to figure out who Bruce was and where he fit into everything.

Bruce sat on the sofa next to Pepper and they all looked at her expectantly. She swallowed, her eyes darting down to the voice recorder resting innocuously in Christine's hand. She'd never had to tell this story before: the people who were allowed to know, already knew it. Taking one last, fortifying breath, she looked directly at Christine.

“Okay, so like I said, I have a story to tell,” she finally began. “It starts about eleven years ago in a village, a small humble farming village where no one had ever heard of a car, or television, or electricity, and their idea of running water the river that flowed a little to the west. The villagers were simple people: honest, hard-working, and faithful to their god and his decrees. It wasn't a glamorous life, but it was the way they'd lived for centuries and they were content.”

Cassie paused to take a breath and to push back the swell of emotion she could feel wanting to burst out.

“Just past the edge of the village stood giant stone circle. The villagers called it the God's Circle, because it was the doorway their god and his messengers used. One day – a sunny day in the middle of the planting cycle – the God's Circle began to spin, only it wasn't their god who stepped through that day. It was a group of four people dressed in strange clothes and carrying weapons the villagers didn't recognize. The group said they were explorers, humans just like the villager, but from another world far away.”

Cassie smiled softly, remembering the excitement she and the other children had felt at meeting people like them from another world. One of them had had a bag of liquorice and shared it with them. Cassie hadn't been able to stomach liquorice since.

“It was late in the day, so the village elder invited them to share the evening meal. The explorers were cheerful and listened closely as the elder told them stories of their village and of their god. And then the sun set and the explorers looked up at the sky and they were amazed. They told the villagers that the strange shape that had been growing in the night sky was very rare, and asked their permission to bring back some of their own equipment to study it. In exchange they offered them seeds for new vegetables that grew well in the type of soil that surrounded the village, and the design for a new type of plow that would make farming easier and allow them to make their fields larger.

I know it doesn't sound impressive, but the sky was always there and looking at it didn't cost anyone anything, but well-growing vegetables and a better plow could've easily made the
difference in how many people survived the winter. The villagers agreed to the trade, the village elder giving up his own home for the explorers to set up the equipment they brought through the God's Circle two days later.”

Christine, Pepper and Bruce were watching her with rapt attention. Cassie took a deep breath before continuing.

“On the third day, the God's Circle spun again and the villagers heard a familiar noise. They looked up to see the god's messengers streaking through the sky like big black birds. The explorers were frightened, and reached for their weapons, but the villagers smiled. Then a fine mist began to fall down upon the village. The villagers rejoiced, for surely this had to be a blessing from their god.”

Cassie closed her eyes, the memory still vivid even after all these years.

“And then, one by one, they fell to the ground.”

Someone gasped and Cassie heard a soft 'Oh God', but she was too lost within the memory to pay attention to the voices. After a moment, when she felt she was able to speak again, she opened her eyes.

“All except one: a little girl, about eight years old. she watched as around her everyone in the village fell to the ground, including the animals. She ran to her parents and found them lying on the ground too, not moving. She tried to wake them up, but they still didn't move. She was scared and alone and had no idea what was happening. Time passed and then the God's Circle began to spin again, so she ran and hid in a bunch of bushes. It was another team of explorers, dressed the same as the first group. One of them was a lady with short blonde hair. She found the little girl and smiled at her with sad, horrified eyes. They her home with them through the God's Circle.

Their home was very different from the village, but the people were friendly and they tried to make the little girl feel comfortable, to take her mind from what had happened. Especially the doctor, who was always smiling even when the little girl could tell she was sad and worried.”

Cassie took a deep breath, pushing back the tears she could feel forming at those first memories of the woman who would become her mother.

“Then the little girl suddenly started getting sick. She started feeling hot and her whole body ached. She-I don't really remember much from that time.” Cassie told her audience with a wry smile.

“Everything felt hot and my whole body hurt. Time passed and then suddenly I was waking up alone in the cold dark. I called out for Sam, who was the woman who'd found me in the village and had spent a lot of time sitting with me in the base infirmary. And then a light turned on and a huge metal door opened and Sam ran to me and held on.”

She swallowed and held up her hands, staring at them as though she could physically see the naquadah swimming through her veins.

“It was a nuclear missile silo,” she whispered. “I was sick because there is a metal called naquadah in my blood and it was coming together somehow, counting down... becoming a bomb powerful enough to destroy all of Colorado Springs. In the end, I obviously didn't detonate and since then the cells that create the 'bomb' have been deactivated so I'm not dangerous.”

She looked back up at them. “That's my story, Christine. My name is Cassandra Fraiser and, other than the presence of trace elements of a metal called naquadah in my blood, I'm genetically one hundred percent human. And I was born on another planet.”
The three of them looked stunned.

“This 'god' turned an innocent child into a weapon,” Bruce whispered and when he looked up, his eyes were bright green and when he next spoke, his voice seemed to echo with a second, deeper voice. “This is who the others have gone off to fight?”

Cassie shook her head, ignoring the fleeting memory of her Aunt Sam with glowing eyes and a second voice that wasn't hers. “No, the Goa'uld empire fell several years ago. The Ori have nothing to do with them. They're not even from this galaxy.”

“Wait, what do you mean gone off to fight?” Christine asked, looking both excited for the story and afraid of the answer.

“Right now, there's an alien armada on its way to Earth,” Cassie answered her. “Their technology is of a level we can't even begin to match. And my uncle, Doctor Daniel Jackson, is out there with Captain America and several of the Avengers risking his life to find that one miracle that could save this planet. He probably would've done it alone, but he ended up meeting the Avengers at the MET on the day it was attacked...”

Christine's eyes widened. “Is this a military project we're talking about?” Cassie nodded. “Then he would've broken a confidentiality agreement to tell the Avengers, which is treason.”

“Exactly. The truth is Earth isn't ready to face this armada at least partially because the people in charge were too focused on Hydra and maintaining the secrecy of their project to continue searching the galaxy for a way to defeat these aliens. We have allies out there who might've been willing to help us, but we cut all ties with them.”

She watched as the journalist took a deep breath and shook her head. When she looked back to Cassie, her eyes were sharp. “I'll need that blood make-up to verify your story.”

Cassie nodded. She'd expected as much and began to roll up her sleeve for Bruce. True to her profession, Christine took the opportunity to fire off questions at Cassie. About the village, about planet, about their god, and whether she'd ever been back. Cassie answered what she could, what she remembered. And also told her about the coming-of-age ritual the children of the village used to preform that turned out to be a way for their 'god' to gather information about his experiments.

“What can you tell me about the people who found you?” Christine finally asked.

Cassie smiled, feeling less brittle now. This was the part she'd been waiting for.

“A lot of it is classified, and some of it I can only guess at because of stuff I've overheard,” she began. “But the people who rescued me are the reason I came to you in the first place. Well one of them is, anyway. If you'll listen, I'd now like to tell you the story of Daniel Jackson, the man who opened the Stargate.”
Given how crazy next week is going to be for me (in a good way), I've decided to start posting Act V already. You'll get most of it this week, but the last part probably not until after Easter. Anyway, thanks for the crazy amounts of feedback on that last interlude!

As an aside: yes, I am aware that Nirrti as depicted in SG1 is female. However in Hindu mythology Nirrti does, in fact, change sex. In earlier Hinduism she's the female goddess of calamity, but later is described as the god of terrifying aspect. This would be in line with the Goa'uld's ability to switch from male to female hosts, which I couldn't resist playing with. Cassie's referal to Nirrti as 'he' was deliberate, because I love the incongruity of it. Nirrti didn't seem to have a relationship of 'mingling with the masses' with the people of Cassie's village so it's more than possible that the only time they saw her was with a male host.

I mean, Selmak went from an old woman to Jacob: does that make Selmak a 'he' or a 'she'? Even better: does it actually matter? Neither the Goa'uld nor the To'kra seem to think of themselves in terms of their host's sexuality anyway (especially since otherwise it would result in a Harsesis, which is forbidden).

NOTE

Somehow, they found time to sleep that night, taking turns watching the gate. Even Doctor Beckett was eventually persuaded to lay down on a cot in one of the recovery rooms for a few hours, before his sleep was interrupted by panicked nurses. Just after two o'clock in the morning, the Ori plague claimed its first victim. It had been inevitable, but the loss hit them all hard, because they knew it was only the first. The small hospital was nearly full to capacity as more people were being brought in for treatment almost by the hour. One of the Russian marines had been the first Earth humans to fall ill.

Steve had taken over watch from Natasha, urging her to get some rest. She'd nodded to him before disappearing into the night. He sat on a log half-way between the town and the stargate, alert and watching for movement.

It was funny, really, all he'd ever wanted was to fight for what was right. And a body that would let him. Now here he was, seventy years later and millions of light years away from his birthplace, and he was still fighting bullies. And the Ori were worse bullies than even Hydra, who at least didn't bother pretending they were peaceful and caring.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the treetops and colour the sky with radiant hues of pink and purple (Steve didn't think he'd ever seen such a deep and vibrant shade of purple in the sky before), when the Stargate came to life.
Steve's eyes widened and he leapt to his feet, activating his comm immediately. They'd been told that sentries in the Tower could see the gate quite clearly, but they wouldn't tell his team.

“This is Rogers,” he said loudly. “Someone's dialling in. I repeat the Stargate is active.”

“Roger that Rogers,” Clint was the first to respond, his voice crackling like someone who'd just woken up. Steve rolled his eyes – Clint was the only one who still found that funny. “We're on our way.”

One by one they all responded, sounding alert if not particularly happy about it. Until the last radio transmission came through:

“This is Lorne, I hear ya Cap. I'll see if I can get McKay to put a rush on getting the ship up in the air.”

Steve meanwhile ran up closer to the Stargate and crouched behind a large rock for cover. The wormhole activated and he tensed, waiting to see who or what would come through. Nothing happened. The wormhole remained active for several minutes and then disengaged. Steve frowned, but remained where he was, remembering the phase-shifting armband he'd used to infiltrate the SGC with Daniel.

He tapped his comm again. “This is Rogers; the wormhole has disengaged,” he whispered. “I didn't see anything come through. Do the Ori have phase-shifting tech?”

There was a pause. “Uh, not that we've seen,” said Daniel. “They don't even have cloaks for their ships. Not that they need them...”

“Could they have sent more of that plague through the gate?” Sam asked.

“Only if it was in a vessel of some sort; bacteria can't travel through the gate on their own.” Steve was surprised to hear Vala answer. “A radio signal perhaps?”

Steve rose to his feet, figuring that if anyone invisible had come through, then hiding behind the rock wasn't going to help him since they'd have seen him just as soon as passed it on their way to the village.

“I'm heading back towards the village,” he said into the comm. “If it's meant to be a diversion then they're expecting everyone to go the stargate to see what's going on.”

“Or they just don't want to be seen,” said Daniel.

Steve stopped part-way to the village, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end as he felt eyes on him. He swung around, his shield up and ready to deflect... but there was nothing there. Nothing except the bright sunrise and awakening green. And the feeling of invisible eyes on his skin. He took a deep breath, wondering if he was really being watched, or just paranoid because he was expecting it.

Carefully, he turned and continued on towards the town.

At the edge of town he was met with Natasha and two of the marines from Atlantis. Up in the air, he saw Sam flying above the town, watching from above. None of them had seen anything. Daniel and Vala joined them a few minutes later with several Aeneid guards. Apparently, the sentries in the Tower hadn't seen anything come through and neither had the Ancient monitors.

It was a mystery.
“Is there any way to find out where the wormhole originated from?” Natasha asked.

Daniel shrugged. “Yes, in theory. In practise... well, Rodney would be able to get the information from the DHD crystals, and if any of the Ancient tech up in the Tower is rigged to monitor the gate then they should’ve registered the address—”

There was suddenly a woman standing in front of Daniel.

Steve and everyone around him tensed and, in with their next breath, weapons were drawn and pointed at the figure. Which was quite possibly the strangest-looking person Steve had ever seen. He was immediately reminded of the fairy tales he’d read as a child. Despite his surprise, he couldn't help that his first instinct was that she couldn't possibly be dangerous. Her clothes were simple, but made of light-weight red, orange and pink-toned cloth and it looked like a thicket of bramble was growing within her thick mane of hair.

She smiled, looking like a wood nymph who'd lost her way. “Hello, Daniel,” she said, her voice soft and oddly melodic.

Daniel had jumped in surprise when she'd first appeared, but his expression quickly turned into delight. He smiled back warmly.

“Lya,” he said. “It's good to see you again. What are you doing here?”

Then he looked around and frowned at the soldiers and guards. “Seriously guys, put those weapons down. This is Lya of the Nox.”

Steve blinked. The Nox: they were one of the Four Great Races. The pacifists who had looked at the people of Earth and called them children. He relaxed and lowered his shield. He wouldn't fight folks who were peaceful. As if following his example, the others around him also lowered their weapons.

Two more figures materialized behind her: an older man who was small and just as delicate-looking as the woman though clearly still in the prime of his life and a boy who looked to be just on the cusp of manhood.

Daniel bowed to both of them. “Anteaus, it's been a long time and Nafrayu, you've certainly grown since the last time I saw you.”

The older man smiled and bowed back to Daniel. “Indeed, we are much surprised to find you here. The Nox hadn't ever expected to return to this place. The Alterans ascended before they could complete their final plans and the beacons were left incomplete. However, we had given our word we would answer the call should it ever come and so we are here.”

“What brings you and the people of Earth to Aeneid, Daniel?” Lya asked and Steve wondered if he was imagining the wariness in her voice.

“One of those statues had been brought to Earth and I found tablets inside with this stargate address,” Daniel responded. “A race known as the Ori – ascended beings like the Ancients – are currently trying to subjugate this galaxy and force its people to worship them, thus increasing their own power. Anyone who doesn't bend to their will, who refuses to cast aside their own beliefs and follow the Ori's teachings, is killed. Right now, they're heading for Earth. I was hoping the tablets would lead me to something that could help stop the Ori and their followers.”

Lya nodded, her expression grim.
"I sense a great sickness in this town," Anteaus suddenly said, a concerned frown on his face.

Daniel nodded. "A Prior, one of the Ori's messengers, was here two days ago. He brought the plague to the town because its people refused to worship his gods. One of our doctors is working with their doctors to try and find a cure."

The three Nox looked at each other and although he couldn't hear any words exchanged between them, Steve nevertheless got the impression they were somehow communicating. When they turned back to Daniel, Anteaus stepped forward.

"Show me," he said.

Daniel and Vala exchanged looks. "I'll take you to the hospital," said Vala and then led him away.

Lya meanwhile gazed over towards the tower. Daniel looked at her curiously. "Why did you come here?" he asked after several moments had passed in silence. "You've steadfastly refused to interfere with, uh, younger cultures, so why come now?"

Nafrayu looked up at the question and glanced at Lya for a moment before turning his eyes back to the strange town around him. The sun had by now risen high enough that most of the town was slowly waking and leaving their homes. A steady breeze brought with it the smell of meat and bread. Colourful songbirds flew above the rooftops, occasionally resting on a window sill or drain pipe. Danger felt far away.

Steve shivered. Some of the most beautiful mornings he'd ever seen had led to the bloodiest battlefields.

"Have you been to the temple?" Lya asked suddenly.

Steve watched as Daniel nodded slowly. "Yes, we saw the Meeting Place."

Lya inclined her head with a pleased smile. "The Meeting Place here was special. It was where the scientists met. Our histories say that the Alterans wanted to create something that would kept this galaxy safe in case dangers from outside tried to invade."

"The Wraith," Daniel whispered. "They were afraid of the Wraith."

"Among others."

"And they brought humans here to settle the planet, so that after they ascended there would be someone here who could use the technology they built."

"No, they brought them here as guardians."

Daniel apparently hadn't expected that response. He froze and blinked at the Nox woman in surprise.

"Is that why the temple's so far away?" Natasha's voice interrupted the ensuing silence. "So that it could only be found if the people living here showed us the way?"

Lya didn't answer with words, but inclined her head like a teacher would to a clever student.

Daniel nodded to himself. "The Ancients did love their puzzles..." He made a face. "Actually, come to think of it, the Asgard have a thing for testing people too and this seems like a combination of both. Hiding things and leaving clues on how to find them, but making sure they're
of the sort that only someone at a certain level of technological evolution and knowledge would be able to figure out.”

He paused. “There was more, wasn't there? But they never managed to finish it. The statues all held either a gate address to this planet, or a beacon to call you and the others.”

Lya nodded. “The Alterans began to grow sick. When they realized the plague had finally reached them, they sealed the temple and ascended, leaving the last phase of their project unfinished.”

“But they left behind just enough clues to make sure what they'd built could be found again should it be needed. Except that I still don't understand why they didn't use it. Rodney – one of our scientists – says the ship is completed and fully operational. That means they could've used it to go back and defeat the Wraith. Or the Asgard could've used it against the replicators.”

Lya shook her head. “I am sorry, Daniel, but I only know what I have read in our histories.”

Commotion from down the street caught Steve's attention. He looked up and saw Hektor rushing towards them, another old man in tow along with two of the apprentices. Daniel took the lead and introduced Lya and Nefrayu (at least that's what it seemed like to Steve, who was picking up the language in bits and pieces, but not nearly quickly enough to understand the bombardment of words coming from them). Lya, it turned out, spoke fluent Ancient.

After a while, Nefrayu wandered away from the adults and casually inched his way towards Steve, who pretended not to notice his movements. He wasn't entirely sure he succeeded, because when he finally turned to the young man once he was standing next to him, he didn't startle at all. He seemed fascinated with the shield. His eyes darted up to meet Steve's, a request for permission.

Steve smiled and held the shield out towards him. Nefrayu carefully reached out and ran his fingers along the curve of the shield. Suddenly he blinked and pulled his hand away, startled.

“It vibrates,” he said, eyes widening.

Steve stared at him for a moment. “Uh, yeah,” he said, wondering how he'd known that with just a touch. “It's made out of a metal called vibranium. It's really rare, but it absorbs impact by channelling it into smaller vibrations along the surface – or at least that's how the man who made it for me explained it.” He gave a wry smile. “He may have been dumbing it down a bit for me. I'm not exactly a scientist.”

Nefrayu grinned. “No, that sounds right.” He looked around. “You are the only one with a shield. Are you also a soldier?”

Steve nodded. “I am.” He shook his head. “It's a long story. Originally the shield was just a cheap symbol, a gimick, but I liked it. I can use this as a weapon when I need to, but I didn't go off to war to kill people, I went to protect them. Back in my day there was this group who thought they were superior to the rest of the world and wanted to use force to rule it, to kill anyone who wasn't like them. I hate bullies, always have, and they were the worst of all.”

He paused and then just shook his head: this kid could tell the properties of vibranium just by touching it, why would he care to hear Steve's story? “Yeah, it's a long story. But the shield and me have been through some tough times together.”

Nefrayu nodded thoughtfully. “So you believe that the strong should protect the weak,” he said.

“I do.”
Nefrayu’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “That’s what O’Neill believed as well. No wonder the Asgard liked your people so much.”

“You knew the Asgard?” Steve asked.

“I did not, but my people did. The histories say we were once close friends, but after the alliance fell apart, they became too busy to stop and visit. The Nox have always held them in great honour: we held a week-long vigil when we heard of their passing.”

“If you hold them in such high esteem why weren’t you helping them to protect the rest of the galaxy?” said Sam, who’d been watching the two of them curiously since the beginning. “I mean, you were one of the Four Great Races or whatever, which means you’ve gotta have some really advanced tech stashed away somewhere.”

Nefrayu blinked when he looked at him and cocked his head. “Helping you or protecting you?” he asked. “You said you believe the strong should protect the weak: do you feel you are weak?”

Sam sputtered for a moment and Steve felt Natasha come to stand next to him. Nefrayu paused and shook his head.

“My grandfather says strength lies not in the destructive power of a lightening storm, but in the quiet steadfastness of the tree. No matter how vicious the storm, or how bitter the winter cold, it endures and flourishes once again when the danger has passed; knocked-off branches heal over and new ones grow in their place, new leaves and fruit sprout the next spring.”

“But strong enough winds can uproot the tree, lightening and forest fires can destroy it,” Natasha commented.

Nefrayu opened his mouth to reply, when a gentle hand landed on his shoulder. He looked up and smiled at Lya, who smiled back fondly – Steve realized she was probably his mother.

“Nothing is eternal,” Lya answered Natasha. “And every tree was once a sapling that bent with the wind and rain. That, too, is strength, but of a different sort.”

“So are we the sapling then?” Steve asked, curious.

Lya’s lips twitched. “You are no longer the flexible sapling, but you are not quite yet the tree. You have the strength, but lack the years and experience from which wisdom grows. And that is not something that can be taught, only learned.”

The Nox did not stay for very long. Less than an hour later, Anteaus and Vala returned and then he and the other two departed with Daniel, the Head Protector and several council members escorting them to the gate. The people of Aeneid were understandably happy for the cure to the plague even if it still took Carson several more hours to manufacture and distribute it.

At around noon they dragged the exhausted doctor out for some fresh air and food. Daniel couldn’t help but notice there were more flowers drawn on the outside of the hospital, some in patches and groups.

“It was amazing,” Carson told them around bites of marinated leaves stuff with vegetables and spiced meat. “I’ve ne’er seen anything like it. Anteaus just reached out an’ ran his hands along the patient with his eyes closed, and he was chanting something under his breath, I think. Then he did the same to two others before going to the Ancient computers and then he touched them – didna move the buttons or so much as touch the controls, just put his hands on the machines and suddenly they were bursting to life. ’Twas all I could do to keep up with it all; like magic it was!”
Daniel felt light-headed from relief when Carson told them the plague's victims were slowly beginning to show signs of improvement. Of course, there was always the fear that a few would be too weak to recover, but the majority would be saved. If the Ori plague only took the three victims that had fallen to it so far, then Daniel – and possibly all of Aeneid – would be happy.

There was laughter as the townspeople prepared to hide from the Ori's armies. It was subdued and didn't completely drown out the anxiousness that infused the town, but it was there.

At around two o'clock their radios came to life.

“SGI this is Lorne, please respond.”

Daniel pressed his radio. “Lorne, this is Daniel. What's your status? Have the first hovercrafts of people arrived?”

“Affirmative. I've got an entire school of kids here, a bunch of elderly citizens and three harassed-looking teachers trying to keep order. They've all disembarked now and I'm really wishing I paid more attention to learning Ancient.”

“Do you want me to talk to them?”

“That would be great, thanks.”

And so Daniel spent the next ten minutes talking to the guard that had been sent to oversee the transport, and translating between him and Lorne over the radio. After the guard left, Daniel heard Lorne's Atlantis-issued comm go off.

“Okay, just got confirmation from McKay,” said Lorne a few minutes later. “He says he's awake and the ship is prepped, so we're ready to attempt to fly her.”

Daniel grinned. “That's great! I don't think you need anything from me for that, so good luck.”

There was a low chuckle over the radio. “Thanks Doc, I'll need it even if McKay will probably claim he doesn't. Lorne out.”

Then the radio went silent and Daniel hurried off to find the Head Protector.

Major Evan Lorne walked into the hanger, although calling it a hanger seemed... unassuming. Inside it looked more like a giant cavern made of stone and metal and moulded precisely to fit the ship. Or perhaps the ship itself had taken on the shape of the cavern. It dominated the space, leaving very little room for anything else. He'd looked at it from all sides earlier, both at the bottom level and along the top walkway, but he still couldn't quite put together a finished picture, because no matter where he stood, there was always so much more ship just out of the corner of his eye.

The colour scheme didn't help either. Most of the ship was made out of a metal that was so silver it looked nearly white under the bright lights in the hanger, except for the strips of black metal (it didn't look like a simple paint job) that were so dark they blended in with the shadows. The silver metal reflected light, but the black one almost seemed to devour it. Both metals were surprisingly smooth, so different than what he'd seen on any other spaceship in either the Milky Way or Pegasus...
and from the ground it reminded him of the underbelly of a fighter jet. Only bigger.

Using Daniel Jackson as a long-distance translator, he'd been assured the locals didn't really need them up top for anything and so he and his team were retreating to the ship to prepare for lift-off. Not that he had any idea as to how they were going to squeeze the ship out of here, unless the walkways and engineering platforms all retracted. Which, he supposed, was entirely possible.

Evan shook his head and led the rest of his team to the ship's cargo hold. Once inside, he activated the internal controls and watched as the large bay doors closed smoothly shut. The hold was empty though there was obviously plenty of room for supplies and maybe a half dozen or so puddlejumpers.

He stopped by engineering before going up to the main bridge. McKay was hovering over the controls and vibrating in a frantic sort of way that spoke of not enough sleep and too much sugar and coffee (the scientist had somehow managed to persuade Jackson to share his coffee stash along with his surprising – but certainly not unwelcome – stash of chocolate). Lorne wasn't concerned, however, knowing that McKay had gone to sleep at some point early in the morning and gotten at least five hours in. The man was many things, but Lorne knew he could at least count on his desire not to take unnecessary risks with people's lives, especially his own.

“McKay, you good to go?” he said.

McKay rolled his eyes. “No major, nothing has happened in the last half hour that the ship has been sitting stationary in its docking port to make it less ready than it was then. If there are problems, I won't know about them at this point until we actually try to get the engines going.”

Evan nodded. “Okay, Doc, just checking. So you wanna be down here for lift-off or on the bridge?”

He actually paused in his motions for that, looking thoughtful for a moment. “I think I'll stay down here. I mean, ideally there should be someone on the bridge too, but if it's a choice then I'll need direct access to the primary systems and machinery if any problems do pop up.”

“Okay, then I'll head on up and get her started.”

Evan didn't have a lot of experience with the Command Chair as his gene wasn't natural and therefore not as strong as Sheppard's or Beckett's, but he'd had the same training all the major gene carriers on Atlantis had received. And, really, it wasn't all that different from controlling a puddlejumper except for, well, everything. Nothing beat on-the-job training.

He was just going to have to trust that McKay knew what he was doing.

Evan took a deep breath and lowered himself slowly into the chair, settling his hands over the ends of the handrests, where he knew the activation controls were located. He felt it come to life beneath him, the power reaching out to connect with him even as the chair itself leaned back and angled itself upwards. A holographic screen appeared above his head, directly in his line of sight. He read energy levels, life support, engine crystal status and drone numbers along with so many other smaller system read-outs... The sudden influx of information made him momentarily dizzy.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Concentrate, he told himself silently. There was only one system he needed right now. He opened his eyes and the screen had changed. Instead of endless read-outs, it was showing him an external schematic of the hanger and the ship nested inside. Like he'd suspected, there was no way to get out without doing something about those walkways. But they were too sturdy to be just a temporary structure, so going on instinct, he
thought about getting rid of them.

He could feel the chair grow just a little warmer as the ship responded, sending out a signal. Moments later, the walkways on the schematic began to retract. Evan smiled. But now they still had to get out. He thought about opening a doorway in the hanger, assuming somewhere there had to be a hatch or maybe a giant escape tunnel or something. He felt the ship respond, but he couldn't see anything happening on the schematic.

He wished he could see it for his own eyes.

His eyes widened as the screen changed again, this time to an external view of the ship. He amused himself for a few moments by swirling the camera around with his mind just because he could – it did give them the opportunity to get a better look around. Then he frowned, aiming it at the walls and then the ceiling, trying to figure out what had changed. Wait.

“Holy...” he tapped his comm. “McKay, this is Lorne: is that ceiling doing what I think it is?”

There was a pause.

“McKay here... did you just say the ceiling? Oh, huh. I was wondering how were going to get out of here. Okay, this is cool.”

“Wait, do you mean that until now you weren't sure we were going to be able to get this ship out of here?”

“No, I didn't how we were going to get out of here. I've been concentrating on the engines and doing system diagnostics and figuring out whether it's still a work-in-progress or not. The Ancients may not have been the greatest at note-taking and they sucked at warning labels, but they weren't dumb. You don't build a ship like this without having a way to get it above ground. But to answer your orginal question: did the ceiling and several hundred metres of soil and plants above it just phase into another – although interestingly enough still visible – dimension, then yes, that's exactly what it did. Which is, as I just said, really really cool. So you had better make sure we survive saving the Earth, Major, so that I can come back and get a closer look at this.”

Evan chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. “Got it, Doc.”

He turned his concentration to the engines, felt the system perk up. “All right then, hold on tight everyone, I'm gonna try starting this thing.” he said loud enough for the entire bridge crew (all three of them) to hear. “Let me know the second you see something wonky.”

Three 'yes, sirs' sounded around him and Evan closed his eyes to concentrate on firing up the systems. This wasn't at all like flying a jumper, where he could think of himself as a pilot; the Aeneidans called their pilots Operators, which he felt was a bit closer to the truth. It wasn't that he'd become a part of the ship, because he could still feel himself as a separate entity within the hum of energy and whirling, chaotic strands of programs, but the ship was instantly feeding him information so that he didn't need the read-outs on the holographic display for this. He knew where the sides of the ship were and how much clearance he had. He could feel the slight jolt to the systems as the crystals in the engine began to heat up and draw on power from the ship's ZPMs.

“Structural integrity is holding at maximum,” Lieutenant Mizner said from the main control panel at the front. “All other systems read in the green.”

“The crystal matrix is maintaining stable levels, manoeuvring thrusters are operating within normal parameters. You're good to go: take her up, Major.”
He could tell that everything was running smoothly – the ship was telling him that herself. But he appreciated the confirmation.

“Alright, here goes nothing,” he said.

He pushed the thought 'up' to the ship, picturing her rising out of the hanger. And with barely a shudder, she did. The world around him was vibrating slightly, but he could feel the ship steadily rising.

“Sir, on the left side–” he heard Captain Bergman begin.

“–I see it,” he said, immediately correcting the ship's slight list to the side. He watched the space around the ship, knowing there was only so much of it phased out of sync and reluctant to get the ship scratched just yet. He felt his palms sweating all over the Chair's controls as agonizing minutes passed and the ship was still surrounded by soil.

He knew the moment they breached ground-level. Evan smiled when he felt the sun shine onto the bridge from behind his eyelids, his grip on the chair tightening as he wrestled to keep a tight leash on his excitement as the rest of the ship slowly cleared the ground.

“We're clear, sir,” said Bergman, probably for everyone's benefit. A cheer rang out from the other two.

“Not bad, Major, you didn't even scratch her once: that'll give you bragging rights over Sheppard. Oh, and it looks like the ground has phase shifted back to solid again so you can land if you want to.”

Evan opened his eyes and grinned widely. “Thanks, McKay. Any reason we need to land?”

“No, none.”

“Then we should probably head on to the town.”

Before he headed off, he looked up into the holographic display and concentrated on the temple. The screen changed to an outside view from the ship. He hadn't had the chance to look at it from a distance before, but immediately recognized the classic Atlantean structures even if it hadn't been built as tall or as large as Atlantis herself. His eyes caught movement around the edge of the temple and he squinted at the screen... rearing back in surprise when it zoomed in. There were several tiny heads peeking out.

Lorne grinned and nudged the ship forward, sending her just a bit higher to avoid hitting the top of the tower. Just around the bend stood an entire school of curious children. His zoomed-in view caught their looks of amazement and excitement as, one by one, they began to wave up at the ship.

“Looks like we've got us a send off, guys,” he said loudly and his bridge crew chuckled. Evan took a deep breath and grew serious again. “Alright, let's get going.”

One of the Tower's side doors flew open and a young woman dressed in what looked like a light-weight version of the guard's uniform dashed out, stretching her long legs to their fullest potential as she sprinted through Aeneid's streets, long golden braid trailing behind her. Townspeople
stepped out of her way, recognizing the silvery white sash across the front of her uniform as the mark of a messenger. They paused in their work and exchanged worried glances, wondering whether the news was good or bad.

She ignored the glances aimed at her, intent on her destination, her footfalls light and quick. In the market district there was a pile of crates smelling of sweet fruit blocking the road; she nimbly leapt across it and then ducked around the cart they were being piled into. She felt a slight burn as her right arm scraped against the corner of a market stall when she had to run around another cart being loaded with salted meat. She pushed on.

The main streets were more crowded than usual, people hurrying to pack supplies into the shelters and onto the floating transportation platforms heading to the temple. There were too many people, and they couldn't see her to get out of her way. The messenger turned into a narrow side-street. These winding backstreets were like a second home to her, but it would take longer. She pushed her legs to go faster, feeling her muscles burn and her lungs heave as they struggled to keep up with her pace.

She would rest after the message had been delivered.

Finally, she rounded a corner and spotted the Head Protector helping to load crates onto the transportation platforms next to several of the Otherworlders. Workers paused and stepped out of her way, one of them grabbing an Otherworlder and stopping him from getting in her way, though she barely noticed as she barrelled past.

Someone up ahead must have seen her, because the Head Protector was already turning when she began to slow down. Her muscles trembled and sweat poured down her face, but she remained standing: she needed to deliver the message. Her heart throbbed in her ears: she could barely hear herself speak.

“Head Protector,” she said, as she gasped for air. “The Tower has seen something coming from the temple. It is large and flying above the trees. The sentries say they have never seen anything that could compare.”

“The ship, it has to be the ship!” said a man who came to stand beside the Head Protector – an Otherworlder, with short, dark hair and glass pieces over his eyes.

The Head Protector nodded to him in understanding and then turned to her. “Thank you, Mauvi,” she said.

The messenger bowed her head in acknowledgement and finally allowed her legs to crumble beneath her.

The ship was amazing, its hull smooth in a way that reminded him more of Earth sci-fi than any actual spaceship Daniel had ever seen. Parts of it were silver that gleamed beneath the afternoon sun, except for the waves of black metal that ran along either side. It reminded him of a black opal: deep, midnight black with just a hint of shimmer. Like the Aurora-class battleships, it was long and bullet-shaped, except that the front looked like it had been flattened with a mallet and then stretched to the sides, making it resemble a hammerhead shark. It even had a raised upper section that was narrow, but ran along a good third of the ship. If he squinted it looked almost like a stubby
fin. The back section of the ship widened gradually and then ended abruptly where the metal created a casing around the thrusters.

The bottom of the hull was flattened between three sets of manoeuvring thrusters, although because of the metal's reflecting surface that wasn't obvious until it began to land onto the ground half-way between the town and the stargate.

“Woah, okay that thing is slick!” Sam exclaimed as he jumped down from the hovercraft the Head Protector had commandeered to get them here.

“Sam, it's a spaceship, I'm pretty sure it would be amazing no matter what it looked like,” said Steve from beside him, grinning madly.

Daniel chuckled. “Oh I've seen a lot of different spaceships before and trust me, this thing's impressive-looking. It makes the Ori ships look big and clunky.”

“Not that looks will mean much if they blow us to pieces,” Clint commented casually. He was still on the hovercraft, leaning against the side as he watched the ship settle and then finally cut its engines.

“Major Lorne to SG1,” came a voice over the radio. “Well, we're here.”

Daniel snorted and reached for his radio. “This is Jackson. We noticed: any problems?”

“Nope, she's smooth sailor, sir. Can't wait to run her through her paces.”

“Hey, can we call her the Avenging Hawk?” Clint suddenly asked.

“No,” Steve answered immediately. Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel saw him cock his head. “Besides, she looks more like a fish than a bird.”

“The Avenging Shark?”

Daniel shook his head. “Hey, has she got a name?” he asked into the radio.

“Uh...”

“Yes, her name is Viltoriaus,” Rodney's voice answered, sounding smug.

Daniel blinked, before throwing his head back and laughing. Oh, that was just perfect. He could feel the others' inquisitive stares. And sure enough, when he looked back to them, they were all staring at him curiously – all except for Natasha, whose Latin had to good enough to figure it out.

“It means victory,” he said with a grin. “The ship's name is Victory.”
Stars sparkled far in the depths of space; giant balls of flaming gas that looked beautiful from a distance, but were deadly up close. And surrounding those stars – at that point called suns – would be planets, some inhabited, some not. The vastness felt infinite and cold, a frontier of neverending possibilities, of neverending nothingness.

But that was far away. Closer there were eight planets orbiting a single sun: the Solar System. Despite its size, it felt relatively small, isolated from the rest of the galaxy, though most of the billions of people living on the third planet from the sun wouldn't think so. Of course, most of them were looking at ground level, at their cellphones, wristwatches and sometimes at each other; they weren't looking up towards the skies. The vastness of space was too abstract to comprehend and nothing to do with them in any case.

Apocalypses and alien invasions only happened in movies.

None of them saw the blue vortexes of light that suddenly appeared at the edge of their planetary system. Or the five giant battleships that flew out of them.

Colonel Ellis was looking. Had been waiting for this moment for days, but his breath caught anyway and for several precious moments he couldn't find the words. He swallowed his fear down and straightened his back as he stood from his command chair.

“Major,” he said, his voice steady. “Contact the SGC. Tell them we have visual.”

“Fair Jane, my love, I have returned with the blessed dark beverage of the gods!”

Jane cringed at the sudden exclamation that exploded into the silence of her research lab. Her eyes slipped from the computer screen she'd been staring at to the doorway, where even in civilian clothes, Thor still somehow managed to look golden and shiny. Darcy walked in from behind him, looking amused.

“He means coffee,” she told Jane.

Jane perked up at that. “Oh, oh my god, you are wonderful!” she said, springing from her chair and running towards Thor. She grabbed the extra large paper cup from Thor and inhaled the aroma of lovely, fresh coffee. “Mmm, I love you so much.”

“So, did you and Selvig get anywhere?” Darcy asked while Jane reached up on her tiptoes to kiss Thor quickly on the mouth. And then again. “Where is Selvig anyway?”

“I think he went to get lunch...” she answered when she finally stepped away from Thor feeling a bit light-headed. She went back over what Darcy had asked before that and then frowned. “And,
yes, we managed to counter-hack the hack and remove it from the satellite feed. It wasn't that difficult actually... I somehow don't think anyone was expecting us to find it.”

“That was poor judgement on their part, as your mind is quite formidable,” Thor rumbled.

Jane patted his chest, but her frown deepened. She took a long sip of her coffee while she thought about her response.

“Well, they weren't exactly wrong,” she said eventually. “I mean, we wouldn't have found it if Coulson hadn't told us to go looking for it. From what we could tell, it wasn't really doing anything. At least not actively and not right now.”

She could feel Thor frown. “Perhaps it was laying in wait for the opportune moment.”

“An ambush program?” Darcy asked as she rolled the computer chair back to the desk. She plopped down and froze. “Uh, Jane, is this the satellite feed you have on-screen right now?”

Jane blinked and turned to Darcy. “Yes, it should be?”

Darcy was squinting at the computer screen. “And it's running in real-time?”

“With a minute or so delay, yes. Why?”

“So those spaceships here are actually real?”

“The-wait, what?!”

Jane ran across the lab, Thor on her heels. She immediately leaned over Darcy's shoulder, her jaw dropping at sight that greeted her. They were tiny, barely visible on the edge of the Solar System: really, they could be anything. Shooing her intern out of the chair, she sat down and magnified the image.

Those were definitely not asteroids.

“Holy shit,” she whispered.

“I do not recognize them, Fair Jane,” said Thor quietly. He sounded worried.

She felt her pulse speed up as she counted five giant ships. “Oh my god, this is... this is...” She took a deep breath. “I need confirmation of this.”

Her purse was laying beside her desk, where she'd thrown it when she'd arrived earlier. Grabbing it, she began to rummage through it for her cellphone. She was relieved to find it charged and immediately dialled Stark Tower.

Sam saw Tony startle out of the corner of her eye and curse as he dropped a wrench when the intercom came on with the loud squeal of a barely-used system no one had bothered to upgrade in over a decade. She was used to working in labs where klaxons and alarms periodically went off for various – usually life-threatening – reasons of one sort or other. Tony obviously was not.

She exchanged an amused look with Siler.
“Attention all personnel, this is General Wellesley. We've just received word from the SGC: the Apollo has reported that five Ori battleships came out of hyperspace approximately two minutes ago. Whatever projects you were working on, people, you just ran out of time. I want reports from all project leaders immediately. Wellesley out.”

The amusement vanished from her face, a black hole of fear suddenly materialized in its place.

“Shit!” she heard Doctor Lee say from the computer station behind her.

That one word was all it seemed to take to galvanize Tony into action. “JARVIS, I don't care how you do it, but hack into the communications systems and satellite feeds,” he said, his eyes wide and movements frantic. “Keep us updated on what's going on—”

“No!” said Sam firmly. She turned to look at the suit standing in the corner. “JARVIS belay that order.”

“Hey! You can't tell my AI what to do!”

“I can in my lab!”

She looked at Tony Stark: genius, playboy philanthropist... and loner. This, she realized with sudden clarity, was a man who was every bit as smart as her and Rodney, but who'd had the resources to not have to ever depend on anyone else for a pay cheque. He'd never been a simple cog within a giant machine of people.

“Look, Colonel, I realize you're used to being a soldier and following orders, but we need to know what's going on so that we can figure out how to help them. The suit might not be able to go into space, but I can fly it into the lower atmosphere if one of the ships gets close enough.”

She snorted. “The armour wouldn't even make a dent,” she said bluntly. She looked him in the eye. “No, Tony, I realize you've never had to work on a larger team before and I don't care, because right now this is a learning curve you're just going to have to get over. The Earth doesn't need Iron Man, it needs us. Not just you, not just me: us.

Earth has its own fleet of ships waiting to fight the Ori fleet, but what don't have is the firepower to take out five battleships. No, let me rephrase that: we might be able to take out the first five battleships, but the Ori have a lot more than five battleships and this is probably just the first wave. We don't know. What we do know is that right now, there are four Earth ships with an international crew compliment of fifty to seventy-five each getting ready to put their lives on the line to stall, to give us time to finish this arch reactor and power up the phase-shift device so that we can save the billions of lives on this planet. We owe it to those people to think about nothing else but finishing this. It doesn't matter what's going on anywhere else, because we already know we've run out of time: we need that arch reactor now.”

She took a deep breath and looked away from Tony's wide eyes to Siler “Sargent, get the men to bring the palladium core into the lab. We'll fit it into the arch reactor.”

“It'll burn out,” said Tony quietly.

“I know, but it might give us just enough time to finish making the vibranium core. That's why we made it.”

“Right away, ma'am,” said Siler.

Sam turned around to the sound of the Sargent's footprints disappearing down the corridor. “Doctor
Lee, how do those energy levels look? Is the converter Jeannie helped us design going to hold?"

The balding man twittered for a moment before looking down at the computer screen. “Uh, yes, uh... all diagnostics show steady energy levels.” He looked up. “It should work.”

She nodded. “Good.”

Tony had moved to look over Lee's shoulder and nodded thoughtfully. “The math is incredible I just wish we had more time to test it with the palladium core, but as it is it'll take us about another forty-five minutes to an hour to assemble everything.”

“Now that I might be able to help you with, sir.”

Sam turned to the open door to find a familiar face standing just inside it wearing military fatigues and a lab coat. Her hair was tied back into its usual pristine tight bun and her face was serious. She nodded to Sam. “Ma'am,” she greeted.

“Captain Hailey,” said Sam with a grin. “You managed to successfully complete your project?”

“Yes, ma'am. We should be able to buy us just over two hours before one of the transmitters overloads – assuming someone doesn't shoot one down first.” She stepped forward and held out a tablet for Sam to take. “Was hoping you wouldn't mind going over my figures just in case.”

Sam was certain the young captain's math would be fine, but she took the tablet anyway. This had been the woman's first large project as leader and a lot was riding on it, though being Hailey she didn't show any of her nervousness.

“It's pretty fortunate that you finished it on time,” said Sam.

Hailey smirked, looking smug (the brat). “Oh we finished yesterday, but you were still busy with the arc reactor, so I decided to get an early night.”

Tony frowned. “Is this the weapon most of your scientists were working on?” he asked. “That, uh, multi-phase ion wave cannon?”

Sam cringed inwardly. Hailey frowned. Doctor Lee blinked at Tony in confusion, before turning to Sam.

"Are we working on something like that?” he asked.

“Of course we're not,” Hailey answered. “That sounds completely ridiculous, if only because an ion cannon of any sort would be a severe downgrade from the Asgard plasma beams we already have.” She turned her gaze to Sam, face perfectly blank. “Ma'am?”

Sam shrugged, glancing over at Tony sheepishly. “I needed you concentrating on this project. And, well, that was sort of the first thing that popped into my mouth.”

Tony gapped at her. ‘But why? What the hell is junior over there working on that you thought would take my concentration away from building an arc reactor for a phase-shifting device?’

Hailey's eyes narrowed at the moniker 'junior'. ‘That would be classified, Mister Stark,” she said.

Which was when the General walked in.
The phone rang, the shrill sound violently disturbing the peace within the spacious office. Sun shone into the room through a long wall of tall windows behind the desk, bathing the phone, the desk, and the man sitting behind it in a blanket of warmth. President Hayes felt a distinct chill at the sound of the phone. His front lawn had been full of crows this morning. It had felt like an omen.

He took a deep breath and picked up the phone. Maybe it was only General Vidrine informing him that something had come up and Iron Patriot was running late flying into Washington.

“Hello,” he said. “Hayes speaking.”

“Good afternoon, Mister President.”

No such luck. “Jack, I wish I could say it was good to hear from you, but I have a feeling you're not about to tell me anything I want to hear.”

“No sir. The Apollo just reported five Ori battleships exiting hyperspace at the edge of the Solar System.”

“Damn, that's what I was afraid of. Where are we with that phase-shifting shield?”

“Carter's working on it, sir.”

“And you're heading to the airfield now?”

“Yes, sir, just as soon as I hang up.”

“Well then good luck, Jack.”

“Thank you, sir. You-what the...”

President Hayes straightened as Jack's voice trailed off. “Jack? Jack, what's going on?”

From the other end of the line he heard crashes and screams followed by shouting. And something that sounded like gunshots. Then the line went dead. The President was staring at his receiver when the door to his office opened and the Secret Service walked in to escort him to Air Force One.

“Excuse me, Doctor Banner, there is a Doctor Jane Foster on the line. She claims to be a friend of Prince Thor and says she is attempting to contact Mister Stark with urgent news. Unfortunately, I am unable to contact with the Iron Man suit and thus relay the message. Would you mind taking her call?”

Bruce blinked and looked up from his microscope. The metallic trace elements he'd found in Cassie's blood were fascinating – and easily-spotted when he knew to look for them. But try as he might, he couldn't figure out how they made a bomb.

The small part of him that wasn't a scientist realized this was probably a good thing.
“Er, Jane Foster?” he said to fill space as his mind re-orientated itself away from chemical analysis to the more mundane aspects of life. “Oh, that must be Thor's 'Fair Lady Jane'. Yes, alright, put her through.”

“Thank you, Doctor Banner.”

There was a beat of silence and then a single telephone ring, followed by silence.

“Hello? This is Bruce Banner,” said Bruce tentatively into the empty space around him.

“Bruce Banner...? Oh! Of course, you're Thor's friend Bruce who turns into the Hulk: I've heard a lot about you. I'm Jane, Thor's girlfriend and astrophysicist.”

Bruce's lips curled in amusement. “Thor's spoken of you as well. JARVIS said you were trying to contact Tony, but unfortunately he's not around at the moment. Was there something I could help you with instead?”

“Do you have access to any of the Stark Industries satellites?”

“Oh, I'm not sure. JARVIS?”

“Yes, Doctor Banner, I am capable of accessing the imaging from all Stark Industries satellites.”

“Then I guess I do, Doctor Foster.”

“Call me Jane. And could you aim your satellites just to the right of Jupiter and tell me what you see.”

Bruce blinked. “I... um, JARVIS, can you do that?”

“Of course, Doctor Banner,” said JARVIS and Bruce thought he sounded rather affronted. “If you would please make your way into Mister Stark's lab, I shall bring up the footage on the projection screen.”

Bruce nodded and made his way to the back of his lab, where a private staircase led down to Tony's lab and workshop. Tony enjoyed loud music to drown out the other loud noises he made while working. Bruce did not. Which was why Tony had designed Bruce's primary workspace on a separate floor, adding in the staircase so that the two of them could easily move between their labs without feeling like they were leaving their 'sacred science-bro space'. Of course, Tony frequently forgot the staircase was there and used the elevator anyway, but Bruce liked having it there.

When he arrived in the workshop, JARVIS already had the satellite feed projected onto a large blank wall. Bruce stood in front of it and stared.

“I'm looking, Jane, but I'm not seeing anything unusual.”

There was a pause. “Oh! You might want to check the satellite's base code. I found a small program in mine that looked like it was waiting for a command to disrupt the feed. Maybe you've got one too.”

“Alright, I'll take a look,” he said slowly. “JARVIS, bring it up on one of the terminals.”

“Yes, sir. I'm bringing it up on Terminal Three.”

Bruce sat down in front of the computer with a sense of foreboding. Daniel had told them an alien armada was headed to Earth, shortly after which Tony took off in the suit to meet Cassie's Aunt
Sam, and now an astrophysicist was calling and asking them to look at what amounted to deep space satellite imagery. It was too much to be a co-incidence. But, Bruce was a scientist, so he would stay calm and get all his facts before he decided whether or not there was reason to panic.

He and JARVIS found the small program – it was well-hidden in the system files – and was neither uploading nor downloading images, just looping the satellites’ previous images. Tony would've likely had the problem fixed in half the time it took Bruce, but with JARVIS' help he still managed to shut off the program in about fifteen minutes.

He refreshed the satellite feed and looked back to the projection. The sense of foreboding became cold fear.

He took a deep breath. “Jane, I'm assuming you're talking about the space ships.”

He heard her in-take of breath over the phone. “Crap. I was sort of hoping it was a glitch. I-we have no idea who they are. Thor doesn't recognize them.”

“I'd imagine they're the Ori.” It looked like Steve and Daniel were going to be late. “JARVIS, can you transfer everything up to the conference room and tell everyone to meet me there?”

“Right away, Doctor Banner.”

“Thank you.”

Bruce ran to the elevator. The doors opened to an anxious-looking Pepper.

“Bruce, I just got a call from the air force,” she said before the doors had shut. “They told me to go home and pack a bag, that they're coming to pick me up in about half an hour. They're here, aren't they: the Ori?”

“I'm afraid so.” He paused thoughtfully. “Or rather, I hope those spaceships on the satellite feed aren't from a second alien race that wants to kill or enslave us.”

Pepper chuckled nervously. “Good point.” She blinked. “Wait, you can see them on the satellite feed?”

They arrived in the conference room minutes ahead of Cassie and Ms Everhart. Cassie took one look at the projection on the wall and paled. Ms Everhart looked annoyed. Bruce tried to remember if she'd gone home yesterday. He assumed so as she'd taken the vial of Cassie's blood he'd given her.

“You called us here to watch sci-fi movies?” she said, crossing her arms in front of her.

“That's not a movie,” said Bruce calmly, his hands in his pockets so he could ignore how much they were shaking. “That is real-time satellite footage. Well, mostly real-time.”


“Well, classically the hero doesn't arrive until the very last minute, when all hope is lost, so he's technically still got some time,” said Pepper absently. “Although personally I'd rather keep my hope intact.”

“I need to call my editor,” Ms Everhart said, though she made no immediate move, her eyes glued to the giant warships heading steadily towards Earth.
Yes, I am evil. ;)

Chapter End Notes
Act V, pt ii

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the kudos and comments guys! I had hoped to have this chapter up over the weekend, but that clearly didn't happen, so I'm stealing a few minutes now. Hope you enjoy it. The next part won't be up until after Easter.

CRESCENDO

“And you're heading to the airfield now?” President Hayes asked.

“Yes, sir, just as soon as I hang up,” Jack answered, quickly glancing to the corner of his office, where his pack was still sitting in the exact same spot he'd put it in several days ago (it felt like longer). It felt like he'd been waiting for this moment for years.

His eyes snapped to his closed office door at a sudden noise from out in the hallway. It had to be fairly loud if he could hear it in here.

“Well then good luck, Jack.”

“Thank you, sir,” he replied, frowning. He'd instructed his staff not to cause any panic and that meant no noise or commotion. There would be time for everyone to panic later – after it became clear they couldn't keep the aliens and their giant honking space guns a secret.

Suddenly, his office door slammed open and two black-clad commandos with P-90s stormed into his office. He heard gunshots from the hallway as his staff fought back against the intruders.

“You- what the...” he began, but quickly dropped the phone and took cover behind his desk just in time to avoid getting shot as the men opened fire.

Bullets hit the desk as he slid the bottom drawer open and grabbed the loaded handgun stowed there. Flattening himself to the floor he turned off the safety with a quick flick of his thumb, aimed and fired at the closest man's ankle. The man screamed and went down. Jack didn't wait to watch, scrambling immediately to his knees and out from under the desk. Daniel could make all the jokes he wanted, but Jack wasn't ever again going to laugh about his bullet-proof desk.

He took a deep breath and then straightened to fire two shots at the second man in his office. His knees twinged at the movement, but he ignored it: adrenaline really was the best painkiller. The man's bullet-proof vest caught the shots, so Jack fired a third at the man's right bicep. The bullet hit and the man's arm jerked backwards, but as he ducked back down to avoid the first guy's bullets, Jack already knew it hadn't penetrated.

“Shit,” he said under his breath. These guys had some top-notch body armour. Ex-SHIELD, he guessed, which of course meant Hydra. Wonderful, just what he needed.

He reached to the holster at his boot and took out his knife. Carrying it was habit more than
anything... and it made him feel a bit more like he was still a soldier instead of just an old, desk-riding bureaucrat. Its weight was familiar in his right hand as he gripped his hand gun in his left. He sat back and listened. The steady crunch of boots on pieces of glass and plastic was coming from the right. He crouched and waited.

The commando came into view and Jack sprang, instantly grabbing the guy's trigger-arm as he threw his entire weight against him, throwing him off balance. He heard a shout from the downed soldier as he thrust the knife into the commando's neck. He then fell backwards, twisting their bodies so that the other soldier's bullets hit his fellow's back. When the barrage ended, Jack let the body slump to the ground, grabbing the P-90 as it fell and pointing it at the other commando, who was down on one knee, blood seeping into Jack's beige office carpet from his ankle.

A single shot between the eyes and that commando was falling too.

Jack quickly reached down to strip the corpse of its back-up ammo and ran to the door. He cautiously looked around the corner. And saw the large black object coming at his head.

He ducked, but his reflexes weren't quite fast enough and his head swirled for a moment as the butt of the gun clipped him along the top side of his head. He fell to the ground and rolled onto his back, immediately opening fire onto the new target. The commando jerked as the bullets hit him and went down, the impacts having apparently managed to hit something vital even if the bullets themselves still didn't penetrate the body armour.

Something cool touched the side of his face and Jack froze.

“Not bad, old man,” said an amused voice. “The reports said you were good; I'm glad to see they weren't written by complete morons. But now it's time to put the gun down and surrender.”

Jack heard the tell-tale clicks of several more safeties being unlatched. Gritting his teeth and keeping his expression neutral, he slowly placed the gun down onto the ground beside him.

“Good. Now, get up and keep your hands where I can see them.”

At least he wasn't being told to kneel, Jack thought to himself and did as he was told. He thought about the zat in his pack and really wished he'd thought about it sooner. Damn secrecy.

“Now turn around.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “So, tell me,” he said as he slowly turned around, doing a quick visual sweep of the corridor and resolutely not flinching at the slumped bodies leaning against the walls. “Did you guys consult your crystal balls this morning or something? 'Cause, seriously, you have the worst timing in the history of... timings.”

His captor was still looking amused once Jack was able to properly see him. He wasn't a large man, but he was stocky and obviously well-muscled, with the stance of a marine: he was former SHIELD black-ops or Jack was a Goa'uld pleasure slave. And he'd obviously seen quite a bit of action if the scars on his face were any indication. Looked like something had exploded in his face; he'd probably been lucky to have survived it.

“Missing out on lunch with the President, General?” the man sneered at him.

Jack raised an eyebrow at him. What exactly did these grunts think he did? “Of course not, it's two o'clock in the afternoon.”

The man snorted. “Good, we weren't going to stop for food anyway.” He motioned with his gun.
“Now move.”

Jack debated with himself for a few moments. It wasn't like his people wouldn't be able to find him what with the subcutaneous transponder embedded in his shoulder, but... “Uh, yeah no, I've got somewhere I need to be right now,” he said instead of moving.

His captor blinked in surprise for a moment and then stopped looking amused. “I would've thought you'd know how this works by now, General O'Neill. I give the order and you obey or I blow out one of your knees.”

“Well you'd have to drag me.”

“That won't be a problem.”

Damn, this guy was good. If they'd all been like this, then no wonder SHIELD hadn't noticed the infiltration until it was too late. Jack sighed, barely resisting the urge to run his hand through his hair in frustration. He was glad he'd had the foresight to transfer command to Landry when he'd been on the phone with him, just in case they came across interference while in the air. Their ships were all needed to stand against the Ori – there would be no quick transporter beam out of this situation. Maybe take a page out of Daniel book on how to deal with hostile aliens?

“Look, I don't say this lightly but the fate of the entire world actually is at stake right now. If I don't get to where I'm going right now then your perfect world definitely won't happen because my imperfect world won't be there to tear down or whatever it is that you Hydra guys are trying to do. The world domination rhetoric all starts sounding the same after a while.”

The man was frowning at him, as though trying to figure out just how much Jack was bullshitting him. Jack only wished he was.

“I'm assuming your people managed to get a hold of at least some relevant information, whether from the NID, the Trust or hell maybe someone close to the Avengers betrayed them after Daniel spilled whatever guts he spilled to get Captain America to help him. The look on your face tells me they either didn't get enough info, or didn't decide to share it with you, and really I don't care which it is. You know what I'm in charge of, though, right?”


Jack waited, patiently (he was really good at pretending to be patient... when he had to be), for the man to put the puzzle together. He could tell by the widening of his eyes when he did.

Two gunshots resounded inside the hallway, felling two of the Hydra soldiers next to Jack. He immediately ducked down and took the handgun out of one of the soldier's side holsters. That was quicker than he'd expected an SG team to get to him. He fired the gun at their leader, but the impact was taken by the body armour with only a small grunt from the man inside. Jack dodged the answering bullet and decided he'd had enough.

Firing several more shots at the soldiers around him and knocking one to the ground with a blow to the trachea, he dove back into his office. He heard shouts coming from the hallway, but his sole focus was on crossing the room and getting to his pack. His knees protested the impact when he landed heavily on them and unzipped the main compartment. He slipped his hand along the right side and grabbed hold of cool metal.

“You're lucky my orders are to take you in alive,” he heard the scar-faced man growl from the doorway. “Should've known you were just stalling for time.”
Jack stood up with a wince. “Yeah, you should have.” He activated the zat in his hand and met the man's eyes. He saw his eyes dart down to the zat curiously. He fired it at the man's thigh. Blue energy engulfed him and he twitched for a moment before dropping to the floor, unconscious.

Which was when the windows in Jack's office blew up.

Jack threw himself to the floor and shielded his head with his arms. When the sound of glass falling stopped, he looked up – in time to watch as a futuristic metal suit with the flag tattooed all over it flew into the space. It hovered its way into a standing position and then lowered itself to the ground. There was a slight hiss and the face mask came up, revealing Colonel James Rhodes.

“Are you alright General?” Rhodes asked.

“You know, some people use doors when they enter a building,” Jack groused and then waved him off. “Yes, yes, I'm fine. Go help take care of the Hydra goons outside.”

In the time it took Jack to tuck the zat away again into his pack, heft the pack over his shoulder and walk back out into the hallway, the fighting had stopped. What was left was about a dozen unconscious or injured Hydra soldiers, and War Machine standing in front the tactical strike team, who was most definitely not from the SGC, both eyeing each other warily.

Jack noticed the symbol on the shoulder of one of the operative's uniforms and groaned.

“Are you kidding me?” he exclaimed as he walked out into the hallway. “Did you guys have to decide to come play on my turf today of all days?”

An Asian woman turned to him with a scowl. “General, we were informed of a Hydra plot to kidnap you, so we came to make sure that didn't happen,” she said sternly.

Jack rolled his eyes. “And I'm grateful, really.” He pointed his thumb in the direction of his office. “Just don't forget to tie up the guy sprawled out on my office floor. Pretty sure he was in charge of all this and he's only unconscious.”

She nodded and passed by him to tie the man's arms behind his back before turning him over. He saw her eyes widen.

“It's Brock Rumlow,” she announced. “Coulson will be glad to hear about this.”

“Good for him,” Jack muttered. Movement from out of the corner of his eyes caught his attention and he looked over to the figure that now leaned against the office door, relief flooding through him. “Major Davis, good to see you're still alive. How are you feeling?”

“Thank you, sir,” Davis answered. “I'm a bit dizzy, but I'll live. Sir, your transport is waiting outside for you.”

Jack nodded. “Thank you, Major. I'll leave things here in your hands. Make sure anyone who needs it gets medical attention – and that includes you. Also, please contact the President and let him know I'm fine and that War Machine came through just in the nick of time. Oh, and that I'm commandeering him temporarily on behalf of Homeworld Security.”

Davis sighed. “Sir, it's Iron Patriot now,” he said.

“Don't care. War Machine sounds better; Iron Patriot makes him sound like a steam locomotive.”

Beside him Colonel Rhodes burst into a sudden coughing fit. Jack looked over to him thoughtfully.
“Actually... Colonel, is there any way for someone to right side-along with you?”

Rhodes blinked and looked at him warily. “Um, if I fly very carefully, sir. And I wouldn't recommend it for long-term travel.”

“Sir, the President specifically said—“

“—Major, the suit isn't experimental and I won't be the one flying it, so there’s no way I'm breaking the President’s directives. And I was just thinking to the airfield.”

Rhodes looked amused at the exasperated look on Davis' face (at least Jack imagined it was there – Davis seemed to get that expression a lot around him for some reason). “Er, that shouldn't be a problem sir.”

Jack rubbed his hands together. “Excellent. Then let's get going.”

Colonel James Rhodes didn't fly while carrying other people often. It threw off his balance and made the ride bumpier. Turned out that didn't really matter with General Jack O'Neill, who spent the entire ride grinning from ear to ear beneath his borrowed motorcycle helmet and safety goggles.

The General looked stiff and walked his first few steps back on the ground with a pronounced limp. In the background, Rhodes recognized Air Force One taking off and frowned. He'd been on his way to meet with the President when he’d gotten a call from his aide telling him to redirect to the Pentagon, where he’d then detected gunfire. This seemed like a rather disproportionate response to a relatively small Hydra attack.

“Is something going on, sir?” he asked.

General O'Neill snorted as they continued towards a waiting plane. “That would be an understatement, Colonel.”

An airman met them half-way to the plane... that didn't look like anything Rhodes had ever seen the air force use. It was painted dark grey except for the symbol inside the round blue circle on the tail where the American flag should've been: a two-sided triangle with a circle at its top. He suddenly got the feeling he was venturing into something he hadn't signed up for when he got up this morning.

The airman saluted the General, his eyes shifting over to the War Ma-Iron Patriot armour. “General O'Neill, your BC-305 is ready, sir. Air traffic control has cleared your flight and the pilot is ready for lift-off.”

O'Neill returned the salute quickly. “Thank you, Airman. You're dismissed.” He waved Rhodes on. “Come on, Colonel, as much as I hate it, we've gotten reports that Hydra has fighter jets and we can't afford to stop for a dogfight. So you get to ride along for now.”

Rhodes nodded. “Understood, sir.”

He watched as the General climbed into the strange-looking plane and was waiting for the hatch to close to take off himself, when O'Neill popped his head out of the plane with an annoyed look on his face.
“Inside, Colonel,” he said.

“Oh. Uh, sorry sir.”

Entry hatches on planes weren't designed for the suit and this one seemed an even tighter fit than
most, but with a bit of manoeuvring, Rhodes managed to get inside. The inside of the plane was
definitely designed for utility rather than comfort. Benches ran along either side of the hold with
enough room to comfortably fit about eight people. The back also had a rather large space for
cargo, what looked like a small fridge and several closed compartments Rhodes guessed likely
housed weapons and first aid supplies.

General O'Neill strapped himself into the seat next to a wall-panel and pressed one of the buttons.
Rhodes picked a seat opposite him, but didn't bother to strap in – in the armour he was too big for
it.

“We're all here, Lieutenant, get us out of here.”

“Welcome aboard, General. I've been told to deliver a message from the President, sir. He says
he's not amused.”

O'Neill rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Never grow old, Lieutenant, you get people telling
you you're not allowed to do any fun stuff and then trying to convince you it's all for your own
good.”

“Yes, sir. Prepare for lift-off, sir.”

Rhodes wondered how it was that he'd never met this particular general before. Of course, judging
by the plane he assumed O'Neill was in charge of something classified, but still. Most of the air
force generals had needed – or wanted, more like – War Machine/Iron Patriot at one point or other.
It had been a bit like playing musical generals at one time, before President Hayes came into office
and put a stop to it.

Then Vice-President Kinsey and his one thousand snide questions had disappeared and it had
gotten even better.

He felt the plane's engine come to life with a deep purr, its vibrations travelling through the armour
like tiny waves lapping against a beach shore (as amazing as the armour was, he still sometimes
missed flying planes). Across from him, he saw the general tapping at the buttons on the wall-
panel again.

The plane took off. He felt the familiar bumps and grinds of tarmac and then, far too quickly in his
experience, they were gone and they were flying. His inner ear had never given him problems, but
he still felt the steady increase of pressure as they rapidly ascended.

“Hello?” he heard from from across the aisle, the voice was male and sounded out-of-breath and
harried.

“Landry, it's O'Neill. I'm in the air and on my way.”

“Oh thank god, Jack. Apparently you can take a guy off SG1, but you can't take SG1's unique
brand of luck out of the guy.”

O'Neill grinned. “Hey, I didn't think of it that way! Almost makes me feel better.” He sobered up
immediately. “How are things?”
“Well, Carter says it'll probably take at least another hour to get the shield up. They ran into some sort of snag with the power source and had to make sure connecting it into the shield didn't make it blow up.”

“I'm glad they've managed to fix that itty bitty little snag. And the others?”

“The Apollo is tracking the Ori fleet and it doesn't look like they suspect anything yet. They'll be in position for the ambush in about fifteen minutes. The Ilya Muromet and the Odyssey are both in position and ready to join the attack formation. What's your ETA?”

“About three hours. Any word from Daniel's group?”

There was a pause. “No.”

O'Neill sighed and shook his head. “Keep me posted if anything changes.”

“I'll be sure to do that, Jack. Good luck.”

“Hey, I've already survived one attack from an evil organization hell-bent on world domination today. I'm on a roll here!”

Landry chuckled and then the line went dead. The humour on O'Neill's face died and fierce determination took its place. Rhodes saw his left fist clench tightly.

“Sir, if I may ask, where are we heading?”

The General looked up at him and blinked. “Oh, I didn't tell you? Antarctica.”

He blinked and then frowned. “Antarctica, sir? I didn't think there was anything important at Fort McMurdo.”

O'Neill smirked. “Aah, well, it's not actually Fort McMurdo we're going to. And you didn't think there was anything in Antarctica because what is there is highly classified. You may or may not have paperwork to sign later, 'cause I have a feeling that Daniel's right as usual – but don't tell him I said that – and by time the dust settles 'top secret' isn't going to be worth the price of that classy red stamp they use in the movies.” He smirked. “Ready or not, Colonel, your world's about to get a lot more interesting.”

Rhodes' eyes widened. He definitely hadn't signed up for this. Just as he was beginning to wonder what his chances were of making a clean break now, his mind paused and went back over the conversation he'd overheard earlier.

“Hang on,” he said with a frown. “You said our ETA was about three hours. Not even the fastest fighter jet could make it from Washington to Antarctica in four hours. Hell, the armour couldn't make it in seven. Sir, you're just pulling my leg.”

The General grinned. “This isn't a fighter jet, Colonel. And it can make it to Antarctica in three hours if it's got sub-light engines. The geeks would kill you for comparing this baby to an ordinary airplane.”

“Sub-light engines, sir? Wait... this is a spaceshuttle?!”

“Not quite, but close enough. The BC-305's designed as a transport ship. And no, we're not borrowing this from NASA; we're putting NASA out of business. Ever wonder why their funding keeps getting cut?”
“Not until now I hadn't.”

“Ah, well, it's a long story, Colonel, but we've got three hours to kill so why don't I fill you in.”

“Okay, this is way more boring than I would've expected it to be,” said Clint, leaning against a bridge console. “I mean, they make hyperspace sound so exciting on TV.”

Lorne snorted from the command chair. “Wouldn't make for good entertainment if they concentrated on the hours you spend in hyperspace twiddling your thumbs,” he said. “Outer space is a good name for it, 'cause there sure is a lot of it. You guys have those screens figured out yet?”

“It's a point and shoot game basically,” Clint answered with a gesture towards the weapon's console. “I mean, do I understand the words on the screen? Hell no. But do I know which buttons to press to make the other guys go boom? Yup, absolutely.”

“I, uh, think I've got it,” said Steve from where he was sitting at the main control console, looking much less certain. He really wished he could at least read what it was saying instead of just having to trust himself that in the heat of the moment he would remember which button did what and which reading could never, ever be allowed to go into the red.

Lieutenant Mizner, who'd been looking over his shoulder and teaching him how to read it smiled at him encouragingly. “You're doing just fine, sir. Really.”

“If you say so. I'll just be hoping the worst doesn't happen and that no one needs me to pinch-hit for them.” He looked over to the panel behind him, where Daniel was tapping away and reading the displays with undisguised curiosity. “Or they decide to just call Daniel instead.”

The Lieutenant chuckled. “Well, if half the stories about SG1 are true, then I this wouldn't be the first spaceship he's flown.”

Steve blinked. “Really?”

Apparently Daniel wasn't quite engrossed enough to fail to feel their gazes on him and he looked up. “Hm?” he asked, blinking in surprise. “Was there something you needed?”

“Lieutenant Mizner here says you've flown spaceships before,” said Steve slyly.

“Wait, seriously?” he heard Clint say in the background. “Why have we not heard this before now?”

“The name Hans Olo comes to mind, sir,” said Mizner with a twinkle in his eye, which prompted snickers from several people around the bridge. “Also the Great and Powerful Oz.”

Daniel made a face. “I wasn't actually flying in the second one, just working communications and providing distraction. Jacob Carter was doing the flying.” He grinned. “Threw the Tok'ra into a huge panic, apparently. By the time Jacob arrived at the meeting, they'd spent nearly two hours arguing over why no one knew anything about this new System Lord. He bust a gut laughing when he realized what they were arguing about.”

Evan burst out laughing. “Man, the look on their faces must've been something.”
According to Jacob, it really was.

The smile on Daniel's face turned sad for a moment and Steve wondered if this Jacob was yet another friend Daniel had lost. He was about to ask when the intercom came on.

"This is McKay. Rogers, Lorne, one of you meet me at the upper aft corridor... uh section 22F on the elevator wall panels. I think I found something really cool."

"He sounded excited," Natasha said after a slight pause.

Evan sighed. "Which means it's probably a useful something and we shouldn't just ignore him no matter how much we might want to just to annoy him."

Steve smiled. "Ah, so it's not just me?"

Daniel snorted as he rose from the control console, relinquishing it back to the Captain who was now back from his short break. "No, it's definitely not just you. Rodney has that effect on people."

The Command Chair made a hissing noise as it pulled back into an upright position and Evan stood, wincing. He lifted his arms and stretched until his back popped.

"Okay, I'm actually glad for the excuse to go take a walk," he said. "Captain, I've put her on autopilot. Let me know when we're ten minutes away from the rendezvous point."

"Understood, sir."

Steve gladly gave Lieutenant Mizner back his seat and followed Evan, Daniel and Clint into the elevator. It turned out they had to take two elevators separated by a long stretch of empty corridor to get to where McKay had told them to go. Around them the ship was quiet, its endless metal corridors cold and lonely. Steve tried to imagine it crowded with personnel, as it was meant to be.

They reached the correct section and the door slid open to reveal a large, circular space with smooth black floors and concave black walls that created a solid dome above a wide round dais in the centre of the room.

"Woah, is that a secondary Command Chair?" Evan asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Not quite," McKay answered him from behind a console to the far right of the chair. "It's completely cut off from the rest of the ship's operations. In fact, it's even running on its own ZPM. That's how I found it, actually: I was going over the ship's energy outputs when I realized the two readings I was looking at weren't for the two ZPMs in the engine room, but rather one of the readings was for both of those ZPMs – one being a back-up – and the second reading was for a third, separate ZPM. So I traced the source and found this."

He stopped in his explanation to frown at something on the console in front of him.

"So, if it's not connected to the ship's system's, then what does it do?" Daniel asked after a few moments.

McKay looked up and blinked. "Oh, it's a weapon's platform. Or rather, the platform for a very specific weapon. Daniel, remember in the blueprints on the tablets there were those drones that didn't really seem like drones because their proportions were off and they seemed to have a magnetic frequency that made absolutely no sense?"

Steve looked to Daniel, who just looked confused. "Uh, sure," he said.
“Anyway, it looks like this chair is directly responsible for them. And the reason for the magnetic readings we saw on the tablet, is because they're designed to spontaneously become high-powered supermagnets, but along a very specific oscillating electrical frequency so that they don't attract any other objects except for each other. In short, they're individually half the size of regular drones, but come together to work in tandem with each other and form larger objects. It allows the chair operator the flexibility of changing their shape based on the target and multiplies the strength of each individual drone.”

Steve shook his head. “So, if I understand it correctly, the drones aren't each a weapon, but they're building blocks which the person in the chair can use to create a weapon?”

McKay opened his mouth to say something – probably give a scathing dismissal – and then closed it again. He shrugged. “Huh, that's actually a good way of putting it. Although, it would be wrong to say that each smaller drone can't be used as a weapon; it just can't do as much damage as one of the regular drones.”

“Remote controlled replicators,” said Evan.

McKay glared at him. “That is a horrifically bad analogy.”

Evan shrugged, not looking at all disappointed. “So, why is this chair on its own grid?”

The scientist looked back to the control console in front of him. “Partly because making all the little drones become bigger weapons will require more concentration than firing the regular drones, but I think the main reason is power consumption. Creating the electromagnetic frequency required to run these things and then deploying them through the chair uses a lot more power than the regular chair and we need a ZPM to run that. I won't know for certain until we test this, but I have a feeling it actually has the potential to drain a ZPM over the course of several extended uses. Which would explain the ZPM cache in the facility.”

“But wouldn't it be dangerous to have the user be completely cut off from the rest of the ship?” Clint asked.

McKay pointed to the console in front of him. “That would be why this is here. I'm thinking the weapon is meant to be run with two people present: one to sit in the chair and actually control the drones and the other to monitor readings from the rest of the ship.”

“Is it ready to go?” Evan asked.

“I'll need to run a few diagnostics to make sure everything got connected and troubleshooted before it was abandoned. And I think we should obviously test it if we can once we arrive at the rendezvous co-ordinates so we know if there are any bugs before we get people shooting back at us, but otherwise we should be good.”

He nodded and looked to Daniel. “Jackson, this is your party. What do you think?”

Daniel blinked. “Uh, no that sounds good. If this is a weapon no one else has ever seen, then it's the perfect thing to take to the Ori. They've seen everything we have to throw at them, except for maybe the Tollan ion cannon, but I don't think that'll make much of a difference...” He looked at Evan. “You seem to have the hang of the ship, so maybe have Steve take the chair?”

Evan smiled. “That would've been my suggestion.” He looked to Steve. “Whadda ya think, Cap?”

Steve looked over to the chair and grinned. “That sounds swell,” he said.
When they reached the rendezvous co-ordinates, they were greeted with empty space.

“So I guess our date isn't here yet?” Clint asked, leaning over one of the bridge consoles as though the extra two feet would give him a better view of the vast emptiness.

Natasha made a point of rolling her eyes at him. “That gives Steve a chance to try out the new weapon,” she said.

“Major Lorne, long-range sensors are detecting a hyperspace signature coming towards us,” said Captain Bergman.

Natasha saw Major Lorne blink and then frown. “Hyperspace signature? We can detect those now?”

“Yes, sir. I can't tell how many ships there are, but if they continue along their current path, they'll reach our position in approximately one hour and forty-six minutes.”

“Hopefully, that's Cameron with backup,” said Daniel. He exchanged a glance with Lorne.

“Well, Strugacky, if you wanna come hold the fort for a bit, I'm going to go grab dinner while I have the chance,” said Lorne, easing the chair into its upright position and getting off. “I noticed the locals sent you off with fresh food supplies and I've been eating nothing but MREs for the past day and a half.”

Natasha's lips quirked.

“Try the meat buns,” Daniel suggested.

“I will.” Lorne tapped his comm. “McKay, this is Lorne. We've got about an hour and a half to sit tight at our present location. You and Steve can go a head and test the weapon.”

“**McKay here. We were just getting ready to do that, Major. And I want to be here for the testing, but someone else will also need to learn these controls because I'll be in engineering during the battle.**”

“Right.” He looked around the room. “Any volunteers?”

There turned out to be no shortage of those and the Major ended up choosing an air force Lieutenant who was fluent in Ancient. Natasha approved of the choice: the woman was a long-haired brunette with a no-nonsense attitude about her. And Natasha didn't fail to notice how her eyes gleamed with excitement at the thought of working with Captain America (or possibly the new weapon, it was difficult to tell). She would definitely spend some time around the two and maybe plant a few seeds, get the conversation going...

Maybe her problem before had been choosing women who were too close, too convenient. A little spontaneity might help: two people coming together in the heat of battle... it sounded like something out of those romance novels Clint read and then left scattered around her apartment to make it look like they actually belonged to her.

It wasn't difficult to claim curiosity to go see the new weapon in use. Like everyone else, she was
surprised to walk into the room to find the dark, drab walls were gone and instead they were walking into the middle of outer space. Even the floor was black and covered in distant stars, making it seem as though they were suspended in the middle of space. Natasha squinted at a tiny planetary system to her far left.

“It's a holographic projection of the view from outside the ship,” McKay explained when he looked up, visibly pleased at their reactions. “As far as I can tell it'll instantly reflect changes visually. My guess is that it's to make it easier to shape the mini-drones. Or possibly someone just thought it would be really cool which, you know, it totally is.”

“It's a bit freaky too,” said Clint. “I feel like I'm going to start falling. Good thing I don't have vertigo.”

Natasha snorted. “You wouldn't be able to do your regular job if you had vertigo. And since when are you afraid of falling anyway?”

“Since I can't see the ground!”

“Don't be ridiculous,” McKay interjected. “There's no gravity in space. You wouldn't fall, you'd just float forever – actually your body would explode before then, so bits of you would float forever.”

“That's so reassuring. Thanks.”

Watching Steve trying to get the hang of the weapon started to get boring after a while. Eventually they all ended up using Major Lorne as an example and grabbing dinner while they could.

“Man, I'm going to miss that spiced meat,” said Clint as he looked down at his empty cloth napkin forlornly. “We need to figure out a good excuse to come back again.”

Natasha nodded solemnly in agreement. Although, she wasn't quite as concerned with the meat as being able to make this not-fruit, not-herbal juice-tea the people of Aeneid had sent several jugs of with them along with the buns and several jars of preserved fruit.

On the table beside her, Daniel chuckled. “Well, we still haven't even scratched the surface of everything that's in that temple, not to mention the actual Meeting Place in the tower. There will definitely be a solid argument for returning with a scientific and archaeological team.”

Clint nodded thoughtfully. “And their bodyguards, of course.”

“Oh of course.”

Just then, Sam raced into the room, wide-eyed and pale. “Have you guys looked out the window?” he demanded. “Cause there are five honest-to-god fucking flying pyramids–”

“–Oh good, they're here!” said Daniel, jumping off his seat and dashing past Sam, Vala at his heels.

“–And apparently we're expecting them.” Sam finished, throwing his arms up in exasperation. “Of course we're expecting them.”

Natasha looked to Clint and smirked at his incredulous expression. “Seriously? Flying pyramids?”

“Go take a look,” said Sam, swiping several buns from the cloth-lined crate sitting in the centre of the table.
Daniel and Vala were already in the transporter when his comm activated.

“This is Major Lorne. Doctor Jackson, please come to the bridge.”

“Already on my way,” he replied. “Sam saw them through the window.”

He heard the man chuckle on the other end. “That must’ve made for an interesting reaction.”

Daniel exchanged an amused smile with Vala. “Uh, yeah, actually it did.”

Lorne turned the chair around to face him when he walked out onto the bridge.

“So apparently, these guys have decided to be difficult and hail us in Goa’uld, which none of my guys speak.”

Daniel grinned, bouncing on the balls of his feet with anticipation. It felt like a lifetime ago since he’d last gone into battle along side his Jaffa friend. “Can you play it for me please?”

And then the bridge was full of a familiar deep voice speaking in the language of his people: “We are the people of the Free Jaffa Nation. I am Teal’c of Chulak. Unknown vessel, identify yourself as friend or foe.”

Aah, so Teal’c was ready to help, but was being cautious – understandably so.

“Hail them back,” said Daniel and then at the officer's nod, spoke loudly to make sure his every word was clearly heard. “Dal shakka mel.” He paused, letting the symbolic greeting of the Jaffa Resistance hang in the air, before switching back to English. “I am Doctor Daniel Jackson of SG1 and the Ancient ship Victory. I greet you as friend and thank you for coming to our aid.”

“Sir, we have incoming visual,” said Lieutenant Kelley from the communications console.

“Let's have it.”

And then the small army of ha'taks was replaced with Teal’c dressed in battle mail in all his imposing glory. Cam grinned on his left and Master Bra’tac looked amused on his right. A few steps behind them, Daniel was surprised to recognize the Tok’ra leader, Delek.

“Daniel Jackson, my friend, it is good to see you once again,” said Teal’c.

“You as well, Teal’c,” said Daniel before nodding to the other two men. “It's been a while, Master Bra’tac, Delek. I trust you are both well.”

Delek inclined his head in greeting.

“I am very well, Doctor Jackson, thank you,” said Master Bra’tac with a smile. “Colonel Mitchell's arrival came at a very opportune time during a meeting of our allies. I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we are looking forward to – as you Tauri put it – kicking some ass.”

Daniel laughed. “Well, I think I speak for all of us when I say we're in complete agreement.”

“Oh hell yeah!” he heard Clint exclaim from somewhere behind him.

“I must say, I was expecting Teal’c and maybe one ship,” said Daniel after a moment. “So I am in awe of your five.”

Teal’c raised a single eyebrow. “In the months that the Tauri have spent laying about, I have been
rather busy.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow of his own. “Uh, excuse me, I've been a bit busy myself.”

“Indeed,” Teal'c deadpanned, but Daniel could tell he was laughing inside.

“Yes. Indeed.” He took a deep breath. “Thank you, all of you, for coming to our aid.”

Teal'c smirked. “Undomesticated equines could not keep us away, Daniel Jackson.”
Act V, pt iii

Chapter Notes

First of all, I apologize for the lateness of this chapter. I went away for nearly a week around Easter and then had a bit of a tough time getting back into the writing groove. And then this chapter somehow decided to take a turn I hadn't entirely been expecting... or at least not to the degree it's ended up as (also, oops time zones). Either way, you'll notice this is still a part of Act V.

Secondly, thanks for all the comments and kudos! Or even for just taking the time to read. You guys are awesome, really. Anyway, with the Marvel Big Bang just around the corner, I'm going to concentrate on finishing this up as quickly as I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SYMPHONY

Colonel Ellis watched the screen like a hawk, conscious of the tension in the air around him as the all of Apollo waited with baited breath. The comms were wide open on a secure frequency and in the background he could faintly hear the hustle and bustle of the SGC operations room. On screen the five Ori battleships seemed to inch forward. They seemed cautious, and he wondered if their last encounter with the Odyssey had shaken their supreme confidence just a little.

Or possibly the entire set-up screamed too much of 'trap' for even the followers of the all-mighty Ori to ignore.

The tension built, but Colonel Ellis didn't dare move a muscle – not even to wipe away the beads of sweat that were beginning to trickle down his brow.

And then, finally, General Landry’s voice spoke: “That's it, they're in position. You have a 'go'. Good luck and may God be with you.”

“Amen to that,” said Ellis softly, hearing Colonel Jiang Li acknowledge the command from the Sun Tze.

He tapped his earpiece. “Attention all hands, this is Colonel Ellis. We are heading to engage the Ori battleships. I repeat, we are engaging the Ori battleships. Prepare for battle!”

He switched it off. “Alright, fire up those engines. I want us to gain as much speed as we can. Lieutenant, don't drop the shield until my mark. Captain, ready the weapons. We won't have the element of surprise for long, so we need to take advantage of it while we can.”

“Yes sir!” echoed in three voices across the bridge.

He sat back into his command chair. They'd practised various ambush routes relentlessly for a week until his crew could all do it in their sleep. Hell, they likely didn't even need him giving the orders anymore, except that his words were their cues, and their call to arms.
He felt the ship come to life around him.

“Engines online, sir. Beginning approach pattern beta.”

The visual changed from partial satellite footage to full screen as the Apollo flew forward. The gas clouds of the planet below them swirled violently in contrast to the open space visible beyond. It took them ten minutes to round the planet, steadily gaining speed as they went, and then they were finally seeing the Ori ships with their own eyes.

“Sir, we are leaving Venus' orbit... now.”

“Drop cloak, raise shields!”

The Apollo sped towards the ships.

“Sir, we're in weapon's range!”

“Fire at will!”

Two streaks of orange-gold light shot out towards the Ori battleship and Colonel Ellis watched with mesmerized focus as they covered the distance that was at once an eternity away and yet within reach. Part of his mind was already calculating their next move, their next evasive manoeuvre, but part of it saw nothing but the streaks of light as they flew through the dark nothingness between the two ships.

The first plasma shot hit the Ori shields and scattered across their surface. The second shot hit parallel to the first seconds later. The Ori's shields held. Although... Colonel Ellis squinted at the screen as the golden glow of the shields seemed to waver for a moment.

“Sir, Ori shields are holding, but sensors registered a brief power fluctuation.”

“Sir, the Ori ship is powering weapons!”

“Evasive manoeuvres!” Ellis commanded. “Cavendish, target that same spot!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Sir, the Sun Tzu has finished its approach and dropped its cloak,” Lieutenant Weissman announced.

Ellis nodded. “Good. Send the subspace signal.”

“Yes, sir.”

On the screen the side of the Ori ship lit up and a narrow beam of light shot out towards them. The view tilted as the Apollo attempted to get out of the way. Moments later, the ship shook with the impact, but Ellis could tell by it hadn't been a direct hit.

“We've been hit across the port side,” Weissman announced. “Shields are holding sir.”

“Nice flying, Captain,” he said, his eyes on the screen as the Apollo's plasma cannons answered the hit.

The Ori ship was too big to move out of the way entirely and the beam hit along its side. Ellis suppressed a triumphant shout as it penetrated the shields.
“Sir, we have two more Ori ships closing in; they'll be in weapon's range in one minute.”

He took a deep breath. They were going to need a lot more than one good hit to win this fight.

He hated when people were right about him, Tony decided. And yet... Well, no, he had to admit, Sam had been entirely spot on. He knew the arc reactor like the back of his hand – or like the scar on his chest, you could say – its miniaturized, more efficient form was his baby, the greatest thing he'd ever created. Next to the Iron Man armour, of course. And JARVIS. Okay, it was one of the greatest things he'd ever created.

It was great, wonderful, but it was old hat for him: undeniable proof of his genius, yes, but he could build the things in his sleep (and probably often did). And he, like his father before him (the bastard), was a magpie to new and shiny science. Still, Tony dared anyone to just shrug their shoulders and walk away after two beautiful and highly-intelligent women mentioned setting up a *time dilation field*.

There should've been fanfare, drums, thunderclaps, a marching band, *something* to accompany the revelation. There wasn't. There was just Tony, staring at Sam and the other air force scientist as they explained what was going on to the tall, heavy-set man with hair that was so white it would've gotten lost in a blizzard, and two stars on his lapels that wouldn't have gotten lost at a halloween party. The General clearly had no idea what the two women were explaining to him, but he nodded along grimly to their explanations.

Ah yes, the joys of dealing with air force brass; he remembered the revelation he'd had at nineteen when he realized that all the 'oh look at me, I'm brilliant' science talk was really just window dressing for when he said 'and it will go boom'. Or something to that effect.

“Good job, Captain,” the General said after Captain Haddy/Halting/Hatsfield/whatever had finished explaining how the Phoenix (whatever *that* was) had finished placing the last relay three hours ago. “And everything's been checked?”

“Yes, sir,” the Captain replied, the cant of her chin just a hair's short of defiant, as though insulated that the general thought she wouldn't have checked every single calculation, tested every signal and gone over each line of code before telling him it was working. “There are twelve relay terminals and each of them is syncing with the others on the testing frequency. We've run the diagnostics on them both as a group and individually; everything is running smoothly, sir.”

“Then I'll go inform the President and the SGC. Prepare to initiate the field.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony trailed behind them as Sam followed the Captain down the hall, slipping silently into the elevator that took them two floors up and then down another boring corridor until they came to a room lined with computers and radar telemetry and satellite images. Tony was a mass of thrumming, jittery suppressed silence by this point. But he could, occasionally, be patient.

It paid off when the Captain finally put her tablet down on one of the work stations. Tony smoothly picketed it up as he sailed past, heading towards the bank of satellite images being manned by several uniforms. Not even the shiny science could override his desire to catch his first look at their enemy.
“Is that them?” he asked, quietly coming up behind one of the airmen manning the computers.

The young man spared him a glance and then nodded as his eyes returned to the read-outs in front of him. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Those are Ori battleships.”

“And are they seriously as big as they look on screen?” They were beautiful, almost regal-looking: curved, elegant lines in platinum with gold detailing and a giant swirling globe in the centre that looked like it was probably a power source of some sort.

God, Tony wanted to see that up close. His fingers itched to sketch a possible design, but for once he honestly didn't know where to start. A power source of swirling energy? Did the Ori have the capacity to create a dense enough centre to keep the energy from dissipating outwards or had they built a strong enough material to contain it inside?

Oh, right, containing things. Tony shuffled a few steps to the side and turned away from the hubbub at the monitor. The great, grand flipping of the switch didn't interest him; he wanted to know how they'd built the time dilation field in the first place. Breaking into the tablet was, okay not entirely dead-easy – the encryption on it was actually half-decent although it clearly hadn't meant to keep out anyone as good as Tony – but it still only took him a few minutes to find the most recent projects.

And holy shit on a swizzle stick, this was labelled Asgard tech. Except... when the hell had Thor's people had contact with the US Air Force? Suddenly Tony remembered Sam correcting him: Asgard, not Asgardian. It had been an odd correction, but he'd let it slide because there'd been more important things to worry about at the time. Now he was thinking it was definitely something he'd have to go back to. Later, after he was done staring at the shiny math.

And the math was shiny. It was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. He hadn't realized math like this existed! He felt humbled in its presence, his estimation of Sam and the young Captain having gone up exponentially. He no longer wanted to drag Sam back to SI and his workshop. Instead he wanted to go collect his bots, coffeemaker, a case of scotch and move in.

His eyes ran over the equations, lines of code and the schematics he managed to find. Of course there were things that could've been improved, places where the equations could've been tweaked for more efficiency. And arc reactors powering every relay terminal would've given them a near indefinite life span... or at least several years. Oh, he realized when the next file opened a wholly alien-looking schematic, the dilation field was supposed to run off only one device centrally located within the field. Hmm. Energy requirements: it all came down to energy requirements and maintaining the stability of such a large field, it seemed.

Suddenly, the tablet was snatched out of his hand. Tony squawked in protest.

“Hey, science!” he protested, looking up to meet the furious eyes of the tablet's owner. He looked to Sam. “Sam, she's taken away the science,” he whined.

Sam rolled her eyes. “You shouldn't have stole it from her in the first place.”

He sighed theatrically. “I don't ever get any sympathy,” he said.

“No, you don't,” said Sam, amusement dancing in her eyes. “But thanks to Hailey and her team, you do get an extra two hours or so to finish the arc reactor.”

Tony nodded. On their way back down in the elevator, he suddenly had a thought. “Wait, isn't this going to disrupt satellite communications?” he asked.
Sam winced. “A bit, depending on how high up in the Earth's orbit the satellites are travelling. Hailey placed the terminals as far from the Earth as she could, but there's a limit to how far she could stretch it.”

“Wow, okay, so how exactly does anyone plan to explain that away?”

“That,” said Sam pointedly, “is thankfully not my problem.”

“Fair enough.”

Jane and Darcy both screamed when the satellite feed went dead. One second they were watching as a second ship suddenly materialized on the opposite side of the Ori fleet, and the next the screen was blank.

“Oh my god, what the hell!” Jane exclaimed, immediately grabbing the keyboard and began to type furiously.

“What is it?” Selvig asked. “Has something shot down the satellite?”

“I don't know! Give me a minute to... There's no signal. I'm not receiving a signal!”

“So it could be shot down.”

“Maybe the government's figured out we were watching and cut it,” Darcy suggested. She blew a cherry-flavoured bubble, shrugging as the others turned to her. “What? It's not like the aliens would care about some stupid research satellite.”

“This isn't the X-Files, Darcy,” said Jane with a frown.

“You're sure 'bout that?”

“...no. Dammit.”

“Look, there has to be a logical explanation,” said Selvig. “Does Stark Tower still have feed?”

Jane frowned, looking at the second computer monitor they'd hooked up in order to chat with Bruce and the others. “They didn't send any messages...”

Jane opened the Skype dialogue window, making a frustrated grunt when it was being slow to load. Darcy took her phone out and began to typing her own message. Minute after aggravating minute passed, until they all jumped at the shrill ringing that exploded into the silence. They swung around to stare at the landline phone hanging on the wall. Selvig ran over and picked it up.

“Holy shit, since when do we have that there?” Darcy asked.

“I didn't think it worked,” said Jane absently before turning back to the computer, finally giving up on Skype and trying a regular internet window. That opened much more quickly. “Hm, I can't open a dialogue window with Stark Tower, but our internet signal's still working apparently.”

“It's not just us!” Selvig announced as he joined them again. “All the other labs are having problems with their satellite feeds too. And Professor Jennings was in the middle of a call to Doctor
LeBlanc in Vancouver when the line just suddenly went dead. When she tried calling again it said it was unable to connect.”

“My cellphone signal's down too,” said Darcy as she looked down at her phone in annoyance.

Thor stood from his chair, where he'd been watching events unfold with an ever-deepening frown. Jane looked to him with a raised eyebrow.

“My friends, I shall contact Heimdall,” he announced. “Perhaps he shall know something of this disturbance. And as my elder, he may also have some knowledge of these Ori who have arrived to threaten us.”

Jane nodded to him and turned back to her computer. Suddenly, she snapped her fingers. “Radio!” she said urgently. “Is the radio still working?”

Darcy blinked. “You want me to go start up the car and check?”

“No need, I've got a small radio in my office,” said Selvig and rushed off.

“And television,” Jane added, looking to Darcy. “Go check the lounge TV to see if there's still a television signal.”

“Sure thing,” Darcy said with a shrug.

Meanwhile Jane got her phone and tried calling Bruce again only to find it didn't have a signal either. She tried the landline. No luck: the call wasn't connecting. On a whim she dialed the curry place they got take-out from on a regular basis (Thor loved curry almost as much as he loved poptarts, said it tasted like nothing from Asgard).

“'ello, Tandori 'ouse, what can I 'elp you wif?” said a female voice from the other end.

“Oh, sorry, wrong number,” said Jane quickly and hung up.

She put her cell down thoughtfully as her mind connected the dots. So it was cellphones and long-distance calls that weren't working. She logged into the university system's server and found her way to the data uplink low-orbit satellites. Cassiope should've been transmitting data for that joint-Canadian project not long ago...

It wasn't long after an air force helicopter had arrived to take Pepper to the airport that the screen went blank. Bruce blinked at the screen.

“Crap, hang on a second, Eric, I think we're having some sort of problem with our signal,” Christine said into her cellphone as the screen went blank. There was a pause. “Eric?”

Bruce looked over to see her frowning at her cellphone. She looked up at Bruce and turned her screen to face him.

“I'm not getting a signal,” she told him.

On the other side of table, Cassie dug her phone out of her pocket. “I don't have one either,” she said.
Bruce frowned. “JARVIS?” he asked.

“I am sorry to say I am unable to make contact with any of the Stark Industries satellites. I am running diagnostics now, however I don't believe the fault to be on our end. I'm afraid the tower's internet server is down as well as Mister Stark has it connected via satellite internet.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Of course he does,” she said. “Which means we can't check with Jane to see if it's just us or not.”

“JARVIS, can you connect to someone else's wireless internet connection?” Christine asked.

“I am attempting to do so now, although I warn the connection will be much weaker than usual.”

“Even a weak connection is better than nothing,” Bruce pointed out.

“Indeed, Doctor Banner.”

Bruce sighed and turned to Cassie. “Do you think this is something the SGC has done?”

Cassie shrugged. “I have no idea. I seriously know next to nothing about what's been going on in the project. I mean, yeah, I know a lot more than some people, but it's been running for almost eleven years now and no one's ever discussed technology with me. Uncle Daniel did tell me Aunt Sam was working on something to protect the Earth... maybe it's a shield of some sort? It would probably take a massive amount of power to cover the entire planet, but it could be possible I guess.”

“You're guess would be correct, Miss Fraiser,” JARVIS said out of the blue. “Doctor Colonel Samantha Carter appeared as a hologram in sir's workshop two days ago in order to enlist his help, because she required a power source for the Dimensional Phase-shift Device she had built. One that would create a field large enough to encompass the entire planet and phase it into another dimension where the Ori could not reach us.”

“A Dimensional Phase-shift Device?” Bruce repeated, stunned... and just a bit jealous. “She wants to phase the entire planet into a parallel dimension? Yes, you would need quite a bit of power for that, especially if you wanted to make it large enough to cover the entire planet. And if the satellites got stuck outside the field then you'd certainly lose all communication with them...”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Christine nodding. “That's actually pretty amazing if it's true,” she said. “But it doesn't explain why they bothered with the ships then if they could just hide. I mean those two tiny Earth ships we saw didn't look like they stood a chance against the gigantic Ori ships.”

“Maybe there's more of them waiting on the side-lines for an ambush?” Cassie suggested. “I mean, maybe the shield – if it exists that is – has a lifespan. Like it'll only hold for a couple hours or a day or something, so they need to make sure the Ori are gone before then.”

“Hm... JARVIS, could you please upload the images from the satellite onto a memory stick for me?” Christine asked. “I think I've got enough for a story... Come to think of it, I wonder if the government's made any statements yet? Either way, I need to figure out if local stations are being affected as well.”

“Why wouldn't they be?” Cassie asked with a frown.

“The satellites they use are in lower orbits around Earth... if not there's always radio and the internet, except for the satellite stations, which run off satellites in geosynchronous orbits like the
The Stark Industries satellites are indeed operating on a geosynchronous orbit at an altitude of 31,000 kilometres from the surface. I would also like to point out that I now have internet access, however it does not seem that the government has made any statements yet as to the disruptions.”

Christine nodded and paused where she'd been about to turn off her laptop. “Then I can use e-mail.”

“Are you planning on contacting the air force for a quote?” Cassie asked, looking curious.

Christine shook her head. “And broadcast that I have information I'm not supposed to have? Hell no. We'll do that after we've broken the story: once JARVIS uploads the images for me I have proof and – oh, actually could I please get Doctor Foster's e-mail address? As an astrophysicist, she's both an expert in the field and an eye-witness. So while, yes, the story's not complete, but if we're dealing with people willing to kill to keep their secrets, then we need to play it safe.”

“Killing you after the story's out would be counter-productive,” Bruce agreed with a nod. “It would only make them look worse.”

Christine grinned. “Exactly.”

“Um, Bruce?” Cassie said, standing up. “I think Jane's trying to contact us.”

Bruce looked over to the screen and noticed the Skype chat tab was flashing. He went over to the laptop and sat down, opening the window.

**Bruce? Have you lost satellite feed?**

Bruce blinked at it. “Looks like Jane's lost her feed too, so it's definitely not just us.”

“No, according to Eric, no one's able to make long-distance calls either,” Christine added, before abruptly shutting the computer. “Anyway, I'm off to the NBC station. I'll be in touch. Please tell Jane to check her e-mail in about half an hour.”

“Sir, we've lost satellite communications,” the pilot announced mere moments after Jack had ended his call with Landry.

Jack pressed the comm button. “It's alright, Lieutenant, Carter and the geeks have managed to buy us some time. Just keep flying. Maybe speed it up a notch; I'm sure they've managed to free up the air space by now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jack leaned back and sighed. So Carter's protege managed to get the time dilation field working. It was a shame it would only give them about two hours, but if they stepped on the pedal for the last bit of their journey, once they were past the major air traffic routes, then they could shave off quite a bit more time.

He looked to Colonel Rhodes, feeling slightly sorry for the man. He was holding up fairly well, all things considered, but Jack could tell by the tense twitch in his jaw that what the man really wanted
to do was get out of the heavy metal suit and pour several bottles of hard liquor down his throat. Most people freaked out in one way or another when they heard about the Stargate Program.

Well, Jack hadn't, but at the time Jack had mostly seen it as a means to a premature end. By the time he'd gotten past staring at his gun and longing for release, he'd already been to another planet, killed a god that travelled in a giant flying pyramid, and come home to divorce papers. By then it had been a bit late for freaking out.

So he'd retired instead.

“Do I even want to know what a time dilation field is, sir?” Rhodes asked, looking both resigned and weary. “Or how it's going to buy us two hours of time?”

Jack shrugged. “You'd have to ask the geeks anyway. All I know is that it's like a bubble where time moves differently. Two hours inside will be like seconds outside.”

“I have a friend who would trade her entire sizable and extremely expensive shoe collection for one of those.”

Jack thought about it for a moment. “Huh, never thought of it that way. I bet Daniel would just love a person bubble for his office. Then he could spend hours inside without anyone realizing he'd just spent ten hours with his precious rocks eating nothing but coffee and chocolate. It's a good thing we don't have that technology perfected.”

Rhodes chuckled. “Yeah, got a friend like that too.”

Jack stayed silent, anticipating the next question. He didn't have to wait too long; Rhodes was obviously sharp that way and seemed to have realized that Jack wasn't going to bite his head off for asking questions. Well, not today anyway.

“Uh, sir, isn't the lack of satellite connections going to cause problems?”

Jack shrugged. “It's not all the satellites, just anything above the dilation field. As soon as the Ori were spotted, Protocol Clear Air went into play along with... well, one other thing. A bunch of other things actually, but that's not the point. The point is that Clear Air means that thanks to the all-purpose umbrella called 'National Security', we're now securing all airports and restricting any and all air traffic by grounding all civilian air craft and most of the military ones. And it's not just us, it's all IOA countries, which is, you know, a lot of them. All over the world.”

Rhodes just nodded, no doubt wondering what his buddy Tony Stark's reaction would be to the satellite blackout. Colonel Rhodes' friendship with Stark had been a blessing back when Stark Industries was manufacturing weapons for the air force, but had turned into a double-edged sword after he'd high-tailed it out of the arms business. On the one hand, it meant the air force still had a small tie to Tony Stark; they'd gotten War Machine out of it, after all. However, it also meant they were unable to send Rhodes out on anything too classified. By all accounts Rhodes was a fine officer and, if not for his nosy, technologically-savvy friend, he probably would've been offered a position at the SGC a long time ago with or without the fancy metal suit.

Jack knew that even now, with the Ori breathing on their front doorstep, reading Rhodes into the project had been a huge risk. Then again, Jack wouldn't have gotten where he was today if he hadn't taken risks – not that he had any idea why that qualified him as general material, which meant it was probably the lucky clover nestled in his sock drawer that was the real reason. He'd taken a risk on Sheppard, and that had panned out beyond his wildest dreams.
“Sir, how exactly is the air force planning on explaining the disruption?” Rhodes asked.

Jack blinked and then shrugged. “I think this week's excuse is a solar flare. It's fascinating how much people will happily chalk up to a solar flare.”

He mentally sent out yet another plea to whatever higher power was listening (provided they weren't a power-hungry evil alien and/or entity pretending to be a god), that Daniel was doing okay. The Ori had sent five ships to Earth. Jack didn't trust five ships; the Ori had to know they could handle five ships. Not easily, but they could handle them. Besides which, the Tok'ra had counted a dozen heading towards Earth.

Whatever miracle Daniel was unearthing, he needed to hurry the hell up.

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Jane's fingers flew over the keyboard as Selvig, Darcy and what looked like half the university's science department looked over her shoulder. No one questioned the amount of people still at the university despite the late hour. They were scientists; it was expected. Or at least it certainly wasn't surprising anyone.

Word had gotten around that she'd captured some interesting images on the satellite feeds before they'd gone down. 'Interesting' clearly hadn't covered alien spaceships and the first computer screen was playing the satellite video feed on repeat for the benefit of each gaping newcomer. A group from the engineering and computer sciences department had meanwhile formed a huddle around a laptop where they were analyzing the line code of the program Jane had discovered hidden inside the satellite's core programming.

Bruce and his group had come up with some interesting theories. The scientists behind Jane seemed to be having a ball arguing just how plausible some of them actually were, or under what conditions could they be made possible. There was a dozen laptops covering every spare surface of Jane's lab, each with the volume on high as their respective owners anxiously waited for the tell-tale pings that would signal new e-mails from various colleagues at other institutions.

When Thor strode into the room, eyes hard and jaw tense, Darcy was the only one who noticed.

“Heya, big guy, you don't look too happy there,” she called out. “Bad news from Heimdall?”

That got everyone's attention and voices quieted as they turned to Thor anxiously. Thor shook his head.

“I was unable to contact Heimdall,” he said, his voice grim. Jane gasped and Thor held up a hand to forestall any panic. “Fear not, my lady, as I have little reason to believe something has happened on Asgard. In fact, I believe the source of this disturbance comes from Midgard itself.”

“Why do you think that?” a white-haired man asked.

“Because if something had happened on Asgard I would still feel my connection to my home even if none answered my call. However, the connection is not just silent, but vanished as though it had never been there.”

The scientists breathed sighs of relief and some of the tension that had risen with Thor's initial pronouncement eased off. The large Asgardian had become a permanent fixture around the
university, endearing himself to the faculty by cheerfully helping to carry large heavy equipment, boxes and eating all of Mrs Throton's homemade lardy cakes (it wasn't that they weren't good, but there were only so many a regular human could eat...). They more or less considered him one of their own at this point.

Jane frowned thoughtfully. “Hm, that's can't be good,” she conceded. “And it means that if it is a barrier of some kind, then it's definitely more than just something made out of energy...”

“Maybe it's emitting an electromagnetic frequency that's knocking out everything,” another woman added.

“It'll take a bit more than that to knock out the connection between Asgardians,” Selvig pointed out. “If Jane's theories are correct, then we're talking about something capable of disrupting an Einstein-Rosen bridge.”

“You know, I heard a rumour that some yank is developing a method to create a Einstein-Rosen bridge and utilize it to combat global warming,” said a tall, skinny man, his long red hair tied back in a ponytail.

Jane had been in the middle of adding to Selvig's comment, when she paused and looked to the skinny man – she was fairly certain he taught applied mathematics. Darcy would probably know.

“How exactly could the Einstein-Rosen bridge help against global warming?” she asked him with a frown.

He shrugged. “Not a clue, love. To be honest it sounds a bit barmy to me and we'll probably read all about after he's blown himself up.”

“Oh I don't know about that,” said Professor Jennings, the short, blonde in charge of the Space Sciences department who Jane consulted with on occasion. The woman's eyes were sparkling with excitement. “Have you heard about that horribly hush-hush military project that's recruiting all sorts of scientists and engineers from around the world. According to the rumours, it's mostly US military, but has the support of most of the world's powers including the EU, Russia and China. Remember Peter Grodin?”

“Quiet, polite, mind sharp as a tack, looked like he spent all day at the beach?” the white-haired man said with a grin. “Yes, I remember him very well indeed; knew how to hold his scotch that lad.”

“Well, he was recruited into the this project, spent a year at some US military base with minimal contact, then completely disappeared off the face of the planet. I spoke to his mother – she teaches at Cambridge, you'll remember – just last month and she told me that one day, about four years ago a strange man came to see her to tell her Peter was dead. Died in an explosion apparently, no body recovered.”

The white-haired professor sighed and hung his head sadly. “What a shame. That poor boy, he had such a shining future ahead of him.”

“The man told his mother that he couldn't tell her the details surrounding Peter's death, but that he had died a hero, helped save hundreds if not thousands of lives.”

“Was he military?”

“No.” Jennings grinned slyly. “She said it was Doctor Rodney McKay.”

“So it would seem.”

Jane blinked. She remembered Rodney McKay, had met him at a conference years ago. They'd bonded amiably over some truly amazing coffee and eclairs – for about five minutes. That was how long it had taken them to fall into a science discussion, which then rather quickly devolved into a screaming match that only ended when security arrived to break them up. Which had been a shame, because Jane remembered finding it rather exhilarating even if the man had been a complete asshole. Had it really been that long since McKay had published anything?

A shadow fell over her and she looked up into Thor's worried face.

“Do you truly believe that it is someone from your world who is blocking Heimdall's gaze?” he asked.

Jane thought about it. “It's possible. I mean, we were watching space ships fighting in the middle of the Solar System a little while ago, so I'm willing to expand my definition of what is possible.”

From her perch Darcy snorted. “Pretty sure we've been doing that for years,” she said.

Just then, Jane's computer pinged with an e-mail. The sender was a Christine Everhart. Jane blinked and opened the e-mail.

“Huh, it's a reporter,” she began. Her eyebrows rose as she read on.

“Which newspaper?” Darcy asked.

“Vanity Fair.”

“Not who I was expecting, but coolio.”

“She says the US government is claiming the satellites are out because of a massive solar flare,” Jane announced loudly for the benefit of the room.

“Rubbish, that's absolute rubbish,” said Professor Jennings immediately. “And you can tell her she can quote me on that.”

One hour and forty-seven minutes after the time dilation field had been activated and thus disrupted the world's connection to its high-orbit satellites, NBC New York interrupted the newest episode of The Voice with a special news bulletin. Like many historical events – Pearl Harbour, the Kennedy assassination, 9/11, the Chitauri attack – it was something people would talk of for years to come, remembering where they'd been and what they'd been doing when they saw it or heard of it from others. And New Yorkers, being New Yorkers, they would never let the rest of the world forget that they'd heard it first.

In Forest Hills, one young man had just returned home exhausted from a full school day followed by filling in for the sick Bugle photographer who was supposed to have been covering the NYPD's Annual Toy Drive. He kissed his aunt and gratefully accepted the warmed plate of food she offered him before plopping himself onto the couch and turning on the television. Two minutes later, he
was wide awake and calling for his aunt to come make sure he wasn't crazy.

In Hell's Kitchen, a tall man wearing dark sunglasses, a grey business suit and carrying a thin white stick tucked under his elbow, let himself into his quiet apartment. His footfalls were soft as he made his way to the kitchen, where he deposited a brown take-out bag that smelled of Chinese food onto the table and placed his leather briefcase onto an empty chair. The only sounds in the apartment were his breathing, traffic noises coming in through the open living room window, and the television program coming through the wall he shared with his half-deaf elderly neighbours. He was on his way to his bedroom when his sharp ears picked up the abrupt change in programming. He froze at the words 'exclusive ground-breaking news report'. Moments later, his eyes widened and, before he'd consciously made the decision, he was dashing towards his little FM radio.

In Manhattan, a woman was pouring herself a glass of wine with a slight smile. Her husband was busy with his latest project, but instead of being annoyed, she was determined to take advantage and settle onto the sofa with some wine and cheese, and a random season of Sex and the City. She groaned when she heard the elevator door slide open in the hallway followed by the familiar sound of her brother's footsteps. Oh well, it wasn't ideal, but one look at what she was watching and he'd roll his eyes and go find something else to do. Possibly bother her husband. Which would serve him right. She smiled slightly and took a sip of her wine as she reached for the remote. The television turned on to show a reporter she recognized as having done a human interest piece on her and her husband a year ago or so ago for Vanity Fair. She listened out of curiosity, her eyes slowly widening in disbelief. She didn't notice the wineglass slipping out of her hand until it shattered on the hardwood floor.

In Times Square, a man with long dark, unkept hair shuffled his way through the thinning crowd, his hands stuffed into the pockets of the dirty trenchcoat he was wearing, gaze fixed onto the pavement in front of him and shoulders hunched. When the words 'We apologize for the interruption to your regular programming' cut through the usual distracted din of the city, he paused and looked up to see that the perfume ad on the video board had been changed for the not-yet-familiar background of NBC news. He vaguely took note that the blonde who took over the newscast was rather pretty. Trained to always be aware of his surroundings, the man noticed when the usual movement around him ceased as everyone else also stopped to hear the report.

NBC New York posted the video of the broadcast on their webpage. The site crashed fifteen minutes later. While their IT department worked at the problem, the station's Twitter and Facebook accounts broke records in hit counts.

“Good Evening New York, I'm Chuck Scarborough.”

“And I'm Sibila Vargas. We apologize for the interruption to your regular programming, but we are here to bring you an exclusive, ground-breaking news report possibly connected with the current satellite signal disruption. And thanks to this disruption, all of you in New York will be the first in the world to hear the news. A word to the wise: you might want to sit down for this. Chuck?”

“Thanks Sibila. Earlier this evening a guest researcher at University College London, astrophysicist Doctor Jane Foster, found an unknown program inside the code to the university's deep-space research satellite. Shortly after removing the code, the satellite caught some rather
shocking images. Christine Everhart from Vanity Fair is with us in the studio with the rest of this incredible story.”

“Thanks guys. It's an honour to be here to break this story. As you've mentioned Doctor Jane Foster found an unknown program inside her satellite's code. She describes it as having been benign at the time with no obvious purpose. This happened at around 5 pm New York time, 9 pm London time. Not long afterwards, the satellite began picking up these images:...”

“Wow, I've seen this video already, but I still can't believe it. I'd just like to interject here that the entire video is about 23 minutes long, right Christine?”

“That's right Sibila. We've cut it down for this broadcast, but the entire video will be available on the NBC New York website shortly after this broadcast. I would however like to bring your attention to one of the smaller ships... okay, there it is doing a fly-by... and if we pause it and magnify the image...”

“That's a US flag.”

“That's right, Chuck. We've been unable to get a clear enough image for the second smaller ship, but this one is clearly flying under a US flag. I would also like to point out that, although Doctor Foster was the first one to notice the images, the video we're seeing here is thanks to Stark Industries satellites. I happened to be inside Stark Tower working on a different, though related, story when Doctor Foster contacted Doctor Bruce Banner, a renown nuclear physicist and biologist working with the Avengers.”

“Well, we already knew aliens existed thanks to the appearance of Thor and then the Chittauri attack last year, but these ships look completely different again. Do we know what's actually going on here?”

“According to an inside source, the large white ships belong to an alien race known as the Ori. They are a race of highly-advanced beings who were once flesh and blood like us and managed to figure out how to 'shed their mortal coil', so to speak, and ascend to a plane of existence where they are made up entirely of energy. And now they're pretending to be gods. Those ships, Chuck, are full of their followers who have embarked on a crusade to spread their religion across the galaxy. From the inside sources' words, the Ori give people two choices: accept the wisdom of the Ori, or die resisting it.”

“And does Doctor Foster think the satellite disruption is related to this attack?”

“Both Doctors Foster and Banner say they can't confirm it for certain, but they do believe it's possible. My inside source says there's a high likelihood that whatever's disrupting the satellites isn't caused by the Ori, but is rather some sort of defence and therefore originating from Earth. The US air force has released an official statement claiming the satellite disruption is due to a particularly strong solar flare. During a conversation I had with Doctor Foster and several of her colleagues in London, they dismissed the explanation as nonsense. In fact the head of University College London's Space Sciences Department, Professor Molly Jennings, wanted to go on record saying the explanation was “Rubbish, absolute rubbish”. Astronomer and expert in space weather, Doctor Richard Puck, added that thanks to the recent research being done in the field, a solar flare massive enough to cause this sort of wide-spread satellite disruption would've been anticipated long before it happened. Chuck?”

“Thanks, Christine. A more in-depth breakdown discrediting the air force's official statement will shortly be found on our website, including scientific analysis by the experts Christine mentioned.”
“Rest assured, New York, we will be following this story closely and bringing you up-to-date information as it becomes available. And please make sure to join us at eleven for our regular evening newscast where Christine will be joining us again with more information, including clips from her interview with her inside source: a seemingly ordinary young woman with an extraordinary story to tell.”

“Thank you for your patience, we now return you to your regular programming.”

Captain Haliey frowned as she watched the readouts. She glanced quickly at the clock. It had been two hours and eleven minutes since they’d initiated the field. That was in-line with her calculations, though she had hoped she’d been conservative with her estimates. She tapped her earpiece, glad that most of Area 51’s projects had been put on temporary hold thanks to the crisis, thus enabling her to use the receivers.

“Colonel Carter, this is Captain Haliey, please respond.”

There was a pause, and then: “Carter here. Are we reaching the end of our borrowed time?”

“Yes, ma'am, I'm seeing an increase instability in the readings and I've got two relays looking like they're on the verge of shorting out – or possibly blowing up. Are you ready to go, ma'am?”

“We're good to go with the palladium core. The vibranium didn't react well to the energy waves emitted by the Dimension Phase-shift Device so we need to insulate its casing a bit more before we use it.”

“Understood, ma'am. I'll let you know when the field comes down; I estimate as little as five minutes.”

“Understood, Carter out.”

Hailey then stood and used the phone to call General Wellesley to inform him of the timeline. When she returned to the monitoring station, one of the technicians pointed out a third relay whose readings had suddenly destabilized at a rate faster than the two she'd been worried about. Sure enough, seven minutes after she'd called Colonel Carter, the third relay blew.

“Turn the rest of them off,” she told the technicians and then stepped back to tap her ear comm. “Colonel Carter, General Wellesley, one of the relays just blew. I repeat, the Time Dialation Field is no longer active.”

The response was almost immediate. “This is Wellesley. Thank you, Captain. Colonel Carter, you have a go.”

“Carter here. Preparing to bring the Phase-shift Device on-line in three... two... one... now!”

Hailey held her breath during the pause that followed.

“Device is operating within normal parameters, the energy flow is stable and the pocket dimension has extended to its projected size, encompassing all objects in geosynchronous orbit.”

Haliey let out the breath she'd been holding. Okay, good, that meant their part was done. The rest
was up to the ship captains. She made her way back to the screen where the Apollo and the Sun Tze had resumed their flight patterns.

Darcy was making another round with the coffee pot, which the scientists scattered around the room embraced like the caffeine camels they were. Thor was perched on top of the heavy-duty equipment table, absently rubbing Mjolnir and looking out the window thoughtfully, while Selvig was busy ordering a truly astonishing amount of Chinese take-away. Jane and several of her fellow scientists sat around her computer working on the finishing touches for an article in which they cheerfully cut apart and debunked the US Air Force's solar flare explanation.

It was all in all a rather relaxed, easy-going atmosphere despite the underlying layer of anxious tension. It was easy to set aside the impending doom presented by five giant alien spaceships when confronted with the more immediate mystery surrounding the satellites.

Sudden movement out of the corner of her eye got Jane's attention. She looked over to the other screen and her eyes widened.

“Oh my God, the satellites are back!” she exclaimed, causing instant chaos as nearly a dozen scientists leaped from their positions and rushed to get a good view at the screen. Meanwhile, Jane frowned.

“Hang on, this a repeat?” Darcy asked. “Cause I could've sworn we'd already seen this part.”

Jane looked over the video feed. “No, this is live.”

“But nothing's changed,” Jennings pointed out. “Even the positions of the ships were almost identical to where the feed had cut out.”

“That's not all: the satellite's looking at the same position too,” said the tall skinny man. He reached into his pocket and took out his phone. “Hang on, I've got a mobile signal now: let me just call a mate of mine who works at the observatory.”

“Excuse me, Doctor Banner, Miss Fraiser, I would like to inform you that I am now receiving a satellite signal.”

Cutlery clattered against china and wood, while chairs scraped harshly on the tiled kitchen floor, nearly toppling over as Bruce and Cassie dropped everything and bolted towards the conference room. Sure enough, the previously-blank holographic video screen was once again showing two Earth ships battling against the Ori invaders.

“Huh,” said Bruce. “I would've thought there'd have been more developments than this.”

Cassie also frowned at the screen. “Yeah... also, the SI satellite's moving in a geosynchnous orbit, so if two hours have passed, should we still be looking at the exact same spot? I mean, I'm no astrophysicist, but I definitely remember learning somewhere in elementary school that the Earth rotates.”
“Your observations are correct Miss Fraiser. The current position of the Earth relative to the rest of the solar system would seem to be consistent with 6:27 pm, which is approximately two minutes after we lost contact with the high-orbit satellites. Furthermore, the data I am retrieving from the satellites indicates a minor system malfunction, and reports a loss of contact lasting 2.58 minutes.”

“Holy shit what the hell did they do: create a time bubble?!”

Cassie looked to Bruce, both realizing with astonishment that her ludicrous idea might not be quite so ludicrous.

They turned back to the screen to watch as the American spaceship (at least, the one they knew for sure was American) swerved to the right, passing over the Ori ship they'd been firing at, then looped around, avoiding a hit from one of the other ships. A second shot glanced across its shields and shook it, but neither stopped nor slowed the ship's acceleration as it doubled-back at its original target. Two beams shot out from the front of the ship. The first one looked like it hit an energy barrier, but after a pause, it obliterated the resistance and hit the ship itself. The second beam flew unhampered directly towards the Ori ship.

As the US ship flew out of the satellite's visual range, the Ori ship it had been fighting blew up in a spectacular burst of flames.

Cassie cheered.

Major Paul Davis didn't need anyone to tell him the satellites were working again. He found out all by himself when the relative silence of the Homeworld Security offices, was broken by the sudden cacophony of shrill noise as every single phone in his immediate vicinity began ringing off the hook.

He answered the first couple calls and then decided he needed to see what was going on for himself.

Now he sat and stared at his computer screen with a feeling of numb shock. They all knew their luck was bound to fail one day – in fact, statistically speaking, it was a damn near miracle that the project hadn't yet been ousted to the public in some way. Still, seeing a photo of the Apollo fighting an Ori battleship placed bold and centre on the NBC New York homepage, felt surreal at best. Paul quickly found himself scanning the attached article, his eyes steadily growing wider – in direct proportion to his sense of dread.

He picked up the phone on his desk. The General needed to know.

Chapter End Notes

Urg, the satellites... I really hope I've gotten it right here. As much as I researched, it seemed that no website on the topic had a clear answer on what would get cut out if you disrupted the feed for all satellites moving along a geosynchronous orbit. So I've partially had to cross my fingers and guess.

Also, I had this awesome moment of scientific revelation when I realized that 'hang on,
time itself doesn't make days and nights, the movement of the planet does...' followed close by: 'holy crap that episode with Sheppard stuck inside a time dilation field is total nonsense!' I mean, I usually take for granted that half the things they do on sci-fi shows only vaguely make any sense, but not being into science myself I never really know why exactly, so this was a fun moment for me. Probably old news for everyone else, but whatever. :) 

For the record, Chuck Scarborough and Sibila Vargas are real-life anchors for NBC New York's evening news. I don't usually like using real people in my stories, but it sort of fit here. Having said that, not being from New York I've never seen them on TV so I've based their interactions on other news broadcasts I have seen.
Seventh Interlude

Chapter Notes

Once again, thank you everyone for your comments and kudos. :)

I'm not entirely happy with this interlude, but I think the contents work better as an interlude then as a scene in the next act, which is what I was going to do originally. So, yeah, probably not as exciting as what you're hoping for but rest assured I am working away at the exciting bits. I just felt that these two ladies deserved a bit of air time. Plus, bonus SG1 character cameo (yes, another one, lol).

Colorado greeted her with a dark and rainy evening as the small plane touched down smoothly onto the tarmac. Pepper shivered and took a few moments to appreciate the poetic touch before she unbuckled her seatbelt and got her carry-on from the overhead compartment.

It had a been a beautiful sunny day when the Chitauri had attacked New York. She wasn't sure which she preferred.

She had one suitcase, a large purse and her waterproof ski jacket. She'd taken Sam's advice to heart and was wearing jeans and a pair of sturdy, well-worn hiking boots she hadn't touched since before becoming Tony's PA. And she hated it. Hated how strangely vulnerable she felt without the suits she wore like an armour. In a business suit and heels, she was Pepper Potts, CEO, with all the responsibilities and expectations that came with the title. To be free of that mantle should've been liberating, but instead she felt out-of-place, lost to the tide of an element that wasn't hers to command.

She flowed along with the procession of people disembarking from the plane, glad for her boots as the stairs were slick from rain. They were at a military airport, so the other two passenger planes were easy to spot: one bearing a Russian flag and the other, further away, looked like it was possibly Canadian.

A large bus waited for them at the edge of the tarmac to take them along the next leg of their journey.

Along the way, Pepper peeked at her fellow travellers, trying to get an idea for how many people knew why they were here. Based on the grim faces, she guessed quite a few, although everyone was looking at least a bit scared (she supposed this would be even scarier if she didn't know what was going on). To her surprise there were even a few children – the youngest looking about six or so.

She checked her phone for the umpteenth time, letting the hum of hushed conversations wash over her. Tony still hadn't responded.

She carefully slid the phone back into her purse, gritting her teeth as she tried to will her hands to stop trembling. She'd know the promise was empty the moment it had passed his lips, known that so long as the Earth was in danger and there was anything he could possibly do, he'd be out in his
suit. She'd continue hoping until the end, but even as she'd packed his suitcase, she'd known this was a lifeboat Tony Stark wouldn't be on.

Damn the stupid, reckless son-of-a-bitch.

Just for that she'd give his vintage rock t-shirts to one of the teenagers she'd seen in the back... no, she'd give it to the mother of that six-year-old. Then she's watch vindictively as the kid got it all dirty: mud, spills, grubby muddy fingermarks, maybe even some crayon. That'd show him. Maybe she'd even go marry an alien – one from an advanced race that was several times smarter than Tony. He'd really hate that.

Pepper took a deep breath and wiped away the stray tear that was trying to fall. The numbness and shock were wearing off, but she refused to allow herself the luxury of falling apart just yet. If they were forced to evacuate, there would be plenty of time to despair later.

They hadn't lost yet. And Daniel, Steve and the others were still out there.

The buses took them past the first security checkpoint at Cheyenne Mountain and through a long tunnel, eerily lit with artificial lights every few feet. The noise in the bus got louder as the few people and kids who weren't entirely aware of what was going on, started getting antsy, and Pepper was surprised to realize how many foreign languages she suddenly recognized. Russian she'd expected based on the plane, but she also heard French, German and Italian among them. Thankfully, they were soon pulling into a parking lot, where they were all let off again.

Not being immediately surrounded by a military unit with guns seemed to do a lot to relieve the tension, and while there were soldiers with guns in their vicinity, the men and women approaching them to help carry luggage were obviously cadets.

“Excuse me everyone!” a voice called out and she turned along with the others to find the speaker, a well-built older man with salt-and-pepper hair. “Welcome to Cheyenne Mountain. I'm Colonel Louis Ferretti and I'm here to take you down into the base. To those of you who don't know what's going on, I promise General Landry will explain everything downstairs. Now if you'll just follow me, we have several security checkpoints to clear and we need to get through as quickly as possible so we can free up the elevators.”

There were two teenage boys – both looking somewhere around thirteen or fourteen years old – and they seemed to naturally gravitate towards each other in the melee that followed. She could hear them in the background comparing outrageous theories about what was going on. Not that anything was going to be more outrageous than the truth. She hid a smile as they walked into the large military complex and the boys both recognized the logo in the foyer as NORAD.

“Mommy, are we going to visit Uncle Mer?” asked a small voice directly behind her as the line inched its way towards the first security checkpoint.

Then the line stopped as the long line of elevators along the far wall were filled to capacity and sent on their way. So Pepper was able to glance back to see the six-year-old she'd noticed earlier looking up at a woman with wavy reddish-brown hair, curious and a little apprehensive. The woman smiled down at her.

“I don't know, honey,” the woman answered. “Maybe. And if we're not right away, we might be able to later.”

The little girl's eyes lit up with excitement. “Really? Uncle Mer said he works really far away and that's why he can't visit.” She paused and frowned as she thought about something deeply. “But
mommy, if we're going to visit then we need to bring presents. Do we have presents, mommy?"

Pepper bit her lip. She noticed the little girl's mother doing the same.

“No, Madison, we didn't have time to get presents. We had to leave in a hurry, remember?"

Pepper hadn't even noticed the tall, dark-haired man standing just behind the two of them until he put a hand on the little girl's shoulder. Without turning, the little girl leaned her head back to look at him.

“Now you'll remember the first time Uncle Meredith came to visit he didn't bring any presents either,” the man – her father, Pepper assumed – said smoothly.

“Besides, he'll get to see you and that'll be the best present ever,” the woman added.

The little girl giggled. “Really?”

“Oh yes, Uncle Meredith will be absolutely thrilled to see you.”

“Oh, okay,” the little girl said, beaming happily, the sarcasm in her father's voice completely going over her head.

“Yes, he will be very happy to see you, honey,” said the woman, the tone of her voice indicating that she would not accept anything less than complete, unadulterated joy from this uncle at the sight of his niece. After a few moments she looked back up at her partner and smiled. “Although to be fair, I think we've all grown on him. In his last e-mail he was describing the new and improved mobile he'd built for Teyla's son and the plans he had for some toys he was going to build him for when he was a bit older. I think there might've even been a remote-controlled stroller involved so that she could take him with her when she went jogging."

The man rolled his eyes. “If she doesn't watch out, it'll probably fly too,” he said under his breath.

Pepper decided then and there, that whoever this Uncle Mer was, she would do everything in her power to make sure he and Tony never met. And that was also when she realized that her apprehension had faded and the shaking she'd felt as she pushed down the panic, was gone.

The woman must've finally felt her gaze on them and looked up to meet Pepper's eyes. For a moment, she felt embarrassed for having intruded on a private, family moment, but she wasn't sorry. She smiled apologetically.

“I'm sorry to eavesdrop,” she said. “I honestly couldn't help myself. Everything's just so crazy right now and you were so... normal.”

Pepper faltered. She wasn't really sure she knew what had drawn her attention except that it had been something else to think about while she waited to find out whether or not the world was going to hell. The woman, however, seemed to understand what she was trying to say and smiled sympathetically.

“Sometimes a bit of normal helps,” she said and stepped forward, holding her hand out to Pepper. “I'm Jeannie Miller and this is my husband Caleb, and my daughter Madison.”

Pepper shook her hand. “Pepper Potts,” she said, relieved not to have to explain anything more in words.

Jeannie cocked her head. “Pepper? As in Tony's Pepper?”
Pepper blinked. “Um, yes. You know Tony?”

“I was up ’till three am my time helping him and Sam with a power conversion issue.”

“Oh. So, you're an engineer then?”

“No, I'm a stay-at-home mom.”

Pepper blinked again. Anyone who could help Tony with anything – not to mention Sam, because she could tell even over the phone that Tony considered Sam his equal and that didn't happen to just anyone either – wasn't someone ordinary.

“So being a genius is a hobby then?”

The woman burst into laughter. Caleb and Madison exchanged grins.

“A hobbyist genius?” Jeannie said. “I like that.”

And then the line was moving again. No longer skating the cold edge of panic, Pepper finally took a good look at the lobby and noticed the curious stares their group was getting from the NORAD personnel. Which meant they didn't know what was going on either. Or maybe this was just another oddity in a long list of strange things to pass through this lobby and down into the depths of the mountain.

She and the Millers were packed into separate elevators and when the elevator doors closed, the cadet at the controls pressed the button to the bottom floor.

Which still wasn't their final destination.

From the elevators they were lead past another security checkpoint, where two guards sitting at a desk verified their identities and checked them each off a list. Then they were lead down a long winding corridor that ended with a small, innocuous-looking door with a keypad and hand scanner. The soldier guarding it was dressed differently from the others they'd seen. He was wearing battle fatigues and a kevlar vest with a symbol she didn't recognize stitched onto his right shoulder, right above a British flag. She also didn't recognize the black device he was holding, except that he held it like a weapon. Or possibly a scanner, but she was betting on weapon.

Upon seeing them, the soldier unlocked the door and held it open while they passed through into a large warehouse. The cadet leading them brought them to the service elevator – probably to save time since there were so many of them, Pepper guessed.

She recognized Colonel Ferretti as the one manning the controls of this elevator. When their entire group had squeezed inside, he dismissed the cadets and closed the doors. And then the elevator went down. And down. And down.

“Holy shit, just how far down are we going?!” she heard one of the teenage boys say quietly.

“Travis, language!” a man admonished him, though she could tell his heart wasn't in it. Like her, he probably echoed the sentiment.

Finally, the elevator stopped and the panels at the front slid open to reveal a plain, drab corridor with guards stationed at either side of the door. Both were wearing the same uniforms as the one at the warehouse door, except the flags on their shoulders were American. These two were also armed with semi-automatic rifles in addition to the black devices.
Colonel Ferretti then led them into a large conference room. There were seats set up facing a podium in the front. The room was already quite packed, but Pepper spotted a long table laden with refreshments along the back wall and headed to the coffee pots, where a line-up had already formed. The coffee was terrible, of course, but not quite as bad as she'd expected. She was spoiled when it came to coffee: Tony insisted that Stark Industries only use high-quality beans in their employee cafeteria. Even the night watchmen were issued their own private stash of coffee from the company's shipment.

She found Jeannie sitting in one of the seats along the side, Madison sitting on her lap drinking chocolate milk from a bright pink twirly straw. Pepper wondered why the military had twirly straws on hand.

“So, how much do you know about this project?” Pepper asked her after she sat down.

Jeannie looked at her with sharp, assessing eyes for a moment, before shrugging. “My brother's been involved for years and some mathematical calculations I did in my spare time one evening ended up being related to something he was working on... so I was read in.” She paused. “I've been to visit him a few times, so I know quite a bit about his side of the project and he's told me stories, but there's a lot more going on I don't know much about at all.”

“You say 'visit him' as though that in and of itself means something...”

Jeannie smirked. “Oh, it does. Like Madison said earlier, Meredith lives very far away right now.”

“As in, on another planet?” Pepper asked, holding her breath for the answer. She knew Daniel had told the Avengers a lot more than she'd overheard, and probably hadn't told them nearly everything, but there was something exciting about the idea of people from Earth living on another planet.

“As in, in another galaxy.”

Pepper froze. Another galaxy. “The Ori are from another galaxy,” she whispered, remembering Daniel saying that.

Jeannie blinked. “Uh, yeah they are, but Mer's project has nothing to do with them. Trust me, I think we might have the better deal with the Ori as opposed to what Atlantis has been dealing with.”

“Did you just say--”

“Travis, what are you doing over there?!” a man's voice suddenly demanded loudly.

Pepper and Jeannie turned to watch a balding man with glasses making his way through the crowd towards the two teenagers, who had found a television in the corner of the room and were fiddling with the channels. One of them was turning towards the man with an annoyed look on his face.

“Gregory Patterson!” another man's voice said loudly. The other boy flinched.

“Jeannie?”

Pepper looked up to see Caleb handing his wife a coffee. She smiled at him gratefully.

“Thanks dear,” she said. He nodded and smiled back at her.

Pepper couldn't help but admire the man for his calm. It was his wife who was the one involved
with the project, but he seemed content to silently support her. She tried to imagine Tony in his place and couldn't. Tony was a force of nature, never silent unless he was absorbed in a project. And then he had the things around him make that noise for him.

She didn't want to go to another planet without that force of nature.

She turned away from happy family and looked back where the teenagers were trying to explain to their respective fathers that they'd just wanted to find out who'd won the Red Sox game. Pepper couldn't help but shake her head at their priorities.

“Travis, trust me, right now it really doesn't matter who won the damn game, now turn it off!”

The boy grumbled something under his breath, but turned around to turn the TV off anyway. As he shuffled to the side, Pepper caught a glimpse of the screen. She froze, her eyes widening. Behind her, she heard Jeannie gasp.

“Oh my god.”

Pepper looked back to watch as Jeannie scooped up her daughter in one arm, holding her coffee cup in the other as she began to push through the crowd. Pepper immediately got up to follow.

“No, wait!” she called out to the teenagers and their parents (and woman had now joined the second man by the teen named Gregory). “Turn it back on!”

The two teenage boys looked confused. “Why?” Travis asked. “There's just some stupid sci-fi show on there right now.”

He exchanged a bewildered look with his father, who shrugged and nodded at him. The boy leaned down and turned the television back on. A familiar picture took its place, complete with an even more familiar logo.

“That's not a sci-fi show,” Pepper found herself saying numbly, recognizing the anchors immediately. “That's the NBC.”

“And that,” said Jeannie, pointing with her coffee cup to one of the smaller ships that was flying around the giant Ori war ships, “is the USS Apollo.”

Suddenly, they could see what looked like a build-up of blue energy and another ship appeared.

“Is this in real-time?” Pepper asked.

“I don't know,” Jeannie answered.

The two teenagers were staring at them – actually, when Pepper looked around, she realized they'd drawn a considerable amount of attention. She looked towards the door and saw Colonel Ferretti frowning at them. He pushed himself away from the wall and made his way towards them.

“Everything alright here?” he asked when he'd reached them.

Jeannie glanced at him and then motioned towards the TV with a quirk of her head. “Does General Landry know about this?”

He blinked and looked to the screen. His double-take was almost comical and his eyes widened as he took in what he was seeing. He said something under his breath that Pepper didn't understand, but caught the meaning of very clearly.
“Was that Goa'uld?” Jeannie asked him, sounding amused.

He winced. “Sorry, occupational hazard, ma'am.”

“No, that's fine. I just don't think I've heard that one from Sam before.”

Colonel Ferretti narrowed his eyes at her. “I believe I missed your name, ma'am.”

“No, you didn't ask.” She raised an eyebrow at him. In her arms, Madison was looking between her mom and the US air force Colonel with a worried look on her face. “I'm Jeannie Miller, Doctor McKay's sister.”

Understanding crossed the man's face just before his eyes turned wary. Pepper once again wondered about this mysterious Uncle Mer: Doctor Meredith McKay. She didn't think the name sounded familiar. Maybe Tony would know it. If he ever got here.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs Miller,” said the Colonel politely. Then the General stormed into the room and he turned around to call to him: “Hey, General, have you seen the, uh, NBC broadcast, sir?”

The General was an older man (as all generals inevitably were) with greying black hair, bushy eyebrows and a no-nonsense air about him. His eyes narrowed at the question and he changed his course to march directly towards them, a path clearing in front of him without him needing to ask.

“Yes, Colonel, I've heard about the broadcast,” the man said tersely when he reached them. His eyes were hard, anger burning within them like a loaded cannon waiting to be fired. And he aimed them directly at Pepper. “Ms Potts, did you know about this?”

Pepper raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him and smiled. It was her business smile, the smile that made Tony pause and try to remember what he'd done this time.

“General Landry, what exactly makes you think I know anything about this?” She was curious. Did this have something to do with Tony or Daniel, or was he guessing?

General Landry gestured towards the screen. “Because the footage is being provided by Stark Industries satellites.”

Pepper blinked and looked back to the television screen. Sure enough, in the top right-hand corner there was a watermarked SI logo. Bruce and Cassie had been busy apparently. And Christine Everhart, of course, Pepper reminded herself as the scene shifted and the woman herself appeared on-screen. She wished she could hear what was being said.

She turned back to the General, the small, confident smile back on her face. She'd faced down businessmen, military brass, politicians and evil villains. This man wasn't going to come even close to riling her.

“Did I know Bruce and JARVIS had found that little program you'd put into our satellites' programming to disrupt the video feed?” she started, because he expected her to defend herself and the best defence had always been a good offence. “Oh yes, I was there when Doctor Foster phoned Bruce about that. Did I know about the alien spaceships they saw on the live feed? Of course. I have eyes; I can see them there. Did I know they were going to take that footage and hand it over to Christine Everhart, who happened to be in the tower, to take to the NBC? No, I was probably on the plane when they did that.”

She took a sip of her coffee, letting the silence linger for a moment.
“But don't mistake me, General, I'm not condemning them. You and your superiors have put this entire planet at risk because of your own fear. I'm not going to pretend to know everything that's going on in this project, but you've been lying to the world for a long time. After so much secrecy and so many lies, how is anyone supposed to believe the truth you finally decide to spin out into the world? Especially after everything that's just happened with SHIELD?"

She smirked, noticing the twitch of his eyebrows that told her that beneath his impassive expression, this big important man was starting to sweat.

“You're lucky I met Daniel Jackson before I heard about any of this – and, more to the point, heard about him. I know General Ross and I can imagine the sorts of favours Daniel would've had to call in when he went up against him in military court. And, yes, he did it for his niece, but he also did it to right an injustice, to exonerate a man he barely knew. For that reason, I'm willing to give his project the benefit of the doubt. But if you want to stop the lynch mobs, you're going to have to start telling the truth.”

General Landry was silent for a very long moment. “I'll take that under consideration Ms Potts, but it's not my call to make. You've worked with the air force before, you should know how that works.”

“Oh, I do General. But most people won't. They'll just see–”

“Holy shit!” Colonel Ferretti suddenly exclaimed. “Kid, turn the volume up on that TV!”

Travis fumbled with the remote in his hand and suddenly the volume rose. Pepper blinked at the image that had appeared at the bottom right hand corner of the screen. It wasn't the whole interview, just clips and snippets of speech cut and pasted together with Christine's narrative.

“My name is Cassandra Fraiser and, other than the presence of trace elements of a metal called naquadah in my blood, I'm genetically one hundred percent human. And I was born on another planet.”

Pepper imagined she could feel the entire room take a deep breath.

“Who is that girl?” General Landry demanded quietly.

“Cassie, Doc Fraiser's kid,” Colonel Ferretti replied. “SG1 found her and brought her back through the gate... We buried the reports, her existence, and Carter created a bullet-proof identity for her.”

“What? Why would you do that? Did General Hammond–”

“–He ordered it, sir. To keep her safe and out of any potential dissecting hands.”

“Right now, there's an alien armada on its way to Earth. Their technology is of a level we can't even begin to match. And my uncle, Doctor Daniel Jackson, is out there with Captain America and several of the Avengers risking his life to find that one miracle that could save this planet.”

“Well, she's certain done everything she can to undo all your hard work,” said the General. “Who'll be able to protect her now that all those 'potential dissecting hands' know about her?"

“The Hulk,” said Pepper and smiled slightly. “Apparently your Doctor Jackson has a gift for making unusual friends.”

Colonel Ferretti snorted. “You don't know the half of it,” he said. “His biography's gonna make millions one day and every single person who reads it, is gonna wonder how much of it's been
exaggerated. And the thing is that none of it will be. I was there for that first trip and that's the sort of shit pulp science fiction movies are made of, pardon my French.”

Then he nodded to the screen. “She's wrong by the way,” he said casually before winking at the two boys. “We're totally a match for the Ori.”


“Sorry sir.”

General Landry turned to address the room. “I'm afraid I don't have a lot of time, but I will attempt to give you a short background on what's going on. Before I do, please be assured that we have our best people doing everything in their power to defend this planet.”

“That's really great, General,” a voice from the back called out. “But we're not soldiers. So why exactly are we here?”

The General's face turned impossibly grimmer. “You're here in case we fail.”
Act VI, pt i

Chapter Notes

I'm finding this act intense and a bit overwhelming to write, so I'm taking a break from writing part 3 to post part 1 (yes part 2 is finished, no you're not getting it tonight - there's only so much editing I can stomach). Anyway, thank you so much for your support!

Warning: Do I really need to tell you that in a battle people will die? No main characters, though, I promise (this is SG1 and Marvel: if I killed a main character I'd just have to then figure out how to bring them back to life and I can't be bothered with that).

And now on to the chapter!

SPARK

“Colonel Carter, General Wellesley, one of the relays just blew. I repeat, the Time Dilation Field is no longer active.”

Tony took a deep breath. Everything that could've gone wrong with the project, had gone wrong. Well, except that it hadn't actually blown up. That would've sucked. Also, probably killed them all, so on the whole Tony was really glad that not everything had actually gone wrong. First there was the energy transference problem, which they solved thanks to super math-mom, and now the vibranium, which never reacted to anything ever – except apparently for strange alien devices. That he at least knew how to solve with a bit more time. Time they were going to get by using the palladium core.

Now here they were, at the Zero Hour – or Zero Hour plus two bonus hours if you wanted to be technical about it – and he and Siler had just finished placing the core and he was inspecting the arc reactor one, last time.

“This is Wellesley. Thank you, Captain. Colonel Carter, you have a go.”

Tony looked up and met Sam's questioning eyes. Tony nodded. The reactor was functioning normally. They were as ready as they were going to be. He picked up his datapad to monitor the read-outs more closely. Behind him, Sam tapped her comm.

“Carter here. Preparing to bring the Phase-shift Device on-line in three... two... one... now!”

Tony watched the numbers. There was a slight spike when the Phase-shift Device turned on, but otherwise they remained steady. He looked up and grinned at Siler. The engineer didn't grin back, but the look on his face was definitely pleased.

“We're golden,” he called out over his shoulder to Sam. She glanced up to him and he could tell she was trying very hard not to grin as she and Doctor Lee looked over the read-outs in front of them.
“Device is operating within normal parameters, the energy flow is stable and the pocket dimension has extended to its projected size, encompassing all objects in geosynchronous orbit.”

“Excellent work, Colonel Carter, Mister Stark. How long do you expect the palladium core to last?”

Tony looked down at his datapad. “I'm thinking about an hour and twenty-ish minutes,” he said.

Sam nodded and told the General.

“Very good. I'll inform Stargate Command. Wellesley out.”

Sam tapped off her comm. Then her face split into a grin. “Well, we did it.”

“Now we just need to do it again,” said Doctor Lee with a slight frown.

Tony rolled his eyes. “God, you're such a party-pooper. Enjoy the moment, Lee. We've managed to keep the world safe for another hour and a half.”

“I thought you said it was an hour and twenty minutes?” said Sam with a raised eyebrow. She looked amused though.

He waved her off. “Whatever. It's not like it'll take us even half that time to rig up the stronger casing, right Siler?”

“Yes, sir. Shouldn't take us more than half an hour, ma'am.”

“In that case, I'll get someone to bring us dinner from the mess. We're not likely to have time to eat later.”

“Sir, the Ori warship has been destroyed,” Lieutenant Weissman announced to the bridge.

It would've been the perfect moment for cheering, except that it wasn't. One down, thought Colonel Ellis, watching the screen as the Apollo flew past the explosion, veering out of the way of shooting debris. Farther away, he caught a glimpse of the Sun Tze flying past the Ori ships, plasma beams shooting out like deadly disco lights.

“Sir, we're being targeted!”

“Captain--“

“–On it, sir.”

“Cavendish, pick a target and fire at will!”

“Yes sir!”

He watched as Major Erika Cavendish's hands settled over the controls. Rumour had it she'd prepared for her post by spending two weeks of leave in Nevada playing space shooters until she could out-shoot her brother and all his gamer friends, breaking records they hadn't known could be broken. Now the blonde's pretty blue eyes were sniper-focused and fierce in a way that gave Ellis
chills even after having her under his command for months. She paused for a few seconds and then her fingers exploded with movement.

Two plasma beams shot out towards the Ori ship they were approaching. The ship pulled forward, but the beams connected.

“Direct hit to the Ori ship's aft thrusters,” said Weissman even as another plasma beam was fired at the ship. “Their shields are holding.”

Suddenly, the Apollo veered to the left. A moment later, it shook from an impact and Cavendish's shot went a little off-course.

“Sir, direct hit along the port-side; shields are holding.”

“Ori ship's shields are down, sir!”

Just as Ellis was about to order them to turn the ship around to make another pass, the Apollo shook again, and this time he had to grab hold of the armrest to keep himself from flying off his chair.

“Sir, the hyperdrive engine's been hit! Shields down to sixty percent.”

“The Sun Tze's has destroyed one of the Ori ships, sir.”

Ellis' mind flew through his options. “Deploy the F-302's. Tell them to keep the disabled ship busy, do as much damage as they can until until we can get back to their location. Captain, turn us about and let's face this tail. Major, as soon as you have a clear shot, take it”

“Yes sir.”

He felt the ship's sub-light engines fire up as they spun them around. The Apollo was already firing at the Ori ship before it showed on the viewscreen. Unfortunately, this particular Ori ship seemed to have a talented pilot at its helm and the warship narrowly avoided getting hit by the first two plasma beams. The third shot hit them square into the curve of their massive bow.

Unfortunately, the Ori ship fired at them at exactly the same time. The Apollo dipped down, but not quite quickly enough and Colonel Ellis' teeth rattled at the impact. The shields were weakening.

“Shields down to forty percent, sir!”

He tapped his comm. “Engineering, this is Ellis: can you do anything about the shields?”

There was a slight pause. “Colonel, this is Michaels, we're re-routing power from minor systems and the lower decks. I should be able to get us back to sixty percent in a few minutes. If you could just do me a favour, sir, and stop taking hits?”

Ellis snorted. “We'll do our best if you do yours. Ellis out.”

“Sir,” said Lieutenant Beauchamps at communications. “We've received a message from Stargate Command. They're initiating the Phase-shift Device.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Sir, we're showing five hyperspace windows opening just outside the Solar System, same entry point as the Ori warships!”
His eyes snapped to Major Levi, who was manning the long range sensors. “Are they Ori?”

Levi's eyes never left the screen. “One moment, sir...” Then he looked up. “Yes, sir, they're definitely Ori. And they're approaching at full sub-light speed. In firing range in about two minutes, sir.”

Ellis took a deep breath. Unlike the first wave of ships, these guys weren't going to take their time. And their backup hadn't arrived yet. Damn.

“Well, it's not like we weren't expecting them,” he said with more confidence than he felt. “Cavendish, finish this one off quickly. Weissman, how's the crippled ship?”

“They've deployed one-manned fighters to combat the F-302s, sir,” came the immediate reply. “The ship has restored minimal shielding, but our squadron managed to take out their manoeuvring thrusters before that happened.”

“Sir, shields are back up to fifty-eight percent.”

Which was just in time as the ship was rocked by another impact. He watched as the Apollo sailed up and above the Ori ship: Cavendish caught the ship in a two-blast volley.

“Ori shields are down, sir!”

At which point a final plasma blast hit it right into the centre of the large swirling blue power supply. The containment field around it shattered.

“Captain, sub-light at full!” Ellis cried. “Get us out of the blast zone!”

“Yes, sir!”

He felt the momentary hum of the ship's engine firing up and then they flying away from the explosion. The Apollo did a wide arc to bring them back towards the main fight, far enough away to avoid being hit by the large pieces of debris that were flung from the exploding warship. Smaller debris peppered against the shield, but Ellis knew the impacts weren't a problem.

“Sir, hyperspace windows opening–“

“–Oh shit!”

Ellis' didn't snap at the Captain for his language, too busy staring at the blue tendrils of an opening hyperspace window that were right in front of them. Suddenly, the Apollo veered sharply to the side and the view screen spun. When it stopped spinning, Ellis forced himself to relax his grip on the edge of his armrests and glanced to his pilot.

“That was some fancy flying there, Captain Cross,” he said, still feeling a bit shaken. “And I appreciate not going out in the most dumb-ass case of bad timing ever, but next time, leave the loop de loops for the F-302s. I'm pretty sure this ship's not meant to move like that.”

“Er, yes sir,” said the red-haired Captain, his face pale. “Sorry sir.”

“Sir, the Odyssey and the Iliya Muromet have just dropped out of hyperspace.”

Ellis let out a small sigh of relief. “About damn time. Captain, bring us about.”

The Apollo came about and flew at the Ori fleet. Outside he could see the Odyssey flying ahead, guns blazing, towards the nearest Ori ship. The Iliya Muromet, meanwhile was flying towards the
ship the Apollo had crippled earlier. The crippled ship managed to avoid the first plasma blast by the skin of its proverbial teeth and shot back with one of its own cannons, which hit the Muromet's shields.

“Sir, one of the Ori ships is moving to intercept.”

“Cavendish, get those trigger fingers ready. On my mark.”

“Yes, sir.”

His eyes narrowed as he watched the white behemoth – could almost imagine the sun's reflection from the golden trim as a malicious gleam in its eye – as it came towards them smirking, confident of its victory. Ellis knew they were the underdog in this battle, but goddammit they weren't going to lose. They couldn't afford to.

Although... why had this ship suddenly decided to break its formation? Ori ships almost never broke formation.

“Levi, what are the other Ori ships doing?”

There was a pause and then a panicked: “Sir, two of the warships are firing up their sub-light engines! They're on a course directly for Earth.”

“Dammit! Captain, manoeuvre us around to intercept them!”

“Yes, sir!”

Easier said than done, Ellis realized, because he doubted the ship heading for them was going to let them do that. Sure enough, the Apollo turned to move around the Ori ship and the ship matched them.

“Sir, I'm reading a build-up of energy at the centre of their bow,” said Weissman.

That wasn't good. “Cavendish, target that area. Beaton, divert everything you can to the shields.”

Two 'yes sirs' rang through the bridge and moments later, he watched as two plasma beams shot out at the Ori ship. The first one hit it directly and the second skimmed its shield as the Ori warship turned to follow the Apollo's course. He could see the energy build-up now: a swirling mass of golden sparks that should've looked beautiful. It was beautiful. And it filled him with dread.

Energy shot along the sides of the Ori ship and then it was coming for them.

“Evasive–“ was all he had time to call out before the massive forward beam that only SG1 had survived to tell the tale about, hit.

The ship rattled like a dinghy riding the wave of a tsunami. He was sent flying from his chair and hit the metal deck, left shoulder exploding in pain. If he cried out, it was drowned by the all-encompassing noise that rattled, crashed and screamed around him. Consoles on either side of him exploded into flames, sending sparks flying across his vision. People screamed. Metal screeched.

And then the shaking stopped and there was silence.

Ellis lay on the ground panting for a moment. Then he dragged himself to his unsteady feet. The bridge was devastated. There were several small fires and part of the ceiling had given way at the front, exposing metal beams and wires. One of the beams had fallen directly into the weapons
system's controls. All he could see of Cavendish, was one hand hanging limply from her chair.

He tapped his comm. “Medical team to the bridge,” he said hoarsely. He cleared his throat and stumbled his way to his chair, hissing at the spikes of pain shooting up from his shoulder.

“Status report!” he barked, his voice a muffled echo across the bridge. He watched as his crew shook off their shock and got to work assessing the damage to their systems.

“Shields are down, sir.”

“Short-range sensors are down, sir.”

“Sir, they hit us along the front starboard side,” Sergeant Beaton reported from the engineering console. “Front starboard thrusters are nonoperational and the blast took out the hull on decks 14-20, which have been sealed off. We're also venting atmosphere on decks 13-11.”

Ellis took a deep breath. Yup, they were in trouble. “Any good news?” he asked.

“We're still here, sir,” said Beaton.

“And that's nothing to sneeze at, Sergeant. The question is for how long. What's that Ori ship doing?”

“Long-range sensors are a bit distorted, but they're working,” came the report from Major Levi. “I think it's being engaged by one another ships.”

“See if you can clear them up,” he immediately answered. “I want to know what's going on.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir, we're being hailed by the Iliya Muromet.” He nodded to the Lieutenant to take the hail. Unfortunately, while Colonel Ivanna Petrovska was a talented commander, her English was only marginally better than Ellis' Russian. Thankfully, Lieutenant Beauchamps spoke fluent Russian. After a few moments, the Lieutenant turned back to him. “Sir, Colonel Petrovska says to get out of the fray. The Iliya Muromet is engaging the Ori ship.”

Ellis nodded. That explained why they hadn't been finished off yet. He knew Carter had theorized that the warships needed some time to recharge their 'forward lance beam' (he was fairly certain that name was Mitchell's fault), but any sensor data that had been gathered during that initial confrontation by the supergate had been lost along with all the ships that had encountered the weapon. The only reason they knew about it at all was because SG1 had managed to survive.

Through the view window, he watched as F-302s flew around his ship, keeping the Ori's fighters away from the Apollo. The shape they were in, even the one-manned fighters were a threat.

“Alright then, Sergeant, tell Petrovska we thank her for her help. And make sure she knows that two of the Ori ships are on a course for Earth. Captain, get us out of the way.”

“Sir, Colonel Petrovska says the Odyssey has already engaged the Ori ships on their way to Earth.”

“Good.” He tapped his comm as he felt the ship move. It was sluggish and the view out of the window a bit lop-sided, but she was moving. “Engineering, this is Ellis. How long until we have shields again?”
Cassie gasped and grabbed Bruce's arm tightly when the Ori ship heading for the American one shot what looked like a massive laser beam. She couldn't hear anything, of course, but years of sci-fi had provided her with enough sound effects to accompany the impact as it tore into the smaller ship. Pieces of the ship's hull went flying.

When the debris settled, the ship looked crippled, half-dead as it hung limply in space. It had always been grey, but now the grey looked dull, the angle of the satellite capturing snatches of corridor exposed to open space. She felt her eyes tearing even as she tried not to wonder how many people that instant exposure had just killed.

Her eyes flew to the Ori ship as it finished its turn towards the smaller one.

And then one of the newly-arrived Earth ships flew just above it, shooting a beam of light at it from its opposite side. It flew around the Ori warship, an obvious ploy to divert warship's attention from its wounded comrade.

“JARVIS, did you see that?” Bruce suddenly demanded. “Can you get a close up?”

“One moment, Doctor Banner. I don't believe that will be a problem.”

The holo-projection on the left continued to show the satellite footage, while the one on the right was paused and rewound to show the new ship flying by. It zoomed in and the pixels adjusted. Cassie's eyes widened.

“That's a Russian flag,” she said softly. “I knew Daniel said he'd been working with the Russians, and he'd been to Moscow and Siberia a few times for talks and such, but this...”

“This is a bit more than just talks,” said Bruce. “JARVIS, send the enhanced image to the NBC studio.”

“Of course, Doctor Banner.”

Cassie had been steadfastly ignoring the NBC newscast as they began playing audio clips from her interview with Christine. It wasn't the whole interview – there wasn't time for that and most of it had nothing to do with the Ori attack anyway.

Then she saw two Ori battleships pull out from between the gap in their formation and head towards the satellite. Smaller white fighters buzzed around them like a swarm of flies, but the Earth fighters were tenacious and clearly giving them a run for their money. It was easy to see that even though the Ori fighters out-numbered them, the Earth fighters had much better pilots.

And then a third Earth ship was there, flying at the two Ori ships that were breaking away from the side, guns blazing at the closest one. The ships changed course to get into a better firing position. The closest one fired first, but the Earth ship's shields easily absorbed the impact.

“Bruce, Cassie, we got a close up of the other ship!”

They both turned to the open Skype window they had with Jane and her group.

“Yeah, so did we,” said Cassie. “It's Russian.”

“Huh, what? No it's not, it's Chinese.”
Bruce and Cassie looked at each other.

“Are we talking about the same ship?” Bruce asked. “We got a close-up of the one that just went to the rescue of that American ship.”

“Rescue? Which... oh, okay... oh wow, that looks really bad. No, we meant the other one from the original two that were here. It’s got a Chinese flag on its side. Darcy’s sending the image to Christine. Oh, and apparently, the BBC’s newscast team should be here in a bit, so we’re going to be surrounded by weird British people soon.”

They heard a soft snort from somewhere in the background.

“I hate to break it to you, luv, but I’m afraid you’re surrounded by weird British people. Well, except for Sajan and Muka; they’re foreign. Oh, and Mac: he’s Scottish.”

There was laughter in the background. Followed by a loud “Hang on, I'm Canadian!”

“Well, that's almost English.”

“What? I was 'almost American' last week!”

“Then make up your bloody mind!”

Cassie rolled her eyes, glad that at least someone was managing to keep from panicking. She looked back to the ships on screen. Both Ori ships were converging on the Earth ship, moving to try and get it between them. She narrowed her eyes, wondering if they'd come out like that on purpose.

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Times Square was uncharacteristically silent. Cars had stopped, and many of their drivers gotten out to stare at the NBC New York broadcast. Far away, horns honked repeatedly – probably people who didn't listen to the radio and therefore had no idea what was going on.

“This just in from the University College London and Stark Tower, we have close-up images from two of the Earth ships.”

Two images overlaid the satellite image of the space battle they'd been watching. One was slight blurrier than the other, but it was still clear enough for anyone with eyes to know what they were looking at. Two flags: one Chinese and one Russian.

The Asset stared up at the screen. Russia. He knew the flag; it meant something to him. Images of uniforms bearing that flag raced across his mind... his mind shrank away from the images, away from the cold fear that made him break out into a sweat.

He'd been to Russia, the Asset knew, and he didn't want to go back. The 'why' wasn't important. He just knew. Just like he knew he was James Buchanan Barnes – Bucky, Captain America had called him. He was Bucky. He didn't know what that meant; the name was nothing but a few snatches of memory and half-remembered dreams. And Captain America, the great hero of the American People, was Cap, or mostly Steve. Except that sometimes in his dreams Steve was small and scrawny and needed the Asset – needed Bucky – to protect him.
The Asset was used to not questioning things. Orders were orders. He knew Steve was not the enemy, he was... where pain didn't happen. He was someone to protect. The Asset knew this deep in a place he hadn't remembered was there until his world had fallen apart with the sounds of explosions and screeching metal, and the words 'till the end of the line'.

Like he'd known that New York wasn't just a place to go to: it was a place to go back to.

But the lady on the screen said that Captain America wasn't here. She said he was away helping a doctor (the Asset frowned; he hated doctors) save the world. She also said the information was coming from Stark Tower. Stark... that name also sounded familiar. Maybe the people there would know where Steve was.

Inexplicably, part of the Asset didn't want to turn away from the screen. He found himself staring up at the large billboard video screen and there was a very odd feeling inside him. Eventually, he forced himself to turn away and begin his walk towards Stark Tower.

Colonel Jiang Li grit his teeth as he stubbornly held onto his chair with his right arm. His left arm hung limply at his side, pain shooting up with every motion, every jolt, but he refused to be given anything that would dampen his mind. He'd served for many years, more years than many of the fresh faces on his crew had been alive for. Pain he could deal with. A mind clouded from medicines made mistakes.

Around him, the ship shook with another impact and he couldn't help the sharp cry of pain that escaped his lips. Bright spots danced around his eyes and he wondered if perhaps the medicines would've been a wise choice after all.

“Sir, we've lost containment on levels eight and nine,” the thin Sergeant to his right said. Jiang thought of him as the City Boy, the one from Beijing with nimble fingers that played the violin. “Shields at fourteen percent.”

Fourteen was an unlucky number.

“Weapons are down, sir,” Lieutenant Xiu announced.

Jiang Li had been born the son of a navy captain, but where his father had once said he looked at the ocean and saw nothing but endless possibilities, Jiang had looked up to the sky and saw freedom. For as long as he could remember, he'd wanted to touch the clouds. Below, on the ground, life would always find yolks to burden men with – it was what it did and there was no point in arguing – but up in the sky, only the elements held control.

And so he'd joined the air force. And he flew.

And then one day they'd told him he could not only fly among the clouds, but beyond them to the stars. He could not believe it: that was a dream beyond a dream, saved only for those few truly reflexive moments he had to himself while stationed in places where the night sky wasn't covered up by ugly smog. They'd given him the Sun Tze and he knew that he would never again feel such an honour. The first time he'd seen the beautiful, gleaming ship, he'd vowed that he would never disgrace this honour.

And the ship had spoken to him: I will fight with you and together we will protect that which is
The Sun Tze shook with another impact. Behind him, he heard an explosion and then a terrible scream of pain.

“Shields are down!”

It seemed the dream had come to an end.

In the distance, he saw two Ori ships slipping ahead of the others, heading towards Earth. The planet was now hidden away inside a pocket dimension, but it was still there. It could still see. And the field would not hold forever.

The Odyssey flew in and its plasma beam tore through space towards the first ship as it planted itself directly in their way. Jiang knew the Odyssey could not help the Sun Tze and he refused to die uselessly. He thought of his wife and his son, who were even now preparing for his son's wedding.

The engines seemed to be the only things that were still working, he thought grimly as his pilot – and the only woman on the Sun Tze's bridge crew – narrowly managed to avoid the next hit.

He tapped his comm. “This is Colonel Jiang Li to all personnel,” he said loudly, in a voice that refused to falter. “You have all shown great honour and fought bravely, but now we have only one course open to us. It has been an honour to serve with each of you. Prepare to abandon ship! I repeat, follow evacuation procedures and abandon ship!”

Outside the bridge, he heard suddenly shouts and clanking footsteps. The bridge crew didn't move.

“Colonel Li, this is engineering. We stand by for your orders. What do you want us to do?”

Jiang let out a soft breath. Yes, the crew had been chosen well. He hoped that one day, their families would learn of the honour and bravery they had shown today. And if not, then they all at least left this world knowing they had died well and that would have to be enough. He thought of his family one, last time.

“Reroute all available power to the sub-light engines and set the core to overload,” he commanded. Then he met the brave, yet terrified eyes of his crew. “Major, set a collision course.”

Cassie gasped as she watched the Chinese ship collide with the giant Ori warship. Moments later, her eyes widened as a second explosion tore them both apart. Giant fragments of the ships flew in all directions. An especially large chunk from the front of the Ori’s hull careened towards the three ships locked in battle further away. It clipped the back of the American ship and hit the side of one of the two Ori ships. Cassie saw a brief flicker of light as the Ori shields caught the impact, but it left behind a burned, darkened mark on the ship's hull.

The Skype window had gone silent.

“How many people do you suppose were on board?” Bruce asked softly.

“I have no idea.”
“At a guess you could probably fit a crew of about one hundred and fifty aboard those things,” said a voice behind them.

They glanced to the doorway, where Maria Hill and Happy Hogan stood staring at the holoscreens. Bruce gestured them closer and both came to stand next to them. Cassie could feel their eyes scan her curiously. She was going to have to get used to that, she supposed.

“They died well, my friends,” came the distant rumble of Thor's voice over Skype. “For their honour and courage, may their souls be welcomed within the hallowed walls of Valhalla.”

Cassie's eyes flickered to the NBC broadcast, where the newscasters were looking as stunned as she felt, as though their words had suddenly abandoned them. And really, what could they possibly say to this? Finally, they managed to pull themselves together. Chuck Scarborough was the first to turn back to look at the camera.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, to those of you just tuning in, we're watching a real-life battle taking place within the Solar System using Stark Industries satellites. And what you've just seen looks like a last-resort kamakazi run by a ship we've identified as flying under the flag of the People's Republic of China. We have no idea how many people were aboard the ship, or even its name, but whoever they were we know they died bravely, protecting our planet with their last breath. May they rest in peace.”

“Yes, may they rest in peace. You know, Chuck, I can't help but be amazed at the very thought that those flags are even together. I mean, the Cold War might've ended decades ago, but I certainly never thought I'd see the day when I would report on a joint, well, attack force flying US, Russian and Chinese flags simultaneously.”

“You're right, Sibila, I guess that's pretty incredible all things considered. Christine, do you have anything to add– hang on...”

Chuck Scarborough, put a hand to his ear, to show that he was listening to something over his earpiece. Suddenly, his eyes widened and he looked up to his co-newscasters.

“Sorry, it seems we have a call coming in from a General Jack O'Neill from, apparently, Homeworld Security. Go ahead, General, you're on-air.”

Cassie's eyes widened. Beside her, Maria Hill frowned. “General Jack O'Neill, isn't he...?”

“There's a chuckle. “You need a lot more than five minutes to tell that story, Sibila. Let's just say
we've had the technology for years, but it took one extremely brilliant young man to figure out how to use it.”

“Would this man be Doctor Daniel Jackson?” Christine Everhart piped in for the first time.

“For now, that's still classified, Ms Everhart.”

“Then what can you tell us, General?”

“I can tell you that ship that was just destroyed was called the Sun Tze and the Russian ship is the Iliya Muromet. You understand I can’t give you the names of our allies' personnel without their approval. However, American ship number one is the Apollo, commanded by Colonel Abraham Ellis, and number two would be the Odyssey, commanded by Colonel Davidson – both of the USAF. And they're not Earth's only line of defence. As of, oh twenty minutes ago or so, the geeks at Area 51 have successfully activated what they call a Dimensional Phase-shift Device, which in a nutshell means we're now in our own private little bubble dimension. It's temporary, but it means that right now those ships out there can't see us or touch us even though we can still see them.”

“Wow, that's... extraordinary.”

“Wait, General, does this mean you're confirming the existence of Area 51?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, sure. And for the record, there are no preserved alien bodies being kept there. Seriously, I don't know where that rumour came from and it's just creepy.”

“Good to know you think so, General. Tell me, what exactly is Homeworld Security?”

“Homeworld Security is pretty much exactly what is sounds like. It's a department dedicated to overseeing the security of the world from extraterrestrial threats. Aaand my pilot is giving me 'we have reached our destination' signals, so I've gotta go.”

“Wait, just one last question General: would you say you have the situation under control?”

“Sibila, we won't have anything under control until it's over. And believe me, there's not a single person working here believes losing is an option. Like the crew of the Sun Tze, we're all ready to our lives to keep this planet safe. We've also got a few tricks up our sleeves you and the Ori haven't seen yet.”

There was a pause.

“Okay, I've got one more thing to add: the ship that's about to launch, new and shiny from the shipyard, is called the USS Phoenix. This is her maiden voyage, so wish her luck.”

“Thank you for the statement, General. And good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“So... was that your uncle Jack?” Bruce asked after a moment's pause.

Cassie nodded. “Yeah, that was him.”

“I think I've met him,” said Maria Hill with a frown. “Lean, short grey hair and dead-pan sarcasm?”

Cassie couldn't help but snicker at the description. “Yeah, that's Uncle Jack.” Suddenly, her cellphone rang. She took it out a grimaced at the call display. “And so is this.”
She took a deep breath and answered the phone. “Hi, Uncle Jack, how's it going?”

“You are in a lot of trouble, young lady.”

Cassie winced at the growl in his voice. “Not legally,” she tried. “I never signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement, you know.”

“Well, we were sort of under the impression that you would be smart enough to understand the importance of keeping your personal history secret. If only to make sure you didn't end up as someone's science experiment.”

Cassie paled. That hadn't even occurred to her. “I... I was trying to protect Uncle Daniel. He broke confidentiality when he told the Avengers and I know you've all said he has enemies and they could've had him executed! I couldn't let that happen!”

There was another pause followed by a deep, heartfelt sign and Cassie imagined Uncle Jack running a hand over his face.

“Cassie, do you really think we would've let that happen?” Jack demanded quietly, a scant tremble of anger audible in his voice. “That I would've let that happen? Yeah, Daniel's got enemies – some of them powerful – but executing Daniel? Seriously? Not gonna happen. We'd probably exile him before we'd execute him and that'd only be a problem for him for the two minutes it took him to dial Dakara. Or the Land of Light, or one of the other dozens of planets in the galaxy full of people who owe him one.

We have too many allies who would be downright furious at us and we can't afford to piss off the Jaffa or the Tok'ra. I mean, as much as I hate those snakes, they've been feeding us info on Ori movements: it's how we're ready for them as much as we are in the first place. And Teal'c might be our friend, but don't fool yourself, he'd turn his back on us in a microsecond if we did something that he deemed dishonourable.”

Cassie closed her eyes, fighting off tears. She thought she'd been doing the right thing: had she made it worse instead?

“The truth was going to come out anyway when the satellites went out,” she whispered desperately.

Jack snorted. “Do you have any idea how many times we've used excuses that shouldn't possibly have worked and no one noticed? Hell, we have projects outsourced to a whole bunch of different places and only a few have ever thought to wonder where the hell we're gettin' the blueprints or research for them.”

She blinked. “You're out-sourcing projects? How are you--“

“Not the point. The point is that you wanted to help Daniel. I get it, I really do, but you don't know most of the story. In fact you don't know the biggest part of the story.”

“I was just trying to help! It's not like I can fight or heal people or... or... anything.”

She cursed internally as rubbed the frustrated tears out of her eyes. A gentle hand squeezed her shoulder and she looked into Bruce's worried eyes. He looked mostly confused, but she saw a sliver of green in his eyes. She tried to smile at him.

“We'll be okay, Cassie. I mean, seriously, what's the worst that could happen? Daniel dies? Big deal: it's not like he's never done that before.”
Cassie burst into laughter. “I thought the worst that could happen was the Ori destroying the planet.”

“Well, yeah, there’s that too. Actually, that would serve Daniel right; let’s see how he likes it when everyone else dies for a change.”

Cassie giggled. “Vengeance would be ours.”

“Exactly. Now, I gotta go and do generally stuff, like yell at people and save the world. Also, War Machine’s starting to give me funny looks. You… stay safe. We’ll deal with everything else afterwards. And you had better be alive to help us deal with it, ’cause you’re not getting out of it that easy.”

“You too, Uncle Jack. I love you.”

“Love yah too, kiddo. Oh, and make sure to cheer doubly for the Phoenix. She’s Sam’s ship.”

“Really? Wow. Will do, Uncle Jack. Good luck!”

The line went dead. Cassie stared at her phone for a few moments before slowly putting it away, telling herself this was not by far the last conversation she would ever have with Jack O’Neill.

Tony looked up when Captain Hailey ran into the lab. She glanced to him and Siler briefly before looking over to Sam.

“Sir, the Apollo has had to duck out of the battle for repairs and we’ve just lost the Sun Tze,” she announced.

Sam’s eyes widened. “Damn. The Odyssey and the Iliya Muromet?”

“The Muromet’s covering for the Apollo and the Odyssey’s taking on two ships that were on a course for Earth.”

Tony frowned. “Does it matter if they make it to Earth? We’ve got the Phase-shift Device working.”

Sam nodded her head in acknowledgement. “Yes, but it’d cause panic if a giant space ship suddenly floated through, say, downtown Manhattan even if it wasn’t able to cause any actual damage.”

“Besides,” Hailey added. “The Ori have a tendency to attack targets from space. The Dimensional Phase-shift Field will prevent damage from that and from any stray debris that might otherwise get pulled into the Earth’s gravitational field.”

“Right, got it.”

Sam reached for a clunky satellite phone sitting on her desk and picked it up. Tony raised an eyebrow, wondering what she was doing. And why the hell was she using something so hideously ancient to do it?

“Kavanaugh, it’s Carter. How long until you’ve got her space-ready?” She paused for a moment and
then rolled her eyes. “Kavanaugh! I don't need everything perfect. What I need is the Phoenix ready five hours ago! Make short-cuts, run patches, I don't care... We don't need the hyperdrive! We need shields, life support, sub-light engines and weapon's systems and I know the life support, shields and weapons are ready, so what's the hold up?”

She listened for another moment. “How long? Okay, good, I'm about done down here. Prepare for launch in ten.” Her expression turned irritated. “Just get it done!”

She hung up and sighed as she ran a hand through her hair. “You know, I never thought I'd see the day when I could honestly say I missed McKay, but damn I wish he were here.”

Lee shrugged, and Tony noted he looked more sceptical. “Well, he always got the job done at least.”

Sam chuckled. “Yeah. He whined and complained, but he got it done. And he's not as bad as he used to be.”

“So I keep hearing.”

Sam shrugged and then turned to Tony and Siler. “Are you guys almost finished?”

“Yeah, more or less,” said Tony. “Now we're basically just waiting for the palladium core to fail so we can replace it.”

Sam nodded. “And you don't need me for that, right?”

Tony blinked. “Uh, no, not really. Why?”

Sam looked to Hailey. “Captain Hailey, take over for me?”

“Yes ma'am.”

Sam tapped her comm. “General Wellesley, the adjustments to the vibranium core are complete. With your permission, I'd like to hand command of the project over to Captain Hailey and report to the Phoenix.”

“Acknowledged, Colonel. Permission granted. Good luck and Godspeed.”

“Thank you, General. Carter out.”

Tony's eyes narrowed. “What exactly is the Phoenix?” he asked.

He had his suspicions, of course. In fact, there was literally no way he could possibly be wrong about what the Phoenix was (and that would definitely explain where all the scientists and engineers had disappeared to). And if she thought she was leaving him behind, she was crazier than he was. He glanced towards the suit, gauging the distance and calculating how long it would take him to get it on. He was fairly certain he could beat her to the elevators.

“It's my ship,” she answered, following his eyes to the suit. “The crew and engineers have been working around the clock to complete it.”

Sam smirked, picked up the satellite phone again and dialled again. “Phoenix, this is Carter. Beam me aboard.”

Tony's jaw dropped as her body was suddenly bathed in bright light. Then she was gone.
Colonel Carter looked around the bridge of the USS Phoenix and took a deep breath. She smiled at Lieutenant Colonel Marks and thanked him as he handed her a comm unit, immediately putting it into her ear. Impressing Tony Stark had been fun. Actually, working with him had been rather fun too if she got right down to it. Maybe she'd manage to convince Jack to out-source a few projects to SI she could be a liaison for.

Well, assuming they all survived this.

She tapped her comm. “Attention all crew: this is Colonel Samantha Carter taking command. Initiate pre-flight checks and report on your status.”
As usual, thanks to everyone who stopped by to read the last chapter and especially to those of you who took the time to leave a comment or kudos. :)
the fray until now.

The ship rattled and shook and Davidson felt the vibrations in his bones. He saw sparks fly out of the corner of his eyes. But the ship held.

“Status report!” he barked when it was over.

“Sir, shields are down to forty-eight percent, but they are holding!”

“Good! We can all toast to the Asgard when this is all over.” He grinned.

The Odyssey's upgrades had been done by the Asgard themselves and the little grey aliens had definitely known what they were doing. Everything else in the small Earth fleet were copies. He had the best ship available and he knew it – as did everyone else aboard.

“Don't get distracted, Lieutenant, we need to keep those ships from reaching Earth,” he said firmly. “Turn her about and target that second ship. Sub-light engines at full!”

“Yes, sir!”

In one smooth turn, the Odyssey put its back to the third ship and was heading back to deal with the one whose shields they'd just taken out. Davidson hoped Carter and her geeks had been right and the Ori ships needed a bit of time to recharge their massive forward beam The Odyssey could probably take one more hit from that thing, but then they'd be in trouble. And they absolutely couldn't afford to let that ship repair its shields.

It had started to move to the side, probably to make itself the less-accessible target, but the Odyssey flew directly to it, a little high so that their weapon's could target the massive power core. The ship shook as the Ori ship behind them shot at them with their regular weapons and the Lieutenant at the helm began to weave slightly as they flew.

The ship they were heading towards began firing from the front just as soon as they were once again in weapon's range, but they must've hit her targeting systems when they took down her shields because the shots went wild. The one that managed to hit them seemed more like an accident.

Two Asgard plasma beams later and the Ori ship's power core exploded.

“Good job, people,” Davidson said with a tight grin. “Now let's get rid of this one chasing us.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Sir, the first Ori ship is continuing on its approach to Earth.”

He nodded. That was also a problem, but they couldn't very well let the ship following them go.

“Acknowledged, we'll get to that one once we've taken care of--”

He didn't manage to finish as the Odyssey shook like it'd just passed through a storm. One of the consoles on the right exploded into a rain of sparks and the officer in front of it cried out in surprise.

“What was that?”

“Sir, we've been hit on the port and starboard sides. Shields are down to forty percent.”
“Oh? Teaming up on us are they now? Well, now that's just not fair.” He grinned and it was all teeth. “Continue to our original target and fire at will!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Sir, Lieutenant Colonel Pratt says they'll try and keep the second ship busy until we can get to it.”

Davidson raised an eyebrow. Pratt and half the Odyssey's F-302 pilots were transfers from Britain's RAF. He was a good man and an excellent pilot – and smart. As much as it chaffed at Davidson that half his fighters weren't American, he couldn't in any way complain about their skills. Pratt had a way of seeing the skies and reading his enemies that made even Davidson a bit jealous. The man didn't boast or talk big either: if he said he was going to do something, he went and did it.

“Tell him we'll be grateful for whatever he can do,” he told the communication's officer.

The Odyssey evaded another shot and sent a volley of their own. Beams of light shot forward like fancy fireworks, shaking as the Ori's returned shots hit their marks.

“Sir, our shields are down to thirty percent!”

“Ori ship's shields are wavering, sir!”

“Short-range sensors are down!”

Davidson tapped his comm. “Engineering, we need the shields back up!”

“Understood, sir, we're working on boosting power by re-routing it from—“

“–Do it! Whatever it takes, Major; we need those shields!”

“Yes, sir!”

“What's going on with the other ship?”

“The F-302s are slowing it down, but it's continuing on a course for Earth.”

“Damn.”

Well, it wasn't like the Ori ships were a Death Star (he knew for a fact the scientists and engineers had spent days going over the scans they had just in case there was an easily-exploitable weakness that a one-manned fighter could use), a swarm of F-302s wasn't ever going to be able to do much more than slow it down.

“Sir, there's a disruption at the edge of the Dimensional Phase-shift field...” His eyes snapped to the captain manning the short-range sensors. “I think something's coming out of the field, sir!”

“Can you put it up on-screen?”

“Yes sir.”

It was a strange sensation, looking at the ominously empty space where the Earth was supposed to be. Even though he knew it was perfectly safe inside the field, the sight still sent chills down his spine. Then he noticed the movement, like the ripple in a pond.

“Magnify the image,” he said and then gripped the edge of his seat as the Odyssey shook.
The image zoomed in and once it had sharpened again, he watched as a distinct shape emerged from seemingly nowhere. He blinked in surprise and then a grin spread across his face.

“Son of a bitch,” he said quietly. “They actually managed it.”

“Sir we're being hailed.”

“Open a channel.”

“This is Colonel Sam Carter of the USS Phoenix. Sorry for being late.”

“Better late than never, Colonel,” he replied. “I'm amazed they managed to finish your ship on time to join in at all.”

There was a chuckle on the other end. “Well, I'm not sure 'finished' is the right word, Colonel. I've got no hyperdrive and some of the internal systems are a bit mcgyvered together. I've got life support, shields, weapons and sub-light engines, though.”

“Sounds like you've got everything you need, then. And we could certainly use the hand. Think you could take care of that bastard trying to give us the slip?”

“I think we can manage that. Carter out.”

“Sir, the Ori ship's shields are down!”

“Then blast her out of the sky, Captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

They took the service elevator in deference to Rhodey's suit. He tried not to listen in as General O'Neill called someone named Cassie – the Cassie from the news reports they'd watched on the BC-305 he imagined. It became a bit difficult to pretend not to, though, when he started joking about their friend Daniel dying all the time. Because really?! Was this some sort of alien thing?

Yeah, he was giving the General weird looks. He was a bit worried that there might actually be people who wouldn't give him weird looks.

The service elevator stopped and they got out. Two guards stationed on either side of the elevator came to attention, but the General just swept past them. Around them, the corridor looked like it had been carved out of the ice and Rhodey could feel the cold emanating from all around him, making him shiver despite the suit. Thick ropes of wire were strung up along either side of the corridor, with mining lamps stuck into the ice wall every few feet.

It looked like the set of a sci-fi horror flick.

General O'Neill had obviously been here before, because he easily navigated the blindingly white corridors, which turned into more familiar – though equally indistinguishable – grey corridors. Except... these didn't look like the usual military design. There was embellishment in places that looked oddly out-of-place. Nothing fancy, just simple geometric designs carved into the walls that didn't seem to have any sort of practical use.
An officer met them at the end of one of the corridors and handed the General a military-issue parka and an earpiece.

“Thank you, Major,” said O'Neill. “Anything new to report?”

“The Phoenix has successfully taken off and joined the fight, sir,” the Major answered immediately. “And the Odyssey has managed to destroy another target.”

“Good, those are all things I like to hear. And how are things here?”

“The Chair is prepped and ready to go, sir.”

“Excellent! Now I don't suppose you could get someone to scrounge up some food from the cafeteria for the Colonel and me?”

“Right away, sir.”

“Thank you, Major.”

The Major hurried off while he and the General got into another elevator. Rhodey had expected yet another corridor when the doors opened, so he was surprised to find himself just outside a large room.

“Don't touch anything,” O'Neill told him before waltzing further into the room.

There seemed to be more people huddled inside the fairly large room than there had been in the corridors. Some of them looked up when the General entered, before quickly turning back to their work. A few greeted him with a smile and a simple 'hello'. Rhodey blinked at the lack of response, then shook his head as he realized most – if not all – of the people in the room were civilians. Scientists, by the look of things.

The General hadn't been entirely clear on what this place was, except that one of the most powerful weapons at their disposal was housed here. He supposed if he was looking for the US air force's super weapon, Antarctica would be the last place he'd look... Except possibly for the moon.

No, yesterday the last place he would've looked was the moon.

An odd-looking chair stood on a small pedestal just off-centre to the room. He took a few steps closer, curious. It seemed to have similar geometrical embellishments to the walls outside, and certainly looked like it was made of the same material. There wasn't anything particularly strange about it, except for the large glass/crystal armrests. It was fairly large, almost throne-like, with a high back and very little padding. It felt alien.

“Pretty cool, huh?” said O'Neill as he came to stand next to him.

“What is it, sir?” he asked. “Is it... is it alien?”

“Yup,” the General answered, popping the 'p' at the end of the word. “They tell me this base was abandoned thousands of years ago, when Antarctica froze over and they couldn't use it anymore.”

Rhodey blinked. They? “Why didn't they just move it?”

O'Neill shrugged as he watched several scientists scurrying around the Chair. “The Ancients have a real problem with compulsive littering. Leaving their stuff all over the galaxy for people to trip over: it's sort of annoying. But, you know, not complaining since we now have a cool toy to play
He paused. “Unfortunately, the tech only works for people with a specific gene and I'm sorry to say you don't have it, Colonel, although I think you're one of the ones the gene therapy should work for.”

Rhodey looked at him. “With all due respect, sir, just how exactly do you know what sort of genes I have?”

The General chuckled. “Remember about, oh, two years ago, when medical took an extra vial of blood from you during your annual check-up? I think they said it was to double-check for some sort of virus that was making the rounds or something.”

Rhodey vaguely thought he remembered something like that. “I think so.”

“Yeah, that was a lie. We were actually checking everyone's blood for the presence of the ATA gene. It's important for one of our projects, so the more natural gene-carriers we can send them, the better.”

“General, it's all hooked-up and ready to go,” called one of the scientists.

“Stay and watch the light show, Colonel. After that, I'll need you to head off to Colorado Springs and meet up with the F-302 squadron out there. If the Ori manage to penetrate the dimensional bubble, then that'll be their first target. It's where the gate is.”

“Understood, sir.”

O'Neill nodded and hiked up the sleeves of his parka as he sat into the Chair, carefully placing his hands over the crystals on the armrests and closing his eyes. Almost immediately, the Chair lit up and the pulled back with a sharp hiss. A holographic display appeared in the air above the Chair and Rhodey couldn't help but think that Tony would kill to get his hands on this tech. As advanced as all of Tony's crazy holograms were, they all still looked like projections of light. This looked like a display that happened to be hovering in mid-air.

It shifted a few times, until it settled as a picture of the Solar System, the Earth looking like a water-marked stamp. There were tiny space ships fighting between them and even though logically Rhodey knew there was still several hundred light years minimum between them and the Earth, they still looked unnervingly close.

“Hey, cool, I can see past the dimensional bubble!” O'Neill declared happily. “Can I fire the drones that far?”

“Sorry, General, but from what we can tell you'd lose control of them just as soon as they left the bubble – I mean, the Dimensional Phase-shift Field,” one of the hovering scientists answered. “Which means they'd probably deactivate and become inert.”

“Damn.”

Suddenly, the water-marked Earth flickered briefly before becoming fully visible again.

“Okay, what just happened?” the General asked.

The scientist beside him hummed. “Hmm, the palladium core on the arc reactor must've burned out. Don't worry, they should have the vibranium replacement one ready to go, so the Dimensional Phase-shift Device should be back up and running in a few minutes.”
Rhodey's eyebrows rose at the scientists words. “Arc reactor? How the hell does the air force have access to an arc reactor?” he demanded, glaring at the scientist.

“That's a very good question, Colonel. Doctor Smith?”

“Uh, w-well, because Tony Stark built us one. He and Sam have been working on it at Area 51 for the past few days...”

Tony Stark at Area 51. Rhodey didn't think his nightmares ever covered that scenario.

“What the hell?” the General exclaimed. The display above his head wavered for a moment. “Who gave authorization for that?”

“Er, you did, General. Colonel Carter said you told her she had blanket approval to use any resources she needed... right?”

Rhodey couldn't help but respect that sort of underhanded cleverness. O'Neill gaped at the scientist for a few moments.

“I never should've let her and Daniel become friends,” he grumbled under his breath after a while. “No respect for command, none at all. Traitors, all of them.”

Rhodey bit down on his smile. Now he really wanted to meet these people. His eyes slid towards the fully-visible, and all-too-vulnerable Earth.

Assuming they lived that long.

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Jeannie watched General Landry stride out of the room. She felt sorry for the man. He had a lot on his plate right now between organizing the potential evacuation of the base and telling several dozen scared people that if the worse should happen, they were going to be mankind's last hope. Not to mention being in charge of coordinating the Earth's defences. He'd managed to not blow up at Pepper, however, and keep the entire room from panicking, so he wasn't doing too badly.

Jeannie barely knew the man, having dealt with him directly only once while at the SGC recovering from being injected with nanites. He'd come to see how she was doing, but she'd been too groggy at the time to remember much past the impression of a friendly smile. Meredith thought he was an idiot, of course – but Meredith's list of 'people who aren't idiots' was almost as short as his 'people who are almost as smart as me' list. But Sam spoke highly of the man, so she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Jeannie certainly didn't envy him his position just now. With the Stargate Project leaked to the world, he and General O'Neill would be bearing the brunt of the worst publicity. If they managed to save the world, they likely wouldn't even get the chance to celebrate properly. Or sleep it off for that matter.

Colonel Ferretti had been left behind to answer questions and keep people calm. Which comprised mostly of being quizzed by the teenagers, all five of whom had gravitated towards him after Landry left. The two youngest were the boys who'd turned the TV on in the first place. The other three looked like they were somewhere around sixteen to eighteen years old. One of the girls spoke very broken English and her facial features looked Eastern European. Having been to Atlantis, this
didn't surprise Jeannie the way she knew it surprised Pepper.

Colonel Ferretti, it turned out, was great with kids. Also, he'd been on the very first Stargate trip with Daniel Jackson and then-Colonel O'Neill. The entire room was half listening to him and half watching the broadcast.

Suddenly, the satellite stream on screen flared. Ferretti frowned.

“Attention all personnel, this is General Landry. The Dimensional Phase-shift Device is temporarily offline. I want all SG teams suited up and on stand-by. I repeat, all SG teams suit up and remain on stand-by. Landry out.”

Around them, Jeannie could feel the mood shift as people realized what this meant. Ferretti suddenly found himself bombarded with questions. Reassuring civilians, he was less good at. Jeannie turned to Caleb.

“Here, take Madison,” she said, handing her daughter over to him. Caleb raised an eyebrow, but easily took on the little girl's weight.

“Mommy?” Madison asked.

“Don't worry, sweetie, I'm not going anywhere,” Jeannie said with a smile. “You’ll be able to see me the whole time, I promise.”

Then she turned around and climbed up on top of one of the chairs so that the whole room could see her. “Excuse me everyone!” Only a few people turned her way and she frowned, suddenly wishing she had inherited her father's vocal chords the way Meredith had.

Actually, that wasn't a bad idea. There weren't many social things Mer was good at, but he certainly knew how to get people's attention. She took a deep breath.

“Hey!” she called out at the top of her lungs. “Everyone shut up!”

That got the room's attention. Heads turned to her and she glowered them further into silence.

“There is nothing wrong with the Dimensional Phase-shift Device,” she announced. “They knew this was going to happen: there's a Stark arc reactor powering the device and the core is made of palladium, which burns out very quickly. I'm not sure why they used the palladium, but I know that Tony Stark and Doctor Colonel Samantha Carter were creating a better core for it that would last a lot longer. Maybe it wasn't finished. Either way, the problem's under control.”

She hoped. Sam had made it sound like they were close to being done with the vibranium core. Something must've gone wrong for them not to have used it in the first place.

“Uh, Jeannie?” she heard Caleb ask. He was looking at the TV screen. “What's that?”

She looked to the screen and blinked at six blue-ish spots that were fluttering at the edge of the picture. Her eyes widened.

“That is a problem,” she said as six more Ori ships dropped out of hyperspace.
The Phoenix came out firing and Sam grinned as the ship that had been making a break for Earth was torn apart in short order by her ship's beams. For the Phoenix, she'd modified the Asgard plasma beams from their original design and changed the firing mechanism to allow for smaller blasts at a more rapid succession. It had taken the Ori ship by surprise.

Granted surprises like this only tended to work once, but that was one less Ori ship heading towards Earth.

“Colonel, I can see the Earth!” exclaimed a panicked voice from the right. “The Dimension Phase-shift has failed, sir!”

Sam cursed that so much of her time had been taken up by the Dimensional Phase-shift Device, not allowing her to get to know her crew. She snuck a peak at the insignia on the young woman's uniform. “Relax, Lieutenant, we were expecting this. Siler and his team just have to change the reactor's core; they'll have it up and running in a few minutes. In the meantime, we need to make sure none of the ships get within firing range of the planet.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“And scan the area for any survivors of the Sun Tze. Colonel Li would've at least attempted an evacuation. If you find any, beam them aboard if you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

She looked down at the small read-out in front of her that showed a layout of the Solar System. “Captain, head for the Ori ship– ”

“–Sir, I'm picking up six ships dropping out of hyperspace just out of Neptune's orbit!”

That was between them and Earth. Sam surged out of her command chair. “Turn us about, sub-light engines at full speed! Ready weapons and prepare to fire as soon as we're within range!”

“I thought the Tok'ra said they counted twelve Ori ships heading towards Earth,” said Lieutenant Colonel Marks.

“Apparently they miscounted,” said Sam through clenched teeth as she willed the Phoenix to go faster.

Six ships. The Phoenix was so new she didn't even have an F-302 compliment yet. She'd taken a peek at the scans of the Apollo and it wasn't going to be much help anytime soon unless the shields had somehow taken less damage than the rest of the ship had. The Odyssey had taken a beating, but was still fighting fit for the moment and the Iliya Muromet was limping on one side thanks to damage to its starboard thrusters.

A miracle was what they needed.

“Sir, weapon's range in five... four... three... two...”

“Full spread weapon's fire! Target major systems and bring those shields down!”

“Yes, sir!”

The screen lit up as the closest Ori battleship's shields were peppered with a hail of plasma beams. It immediately retaliated and Sam watched the beam of light head towards the Phoenix. The ship shook, but the shields held firm and its course never changed.
Suddenly, the left side of the screen lit up as a pillar of light enveloped the farthest Ori ship. Sam's eyes widened and she grinned at the miasma of swirling light. Well, she'd asked for a miracle, hadn't she?

“Wow, those are beautiful,” she distantly heard Marks say.

“They sure are,” she agreed. She shook the awe away and set her jaw. “How are the Ori's shields?”

“They're barely holding, sir.”

“Then bring them down!”

There was an explosion from within the column of light and the mass of swirling drones broke apart. Like an intergalactic swarm of glowing bees, they swerved around and descended upon their next target. The Ori warship tried manoeuvring out of their way, its weapons frantically firing at targets too small for its massive guns.

“Sir, we're being targeted from behind!”

“Evasive manoeuvres!” Sam commanded, hoping that didn't mean the Odyssey had been taken out. She had a soft spot for the Odyssey, even if she didn't remember the fifty years she'd spent stuck on it. “How's the Odyssey doing?”

“The Odyssey's still being tag-teamed, sir... Their shields are holding, but their weapons systems seem to be down.”

“Damn.”

“Sir, the Ori ship is following us!”

“Double damn,” she grumbled as she considered her options. She looked down at her read-out and winced. There was no choice, really. “Sub-light engines at full speed: run an intercept course with the warship closest to Earth.”

“Yes, sir!”

Sam had just turned to sit down again, when she was thrown off her feet as the world around her shook. Metal screeched as it rubbed together, and Sam heard someone in the background scream. As soon as the floor stopped moving, Sam scrambled to her feet even though her insides felt like they were still shaking.

“Report!” she barked. “What the hell was that?”

“The ship following us fired its forward lance weapon, sir!”

Sam let out several choice Goa'uld expletives. Then her eyes narrowed at the screen. “Alright then, fine. Captain, turn the ship around. Weapons at full. We don't have time to play, so give them a full volley as soon as you've got a lock.”

The Earth disappeared from the screen as the ship turned around. She gripped the edges of her armrests as she watched the screen intently for the first glimpse of the other Ori ship. They couldn't afford to take their time. Every second they took destroying this ship, took the other five closer to Earth. The Ancient Chair was an amazing weapon, but even it had its limits.

The first plasma shots were already being fired by the time the Ori ship began to appear on the
screen. The Ori ship's shields held against the impacts. A beam from the ship fired back at the Phoenix and the ship shook again.

“Sir, we've received a direct hit to the port-side forward thrusters.”

“Shields?”

“Holding at sixty-four percent, sir.”

She nodded and watched as the Ori's shields were peppered with more plasma shots.

“The Ori ship?”

“Its shields are barely holding, sir.”

“Good, continue shooting on the fly-by and then turn her around to finish the job.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Understood, sir.”

“Sir, one of the Ori ships is breaking away and heading towards us!”

“What?” Sam glanced down at her little read-out screen. Her eyes widened at blip on the screen that represented one of the Ori ships that had been heading to Earth – only it wasn't heading to Earth anymore, but right for the Phoenix.

Suddenly one of the other Earth blips began blinking violently. She held her breath, unable to turn her eyes away as she waited for it to go dark. That was the Odyssey.

The Phoenix shook with another impact and she glanced up to the screen.

“Glancing blow across the starboard side, sir, shields holding steady.”

“Sir, engineering is reporting that environmental controls on the lower decks are down.”

Sam winced. Those were one of the systems they'd had to cobble together to get the ship off the ground. “Life support?” she asked.

“Life support is working, sir.”

“Good. Marks, have them evacuate the lower levels. There are parkas in storage; anyone who has to go down there can use those for now.”

“Understood, sir,” said her second-in-command and then immediately stepped away, tapping his comm to relay the order.

“Sir, the second ship is in weapon's range!”

“Single shot fire at each of them!” she commanded, mentally crossing her fingers that the switch worked the way it was supposed to.

They hadn't exactly had the chance to test the weapons systems' ability to switch from the short-burst rapid fire to a single, more powerful plasma shot. The single shot wasn't quite as powerful as the regular Asgard plasma beam, but it had a lot more power than any of the individual rapid-fire plasma bursts and still had a faster deployment.
The shots went off and she breathed a sigh of relief. Then she glanced down at the display screen. The Odyssey was still blinking and there was another Earth blip circling between it and the Ori ships that had managed to tag-team the Odyssey: the Iliya Muromet. Thank God.

She looked back to the screen as the Phoenix veered to the left to avoid a shot from the newly-arrived Ori ship. Far in the background, she caught a glimpse of the swirling mass of bright light, looking no less brilliant from a distance.

Suddenly, the lights went out.

An impact rocked the ship and Sam gripped her chair to keep from falling out of it. In front of her, she saw the Lieutenant at the long-range sensor console get flung from her chair. A console to her right exploded in sparks and she heard a man cry out in surprise and pain.

“Return fire!” she called out before the ship had stopped shaking. Behind her, she heard Marks call for a medical team.

“Damage report!” she barked to the major manning internal systems.

“Shields took a hit, sir, but they're holding at forty-six percent,” he began. She listened with half an ear as he listed the damage: isn't nothing, but they could handle it and continue to fight.

By the time he'd finished, the Lieutenant manning long-range sensors had managed to get back to her station, wincing as she sat down.

“Sir, the Earth is no longer visible on any scanners,” she finally announced.

“The Dimensional Phase-shift Device was re-activated,” Sam concluded. She'd known that between Tony and Siler, they'd manage easily enough. “The Ori ships?”

The silence for a moment too long.

“Lieutenant?” Sam prompted her firmly.

“Sir,” the young woman said uneasily. “I-I've lost track of two of the ships... sensor data indicates they were in Earth's orbit when the device came back online.”

Sam's eye widened, but she didn't get the chance to despair as another impact rocked the bridge.

'Stay and watch the light show' General O'Neill had said. And up until the far wall exploded in brilliant white light, Rhodey had expected giant laser beams.

He hadn't even realized the far wall had been made up of a row of large windows that looked into another chamber until he was running towards them. Awed, he watched as hundreds of mechanical fireflies swarmed upwards into the clouds. Yeah, that was a light show alright.

“What the hell was that?” he asked no one in particular.

“Ancient drones,” a tall thin woman to his left answered. When he raised an eyebrow at her, she gestured back towards the General. “General O'Neill is controlling them using the Chair. It's a weapon's platform, you see. Well, among other things. Theoretically it does a lot more than that,
Rhodey blinked at her and turned back to look at the General. The Chair was glowing, illuminating the older man in soft, white light. His eyes were still closed, his face tense with concentration, looking like he was, well, trying to save the world with his mind.

The holographic display still hovered above his head, although the picture had changed slightly with the addition of a swirl of bright light. Rhodey walked over to look at it.

On the display they looked like tiny little pin-pricks, creating a moving wave of light drawn in pointillism. They surrounded one of the newly-arrived Ori ships and congealed into a moving mass of light that grew brighter for a moment. Then the Ori ship exploded.

“Yes!” he heard Doctor Smith exclaim happily. When he looked over, the man was beaming. “We’d hoped the drones could take out an Ori ship, but this is the first time we’ve actually been able to test them against one.”

“Well, then I’m sure glad you were right, Doctor,” said Rhodey.

He watched with bated breath as the Ori ships crept closer and closer to Earth. One Ori ship down, the drones then moved onto the next one. This one attempted to resist as they swarmed it, but resistance, it quickly learned, was futile. One of the Earth ships had managed to take out another of the Ori warships, but then had to turn away to deal with an especially irritating tail. Rhodey held his breath as he watched one of the remaining three Ori ships break away and head towards the Earth ship to catch it from behind.

It was two-on-one, but the much-smaller Earth ship wasn't giving any ground. It took all his effort to stop himself from breaking out into loud, enthusiastic cheering that the people on board those ships would have no hope in hearing. It wasn't the only Earth ship being tag-teamed, though, but the other one seemed to be in much worse shape: it was barely moving and not returning enemy fire.

“Goddammit, Carter!” General O'Neill suddenly exclaimed. “No, wait, Carter's on the Phoenix... Goddammit, Stark! Took you long enough and you couldn't wait five more minutes!”

Rhodey looked to the General and noted that whatever had happened, the man looked highly annoyed, but not out-right angry. He looked back to the screen and immediately saw that the Earth was back to being its previous water-marked outline. On one side of it a mass of small, black dots floated aimlessly.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Half my drones were outside the field when the bubble went up again,” O'Neill groused. He opened his eyes, jaw tense. “Which means I'm down half my fire power and we've got two Ori warships inside the bubble with us. Colonel, go back up top and get the 305 to take you to Colorado Springs immediately. And tell the pilot to step on it. If you get the chance to, report to General Hank Landry, otherwise consider your standing orders to help wherever you're needed and protect civilians.”

Rhodey stood at attention. “Yes, sir.”

“Good luck, Colonel.”

“You too, sir.”
Rhodey ran back to the elevator and resisted the urge to press the button for the top floor continually to try and make it go faster. The Major who'd gone to get them food earlier was waiting at the top of the elevator holding an overflowing tray. He blinked once at Rhodey, but didn't ask any questions after getting a glance of his face.

“Follow me, Colonel,” he said and hurried off down the corridor.

Rhodey couldn't help but wonder if the people around here could read minds, but he certainly didn't protest the guide through the creepy frozen corridors. When they finally arrived at the elevator that went up to the surface, the Major handed him a bottle of water and an apple and wished him luck.

“What in the world is that?” Bruce asked as he stared at the screen, mesmerized by the bright lights converging on the first Ori warship.

“I have no idea,” said Cassie, wide-eyed and equally mesmerized by the sight.

“I'm going hazard a guess at some sort of weapon,” Maria Hill commented after the Ori ship exploded.

There was a pause and then Thor's voice came on over the speakers, sounding slightly awed: “My friends, never have I ever seen nor heard of such a weapon: not on Asgard, nor any of the other realms I have visited.”

“It's definitely the prettiest weapon I've ever seen,” said Darcy. “No offence to Mjolnir.”

“I assure you, none is taken, Lady Darcy.”

“It's impressive is what it is,” Happy spoke for the first time. He was frowning. “But if they have something like this, why didn't they use it earlier?”

“The dimensional phase-shift most likely,” said Bruce thoughtfully. “If whatever that is, is being controlled from Earth, then the signal connected to it most likely wouldn't cross over to another dimension.”

“Makes sense,” said Maria Hill.

The lights – and at this point it had become clear it wasn't a single wave of light, but a wave made up of hundreds of small lights – destroyed another ship and then headed relentlessly towards their third victim. However, just as they reached the ship, the tail of the wave went dark.

The remaining lights continued to attack the ship as it passed by the satellite.

Cassie's eyes widened. “Hang on, if that ship just passed by the satellite...”

“Then that means its reached a geosynchronous orbit with Earth,” Hill finished, her eyes widening. “Shit!”

They exchanged looks. “What the hell do we do now?” Cassie asked, her voice trembling.

“Excuse me, I apologize for interrupting, but I am receiving a call from the Baxter Building.”

“The Fantastic Four,” Hill answered.

“Oh. Well then put them through, I suppose.”

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General Hank Landry stared at the screen in horror. The worst had happened: two Ori warships had made it past their defences. And to make matters worse, it looked like about half their Ancient drones were stuck on the other side.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He let it out slowly.

No, the worst hadn't happened yet. They still had the chance to prevent that.

He opened his eyes. “Sergeant Harriman, alert the airbase. I want all F-302s up in the air immediately. And contact Colorado Springs PD and emergency services. Tell them to fall into a state of emergency. Lock down all schools, hospitals and public spaces. Get people to shelter: basements, sewer systems, as far down as they can go.”

“Yes sir!”

He grabbed the microphone and turned on the intercom.

“Attention all personnel! This is General Landry speaking: the Dimensional Phase-shift field has been compromised. We have two Ori warships within the field. All SG teams prepare to defend the base. I repeat, all SG teams prepare to defend the base!”

He flicked the button off and looked back to the screen. As he watched, tiny dots that signalled one-manned fighters spilled out of the two ships. Half the fighters headed directly inland. Landry traced their path with his eyes.

“Major!” he barked at his aide. “Contact Area 51; tell them they have incoming.”

“Yes sir.”

Then he looked back to the ship the fighters had come from. Sure enough, its current course was taking them directly to the SGC. He only hoped that a half-force of drones managed to take it out before it got here.

“Now would be a really great time for SG1 to live up to their reputation,” he said quietly.

“Sir?” Landry turned to look at Sergeant Harriman who was just returning. “Don't worry, sir, they will. SG1 always comes through.”

He gave the Sergeant a half-smile and a nod. The smile fell off his face once the other man was seated at his station. That was the problem with heroes and repeated miraculous saves. People began to expect it, but everyone's luck ran out eventually.

One day SG1 would leave and come back too late. Or not at all.
The Phoenix rocked with another impact. The last one had taken out their sub-light engines, but Kavanaugh and the engineering team were already working on repairs. The flickering life support on decks four to ten was a bigger problem. But the shields were, somehow, still holding and they had weapons. Sam coughed and waved her hand in front of her face to dispel the smoke lingering on the bridge like a bad dream. The fire that had exploded from one the science stations in the back had been put out, but the bridge still smelt of electrical fire and burning hair.

She watched as the Phoenix shot out another round of plasma bursts at the Ori ship on the left. The last one impacted with the gleaming white hull.

“Sir, the Ori ship's shields are down!”

“Finish her off!” Sam spat viciously, her voice sounding hoarse and muffled by the smoke.

“Sir, I'm picking up more ships coming out of hyperspace!”

Sam's eyes widened. “What? How many?”

Even through the smoke, she could see the Lieutenant swallow heavily as she operated the controls on her console with shaking hands. When she looked up to meet Sam's eyes, they were wide and terrified.

“Six, sir.”

“Holy Hannah.”

The Phoenix rocked again from another impact as the second Ori ship flew in to intercept and prevent them from taking out the first one. Sam barely felt it as she thought about having to fight six more ships. She would do it. They didn't have a choice. Jack would protect the Earth with his dying breath, so would Teal'c and Daniel – wherever they were. She could do no less.

Years ago, her grandmother had taught her and her brother the words to the Lord’s Prayer. Her eyes had been kind and her words sure, full of faith in the words she was speaking, and inspiring her two grandchildren to learn each and every word dutifully. Now, staring out at the enemy she was almost certain would be her last, needing the reassurance of those words, of her grandmother's quiet faith, she found she couldn't remember a single word.

Chapter End Notes

Have I mentioned yet how much I love cliffhangers?
Okay, let's try this again. My internet conked out on me last night just as I was about to post this chapter. And at quarter to two when I had to work at nine, I was not about to go fiddle with stuff to make it work (especially when I knew I'd probably just lost all the formatting I'd done). So, sorry for the posting delay.

Anyway, as usual, thanks to everyone who commented on and/or left kudos on the last chapter! In other news, I'm almost at 200 kudos on this story!! I am super excited by this. :)

BLAZE

Thor watched the battle in space intently, feeling both amazed and proud to bear witness to Midgard's true strength. To think the All-Father and his brother had both thought them weak and primitive. Midgard, it seemed, was full of surprises even to him.

He knew those around him would never believe him were he to speak of it, but he could feel the changes in the air around them, like the subtle hint of energy before a storm. The invasion of the Chitauri had not changed this realm nearly so much as his friends would think. This, however, these Ori and the revelation of Earth's hidden might: this would change the world. Time would tell whether it be for good or for ill.

He could've gone and joined the battle – not even his shield-brothers, the Avengers, truly understood just how different from them he was – but that same feeling had stayed his impulse to battle. No, he realized quickly, he did not belong in that battle in space, glorious though it was. He relished the chance to hear the no doubt many tales that were to come from those who fought in it – and in the ones that came before it, for ships such as those did not spring from nowhere. Nor was such prowess learned anywhere but in battle.

He had never questioned his claim on Midgard: his right to protect it. Until now. When bright lights flew up from the planet like a swarm of angry faeries from Vanaheim, and a ship had taken flight from the planet, taking away what little doubt that the ships were not from Midgard. All of it was far beyond anything he'd seen in this realm. T'would seem he had not been the first to wish to protect it.

Most importantly, what he'd kept to himself above all else as he'd watched and listened to the brave Midgardian named Cassandra Fraiser, was that he'd travelled across the nine realms, and met merchants and travellers who'd gone even farther. He'd even smuggled away with the Warrior Three for his five hundredth birthday to Nowhere, where even Heimdall's sight did not reach.

He had never heard of the Goa'uld. That such evil had been allowed to fester in any realm was repulsive to him. But how could it have done so without his knowledge of it? Surely Odin would not have let such evil grow under his watch?
But this was not the time to ask such questions. As he watched the Ori ships sail past the Midgardian watch towers they called satellites, he knew his time had come. The Midgardian warriors brave enough to fight among the stars had done their part well. Yes, they had failed in keeping the Ori away from the planet itself, but the odds they'd fought against were nigh on overwhelming.

Whether or not Midgard was truly his realm to protect, protect her he would. While there was breath in his body, he would continue to protect the home of his friends and of his lady love. So he had once sworn, so he would now act.

Thor stood, grasping Mjolnir tightly. “My Lady Jane, friend Bruce, do you know whence these ships are headed?” he asked loudly.

There was a pause and then a voice he did not recognize, said: “By my calculations, they seem to be headed towards the United States. One is headed north, but the other is going towards the midwest, I believe. There also seem to be smaller fighters heading towards, well, I'm going to assume Nevada and Area 51 because quite frankly it's the only place that makes sense.”

“Colorado Springs,” he heard Cassandra say with a gasp. “The second ship, it has to be headed towards Colorado Springs. That's where the SGC is.”

Thor nodded. “Then it is time for me to depart and join the battle,” he declared solemnly.

Jane's head snapped up. “You're sure- oh, what am I saying? Of course you're sure.” She stood and went over to him. For a moment, Thor lost himself in her eyes. “Just, be careful, okay?”

“Fair Jane, I promise to return to your side,” he told her and then leaned down to capture her lips, to memorize their feel, their sweet tenderness, one last time before he left for battle.

She looked dazed when they parted, a look Thor thought well-suited her. He ran his hand through her hair and then stepped back and nodded to the rest of the room.

“Upon my word, Midgard will not fall this day!” he declared and then spun on his heel, exiting the room in a swirl of red robes.

Apparently, 'step on it' meant flying from Antarctica and across the Atlantic ocean in just over ten minutes. Rhodey was sort of glad the pilot was in the cockpit and thus unable to see him gaping at the radio after being informed they'd just received new orders and were being re-routed to Area 51 to help with the defence and potential evacuation of the base.

“I'm sorry, could you please repeat that, Lieutenant 'cause I could've sworn you just gave me an ETA of six minutes,” he said, still staring bug-eyed at the internal comm unit on the wall beside him.

“Affirmative, sir. We are being ordered to change course and are currently heading towards Area 51, ETA five minutes and thirty-two seconds.”

Oh, of course, because those thirty-two seconds made all the difference.

“So if this thing can go this fast, why the hell did it take us hours to get to Antarctica the first
“IOA regulations on planet-side travel, sir. General O'Neill is one of three people allowed to override them in times of great emergency.”

Part of him couldn't wait to tell Tony the air force had something that went faster than his suit. The other part just wanted to go back to bed and start this day all over again. He was sure he'd handle it all much better the second time around.

“And this counts as a great emergency, does it?”

“Yes, sir. We take alien invasions very seriously, sir.”

Rhodey raised an eyebrow at the speaker next to his seat. “And how many alien invasions have you seen exactly?”

“Four, sir. I flew an F-302 during Anubis' attack on Earth, was at the SGC for debriefing during the BC-305 program when the base was knocked out by a group of wraith who'd taken the mid-way station in Pegasus, then the Chitauri Invasion and now the Ori.”

“I think I'm sorry I asked.”

“You get used to it, sir.”

“That's a terrifying prospect, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir. Sir, we are approaching Area 51.”

“Any sign of the alien fighters?”

“Scanners indicate their ETA is about one minute, twenty-one seconds.”

“Okay, then. Anyone else in the area?”

“Yes, sir, there's a squadron of F-302s just ahead of us, sir.”

He had no idea what an F-302 was, but he'd take all the backup he could get. A few moments passed in silence and Rhodey had just enough time to realize he was about to go up against alien space fighters, when the comm came on again.

“Sir, we are flying a parallel course just below the F-302 squadron. Would you like me to open the back so you can join them?”

“Uh, this might be a stupid question, Lieutenant, but won't that destabilize your flight pattern this high up and at this speed?

“No sir, the containment shield is fully operational.”

Containment shields, of course they had a containment shield. “You're enjoying this, aren't you Lieutenant?” he said dryly.

A pause. “A little, sir.”

Rhodey shook his head. “Well, okay then, open that hatch and wish me luck.”

“Good luck, sir.”
“Thanks, you too.”

Rhodey stood and put his helmet on, waiting until the familiar hiss indicated it had been sealed shut. Then he clanked his way to the back of the 'plane', where a hatch was sliding open. The movement shook the 305 slightly, but otherwise it continued on a steady course. Rhodey took two seconds to be amazed at the smoothness before he jumped. He didn't let himself fall too much this time, activating the repulsors almost immediately and using them to push himself upwards.

Sure enough, just like the pilot had told him, there was a squadron of dark grey fliers just above him. They were at least recognizable as fighter jets; he wondered how often they'd flown overhead and he – and other people – had just assumed that's what they were. The engine thrusters in the back were massive and their wings were wide, taking up nearly the entire width of the aircraft before being cut off with a blunt edge, making them shorter, stumper than they should've been for a plane their size. And they were pointed downwards.

Rhodey opened his comm. “F-302 squadron leader, this is Colonel Rhodes with War Ma– I mean, Iron Patriot. I'm under orders from General O'Neill to join you and render assistance.”

“Copy that, Colonel Rhodes. This is squadron leader Major Carol Danvers. Welcome to the Snakeskinners, Colonel.”

“Thank you, Major. What's Area 51’s status?”

“The base is currently evacuating all non-essential personnel through the regular base exit. Their shield is fully operational and ground defence forces are en route. We are under orders to protect the base at all costs so long as the Dimensional Phase-shift Device is operational. Should it be destroyed, we are to proceed with covering the full evacuation and then return to protect the SGC.”

“Copy that, Major Danvers. Any tips on how to fight these bastards?”

“Hit them with everything you've got until you can get their shields down, then aim for the thrusters and power source at the back.”

“Thanks!”

“Good luck, Colonel. Danvers out.”

“Yeah, good luck,” said Rhodey to himself. “I'm gonna need more than luck.”

He looked up and got his first look at the Ori fighters. They were pretty sleek-looking: long, dark flattened ovals with a massive circular glowing light at the back, which had to be the power source and engine Major Danvers had mentioned. There was going to be nothing easy about this fight, so he was at least glad that finding his target wasn't going to be a problem.

And then the Ori fighters were right in front of them and Rhodey had no more time to think about anything.

Dogfights were always barely controlled chaos at the best of times. But these machines moved differently than anything he'd ever seen before: fast, manoeuvrable and with no wings to clip. They also packed one hell of a punch and were protected by some sort of energy shield that deflected his repulsors like they were nothing but pot-shots from a pellet gun.

Within two minutes, Rhodey had gone from being the height of military tech to next to useless. He was not appreciating the feeling. So he improvised.
He flew in next to one of the F-302s and opened his comm. “Hey, this is Iron Patriot here, I'm gonna distract them while you shoot 'em down.”

“Roger that Iron Patriot.”

The look on the Ori pilot's face when he landed on top of the see-through dome above his head was priceless. Just for kicks, Rhody aimed a repulsor right at the pilot's head and fired it at point-blank range. The impact threw him backwards, but he stabilized himself just in time to see a rapid-fire volley of laser shots (he wondered if they were actually called phasers) shoot the Ori fighter out of the sky.

“Yes!” he exclaimed.

“Nice work, sir, thanks. That was so much easier.”

It wasn't quite the same as blasting them out of the sky himself, but he was helping. He did it again a few times before deciding to switch up his tactics. So flying above the main part of the fray, he aimed for one flat oval and then dropped down onto its back end, using his hand repulsors to give himself more speed. It disrupted the fighter's flight pattern enough that it didn't quite manage to avoid the shot aimed at it. Rhody flew off again before the closest F-302 hit its power core. He did, however, hear the explosion.

Suddenly, a mayday sounded over the comms. He had his HUD zero in on the signal and then deftly twisted and swerved his way through the moving throng of fighters. He found the F-302 easily, its engine had been hit from the side, making making the pilot lose control of his craft and apparently seizing up the emergency release mechanism.

It was slightly irritating to know that no matter how advanced the tech became, there would still be glitches.

Finally reaching the plummeting F-302, Rhody positioned himself just underneath it and braced himself against its belly. His foot repulsors turned on to full power, and he grit his teeth against the strain as the suit tried its best to defy gravity.

It worked. It seemed to take forever, but their descent slowed until Rhody could let the F-302 land on its own with only a small wave of sand and one bent wing as the cost. The suit thankfully didn't betray how light-headed he felt afterwards as he propelled his way up to the control pod and helped the young man trapped inside open the cabin hatch.

“Thank you, sir,” said the pilot as he staggered out. “Thought I was a goner back there. You saved my life, sir.”

“You're welcome, Lieutenant,” he replied.

Just then the earth shook. Rhody's head snapped up and he spotted a large cloud of dust and sand to the south-west.

“You just continue broadcasting your mayday and sit tight until someone comes to get you,” he ordered the pilot. “I'm going to go check that out.”

“Sir?” Rhody turned to the young man, who was now looking in the direction of the cloud with grim, worried eyes. “That's where the main part of Area 51 is, sir.”

He blinked and cocked his head. “Really? I didn't think I'd seen anything when we were flying overhead...”
Sue Richards watched as her husband argued with Doctors Banner and Foster (and half the University College London's space sciences department by the sounds of it) over the plausibility of the science of what they were seeing.

“Uh, why are they wasting time arguing about this?” Johnny asked as he came to lean against the console next to her. He crossed his arms over his chest. “We can see the alien spaceships, so why does it matter whether or not the dimensional field thing makes scientific sense or whatever?”

Sue rolled her eyes. “I think Reed's mostly just annoyed that Tony Stark figured out there was an extra code in his satellite's programming before he did. Besides, I'm pretty sure they're back to the time dilation field now.”

Johnny frowned. “But he didn't: Banner said Foster called to tell them about it. And Stark's not even there anyway. Also, isn't there enough proof to show that the time dilation field somehow worked even if it was 'cause of crazy alien magic?”

“You would think so.” She sighed and looked at her husband with exasperation. She loved the man, quirks and all, but sometimes...

Heavy, booming footballs announced Ben's arrival and both siblings looked up to see him appear at the top of the railing with his girlfriend in tow.

“Do we know what's going on yet?” he asked sounding slightly out-of-breath, eyes wide and clutching Alicia's hand as tightly as he dared.

“Nothing beyond what NBC's been broadcasting,” said Sue. She gestured towards where Reed was typing madly as he continued to argue. “Reed's on the line with Stark Tower, but they've been the ones feeding NBC info in the first place.”

Ben glanced at Reed and rolled his eyes. “Yeah he looks like he's helping alright,” he said and then headed for the stairs. “So what happened in the last ten minutes?”

“Did you manage to catch the interview with the general in charge of Homeworld Security?” Sue asked.

“Yeah, we left right after to get here.”

“Well, that ship he mentioned, the Phoenix, joined the others just before the pocket dimension field temporarily failed. Which was when six new alien spaceships appeared. Two got destroyed by a swarm of bright lights.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “A swarm of bright lights? Seriously?”

Sue smiled. “Yeah, it was actually quite beautiful. Anyway, two of the alien ships managed to get into Earth's orbit before the field went up again.”

“Shit, that's not good.” Ben's eyes flicked to the side. “Where are they heading?”
Sue's fists clenched and she forced herself to relax. “One's heading to Colorado Springs according to Cassie – that would be the girl from the broadcast – but we're not sure where the other one's going.”

“They're heading for NORAD?”

“No, the secret base underneath NORAD.”

“You're shitting me.”

“Not even a little bit.”

Ben ran a hand over his scalp and Sue forced herself not to wince at the sound of rock scraping against rock.

“Uh, hey guys?”

They both looked to where Johnny was now looking at Reed's satellite map – the one he'd set up to track the movements of the alien ships. He was looking thoughtful, but there was a tremble in his voice and his eyes were just a fraction too wide.

“Yeah, Johnny?” Sue called.

“So, if you were an alien invading force that wanted to take over a planet of over ten billion people, where would you start?”

Sue blinked. “Um, the capital city...?”

“Of the country with the most industry and weapons,” Ben added. “Which would probably make Beijing my target, wouldn't it?”

“Unless whatever that base under NORAD is, has something way more advanced – I mean, apparently they've got some way of travelling to other planets...” Sue pointed out.

“Yeah, right. Control the country with the most advanced tech. So, Washington.”

There was a pause during which Reed's voice was the only sound in the room.

“But how would an alien race that's never been to Earth know which city's the capitol?” Alicia asked.

Sue felt her eyes widen involuntarily. “They wouldn't, so they'd pick the largest, most densely populated one,” she said with dawning horror.

“Shit, and between us and Stark Tower we're like two beacons of the most highly-advanced tech on the planet.” He grimaced. “Well, the most advanced, non-alien tech on the planet.”

Sue heard Johnny take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yeah, that's sort of what it looks like they're thinking too,” he said and she could hear the clenched teeth behind the forced lightness in his voice.

Unable to put it off anymore, Sue walked over to look at the map her brother was studying so intently. Sure enough, while one of the alien ships was heading inland towards Colorado, the second one was continuing steadily along the coast. If it continued along its path, it'd be in New York soon.
Sue pushed Johnny out of the way and sat down at the computer console and began imputing parameters. The math wasn't difficult – she could've probably done it with paper and a pencil had she trusted herself not to fumble in her barely-controlled panic.

“Damn,” she said quietly when the numbers came up.

“Okay, we're officially screwed now,” said Ben.

“Hey, hey, don't go saying that!” Johnny suddenly exclaimed, looking scared but determined. “We're the Fantastic Four. Between us and the Avengers we'll make those aliens regret choosing this planet to invade!”

“Aveng-er,” Sue pointed out. “The only one in town at the moment is Doctor Banner. The rest of them are away, remember?”

She saw Johnny's bravado slip for a moment, but then it was back along with a mischievous grin. “Well, I guess that's fair. They got the last aliens that tried to invade the city; this time's our turn.”

Ben let out a huff of laughter. “And the Hulk's hardly the weakest link.”

“Exactly! And maybe they'll take one look at Ben's ugly mug and run! Problem solved.”

“Why you little...”

Sue's lips quirked as she stood, leaving her brother and Ben to deal with their nerves by getting on each other's. Walking over to where her husband was still arguing with the other scientists (although now they were apparently doing so over Skype), she planted herself directly behind him and placed her hands on her hips.

“Alright, enough!” she said firmly, feeling a rush of satisfaction at how Reed jumped at the sound of her voice. She raised her eyebrows at him and then met the eyes of both Doctor Banner and Doctor Foster – noting there were several others she couldn't place gathered around them. “This is pointless! From what we can figure we have about twenty-five minutes before that second alien ship reaches New York, so this really isn't something we have time for!”

“By my calculations, it's 23.6 minutes to be precise,” said a smooth voice with a British accent from Stark Tower.

Doctor Banner blinked. “It is? Since when do we know that?”

“Since about two minutes into your pointless argument with Mister Fantastic,” said a slim woman with dark hair and a military-style posture in the background.

“Oh.”

“Well, Thor's already on his way,” Doctor Foster offered. “Not sure when he'll get there, though.”

The hark-haired woman nodded as she typed away on her tablet.

“Mister Hogan's already gone to start evacuating everyone in the tower into the basement bunker. I've sent out a message to the NYPD and – Coulson, finally!”

She held the tablet a bit father up and walked out of the room to presumably talk to whoever she'd been calling.

“Excuse me, I thought you would like to be made aware that I have re-established contact with
Mister Stark.”

Doctor Banner looked relieved to hear that. “Can you put him through?”

“Not at the moment, I'm afraid. It appears that Area 51 is under attack.”

The young woman standing beside Doctor Banner gasped. “Oh my God! They're trying to take down the phase-shift field!”

Sue's head snapped towards Reed's own satellite images of the battle in space and she did a double-take as six new ships suddenly appeared. Her blood went cold. Their tiny Earth fleet had been fighting hard and standing their ground even as they were dwarfed and out-numbered by the alien ships, but six more...

Although these ships were different...

“You seriously have got to be shitting me,” she heard Johnny say. “This is either the coolest thing ever or the most cliche thing ever.”

Someone in the Skype conversations shrieked.

“I've spoken to General Harper at Fort Carson and he's sending out anti-aircraft support, heavy artillery, combat chopper, and three of his four combat-ready brigades to help secure the city and to engage Ori forces in case they land,” said General Landry to the briefing room. It was a full house, no standing room available.

“SG2, I want you, SG4 and SG5 to meet them and provide support with the alien tech they've never seen before. Each of you grab some of those anti-prior devices and work with the Green Berets. SG11, you're going along with them. Your job is to figure out a way to disable the ships from the ground. Take whatever odd-ball tech you think you might need – within reason. The rest of the F-302 squadron should have left Peterson five minutes ago.”

He took a breath, needing the two seconds of reprieve before issuing the next order.

“Doctor Lam, you're in charge of field medical. Put together a team and take whatever you need. Secret's out anyway, so there's no point in pretending we don't have more advanced stuff than anyone else. Co-ordinate with local hospitals if you need to. SG10 will go with you to provide back-up should you need it.”

“Yes, sir,” said Doctor Lam and the General moved on to the next point before he had a chance to think about how he'd just ordered his daughter into a war zone.

“We know Area 51's under attack and from our last reports they're holding their ground, but all the Ori need is to do is take out the Dimensional Phase-shift Device and we're all in big trouble,” he said. “They certainly won't go down easy, though, so I'm not counting them out just yet. The bigger problem is that second ship. By our estimations, we think they're likely heading to New York. Between residual radiation from that damn portal the Chitauri got through last year and atypical energy readings from Stark Tower, it's probably managed to catch their attention in a big way. SG3 you take SG8 as emergency medical along with teams 17 to 21 and get your gear. You're heading to New York. There's a 305 on the way to pick you up and Fort Weston is already mobilizing to
send you backup. Unfortunately, unlike Carson they weren't put on alert so it'll take backup a bit longer to get there. In the meantime, I know you'll do what you can.”

He looked around the room, meeting everyone's determined eyes and wondering how many of them he'd be seeing after this was all over.

“Everyone else is remaining to defend the base. Any questions?”

“No, sir!” they said in one voice.

Suddenly, the door to the briefing room flew open and Sergeant Harriman poked his head it.

“Sir, six new ships have just entered the Solar System!”

The bottom fell out of General Landry's world, making him dizzy with despair. “Ori?” he asked, forcing his voice to sound strong hoping like it he was succeeding. He couldn't afford to look anything less than confident in front of his people. Not now.

“No, sir... you should really come see for yourself, sir.”

Landry blinked and clamped down on the hope that threatened to take hold. The SG teams parted as much as they could in the cramped space to let him get through first. Then they followed him into the control room. He didn't bother to order them to do otherwise as he hurried to the main screen.

He stared at it for a moment, unaware at first of the smile that split his face while the rest of the room erupted into cheers. “Those bastards,” he said quietly. “They did it again.”

“Told you they would, sir.”

He looked over Sergeant Harriman. “That you did, Sergeant,” he said. “And I'm glad you were right.”

General Landry took a deep breath, relishing the hope that made him feel lighter than he had all day. He forced the smile off his face several moments later and turned to face the rest of the room.

“Alright people, you have your orders now get to it: we've got a world to save! Dismissed!”

“Yes, sir!”

He watched with pride as the smooth machine that was the SGC got to work. These men and women were the best in the world, he'd stake his commission on it. He wasn't happy with Ms Fraiser for spilling the SGC's secrets to the world, but at the same time he was looking forward to finally being able to publicly acknowledge the amazing people under his command.

Sam Carter couldn't turn her eyes away from the screen as she watched six hyperspace windows open into the Solar System. The moment of entry would be when they'd be most vulnerable.

“Target the entry points and prepare to fire as soon as you confirm that they're Ori,” she said. Not that they were likely to be anything else...
Six ships were spit out of hyperspace. She didn't recognize the first one, but the other five...

“Ha'taks,” she heard Marks say incredulously from behind her.

Just then the black sides of the formation's first ship exploded with white light as hundreds of drones swarmed towards the Ori ship closest to the Phoenix. Sam's jaw dropped. The ship didn't look like any Ancient ship the SGC had ever come across and yet those were the most recognizable of the Ancient's weapons. The Ori ship came apart under their onslaught.

The ha'taks spread out, two immediately heading towards Earth's location and the others began targeting the Ori's one-manned fighters.

“Sir, the fleet's being hailed on open communications!”

“Open a channel,” she heard herself say through the buzzing in her head.

“Hello, this is Daniel Jackson of the Atlantis ship Victory. Uh, sorry we couldn't be here sooner.”

Sam laughed. “Daniel, you're just in time,” she said. “And is that Teal'c you've got with you?”

“Indeed it is, Colonel Carter. I am most gratified to see you are still in one piece.”

“Thanks Teal'c. It's good to hear your voice. Both of you.” She forced her happiness down and became serious once more. “We've got the Dimensional Phase-shift Device working, but it was down a little while ago and two Ori ships managed to make it in before it went back up.”

“I'm picking up inert drones, so I'm assuming that means the Antarctic chair is short?”

Sam blinked. “Major Lorne?! What are you doing there? Daniel, how exactly did you get to Atlantis?”

“Hello Colonel Carter, nice to see you too ma'am. As for me... well, they needed someone to pilot this beauty.”

“It's a long story, Sam. After we're done saving the world we can go grab a beer and I'll tell you all about it.”

“It's a date. Carter out.”

Sam didn't bother to hide her grin. Physically there were still light years between them, but SG1 was once more fighting together on the same battlefield. They could do this.

“Are the Ori ship's shields still down?” she asked.

“No sir, it looks like they've managed to at least partially restore them, though they are weak.”

“Then swing in closer and take them down again!”

“Yes, sir!”

They exited hyperspace into the middle of a battlefield.

Daniel couldn't stop the sharp intake of breath at the sight of floating debris from ships that had
been destroyed or damaged in the fight. He immediately recognized the Odyssey floating dead in space while another Earth ship was defending it from two Ori battleships. Then, a little closer to them, an Ori ship had flown itself in-between a fellow ship and an Earth one Daniel didn't recognize.

“Oh don't tell me, the bit white monsters are the Ori?” said Clint.

“Yeah, that'd be them,” Daniel confirmed.

“They really are quite dramatic, aren't they?” said Vala.

“Anyone got any problems with me testing out the drones on one of ‘em?” Lorne asked.

“Nope, go ahead,” Daniel answered.

“You mean, like the ones we dragged to Atlantis that they went all googly-eyed for?” Clint asked.

“Uh, yeah those...” Daniel glanced to Lorne, who smirked slightly as the Command Chair activated with a hiss. The airman closed his eyes, furrows appearing on his brow as he concentrated.

“Doctor Jackson, the Jaffa are deploying their ha'taks into positions.”

“Thanks, Captain.”

Just then light erupted onto the screen as drones poured out of the side of the ship, sweeping by them like twin rivers of light. They descended onto the second Ori ship and cocooned it into a mass of constantly-moving light particles that bombarded the ship from all sides.

“Woah,” he heard someone say.

He looked over and smirked slightly at Clint and Sam's awed expressions. They both blinked as the Ori ship exploded.

Clint shook his head. “Okay, nevermind, googly-eyes totally justified.”

“Gee thanks,” said Lorne dryly.

Daniel snickered and then turned to the airman at the communication's console. “Lieutenant Kelley, could you please hail the fleet?”

“Right away, sir.” There was a pause and then: “The ship ahead of us has responded to the hail: go ahead, sir.”

Daniel took a deep breath. When he'd hailed the ha'taks earlier he'd introduced the Victory as a Ancient ship, but afterwards realized she wasn't really. Yes, the Ancients had built her, but it had been a joint project between the Four Great Races. And the Ancients weren't around anymore – at least not physically in this dimension. But at the same time she certainly wasn't an Earth ship. Looking around the bridge, he suddenly had an epiphany. This ship had been created with one cause in mind.

“Hello, this Daniel Jackson of the Atlantis ship Victory,” he said in a strong voice. “Sorry we're, uh late.”

He recognized Sam's laughter immediately and grinned. So that made the mystery Earth ship the Phoenix; Sam hadn't been sure if it would be finished on time. It felt good to hear her voice, like
yet another puzzle piece was sliding into place. The only one of their little circle missing was Jack.

“Doctor Jackson, we’ve got one of the Ori ships heading towards us,” Lieutenant Mizner announced after Sam had signed off.

The smile slid off Daniel's face and he nodded. “Okay, then let's get to it. Sam's got this one here. Lorne, you wanna take the one heading for us and Steve, help the Odyssey and the Iliya Muromet?”

“Sounds good, Doc.”

“So just aim for the gigantic white ships?”

“They're huge Steve, you can't miss,” said Natasha.

“Seriously, like a barn door,” Clint added with a grin.

“So basically if I miss you'll laugh at me.”

“Till the end of forever, Cap, count on it.”

“Then I'd better not miss.”

Daniel held his breath as the Victory turned to face the on-coming Ori warship. He tried not to think about how many people there were aboard. Ordinary people who'd once been farmers, weavers and merchants, until the Ori had taken them from their peaceful existence and sent them to war on a senseless, wasteful whim. It was that, above all else, he could never forgive the Ori.

Drones surrounded the large ship, battering at its shields in a chaotic jumble of unstable energy. Suddenly, a beam of light flew out of the jumble and headed right towards them. He heard Mizner swear just before the ship tilted to the right and swerved slightly to the side. They flew past the drone-covered ship and Daniel caught sight of the Odyssey, floating dead in space, the Iliya Muromet in front of it.

“Sir, Iliya Muromet's starboard thrusters are damaged and shields are low – less than twenty percent,” announced Captain Strugacky. “And Ori ship is powering front beam.”

“Damn,” said Daniel.

Just then a holographic screen popped up just in front of the top left corner of the viewscreen. It showed the outline of a side view of the Victory. The top of what almost looked like a stubby dorsal fin opened and hundreds of tiny specks poured out. Daniel's eyes widened as he watched them assemble just above the ship, combining into a flat, round disc. The specks were dark on the holograph until the last one joined the group and then suddenly the disc lit up and began spinning.

Daniel grinned as he saw it fly by them on the main viewscreen, tilting onto an angle as it curved to avoid hitting the Iliya Muromet. The disc plowed into the Ori ship and Daniel swore he saw sparks fly as it spun against its shields for a few moments. The shields collapsed and the disc of light buried itself into the side of the Ori ship.

When the disc's movement finally stopped, the light went out and it dissolved into thousands of mini-drones.

“Okay, that was cool,” he heard Lorne mutter.
Immediately, three ha'taks converged on the damaged Ori ship, their weapons battering at the power core. Ori fighters swooped in to defend it, the ha'taks shaking amidst their barrage until a squadron of F-302s flew out from where they'd been clustered around the Odyssey. The bottoms of the ha'taks opened and four alkesh flew out of each, immediately joining the fight.

Lorne's drones flew at the Ori's fighters.

“Lieutenant, hail the Ori ship,” said Daniel.

“Yes, sir!” A moment. “The hail's been answered, sir, and I have visual.”

“Thank you.”

Another, slightly larger holoscreen appeared in front of the viewscreen. The grey, sickly face of a solemn-faced prior took up most of it, but in the background Daniel could see the familiar sight of the bridge.

Daniel cleared his throat. “I'm Doctor Daniel Jackson of the Atlantis ship Victory,” he said loudly. “I want to offer you the chance to surrender. If you do so I promise you that neither you nor your people--“

“--Hallowed be the Ori!” the prior interrupted him, the familiar light of righteous madness shining from within the depths of his eyes. “Death will come to the unbelievers, to those who dare to turn away from their light as it is written in the Book of Origin so shall it--“

“Cut him off,” said Daniel and the holoscreen disappeared. He closed his eyes, feeling sick. His body numb and he could barely feel his right hand as he clenched it into a tight fist. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. “Okay Steve, go ahead and finish it.”

A hand closed around his fist and he turned to look into Vala's knowing eyes. Of course. Somewhere, on one of the many Ori ships were the villagers she'd lived amongst for several months, others with whom she'd travelled to the Milky Way. No matter the pain the experience had caused her, Daniel had always been aware that she hadn't entirely hated the people she'd been surrounded by. The Ori had used her, but their followers had been kind to her.

He gave her a small smile and opened his fist to squeeze her hand in return, in understanding. They dropped their joined hands and turned back to the viewscreen just as the mini-drone disc lit up again and resumed its spinning.

Steve had apparently been paying attention to the ha'taks, because he sent the disc flying directly at the power core. The other ships and fighters flew out of the way as the core was easily split apart by the disc. The explosion flung debris in all directions.

“Sir, the two ha'taks in near-orbit position to Earth are being attacked!”

Daniel's head snapped to the side. “Steve?” he said.

“Uh, sure thing Daniel. I think I can- oh hey, I didn't know it did that!”

“What? What did it do?” Rodney immediately demanded.

“The, uh, room projection shifted to show me the pyramids from closer up”

“Huh. Like a proximity zoom: neat.”
He saw the glowing disc fly by along the corner of the view screen. The display on the small holoscreen changed, the outline of the Victory suddenly shrinking and moving to the bottom of the screen in order to show the two ha'taks and the Ori warship the disc was heading towards. He watched as the Ori ship shifted towards the disc. There was a build-up of light at its bow and then a beam of light flew out. The disc suddenly stopped mid-flight and swerved so that it faced the beam.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Rodney screamed over the comm.

The Ori's forward lance beam hit the disc and the light intensified for a second before the drones suddenly went dark.

“Rodney, Steve, what just happened?”

“The direct hit of the Ori’s weapon disrupted the electromagnetic connection between the mini-drones. Despite Captain Stupid's use of the weapon to make a gigantic copy of his shield – which I'm sure we all think is just adorable – the drone-disc isn't actually the same thing! It's made of hundreds of tiny pieces stuck together with electromagnetic energy, not metal! What exactly did you think it was going to do, deflect the energy beam?! Ship's shields don't do that, what made you think the drone weapon would?”

“It stopped it, didn't it?” Steve's voice was pinched, sounding as though he were speaking through gritted teeth.

“Stopped it from what? It was trying to hit you and you gave it a clear target!”

“If I'd avoided the beam it could've hit another target? I thought you said things just continue on flying through space!”

“Not pure energy! And what exactly were you trying to protect? If the beam had continued along its course it would've... okay, it would've actually clipped the Odyssey which would've sucked for it – but you had no way of knowing that!”

“And the Odyssey's the ship in really bad shape, right?”

“Yes, yes, fine. Good job: you accidentally saved the Odyssey.”

Daniel sighed and exchanged a look with Lorne who'd in the meantime managed to destroy the other Ori ship that had been attacking the Iliya Muromet and the Odyssey. Now his face was screwed up in concentration as he used them to target the smaller Ori fighters.

“Rodney, can you get the mini-drone weapon back up and running?” he asked.

“It should only take a minor reboot of the systems. I've found their system code in the computer banks, now I just have to find the right subroutine. This is me, so it'll probably only take a couple of minutes. Can you still feel them through the chair?”

There was a slight pause before Steve answered. “Yes, I can, but they feel... stunned? I can't get them to respond to me.”

“Keep trying and let me know if something twitches. They could've been programmed with an automatic reboot for all I know.”

Daniel nodded, satisfied the McKay Freakout was over.
“Kelley, please contact the Odyssey and the Iliya Muromet and ask them if they need immediate assistance. We can't exactly spare our engineering team of one, but we've got an empty sickbay even if there's only one doctor and a medic standing by. What we definitely have is lots of room.”

“Uh, sure Doctor Jackson, except that I don't speak Russian...”

“I do,” said Natasha, pushing herself from the back wall and walking towards the communication's console.

“Thanks Natasha,” said Daniel. She waved away his thanks as she passed by. “Lorne, bring us in closer to that last ship.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied and his face relaxed slightly as he stopped concentrating on the drones and got the ship moving.

The ha'taks had managed to avoid the Ori ship's hits and Daniel couldn't help but wonder if their movements had changed since the last time he'd seen them, because they seemed to be swerving better than he remembered. Admittedly it had been a while since he'd last seen a ha'tak fight.

On the viewscreen he saw the drones surround them, moving alongside the Victory like an honour guard of fireflies.

“Sir, the Odyssey and the Iliya Muromet say they're good for the moment so long as no one starts shooting at them, although they'll gladly take us up on the offer of medical assistance,” Lieutenant Kelley announced.

Daniel nodded. “Tell them we'll swing 'round again once we've dealt with this guy.”

“Yes, sir.”

As they came closer, the Ori ship stopped shooting at the ha'taks, whose weapons impacted uselessly against its shields, and turned to face them. He frowned. There was something incredibly deliberate about the movements of this ship and he wondered what they were planning. He looked at the gleaming white ship and realized it was completely unscathed from the fight. That meant it had been holding back even as its comrades were being destroyed. Why?

“Daniel, I don't like this,” said Natasha.

“Yeah, I'm with you on that,” Sam agreed. “This feels like a trap. You're sure there's no more of these around hiding?”

“Not unless they've developed cloaking technology since the last time we met them,” said Daniel slowly. “Rodney, would this be possible?”

“There's technology is a derivative of the Ancients', so of course it's possible,” came the immediate response. “Unfortunately I don't actually know enough about it to tell you how close they were to achieving it. Call Sam, she'll have a better idea.”

Daniel nodded, not taking his eyes off the ship they were steadily getting closer to. “Kelley, hail the Phoenix please.”

“Right away, sir... Sir, I've got Colonel Carter on the line.”

“Hey Sam,” he said.
“Hey Daniel, what's up?” He could hear the frown in her voice and he wondered if she was watching what was going on and getting a bad feeling too.

“Um, well I was just wondering—”

Which was about as far as he got before the Ori warship laying in wait dropped its cloak and fired its forward beam weapon at them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lieutenant Mizner's panicked scrambling, but they were too close and too unprepared to get out of the way in time. The beam hit their port-side shields and the ship shook.

“Okay, nevermind, that answers my question,” he finished. “Daniel out.”

“Daniel!”

A second beam flew at them from the ship closer to Earth. Mizner managed to dodge to the side and the beam only grazed them.

“Okay, that didn't feel so bad...” said Clint, looking around carefully. He'd leapt to his feet as soon as the first beam had hit, one hand automatically reaching for an arrow.

“Good ol' inertial dampeners,” said Lorne. “Doctor Jackson, which one do you want me to prioritize?”

“This new one: who knows what other modifications they've come up with. Rodney, how are you coming with the mini-drone weapon?”

“I've found the subroutine; the reboot will need about five minutes or so. In the meantime, Russian guy on sensors, do a full-spectrum scan on that ship that just appeared and go back and see if the sensors picked up any stray energy discharge when it first came out of cloak.”

Strugacky looked irritated for a second before he rolled his eyes. “Da, Doctor Mckay, I will do scan,” he said and got to work.

“Good.”

“Steve,” said Daniel. “As soon as those mini-drones come back on line target that ship by Earth again.”

“Uh, Daniel? Speaking of Earth, I think we have another problem. I saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“The Earth: just for a second before it blinked out of sight again. But I don't think that's a good thing.”

“That's definitely not a good thing. I means something's destabilizing the energy flow of the Dimensional Phase-shift Device.”

“Yeah, sorry to be the harbinger of even more bad news, but the drones can't seem to get through the Ori's shields,” Lorne suddenly announced as soon as Rodney finished.

Daniel swore under his breath, using every single colourful phrase Skaara had once so diligently taught him.
About half a dozen tanks had rolled across the miles of desert, accompanied by military trucks pulling anti-aircraft missiles behind them. And, in the middle of nowhere, a giant rock formation seemed to have receded to reveal a single tall cannon pointing upwards. At least it looked like a cannon: an alien cannon that shot laser blast cannon balls at the Ori fighters.

Okay, Rhodey had to admit the alien tech was cool. And if he was admitting things, then there was the slight possibility that the tiny part of his brain that wasn't engaged in fighting had spent the last ten minutes trying to figure out how to capitalize on having saved the general-in-charge's life today to get in on this top secret project.

The cannon fired another laser blast at an Ori fighter, clipping its rear as it tried to veer away. Rhodey set his repulsors to full power and streaked after it, flipping in mid air when he reached it and retracting the suit's shoulder pads to engage the missile launchers. He fired two directly into the smoldering section of warped metal. An explosion tore the fighter apart as he flew out of the way of the blast.

“Well hey, fancy meeting you here, gumdrop!”

Rhodey blinked and then rolled his eyes. “Hey Tony, glad to hear you're still alive,” he said, hoping the relief in his voice wasn't too obvious. “I mean, I'd hate for you to die before I could tell you all about the tech the air force has that's so much cooler than anything you've got.”

There was a pointed pause. Rhodey grinned as he pictured Tony glowering at him through his HUD.

“That's because they stole it from aliens,” finally came the clipped reply.

“It's still cooler.”

“Colonel Rhodes come in. This is Major Danvers. Please come in Colonel Rhodes.”

“Hang on a sec Tony,” he said switching lines. “Major Danvers, this is Colonel Rhodes.”

“Hey Colonel, I was wondering if you could give me a hand with this tail I've acquired.”

He turned around, his HUD helping him locate the source of the audio signal, and saw Major Danvers' F-302 being chased down by an Ori fighter. It wasn't gaining on her per say, but with nothing to manoeuvre around, she wasn't having any luck shaking it.

“I see you, Major. On my way.”

“Thanks Colonel. I just need you to distract him for a second so I can turn around and blast the bastard.”

“Distraction I can do. Rhodes out.”

He took off, twisting around another Ori fighter and swerving out of the way of a stray shot. And suddenly the proximity detector flashed red and he grinned as a red and gold figure zoomed in beside him.

“Hey, so you don't actually think their stuff's cooler than mine do you?”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Seriously not the time Tony. Now help me distract the alien pilots.”
"Distract?! Excuse me, you're flying in one of my suits. You're supposed to blast the aliens out of the sky, not be a distraction!"

"Yeah, and I would be if the repulsors were any more effective than throwing rocks."

"What?! What do you mean- you're just doing it wrong. Here, let me show you how you fight aliens."

Rhodey didn't bother to look as Tony flew off. Instead he shot upwards to gain altitude before flying into position and taking a dive at the fighter following Major Danvers. He landed with as much force as he could manage onto the shield at the pilot's window. He would've thought by now they would've cottoned on to his trick, but apparently the Ori pilots weren't particularly good at adapting tactics on the fly. No pun intended.

He stayed where he was directly in the pilot's line of sight and looked up as Danvers' F-302 curved upwards into a loop that she twisted on half-way through and then out of so that she was now flying directly at the fighter who'd been following her. Rhodey launched himself off the fighter.

"Thanks, Colonel!" came over his radio just as the F-302 fired a series of head-on blasts at its former tail.

The Ori fighter blew apart.

"You're welcome, Major. I might not be able to do much out here, but it's good to know I'm not completely useless."

Just then a column of light streaked across his line of sight directly at another Ori fighter. He twisted around mid-flight. His eyes widened as he realized the column of light was coming from Tony. Or, more to the point, from Tony's chest. It hit the Ori fighter and sent it careening to the side.

Its momentum carried it directly into the path of a cannon blast.

"Okay, first of all, the air force is officially on my shit list now. Second of all, I just want to point out how crass 'I told you so' is. And thirdly, that cannon is really cool."

"The laser blasting one? Yeah, it's really cool. Not as cool as the chair weapon's platform, but really cool."

"Laser blasting? Laser blasting?! That's an ion cannon thank you very much. And according to JARVIS' scans the ion particles phase-shift on a continuous basis which is how the shots are getting through the fighters' shields. Also, 'chair weapon's platform' doesn't exactly sound very cool. Sounds like a party game: a very lame party game"

Rhodey looked down as several loud explosions came from ground level. The sand had been blasted apart, revealing a smooth metal surface beneath.

"Oh trust me, it's really cool. Way cooler than just some ordinary cannon, ion or not."

His answer had been automatic as he observed the fight at ground level. He'd been concentrating on the fighters in the sky that he hadn't realized there'd been some doing sweeps towards the ground. The young pilot's words came back to him and suddenly he realized the Ori were deliberately making dives at the desert floor.

They were aiming for the underground base.
“Rhodey, behind you!”

Rhodey glanced at his proximity detector and then shot out of the way with a blast from his repulsors, narrowly avoiding a collision with a smoking Ori fighter. He watched with horror as it hit the ground nose first. Everything around it exploded.

“Oh shit. Oh fucking shit! No no no no!”

Rhodey didn't even bother asking what was wrong, he just set the repulsors to full power and shot after Tony. If his friend was panicking, then it was bad. Or something Pepper would be furious about. Possibly both.

“Colonel Rhodes, this is Major Danvers. You have incoming on your seven o'clock.”

He glanced at his sensor readings. “Copy that Major Danvers. Thanks. Any word on how the evacuation's going?”

“Negative, Colonel, but I've seen two BC-305s leaving the area.”

The Ori fighters – three of them – were coming on a bit too close for comfort.

“Tony, we've got incoming on our tails. You've gotta pull up, man.”

“Rhodey the thing protecting the entire planet's down there! We can't let them destroy it. I'm just gonna go in and get it.”

Rhodey suppressed the urge to groan. “Tony, no, there's no time. I know you've put in a lot of time on that thing, but they'll just destroy you along with it! How the hell are you and your crazy genius brain going to save the world if you're dead?!”

Tony was already at the crash site, hovering just above the ground and obviously searching for a way to get in.

“Tony Stark get your dumb ass out of there!” a woman's voice suddenly cut into their conversation. “We're all out; the base has been evacuated, now get the hell out of the blast zone! Seriously, if you die stupidly then you'll never get to see the schematics of the cool new spaceship SG1 just showed up with!”

There was a pause during which Rhodey saw Tony look up. He imagined the man probably looked stunned behind his faceplate. And then Rhodey was there and grabbing his buddy by the arm. Stunned was probably right as Tony gave him almost no resistance to being dragged away.

“Hailey?” he finally heard Tony say. “Wh-how did you...? I mean, how–”

The woman on the line snorted. “I built a time dilation field and you thought I couldn't hack into your communication's network?” The smirk in her voice was practically a tangible object.

“Are you single by any chance?”

“No. And neither are you.”

The Snakeskinners and Area 51's Rapid Response Force chased and battered at the Ori fighters all the way until the end, firing blast after blast at the oval-shaped invaders. But a large expanse of the desert eventually gave way and collapsed under their attack anyway. Rhodey knew it was over when Tony's breath caught audibly.
“Okay... okay, now we've got to figure out how to take out the space ships right?”

“My standing orders are to head to Colorado Springs and help with defence and evacuation and whatever else they need me for,” said Rhodey. “Major Danvers, that where your people are headed?”

“Yes we are, Colonel. Hitch on and I'll give you a lift.”

Rhodey grinned. “Will do, thanks!”

“Colorado Springs?” Tony suddenly asked. “Shit! That's where Pepper is. The warship's headed there?”

“That's where the Stargate is, so yeah,” said Hailey. “It's the best strategic target after Area 51 and Antarctica. Wait, hang on... we're getting chatter that it's being engaged by drones and... something else...”

“Okay, I'm coming with you guys. Pepper's in danger.”

“Stark, no, you need to get to New York. We're pretty sure that's where the second ship is heading and we have less resources there and more people who don't know what they're doing.”

Rhodey took a deep breath. New York. Holy shit. There were over eight million people in New York City.

“Tones, I got this. I'll make sure Pepper's safe. Colorado Springs has the SGC and most of the alien tech experts. New York's got the Avengers and most of 'em aren't even there.”

“Shit, right, yeah. I'll go to New York.” The red and gold suit turned to face him and the faceplate opened. “You take care of Pepper. And... and tell her I'm fine.”

Rhodey opened his own faceplate. “I promise Tony.” He paused for a moment and then said into his comm. “Hey, Major, don't suppose you can spare someone to take Tony to New York?”

Tony glared at him. “Hey, the aliens might have slightly superior firepower, but I can still fly to New York faster than any air force plane.”

Rhodey smirked. “Yeah, Tony, in case you haven't noticed, these aren't planes.”

Before Tony could say anything the Major could on over the comm. “Captain Rashim can take him,” she said. “His weapons were damaged in the fight anyway, so he'll give Ironman a lift before heading back to the hanger for repairs in exchange for an autographed t-shirt for his son.”

Tony laughed. “Wow, and to think how much I usually spend on chartered flights to New York. It's a deal. But just so you know, I'm ditching the flight if it's too slow.”

“Oh, trust me, it won't be.” Rhodey let his faceplate slide down. “Good luck, Tony. Don't get yourself killed, alright?”

“Right back atcha, Buttercup.”

Rhodey flew over to Major Danvers' F-302 and grabbed hold.

“Hold on tight, Colonel,” she said, and then they were off.
The Final Interlude

Chapter Notes

Once again thanks for all the comments and kudos you've sent my way! This probably isn't the update you're all looking forward to, lol, but I think it's a rather important insert into the story (at least I hope at least some of you would otherwise wonder at some point what happened to Aenied).
I'm curious to see if anyone figures out what happened here...

Up in the Tower, Operator Tallis watched the screen before him with sharp, though weary, eyes. The older man had spent his lifetime staring at the screen, and in that time it had rarely changed but for the odd meteor. As a young man he remembered wishing it would, that something would happen and make his job more interesting. It was an important job, monitoring the screens, but dull. They'd been peaceful for as long as history could remember, their protectors little more than dispute settlers for all their arms training.

Suddenly, a large oval-shaped dot appeared on the screen just past the third moon, Poseideon. He gasped sharply and his widened. He lifted a shaking hand to press the Speaking Stone at the side of the console.

“Mauvi,” he said, his voice gravelly with age and tight with fear. “Go tell the Head Protector the Ori have come.”

“Yes, Operator,” he heard the young girl reply. She was one of the fastest of the messengers and certainly the most agile – certainly the best to weave through the alleys of Aeneid and around the evacuating city.

He took a deep breath, sending out a prayer to the Founders that they would keep his granddaughters safe in the Temple and bless his son's transportation platform with the speed of the wind. Then he returned his eyes to the screen and watched as the Ori steadily approached from the stars.

The Head Protector watched as another transportation platform left for the Temple. This one carried several merchants and a handful of soldiers – all parents whose children were already at the Temple. She felt bone-weary, but anxiousness was thrumming in her veins and she knew she would find no sleep even if she tried. So, instead, she moved on to her next task.

Never had she felt prouder of her people than when she saw how smoothly they'd all taken to the task of preparing themselves and the city for the coming of the Ori's followers. Old feuds had been forgotten – or at least temporarily pushed to the side – as the citizens of Aeneid worked side by side to prepare the underground cellars for a siege. The Council had been moved there this
morning with their families, after the hospital had finished moving their patients and equipment.

They had worked through the night, backs illuminated by torches held by tired, but determined apprentice protectors.

Though none of them dared say it out loud, she knew many resented letting the travellers from Earth – the planet of the Founders – leave with a weapon that could've protected them all. But the Head Protector knew that a weapon they did not understand was as useless to them as a sword too heavy to lift. No, they would have to endure and survive. The cellars had been built by the Founders and none knew how sturdy they were, but unlike the quarry mines or the connecting tunnels they'd built themselves for the stormy season, the cellars had never collapsed or fallen into disrepair.

They had hope and they’d had warning. Now they could only hold their heads high and do what they could to survive.

So in-tuned to the people, the city around her she was that she didn't need to turn around; she knew the messenger was approaching long before she heard the soft clatter of armour or the light but urgent footfalls. A solemn hush preceded the messenger, as men and woman paused in their work and went silent.

She turned and watched as Mauvi flew towards her as fast as her legs could carry her, weaving her way around carts and crates as people stepped aside to let her pass. No one ever dared stop a messenger, now even more so.

Mauvi finally came to a stop, sweat pouring down her skin as her lungs heaved for air and her limbs trembled with exhaustion. Though not necessarily the fastest of Aeneid's messengers, the Head Protector thought she was their best because she was their most determined – she would die of exhaustion to deliver a message if she had to.

“The Operator says... he sees the... Ori,” Mauvi panted.

The Head Protector nodded and handed the girl a flask of water, which she took gratefully. “Rest for a moment and then go into the cellars,” she told the messenger.

Word would spread on its own – was already spreading as the messenger's words were being repeated through the waiting crowd. She turned to the guards who'd been organizing supplies.

“Whatever is not already below ground, leave it.” she ordered. “Now we must get the citizens to safety. Spread the word to all corners of the town and help those who need it. There will be no more platforms to the Temple; everyone left in the city is to go into the cellars now.”

The guards saluted and left to carry out their orders.

An hour later, the Head Protector bore witness to the horror of the power of the Ori.

The illness had been a silent, creeping evil that struck at their hearts as it ravished their bodies. But the sudden strike of light that fell from the sky, destroying the Tower, was like a curse from the gods. She heard screams from below and from around her as guards and protectors moved to get away from the chunks of stone and shards of glass that rained down upon them.

The pride of their city had fallen in a single strike, the Watching Screens left by the Founders gone forever. The lives of those still watching inside snuffed as easily as the flickering flame of a candle. No wonder the Otherworlder, Daniel, had felt guilty for leading the Ori to Aeneid. Until now she had expected a battle, but it would seem the Ori were not interested in giving her one.
Gritting her teeth, she turned and began barking orders to her guards and to the protectors. They could not fight a rain of fire and so all they could do was hurry to the cellars. And pray that at least those in the Temple would be safe, that their Watching Screens had also warned them in time.

Another strike fell from the sky and the ground beneath her feet shook as buildings around the Marketpace to the east shattered as though they were made of porcelain.

The giant Ori ship hung in orbit around the planet like a fat, gleaming cow, watching disinterestedly as it lazily flicked its tail and sent beams of light at the planet. On its bridge, a thin, grey-faced Prior ordered a third strike and one of his followers unquestioningly pressed the controls.

A third beam fired down at the small town. Another piece destroyed, sacrificed to the Almighty Ori.

“Prior, the sensors are picking up a large building,” a man announced and the Prior turned his gaze to him. “There are traces of advanced technology just like in the town. There might even be more of it. Something is blocking the sensors so I do not know for certain.”

The Prior nodded. “Then the Alterans left more behind than I’d thought,” he said. “Good job, Brael, we will take care of that once the town is gone. Hallowed be the Ori.”

“Thank you, Prior. Hallowed be.”

The Prior turned back to the screen and ordered another strike. He felt it fitting to give those who rejected the teachings of the Ori the time to truly regret their decision even if that regret could no longer help them. Perhaps, in death, the Ori would offer them mercy.

“Prior, a hyperspace window has just appeared!”

His eyes widened as he saw the truth of the man's words for his own eyes. The ship that slid out of hyperspace was unlike any he had ever seen before, nor been shown by the Ori. It was smaller by many degrees and dark as night, barely visible against the blackness of space surrounding it, tiny pinpricks of light the only true indicator of its shape.

It seemed to hover in place for a while, silently observing. And then a thin, weak light shot out, hitting them across the prow. The ship shook gently and the Prior scowled.

“Prior, I am receiving a message,” the man at the communications station said. “The system is translating it... It reads: 'Leave now'.”

The Prior smirked. “Do these unbelievers think that anything they can do will cause harm to those who follow the Ori? Fire the forward beam; show these unbelievers the might of the All-powerful Ori! Hallowed by the Ori!”

The beam charged and then fired at the small black ship. The black ship didn't move, but just before the beam hit, a white halo surrounded it. The forward beam went through the ship as though it weren't there, leaving it completely unharmed.

The Prior's eyes widened.
Then two glowing balls of fire shot out from the ship and careened at them. The Prior felt barely a
twinge as they effortlessly passed through the shields and the hull like flaming ghosts, causing no
damage along their path. Until suddenly, their movement stopped. And then, the Prior felt them –
just before they exploded and tore the ship apart.

Hektor watched with wide eyes as the new, much smaller dot did not fire upon their planet but on
the Ori ship. The Watching Screens inside the Temple were much better than those in Aeneid. It
had been Mauffid, one of his apprentices, who'd discovered how to bring up an actual image of the
dots so they could see what their enemies looked like.

The Ori ship had been larger, but its bulk made no difference to ease at which the smaller ship's
weapons tore it apart.

He then watched as it turned and flew towards the planet. His eyes widened further when he
realized it was heading towards the Temple. Ordering the Operator and Mauffid both to keep an
eye on the screen, he ran to the elevator, where another Operator took him to the top. He was now
glad the Head Protector had insisted on sending as many Operators as they could to the Temple.

Hektor reached the surface just as the small black ship was landing.

As the Daedalus flew through hyperspace, Colonel Caldwell gripped the edge of his seat and bit
his tongue against the urge to ask, once again, for their ETA. Even with his most gruff and
commanding voice, there were only so many times he could do so before he began sounding like a
whiny toddler.

They'd come out of hyperspace briefly four hours ago to check in with the SGC – in case there was
something urgent they wanted them to do or pick up on their way to Earth, perhaps reroute to the
Alpha Site. He'd gotten into the habit of doing that with Atlantis (where nine times out of ten he
was needed to go pull Sheppard's team out of their latest fire) and eventually extended that habit to
Earth.

This time there would be no detours.

Willpower was likely the only thing keeping his ship from flying apart and the engines from
burning out – perhaps Hermiod's spirit was with them and keeping them intact despite his better
judgment. Novak assured him that were the Asgard engineer here, he'd be sighing disapprovingly
at how they were taxing his engines.

But none of that mattered: they were already running late.
Act VII, pt i

Chapter Notes

Having just come from watching Jurassic World, here's a question for you all: do you suppose Thor's All-Speak would extend to the raptors? I mean, as I understand it, All-Speak allows him to communicate with animals as well as humans, but raptors have got to be older than even Asgard...

Anyway, back to the matter at hand. Which would be the new chapter. As usual, thank you to everyone who stopped by to read/comment/leave kudos on the last chapter. Seriously, you guys are awesome!

WARRIORS

Sam Carter gasped as an Ori warship appeared seemingly out of thin air right in front of the Victory, her mind scrambling to comprehend this new horror. Where the hell had the Ori gotten cloaking technology from? None of their people were scientists... Her eyes widened further as the Victory's Ancient drones battered the ship's shields and bounced back uselessly, unable to get through.

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes.

“Captain,” she finally said loudly. “Set a course for the Victory and that new Ori ship, full sub-light. Lieutenant, as soon as we're close enough, open fire with everything we've got.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Yes, sir!”

She brought up readings from the Phoenix's sensor scans of the new Ori ship. It was physically slightly smaller, but the sensors were picking up a higher energy usage. Which meant a cloak possibly wasn't the only new gadget it was packing. She was wondering whether or not to call Daniel to warn him about this when suddenly the forward section began to gather energy.

She surged to her feet. “Fire!” she cried, desperately hoping they were in range.

A full spread of short-burst plasma shots rained at the Ori ship, although only the second half had been close enough to connect. It seemed to rattle the gleaming white ship a bit, but didn't even scratch the paintwork.

A bright orange beam shot out of the Ori's frontal weapon.

Like a ballerina, the Victory spun elegantly to the side and then sailed in a downward arc beneath the Ori ship's belly, the drones covering it like a cloak made of stars.

Unfortunately, Sam didn't have time to spend admiring the other ship (she'd promised herself she
would take the time to properly drool over it later – provided they all survived). The Phoenix was now well within weapon's range.

“Is the weapon's shift operational again?” she asked.

“Sorry, sir, it's still off-line.”

She nodded. “Then rapid-fire plasma shots it is. Give 'em a full volley, Lieutenant!”

“Yes, sir!”

She watched the plasma shots pepper the Ori ship's shield and cursed at their ineffectiveness. The rapid-fire plasma shot system was going back onto drawing board when this was over.

“Sir, they're returning fire!”

“Evasive manoeuvres!”

The Phoenix veered to the right and shot upwards. Sam felt her teeth rattle as ship shook took another hit. The lights flickered above her head and she cursed under her breath; lighting wasn't actually one of the cobbled-together systems, but it was interconnected with a few of the ones that were.

“Sir! The-the Earth, sir!”

“What is it, Lieutenant?” Sam demanded, turning to the woman manning long-range sensors.

“It's visible, sir! The Phase-shift field has fallen.”

Her eyes widened. “Send the image to my screen,” she ordered and then sat back down into her command chair.

Almost immediately the sensor read-outs from the Ori ship were replaced with a small image of the Earth – clearly visible and remaining so.

“Dammit, they must've taken out Area 51,” said Marks from behind her.

“Yes,” she agreed, sparing a thought to hope that everyone inside managed to get out alive.

The ship shook again and Sam's head snapped up to look at the ceiling at the ominous-sounding creak that accompanied the shaking. That... wasn't good.

“Status report!” she called and then listened as the crew listed off their stats. Weapons were good, life support was holding, but she winced at the measly 32.7% their shields were at.

She glanced to the main screen, where the Victory's drones were now attempting to penetrate the ship's shields by concentrating on one spot. Wait, she suddenly realized, with the Dimensional Phase-shift Device now offline, General O'Neill would be able to use his half of the drones again! She looked back to her personal screen.

Just in time to watch as the Ori ship in orbit completely ignored the ha'taks attacking it and instead shoot a forward lance beam directly at the planet. Sam watched the trajectory and felt her mouth go dry.

“Lieutenant,” she called out, although she suspected she didn't manage anything much louder than a whisper. “What was the Ori ship's target?”
Teal'c had been watching the battle with a measure of deep satisfaction. It was good to watch the Ori feel the heat of a superior force for once. Their army had never been more than a collection of men who knew nothing of battle, had not ever endured the training that forged warriors. It made their technology all the more irritating because without it, they were nothing but toy soldiers.

Although, it seemed they were capable of learning. He wondered how much of their new-found tactics had come from observing Tauri and Jaffa warriors. His suspicion was quite a lot.

He'd foreseen this battle and had known that despite Earth's withdrawal from gate travel, his team would somehow inevitably find a way to circumvent the ban. Or, if necessary, outright defy it. Daniel Jackson was predictably determined and the others loyal enough that they would not allow their teammate to venture out alone. Or perhaps they were aware of what Teal'c would do to them if they did.

As he had told his friend, he had spent the time following Earth's sudden silence preparing for this battle. First, he had approached the Tok'ra. It had taken surprisingly little persuasion to convince them that making a stand in the Solar System would be advantageous, if only because it was an inevitable battle, therefore one they could count on. The Tok'ra, unamused by how quickly the Tauri had amassed powerful weapons and technology thanks to the friendship and favouritism of the Asgard and Ancients, were quick to take up the task of proving their own competence together with Jaffa scientists.

The alkesh that now flew on equal ground with Ori fighters were the result of that union of minds. Leaving them to their battle ground, Teal'c ordered the ha'taks to converge on the remaining Ori ships.

To his right, he could see Cameron Mitchell frown. Teal'c smirked. Now it was his turn to surprise both their allies and their enemies. It was then that one of his warriors announced that the planet of the Tauri had reappeared. Before the leader of SG1 could ask, Teal'c was asking for an update on the planet and the two Ori ships that had managed to slip inside the Dimensional Phase-shift Field.

His eyes remained on the viewscreen as he waited for his orders to be carried out. The smirk disappeared from his face when he saw the Ori ship in orbit fire down at the planet. He heard Cameron Mitchell cry out in surprise. Teal'c's jaw clenched, his fist curling involuntarily into a tight fist as he contained his anger the way Master Bra'tac had taught him, storing it away until it could be useful.

Daniel Jackson's ship could not leave their current entanglement and so Teal'c changed his previous orders. Both of his ha'taks immediately changed course for the Ori ship in Earth's orbit. He turned to the back science station, where the Tok'ra leader was busy running his endless last-minute systems checks.

“Delek,” he said, noting how the man paused in his movements at the sound of his name – his only indication that he'd heard Teal'c. “Are the beams prepared?”

“Yes,” Delek answered, not bothering to look up from the screen in front of him. “We can initiate as soon as we are in position.”
“Good. Then we shall move into position.”

Jeannie watched as the airman entered the conference room, took one look around and headed straight for Colonel Ferretti. He looked young, his face pale and his movements stiff – not yet adept at hiding his fear. His eyes never strayed from his target, purposefully ignoring all the attention that followed him as he approached. Ferretti’s eyes widened slightly as he listened to the young airman's report, before his jaw set into a firm line.

The airman left and Colonel Ferretti looked to the group surrounding him.

“Alright everyone, if I could just have your attention!” he said as though he hadn't had their attention from the moment the unknown airman had started whispering into his ear. “Please gather the belongings you have with you and follow me to the gateroom. Don’t worry, your suitcases are already there ready for transport.”

For a moment, even the dust in the air froze. Then movement, sound, came back like a tidal wave made up of several dozen murmuring voices. The steady anxious thrum became a cold spike of fear. Until now it had all been stressful and terrifying, but surreal – a fantastical possibility. Now that final thread of 'oh, they’ll figure something out, the worst can't possibly happen' had been cut and even Jeannie was surprised by how much her sanity had relied on it.

She grabbed Kaleb's hand and pushed through the crowd, towards Ferretti.

“Colonel Ferretti!” she called out, barely noticing how the room around her quieted again. “What's happened? That new ship looked like it was making some serious head-way.”

Ferretti looked like he was contemplating not answering her for a moment. His eyes swept the room and then came back to meet hers again.

“Two Ori warships have managed to penetrate our defences and gotten into Earth's atmosphere,” he said. His words were punctuated by a chorus of gasps. “One sent fighters out to Nevada, where they engaged our defences along with several squadrons of F-302s. During the fight Area 51’s underground complex was compromised and the Phase-shift shield generator taken out.”

“Oh god,” she heard someone say softly behind her. Pepper.

She took a calming breath. “And the people inside?”

He shook his head. “I'm sorry. I don't know ma'am. If you like I can ask the General for you.”

“Yes please, I'd appreciate that. Thank you.”

They headed down a long, claustrophobic hallway painted a dull military grey. Even the children had broken apart, each drifting to the relatively comforting presence of their respective parents. Jeannie took Madison into her arms and held on tight, grateful for Kaleb's hand at the small of her back reassuring her of his presence behind her. Spying Pepper out of the corner of her eye – walking resolutely forward with her head held high and back straight – she shifted Madison onto one arm and reached out to briefly squeeze the other woman's arm.

Pepper turned to her in surprise and then flashed her a small, grateful smile.
Then they entered the gateroom. Jeannie had seen it before, of course, but it seemed most of the people around her hadn't. Madison gasped.

“Mommy, what is that?” she asked, sounding positively enchanted.

“Hey, it looks like the Wormhole on Wormhole X-treme!” one of the older boys exclaimed.

“Cool, it totally does too!”

Beside her, she heard Pepper stifle a giggle as Kaleb leaned in closer.

“So, this is the famous stargate?” he said conversationally – as though he wasn't talking about the single most advanced piece of technology in existence (that she knew of).

“Yup, that'd be it,” she replied. “It's actually pretty cool to watch it activate.”

“Hmm.”

The gateroom was now packed with people. In addition to the 'Lifeboat Group' – most of whom were still lined up out in the corridor – she noticed armed soldiers, some of whom looked like they were gateroom guards. There was also a team of what she guessed were medical personnel. They were looking nervously up at the observation window. Jeannie followed their gaze.

“Crap, that doesn't look good,” she said softly.

“Mommy?” Madison asked.

Instead of answering, Jeannie turned to kiss her daughter's cheek as she watched soldiers up in the command room frantically watching screens and rushing from station to station. General Landry wasn't paying the civilians in the gateroom any attention either as he stared at one of the large screens, a phone to his ear. The walls were sound-proofed, but she didn't need sound to understand that the General wasn't just playing it safe when ordered them to be prepared for evacuation.

His fingers flew over the controls, his mind a whirlwind of numbers, calculations and charts as Doctor Rodney McKay monitored several things at once. Every few seconds his eyes darted to the side, where the main screen was displaying the ship's stats, before returning to the three screens he was actually working at. The smallest one was showing drone status – it had taken him longer than he’d care to admit to anyone to find the subroutines that monitored the secondary command chair and the weapon it controlled. His suspicion was that the person stationed inside the chair room was meant to be an engineer, someone who could immediately deal with any sort of problems and malfunctions.

Sadly, they didn't have that luxury, but at least he was genius enough to work several diagnostics while he tried to figure out their newest problem. Having incredibly effective shields was also helpful. And core operating systems that weren't ten thousand years old and heavily used.

The Ancients had clearly designed a whole new operating system for this ship and Rodney was in geek heaven as the controls morphed beneath his fingertips into something so intuitive it felt like the ship was reading his mind and then responding back at the speed of thought. The read-outs showed him exactly what he wanted to see without any extraneous, useless information. If Atlantis
was a weathered, welcoming matron, then the Victory was a young buck, energetic and eager to show off. And Rodney was going to have to stop anthropomorphizing the Ancient systems before Victory decided to develop an AI to talk back to him with. Which would admittedly be sort of cool, except that he doubted it would do so in English.

Most of his attention was currently being taken up by scanning sensor readings of the new Ori ship. The Ancient drones weren't getting through: why? He looked over scan after scan before pausing – wishing for a moment that Zelenka was here, before dismissing the sentiment as ridiculous – and recalibrating the sensors to concentrate on specific energy readings coming from the Ori ship's shields.

He grinned when a new set of data came up on-screen, complete with several other graphs and analysis he hadn't thought to ask for. He hummed to himself as he looked it over.

One thing became almost immediately clear: the new Ori ship's shields weren't stronger so much as they were different. The energy patterns, their resonance, they were simply not the same as the shields used by the SGC, Asgard or Ancients.

His mind flashed through all the reports he'd read of the Ori: their technology was advanced, possibly on par with the Ancients themselves. Even the Asgard hadn't been a match at first and had had to go back and create something new that was. But the Ori themselves were dead and their followers weren't scientists; they shouldn't have been capable of creating something new like this. Unless it wasn't entirely new. Facts flew through his head: every report, every conversation he'd had with Sam and Daniel, every reference he could remember. Their power cores, ships, weapons, shields, fighters...

The Priors.

The Priors, who had personal shields unlike anything the Milky Way had ever encountered: nothing got through their shields. Just like the Ancient personal shield device Rodney had found during their first month on Atlantis. Of course Rodney had never had the chance to study a fully-functional personal shield device before, but he'd spent hours poking at the dead one. And the SGC had figured out a way to disrupt a prior's connection to whatever energy in the sub-atomic structure of the universe they were drawing power from. His mind also recalled the Evil Asgard and the way their ship had glided right past Atlantis' shields as though they weren't there.

He'd spend weeks afterwards pouring over every piece of data he could find in his spare time, trying to puzzle out how they'd done that. The best theory he could come up with was that they'd somehow convinced the shields they weren't there – which indicated either a very intimate knowledge of the technology or the ability to mould energy around themselves.

Or phase out of sync with it. Rodney snapped his fingers, his mind jumping to the Tollan ion cannon. It worked on a principle of a constantly phasing outer energy barrier, which was what had made it so effective against Goa'uld shields. The cannon was no match for an Ori ship, but in theory the principle worked for any sort of shield.

Rodney threw himself into new calculations, using a large dark touchscreen he assumed was meant for building and creating schematics. When the ship shook around him, he glanced up at the main screen and then went back to his work after he'd confirmed everything was fine.

A few minutes later, he had a workable idea. Unfortunately it required recalibrating the drones and that would mean recalling them all and programming each one separately. Which just wasn't an option.
He glanced at the smaller screen to his left and then tapped his comm for a private channel.

“Rogers, this is McKay,” he said.

“Rogers here. Please tell me those drones are going to be back online again soon.”

“Uh, actually, yes, the reboot is nearly finished. But before you string them together again, I need to try something. I think I’ve figured out how this fancy new Ori ship's repelling the drones, but fixing the regular drones would take too much time and manpower we don't have. You might be able to push your shield through physically with enough momentum, but if I'm right – and I usually am – you should be able to use your connection to recalibrate them remotely to counteract what the Ori have done to make their shields drone-resistant.”

There was a pause. “What do I need to do?”

“Okay, first of all, when they come back online you'll need to access the electromagnetic field they're each generating, which is more or less what you've been doing all along to get them to stick together so there's no reason why you shouldn't be able to do so provided you have at least half the intelligence of an orangutan...”

“I think I can manage that,” came the dry reply. “Just don't ask me to rewire anything that isn't colour-coded.”

Rodney snorted. “Luckily for you that won't be necessary, because the Ancients didn't colour-code their wires. No, what I'll need you to do is change the drone's electromagnetic frequency.”

“I can do that?”

“I hope so. Based on the schematics I managed to bring up I'm fairly certain you actually have full control over the drones from that chair including most of their inner systems. Another reason why it's on a separate ZPM and in a separate room with what's supposed to be a supervising engineer if we had an engineer to spare, which of course we don't.”

“Wait, so does that mean I can change the light coming off them too?”

“Yes, probably why- ooh, are you thinking of giving them a sort of cloak? I mean, the Ori's sensors will still see it coming light years in advance but it's not an entirely stupid idea if we could somehow muffle the energy output. Which we sadly also don't have time for right now...” He glanced back at the small screen. “Okay, get ready. Reboot will be completed in three... two... one...now! Can you feel them again?”

“Yes! Wow, okay I'm glad I was sitting down for that. Uh, give me a sec, Doctor McKay... Okay, I can feel the electromagnetic field. I'm keeping them steady for now, so how am I supposed to go about changing this frequency?”

McKay looked over the scans of the drones and compared them to the scans of the regular drones and of the new Ori ship's shields. A few moments later, he snapped his fingers.

“Okay, got it!” he exclaimed and began to walk Rogers through the changes he needed him to make.
Daniel stared in horror at Lieutenant Strugacky as he announced that the Ori ship in orbit had fired on the planet.

“Do you know what their target was?” he asked.

“According to this, I think Antarctica, sir,” Strugacky answered and Daniel felt his blood freeze in that instant. Oh God, Jack.

“Fuck,” said Major Lorne. “Well, I guess we can count out help from General O'Neill then.”

“Don't count Jack out just yet, Major,” Daniel heard himself replying.

Lorne chuckled. “Of course not: he's SG1 isn't he?”

Daniel smiled, feeling the cold beginning to dissipate. “Exactly.”

He turned his attention back to the viewscreen, where he watched as the Ori ship fired on the Phoenix. The Phoenix shot forward in an attempt to avoid the hit. Daniel winced as the beam hit its stern, rattling the ship and throwing it slightly off-course.

“Are the drones having any impact on their shields?” he asked.

“Some, sir,” Mizner answered. “but it'll take a while to chip anything significant out of them.”

“It almost feels like the shields are repelling me,” Lorne commented, his face scrunched up in concentration as he continued to direct the drones to assault the Ori ship.

Daniel swallowed down the despair that had formed a knot in his throat. Suddenly he really wished Jack, Sam or Teal'c – or hell, even Mitchell – were here. He wasn't military; he'd done his part, found the great big honking space gun (or in this case, spaceship). This was supposed to be the part he left to someone else, but Major Lorne seemed perfectly happy to follow his lead and the others weren't here.

The smaller screen to the left caught his attention. Far beyond the silhouette of the Victory, the tiny pinpricks depicting the mini-drones were flickering. Daniel blinked and then looked down at his watch. He hit his comm.

“Rodney, it's been more than five minutes,” he said. “What's the status on those mini-drones?”

The pause that followed was so long that he sighed and tapped his comm a second time. “Rodney?”

“The drones are back online, but we're working on calibrating them for this new ship's shields. Which is delicate work and Rogers needs to concentrate- Whoa, hang on, what just happened? Rogers, what the hell did you just do?!”

The comm cut off abruptly and Daniel looked up at the ceiling, wishing not for the first time that Rodney was just a little less abrasive. Suddenly, the ship shook and his head snapped back to the viewscreen.

“What was that?” he demanded.

“Direct hit to the port-side,” said Lieutenant Mizner. “Shields are down to 87 percent, but I'm not registering any other damage.”

“Sorry, Daniel,” said Lorne. “Got distracted.”
Daniel nodded, thinking over what was going on.

“Doctor Jackson,” said Lieutenant Kelley, “I’ve got a message from the Odyssey. They’ve managed to patch up their weapon's systems and are heading towards the other Ori ship.”

“Got it, thanks.” Daniel let out a breath of relief. It wasn't all up to him anymore. Well, not entirely. Alright Jackson, he thought – his inner voice sounding an awful lot like Jack – time to put that big brain to use.

“You know, the Odyssey might be moving again, but she looked pretty banged up in those images,” Clint suddenly pointed out. Daniel glanced over and saw the archer leaning against the bulkhead, his arms casually crossed over his chest as he watched the viewscreen with seemingly unconcerned eyes. “She'll still be really vulnerable to weapon's fire.”

Clint finally looked over and met Daniel's eyes. Daniel thought about his words carefully and then nodded to him in acknowledgement before turning back to their meagre bridge crew.

“Lorne, I want you to fly circles around this Ori ship,” he said, thinking out loud even as he said it. “Keep their attention on us and not the Odyssey. And keep the drones moving in random attack patterns. See if you can find any weak spots. Hopefully that'll be enough to stall until McKay can come up with one of his famous miracle saves.”

“Yes, sir.”

Apparently, while the Ori ship's shields and cloak were impressive, whoever was manning their weapons had skipped the practise sessions with moving objects. Ori ships were big and bulky – built to be impressive and intimidating, not manoeuvrable – so it had a heard time keeping up with the Victory's weaving flight pattern.

The Odyssey flew by them untouched.

“Doctor Jackson, the Odyssey is out of weapon's range,” Captain Strugackey reported. Then the Russian scowled. “Uh, and the ha'taks are coming together around other Ori ship.”

He pressed a few controls and yet another holoscreen popped into existence. This one showed a view of Earth's orbit where the Ori ship was indeed being surrounded by the five ha'taks: three were flying around the large ship, taking pot-shots and deftly avoiding return weapon's fire while the last two were floating stationary to either side of the white behemoth.

“I wonder how many of these screens you can get at once,” Sam commented.

Beside him, Natasha shrugged. “There's still plenty of space.”

Just then, one of the Ori's shots got lucky. The beam plowed through a ha'tak as though it were nothing but a cardboard cut-out and came out the other side. Daniel was barely aware that he cried out as he watched as the giant pyramid crumbled around it.

A firm grip latched onto his arm and he immediately grabbed back, recognizing the scent of Vala's floral shampoo. “Which one was that?” he heard Vala ask urgently.

There was a pause and then: “It was one of the Jaffa ha'taks, but not the one commanded by Teal'c or Bra'tac.”

Daniel felt relief flow through him and he sagged against Vala as she placed her forehead against his shoulder for a scant moment. It took both of them that moment to regain their equilibrium and
then they broke apart.

And then the Odyssey was there, firing her Asgard plasma beams. The first shot hit the Ori ship across the prow. The second shot was a direct hit into its side. The third shot never came.

“What's going on?” Daniel asked when the Odyssey failed to finish the ship off and simply veered off, peppering the Ori ship with fire from its rail guns as she flew by. The Ori ship shot back, hitting the Odyssey across the bow. The Odyssey shook violently.

“Odyssey's shields are down!” Strugacky exclaimed.

Suddenly, two circular beams of blue light shot down at the Ori ship from the two stationary ha'taks. Daniel gaped at the familiar-looking beams.

“Are they trying to get transporter rings through the shields?” he asked.

“Those don't look like ordinary transporter rings,” said Vala, frowning at the screen.

They didn't either, he realized squinting at the screen. For one, the 'rings' were cycling in the beam in what looked like a continuous loop – the cycles too quick to be leaving people behind – and the beams themselves didn't look quite as hollow as ring transporter beams tended to look like even in space.

“I guess Teal'c really has been busy,” Daniel commented as he watched in fascination. “Although I think those are actually the Tok'ra ships.”

The Ori ship began to shake between them. It fired at the ha'taks using its side guns. One shot went wide, not coming even close to hitting the pyramid. The second shot, however, clipped the edge of the second Tok'ra ship, creating a small explosion that visibly rocked it and sent a small amount of debris flying away. The ring-beam wavered for a moment and then returned to full power.

And then the beams penetrated the Ori shield and smashed into its hull. The hull crumbled where the beam touched it, leaving behind a circular hole. Just then the two other ha'taks flew in behind the first two. The beam cut out and the new arrivals wasted no time in firing directly into the holes. Thick, black smoke billowed out of the openings.

“Whoa, okay what the hell was that?” he heard Sam ask.

“Not your average, everyday pyramid, obviously,” Clint quipped.

“Really? You don't say? See, I thought all pyramids flew through space.”

“Of course, they do Sam,” Natasha answered him with a straight face. “Only usually they do it at night when you're not looking.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “You two are just hilarious.”

The corners of Daniel's mouth twitched, but he was serious again when he turned to the Chair. “Lorne, is that ship out of range for your drones?” he asked.

Lorne's eyebrows rose. “Don't see why it should, Doc,” he answered. “But only one way to find out.”

“Then send the drones to finish it off the second Rodney and Steve get the mini-drones working again.”
“Yes, sir- aw crap.”

“What?”

Daniel snapped his attention back to the viewscreen. The problem was immediately clear: the enhanced Ori ship was moving away from them and towards Earth. He activated his comm.

“Rodney, where are you and Steve with those drones?”

“I think we’re actually good to go,” came the almost-immediate reply. “Rogers, you know what you’re doing?”

“As much as I’m going to. ’S not like I have time to practise.”

“You’ll be fine; just concentrate.” There was a pause during which Daniel saw all the mini-drones on the top corner of the screen begin to move into the familiar circular shape. “Alright, everyone, time to watch what was already one of the coolest weapons ever become even cooler. Because apparently that’s still possible. Sheppard is going to be so jealous.”

“Don’t actually care if it’s cool,” Daniel heard Lorne mutter. “Just so long as it destroys that fucker.”

Daniel nodded absently.

The last mini-drone fell into place and the cosmic shield lit up once more and began to spin. They watched it do a little half-loop on screen before charging through space at the Ori ship. The Ori ship seemed to slow down for a moment.

“Sir, Ori are charging the forward lance beam.”

Daniel held his breath. This was their last chance, their last brilliant idea. They couldn't afford for it to fail.

The shield continued on its path, seemingly oblivious to the beam being prepared for it.

“Uh, Steve, you might wanna watch out for that forward beam,” he heard Clint warn him.

“Don’t worry, I see it. Now, at the risk of sounding like Doctor McKay, shut up and let me concentrate.”

“Hmph, you should be so lucky as to sound like me.”

Clint sniggered. “Man, he's gonna be even easier to rile up than Stark,” Daniel heard him say quietly to Natasha.

Daniel sighed. “Please don't,” he said. “At least until we're back on Earth.”

“Yeah guys, please don't rile up the guy who blows up solar systems when he's careless while he's responsible for making sure the ship stays in one piece,” said Sam.

Daniel saw Clint shrug.

“For the record, there's a bit more to that story than McKay being careless,” said Lorne after a pause. “Not that it didn't play any part, but, well... it was a lot more than that.”

“Yeah, we sort of figured,” Sam acknowledged. “Or else none of you would trust him nearly as
much as you seem to.”

Lorne nodded.

The Ori ship fired. Daniel stared at the viewscreen, his eyes glued to the progress of the glowing orange beam heading right for the drone-shield. And then the shield flipped up onto its edge, not even slowing down as the beam passed by harmlessly.

“Nice, Steve,” said Sam. He was answered with silence.

The shield tilted slightly as it spun towards the Ori ship.

“Um, Daniel, do you suppose colour-changing is a good thing or a bad thing?” Vala suddenly asked.

Daniel blinked and then looked towards the holoscreen she was pointing at: the one showing the mini-drones. Which had, in fact, changed colour and were now looking a bit on the orange side.

“I have no idea,” he answered and tapped his comm. “Rodney? This is Daniel. The mini-drones have changed colour on the holoscreen: are they supposed to do that?”

“Rodney here. Holoscreen? What holo- Oooh, nice! As for the colour changing, that should mean that he managed to... Yes! Yes, he did it! Way to go Rogers!”

Daniel decided watching the screen would take less time than wheedling an actual answer out of Rodney. So he let it go and watched as the drone-shield got closer to the ship, clenching one hand tightly into a fist, waiting for it to hit the shields and praying it managed to cause at least some damage.

The Ori ship's shields didn't do anything to stop the shield. In fact, it passed right through them and into the hull of the ship as though they were nothing but a gigantic mirage.

“Now Rogers!” he heard Rodney cry out over the comm. “Switch it back now!”

“Got it,” came the tense reply.

Out of the corner of his eye, Daniel saw the drones on the holoscreen turn into bright white dots of light.

The viewscreen showed as the Ori ship broke apart, cleaved in half by the suddenly-solid shield forging itself a path right down the centre until it hit the power core. The Ori ship exploded and the shield separated into a flock of small drones.

“Holy... what the hell just happened?” Sam asked.

There was only one sort of technology Daniel had ever seen capable of doing something like that. “Rodney?” he asked loudly, hoping the scientist hadn't gotten lost pouring over sensor readings. “Did those drones just phase-shift?”

“Of course they did: have you ever seen a drone just go through solid matter like that? More to the point, this is clearly not Asgard tech and the coding looks very different to most of the Ancient stuff I've seen, which means we've probably just gotten our first glimpse at either Nox or Furling tech.”

“And the Nox are devout passivists,” Daniel added, grinning as he bounced on the balls of his feet. He'd almost forgotten that the Furling had contributed to this ship. “Wow, the Furling. I've spent
years searching for any scrap of information about them: do you suppose the Victory has an informational database, or even just a virtual encyclopedia?”

“In between getting the ship operational, testing its systems and figuring out how to destroy a nearly-indestructible ship, I haven’t really had the time to check.”

“Aaand boom,” Lorne interrupted Rodney and Daniel’s conversation.

Daniel looked at him and then up to the viewscreen which showed the last Ori ship exploding under the onslaught of Ancient drones – the regular kind. Right, he vaguely remembered telling Lorne to take it out as soon as the mini-drones were back in action.

“Wait, are we done now?” Vala asked, stepping forward in order to look over all the viewscreens more closely.

“Well there’s still the two on Earth...” said Clint.

Daniel nodded. “Lieutenant Kelley, please hail the fleet.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Doctor Jackson!” Strugacki suddenly exclaimed. “There is ship coming out of hyperspace!”

“What?” said Lorne. “Another one?”

“Wait, wait hang on! I recognize the signature: it’s not Ori!”

They watched and waited with bated breath as a hyperspace window opened, spitting out a long, incredibly familiar shape.

“That looks a lot like the Earth ships,” Natasha commented.

Daniel looked at her and smiled. “It’s the Daedalus,” he said, his voice heavy with relief.

“Transmitting Atlantis codes now.”
Act VII, pt ii

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the delay on this chapter. Well, sort of sorry for the delay on this chapter. It's much better for the delay, I promise. Anyway, first of all, thank you as always to all of you who read, commented and/or left kudos on this story. I seriously can't believe this story's going to pass 200K before it's done.

Secondly, I'd like to send out like a thousand thank yous out to JonHarper on ff.net for his help on this chapter. He was an insanely big help and actually full-out wrote parts of it. Seriously, it looks as awesome as it does thanks to him. :)

And lastly, I seem to have written a chapter populated mostly by OCs (there are a few names you should recognize here and there), but there just weren't any characters for it from either series. SG1 and SGA tend to let the airforce and marine corps shine, Marvel tends to portray the US Army as somewhat incompetent and slightly evil, and I'm not even American, but here to a competent, not-evil US Army anyway!

BATTLEFIELDS

Inside the Fourth Infantry Division Headquarters at Fort Carson, General Harper stood with his hands clasped behind his back and stared at the monitors inside the Situation Room, watching the satellite maps and video displays from his predator drones showing his troops' progress.

He'd had a bad feeling about being put on alert without explanation. None of his feelers had garnered any results either; the most he'd managed to figure out was that it all had to do with a classified air force project. Which rankled: an army base being put on alert by the air force? But orders were orders and so he'd had all personnel recalled back to base and his three remaining Brigades prepped for combat-readiness. Fourth Brigade would unfortunately have to sit this one out at NTC. And Second Brigade wasn’t exactly in the best shape for immediate combat deployment, having just returned from Afghanistan a little more than two weeks ago. It took the entire week and a lot of angry grumbling just to get 2/4 ID up to passing fair for this little fiasco.

A week they'd waited with no word from anyone and no further orders other than 'remain ready for anything'. Then they'd lost contact with satellite surveillance and phones. Instinct had told him this was it; whatever happened next, their wait was over. So he'd mobilized the troops and waited for anything resembling information on the situation and how to proceed.

He hadn't realized 'ready for anything' included aliens.

The staff sergeant in charge of communications had alerted his aide to the NBC broadcast once the satellites had resumed feed. His technicians had then immediately found the bug in their own satellite feeds and neutralized it. Then two ships had gotten past Earth's defences and his phone rang.

It was General Landry from the USAF, specifically the commanding officer at Stargate Command,
a classified project hidden in the bowels of Cheyenne Mountain with the cheery news that one of those two ships was going to head for them. A ship the size of a small city with plasma weapons and one-manned fighters and an on-board compliment of roughly twenty to thirty thousand soldiers with weapons that could likely rip through a tank. Although no one was entirely sure on that, given that they’d never been tested against one.

Immediately General Harper had summoned his brigade commanders and had a map of Colorado Springs and Cheyenne Mountain pulled up. He took a few moments to study the map, another to check the projected course and speed of the Alien ships, and then he sent out deployment orders to secure the City and establish a perimeter south and south-west as far as highway 115 to interstate 25. While keeping several armoured battalions supported by infantry held back in reserve to strike the enemy’s landing zone…

That was assuming the enemy was going to land. Which General Landry seemed confident they would do.

“Then may God help us all,” he’d said.

“Don't let their ships deceive you, General Harper,” Landry had answered him. “The Ori might have superior numbers and they might have better weapons, but they do not have better soldiers. Besides of which, they're used to dealing with minimal resistance from folks who consider indoor plumbing advanced technology. They've encountered us before, sure, but all my combat units consist of three to five-manned teams. Even working together, they don't come close to replicating the sort of manpower and combat manoeuvres you and your troops can bring. Don't sell your people short, General.”

And now he stood back and watched as the well-oiled machine he commanded rolled along towards their designated staging points. He was keeping one battalion in reserve to defend Fort Carson itself, while he sent a battalion from 2-8 Infantry to augment Cheyenne Mountain's already beefed up Security Forces garrison.

As they headed up the 115 and I-25 towards the city, he watched companies and platoons split off and begin securing key intersections all around the city. Two platoons of Headquarters Company 2-8 Infantry headed off to the west of the city to cover the civilian evacuation.

When the ship finally arrived on an arc from the south-east and began to cast its shadow over the city, he held his breath. He’d seen it during the space battle and was under no illusions of their ability to stop it from turning the city into a crater should it choose to. Soldiers – men and women with weapons – they could fight, but the ship itself? Not a chance. His people were good, but they weren't superhuman.

“Status of our Artillery?” General Harper asked while his eyes never left the multitude of digital displays showing feeds of the city from his predator drones or the electronic tactical map that highlighted his unit’s positions and dispositions.

“Delayed sir. There was an accident involved on East Woodman road with one of our Paladins and a school bus full of kids. Medics from 3-16 Field artillery are on station rendering assistance. So far no new updates other than they’ve been delayed.”

“Tell them to step on it. I need those artillery assets in place. If Cheyenne Mountain truly is their primary target then that means they’ll need a good landing zone nearby to deploy their troops. Best terrain for that kind of large scale deployment close to the mountain would be Cheyenne Mountain state park. The moment we get confirmation of the enemy massing their troops I intend to drown them in a deluge of steel rain.”
Slowly and steadily the ship passed over the city and he continued to will it onward, hoping and praying it gave his troops the time they needed to establish the little welcoming party they were planning, and didn't just vaporize the city.

Colonel Greyson, Brigade Commander of the First Striker Brigade Combat Team, Fourth Infantry Division, wasn't too proud to admit that his first glimpse at the alien spaceship made his jaw drop. He was fairly certain his driver had sworn, but he didn't think to admonish him until several moments later at which point he may as well let the young man think he hadn't been heard. It wasn't like he didn't echo the sentiment, after all.

Goddamn, but it was huge. Here he was barrelling down the 115 with a brigade of armed soldiers – with two more proceeding up the I-25 – and enough firepower to turn a small city into rubble. The problem was that that spaceship looked large enough to house a much larger city. And it hadn't landed yet, which was good because urban warfare was ugly and the city had only begun its evacuating. Besides of which, he had a feeling emptying the entire Fort Carson ASP and AHA still wouldn't take that thing down.

Well at least his orders not to engage the ship itself made sense now.

As they got closer, he realized the behemoth wasn't quite as white and pristine as it'd looked from afar. There were signs of damage: scorch marks, dents and even small holes littered the ship's hull. Then he noticed the moving lights. They were twittering around the ship like angry fireflies. Greyson had never seen anything like them before, but they were clearly attacking the alien ship and slowing it down. His aide handed him a pair of binoculars so he could get a closer look. He still couldn't quite tell what they were, but he could now tell they weren't just twittering about randomly, but swarming in symphony as they battered against the ship's... energy shields? Really were those energy shields?

“Shit, I'm stuck on an episode of Star Trek,” he muttered under his breath.

Or maybe it was Star Wars... whatever, his wife had been the science fiction junkie. He felt a momentary pang of loss as he thought of her reaction to all of this. Well, it was five years too late for that. And he had a battle to win, people to protect.

Against aliens. Nope, he wasn't getting over that part anytime soon.

As though on cue, the fireflies suddenly all backed up away from the ship and into a single swarm. They looked tiny next to the ship, but a moment later, they proved that size really didn't matter as they moved in unison towards it, looking like a beam of light. They paused only for a moment when they hit the shields and then barreled through the ship, coming out the other side.

The giant alien spaceship faltered in mid-air and the Colonel had a momentary, horrified vision of that gigantic ship crashing into the buildings below it and killing thousands of people. Thankfully it managed to right itself.

Then it launched fighters.

There were no wings, nothing to make them look even remotely anything but alien. And there was a giant swirling marble at the front of each oval-shaped craft, which he'd guess was an energy source of some sort.
He flicked his radio on. “Major Hanson, this is Colonel Greyson. Set up a perimeter of anti-aircraft batteries along the roads and have the new Cheetah anti-air vehicles stay mobile and engage at will; it looks like the enemy's got air support. Might want to set up that aide station a bit more to the west than we'd originally planned. Radio in once you've set up, but do not under any circumstances fire on the main ship until it's cleared the city.”

“Understood, sir. Hanson out.”

One of the alien fighters flew above their convoy and shot twin pulses of blue light in their direction. In the rearview mirror, Greyson watched as one of the houses on the right exploded in a rain of wood and glass. He saw the nearest LMT pull over to the side of the road and five soldiers jumped out, hurrying towards the demolished house. Good. Their orders were to give protecting and rescuing civilians priority; he was glad to see his officers and NCOs had been listening.

By the time they'd arrived at the evacuated school they'd designated as one of the aide stations the Colonel finally saw the first of Peterson's squadrons arrive. And did a double-take, grabbing the binoculars again to take a closer look at these newly-arrived fighters.

Those were not F-15s. Well, he'd heard rumours that Peterson had been working with experimental aircraft...

“They're F-302s.”

Greyson lowered his binoculars and looked to the four individuals approaching him. They were dressed in full combat gear and carrying P-90s. Their uniforms bore air force insignia... and some sort of symbol he didn't recognize. When they came to a stop before him, three of the four saluted him. The fourth stood a step behind them, silently watching the skies, her hands ready on her P-90.

“Colonel Greyson, I'm Colonel Pallin reporting with teams SG2, 4, 5 and 11,” said a tall, dark-skinned man with a serious expression. “Sir, SG4 has secured the aide station's perimeter, SG5 should be meeting up with your battalion commanders at their forward CP, and SG11 is setting up their equipment inside the school gym. Field Medical is being established at St. Francis hospital, which is in the process of being evacuated as we speak, while Colorado State PD is proceeding with the city-wide evacuation. And, well, as you can see, sir, the squadrons from Peterson have arrived.”

Colonel Greyson blinked. “Well, Colonel, then I'll be relieving you of your temporary command,” he said a moment later. “At ease.”

“Yes, sir.”

“This is your team then, Colonel?”

“Yes, sir. We're SG2, sir.”

“Hm... then tell, Colonel, is it typical for the air force to allow their airmen to ignore protocol?”

His eyes slid towards the woman, who still hadn't acknowledged him.

“Er, no sir.” The leader of SG2 looked confused.

“He means me,” the woman spoke, looking over to them in amusement. “I'm not a soldier, Colonel. I'm a civilian liaison with the program.”

“You take civilians into combat zones?” Colonel Greyson said, incredulously: that was just asking for trouble.
Oh he had seen civilians in combat zones before, but most of them had been former soldiers or private contractors who shipped in food, diesel generators, fuel and maintained the Forward Operating Bases. This little slip of a girl, however, just screamed non-combatant with her demeanour – though to her credit, she did seem to know what she was doing with that P-90. And she was quick to note the barely concealed horrified disbelief on the Colonels face. Her eyes narrowed at him.

“We're a first contact team, Colonel – and yes, that is exactly what it sounds like – and, believe it or not, not everyone in the galaxy speaks English. I'm an anthropologist and a linguist, and I'm weapons certified. And a member of SG2: I go where my team goes, Colonel.” She shrugged.

“Besides, you might need me in the city to help with herding civilians. I'm small and unassuming, which means I usually get a far more favourable reaction from civilians than big soldiers with their big guns. I may not be Doctor Jackson, but I still speak ten languages and this is far from my first rodeo. The location's a bit closer to home than I'm used to, but I've seen my fair share of combat. I'm an asset, not a hindrance, Colonel.”

“You countin' all of them or just the Earth languages in that, Doc?” one of the other members suddenly asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, I speak eight Earth languages that might come in handy while trying to move panicked civilians around.” She paused and made a face. “Seven Earth languages that might come in handy. Admittedly, my Ancient Greek might not be entirely useful at the moment.”

The Colonel nodded, not entirely convinced, but willing to concede that she had a point. Someone with her kind of experience and language skills could come in handy. Especially since his own public relations officer was laid up in Evans Army medical thanks to a drunk driver last weekend.

“Then you'll be most welcome...”

“Doctor Emma Grissom.”

Suddenly, Colonel Pallin's hand flew to his ear. “Pallin here,” he said. “What is it Boris?” His eyes widened and looked to the sky.

“Everyone get down: we have incoming!”

Like a well-oiled machine, every soldier in his vicinity threw themselves to the ground just as one of the Ori fighters flew past, shooting their energy, laser weapons at them. It was cut off by a blast from the side that didn't seem to cause any damage that he could see, but certainly threw it off course. It immediately began to climb up again, chased off by the F-302 that streaked in so close it nearly skimmed the ground before swirling upwards while shooting yellow tracers from its forward canons at the Ori fighter.

He was still staring after it as he staggered back to his feet. The fireflies were also chasing the fighters and having better luck against them than they'd had against the large ship. They were also easier to see now that the sky was beginning to cloud over.

“That isn't like any aircraft I've ever seen before,” he declared.

“Well, it's not really an aircraft, per say,” the civilian said with a shrug.

“What the hell do you mean by that?!” the Colonel snapped, suddenly irritated by the fact that this civilian knew more about a piece of military hardware – and, hell, probably the enemy – than he did.
“Er, well in the strictest sense of the word, sir, yes they fly therefore they could be considered fighters,” one of the airmen answered him. Greyson turned to him, glancing at his uniform. “But while they are clearly capable of flying within a planet's atmosphere, they weren't really designed to be a terrestrial aircraft.”

The Colonel blinked in astonishment as his mind processed what the Airman was saying. “Are you saying that thing is space capable?”

“Yes Sir.” The Airman nodded. “It has technology built into that would allow it to pull high G manoeuvres in atmosphere that would snap an F-22 or any other terrestrial aircraft in half – the type that typically turn their pilots into red smears against their canopy. It also has stealth technology built into it, making it invisible to radar and more than few alien sensor technologies. It can dogfight in space and can be used to deliver heavy strike ordinance to enemy motherships.”

“Lieutenant, are that those are the same fighters we were watching on the television fighting in space?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes, sir. There's an F-302 squadron stationed with every BC-304 class ship.”

Colonel Greyson looked over SG2. They stared back calmly and he got the impression he was being assessed just as much as he was assessing them. He took a deep breath and took off his eyepro to see them better in the rapidly-diminishing light (he didn't think they'd been predicting a storm, but that might work in their favour given that they had home advantage).

“So, your other three teams, are they also first-contact teams?” he asked. Might as well figure out who was going to be at his back.

“Negative, sir,” Pallin answered. “SG teams 4 and 5 and marine combat units, and SG11 is the SGC's mobile engineering detachment. They'll be staying here and fiddling with their equipment to try and figure out a way to take down the Ori ship.” He shrugged. “We've found it useful to have the scientists out in the field where they can instantly react to things and make stuff work for us.” He stuck a thumb in the direction of the Lieutenant who'd earlier explained the F-302s. “Like Miles here. He's our tech guy.”

“Nuclear physicist,” the Lieutenant said with an exasperated sigh. He instantly stiffened at the sound of explosions coming from the city.

Greyson nodded. This was no time for pleasantries. He motioned for them to follow him and began to head back to his command post. “Right. I'm assuming these Ori have actual foot soldiers inside that gigantic ship of theirs?”

“Yup, lots of them,” Pallin confirmed. “Luckily for us they don't have transporter tech, which means they'd have to land to let them off the old fashioned way.”

Transporter tech? Was that a joke or an actual option? “Any chance we can prevent them from landing?”

Pallin shrugged. “Well the ultimate goal is to take them out, so eventually that ship'll have to come down whether on its own or by us.”

“Preferably without blowing it up,” Lieutenant Miles added as the sky above them began to rumble. “That power core blows and it'd take most of the state of Colorado with it.”

“So nukes are out of the question, then.”
“Wouldn't get through their shields anyway, sir. An orbital plasma strike would be out for the same reason: no matter how far off the ground they are, there's too much risk of massive collateral damage.”

Greyson nodded, wondering whether it would be ridiculous of him to ask if those P-90s they were carrying were actually regular P-90s as opposed to, oh say laser guns made to look like P-90s. He didn't.

“Command seems confident that the enemy is going to land and that Cheyenne Mountain State Park is the likely place they'll land at, so that's when we hit them.”

Grissom suddenly gasped. “Holy shit, is that...?”

Lightening lit up the sky as Greyson looked to the spaceship... and blinked. The little balls of light were still flying around the giant ship, but there was a larger, darker shape flying around there as well. A second streak of lightening came down from the sky and hit the figure, illuminating it momentarily, before it redirected towards the Ori ship. The energy spread out like glowing veins across the ship's shields.

“Hey cool,” said Lieutenant Miles with a wide grin. “Looks like both Thors like us equally.”

“Unfortunately, *this* one wears pants.”

All four men turned to stare at the civilian woman, who felt their eyes on her and turned to blink back at them owlishly.

“What?!” she said. After a moment during which all four of them continued to stare at her – Greyson had a feeling he should be admonishing her for the statement, except that he had no idea where to start with it – she rolled her eyes and sighed. “God, I wish Vala was here. She'd understand.”

“I'm sure she would,” said Pallin with the straightest face Greyson had ever seen a man give anyone.

“I thought Vala was a Captain America fan,” the fourth member of SG2 said with a frown.

“West!”

“Right, sorry sir.”

Greyson bit his tongue as he led them into the school, where he could see the other senior battalion leaders already gathering. And sending slightly confused and wary looks in the direction of the air force squad setting up in one corner: they'd already dragged in several large tables into the room and had an array of laptops and several very odd-looking devices set up.

Leaving them be for the moment, he scanned the rest of the gym. Satisfied the forward CP set-up was proceeding smoothly, he then found his second-in-command and left him in charge before leading SG2 into the first empty classroom.

“Alright, Colonel Pallin, what can we expect from this ship?” he asked once they were inside with the door shut behind them.

“First of all, I'm assuming you've seen the NBC footage, right?” Pallin asked.

Greyson nodded. “I saw some of it before we were ordered to mobilize,” he answered. “I gather
they have quite a bit of firepower.”

“Right, which they're obviously not using at the moment. Plus, those ships go a hell of a lot faster than it's going now. We're pretty sure it's 'cause it's looking for the gate. The SGC's got their own sort of shields hiding them from sensors. The Ori ship can obviously see through them, but not enough to pinpoint the exact location, which is why they've been orbiting the town. And since they haven't just shot up the place, we're figuring they want to take the SGC and the gate to create themselves a beachhead, so they can bring in more troops through the gate. And keeping Colorado Springs more or less intact would go a long way to aid in that goal.”

“That might've actually been something they decided on the fly once they got here,” the civilian linguist added. “They've encountered us out there, but they don't really know the first thing about the planet and even among our allies only a few individuals have ever been past the mountain. From what we've seen, we are by far the most heavily-populated planet in this galaxy and, while there are certainly more industrially-advanced planets, we're pretty high up there too.”

Pallin nodded. “Could be. And the Ori gain power by amassing followers, er believers, or something.” He looked to Greyson and shrugged. “Don't ask me how, sir. Quite frankly, it sounds like magic to me. But, bottom line, it means they might've decided that taking the planet over in the name of the Ori might just be more beneficial. Six billion new worshippers would be a huge powerboost.”

“Attempting to, anyway.” Grissom looked at him grimly. “Colonel, don't make the mistake of thinking that makes the population safe. If the Ori can't convert the planet, they will destroy everyone on it. This isn't just a war; this is a crusade – a Jihad – they're on.”

A Holy War: well wasn't that just lovely. God, he hated fighting religious zealots.

“Then we have no choice but to win,” he said sternly.

SG2 grinned at his words and he felt as though he'd passed some sort of test. Which was ridiculous, because he was a decorated officer with four battalions under his command. He'd already passed all the tests.

“Allright, so first of all, the most important you've gotta remember is that these guys in that ship have never been up against a full force from Earth,” Colonel Pallin began again. “We've got some manpower, but the SGC's mandate is largely exploration and tech-gathering. They might think they know what to expect from us, but they really don't. There are a lot of them, but they don't know the first thing about what we consider modern warfare.”

Greyson nodded. General Harper had said as much, told him not to focus on the numbers so much as the tactics. “Throw everything we've got at them and don't give ground,” he'd told him.

Pallin took a deep breath. “The most important and most difficult target will be the Prior,” he said. “He's their leader, both religious and military. The Ori somehow grant them magic powers or something, which gives them this annoying personal shield that none of our weapons work on. And we've tried everything from guns to grenades to missile launchers on them, so short of calling down one of our ships, we're just gonna go with 'nothing works'.”

He reached into his pack and pulled out a round device just a big smaller than a dinner plate with a circle of lights around the edge. Greyson noticed there was at least one more in his pack.

“Except these puppies here. These neutralize the Prior's powers. The affects are temporary and only while the Prior's within their field radius, but a few moments should be all the time we need.”
By Odin's beard, the ship was a monstrous beast. It moved slowly, but steadily ahead, its belly hanging from the clouds like that of a pregnant sow. And around it, swarmed a hundred small lights. Their numbers were much diminished, but Thor recognized them as the same lights which had attacked and destroyed several of the Ori ships. Even now, they still attacked, though clearly unable to bring the ship down on their own.

He tightened his grip on Mjolnir and felt the air around him darken and begin to spark with energy.

As he flew in closer, Thor realized the lights were mechanical yet organic, the light streaming around them like the tendrils of some undersea creature. They nearly looked alive, except for that missing spark that came with true life. For a moment, he marvelled at them, wishing he could show them to the lovely Jane, who would no doubt appreciate both their beauty as well as their mechanics.

He watched them burrow through the great ship's energy shield and into its hull.

With a mighty battle cry, Thor swung Mjolnir and charged at the energy shield, feeling the hairs on his arm rise as he approached it. When the air smelt of alien energy, he swung his hammer with all his might. It hit the shield and energy cracked at its touch, but the shield didn't give.

Thor allowed himself to be repelled and flew a short distance away from the ship. He raised an eyebrow at the mechanical creatures of light as they emerged out of the other side of the ship, impressed by their strength.

Well, it seemed this would be a battle to relate at many feasts to come. Thor's face split into a delighted – and more than a little blood-thirsty – grin.

He backed up even more and spun Mjolnir, feeling the air crackle with energy waiting to be released. Then he stopped the hammer's spin, it calling forth. The sky thundered and light streaked towards him, lifting his cloak as it surrounded him and invigorated him further. Then, with a warrior's cry, he pointed Mjolnir at the ship and channelled the energy towards his quarry.

Lightening flew towards the ship, and for a moment the pure white outline of its shield became visible to him as the lightening broke apart and skimmed across its edges in a web of jagged lines.

Thor frowned, waiting for the ship to strike back at him. When nothing happened, no retaliation came, Thor huffed in annoyance.

“Fiends, you think me but a minor nuisance?” he called out, though knowing those inside the great white beast were most likely not listening. “Then I shall show you the true might of the Prince of Asgard!”

Below him, he was aware of the city, sprawled and full of people still, despite the efforts he could see being made towards evacuation. Just outside the city to the west, he could also see Midgardian forces gathering for battle: not waiting to be saved, but waiting to fight.

Thor approved.

Still they could not fight this Ori beast from the ground. The beast's wings required clipping. This, Thor was more than happy to do.
Once more he spun Mjolnir, feeling energy gather until it sparked and crackled and the sky rumbled. He threw his hammer, and the sky lit up as a massive bolt of lightning chased the hammer from the clouds. Thunder roared. The hammer and lightning hit the ship's shield at the same time, illuminating the sky further with a brilliant explosion of light and turned the dark grey clouds now surrounding the ship a light grey.

The energy shield held, but the ship shook and wavered along its course.

A moment later, it responded with a streak of yellow-orange light. Thor deftly avoided it and caught his hammer as it returned to him.

And then he swung it again to deflect a shot from behind.

“Oh ho!” he exclaimed at the smaller one-manned ships that approached him. “You dare to challenge the might of Thor!”

They were no bigger than the flying hagsvelterings of Niffleheim – and certainly less odorous. Nor did they appear to spit acid.

Thor threw Mjolnir at the closest small ship. Either it did not recognize the hammer as a weapon, or else the pilot grossly underestimated its power. The hammer shattered its energy shield as though it were nothing more than a bubble made from soap and water. The front of the small ship dented from the hammer's blow and shattered the ball of swirling energy just behind the metal. It exploded at the impact and Thor shielded himself from the impact of debris with his cloak.

He was already heading towards the next small ship when Mjolnir returned to his grasp.

The other ships had clearly seen their brother fall and were much more wary of allowing Thor to approach, but the pilots had not the skill to follow his movements and keep him away. He easily avoided the bolts of energy sent towards him, deflecting the ones that came close. They were firing at him like panicked children, not warriors, he thought with disgust.

Eager to stop this farce, Thor suddenly flew above them and then swung his hammer, bringing it down with all his strength at the first small ship. Lightening crackled in the clouds above him as he shattered this one's energy shield with the blow. A split-second later, the energy poured down from the heavens and hit the ship, surrounding it with power not its own and robbing it of strength.

Thor did not stop to watch the ship plummet to the ground.

He downed the third ship with one mighty throw of Mjolnir aimed at its energy source and then turned to find yet more ships approaching. He gripped his weapon and prepared to engage them, his blood singing with the familiar thrill of battle.

And then another group of small ships descended upon them from the clouds. Dark grey with wide wings, they immediately set upon the oval-shaped Ori ships with a rain of yellow tracers from their twin railguns as well as missiles. It looked much like the battles he and friend Hawk had engaged in on the large screen in the Man of Iron's tower.

And then a figure detached from their midst and flew towards Thor and the Prince of Asgard grinned with delight.

“Man of Iron, have you mayhaps lost a bet?” he called to the figure who looked like his comrade except for the blue stripes and white stars painted on his armour. “If so, I look forward wholeheartedly to hearing the tale.”
The figure came to a stop before Thor and cocked his head at him.

“Uh... oh, I see, you think I'm Tony,” said a voice Thor did not recognize. “Sorry, I'm not him. I'm a friend of his: Colonel Rhodes of the United States Air Force. Also known as War Mach-goddamnit, I mean Iron Patriot. No, you know what? If General O'Neill can call me War Machine, then I can call myself War Machine. So, nice to meet you, Thor, I'm War Machine.”

Thor looked upon the man with amusement. “It is an honour to make your acquaintance, Machine of War. Are you perhaps aware of the location of the Man of Iron?”

“Tony's on his way to New York. We're pretty sure that's where the second ship's headed and its gonna need him more than Colorado Springs will.” He looked towards the Midgardian forces setting up on the ground. “Fort Carson must've been on alert, 'cause there's no other way they could've mobilized anything close to this sort of force this quickly. But I doubt New York got this sort of warning.”

Thor nodded gravely. “Indeed. Then we should end this quickly so that we may then proceed to aide the city my shieldmates call home.”

“Uh, yeah sure.” The Machine of War paused for a moment. “Okay, so just got a message from the ground.” He turned and pointed towards a mountain in the west. “That there's Cheyenne Mountain, which is going to be the Ori army's ultimate goal. They're probably going to want to take the, uh, stargate.”

“Stargate?” Thor asked, blinking at the unknown term.

“Yeah, no, don't ask me to explain that one. I only just learned about all this a couple hours ago and it still sounds like fiction to me: the sort I hate watching with Tony, 'cause he ruins it by yelling at all the impossible science. Anyway, they want me to ask you to please make sure you don't actually blow up this ship. That big round energy thing it's got there will apparently take a good chunk of the countryside with it if it blows and we'd all really rather avoid that.”

Thor nodded. He understood the desire to reduce the damage to the city. “Very well. Then I shall endeavour to take the great white beast of metal down without destroying it completely.”

“...That would be, uh, great, thanks.” Suddenly, his head snapped towards said giant white beast. “Shit, that can't be good.”

Thor turned his gaze towards the ship. His eyes widened as he saw that the mechanical lights that had felt so alive, had gone dark and were now falling towards the ground like hail.

“What is happening?” he asked.

“I have no idea, but I'm gonna assume the Ant-er the base controlling those things has been compromised... Okay, listen, there's nothing we can do about that for now. I've got my orders, so I'm gonna go help with the evacuation of the city and help the fight on the ground. Catch you later, Thor.”

“May we meet again once victory has been secured, Machine of War!”

“Yeah, sure. I'm betting saving the world from an alien invasion deserves one hell of a party.”

“Verily! Now we fight and later we shall feast!”

“I'm down with that s'long as you're not planning on adding the blood of our enemies in there.”
The Machine of War flew off towards the city and Thor turned his sights once more towards the Ori ship. It was nearly past the city now, steadily flying towards the mountain. He wondered why it was moving so sluggishly towards its goal, but dismissed it. It mattered not, after all. All that mattered was that it not be allowed to arrive there.

He flew towards it once more. He saw it had gained more damage from the small creatures of light. Scorch marks and small holes in its hull had multiplied: enough to have weakened it, but not enough to have seriously harmed it. Considering carefully, Thor flew upwards, into the clouds and watched as the ship flew past the city. He was uncertain as to whether it did not see the Midgardian forces preparing for it, or simply did not care.

The men manning the great beast were underestimating the Midgardian forces. The Ori were clearly not particularly wise commanders, for underestimating one's foes was the height of folly.

Thor waiting patiently until the giant white beast had passed the city, silently gathering his strength all the while. It was something he had never seen his father do but heard much of from others, for Odin's battle prowess was legendary and spoken of often during feasts. Thor had grown up around the armouries and hung upon the words of older, wiser warriors. And Asgardian warriors enjoyed their tales as much as they enjoyed their drink – though neither as much as the fire that lit their veins during battle. Many times had he heard of the Allfather Odin fighting with endless energy against an army, or else watching from a distance as his men valiantly engaged the enemy, waiting until the perfect moment and then ending the battle with a single, decisive strike.

Thor felt the power of the storm gather around him, let it gather strength and speed, let the energy continue to mount until the air burned with it and he could feel it filling his lungs, and his veins where the blood simmered with it. Then, when his skin felt raw with it, his head hollowed out and buzzing, he finally saw the white beast float far enough away from the city, into a perfect position above a stretch of forested land.

He lifted Mjolnir and swung it around, whipping all the gathered energy and concentrating it around the hammer in his grip. His ears popped and his hair stood even further on end. Then, Thor, the God of Thunder, let out a mighty battle cry and released the energy, siphoning it through Mjolnir and sending it careening towards their opponent, directly into the weakened shields around the behemoth's rear thrusters.

The violent, uncontrollable force that blasted from the sky towards the Ori lit up the sky and was seen for miles.

Every soldier on the ground looked up, covering their eyes as they stared at the sight. At the St Francis Medical Centre, Doctor Lam looked away from the chart she'd been reading, trying to determine if she had something at her disposal that could make it possible to transfer the critically-injured patient elsewhere. Inside the SGC and Fort Carson's Fourth Infantry Division's Situation Room, technicians cried out in alarm as several important screens went momentarily fuzzy.

Up in her F-302, Snakeskinner squadron three leader Colonel Carol Danvers summed it up best: “Holy shit,” she said quietly.

From the relative safety of several school buses heading out of the city, hundreds of little faces stared out at the light in awe. “Wow,” they all somehow managed to say in unison before dissolving into an excited, chittering mass of excited voices.

Unaware of the attention, Thor looked down upon the Ori ship as it crashed to the ground, its shield shattered and one side blackened and twisted beyond recognition. But the power core had not exploded.
Feeling tired and drained in a way he could never remember having felt before, Thor nevertheless grinned proudly.

The crash had shaken the countryside, startling birds and violently rustling the vegetation. On the top of their hill, three soldiers and an airman had hastily pulled the green tarp over their heads to protect themselves against falling branches – and one squirrel that had immediately scrambled away screeching, its claws scratching frantically against the slippery tarp.

They waited for the explosion, which thankfully never came. A few moments of silence later, their radio crackled quietly to life.

“All teams, this is Mountain Top: report status. You guys alright? Please respond.”

The Air Force JTAC picked up the radio and opened the channel.

“Bravo here, we're green to green.”

They listened as the rest of the sniper nests radioed in, all but Delta unharmed. Delta had one man down with a broken leg from a fallen tree and another one with claw marks to the face from an unidentified furry and terrified mammal that had apparently mistaken his tarp for a burrowing hole. The Bravo team rolled their eyes in unison, because really how did Delta always manage it?

“Acknowledged. New orders: they're sending an SG team to attempt to negotiate a surrender. Not confident that they'll take it, but they're trying anyway. Hold your fire, until it's clear the offer of surrender has been rejected. Start getting ranges and factor in drift due to wind. All sniper teams will be providing cover should the negotiation team need to extract quickly.”

The Bravo snipers exchanged a look as the JTAC responded before setting about their work.

“This is Bravo. Roger that Mountain Top.”

“Guess they gotta try it,” one sniper said with a shrug. “If only so they can say they did.”

“Yeah,” the JTAC on the radio responded as he took his hand off the radio and studied his blue-for tracker then frowned. “Hey Guys, we got a bit of a problem. Blue-for tracker just updated where the downed Ori ship crashed and we’re not in any position to render cover whatsoever. In fact we’re going to need to move about 15 clicks north to get eyes on.”

“Our orders are clear: we stay and protect the mountain and provide sniper over-watch and call in airstrikes on enemy troop concentrations,” the lead sniper stated.

“And that’s all well and good gunny, but the threat hasn’t yet reached the mountain. Look here.” He showed the Blue-For tracker on his tablet to the team as they gathered around him. “Thor brought the enemy ship down at Red Rock Canyon open spaces. To the north, south and west is nothing but rocky and mountainous terrain. They're virtual no-go zones for an army as large as the one speculated to be on that ship. If the enemy wants to get to Cheyenne Mountain and take the Stargate they’ll have to strike out east along highway 24 and then south along 115 once they clear Bear creek Regional Park before they eventually come in range of the mountain.”

Staff Sergeant Perez, who was in charge of Bravo Team, frowned as he considered this.
“I see what you’re saying.” He took a moment to study the terrain in the region on the tablet map before his eyes lit up. “Alright this is what we’re going to do. Get on the horn with Mountain Top and tell them we are repositioning north at Bear Creek Nature Center to provide eyes on and cover for the SG team making contact. Tell Alpha to pack up and join us at... section 16 trailhead. Charlie, Delta and Fox teams are to remain in place while we reposition.”

The four man team mounted up on their ATV and took off down the secret restrictive dirt paths known only to the air force. They drove from Cheyenne Mountain, past Mays peak until they passed into Bear Canyon and their final destination, Bear Creek Nature Center. It took almost twenty five minutes to reposition, five more than they would have liked, but the terrain along the mountains was treacherous and they couldn't afford to lose a man due to negligence.

They were disheartened by what they saw when they arrived. Already hundreds of enemy soldiers had established a perimeter around the crashed ship and more were constantly pouring out. And in the center of the troops stood a figure pale as death, holding a staff and a book, dressed in plain robes.

“Alpha reports they have set up at section 16 trailhead half a click to our rear and west of us. They have a perfect unobstructed view of the enemy landing zone.”

“Understood,” said Staff Sergeant Perez as he went prone and folded the bipod legs of his sniper rifle. “Maintain contact and coordinate with your fellow JTAC. Start designating targets immediately. Soon as this shit goes south I want to put them in a world of hurt.”

“I have eyes on the Prior,” the spotter commented after lazing the range with his laser range finder. “And he is one ugly son-of-a-bitch too. He's about a click out.”

“Got him,” the sniper acknowledged. He panned his scope across the field. “Holy shit, there are a lot of them.”

He then resettled the scope onto the Prior and kept it there, just in time for the Prior to turn and look right at him. The hair on the back of Perez's neck stood on end. He didn’t know how, but he was certain the Prior knew he was there.

“Anyone else get the feeling this guy knows we’re here?”

“They’re supposed to have psychic powers or something,” the team medic piped up. “Supposedly they can feel your intent or something like that. It’s almost Jedi like.” The guy chuckled.

“Yeah you would think Jedi, wouldn’t you Watson!” the team spotter snarked which elicited a chuckle from the rest of the team.

“No seriously, I think that fucker knows we’re here!” Perez snapped.

“Doesn’t matter; isn’t anything he can really do about it at this distance,” the spotter remarked and then paused. “At least I hope not...”

“I still don’t like it.” The sniper turned his attention to their JTAC. “Perry, what have we got coming in?”

“A squadron of F-15s and F-16s loaded for air to ground munitions. Also Peterson has advised us they’re calling in all air assets from across the western United States. Skies are going to get mighty crowded in the next couple of hours – it's a good thing all air-traffic was grounded hours ago.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”
“Contact, six vehicle convoy; Strykers moving from east to west on Highway 24. They have a white flag hanging off the third vehicle.”

“That would be the welcoming committee.”

Perez noted how the Prior's attention moved away from them to the vehicles. The Ori soldiers levelled their weapons but on a signal from the Prior, lowered them again. The Prior moved forward, towards the road, apparently intent on meeting the disembarking SG team half way.

And all the while Perez was hoping the enemy really did want to talk and wasn't quite as insane as they'd been made out to be.

Corporal Wells stood beside his rocket launcher and waited for orders. Watchin' that ship come down had been nothing short of amazing, almost enough to make him want to take up a new religion. 'Cept his ma would whop him but good if he brought home any such blasphemous talk. She was pro'ly already kickin' up a storm at home at the thought of them aliens comin' from nowhere and wantin' ta turn good honest people's heads with talk of their supposed gods.

Them aliens didn't know what they was doin' here on Earth if they thought they could convince his ma to believe in some alien gods – didn't even have one god like proper people neither, they had a bunch o' 'em.

He and his battalion had scrambled ahead o' the rest of 'em, hurryin' all the way to Cheyenne Mountain. His pop'd be right tickled to hear 'bout him an' his battalion being sent to help defend an air force base; ne'er let the retired pilot down the road forget it. Still, what the aliens wanted was inside the Mountain, deep down below all them NORAD levels. He'd heard some people callin' it a 'stargate'. He wondered if that really meant a gate to the stars or if it were just a name for some fancy telescope.

Though they had spaceships, so maybe it wasn' just a telescope. Wasn' like they were gonna tell him anyway.

He checked over his weapon again, just to be sure. Could never be too thorough and this one was a real beauty – deserved to be treated right. He recounted his ammunition: twenty rounds. And he knew how to make every single one count. That's why they gave him the rocket launcher. Them aliens came anywhere near this mountain, they was gonna regret it.

He and his battalion weren't gonna let 'em through, that was for damn sure.

Colonel Greyson watched as SG2 walked past the line. No, they weren't just walking: they were strolling casually as though at a park on a Sunday afternoon instead in the middle of a potential battlefield with a gigantic alien spaceship in front of them and only six combat vehicles of questionable effectiveness at their back. Only his trained eye could see the tension that suffused their steps and advertised their readiness. Their hands were on their guns, but they were aimed at the ground.
SG4 was walking right behind them, weapons drawn and aimed at the ship. And didn't that just take all the cake – the ranking officers at Fort Carson weren't allowed to know about this SGC, but apparently the Russians were. Colonel Pallin had assured him they were just as interested in saving the world as the rest of them were. Which, Greyson acknowledged, was a fair point. Didn't mean he had to like it.

And the worst, the absolutely worst thing about the situation, was that he couldn't exactly disagree with it.

He'd survived enough combat to know that afterwards, their every move would be analyzed by both their superiors and the media. And this here? This would be doubly scrutinized. So, yes, they had to offer the Ori the chance to surrender. It was also the perfect opportunity for SG2 to get close enough to the ship to covertly plant the anti-Prior devices while stalling the Ori's assault just long enough to give the rest of the artillery to get into place.

He'd told them it was still crazy. They'd laughed.

“Our day job consists of travelling to other planets via wormhole,” said Doctor Grissom with a twinkle in her eye. “You don't do that unless you're at least somewhat nuts.”

“Too bad Doctor Jackson isn't here,” Pallin had answered. “Then you'd see crazy. Hell, he'd probably insist on going alone and unarmed. We're at least not that crazy.”

They were half-way to the ship when the Prior stepped forward, moving away from his amassing troops with no close protection detail. Everyone stopped and waited. He carried a tall staff and even through the binoculars, he looked ill – no, not just ill, diseased. His face was grey and pock-marked and Greyson was glad he was too far away in his command vehicle to see his eyes.

SG2 kept their radios on as they spoke with them.

“Well, hello there, Prior,” he heard Colonel Pallin call out. “Welcome to Earth. Now normally we'd be much more friendly and inviting, but, well, we're not all that keen on being nice to people who try to take over our planet. As you probably know, we've got a lot of soldiers at our backs and you might have a lot of soldiers of your own, but you've also probably got tons of injured inside that ship and no back-up coming. We're not afraid to fight you, but we'd rather avoid that fight if it's all the same to you.”

Doctor Grissom took up the speech next: “We're giving you and your people the chance to stop this. Drop your weapons and surrender and we'll help with your wounded. Surrender and we promise that no further harm will come to any of you. There's still time to avoid bloodshed on both our sides.”

Behind the Prior Ori soldiers continued to assemble in formation as they continued to pour out from the wounded ship. Greyson estimated around fifteen thousand at this point with no sight to an end of the never-ending stream. They were wearing armour and carrying sharp, pointed weapons with crystals on the end. It should've looked ridiculous, but SG2 had already warned him that those pointed weapons shot laser-like beams that packed quite the punch and that armour, while not entirely bullet-proof, certainly wasn't anything like the stuff you'd find in museums or medieval re-enactments.

The Prior, meanwhile, continued to silently look upon SG2 as something distasteful that had just crawled from the bottom of the ocean. Yeah, the Colonel was beginning to really like the plan that involved taking out the Prior first.
He saw movement on his right and then someone saluted. He looked away from his command vehicle's optics to another screen showing his Second in Command.

"Report, Major Schwarzentruber," he said, a part of him inordinately proud of himself every time he said the man's name without stumbling.

"Sir, two sniper teams in the area have reported in. Seems yet more Ori troops are disembarking from the rear of the ship. Estimated twenty thousand plus at this point and still rising."

Colonel Greyson took a deep breath. That was only to be expected really; they'd be stupid not to.

"Thank you, Major," he said. "Tell Colonel Jensen to send 1-10 Cav north to the Garden of the Gods to cut them off so they can't circle around us." When the Major had hurried off to execute his orders, he spoke softly into his radio as he brought his binoculars back to his eyes. "You get that SG2? Apparently there are more troops coming out the back."

"Roger that, Colonel. This is about three seconds to FUBAR anyway. Only good news is that Miles says their hanger bay door's crushed, so even if they've got more flyers in there, they're not getting out."

Well that was something, he thought, the battle taking place in the air their heads suddenly sounding much more immediate. Then there was a crash of thunder, followed by flash of lightening, and moments later, a crash behind them and an explosion. He tore his eyes away from the monitor and stepped out of his command vehicle to look back towards the city. Black smoke billowed out from behind a row of townhouses. He hoped they'd all been evacuated.

And then finally a strong voice, full of conviction and betraying none of the frailty his body showed was heard over his radio, ringing out in a low voice so intense that it seemed to reverberate inside his head. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if everyone in town could hear it in their heads.

"Death holds no fear to those who worship the Almighty Ori. Wounds received while in their service are not to be feared, but revered for they are proof of the strength of their beliefs and all will be healed when they join the Ori within everlasting enlightenment. Death and scorn befall the unbeliever as they willfully turn their backs on the teachings in the Book of Origin. You have sealed your fate, but perhaps it is not yet too late for the rest of your people. We have been called to battle by the Ori and in that path there can be no faltering. Hallowed be the Ori!"

"And that's our cue to get outta Dodge," Pallin muttered just as the ground around them began to shake.

The SG team stumbled back a few steps. If he hadn't been looking for it, he might've missed the moment Lieutenant Miles took advantage of the shaking to deliberately over-balance and fall to the ground, his pack flying from his grasp. He left it laying where it had fallen as he scrambled to his feet and followed his team towards safety.

Meanwhile, the Ori soldiers echoed the Prior's battle cry. "Hallowed be the Ori!" was yelled in several hundred voices and echoed across the hills.

"Hold your fire!" Greyson commanded loudly and vaguely heard his order being passed down the line by his officers. He turned to Major Schwartzentruber on the monitor. "Have our mortar teams and artillery prepare to fire on my mark to cover the SG2 and SG4's retreat."

No sooner had he said this, the Prior lifted his staff and pointed it towards the SG teams. A large burst of flames shot out of its end and Greyson blinked in disbelief as it missed Pallin's head by
“Oh come on, seriously?” he said quietly. “A magic staff?”

He heard breathy laughter interspersed between automatic rounds over the radio. “Careful there, Colonel, you’re starting to sound like one of us,” he heard Pallin say.

He snorted. The Ori soldiers were moving forward now – more hatches opened along the sides of the ship and troops spilled out in tight, but ordered lines. Like ants out of an anthill. He raised his arm.

“Convoy, covering fire!”

Moments later, 50 caliber machine guns, mark 19 grenade launchers and m429 machine guns opened up on advancing ranks of Ori soldiers dropping many of them like a scythe through a wheatfield. The rest dropped to the ground or fought to find cover as enemy weapons fire flew over them. More subtle were the two sniper teams as they, too, began picking off anyone who looked like they were in charge. It helped sow confusion into the Ori ranks.

Bullets and grenades pelted at the Prior, but he didn't move and none of them hit their mark, exploding against his personal energy shield.

The two SG teams finally made it back into the Stryker vehicles and collapsed into their seats, panting as the rear door locked and secured behind them. Greyson nodded to them and then turned his eyes back to the advancing enemy line.

“Miles, how're we doing with that Prior?” he heard Pallin ask. “I don't see him slowing down any.”

“Just a minute, sir,” Lieutenant Miles answered as he shuffled around for something. There was a moment of silence and then the airman let out a string of glutteral words Greyson couldn't even begin to translate.

“Huh,” he heard Grissom say. “You know, I don't actually speak Goa'uld, but I understood every word you just said. For the record, I don't think you can actually tear a man's spine out that way.”

Greyson blinked, then decided he just wasn't going to ask.

“What's the problem, Lieutenant?” Pallin asked.

“I threw the pack too far away, sir,” the Lieutenant answered, thankfully in English. “He's just out of range.”

“How close is 'just out of range', Lieutenant?” Greyson asked, glancing at them SG team huddled around their 'tech guy' and his tablet.

“Like, he's gotta take two steps, close, sir!”

He nodded, considering this complication. “If we provide too much resistance, will the Prior move forward to clear the way for the soldiers?”

Pallin exchanged looks with his team. “He might... I mean, Priors aren't exactly warriors...”

“... but they have powers and think they're invincible,” Grissom finished his sentence.

Pallin nodded in agreement. “Besides, it's not like a long, drawn-out battle is to their advantage either.”
“Good.” He turned looked towards the front of his Stryker. “It's going to get hot here very soon. What's our status?”

“All vics good to go, Colone,” his driver and TC responded.

“Enemy troops moving: two hundred metres out and advancing, weapons raised!” came the second report seconds later.

“Gunners, focus fire on those lead elements, keep them pinned down! Get on the horn with our mortar teams. Tell 'em to start laying down ordinance to cover our withdraw. Driver, pop smoke and get us out of here!”

“Yes, sir.”

When the Ori soldiers began firing back, it became immediately obvious their hand-held stave weapons had a longer range than had previously been estimated. One well-aimed energy bolt punched through the relatively thin armour of a Stryker like a knife through tissue paper, no doubt killing the three soldiers inside.

Well, no one said this was going to be easy, Greyson thought to himself. He took a deep breath and watched the soldiers advance closer to the defensive line, waiting for the moment they were close enough for him to commence the full attack. Didn't matter where these people came from or what sort of strange weaponry they were packing. Their job was to hold the line and protect the city – hell the world, and wasn't that just something he'd never thought he'd be able to say.

This was turning out to be a day of things he never thought he'd ever do.

“Colonel, Sir,” Major Schwartzentruber said over the net. “Receiving new orders from General Harper. First and Third Brigades are to collapse from their positions along Interstate 24 and Highway 115 and establish a half-circle perimeter from Garden of the Gods north down to Cheyenne Mountain High School in the south. Second Brigade is to maintain their position in the city and act as reserve force should the Ori manage to break through our perimeter.”

“Acknowledge the order and send it down to our Battalion commanders. Tell them to double-time it.”

The plan made perfect sense. The Ori were pushing out eastward in a straight line toward the city. If First and Third brigade could cut them off they’d essentially be bottled up in and around Manitou Springs. Not ideal, but they could limit the damage from the attack. And since the Ori seemed intent on pushing outward, they’d walk into the mother of all crossfires from two heavy brigades.

Greyson looked over to where he could see the Air Force Colonel studying the tactical map displays and icons of US Army troops moving to establish their new perimeter. And in his eyes Greyson could see a flash of understanding. Good, the man understood what the Army was about to do.

“I really don’t want to be those guys right now,” Pallin stated with a grimace.

“No one is going to want to be in their shoes in a few minutes, Colonel. Hopefully it'll be enough to draw out that Prior.”
The Prior watched, unconcerned as the Ori's soldiers moved forward towards the enemy. There was no doubt in his mind that the Ori's army would be victorious, for they walked the path of Origin, the path of the believers and of Truth. But as he watched, he frowned, realizing it was taking the soldiers too long to move forward. The unbelievers of this planet were persistent. Perhaps they thought they had seen the full power of the Ori.

Though his eyes were clouded over, the Prior saw more than any mere mortal man could ever hope to see, thanks to the blessing bestowed upon him by the Ori. He looked past the Ori forces, into the crowded ranks of the unbelievers. He saw them, saw the ignorant savages with their primitive weapons and concentrated on their hearts, on their minds.

He began chanting, feeling his staff glow with power. He felt as the power reached out towards them. Then he felt their pain. They writhed beneath his powers, and though he couldn't hear them, he imagined their cries for mercy. But it was too late, they had already chosen to oppose the Ori. Their lives were nothing; their pain inconsequential.

The noise from their weapons quieted. The Prior took a step forward. A shot rang out from the left and took down one of his commanders. He raised a hand and reached out towards the humans he could feel hiding in the trees like the cowards they were. The ground beneath them shook and their heartbeats quickened.

The Prior smiled grimly. He took another step forward.

And staggered another step forward as the world around him seemed to disappear. Where he'd felt so many, he now felt none. He reached for the blessing of the Ori and could not reach it.

The sound of a small explosion echoed out across the canyon, but the Prior never heard it.

“Hohoho… did you see that? I think someone just took his mojo,” said the spotter for Bravo team with a grin.

Staff Sergeant Perez centred the crosshairs of his weapon over the face of the Prior. The expression of shock would be forever etched into his memory. “And now I’m about to take his life. Range?”

“Sixteen hundred fifty two meters. Very light wind from the west at two knots.”

Perfect.

Perez exhaled and held his breath as he gently squeezed the trigger. The Barrett M82A1 50. calibre sniper rifle let loose a loud retort, but at nearly 3 times the speed of sound, the round impacted the Prior's face long before the sound of the shot echoed outward.

The soldiers of the Ori froze in horrified disbelief as the head of their Prior – and much of his upper
body – exploded like a ripe melon smashed by an unseen hammer. Brain matter, bits of skull and blood coated the nearest warrior, who promptly bent over and emptied the contents of his stomach violently.

The Ori warriors that had been by the Prior stood in numb confusion, unable to understand what they had just seen as the body of the Prior toppled over and promptly caught fire. They were veterans of the Ori Crusade. They had faced the Jaffa and other unbelievers on over a dozen worlds and had always come away triumphant, their conquered enemies joining them as brothers in faith in their righteous crusade.

But now the Prior, the invincible voice of the Almighty Ori, was dead. That surely was an omen of doom, a sigh that they had been deemed unworthy of the protection of their gods. They had been abandoned to die on this accursed world.

One by one, they soldiers of the Ori turned back to face their enemies. Somehow, they had lost the favour of their gods, but they had not lost sight of their duty. Perhaps their deaths would be enough to regain the favour of the Ori.

As the spent shell casing hit the ground and bounced twice, Staff Sergeant Perez turned to the rest of his team with a satisfied smirk.

“And that boys and girls is how you shape the outcome of a battle with one well-placed shot.”

“Hooorahhh!” three voices answered in unison.

“Whelp we definitely got their attention. They’re no longer focusing on the Strykers. We now seem to have their undivided attention. And…yup, they’re moving! Looks like two elements advancing on our position, battalion strength.”

“Over a thousand guys for just little ole us?” Perez snickered. “I’m touched.”

“Should we move?” his spotter asked.

“Nah, we’ve got good cover here and they’re still too far away to engage us effectively. But keep an eye on them. Soon as they get to about five hundred meters we’ll pull back to a more tenable position. Alpha can cover our retreat. Doc, stay alert and watch our six; last thing we need is some of them sneaking up on us.”

“Got it,” the team medic responded.

“Oh and Perry,” he called out to their JTAC after firing off a round. “Anytime you wanna call that air support, it would be appreciated. And make sure to contact Mountain Top and inform them the Prior is dead.”

“Already on it,” the JTAC responded.

“Well boys it's about to get a bit lively. Let’s see how much damage we can do.”
Meanwhile, in New York City, the second Ori ship landed in Central Park.
As always, thanks so much everyone for reading the last chapter, leaving kudos, dropping a comment, ect. This chapter somehow became a monster I hadn't expected it to (which is why it's taken so long for me to post it). And thanks to JonHarper for reading it over and making sure I wasn't being too ridiculous... ;)

ALLIES

Jack cursed himself at his stupidity of dividing the drones in an attempt to go after both ships. And he called himself a general (although technically, that hadn't actually been his idea)? Maybe his age was catching up to him.

Controlling the drones in two separate places and monitoring both was complicated and Jack could feel his attention slipping from one set to the other. As it was, he was delivering damage to both ships, but not enough to seriously disable either one. He grit his teeth and concentrated. It became slightly easier when it occurred to him to think of the drones as being two separate hands: left and right. It was the ultimate in multi-tasking.

He vaguely heard cheering in the background and figured someone must've blown up another Ori ship. Good.

He loved operating Ancient tech, loved the way he could feel the systems respond to him. It gave him the same thrill as flying a plane, feeling the connection between himself and the machine he was operating. He didn't have the words to explain how it felt – Daniel no doubt would, except that the universe loved its ironies and so left the man closest to the Ancients without the ability to use their technology.

The sudden, shrill warning was so loud inside Jack's head, it made him cry out. His eyes flew open and he looked up at the projection. The first thing he noticed was that the Earth was no longer a watermark, which meant the dimensional bubble field was down. That meant Area 52 had fallen. Crap. Then he noticed the plasma blast heading towards the base.

“Dammit, this is so not my day,” he muttered as the geeks in the room rushed about.

He felt a tug from the base and frowned, closing his eyes. The warning was no longer quite so deafening and, as he concentrated, he could feel the base responding to the threat. Old, half-forgotten threat-response protocols were initiating themselves. The base didn't speak in words, or really in emotions either, more like sensations that felt like a coded imprint Jack had part of the cipher to.

Threat detected.... threat analyzed... threat response determined: command raise shields...
command raise shields... command raise shields... shields not initialized... shields not found...
unable to complete command... unable to complete–
Jack's eyes had been closed – desperately trying to coax the Ancient base into finding its long-lost shields – so he didn't see the explosion. But he heard it. He felt the heat and pressure on his face. The Ancient chair had been gently murmuring and then it went silent while the rest of the world roared and shrieked and screamed around him. He felt pain.

Then he felt nothing.

Until his eyes fluttered open and he saw some sparks off to the side: bright, pretty little lights within a pitch black world. He tried to move, groaning as pain shot up his leg. Something hard, heavy and very unyielding was pressing against his torso. Somewhere off in the depths of the darkness, he heard soft muffled sobs and felt the urge to do something, or say something, but his head felt muffled and fuzzy... and maybe closing his eyes was a better idea.

He thought he saw a bright light just before he closed his eyes and darkness claimed him again.

There was a lot more light the next time he opened his eyes. He winced against it, wishing – like he did every time – that hospitals could be just a little bit more hospitable to the people waking up inside them. A shadow fell over his face and he opened his eyes again to blink up at an unfamiliar, dark-skinned face.

“Hey, Doc, the General's awake!” the man called over his shoulder.

The man who hurried over and immediately began fussing over his vitals was, however, very familiar. Also, supposed to be in another galaxy. Unless the Daedalus was back already... He looked around the infirmary and blinked at how very much not like the Daedalus infirmary it looked. Although... had he ever actually been inside the Daedalus infirmary? He was sure he had at some point. But even so...

“This isn't the Daedalus,” he rasped as he sat up, ignoring Doctor Beckett's protests. Then he finally got a good look at the infirmary... the very empty infirmary. There were several beds containing scientists he recognized from the Chair Room, but the only two staff appeared to be Beckett himself and the dark-skinned young man. “Where am I?”

“Ah well, welcome to the Victory, General,” said the Scotsman.

Daniel looked away from the screen when he heard the doors to the Victory's bridge slide open. He was hardly surprised as Jack hobbled into the room on a pair of metallic crutches and looked around, shrewd eyes taking in every detail. Daniel, meanwhile did some observing of his own, making note of the bandage on the side of his face and the way he held himself just a little to the right, and of course the partial cast on his right leg.

“Jack, I see Beckett let you out of the infirmary,” he said mildly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lorne turn the command chair around. “That must've taken some impressive whining.”

Jack looked to him and raised an imperious eyebrow. “I'm a general, Daniel, and generals don't whine. They forcefully demand.”

“In extremely whiny voices.”

“Daniel.”
Daniel grinned, allowing himself a moment to feel happy to see his friend alive.

“It’s good to see you in one piece, sir,” said Lorne from the chair.

Jack’s eyes slid over to him. “Now, my memory might not be what it used to be, but I know you're supposed to be in another galaxy.”

“Yes, sir. Mister Woolsey agreed to Doctor Jackson's request for personnel to help save Earth, sir.”

“I see. Daniel?”

Daniel shrugged. “We stopped by Atlantis for a few days because we needed someone familiar with Ancient tech.”

Jack blinked at him, his face impassive. “Let me get this right: you made a pit stop. In the Pegasus Galaxy. Because you needed someone who knew Ancient tech and had the gene.”

“Oh, we already had someone with the gene. Turns out, according to Carson, the reason the supersoldier serum worked on Steve is because he has the ATA gene.”

Jack blinked again. “Really? Huh... he comes from an Irish-catholic background too.” Jack grinned. “Sweet!”

Then he cleared his throat and turned serious again. “By the way, you realize you're in a world of trouble, right?”

Daniel swallowed heavily. “Yeah, but the Ori attack has been mostly stopped. Just two more ships on the planet's surface.”

“Oh, that's just the beginning of the trouble you're in, Doctor Jackson. Just wait 'till you see what Cassie's been up to while you were gone.”

Daniel blinked and then frowned. “Cassie? What does she have to do with this?”

“She's been a very busy young lady, that's what. You could say she takes after her uncle – not the handsome general one, the trouble-making civilian archaeologist one.”

Daniel groaned. “Jack.”

“Daniel?” Jack asked mildly. “You know, it's almost like the two of you have decided to conspire against me, trying to put even more white hairs on my head.”

Daniel crossed his arms and glared at him as Jack turned to the Avengers on the bridge and pointed to his hair.

“See, when I first met Daniel, I had a beautiful head of lovely brown hair--“

“--You had a crew-cut, Jack,” Daniel interjected with a roll of his eyes.

“A beautiful head of lovely brown hair. And ever since meeting the venerable Doctor Daniel Jackson, all those brown hairs have been steadily turning white.”

“That's because it was twelve years ago.”

Jack turned to him with narrowed eyes. “Are you saying I'm getting old, Daniel?”
“I don't know, let's ask your knees.”

“Low blow, Danny, low blow.”

“Okay, not that it's not amusing to listen to your intergalactically-acclaimed comedy act, but that Ori ship headed for New York's not going to just destroy itself, as convenient as that would be. I've figured out the easiest way to disable it and Rogers is pretty sure he can handle it, so can we get a move on? I just discovered a whole new systems interface that I want to experiment with, but of course I can't while we're still in the middle of a battle!”

Jack looked up towards the ceiling. “McKay?!” He frowned. “So where's Sheppard?”

“Back on Atlantis recuperating after being taken down by a bunch of rabid silver Tribbles,” Rodney responded immediately, his voice gleeful.

“Rabid, silver Tribbles... No, you know what, let's just save the planet first. Major Lorne, I'll take the helm.”

Daniel's eyes shot towards Lorne, not at all surprised by his stricken expression. He held a hand up to stop the Major from getting up.

“Sorry, no can do, Jack,” he said. “By order of the President, you're not allowed to fly experimental aircraft and I'm pretty sure this one counts doubly since she's an alien experimental aircraft.”

Jack glared at him. “It's a spaceship, not an aircraft.”

“Pretty sure it still counts.”

“Why exactly did the President issue an order not allowing the General to fly experimental aircraft?” Natasha asked, her eyes glittering with amusement. Next to her, Clint was grinning openly.

Daniel smiled slyly and towards her. “Because it was the only way to stop him from putting all the air force's test pilots out of a job after he'd been promoted and taken out of field ops.”

“Aw, that sucks man,” Clint commiserated. “Why don't you just retire and go into the civilian sector?”

“What, and miss all this fun?” Jack asked with a straight face.

“Sir, we've just received a message from the Jaffa. They're ready to move out.”

Daniel took a deep breath. “Okay, good. Send confirmation to them and then let the Daedalus know we're leaving the rest to them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “The Daedalus? They're early.” Then he cleared his throat. “Alright Daniel, so what's the plan?”

They timed it to the second: hundreds of television stations across the country (with many more
around the world also catching the stream) synchronized their digital watches to Air Force One
time. Millions, billions of televisions, showed news anchors turn, grim-faced, to their viewers at
the exact same moment and say:

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have the President of the United States, Henry Hayes, direct
from Air Force One with a message for the nation.”

The screen changed and the familiar face of President Hayes took up most of the screen. The
background, however, wasn't the oval office, but looked rather like the inside of a bunker with
monitors, read-outs and small flashing lights lined up behind him. The President looked mostly-
immaculate in his charcoal suit and navy blue tie. He looked tired, somehow older than usual,
except for his eyes, which burned with fire and determination.

“Good evening my fellow Americans, and to all the citizens of this planet who may be watching.
Today isn't a day any of you ever expected to face and, for better or for worse, this date will live on
in the history of not just this country, but of this planet. Because today, we have all been challenged
to think of ourselves as not just citizens of a country, but as citizens of a planet.

Six years ago, my first day in the Oval Office after being sworn in as the leader of this great nation
in fact, I received a visit from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He handed me a docket
and told me to read it. I skimmed it and, I kid you not, I laughed. In fact, the first words out of my
mouth were: “Is this a joke?” Ultimately, the thing that convinced me it was the truth is that
General Maynard is a great many things, but a comedian he is not.

In my hands that day I held files relating to a project whose beginnings dated back to the Second
World War. A project the administration before me had reinstated and grown into what is quite
possibly the single greatest endeavour humankind has seen since the colonization of North
America – if not the greatest ever. And since the moment I held that classified file in my hands, I've
wondered how I could share it with the people of this country. Analysts have spent hours
pondering consequences and considering the best way to reveal the existence of what we call the
Stargate Program. Needless to say, this is not how I'd hoped it would happen.

In those early days of this administration we were fighting a group of aliens known as the Goa'uld.
Their empire had lasted for thousands of years, built on fear and the backs of hundreds of
thousands of human slaves, all of whom they'd originally transplanted from Earth. They pretended
to be gods using advanced technology.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Empire of the Goa'uld has fallen, their threat gone from this galaxy.
Now I wish I could say it was all our doing, but frankly we were small players in the end. Which
isn't to say that we didn't hit that empire like a rock, creating a giant splash and plenty of ripples.

The Ori are a little different, with different technology and different ideas, but just like the Goa'uld,
their powers, no matter how amazing, aren't magic. Their gods were once mortal beings just like
all of us. We didn't give in to the Goa'uld and we are not going to give in to the Ori.

To the citizens of New York City: hang in there. Help is on the way, I promise. It's having a bit of
trouble getting there, but it's coming. Some of you are no doubt wondering why we can't just blow
that ship up from the sky. The truth is, well, we actually could do that, but I'm told by people
smarter than me that the explosion would take out the entire city and some of the surrounding
area. New York, I'm not going to give that order, because none of us have given up on you yet.

So, just hang in there and do what you can to survive. You're all in it together, so for God's sake,
help each other out. If that little old lady living across the street needs help, help her. You see a
child running around without an adult? Grab them and find their parents, or at least make sure
they make it to an evacuation point. Your city's Office of Emergency Management is already working tirelessly to coordinate the evacuation, but both the police and fire departments will greatly appreciate it if you make sure everyone is out of your building as you're leaving.

Remember, you're not only American, you're New Yorkers. You're tough. You can do this, so don't give up. None of us are going to. And believe you me, I've seen the SGC and their personnel pull off some damned crazy miracles in my time in office, and you've got some of their best heading right for you, assuming they haven't already landed.

To the rest of the country and to the world, once this crisis has been averted, you can be assured this administration, along with our allied world governments will begin releasing more detailed information about the Stargate Program. But, in the meantime, please join me in praying for the brave men and women fighting in Colorado Springs and to all those fighting for their lives and for their city in New York against next to impossible odds.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time and God bless America.”

The camera held the President's gaze for a moment and then moved, panning out to show the back of the plane, where about a dozen or so men and women sat solemnly on comfortable-looking leather seats. Nothing was said, no explanation given, but any astute follower of global news would've instantly recognized the collection of global leaders before the picture faded out and returned to the news studio.

Cassie was relieved to find that no one recognized her. As soon as they'd realized the second Ori ship was headed for New York, Happy Hogan had begun evacuating all of the Tower's employees into the re-enforced basement. Maria Hill had called the NYPD and begun coordinating with emergency services. Who, as it turned out, had already been put on official alert by the air force. They'd also called Christine to let the general public know.

She and Bruce were just outside the tower, herding people inside and into the re-enforced basement levels.

In the middle of the somewhat-organized chaos, someone grabbed her by the arm. Startled, she looked up into the face of a man with dull eyes and shoulder-length, unkempt dark hair. He looked like a homeless man with his several days-old scruff and dirty trenchcoat, but there was something about the way he held himself and the purposeful grip on her arm that made her decide he probably wasn't.

“You're her,” he said, his voice as dull and emotionless as his eyes. Cassie froze, her eyes widening in horror. “The girl from the broadcast. You know where he is.”

“Let me go,” she said, trying to keep her voice even, even as she struggled against the vice-like grip he had on her arm.

“What is he?”

“What is who?!”

And here the man paused, confusion crossing his face. Cassie twisted and struck out just like Uncle Teal'c had taught her. The man didn't go down the way he should have, but he grunted and his hold
loosened just enough for her to wrench free. She ran around the throng of people being herded into the basement, knowing he was right behind her.

“Bruce!” she called out.

Up ahead, she saw the scientist look up from where he'd been nervously shuffling the crowd onward. She saw his eyes narrow when he noticed the man following her. He tapped his comm as he began making his way towards her. She ran gratefully to his side.

The man stopped just in front of them and stared.

“Hello, was there something we could help you with?” Bruce asked mildly.

The man's dull eyes were even more unnerving from further away, his stiff movements more obvious. He reminded her of the Terminator. She shivered and barely resisted the urge to grab Bruce's arm.

“Where is he?” the man asked.

Bruce's eyebrows rose. “He who? I'm afraid there are over 500 people employed in this building, a good portion of which are male: you'll have to be a bit more specific.”

The man frowned. “Steve.”

“Steve? You're looking for Steve?” Then Bruce pause, his hand going for his comm. “Yes, Bruce here... oh.” He looked to the man, his eyes widening. “I see... yes, okay. Bruce, out.”

Bruce then turned his attention to the man. “Perhaps we should take this conversation upstairs?” he suggested. “You'll be alright here, right Cassie?”

Cassie nodded. “Yeah, I'll be good.”

The man nodded once and then followed Bruce into the elevator that opened for them. Cassie watched them go, wondering who he was. A moment later, she shook herself out of her stupor. There were more important things for her to do right now.

All eyes in the room turned to SG3 when they walked into the noisy room, however most of them turned their attention almost immediately towards their tasks, the clacking, clicking and chatter not ceasing even for that momentary acknowledgement.

New York's Office of Emergency Management, a veteran to disasters – including alien invasions – had mobilized its Watch Command almost as soon as the alien ships had appeared on their television screens. Now the sea of monitors showed readouts, graphs and satellite images of the city detailing everything from 911 calls, traffic congestion to meteorological reports. Every station was manned with sharp-eyed, focused individuals dressed in everything from suits to bermuda shorts.

Colonel Reynolds immediately turned to the heavy-set woman who rushed forward to greet him.

“Hello, you must be the reps from the air force,” she said, holding a hand out. “I'm Trisha Yates, Watch Command Supervisor.”
“Nice to meet you, Ms Yates. I'm Colonel Reynolds. Sorry to skip the pleasantries, but the Ori ship's ETA to city limits is about ten minutes.”

The woman nodded. “Absolutely. I understand you have several units with you?”

“Yes, ma'am. It's not a lot, but I've got about two dozen men and women with me.”

She made a face. “Given what the reports from Colorado Springs are showing right now, you'll have to excuse me if that doesn't fill me with the utmost of confidence.”

He shrugged. He couldn't really argue that two dozen against twenty thousand were shitty odds on a good day. Today wasn't a good day.

“What have you got?” he asked.

“We're evacuating all schools and hospitals. Since the ship's approaching from the south, we're sending everything north, except for Brooklyn, which we're evacuating by ferry to the west and ship out into open sea from where there'll probably head on to Boston or Bangor. And I gotta say, I'm impressed how even the international ships are cooperating – apparently they all got orders from their own governments and right now every single ship docking at the harbour is taking on as many passengers as it can carry, with orders to get the hell away from the city.”

Reynolds nodded. “IOA's gotta be good for something,” he said.

“The what?” she asked, looking confused.

“Nevermind, please go ahead.”

“Right, well, this would all be easier if we knew exactly where they'll be landing. Anyway, we've got subways and city buses all packed with people and moving them as far north as they can. They'll be a lot of displaced people by the end of this, but hopefully they'll at least be alive. I've got police coordinating on the ground, moving people and getting them to shelter if they can't. We've got NBC New York telling people to get off the streets if the police haven't gotten to their area yet and a lot of the larger, sturdier buildings are providing shelter.”

She took a deep breath.

“I've personally spoken to both security from Stark Tower, who are saying Iron Man isn't actually in the city right now, but the Fantastic Four are standing by to help fight the aliens along with the Hulk.”

Reynolds nodded. He wasn't a huge fan of the vigilante superheroes that were popping up all over, but they were certainly a force to be reckoned with and not like anything the Ori soldiers would've ever seen before.

“Hey, doesn't one of the Fantastic Four burst into flames?” Captain Bosco suddenly asked from behind him.

Ms Yates blinked and looked to him. “Uh, yeah, the Human Torch does.”

Reynolds looked back to his second in command. “What're you thinking Captain?”

He shrugged. “Aren't the Ori big on flames? I remember reading Jackson's report when he met them and he said they were this echoing voice talking outta a wall of flames. Not even the Priors can burst into flames and survive. Could keep enough of them occupied for us to throw a stun
grenade at ’em or something.”

Reynolds nodded. “Good idea. Bosco, you’ve just volunteered to stay here as liaison.”

“Yes sir.”

He turned back to the Watch Command Supervisor. “Despite the fancy tech they’re using, the Ori soldiers are actually less advanced than we are. Some of what those superheroes you’ve got around the city can do will look like magic to them, might make them pause and maybe panic. Spread the word to them if you can. We’ll need to use every little bit of advantage we can get. Backup from Fort Weston will be trickling in, but their main force won’t be ready to move for at least another hour, probably more like two. Plus whatever it takes for them to weave through the city. And last I talked to General Landry, he said the Navy’s rerouting their nearest carriers towards the city. In the meantime, the ’305s we arrived in can be used to help with the evacuation and to move your people around since they can move above regular traffic.”

“Got it.”

Just then his radio went off.

“SG3, this is SG18, we have visual confirmation of the Ori ship. Repeat, we have visual confirmation of the Ori ship. SG3, do you copy?”

Reynolds was aware of how still the room suddenly went as he keyed his radio. “Copy that SG18. This is SG3. Is the Ori ship coming down for a landing?”

“Negative, sir. The ship is continuing on course and gaining altitude.”

“Shit!” he cursed under his breath and then headed directly for the large map of the city hanging on the far wall.

“Central Park.”

He froze in front of the map and turned to Yates.

“Gotta be where they're headed to land,” she explained, her back straight and voice confident. “A ship that size, there's only so many places it can land in the city. Well, actually, there's only one place inside the city itself it can land, and that's Central Park. And if these guys are religious nuts like you say they are, then they'll wanna get into the centre where all the potential converts are.”

He couldn’t argue with her logic.

“Then we'll need barricades all around the park and more about two blocks down that we can retreat to once those are compromised,” he said.

She nodded. “Reilly, get on the horn with the NYPD and tell them they need to barricade off Central Park,” she then called over her shoulder. “That's where the ship's landing. Mount Sinai needs to double-time their evacuation and, oh Christ, the MET.”

Her eyes were wide with horror when she turned back to Reynolds. “It's a big, solid building with re-enforced everything,” she said. “We've been telling people to go there; it's gonna be packed full by now.”

He’d never been to the MET himself, but he gathered it was a large building... and directly in the Ori soldier's path if they landed in the park. He keyed his radio.
“This is Colonel Reynolds to all teams: head to Central Park asap. SG17, set up sniper positions with Fort Weston's units. SG19, the MET is packed with people; see if you can rig something up to protect them. The rest of you help the NYPD set up a perimeter around the park. All teams confirm.”

One by one, each of the SG teams copied in.

“Alright, Ms Yates, I'm going to leave Captain Bosco here as our go-between,” he said after he had their confirmations. “Tell the NYPD I'll meet their representative at the scene so we can coordinate in person. Just keep moving those civilians out of the area using everything you can. Hell, even walking through the sewers might work. Might not be particularly pleasant, but it's a sight better than being dead.”

He shrugged. “Be creative. These guys have no idea what a modern American city looks like, so use it to your advantage.”

The Watch Command Supervisor nodded thoughtfully. “Sewer systems... that could work. We can also use some of those old subway tunnels too.” She made a decisive nod, her mind clearly made up about something. “Well, we'll be in touch. Good luck out there, Colonel.”

“Thank you, Ms Yates. We're gonna need it.”

On their way to the location he checked in with the SGC, and was happy to learn the Daedalus had arrived and the last of the Ori ships above Earth's orbit had been defeated. Much grimmer was the news that the Ori soldiers that had set down by Colorado Springs seemed determined to fight to the death even without their Prior, taking as many Tau'ri with them as they could.

Not that they were going to have it any easier.

“Uh, Colonel?” their pilot suddenly said. “We have company on our three o'clock. Pretty sure it's one of the superheroes.”

Reynolds sighed. Yeah, this was happening. “Only 'pretty sure', Captain? Can we get confirmation of that? Not all the powered in New York are good guys. Last thing we need to add to this day is for Hydra or someone to get a hold of one of these in the chaos.”

“Understood, sir.”

A minute passed in silence during which Reynolds watched the monitors like a hawk.

The Ori ship was, indeed passing into city limits without showing any signs of setting down. He was torn between hoping it just passed the city entirely, and hoping it set down in Central Park like they predicted. To have to set all of this up all over again in a different city would be hell, but fighting in the middle of the densely-packed, populated city was going to be worse. Well, at least the snipers would have a clear advantage amongst the sky-scrappers. Which, come to think of it would give them the upper hand. New York could be claustrophobic to people who'd never been there before and the Ori soldiers had certainly never seen anything like it. On the satellite images, he already saw the NYPD along with crews of volunteers firefighters – and, by the looks of it, just plain volunteers – setting up barricades made of both wood and sandbags.

It wasn't nearly enough, but it was all they had until their backup arrived.

“Colonel Reynolds, I have visual confirmation from Watch Command. It's Johnny Storm of the Fantastic Four.”
“Thank you, Captain. Open the hatch for him.”

He motioned to Lieutenant Meyers to take care of the superhero. Meyers nodded back and made his way over to wait by the opening hatch. Reynolds looked back to the maps of the city. It was a warren of intersections, side-streets and alleys that branched into so many directions it would quickly become impossible to contain.

And that was assuming the soldiers didn't start crawling through the buildings.

“Hey, woah, this is cool!” an unfamiliar voice said behind him. He looked back just as the flames receded from around the young man's body. “Although I gotta say, I was expecting a bit more Star Trek.”

Reynolds snorted. “This is just a humble transport ship, son,” he said as he stood and held his hand out. “Colonel Reynolds, SG3.”

The kid shook his hand with an excited grin. God, he looked like a fresh recruit – one of the bright-eyed ones who still thought war was cool. He mentally apologized to him for the nightmares he was going to be responsible for giving him before the day was done.

“I'm Johnny Storm, the Human Torch. Uh, Trisha at Watch Command said you guys thought my powers might be extra special helpful to you.”

Reynolds nodded. “The Ori present themselves as beings bathed in fire,” he said and watched as Storm's eyes widened in comprehension. “Now, I'm not asking you to pretend to be a god, but you could come in especially handy as a distraction. Which means I'm gonna have to ask you to wait for my mark to use your powers. Don't want them used to you too quickly.” He paused. “And whatever you do, don't underestimate the Prior.”

“Sir, we're above Central Park.”

“Take us down.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What's the Ori ship's ETA?”

“At their current speed, approximately seven and a half minutes, sir.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

He took a deep breath. That was almost no time at all.

“Sir, I've been thinking...”

Reynolds looked back to Lieutenant Mankeep, the newest member of their team, having replaced Hailey as their team scientist for the duration of her temporary (supposedly) transfer to Area 51.

“Lieutenant, you got any ideas then out with them! We've got exactly seven and a half minutes to get ready for the world to go to hell in a fucking handbasket.”

“Yes, sir.” The young man bit his lip. “Sir, I was thinking that our priority is really to keep them out of the inner city for as long as possible, right?”

“Yeah?”
“Then what we need to do, really, is to make their way as difficult as possible, right? Like, seriously block their way in order to force them to take only the paths where we're waiting for them.” He pointed at the screen. “If we set carefully aimed explosions to the corner buildings, we can bring them building down and they'll become gigantic barricades.”

Reynolds stared at the screen. “Holy shit, that's extreme measures alright.”

“Hey, you can't do that!” Johnny protested behind them. “Those are people's homes there.”

“And they can be rebuilt.” He keyed his radio. “SG21, this is Colonel Reynolds, please respond.”

“Colonel, this is Travers of SG21.”

The smooth tones of the British unit's commander's voice sounded as jovial as she ever did. There was something entirely unnerving about someone whose expertise was munitions constantly sounding so happy, but the woman was brilliant when it came to laying charges.

“Travers, you and your unit rendezvous with us by the MET. I've got a job for you.”

“Copy that, Colonel. We'll be there in two shakes.”

Two shakes? He swore the Brit did it on purpose, that she didn't actually speak like that normally.

They landed in the middle of the street, just in front of the MET. He was happy to note that there was an NYPD representative, someone from the fire department as well as the Colonel in charge of Fort Weston's advanced guard. And, as promised, Colonel Travers.

“Good afternoon, I'm Colonel Reynolds from the SGC,” he said. “Travers, talk to Mankeep: he's had an idea and we want your opinion as to its feasibility.” The British Colonel's eyebrows raised, instantly looking interested. He then exchanged salutes with his army counterpart. “Colonel Ferris? Your boys setting up okay?”

“Yes sir, I've got four units helping with the barricades, two units setting up the big guns we brought and six sniper nests making themselves comfortable on the rooftops.”

Reynolds turned to the other two men waiting for him. “How's the evacuation coming?”

“We've just managed to get the foyer of the MET evacuated using the subway lines and sewer systems,” said the tall African-American from the NYPD. “Everyone else has been pushed as far back from the exists as the staff can get them and the building is locked down with full security systems active in the front. And just for the record, there are a lot of people really not happy about having to walk to safety.”

“They'd rather sit and wait to die would they?” Reynolds asked, rolling his eyes.

The policeman shrugged. “Mount Sinai is still in the process of evacuation, but its director wants to thank you folks for the use of your fancy transport planes; they're making things a lot easier.”

He nodded.

“Oh, and the zoo is making headway with their evacuation.”

Reynolds blinked. “The zoo?” He sighed and lifted his hat as he ran a hand through his hair. “Right, yeah, the zoo. You ever have those moments when it hits you just how weird we are as a race?”
The man snorted. “I'm a cop in New York. Hell yeah, I get those moments all the time.”

Reynolds looked around him. “And what about the buildings? They free of people?”

The fireman nodded. “I've had volunteers going through every building to make sure we got everyone out.”

“Good, 'cause we're probably going to have to do something drastic.”

“Drastic? What do you mean, drastic?”

Reynolds looked up as Travers came to stand behind him. “Well, what about it?”

“It'll be tricky, sir,” Travers answered. “But I think we can just about pull it off. The second barricades will have to be moved farther back and the people behind the first set will have to be ready to run like hell.”

“I'm pretty sure it won't be difficult to find the motivation for that.”

“No, sir.”

“Hey, what's this blondie's sayin' 'bout you blowing up buildings?!”

Reynolds sighed and looked up to find a large humanoid man who looked like he was made of rock, heading right for them with a determined glare. Beside him was a blonde woman and a tall, thin man with black hair. They were all wearing the same uniform Johnny Storm had been wearing. So, this was the Fantastic Four.

“Everyone gather 'round, I don't want to have to explain this twice,” he said resignedly. Well, at least it'd mean more hands to help move the barricades. He paused. “Actually, Mankeep, Travers, this is your baby: you get over here and explain the details.”

Mankeep barely hesitated before getting his tablet out and filling everyone in.

“Won't this take a while to set up?” Mrs Richards asked with a frown after he was done.

Mankeep grimaced. “It will, which means we'll have to stall for as long as we can.”

“Sir, I can lend you a unit to help set the charges,” said Colonel Ferris. “If we can force them into a bottleneck of our choosing, it'll make our job a lot easier.”

“I can help as well,” Doctor Reed Richards added with a nod.

“Thank you, we can use all the help we can get, and if we can't stall for quite long enough, well I can't really say I'll be too disappointed if we bring those buildings on top of them.” Reynolds looked around as the makeshift bomb squad hurried off to things set up. “The main cavalry from Fort Weston's on their way and every other base within a day's drive is mobilizing as we speak. But they won't be here quick, so until then we're going to have to use every trick in the book and make up a few dozen others.”

“The amusement park!” Susan Richards suddenly exclaimed. He looked to her with a frown. “Trisha said on the phone that they're actually from a much more primitive culture than us. Have they ever seen anything like an amusement park then? I mean, if there was no one around and you didn't know what you were looking at, you'd just see all those moving pieces and wonder what it was all about.”
“And I'll bet you could make those speakers blare pretty loud too,” Ben Grimm added. “That'd be distractin' enough for normal people.”

Reynolds nodded. He couldn't wait to write up this report. Landry was going to flip when he read 'used children's rides to distract enemy'. Or possibly just shake his head and add it to his ever-growing list of 'weird things SG teams did'.

“Can you get someone on that?” Reynolds asked his NYPD liaison. The other man nodded and walked off to talk into his radio. Meanwhile Reynolds turned back to the rest of the group. “Prior's love to talk. And they'll likely try to convert anyone if they can. That might also be able to buy us some time. Problem is that given the resistance they've already encountered from us, they might not be willing to try too hard. One way or another they're here to invade.”

He looked at every, single person in the group. “These guys aren't here to play games and there's too many of 'em for us to go gently. Aim to kill. All of you.”

Eyes widened, tainted with a hint of fear as the fight just became real. But they all nodded.

“Kill as in using....” Johnny Storm said quietly.

Reynolds nodded to him. “As in using anything and everything at your disposal.” He got it, and he felt for the kid. Fire was a powerful weapon, and not a pretty or clean way to die. But he didn't have the luxury to give the kid any breaks. He reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. “Look kid, afterwards, you'll probably throw up, you'll have nightmares. And you'll never forget the smell of burning flesh. And every time you wake up with a nightmare, you'll wonder if you're still human, wonder if you've become a monster. 'After' is never easy, but right now, you need to be thinking about the over eight million people living in this city. Because right now, they're more important than your peace of mind. Got it?”

And Johnny Storm took and deep breath and nodded, his face growing resolute despite his fear. “Yeah, I got it.”

“Good. Now, we've got zero time people, so let's get to it.”

As far as Tony was concerned, life was something meant to be lived at full speed, no slowing down and no stops in between. His women, his cars, his spending: he wanted it all hyped up on alcohol and excessive amounts of caffeine. Well, except for the women nowadays because he had Pepper. And Pepper had full access into all his accounts, apartments and records, and, most importantly, conspired with JARVIS.

Tony was quickly redefining 'fast'. His suit was fast. The F-302s were even faster.

“JARVIS, forget the autographed t-shirt,” he said after the AI announced they were approaching the boarder to New York state, ten minutes after leaving Area 51. “Make me a reminder: this guy's kid is getting a remote-controlled Iron Man car. Maybe it'll fly. I can even autograph it.”

“Very well, sir. I'll tentatively put it on the schedule for next Tuesday, shall I?”

“Yeah, sure, sounds good.”
As they approached the city, JARVIS finally managed to pick up the first scans of the alien ship. It was huge. And it gave off a lot of energy, but not nearly as much as it should've, which told Tony it also had some pretty awesome shielding. Which was good for it; not so good for them. On the bright side, the suit was holding up nicely to the impromptu stress test Tony was putting it through.

Lieutenant Rashim flew Tony all the way to the city limits, which Tony could see the ship had decided to fly over.

“JARVIS, call the Tower,” he said after thanking the pilot and detaching himself from the F-302.

“Right away, sir.”

A few moments passed, during which Tony wondered what the alien ship was planning. It clearly wasn't shooting up the city – which he wasn't complaining about – but he highly doubted it was interested in any of the Big Apple's tourist attractions.

“Sir, I have Doctor Banner on the line,” said JARVIS a moment later.

“Then put him through, J.”

“Tony? Hello, Tony?”

“Big Green, how are ya? Did you miss me?”

“Tony, it's good to hear your voice again. I'm assuming you know about the Ori ship above the city?”

“Kinda hard to miss. And if it lets out any of its flyers then we're in big trouble, 'cause the repulsors aren't all that useful against them. I'm sorry to tell you, but we're definitely gonna need the Hulk for this one.”

He heard a sigh. “I figured as much. According to Hill, Coulson's team is on route as well to help with as many agents as they can fit into the Bus and their quinjet. And a friend of Steve's has also decided to drop in and, uh, help.”

“A friend of Steve's?”

“Yes, a man by the name of Bucky Barnes,” said Bruce in a tone that was deceptively mild. “More recently known as the Winter Soldier.”

“Uh, didn't he try to kill Steve– Okay, woah, danger Will Robinson... what the hell is that ship doing?!”

The voice that answered was Maria Hill's, somehow managing to sound even grimmer than usual. Or maybe Tony was just projecting. “Landing in Central Park. The city's defensive force – such as it is – is already on-site and preparing. An air force colonel from the SGC named Reynolds is in charge.”

“Got it. Hill, I'm assuming you and Happy are already herding civilians into the Tower's lower levels?”

“We're almost past capacity already.”

“Fuck. Just get as absolutely many people inside as you can.”

“That would be what we're doing.”
“Right, well... good luck then. Brucie bear, I'll see you and your alter ego on the battlefield. Does anyone know where Thor is, by the way?”

“Colorado Springs,” Bruce answered, sounding surprisingly amused. “He took down the other Ori ship and has been helping with the smaller flyers... it's bad out there, Tony. We've only caught glimpses of the newscast, but it's bad.”

Tony felt his blood run cold. Shit, maybe he should've followed Rhodey after all. “Are we losing?”

“No... no, not really. But let's just say Colorado Springs might never manage to clean all the blood out of its soil.”

“Shit.” He swallowed and grit his teeth. “We can't let that happen here.”

“We might not get the choice.”

“We'll make another choice. I'm Tony Stark, I'll think of something.”

“Good luck, Tony.”

“Yeah, you too.”

The line went dead. “JARVIS, patch me into the air force's radios.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Hello boys and girls, this is Iron Man on an incoming course. Does anyone have schematics of this ship?”

There was a moment of silence and then: “Iron Man, this is Colonel Reynolds of SG3. Do not, I repeat, do not attempt to blow up the Ori ship. Disabling is fine, but if the power core blows then it'll take the entire city with it. Do you copy, Iron Man?”

Tony blinked. “Yeah, okay, no blowing up the spaceship. I got it- I mean, I copy.”

Following JARVIS' lead, Tony flew down and skimmed the tops of the buildings towards the radio signal. His eyebrows rose as he caught sight of three of the Fantastic Four standing next to the Colonel. The massive behemoth of a spaceship was, meanwhile gently easing itself towards the ground. He frowned as he noticed the army's line wasn't actually spread out around the park, but a block further down, along Columbus, Madison and 58th.

“Stark, this is Reynolds. We need to buy time, as much as possible. We're hoping the Prior feels like chatting, maybe thinking to convert people.”

Tony snorted. “Seriously, you want to send me to talk to the religious nutjob? Do you realize how badly this is going to go?”

“Worse than them deciding to level the city as an example of the Ori's powers to the rest of the planet?”

“Point. You realize this plan sucks, right? I mean, there's what, ten thousand soldiers in this ship against your handful. I know being an underdog has its advantages, but I think you've sort of missed all those.”

“It's about twenty to thirty thousand soldiers. Backup's on the way. We just need to slow them down and hold out until they get here. Give the NYPD and the fire department as much time as
Tony grimaced. “I’ll do what I can.”

“No, we will. If the Prior comes out first like they usually do, then I'm gonna come out to meet you. And Stark, whatever you do, don't underestimate the Prior. The Ori might not be gods, but their powers are real and so are the ones they gave their Priors.”

“Yeah, whatever, I'll keep an eye on him.”

And then a hatch on the side of the Ori ship slid open and a tall, thin man stepped out. As boogeymen went, he was pretty pathetic-looking. In fact, he looked pale and sickly, like a breeze would knock him over if was persistent enough. A close-up of his face showed marks all over his skin and eyes that were milky-white. But he held his head high, as he arrogantly descended to the ground in his long white robes and tall staff.

He looked straight ahead as he spoke, not acknowledging Tony as he landed mere feet away from him, as though his presence was more an inconvenience than anything worthy of note.

“Your people flee from us who would bring them salvation through the path of Origin,” he said. “How their minds have been poisoned and corrupted. Hallowed be the Ori who would yet persevere and bring hope to this dark, accursed land.”

Tony, who had never learned when to keep his mouth shut couldn't help himself.

“Did it occur to you to try the ‘We come in peace' routine?” he said and the Prior's white – and really creepy – eyes turned towards him and he felt like he was being studied. Like an insect. “Which, FYI, goes way better when you don't show up with several armies. Not that it would've helped you much with your mission to ‘spread the word' or whatever, 'cause this planet has more religions than you can shake a stick at and that's not going into all the sub-sects and branches of each religion. If there's one thing we've perfected over the centuries it's religious wars.”

“The Ori are the only true gods. They are benevolent and merciful to their followers, but like a great wave, will sweep away all those who obstinately refuse their blessings. Your people will bow before the Almighty Ori or you will perish!”

Tony felt the words burrow under his skin; the Prior was good at this. He hadn't even raised his voice, only put more force into the words. Made them feel real in a way words didn't usually feel.

He raised a repulsor at the Prior. “Yeah, I think we're gonna go with option three: the one where you get the hell off our planet.”

The Prior raised his staff and Tony fired. The blast spread across an invisible barrier about a foot away from the Prior's torso.

“What the fuck?!”

“Sir, the ship!”

Tony looked towards the ship and and cursed again as he saw flyers streaming out of a side hatch of the ship. He looked back to the Prior, furious.

“You'd kill millions of innocent people all in the name of your stupid religion?”

“Death to the unbelievers!”
Tony activated his boot repulsors and lifted off the ground. As he activated the suit's defenses, he noticed the soldiers quietly gathering around the ship. Shit, he thought, there was already a small army out there and this was just the beginning. And his arsenal was severely depleted from the battle at Area 51. He aimed two missiles at the Prior.

The Prior looked up at him and Tony saw his lips begin to move, though he couldn't hear the words. The top of the staff in his hand began to glow.

“JARVIS, increase volume, I wanna know what he–“

The pain hit Tony like a wave of icy water laced with razorblades. At first he was struck breathless, unable to react to the sudden sensation as his body seized up and he went blind. Then a more familiar pain exploded along his left side, hip and his back of a blunt impact. He came back to himself and finally sound made its way out of his throat. He screamed. Somewhere in the background he heard voices calling out, but none of the voices were louder than his own screams.

And then the pain stopped and Tony sagged, his panting almost louder in his ears than his screams had been. His limbs hurt as though a million pins were poking at his nerves and his throat was sore. Air, he needed air.

“Stark!” he heard just as his faceplate slid up. “Jesus, I told you not to underestimate the Prior.”

Tony forced his limbs into motion, groaning as he sat up. Suddenly, there was someone there, helping him.

“Get up, we've got to get out of here,” the voice said again.

Tony looked at the man speaking. He was wearing battle fatigues with air force insignia and a colonel's bird on his lapel.

“Reynolds, I presume?” Tony rasped. “Thought you were supposed t’ meet me here.”

Reynolds grimaced. “Sorry, something came up. Had to make sure our guys didn't shoot at the unexpected backup.”

“Backup is good.” Tony winced as his hip throbbed, and admitted defeat. “JARVIS, a little help here?”

The AI didn't reply, but suddenly the suit's limbs were pushing up and moving smoothly without any input from Tony. He looked towards the Prior, only to notice he was making his way back towards the ship through the ranks of Ori soldiers. Far above them, he saw flyers shooting indiscriminately at the ground.

“Shit,” he said.

“We gotta get out of here,” said Reynolds as he shook off his pack and dropped it to the ground.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Uh, you realize I've carted Rogers around before? I can take your weight no problem.”

Reynolds smirked. “Not about weight. There's a device inside that neutralizes the Prior's powers. If he comes back out it might come in handy.”

Tony's brain itched to ask about the details, but even he knew this was not the time – he could hear the Prior preaching to his troops. He'd ask Sam later. “That would've been useful to have a little
earlier.”
“Yeah, sorry.”
“Okay, then hang on.”
As soon as the suit's sensors indicated Reynolds had a good grip on the suit, Tony took off.
“Hallowed be the Ori!” he heard from behind him. It was rather difficult to miss: half the city must've heard the battle cry shouted by thousands of voices.

“Sir, we have incoming.”

Tony checked the proximity sensor and swerved to the left to avoid the blast from the side. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a familiar roar and grinned. Looked like the Big Guy was finally in the game. The flyers, however, were a bit of a problem. Three problems, in fact, all converging on him.

“Sorry, Reynolds, looks like you might be stuck as shotgun for a while,” he said.

“I'll manage, just don't get shot down,” Reynolds yelled back, his voice muffled by the air buffeting him as they flew.

Which was going to be easier said than done, because these things weren't any less manoeuvrable than the ones at Area 51 had been, only this time he was their only airborne target. He narrowly managed to zip and twist out of the way of several shots, but it was only a matter of time before one of them got lucky.

Like the one heading right for him now. Tony took a deep breath, preparing to fire his boot repulsors to shoot him upwards at the last moment. Only then something really unexpected happened.

A shot hit the flyer from the left. The flyer spun to the side only to be hit by a second shot. It exploded, chunks of metal flying away in all directions. Tony turned to watch as five new ships smoothly flew in and began shooting at the Ori flyers, instantly taking their attention away from Tony.

Distantly, he was aware of Reynolds talking on his radio, but Tony's eyes were focused on the new ships. They were larger than the flyers and more bulbous, without a single sharp edge on them anywhere. It made them look like they were gliding above the buildings of New York instead of flying.

Suddenly, there was clanging on the back of his skull.

“Stark, get us down!” Reynolds screamed at him. “We gotta figure out a way to keep that ship from taking off!”

Tony blinked. “What?” he said even as he flew off towards the area Reyonld's radio signal had originally been coming from when he arrived. “Don't we want it to leave?”

“If it was leaving, that would be great, but if it starts taking pot-shots at the city, then all our defenses become useless.”

Tony picked up speed.
When Bruce and the Winter Soldier arrived at Columbus Circle, they were greeted by soldiers and policemen setting up a perimeter of barricades.

“I'm sorry, sir, you two need to head back towards the evacuation zone,” a young woman wearing NYPD blue said as she stopped them. She looked newly-minted and scared, as though she was holding herself together only through sheer determination. “This is going to become a battlezone soon.”

“That's actually why we're here,” said Bruce with a small smile, while the Winter Soldier grunted beside him. “We're with the Avengers.”

That made the woman pause. “With the Avengers?” Then she eyed them speculatively. “Really? So which one are you?”

He could feel the Hulk close to the surface, making his grin more feral than usual. “The one you really don't want to make mad.”

Her eyes widened. His comm went off.

“Doctor Banner, sir is under attack from the Prior. I'm not sure what the Prior is doing, but sir is in great distress!”

His own eyes widened and he tapped his earpiece. “Tony, this is Bruce. What's going on? Tony?”

And then the communication's link opened and Bruce heard him screaming... the Hulk also heard the sound and opened his eyes wide, surging past Bruce's barriers like a green tsunami.

The Asset watched in fascination as the small, slouching man transformed into a large, green force of nature. He'd seen pictures, television footage of the Hulk, but in person he was awe-inspiring. The monster finished transforming and bellowed at the sky. Then he looked back to the small humans at his feet, looking angrily around, no doubt to find the target responsible for making him transform.

Around them, the soldiers and police had stopped to stare at the Hulk with wide eyes. For a few moments, no one moved.

The Asset noticed movement and looked up. There were flat oval crafts flying around in the air, looking nothing like any airplane he'd ever seen. They started shooting into the city, seemingly at random. The Asset clenched the fist on his flesh arm, feeling anger – and confusion, because he wasn't sure why he was angry. The aliens were here to invade: of course they would bomb the city. He wondered if the anger was memory still lost to him.

“What the blooming 'ell is going on 'ere?!” a female voice suddenly yelled. “There's an alien armada on your doorstep and you think this is the time to dawdle?”
The Asset turned towards the voice, his eyes automatically assessing her. Blonde hair pulled back from her face, smudged with gun powder, British insignia on her battle fatigues that identified her as a colonel with the RAF, and she was carrying a P-90, a handgun, a knife, and something black and oval-shaped the Asset couldn't identify but was hanging in the place of a second handgun. There were wires sticking out of the pack on her back. Behind her, two grim-faced soldiers stared at the group in Columbus Circle, their expressions blank, but their eyes flashing with annoyance. “Well, Sergeant?” she demanded, turning to the ranking soldier in the group.

The Sergeant looked confused. “Er, but it's the Hulk, ma'am.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, thank you, I 'aven't gone blind yet. It's fairly obvious that--“

She was interrupted by a clanging metallic noise. The Asset swivelled onto the balls of his feet and pulled his trenchcoat open, distantly hearing the buttons popping as they tore free. He felt for the semi-automatic hanging at his side. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the Colonel had placed a hand on her weapon, but hadn't drawn it. Next to him, he heard the Hulk growl.

The Asset tried to remember if he'd seen anything like the giant stone rings that fell to the ground one on top of another, light shining brightly between them. They came together for a moment and then flew back up from the ground, leaving behind a group of ten, tightly-packed people. The one in front, an old man with a short gray beard, stepped forward and the others spread out.

“Weapon's down, they're allies!” the British Colonel barked and even the Asset found himself relaxing minutely, though his eyes followed the newcomers carefully. She stepped forward and saluted the old man.

“Master Bra'tac, I'm Colonel Cynthia Travers of SG21. It's good to see you and your men; I'm not going to pretend we're not desperately in need of help.”

The old man bowed to her and clutched the tall staff in his hand. “The Tau'ri have been good friends to us and always came to our aid when we requested it. It would be dishonourable of us to ignore our allies in their own desperate hour of need.”

Just then another set of rings came down from the sky and deposited more people... along with a device set on a tripod with a large rounded head at the front. The Asset could only assume it was a weapon. He paused, frowning. He felt something deep inside him. A forgotten part of his mind was... bubbling, like tiny pinpricks of energy, but ones that didn't hurt. It made his facial muscles want to move, but the Asset kept them steady.

He mentally shook himself. He would think about this later. Maybe Steve would know.

“Oh, and you have artillery: brilliant!” The woman looked pleased by this (so it was a weapon). “Don't suppose you've got a few men who know their way around a bomb? I've got a party to set up and not a lot of time to do it in.”

He raised an eyebrow and nodded. Then he turned and snapped out orders in a tongue the Asset didn't recognize. Several of the alien soldiers stepped forward and inclined their head to the old man.

“Master Bra'tac, don't waste your men,” a new voice called out and a man hurried up to them, a frown on his face. He turned to the Colonel. “What is it that you're trying to do?”

She grinned. “Follow me and I'll show you. Sergeant, get back to work; we're working on borrowed time as it is. And do not shoot the Hulk.” Finally, she turned to the Avenger. “You're 'ere
to help us smash aliens, right?"

The Hulk blinked at her and then grinned.

"Excellent! I'm looking forward to seeing that in person. Wish we'd had you along for the ride when we were clearing out the System Lords."

The Asset watched the woman and her team hurry off. Explosions in the distance brought his attention back to the oval-shaped flying crafts. Except that now there was something else flying in the air. A person... Iron Man, his memory supplied. The son of Howard Stark – that name felt familiar to him, but he didn't know why, except that it came with a blurry, indistinct picture of a man rushing around a workshop. But Iron Man knew Steve; he'd fought with Captain America in this city when the Chittauri aliens came down from the sky.

The Asset didn't have time to watch Iron Man evade the enemy flyers, because just then a loud battle cry split the air, even above the irritating music blaring from the amusement park.

"Hallowed be the Ori!"

"Jaffa kree!" he heard the old man call out from behind him.

And then, his ears picked up the sound of running feet. He shrugged off his trenchcoat, no longer needing to conceal the weapons he was carrying, and chose the Barrett M99-1 rifle. He embraced the fear and anticipation around him like an old friend. There followed a chorus of weapons being primed even while people continued to run around strengthening the barricades where they could.

Suddenly, the music from the amusement park went silent. Which was a relief. The Asset couldn't remember if he liked music, but he definitely hadn't liked that music.

And then the Ori soldiers came into view: a mass of running men wearing armour. He watched a few pause and blue shots of light fired out of the thin metal sticks they were carrying. The first shot sent part of the barricade flying apart and he heard screams as the pieces slammed into people. The Asset remained steady, carefully aiming at the approaching soldiers.

A rain of what looked like fireballs shot out from behind him and into the fray of enemy soldiers, followed by three much larger fireballs. There were screams of pain and several soldiers fell, quickly trampled as their fellows marched on.

The Hulk roared and the Asset watched as the soldiers in the lead paused at the sound. The Asset pulled the trigger and one of the men in front burst open like a ripe melon, showering those around him in blood, guts and brain matter.

And then the ground shook as the Hulk took two steps and leapt into the Park, landing with an impact that made those less-steady on their feet stumble. The Asset reloaded his rifle, glancing up at the ripping sound when the Hulk tore a tree out of the ground. He swiped it at the Ori soldiers, sending a group of them flying and finally breaking the rest out of their stupor. They began firing at the Hulk, which seemed to enrage the giant green beast more than damage him.

Another volley of fireballs seemed to remind them the Hulk wasn't their only enemy. The Asset looked through the scope and saw a tall man who looked like he was giving orders, waving his arm as he gave direction. The Asset did some mental calculation and lined up his shot. Then he fired.
Garry hated museums, thought they were dead boring – dead, just like everything in them. As far as he was concerned, they were only marginally more interesting than art galleries. Not even his ex-girlfriend – the one with the mile-long legs, tiny waist and breasts that bounced enticingly when she walked – had managed to get him to take her to the museum.

So it was fitting that he was now huddled with hundreds of other people inside the MET, waiting to die because apparently New York was a beacon for aliens. Seriously, was there some sort of newsletter for evil aliens pointing them towards the city as the ideal place to invade?! He was starting to change his mind about science fiction. As soon as he got home – assuming that happened – he was throwing out all his Star Wars memorabilia. Or selling it on E-bay. It was worth money, after all.

The building shook, resulting in several sobs and whimpers. He looked around him and saw his own fear and grief echoed on people's faces. The initial screams had died down long ago, the terror seeping into all of them to the point that the screams had been silenced, trapped in their throats. The air was sweltering, hot with so many bodies in an enclosed space, and smelt nauseatingly of fear, perspiration, perfume and vomit. The staff had pushed them all as far back into the depths of the museum as they could and locked down the building. He wasn't sure how much that would help against alien weapons, but he felt somewhat better knowing there was at least an iron gate between him and certain death.

Somewhere down the corridor a baby began to cry, great wailing sobs that pierced the silence and drowned out the constant whispered prayers. He bit back a sob. God, he'd always intended to have kids one day; some little tykes to teach all about the Force and go trick-or-treating with dressed as jedi knights.

He didn't want to die.

Suddenly, the corridor was awash with bright light. He didn't even have time to cover his eyes against it. And then it was gone... but the air felt different. He felt a breeze on his cheek and looked up to see blue sky.

"Hey everyone, if I could just have your attention please!" he heard a voice say through a microphone.

He turned around along with the rest of the crowd towards a guy with short hair wearing a blue and white baseball jersey with a bird on it. With a start, Garry realized they were in a stadium. Was heaven a baseball diamond? That was lame.

"Hi guys, I know it's a bit of a shock and hell if I know exactly what's going on myself. I'm half-convinced this is all a giant hoax, but in case it isn't: welcome to the Rogers Centre.” The man smiled down at them. “You're in Toronto, which would be in Canada. You're safe.”

Safe. Garry felt his legs give out and he collapsed into the dirt floor. Around him, he heard incredulous laughter, more sobbing and voices raising beyond the scared, hushed tones in the museum. And somewhere, someone in the crowd said: “Holy shit, was that a transporter?!!”

He could feel the hysterical laughter bubbling up inside his chest. They were safe. Maybe he wouldn't give up on science fiction after all.
General O'Neill watched the holographic map: a perfect snapshot of New York in real-time. It was like a combination of Google Maps and satellite imaging projected onto a large, holographic map (with a 3-D rendering option no less). He could see the Ori soldiers swarming forward like ants. The infusion of Jaffa was helping and the lines weren't falling nearly as quickly as they would have otherwise. Behind him, the bridge was silent.

“Sir, I have a message from the Daedalus,” Lieutenant Kelley broke the silence. “They've finished beaming the last of the people out of the MET.”

“And the hospital?”

“I'm not reading any lifesigns in the building, sir,” Lieutenant Mizner responded. He frowned. “Or the zoo... Did someone have orders to evacuate the animals from the zoo?”

Jack blinked. “Not from me they didn't.”

“Oh, well, the zoo's empty too, sir.”

“That's... fantastic. I hope they didn't just beam them all into one big room.”

He turned as the bridge door slid open and the dark-skinned man from the infirmary walked into the room wearing a funny metal pack on his back. He nodded to Jack and then went to stand beside the other two Avengers on the bridge.

“Hey Sam,” Daniel called to him.

Jack turned back to the map, seeing more Ori fighters fly out of its open hatchway. He wondered if there was a reason they hadn't all just flown out at once. Not that he cared if it made their job easier.

“Major Lorne, as soon as the ship's shields come down, I want your first target to be that hanger. Take out everything still inside first and then go after the ones in the air, understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir, I've got radio communications from Colonel Travers,” Kelley suddenly announced loudly. “They've just finished.”

“Tell them to sit tight, Lieutenant. Do we have a lock on them?”

“Da, I have them, sir,” said the Russian whose name Jack couldn't pronounce and wasn't even going to bother attempting to.

“And Dropzone one?”

“Still clear, sir,” Mizner answered immediately.

“Good, then beam them over. What about the other team?”

He waited while Lieutenant Kelley shuffled got them on the line. “They're just finishing up, sir... they're done.”

“Dropzone two is still clear, sir, but the line at Madison is about to fall.”
“Is the next street down still within range?”

“Uh... yes, sir.”

“Good, alright beam them out and one street down from Dropzone two.”

“Yes, sir,” said the Russian. A few seconds passed. “Both teams are clear in dropzones, sir.”

“Kelley, open a line to Reynolds.”

“Right away, sir.”

Suddenly the bridge was enveloped in the sound of gunfire, staff blasts and screams.

“Colonel Reynolds, this is General O'Neill, evacuations of Central Park area have been completed and both demolition teams are clear. I repeat both demolition teams are clear. Do you copy?”

Reynolds ducked back into the wide doorway he was using as cover and keyed his radio. “Copy that, General. This is Reynolds. Permission to proceed with the plan, sir.”

“Go ahead, Colonel. We'll be watching your retreat. O'Neill out.”

He took a deep breath and keyed his radio. “Storm, this is Reynolds. Let your sister know she can stop guarding the MET; we've cleared it of all personnel.”

“Storm here, I'll let her know. Although, when the hell did you do that?! ”

“Doesn't matter. Buildings are rigged and ready and the teams are clear. We're gonna need that distraction now.”

“Right, I'm on it.”

Susan grit her teeth as she felt the impacts against her shield. Iron Man had set her down on the roof of the MET, so that she wouldn't be an immediate, easy target if it went down. Which it inevitably would, she knew. Hopefully, her efforts wouldn't be wasted by the alien soldiers figuring out the shield didn't extend around the whole building.

At least the loud speakers weren't playing Hillary Duff and Justin Bieber anymore (she'd been right, the amusement park playing at full volume with all the rides on was distracting – and highly annoying). From her vantage point she'd been able to see the Ori soldiers pause at the amusement park, seemingly worried about all the moving contraptions. Until one of them had finally just shot at them and discovered that, whatever they were, they didn't shoot back. She was sure someone would later have something funny to say about how the alien soldiers spent several minutes shooting up empty childrens' rides.

Then the Hulk had shown up.
“Sue, it's Johnny. You can drop the shield now: the building's empty.”

She dropped the shield with a relieved gasp, staggering at the suddenly lack of pressure. She took several deep breaths and touched her communicator.

“Johnny, this is Sue. It's down. Are you coming to get me?”

“Yes, just give me a minute—”

“--Negative, Torch, I've got visual of the MET rooftop. I'll grab her, you concentrate on wowing the out-of-towners.”

“Gotch'a, Iron Man, thanks!”

True to his word, several moments later, Iron Man landed on the MET's rooftop.

“Heya, Sue. Reed finally done playing with the soldiers?”

She rolled her eyes as she grabbed onto the armour. “Yes, apparently they're done setting up.”

“About damn time too. City's already crawling with these guys. Seriously, how are there so many of them?”

“It's a really big ship, Tony.”

“Yeah, but still.”

Iron Man's repulsor's flared again and then they were rising into the air and away. She looked towards the edge of the park and saw her brother in all his bright, fiery glory hovering in the air in front of a press of Ori soldiers. Playing to a crowd who would instantly associate him with their gods: he hadn't even bothered to pretend he didn't love that plan. She just hoped he realized he wasn't necessarily invulnerable to their energy weapons.

Meanwhile, behind him soldiers, police and all the other volunteers were pulling back towards the second set of barricades, where the Jaffa soldiers were already waiting with their own weapons and some more newly-arrived army units.

And then it felt like the world paused for a split-second.

The noise that followed could be called nothing else but deafening, a roar and rumble that shook the city as dozens of explosions went of simultaneously. Even knowing what was supposed to happen hadn't prepared Sue for a sight of dozens of old buildings falling to the side like drunken dominoes. The sounds from the ground overlapped into a rhythmless symphony of screams, shouts and loud bangs of falling bricks and mortar, the dust swirling up so high she could barely make out what was going on.

Inside his suit, Tony goggled at the sight.

“Holy shit,” he said. Then he radioed Reynolds. “Wow, okay you realize the New York historical society is going to be sending you hatemail for the rest of forever, right?”

He heard a tired chuckle. “Stark, seeing as how they can't send me mail from the grave and I doubt they'd go through all the effort of sending anything to a dead man, I'm actually okay with that.”

“You clearly underestimate the tenacity of little old ladies.”
“Pretty sure their headquarters is one of the buildings we blew up; it'll take them months to get organized again.”

Tony grinned and then headed back to the battle.

On their holoscreen, the entire bridge watched as Central Park became a sort of giant colloseum with three distinct exits. Oh sure, the soldiers could climb the wreckage, but it would be time-consuming and dangerous.

“Sir, the Ori ship's powering thrusters,” Mizner announced.

General O'Neill nodded. “Lorne, drop the cloak and take us in. Rogers, McKay, you're on.”

“Understood, sir. Anyone wanna tell Stark to get out of my way?”

“With pleasure,” said Natasha as she tapped her Avengers comm.
Victory part 1

Chapter Notes

Holy crap, I am so unbelievably sorry for disappearing on you guys and leaving you hanging!

Long story short: back in April/May-ish I'd signed up to participate in the Marvel Big Bang, thinking I'd totally be done this story in time to write one for that. Then this story grew way, way beyond my expectation. And continued to grow. When August came around, I suddenly realized I just had to write the Big Bang story or it would never be done in time for the deadline. Of course, at the time I was still thinking it would be maybe 40-50K and would take me about a month to write... 106K and three months later I finally posted. Early-October I also suddenly found out I had to move, which meant apartment hunting, packing, organizing, ect. Life has finally calmed down (just in time for Christmas, I know), so this is me returning to finally finish the story.

If the idea of a futuristic sci-fi cannon AU, MCU/EMH/616 fusion with haunted houses and Tony/Steve slash doesn't have you running for the hills, then go check out my Big Bang story, 'And Time Went On' (also features a Mandarin, who is not a British actor). ;)

Ehem.

Thanks everyone for your patience, and for your continued support. And many thanks to Jon Harper for looking the chapter over!

“...and in deference to the alien attacks in New York and Colorado Springs, the NFL, NBA and CFL have announced that they are cancelling all scheduled games for the next five days.”

“Speaking of sports, we've also just heard from a spokesperson from Homeworld Security that the USAF Daedalus, one of the ships in orbit, is – and these were his exact words – transporting people out of the downtown Manhattan area into empty sporting arenas across North America. The spokesperson said they chose arenas because of their size and enclosed nature, which allows officials to easily keep track of, and communicate with, those they're transporting.”

“To see if your loved ones are one of the ones that have been thus moved out of the city, check out the alphabetical list being compiled on the Office of Emergency Response's website or their twitter feed #outtaNY.”

“And now, we have CBS reporter, Daryl Billingsly, from the ground in Colorado Springs. How's it looking Daryl?”

“Well, Tom, first of all, the evacuation is proceeding smoothly. From what I can see everyone is doing an admirable job of moving people out of the city as quickly and efficiently as possible. There have been some casualties due to bombardment from Ori fighter craft, but our own fighters, along
with Thor of the Avengers seem to have managed to keep most of the battle away from civilian targets. I don't have an exact casualty number for you at the moment, but the latest estimate I heard was just over forty, with dozens more wounded.”

“That sounds like mostly good news, considering the situation. And what about the battle itself?”

“Yes, Stacey, I was at one of the Battalion Command Posts earlier and the command staff seems to be hopeful. The ship in question came down in Cheyenne State Park in the valley by Bear Creek Pass, taking heavy damage and leaving it completely exposed on three sides. Apparently, one of our snipers managed to take out the Prior, who is both the Ori’s religions leader and military commander, within minutes of the battle. Unfortunately this seems to have only made the Ori soldiers more determined to fight to the death.”

“Fight to the death? That sounds like a massacre. Is it really that bad?”

“Oh yes, it’s really that bad. Due to the dogfights still raging on in the airspace above the city, all civilian aircraft are grounded so I don't have any images to show you, but it's a bloodbath out there, Stacey. The Ori soldiers just aren't stopping: they are literally stumbling over corpses of their own dead as they move forward. And they keep coming. I, myself, witnessed the commanders and their air force liaisons offering them the chance to surrender. Their appeals were completely ignored and, from what I understood, it wasn't the first time.”

“And what about our side? How are our boys doing?”

“According to the command staff I spoke to, casualties are light but approaching moderate levels. The Ori’s weapons might look a bit like medieval staves, but they shoot plasma bolts that can punch a hole through a tank with concentrated fire. Our vehicles just weren't designed with plasma munitions, which is what the enemy is using. The latest Dragonskin and Interceptor body armours are also equally useless, thus ensuring a hit is fatal more often than not. Thankfully, our own weapons and optics greatly out-range the Ori soldiers, so overall the US Army is giving better than its taking.”

“Yikes! Well, thank you for the information, Daryl, we'll be keeping in touch.”

“You're welcome, Tom, Stacey.”

“Well, that was Daryl Billingsly from the ground at Colorado Springs. Make sure you join us at nine for coverage of the press conference given by the President's Chief Military Adviser and former Air Force General, George Hammond. And now we have some footage from New York taken about twenty minutes ago from a Fox News helicopter before they, too, were grounded due to the presence of alien fighters.”

Pepper felt sick as she watched the footage, coming right after the report of a bloodbath practically on the doorstep of the mountain she was standing within. She hadn't quite been able to comprehend the size of the Ori ships until she saw how it filled up Central Park, crushing trees as though they were mere twigs. Her very soul hurt at the thought of those aliens running loose inside the MET. All those priceless artifacts and the irreplaceable artwork...

She took a deep breath and quietly reminded herself that if it kept them busy and away from people, then that would be a worthy sacrifice. People's lives were more important than any of the
MET’s collections after all. That was obvious.

Several airmen had brought a projector down into the gateroom and rigged it up to project CBS Denver's broadcast just in time for the President's speech. Which, to Pepper's surprise, was then followed by speeches from every world leader on Air Force One, in their native language. Colonel Ferretti explained to them that most US stations weren't transmitting them all, but CBS had agreed to in exchange for an exclusive interview with all three commanders of the American spaceships.

“Mommy?” she heard Madison say quietly. “Is Uncle Mer going to come and save the day? When the bad men took you away, he came to bring you back. Will he come now too?”

Jeannie sighed and smiled down at her daughter. “No, Maddy, Uncle Mer's far, far away, remember? He won't be here to help this time.”

“Actually, that's not entirely true.”

Pepper watched as Jeannie's head shot up to stare at General Landry, who had come down to look at the footage from New York.

“What do you mean?” Jeannie asked with a frown.

“I just got off the horn with General O'Neill and, turns out, Doctor Jackson's usual stubborn refusal to follow rules he doesn't agree with managed to take him quite the distance. All the way out to Atlantis, it seems. That ship that showed up just in the nick of time to save our collective butts is manned by SG1, the Avengers and two marine units from Atlantis, along with both your brother and Doctor Beckett.” Landry snorted. “Hell, as a nice little bonus, Doctors Jackson and Beckett also managed to solve one of the greatest mysteries of the mid-twentieth century.”

He looked to Jeannie with a twinkle in his eye. “Apparently, Captain America has the Ancient gene.”

Jeannie blinked and then shrugged. “Sorry, I have no idea what that means. Never was a comics reader and Meredith liked Batman.”

He shrugged. “Well, I'm sure you can find someone here to explain the Super Soldier Serum to you. Now, I need to get back to the Operations Room.”

“General?” Pepper called after him. He turned back to her and raised an eyebrow. She swallowed. “Are we winning?”

“I haven't sent you away yet, so for the moment, yes. To a certain definition of the word.” He sighed. “Like the PBS reporter said, the Ori soldiers sure seem determined to fight to the death. That's somewhere around twenty thousand or so people, Ms Potts. For now, they're contained in and around Manitou Springs, but they're certainly trying their hardest to break out of that crossfire they're trapped in. Victory might be ours in the end, but given the price, none of us here are going to be feeling particularly ecstatic about it. And no one will want to be part of the clean-up crew.”

Iron Man dropped the Invisible Woman down beside her husband before taking flight back towards the park. The collapsing buildings had certainly paused the Ori advance. He knew it probably wouldn't last long, but they could use the pause to assess.
“JARVIS scan the new buildings barrier for holes,” he said.

“Right away, sir.”

Just then the HUD started going off like a Christmas tree. He immediately focused on the read-out of the Ori ship. His eyes widened.

“Sir, I am detecting a sudden power increase in the Ori spaceship. I believe they are powering up their engines.”

“Yup, I see it, J. Shit, that's not good. Can you detect any weaknesses?”

“Scanning now. Incidentally, I have not been able to detect any holes in the barrier created by the collapsed buildings, however, some of the Ori soldiers had already made their way past the barrier's perimeter before it fell. The rest appear to be trying to climb over the rubble. There are Ori soldiers on 73rd, 68th streets and 7th avenue.”

Tony sighed wearily. “Great.”

“Iron Man, this is Black Widow, come in Iron Man.”

Tony grinned. “Black widow, this is Iron Man. Welcome to the party! For a minute there, I thought you were going to miss the whole thing.”

Natasha snorted. “Iron Man, we've been in the party for longer than you have. Now get out of the way.”

Bewildered, Tony scanned the area for Avenger transponder signals. The only Avenger he could see on the HUD's display was the Hulk, still happily scaring away Ori soldiers – it was probably why 68th Street and 7th Avenue had gotten more congested. It seemed most of the soldiers weren’t stupid enough to continue charging at the Hulk, who'd changed his tree for a chunk of building. Tony also saw a few smashed cars littering Central Park's turf.

“Uh, where are you? How am I in your way if you're not even here? Plus, I'm in the air and you're not a flyer, unless – ooh, do you have a shuttle?”

“Actually, you're not in my way, you're in Steve's way. Now retreat to the buildings and stay low.”

“I'm in Steve's way?! That makes even less sense!”

“Iron Man, move.”

The words were almost growled and Tony decided that discretion was the better part of survival. Or maybe it was valour. When dealing with Natasha, it was probably a bit of both. He flew towards the intentional gap that had been left in barrier, where the Ori soldiers had wasted very little time in getting back to their invading. He aimed repulsor blasts at them as he passed by overhead, before banking back up sharply. He landed on the flat roof of an office building, where a sniper team had made itself comfortable and was shooting into the growing congestion of Ori soldiers.

They looked up and nodded to him, before turning back to their work.

Tony looked towards Central Park. “JARVIS, can you detect the other Avengers?”

“Negative, sir. Other than the Hulk, I do not have sight of any of the others.”

Was it a ruse? Had someone hacked his communications in order to get him away from Central
Park? But that didn't make sense either...

“Sir, I am detecting a large object approaching at great speed! It is giving off high amounts of electromagnetic energy on a frequency I am not familiar with. Trajectory suggests it's heading towards Central Park!”

Red warning lights flashed on the HUD and Tony's eyes immediately went to the display showing the readings JARVIS was detecting. He felt his eyes goggling.

“What the hell?” he demanded. “This shouldn't even be possible! It can't be a ship; there's no way this is from an engine. But wha–”

“Sir!”

Tony turned and looked up, barely finding the time to feel astonished as a brightly lit, spinning circle flew past several feet above his head. As it cleared the buildings, the disc flipped onto its side and the light took on a slightly orange hue. Whatever shielding the Ori ship possessed might as well have been made of paper as the disc cut through it and embedded itself deeply into the hull. The orange hue turned back into blindingly white light, and Tony heard metal scream and bang. As the ship was cleaved in two, the blue light of the power core died out and its energy signature disappeared.

The brightly-lit disc suddenly blinked and then filled out with colour. Tony felt his jaw drop at the gigantic white star in the middle of familiar blue and red concentric circles.

“Fucking show-off,” he muttered, before firing up his repulsors and going to take a closer look.

“Sir, with all due respect, you are ridiculous.”

Steve didn't open his eyes, just smiled. “So it worked, then?”

The marine manning the tech console looked up from where she'd been watching the action unveil on the floor – because the technician’s console didn't have an actual screen, just sensor data. She gave the chair and its occupant a flat look even though she knew he couldn't see it.

“Yes,” she finally relented. “It worked.”

Captain America's smile widened into a delighted grin. “Good.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, but couldn't stop the corners of her lips from twitching with amusement.

The USS Bataan finally pulled into port on the Hudson river. From his post, Captain Norman King could see his marines preparing the last of their weapons and equipment. The F-35 squadron had arrived ahead of them and he'd been getting reports in from their pilots for the past half hour. Getting at the city from this end had taken careful manoeuvring and less speed than he would've
liked, but it was still the fastest way to get his squads to Central Park. And from here, the Bataan's on-board artillery was within easy reach of the Ori soldiers. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that. At least not until the other fleet ships arrived. The Ticonderoga-class cruiser and Arleigh Burke-class destroyer that were thirty minutes or so behind him packed a lot more firepower than his own limited artillery. They'd be able to provide support to his marines.

He ruthlessly stomped down on the disquiet he felt at deploying US Marines in New York City.

Now he really regretted not going to Central Park last time he'd been on shore leave. It was going to be unrecognizable by the time the day was done. He glanced up at the sky. Well, what was left of the day. The sky was already darkening; hoping this wouldn't carry on into the night was wishful thinking.

“Sir, I have a General Jack O'Neill from the Air Force on the radio for you,” said Lieutenant Webster from the communication's station.

Captain King raised an eyebrow as he turned towards the Lieutenant. “The one from Homeworld Security?”

The Lieutenant paused for a moment. “Er, I'm not sure, sir. He didn't say, but the voice does sound similar.”

And how many General Jack O'Neills could there possibly be in the service? He walked over and took the proffered radio.

“This is Captain Norman King of the USS Bataan, over.”

“This is General O'Neill. Captain King, I see you're just coming in to dock on the Hudson River.”

Both his eyebrows raised this time. “Watching us on the satellite imaging are you, General?”

There was a chuckle. “Something like that. Anyway, the teams around Central Park have managed to block off most of the park, except for three distinct exits at Columbus Circle, 79th and 87th Streets, but we've got a few stragglers that escaped the explosions on 68th Street and 7th Avenue. Don't suppose your boys could take care of those for us?”

As the General spoke, Captain King had walked over to a map of New York City – it had been surprisingly difficult to find one – and found all the streets mentioned.

“That shouldn't be a problem, General. Does the line need strengthening?”

“Affirmative. The first line has already been breached and all forces have fallen back to the second line at Park, 57th, and Amsterdam, except for those still holding out at Columbus and Broadway. The first priority should be Columbus and Broadway, and then Park Avenue. Any questions, Captain?”

He stared at the map for a moment longer, before nodding to himself. “No sir, I don't think that should be a problem, General, and I'll make sure to instruct the men accordingly.”

“Jack, the Jaffa,” said another male voice quietly over the radio.

“I was getting to that Daniel,” General O'Neill hissed between his teethed. Then he cleared his throat. “Right, so Captain, make sure your marines all know that the Ori soldiers are the guys in medieval-looking armour and red cloaks – and, no, I'm really not kidding about that. They'll be shooting at our guys, so it should be kinda obvious that they're the enemy. The guys wearing not-
quite-so-medieval-looking black and silver armour with gold tattoos on their foreheads and shooting at the guys in the medieval-looking armour, are the Jaffa. They're our friends and allies, so make sure your marines know not to shoot at them. Oh, and don't shoot at the Hulk either; he's also on our side.”

Captain King blinked. Just when he thought the situation couldn't get more surreal... “Understood sir, I'll let them know.”

The aliens looked like medieval knights? Well, he was fairly certain the marines' betting pool – the one he had absolutely no knowledge of what-so-ever – didn't include that in the list of possibilities of what the aliens were going to be like. Then again, he wouldn't have guessed they'd be religious fanatics either. Weren't higher beings supposed to be past that sort of thing?

“Good, then I'll leave you to it, Captain. Ground command is with Colonel Reynolds of SG3. O'Neill out.”

Scarcelly believing this was actually happening, he sent a seaman to fetch him the marine unit leaders and braced himself for the ensuing conversation.

Johnny Storm had managed to fly away just in time to avoid any hits from the falling buildings. These weren't wooden houses he could've burned through easily, but old, solid buildings made of steel and concrete. It hurt to watch the buildings go down. Though it had been deliberate, it still burned sharply of failure in his chest.

After the buildings had fallen, with dust still thick in the air, there was silence. Silence and a sliver of hope that maybe, just maybe, the alien army would turn around and go home. For a moment even the sounds of the second battle above their heads felt muted, as though the Ori fighters, alien spaceships and Earth fighter jets were suddenly miles father away.

And then the silence was broken with the sound of plasma blasts from Ori weapons. And then the maelstrom resumed as automatic weapon's fire and staff blasts answered back. At least Hillary Duff was no longer singing in the background: that had been just a little disturbing.

Taking a deep breath and steeling himself, he flew off to help his sister and the rest of his team at 87th Street. The line had taken advantage of the explosions in order to fall back, but the Ori soldiers were still coming and there was only so long even superheroes could hold back the constant stream. Reynolds had said the goal was to bottleneck the enemy as much as possible, which meant cutting off as many of their routes as they could.

Or making them virtually impassible.

Johnny zoomed over his sister's head, glad to see that Sue looked mostly fine, if tired. She looked up and smiled at him as he passed overhead. Reed was busy doing... something. He seemed to be fiddling with bits of machinery along-side a man wearing a long leather vest-overcoat thing and a couple military techs. Meanwhile, just outside the line, Ben was dropping one soldier after another with his massive stone fists – he was covered in scorch marks, but was thankfully proving to be otherwise as resilient to the Ori's weapons blasts as he did to just about everything else.

Johnny stopped at the Madison Avenue intersection. Sure enough, there were Ori soldiers crawling all over Madison, branching off towards the rest of the line. He remembered Reynold's words.

It was time to be the monster.
They were shooting up at him, but he ignored them as he circled the intersection, increasing his pace gradually and burning even brighter, hotter, until the scenery itself became a blur and he was certain the soldiers far below him could feel the heat. When he felt white-hot and blazing red, he shot out of his circle, spread his arms, and flew just above the Ori soldier's heads.

He kept his eyes facing forward as a river of flames shot down from his body, closing his ears to the screams, and stubbornly not looking as the metal helmets melted and flames licked at hair, skin and clothing. He came to the end of the soldiers and paused, letting the heat dissipate into the air, but not the flames – his sense of smell was dulled when he was covered in flames.

He made himself turn and survey the damage, but he couldn't bring himself to count the still-burning corpses – the blackened, shrivelled lumps that had once been people. He wanted to hurl, but closed his eyes instead and took a deep breath. Later. Like Reynolds had said, he'd do that later.

Johnny just hoped these people were happy to become sacrifices for their fucking gods.

Bright light flew overhead and Johnny's gaze snapped up to follow. He flew above the buildings to get a better look and saw the Ori ship cleaved in half by the bright, glowing disc. And then his eyes widened when the light changed colour. He couldn't help the laugh that escaped him at the gigantic, glowing replica of Captain America's shield.

And then there were smaller lights flying all around him, each the size of a small melon with a semi-translucent train, like a massive school of bright fish. They flew towards the ship and disappeared into an opening at the back. The ship shook with a series of small explosions, but remained in one piece.

The explosions stopped and the lights swarmed back out, immediately setting themselves upon the Ori fighters. Johnny grinned and returned to the battle in the streets.

The Hulk was a force of nature, but he was a single hurricane in the middle of an ocean. For every ten soldiers he knocked down, ten more managed to slip around him. And of those ten he knocked down, only two were permanently down. For all his anger and incredible strength, the Hulk was not a killer – at least not if he didn't have to be. The Asset thought the sentiment impractical, especially now.

Especially since it meant the soldiers moving towards the Hulk were moving all the faster to get past him. A group had by-passed him entirely and was desperately attempting to climb the wreckage of the downed buildings. The Asset could see them, but there were too many others right in front of him. They'd been pushed back to the periphery of Columbus Circle. Having run out of ammo for the MK99-1, he'd thrown it away and taken up the Russian semi-automatic he'd had slung over his back.

The Ori weapons didn't ever seem to run out of ammo; he was going to have to figure out how to get his hands on one soon.

The army sergeant who'd been in charge of the squads had fallen even before the buildings had come down – when the barricade had still been in mostly one piece. It hadn't taken the Ori long to reduce it to rubble.

The smell of gunpowder and blood mixed heavily with dust still in the air from the collapse of the
buildings. The Asset's sharp ears picked up cries of pain amid the symphony of varied weapon's fire. A plasma shot had nicked his side and he was vaguely aware of the pain, but a single look had shown him the wound had also been cauterized by the same shot, so he ignored it.

The soldiers kept coming. The Asset kept shooting, pausing only to wipe sweat and grime away from his eyes. Further away, a gigantic Captain America shield continued to stick out of the Ori ship like a beacon. He'd seen other lights gathering around the ship, but hadn't paid them any attention. They weren't attacking him, so he had no attention to spare them. Out of the corner of his eye, the young female police officer who'd first greeted them fell down with a scream, smoke curling up from her side. He ducked down and a second shot flew above his head.

“Jaffa, kree!” he heard the leader of the alien soldiers, Bra'tac, yell behind him, followed by a string of words he didn't understand, though the tone told him they were orders.

“Fall back!” he then commanded in English, suddenly appearing beside the Asset. He hefted his large staff weapon as though it were made of nothing but plastic and sent three shots out in rapid succession. Then he bent down and helped the female cop stagger to her feet.

He looked over and met the Asset's eyes. Bucky nodded to him, then stepped out from his hiding place and depressed the semi-automatic's trigger, sending a wide spray of bullets at the approaching soldiers as he backed up after the old man. Glancing behind him he realized someone had already set up more barricades. Well, incredibly make-shift barricades, but cover was cover. Although he was sure the owner of the Lexus he ducked behind wasn't going to be happy to hear his car had been dragged out into the middle of the street to face alien weapon's fire.

It looked like every vehicle that had been parked along the street had been made part of the series of barricades set up like reverse-trenches down the block. He could only assume something similar had been set up along the other streets branching out from the circle, because the influx of soldiers were now splitting up into them.

The cars did not make particularly good barricades, the Ori's weapons punching through them far too easily. They'd nearly made it to the end of the the block when a single long, shrill note sounded above the jagged flow of sound. The Asset held his fire long enough to watch the rocket land on top of the first pile of cars, sending shrapnel and pieces of car flying in all directions, and causing gas in one car to ignite. The Asset ducked down to shield himself from the explosion.

The Asset gripped his gun tightly and looked around the car behind him, just as two more US marines shot their rocket launchers. A hand landed on his shoulder and the Asset froze, his head snapping to the side and eyes narrowing. The old man grinned at him, the light of battle shining in his eyes.

“My friend, it seems we are to have help crossing this bridge,” he said cheerfully.

The Asset was confused. No one called the Asset friend. The Asset was no one's friend... except Steve. Steve had called him a friend. Bucky blinked and nodded mutely at the old man.

“...And in the Vatican, thousands of people have gathered in front of the St John Latern Archbasilica, where Pope Francis held a special midnight mass in which he prayed for all the citizens of Colorado Springs and New York, as well as the brave soldiers fighting to protect the
lives and freedom of everyone on this planet. He also prayed for strength and courage to everyone in the world as this new threat is revealed to us. Interestingly enough, he mentioned how he himself felt a sort of abstract terror when he first saw the images on his television screen: of the gigantic ships of alien crusaders, only to then feel uplifted by the sight of US, Russian and Chinese flags. He said that seeing those three oft-time enemies uniting under a single banner felt like a symbol of hope, even as it came hand in hand with horror and bloodshed. According to Pope Francis' twitter, the vigil in front of the Archbasilica will continue until the two battles have come to an end.”

“The Vatican's not the only one holding vigils, Tom. Many churches, mosques, synagogues and temples across the country are keeping their doors open for their congregations, and anyone else who wishes to join them to pray and seek strength during this difficult time. But now we turn to Washington, where former General George Hammond, the President's Defence Adviser, is about to give an official statement on the battle so far.”

“Joining us from Washington, is our very own Naomi Patel. Hello, Naomi.”

“...Hello, Tom, Stacey.”

“Hello, Naomi. So, if the rumours we've been hearing are correct, George Hammond isn't just another former Air Force general, but was in fact heavily involved with the Stargate Project for years before he retired?”

“That's right, Stacey, according to a source from the White House, General George Hammond was in fact the very first Head of Homeworld Security, before he finally retired from the Air Force almost two years ago. For the White House to give the podium to a man so deeply connected with the program, we're all anticipating a little bit more than just a statement on the battles.”

“I know Stacey and I are on the edge of our seats over here. What's the mood like over in Washington?”

“Well, Tom, it's of course very grim. The Stargate Program was heavily classified, so there's a lot of fear and confusion as many in Washington weren't aware of its existence. But there's also a sort of anticipation from anyone involved with Homeworld Security. A Lieutenant working within the Office of Homeworld Security, who requested she not be named, confirmed to me that we've really only seen the tip of the iceberg. She also seemed confident that no matter what it looks like, this isn't a battle we can't win.”

“That's certainly good to hear, Naomi. But there must be a lot of anger from people who weren't in the know.”

“Yes, Tom. At the moment the government seems to be determined to pull together and stand united in the face of this threat, but we've certainly heard more than a few rumours on the grapevine about various politicians who are decidedly not happy about this news. I imagine we'll be hearing more about that once the immediate crisis is over. Oh... and I think we're about to start. Yes, that's former General George Hammond approaching the podium now.”

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen of the press, the people of America, and the people of the world. To those of you who don't know me, my name is George Hammond and I was formerly a General of the United States Air Force. I have here with me the latest information directly from the front lines, but I have a feeling that's not why you're all here. I've been told there are rumours circulating about my involvement with the Stargate Program and Homeworld Security. Well, I thought long and hard on how to address those rumours and, in the end, I decided to tell you a story.
“It all started thirteen years ago when I was given what I thought would be my last assignment. My wife had died not long before then, and I was just about ready to go to pasture and spend some leisurely time with my granddaughters. My predecessor told me that it would be an easy assignment, commanding a minimally-staffed secret base that guarded an inert artifact of alien origin. Now, I’m pretty sure it’ll come as absolutely no surprise to any of you at this point that this easy assignment didn’t exactly stay easy. And this supposedly inert alien artifact not only activated without warning one quiet Tuesday morning, but spit out several alien invaders who took out the artifact’s guards and abducted a female officer. Now, what followed wasn’t our first trip through the gate – and I’ll leave that story for others to tell – but, for me, that was when it all began. Thirteen years have passed since that moment and over the course of those years I’ve seen things I could never have imagined possible. I’d like to say that I’ve seen it all, but I’m not that naive. Not anymore.

“I’ve seen a quiet, empty base transformed into a hive of constant activity, seen our operations grow from three full-time exploratory teams to twenty-seven teams of both exploratory, military, science and diplomatic designations. At this moment, I am proud to say that the Stargate Program boasts the most integrated military and civilian operation of any base in the world. And I may be biased here, but they are among the finest our planet has to offer. Civilian and military both, the personnel at Stargate Command, have been by far the best and most dedicated men and women I have ever had the privilege to lead. It hasn’t always been smooth sailing and, as you can imagine, we’ve made our fair share of mistakes out of both ignorance and arrogance. However, I truly feel that the world is safe in their hands.

“And I believe I speak for everyone involved with the program when I say that the most difficult part of working for the Stargate Program, has been its secrecy. For all of us to go home to our families and loved ones and stay silent about the amazing things we’ve seen and done. To write letters of condolences to family members, telling them their son/daughter/husband/wife died in an unfortunate training accident, when in fact they died bravely defending a town full of civilians on another planet. Believe me when I say that I, General O’Neill and General Landry – the current commander of the SGC – all look forward to setting the record straight and finally telling all those families how their loved ones really died. As heroes.

“Over the coming days, weeks and months you’ll, no doubt, be hearing many stories. And, once they’ve had a chance to sleep off the crisis, the scientists on the project will probably be chomping at the bit to finally publish the research they’ve done, whether it be physics, biology, linguistics, anthropology or astronomy. But I’ll leave it to them to tell you what they’ve discovered. Before I get back to those battlefield reports, I’d just like to thank you all for your support and your encouragement. I realize that, right now, you don’t really have much of a choice in the matter, but I assure you, the men and women fighting to defend not just our country, but our planet, are the best at what they do. And they will succeed. I’m staking my life and the lives of my granddaughters on that.”

New York was never quiet, never still – it was the city that never slept. Its heartbeat was less a steady rhythm and more like a clanking, jangling screaming cacophony – like a toddler who’d gotten into the kitchen cupboard and discovered the delight of banging pots and pans together. It became a beat only because it never stopped and therefore somehow, despite all logic, became a drone of background noise. Unnoticeable.

From far above the city streets a lone sentinel stood on a rooftop, his head bent as he listened to the panic of the city. The fear tasted sour on his tongue, the cacophony having taken on a frantic edge.
The wrongness of the city's rhythm screamed at him through the fiery haze that was his world. His muscles were tense, waiting and ready for a fight he hoped didn't come near him. But he was ready for it if it did.

From his perch at the outskirts of Hell's Kitchen, he could hear the gunfire and explosions that were tearing Manhattan apart.

And then his cellphone rang. With a sigh he reached into the pocket of his red suit and answered the call, recognizing the caller by his ringtone.

“Hey Foggy.”

“Matt, where the hell are you?! And please don't tell me you're on your way to Manhattan to help fight aliens.”

His lips were the only thing visible beneath his facemask and they quirked in amusement. “I’m not on my way to Manhattan, I promise.”

The phone was silent for a moment. “Oh... Okay, that's-that's good. No, wait. Tell me you're on your way to an evac point.”

“Sorry, Foggy, I can't do that. If those aliens get out of Time's Square they could head to Hell's Kitchen and it's not like the evacuation will be finished anytime soon.”

“Dammit, you asshole. You realize there's an army of them, right? This isn't a bunch of street thugs or Fisk's goons, there are thousands of them. Tens of thousands, actually, according to the latest reports. You're good, Matt, I'll give you that much, but you're only one person.”

“Every soldier on the battlefield is only one person, Foggy.”

“You're not a soldier. Soldiers have other soldiers standing on the battlefield next to them. Also, long-range weapons.”

He heard his friend sigh and could picture him pacing as he ran the hand not holding his cellphone through his hair.

“See, if I'd become a butcher instead of a lawyer I'd probably have some totally wicked knife skills right now that I could use to help you.”

“Don't worry, Foggy, I've got this. And I'm not going to be fighting them alone. I'll be fighting alongside everyone else who's already fighting the aliens.”

“Uh, you realize that if the aliens get as far as you that means the soldiers and everyone else lost.”

“Not completely, Foggy. Sure, they probably won't be able to contain them in Central Park for very long, but they won't lose so long as the Ori don't control the city. And they won't let that happen. I'm sure you heard the President, they'll bomb the city as a last resort if they have to.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath. “So you heard that speech, did you? That was pretty much a call out to you, wasn't it? Dammit, Matt!”

Daredevil smiled fondly. “Foggy, get Karen and make sure the two of you make it to one of the evac points.”

“Yeah, sorry buddy, but we're meeting at the office and then heading over to help with the
barricade-building. You're not the only one who wants to protect this city, remember?"

“Foggy...” He stopped himself, swallowing the protest he wanted to make, knowing full well it wasn't fair to ask his friend to run away to safety when he was risking his own life. Knowing neither Foggy or Karen would listen anyway. “Okay, just be safe. Both of you.”

“Oh don’t worry, we’re not about to heroically throw ourselves in front of the laser weapons. I'll leave that to the idiots like you, who lack self-preservation instincts.”

“Thanks, Foggy, I appreciate your unwavering trust in me and my abilities.”


“Yeah, you too.”

He squeezed the cellphone tightly before carefully slipping it back into his pocket. He turned towards Manhattan again and resumed his vigil. Around him he could feel the temperature steadily drop as the sun began to set.

He froze as a new sound entered the wall of fire. It came from far above: a gentle humming that felt deep rather than loud, reverberating gently as it passed above his head. It was heading towards Manhattan.

Colonel Reynolds cried out in pain as he didn't quite manage to dodge fast enough. Falling onto the unforgiving asphalt road jarred the injury further, causing bright spots to appear in front of his eyes. He grit his teeth as he clung to consciousness despite the agonizing burning in his gut. When the world finally stopped trying to fade away into darkness, he pushed himself up.

“Colonel!”

He looked up to meet Lieutenant Mankeep's panicked, terrified eyes. Or tried to. Everything was just a bit hazy. Only the burning pain in his gut felt real. Suddenly, Mankeep was hollering over his shoulder for a medic and quickly pulled apart Reynold's uniform to take a look at the wound. He finally looked down to assess the damage.

Well damn, no wonder it hurt so much. The flesh was charred black around the bright angry red gouge in his abdomen. It looked a bit like rare steak hot off the barbecue – except for the peeking intestines.

“Lieutenant,” he rasped. He could feel himself begin to shiver. Not good. “Leave it.”

Mankeep's head snapped up, grief flashing across his face. But not surprise.

“Lieutenant, how many grenades do you have left?”

The scientist swallowed. “Five, sir,” he answered promptly.

“Then give me two.” Mankeep hesitated. “Now, Lieutenant!”

That snapped the man back into action and Reynolds quietly took the offered grenades. He could already feel himself getting weaker. “We've done all we can here, now call the retreat. That's an order. I'll cover you.”
“Y-yes, sir. I... it's been an honour, sir.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “Good luck, Lieutenant.”

He heard shouted orders from far away. He knew they weren't, but the world was swaying and his mind was trying to pull him under. Funny, the wound didn't hurt as much anymore. He reached for his radio with a single, shaking hand.

“Colonel Mitchell of SG1, this is Reynolds, please respond,” he said as loudly as he could. For a long time there was silence, so he tried again. “Colonel Mitchell, please respond.”

A slow heartbeat passed and then his radio crackled to life.

“Mitchell here.”

“Mitchell I am hereby transferring field command to you. I repeat, you are now in command of ground forces, do you copy?”

A pause and then: “Copy that, Reynolds. What's going on? Do you need us to send back-up to your position?”

He chuckled wetly, tasting blood on his lips. “Negative, Colonel. There's no point. Been fun while it lasted, though. Reynolds out.”

He keyed off his radio and pulled his own three grenades out of his tack vest before placing them in his lap. His hands were shaking uncontrollably now, but he still had just enough strength to pull the pin out of the first one before rolling it off to the side, along the barricade. Behind him he could hear the jangle of armoured troops. He let the second grenade roll off after the first. The footsteps came closer and the rolled the third and fourth grenades off to the other side.

He kept the last grenade, snuggling it into his chest, next to his last packet of C-4. He looked up. The most beautiful shades of pink and purple streaked the sky, the heavenly painter clearly oblivious to the carnage down below. Shadows moved from behind him as Ori soldiers made their way through the remnants of their second barricade.

The world exploded.

“Sir, I'm afraid scans of the objects are proving inconclusive due to interference from the energy source.”

“You mean the energy source that I so badly want to take apart and analyze?” Tony asked as he avoided twin plasma blasts from one of the Ori fighters. “How about interfacing with it?”

“I'm sorry, sir. I am picking up a muted signal, however it appears to be incompatible with my systems and thus illegible to me.”

“Dammit! But they're bright shiny battle drones, JARVIS. It's not like they have independent thought... can you decipher the language?”

“Perhaps, with enough time, however I would like to point out that you are down to 36.8% power.”
Okay, fine, then we'll just have to steal one and smuggle it away."

"I believe that may prove slightly problematic, sir. I strongly advise against it. Perhaps Colonel Carter will be willing to share her knowledge of them?"

“But that's not the same!”

Tony twisted in mid-air and aimed both hand repulsors at the Ori fighter swooping down on him... only to watch as a dozen brightly-lit drones descended on the fighter and began burrowing deep into its hull. Inside, he could see the fighter's pilot panic just before the ship blew up around him.

The drones were beautiful, a work of art of the highest calibre – a perfect marriage of technology and aesthetics. And they were a complete mystery. Bright, shiny, deadly, remote-operated, and definitely not from Earth: thus concluded Tony's wealth of information on them. It was infuriating. If he was going to be shown up by something, he at least wanted to know what that something was.

They were making short work of the Ori fighters. It was destruction on a scale Tony had never imagined even during his most intense weapons-designing days. And just how were they being controlled? Was it one person or a team of controllers? They’d certainly have to have some form of rudimentary AI to be able to move so fluidly and in-sync. He wanted to go home and start writing up mock schematics.

An explosion from 79th Street caught his attention, bringing him back to the situation at hand. He mentally shook himself and scanned the visuals he was getting from the HUD. It looked like even the Hulk was being overwhelmed by the massive influx of Ori soldiers rushing past him. Tony fired up his repulsors and flew over to back his big green buddy up.

The Hulk turned to him after two repulsor blasts hit the crowd around him. Angry green eyes looked to Iron Man and, for a moment, Tony wondered if the Hulk was with it enough to recognize him as an ally. But then the Hulk huffed and went back to smashing Ori soldiers with a swing of a rebar and cement club and an ear-splitting roar. Tony grinned. He couldn't wait to tell Bruce.

The flyers had been much easier to deal with. The Ori soldiers were like ants. Taking one down barely seemed to make a difference, because three others swarmed around the body and the dead soldier simply disappeared from view. One by one was going to take forever. He fired two more repulsor blasts at the soldiers nearest to Columbus Circle. The Earth forces there had clearly had to fall back, but they were still fighting. Two rocket launchers fired into the Ori swarm, someone else threw a grenade and then – okay, what the hell was that?! The bright orange fireball that had shot out into the fray definitely wasn't actual fire, but some sort of laser/plasma blast. It was also not an Earth weapon.

Yep, Tony was going to need to get his hands on one of those too. He wondered if the Hulk would be willing to help him smuggle alien tech...

He fired repulsors at the soldiers again.

“Sir, incoming from below!”

Tony glanced at the HUD and swerved to the side, just managing to avoid a shot from one of the Ori staves. He took a moment to marvel at its range and how little gravity seemed to be affecting it. Then he flipped in mid-air and zoomed the HUD display in on the industrious soldier who'd decided to fire at him. The soldier – and his four friends – stood among the crowd, their weapons pointed directly at him. Tony wasn't actually sure what sort of damage those weapons could do to his suit and he wasn't willing to test it. He opened the shoulder panels on his suit and fired one of
his dwindled supply of guided micro-rockets at the group.

Just then a shadow fell over him and he looked up. One of the larger alien ships was slowly sailing over his head – Reynolds had called the aliens Jaffa. Then bright orange blasts began firing into the Ori troops, causing bodies and clumps of dirt and grass to go flying in all directions.

“Iron Man, this is General O'Neill, come in Iron Man.”


“Well, seems we've got some enterprising young Ori soldiers trying to climb the wreckage just a little up from where you are. Don't suppose you could do something about them?”

Tony scanned the HUD images, finding them easily enough. “Sure thing, General. I think I can just about clear my plate for that.”

“Good. O'Neill out.”

“Sir, if I may–”

“Yes, power's running low. I see that.”

“Very good, sir.”

Clint blinked as light surrounded them. When the light disappeared again, he suddenly found himself staring at a mostly familiar sight. Mostly familiar, because New York streets were never this eerily empty in broad daylight. The sound of gunfire and explosions in the distance was also decidedly out-of-place. The laser gun fire even more so.

He shielded his eyes as he looked up at the rooftops. Around him, he heard Atlantis' marines unlatching their safeties and murmuring radio checks. It took him a few moments from this vantage point to identify the building he'd chosen to take position in. From the ground it still looked like an ideal spot. Satisfied with his choice, he looked away from the sky and back to the marines. One of the older, more weathered-looking men was looking at something in amusement. The source of the marine's amusement was easily-spotted. It was sitting on its haunches on the wall of a tall office building, silently staring at them with large silver-black unblinking eyes.

Clint snorted. “Aren't you a bit outside your usual stoppin' ground?” he called out to the figure.

Spiderman cocked his head to the side. “You–you just appeared. Out of thin air. It was like Star Trek. Seriously, that was the most awesome thing ever! Is this something the Avengers can do now?”

“Yes.”

“Uh, okay, that's cool. Maybe I could join the Avengers then?”

Clint rolled his eyes. “Maybe you could graduate high school first. Get lost kid!”

He could just about make out the way the facial features behind the mask shifted into a grimace.
“Nuh uh. Last time aliens attacked New York, I was stuck in school and couldn't get away. This time I'm totally helping. It's my city too you know! Maybe if I save Captain America's life, he's let me join the Avengers!”

“Dream on!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. It could happen.”

Spiderman reached up and a strand of webbing shot out and attached itself to an overhanging ledge half-way up the next building.

“Hey kid, watch out for those staves! They shoot plasma shots.”

“I'll keep that in mind, thanks!” he called back as he swung on towards the battle.

“You're good to get settled, Hawkeye?” Captain Patterson, the marine unit's commanding officer, asked after she'd deactivated her comm unit.

Clint nodded to her. “Yep, I've got eyes on my perch. All I've got to do is go get cozy.”

“Radio when you're in position. Everyone else, we've got our orders: cut off the small group at 68th and take them down before joining SGs one and three. I'll take point. Schuman, cover our six. Any questions? No? Alright then, let's move out.”

Clint nodded to the departing marines, mentally wishing them luck. He didn't bother watching the Atlantis marines head off, pausing only for a moment to glance up as a giant shadow blocked the sunlight from far above.

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“And here's Sibila Vargas live up on the NBC studio rooftop with the latest development here in New York.”

“Thank you, Chuck. As you all know, we've refused evacuation in favour of bringing you the latest developments of the Ori Battle here in New York. Fifteen minutes ago we began receiving calls from those still in the city along with cellphone footage of what we're about to show you.”

Christine let Sibila's voice wash over her, glad she wasn't needed for this broadcast. To say they'd refused evacuation wasn't entirely true. Most of the NBC studio had been evacuated, leaving only enough of a team of volunteers to keep the broadcast running – despite the danger, there were a lot of volunteers. She herself wasn't entirely necessary anymore, but she'd refused to leave anyway. She'd done what every reporter dreamed of – broken the Big One, the story of the century. From now on, she'd be famous, able to get any job she wanted. It didn't even matter that with what was happening, it would've broken anyway, and that her involvement was more happy accident than actual skill. She'd still been the first.

If she'd been a little less cynical, she might've called this destiny. So much had happened today. The world had fundamentally changed in a way they wouldn't even begin to understand until the dust had settled and the shock wore off. And she was right in the thick of it. It felt right.

As she watched the dark shape slowly make its way above the New York skyline, she thought back to her early days as a reporter. Back to when she'd still been willing to believe in human nature.
Ever since she'd been a child, she'd wanted to tell stories. But she didn't possess the creativity for fiction, so she'd decided to go into journalism, where she could tell other people's stories. Except people lied. For one reason or another, they all lied. Being a reporter was about seeing past the lies and exposing them. Because the Truth was as sacred as it was rare.

She still wanted to tell stories. And right now, she knew exactly which stories she wanted to tell; they were so tantalizingly close, practically daring her to tell them.

The thing about a pile of rubble, was that it was already inherently unstable. Which meant it only took a few strategic repulsor blasts, to destabilize it further and send it toppling down – along with the entrepreneurial soldiers who'd decided to scale said pile of rubble. Tony almost felt embarrassed by how simple the whole thing had been and shook his head at the surprised shouts of Ori soldiers as they began to slide down along with the rest of the rubble, with more rubble sliding right on top of them.

“Sir, I am detecting movement from the Ori ship. I believe the front hatch is opening.”

“Thanks, JARVIS.”

Tony twisted around as he fired up the repulsors to take him back towards the Ori ship. The shiny shield still protruded out of the ship like an extremely gaudy victory mark. He flew just high enough that he wouldn't be in the immediate sight of anyone exiting the ship. The hatch on the side slid open and several soldiers hurried out, their staves held out and ready.

Tony took down the first group with several well-placed shots. More poured out of the ship and he repeated the process, though he didn't manage to take them all down this time. The ones who remained, immediately turned their staves on him and fired back, forcing Tony to dodge the plasma shots. More soldiers hustled out of the ship. And then the prior finally stepped out, his milky white eyes surveying the area around the ship, at the much-changed landscape. He was frowning, no longer looking quite so disinterested. This was apparently not how he'd imagined the invasion would go. Tony felt a thrill of pride for his fellow New Yorkers – hell, his fellow Earthlings and their allies – for having manged to put a rather significant dent in the prior's plans.

What happened next was something Tony would later have JARVIS replay for him from every angle he could get footage from.

He was too intent on the Prior, too focused on figuring out how to get past that personal shield of his. The pack Reynolds had dropped was still too far away. He needed to either get the Prior to step closer and a little to the left or risk taking a stave blast to go get it. It was a no-brainer, really. The suit would probably survive a stave blast. Probably. He backflipped and revved up the boot repulsors to full power. The HUD showed him in-coming blasts from the Ori soldiers as he raced towards the ground. He took a deep breath and didn't waver in his course, trusting his suit to out-run the blasts. It would be tight. He grabbed the bag, swearing he met the eyes of a startled earthworm as grass tickled the faceplate before he switched directions and banked sharply upwards again.

“Sir, the shield!”

Tony blinked at the awe in JARVIS' voice. It wasn't an emotion he thought he'd ever heard from
the AI before. Clutching the backpack tightly, he twisted in mid-air to look back at the ship. He gaped.

The shield that had been cleaving the Ori ship in two was gone, leaving a giant gaping wound in the ship's hull, tendrils of smoke softly wafting from inside. Instead of the shiny shield, there was now a giant spike embedded deeply into Central Park's turf. The slightly orange colour turned bright white as Tony watched. And, where he was skewered by the giant spike, the Prior died.

And then, to his utter amazement, Tony watched as the spike just... dissolved into hundreds, thousands of tiny bright lights. They looked like the drones that had earlier been taking out the Ori flyers, but these were smaller – about half the size if not less. Under the dusk-darkening sky, they looked like fairy lights as they blanketed the sky above Central Park in bright pinpricks of light. Hanging in the air, they somehow gave the impression that they were waiting for something. Or someone?

Tony wasn't sure what changed, how he knew to turn around. JARVIS was saying something, but he couldn't hear him, the words muffled by the buzzing of anticipation in his mind. Still, some subconscious instinct had him turning to stare in awe at the black ship that slowly crept above the buildings and came to hover above Central Park. It was in every way the opposite of the Ori's massive white ship: smaller and sleeker, with large dark swatches of black metal gleaming across its hull.

The Ori ship had been a beast, majestic in its strength and power. This ship was a predator.
Hi, everyone! No, I’m not dead yet. Sorry it’s been so long since I’ve updated. It's not writer's block, because I know what I want to happen, but I've been having a bit of a hard time getting that what’s in my head to translate to paper (er, computer screen). Writing this chapter was a bit like pulling taffy, but rest assured I am continuing to work on this story no matter how long it takes me to get my thoughts together.

Having said that, thank you all for sticking with this story and for all your kudos and comments. I am absolutely thrilled with the response it's gotten. And also many thanks to Jon Harper for helping me make the battle in Colorado sound like less of a pretend mock battle (even if he is being meaner to Colorado than I'd intended to be, lol).

VICTORY, part 2

“Holy shit,” said Skye softly, as she stared at the screen.

“Touched the words right out of my mouth, luv,” she heard Hunter mutter into the silence that descended on the Bus' Operations Room. It was a silence that almost felt deafening after the cacophony of noise it had been only moments ago. Before May had announced over the intercom that she had visual.

The stylus fell from her hand, the soft clattering sound it made as it landed on the tile floor finally shaking Skye from her stupor. She blinked and shook her head before bending over to pick it up. It seemed the sound had been enough to bring everyone else back to reality too. When she'd straightened, she saw Doctor Weaver was back to tapping away at her tablet in between periodic glances at the read-outs spread out along the table. Mac was looking over her shoulder.

He let out a low whistle. “Wow, that's an impressive energy output for something so small.”

Doctor Weaver looked back at him, her face grim. “And there are hundreds of them.”

Coulson stepped closer to the screen. “They look a lot like the those lights that took out two of the Ori ships.”

“Well, they're certainly not from this planet. Even without seeing them up close, I can guarantee you there's no one on this planet – not SHIELD, not Hydra, and not even Stark or Richards – who could create something this compact exhibiting these energy and electromagnetic levels. Especially not with the added ability to fly.”

Skye felt her eyes widen. They'd been watching the space fight on several different news channels – and then on live feed once Skye had managed to break the encrypted hidden program on the SHIELD satellite networks. Despite herself, she was impressed and insanely curious as to how the SGC had managed to get the program into the SHIELD satellites in the first place. Although, she supposed that if you had spaceships, then you could theoretically just fly to every single satellite in
orbit and manually insert the program without really knowing who each individual satellite belonged to...

Sadly, the SHIELD satellites weren't in a high enough orbit to catch the parts of the battle that were taking place deeper in the Solar System, but watching a bunch of flying pyramids take out one of the giant white Ori ships was still pretty cool. And also proved that Daniel Jackson had been at least somewhat right in his thesis all those years ago. There was a giant slice of humble pie waiting for the archaeological community to swallow once this was all over.

May took them lower, skimming just above the buildings on their approach to Central Park. A large black shape came into view and Skye grinned. “That's the ship that arrived with the pyramids!”

“Looks even cooler up close,” said Mac. He exchanged a look with Hunter that was glittering with suppressed excitement. Beside him, Fitz was slack-jawed with awe.

Then they cleared the buildings and saw the extent of the battle.

Hunter was the first to react. “Fuck.”

“Well damn, that's... do we actually think the Ori did all this?” Trip asked from just over Skye's shoulder.

Skye just stared at the rubble that now surrounded the park.

“You mean somehow managed to take out only the outside buildings surrounding Central Park and make them fall in such a way that they created an enclosure?” Coulson asked. “Doubtful. If anything, the SGC's people did this in order to keep the Ori army contained for as long as possible.”

“It's a bit extreme, but clever,” Mac acknowledged reluctantly.

“I just hope they managed to evacuate them all first,” said Skye.

“Coulson, I'm getting an incoming transmission.”

Skye froze. Coulson merely raised an eyebrow. “Put it through, May.”

“Right away.”

There was a moment of silence before a male voice came on over the intercom. “–I repeat, unidentified cloaked vessel, please respond. This is the Atlantis ship Victory to the cloaked vessel just above Central Park. Identify yourself.”

Skye looked to Trip and mouthed 'Atlantis?'. Trip nodded back to her as if to acknowledge that, yup, he'd heard that too.

Coulson, meanwhile, calmly activated the external comm. “Victory, this is Director Coulson of SHIELD. I'm a friend of Doctor Daniel Jackson's and I'm here to render assistance.”

There was a pause and then a different, and much more familiar, male voice spoke. “Director Coulson, this is Daniel Jackson. Uh, as you can see, mission accomplished beyond our wildest dreams.”

The corner of Coulson's mouth quirked into a small smile. “I can see that, Daniel, congratulations.
I'm here with several teams of trained field agents on standby, but I can tell that haphazardly throwing them into the fray won't really be of much help. Any idea where they can best be utilized?

Skye looked at the screen. It was a chaotic mess. The sky was full of flying aircraft of various sizes and shapes. The Ori fighters were easily recognizable by the large blue balls of energy at their backs that made them look like streaks of blue when they moved. But she also saw F-16s, as well as the chunkier-looking, but more maneuverable space fighters she remembered from the satellite footage, and large bulbous brown ships that were firing lasers beams at both the Ori fighters and the Ori troops on the ground. The ground was a swarm of Ori troops. There were so many of them Skye couldn't help but wonder how much help their small contingent was going to be.

“Hm, actually, we were about to send a small boarding party to the Ori ship. Don't suppose you'd like to join us?”

“Oh hell yes,” said Mac immediately. Skye exchanged excited grins with Trip.

Coulson looked around the room. “I'm pretty sure I'd be looking at mutiny if I said 'no'.

Daniel laughed. “Good. You should be able to get in through the hanger bay. The smoke's dissipated enough by now that it won't be too bad, although I still recommend you wear gas masks if you have them. We'll meet you down there.”


“See you down there.”

They ran to get their gear.

The conversation, when it had happened, had been both surreal and terrifying. It had gone something like this:

“Can you fire a gun?”

Cassie had blinked up at Maria Hill in surprise. “Um, yes. Uncle Jack made sure I learned the proper handling of both hunting rifles and hand guns after I turned sixteen. Just in case I ever needed to use one. He or Aunt Sam take me to a range every once in a while, but I've never actually...”

Maria Hill had nodded once and then handed her a military-issue handgun. Cassie had stared at it for several long moments, before finally reaching out to take it. It had felt inordinately heavy in her hands. Foreboding.

“Just in case you need it.”

Cassie had taken a deep breath. “I really hope I won't.”

For a moment, Maria Hill's eyes had softened. “Trust me, I hope you won't either. But 'hope' isn't something we can afford to rely on.”

That was two hours ago. The gun felt like it was slowly burning a hole into her side, but she didn't
dare remove it. The ground beneath their feet was trembling and her heart was beating in time with the artillery blasts she could hear in the distance. Her breath hitched every time she thought she heard the Hulk roar and her heart skipped a beat at every explosion.

JARVIS had blacked out the glass in the lobby doors, which were locked and magnetically sealed. And bullet-proof – for all the good bullet-proof glass would be against plasma shots. The street in front of Stark Tower was empty for now, but the gunfire was steadily getting louder. Cassie wiped her palms on her jeans, desperately trying to get rid of clammy sweat.

A large hand came to rest on her shoulder and she looked up into the face of Tony's Head of Building Security, Happy Hogan. He was trying to smile reassuringly at her.

“Hey, it'll be alright,” he said.

She chuckled. “Thanks, but I think I actually know that better than most. It's what comes before 'alright' that's the hard part.”

The hand on her shoulder squeezed tighter. “Yeah, I guess you're right. Though, I was talking about the gun. It's not easy shooting people for the first time.”

Cassie froze and then looked away, taking a deep breath and swallowing around the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. Oh God, she didn't even want to think about it, let alone talk about it. What if she froze up? Shooting at people was very different from shooting at a paper target on a firing range.

She took another, shaky breath. “Don't think about the people you're shooting at, think about the people who'll die if you don't,” she said quietly. She looked back up to Mister Hogan, who was now looking at her quizzedly. “Daniel hates guns, you know, absolutely loathes them. He hates what they stand for, what they can do... just everything to do with them. The only reason he even carried a handgun on his first few missions was because they wouldn't let him through the gate otherwise. Now he carries a P-90. When I asked him about it, that's what he told me. That he carried a weapon because of the people who would die if he didn't.”

This time, Hogan's small smile was much more genuine – and quite a bit sadder. “Sounds like he's a real smart guy, your uncle.”

She smiled. “Yeah, he really is.”

An explosion rocked the ground and Cassie's heart leapt to her throat. Hogan's hand left her shoulder and reached for his gun.

“That felt close,” he said, looking towards Maria Hill.

They'd moved the reception desk in the front lobby a little further up, to give themselves more space behind it, and a little to the left to allow them better access to the elevators along the wall. The shiny metal furniture had been designed to look slightly futuristic, but it was also re-enforced with a thin layer of the same titanium alloy that the Iron Man suit was made from to give the receptionists and security guards a safe place to take cover should any of Tony's enemies ever come knocking. Maria Hill had pulled out one of the computers from the desk and moved it to ground level so that if the Ori soldiers did blast their way in, it would be safe from any initial volleys.

She was currently bent over the computer and examining footage JARVIS was sending her from CCTV cameras in the area. “It is closer. The Ori are pushing their way up the street.” She frowned.
“Although, I'm not sure who they're fighting. Those aren't US military troops.”

Cassie walked over to peer over her shoulder. She sucked in a breath. “They're Jaffa.. They're from the pyramids.”

“Huh,” said Hogan as he, too, came over to take a look. “Cool weapons.”

Cassie shrugged. “Uncle Jack said they were designed for intimidation more than accuracy, but the Jaffa barely came to my world except in their death gliders so I haven't ever really seen staff weapons in action.” Seeing Happy's confused frown, she continued. “The Jaffa were once the soldiers and enforcers of the Goa'uld System Lords, although in reality they were slaves just as much as the humans they terrorized – genetically enhanced warrior slaves.”

“That's... wow.”

“It's why Uncle Mur–Teal'c. It's why Uncle Teal'c joined SG1 and allied himself with Earth, because he wanted to free his people from Goa'uld oppression.”

“JARVIS, how long do we have until the Ori reach the tower?” Maria Hill suddenly asked, as though she hadn't been paying attention to the conversation beside her.

“If they continue at the same pace, I estimate approximately 17.6 minutes.”

Cassie took a deep breath and willed her hand to stop shaking as she reached for the gun at her side. She winced as yet another Jaffa warrior on the screen fell to the ground. “Del shakka mel,” she whispered.

A few moments passed in silence.

“Miss Fraiser, may I inquire as to the meaning of that phrase? I am afraid I do not recognize the language.”

Cassie startled at suddenly being addressed directly by JARVIS. “Uh, you wouldn't, it's Goa'uld. Uncle Teal'c taught me a few phrases... That sentence it's, uh... well, it's the slogan of the Jaffa resistance. They used to use it to identify themselves to each other. It means 'I die free'.”

There was a pause. “Dell shakka mel. An appropriate slogan.”

Somewhere behind them, someone's breath hitched on a sob. Cassie, Hogan and Hill turned to the stairwell that led to the basement. A group of scientists wearing Stark Industries logos on their labcoats were standing in the now open doorway with more people crowding in behind them.

Happy Hogan frowned. “What are you guys doing up here? It's not safe!”

A small balding man jumped and wrung his hands together. “We're sorry,” he squeaked. “It's just that, well, we were curious what was going on.”

Next to him, a tall skinny man with a mop of copper hair rolled his eyes. “We know what was going on, we hacked the CCTV footage. What we wanted to know was what you were doing about it up here.”

“We're going to do everything in our power to keep you safe,” said Maria Hill, as she stood up, looking fierce and confident.

An older woman on the left scoffed. “While we do what? Hide away and pray that your, what, half
a dozen handguns manage to protect us from an army of alien, plasma weapon-wielding soldiers?”

Beside her, Cassie could feel Happy Hogan bracing himself for a fight. Glancing around the lobby, she could see the other security guards doing the same.

The copper-haired scientist crossed his arms over his chest with a hard stare. “We're Stark Industries scientists and, in case you've forgotten, until very recently, we used to design weapons.”

Maria Hill frowned thoughtfully. “What exactly are you proposing?”

“Something other than waiting around to be slaughtered.”

The older woman snapped her fingers and pointed at two of the security guards. “You two come with me. Adam, I'll need a remote trigger mechanism.”

The short balding man blinked. “You have an idea?”

“Yes, now move it. You've got sixteen minutes.”

The man squeaked again and ran to one of the employee elevators.

Meanwhile, the copper-haired man was looking thoughtful. “I believe there are one or two abandoned prototypes in the vault on the twelfth floor that we could put back into working order. In the meantime, it also occurs to me that this building is rather tall. If you throw even ordinary objects out of the upper story office windows, they'll gather quite the momentum. There might not be explosions as such, but any object traveling at great speed will cause quite a bit of damage...”

Cassie felt herself starting to grin. “So will boiling water. Or hot oil. It might not kill anyone, but second degree burns are nothing to laugh at if you manage to hit skin.”

“Especially if we put salt into the water.” A woman wearing a simple light blue smock and her hair tied back in a hairnet pushed her way out of the crowd. Her grin was nothing short of gleefully malicious. “It adds that extra sting.”

Maria Hill chuckled. “Alright, gather your volunteers and ammunition and get into position. But remember, don't begin until either the Ori try to enter the building or the Jaffa are far enough away that they won't be accidentally hit. JARVIS, cut the main lights to the upper floors. The sun will have finished setting in about half an hour which will make it more difficult for the Ori to tell where the projectiles are coming from.”

“Understood.”

Fifteen minutes later, the noise from outside was almost deafening. Just as they could see the first physical evidences of the firefight heading their way, the elevator doors opened and the older female scientist came out with the two security guards. Each of them was wheeling a giant canister of liquid nitrogen.

Cassie took a deep breath and thought of all the scared people still huddling down in the tower's basement. Then she eased her gun out of its holster.

“General, I've just receiving confirmation from the Air Force, the skies are all clear. We have
achieved air superiority.”

General Harper allowed the personnel inside the 4th ID Situation Room thirty seconds to celebrate the victory in the air. It was only a minor victory, but an important one. And good for morale. Now that the skies were theirs, his forces could really start to lay into the Ori troops.

“Corporal, inform all unit commanders,” he told the young woman manning the comms. He turned to his aide, Corporal Duncan. “Get me General Landry on the line.”

Then he turned back to the satellite images of the battleground. The sun would be setting soon and while his troops were all outfitted with standard-issue night-vision goggles, visibility from the skies would be next to nothing in the densely-wooded areas in and around Manitou Springs, where the battle had spread into. Thor had brought the Ori ship down into a position that put the Ori army directly into the path of concentrated artillery fire from three sides, making any advance on Cheynne Mountain and Colorado Springs nearly impossible to achieve. Which had sent the Ori marching in the opposite direction, where Harper hadn't prepared for them.

The Ori were already pouring into Manitou Springs in numbers too big for the national guard to deal with. His own troops had hustled to get into position, but the time it had taken them to do that had still cost them valuable ground. So far, civilian casualties had been thankfully light, but that would change as Ori troops made their way into the town proper. To make matters worse, most of Manitou's population didn't exactly put stock in the current conservative administration and its Military industrial complex, which meant the initial order to evacuate had gone mostly ignored. Now that the citizens had finally realized the gravity of their situation, the sudden exodus to get out of town was causing traffic congestion.

Thermal and night vision sensors were also less useful in an urban environment. Unless those ‘experimental aircraft’ had some sort of fancy sensors he wasn't aware of. Which would be convenient and not exactly unexpected. Either way, the sooner he could get air support to his ground forces, the better. Especially over along the east flank of Manitou Springs.

He considered pulling half a battalion away from Cheyenne Mountain, giving them orders to reinforce units already engaged with the Ori to shore up loses. Heavier artillery was already doing wonders shattering Ori units outside of Manitou Springs, but wouldn't be all that effective in the town proper... not if he wanted maintain minimal civilian casualties.

Unfortunately it seemed the Ori troops weren't so far gone they hadn't caught on to that little fact as well, and were pushing hard to take Manitou. Already they had strong positions north, west and southwest of town, with his own troops pushing in from the east, southeast and northeast.

All into the heart of Manitou Springs.

It had taken a few hours – the alien technology and sheer number of soldiers was not an advantage to be underestimated – but General Harper could now see the truth of General Landry's words clear as day. The Ori soldiers had many advantages on their side, but now, hours into the battle, his soldiers were showing theirs. Yes, they'd had to pull the line back twice. Yes, they were taking a not-inconsiderable amount of casualties. But they were making the Ori army fight for every damned inch they took. And, most importantly, they were still a well-oiled machine – a little dented and bruised, but still pumping steadily along.

The Ori army was in chaos.

There were a lot of things satellite images didn't show, but the movements from the ground were unmistakable. His people weren't really fighting an army anymore: they were fighting a
disorganized mob. On the one hand, this meant he no longer had to worry about any last-minute surprise maneuvers, however with the leadership structure so completely disintegrated it also meant there was no one to call the retreat and surrender. The soldiers would continue going forward, because their minds were clouded with bloodlust and the haze of battle, and there was no one to tell them to stop.

He almost felt pity for those soldiers down there, nothing but cogs in their own army's now-broken machine. But, more than anything, he was proud of his people for breaking the alien army so thoroughly.

“Sir, I have General Landry on the phone,” said Corporal Duncan, holding a phone out to him.

He took the phone. “Thank you, Corporal.” He put the receiver to his ear. “General Landry, my compliments to your squadrons for downing the last of those alien flyers.”

There was a soft chuckle. “Thank you, General Harper. Was one hell of a fight, too. We've had to send one squadron back to base for repairs, but the rest of the Snakeskinners are on standby for further orders. Where do you want them to concentrate their fire?”

Harper raised an eyebrow, appreciating Landry's to-the-point approach before leaning slightly forward to study the TAC-MAP now focused almost solely on Manitou Springs. “Second Battalion eighth infantry is driving hard north through southwest Manitou Springs to Miramont Castle Museum. They intend to secure is as a forward CP to conduct urban operations. 1-10 CAV has secured Pike's Peak Cog Railway station and is using it and the routes to and from to evac civilians out of the combat zone. Third Brigade is heavily engaged from Manitou Cliff dwellings all the way to the Garden of the Gods trading post. My limited air assets are already committed to supporting those engagements.”

“Then what do you need?”

General Harper highlighted a section of highway 24, knowing Landry could also see it due to the secure data-link between the 4th ID Situation Room and Cheyenne Mountain. “I intend to commit First Brigade, supported by 1-67 armour, to drive forward along this route through the city center and break the last line of defense the Ori have left.”

“A Thunder Run.”

“Exactly. I would certainly appreciate some air support to help take some of the heat off of them.”

“Done. I'll let Colonel Danvers know. And I'm sending Iron Patriot and, hopefully, Thor to help with the civilian evacuation. Their main objective will be to protect civilians and get them out of your people's way.”

“Thank you, General Landry. I appreciate the assistance.”

“You're welcome, General Harper. And good luck.”

Harper looked back to the Satellite images. “You know, General, I think that for once we might not actually need luck, just perseverance.”

“In my experience you can never have too much good luck.”

“Then I'll take every scrap and keep it in reserve. Harper out.”
Jack watched stone-faced as Daniel and his boarding party of three were beamed down into the Ori ship. Even knowing they'd be joined by two marine squads from the Daedalus didn't make him feel any better. He wished it were Carter and Teal'c, or even Mitchell, going with him. Though Vala had proven herself just as dedicated and capable when she needed to be, her focus was sometimes a little suspect. But she and Daniel knew the inside layout of the Ori ships better than anyone else on the planet, so both of them had to be a part of the boarding party.

Jack had looked to the Black Widow, meeting her eyes while Daniel's back was turned. He had heard about her, read the files they'd downloaded from the SHIELD database. Jack didn't doubt for a second, that the woman standing before him could take on the look and persona of any number of aliases and make each of them seem completely natural, but right now his gut told him he was seeing the real person, the one her training had molded her into. Physically, there was no resemblance, but the calm way she held herself as though she was aware of everything around her and was in complete control of every single twitch of her own body reminded him of Teal'c. She'd nodded back to him after a moment, a solemn promise in her eyes to watch Daniel's back.

Because, of course, Daniel would earn the loyalty of someone like Natasha Romanov after only a few days. Well, it wasn't really that surprising; he'd earned Jack's loyalty and respect at a time when he hadn't been ready to give anyone anything.

The Victory's bridge seemed a lot quieter with most of her crew now gone. Jack turned to the holoscreens floating in mid-air across the front of the bridge. Outside, Mother Nature was treating them to a gorgeous sunset, apparently oblivious to the fact that no one was paying attention. The Victory's drones swarmed through the skies above the city, chasing the Ori's remaining flyers along with F-302s from the Daedalus and the US Navy's F-35s. The smaller drones were surrounding the Ori ship like a bright net, preventing any more soldiers from leaving the ship – and to prevent the ship from calling for back-up.

The alkesh, meanwhile were concentrating their fire down on the bulk of the Ori's army still fighting its way out of Central Park, trying to slow their progress as much as they could. Containing them within Central Park was always going to be impossible, but seeing the Ori army spreading steadily through Manhattan's streets like an army of replicators made his blood boil. Soon they were going to break past the line. Thankfully, they didn't seem to be interested in exploring the buildings yet. (Daniel had hypothesized that the steel and concrete buildings probably intimidated the simple farmers and medieval townsmen with their harsh, unforgiving lines.)

“Contact the USS Batan and the USS Monterey and tell their captains to aim into Central Park, at Columbus Circle. Our people have fallen back far enough now, so let's see if we can stem the flow a bit more. Under no circumstances are they to target the Ori ship. Then call Fort Weston and inform them of the change.”

“Yes, sir.”

He listened with half an ear as Lieutenant Kelley relayed his orders to the Naval ships. He was purposefully keeping the destroyer in reserve, in case they needed more serious firepower later on. If it came to it, he'd bring Manhattan down on top of the Ori's soldiers and let the decades old buildings crush them.

“Lorne, take us up a bit higher.”
“Yes, sir.”

He could barely feel the ship responding to Major Lorne's commands, but he could see them climbing higher, out of the range of friendly fire. It gave him an even better view of the Ori ship, surrounded as it was by the Victory's golden drone net. Daniel and Vala were inside there somewhere.

Jack looked back to the rest of New York. The view was even worse. He'd seen battlefields before, cities torn apart by artillery. This city wasn't even one he'd known well, though he and Sarah had visited once for a week the year before Sarah had become pregnant. It hadn't looked anything like this back then. Smoke billowed out from the skyscrapers, where aircraft had crashed into them. A few, he noticed, had huge gaping holes in their sides with just the tips of F-302s or Ori flyers sticking out. Jack hoped the crashes had happened after the buildings had been evacuated.

He pushed those thoughts to the side. There'd be plenty of time later to count casualties. Now he needed to concentrate on ending this and preventing more.

Another look at the holographic map of downtown Manhattan made him freeze. The Jaffa were being pushed steadily up Broadway – they were at Stark Tower.

“Sir, you wished to be informed when Ori soldiers reached the Tower.”

Tony cursed as he swerved out of the way of another plasma blast. “Are they showing any signs of a desire to trespass?”

“Not at the moment, sir, although I anticipate that will change shortly.”

He flipped in mid-air and aimed a repulsor blast at the soldiers on the ground. “Time estimate?”

“I estimate the last of the Jaffa warriors will be clear of the Tower within the next ten minutes, at which point the volunteers in the upper levels shall begin their offensive. I am unclear as to how long it will take the Ori to identify the source of the attack, although I do not anticipate any more than fifteen minutes, at which point they will no doubt attempt to breach the Tower's perimeter.”

Tony paused. “Um, offensive?”

“Indeed. The kitchen staff have heated up the deep fryers and currently have eight pots of boiling salt water and counting at the ready, sir. And the director of human resources is heading a team of thirteen people who are creating piles of office furniture and heavy items in order to throw out of the twenty-fifth story windows. I regret to inform you that the glass paperweights Ms Potts had ordered for all the Stark Tower employees as part of the release bonus will require replacing. Incidentally, I detect incoming.”

Tony glanced to the flashing HUD readout and his eyes widened. Putting a little extra power into his repulsors, he shot to the left, just seconds before a large artillery round whizzed past him.

“What the hell was that?!”

“Based on the speed and trajectory, I believe it came from the USS Batan, which is currently holding position on the Hudson River.”
The street lights were all down, but that wasn't a problem for the suit's night vision. Down below, he could see a great black gouge where the round had torn the soft earth apart and flung debris in all directions. Bodies lay crumbled around the area like scattered dolls – and doll parts – bloody and abandoned. And already there were more soldiers moving forward relentlessly, seemingly blind to the dead they were trampling past.

Tony closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. He had once contributed to the nightmare below him.

"Sir?"

“I'm running low on power, J. Are you going to be able handle Tower security on your own, or do I need to ask the General for an evacuation?”

There was a careful pause. “Sir, all my defense systems are online and at full power. I would also add that the entire Stark Industries security team is standing by and ready to defend the building. Also Doctors Pertwee and Hartnel have prepared a remotely triggered release mechanism attached to several canisters of liquid nitrogen by the main entrance, and Doctor Baker has modified two laser cutters and expanded their range to cover the entire length of the doorway. Doctor Troughton is currently adding the finishing touches to the prototype sonic bullet device you had brought over from Malibu in the hopes of finding a non-violent use for it. And DUM-E is standing by with the fire extinguisher.”

Tony blinked. Then he grinned. “I employ the best people ever. JARVIS, make a note of all of the people who are helping and remind me later to give them all a raise. And if they don't work for me, see if we've got a job for them. Also, tell DUM-E to put the fire extinguisher down. I think he's seriously the one who scares me the most on that list.”

“Very well, sir.”

The next artillery strike didn't come anywhere near him, instead blasting into the dead centre of Columbus Circle. Concrete and asphalt flew into the air, scattering at speed into the Ori soldiers in the circle. Tony couldn't quite hear the screams over the sounds of gunfire and staff blasts. He did, however, hear the Hulk roar.

Tony slid under the belly of a passing alien ship (one of the not-Ori ones). “Okay, I'd better make sure the Big Guy knows those blasts aren't aiming at him. JARVIS, can you get a comm link to General O'Neill.”

“One moment, sir.”

Tony came to a stop in front of the Hulk – and then shouted out in alarm at the twisted bar of metal swinging in his direction. A quick burst of his repulsors gave him just enough distance to avoid the hit. Then he found himself staring down into the furious green eyes of the Hulk, whose giant right fist was holding a chunk of bright red metal that had been twisted beyond all recognition.

Tony held his hands out in a placating gesture. “Hey, easy there, Big Guy, I'm on your team, remember?”

The Hulk huffed in annoyance. There was the sound of an incoming missile and his head snapped to the side. The explosion shook the ground and the Hulk growled. Tony focused on his buddy's alter ego's face to keep himself in the here and now. He couldn't afford to let memories overtake him, not now.
“Hey, Hulk, you know they're not aiming at you, right?” Tony said, glad the suit's voice modulator didn't make his voice sound as shaky as it was.

The Hulk glanced over to him. There was a pause and then the Hulk slowly nodded.

Suddenly, two twin plasma blasts hit the Hulk in the side. The Hulk bellowed in pain and anger, and whirled around in the direction the blasts had come from. With an enraged roar, he then threw the metal bar in his hand. It spun as it flew through the air, taking down dozens of soldiers along its path, before hitting its actual target. The two Ori soldiers had been attempting to retreat, so the bar hit them square across the back, throwing them to the ground and pinning them in place. They didn't move again.

“*I have General O'Neill for you, sir.*”

Tony blinked. “Thanks, JARVIS.” He saw another soldier take aim at the Hulk and aimed a repulsor blast at him. “Heya, General. So, I see you're bombing the city. Any actual plan in place? 'Cause I'm getting close to the point where I'm gonna need to go home and recharge.”

“The plan is to stop the Ori and save as much of the city and its inhabitants as we can.”

“Yeah, that doesn't really seem to be working too well for you. You realize they're half-way up Broadway at this point, right?”

“I know exactly where the Ori are, Stark. Fort Weston's reinforcements are twenty-six minutes away and we're taking down the last of the flyers now. Then we can use concentrated air strikes and bombardments from the Navy to thin the ranks. Of course, as a genius, you probably know that's easier said than done because the city's full of narrow streets and tall buildings – buildings we don't want to accidentally bring down on top of our own people.”

Tony made a face as he aimed another repulsor blast at an Ori soldier. He made a mental note to make sure he got Bruce out of here afterwards, before the man had to wake up in the middle of this carnage. “Yes, obviously, but don't you have some way of getting them out of the city? I mean, you managed to evacuate the MET without anyone figuring out how you did it, which I'm assuming you did using that transporter technology I know you have – and don't even try denying it, I saw Sam using it. So why can't you just use it to transport the Ori out of the city?”

He heard the General make a frustrated sigh and mutter something about people never actually listening to him. “It's not that easy and you can only transport a limited amount of people at a time.”

“Uh, what we're doing now isn't exactly easy either.”

“Oh for crying out loud! Kelley, patch McKay into this conversation!”

There was a few moments pause, during which time Tony wondered who this McKay was. A scientist of some sort, probably. The name did sound vaguely familiar...

“What?! I'm busy here!”

“Doing what, McKay? We're hovering above the city and the drones are working fine, what could you possibly be busy with?”

“Uh, excuse me? First of all, genius I may be, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm one person doing the work of an entire engineering team. Secondly, there's sort of this thing down there with the several hundred thousand Ori soldiers trying to take over New York City. Obviously, I'm
looking through the ship's database to see if there's anything else that might be useful in getting rid of them. I'm also running calculations to see how far we could expand the ship's shield to cover parts of the city. It would stop the Ori from getting into at least some of the city.”

“Oh. Good idea.”

“Thank you, General I'm absolutely thrilled that you approve. Now can I get back to work?”

Tony snickered. Yeah, he was pretty sure he'd remember meeting this guy.

“Uh uh, not so fast. First, explain to Stark why we can't just transport the Ori army out of the city. I mean, we can't, right?”

“Oh course we can't. That's a ridiculous idea.”

Tony opened his mouth to protest, but McKay plowed on before he could get a word in edge-wise.

“Aside from the fact that it would take too long, the Ori are too genetically similar to us. The ship's sensors can't actually differentiate between us and them except that we've already told them who our people are and the computers are keeping track of their movements. But in order to do a broad transporter sweep like that, you'd need to recalibrate the transporter sensors to look for something a bit more specific, like genetic markers. Which we can't, because we don't have a full DNA analysis and given that the Ori's followers are all from different planets to begin with, that probably wouldn't be of much help anyway. You'd basically end up transporting our people along with theirs.”

Tony closed his mouth. The other scientist's words made sense. Which was a shame, but–

“Now, their weapons, on the other hand, might be a more viable target. From what I've seen of their tech so far, the power sources they use are pretty distinctive. If I can isolate the energy signature those staves give off, I could probably calibrate the sensors to pick it up and transport it, and anyone holding it, to an alternate location.”

There was a pause. “And would it be possible to calibrate the Daedalus' and Phoenix's sensors in the same way?”

“It should. The transportation wouldn't be instantaneous, because the range of the transporters isn't limitless, and the Victory's transporters are an older version of the ones we based our own tech on – although the Victory's are powered by a ZPM. Which, now that I think of, makes it sort of weird that the Asgard never adopted ZPMs into their own technology when their scientists clearly had access to specs... And come to think of it, the phase-shift stuff from the Furlings would've been really helpful against the Replicators...”

“Wait. Furlings?”

“Didn't Jackson tell you? This ship's a co-operation of all four of the Great Races, including the Nox and Furling – not that we know which bit is Nox and which is Furling, but we're sort of guessing the phase-shift stuff is Furling.”

“Really? Huh. Don't suppose you found any pictures of Furling in that database?”

“Yes, of course, because between getting this ship operational in the first place, figuring out its systems, and then the space battle, I totally had time to browse the database for useless information I wouldn't have cared about even if I didn't have any other priorities.”
A simple 'no' would've been sufficient. Well, Stark, there ya go. Get us one of those stave weapons and we'll see what we can do with it."

Inside the suit, Tony raised an eyebrow. “Uh, you seem to have forgotten that I'm more than just a shiny suit of armour, General. A suit of armour, which has been taking readings on the Ori weapons for the past several hours.”

McKay scoffed. “Please, as if anything you might have could beat our sensors. I could do basic scans from here, but I need to see one in person in order to do a more in-depth analysis and figure out the actual frequency of the energy and radiation signatures for the transporters to latch onto. Not to mention that I'm still monitoring the drones' status and ZPM levels and, oh, about a thousand other things since, as I've already mentioned, usually my job would be done by an entire engineering team instead of just one person and a helper whose usefulness ends at being able to read.”

Tony rolled his eyes – to think people told him he never shut up. “Uh, you realize you're talking to a genius here, right? Tony Stark? Stark Industries? Genius, billionaire, philanthropist? Ringing any bells there?”

There was a pause.

“Huh, you're that clean energy guy, with the supposedly cool new energy source. I remember reading about that the last time I was on Ear-uh, on leave – not that you ever published anything about it, which is just so typically Big Business American, to go after the dollar value instead of contributing valuable knowledge to the scientific community where it could—”

“—Hey, I have my reasons for that! Among them being that I don't want something this powerful falling into the hands of the military who'd use it for making weapons!”

“Then why make an energy source in the first place? Anything that produces energy can be made to blow up! Only an idi—”

“—Enough! Seriously, you two can argue this all you want after we've evicted our uninvited guests out of New York! Right now, I want a way to finish this – preferably without blowing up half the city.”

Tony fumed. “Yes, fine. I can get the stave weapon.”

“Good, then the General can beam you on board so we can analyze it and huh.”

“McKay? Is that a good 'huh' or a bad 'huh’?”

The line was silent for several, long moments. Tony knew Pepper hated when he did that... and right now he could see her point. It was really irritating to have someone stop talking mid-explanation.

“McKay!”

“What? Uh, yes, I think this is... Oh. Oh, oh, ooooh! This is... Wow, okay, if I'm right – and this is me here, so I probably am – then this is definitely a good 'huh'. Stark, get a couple of those stave weapons – maybe four – and then get up here. McKay out.”

“Think you can handle that, Stark?” the General asked dryly after it became clear McKay wasn't going to be contributing anything more to the conversation.
Tony blinked. “Uh, yeah, sure. Just give me a few minutes.” As he dove to the ground, repulsors firing forward to clear his path, he couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. Transporters, alien spaceships, alien science – and oh, he definitely hadn't forgotten Daniel's glib comments about zero point energy. ZPM had two too many letters in common with Zero Point Energy for him to not get excited over.

Science was awesome. The stupid alien army wouldn't know what hit it.

“Okay, we have a slight problem.”

Coulson's eyes darted to Mac for a moment before returning back to the corridor he was watching, his gun pointed and finger on the trigger waiting for a target to appear. “Define 'slight'.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the engineer straighten and throw the hatch he'd managed to get open a disgusted glare. “This doesn't look like any sort of lock mechanism I've ever seen. I mean, what's with all these damned crystals? It looks like it was put together by a Sailor Moon groupie!”

Coulson frowned. “Skye, what about you? Any luck?”

Skye shook her head. “Sorry, Boss. I can get my laptop to recognize that it's connected to something, but it's like the ship's talking in a completely different language.”

“Okay, that's a problem.”

“So, we can blow it up then?” Hunter asked eagerly.

“I guess we're going to have to.”

Coulson continued to watch the corridor as Skye disconnected and packed up her laptop and then switched places with Hunter.

The resistance they'd met had been minimal, which, after seeing what remained of the flyer bay, wasn't entirely surprising. Whatever had gotten into the hanger had been extremely thorough, though somewhat haphazard: the room looked like someone had put it through a blender. Daniel had been right, most of the smoke from the room had dissipated by the time they rappelled down from the Bus, giving them a fairly good view of the broken flyers, shredded walls, bodies and random debris scattered over the floor. Blood, oil, and some sort of yellow gooey liquid coated much of what was left. One section of the far left wall was blackened from the heat of what Coulson could only presume had been one of the flyers exploding.

Those first doors at the end of the hanger had been broken and bent, a small flashing light on the panel beside them the only indication of remaining life inside the ship. They'd made it all the way down the first corridor before they'd encountered anyone. However, the soldiers left behind on the ship clearly hadn't been expecting any trouble and taking them down took a matter of minutes even with their advanced tech. Mack had immediately grabbed one of the staves and shoved it into his pack, as had Hunter and several of the other agents. Coulson let them.

“How's it coming?” he asked over his shoulder when Mac and Hunter's whispered conversation had gone quiet for a few moments.
“Uh, we're just about done,” Hunter answered. “Just 'ad to figure how much explosive to use, since we're not exactly sure what the door's made of.”

“You know, I would've thought you'd take this as an opportunity to test out those cool alien weapons,” Skye commented with amusement.

Mac's answer was immediate and clearly meant to cut off whatever Hunter was about to say. “Yeah, no. Unknown weapon in tight spaces when we don't know anything about its power, range or energy source? That sounds like a great way to get ourselves blown up along with the door.”

Hunter's answering eyeroll was nearly audible. “The aliens didn't seem all that concerned about tight spaces back there, mate.”

There was a pause. “We'll save it for Plan B.”

Coulson kept his face blank. After a few moments more, the two men straightened and moved back.

“Alright, we're done,” said Hunter. “Now everyone needs to move ba–”

The door slid open with a soft hiss.

Coulson barely had time to blink, before he was automatically swinging around to point his gun at the new threat. Around him, he heard everyone else doing the same. It took two seconds for his brain to register the lack of shiny armour and helmets and the familiarity of the weapons being pointed back at him.

“Hold your fire!” he called to his team. Then he finally recognized the air force insignia on the unfamiliar uniforms of the men on the other side of the doorway.

“Sir, I think it's the SHIELD team,” one of the men called behind him.

Black Widow stepped into view. “Yep, it's them,” she said calmly.

“Your timing is impeccable,” said Coulson as he lowered his weapon. “We were about to blow that door.”

The airmen also lowered their weapons, stepping aside to let Daniel Jackson through. Coulson marveled at just how different the man looked in a field uniform, the P-90 held confidently in his grip. If not for details in the way he moved, Coulson would've almost mistaken him for one of the soldiers.

“Uh yeah, sorry about that,” Daniel said, looking a little sheepish. “I hadn't realized Lorne's attack on the hanger would put this section into emergency shutdown. Normally, you just have to tap the panel to open the doors.”

“Please tell me the rest of the ship's going to be that easy,” said Mac.

Daniel's lips twitched. “Yes, it should be. As far as we can tell, the ship's running on backup power. Life support and all essential operations seem to be on – which apparently includes the doors. Except for the heavily damaged areas like here. There'll likely be a section around where Steve's, uh, drone shield went through that'll also be in emergency shutdown...”

A woman with long dark hair and a bubbly grin on her face shut the panel on Daniel's side of the door carelessly and bounced over to his side. “Oh, but don't worry about that, I'll be going with you
and I know how to override the door panels if we need to.”

Daniel gestured to her wryly. “This is Vala mal Doran. Vala, this is Phil Coulson, Director of SHIELD. I was actually going to propose a trade. We were going to head up and take the bridge if you want to take the engine room. Vala might not be an engineer, but she's familiar with Ori ships and their tech. In exchange, I was hoping to take Skye. We'll need her to hack into the ship's systems.”

“Uh, one problem,” said Skye. “I don't speak alien and neither does my laptop.”

“Oh, right.” Daniel took one hand off his P-90 in order to flip open one of the pockets on his tac vest. He then dug out a large thumb drive and handed it to Skye. “Sam sent me this. It's the program she designed to allow our computers to interface with the Ori's systems.”

Skye's eyes lit up. “Sweet!” She turned to Coulson. “I'm okay with this plan if you are, Boss.”

Coulson felt his lip twitch in amusement. “I'd say it's a fair enough trade. Just make sure I get her back in one piece. Trip, go with her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Daniel nodded. “I promise. Don't worry about doing the same for Vala, though. She's entirely expendable.”

“Hey!” Vala's eyes were wide with what was clearly mock outrage, a hand dramatically splayed over her own chest. “I'm hurt, Daniel. And after everything we've been through together!” She sniffed and tossed her head to the side. “See if I ever have sex with you again.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “There was never a first time, Vala,” he said dryly. Then he turned to Coulson. “Well, good luck, Phil.”

Coulson nodded back. “You too, Daniel.” Then he turned to Vala, who had now taken notice of Mac and was eyeing him up and down appreciatively. “Lead on, Vala.”

“I'm not sure I'm okay with this trade,” he heard Mac grumble behind him as they left.

“JARVIS, make sure you record everything,” said Tony as he adjusted the suit's grip on the staves under his left arm, moments before he was bathed in the brilliant white light of a transporter beam.

“Of course, sir.”

He expected to feel something – mild dizziness, a tingling sensation in his limbs maybe, or a slight sting – but the only thing he felt was a strange sort of pull, as though his skin was pulled too tight for a moment before snapping back into place. But it was so mild that he wondered if he was maybe projecting it. Between one blink to the next, he was suddenly on the bridge of a spaceship.

The first thing he saw was the holographic displays lining the room like half a dozen floating flat screen TVs. Only instead of being a boring rectangular shape, the screens were rounded and hazy blue along their outline, as though the projection was fading into view. A few looked like they were projecting readings or monitoring the status of something Tony couldn't read due to the lack
of any sort of language he was familiar with, and others showed views of the city.

The second thing he saw was The Chair.

He remembered Rhody mentioning something about a chair. It really hadn't sounded impressive then. Tony wasn't actually sure what it as doing, but JARVIS was detecting extremely high energy levels and, well, it certainly looked impressive. A man wearing a field uniform with air force insignia was reclining in it, his eyes closed and forehead furrowed in concentration. His entire form was bathed in a soft blue light that emanated from the chair itself. His fingers twitched and his frown deepened for a moment, before his brow smoothed out again.

Tony's faceplate slid up with a soft hiss. He breathed in the metallic, artificially regulated spaceship air as he looked around, taking in his surroundings with his own eyes.

“Welcome to the Victory, Mister Stark.”

Tony turned to face a slim man with short hair that was speckled with so much grey it was difficult to tell what its original colour might've been. His face was blank, but Tony somehow got an amused vibe from the man anyway. Or maybe he was just projecting again. The older man was leaning on a crutch and there was a large bandage on his left leg. And three gleaming stars on his shoulders.

Tony flashed him his best publicity smile. “General O'Neill, I presume? Or, otherwise known by certain people of my acquaintance, Uncle Jack?”


Tony blinked, but the General didn't comment any further. “Right. Okay then.” He pointed to the chair. “So, I'm assuming that's not a fancy alien massage spa.”

The man in the chair snorted. “Not even by the loosest definition.”

“The Command Chair pilots the ship and controls the drones,” said O'Neill.

Tony blinked, turning to look at the Chair again. There seemed to be some sort of illuminated pads under the man's hands and a circular illuminated surface on the headrest, but the man was barely twitching. Unless...

“Holy shit, it works on a neural interface, doesn't it?”

“Something like that,” O'Neill answered. “But we can walk and talk in the elevator. Major, I'm leaving you in command of the bridge. I'm gonna go see for myself what McKay's managed to pull out of the ship's database. Let me know if there are any developments.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony took one last look around before following the General out, the other man's leg injury barely slowing him down. The ship's corridors were less drab than Tony would've expected, with geometric designs engraved into the walls and elongated lights jutting out of the wall every few feet. There were no pipes and no loose wires to be seen anywhere.

“So, where did they find this ship, anyway?” Tony couldn't help but asking.

“Apparently hidden underneath a temple.”
Tony blinked. “Seriously?”

“You'd be surprised by how many things we find inside temples.”

“We?”

The General didn't answer, instead stopping at what looked like a random spot in the middle of the corridor. He waved his hand in front of a panel and a section of the wall beside it slid apart to reveal a small compartment. Tony followed him inside, carefully making sure not to scratch the walls with the Ori weapons he was carrying. At the back of the elevator, there was a glowing panel with what looked like a map, which O'Neill studied for a moment before tapping on one of the sections. The elevator doors slid closed and a yellow light came on above them, pulsing mildly.

When he stepped back, Tony took a step forward to take a closer look at the map. He frowned. It was clearly only a partial map – and Tony didn't recognize the language at all. “Can you actually read the alien language?”

There was a pause. “Yes.”

Tony looked up at the tone. “That's impressive.”

O'Neill was grimacing slightly. “Yeah, well, it helps when you get it downloaded into your brain,” he said dryly and then looked over to Tony, who could feel his eyes widening in excitement. “Don't get excited, Stark, it came with an entire alien database. Nearly fried my brain. This is all that's left over after the little grey guys got it out.”

Tony wasn't really sure where to start with that. “You're making that sound like it was an accident.”

“It definitely wasn't on purpose from my end.”

The elevator doors slid open and O'Neill walked out. Tony followed after a beat. At the end of a short hallway, they entered another elevator.

“So, the Chair...”

“Stark, you're really asking the wrong person. All I know is that I sit in the chair and it lights up and suddenly I can feel a connection in my mind and I can make it do stuff. If you want a more detailed explanation, ask McKay. Or Carter, since you've apparently already met her and worked with her well enough that she didn't shoot you.”

“You've used the Chair?”

“Not this one. We've got one of our own in a different secret base. Well, we might still have one assuming it survived the Ori’s bombardment.”

The elevator doors opened and they stepped out into what looked like it was probably engineering. The air that hit Tony's face felt several degrees warmer than it had been on the bridge and in the corridors. The room was lined with computer terminals and displays, with a central section covered in large controls and with holographic screens hovering above its surface. At the far right, he saw an alcove containing three glowing orange crystalline objects that Tony guessed were probably power cells of some sort.

A lone man in a combat uniform sat in a backless chair, his eyes darting between the various screens in the room. He looked up when they entered and then jumped out of his chair and came to attention. “General, sir.”
“At ease,” said General O'Neill, absently waving away the formality as his eyes scanned the room with a frown. “Where's McKay?”

“He ran off about half an hour ago, sir. Said there was something he needed to take a look at.”

O'Neill's sigh was half irritated and half resigned. He tapped his earpiece. “McKay, this is O'Neill. Stark's here with the Ori stave weapons. Where the hell are you?”

“McKay here. I'm on the aft forward of the top deck and you really need to come see this, General. I think I've just found our finishing move. Don't take the elevator in engineering, take the one at the end of the hall on your right. Oh, and bring the staves. McKay out.”

Tony immediately turned to find a door out of engineering. The words 'finishing move' had been enough to snap him out of his 'ooh, spaceship' excitement and remind him that there was a reason he was on said spaceship. That outside, where he couldn't see or hear anymore, people were fighting and dying.

He found the door and waved a gauntlet in front of the motion sensor. The door remained obstinately shut. He glared at it. Then the General was beside him. The door opened for him.

He smirked up at Tony. “The Ancients didn't really do armour, Stark,” he said before passing through, somehow managing to saunter smugly despite the crutch.

When they reached the end of the corridor they found that there were, in fact, two elevators. O'Neill paused for a split second and then called for the one on the right. It didn't look any different than any of the other elevators they'd been in so far – except possibly that the map on the back wall was narrower and contained less sections.

The decor on the top floor had clearly been done by an entirely different decorator than what Tony had seen in the rest of the ship. The walls on this floor were painted in muted shades of blue and green that faded into each other in large swatches, with the odd swirl of yellow thrown in. It was almost relaxing.

“Okaaay, well this is different,” said the General, eyeing the corridor warily.

It took them about ten minutes, but they eventually found Doctor McKay standing in front of a small console in the middle of a very large, very empty room. Tony didn't actually look at the man at first, instead scanning around the room for clues as to its purpose. It was a really big room.

“J, you getting anything here, buddy?” he finally asked.

“Negative, sir. I'm afraid my sensors aren't detecting anything present other than three humans and the same low-level energy readings that have been present throughout the rest of the ship.”

Tony made a face and then turned to the General. “Well, that's it, JARVIS says there's nothing here.”

General O'Neill raised an eyebrow. “Who's JARVIS?”

“My AI.”

“Right. Of course he is.” He rolled his eyes and then bee-lined directly to the man at the console. “McKay, I really hope this isn't you finally having a mental breakdown, 'cause all I'm seeing is a big room full of absolutely nothing.”
“Hm, it certainly does look like that doesn’t it?” said the man at the console. He looked up, a mischievous, gleeful glint in his eyes and a sly smile on his face. “Trust me, General, there is definitely something here.”

Tony's eyes widened with excitement as something occurred to him. “Is it cloaked?”

“What? No, of course not. Do you seriously think I be this excited for a stupid cloaking device? Even the puddlejumpers have those.”

“The what?”

McKay blinked at him, as though suddenly registering who he was. “Uh, nothing. Never mind. It's, uh, classified.”

Beside him, the General snorted. “I'm glad someone still remembers they work for a highly classified government program.”

The scientist frowned. “First of all, I've worked on classified projects pretty much my whole life. Secondly, it's an international program.”

Tony felt his eyebrows climb. Then McKay shifted and he caught a glimpse of a red maple leaf. “You're Canadian?”

McKay rolled his eyes. “Yes, and the guy up in engineering is Dutch, the witch doctor's Scottish and there's at least one Russian on the bridge.”

Tony could almost feel the neurons firing in his brain he sifted through a day's worth of information. He'd talked to someone from Canada recently... And come to think of it, where had all these people that were on-board the ship come from? Coulson hadn't reported this many people leaving with Daniel and the Avengers...

His eyes widened and he snapped his fingers. “Holy shit, you're Jeannie's brother! The one from the Pegasus Galaxy!”

McKay's eyes snapped to him, narrowing. “How exactly do you know my sister?”

“She did some math for us while Sam and I when we were trying to get my arc reactor to work with her phase-shift device. There was a slight problem with energy transference.”

“Hm. Well, my sister is very smart.”

“You know I hate to be the pooper to your little party, but time is sort of of the essence,” said the General dryly. “So, tell us, McKay, when is an empty room not an empty room?”

McKay blinked once and then Tony watched as his face transformed into one of excited glee. He flipped the tablet in his hands around to show them the screen – and woah, that definitely wasn't an i-pad. Or a Starkpad for that matter. “When it's full of this!”

O'Neill stepped forward to take a closer look at the screen. “I think your signal's getting some serious interference,” he said after a while. “Or is this the weather forecast for tomorrow?”

The Iron Man suit opened with a hiss and Tony stepped out, his left foot catching on the side in his rush, making the movement less than his usual smooth. He idly noticed McKay rolling his eyes as he grabbed the tablet – which was, apparently, also a scanner – from the General. The screen was showing three humans, the console between them that had some sort of halo around it that Tony
assumed indicated a strong energy signature, and hundreds of thousands of little tiny dots hovering around them. Tony turned, pointing the tablet/scanner at an empty part of the room. Now the screen was just full of a gazillion tiny dots.

He looked up. Nope, none of it was visible. “Hm, I'm assuming this is magnified – not that I can read any of the gibberish along the side, although it does look similar to the writing Jackson had all over the whiteboards in my conference room when he was translating those tablets...”

“It's Ancient,” McKay volunteered.

“Right.” Tony frowned, cocked his head at the screen, and then looked back up to McKay. “Nanobots?”

“I've seen several different types of nanobots and, as far as I can tell, no. The scanner's not actually showing anything complex enough to be a nanobot. For lack of a better word, each individual particle seems to be its own separate piece. Honestly, it's more like dust than any sort of machine or device I've ever seen.”

The General raised a very skeptical-looking eyebrow. “Dust?”

McKay took back the alien tablet and tapped at it. “Dust. Among other things, I'm picking up trace amounts of naquada, trinium, copper, carbon, something that chemically resembles silica, a few organic compounds and at least two elements I've never heard of before.”

Tony circled around to look over the scientist's shoulder. He blinked at the list on-screen. It took him a few moments to figure out the strange chemical annotations – although, it seemed even aliens used a similar method of labeling chemicals. Thankfully. One particular element caught his eye. He pointed to it, feeling stunned. “That looks a bit like vibranium.”

McKay glanced over to him. “Vibranium? Never heard of it.”

“It's incredibly rare, like only available in one place on the entire planet rare. It's what Captain America's shield is made of.”

“Huh. Interesting. And I'm assuming from its name it contains vibrational properties of some kind? Like a motion conductor?”

“Yeah. Any impact vibrates out to the side. It's also nearly indestructible.”

General O'Neill made a frustrated noise. “So it's really impressive dust. Awesome. How exactly is super-dust supposed to help us with our Ori problem?”

The look McKay shot the General could only be described as an 'are you a complete moron?' look. “General, despite all logic, this 'super-dust' – and for the record you are even worse at naming things than Sheppard – somehow manages to shield itself from all sensors except those specially calibrated to see it, be completely invisible, and generate a low-level energy field.”

Tony blinked. “It's generating an energy field?”

“Yes, but like the visual, you can't detect it without the proper sensor calibrations. It also doesn't seem to be doing much of anything right now, but given the presence of controls, I'm guessing the energy field can be changed, or wielded or something. Also, the presence of naquadah means you might be able to make it explode, although I highly doubt that. More likely, the naquadah is somehow acting as an energy source.”
Something flashed on the screen, catching Tony's attention. “What was that?”

McKay smirked. “And then there's that.” He tapped on the screen and the area the flash had come from magnified.

From closer up, the mysterious dust looked even more like dust. McKay was right, the bit and pieces floating haphazardly in the air looked like cut-off and flat patches, nothing uniform or complex enough to be a nanobot.

Then it happened again: a spark of light flashed quickly from one speck of dust to another, darker, speck of dust. Tony watched until he saw it happened again, further away from the magnified area.

“You know, it almost looks like neurons firing,” he said thoughtfully.

And this time McKay looked over his shoulder at him, he was grinning, his eyes shining with excitement. “That's what I thought. Except that I see nothing in the database to indicate that it's meant to emulate a brain, which means the flashes are either accidental, or deliberate, but with an entirely different purpose in mind.”

“Neural interface,” Tony immediately added. “It's primed for a neural interface. Like that fancy chair on the bridge.”

McKay's face fell. “Not even close. The Chair reacts to the presence of the ATA gene and connects to the user through the gene. To call the connection a neural interface is a gross oversimplification.”

“I like oversimplification,” said the General, cutting McKay off before he could continue. “So oversimplify this for me. The dust: how is it going to help us?”

Tony nearly laughed at the glare McKay leveled at the General. Seriously, the guy had guts and they apparently came with zero poker face. “It's going to help us, because if I'm very much not mistaken, then based on the reports I've read, this looks like it's probably the contribution of the last of the Great Races: the Nox. Now, granted, given this ship's age it might very well be a precursor to any of the tech you and SG1 have witnessed – or at the very least an earlier version – but it's the only thing that makes sense. I mean, no one's ever really seen a shred of technology on them and they just do things by waving their hands around as if it were magic. Which is ridiculous. This stuff is invisible and virtually undetectable. Can you imagine how much of it they could be covered in each time they step through a wormhole?”

“Would explain the hair,” O'Neill muttered. Then he cleared his throat. “So, I see one major problem here: the Nox are pacifists, which means this isn't a weapon.”

Tony could almost hear the sparkling in McKay's eyes. “No, it's not. But a newer shiner, bigger gun is only going to cause more destruction to the city, and our goal is to avoid that as much as possible. We really don't need another weapon, General.”

McKay's eyes then looked pointedly to the Ori staves the Iron Man suit was still holding. The General followed his gaze and Tony could tell the moment the older man understood whatever the scientist was trying to say, because he smiled. “Sweet. How long will you need to get it to work?”

“Give me a couple hours or so.”

“The two of you have two hours. I'll want your report then.”

As the General was leaving, Tony turned to McKay. “Okay, so what are we doing?”
McKay set the tablet aside and turned to the controls on the console. “I don't know what you're going to do. You can just stand there and look pretty – at least I'm assuming based on heresay that someone would consider you pretty, since you're neither blonde enough nor female enough to be my choice of scenery. Meanwhile, I am going to figure out how this alien device works and then use it to save the world. Or at least New York anyway.”

Tony felt his jaw drop. Part of him was angry, but an even larger part of him was just simply stunned. Sure, he got a lot of people who felt threatened by him and therefore refused to work with him, and there were plenty of people who simply hated him. But it had been a very, very long time since someone had just dismissed him out of hand like this. Not since his father had died.

He glared at McKay. Which would've admittedly had more effect had the Canadian bothered to notice. “You know I do happen to know just a little bit about program codes.”

“You don't have the ATA gene, you don't speak Ancient and you've never seen this tech before, therefore you're useless to me. Even that idiot from Nebraska pretending to be a quantum physicist they sent me in the last personnel shipment would be of more help to me right now.”

“And how do you know I don't have this ATA gene?”

McKay made an annoyed sound and look up at him. “Did any of the consoles in engineering work for you? Or the door mechanisms, actually. The elevators are already activated so anyone can use them, but some of the doors around engineering require the ATA gene to open.”

Tony blinked. “Uh, the door mechanism didn't like my suit.”

Rodney blinked back at him. “And O'Neill didn't get you to take it off and try?” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Right, of course he didn't.”

He then picked up the alien tablet/scanner and did something to it before handing to Tony. The screen was blank. “See if you can turn it on.”

Tony raised an eyebrow at him as he took the device and turned it over. There didn't seem to be any obvious buttons or controls. “So this a test to see if I can find the 'on' button?”

“There is no 'on' button. As I said earlier, Ancient technology reacts to the presence of the ATA gene. If the scanner hasn't turned on yet, then that means you don't have it.”

Tony scowled at the scanner and then reluctantly handed it back to McKay. His scowl deepened as he watched it light up for him almost the moment it touched his hand. “I'm really starting to not like these Ancient people very much. I mean you'd think that such highly intelligent beings would be beyond buildings racist technology.”

McKay snorted as he turned back to the console. “Highly evolved and scientifically advanced. Their actual level of intelligence is up for debate. Crap.”

“What?” Tony walked over to look at the console McKay was now glaring at as if it had mortally offended him. “Okay, that doesn't look like the same gibberish that was on the tablet.”

“It's not,” McKay growled out. “It's not Ancient and the only person who'd have a hope in hell of translating it is off playing 'capture the alien spaceship' with a bunch of marines from the Daedalus.”

“Don't suppose the ship has a built-in translator?”
McKay opened his mouth and then closed it thoughtfully. “Hm, it might actually.” He reached
down into a large backpack Tony hadn't noticed until that moment and pulled out a laptop, which
he turned on before grabbing a screwdriver. “Here, help me get this panel open.”

Had his hearing not been so sensitive he might not have heard his phone ring. The battle was
getting closer and the gunfire, laserfire and explosions were nearly overwhelming. For the first
time, he was worried if he'd be able to tell anything apart within the chaos of sound that was
approaching. At least the whizzing above his head had gone down, and there hadn't been any
explosive crashes for the past half hour or so.

The last vestiges of the sun's warmth had disappeared and the evening breeze was making him
shiver as it blew along his sweaty neck.

He answered the phone, recognizing the caller by the ringtone. “Hey Foggy.”

“Matt. I take it they haven't gotten to you yet.”

Matt smiled. “No, not yet. But they're getting close. How's the barricade-building coming along?”

“Oh we've got so many barricades up that we actually had to tear one down in order to let the
army reinforcements get through. They looked like they weren't sure whether to be annoyed or
impressed by us.”

“Wow, I didn't realize there'd be so many volunteers staying behind.”

“Hey, again, you're not the only one who wants to defend this city! Also we've got this chick
helping who apparently bench-presses cars in her spare time. She's a PI, of all things, so I got her
card 'cause you never know when we might need someone to do some on-the-clock snooping for a
client.”

“Good thinking.”

“Well, someone's gotta have their mind on the future. And I've decided to think positively and
assume that we'll all survive this and will therefore need resources for said future that is most
definitely coming.”

Matt felt something in his chest loosen. He chuckled. “Thanks Foggy, I think I needed to hear that.
Between the explosions and gunfire, it really doesn't sound very optimistic from up here. Although,
I do sort of wish I could see the aliens. Hearing the laser weapons isn't quite the same thing.”

“Oh, yeah about that... See here's the thing, you know how there were those pyramid spaceships
that showed up during the space battle?”

“They were a bit memorable. The radio host actually forgot he was talking live on a family-
friendly broadcast for a few moments.”

“Pretty sure no one's going to call him on it. Anyway, there are alien soldiers from the pyramids
down there helping us fight the Ori bastards and they're also using some sort of staff weapons that
shoot, uh, flaming laser blasts or something. So, try not to mistake them for the Ori, buddy.”
"Oh great. Thanks for the head's up. How do you know about this anyway?"

"Tweets from Stark Tower. And, FYI, New York's got itself a new slogan. By the looks of things it's gone viral, like internationally viral. Del shakka mel. Turns out the pyramid aliens used to be slaves to the same aliens that killed that girl Cassandra’s village and, when they rebelled, that was their slogan. It means 'I die free'.”

"Del shakka mel, huh? Has a cool ring to it."

"Sure does. Now having said that, don't you dare go del shakka melling it on me, Matt. I have no idea what the alien word for 'live' is, but that's the part you should be concentrating on, got it? Or I'll make sure they put something really embarrassing on your tombstone.”

Matt laughed.

Mac cried out as a plasma shot skimmed his leg and sent fire blazing across his nerves, the heat searing into his flesh. He threw himself against the metal wall and grit his teeth as he breathed through the pain. He heard someone call his name.

"I'm fine, it's just a graze!” he called back into the chaos to make sure the someone didn't do something stupid trying to help him.

He looked down. The edges of his uniform were singed and still smoking lightly, the wound itself an angry red. Thankfully, it had been cauterized by the blast, so he wasn't going to bleed to death. It was just going to hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. Ah well, wasn't like it was the first shot or burn he'd received on the job.

Doing his best to ignore the pain in his leg, Mac looked around the corner to where the Ori had packed the corridor several deep to form a defensive wall. They hadn't encountered a whole lot of resistance until now – the corridors of the alien spaceship had been downright spooky in their emptiness. Apparently, they'd all been waiting around engineering. Which, Mac had to grudgingly acknowledge, made a lot of sense. With most of the soldiers gone, the ones left behind would've been tasked with protecting the two main strategic points: engineering and the bridge. And possibly whatever passed for an alien sick bay.

He twisted around and fired a spread of bullets at the soldiers, before darting back behind his wall, wincing as the movement aggravated his leg. He risked a quick peek, before ducking away from another plasma blast. Damn, that armour looked ridiculous – it had no right to be bullet-proof.

And then Coulson's voice rose above the din. “Everyone, get down!”

Mac was crouching low before he even realized he was doing it, and then he was clenching his eyes and hissing as pain flared up his leg. An explosion boomed through the corridor, the sound bouncing off the metal walls and making it sound bigger and more immediate that it probably was. A grenade, he guessed, something he would've expected from Hunter, but not from Coulson.

He opened his eyes and went to stand back up, pausing part-way when he noticed there were people rushing towards him – namely, Coulson and that Vala woman. Who Mac found just as irritating as she was useful.

“Mac, I saw you get hit,” said Coulson as soon as they'd made it to his side.
Mac stared at him for a moment, unable to believe his ears. “Yeah, but it's just a graze, nothing serious. Please tell me you did not risk a grenade in an enclosed space just because you saw me get hit.”

Coulson shrugged. “You're my engineer, I need you in good condition. None of the rest of us will be able to make heads or tails of the engine room once we get there.”

“If we get there,” Mac grumbled. He peeked around the corner. Two wounded Ori soldiers were being tied up and a third lay sprawled out and unmoving just in front of the metal blast door that definitely hadn't been there before the explosion.

“We'll get there. Apparently there's another way into engineering, we just have to take a service shaft down a level and approach from the other side.”

Mac raised an eyebrow at him. “Won't the Ori be expecting that?”

“Possibly. It's why we're splitting up.”

“Oh, that's a good idea how exactly?” His protests sputtered to a halt when Vala suddenly knelt beside him and began to gingerly inspect his wound. “Okay, what are you a medic now too? Look, it's really not that bad.”

Vala mal Doran ignored him as she carefully peeled the fabric of his pants away from the wound. Mac winced when one of the strands pulled at the edges of the wound. “Seriously, just leave it alone, it's fine.”

“Stop being ridiculous,” Vala snapped up at him. “It's not a very deep wound. It'll only take me a minute.”

Mac blinked down at her and then looked up to Coulson, who simply shrugged. When he looked back to Vala, she was taking a strange, palm-sized object out of her pocket. With a large red oval-shaped crystal set into an elaborate golden frame, it looked like a piece of jewelry. Large, incredibly gaudy jewelry.

Vala slipped it onto her hand so that the large orange-red stone sat comfortably in the curve of her palm. “Now hold still,” she said and brought the stone up close to the angry burned slash on his thigh.

Mac's eyes widened when the stone began to glow. At first, he felt nothing, but gradually, he realized pain from the wound was dulling. He could still feel it, but it was as though he'd been given mild local anesthesia. Then he felt prickling, like a thousand tiny pins were being poked gently into his flesh, which should've hurt but somehow didn't. At first the sensation felt almost warm, and then it began to itch. Though he hadn't looked away from Vala, it wasn't until the itching began that Mac realized the angry burn across his thigh was becoming fainter, smaller. His breath caught in his throat as he watched. When Vala finally pulled away from his thigh, the angry red plasma burn was gone.

She pocketed the device and grinned as she bounced to her feet. “There, all done!”

Mac stared at his healed leg. He flexed it experimentally. He still felt a ghost of pain, but not the pull of newly-healed skin. “Wow, okay that's impressive. Thanks.”

“You're welcome.” She turned to Coulson. “So, who are you sending down the service shaft with me? I'd prefer a smaller group. Less likely to be noticed.”
Coulson nodded. “I agree. I'll send Hunter and two others with you.” He looked to Mac. “In the meantime, Mac, I want you to see if you can punch through those blast doors with C4. Feel free to try those Ori plasma weapons too. Once Daniel's group get to the bridge, Skye should be able to get them open for us, but in case they can't I don't want our entire group stuck here.”

Vala looked down at her watch. “Daniel's team is going through the crew quarters. It's a longer route, but less likely to be heavily guarded. Unless something unexpected happens, they should be reaching the bridge level anytime now.”

Mac looked to Coulson. “So, I'm assuming the C4's at least partially a diversion...”

The corner of Coulson's lip quirked. “Yes. If the Ori think we're trying to blast through the doors, they're less likely to guess that we've found an alternate way around. So, shake the doors, weaken their structure, but don't seriously try and blast them open until I tell you to.”

“Okay then. Fake attempts to blast the doors open coming right up.”

Vala winked at him playfully. “Have fun!”

Mac snorted. “Yeah, right.”

His eyes burned from smoke and exhaustion, and his ears were ringing with the sounds of screams and explosions, punctuated with the never-ending rattle of gunfire and plasma blasts that felt like it was bombarding directly into his skull. And his limbs ached, burning with the effort of holding him upright, but Colonel Cameron Mitchell didn't dare put down his gun, didn't dare stop to rest. He'd past exhaustion several streets ago and was now running on crumbs of energy and adrenaline fumes. If he stopped, he'd never get up again. There were people depending on him – an entire city depending on him – to keep going.

Another street lamp exploded in a blast of sparks, plunging its section of the street into darkness. Cameron cursed under his breath, but continued firing into the oncoming Ori soldiers. He didn't need light to see them. They were always there, always coming. He wasn't even sure what time it was. The sun had set long ago, it seemed, and since then he'd been measuring time in ammo cartridges.

He'd lost count of the number of ammo cartridges he'd gone through. The troops from Fort Weston had brought with them fresh faces, weapons and ammo. He knew he'd restocked at least once...

Mitchell never quite knew how he managed to hear his name being hailed on the comm, amongst the explosions and other chatter, but he did. Slipping away from the front line, he ducked into an alley and tapped the comm. “Mitchell here.”

“Mitchell, it's O'Neill. How's it going out there?”

“The reinforcements are much appreciated, but some of us have been at this a while. Not sure how long we'll manage to hold the Ori back. I hear Hell's Kitchen's got some pretty decent barricades put up by volunteers, so I'm thinking we might try to steer them that way.”

“Do whatever you have to, Colonel. McKay's found something and he and Stark are working on making it work.”
Mitchell raised an eyebrow. “McKay and Stark, sir? Are you sure that's a good idea?”

“It's a great idea. I've got two geniuses trying to one-up each other in figuring out how to stop the enemy. According to McKay, their oh-so-very-cool idea will probably be ready in a couple of hours. You and your people just have to hold out until then.”

“Yes sir. I'll pass that on to the unit commanders.”

“Good man, O’Neill out.”

Mitchell took a deep breath and looked up to the sky. If there were any stars out, they were being obscured by smoke and smog. He prayed to whatever real god was listening that they’d survive those couple of hours.

Then he hefted his P-90 and returned to the line.
Act VIII, pt i

Chapter Notes

I leave for Ottawa in the morning, so I'm just quickly posting this before I go to bed.

Thank you so much for all your comments, kudos, etc. I really do appreciate them. And I'm really sorry for, once again, not getting around to responding to comments. I was going to do that tonight, but seem to have run out of time. Figured you'd all rather a new chapter. Also, many thanks to Jon Harper for looking the chapter over for me. :) 

P.S. I won't be seeing Captain America: Civil War until at least the 13th, so please no spoilers in your comments.

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DAWN

Daniel ducked and the stave blast hit the bulkhead above him. Not bothering to wince, he adjusted his grip and then aimed his P-90 at the closest Ori soldier. The bullets ricocheted off the armour, sending the soldier staggering backwards. A dark blur with red hair ran past him and Daniel stopped firing for long enough to find a second target. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a blue-white flash of light as the Black Widow took down the first Ori soldier.

The armour was unfortunately mostly bullet-proof head on, but, being made of metal, it was extremely conductive. Daniel couldn't help notice how pleased Natasha had been by that discovery.

They had managed to get through the living quarters easily enough, only to encounter the official greeting party two corridors later. He couldn't quite tell if they'd been expecting the boarding party and their attempt to take control of the ship, but the Ori had certainly left enough soldiers behind to effectively defend the bridge. Although Daniel couldn't help but wonder if maybe they would've been better served to concentrate their entire force in one place instead of staggering them throughout the corridors... Not that he was about to complain about a potential oversight that made his team's job easier – or at least more likely to succeed.

It had been hours, though, and the corridors seemed endless. Adrenalin was mostly managing to keep away the exhaustion he could feel tugging at his temples, making him feel at once both jittery and cotton-headed. The hours had narrowed into an infinite stretch of grey corridors full of Ori soldiers and weapon's fire.

The Ori soldier's head snapped backwards, exposing his neck. Daniel adjusted his aim and pulled the trigger. The soldier let out a gurgled scream and collapsed.

Daniel chose a new target.
Rhodey sighed as his eyes once again slid to the red flashing light at the corner of his display. He had maybe forty minutes of power left in the suit, so long as he didn't need to use his repulsors. He sent a requisitions request to the Iron Patriot support team for a recharge unit. They acknowledged almost immediately, however it would take them about an hour to get one to him which meant he would have to be smart about how he used his remaining power.

Down below, traffic inched its way onto the highway ramps out of Manitou Springs. Pockets of troops from Fort Carson stood sentry over the evacuation, but with the flow stalled there was nothing much for them to direct except to keep people from abandoning their vehicles and running on foot. The side of the roads were packed with cars belonging to people who'd already done just that.

In the distance, he could just barely make out the Snakeskinners, still in the air and firing on the advancing Ori army. The occasional flash lit up part of the sky, but if something hadn't taken out most of the city's power, he probably wouldn't have been able to make the explosions out at all through the haze of smoke that now surrounded the city. He'd lost track of Thor hours ago.

Suddenly, his radio came to life. “Colonel Rhodes, please come in. Iron Patriot, please respond.”

Rhodey blinked. “This is Rhodes. What's going on?”

“Colonel, this is Captain Hailey of SG-3, temporarily on loan to Area 51. My team and I were one of the groups who evacuated out of Area 51 before the base was destroyed.”

That felt so long ago, but the name struck a bell. “You're the woman I have to thank for getting Tony to leave the base.”

“Yes, sir, that was me.”

“Okay, well what can I do for you, Captain?”

“Sir, I'm told you're in charge of the evacuation.”

“Yes, Captain, I am. Not that there's a whole lot of evacuating going on right now what with traffic mostly standing still.”

“I think I can help you with that, sir. My team and I are setting up a shield generator at an old sports arena just off Manitou Drive. Should fit just over two thousand people. I realize that's not a lot, comparatively, but that's still two thousand people and their cars off the road. Once it's on, no one will be able to get in or out of the arena, but it'll be able to withstand heavy fire from the Ori for a minimum of four to five hours. Possibly longer, depending on the concentration of fire.”

Rhodey could feel the grin slowly spreading across his face. “Captain Hailey, Tony was right. You are amazing. Do you have just the one generator?”

“Negative, sir. I have three, including the one we're setting up now.”

“Excellent news, Captain. I'll instruct the troops to start sending civilians your way.”

She'd been afraid of freezing, of facing an enemy who was someone else's brother, husband, son
and pulling the trigger. She'd been afraid of missing and watching someone beside her die because she wasn't fast enough, accurate enough. She'd been afraid of dying, of failing. She'd been afraid her determination – their determination – wouldn't be enough.

Nothing could've prepared Cassie for the sheer mind-numbing terror that would take hold of her once faced with the Ori. The moment the bullet-proof glass came shattering down, rational thought fled. The Ori were here and there was no time to think of anything but pulling the trigger, none left to be horrified that the liquid nitrogen-petrified statues were people as they were knocked over and shattered to pieces on the hard tile floor.

“Ms Hill, we're down to the last two shots of liquid nitrogen!” someone called out above the din. It wasn't Doctor Hartnell – she'd gone down from a well-aimed plasma shot ages ago – but Cassie couldn't remember who'd taken over.

“Retreat to the elevators!” she heard Maria Hill command. The other woman's voice was muddled, coming from somewhere beyond the cotton that surrounded Cassie, yet clearly audible. Cassie wasn't a soldier and yet she found herself automatically preparing to obey. Maybe she'd acquired the reflexes by osmosis.

She was using her last clip of ammo, only a few bullets left. Her hands were probably shaking, but she didn't look to check as she shifted into a crouch. It wasn't important.

She felt Happy's bulk shifting beside her. “Go, I'll cover you!” he said.

She nodded and took a deep breath. The moment she heard Happy's gun go off behind her, she took off towards the elevator. And then her hip suddenly exploded with burning pain. She cried out as she stumbled to the ground mid-sprint.

“Cassie!”

Cassie grit her teeth, feeling tears spring to her eyes as she breathed harshly through her nose, trying to breathe through the pain.

“Miss Fraiser, you must get up!”

JARVIS sounded panicked. That couldn't be good. Cassie clenched her hand around her gun, as though she could let the cold metal absorb her pain. She had to get up. Light flashed across her vision as a plasma shot streaked past her and hit one of the ornamental palms. She had to get up. Pain still radiated from her hip, a throbbing burning that made her see stars when she moved. She forced her eyes open, horrified at herself for closing them, and looked up. Ori soldiers were pouring into the lobby now, Stark Tower's diminished security force desperately shooting. One soldier was taking shelter behind an empty liquid nitrogen canister and aiming for Happy. Cassie pulled herself up to one knee and raised her gun. Her hands were definitely shaking now.

She fired three bullets. The second hit the side of the canister, puncturing the metal and moving it a few inches back. The soldier jumped in surprise. The third bullet hit him in the side of the face, shattering his left cheekbone. He fell to the ground with an inhuman shriek of pain.

Suddenly hands were grabbing her by the armpits and dragging her upwards. “Come on, we've gotta move!”

Her vision swam, but she forced her legs to move forward, trusting Happy to guide her. Behind them, she heard gunshots. She shook her head, trying to blink some of the fuzziness out of her eyes, and then she was being shoved against the elevator wall. A new pair of hands grabbed her and
steadied her. She looked up. Happy was still outside, shooting at the Ori with a determined look on his face while Maria Hill backed into the elevator, still shooting.

Maria and Happy exchange a quick glance and a nod. “JARVIS, take us up,” said Maria and the doors began to close even as she continued to shoot.

“All down!” she suddenly cried and crouched low, hunching her shoulders and ducking her head, but not lowering her gun in the slightest. There was a clamour of hurried movement as the elevator's occupants threw themselves downward.

A bright red plasma blast squeezed through the gap in the closing doors. Someone screamed. Cassie looked over, gasping as a man with long blond hair slumped to the ground, a smoking red burn spread across the upper half of his chest. Her own wound throbbed with renewed vigour. And then the elevator began to move.

Happy watched the elevator doors close with half an eye. As soon as the light above the elevator doors turned on to show it was in motion, he sighed with relief and signalled the other two remaining security officers. They emptied their clips into the growing crowd of enemy soldiers as they backed towards the narrow hallways that led towards the emergency bunker.

Then they turned on their heels and ran. From behind, they heard the clanging of armour as the soldiers took off after them.

JARVIS waited until all three members of Stark Tower security were safely behind the bunker's thick blast doors. He even let the Ori soldiers shoot at the titanium-enforced metal for a few minutes while the lobby continued to fill. The elevator was almost to its destination on the twenty-fifth floor when he finally spoke over the Tower's speaker system.

“Intruders detected. Activating security protocol Q-4.”

Many of the Ori soldiers in the lobby paused and looked up, startled by the mysterious voice that seemed to come from all around them. They jumped and spun around when solid steel walls slid down with a resounding bang to replace the missing bullet-proof glass along the front of the lobby. So surprised by this development were they, that they didn't notice the gas being poured into the lobby until it was too late.

“JARVIS, report,” Maria Hill demanded as soon as she stepped out of the elevator.

“I am pleased to report that the threat inside the lobby has been neutralized. It would appear that more are attempting to gain entrance into the Tower. Estimated time to renewed incursion: eighteen minutes. I am increasing the concentration of gas in the lobby to compensate.”

“Good job, JARVIS. Let me know if anyone makes it through the lobby.”

“Of course.”

The Ori's soldiers were relentless, their numbers seemingly never-ending, filling the streets of the Tau'ri city as they marched onward. Dust and smoke had taken the shine from their armour, though not the shine of determination from their eyes. They had not yet realized the true enormity of the task they had before them, but Master Bra'tac had seen this city from his ha'tak. Teal'c had once
tried to explain to him the sheer massive size of the cities of the Tau'ri, but this was well beyond what he had imagined. The tower-like buildings cast dark shadows over the battle, like mountains made of stone, metal and glass. The young woman who'd been one of this city's guards had called them skyscrapers and Master Bra'tac through the word appropriate – they did indeed look as though they were attempting to scrape the clouds out of the sky.

But Master Bra'tac had no time to be looking up, not with an enemy directly in front of him.

Again, he straightened to look over top of the strange metal wagon that smelled of food and fired his staff weapon. His aim was true and one more Ori soldier fell to the ground with a scream, his comrades barely noticing as they stepped over the body. He ducked behind his cover as the Ori answered his fire, the shots missing. The trainer of young Jaffa warriors frowned in disapproval at such incompetence.

A Tau'ri soldier ducked in beside him. He recognized the young marine they had assigned to help him with communications with the Tau'ri forces. "Master Bra'tac, SG21 reports they're in position and good to go."

Master Bra'tac nodded. "Are the covering artillery in position as well?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He looked thoughtfully at the wagon he was hiding behind. "Sergeant Helborn, do happen to know anything about the heating device on this wagon?"

The marine blinked. "Uh, 's probably a propane tank, sir. Blows up real nicely if that's what you're thinkin'."

Bra'tac grinned. "You have read my mind, young man. Do you know how to set that up?"

"Yes sir." Sergeant Helborn immediately turned and opened the lower compartment of the metal wagon. "Oh hey, there's two unopened spares in here. Lucky. Good thing the guys we've got against us shoot like stormtroopers."

Master Bra'tac raised an eyebrow, but remained silent as the marine twisted the lids of the two small canisters sitting to the side until he heard the tell-tale hiss of leaking gas. They both ducked down as a plasma shot flew over the wagon.

A loud metallic squeal followed by some loud rattling. Bra'tac peeked around the side of the wagon just as a large metal dumpster was pulled up by some sort of white rope and flung into the front lines of the Ori soldiers. The soldiers staggered for a moment, the unexpected assault catching them off-guard. Master Bra'tac looked to the buildings and blinked in surprise when he saw a figure crouching on the side of the building.

Earth was truly a strange planet.

It didn't take the Ori soldiers long to spot the man – the form-fitting nature of his outfit left no doubt as to his gender. Sergeant Helborn immediately took advantage of the soldiers' distraction and disengaged the wagon's break, placing it squarely on its four wheels. Bra'tac quickly helped the young man turn the wagon and then Sergeant Helborn tossed a grenade into the hollow compartment and closed the door. Together, they pushed it forward, towards the soldiers and then ran.

They dived behind a low concrete barrier just as the grenade went off. The gas further igniting the air around the wagon.
“Woah, talk about explosive taste.”

Master Bra'tac glanced to his right. The mysterious stranger was perching on top of a wooden stall. His body was lean and lithe, muscular but not broad. His face was covered by a mask, two dark mesh ovals where his eyes would be, and this close it was evident that his outfit was made of a rather bright material in red and blue. His neck stretched out curiously as he observed the Ori soldiers, his body somehow at rest and yet thrumming with barely-concealed energy.

He had trained many Jaffa warriors, taken boys and turned them into warriors. His eyes knew what they saw: this was no man, but a youth. “Boy, get down from there!” he barked. “This is no place for curiosity seekers!”

The youth startled and then quickly scrambled down, his movements easy and flexible as he half-crawled down the stall. Like an insect or a lizard, Bra'tac thought.

“I'm not a curiosity seeker!” the boy protested as he crouched next to them. He thrust his chin out. “This is my city and I'm here to fight!”

Bra'tac felt the corners of his mouth twitch in amusement. “Dancing between the lines of battle will only see you caught in the crossfire! I do not think your parents would be happy to see that.” He turned to the marine. “Sergeant Helborn, tell the artillery to begin their cover fire.”

“Yes, sir,” said Helborn and reached for his radio.

The long, silent pause on his other side was tell-tale. “My parents are dead,” came the silent response.

“Then I very much doubt they would be happy to have you join them so soon.”

“Hey, I'm not planning on–”

Master Bra'tac placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, silencing the rising indignation. “–Quiet, there is no time for this. In a moment, the artillery will begin firing to cover our retreat. You will run with us and you will stay low. Do you understand?”

The boy paused and then nodded. “Okay.”

No sooner had he agreed, the first Tau'ri missile sailed over their heads and into the swarm of Ori soldiers, followed by a series of Jaffa staff cannon blasts. Bra'tac pushed the youth ahead of him and ran towards the barricade at the end of the next intersection of streets. Opposite them, he saw the Tau'ri with the metal arm also turn and run, keeping pace with them though Bra'tac suspected he could easily outrun them all.

Half-way to their goal, Bra'tac ducked behind a Tau'ri vehicle, whose roof was bent and twisted under a large chunk of masonry, and used it as cover while he fired several more staff blasts. Three more Ori soldiers fell. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the youth peering cautiously through the vehicle's windows. Sergeant Helborn was firing his own weapon at the Ori soldiers from the car at their backs.

Bra'tac fired once more and then ducked down. The car shook with impact as a blast from an Ori stave skimmed across its hood.

“Yikes!” exclaimed the youth. “That was close!”

“Which would be why I told you to stay low.”
“Uh, right.”

The youth paused for a moment and then cautiously inched his way slowly towards the front of the car. Bra'tac watched him out of the corner of his eye while he waited for the overhead artillery fire to begin its next wave of assault. It took him a few moments to realize the youth was looking up at the buildings on their right, his head cocked to one side thoughtfully. Bra'tac glanced up. There was a Tau'ri flyer wedged into the top of the building, which explained the masonry littering the ground.

A moment passed and then the youth nodded to himself and straightened. He held his hands up, palms up and bent, his wrists pointing oddly towards the building. He pressed two fingers into the centre of his palms and white ropes suddenly shot out. They attached themselves to the flyer's wing.

Bra'tac raised an eyebrow as he watched the youth begin to pull. To his amazement, the flyer began to slowly slide out of the hole, showering the sidewalk below it with bits of brick and mortar. He turned to the marine. “Sergeant Helborn, tell Colonel Travers to brace for impact.”

“Yes, sir.”

A plasma bolt hit the trunk of the car and sparks flew from the impact. Bra'tac instinctively turned his back to the hit, raising an arm to shield the boy from flying debris. He felt something hit his upper back and he staggered to the side as the car bumped against his hip. At one time, this would've been nothing, but Bra'tac was no longer a young man and that hip had been bothering him for some time. He hissed as it flared with pain.

The boy must've heard him, because he paused in his efforts and looked over his shoulder. “You, okay?” he asked.

Bra'tac chuckled. “I am uninjured, merely old.”

“Yeah, can't help you with that one, sorry,” the youth quipped before resuming his pulling.

Bra'tac threw him an amused glance before turning to once again fire at the on-coming Ori army. Two more soldiers were hit. One went down immediately, but the other staggered and cried out, but remained mostly upright. He felt movement behind him and tensed as he glanced over his shoulder. He caught a flash of metal and relaxed minutely, recognizing the Tau'ri with the metal arm joining the youth. He returned his attention back to the Ori soldiers after the man grasped the white rope, adding his strength to the effort.

Bra'tac was about to order them to abandon their attempts when the flyer finally came crashing to the ground and into the mass of Ori soldiers. He grinned at their panicked screams. “Well done! A truly inspired idea. Now, quickly, we must take advantage of their confusion.”

No one chose to argue with him. Instead they followed his lead and ran towards the barricade, now visible as a solid jumbled line in the dark shadows set between tall buildings.

As they ran, he heard Sergeant Helborn talking into his radio. “This is Alpha One to SG21. We are approaching the access point, I repeat we are approaching the access point...” To his left, Bra'tac saw a set of stairs disappearing underground. “...and we're clear. I repeat this is Alpha One now clear of the access point. The Ori are on our six. Stand by for orders.”

The Ori soldiers were indeed still right behind them. The confusion from the sudden crash of the flyer hadn't lasted long, and certainly not for the ones who hadn't gotten caught in its path. Still, it
had been a good distraction and bought them just enough time to make it to the barricade. Jaffa and Tau'ri artillery were keeping up a constant barrage, slowing down their pursuers.

“Tell Ma'lek and Hinuk to target that flyer,” he said to one of his Jaffa soldiers as soon as they were safely behind the line. The soldier bowed slightly and then hurried off to relay the orders. Ma'lek and Hinuk were manning one of the Jaffa staff cannons. Brothers, they were both clever enough to understand his meaning and his best cannon team.

He placed a hand on the youth's shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. “We will take full advantage of your idea,” he said. “That rope of yours is quite impressive.”

The youth cocked stared at him for a moment. “Oh, it's not rope. It's webbing.”

Bra'tac frowned. “Webbing?”

“Yeah, like from a spider. I'm Spiderman.”

He looked out at the advancing army, carefully marking their progress. “I think you have a few years yet before you can call yourself a man.”

“Hey!”

“But all warriors must start as boys before they can become men. It is the way life goes.” Finally, the line of Ori soldiers had gotten far enough. “Sergeant, tell SG21 they are free to advance.”

“Yes sir!”

“Who's SG21?” asked the youth who called himself Spiderman.

“It is one of your Tau'ri gate teams.”

“Yeah, that didn't make it any clearer. What's a Tau'ri?”

Bra'tac looked over to him in amusement. “You are. As for what that means... that, I believe, is a story for another time.” He grabbed the boy and pushed him down as he too ducked an Ori stave blast. “Preferably when we are not being shot at.”

He kept himself low as he rose and fired into the Ori line, a rapid succession of staff bolts designed to keep the enemy's attention on them, rather than on accuracy. To his right, he heard the metal-armed Tau'ri following his lead. And then the flyer exploded. Flames shot upwards, illuminating the soldiers on the ground. What windows had been left intact, shattered. There were more panicked screams as soldiers scrambled to avoid flying debris.

SG21 chose that moment to come charging out of the entrance to the Tau'ri underground transportation system.

Colonel Travers grinned at the burning F-302. A shame at the loss, but a great distraction. The Ori weren't looking anywhere near the subway tunnels. They'd passed tons of them, but as far as anyone could tell not a single soldier had ventured down. Probably hadn't even occurred to them that they led anywhere other than a cellar.
Her strike team consisted of SG21, a dozen marines and a handful of Jaffa. They waited for the flying debris to settle and then they charged out of the tunnel and directly into the middle of the Ori army, where they hadn't been in the least expected. They came out firing, a dozen grenades immediately thrown into their enemy's ranks. The Ori soldier's surprise was obvious and the first dozen soldiers fell in rapid succession well before they'd realized what was happening. Then they started to rally, but not quickly enough.

Travers was happy to report the Ori suffered a not-inconsiderable blow during those precious minutes it took them to readjust to the change in circumstances.

They began to advance towards them. “Retreat into the tunnels!” she called out.

She, two marines and a Jaffa who'd been personally recommended by Master Bra'tac lay down cover fire for the retreat, while the rest of the strike force hustled back to the subway station. They gave them as much time as they dared and then she and the marine each lobbed a couple grenades towards the Ori soldiers, before turning and executing their own retreat. This was the most dangerous part of their plan, because the stairwell was narrow and provided no cover whatsoever.

Behind them, she heard the sound of boots and the clanging of armour.

They jumped the ticket stations and charged onto the platform, where several Jaffa warriors were waiting for them, staff weapons primed and ready. At the first sign of the Ori, they began to fire. Travers ran to the edge of the platform and leapt down, landing into a crouch. She winced at the twinge in her ankle. She'd twisted it on a piece of masonry a while back, but not badly enough for her to be immediately concerned with.

The Jaffa warrior who'd stayed with her to cover the strike team's retreat landed next to her. They exchanged nods and then rose.

“Jaffa, kree!” he called out, his voice booming over the sounds of weapons fire.

The warriors on the platform immediately began to fall back. Travers raised her own P-90, the two marines on her other side doing the same as they fired into the Ori soldiers. One of the Jaffa on the platform cried out and then crumbled to the ground, a smoking hole in his chest.

“Bollocks.” She grit her teeth. It had almost looked like they might just manage to avoid casualties during this strike.

The other Jaffa made it to the platform and jumped down.

“Everyone heads down!” Travers commanded even as the Jaffa commander called out his own order.

She ducked down and covered her eyes. Moments later, there was a flash. When she looked up, the first wave of Ori soldiers were laying on the ground, stunned by several Jaffa grenades. She exchanged a smirk with the warrior at her side. Then she turned to the marines. “Lieutenant, lead the retreat and hustle to it.”

The brunette nodded once and then turned and hurried away, the rest of their strike team running behind them. Several marines provided cover fire, emptying their cartridges into the newly-arriving Ori soldiers. Travers hummed thoughtfully. It was going to be tight.

She decided to take a risk and pulled out a grenade. Keeping in mind where she'd laid her charges, she threw it into the crowd. “Down!”
They all ducked, plastering themselves as close to the edge of the platform as they could. She keyed her radio. “McNab, this is Travers. Cut the power!”

“McNab here. Acknowledged sir. Cutting power in three... two... one.”

Suddenly, the station went dark. Travers raised herself and fired a steady stream of bullets at the no-doubt disorientated Ori soldiers. The effect was almost immediate and when she ducked back down, the Ori were firing back. “Go, fall back!” she ordered over the sounds of Ori stave weapons.

The plasma blasts provided just enough light to give them a modicum of visibility as they ran in a crouch along the subway platform. Once they passed the platform, they were able to run upright. It wasn't long before a few plasma blasts followed them down the tunnel. She had no way of knowing if they were stray blasts or on purpose.

This would have to be far enough. She crouched down as close to the sturdy walls of the subway tunnel as she could get, knowing the others were watching her every move. She slipped the remote detonator out of her pocket and primed it with a flick of her thumb.

“Alright, gents, 'ere goes nothing.” She silently counted to five. “Fire in the hole!”

She pressed the flashing red button and then covered her ears as the C4 charges on the support pillars and the one above the entrance to the station all went off. There were screams as the subway station ceiling came down on top of the Ori soldiers' heads.

And then there was silence.

Despite all the troops they'd already encountered and taken out, the bridge still managed to be heavily-defended. Daniel hated how many lives were being wasted, both Ori and theirs. He idly wondered what exactly the Priors were telling their followers about Earthlings to make them so determined; it certainly wasn't an uncommon practice for military and religious leaders to paint their enemy as horrible demons that would rape their wives and eat their children should they win. They'd never said anything outlandish or even derogatory in front of Daniel, but the Priors weren't really a chatty bunch when they weren't spouting rhetoric.

Daniel blinked the sweat out of his eyes and pulled the trigger, wincing when the shot went wide. The soldier he'd been aiming at went down moments later under a spray of bullets from one of the S.H.I.E.L.D guns. He ducked around the corner to avoid the answering fire.

Trip Tucker threw himself against the wall beside him. His brow was covered in sweat and there was blood soaking his uniform on his right shoulder. “So, you sure this is the only way onto the bridge?”

Daniel nodded. “Positive. Only other way onto the bridge is from the Prior's quarters and I don't know if they're connected to the rest of the ship. They never gave me my own ship when I was one.”

Trip stared at Daniel incredulously. “You were a Prior?!”

“It's a long story. I was sort of possessed at the time if it helps.”
“No, man, that really doesn’t.”

“Didn’t really think so.”

There was a slight pause in the Ori’s fire. Daniel pushed himself away from the wall and spun around the corner, letting loose a spray of bullets, aiming low for their less-protected legs. Trip followed him, pausing only for a moment before aiming high. The SHIELD guns seemed to do a better job getting through the Ori’s armour (some of which they also seemed to have been upgraded since the last time they’d encountered them), but not by much.

Suddenly, the door behind the Ori soldiers opened. Daniel stopped firing the moment he recognized the redhead on the other side. Natasha fired her Spider Bites at two of the soldiers before kicking the right knee out of a third. The soldiers’ cries attracted the attention of their fellows, but they were too slow to react to the new threat from behind them while keeping their weapons aimed at the one still in front of them.

After what felt like hours trying to get to the bridge, the rest of the fight took mere minutes.

“I thought you said there was no other way to get to the bridge,” Trip said after it was all over.

Daniel shrugged. “I said I’d never been to the Prior’s quarters before.” He turned to Natasha. “How did you know it was there?”

Natasha smirked before heading back through the door to the bridge, clearly expecting them to follow. “Skye managed to get access to the ship's computer and downloaded the schematics. There’s a narrow ventilation shaft that runs above what I assume you’re calling the Prior's quarters.”

“Huh, good to know.”

They entered the bridge to find Skye already at a console, her laptop hooked in, and typing away. “It was really tight squeeze,” she called to them. “I mean, none of you guys would've been able to get through. Black Widow and I barely managed.”

Daniel smiled. “Well, awesome job, ladies. So, that means the computer system's not giving you too much trouble, Skye?”

Skye snorted. “Please, now that my computer's speaking the same language thanks to that interface program you gave me, this is the easiest hack job I've ever done. Their firewall's a joke. In fact, I'm not really sure this is actually supposed to be a firewall.”

“It might not be. I mean, the Ori's followers for the most part come from pre-industrial societies. It's not like hackers are a problem they've ever had to deal with. They probably don't even understand the concept of a firewall, except in the literal sense of a wall of fire.”

“Well, either way, I'm not complaining.”

Daniel chuckled and then stepped over to the side to radio Jack.

Sam paused just inside the Victory's makeshift cafeteria (as in, the room with benches they'd shoved their food supplies into), surprised by the sight of Major Lorne stretched out along one
wall. He had his pack beneath his head and one hand flung across his eyes to keep the light out. There was a half-empty water bottle sitting to one side next to an empty cloth wrapper. Sam spared a moment to wonder who was piloting the ship before he quietly made his way towards the food supplies.

“'S okay, I'm not actually asleep.”

Sam fumbled the MRE he was quietly removing from one of the Atlantis supply packs. Then he looked over his shoulder to where Lorne was looking at him from beneath his raised arm with amused eyes.

“If you're down here, does that that mean the Ori flyers are taken care of?” Sam asked.

Lorne removed his arm entirely and sat up. “Yup, it's clear skies all the way. The General ordered me to take a break from the chair and grab a bite.”

“You know you probably could've found somewhere a bit darker to sleep.”

Lorne shrugged. “Nah, too wired to sleep. Just needed a bit of quiet and to not be connected to the Chair for a while.”

Sam hummed. “That must be pretty intense, man. I could go get you some tylenol from the medical kits if you want.”

“Thanks, but I'm good.” Lorne paused thoughtfully. “It's not really like that. The Chair doesn't feel invasive like you'd expect it to, more like using a touchpad without your fingers. It's like... my head's not hurting exactly, more like there's this buzzing in the back of my mind, like white noise. It's just making me feel a bit off-kilter, but not to the point of being painful. It's hard to explain, sorry.”

“I think I get it.” He turned back to the food, stuffing the one MRE into the front of the pack he'd emptied and then moving on to the crates they'd gotten from their friends in Aeneid. And, seriously, how cool was it that he could honestly say he had friends on another planet?

“Taking food to the scientists?” Lorne asked after a few moments.

Sam nodded. “Carson asked me to go make sure everyone gets some food and water in them. We managed to get everyone we beamed over from the Phoenix stabilized enough for now, so he told me to take a breather and stretch my legs.”

“Better get moving before McKay starts complaining about his hypoglycemia.”

Sam blinked and then looked back to Lorne, startled. “McKay's hypoglycemic?! Shit, I should head there first then.”

Lorne chuckled. “Thing is, McKay's hypoglycemia's the stuff of myth and legends. He keeps reminding everyone about it, but no one's really sure how much of it is real, and how much of it is his hypochondria speaking. Also the stuff of legends, by the way.”

Sam groaned. “Great, that's just great. Well, can't be too bad if Carson didn't warn me about it.”

“Possibly. It could also be that since McKay pretty much never goes anywhere without half a dozen power bars on his person, the Doc figured he'd be fine either way.”

“And from what I hear, that's pretty much what Stark lives on most days anyway. Okay, so I'll start
with the bridge and then Steve, thanks.”

“No problem.”

He should've braced himself before entering the Secondary Chair Room, should've remembered and realized what would be waiting for him. As it was, he'd forgotten – it'd been a long day, after all – and the scene that greeted him took his breath away for several long moments. There was a light glow coming from the ceiling, though not from any visible light fixtures. The rest of the room was dark, the floor display showing a nighttime scene of New York that looked like it had come straight out of his worst nightmares. He felt the sudden urge to call his mom, to make sure she was alright.

The lights were off in most of what he could see of the city and the lack of light pollution, coupled with smoke and dust from the battle, bathed Central Manhattan in thick darkness. Had he not known they were hovering above Central Park, he wouldn't have recognized the area. He still didn't recognize it. Through the darkness he could make out piles of rubble lining the park and the constant blue, white and orange lights from Ori, Jaffa, and Earthing weapon's fire revealed the torn-up, pock-marked ground Central Park's turf had become. The Hulk was the only noticeable irregularity amidst a sea of Ori soldiers on the ground, though he looked shadowed, more gray than green, in the darkness. A missile hit the pavement just outside the park with a short flash, sending bits of asphalt flying into the air.

In the centre of the room, the Chair shone like a beacon, hovering above the city. Steve's still form was bathed in white light, his eyes closed and, though his body was clearly tensed, he almost looked asleep.

Sam didn't suffer from vertigo, yet he still had to look up before he could bring himself to walk any further into the room, wishing he hadn't left his wings in the med-bay. Off to the side, the top of the engineering console gave off an eerie blueish light and illuminated the Lieutenant's face, making her look even more exhausted than she probably was. He made his way over to her, his jaw clenched against the urge to run.

She smiled tiredly at him as she gratefully accepted a meet bun and a bottle of water.

“How's he doing?” Sam asked her quietly.

“He's doing great, Sam,” Steve answered loudly.

Sam looked up. “Sorry, man, thought you needed quiet to concentrate.”

Steve opened one eye to look at him. “Right now I'm pretty much just holding the drones steady around the Ori ship. Don't really need much concentration for that.” Then he noticed the pack Sam was carrying and his other eye opened. “Oh, did you bring food?”

“Yeah, Carson told me to go 'round and make sure no one was ready to pass out from manly – or, uh, womanly – hunger.”

Steve grinned. “Thanks, Sam, I'm starving.”

“That's your default setting.” Sam frowned as he walked over to Steve, ignoring the movement beneath his feet. “Can you even eat while you're in that thing.”

“Uh...” Steve frowned and closed his eyes. After a moment he carefully lifted one hand and then opened his eyes. “Okay, I'm pretty sure I need to maintain contact with at least one hand, but that gives me one hand free to eat with.”
Sam shook his head. “That thing is really weird.”

“Tell me about it. As cool as this is, it feels really strange not being on the ground fighting with my shield.”

“Excuse me, sir, but you are fighting with a shield,” the Lieutenant at the console spoke up. She grinned. “It's just a bit bigger than your usual one.”

Steve answered her grin. “And it took out alien space ships.”

“Exactly, sir.”

Sam rolled his eyes as he piled three meat buns onto Steve's stomach, partially unwrapping them so he could get at them easily one-handed. The water bottle was a bit more of a problem, but he managed to wedge it between the edge of the chair and Rogers' side.

“Thanks, Sam.”

“No problem, Cap. And just so you know, after this is over I'm gonna have tons of fun telling everyone all about how you spent the entire battle sitting on your ass.” He paused as Steve good-naturedly rolled his eyes, noting the tightness around his eyes that seemed to be the only indication that he wasn't, in fact, just sitting on his ass in a fancy glowy alien chair. Which didn't really mean much as Steve was very good at hiding just how awful he was feeling. “Having said that, I just ran into Major Lorne taking a break. You sure you don't need one too?”

“It's not like there's anyone to take over if I did.”

“Technically, the General could, sir,” said the Lieutenant (Sam was really going to have to ask Steve what her name was).

Steve blinked. “He could? Wait, that would be General O'Neill, right?”

“Yes, sir. He's the strongest gene carrier on record – stronger than even Colonel Sheppard. He was the one who discovered the Command Chair in Antarctica. That was before he got promoted to General, when he was still the leader of SG1.”

“Okay, that explains why he and Daniel seem like such good friends.”

“Oh, he and Doctor Jackson were both part of th–”

The ceiling began to pulse.

Steve dropped the meat bun he was eating onto his stomach and wiped his hand on his uniform before grasping the armrest again. The light from the Chair brightened slightly. “Lieutenant Blake, what's going on?”

Sam ran to the console and then blinked at it from behind the brunette, whose attention was now riveted to the displays. He groaned. “Aaand why the hell did I just run over here, when I can't understand any of this?”

“I have no idea, sir,” the woman replied absently as she tapped at the console. She then looked up. “Captain Rogers, whatever's going on, I don't think it's us. There seems to be some sort of power transference from the ZPM.”
She then tapped her comm. “Doctor McKay, this is Lieutenant Blake in the Secondary Command Chair Room, we're experiencing some sort of power fluctuation. Source unknown.”

There was a long pause. Long enough that the Lieutenant had begun to frown in concern.

“McKay here. What sort of power fluctuations?”

“I-I'm not sure, sir. The ZPM output is holding steady, although there was a slight power spike just over six hours ago and then another one fifteen minutes ago. Both only lasted less than ten seconds and didn’t seem to effect the function of the chair, so I didn't feel it was necessary to alert you. The Chair and drone system doesn't seem to be effected, however the energy in the room itself is being disrupted by something.” Her frown deepened. “If I'm reading this right, I think there's something trying to use the same output.”

“What are the levels fluctuating between? No, wait. Did you say the first spike was just over six hours ago?”

“Yes, sir, and the second one 15.67 minutes ago.”

“That... can’t be a coincidence.”

“Sir?”

More silence followed. And then the ceiling stopped pulsing and returned to its previous dull glow.

Lieutenant Blake looked back down to the readouts and tapped her comm. “Doctor McKay, the fluctuations seemed to have stopped.”

“Good. I'm pretty sure I know what caused it. Hang on, we're going to try something. Don't panic.”

“Famous last words,” Blake muttered under her breath.

Steve chuckled. Sam opened his mouth to speak, when the ceiling pulsed once and then the glow went out completely. He closed his mouth and looked up at the pitch black space above him, worried. The floor was still projecting the battle, the blue and orange weapons blasts, and sharp white pinpricks of machine gun fire suddenly more noticeable than a moment ago. More immediate. Without the clearly-visible ceiling, there was nothing to distract him from the feeling of being suspended within a void overlooking the battlefield.

“It's a good thing he told us not to panic,” said Sam with a glance to Lieutenant Blake. She met his eyes with a wry look of her own and he gestured towards the centre of the room. “Although at least with Captain Glowbug over there, we're not completely in the dark.”

“You're hilarious,” said Steve dryly.

Light returned to the room gradually as the ceiling seemed to... vanish. Instead of a gently glowing ceiling, they were looking up into a generously-illuminated, cavernous room with warm green walls. It was somehow an even stranger sensation to be looking into a room from beneath it than it had been to look down on the battlefield.

“Movement had Sam noticing yet another alien console just at the edge of their ceiling – though clearly not at the edge of the room above them. A top section of the console had been taken apart and thick white wires stretched out like octopus tentacles from inside into a black laptop perched on the corner. More tentacle-like wires ran along the console and then plugged into a rather
scorched and slightly dented Iron Man. Sam blinked at the armour, confused by its presence, when a dishevelled Tony Stark popped up from behind the console. His eyes widened as he leaned over the console to get a better look.

Sam waved up at him.

Stark brightened and raised his hand as if to wave back, when suddenly a second head popped up from the other side of the console. Moments later, Doctor McKay was across the console and practically plastered up against Stark's side – much to the billionaire's obvious discomfort and annoyance. At least it seemed obvious to Sam. McKay was clearly either ignoring it or entirely oblivious while his mouth ran a mile a minute. Stark rolled his eyes and pushed the other man to the side. McKay went easily enough – clearly this wasn't the first time – his attention already back on the console. Stark, however, was still looking down at them in amazement.

Or, rather, he was until McKay looked up, said something, and then turned around and left. Stark blinked, looking bewildered, and then followed a few seconds later.

“Sooo, how scared do you figure we should be at the fact that McKay and Stark are apparently working together?” Sam asked after a moment.

Steve chuckled. “Well, at least they seem to be getting along.”

“Yeah, I'm not really sure that's as reassuring as it should be.”

The doors swished silently open and the two scientists came charging in.

“Oh, this is interesting,” said McKay almost immediately, looking around at the walls and what remained of the ceiling, while Tony Stark froze two steps into the room and stared at the floor. “The room reflects the outdoor weather conditions.”

“Wh-what the hell?” Tony exclaimed. “Is this room built on a window?”

McKay waved away his comment. “Don't be ridiculous. It's a real-time holographic projection. Oh you brought food! Excellent.”

Sam bit his lip as he dutifully took out the MRE he'd stashed away and handed it over to the excited scientist.

“You should've seen it while we were in space,” said Lieutenant Blake.

“In space?” Tony's eyes widened when he realized what she meant. “Holy shit! That must've been awesome.”

“It was pretty swell alright,” said Steve with a grin.

Sam handed Tony a meat bun. Tony stared at it, a panicked look in his eyes as he looked around his immediate area. Sam frowned. “Uh, Tony?”

“Oh for–” said McKay, his words slightly garbled because his mouth was full of food. Holding the MRE in one hand, he then reached behind him and pulled out the large alien PDA he seemed to be attached to. He turned it screen down and held it out like a tray. “Here, put it on this.”

Sam raised an eyebrow and did as he was told. When he glanced back to Tony, he was surprised to find the billionaire looking much more relaxed. Tony cautiously took the bun from the PDA and sniffed at it. Then his eyes slid back over to McKay, who was scarfing down his MRE with far
more gusto than the meal deserved.

“So, what exactly did you do to get the crap the military calls food instead of this?” he asked.

McKay rolled his eyes. “S not tha’ bad,” he said as he shovelled the last bit into his mouth. “Besides, I at least know what’s in this. The last thing we need right now is for me to go into anaphylactic shock thanks to hidden alien citrus-like ingredients.”

Tony's eyes widened. “A citrus allergy? Wow, that must suck. I mean, that means no margaritas, no gin and tonics–”

“–Yes, because that's clearly been a priority in my life.” The scientist finished his meal and shoved the empty container at Sam. Sam glared at him, but took the container and shoved it back into his food sack.

“Maybe it should've been,” Tony argued around his own meal.

McKay didn't hear him. He was too busy looking up at the console in the room above them. Then he looked to the floor, paling slightly as he took in the scene below them for the first time. “Wow, it's really bad out there.” He swallowed.

“Yeah,” said Tony softly. “That's why we've gotta work fast.”

McKay nodded grimly. There was a distant pain reflected in his eyes, and it wasn't the sort that came from seeing a battleground for the first time. Sam suddenly remembered hearing the scientist was part of a veteran first contact team.

And then McKay blinked and the determination was back in his eyes. There was still fear there, obvious for anyone to see, but the hands that held the alien PDA were reassuringly steady. “Then it's a good thing I've just figured out why they set the rooms up like this.” He turned on his heel. “I wonder if this console is linked to the one upstairs.”

Lieutenant Blake stepped to the side before McKay could shove her out of the way. Stark joined him moments later. Sam exchanged a look with Steve (who had gone back to devouring his meat buns now that it seemed the problem had been solved).

Less than fifteen minutes later, McKay was tapping his comm. “General O'Neill, this is McKay.”

“O'Neill here. Please tell me you have good news. I could use some right about now.”

“Then you're in luck. I've figured out how to work the device. We can have it ready to go within the hour.”

“Sun rises in forty-seven minutes. You have until then.”

Colonel Mitchell barely noticed when the sun began to rise. He had noticed when the bombardment in the distance had gotten louder. It didn't sound like F-302 or Al'kesh fire, which meant the General had finally decided to bring the destroyer waiting in the wings to the party. Clearly something was about to happen, so he took rolled his shoulders to loosen the muscles and took a deep breath.

A plasma bolt seared into the pavement two feet away from him and he smirked. The Ori's aim just
kept getting worse the more tired they got. He leaned out from behind the dumpster he was using for cover and aimed at the first Ori soldier he saw. The soldier had lost his helmet somewhere in the fray, so Mitchell went for the head shot. The soldier went down like a rock.

And so, in the shadow of New York's skyscrapers, air clouded over with dust and gun power, Cameron didn't notice it had gotten light out until a flaming Johnny Storm landed next to his dumpster and proclaimed: “Please tell me dawn brings new hope or some other sort of sappy bullshit, 'cause I think I might actually be running out of flame power and I didn't think I could run out of flame power!”

The mild rant brought a small, tired smile to Cameron's face. “The General said they'd have something for us at dawn.”

“Well it's past dawn now.”

“Is it?” That was when he looked up at the sky and realized that, yes, it was in fact a brand new day. Whatever that meant.

Storm's flames went out, revealing dark circles around blood-shot blue eyes. His face was smudged with what looked like soot, his blond hair carried a liberal dusting of grey, and there were tears and burns in his uniform. He huffed tiredly. “Yeah, it really is.”

The sound of the battle was ringing in his ears. Cameron would be hearing it in his head for days after, he just knew it. Assuming he survived. He hefted his P-90 once more – it felt like it weighed about five hundred pounds at this point – and pushed himself away from his cover again. His radio went off just as he was about to pull the trigger, prompting him to throw himself back against the side of the dumpster.

“This is Victory Ship to all unit commanders. I repeat this is Victory Ship to all unit commanders. Please respond.”

He opened his radio comm. “This is Ground Commander Colonel Mitchell of SG1. Over.”

One by one, the other unit commanders all responded. Cameron raised an eyebrow at the marine lieutenant who responded on Bra'tac's behalf. He hadn't been aware the Jaffa was in command of one of the units.

“This is General O'Neill. Stand by, people. Reinforcements are inbound from Fort Dix. They've been convoying overnight and should be hitting the outskirts within the hour. We've got the 2nd Brigade of the 75th Division as well as the 174th Infantry brigade coming our way, supported by the 72nd Artillery brigade and Marine Aircraft group 49. Until they get there, I need you to hold the line.

In the meantime, we've got a bit of a surprise for the Ori soldiers, a way to hopefully neutralize their weapons at least temporarily, possibly permanently. This should give us the break we need to finally end this, but I'm told it won't be instantaneous so continue as you are until the enemy stops firing back. Remember, your number one priority is to keep the Ori soldiers contained. There's too many of them to pussy-foot around, so shoot to kill if you have to, but let's not make this anymore of a massacre than we have to. Do you all copy?”

Cameron blinked. Neutralizing the Ori soldier's weapons? He could get behind that. He keyed his radio. “Mitchell, here. I copy.”

Once again, the unit commanders all radioed in their affirmation of the orders.
“Alright then, good luck people. McKay, you're up.”

“Right, yes. Okay, so we're not sure how quickly this is going to happen. Could take anywhere from minutes to hours, but I'm thinking closer to minutes, starting with Central Park and moving out from there. You'll know it's working when you stop getting shot at by those ridiculously-medieval looking weapons. Should be simple enough for anyone to understand. Questions?”

“Just turn the damn thing on, McKay.”

“Fine. Turning the 'damned thing' on in three... two... one... now!”

Cameron exchanged a look with Johnny Storm and held his breath. Several moments passed and nothing had changed. He let the breath out and sighed. “Guess they said it wouldn't be instantaneous.”

Johnny chuckled tiredly. “Would've been nice if they'd been wrong, or overestimating stuff, but I suppose we'll just to be glad if it works as advertised.”

“Yeah, here's hoping.”

Johnny nodded to him as flames once again erupted from his pores and surrounded him. He took off and Cameron once again threw himself into the battle. Time passed in gunshots and answering plasma blasts. And then one of the army privates on his right went down with a scream, the side of his neck and upper shoulder exploding into a smouldering mess. Cameron cursed.

“Cover me!” he called back to the soldier behind him, taking only a moment to realize it was a Tokra who'd apparently picked up a P-90 somewhere. The Tokra merely nodded and stepped forward to pepper the Ori soldiers with bullets while Cameron weaved out and ran towards the fallen soldier.

It was bad. The soldier was still awake, though clearly in shock. Cameron winced at the partially-exposed collarbone. Kid looked young too; this was probably his first action. Out of the corner of his eye, he could already see army field medics running towards them, weaving their way through the battle field to extract the wounded soldier. Who was going to need more than just field medicine.

Suddenly, Cameron had an idea. He pulled his Atlantis communicator out of his pocket and stuck it into his ear. “Doctor Beckett, this is Colonel Mitchell, do you read me?”

There was nothing, so he tapped the communicator and tried again. “Doctor Beckett, this is Mitchell, you there?”

A few more moments passed. “Aye, Colonel. I'm here. Am a mite surprised to be hearing from you, though. What's going on?”

Cameron let out a sigh of relief. “Doc, I've got a kid here who's in a bad way. Got part of his shoulder blown off. I know you're pretty much a medical team of two up there, but any chance you've got some sort of Ancient regeneration do-hickey that could help this guy out?”

“How severe are we talking?”

“I can see his collarbone, Doc.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath. “Hang on, lad, give me a moment.”
“Sir, we need you to move.”

He looked up at the army medics and shook his head. “You'll never get him to a hospital in time. Give me a second, we're trying to figure something out.”

They all ducked down as plasma shots flew over their heads.

“Sir?” the medic asked again, obviously confused.

Cameron opened his mouth to answer, trying to figure out a way to explain things with as few words as possible, when Doctor Beckett was once more speaking into his ear.

“Beckett here. Alright, lad, we'll see what we can do. I'll assume he's the lifesign nearest to you?”

Cameron smiled and gestured to the medics. “Take a step back, guys. Don't want you getting caught in the beam too.”

The medics exchanged a confused look, but he outranked them so they did as they were told.

He hit his Atlantis comm. “Yeah, he's the guy laying on the ground next to me. You have a lock on him?”

“Well, not me personally, but yes we do. Ye might want to take a step back yourself now, Colonel.”

Cameron looked down at the terrified private and smiled reassuringly. “You'll be okay, Private. Just relax, Doctor Beckett's one of the best.”

“Sir, what's going on?” the second medic demanded.

Suddenly, the private was bathed in the familiar white lights of an Asgard transporter beam. And then he was gone. Cameron breathed a sigh of relief and looked up into the astonished faces of the army medics... who probably didn't have the security clearance to see that. “Er...”

“Sir, there's something going on with the Ori!”

Cameron was on his feet in an instant and running over to Captain Lee of SG18 to see what was going on. The Ori soldier's movements seemed to have stalled. He could just about make out shouting, but couldn't hear any actual words above the weapon's fire. Weapon's fire that was coming from their side. Because, he realized, the Ori soldiers weren't firing back. He grabbed his field binoculars and looked ahead.

It took him a few minutes to realize the significance of what he was seeing. Or, rather, to realize what he wasn't seeing. He raised his hand to get his unit's attention. “Hold your fire!” he called out and then heard the order echo through the ranks.

He returned his attention back to the Ori soldiers and wondered just how McKay had managed this one. He'd worked with the neurotic Canadian before, but he'd never quite found it in him to like the guy, and had certainly never understood how McKay had managed to grow into the affections of the Atlantis crew. But right now, he was maybe falling just a little bit into like with the guy. He and Stark hadn't just disabled the Ori's weapons, they'd made them disappear.

And weaponless, the Ori's soldiers superior numbers didn't mean so much anymore. Cameron grinned.
Dawn broke over Colorado Springs with a soft whispering of light, just enough to charge the air with anticipation, before a brilliant explosion painted the sky in pink, blues and purple. Weary eyes looked up, too tired to feel pleasure, having just enough energy to feel surprise that the night, an eternity of darkness, was finally ending. The sun rose higher, a blessing for the new day and a curse as the light revealed what the darkness had hid.

The mountains were bleeding.

Lush green trees still grew along the mountain and throughout Cheyenne National Park, their branches providing cover for a multitude of shrubs and bushes and hideaways for startled animals. It was a stark contrast to the wound in its side that was muddy with blood and piled with corpses. Screams had long turned to moans and the moans were growing quieter.

Over to the west, a cloud of smoke hovered over Manitou Springs, made thick from fire and gunpowder. Broken buildings and bloody streets greeted the day and, hidden beneath their foundations, inside basements and sewers, people whimpered and prayed in the dark, neither realizing nor caring that a new day had dawned. To them it didn't matter; their nightmare wasn't over.

The quiet whimpers in the basements and sewers were swallowed by the raging storm of artillery fire and automatic weapons as soldiers fought street to street, and house to house, to hold back the Ori army. Tired eyes looked momentarily at the sky, the light of the early morning sun barely reaching them through the haze of smoke and dust. The night had ended and they were still here, though every inch of ground had been dearly paid for.

A dark shadow emerged from behind the clouds and blocked the sun.

It ripped through the clouds, too big to do anything less no matter how gradual its descent. Silent at first, the steady thrum of its engines and burning rush of its thrusters became louder, until the haze scattered away in whirls. A huge metal beast with a long neck, it was full of harsh geometric angles and grey, utilitarian design – a tank to the Ori's opulent chariot.

It came to a halt still far above the city, nowhere near close to the ground force's ranges. It paused for a moment, as though taking in the scene.

Aboard the Daedalus, Colonel Caldwell leaned forward in his seat, his eyes not wavering from the main screen and the battlefield it showed him. “Lieutenant Blackwell, inform Major O'Connor that he and his teams are green to go.”

He barely paused to hear the Lieutenant's acknowledgement of the order. “Captain Maxwell, target the Ori soldiers outside the city, full rail gun spread.”
Chapter Notes

I'm not quite sure how it's nearly August, but apparently that's somehow happened. In good news, though, I do actually have the next two chapters already written, which means the story is finished except for an epilogue. They still have to be edited, of course, but they are written. Thanks for your patience, guys, and for all the comments and kudos! :)

LIGHT

Despite the noise from battle outside, the children had somehow managed to fall asleep, their small bodies finally giving in to exhaustion despite fear and hunger. Walter turned away from the crack in the hastily boarded-up window – it was nothing fancy, just garbage bags and as many stiff boards and magazines as he could find and duct tape over it to keep the smoke and dust out. Wouldn't protect them against the bombs, of course, but the old house had a sturdy basement. And maybe they'd get lucky.

To think they'd retired from Denver to Manitou Springs for some peace and quiet. And the beauty of the mountains.

His back was stiff from hours of sitting on the cold basement floor; his muscles shook slightly as he carefully eased himself down from the rickety step-stool they kept down here. Agnes kept telling him they needed to replace it before one of them got hurt. He supposed it hardly mattered now.

He met his wife's green eyes. Even tired and bright with tears, they were beautiful. The two of them were supposed to be boarding a cruise ship in three weeks, their first tropical vacation. It didn't look like they were going to make it to the Caribbean now. Or anywhere else. And, if he was completely honest, he wouldn't mind it quite so much if it meant he never had to contemplate ever living without her. But the grandchildren.

They were curled up against her from either side, clutching at her bright yellow sweater even in their sleep. He remembered how excited they'd been when they'd arrived two days ago to spend a week at their grandma and grandpa's while their parents attended a conference in Colorado Springs. Agnes had baked up a storm for their arrival and just yesterday evening the boys had helped her bake some more cookies – with colourful sprinkles for variety.

They'd been waiting for them to cool when they'd heard the first screams. And then the ground had begun to shake. It hadn't stopped since. There hadn't been time to do anything but run down into the basement and barricade the doors and windows. Walter still cursed his old, feeble mind that he hadn't thought to grab so much as a single tray of cookies, or the pitcher of water from the fridge. He didn't dare venture upstairs, in case he caught the attention of an enemy soldier. Maybe they'd leave the house alone if they thought it was empty...
The radio had said they were aliens, but they sure didn't look anything like the little green men he and his wife had seen enthusiastically decorating parts of Roswell the one time they'd driven through the city. He'd heard them clanging by, jogging instead of marching. Could sometimes catch a glimpse of their red cloaks – they looked like they'd just walked off the set of a Hollywood historical epic, not a spaceship.

A sudden blast shook the ground so hard it made him stumble to the ground. His sight flashed white as pain shot up from his kneecap, but any cry he made was drowned out by the dull sound of impact and the shattering of glass. The children woke up with identical cries of alarm. Gritting his teeth, Walter breathed through the pain, concentrating on the sound of Agnes' voice as she calmed the children, desperate not to make another sound. What if he gave them away?

There was silence for a moment, except for the continuous accompaniment of gunfire and those damn laser blasts in the distance. More blasts, further away. The house shook slightly. The wooden ceiling creaked ominously.

Why the hell couldn't the aliens have gone to New Mexico like they were supposed to have?

And then Walter's thoughts stopped as heard a different sort of creek. He held his breath. For several moments there was nothing. And then another creek. It was the floorboard right outside the living room. The one that was nearly impossible to step over.

Walter staggered to his feet, wincing at the pain in his knee – it would be one hell of a bruise, no doubt. He met his wife's wide-eyed, frightened look and then helplessly looked at the boys. The basement was sturdy, but it wasn't designed with hiding in mind.

He saw Agnes' hands tighten around the boys' shoulders before pushing them both away. “Quick,” she whispered, “Patrick, Nicholas, both of you find a hiding place. A box, a little corner, wherever you can. Find a spot and stay there until we tell you to come out.”

The boys hesitated. “But grandma...” Nicholas protested as Agnes climbed to her feet.

“Don't argue with me, go!”

Finally they scurried away and Agnes moved to Walter's side. He pulled her close and inhaled her scent. “My Agnes,” he whispered.

“Walter,” she sobbed, burying her face in his shoulder. He remembered a time when he would sweep her off her feet and carry her as she laughed. That had been a long time ago.

When he heard steps coming down the stairs, he pulled away. One last look into her eyes and then he hurried over to the toolbox and pulled out a rusty old ax. They used to take it with them when they went camping with the children, the six of them together. It probably hadn't been sharpened since their youngest went off to college.

Agnes was holding a broom when he joined her. Her hands were shaking, but her head was held high. He smiled at her reassuringly.

The footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs.

“I love you, Walter,” he heard Agnes whisper.

Another explosion rocked the house and Walter stumbled. Agnes caught him before he fell and the two of them just managed to keep their footing. He heard a muffled cry of alarm from somewhere behind him and he tensed further. Something on the main floor came crashing down with a bang
and shattering china. The window at the back of the basement shattered.

One of the boys screamed, but Walter had no time to check which one because then the basement door was crashing open. Three shadows crouched on the other side, thin beams of light pointing into the darkness.

“Sir, Ma'am?” a deep voice asked.

Agnes gasped just as one of the beams of light moved, illuminating the American flag stitched onto the front man's uniform. Walter blinked, sagging with relief and feeling tears prickling at the corners of his eyes.

“Y-yes?” he said.

“I'm Captain Browning, United States Marine Corp of the Battle Cruiser Daedalus, sir. We're here to get you out. Is it just the two of you down here?”

“No, our grandsons...”

“Patrick, Nicholas, you can come out now!” Agnes called out. “Hurry!”

“Grandma, Patrick's hurt!” Nicholas called back, sounding panicked.

“Sergeant, we need a medic!”

“Yes sir.”

The next five minutes passed in a blur of movement. A large burly sergeant helped pull Patrick out of the pile of boxes that had fallen around him and allowed the arriving medic inspected the heavily bleeding wound on his arm, where a large shard of glass had impaled him. Nicholas looked more upset at his little brother's wound than Patrick, who just stared at it, trembling slightly, as though he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

“He's in shock,” said the medic. “Best thing would be to get him to medical before it wears off completely, and he realizes how much it hurts and starts panicking.”

“Look, just take the children and go,” Walter told him. “Agnes and I will only slow you down.”

The Captain looked him and chuckled, but his eyes were serious when he said: “Sir, we don't believe in leaving people behind.” And then he pulled a round disc out of his pocket with a single red button on top. “Besides, you're taking the expressway outta here.”

He knelt down next to Nicholas. “Hey there, buddy, you a Harry Potter fan?”

Nicholas blinked at him and nodded slowly.

“Awesome. I've got a nephew and he loves Harry Potter too. Anyway, I'm gonna need to hold tight to your little brother and to your grandma and grandpa too. See this disc? This is like your portkey, so you've all gotta be holding on tight to make sure it doesn't leave anyone behind. Got it?”

“Yeah,” said Nicholas, his attention now shifting between his brother and the apparent portkey.

Walter tried to remember what a portkey was and drew a blank. The gist was clear, though, so he and Agnes both stepped in closer to hold onto the boys when the Captain stood and handed him the disc.
“Huddle together and then press the button,” he said.

Walter took it and turned it over. Well, there was only one way to find out what it did, he supposed. He looked up to the Captain and his men. “Thank you, all of you. Thank you. And good luck to you.”

“God bless you,” said Agnes.

Walter pressed the button. It flashed red for a few moments and then white light enveloped them. He blinked...

“Medic!”

Walter blinked the light out of his eyes, his ears ringing with the din of... hang on. His jaw dropped as he took in the changed scenery. The walls were made of metal and there were computer panels lining one of the walls. This wasn't their house. He couldn't hear any explosions either.

“Sir?” he started at the unexpected voice beside him. A young woman with dark skin and short black hair was standing beside him. She looked tired, exhausted even, but she was still managing a small smile for him. “Sorry, but I'm afraid I need the transponder back.”

He looked down at the disc he was holding and then handed it over. She thanked him and hurried off to another astonished-looking couple standing a little ways from them. Walter thought they looked familiar. Perhaps he'd seen them at the grocery store. Agnes would know.

“Wow, where are we?” he heard Nicholas ask, voice full of the sort of exaggerated wide-eyed wonder only children could pull off without sounding completely addled.

Someone chuckled. Walter looked down to where another young woman was examining Patrick's arm. “Welcome aboard the USS Daedalus,” she said, winking at him. “You're on a spaceship.” Then she stood. Looking over her shoulder she called to one of the techs. “Looks like the wound's pretty deep. Send them to the medical centre!”

“Got it!”

The medic turned back to them. “Don't worry, they'll take good care of you there.”

And then there was more white light. It dissolved into bright sunlight that shone into his eyes, the first glimpse he'd seen in what felt like an eternity. People in scrubs descended on them moments later and Patrick was put on a gurney and given an IV in short order.

It was hours later that Walter found out they were in New Mexico. He laughed so hard his sides ached.

Colonel Greyson stared at the screen. “Please tell me that's one of ours,” he said. It was smaller, more utilitarian than the Ori ship had been, more like the Earth ships he'd seen on the news broadcast, but not one that had participated in the battle. She was too pristine, with not enough nicks or dents or scorch marks on her. Even if she did look a bit like a flying brick with guns. Lots and lots of guns...
“That's the USS Daedalus, sir,” said Colonel Pallin, barely hidden excitement in his voice. “She made it back on time!”

“That's Colonel Caldwell for you, he's always got the best timing,” said Sergeant West.

Greyson blinked at the strange statement, wondering what this colonel had the best timing for. Then he shook his head. Nope, he had more important things to concentrate on at the moment. Though part of him wished he'd been on the ground to see the ship slip down from the clouds. That must've been quite the sight. Then he watched as it opened fire on the Ori soldiers trying to make their way into Manitou Springs and he found he didn't really care about the aesthetic of the ship's arrival, because that was some serious firepower it was packing. And he had the feeling it was holding back big time on account of the nearby city. Even more than before, he could truly visualize the sort of devastation the Ori ship could've wrought.

The gym doors swung open and Greyson looked away from the screen showing Manitou Springs to where a new group of people was entering, a small contingent of airmen dragging equipment he didn't recognize. A young woman wearing what looked like an on-base flight suit with a tack vest thrown over it was giving orders. Most of the group hurried over to the long tables where SG-11 had set up their equipment, being readily greeted by the science team (and Lieutenant Miles, Pallin's 'tech guy', who'd joined them shortly after the battle had begun). The woman, however, hurried over to the command post.

There were dark circles around her blood-shot eyes, her hair was half out of its perfunctory bun, but her back was straight and her steps sure. Her salute was regulation perfect as she greeted Colonel Pallin.

Pallin grinned as he returned the greeting and salute. “Captain Hailey, this is Ground Command Leader, Colonel Greyson from Fort Carson. Colonel, Hailey here's usually a member of SG2, but she's been on loan to Area 51 for the past couple months working on planet-wide defense systems.”

Captain Hailey's odd uniform made sense now. “I take it that's where you were during the attack, Captain?” he asked anyway.

Captain Hailey nodded to him, her face blank. “Yes, sir. When the base came under attack from Ori flyers, we evacuated and retreated to a safe distance. Once the Ori flyers left, we went back to see what we could salvage and then proceeded to Colorado Springs to assist. Under orders from General Landry, my teams and I have set up three shielded sites running on naquadah generators along the north-east of Manitou Springs to protect civilians. With Iron Patriot's help we redirected civilian evacuees into these sites and currently have nearly eleven thousand civilians safely inside the shielded areas.”

Colonel Greyson blinked. Naquadah? “How long will these generators last?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Without any interference, years. Under heavy fire, they'll last a minimum of ten hours, sir. If we're talking stave blasts only, then I'd estimate it closer to 24.”

“That's excellent news, Captain. You and your people deserve a break.”

“Negative, sir.” Captain Hailey interrupted him and Greyson frowned at the stubborn glint that appeared in the woman's eyes. So this was what she'd been hiding behind her blank facade. “We just received some files from the Victory via the Daedalus that we need to assess.”

“The Victory?” Pallin asked.
Hailey smirked. “SG1's little miracle, sir. The Ancients called her the Viltoriaus, which translates to Victory. McKay's used her systems to do an in-depth scan of one of the Ori stave weapons, which General O'Neill's passing on to us and the SGC to analyze for weaknesses. We already know a simple EM pulse won't do a thing to them, but maybe we can find something else that will.”

“Woah, hang on, did McKay arrive on the Daedalus?” Pallin asked incredulously.

Greyson looked back and forth between the two air force officers, irritated by how out-of-his-depth he was feeling listening to their conversation.

“No, he was on the Victory and, no, I didn't get the full story. All I know is that somehow SG1 managed to come back with more personnel than they left with, and where they acquired them from is still classified.”

There was a significant pause during which Greyson couldn't help but notice the quick look he got from Pallin. He gritted his teeth, knowing full well that the air force officers had no more control over what they could tell him than he did. It didn't make him any happier.

“Captain, I'll have someone bring you and your people some food,” he said instead, recognizing how useful finding an exploitable weakness in the Ori's weaponry would be. “Report to me as soon as you have something viable.”

Captain Hailey nodded once and then saluted. “Yes, sir.” She spun on her heel and hurried over to what he'd taken to calling the 'science corner' in his mind.

He looked back to the satellite images and saw that the Daedalus had launched its own F-302s into the fray. They were flying above the city and making bombing runs of Ori troop concentrations in the streets.

A bright light appeared in the corner of his vision and Colonel Greyson's head snapped to the side to... watch as a tall dark-haired woman in a blue flightsuit appeared inside a swirling beam of lights. He was dimly aware of the gymnasium falling silent as they all froze in shock – except for the scientists, who'd apparently glanced up, deemed the magically appearing woman uninteresting, and went back to whatever they'd been doing.

Oh dear God that had been a transporter. Like in Star Trek...

“So, I gather the Ori having transporter tech was an actual possibility and not just a jest,” he said dryly as the woman surveyed the room. It took her mere moments to find them and begin to head in their direction.

“Not so much, no,” said Pallin. He sounded almost cheerful.

Greyson glared at him. “I'm not sure I like how much you seem to be enjoying this.” He scanned the room. “Alright people, you've got jobs to do, so quit gawking!” he barked at the soldiers who were still staring after the airman.

“I'd say I was sorry, but...”

Greyson waved him off, not caring for his half-assed apology. He had a feeling that 'raw recruit' had an entirely different meaning at the SGC than it did elsewhere, and was probably measured by how much gaping a person did.

And then the dark-haired woman was saluting them. “Sirs,” she said, her voice surprisingly high-pitched. “Lieutenant O'Reilly of the USS Daedalus. Colonel Caldwell sends his regards and some
“At ease, Lieutenant,” said Greyson, eyeing the surprisingly small silver case she was holding in her left hand as she dropped the salute. Her left pant leg was covered in dark grease smudges and there was a burn on her jacket. Engineering division, he guessed. “I'm assuming this is to give us direct communications with your ship?”

“Yes, sir. It'll be easier to co-ordinate troop transport if you and the Colonel can talk directly.”

Greyson blinked. “Troop transport...?” No sooner had he articulated the question, his eyes were widening as he realized what the Lieutenant was implying. “You mean you can transport more than one person at a time?”

The young woman nodded. “The Daedalus transporters can handle a load of up to thirty-eight people at once with a delay of fifteen seconds between loads. Equipment can be a bit trickier, but no one on the planet knows Asgard transporter tech like Captain Novak, sir.”

The pride in the woman's voice was obvious, though she was managing to keep her expression mostly neutral. More impressive was that when she said 'no one on the planet', she probably meant it to the letter. Greyson realized there was something incredibly reassuring about knowing that the people he was working with were the absolute the best the world had to offer.

“Alright, let's set up this communications, uh, system?” he said.

The Lieutenant raised an amused eyebrow. Then she set the small case on the table and deftly opened it. The two ear pieces she pulled out of the case were almost disappointingly normal-looking. “I've already calibrated the ear pieces to communicate directly with the Daedalus, although you could re-tune them to contact the SGC or any of the other ships. Except for the Victory. Doctor McKay apparently hasn't had the chance to tune the Victory's systems to accept direct SGC communication frequencies yet.”

Colonel Greyson and Colonel Pallin each accepted a communicator. Greyson examined his for a moment to familiarize himself with the position of its controls, before sliding it into place around his ear.

“O'Reilly to Daedalus,” said the Lieutenant as soon as they had their communicators in place. “Colorado Springs Ground Command has communications set up.”

A moment later, the communicator in Greyson's ear came to life and he heard a smooth male voice that sounded clearer than any radio he'd ever used in the field. “Ground Command, this is Colonel Caldwell of the Daedalus. Please come in, Ground Command.”

He tapped the side of his communicator. “Ground Command here,” he said, already turning towards his satellite maps. “This is Colonel Greyson. You and your ship are quite the pleasant surprise, Colonel Caldwell.”

There was a slight chuckle. “Believe it or not, I tend to get that a lot.”

“So I've heard. Now, Lieutenant O'Reilly mentioned that you'd be able to help with troop transport?”

“That I most certainly can, Colonel. I've also got ten teams of marines infiltrating the buildings behind enemy lines looking for trapped civilians and transporting them out of the area.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a beam of light as Lieutenant O'Reilly beamed back to her
Courtesans, servants and warriors alike moved to the side as Thor stormed through the palace halls, the look in his eyes hard and sparking with anger. There was blood trickling from a livid burn on his left arm, and a bruise forming on the right side of his jaw. His hair was dulled with soot and dust, the locks wilder than usual and still crackling with the energy of battle. His armour was scorched and dented, the bright red cape matted with dirt and grime as it flowed behind him, like a punctuation of spilled blood.

No one dared approach the God of Thunder when he was clearly so fresh from the battlefield, and furious.

Thor was grateful for the reprieve, for he did not trust himself to act civilly to anyone at the moment. He knew he was opening himself up for speculation and that rumour mongers would no doubt have much to say about his argument with his father. Right now, he did not care. Let his father deal with the rumours, and let the Asgardian court think what it would of his confidence in his father's rule.

He wasn't quite sure when a second set of footfalls began to match his steps. He growled at the interloper to scare them off and was rewarded with a low chuckle.

“Peace, my friend,” he heard Fandral say. “We heard word that you had arrived back from Midgard bloodied from battle. I can assume from your unpleasant dour that your request for aid has not been granted by Odin?”

Thor felt something in him relax at the presence of his shieldbrother, even as his steps quickened. “No,” he said through gritted teeth. “Odin has not granted my request for warriors to aid Midgard.”

The warriors guarding the gate to the Rainbow Bridge opened the doors upon their approach and Thor swept through, Fandral still at his heels. Half-way down the bridge Thor paused, the haze of anger dissipating as he suddenly became aware of the rather substantial crowd gathered on the Bridge, gazing with rapt attention into the depths of Heimdall's vision pools. He frowned and continued on, his approach still quick, but more cautious.

In the centre of the crowd he saw his friends and shieldmates and, surrounding them, he recognized traditional scholars' robes interspersed among Asgardian warriors. Thor relaxed at that, knowing that whatever their purpose, his father had not sent anyone to stop him from returning to Midgard.

Lady Sif was the first to turn to greet them, her eyes sparkling with excitement and lips spread in a grin. “Thor, it seems you were right to think Midgardians interesting,” she proclaimed. “What surprises they seem to have been hiding!”

Thor grinned, aware it must've looked almost feral. “In truth even I did not expect this surprise, shieldsister, though I am pleased to see this development.”

“Ah, Prince Thor!” he heard a voice exclaim. One of the scholars had looked away from the pools. Thor couldn't remember his name, but knew he had been a good friend of his mother's. “Tell us, do you know what this enemy the Midgardians fight is called?”

“The enemy are called the Ori. They call themselves gods, but they are cowards for instead of facing the Midgardians directly, they send armies of mortals in their stead.”
A murmur of censor passed through the gathering. Even Asgard scholars were warriors, after all, and cowardliness was the worst sin a warrior could commit. A cowardly enemy was one that deserved no respect.

“Heimdall tells us they arrived in great ships, royally decked out in while and gold,” said Volstagg jovially. “And that you took one of the beasts out with a single mighty blow reminiscent of Odin himself.”

Thor grinned proudly. “That I did.” And then the grin slipped off his face. “But I’m afraid I cannot tarry here. The battle is far from done and I must return to the field.”

“Of course,” said Lady Sif. “Why do you think we are here?”

He blinked. “King Odin has forbidden me from taking any Asgardian warriors with me back to Midgard.”

“Ah, but has he forbidden your friends from visiting you?”

He felt his own expression echo her sly smile. “No, my Lady, that he has not.”

Fandral clasped his shoulder. “Then it’s settled. We insist on accompanying you into battle with these cowardly Ori.”

“Truly, we refuse to be dissuaded,” Hogun added, his expression as serious as ever, though his eyes betrayed his eagerness.

Thor grinned and clasped Fandral's shoulder in response. “Then I welcome your company, my friends. Heimdall, send us into the thick of our enemy, so that we may scatter them like the insects they are!”

Heimdall seemed amused as he inclined his head. “Very well, my Prince.”

The light of the Rainbow Bridge surrounded them and sent them flying across space, millions of stars zipping past too fast for them to see, until finally they arrived with a clap of burning thunder. The scent of fresh ozone and burnt sulfur clung to them as they got their first look at the battlefield. They were standing in an intersection of roads, scorched, torn-up buildings on all sides. Somewhere to their left they heard the pained whimpering of an injured animal.

The Ori's soldiers stood in the streets, evidently surprised by the sudden appearance of five Asgardian warriors in their midst.

“Well, it would seem we have our enemy in our sights,” said Hogun.

“And already they tremble before our might,” Volstagg exclaimed.

“Indeed,” said Fandral, raising his shield.

The Ori soldiers raised their stave weapons cautiously, as though waiting for more warriors to drop down from the sky. Thor grinned menacingly.

Lady Sif drew her sword. “Then may we meet once more in the hallowed halls of Vallhala.”

The Ori soldiers finally recovered from their shock and began to shoot at them.

Thor raised his hammer. “For Midgard!” he cried.
“For Midgard!” the others echoed him as they threw themselves upon the enemy.

It was a common misconception that Jeannie was the ‘nice’ and amiable McKay sibling. Or at least when people saw her next to Meredith, who was loud and didn't bother to hide his anger, irritation or derision with anything, they tended to come to the conclusion that she was his polar opposite. And in many ways she was, which helped with the misconception.

This meant they were then surprised when she proved that she was his sister and every bit as capable of performing verbal evisceration at the drop of a hat. Or manly ego. Exhausted and nerves frayed thin, she almost felt sorry for the airmen she'd encountered in the corridors on her way to find the General. At least she knew she probably would eventually.

General Laundry had looked up and groaned at her entrance, not even bothering to mask the irritation in his voice. The lines on his face were deeper than usual and the circles around his eyes looked almost black.

“Yes, Mrs. Miller, I assure you we are doing everything we can to end things sooner, but the base is on Level 5 lockdown,” he said before she'd had a chance to open her mouth. “That means nothing in or out until we get the all-clear from the battlefield.”

“I'm aware of that, General,” Jeannie snapped, too tired for diplomacy. “Do you really think I want to take my daughter outside while there are still people shooting at each other?!”

Landry blinked slowly and then nodded, conceding the point. Jeannie took a deep breath and let it out slowly, looking out into the Gateroom for a moment in order to find some shred of inner peace.

The room below was deserted now except for a small contingent of guards and the Stargate itself. They'd moved everyone else out hours ago, once it became clear the Ori soldiers had veered off towards Manitou Springs instead of towards the Mountain. Landry had offered to have extra cots brought to the VIP rooms, but except for a few of the families, most of the Lifeboat members had opted to remain in the large conference room they'd first been taken to. No one wanted to be alone, or far from the television.

Though impossible to tell from inside the Mountain, Jeannie knew it was well past dawn. She'd left Madison snuggled up to Caleb with a quick, heartfelt kiss. Sleep hadn't come for her during the night, though the constant stress and worry was far more draining than the loss of sleep.

She met General Landry's curious eyes. “I know I'm not one of your scientists, but is there something I can help with anyway?” she asked.

His eyebrows raised in surprise, though she wasn't sure why. She was a McKay, after all. He was silent for a moment, thoughtful.

“Well, now that you mention it...” he finally said. “Your brother sent us some scans he took of the Ori stave weapons using the equipment on the Victory. They're more detailed than anything we've managed before. Most of our scientists were either at Area 51 or helping with the Phoenix, so I've forwarded the files to Captain Hailey of SG2. However, everyone currently looking at them has been working more or less non-stop for the past week, so I'm sure they'd appreciate a fresh set of eyes.”
She frowned. “Weapons are a bit out of my usual area of expertise, but if you've got a computer terminal for me to use, I'll happily take a look at the files.”

General Landry motioned to one of the airmen standing around the Control Room. “I'll have someone take you down to Carter's lab and set up communications with SG11 at Ground Command and the Victory.”

Jeannie smiled. “Thank you, General.”

“Carson!” Rodney called as he rushed into the medical bay, glancing up from his tablet for the scant half-second it took to establish the location of the door frame so he didn't run into it. Around him, he heard the gentle humming of medical machines and someone's rough, wheezy breathing.

What he didn't hear was Carson replying.

He looked up and scanned the room. Half the beds were taken up by scientists from the Antarctic outpost, three marines Rodney thought looked vaguely familiar and two other airmen. There was no Carson. Rodney blinked in confusion, his mind taking several long moments to comprehend what he was seeing.

He tapped his communicator. “Carson, this is Rodney. I'm in the infirmary, where are you?”

“Rodney, this is Carson. I'm in the adjoining room, off to your left.”

Rodney scanned the infirmary again looking for a door. Finally, he noticed a small yellow light shining from a slightly protruding wall panel. It was the most subtle door interface he'd ever seen the Ancients use – as though they were trying to hide its existence as much as they could without actually making it invisible. Curious, he waved his hand in front of the panel and the door slid open to reveal a brightly-lit room with a single, round computer terminal in the centre and oval-shaped man-sized pods lining the walls at 45 degree angles.

Carson and his temporary minion, Sam, were hovering over one of the pods. Rodney walked silently over to them, curiosity momentarily overriding the panicked fear steadily humming in the back of his mind. The door slid shut behind him, leaving the room in an odd sort of hush, as though the pristine white-silver walls would swallow any sounds they tried to make.

Sam was the first to look up as he approached, the man obviously a soldier first. He nodded to Rodney.

“What's this, stasis pods?” Rodney asked, his sentence punctuated with a wide yawn. Carson glanced up, his eyes roaming up and down Rodney with concern. Rodney rolled his eyes. “I'm fine, Carson, just tired. Exhausted.”

There was a flash of understanding in his friend's eyes, and a barely-there nod.

Sam just looked between them. “Yeah, they're stasis pods,” he said. “And for the record, I think they're pretty cool, even if to you guys they're 'just another alien thing’.”

“There's a lot of them here for such a small ship,” said Rodney as he peeked inside the one they were hovering over. He pulled back immediately at the gruesome sight inside: a young soldier with
half his left shoulder blasted off, right down to the collar bone. “Whoa!”

“Mitchell asked us to take him,” said Carson. “The young lad here would've most likely died on the way to the hospital and he thought that maybe we had some sort of tissue regeneration device on-board that could help him.”

“This isn't a tissue regeneration device,” Rodney pointed out needlessly.

Carson rolled his eyes. “Aye, I'm aware of that. I'm also not about to perform major surgery of this nature on me own, device or no device.”

Rodney rubbed at his eyes. “Right, of course, so you stuck him into a stasis chamber until you can get him to a proper hospital. That's not a bad idea... oh! That's why there's so many pods right next to the infirmary.”

“That's our theory,” said Sam. “I was kinda puzzled that for a warship, it seemed to have a strangely small infirmary and only one operating room.”

“Actually, lad, I think there might be a second one down below us,” said Carson. “The database I found seemed to mention having a sealed room with extra security.”

“Like the one we have on Atlantis.”

“Exactly. I think this ship was meant to be stationed at the city with an on-board medical team for emergencies or minor injuries. The stasis pods seem to be for major injuries, preserving the patients' conditions until they can be handed over to a proper medical team at someplace like Atlantis.”

“Huh. That's surprisingly efficient given the Ancient's usual haphazardness.”

There was something there, something hovering just at the periphery of his brain, a lone thought trying to break its way through the haze of exhaustion. Rodney yawned again, and the thought vanished.

“Anyway, as fascinating as this is,” said Rodney. “That's not why I'm here.”

“No, I imagine 'tis not,” said Carson as he stepped away from the stasis pod and his patient. “Come on then.”

Relieved that he wouldn't need to convince him of the necessity, Rodney followed Carson out into the main part of the infirmary. The room felt fuzzy around the edges, and a bit like it was listing to the side. Or maybe that was just him. There was a metal chair sitting against the wall, so Rodney sat down, knowing Carson would insist on it anyway. The metal felt oddly warm.

“What are you giving him?” he heard Sam ask. It sounded like the dark-skinned man was frowning.

“Just a stimulant.”

“Woah, that's not even a mild one. Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“It's not, which is why we reserve it for desperate situations only.”

“Which this is,” Rodney interjected, sending the full force of his glare at Sam. “I may be able to do math in my sleep, but are you really sure you want to risk the potential fate of New York City, and
possibly the world, on calculations I make while half-asleep?” He snorted. “Trust me, I've done this before and the inevitable crash is definitely not something I want to go through unless there's absolutely no other choice.”

Sam seemed mollified by his words. Not that Rodney cared if the man disapproved. The only person whose agreement he needed was Carson's, if only because he was the one with the stimulants. And Carson knew full well how much Rodney hated the feeling of being on stimulants, that shaky, wide-eyed feeling that made him hyper-aware and a bit like he was flying, yet grounded at the same time. If Rodney wanted to stay in the lab for long hours without sleep, he wanted it to be science and the excitement of discovery that kept him awake, not an outside, artificial source. Coffee didn't count.

And then Carson was by his side. “Yer sure?” he asked Rodney.

Rodney held out his arm. “Napping isn't really an option, so yes.”

Carson sighed. “Make a fist then.”

Rodney winced at the prick of the needle.

“Now you know the drill, lad,” Carson was saying as he pushed the stimulant into Rodney's bloodstream. “Any unusual symptoms – racing heart, blurry vision and the like – you come to me immediately and once this is over, you come seem me so I can check your vitals.”

Rodney rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, of course.”

Carson huffed and pulled the needle out. Thirty seconds later, Rodney felt a rush of adrenaline as the stimulant took effect, like a wave of electricity that had him nearly gasping under its onslaught, forcing his eyes wide open and rebooting his brain.

The illusive thought came crashing back and Rodney leapt to his feet. “The stasis chamber!” he exclaimed. He grabbed his tablet, fingers flying through specs and calculations as he raced out the door. Behind him, he vaguely heard someone wishing him luck, but he ignored them.

He made his way back to the Secondary Chair Room mostly on automat, only occasionally glancing up to make sure he was going the right way. On Atlantis he didn't need to look up at all anymore, but this wasn't Atlantis.

“Rogers, can you change the electro-magnetic frequency and output levels of the drones?” he demanded as he breezed into the room.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve Rogers look up and blink at him. “Uhh...”

He waved him off. “Nevermind, I'll take a look at the specs and walk you through it.” He paused. “Damn, I'll probably have to be down in engineering for that. Unless...”

He took a deep breath and thought about the specs he wanted. Suddenly, a holographic display popped into existence at his side, showing schematics for the drones and their current stats. “Ha!” he exclaimed, grinning happily.

“Ohay, I'll admit that is really cool,” said Tony as he came out from behind the engineering console. He was frowning at him warily. “But what the hell happened to you? You looked dead on your feet when you left and now you're practically bouncing off the walls: did you take an IV of coffee or something?”
Rodney rolled his eyes. “Unfortunately there's not enough coffee on Atlantis to waste it on an IV. I got Carson to give me a stimulant.” He froze. “Oh my god, I'm in the Milky Way! I'm on Earth, the planet of Starbucks and Tim Hortons! I should tell Lorne to stop by a drive-through once we're done with the Ori army.”

The marine at the console snorted. “I'm pretty sure you can't take a spaceship to a drive-thru,” she said.

“Why not? It's a vehicle!”

“Hey, I've taken the suit through drive-thrus before,” said Tony, grinning madly. “We should do it just to see the look on the staff's faces.”

Steve chuckled. “That would be something for sure.”

“Mmm, and doughnuts,” said Rodney dreamily. “We should get doughnuts.” He blinked and then snapped his fingers. “But first, let's rid of this Ori army. Then we can have caffeinated bliss. Okay, so Rogers—”

Which was when his comm unit came to life. “McKay, this is O'Neil, come in.”

Rodney groaned and tapped his comm. “McKay here. What is it?”

“We've got in-coming communications for you from the SGC.”

Rodney frowned. “But there's no one useful left at the SGC.”

“Gee, thanks, Mer. I'll try not to take that too personally.”

Rodney blinked. “Jeannie?! Wait, what are you doing at the SGC? Did they bring you in to help with something? No, wait that doesn't make any sense. All the projects would've been moved to Area 51.”

There was an exasperated sound over the comm and he could picture his sister rolling her eyes. “They brought us here in case they needed to evacuate as a last resort.”

“Oh. Right. The, uh, Lifeboat last resort. Wait, does that mean Madison's with you?”

“And Caleb, yes.”

“Okay good. Good. That's great that you're all safe. Er, safe-ish. I'm assuming the defenses are holding up since you haven't been evacuated yet.”

“The Ori army apparently decided Colorado Springs and Cheyenne Mountain were too well-defended after Thor, the Avenger, took their ship down single-handedly. They've changed direction to Manitou Springs. The Daedalus is hovering above the town the last time I checked, but it's bad, Mer. It's really bad.”

Rodney took a deep breath. “It's gotten a bit better here. We've managed to find some neat Nox tech – at least we're assuming it's Nox – that made the soldiers' weapons disappear.”

“Nox tech? You've got Nox tech on that ship?!”

Rodney frowned. That female voice wasn't his sister, although it did sound vaguely familiar. His sister's voice cut into the conversation moments later.
“I have no idea what that means, but I'll assume it's impressive since it can apparently make weapons disappear. Incidentally, that would be a weapon I fully approve of.”

“Wait, why are you still in New York if you've taken care of the army there? We're looking at hours, if not days, of fighting in Manitou Springs even with the Daedalus helping. Why aren't you on your way here to magic away the weapons?”

Rodney's frown deepened. “Okay, first of all, you'll have to take that up with General O'Neill. Secondly, it's only a temporary solution and will only work so long as the device we used remains in close proximity. Thirdly, it's not magic. And lastly, just who the hell are you?”

Suddenly, Tony was beside him, grinning tiredly. “Hailey!” he exclaimed. “One of my three – no... five – most favourite women in the world! Definitely one of the brightest spots of the US Air Force.”

Rodney wracked his brain. The name sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

Hailey snorted. “This week, you mean.”

“You wound me, Captain, my Captain.”

The mention of rank sparked a moment of epiphany in Rodney's brain. He snapped his fingers. “Right, Captain Hailey, Sam's protege. The one she broke the rules for to keep from dropping out of the academy so that the air force didn't have to pay you more money later when they hired you as a civilian scientist, assuming you wanted to leave the civilian sector in the first place.”

There was a long pause over the comm.

“Wow, Mer, that was insensitive even for you.”

“Actually, no, I think I like this version. Civilian scientists do get paid better than the military ones, that's hardly a secret. But it's flattering to assume they'd have wanted me in on the project no matter what and this way they don't have to pay me as much. Hm, now I'm re-thinking my air force career again.”

Rodney wished his sister was in the room so he could stick his tongue out at her. Or possibly do something more mature like smile smugly. “There, see, I'm apparently being accidentally flattering, not insensitive. Now, has everyone had a chance to look at the stave specs we passed along to the SGC?”

“Yes, I've got a team from Area 51 along with SG11 examining them.”

“I'm looking at them now. I'm afraid most of this is outside my field. I'm more of a mathematician than an engineer.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tony examining the holographic screen showing the specs. There was a deep frown on his face. “Does everyone in the program speak alien?” he suddenly asked.

Rodney rolled his eyes and pointed. “There's a translated version on my laptop.”

“Ah.” Tony looked around and then went to lean over the laptop that was plugged into the Ancient console. “Okay, yes, that's much better. Hmm.”

“So far, we've got nothing new. The scans from the Victory are more detailed than what we've
managed at Area 51 or the SGC, but there still doesn't seem to be a way to knock them out.”

“Aha!” Rodney exclaimed smugly. “But that's the thing, we don't actually need to knock them out completely. We just need to made them freeze.” He walked over to the holoscreen and began to sift through the data until he got to what his mind had connected to back in the infirmary. “During the firing sequence, there's a 1.8 second lag time between the stave's power core firing up and the actual plasma discharge.”

“Oooh, good catch!” said Tony. “And during those 1.8 seconds, there's a slight radiation spike from the plasma chamber... no, sorry, the heat-conduit just outside the plasma chamber.”

“Exactly!”

Captain Hailey's voice sounded thoughtful over the comm. “1.8 seconds is a narrow window, but if we can find a way to disrupt the firing sequence at the moment of that radiation spike, then we could theoretically stop the staves from firing.”

“Or cause them to blow up,” Rodney admitted. “But I'll take that for now and hope they catch on quick.”

“Do we know what's causing the radiation?” Jeannie asked, sounding thoughtful.

“JARVIS, isolate that radiation spike and give me everything you can extrapolate from our scans,” said Tony.

“Of course, sir, just one moment.”

“In the meantime, I'll see if the Daedalus can get us some stave weapons of our own to analyze. Miles, go see if Pallin can arrange that.”

Rodney nodded idly, knowing Hailey both couldn't see him and wasn't actually talking to him anyway. He wondered if the Victory's computer could do a stop-motion video analysis of the plasma firing process. And then he froze mid-thought.

“Oh my God, we are morons,” he said and tapped his comm, pulling out of the science conversation and switching to the channel he'd created for the Victory's crew. “McKay to General O'Neill.”

He was just beginning to get irritated at the lack of response, when his comm finally came to life.

“O'Neill here. Have you got something, McKay?”

“Maybe. At the moment we've got an idea and possibly a theory. Actually, I was wondering if Jackson could get his hands on some original stave blueprints from the Ori ship's database.”

There was a pause. “I'll ask him and find out. O'Neill out.”

Tony had looked up from the scans at some point during his exchange with the General. “Original blueprints?” he said with amused eyes. “Isn't that cheating?”

Rodney shrugged. “I am not above cheating when there are people shooting at me.”
Somewhere high above them, the sun was shining. Its outline was just barely visible above the smoke and dust from the battle, which was finally beginning to settle despite the wind blowing through New York's streets. For the first time in close to twenty-four hours, the guns had gone silent.

The City That Never Slept, however, was far from silent. The Ori soldiers were retreating towards their ship. Mostly.

Mitchell's headache was growing by the minute.

“They're going which way?!“ he yelled into his radio incredulously.

“They've veered off Broadway and up 50th Street, sir.”

“But they didn't come from that direction! What exactly do they think they're going to do, catch a show while they're in the city?!”

“Er, maybe they're lost, sir?”

Mitchell groaned. “Lost. They got lost while retreating.” He ran a hand over his face, way beyond caring how grimy it was. “Goddamn tourists! Couldn't they at least have grabbed a map at one of the shops? There's like ten thousand of them along the way. Wait, wasn't 50th blocked off with debris on that end?“

“Yes, sir. Apparently they found a way through.”

“Great. That's fantastic. Thanks for the update, Lieutenant, I'll get someone to head them off and get them going back the right way. Mitchell out.”

Cameron paused for a moment in the madness and looked up at the yellow-grey sky. “Fuuuck,” was all he could think of to say as he stared at the brightly lit drones hovering menacingly several feet above his head. The moment passed and he shook his head before tapping his comm. “Mitchell to Victory. I repeat, Mitchell to Victory. Please respond.”

Less than thirty seconds later, a voice he recognized as Lorne's XO came on over the comm. “Victory here, Colonel. What's your status?”

“Well, apparently we've got a group of Ori soldiers retreating in the wrong direction towards the Radio City Music Hall. Don't suppose you could get them to turn back around?”

“Copy that, Colonel. Standby.”

While Cameron waited for further instructions, a short burst of gunfire erupted in the distance, accompanied by the deeper tones of staff weapons. It only lasted a few moments, but Cameron tensed at the sounds. Thankfully, the Ori soldiers didn't seem so far gone that they thought attacking their armed opponents was a good idea, but a few groups had apparently still felt the need to test the Earth-Jaffa joint forces' resolve. It left a sour taste in his mouth – which he was certain counted double for the Jaffa – but he knew the General had been right. Weapons or no, the Ori soldiers still had the advantage of sheer numbers.

“Victory to Mitchell. Backup is being redirected to Broadway and Lexington. Do you copy?”

Even as he tapped his comm, Cameron saw a snake of the Victory's mini-drones twist its way above the skyline and head towards 50th Street. He grinned at the sight. “Copy that. Mitchell out.”
Movement high above him had him looking over his shoulder and into the clouds. He had his binoculars half-out of his vest pocket when the clouds parted and a geometric shadow slipped through. Around him he heard exclamations of surprise from soldiers.

He smothered his grin. “Hey, hustle to it, people!” he barked, pleased to see that his sharp voice was enough to break them out of their stupor. “There's no time for sight-seeing. You already know the Jaffa and the To'kra are allies, so get back to work! We need to get the Ori soldiers contained ASAP!”

Teal’c carefully kept the dismay off his face as he caught his first glance of the mountains from his ha’tok. The beautiful lush Colorado forests were scorched and bloody. His fists clenched at his sides. Though none would ever earn his anger as the Goa'uld had, observing the destruction the Ori and their followers had wreaked caused a very familiar burning deep within his chest.

Slowly, the ha’tak glided above the countryside towards the city the battle had spread to. Manitou Springs. Teal’c remembered the weekend SG1 had spent there. It had been years ago, when Teal’c had still been new to Earth and unused to walking among civilians without seeing either hatred or fear in their eyes. The city looked very different now.

“Scan the city and show me a layout of the battle,” he commanded. Behind him, he heard the Jaffa at operations acknowledge the order. He turned to the female Hak'tyl warrior at communications. “Hail the Tau'ri ship.”

“Yes, Commander,” she said, her fingers nimbly flying over the controls. A few moments later, she looked up at him. “Commander, I have the Daedalus.”

He nodded to her. “Put it on screen.”

Teal’c looked up and into the grim face of Colonel Caldwell.

“Commander Teal’c, welcome to the party,” said Caldwell. “We could certainly use your help.”

Teal’c nodded. “Indeed. My pilots and ground troops are rested and ready to engage the enemy.”

Bres’dek, his second, came to stand beside him and brought an image of the battlefield up on his console screen. Teal’c looked down, nodding his acknowledgment. His eyes scanned the battlefield, his years spent on Earth at the SGC having made him familiar with Tau'ri weaponry and battle tactics. A small smile of approval flashed across his face – the Ori soldiers’ change of target had obviously caught them by surprise, but his allies were acquitting themselves well.

He looked back up to Colonel Caldwell. “I see there seems to be an isolated pocket of Tau'ri fighting Ori soldiers in the eastern part of the city. There doesn't seem to be anything strategically sound in that area, however, there is a school to the south of that position that will allow me the space to assemble my ground troops. From there we can cut a line across the Ori forces and join the Tau'ri contingent.”

Colonel Caldwell snorted. “Those aren't our soldiers, they’re Asgardian warriors. And come to think of it, you meeting up with them would serve the dual purpose of both increasing their effectiveness and giving us a way of communicating with them. Apparently, Ground Command was using War Machine until Thor suddenly disappeared. Now that he's back, War Machine's nowhere
near his position.”

Teal’c nodded solemnly. “The Asgard were mighty, honourable warriors. I look forward to fighting beside this incarnation.”

Less than ten minutes later, Teal’c was standing in an abandoned schoolyard watching as the rings that had transported him there flashed back to the ship for the next load of warriors. Ring transporters were slower than the Asgard beam used by the Tau’ri, which was why he’d chosen a location the fighting hadn’t reached yet. When he looked up, he saw an al’kesh fly out towards the school at their backs. According to Daedalus’ scanners, there were a large number of lifesigns inside. His best engineers were aboard the al’kesh in order to expand their shields around the building, its weapons further protection for the children and teachers he assumed were inside.

He turned his eyes northwest, where the main battle was being fought. The Daedalus hovered above the city like a giant grey beast. Below it, F-302s darted back and forth, shots from their on-board weapons illuminating the dark cloud of dust and gunpowder enveloping the city like bright white bursts of fireworks. They were far enough from the battle that the noise wasn’t deafening, but he could clearly hear the medley of Ori staves and Tau’ri automatic and larger caliber weapons. The ground beneath his feet shook from constant blasts.

When his troops were assembled, Teal’c raised his communicator to his lips. “Bres’tak, this is Teal’c. Launch the gliders.”

“Right away, Commander.” There was a slight pause. “Gliders launched.”

Even as his Second finished speaking, four squadrons of death gliders slid smoothly out of the side of Teal’c’s ha’tak. They flew over his head as they went to join the F-302s over the battlefield.

Teal’c took a deep breath. “Jaffa kree!” he called out. “Assemble into formation!” He turned to his men – and women, he corrected himself internally – and observed them for a few moments. Determined eyes looked back at him, steady and silent, waiting with barely-suppressed anticipation. He noticed several of the younger men and women puff their chests out when they felt his regard. He smirked.

“Remember, we approach quietly,” he said, his voice just loud enough to be heard, but no louder. “Del shakka mal!”

The Jaffa echoed his war cry softly, like a prayer.

They managed to get farther than he’d anticipated they would before they were spotted. His ground troops were rested and the Ori’s had been marching and fighting all night. Teal’c saw not only surprise, but also despair flash in their eyes when he and his Jaffa warriors charged out of the alley beside a bank.

Their numbers were still so large that Teal’c barely had to aim in order to hit a target. They obviously hadn't been expecting the attack, so their flanks were poorly protected. Teal’c ran forward, firing shot after shot from his staff weapon, his world narrowing into the rhythm of the blasts, his senses sharpening at the edges as he descended into a familiar calm panic could not touch.

Behind him, he heard Jaffa fall into formation, their confident hands quickly assembling staff canons. Their timing was perfect and no sooner had Teal’c’s force managed to punch into the throng before him, the canons were firing. He raised his hand and gave the signal. He heard squad commanders passing on the order.
Seamlessly, the Jaffa warriors split into three waves. The first third fired into the first half of the Ori soldiers, pushing them back and keeping them there under heavy fire. The second third fired into the second half, hurrying them forward. Teal'c led the rest of the Jaffa through the path the first two had cleared, cutting through the mass of Ori soldiers like an arrow.

Teal'c saw a flash of silver out of the corner of his eye. He paused only for a split-second, swiveling on his toes and planting them firmly as he aimed and fired. The Ori soldier managed a shot, but like his fellows, it was sloppy and hit a shop sign high over Teal'c shoulder. Teal'c's staff blast caught him square in the chest and he was pushed momentarily off his feet before crumbling to the ground.

Teal'c didn't pause, but fired off three more shots into the Ori soldiers as he ran.

The sky lit up as a bright flash of lightning streaked down from the heavens, illuminating a single figure floating mid-air, surrounded by a halo of golden hair and a bright red cloak.

“What the fuck are those?”

Rhodey paused in mid-flight to stare at the new flyers approaching the battlefield from the awkward-looking triangular spaceship that he was absolutely not going to call a pyramid. Because flying pyramids were the sort of things you talked about just before they carted you off to a nice padded cell. The flyers were small and compact, their wings as wide as the cockpit. More than any plane he'd ever seen, these looked like giant metallic birds gliding across the sky.

He activated his comm. “Ground Command, this is War–I mean Iron Patriot. I've got unidentified incoming flyers.”

There was a long pause. “This is Ground Command. Copy that Iron Patriot. Are the flyers coming from the, er, flying pyramid?”

Rhodey smirked. “Affirmative, Ground Command, they're coming out of the, uh, alien spaceship. It is alien, right? I didn't picture the geeks at Area 51 having this sort of demented sense of humour...”

A new voice came onto the line. “Colonel Pallin of the SGC here. That would be an affirmative, the flying pyramid's alien alright. The Jaffa are allies, though, so no shooting at the death gliders, Iron Patriot.”

“Thanks for that, Colonel. Death gliders, huh? That actually sounds surprisingly badass coming from a flying pyramid, even if this all feels like a bad 80s science fiction movie.”

Colonel Pallin laughed. “Well if it makes you feel better, you can call it a ha'tak. That's what they're actually called.”

“How? Yeah, that sounds way less like crazy-talk, thanks Colonel.”

As he watched, the giant black birds fanned out into a grid formation and then dove sharply towards the ground, pulling up just above the buildings and skimming above them as they fired down at the Ori soldiers on the ground. Rhodey whistled appreciatively. The Ori flyers had looked far more impressive tech-wise, but the death gliders' tight handling and easy maneuvering made
him want to test fly one himself.

Plasma blasts shot up from the ground, but the death gliders continued steadily with their assault. One blast clipped a glider, causing it to swerve to the right and push its wing directly into a giant billboard advertising the newest Starkphone.

“Iron Patriot, this is Ground Command. Please respond.”

“I'm still here, Ground Command. What's up, sir?”

“We've had confirmation from the Daedalus. Seems Thor's back with a few friends. The Jaffa, led by a Commander Teal’c, are cutting through the Ori to rendezvous with them. The Daedalus is redirecting their S&R teams into the area to search for civilians. I'd like you to proceed to their location and provide aerial support. Teal’c is apparently somewhat familiar with Manitou Springs, or at least Earth cities, so don't worry about the Jaffa. Your number one priority is keeping the Ori away from any trapped civilians. Co-ordinate with the Daedalus teams, they're handling the actual extractions.”

“Understood, sir.” He glanced at his HUD as he fired his repulsors. “My ETA is 4.3 minutes.”

“Copy that. Ground Command out.”

Since his first encounter with Ori flyers at Area 51, Rhodey had gotten used to weaving his way around the movements of space fighters, making it almost second nature to him now. He cut through the F-302s, death gliders, and stray stave blasts, while keeping half an eye on the battle below.

A firefight by a fairly large stone church caught his attention. There were stave blasts coming from the upper story, pinning down several squadrons of US troops and halting their forward progress. By the time he'd taken it in, Rhodey was well past the church, so he looped over and twisted in mid-air to change directions, focusing his scanners at the building as he flew back towards it. He felt familiar whirling vibrations as his shoulder missiles primed. He aimed at the church's top story windows, but paused their launch when he glimpsed the building scans on the HUD.

There was a cluster of heat signatures at the back of the church, so close together it was difficult for his suit's scanner to give an actual number. While it was possible that a large group of soldiers had hidden inside the church to get some rest, he doubted they were all soldiers. Many people still thought of churches as sanctuaries, after all. And it was a large stone building, much sturdier than the wooden houses surrounding it.

He cursed and retracted his shoulder missile launchers, coming to a hovering stop just above the church. The Ori soldiers were focusing on the ground troops and didn't look up. He aimed his repulsors at the soldiers in the windows. From the ground, the shots required to take them out would've been complicated, but Rhodey had a clear, unobstructed view. He fired his repulsors several times in rapid succession. Chunks of stone flew away from the windows and glass shattered as wooden frames splintered. The Ori soldiers screamed, their blood splattering across the window sills.

Rhodey hit his comm. “Ground Command, this is Iron Patriot. Come in, Ground Command.”

“Ground Command here. Go ahead, Iron Patriot.”

“I have a situation here. Ori soldiers infiltrated a church, pinning our troops down with cover fire. I've taken out the shooters and there doesn't seem to be any more movement around the windows,
but I'm getting a large number of heat signatures from inside. Unknown whether hostile or civilian.”

“Copy that, Iron Patriot. Standby.”

“Copy that, Ground Command.”

Rhodey waited for a few moments, acknowledging the ground troops' waves of thanks with a small wave of his own.

“Iron Patriot, the Daedalus has your current co-ordinates and is sending in a recovery team.”

“Copy that, Ground Command. Am continuing on to my rendezvous with Thor and the Jaffa troops. Iron Patriot out.”

Thor was difficult to miss, hovering above the battlefield and deftly deflecting stave blasts with both his hammer and his cloak (making Rhodsey wonder what the hell that thing was made of). He really did look like a god. Down below, four other Asgardian warriors were swinging swords and deflecting stave blasts. It should've by all rights looked ridiculous, but somehow it only made the Asgardians look all the more awe-inspiring. There was a power in their movements, a strength to each of their blows, and in the way they didn't even flinch in the face of what should've been superior weaponry. As though the plasma weapons simply didn't impress them in the slightest.

“Hey, Thor, I see you're back,” Rhodey called out as soon as he got within talking distance. “And you brought friends.”

Thor turned to him. “Machine of War!” he exclaimed with delight. His hair was wind-swept and his face covered in dirt and sweat, with a rapidly darkening bruise along his lower right jaw, but somehow he was still radiant. “My father denied my request for aid, however my shieldbrothers and sister refused to allow me to return alone to do battle with these enemies of Midgard.”

“Well, we're sure glad for the help.” He couldn't help the way his eyes moved to take in the... ha'tak, looking even odder from up close – though the scorch marks and gauges in its sides were also more visible. No matter how ridiculous-looking, this ship had clearly been in a battle recently.

Thor chuckled knowingly. “It is quite impressive up close, is it not?”

Rhodey shook his head. “Yeah, I should've guessed you'd be totally cool with something this weird.”

Thor laughed as he casually deflected a stave blast with his hammer. “They are allies of Midgard, so why should I be concerned by their presence?”

“Okay, fine, point there. Anyway, the ship belongs to the Jaffa and they've got a contingent of warriors/soldiers/whatever cutting through the Ori and heading this way, under the command of a guy named Tilk, or something like it.”

Thor nodded solemnly. “Aye, I have taken note of their progress. They appear to be skillful warriors indeed. I look forward to fighting by their side.”

“Right. Well, I've got my orders to scan for civilians.”

Thor nodded in acknowledgment and then raised his hammer. The air around them crackled. Rhodey took that as his cue to get himself and his highly-conductive metal armour out of the immediate area. He flew to where the Jaffa troops were clashing with the Ori.
The Jaffa were making good time with their quick assault and, from what he could see, it was only partially due to being fresh to the battlefield. It gave them an edge over the tired Ori soldiers, but the skill was clearly also there. They wore metal armour, but it wasn't quite as shiny as the Ori's had been and there were no decorative cloaks. The weapons they were carrying were shaped like staffs and shot what looked like small fireballs. Yeah, those were cool.

Their leader was relatively easy to spot. He was, quite literally, leading their charge. He was a large dark-skinned man who wielded his staff weapon with an ease that shouldn't have been possible with such a large, bulky weapon. His movements were fluid and confident – this obviously wasn't his first battle. Or even his forth.

And then the man looked up and saw War Machine. Rhodey was anticipating a lot of different reactions, but all the large man did was frown, before barking something at the men beside him. The men closed ranks, allowing him to pull back and duck out of the front line. He stepped off to the side, taking cover in the doorway of a Starbucks that was only recognizable by half a torn green canopy and a few scattered paper cups. Taking that as an invitation, Rhodey flew over and landed next to the man.

The alien glanced over briefly when Rhodey landed before firing at an Ori soldier. Rhodey raised his left palm and took out the one standing next to his target.

“So, uh, I'm Colonel Rhodes of the USAF,” he began, not really sure how someone went about introducing themselves to an alien commander.

“It would seem O'Neill was right,” the Jaffa leader said.

Rhodey blinked at the non-sequitur. “O'Neill? As in General O'Neill?”

“Indeed.”

“Uh, and what was he right about exactly?”

The other man looked back over to him, his face showing obvious disgust. “The new 'paint job', as you would call it, is hideous.”

Rhodey just stared at him for a few moments, before snorting. “Yeah, no one seems to like it. Me included. So, anyway, as I said I'm Colonel Rhodes, also known as, uh, War Machine.”

“And I am Teal'c of Chulak. You are here to provide aerial assistance?”

“Uh, yeah, and to scan the buildings for civilians. The Daedalus is evacuating them somehow.”

Teal’c of Chulak nodded. “No doubt they are using Asgard transporter beams to move them to a safer location.”

Rhodey was really glad he'd kept his faceplate down, because goggling at the alien commander wouldn't have made the best first impression. Transporter tech. Right, sure, why not?

He shook his head. “Anyway, I'll be in air and scanning buildings. If you have radio, I'm on channel three.”

The other man nodded and then shifted his grip on his staff weapon so he could fiddle with the US military-issue radio he had attached to his left shoulder plate. “Then I shall also be on channel three.”
Rhodey decided not to comment on that and just saluted before taking off into the air. Below him, he saw Teal’c return once more to his place at the front.

Colonel Greyson stopped in front of a classroom and looked out the window. Dusk was falling once again. He sighed and ran a hand over his face. The three hours he'd managed to pull together hadn't been nearly enough sleep to ward off exhaustion, only enough to ensure he didn't collapse at his post.

Steeling himself, he continued on towards the Command Centre, anxious to see what had changed in his absence.

The room was still a hive of activity. Major Schwartzentruber, his Second-in-Command was standing beside Colonel Pallin and talking to someone over the comm. Greyson strode over.

“...Copy that, Iron Patriot,” Schwartzentruber was saying. “I'll inform the Colonel when he returns. Ground Command out.”

“Major, I'm taking back command,” said Greyson as soon as the other man keyed off the radio.

“Yes, sir,” said his Second-in-Command with a salute. “Command is yours, Colonel.”

He took back the communicator from the Daedalus and slipped it over his ear. “Report, Major. Start with that last one from Iron Patriot.”

“Yes, sir. Iron Patriot reports that the Jaffa and Asgardian troops have managed to push the Ori back out of the southeastern part of the city and the area has been cleared of civilians except for those hiding inside Manitou Springs High School. He reports that according to Commander Teal’c, his men have expanded the shield of one of their, er larger flyers, to provide protection for the school in case the Ori redirect their troops to that part of town. Additionally, Colonel Rhodes reported he was running on empty and is therefore retiring from the field to recharge.”

Greyson nodded. He wasn't happy about the Asgardian and Jaffa troops barging into the battlefield the way they had. Though he was glad for the help, neither one of the groups fell into the chain of command and his lack of control over them was a thorn in his side no matter how much Pallin assured him that Teal’c was familiar with US military procedures and protocols. Wildcards were the last thing he wanted on a battlefield even if they were proving themselves to be assets.

“And the rest of the battle?”

“Sir, Major Gates of the 4th Infantry Division reports that–”

“WAHOO!”

“YES!!”

“Holy shit, we did it!”

The sudden exclamations and whoops of joy made all three military officers jump. As one they turned to the Science Corner, where the scientists were up and out of their seats, slapping each other on the back, and grinning, laughing and cheering loudly.
“I’m going to take that as a sign that things are looking up,” Greyson heard Pallin said under his breath.

Greyson nodded, frowning at the scientists for their unprofessional behavior.

The scientists, who’d up ‘till now been so quiet – well, mostly quiet – and focused that he’d barely known they were there outside the odd argument (Captain Hailey especially had seemed inclined to argue loudly with whomever it was they were conferencing with). Now the perpetual frowns and tired eyes had transformed into joy. Even Hailey looked elated.

She was also the first to remember herself. “Alright people, this is no time for celebration!” she barked, the smile not completely gone from her face, but enough to make her look stern. “We still have to build this thing. Siler!”

An air force sergeant with glasses slid up behind her. “Yes, ma’am.”

She looked over her shoulder and then stepped to the side to make room for him. “This is what we need built. Can you do it?”

The Sergeant frowned thoughtfully and leaned in closer. Greyson couldn't help feeling like the entire room was holding its breath as they waited for his verdict. Before he realized what he was doing, he found himself walking over to find out what was going on.

Just as he’d reached the table, Sergeant Siler nodded and stepped back. “Yes, ma’am, I think that between what we brought from Area 51 and what’s in the school shop classroom, I can build this.”

“The shop classroom?” a middle-aged balding man asked in confusion. “You think the shop classroom's got anything useful in it?”

Siler shrugged. “The shop teacher collects oddball, esoteric gadgets to tinker with and amuse the kids.”

Captain Hailey looked skeptical. “How exactly do you know that?”

“I've been dating her for five years now. I built her the electromagnet myself for our one year anniversary.”

Even Colonel Greyson couldn't help the way his jaw dropped.

Captain Hailey blinked once and then grinned. “Siler, when this is over I want to meet the woman who's crazy enough to date you.”

“Forget that, I wanna meet the woman who thinks getting an electromagnet as an anniversary gift is a reason to stick around!” exclaimed Lieutenant Miles. The rest of the scientists laughed.

Greyson wondered if scientists were always so easily derailed. He cleared his throat. “Captain, report.”

The scientists turned to him, looking surprised, as though they'd forgotten he was here. Hailey straightened. “Sorry, Colonel,” she said. “We seem to have finally made a breakthrough.”

“Yes, I gathered as much,” he said dryly. “What sort of breakthrough, Captain?”

Hailey smirked. “We've figured out how to disable the Ori stave weapons or, more precisely, keep them from firing, sir.”
He blinked. Okay, he acknowledged the unprofessional behavior was possibly justified. Not that he’d tell them that.
See, told ya this update would be faster than the last one. =D It's a bit shorter than the last few have been, but given how long those have been, that's not really saying much. Thanks for the kudos: both real and mental, lol!

PEACE

To absolutely no one's surprise, the moment the Victory shut down the Nox Super Dust Collector – as coined by General O'Neill – and the Ori soldiers' vanished weapons reappeared in their hands, chaos ensued. Suddenly finding themselves armed once again, the retreating soldiers naturally stopped retreating.

“This had better fucking work, McKay,” Cameron muttered through clenched teeth as he fired into the crowd of Ori soldiers that had decided to continue with their original mission. He was exhausted, hungry, and covered from head to tow in dirt, grime and blood – though thankfully most of it wasn't his own. On a good day he barely had the patience for the arrogant, egotistical scientist. Not only was this far from a good day, but he was once again taking fire from an enemy that out-gunned him and the meager forces in the city by, well, a lot.

“It'll work, now shut up. Stark, Sam, you guys and your volunteers ready?”

“Iron Man here, I'm go for green, or green for go, or whatever.”

“Falcon here, I'm green to green, in position.”

“Human Torch here, I'm ready when you are.”

“Spiderman he-ah crap!”

“Spiderman?”

“Hey, kid, you alright?”

Cameron cursed as he ducked out of the way of another stave blast. He really hadn't missed this. Immediately he fired back with a tight controlled burst of rounds. Their job was to contain, to keep the Ori soldiers from gaining back any ground until McKay's group could activate their Stave Neutralizer. The Ori soldiers, however, seemed to have discovered a new determination – or possibly desperation. Cameron had to stop firing when a thick volley of stave blasts were unleashed at him and his men, pinning them down behind a pile of debris that had once been the side of an office building.

“What's the hold up?” he demanded into the comm.

“Sorry, sorry, one of them saw me. These guys don't joke around, do they? Whoo. Luckily I've got my new metal-armed buddy whose name is apparently the Asset, except when some guy named Steve calls him Bucky, so maybe it's Bucky... He's a little confused, but totally baddass.”
“That's great and I really don't care. ARE YOU IN POSITION?”

“Oh, sorry. Yeah—I mean, yes, I am.”

“Good. Rogers, you ready?” There was a pause. “Captain Rogers?!”

“Did... did he just say there's a man with a metal arm named Bucky fighting with him?”

Cameron opened his mouth to order them to just get on with it, when a single stave blast shot between a gap in the debris, skimming the top of the concrete mound. He ducked and covered his head as pieces of concrete rained over him. “Guys, now is not the time!”

“You can ask him later, after we've made it so that the Ori soldiers can't kill him.”

“JARVIS says the Winter Soldier showed up at the tower looking for you, Cap, and then left with Bruce to help defend the city.”


“Finally. I'll let O'Neill know.”

Cameron moved his arms and low crawled up the debris pile, careful not to disturb any of the precariously balanced mess. He peered through the now much-larger gap. The Ori soldiers were apparently done hesitating. Having established that their weapons were in working condition, they were now advancing with a vengeance. He shouldered his weapon once more and pointed it through the gap.

“Don't stop firing,” he called to the rest of his unit and the army units standing with them. “We can't let them take back so much as a single foot! Stand your ground and prepare to get down on my signal!”

They didn't acknowledge his order verbally, but it didn't escape Cameron's notice that the fire from their side increased. He looked to the Ori soldiers, sighting down someone who looked like he could be a squad leader and squeezed his own trigger.

Meanwhile, McKay came back on the comm. “Alright, people, we've got the go-ahead. Rogers, spread your drones out into position.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cameron was vaguely aware of the movements of drones high above his head. He could see the Ori soldiers noticing as well. A few idiots even tried firing at the drones. He took advantage of their distraction and fired at them.

“Okay, everyone, let me know when you've got visual on the drones.”

“Falcon here. I've got visual. Drones are in position.”

“This is Johnny Storm. I've got drones right where we want them.”

“Spiderman here. Those are so cool! Also, they're here and, um, in position.”

“Iron Man here. Got visual, way to go, Rogers.”

“Good. Rogers, adjust the electro-magnetic frequency. Mitchell, you might want to warn your
“Got it, McKay.” Cameron ducked down behind the pile and switched his comm to the general frequency. “Colonel Mitchell to all units, I repeat, this is Colonel Mitchell to all units. Prepare to drop and cover on my mark.”

He received a rapid succession of acknowledgments and then quickly switched to the Victory’s channel. “Mitchell to Victory. We're ready down here, just give us the mark for countdown.”

It would’ve been much easier had the Victory been using a regular comm channel, but adjusting communications to work with Earth radio hadn't been one of the most urgent things on McKay's to-do list and so Cameron was stuck relaying orders and hoping they all got their timing right.

“McKay here. I'll give you the count of eight then. On zero, turn the stave neutralizers on. Eight...”

Mitchell switched comm channels. “Mitchell here!” he yelled into the comm. “Drop on my mark. Six... five... four... three... two... one... MARK!”

There was a loud clatter and a collection of low grunts as the soldiers around him dropped to the ground. For a beat, nothing happened.

And then there were several small explosions from the ranks of the Ori soldiers. Men screamed in pain. Then more screamed in alarm. However, the explosions seemed to be contained. The ground wasn't even shaking. Cameron motioned to his men to stay down as he crawled back up the debris pile to peek over the top.

The Ori soldiers had, once again, stalled in their advance as they stared in horror at their comrades. There were two soldiers right in front he could see clearly, one staring down in shock at the bloody stumps that had been his hands, a shard of metal embedded deep into his skull. Mitchell winced, wondering how the man was even still alive. Next to him, another soldier was screaming in pain as he stared in horror at the bloody, mangled mess that was his dangling right arm. More burns were seared into his armour.

Cameron took a shaky breath and hit his comm. “Mitchell to Victory.”

“O'Neill here. How's it looking out there, Colonel?”

He swallowed down the bile. “It's definitely working, but it's option number two. The staves are blowing up.”

He head the General's intake of breath, but his voice, when he spoke again, was calm and certain. “I'll pass that on to the SGC. You and your teams continue to round the ones who can move back towards Central Park. The Black Widow is working on calming the Hulk down so that they can be settled there safely.”

“Copy that, Mitchell out.”

Finding the group he was told to report to was easy. They'd taken over the entire football field – the former athlete in Rhodey winced at the damage being done to the turf. The air force officer could
see the logic, however, of setting up in the only area with bright, overhead lighting for the
scientists and mechanics to work in. It barely resembled a sporting arena anymore, but rather some
form of outdoor hanger. One from Area 52, no less, because the four F-302s lined up across the
field looked even more alien when they were at rest and swarmed by scientists and engineers.

After taking in the chaotic scene, he scanned its edges. The Iron Patriot Support Team was
standing off to the side. They waved up at him to get his attention and he shot towards him. Staff
Sergeant Warren gestured to a thick plank of wood with wide motions, while the airman who'd
been waiting with them ran off. Rhodey carefully landed on the plank, looking down in surprise as
it sank several inches under his weight.

“Sorry, sir,” said the Staff Sergeant. “The scientists decided that the lighting was too important to
try a different location.”

Rhodey slid his faceplate up. “Yeah, I get that, Sergeant. I'd kinda rather no one got any wires
crossed that would make me accidentally explode.”

His Head Technician, Lieutenant Young was already scuttling around the suit, confident hands
helping him remove the gauntlets. “Don't worry, sir,” he said, amusement evident in his voice.
“From what I've understood, what they're building is more of a jammer than anything. Shouldn't
explode unless you let something hit you, sir.”

The front of the suit slid open with a hiss and Rhodey stepped out. “That's reassuring, Lieutenant.”

“Electrocution, on the other hand...”

Rhodey sighed and looked to the west. Even in the darkness of just-past-midnight, the cloudy sky
was noticeably darker there. “Right. And I suppose these jammer gadget things aren't water-
proof?”

“Not yet, sir. Captain Hailey and her team are working on it now.”

Rhodey raised an eyebrow. “Captain Hailey? As in, from Area 51?”

The Lieutenant looked up at him in surprise. “Apparently, sir.”

He was about to explain how he'd come into contact with her after the battle at Area 51 when the
airmen who'd run off before was back, a man wearing the fatigues and insignia of the engineering
corps in tow with a large toolbox.

“Colonel Rhodes,” said the man with a quick salute. “Sergeant Siler, sir. I'm here to install the
modifications to your battle armour.”

Rhodey returned his salute. “Then get to it, Sergeant.”

“Yes sir.” He hurried over to the armour and placed his toolbox down next to it. Then he paused
and turned back to Rhodey. “It'll probably scratch the paintwork, sir.”

“Please do.”

Siler nodded, completely serious. “Yes, sir.”

“Tired of it already, sir?” Lieutenant Young asked him as he headed over to join the engineer.

Rhodey let out a deprecating chuckle. “It's been made abundantly clear to me that the only people
who like it are the damned politicians who thought it was a good idea in the first place."

His team laughed. They'd never really spoken of it – or at least not around him – but none of them had really liked the change from War Machine to Iron Patriot.

“Sir,” said Sergeant Warren as he wheeled the charger over. “There's food prepared inside the cafeteria and cots laid out in one of the first floor classrooms if you'd like to eat and rest. We'll find you when the modifications are done.”

Rhodey nodded. “Thanks, Sergeant. I'll leave you to it then.”

What he really wanted to do was collapse into a cot, but experience had taught him that food and drink needed to come first. Because he'd need the energy and there was no guarantee that he'd get a chance to eat later.

It had felt strange to be inside a school cafeteria again. The colours were too bright and the benches not built for adult men to sit at. Someone had used the school's kitchen to cook a small selection of food that weren't standard-issue MREs, which Rhodey appreciated. He served himself a plateful of spaghetti and meatballs and grabbed a bottle of orange juice.

There weren't a lot of people in the cafeteria, most of them army. A group of men in the corner were speaking Russian in low tones. Rhodey recognized the same symbol on their uniform sleeves he’d seen in Antarctica, right above the Russian flag. He blinked at it for a moment. One of the men noticed his gaze and nodded to him, raising a bottle of water in greeting. Rhodey had his hands full with his tray, but he nodded back before heading on to an empty table.

As hungry as he was, he was also too tired to drum up much of an appetite and only managed to get through half his plate before his energy began to flag. He didn't notice anyone approaching him until the chair across from him was being slid away and the said someone was sitting down.

“Colonel Rhodes, it's a pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

Rhodey blinked at the blonde woman sitting across from him in confusion. She had a severe, though appealing, face and bright yellow-blonde hair tied back into a ponytail. He was sure he'd never seen her before in his life. Although her voice did somehow sound familiar...

And then he realized where he'd heard that voice. He smiled and held his hand out. “Colonel Danvers, sorry, it's been an incredibly long, uh, day... days?”

She laughed as she shook his hand. “No kidding. This has been a long day even for us.”

“Well, now there's putting a perspective on things,” he said with a tired chuckle. “Even the people who specialize in weird think it's weird. How long have you been doing this anyway?”

“You mean flying F-302s? About four years.”

“Wow, that's about as long as I've been War Machine... What's the weirdest thing you've had to get used to?”

“The silence.” At his confused frown, she shrugged. “Star Wars is shit. Explosions don't make any sound in space. The only thing you can hear is the chatter on the comms and reverberation from the guns as they vibrate through the hull. But everything else? It's like the rest of the world is on mute. That took some getting used to.”

Rhodey felt his jaw drop. “You've fought in space?!”
She smirked. “Sure, the F-302s can do standard aerial, but they were designed primarily for space combat. They were originally called the X-302s, but I think someone got afraid Disney would start demanding royalties if people started affectionately referring to them as X-wings.”

Rhodey laughed. “Well, either way, even out-gunned you guys flew well against those Ori flyers.”

“Thanks. The Ori might have bigger and more effective guns, but they're actually not that difficult to out-fly. My squadron did two tours aboard the Daedalus, took on the wraith a few times. Now those are a bitch to deal with. Their flyers' weapons are basically a sort of laser beam, so not as powerful as the Ori's weapons, but with a much faster rate of fire. We call them darts because of their shape, but also 'cause they're small and fast, zip around like fucking insects.”

“The wraith?”

Danvers opened her mouth and then hesitated, frowning as she seemed to realize what she was saying – and to whom. “Sorry, I'm not sure I can talk about that. Technically, it's still classified.”

Rhodey nodded. “You know General O'Neill gave me the overview while I flew with him to Antarctica.”

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. “You've been to the Antarctic base?”

“Yup. But no harm if you don't think you can talk about it. I get the classified thing.”

“Sorry, Colonel.”

“Call me Rhodey.”

“Then I'm Carol.”

Rhodey smiled. “So if you can't tell me about the wraith, maybe you can answer the question I've been wondering since I first met up with you guys.”

“Ask away,” she said, looking amused.

“Why the Snake Skinners?”

Her answering smile was full of teeth.
spaceships on the tip of our tongues. In fact, having skimmed a variety of social media sites myself, I don't think anyone in the world is talking about anything else.”

“You spent quite a few hours doing that yesterday and this morning, Richard. What seems to the general sense you got about what people are feeling right now?”

“Well, Hillary, the reactions seem to be unsurprisingly varied. There are certainly a lot of very scared people out there, and a lot of people who are angry with the government for keeping such a huge secret from the general public. However, there are also a large number of people who are simply excited about what they're seeing, and what it could mean for the future. Spaceships, laser guns, aliens: it's like something out of a science fiction movie.”

“It is, isn't it? I'll admit, there's a part of me that just can't wait to see what else this Stargate Program has in store for us. Now, you were involved with the coverage of the Chittauri invasion in New York. How does public reaction compare to that episode?”

“Now that's an interesting question, and it is actually quite difficult to compare the two. The Chittauri invasion was sudden, brutal and over relatively quickly. By the time most of the world heard about it, it was over, which is very different to these drawn-out battles. If I was to take a stab at a guess, however, I'd say the actual sentiment is much more optimistic. I didn't actually see a whole lot of doomsayers, people who didn't trust that the Ori will be defeated. It seemed to be more of a matter of how long it will take and just what the cost will be...”

Rain battered them continuously. Its rhythmic pattering was a constant, insistent companion even though their skin was already so soaked they could barely feel the drops. The wind, however, was relentless and contained a chill that made them shiver as it whipped at their faces and sneaked beneath their armor.

The clouds had been steadily gathering throughout the evening, but the storm had come suddenly, a slight smell of moisture in the air the only warning Teal'c received before the heavens released buckets of what could've poetically been called cleansing rain. It didn't feel particularly cleansing to him. It felt mostly wet.

It was, however, steadily chipping away at the Ori soldiers' resolve. Their steps had flagged further and their aim gotten even worse. He felt that it would not take many more straws to break the back of this camel, as the Tau'ri would say.

Lightning streaked across the sky. High above him, he heard Thor's laughter. The Thunder God appeared to be the only one enjoying this turn in the weather.

Teal'c aimed, squinting as he attempted to see through the raindrops. Several plasma bolts shot towards him from the darkness. One seared the ground three steps from his feet, the rest went wildly over his head. He fired his staff weapon. And then adjusted the aim slightly to the right and fired again. The first blast missed its target's torso, but burned across armor on the Ori soldier's side. The second one blasted through his battle-worn chestplate armor.

An explosion rocked the ground and Teal'c glanced to his right where tall flames and billowing clouds of black smoke reached towards the heavens. He quickly decided it it was far enough away not to be a concern and turned back to the enemy in front of him. He ducked behind the building he
was using for cover to avoid a plasma blast and then spun back to turn his staff weapon in the
direction it had come from.

A succession of smaller explosions shook the ground and threw his aim off. His shot went wide,
hitting the large storefront window behind the soldiers. It shattered, showering the Ori soldiers
with glass. As the soldiers ducked down to cover their heads, a smoking mannequin fell into the
group. Teal'c fired several more shots.

The rain muffled their screams.

The survivors scrambled backwards, retreating to a less open space. Two scrambled over the
broken glass and into the store. He motioned to two of the Jaffa beside him to go in after them. The
rest of his warriors followed him as he left their cover and charged forward, staff weapon firing.

The charge was a risk; they were in a small shopping district and there was very little cover other
than the shops themselves.

As the Ori soldiers retreated, a figure suddenly fell into their midst. Teal'c heard shouts of surprise
and then screams of pain. He picked up speed, taking advantage of this new distraction. The
soldiers at the rear were clearly confused as to where they were supposed to be aiming their
weapons – in their panic, they hesitated and that was enough for Teal'c and his warriors to catch
them.

In close combat, the Jaffa had the clear advantage.

Teal'c adjusted the grip on his staff weapon and stabbed it at the first Ori soldier's chest. The Ori
soldier gasped as the air was knocked out of him. A further swipe of the staff against his head
knocked him out. And then he set on the next one.

Before long he found himself at the side of the figure who'd fallen from the roof. All it took was a
glimpse in the darkness for him to confirm it was one of the Asgardians. This one was a man of
considerable girth that seemed to barely weigh him down as he fought his way through the ranks of
Ori soldiers. The stray plasma shots lucky enough to hit his armor, bounced off harmlessly. The
Asgardian's own sword strikes were considerably less harmless, cutting through the Ori soldiers'
armor as though it were aluminum foil.

It was the subtlest advanced weaponry Teal'c had ever seen.

Teal'c fought his way to the Asgardian's side. The Ori soldiers were clumsy as they fumbled with
their staves in an attempt to emulate the Jaffa warriors they found themselves facing. The path was
made all the more treacherous by fallen bodies laying across the streets.

Three death gliders flew over their heads, near invisible in the darkness of the storm except for
flashes from their weapons as they fired at the ground forces.

Finally, he reached the Asgardian, falling naturally into a defensive stance at his back. He
shouldered his staff weapon and fired at an Ori soldier, who fell to the ground with barely a
scream, a scorched, smoking hole in his chest.

“I am Teal'c of Chulak,” he called over his shoulder. “Commander of the Jaffa army.”

The Asgardian deflected a stave blast with his shield and looked back over his shoulder at Teal'c, a
large grin on his face. “Well met Teal'c of Chulak. You and your people are impressive warriors! I
am Volstagg of Asgard.”
Teal'c nodded in acknowledgment. Then he swung his staff weapon to intercept a stave. A twist of his wrist had the weapon flying out of the other soldier's grasp. A single punch to the head with his gloved fist crushed the soldier's nose and sent him falling backwards into another soldier. Using the second one's surprise, Teal'c jabbed his staff weapon into his neck. Then he shot him in the face.

His radio crackled to life.

“War Machine to Teal'c. Do you copy?”

Teal'c crouched and released three staff blasts into the crowd of Ori soldiers before keying his radio. “This is Teal'c. I copy. What news is there War Machine?”

“The modifications are complete and I'm returning to your position, ETA approximately six and a half minutes. The scientists have built some sort of device that disrupts the function of the Ori's stave weapons. But, according to the guys in New York, it makes the weapons explode, so prepare to pull your people back so they don't get caught up in the backlash.”

“Understood, War Machine. I will inform the Asgardian warriors as well as my own.”

“Oh, you've made contact with them?”

“Affirmative. Advise me when we are to pull back. Teal'c out.”

He glanced over his shoulder, taking note of how the Asgardian had stilled. “Did you hear that?” he asked.

Volstagg met his eyes, his glittering with excitement. “Aye, that I did. The Midgardians have a clever scheme. I will inform the others.”

Teal'c nodded once and then ran forward, into the crowd of soldiers and Jaffa warriors, swinging his staff weapon mercilessly into any Ori soldier unfortunate enough to get in his way. He fell into step with one of the squad leaders.

“Hestus, spread the word among the warriors. They are to prepare to fall back immediately on my word.”

Hestus, a young and ambitious warrior, simply met his eyes and nodded. “I'll spread the word, Commander.”

“Good.” He knew it was impossible for the command to spread to all the Jaffa in the middle of battle, but he hoped it would spread to enough that the rest would simply follow automatically.

Time passed in the chaos of battle. Some indeterminate period of time later, a particular large bolt of lightning streaked down from the sky, hitting an unseen target somewhere several blocks down behind a tall building. It illuminated a dark figure in the sky. Moments later, his radio crackled again.

Teal'c keyed it without prompting. “War Machine, you have arrived.”

There was a pause. “Um, yes, I have. I mean, I'm in position. Pull your people back, Commander Teal'c.”

“To what range?”
“Not far. A couple of feet away should be fine. The blasts aren't large, mostly concentrated around the immediate area around the stave weapon and its wielder, but Command wants to minimize the risk of collateral damage to our own people. And, uh, yours.”

Teal'c's lips quirked in amusement. “I appreciate the sentiment.”

“You have two minutes to get as clear as you can before I activate the device. War Machine out.”

Teal'c took a deep breath. “JAFFA KREE!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. Around him, he noticed his warriors turn their heads if they were able. “Fall back!”

More than he had expected appeared to have been ready for the order, for it was obeyed quickly and with very little confusion. The key to a successful retreat was to have a path already mentally mapped out, and most of the men and woman took only seconds to extricate themselves from the battle and fall back. The Ori seemed to be the only ones confused by the Jaffa's sudden retreat, hesitating between pressing their advantage and wondering how this sudden advantage had come about.

With space between them and Ori army, Teal'c suddenly realized the rain had stopped and sky was lightening. Another dawn.

“War Machine to Teal’c. Do you copy?”

Teal’c absently keyed his radio as the Ori soldiers in front finally began to fire at them. Jaffa warriors fired back. “Jaffa, keep them from advancing!” he ordered before turning his head to speak into the radio. “Teal’c here. I copy. The device?”

“Primed and ready. Initiating in five... four... three... two... one...mark!”

“Jaffa, take cover!” he bellowed, throwing himself behind an upturned and dented mailbox.

Three more plasma bolts shot in their direction. And then there was a series of small explosions, followed by screams of surprise and pain. Some of the screaming didn't end with the explosions.

Carefully, so as not to expose himself to enemy fire just yet, Teal’c peeked over the top of the mailbox. The carnage was wide-spread, more so than any one of their strikes thus far had managed. The smell of blood and charred flesh hung heavy in the air.

The Ori soldiers who were still in one piece were staring at their comrades in horror. Screams and moans accompanied their stunned silence. Bombardments from the Daedalus stopped.

Teal’c stood, his exhausted muscles protesting the movement. He winced as a sharp pain burned across his back. Had he been hit and not noticed? It didn't matter. Not yet. Gritting his teeth, he raised his staff weapon and forced his limbs to move steadily forward without limping.

“Ori soldiers!” he called out, his voice echoing in the near silence. Heads shot up to stare at him. “We have turned your weapons against you. Continue to fight, and you will die before you take a single step. Surrender, and you will not be harmed any further.”

He paused, waiting for their new situation to sink in. He saw despair settle into their eyes as they looked at the armed Jaffa warriors closing in, saw the moment their spirits truly broke, and knew that they needed only a push to decide upon their next step.

Once he had been nothing but a warrior, known nothing but violence and fear as a method of persuasion. Then he had met the Tau'ri and joined SG1. If he had learned one thing in his time with
them, it was that in order divert someone from violence, it often helped to turn their motivations elsewhere. When faced with circumstances such as this, Teal'c always found himself asking one thing: what would Daniel Jackson do?

The answer, it turned out, wasn't difficult to find.

“All of you have families at home,” he called out again. “Ones you have not seen in some time. Who, I wonder, will help your wives and mothers plow the fields and bring in the harvest? Who will help keep predators away from your flocks? Your children are growing up without you and, when you return, you will return to some of them as strangers. Do you truly think they will find more comfort in knowing you died senselessly in the name of your gods, than they would in your arms?”

He once again paused, watched as the battlehaze and bloodlust gradually left the soldiers' eyes and was replaced with weariness, fatigue, and even tears.

“Surrender, and you shall perhaps see them once again.”

The moments that followed seemed to stretch for far too long and Teal'c wondered if perhaps his words hadn't been enough. He was a warrior of weapons, after all, and not a warrior of words like Daniel Jackson. His words had moved people into revolution, spurred them on to turn against their gods. But he didn't think that would work with the worshipers of the Ori. Not yet, at least.

And then he heard the most blessed sound, as the first Ori stave clattered to the ground. It seemed like the sign the rest had been waiting for. More clattered to the ground in quick succession. Some of the tension left Teal'c's shoulders, but he did not yet allow himself to sag. He was aware of a figure descending from the sky even as lower-ranked Jaffa hurried forward to begin gathering the discarded weapons. Sure enough, moments later, one of the squad commanders stepped up to him and spoke into his ear.

“Commander, one of the Asgardians approaches,” she said, her voice holding only a hint of awe. Having seen the Asgardians both on-screen and now witnessed their might in person, he didn't begrudge her the awe.

“Let him through,” he said. Having caught a glimpse of red, he had a fair idea who it was.

He scanned the throng of Ori soldiers, watching for any signs of last-minute heroics – he was, after all, a member of SG1 and thus intimately familiar with such acts. The eyes and posture of the Ori soldiers, however, showed fear and resignation. But there was also relief – the battle had not been kind to them either. Tired, hungry and in pain, they didn't have the energy for anymore fighting.

Teal'c turned away from the defeated enemy, nodding to the senior squad leader to take over for him as he went to greet Thor of the Asgardians.

It was almost inexplicable to think this was an alternate version of the Thor of Asgard Teal'c had known. The Asgard had been warriors, though with their quiet, soft-spoken manners and small, delicate-looking stature, it was easy to mistake them for merely scientists. This Thor, with his wild hair and battle-tarnished armor, looked the part of the warrior. Had Thor of Asgard once looked like this? If so, it was easy to see how he and his fellows could have been mistaken for gods. The air around this being still sparked with electricity as he strode towards Teal'c, an elated grin on his face.

“My friend, I assume you to be Teal'c?” he exclaimed loudly.
Teal'c inclined his head with a slight smile. “Indeed, I am Teal'c of Chulak, of the Free Jaffa Nation. It is an honour to meet you, Thor of Asgard.”

Thor's grin impossibly widened. “The honour is mine, Teal'c of Chulak! Your warriors fought well and your words were truly inspired. To be true, a warrior who forgets those he left behind is only half a man.”

Someone behind Thor cleared their throat. He winced. “Or half a woman.”

Teal'c felt the corners of his mouth twitch. It was reassuring to see he wasn't the only one having to adapt to new circumstances. “I thank you. I had a wise and noble teacher, who taught me that some battles can better be won with words than with weapons. It has been an honour to fight beside warriors of Asgard once again. Your strength is impressive indeed.”

Thor frowned and exchanged confused looks with his fellow Asgardians. “Once again? Have we fought side by side before?”

Teal'c raised an eyebrow. Could it be that this Thor was not aware he was in an alternate dimension? “Not by the side of your people specifically. However, the Asgard of this dimension were allies of the Tau'ri.”

Four other Asgardians came to stand next to Thor. “This dimension?” the only woman asked. “What mean you by that?”

Teal'c hesitated for a moment. “I believe that is a discussion best left for another time, when we have more time and comfort. It is a long tale and requires the presence of my team to be told properly.”

The Asgardians nodded in understanding.

“Tis true, a proper tale cannot be told in the midst of a battlefield,” said Volstagg.

“Better it be left for the feast that follows,” the woman added.

“You speak truth, Lady Sif,” Thor said, eyes sparkling with delight. “Very well. But be warned, we shall hold you to the telling, Teal'c of Chulak.”

Teal'c smiled. “It will be my honour.”

It looked like another sleepless night. Pepper was sorely tempted to start counting sheep, just to see if it would work. Nothing else had.

She wasn't even sure what time it was, but it was definitely closer to 'tomorrow' than 'tonight'. She'd actually managed to fall asleep for a few hours at one point, but had been woken by something clanging to the floor in the hallway and hadn't managed to fall asleep since. She wasn't the only one, either, if the number of drooping heads staring dully at the television was any indication. The sound was off, but she could make out the continuous news broadcast that was looping the same images, interviews and information. Over the course of the previous day, someone had managed to dig up an old photo of Daniel Jackson as well as a very old – and no doubt very abbreviated – bio of the man, which was on-screen now along with a picture of Cassie.

Pepper looked to her right and smiled. Caleb and Madison were both cuddled around Jeannie, both
obviously relieved to have her in their sights once again. Jeannie had spent most of the previous day working in one of the science labs, which had left Madison on-edge and restless all day, and Caleb only barely managing to maintain a calm facade for his daughter's sake.

When Jeannie had finally joined them for dinner in the cafeteria, she'd been all smiles. To Madison's delight, she'd run up to them, picked her up and twirled her high in the air, the expression on her face one Pepper knew well. Tony got the exact same expression after a major breakthrough. Some of the stifling, anxious atmosphere in the room had lifted at the sight. It had hardly been a secret where Jeannie had disappeared to all day, after all.

The hope hadn't gone, but after hours with no news, the anxiousness had returned.

Pepper now at least knew where Tony was, thanks to Jeannie, but she wished he was here. She longed to have someone to hold onto, someone to help alleviate the tightness in her chest.

She might've possibly finally been drifting off to sleep when the intercom crackling to life made her jump.

“Attention all personnel, this is General Landry speaking. Word has just come through from the battlefield, the Ori army at Manitou Springs has surrendered. I repeat, the Ori army has surrendered. General O'Neill reports the same from New York. The battle is over. Good job, people. You've all done very well and I'm proud of each and every one of you, but this no time to relax just yet. I want all medical personnel report to the infirmary and all remaining SG teams to the Briefing Room. That's all medical personnel to the infirmary and all remaining SG teams to the Briefing Room. Landry out.”

Pepper's eyes widened as she listened to the General. Around her, people were shaking sleep out of their minds and eyes. Dazed, she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Could she be dreaming?

“Did he just say...?” someone asked quietly.

Cheers from the hallway answered everyone's questions. They were followed by the sound of running footsteps.

Tears sprung to Pepper's eyes and she sobbed around a sudden lump in her throat. She brought a hand to her mouth to stifle the sound. It was over. The fear, the grief, horror and heartsickness...

Arms circled her shoulders and she felt curls brush against her cheek. She looked up into Jeannie's teary eyes. “It's really over?” she asked, needing the confirmation from someone other than an intangible voice.

“It's over,” said Jeannie with a small smile. The she winced. “Well, the fighting is, anyway.”

Pepper chuckled. “True. I'm not sure I want to go back to New York right now.”

“I don't blame you one bit. There are definitely advantages to living in Vancouver. No one ever attacks Vancouver.”

Something brushed against Pepper's thigh and then poked her in the ribs. Looking down, she watched as Madison settled into her mother's lap, Jeannie's arm instinctively coming up to wrap around her.

“Mommy, are we going to go home now?” Madison asked as Caleb shuffled in to settle next to Jeannie.
Jeannie smiled down at the little girl. “Yes, Maddy, we'll be going home soon. Not right away, but soon.”

Madison nodded, her face serious. “And will Uncle Mer be coming to visit?”

“Oh I'm sure he will. I talked to him earlier and apparently he remembered to bring presents this time.”

Madison's eyes widened with delight. “Yay! Uncle Mer is the bestest!”

The three adults laughed.

“Well, since he did just help save the world, I suppose I can allow that,” said Jeannie.
Hey guys! Can't believe there's only one more chapter of this story to go. It's both sort of sad and also rather exciting. Anyway, thanks so much for all your comments and kudos. And to Jon Harper for looking over this chapter.

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THE TAU'RI

“... and it looks like we've managed to resume our connection with the NBC New York studios. Chuck, Sibilia, it's good to see you again. The last thing we saw before the feed cut out it looked like the whole building was shaking. Is everyone okay over there?”

“It's good to see you too, Leroy. We're not entirely sure what was going on, but it felt like there were explosions coming from the subway tunnels, which knocked out one of our emergency generators. Thankfully, our resourceful tech crew managed to patch it up and now we're back in business.”

“As you can imagine from Chuck's description, it was pretty harrowing there for a while. However, we've been very lucky and there've only been a few minor injuries.”

“That's good to hear. Is it just my imagination, or has it quieted down over there?”

“It has, Leroy. We've been unable to get ahold of anyone, but the bombardment has definitely stopped.”

“In fact, I don't think I've ever seen New York this quiet. It's sort of eerie. Unfortunately, we're too far away from the action to see exactly what's going on, but we did get these images to show you. They were taken by our staff photographers about half an hour ago from the roof of this building.”

“...Wow, that looks even more like a pyramid up close.”

“Yes, yes it does. A slightly beat-up pyramid, but definitely a pyramid.”

“I guess Erich von Daniken is getting the last laugh today, although I bet he never expected this.”

“Probably not, Leroy. However, the pyramid's not the only interesting thing in the photos. Do you see those small lights in the frame? There should be a close-up in the photos...”

“Yes, I think so, Chuck... Ah, there it is. Are those the same lights that destroyed the Ori ships in orbit?”

“They're from the black and silver alien ship hovering above New York. From what we can tell, there are two sizes. Even from up close they're quite beautiful.”

“But deadly.”
“Oh definitely. I'm glad they're on our side.”

“Well, unfortunately, that's all we have for you at the moment. However, Vanity Fair's Christine Everhart is currently making her way towards Central Park on foot to try and find out more about what's going on, so hopefully we should have more information for you soon.”

“That's very brave of her. Everyone here in the studio certainly wishes her luck. Thank you Chuck, Sibilia. For your sake, and the sake of everyone still in New York, we hope the worst really is over.”

“Thank you, Leroy.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Well, folks, that was Chuck Scarborough and Sibilia Vargas in New York. And once again, if you have family or loved ones in New York, the Office of Emergency Response is maintaining an alphabetical list of civilians rescued from the city on their twitter feed, #outtaNY. For civilians evacuated from Manitou Springs, we've been informed the lists are a bit slower in coming due to the large number of people being sent directly to hospitals and medical centres across the south-west. There are also rumours of shielded safehouses having been created in the northern parts of the city that have been cut off from all communications due to power outages. However, Major Paul Davis from the Homeworld Security Office assures us that every effort is being made to compile that information as quickly as possible and post it to the office’s brand new facebook and twitter accounts, #safeManitouSprings.”
triage centre. The hospital itself has canceled all other surgeries for the day, and all emergency cases are being redirected to other hospitals in the city so that the hospital’s staff can concentrate solely on patients being sent in from Manitou Springs.”

“Now, that seems to be quite the distance. How exactly are they getting to Roswell?”

“Hillary, the answer to that should be in the footage I sent you. We’ve heard mention of it before, but I really think it needs to be seen to be believed.”

“We’re putting that footage up now... Okay, there it is.”

“...Wow. Is that a transporter?!”

“Yes, Richard, it is. Instantaneous transportation from one place to another is apparently no longer the exclusive purview of science fiction television.”

“I can feel the airline industry bracing itself already.”

“Haha, that’s probably true, Hillary. When I think of how many long hours I spent in a car to get here when there’s a way it could’ve been done in seconds and without needing to deal with traffic...”

“So, Eugene, describe what it’s like at the Medical Centre?”

“Well, Hillary, the Medical Centre’s a beehive of activity. It's all hands on deck for the hospital staff and many of the nurses, doctors, and technicians have been on their feet for well over twenty-four hours at this point. The same can be said for the army of volunteers helping out. High schools in the city have given their students a free pass from classes today if they're volunteering at either the hospitals or the nearby sporting arena, where injured not requiring hospitalization are being transported to. Food, blankets and extra medical supplies are pouring in from the Red Cross, charities across the cities, and other hospitals. Everyone is working hard to make this operation run as smoothly and efficiently as possible.”

“That’s inspiring to hear, Eugene. Did you manage to talk to any of the evacuees from Manitou Springs?”

“Yes, Richard, I did. Most of them are shaken, but relieved to be out of the war zone. More than a few expressed surprise at being alive at all. All of them described being rescued by US marines and then transported to the USS Daedalus, where they were quickly examined by a medic and then sent to the Medical Center.”

“And CBS News will have that full report complete with interviews from the survivors during their Emergency Broadcast starting at nine-thirty.”

“Well, Eugene, it looks like we’re out of time. Thank you for your report. I’m sure we'll be talking to you later.”

“You're welcome Hillary, Richard. I'll be talking to you later.”

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, that was Eugene Kent in Roswell, New Mexico.”

“Proving that someone in the Air Force has a sense of humour.”

“Yes, indeed. And now we turn you to Mark Malina for your daily weather repor–”
“–Wait, hang on. We've got new information coming in...”

“Sorry, Mark, it looks like the weather report will have to wait. It seems there's something going on in Washington. For more information on this, we're turning the mike over to CBS reporter Naomi Patel, who's been camped out in front of the Pentagon for the past two days. Naomi, what's going on?”

“...”

“Naomi, we seem to be having some technical difficulties. Are you there?”

“Sorry, yes I am, Hillary. I'm not quite sure what exactly is going on just yet, but about ten minutes ago a junior officer came out and told the assembled press and civilians that General George Hammond would be out shortly.”

“Wait, civilians? Are you saying it's more than just the press camped out in front of the Pentagon?”

“That's right, Richard. Ever since General Hammond's initial press conference, the area in front of the Pentagon has steadily filled with people. City police have had to close down the roads leading up to the Pentagon due to the size of the group waiting to hear war reports and announcements in person. As you know, there have been a number of updates over the past twenty-four hours, the last one being at approximately 11:30 pm last night when General Hammond announced their science teams were working on a way to overcome the Ori soldier's technological advantage.”

“I guess this is where we find out whether or not they've been successful.”

“Most likely, Hillary, yes. Okay, there's General George Hammond now.”

“...”

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I can't say how much it warms my heart to see so many of you anxious to hear how the men and women in the armed forces are doing in New York and Manitou Springs. The last time I stood on this podium, it was to tell you our scientists were hard at work inventing a way to overcome the Ori soldier's technological superiority. And thanks to the tireless efforts of our teams, led by Doctors Rodney McKay and Captain Jennifer Hailey, I am here to tell you they were successful. I would also like to extend special thanks to civilians Tony Stark and Jeannie Miller, whose help was also vital to the team's success.

Now, before you start cheering, that's not all folks. But before I tell you the real news, on behalf of everyone from the President's Office, Homeworld Security and Stargate Command, I would like to thank each and every one of you for your support. From those citizens of New York who refused evacuation in order to help build barricades, to those helping at the hospitals and evacuation sites, to those of you holding vigil and praying for our soldiers in the field and the civilians they've been fighting to protect.

I would also like to take this time to officially thank our extraterrestrial allies, the Jaffa and the Tok'ra for their assistance in both Manitou Springs and New York City. And, of course, our terrestrial allies, specifically those in Russia and the People's Republic of China, who have finally given their permission to release the names of the brave ship commanders who fought alongside ours within the Solar System.

So, with that in mind, I would like to commend Colonel Ivana Petrovska of the Illaya Muromet and her crew for their brave defense of our planet and send our deepest sympathies to the families of
Colonel Jiang Li and the crew of the Sun Tze. Colonel Li, in particular, who was recalled from preparations for his son's wedding in order to head into battle. I sadly only had the opportunity to meet him once, but he seemed to be a brave and honourable man.

And now to the part you've all been waiting for. The latest news from the battlefield came in from Colorado less than fifteen minutes ago. It is my honour to announce that at approximately 8:06 am Colorado time, the Ori army surrendered. In New York, the Ori army is being pushed out of the main part of the city and contained into Central Park. Ladies and gentlemen, the fighting in both Manitou Springs and New York is over and we can stand proud knowing that no one across the entire galaxy has managed what we've just done: defeated the Ori army.

Well, that concludes the news I have for you all. But before I take questions, I would like to add my own two cents. Not as a representative of the United States government, or a former general in the United States Air Force, but as the man who's seen the Stargate Program evolve from a shelved, forgotten basement project, to one of the most innovative and integrated projects in the world.

This moment, right now, this is where each one of you individually decide how the future will play out. Yes, you've been lied to and yes, grave mistakes have been made over the course of this project. I'm not going to deny that or excuse it.

Despite that, I urge you to approach everything you're about to learn with an open mind. Consider that, for the first time in living history, all of you – all of us – are being challenged, truly challenged, to think of ourselves as part of a larger unit. To the Ori, to our allies, in fact to the rest of the galaxy, we are not American, Canadian, Russian, Chinese, Mexican, or Arab. To them, we are the Tau'ri, the people of Earth, the First Planet, from whence all human life in the universe originated.

Thank you for your time. I will now answer questions.

Christine had never been happier that she kept an emergency pack in the trunk of her car. The navy suit and four inch heels she'd worn to the conference had looked sharp and professional, but were entirely unpractical for wandering through post-battle New York with all the rubble strewn everywhere. She'd kept the blazer for appearances, but donned jeans and hiking boots for the journey. She'd also changed her briefcase and pink and silver Coach handbag for a large beige canvas messenger bag with enough room for two bottles of water, a handful of powerbars, a legal pad, her camera, cellphone, and voice recorder.

And a small handgun with both her spare clips carefully tucked into a side pocket.

She'd never seen New York so eerily silent. The Ori army hadn't actually reached the NBC studios, no matter how close the battle had felt, how the building had shook, how the sound of explosions and gunfire had rattled their bones. It wasn't the first war zone Christine had been to, but it was certainly the last one she'd ever forget. If forgetting a war zone was even possible.

She tried to keep out of sight of the soldiers as much as she could, taking side-streets and sneaking through abandoned buildings – knowing New York as well as she did helped in that regard. Sometimes, it was to avoid being seen, sometimes it was to avoid rubble, burning cars or... other carnage. The contributions of some of New York's superhero community were obvious and she knew the smell of burning flesh would be haunting her nightmares for years.
Once she'd hit the first signs of the battle, she'd taken out her camera. No picture would ever truly show the horror of a battlefield, but she determinedly took pictures anyway. It was easier to bear the horror and devastation if she looked at it through the lens of her camera, concentrated on getting the right angle for a shot rather than on what she was actually seeing. Already she could feel the smell of smoke, gunpower and blood settling into her skin, hair and clothes.

She rounded a corner and was surprised by a small group of armored soldiers. Christine froze, her eyes widening. She'd seen men and women dressed like them helping the military clear rubble and carry wounded. She took a deep breath: these had to be the Jaffa, not the Ori. Her eyes slid upwards to the golden embossed tattoos on their foreheads. They looked Egyptian. So, definitely the Jaffa.

"Who are you, woman?" the large dark-haired man in the front demanded.

Christine pulled herself together and smiled. "I'm Christine Everhart. I'm a reporter for Vanity Fair..." She trailed off at their blank looks and confused frowns, kicking herself when she realized that being from another planet, they'd of course have no idea what Vanity Fair was. Did aliens even have reporters? She held up her camera instead. "I'm taking pictures of the battlefield, to document what happened here. So that I can tell the rest of the world about it."

That seemed to make more sense to them. The lead man nodded. "You should be careful. There are still Ori soldiers hiding among the rubble and in the buildings."

"I will, thank you." She snapped a picture. "You're Jaffa, right?"

The lead man nodded. "Yes, we are warriors of the Free Jaffa Nation. I am Quin'tak of Reshal."

"Well, it's been nice to meet you Quin'tak."

He nodded to her and then he and his group continued on their way, their movements somehow quiet despite the metal armor they were wearing.

She watched as they passed her, but they were only a few feet away, when she suddenly felt the urge to call out: "Quin'tak!"

They paused in their steps and turned, the other warriors stepping to the side to give their leader a clear line of sight to her.

Christine smiled. "Thank you. All of you, thank you for coming to help us. It would've been a lot worse without your help."

Quin'tak smiled warmly. "You are very welcome, Christine Everhart. We are quite happy to return home to spread the word of the Ori army's defeat. It will bring hope to those who have already been subjugated by the Ori's followers, and to those who continue to fight."

Christine continued to watch until they turned the corner, the smile still on her face. Then she, too, continued on her way, pleased that her first encounter with an alien (Cassie didn't count) had gone so smoothly.

Her first encounter with an Ori soldier didn't go quite so smoothly.

He was hiding in the rubble of a convenience store. An Ori fighter had crashed into it and then been abandoned by the pilot. She didn't see him until she was almost on top of him. In her desire to get a better angle of the downed fighter, she'd forgotten Quin'tak's warning. It wasn't until she was looking into wide, desperate eyes staring back at her from the shadows of the Ori fighter that it occurred to her the convenience store would make a perfect hiding spot.
“Shit,” she swore softly.

For several, long moments neither one of them moved. The Ori soldier was dirty, his armor crusted with mud, dust and blood, though she couldn't tell how much of it was his. But his eyes were what scared her the most: they were wild with fear, and desperate.

Christine couldn't even say what broke their stalemate, but suddenly the soldier's arm shot out to grab his weapon and she was scrambling backwards, not entirely willing to take her eyes off of him, but needing to see where she was stepping. She could hear him behind her, his armor clanking as he followed. The ground was uneven, a challenge when she'd been carefully watching where she was going, but hazardous when she was rushing.

It was almost inevitable that, eventually, something would give way beneath her feet. Her ankle rolled on the unsteady piece of ground, causing her to cry out in both pain and surprise. Then she hit the uneven surface and screamed as pain seared across her upper arms and left knee. But panic quickly overrode her pain and she rolled to the side, sliding about a foot down towards the fighter. The clanging was closer. Her right hand closed over something loose.

She twisted her body, ignoring the twinge of discomfort as something sharp nudged against her tailbone, and threw the piece of masonry at the Ori soldier. It made him pause for a moment, but the projectile didn't come anywhere close to hitting him. Still, it gave her enough time to open her canvas bag. She rooted desperately for her gun as he once again began his approach, a grim, determined look on his face.

If he got to her, he was going to kill her. She knew this in the very depths of her being.

“Come on, come on, where the fuck are you?” she muttered under her breath, because talking to herself was better than hyperventilating.

He was close enough she could smell his pungent body odor.

Finally, she felt led. Grabbing it, she yanked the gun out, not caring what else was being dislodged from her bag in the process. She fumbled with it once before managing to point it in the right direction.

“Stop!” she screamed. “Don't come any closer or I'll shoot!”

The soldier paused, his expression surprised – and slightly confused. And then the fear was back and Christine saw the desperation flicker back into his eyes. A hysterical part of her mind wondered if the Ori soldiers even spoke English. Though he seemed to be understanding her well enough right now.

“Back off!” she commanded, glad to note her voice sounded steadier, less hysterical, even if she didn't really feel it.

The Ori soldier hesitated. Christine unatched the safety and took a deep breath. Was he desperate enough to try and come after her even when she was armed? Her hands were shaking and she knew she wasn't a great shot to begin with, just enough not to be completely useless. If he came after her, she had about a fifty percent chance of actually hitting him and a kill shot would probably be a complete accident...

The soldier darted to the side. Christine fired and saw a spark as the bullet ricocheted off the shoulder plate of his armor. She adjusted her aim, fired again, her pulse drumming loudly in her ears, drowning out the sound of her gun going off.
He raised his long metal weapon and she cried out in pain as it came down on her right wrist. The gun fell from her hands. He raised the weapon again and she brought her hands up in front of her to shield her head.

And then the soldier let out a cry of surprise and alarm.

Christine cracked her eyes open and looked up. The soldier's arms and head were covered in a white, gauzy substance he seemed unable to dislodge. Not waiting for any further miracles, she scrambled backwards, gritting her teeth against the pain that shot up from her right wrist.

And then there was strong pair of arms lifting her up. She let out a cry of alarm, struggling in the stranger's grip until a gruff voice with a thick Brooklyn accent said: “Stopa strugglin' woman, we're tryin' ta help you!”

She stilled and managed to get her feet under her, wincing at the sharp pain from her knee. Another figure hurried past them, and she relaxed further at the silver Jaffa armour. He stepped in front of them, a long staff weapon in his grip, which he pointed at the Ori soldier. The front of it opened with a mechanical hiss, immediately capturing the soldier's attention.

“Cease your struggling!” he commanded. “If you surrender to us peacefully, then you shall be harmed no further!”

And then a lanky red-and-blue costumed man swung down from above them. Christine blinked. Not gauze, she realized, spider-webbing. Oh, so this was the infamous Spiderman the Bugle's Head Editor kept grousing about.

The Ori soldier froze and, for a moment, no one moved. Christine barely dared to breathe. Finally, the Ori soldier let go of his weapon. As it clattered to the ground, his body seemed to crumble in defeat. Spiderman walked up to him and began to disentangle him from the webbing.

The Jaffa warrior half-turned towards her and she was surprised to see a silvery-grey beard. “Are you unharmed?”

Christine swallowed, feeling slightly shaky. “I wouldn't say I'm unharmed, but I'll live.”

He nodded slightly before turning his attention back to Spiderman and the Ori soldier. The soldier's face was entirely different than when she'd first seen him. The fear and desperation were gone, replaced with eyes that were dull, defeated and weary. She almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

She cleared her throat. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

The man behind her grunted and then let go of her as he stepped back.

Spiderman turned to her and she could almost imagine him grinning behind his mask. “You're welcome,” he said. Then he paused and cocked his head at her comically. “Hey, you're that reporter from Vanity Fair who broke the alien invasion story!”

Christine straightened, happy to be recognized. “Yes, I am,” she said. “Christine Everhart. I'm trying to see how close I can get to Central Park to see what's going on there.”

“Oh, cool. I didn't ever get that far, but these two were there at the start of the battle.”

She perked up at that. “Really?” She turned to the man behind her just as he swept past her to grab the Ori soldier to drag him up and out of the rubble pile. He was a well-muscled man with unkept, longish greasy dark hair that created a curtain around his face. And one of his arms was encased in
metal – or perhaps made of metal, Christine couldn't quite tell.

Spiderman bounded up to her. “This is pretty much what we're doing now,” he said eagerly. “Trying to route out all the left-over Ori stragglers.”

“Yes, or do not,” said the Jaffa warrior sagely as he walked past them, his feet far more agile than hers had been on the unstable rubble. “There is no 'try'.”

Spiderman was silent for a long moment. Then he turned to her. “Did he the alien commander just quote *Star Wars* at me?”

The Jaffa paused at the top and looked back down at them with a frown. “I was told these were the words of a great Tau'ri philosopher. Is this incorrect?”

Spiderman blinked. “A great philosopher? Uh... yeah, sure we can call him that.”

Christine knelt down to retrieve her camera, her gun, and the few things that had fallen out of her bag before following her rescuers back to the street. When she finally made it to solid ground, the Jaffa commander and the metal-armed man were conversing in quiet tones beside the captured Ori soldier. Finally, the metal-armed man nodded and both of them turned to her.

“Christine Everhart, Asset Bucky also has reason to travel towards your central park,” the older man said. “And so you will travel together. Do not leave his side for he will protect you.”

Christine blinked at him. She'd fully expected to be turned away and escorted out of the area. Not one to look gift horses in the mouth (especially one that would probably look rather handsome after a shower, shave and haircut), she smiled and nodded. “I'd be happy for the traveling partner.”

The Jaffa grinned. “Excellent!” He placed a friendly hand on Asset Bucky's shoulder. “My friend, it has been an honour fighting by your side. I hope that, by the time we meet again, you will have found your friend.”

Asset Bucky's lips quirked into an almost-there smile. “Thanks,” he said. “And, uh, you too.”

“Bye!” Spiderman called after them as they went their separate ways. “Good luck with the story!”

Christine waited for about two blocks before she took out her voice recorder. “So, describe the beginning of the battle for me,” she said to her new traveling companion with a bright smile.

Slowly, gradually, Bruce woke up. It was less of an awakening and more of a gradual realization that there was a world beyond the darkness. His eyelids felt like they were being weighed down and he would've loved to just let the darkness pull him back into sleep, but his instincts were alert now. There were sounds around him he didn't recognize, voices that were foreign – he'd spent too many years on the run to be able to ignore them.

Bruce forced his eyelids open. The world was a blurred haze of light and colour. He blinked, his eyelids cooperating more easily now that he'd pried them open. He stared at the ceiling. It was a soft silver-grey. Metal. Unfamiliar.

Slowly, carefully so as not to make a sound, he turned his head towards the voices and sounds.
breath caught in his throat at the all-too familiar sight of military uniforms. Not army though, but air force, marines – neither were much better. Except... none of them seemed to be so much as looking in his direction. Instead they were standing around a table speaking softly. One of the soldiers moved to the side and Bruce caught the outline of a body laying on the table.

Bruce tensed further. His eyes scanned the room. He paused. Blinked. Then blinked again, now tense and confused for entirely different reasons than a moment ago. The familiar instruments he'd expected to see weren't there. Well, he supposed the odd-looking console next to his bed could possibly be a heartbeat monitor. It certainly looked like it was measuring something using a familiar squiggly line. And a lot more somethings in addition to that. There was also a coloured graph and several other values, all labeled in some strange language he didn't recognize.

He wondered idly whether it was possible for him to get brain damage from Hulk over-exposure. Not that he had any clue how long he'd been hulked out for, but somehow the exhaustion still weighing his limbs down made him think it had been longer than usual.

Curiosity overcoming his anxiety for the moment, Bruce forced his arm to move towards the monitor. He winced as he pulled at something in his arm. Bruce looked down and froze. There was an IV attached to his arm. He stared at it, horrified, but instinctively took a deep, calming breath, knowing the Hulk wasn't who he needed just yet.

He glanced towards the soldiers. There was a man with them now, a stethoscope draped around his neck. He was wearing flak pants and black uniform t-shirt bearing a flag Bruce didn't recognize, but no military rank: a civilian doctor working with the military then. The Doctor stepped into place at the head of the group and reached out to cradle the body's head and neck. Ah, so not a dead body then. A patient. He heard a muttered countdown. The entire group moved as one as they shifted the patient off the table and, presumably, to a waiting gunnery.

“Bruce.”

Bruce started at his name, then relaxed when realized the voice was familiar. He heard a shuffle of movement and then looked up at the presence that appeared at his side.

“Welcome back, Bruce,” said Natasha, a small smile on her face and dark bags under her eyes. She pointed at the two IV bags suspended beside his bed in turn. “Liquid. Nutrients.”

Bruce nodded to her gratefully, finally relaxing back into the bed. “Wh-ere?” he croaked, his throat desert dry.

“You're on the Victory,” she said. Her eyes gleamed with excitement. If she were anyone else, Bruce knew she'd be grinning. “Daniel's treasure hunt was successful.”

Bruce chuckled. “I'm glad,” he rasped and then cleared his throat. “I take it we won?”

“Of course.”

Bruce let his eyes slide up and down Natasha's body, checking her for injuries. There was a livid bruise on the right side of her face, and a piece of gauze covering her lower jaw just below it. Her left wrist was bandaged and Bruce could just make out more bandages peeking out beneath her shirt. “How is everyone?”

Natasha opened her mouth to answer.

“And just what do ye think you're doing out of bed, lass?”
Bruce tensed, his eyes shooting towards the voice. It was the Doctor. He was standing a few feet away from his bed, arms crossed over his chest and looking directly at Natasha with narrowed, stern eyes. The soldiers and patient were gone.

Whatever look Natasha had on her face, the Doctor rolled his eyes at it. “Ye do realize I have Ronon, Sheppard and McKay as regular patients? Now that hip o' yours isn't going to get better if ye keep putting pressure on it.”

“Carson, I was just making sure Bruce knew he was safe,” Natasha said calmly, her voice casual, as though she didn't care what he thought of her answer. “Wouldn't want him to panic while in the infirmary, would we?”

The Doctor snorted and pointed at the monitor next to Bruce's bed. “If those readings are any indication, I'm fairly certain Doctor Banner couldn't 'Hulk out' if he wanted to, lass. In fact, I highly doubt he could so much as stand at the moment. Now off to bed with ye! I can still have ye transferred to a real hospital like the rest o' my patients.”

To Bruce's amusement, Natasha finally gave in and slinked back to the bed on the other side of Bruce. He frowned when he noticed her slight limp, but his attention was diverted when the Doctor moved to stand next to his bed. Bruce looked up to meet his eyes warily. The open, friendly smile that greeted him took him by surprise.

“Now then, it's a pleasure to finally meet you, Doctor Banner. I'm Doctor Carson Beckett. How are you feeling?”


“Aye, I apologize for the lack of ice chips. We've been in a bit of a rush since we took possession of this ship and haven't quite figured out where everything is just yet. I've got someone fetching more water, though, so shouldn't be much longer before I'll have something for you to wet your mouth with. In the meantime, would you like me to go over what I've done here so far?”

Bruce blinked, finding he couldn't quite find himself capable of being leery of the warm, friendly Scotsman. It was partially the accent, he was sure of it. Still, he wasn't about to let the other man know. “Please. Also, if you wouldn't mind explaining this strange monitor beside me. It almost reminds me of a heart monitor, but I can't read any of it.”

Doctor Beckett laughed. “Aye, 'tis the problem with dealing with technology that's older than the English language. Doctor Simpson and some of the linguists built translation software, but sadly we dunna have it here.”

He either didn't notice or chose to ignore the slack-jawed look on Bruce's face – he was likely used to it in any case – and pointed to the console.

“Anyway, as ye already guessed, this 'ere monitors your heartbeat. Then on this side we have blood pressure, body temperature, kidney function, and levels of brain activity. This graph is measuring your approximate glucose levels, white cell count, hydration, and electrolyte concentration. Oh, and this strip at the end is your stat chart.”

Beckett tapped on the top of the strip and Bruce jumped as it expanded. Only instead of expanding across the screen the way he would've expected it to, it popped out of the screen and became a thin holographic projection.

“Up at the top are your vital statistics, below that the condition you arrived in – in your case that
would be extreme fatigue, dehydration and dangerously low blood-sugar levels. And, below that, my diagnosis and treatment.” Beckett concluded his presentation, his eyes twinkling with mirth at Bruce’s obvious amazement. “It replaces the traditional clipboard at the end of the bed.”

Bruce shook his head and chuckled. “Well, I must admit, even after living in Stark Tower, that is impressive. So, how exactly is the monitor scanning me? The only things I seem to be attached to are the two IV bags.”

“Ah well, Rodney's had more important things to concentrate on than figuring out medical equipment, but I'm fairly certain there are sensors in the bed. Might even be inside the padding.”

“Hm, makes sense.” He looked back to the Doctor, keeping his face serious. “Where can I get one?”

Doctor Beckett laughed. Bruce smiled.

“Sorry, lad, at the moment, I'm trying ta figure out how to get one of me own.”

“Lad?” Bruce asked, his eyebrow rising in amusement. Beckett shrugged.

The doors to the infirmary slid open with barely a sound. Bruce's smile widened at the two men entering, arms full of crates and cloth bags slung over their shoulders. Both looked over in his direction as soon as they entered. He wiggled his fingers at them in greeting.

Steve's eyes lit up and a wide grin spread across his face. “Bruce, you're awake!”

“Hey Bruce, you're looking a thousand times more alive than when Natasha dragged you in here.”

“Ehem,” Beckett interrupted them gently, his lips twitching. “Before you get too carried away there, did you bring the water?”

“Oh, right, sorry Doc,” said Sam. He and Steve quickly placed the crates they were carrying onto the ground next to the wall.

Steve then shrugged off the cloth bag and handed it to the Doctor. “We've got both water and some of that tea-juice stuff from Aeneid.”

Beckett nodded and then looked to Bruce. “Any allergies I should know about?”

Bruce shook his head. “No, I've never had any and thanks to the Big Guy I can't develop any.”

“The Big Guy?”

Bruce tensed. Damn, how had he forgotten that Doctor Beckett didn't actually know him? “Oh. Uh, the Hulk. It's what I call the Hulk.”

“Ah, I see.” Then he turned to Steve. “I'll take a bottle of water, please, and you can give Doctor Banner one of the tea-juice. I analyzed some to test the equipment and there’s no citrus, but it's full of vitamins C and D. Plenty of electrolytes as well, and even a dash of magnesium.”

Steve stepped up to the other side of Bruce's bed and passed Beckett a plastic bottle of water and then reached back into the bag and pulled out a bottle of water, which had been refilled with a pale peach-coloured liquid. Bruce accepted it gratefully.

“Hey, by the way, Bruce, you should talk to Carson about your research into the Super Serum,” Steve said, suddenly looking eager. “He figured out why I ended up as me and you ended up as the
Hulk and it wasn't anything you did! Apparently, Doctor Erskine just got lucky when he picked me for the experiment. He was also thinking there might be a way to use the serum, or an altered version of the serum, for other applications than making super soldiers.”

Bruce blinked. He turned to Beckett, who merely shrugged.

“ER doctor's just my day job,” he said. “I'm really a geneticist. I was brought into the program after I discovered a latent gene that seems to exist in approximately 12% of the population.”

Bruce’s eyes widened. “And Steve has this gene?”

“Aye, and a particularly strong expression of it at that, though how much of that is due to the serum is difficult to tell.”

“No original samples,” Bruce said automatically, his mind whirling at the new information. A gene that happened to be present in Steve's blood, but not in his. That changed everything researchers knew about Project Rebirth. He gasped. “That means that even Erskine wasn’t actually successful in his original goal. Steve was just a happy accident!”

Natasha snickered. Bruce winced and looked up to Steve, an apology on his lips. However, Steve just looked amused.

And then the infirmary doors slid open again, this time admitting Daniel supporting a man in an air force uniform – Bruce tensed at the three stars on his shoulders. The General looked up as they entered and scanned the room in the same way Natasha, Clint and Steve always did, an automatic response regardless of whether or not they expected danger. He didn't even pause in his grousing to do it.

“I had box seats and everything! Was gonna fly up next weekend and surprise you and Cassie, and maybe Sam if she was around. I'd even let Mitchell and Vala tag along.”

“Wow, that's such a shame, Jack,” Daniel replied, not sounding the least bit disappointed. “You know how much I love baseball.”

The General glared at him.

Daniel ignored him. Instead, he looked over to their corner of the infirmary. “Hey, Bruce!” he greeted him with a grin and then looked to the Doctor. “Carson, where do you want him?”

“The third bed from the far end is already set up for the General,” Doctor Beckett called back.

Daniel nodded and steered the General towards the bed.

“Doctor Beckett, is that General O'Neill?” Bruce asked quietly.

“Aye, that he is. And please, Doctor Banner, call me Carson.”

Bruce smiled up at the Scotsman. “Then I'm Bruce.”

Carson grinned at him. “Well, it was nice to meet you, Bruce. You rest up now and we'll talk later.” He frowned. “I've got more difficult patients to take care of now. Sam, you make sure the Black Widow stays in that bed.”

“Got it, Doc!” Sam called back, glancing nervously at Natasha.

With a last nod to Steve, Carson hurried off to his new patients. “And Daniel, you can take the bed
behind him!” he called as he went.

“Carson, I'm fine,” Daniel replied. “Just a few scratches. I don't need you to–”

“I'll be the judge of that! I've heard all about your definition of 'fine': yer all 'oh, it's nothing, just a mite of indigestion' all the way up until collapsing in the middle of a briefing when yer appendix finally bursts!”

The General grinned. “It looks like the medical staff's been sharing information. The tips and tricks of handling one Doctor Daniel Jackson.”

“Jack?”

“Yes, Danny?”

“Stop being a pain in the mikita.”

“Ah, but it's so much fun being a pain in your mikita.” The General frowned. “No, wait. That came out wrong.”

Daniel burst into laughter. “Well I won't ask if you don't tell,” he teased.

“Daniel, I do know where you live.”

“Well, considering you've stayed in my guestroom on several occasions, I'd be worried you were going senile if you didn't.”

General O'Neill muttered something about smart-ass dirt-diggers before gritting his teeth in pain as Carson helped him lift his legs onto the hospital bed. One of them was in a partial cast and bandaged at the thigh.

“Are they always like this?” Bruce asked the others. He tried to imagine General Ross joking around and bantering with anyone while in uniform and came up blank. The idea simply did not compute.

“Well, we only picked General O'Neill up after the Ori blew up the Antarctic base...” said Sam. He shrugged “But, from what we've been able to figure out, yeah, pretty much.”

“O'Neill was Daniel's team leader before he got promoted to General,” Natasha added. “They've been through a lot together by the sounds of it.”

“He's also got that same special gene I do,” Steve added, sounding happy.

“Hmm, interesting,” said Bruce thoughtfully. He looked to Steve. “He's Cassie's Uncle Jack, right?”

“Yup. It was his cabin Ross blew up.”

“Aaah.”

The doors to the infirmary slid open again and another man rushed in. He was wearing the same jumpsuit as Carson and holding an open laptop in front of him as he went. Bruce took note of the Canadian flag stitched onto his uniform and the lack of military insignia.

“Carson!” he barked.
“Take a seat, Rodney, I'll be right with ye,” Carson called back, calmly.

The man – Rodney, apparently – looked up just in time to avoid bumping into a stand of medical equipment. He scanned the room and frowned. “I can come back later.”

“No, ye won't. You'll get engrossed in some new project and I'll not be hunting you down on a strange ship.”

Rodney rolled his eyes. “I've got my communicator on me. You just have to call me when you're ready. Oh, and we just got word from Colorado, apparently it was Thor who downed the Ori ship. Their Thor, not ours, obviously. Our Thor is sadly dead, unless you count him living on in hologram form in the Odyssey's engine room...”

“McKay, your point?” said O'Neill through gritted teeth as Carson re-bandaged his leg.

“What? Oh, right, well anyway apparently they've boarded and secured the ship and they think it should be repairable.”

“Good. That'll make figuring out what to do with all the leftover Ori soldiers much easier.”

“You want to send them back to the Pegasus galaxy?” Daniel asked, sounding mildly curious.

O'Neill shrugged, his face relaxing slightly as the painkillers Carson had given him apparently started to take effect. “With an escort. After we've disabled their weapons. I mean, we can't exactly keep them and, besides, how else is everyone on the homestead gonna learn we kicked their asses if no one goes home to spread the word?”

Daniel nodded. It was a ruthlessly pragmatic idea and typical Jack O'Neill. Not only would it help destroy the image of the invincible Ori Juggernaut that had been prevailing across the Milky Way, but it would also show the Ori's followers that their gods were not all-powerful. And, perhaps, it would be what they needed to get the few allies Earth had left off the fence and into the fight.

Suddenly, Rodney's hand went to his ear. “Yes, McKay here...” His face lit up. “Sam, I'm glad you're still alive. What do you need my help with?” As he listened to the response, a gradually-deepening frown appearing on his face. “You're sure–yes, I know you know what you're doing, but the Phoenix was damaged in battle. Are you sure it's not a problem with the sensors?”

Even as he questioned the sensors, Rodney was already crossing the room to what turned out to be a panel in the wall. With one hand he placed his laptop down onto one of the empty beds as he reached into his khakis with the other and pulled out a screwdriver. While he spoke with the mysterious 'Sam', he got to work opening the panel and pulling it open.

Bruce blinked as he caught a glimpse of white crystals and wiring. Before he got a chance to ask about it, however, Rodney was pulling cables out of another pocket and hooking the laptop up to the wall panel. And then he turned his full attention to the laptop.

“Hm, okay I've got the Victory's sensors up... I don't see anything... Where are you seeing this?!?” His frowned deepened for a moment and he squinted at the screen as he tapped away at the keys. “Okay, I've got something, but it's smaller than I was expecting. In fact it's tiny. There's no way that–” He rolled his eyes. “Alright, fine, but I'll have to go to engineering... no, I'm in the infirmary. I'm fine. Carson gave me stimulants earlier and you know what a Scottish mother henning witch doctor he is.”

Bruce looked over to Carson, who was rolling his eyes. It felt almost routine.
“Yes, yes, I'm on my way. I'll call you when I get the sensor logs up. McKay out.” He tapped the comm unit in his ear and began hurriedly disconnecting his laptop from the wall panel. “Carson, I've got to go check out something Sam caught on her sensors.”

“I heard,” said Carson, sounding resigned to loosing his patient. “You have an hour, Rodney.”

Tucking his laptop under his arm, Rodney breezed past them – barely pausing to grab the MRE Steve held out to him – and waved off Carson's words. “I'll make sure I'm back before I collapse somewhere.”

Carson's eyes narrowed at him. “One hour, Rodney.” Then he turned and winked at Bruce before calling out just as the doors were sliding shut again. “Dunna make me send the Hulk after you!”

Less than five seconds later the doors were sliding open again and Rodney stepped back into the room, looking horrified.

“Carson! I've seen footage of the Hulk. There is absolutely no way he'd fit into the corridors! Besides, with our luck the internal sensors would probably decide he was a biological hazard and activate the security protocols. Do you remember what happened the last time the internal sensors on Atlantis glitched and sent us into lockdown?! And this time I am literally the only person on the ship who could unlock the lockdown, assuming that's the only security measure this ship has. For all we know it might be programmed to deal with biological contaminants by transporting them to the nearest sun–!”

“McKay!” the General barked. “I'm pretty sure your hour is ticking away as you rant.”

Rodney huffed and then turned on his heel. The doors slid shut behind him. They didn't open again.

“I need more morphine to deal with him,” the General grumbled. And then frowned. “Or possibly less. I'm not really sure.”

Bruce continued to stare at the door, not entirely sure what to think. After a few moments, he turned to the others. “Atlantis?” he asked mildly.

Steve, Sam and Natasha grinned back at him. Steve reached into his bag and pulled out a large sketchbook. He leafed through it until he found what he was looking for and handed it to Bruce.

“Atlantis,” he said, eyes sparkling with excitement. “Not so lost anymore.”

Bruce took the sketchbook and stared at the image of a city made of smooth lines and pointed towers floating on water. Mesmerized, he traced the delicate-looking outline.

Rodney stared at the screen, torn between wanting to rant about the sheer impossibility of what he was seeing, and excitement at the fact that he was actually seeing it. There was also some worry and fear inching its way past his outrage, because he had no idea what he was seeing. Physics and engineering simply did not work like this.

Except that they apparently did.
He grabbed the tack vest he'd taken off and thrown against the wall days ago and put it on, securing his pistol at his waist. He paused, before grabbing his P-90 as well and slinging it over his shoulder. Just in case.

He tapped his comm as he headed back to the engineering console. “McKay to Stark.”

There was a pause. “Yeah, I'm here. What's up, Rodney?”

“The Phoenix’s sensors detected something entering the Solar System using a hyperspace window. They've been tracking its approach to Earth, but it's like nothing we've ever seen before.” He hunched over his laptop and typed away. “I'm sending you the sensor data now. The Phoenix lost it on its sensors, so it must also have some sort of shielding, but I'm pretty sure I know where it's going.”

“Let me guess, it's not Miami. Whoa! I'm getting your sensor data now. Is this for fucking real?! This generated a hyperspace window?”

“That was pretty much my reaction. I'm also sending you my estimated trajectory for this thing. I'll inform the General and meet you on the ground.”

“Roger that. I'll get JARVIS to run a sweep and intercept it. See if I can't figure out what the hell it is.”

“Keep me posted. McKay out.”

Modified lifesigns detector in hand, Rodney took two minutes to double-check the Victory’s sensor data and then reaffirm that the Lieutenant watching the engineering consoles would inform him of any changes in the readings. Then he was out the door, tapping his comm as he went.

“McKay to Jackson.”

“Jackson here. Is there a problem, Rodney?”

“There's a something. Not sure if it's a problem yet. I need you to get your gear and meet me on the bridge.”

“Uh, okay. I can do that.”

“O'Neill to McKay. Don't suppose you'd like to inform your commanding officer what's going on?”

Rodney rolled his eyes as he stepped into the elevator. “I was getting to that. Also, you're technically not my commanding officer.”

“Right now I am.”

“The Phoenix sensors caught something coming out of hyperspace. They tracked it on an approach towards Earth, but lost it before they could try and reel it in. Neither Sam nor I can figure out what it is, but my guess is it's heading towards us.”

“Us as in New York?”

“Us as in people on the Victory.”

“Is it Ori?” Daniel chimed back into the conversation.

“If the Ori had this sort of tech we would've have stood a chance against them. No, I have a hunch,
but I won't know for sure until I get a chance to scan it up close. See, Sam didn't recognize the
construction using the Phoenix's sensors, but the Victory's database has a few entries Sam's
doesn't. It recognized the metal the object is made of as being one of the metals used in the
construction of its own hull. Which is why this probably isn't Ori tech. The energy signatures and
materials are all wrong for that.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath just before Daniel came back on, voice full of excitement.
“Rodney, are you saying that the object on approach was built by someone who had a hand in
building the Victory?”

“That would be exactly what I'm saying.”

“I'm on my way. Jackson out.”

“Hang on, Daniel! McKay, you haven't called this a ship, but what are the odds that this is a
weapon?”

The elevator doors opened and Rodney stepped out. “It could be anything, General. Could be a
bomb, a beacon, a surveillance device... All I know is that somehow this thing came out of a
hyperspace window and it's no bigger than an over-inflated beach ball. When I was a super-genius
about to ascend, I managed to build a hyperdrive into a puddlejumper and I still haven't been able
to figure out how I did that. This, whatever it is, is a lot smaller than a jumper. Whoever built it,
their physics are so far beyond us we might as well be cavemen. Quite frankly, General, if they
want us dead, we're screwed.”

There was a long silence. Finally, O'Neill let out a weary sigh. “Keep me informed, McKay.”

“Yes, yes. McKay out.”

As soon as he reached the bridge, Rodney thew himself at one of the consoles and brought up the
ship's long-range sensor readings as well as the analysis from engineering.

“Uh, Doctor McKay?” he heard Lorne ask carefully. “Is something going on?”

“We've got an unidentified object on approach to New York.”

Behind him, the bridge fell silent. “Ori?”

“No.” He paused. “Well, probably not. Almost certainly not. Look, I don't actually know what it is,
let alone who made it.”

The doors to the bridge slid open. Rodney looked up as Daniel walked onto the bridge followed by
Rogers and Rogers' friend – the one with the wings. “The General didn't trust you to go alone,” he
said dryly.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Jack's feeling a little overprotective since Carson won't let him leave the
infirmary again.”

“Yeah, I don't blame him,” Sam commented. “You do realize the rest of the Ori army is on our
doorstep, right?”

Lorne looked between them. “I'll be in the chair ready to activate the drones if you need them.”

Daniel nodded to the Major. “Thanks, Evan. If Jack wasn't high on morphine, he probably
would've already told you to be.”
The corners of Lorne's lips twitched. “Yes, sir,” he said as he headed to the command chair.

Rodney had seen Central Park from the Secondary Command Chair Room, but on the ground, surrounded by the stench of blood, death and burnt flesh, it was even more horrifying. He had to close his eyes for a moment and count backwards from ten to keep the dizzying nausea at bay. Taking deep breaths didn't help. But this wasn't the first battlefield he'd ever been to, and so he knew what to do to shove the unpleasant parts out of his mind.

He opened his eyes and looked down at his scanner, bringing up its connection to the Victory's sensors.

Meanwhile, Daniel, Sam and Steve were looking around them in stunned horror.

“Fuck,” said Sam in a low voice.

Central Park looked like it was in the midst of an identity crisis. The south side of the park was a bloody, muddy mess of craters, masonry and dead bodies. The north side was still green, though greyed with dust, as though in mourning for the city. Luxury condos, old solid buildings that had once proudly over-looked the park, were laying in crumbled pieces along the park's perimeter. It looked as though someone had taken a knife and carved a chunk out of the city, leaving it carelessly discarded behind. Sitting on the grass, in a parody of the park's usual denizens, were dull-eyed, tired Ori soldiers, with more being herded into the park. Though obviously past caring about anything, they still seemed to almost religiously avoid the shadow cast by the Victory.

In the middle of the carnage, lay the Ori ship, its giant corpse bone-white in the morning sun.

Daniel forced himself to look away and turned to Rodney. “Anything?”

“Not yet. Wait.” He tapped his communicator. “Stark, it's McKay. I've got it on sensors. Do you have visual yet?”

“Iron Man here. Hang on, JARVIS has something. I'm moving to intercept. I'll let you know when I've got eyes on it.”

“Okay.”

There was a mechanical sound from behind him and Daniel turned to see that Sam had unfurled his wings and was sliding his flight goggles down over his eyes.

“I'm gonna go put another pair of eyes into the sky,” said Sam.

Daniel nodded. “Good idea.”

Sam took off without another word, sailing over Central Park like the falcon he was named after. Daniel noticed the Ori soldiers watching him in the sky with something between awe and fear. If he'd been less tired, he probably would've tried to reassure them, but he wasn't sure he could do so convincingly right now.

“Uh, hey guys, it's Iron Man. JARVIS has a second object on approach. Looks like the God of Thunder's decided to drop by to say 'hi'.”

Daniel chuckled. “Jack will love that. He's a fan of guys named Thor.”

Steve looked over to him in amusement. “Does he know a lot of guys named Thor?”
“Oh, just the one really. Asgard Thor really liked Jack, for reasons none of us could ever entirely figure out. Personally, I think he found him amusing.”

“Oh, Iron Man here again. I've rendezvoused with Thor and we've got visual on the UFO. Seems to be heading straight for you, so we're gonna fly escort. In case you're wondering, Thor says he doesn't recognize it.”

“Got it,” said Rodney. “We're waiting outside the ship for you.”

“See you soon.”

Daniel looked up. It was, if anything, a great excuse not to look at his surroundings. He stared into the distance, willing the object and its escort to show itself overtop the buildings.

“Falcon to Jackson. Do you hear me?”

He tapped his comm and saw Steve, beside him, doing the same. “Yeah, I hear you Falcon. What's up? Do you have visual?”

“Yes, but not of Iron Man. I'm incoming with a couple guests. Let Rogers know I found someone who's looking for him.”

“I'm here, Sam,” he heard Steve say beside him. “Is- is it Bucky?”

“Look around and see for yourself, Cap.”

Steve whirled around, his hand still on his comm. Daniel stepped over beside him as Sam began to descend. He had his hands hooked under the arms of another man... who was holding a blonde woman in his arms. While Sam was managing his load, it was clearly straining him. Their landing was a bit of a stumble, but neither the man nor the woman complained.

The man looked like he'd just walked off the battlefield, his skin and shoulder-length hair caked with dust and blood. There was a plasma burn on his torso and blood sluggishly trickling from cuts on his left arm. In fact the only part of him that didn't look bruised or bloodied was his metal arm, which looked only slightly dented.

He was almost gentle in the careful way he set the woman back down. She smiled at him gratefully and then thanked Sam for the lift. Then her eyes zeroed in on Daniel. Daniel swallowed, wondering if running now would seem cowardly. Except that Daniel had faced down System Lords, priors, evil Asgard and even the Ori themselves, and he didn't even know who this woman was.

She headed right for him and held out her hand. “Doctor Daniel Jackson?” she said with a bright, determined smile. “I'm Christine Everhart of Vanity Fair.”

Oh dear God, she was worse than the System Lords and the Ori. She was a reporter. Who knew who he was...

Daniel shook her hand, frowning. “It's, uh, nice to meet you, Ms Everhart. Although I'm surprised you know who I am.”

She raised a single, delicate eyebrow. “Well, I suppose you've probably been too busy trying to save the world to watch the news.”

“A little. Also, alien spaceships don't exactly get cable.”
She smiled, obviously amused by his flippant response. “Point. Your niece, Cassandra Fraiser, told me about you. She had quite the story to tell the world, both about herself and a bit about you. I certainly got the impression that, when it came to you, she was leaving out more than a few details.”

Daniel blinked at her and then groaned. He pinched the bridge of his nose, remembering Jack mentioning something about Cassie being busy. “She went to the press.”

“Well, to me specifically.” She paused, looking him over thoughtfully. “She said you were the one who figured out the Stargate.”

His eyebrows shot up. Did the world actually know about the SGC? That... was huge. Way too huge to contemplate at the moment. “I, uh, just figured out the significance of the symbols on the gate. The scientists would've figured it out eventually. It was really an accident that I got there first.”

“But you did figure it out first.”

“Well, yes. For better or for worse, I did.”

“You mean, you're not sure it was a good thing anymore?”

Daniel sighed, looking away from the woman's searching gaze as he gathered his thoughts. “No, I think it's a good thing. An amazing thing really. What we've discovered... The Stargate Project is quite possibly the single most important undertaking anyone on this planet has ever done. I've believed that since the beginning and I still do. It's going to change the world. In a lot of ways, it already has even if people couldn't see it.”

He looked back to her, idly noting the voice recorder in her hand. And the handle of a small-calibre handgun poking out of her blazer pocket.

He shrugged. “The spaceships, the technology, it's just the beginning. The Goa'uld had been taking humans from Earth for centuries and relocating them across the galaxy. What we have out there are pockets of cultures, communities long extinct on our planet. The first people we encountered had been taken from Ancient Egypt more than five thousand years ago. Without the influences of outside cultures the Egyptians on Earth had been subject to, their language and culture had evolved, but it was much closer to Ancient Egyptian than what we consider modern Egyptian to be. On another planet, we found a settlement of Minaons. Do you know how little we know about Ancient Minoans? Almost everything we know about them has been filtered through the eyes of the Greeks. But on the Planet of Light, their culture remains almost perfectly preserved. There's just so much out there for us to learn. About ourselves, about those who came before us...”

He trailed off, realizing he'd been lecturing. The woman, however, didn't look annoyed. She looked fascinated.

Her smile widened. “Doctor Jackson, I'd really like to write your biography.”

“My what?”

“Daniel!” Rodney barked and Daniel's attention snapped instantly to the scientist. He was peering up into the sky now. “We've got incoming.”

Daniel followed his gaze. There were two large dots flying towards them, flanking a third, smaller dot. As they came closer, he recognized the Iron Man armor and Avenger Thor.
“What's going on?” Christine asked, having obviously picked up on the tension in Rodney's voice and Daniel's posture.

“We're not entirely sure,” he said, pushing her behind him. “But we're pretty sure it's not Ori.”

“Pretty sure?”

“Jackson!”

Daniel glanced over to see Cameron jogging in their direction. The SG1 team leader looked to be in mostly one piece, give or take a few strips of uniform and some rather impressive bruising he could see beneath the rips. There was a bandage covering the tip of his right ear and a long cut along his cheek. And dark bags under his bloodshot eyes.

He looked like hell.

“Hey, Cam, come to join the surprise welcoming party?” Daniel asked when the other man reached them.

“Uh, that depends. What are we welcoming?”

“That's the surprise.”

“Oooh, I like surprises!” Vala exclaimed in his ear as she grabbed him by the arm.

Daniel winced both at the pitch of her voice and at the bruises she was inadvertently squeezing.

“Yes, well, we have yet to determine whether this is a good surprise or a bad surprise,” said Rodney dryly as he shifted his gaze between the tablet in his hands and the object that had now reached Central Park with its escort. “So you might want to tone down on the excitement.”

Oddly enough, it really did look like an over-inflated beachball from a distance. It was almost perfectly round, save for a stubby circular protrusion at the top made of glass. As it crossed the distance towards them, it also became more obvious that its surface wasn't entirely smooth. Instead, it was littered with pock-marks at regular intervals, though more concentrated along what was probably its base. They glowed with a dark blue light.

“Okay, that has got to be the weirdest-looking thing we've ever seen, right?” said Cameron.

Daniel cocked his head thoughtfully. “That'll depend on what it does.”

“It's definitely one of the more advanced pieces of tech we've ever seen,” said Rodney. Then he paused and looked up thoughtfully. “Actually, scratch that. The quantum mirrors were both weirder and possibly more advanced than this.”

“Right, the quantum mirrors,” said Cameron knowingly.

Daniel rolled his eyes. “You've never seen one.”

“Read the reports, though.”

“Of course you did,” said Vala.

Daniel felt the tension grow around him as the object flew – or possibly floated – closer towards them. No one's eyes left the object, no matter what their mouths did. The bickering felt normal, grounding. So the universe had decided to throw them another curve ball? They were SG1:
together, they could deal with all the curve balls, all the false gods and all the weird alien
dohickeys it threw at them. Not even death could stop them.

And then it came to a stop just above their heads, bobbing on the spot for a few moments before
floating slowly downwards, stopping only when the glass protrusion was at eye-level. Thin tendrils
of green light streaked across the surface of the sphere, but other than a faint almost-humming
noise, it was silent.

Iron Man and Thor both continued to hover above them, repulsors and hammer at the ready. A man
surrounded in flames streaked in and flew around them once before stopping to hover a little to Iron
Man's right. From behind him, he could hear Christine Everhart of Vanity Fair snapping pictures.

“Guys, just a head's up, I'm pretty sure it's scanning you,” said Tony, his voice sounding flat and
mechanical through the suit.

“Well, fair's fair,” said Daniel with a quick glance to Rodney, who was furiously typing away at
the lifesigns detector. “We're scanning it.”

The green lights stopped abruptly and the sphere began to rise.

“What, that's it?” Sam asked.

“Uh, I seriously doubt it,” said Tony, his voice sounding slightly nervous despite the suit's voice
modulator.

Rodney cut in before he could continue. “Its power levels are increasing. And I think I'm picking
up a signal... outgoing – no. Wait, hang on, I think it's a two-way signal: outgoing and incoming.”

“Holy shit, I see it. Wow, that's amazing. Beautiful.”

Rodney rolled his eyes. “Long-range communications. It's not that impressive. Although, the
bandwidth is nearly non-existent, which is very impressive.”

The sphere stopped rising when it was just past the height of the nearby treetops. And then it
slowly flipped upside down until the glowing glass protrusion was facing towards the ground. At
ground level, in the middle of the semi-circle they seemed to have formed, a speck of white-blue
light appeared. It then began to grow, causing them to step back and, in a few cases, flick off the
safeties on their guns. The sphere of light didn't stop growing until it was roughly twice the size of
the original device.

“Daniel Jackson? Ah, is Scholar Daniel Jackson there?”

Daniel blinked and then stepped forward. “Uh, yes, I'm here,” he said, stepping forward with a
frown. “Who are you?”

“Daniel, my friend! I thought I was supposed to see you? Ah, just a moment...”

Meanwhile, Cam stepped closer. “Friend of yours, Jackson?”

Daniel's frown deepened. “I'm not sure...” The voice sounded familiar, but there was something
odd about the words. They felt alien, the syllables off in some small way that made the voice
sound wrong even as it sounded familiar.

And then the large ball of blue-tinted light shimmered. When it came into focus again, there were
three figured standing in the middle of it.
Daniel's mouth dropped, his eyes widening in surprise. “Hektor, Dion!” he exclaimed, a delighted grin stretching across his face. He bowed slightly to the third. “Head Protector. It's good to see you all alive and unharmed. What happened?”

Inside the ball of light, Hektor's grin turned solemn, but it was the Head Protector who answered. “As you said, the Ori came in their large ship. Cowards,” she spat. “They shot balls of flame from the sky, as though we were nothing more than vermin to be eradicated. The Watch Tower fell first, knocked down like nothing more than a stack of childrens' blocks. The operators inside died at their posts. Only a few messengers were rescued from the rubble.”

“But we were saved!” Hektor interjected excitedly. “The Watching Screens inside the Temple are much better than those in the Tower and so several of us were able to witness the event. It was incredible. Another ship appeared out of nowhere. It was so much smaller than the Ori's beast that I feared for its fate, but its size was immaterial. The Ori ship fell before it had the chance to resist!”

Daniel closed his eyes, swallowing down the lump that had lodged in his throat. He'd barely allowed himself to think of the fate of the people of Aeneid, who they'd abandoned in order to reach Earth. They'd had no choice, not really, but that didn't mean it hadn't weighed heavily on him. He'd been terrified that when they finally got the chance to go back, it would be to bury the dead.

“I'm glad,” he said softly. He opened his eyes and smiled at them. “I'm very glad the town survived.”

“As are we, Daniel,” said Dion with a soft smile of her own. “And you, too, have been victorious?”

“Yes, we have.” He looked behind him, to where the Victory was casting her shadow over what was left of the turf of Central Park. “The Victory saved the day. She's amazing.” He turned back to them. “I - no, we, all of us - owe you a dept of gratitude. We would've never found her without your help. Thank you.”

The Head Protector nodded, a slight smile on her face. “On behalf of the people of Aeneid, you are welcome. As we ourselves have witnessed, the Ori are an evil that can neither be ignored nor overlooked. It is the sort of evil that good warriors must raise arms against.”

“Speaking of which, how is your wife doing?”

Her smile widened. “My wife is recovering well. As are the others struck down by the plague. Our doctors believe they will stand again within days.”

“That's good. Doctor Carson will be happy to hear that.”

“We're all glad to hear you made it,” Steve suddenly added and Daniel looked over to see him standing beside him, frowning slightly. “But, how are you suddenly speaking English?”

Daniel blinked and then looked back to the ball of light. The three people inside looked confused. Of course, Daniel realized, that was why Hektor's voice had sounded so strange.

Rodney snorted. “Obviously the device has a universal translator.”

“Oh,” said Steve.

“Basically, Cap, they're not speaking English, you're just hearing them in English.”

Steve looked up at Iron Man. “Huh, that sounds mighty useful.”
“Trust me, we've been trying to figure out how that works for ages,” said Rodney. “Most of the Stargates do something like that too.”

“Really?!!”

“Then it is good that we can speak to you and be understood by all of you,” said Hektor, pulling their attention back to his group. He had an amused smile on his face. The Head Protector was, meanwhile, looking up at Iron Man with interest. “However, we will have to find time for that later. Our rescuers are rather anxious to meet you, Daniel.”

Daniel's eyes widened slightly, all the exhaustion that had been haunting his limbs gone in an instant. “I'm probably just as excited to meet them,” he said honestly.

Hektor's smiled knowingly. “Then allow me to introduce Commander Marvel.”

Dion and Hektor stepped aside to make room for a tall, solemn-looking man wearing a red and green form-fitting suit to step into the globe. His dark hair was combed away from his angular face, giving him a severe look. There was a blaster of some sort at his waist, but it appeared to be his only weapon. Or at least the only item Daniel recognized as a weapon. But the man's most noticeable feature was his blue skin.

“Greetings Daniel Jackson of the Tau'ri,” he said, his voice deeper than Daniel would've expected from his slim build. “I am Commander Marvel of the race you no doubt know as the Furling.”

Daniel clamped down on the urge to whoop loudly and jump for joy.

“It's an honour to meet you, Commander Marvel. I confess, I've been excited to meet your people since we first learned of your existence. Information about the Furling is frustratingly illusive.”

The Commander's eyes coloured with amusement. “That is likely because we were mostly visitors in this galaxy. Our friendship with the Asgard, Nox and Alterans is what kept us returning, however we were mostly explorers and so were careful not to leave any marks that time would not erase.”

“Unlike the Ancients, who were compulsive litterers,” Cameron grumbled.

Commander Marvel must've heard him, because he chuckled. “Indeed, history tells us the Alterans were great scientists and builders, who enjoyed expanding into new places and thus leaving behind evidence of their existence. Of course, history also tells us they were well aware they were dying, so perhaps it was their way of ensuring they were never forgotten.”

Daniel noticed Thor drifting down to the ground, a deep frown on his face.

“So, you haven't been back to the Milky Way in a while then?” Daniel asked.

“Not since the Nox entered into a time of change. It was after the Alterans finally left this plain of existence. The Asgard isolated themselves with their science and the Nox were going through societal upheaval. Our home was also being threatened by an enemy from outside our nebula and so we pulled back to deal with it.” He shrugged. “And so the Alliance of Four fell apart.”

“But, like the Nox, you answered the call of Aeneid's beacon.”

“I confess it was curiosity as much as duty that brought myself and my ship to your galaxy.”

Daniel grinned. “There is nothing wrong with curiosity.”
“Yes, I hear I am not the only one struck by that particular affliction.”

Just then the Furling Commander stepped forward, and the glowing orb he was surrounded by moved with him. He looked up at the Victory, his eyes sweeping over her curiously, though Daniel also detected not a small amount of awe in his expression as well. Several moments of silence passed before he spoke again.

“There is a legend of a great ship built by the Alliance of Four, one that combined the best of their technology as well as their desires and ideologies. It was a ship built to fight, built to protect. The fiercest battleship any of them had ever created... If this is it, and there is no doubt in my mind that it is, then it is magnificent.”

“It is. Without her, we wouldn't have defeated the Ori's armada. At least not nearly as quickly.”

“It is not who she was designed to fight.”

“The Wraith. She was designed to fight the Wraith, possibly even free the Pegasus Galaxy from their oppression and win back Atlantis.”

Commander Marvel looked back to Daniel in surprise. Then he threw his head back and laughed. “Then you have gotten further than even I had imagined. Not only do you know Atlantis, but you have faced the Wraith. I spoke to Lya and Anterus of the Nox before sending this communications orb to you and they told me of the Asgard's legacy. And that they think you have yet far to go, but that they believe you have the potential for greatness.”

He paused and looked around. Daniel winced. This was quite possibly the worst time and the worst place to make first contact with the representative of a powerful advanced alien race. Commander Marvel, however, did not appear disappointed when he turned back to Daniel.

“You are treating the enemy that arrived to destroy you with compassion.”

Daniel frowned and looked over to where the Ori soldiers were being herded. There were army and air force medics scuttling within their ranks, providing what emergency medical assistance they could. Others were going around with water and some sort of basic rations, although Daniel was too far away to tell what exactly they were being given.

He turned back to the Furling Commander. “We've defeated them. There's no reason not to be compassionate. They're living, breathing beings, like us. There's no point to being cruel for the sake of cruelty; it doesn't show superiority and it's wrong.”

“And what do you plan to do with them?”

Daniel shrugged. “We have a second ship that's in better shape, probably repairable. Jack – er, the General – says he wants to fix it up, disable the weapons and then send them home.”

Commander Marvel nodded, looking satisfied by his answer. “Yes, I think I understand what the Asgard recognized in your people. You are young, eager to learn and have in fact made great leaps in the last decades, according to the Nox.”

Daniel's lips twitched. “But we are not yet the tree.”

Commander Marvel chuckled. “No, not yet. But Lya believes that one day you will be. Just as the Asgard believed. As the Alterans had obviously hoped.”

Finally, Daniel couldn't resist the words he'd wanted to say since he'd first realized who he was
speaking to. “Commander, the Furling have been a mystery to us for so long. I would love to learn more about you, about your history, your world. Anything and everything you are willing to tell me.”

“And I would love nothing more than to tell you everything you wish to know. But, it is not yet the time nor the place for such things.”

Suddenly, with a swish of bright red cloak and golden armor that gleamed under the sun, Thor stepped forward, his expression thunderous. “Liar! You are not called the Furling!” he said accusingly. “I recognize you well. Your people are called the Kree.”

Commander Marvel’s eyebrows rose. After a moment, he shook his head. “I do not lie. The Kree is what we call ourselves. When our first exploratory vessel came to this galaxy, we met the Asgard in short order, however our languages were quite different and unknown to each other. When they asked us who we were, the expedition commander answered that we were 'furling'. In our language, that means 'friendly traveler', however the Asgard took it to mean the name of our race. And so, to our friends and allies in this galaxy, we became known as the Furling.”

“Geez, that's the most ridiculous misunderstanding ever,” said Cam. “I mean, you wouldn't think it was that difficult to get the language right.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Really, and just how long were Native Americans called Indians because of a ridiculous misunderstanding?”

“Canada is only called 'Canada' because of a mistranslation,” Rodney added, though his eyes never left the scanner in his hands.

Cam sighed. “Fine, point taken.”

“Asgard has long known of the Kree,” Thor persisted. “This story is unknown to me.”

“Uh, we'll explain later, Thor,” said Steve as he walked over to his teammate's side and placing a placating hand on his forearm. “But they're not really talking about you and your people. The Asgard are different from Asgardians.”

Thor frowned in confusion, but backed down.

“Ah, I see. That is most interesting.”

Daniel looked back to Commander Marvel, who was examining Thor curiously. As though feeling his eyes on him, the Furling glanced to Daniel and smiled ruefully.

“I regret not having more time to exchange tales. I feel yours would make a worthy trade for mine.”

“Well, it's certainly not boring.”

“Unfortunately, the communications orb is reaching its limit. It was a pleasure meeting you, Daniel Jackson of the Tau'ri. Though it will likely not happen within our lifetimes, I look forward to the day our people meet as equals. When the Tau'ri take their place as the Fifth Race.”

“You're right, it probably won't be within our lifetimes, but I'll keep hoping that one day it will happen,” said Daniel. “Even if this is the only contact we have until then, I am honoured to have met you and spoken to you, and happy to know the Furling did not die out or disappear, that you're still out there somewhere.”
The Commander nodded and then the globe shimmered, the image disappearing. The globe of light began to shrink back to nothingness. When Daniel looked up, he saw the dark sphere turning once more until the glass protrusion was facing upwards again. It was no longer glowing.

And then the sphere flew away. This time, no one bothered following it.

“Oh my god,” Daniel breathed, feeling all the excitement he'd been clamping down on bubbling up to the surface. He turned to Cam and Vala, eyes sparkling. “I just met the Furling!”
Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the comments and kudos on the previous chapter. And to Jon Harper for reading this chapter over.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEW BEGINNINGS

To his left, he heard a slight shuffle, a faint intake of breath and a rabbit-quick heartbeat, and caught a faint whiff of smoke, dried blood and stale sweat. Then he felt the barely-there breeze that came with a displacement of air caused by sudden movement.

Matt ducked and then spun around, kicking his leg out. There was a dull ring as it connected with metal and then a clang and a pained grunt as the Ori soldier hit the ground. Lightning-quick, Matt rushed to the soldier's right, where the sharper, clearer sound of metal had come from, and grabbed his stave weapon. For some reason, the Ori soldiers he'd been encountering didn't seem inclined to use them to shoot at him. He wasn't complaining; they sucked at hand-to-hand.

He pointed the weapon at the soldier and felt him go still.

"Okay, now I'm going to back away and you're going to slowly stand up," he said. He waited a moment and then took two steps backwards and then gestured with the end of the weapon. "Now get up."

Slowly, he heard the gentle scraping of armor on cement and felt the air shifting as the man slowly stood. He was shaking. The soldier took a step backwards and Matt frowned.

"Freeze!" he commanded. "Don't move another step."

The soldier froze, his breath coming in quick, frightened pants. And then there was a rapid displacement of air and the tinkling of metal as the Ori soldier turned on his heel and made a run for it.

"Shit," Matt said under his breath. He raced after him, leaping up to launch himself off the dumpster he'd heard the breeze brushing against with his right leg, using the momentum to reach the wall of the adjacent building with his other. The bricks made for good traction and so he ran several steps along the wall, before flipping himself away and to the ground, landing right in front of the soldier.

There was a clang of armor and a cry of surprise as the soldier skidded to a halt. Matt pointed the stave at the soldier again. From several feet behind him, he caught the smell of leather mixed with blood and sweat, tinged with a faint whiff of Chinese take-out and cheap whiskey. He tightened his grip on the stave. The soldier began to quickly back-pedal again.

"Don't shoot the weapon!" he heard a husky female voice call out from behind him.
Matt immediately shifted his grip on the stave and feigned movement to the right before stepping into the left and jabbing out with his left fist. He hit the armor, sending the soldier stumbling backwards. Then he swung the stave weapon, feeling it hit soft flesh and hearing metal jangle as the thin weapon brushed against the base of the soldier's helmet.

The soldier dropped to the ground and didn't move. Matt listened for a moment, relaxing when he heard a faint heartbeat. Then he turned towards the steady sound of approaching footfalls. The figure was light and the footfalls sounded heavy, but quiet. That meant large shoes, probably with rubber soles. Combat boots, military-issue, or – given the accompanying smells – possibly military-surplus.

“So why shouldn't I shoot the weapon?” he asked the mystery woman.

“Soldiers warned us not to,” she answered. “Apparently the guys from the spaceship managed to rig something up that stops their weapons from being able to fire. Makes them explode instead.”

Matt's eyebrows rose. “Well, thanks for the warning then.”

Her leather jacket creaked softly as she shrugged. “I was in the neighbourhood.”

Matt smiled. “Still I appreciate you not letting me blow up my own hands.” He paused. “I'm Daredevil, by the way.”

The woman snorted. “Yeah, I sort of figured that out by the costume.” A long beat passed in silence. “Jessica Jones.”

Matt cocked his head. “The private investigator?”

In the silence that followed, he imagined her frowning at him with narrowed eyes. “How do you know who I am?”

He continued to smile congenially, hoping to keep this woman friendly and on his side. “I got a call from a friend of mine sometime... yesterday, I think. He said you were helping to build barricades.”

He felt her relax. “Yeah, lifting heavy objects is something I'm good at.”

“So I heard.”

Beside him, the Ori soldier groaned.

“Come on,” said Jessica Jones. “I'll show you where they're collecting the Ori soldiers for transport.”

Matt froze, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Do you know where they're taking them?”

“Herding them back to Central Park, apparently,” she answered, sounding entirely unconcerned. “Except for the ones who need immediate medical attention. I'm not sure where they're taking those exactly, but based on the conversations I've overheard, I think it's some sort of hospital in Boston.”

Matt let out the breath he'd been holding. So they weren't just killing them. Good. Although he wasn't quite sure what he would've done if they had been.

Reaching down, he hefted the mostly-unconscious soldier into a fireman's carry. “Well then, lead the way, Jessica Jones.”
Teal'c watched as another group of Ori soldiers were herded into the circle by Jaffa warriors. The Ori soldiers went slowly, their feet dragging with every step. He was convinced his warriors did not require their weapons at all anymore – not that he nor they were willing to take that chance – for the defeated soldiers seemed to barely notice them. They seemed beyond fear, so strung out that they looked almost like the walking dead. Like the zombies in the movies he had watched – marathoned, he believed had been the word the marines had used – with SG3 one Halloween several years ago.

Once the soldiers were settled inside the circle, the Jaffa stepped back behind the beacons erected along the perimeter. As they moved away, they activated the beacons. Eight lights began to flash. Less than a minute later, the circle was flooded with the white light of an Asgard transporter beam, taking the Ori soldiers with it.

Teal'c wasn't certain exactly where the soldiers were being transported to, however he'd heard it was a remote facility either in the prairies or the desert. Somewhere surrounded by a lot of flat land and not much else.

He felt someone approaching him from behind.

“Well, that is a rather convenient way to move the enemy away from the city,” said Lady Sif of Asgard as she came to stand beside him. She sounded intrigued, and just a little awed.

“Well, that is a rather convenient way to move the enemy away from the city,” said Lady Sif of Asgard as she came to stand beside him. She sounded intrigued, and just a little awed.

“Indeed, it has many advantages,” Teal’c replied. “It is technology given to the Tau'ri by the Asgard who had held them in great esteem.”

“The Asgard?” she said, sounding surprised, before her face settled into a thoughtful frown. “But not Asgardians. I have noticed you and the soldiers of this Stargate Command making a distinction in your speech. I find myself all the more curious to hear your story, Commander Teal’c.”

Teal’c looked over to her and nodded. “It is a long story, full of great deeds of valor and brave heroes overcoming impossible odds to defeat enemies with numbers and weapons far superior to their own.”

Lady Sif grinned. “Ah, then a grand story indeed.”

They both looked up as an F-302 squadron flew over their heads, the last one to head back to Peterson.

Colonel Carol Danvers didn't take any special notice of the Asgardian warrior and Jaffa commander as she led her Snake Skinner squadron away from the battlefield. They were exhausted all, with nothing more on their minds than getting back to base and collapsing into their bunks. Although Danvers was contemplating whether she wanted to delay the collapsing long enough to have a hot shower first.

“Snake Skinner three to Snake Skinner one, please reply, over.”

She sighed and flipped the comm link open. “Snake Skinner one here. What is it, Lieutenant?”

“Sir, I've calculated our trajectory and we're flying right over a couple of Colorado Springs' designated evac sites. Any chance we can show off for the crowds? Over.”
Colonel Danvers frowned. Reaching over, she brought their flight path up on the SatNav and then overlapped it with civilian evac information. She rolled her eyes as she opened her comm again.

“You mean we're flying right over the school board's designated evac sites, Snake Skinner three.”

“Oh, yes ma'am. That's what I mean.”

“Everyone else feel up to showing off for the kids?” she asked, knowing the rest of the squadron was no doubt monitoring the communications closely.

After an eager chorus of 'yes, ma'ams' and 'affirmatives', she ordered them to half-speed and switched channels.

“Snake Skinner One Alpha to Mountain Top. I repeat, this is Snake Skinner One Alpha to Mountain Top, please respond Mountain Top.”

The response was almost immediate. “Snake Skinner One Alpha, this is Mountain Top. What's your status? Over.”

“Status is five by five. We are on-route to Peterson base with a fly-over of evac sites eleven and twelve. Request permission to do a victory lap. Over.”

There was a long silence and the Colonel was half-convinced the request was about to be denied. After all, even at half-speed they were about to reach the evac site in question.

“Snake Skinner Alpha One, this is General Landry. Are you sure your squadron is up to it?”

“Affirmative, General,” she responded almost immediately. “They're ready and able.”

“Then you have permission, Snake Skinner Alpha One. But nothing fancy, Colonel. Just keep it slow and simple, impress the kids and go home. Do you copy?”

She grinned. “Copy that, General. Slow and simple. We'll leave the fancy stuff for the Air Show. Snake Skinner Alpha One out.” She switched frequencies again. “Snake Skinner One here. We've got permission from Mountain Top boys and girls. Snake Skinner Three, since this is your idea you get to fly in first. Go in low and slow, flash them that American flag, Lieutenant. The rest of you, on my tail.”

“Yes, sir!”

She wished she could see the look on the children's faces as she led her squadron around a wide loop of the evac site while Snake Skinner Three flew in to do a leisurely circuit two feet above the tops of the school buses. Once her systems told her he'd flown over most of the site, she increased her speed and dove down, the rest of the squadron right behind her like a gaggle of ducklings.

Really fast ducklings.

She kept the angle steep, bringing her nose up just in time to avoid hitting Snake Skinner Three as she breezed above him and then flew straight before banking up again and twisting her F-302 into a partial loop. She felt herself grinning like a maniac as she put the brakes on for long enough to twist again and then continue the steep ascent.

This. This was what was so amazing about flying an F-302 – and why they'd be peeling her out of the pilot's seat by force one day. She understood the appeal of flying a behemoth like the Daedalus, because it was partially about the awe of sitting at the navigation of something so amazing, but nothing maneuvered like an F-302. It was like finally being able to really defy gravity.
Glancing down, she saw thousands of jumping, waving children. The noise was probably deafening. Deciding she could stand to perform one, last trick, she looped around again and dove, pulling up just in time to come to an abrupt stop hovering just above the crowd.

She waited for them to straighten, to carefully remove the arms that had been shielding their eyes. Then she waved at them. The sudden terror turned very quickly to joy, excitement. She imagined that quite a few of the children present had parents in the air force, and even more had been taken to various air shows over the years. The ability to hover was unique to SGC aircraft.

“Alright Snake Skinner Alpha Squad,” she finally said into her comm. “It's time to head on home.”

“Daniel, smile!”

Daniel barely had time to brace himself before he had Vala draped over his shoulder and her smartphone hovering inches from his face. He had no idea what sort of face he'd made, but it certainly wasn't a smile.

“Oh that's a horrible picture, Daniel,” Vala complained. “Do it again!”

“And why am I doing this?” Daniel asked, even as he smiled at the cellphone camera – because, when it came to Vala, it was sometimes easier to just go along with things. He'd long ago learned to pick his battles.

The camera snapped again. “Ah, much better.” Vala hopped off his back and began to tap at her phone furiously. “I'm going to tweet it.”

Daniel blinked. “You're going to what?”

“Tweet it.”

“That's that messaging thing where you write about what you're doing, right?”

Vala rolled her eyes. “Yes, Daniel. It's called Twitter. We've had this conversation before, remember?”

“Right.”

Then Vala held her phone up again. “Cameron, smile!”

Cameron, who'd been speaking on his radio behind them looked up from his conversation. “Huh?”

Vala snapped the picture. “Close enough,” she said with a grin on her face, before tapping away again.

Before Daniel could stop her, Christine Everhart had slipped around him and was holding her hand out to Vala. “I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced yet,” she said with a professional smile and an excited gleam in her eye. “I'm Christine Everhart of Vanity Fair.”

Vala blinked once and then her grin widened. “Oh hello, I'm Vala Mal Doran,” she said as she took the reporter's hand. “The sexy member of SG1.”
Just then Cameron came to stand next to Daniel, a pinched look on his face as he regarded the reporter warily. “Uh, should we be putting a stop to this?” he asked Daniel in a low voice.

Daniel sighed. “Part of me wants to say 'no', because at least Vala will keep her occupied, but on the other hand, it's Vala who's keeping her occupied.”

“Right.”

Cameron began to head in their direction when Iron Man swooped down from the sky and landed beside Vala and Christine Everhart. He pointed at Christine as his faceplate slid up.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

Christine smiled sweetly at him. “Why I'm a reporter and there's some very exciting things happening here, so where else would I be?” She lifted her camera slightly and snapped a picture of Iron Man. “Besides, I broke the alien invasion story, so it only makes sense for me to follow-up. I'll be the first one out with any sort of footage. Other than whoever's been posting from Stark Tower, that is. But that's only one part of the city.”

Daniel's eyebrows rose. “JARVIS has been posting footage from Stark Tower?”

Tony looked in his direction and shrugged. “Yeah, since the battle made it to them, he's been writing regular status updates.”

“Oooh, yes he has!” said Vala, her nose buried in her phone. “I'm following Stark Tower now...” She looked up to meet Daniel's eyes. “Cassie's wounded, by the way, but alive.”

Daniel closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. “Good. That's... well, not entirely good, but not as bad as it could be. Thanks, Vala.”

“You're welcome, Daniel.”

Daniel turned to look at the Ori troops, where they were being watched by army re-enforcements who'd been beamed into the area. They looked exhausted and heavy-hearted, their energy from the battle long since depleted, leaving them looking like empty shells of the men they'd probably once been. Daniel hoped they'd find themselves again once they returned home – the part of him that wished for peace wanted them to find it as well. He knew it wouldn't be that easy and hated the Ori all the more for ripping that peace away from their followers – for taking so much more from them than they'd ever planned to give back.

Though, at the moment, he mostly wanted them gone.

Daniel turned away from the enemy soldiers to look up to the Victory, the ship that was the final legacy of the Four Great Races. The ship that was built as the last hope for the Milky Way and Pegasus Galaxies. Commander Marvel had been right: she was magnificent. The morning sun reflecting off her hull made her shine, the darker metal sparkling as though several star systems had somehow been captured and frozen within.

“Thank you,” Daniel whispered, not quite sure whom he was addressing, but hoping that maybe, somehow the sentiment managed to reach the Victory's builders. “I promise to do everything in my power to make sure she makes it to Atlantis.”

A gentle breeze swept across Central Park and ruffled his hair. Daniel could've sworn he smelt jasmine.
A small smile on his face, he then turned back to his friends and fellow planetary defenders. Cameron had wandered off again and was talking on the radio to troops in the city, his eyes carefully following Vala, who was taking pictures of herself with a bemused Iron Man and Thor. Sam stood to the side, quietly watching over Steve and his friend. Steve looked like he was ready to vibrate right out of his skin as he held himself at a careful, respectful distance away from the man he was staring at with anxious excitement. The other man's expression was wary, but Daniel noticed that his body language was turned towards Steve and he thought he felt an air of careful hope just hovering in the background.

Rodney was nowhere to be seen. Daniel assumed he was already back on the Victory analyzing the data he'd collected from the communications beacon.

And then there was Christine Everhart quietly wandering around and snapping pictures. Daniel sighed. He would have to ask Jack what to do about her. It was strange, though, to think that it wasn't just his world, the way he viewed it that was about to change. The whole world was going to know what he knew – well, most of it anyway. He was excited to share his knowledge, to finally tell people about the amazing things he'd seen, tell them about the amazing people he'd met. But it was terrifying.

He was under no illusions that he would be able to sweep himself under the carpet, to go unnoticed. He was a member of SG1, one of the program's oldest members, and the Head of the Anthropology department. Everything he'd ever done, every decision he'd ever made was about to become public record, and he was going to be judged for each and every one.

“Oh look, the President's commented on my twitter post!” Vala suddenly exclaimed. Daniel looked to where she was practically bouncing with excitement. “He says he's glad we made it through in one piece. And Teal'c posted from Manitou Springs. He says he's glad too. Oh, there's a picture of him and War Machine!”

“Teal’c has a twitter account?” Daniel asked, feeling more than a little out-of-the-loop.

Vala sent him a look. “Of course he does, it's how he keeps track of all the latest Star Wars chatter.”

“I'm not quite sure what it says about us that it's the aliens on our team that are the social media gurus,” Cameron commented.

“What, you guys aren't on twitter?” Tony asked them, looking up from Vala's phone. “What about facebook? Please tell me you're at least on facebook. It's what all the cool kids are doing nowadays.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow at him. “I am not, and never have been, one of the so-called cool kids.”

“Well, I'm making us a facebook account, so you'd better get used to it,” said Vala, still tapping on her phone. “Before some fan group comes along and creates a fake SG1 page.”

Daniel groaned. “I think I'm going to go hide in my office until everything goes away.”

Next to him, Cameron chuckled. “Sorry, don't think anyone's going to give you that option.”

He sighed. “I know, but I can still dream about it.”

“Hey, on the bright side, your office is still there,” Steve called to him, his voice full of laughter.

“Yeah, yeah it is.”
Daniel looked up into the cloudy sky. The wind had dissipated enough of the dust from the battle that he could see blue again. No matter what came next, he supposed the good news was that they were there to face it.

They'd done the impossible. Again. They'd meet the Ori again, it was inevitable. But that future meeting was already looking much less daunting. For the first time since this whole nightmare had started, Daniel founding himself looking to the future with optimism.

They could do this. Probably not tomorrow. Tomorrow, they would morn. The day after that, they would begin to rebuild. Some day after that, though, they would finally win this war.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, just wow. I can't believe we've finally reached the end of this journey. It's been a blast. Once more, thank you to all of you who've shared it with me, whether you've been here since the beginning or just joined now. Yes, there will be a sequel of sorts -- or, more likely, a collection of follow-up one-shots -- but it won't be coming right away. I have a couple of other projects I'd like to get a chunk of done first before I start on the sequel to this one. If any of you are interested, one of these projects is going to be a Harry Potter/Stargate crossover, so maybe I'll see some of you there. =D

End Notes

This story is all planned out, but I will be writing it as I go along. The story is divided into seven, three-part Acts with several interludes in between. I plan to post each Act at once, which means you'll likely have no update for a while and then the three parts in one go or at least very close together. It's a little different than how I usually do things, but I want to give this posting style a try and see how it works.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!