Stargate Trip

by Obsessed Romantic (2SFlovers)

Summary

Stargate Command receives the latest in a long line of strange visitors.
``Hey, dial us up." Col. Cameron Mitchell directed an irritated gaze at the control booth. All he needed was for Vala to start getting bored, start annoying Dr. Jackson, and then he might as well stick his head in the activation flare (kawoosh, didn’t Carter call it?). Dr Jackson was usually a great guy, genius, calm, even-tempered, …until Vala started in. Then all bets were off and the great Dr. Jackson became what did General O’Neill call it? Oh yeah, the Snarkeologist. Please, save me.
``Carter, could you….?"
``On it.’’
``Maybe the incoming wormhole is blocking the dialing program.’’ Vala suggested.
``There is no…..Okay, that’s new."Dr. Jackson sounded intrigued.

Turning, the Colonel saw what looked like an activated gate ….except the shimmering circle of water-like light was RED, not blue. And it really didn’t look like water so much as ….blood. Ick.
``Teal’c?"
``I have never seen such a phenomenon, Colonel Mitchell.’’
``Cam …’’ Carter’s voice over the intercom sounded tense as he turned to face the control booth. The expression on her face removed the comfort of her presence at the gate control terminal ‘’.. it’s not registering on our system. It’s like there’s no wormhole at all, but …the iris won’t close.’’

Marine contingents came thru the blast doors, taking up their positions & glancing at the remaining members of SG-1 as if to question their continued presence. Come to think of it, what AM I still doing here? Waving his team back, Cameron shot a last glance at the blood-red circle. It seemed to be … pulsing? Feeling ill, he followed the rest of the team into the control booth. Catching the tail end of Carter’s explanation of how nothing was registering, nothing was even turned on…..
``A Prior doohickey in the gate room might be a good idea, General.’’
``You think this is Ori?’’ The look Jackson gave him was actually respectful.
``Gate-builders, Ancients, Ori ……… they all went to the same country club, right? Anyone else you know of could do this to the gate? Or would?’’
``Something’s coming through!’’

Everyone turned back to the eerily glowing portal where two shapes were indeed emerging. In the background, Mitchell heard the General send Siler for a Prior blocker. Down on the ramp, the pulsating energy flared up once, twice, then spit out the two figures. ….. people.

The one on the right was taller, about 5’11”, muscular, blond, ….he turned his head to look around, blue eyes glazed, and Cameron gasped in shock.
``Secure the room, secure the room. ‘’ General Landry’s voice was strained, staring at the man in the gate room.
``How did he even GET here?’’
``Does it matter, Jackson? ‘’ Scowling, the Colonel switched the safety off his P90 & headed down to the gate room. ``If the Wraith have found a way here, with the Ori’s forces still cleaning our clocks ...... face it, we’re screwed blue.’’ Feeling more than seeing Teal'c behind him, he strode back into the gate room, aiming his weapon at the guy’s head. ``Wassup, Mike.’’
Teal’c raised his eyebrow at Col. Mitchell’s flippancy. He took a position next to the colonel, intending to be the voice of reason with Daniel Jackson in the control booth. He was disappointed that the man who might be Michael moved protectively in front of the woman. From what he had seen in the booth, her eyebrows were slanted up, eyes and hair dark, about a foot shorter than her companion. It was her pointed ears that had drawn his curiosity, though. He had never, in all his years, heard of a people with pointed ears. Perhaps her people are the foundation for the Tau’ri legends of elves?

``Ya got the wrong guy.’’ His hands were up, his eyes nervous. Teal’c was starting to suspect that the man was, in fact, NOT Michael Kenmore.

``Sez you.’’ Colonel Mitchell’s firearm never wavered. ``Tell your friend to step out here.’’

``No.’’ The stranger took a wider stance, spreading his raised arms a little. His protectiveness for the woman was apparent. A trait Wraith did not possess. Teal’c was about to speak when the strange woman addressed her companion in an alien tongue.

``Satalau wilat eh lu etek lamok.’’ The man stiffened, then eyed them nervously as everyone tensed at her speech.

``Tell her to shut up.’’

``My mama raised me more polite than that, didn’t yers?’’ Obviously nudged from behind, he moved his gaze to the control booth. ``Can I ask when we are? The year? Maybe who the American president is?’’

``We’re not in the habit of giving intel to the bad guys, Mike.’’

``Will ya quit calling me that? My name’s …..''

``Tor ri.’’

``….. not important, I guess.’’

``The year, by the Tau’ri calendar, is 2007 The president of the United States is Henry Hayes. You are on Earth at Stargate command.’’

``Teal’c, what’re you…..''

``This is not Michael Kenmore.’’

``Are you kidding?!’’

``He is not.’’

Moving out from behind her protector, the women glanced unconcernedly at the multiple weapons pointed her way. She stood motionless beside him, as if to allow everyone to notice her alien nature. She looked directly into Teal’c’s eyes. He was immediately impressed with her quiet confidence, a calm and controlled demeanor much like his own. She nodded almost regally at him, a gesture of respect and acknowledgment. He inclined his head at her.

``You know her?’’
"I am merely being respectful."

"I am Commander T'Pol of Vulcan. This is Commander Charles Tucker of Earth."

"Hey, how ya …" At his introduction, Commander Tucker had lowered his arms. Immediately, the marines & Mitchell stepped forward, tensing. He returned his arms to their previous position.

"Friendly bunch."

"Where we are from the Earth year is 2157 I am unaware of the American President’s name ….."

Commander T’Pol looked at Tucker.

"How would I know? Politics isn’t my strong suit, either.’’

"Look, miss, I’m sure your story is VERY convincing, but Count Chocula here is a bad guy, so I’m gonna need you to move away."

"No."

Much like Tucker's statement before, this was an uncompromising, unalterable fact. Teal’c fully expected her to move in front of the man.

"Look, I don’t want to shoot you, lady, but….."

"Shoot her & I’ll strangle ya with yer own intestines."

"See?" Mitchell commented to Teal’c out of the side of his mouth. "Sounds like Mikey to me."

"There is no need for violence or threats."

T’Pol shot a look at Tucker, who managed to look both determined and abashed. Teal’c was amused. Their dynamic was much like that of Daniel Jackson and Vala Mal Doran. "There must be a way of establishing ourselves as non-hostile."

"I tell ya, if this is another of Daniels’ stupid ‘missions’ I’m gonna wring his neck like a chicken’s."

Again, the marines moved forward. Tucker stepped back and swallowed. "Maybe I should let you do the talkin’."

"Indeed."

"Stole your line, there, buddy."

"Indeed.’’ Teal’c noted a flicker of amusement within T’Pol’s eyes. Tucker snorted, grinning a little despite the situation. "Perhaps if you were to ask a question Michael would not know?"

"Like what? He didn’t know who the President was. Guy says he’s Marty McFly, for cryin’ out loud!"

"Hey, you see a Delorean anywhere around here? No. That’s because you people used yer big glow-ring to suck us up like a cherry soda."

This time, the marines moved back. Several shifted their feet and a couple exchanged nervous glances. Colonel Mitchell lowered his weapon, eyes wide with shock.

"Y’know, Teal’c, you may have something here."

"What?" Tucker looked around at the room. "What’d I say?"

The blast doors opened, just as General Landry called for the marines to stand down. Daniel Jackson
and Vala Mal Doran came through the doorway, the later rushing over to the group enthusiastically. Teal’c saw Tucker lower his arms slowly, rolling his shoulders as he did so. He traded a look with his compatriot, a silent mutual assessment that appeared to satisfy both. Nodding at him, T’Pol stepped forward and was immediately covered by Mitchell and the standard gate room contingent.

``Thought we was all friends, now.’’ Tucker stepped forward, hands twitching. Teal’c placed ‘unarmed’ in a mental category with a high degree of probability. More and more, he was convinced their visitors were just as confused as they were.

``Oh, they’re probably just jealous. Not that often we get visitors.’’ Vala smiled. ‘‘Especially handsome drinks of whiskey, like yourself.’’ Teal’c was interested to see Tucker’s face begin to turn red and T’Pol’s eyes to narrow slightly.

``It’s `drink of water’, Vala, and he’s not that tall.’’ Daniel Jackson nodded at Teal’c. The Jaffa moved back, yielding his place as diplomat to his friend. His new position afforded him a clear shot at anyone in the entire group. Switching hands with his staff weapon, he drew his zat’nik’atel and held it loosely at his side.

``You drink what you want, I’ll drink ….’’

``Vala.’’ This time, Mitchell attempted to rein her in.

``This conversation serves no purpose.’’ T’Pol directed her gaze to Daniel Jackson. ‘‘We had no intention to come here. If you would please return us where you found us, this situation ….”

``I’m afraid we can’t do that.’’ Daniel raised his hands to ward off protests. ‘‘We don’t know how you got here. We have no idea how to send you back, or even where back IS.’’ Looking at the visitors, he sighed. ‘‘I’m sorry, but I’m afraid you’re stuck.’’
Three

Dr. Lam hung up the phone. General O’Neill had said that this would be a strange assignment. Looks like my definition of strange just got moved again. She readied the infirmary for the exams General Landry had suggested. She’d just finished clearing the last of SG-7 from the room, when most of SG1 walked in, accompanied by a man with dark blond hair and blue eyes wearing what looked like a mechanic’s coverall. Moving closer, she noticed that the coverall was apparently a uniform of some kind with a unit patch on the left shoulder and what appeared to be silver naval Commander’s rank on the right side of his chest. Then she saw the woman.

Copper skin, slanted eyebrows, thick dark hair, dark eyes, about 4’11”, wearing a skin-tight red cat suit with the same unit patch & rank insignia as the man. All of this registered in a blur as Dr. Lam focused in on the pointed ears. Pointed ears. Obviously not latex, real POINTED ears. Strange just got redefined by light-years. She wanted to ask if her next patient would be Frodo or Gimli.

“Who …?”

“Dr. Carolyn Lam,” trust Dr. Jackson to try and smooth things over “may I present Commanders T’Pol of Vulcan and Charles Tucker of Earth.”

“Charles Tucker the Third, ma’am.” He stuck out his hand in her direction, compelling her gaze away from the woman’s ears. “Friends call me Trip.”

“You didn’t tell us that.” Mitchell commented, hand on his sidearm.

“Y’all were pointin’ guns at me.” He smiled at her, his hand as warm as his eyes. “She’s gonna be pokin’ me with antiquated medical instruments, I’m gonna be as friendly as possible.”

“Antiquated?” Tucker just went from charming to obnoxious. “Antiquated?”

“We are from 150 years into an alternate future.” T’Pol was looking around the infirmary with just a little nervousness. “The appellation is appropriate.”

“No offense.”

“None taken.” Carolyn smiled at him. “I’ll just make sure to refrigerate those ‘antiquated’ instruments. Wouldn’t want any infections to set in.”

Stepping away, she directed him towards the exam table she’d set up. Swallowing, Tucker moved toward the table only to be stopped by his companion’s voice.

“Ul’haf.” Glaring over his shoulder, he turned to face Dr. Lam.

“I got stuff in my pockets, ya got a bin or……” silently, one of the nurses handed him a plastic basin. “Thanks.”

Starting with the pocket on the right shoulder, he removed a squarish technical device. The pocket on the left contained what looked like a couple of snack bars. The breast pocket held a different device, more oval in shape and silver. His right hip pocket had a number of slim objects bearing a vague resemblance to screwdrivers or flashlights. His left revealed a rag, stained with what had to be grease, and a rectangular slim device with a display screen. A mini-laptop? From his right leg pocket he pulled out a gun-shaped object that caused Mitchell and Teal’c to tense and more of the screwdriver like things. Still blushing slightly, he set them the bin. Lastly, he unzipped the left leg
pocket & removed a silver box w/latches and a very familiar symbol. Looking towards T’Pol, who nodded, he placed the first aid kit? Directly in Carolyn’s hands.

``You had a med kit in your pocket?''

``Given’ my track record with away missions, are ya really surprised?’’

``Yes.’’

``I do learn, y’know.’’

``In some matters, apparently.’’

``This is a med kit?’ Carolyn looked into the little box. There was some kind of device, six small tubes with colored labels, a smaller rectangle that almost looked like a cell phone, and two tiny spray canisters.

‘Yeah.’’ Pointing at the rectangle ‘`med scanner ‘’ at the spray cans ‘`dermal sealant and binder’’ the other device ‘`hypo spray’’ at each of the tubes in turn ‘`tri-ox, broad based anti-toxin, painkiller, anti-infectious compound, anesthetic, and stimulant’’

``There’s not much medication in this.’’

``Each ampoule holds approximately 20,000 milligrams.’’

``Twenty…..?’’

``It is extremely concentrated.’’

``You just set the hypo spray…’’ Tucker reached out for the med kit.

``Perhaps a demonstration on how to utilize the med kit can wait until our exams have been completed.’’

``Oh, yeah, sure.’’

Tucker unzipped his uniform, obviously intending to disrobe despite the crowd of observers. Snapping the med kit shut, Carolyn reached for the curtain, pulling it around the exam table. Tucker wasn’t the only one in the room blushing, now.
Daniel watched T'Pol stand at apparent ease, gaze directed at the curtain, hands clasped lightly behind her back. Are the tips of her ears turning green, or is that just the light in here? She looks…….. uncomfortable. Maybe I’m just projecting….

``Your turn." Mitchell held out the plastic bin, shaking it a little to gain the Vulcán’s attention.

``Where would she put anything, Mitchell?'' Vala asked `Her outfit is….well, I like it. Where do I get one?"

``Vala.'’ Daniel pushed away the image of her in a skin-tight….anything with the ease of long practice. He was more concerned with the woman everyone was now staring at. Her discomfort was becoming more obvious and he had a suspicion he knew why. ``That lack of modesty …'' he indicated the curtain behind which Tucker & Lam could be heard murmuring `` that’s a personality trait, isn’t it? Not a cultural habit?''

``Yes and no." Discussing the matter in an objectively scientific manner seemed to soothe her. Daniel wished he had a notepad. ``While most humans of our ….. continuum have less modesty than their 21 st century counterparts, Commander Tucker… " she raised her voice slightly, obviously intending him to hear ``.. has always been something of an exhibitionist."

``Ya lose a few inhibitions after ya save the ship in yer underwear." Tucker called out from behind the curtain.

``So that was the reason.’’ T'Pol lifted an eyebrow at the curtain and stepped over to the bin. Unclipping the belt, she simply placed it gently in the bin. Turning her gaze to the somewhat disappointed Mitchell, she said `` I would suggest that you not shake or otherwise disturb this equipment. My tricorder has a recording of the energy wave that brought us here. It would be distressing if it were to be erased or the equipment damaged.''

``Hands off, you mean." Mitchell frowned at the bin of futuristic tech. ``Just once, I’d like to meet an advanced civilization that doesn’t treat us like a bunch of kids trying to crack the cookie jar."

``You’n’m both." Tucker called out again.

``I hope we haven’t offended you, Commander." Daniel tried to steer the conversation into friendlier waters. Was it his fault that meeting new cultures was so personally fascinating? ``I’d like to know more about your culture, the people of Vulcan? So that we can avoid any…"

``You have not given offense." T'Pol resumed her stance with her hands clasped behind her back. ``I believe an exchange of cultural information would be beneficial.’’ Daniel swallowed as she looked directly into his eyes. The intensity of her gaze was uncomfortable, probably just a human reaction to alien regard. He smiled at her experimentally and got a raised eyebrow. ``Both the name of my race and my planet is Vulcan. We are copper-based carbon life forms from a desert environment with several biological adaptations that give us superior survival abilities. Some of our internal organs are, from a human viewpoint, misplaced, and….”

``I don’t think he’s that kinda Doctor, T’Pol." Tucker had emerged from the curtain, now wearing the standard black tee & green fatigue pants given to all refugees. He was carrying his boots, and sat on an empty bed to pull them on. ``Yer up.” Daniel nearly moaned in frustration when the most interesting first contact they’d had in YEARS inclined her head at him and walked behind Dr. Lam’s
curtain. He found himself glaring at Tucker. "She’s a science officer. She’d probably end up given ya a biology lecture on Vulcan evolution ’fore she got to the stuff you really wanted to know."

"Anthropology is a science." Even to his own ears, he sounded petulant. "You speak her language, I don’t suppose you know anything about…"

"Vulcans believe in logic over all." Tucker leaned comfortably back on his arms, posture relaxed; though his eyes darted occasionally to the curtain. "That means they control, repress, stifle, and otherwise strangle the life outta any emotions that come along; as well as any fun they might have ……"

"Limit your answers to the facts, not your opinions, Commander."

"Yes, ma’am." From the smirking tone of his voice, Tucker seemed to think he’d scored a point of some kind. "As ya probably guessed, those ears aren’t just for show. Vulcan’s have superior hearing, superior intellect, superior strength, female’s have a superior sense of smell .." Tucker tilted his head, running his tongue around in his cheek. "T’hear them tell it, Vulcans have a superior everythin’." Expectantly, he looked over at the silent curtain. "T’Pol?"

"You are continuing to relay facts, Commander, do not desist."

"Score: Vulcan, one to zero."

"Aside from the logic thing, you’re giving a biology lecture, too, sweetie." Vala plopped herself down next to Tucker. Daniel expected him to blush again and move, but he just looked the ex-thief right in the eye. He looked at her for a few minutes, then a somewhat sad, soft smile crossed his face. Tucker reached out and brushed her hair back from her face. There were no sexual overtones to the behavior, though the archeologist was aware of Mitchell shooting him an expectant look. Tucker pulled out her barrette and refastened it with the stray hair in place. Vala looked stunned.

"You remind me of ma sister." If everyone hadn’t been quietly expecting the former host to attack the Commander, the soft tones he used would’ve been lost. Daniel fought the urge to laugh at the look on Vala’s face. Then she smiled brilliantly with a mercurial restoration of her usual mood.

"What, gorgeous with a winning personality?"

"Yeah." Tucker’s honest sincerity derailed her flirtation again and Daniel was torn between wanting the new arrival to continue confounding her and taking that confused and unsettled look off his friend’s face. Thankfully, Tucker returned to his conversation with the rest of the room. "So, since they repress emotions, Vulcans don’t like to be touched." At the furrowing of brows around him, he said "It’s an empathy thing."

"Vulcans are telepathic?" Daniel couldn’t keep the apprehension out of his voice. Mitchell put his hand on his sidearm and muttered something about Priors.

"Nah, just empathic. And only thru physical contact. That’s why the no touchin’. " There was more to the question of Vulcan telepathy, the anthropologist could tell by the way their guest’s eyes slid minutely away. Whatever else he was, this man wasn’t a good liar. He also wasn’t dangerous, not if Teal’c’s instincts were to be trusted (and they usually were). "They use daily meditation to clear out the subconscious crap, so she’ll need a candle when ya set us up, or throw us in the brig, or whatever."

"I use candles for meditation as well, It would be a simple matter to provide Commander T’Pol with meditational supplies."
“Most kind.” T’Pol had come out from the curtain, clad in the green fatigue coat in addition to what her companion was wearing. She had retained her boots as well, but put them on while behind the curtain. Daniel noted the green of the fatigues heightened the green tinge of her skin, or was it that it was just more noticeable when she was wearing green. Or perhaps it had something to do with Vala sitting so close to her human friend on the bed.

“Thank means thank you.”

“I am capable of expressing gratitude.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

“When you perform an action worthy of gratitude, I will not hesitate to express it.”


“Yer a funny guy.” Tucker stood “That leaves two things ya really need to know.”

“Only two? Vulcan culture can’t possibly be that simplistic….”

“Vulcan’s are vegetarian, which is a biological necessity, not a choice. An’ … well, some questions ‘re considered ‘intimate’ an’ real offensive fer strangers t’ask.”

“Like what?” His accent had gotten thicker, had he asked one of the questions?

“My age, details of my childhood or personal life, things of this nature.” T’Pol nodded at Daniel. “An anthropologist will be capable of restraining his curiosity to acceptable subjects and will no doubt refrain from asking questions which I find intrusive.”

“Ya never said they were intrusive, ya just refused ta answer them.”

“Telling you it was none of your business was not indicative enough? I must re-evaluate my estimations of your intelligence.”

“Is that what WE sound like?” Vala had moved over to stand next to him, watching the two visitors bicker with what had to be the ease of experience. Daniel was initially thankful for her lowered voice, as he was thinking the same thing; until he saw the Vulcan turn her head to look at him.

“Perhaps it is time to be ….questioned by your commanding officer?”

“Debriefed.” Mitchell corrected. “Right this way, commanders.”

Daniel saw the Colonel insert Teal’c between the two and the glare Tucker shot him as a result. Vala was right, there was some kind of relationship there, and …. Wait, if they had a relationship, and he and Vala sounded like that to their friends ……. He shoved that train of thought to the back of his mind and followed the little group to the conference room. Tucker pulled out one of the chairs for T’Pol and she accepted, giving him an almost affectionate look that turned to a narrow-eyed stare as he went around the table to perform the same courtesy for Vala and Sam. Mitchell was shaking his head in amusement, taking a seat to the right of the table head. Daniel took his seat between Vala and Mitchell, leaving Teal’c to sit between T’Pol and Landry. Tucker took the seat on the other side of his Vulcan ….. coworker? Friend? Love interest? The anthropologist was as fascinated by the personal interaction as the potential to learn about an entirely new & original culture.
General Landry looked over the group feeling somewhat petulant. It wasn’t enough that they were barely holding their own against the Ori, that the Asgard were gone for good, that the Wraith and the Human Replicators and the Lucian Alliance all wanted their heads on platters … No, now they had other dimensional refugees to take care of. As if the problems of one reality weren’t enough, they have to tackle another’s. Restraining the urge to sigh, he nodded to Col. Mitchell & Carter to stand down and seated himself at the head of the table.

``Dr. Lam says initial results show you to be human, Commander. Glad to hear it."

``Me, too.” The man smiled in a friendly fashion, looking around at the others. ``Maybe we can figure some stuff out, now.’’

``We can certainly try.’’ He hoped they’d be able to send these people home. Holding someone against their will, even by accident, left a bad taste in his mouth. ``I’m General Landry. I’m in charge of Stargate Command. This is Colonel Mitchell, Lt. Colonel Carter, T’ealc, Dr. Jackson, and Vala Mal Doran.’’ Each of his people nodded their heads at their introduction, Dr. Jackson throwing in a smile & Vala giving a little wave as well. ``You’re Commanders Tucker and .. T’Pol? Did I pronounce that right?’’

``Quite correctly.’’ The woman had no expression at all on her face, but from what Carolyn had told him over the phone, that was to be expected. ``Might I conclude that the Stargate to which you refer is the artifact through which we traveled?’’

``That’s right.’’

``A stable, planet based wormhole generator.” Tucker seemed impressed. He grinned at Carter. ``Not bad.’’

``Wish I could claim responsibility, but we didn’t build it.’

``Maybe we should start with what happened from your end of things.’’ Mitchell interrupted.``Seeing as how you’re the visiting team..’’

``Ball’s in our court, huh?’’ Tucker didn’t seem as friendly towards the Colonel as the rest. Not that we should expect him to be friendly at all, Landry mused. For all he knows, we did pull him here and all this is a clever ruse.

``We were escorting a group of archeologists to a recent discovery on a moon in a distant system. Our ship was invited to join the expedition by our hosts out of respect for the captain. The … compound was extensive, perhaps the size of a small city. Several theories abounded about the purpose of the facility.’’

``Sounds like your kind of barbeque, Jackson.’’

``This debriefing will be more effective if you do not interrupt, Colonel.’’ Landry looked down to hide his grin. Mitchell looked as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. ``On our 12th day there, I was running scans on one of the smaller rooms. There was a particularly impressive mural, containing a large representation of a circle, what I believe may have been a ’Stargate’. There was an altar-like table in the room with blocks of writing that were apparently sunken into the table, perhaps to be manipulated?’’ Lifting an eyebrow at the reaction this got, the woman continued her story. Landry had to admire her aplomb. Cast into another dimension, she
was handling things pretty well. Although, he did notice that she was less than forthcoming as to who their hosts were, why they respected the captain, even what organization they served with. "I was running another scan of the mural, my back to the table, when there was a power surge. I heard the blocks begin to move…"

`` I was comin’ in to ….well, to invite her to lunch when I saw the blocks start movin’. I hadn’t touched anythin’, either.’’
``No one said you did, Commander.’’
``Just so you remember that when we’re explainin’ this to the Cap’n. ’’ Most of the table was smiling. Jackson looked sympathetic, though. "I tried my communicator, no go, not even static. I was tryin’ to scan for what was goin’ on, when the sound started.’’
``The sound was already present, it merely changed pitch so that you could hear it.’’
``Whichever, it was buildin’ up. When I called t’T’Pol, she didn’t move, so I set the tricorder down on the corner of the table thing & grabbed her arm. There was this tingling, like when the transporter takes hold, so I moved completely into the energy field. I thought if I could get a better grip, I could toss her free of it.”
``When I heard the blocks move, I attempted to turn to scan the table. I was unable to move. The mural Stargate was illuminated, several parts appeared to be moving. The center of the circle …. altered. Prior to the energy surge, it was a black, featureless surface. Once the ring began to light and move, the center gained depth. ’’ Landry made a questioning noise in his throat, preparatory to asking what she meant. Obviously, the woman was used to people not following her explanations, as she continued. "It was as if, after looking at a photograph, one suddenly realized one was looking at the real object. Black painted wall became…. space without stars.’’ Several people shuddered. "When the energy changed to an audible pitch, the center was glowing. A red light, through which I could see a room, several people, another table.’’
``Not this room, then.’’ Carter stated, twitching a hand towards the gate room.
``No. The image shifted when the energy became …..physical. I experienced a sensation, as the Commander said, not unlike that of a matter transporter locking onto my biosigns. I felt the Commander’s hand on my arm, then realized he had joined me in the energy field.’’ Turning to look at her companion, T’Pol inclined her head. "My thanks, Commander.’’
``Kwon-sum teretuhr, t’hai’la.’’
Whatever he had said in return obviously shook her, though she gave no sign of it other than widened eyes. Landry thought Carolyn was right, there was something between these two. He gave his guests a few more minutes of staring at each other before clearing his throat. Tucker looked down at the table, blushing, but T’Pol looked right at him as if she hadn’t been staring into her companion’s eyes for a good 2-3 minutes. "The next thing I was aware of was standing on the ramp before your Stargate.’’
``That’s so weird.’’ Vala declared. She had rested her chin in her hands as if she were a child listening to a good story. "Gates in walls, Ancient tables that transport people from other dimensions.’’
``The table you saw, did it look anything like this?’’ Jackson had taken the opportunity during the recitation of events to not only help himself to one of the ever-present notepads on the conference table, but had sketched what looked Landry like ….well, like Greek as well as a crude representation of an Ancient table/altar device.
``Exactly like.’’ T’Pol stated. ``We could assist you in re-creating the position of the stones, the writing on them, the frequencies of the energy wave…..’’

``I’m afraid that’s not going to be much help.’’ Carter put in. Landry resisted the urge to sigh again. Why couldn’t anything ever be easy? Or smooth?
``How can detailed information not be helpful?'' Sam wished she hadn’t said anything. Breaking news this bad should’ve been left to Daniel. ``We bear you no ill will for this event, we will not....’’

``I think what she’s sayin’ is they didn’t do it, T’Pol.’’ Sam nodded gratefully at the man across the table.

``We don’t even have a good idea who did. All we know is what they used to do it. How they did it, whether they meant to, where they are, WHO they are.....We just don’t have that information.’’

``Perhaps we can use our information to ..... I believe the term is jury-rig? A means of re-creating the event.’’

``I hope so.’’

``We can keep looking for the guys who did this, too.’’ There was a light in Cameron’s eye. Sam knew that he’d found a new cause. Since getting SG1 back together and at least attaining a foothold against the Ori, she had the feeling he’d been looking for a new project.

``They’re probably on Earth somewhere.’’ Vala became the instant center of attention. Sam wished she had a camera for every time Vala’s strangely perceptive statements put that look on Daniel’s face. ``I mean, they came through OUR gate, right? Wouldn’t it have pulled them through another gate if it was on another planet?’’

``That’s probably true.’’ Sam agreed. ``We’ve seen that behavior before, wormholes pulled towards nearby gates when the target gate is offline.’’ She felt she had to be honest, though. ``That’s no guarantee, though. We’ve never had the gate pull people from other dimensions, before.’’

``You forgetting the march of the SG1’s we had through here a while back?’’

``Those were alternate realities, versions of ourselves. These people are obviously from a universe that is drastically different.’’

``Not so different.’’ Cam said, looking suspiciously at Tucker, who glared back. Personality conflict or just misunderstanding? Sam wondered.

``I ain’t gonna apologize for this Michael fella havin’ my face., so get over it , already.’’

``When the in-depth test results come back.’’

``You people must have a lotta enemies.’’

``Why do you say that?’’ Sam tried to shift his attention. The last thing they needed was a fistfight in the conference room. Again.

``Cause of how suspicious y’all are.’’

``Not all of us.’’

``I’m sure yer a nice guy an’all, Dr. Jackson, but I ain’t blind. There was a guard on us all the way down to sickbay … the infirmary. That’s in addition to you folks, who are still armed, I’m noticin’. An’ unless yer medical practices are really off, nurses don’t usually carry side arms? At least, not durin’ an examination. An’ how about yer friend Mitchell’s attempts to keep us apart, sittin’ yer
strongest guy next to us, but no one else. Those four gorillas at the room’s exits don’t scream ‘we trust people’ y’know.’

“You don’t know the situation” Daniel sounded defensive, sure sign he agreed with their visitor.

“Sure I don’t. And I don’t need to. I’m just sayin’ that people work better without guns in their ears.”

“No one has threatened us, Commander. You are overreacting.”

“Yeah, listen to your girlfriend, Tucker.”

“Yer outta line, Mr…..”

“I will handle this, Commander.” The look she gave Cam could’ve frozen the sun and flash-fried the planet at the same time. “I do not know why you feel it is necessary to antagonize Commander Tucker. A defensive mechanism not unlike his own brand of teasing humor, I suspect.”

“Hey!”

“I do not believe, however, it is appropriate, by either of our cultures, to…… `drag me into it’. The Commander and I are officers on a starship. Co-workers. Nothing more.” Sam would’ve missed the flicker in Tucker’s eyes if she hadn’t been watching closely. He was disappointed, even depressed at his friend’s statement. “I would request that you restrict your puerile speculations to the gossip mill, where they belong.”

“Rumor mill.” Teal’c’s voice boomed into the sudden silence. “It is referred to as a rumor mill.”

“I stand corrected.” T’Pol seemed at a loss for what to say next, the rest of the room uncomfortably silent.

“No hard feelin’s” Tucker leaned over the table to offer Cam his hand. “My mouth tends to run free of my brain sometimes.”

“I get the same problem.” Cam shook the offered hand, looking relieved at not only the subject change but the excuse. “Sorry, Commander.” This towards the Vulcan.

“Apology accepted.”

“So………” Tucker looked back at Sam, tilting his head inquisitively. “If y’all didn’t invent the wormhole gate, who did? And maybe they can help us get back?”

“No, they left this plane of existence …………..speaking of questions, how did you know the Stargate generated wormholes?” Sam could tell the subject change was deliberate. There were very few subjects Daniel wouldn’t discuss, and all of them were linked to his personal experiences. Ancients were a big sore point.

“Figured you wouldn’t call it a Stargate otherwise.”

“You can’t have figured that out just from the name.” Same chimed in. Maybe the Vulcan wasn’t the only one with mental abilities.

“Sure I could. I mean, it’s not a communicator. Not underground, not with all’y’all armed to the teeth in the room. Not after we traveled through it ourselves. Only way you can travel from planet to planet without a starship is a wormhole. Never heard a’one on a planet, naturally speakin’, but with a
device? Star – gate. Seemed kinda obvious. ‘’

‘’Obvious.’’ Sam tried not to fell insulted. All that work, all that time to figure out what the Stargate was, how it worked; and this …… hick declares it obvious. Of course, he does have the advantage of coming from a highly technological society, one in which alien life was apparently readily accepted. Feeling a bit better, she shrugged. ‘’I suppose.’’

‘’Sorry.’’ He was smiling softly at her. ‘’Didn’t mean to be insultin’, or nothin’’’

‘’So, what’s the plan?’’ Cam looked to the General, she was grateful he pulled attention away from her. That was all she needed, for yet another handsome visitor through the gate to take a liking to her before leaving or dying or …. Deep breath, Sam, she told herself. Keep that cart firmly behind the horse.

‘’We will try and help our guests’’ She thought his emphasis on the word guest was a bit much ‘’to return home. Carter, take the data we recorded and work with Commander T’Pol with her readings. Perhaps we can gain some idea of what we’re looking for. Mitchell, you and T’ealc will coordinate with the NID to see if anything’s gone missing from the Antarctic or Area 51. See if you can find out what the Trust is up to, determine who’s behind this. Vala ‘’ the former host perked up eagerly ‘’try and make contact with your former business associates and get the current gossip. I know you said it wasn’t off world, but let’s cover all the bases.’’

‘’Yes sir!’’

‘’Commander Tucker is the Chief Engineer of .. our vessel. He may be of use in our endeavors.’’ Okay, Sam was confused. After coldly declaring him to be a mere co-worker, the Vulcan’s tone was now affectionate, her manner one of studied indifference that didn’t fool the Lt Col. For a minute. She wanted him included.

‘’Y’know I’m more a hardware kinda guy. Sounds like yer gonna be workin’ theories & software for a while.’’ Looking around the table, he grinned at Daniel’s notepad. ‘’I could chat Vulcan culture with Dr. Jackson, ‘till yer ready to start buildin’.’’

‘’We may not need your help at all.’’ Sam couldn’t help trying to get him back, still smarting from the ‘’obvious’’ ‘’I am something of an engineer myself.’’

‘’Would ya trust a machine ya didn’t at least go over once yerself? With so much ridin’ on it?’’

‘’No.’’ She had to admit the truth. ‘’Not really.’’ Now she felt a little ashamed of trying to put him in his place. Not to mention Daniel had to be chomping at the bit to get started on the cultural exchange.

‘’I trust you will be discrete in the information that you share.’’

‘’Always am.’’

Sam was torn between diving into the scientific puzzle in front of her, or figuring out the personal one between the two travelers. Landry dismissed the group and she waited for T’Pol to join her. Ah, well, science it is. I think I’ll take Daniel to lunch tomorrow, though. Satisfied that both curiosities could be satiated, she escorted the Vulcan to her lab.
Seven

Vala jogged down the hall, eager to catch up with the two handsome men. Hopefully Daniel won’t concentrate on the boring stuff. It seemed unlikely though, with the affable `Trip’ as the source of the information. She still wasn’t sure how she felt about being seen as someone’s `sister’. Of course, she could tell no woman had a chance with him, not with the way he looked at his Vulcan.

``I really don’t know where to start.” Daniel was saying with a nervous laugh, gesturing for Trip to sit.

``Why not start with the `saving the ship in your underwear’ story? I’m sure that’s a good one.” Vala helped herself to Daniel’s computer chair and grinned at his exasperated look.

``Shouldn’t you be with the General calling thieves and bounty hunters?’

``Most of my contacts aren’t people you call up. You have to have a ….face-to-face?’

``Thieves an’ bounty hunters?” Trip put in. ``Looks like I’m not the only one with interestin’ stories.”

``Oh, you should hear the one about how we met, shouldn’t he, darling?” Vala leaned back in her chair and smiled, inwardly wondering how he’d play it this time.

``Maybe later.”

``Spoilsport.” Hmmm . That had to be the mildest reaction she’d had in a while. He must really be interested in this Vulcan stuff. ``So, Trip,’’ he looked startled to be addressed by his nickname so readily `regale us with tales of Vulcan. Desert world, right?” To Daniel’s stare `I was paying attention.’”

``Obviously.”

``Why don’t I start with Vulcan history, move into the modern stuff, an’ you can ask any questions you have along the way?”

``I’m sure I’ll have a lot of them.” Vala hadn’t seen Daniel this excited since their quest for Merlin’s device. She hoped this encounter had a sunnier result.

``Well ….” Leaning back, Trip rolled his tongue around in his mouth. Vala knew an unconscious gesture when she saw one. Backing up a bit, she made sure Daniel’s tape recorder was on and supplied with tape. ``A long, long time ago’ inna galaxy far, far away....” Grinning madly at their groans `` sorry, couldn’t resist. Anyway, the Vulcans were workin’ on space travel, but they had bigger problems. See, they didn’t always control their emotions, so they were tearin’ each other apart somethin’ fierce.” Vala tilted her head at him and opened her mouth. ``’Cause of the empathy. See, if person A ..” he held our a hand ` hates person B” he extended the other hand `and person B can FEEL it, then he hates person A back even more’” he raised the first hand higher `and person A picks up on that and feeds it back to person B’” he raised the second hand higher than the first.

``Feedback.” Vala looked over her shoulder at Daniel to see a look of horror on his face. ``The emotion would keep bouncing back and forth between them until…”

``Until they couldn’t feel anythin’ else an’ the only way to end it was to kill each other.”

``It’s a wonder they aren’t extinct.”
That’s where Surak came in. Surak was this guy, kinda like Gandhi, who said that their emotions could be controlled. That the only thing standing between their savagery and peace was a disciplined mind. He proposed the tamin’ of their emotions, using meditation to harness them and put them under the control of the ordered, disciplined, logical mind. He wrote a book about it, the Kir’Shara.

Sounds like a good insomnia cure.” Vala commented, feeling Daniel’s glare on the back of her head.

‘Yer not far wrong. It’s a philosophy manual, basically. Pretty hard to get through.’

‘You’ve read it?’

‘I’m tryin’. It’s on the data padd I had in my pocket. The big rectangle?’ Motioning towards his left hip pocket, Vala could just imagine the avaricious look that was stealing over Daniel’s face. ‘It’s in Vulcan, that may be what’s makin’ it so hard.’

‘You read Vulcan?’

‘Again, tryin’. Speakin’ it it’s easier, the written form is very ….well, ornamental. It also reads vertically, top to bottom? So, it’s a little tough.’

“I’d like to see it, try and read some myself.” Vala wished he’d have half that passion about something other than languages. Sighing, she leaned forward and tapped Trip on the knee.

“So Surak saves the Vulcans. Then what happened.”

“Well, for starters, it wasn’t that easy. Some Vulcans liked bein’ savage, thought their clan would win. There was a nuclear exchange” Daniel flinched “some of the ecological damage from the wars still hasn’t healed, an’ it was somethin’ like millennia ago. Not to mention that the Kir’Shara was lost until about three years ago.”

“That probably lead to some mis-interpretations, some factions rising up with their own take on `the true word of Surak.’ ”

“Right on the money, Dr. Jackson.” Trip shrugged. “‘Bout three years ago, though, the real Kir’Shara was recovered and released to the Vulcan people at large.”

“At large …meaning, some faction actually had the true writings?”

“No. One faction had Surak.”

“Wouldn’t he have been dead by then …now?” Vala asked. She hoped he was, they really didn’t need any other immortal problems what with Ori and Ancients and Wraith and Replicators …. No, no more eternals, good or bad, please.

“His katra. His soul? Vulcans can …. I guess kinda …store it? And, with a LOT of discipline an’ trainin’, they can ….merge consciousness with it.”

“Like a demonic possession.” Daniel’s tone was sharp. Vala crossed her arms and slumped. If Vulcan’s were like Go’auld……well, she wouldn’t be trying to get to know their visitor, after all.

“No, there’s no oppression of the core personality. It’s more like ….ya got a mental houseguest that ya really never see, but can have conversations with and other people can come in and talk to him too ….’ Trip trailed off at the looks on their faces. “You gotta understand, this isn’t somethin’ that
happens everyday with every Vulcan. Surak was highly disciplined and focused, so were most of the Syrannites.’’

‘‘That’s the name of the faction that had his katra?’’ Daniel asked. At Trip’s nod, he frowned. ‘‘So, his worshippers…’’

‘‘Worship’s goin’ a bit far, Doctor Jackson.’’ Trip sat up straight, hitching his shoulders as if preparing himself physically for the verbal match. ‘‘Vulcan’s re deeply spiritual people, yeah, an’ they got a lotta respect for Surak; but worship? ’’ He grinned suddenly. ‘‘That would be illogical.’’
Cam hung up the phone with a frustrated sigh. No one knew anything about anything. Nothing was missing, supposedly, and no one had any plans or ulterior motives. Right. And the Ori just want to hold hands and sing Kum-By-Yah. He’d taking the opportunity to plant a bit of bait, though. Chatting with his contacts about the visitors, he’d downplayed T’Pol & concentrated on Tucker. Yeah, seemed like a nice guy, for a WEAPONS engineer. He figured that should generate interest in the guy real fast. And, of course, when the nefarious minions showed up to snatch what they thought of as an advantage, he & T’ealc would be waiting. Catch the bad guys, make ‘em tell us where the table is. It’s a plan.

``Bra’tac will keep `an ear out’ for any information.’’ Teal’c’s voice boomed into his musings.

``Meaning that he doesn’t know anything NOW.’’ T’ealc shook his head regretfully. ‘‘Well, it was a long shot, anyway. I think Vala’s right, I think it’s Earth-based.’’

``Aside from Vala Mal Doran’s observations, do you have any other reason to think so?’’

``Call it a gut feeling, T’enc. Something about the way certain of the NID guys talk. Something they aren’t saying, or that they are, but they’re saying it wrong…..’’ Huffing out a breath, he stood. ‘‘Dinner’s about over, but I could eat. You?’’

``Indeed.’’

The two traveled to the cafeteria in silence, Cam grateful for the chance to think about the problem some more. There was something he wasn’t doing, he knew, some possible solution he wasn’t seeing. On the tip of his tongue, right in front of his nose, in plain sight, something. Frowning, he glanced around seeing who else was eating late. Carter sat with Vala, Dr. Jackson, & their Vulcan guest. Tucker. Where’s Tucker? His stomach clenched.

``Where’s Tucker?’’ He called over, trying to look casual.

``Dr. Lam found some anomalies in his tests and called him back to run some more.’’ Jackson sounded……well, pissed. It had to be a little irritating to try and learn something when people kept hijacking your source of intel.

``Now, Daniel, she said she’d give him back in an hour or two.’’ Vala nudged him with her elbow, picking at her pasta. ‘‘Don’t pout, darling.’’

``I’m not…..’’ Jackson dropped his gaze to his food & starting eating without finishing his sentence.

Not what, Jackson? Cam wondered as he took some fries and a couple sandwiches. Not pouting? Not her darling? He kept his back to the group so they wouldn’t see the smirk. As he gathered his meal, he heard T’Pol start up with what sounded to him like a language lesson.

``Tor ri. Do not.’’

``So you were telling him to keep quiet.’’

``Basically.’’

``Ul’haf?’’
There was a shared grin (well, except T’Pol) around the table as Cam sat down. Carter was finishing up some sandwiches, Vala had the pasta, Jackson was working on soup (kept putting his spoon down to ask questions, though) and their guest …..

``Is that all you’re eating?” A fruit plate and a glass of water. And not even a very big fruit plate.

``It is sufficient.” T’Pol glared at him. No emotions, my ass, that was a full-fledged, “mind your own damn business” glare. “Dr. Jackson, your knowledge of my language will no doubt go faster if you ask for translations of the entire phrases, not just words. You are trying to determine what has been said since we arrived, it is only logical.”

``Okay.” Daniel put his spoon down decisively. ``So, you told him `stalau wilat eh lu etek lamok’…”

`` `Determine where and when we are’.”

``…..so, what did he say to you?’” A blank look. ``In the conference room? UH…. Kwon-sum teretuhr, t’…”

``That is not your concern.” Her tone of voice could’ve frozen a sun solid.

``Any progress on the tech front?” Cam tried to cover his amazement at anyone being rude to Jackson. The man could charm an UNAS, for Chrissakes.

``We can chart you a graph of the energy readings, we even know what some of them are.’’ Carter sounded as irritated as Jackson looked. “I can only get so far on the math before….’’

``Mckay!” Cam interrupted. That’s the solution he’d been looking for. Carter was looking at him like he was deranged. She wasn’t the only one.

``I don’t think he’d be much help.” Carter said, flatly. “He’d probably offend our Vulcan guest and start sulking or something.”

``Actually, Sam, I think he could help.” Daniel sounded sorry to disagree with his friend. Twins separated at birth, Cam remembered General O’Neill commenting. “He does have more hands-on experience with Ancient technology.”

``I was thinking more of he’s the only one to create a gateway to another dimension.”

``That was his sister, and it was a close dimension, not one 150 years in the future on a radically different path.” Carter sounded very irritated. “I traveled to another reality, the other Carters came up with a way to travel here Twice…..”

``By accident.” Cam put his observations in. “And those other Carters used a black hole to alter the ‘gate and a mirror device we no longer have. Besides, since it’s a possibility that the planet they were on in Their reality doesn’t exist here…”

``It does not.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow at him. “I perused your database of star charts. There are several planets missing or in drastically altered condition. The moon with the anthropological discovery is among the missing. As is Vulcan.” The last effectively silenced the table.

Cam tried to think of something, anything, to say. He could imagine traveling to another place, a place where you were the only one of your kind among strange and alien creatures. But to have your
very planet, your home, NOT EXIST. That was a whole level of wigged out he never wanted to experience. Someone entered the room, laughing, and for the first time, he was actually glad to see Tucker
``Surely they let up on you after a while?'' Dr. Lam sounded like she was fighting an attack of `the giggles.' Teal’c kept eating steadily, noting that T’Pol was mashing the fruit on her plate into inedible mush. She had only eaten a small portion of the fruit, at that.

``Nah, I’m still findin’ booties an all manner a’stuff in my office, delivered to my quarters….. It’s like new crewmembers get a breifin’ or somethin’ .’’ Tucker stepped over to the table, resting a hand on the back of T’Pol’s chair. Oddly, he didn’t say anything about her food. ``Hope y’all left me somethin’.’’

``If you’re willing to risk it.’’ Mitchell’s tone was one of relief. No doubt he was unsettled by T’Pol’s planet being gone. The others seemed equally eager to change the subject.

``Hey, I’m an explorer. `To boldly go’ an all that.’’

``I doubt Zephram Cochrane was referring to meals in his speech.’’

``Y’never know, Commander, he was a wild kind of guy.’’

Teal’c hid his amusement in his meal. They continued the debate, to the entertainment of the rest of the table. He was less successful in hiding his surprise at the selections Tucker had piled onto his tray. Two bottles of iced tea, a plate of the pasta Vala was finishing, a plate of fries, a salad, a couple pieces of bread, and two cups of Jell-O.

``Uh, Commander….’’ No one added to Dr. Lam’s tentative observation as Tucker proceeded to transfer the fries, salad, and one of the teas to T’Pol’s tray.

``So, what’s our status?’’ He addressed Carter, paying no attention to the glare T’Pol was giving him. She set the salad back on his tray and he matter-of-factly returned it to hers, starting to eat with his other hand.

``Uh…’’ Carter was obviously as stunned as the others at his activities. T’Pol was sitting icily beside Teal’c, glaring across at the human Commander. ``We know what happened, obviously…’’ her emphasis on the adverb caused Tucker to grin. T’Pol was now glaring down at the food on her tray. Teal’c could feel the tension in her. ``...and we know some of composition of the energy involved…’’ There was a slight gasp, from who, he couldn’t determine, as T’Pol began to eat the meal before her. ``We just can’t figure HOW the energy was generated, or focused, or…. There’s just too many variables.’’

``It is not hopeless.’’ T’Pol was cutting a fry in half before using a fork to eat it. Teal’c shot Mitchell a look, knowing the Colonel was about to say something about how she was eating. He had a `gut feeling’ that if anyone said anything about her meal, she would instantly stop. ``You are a competent scientist.’’

``Competent.’’ Teal’c felt sympathy for his friend. She was used to being the most intelligent person in any conversation, now there were two people who were just as gifted. And of necessity, she had to work with them both.

``It’s a compliment.’’ Tucker put in. Teal’c saw a look pass between the two. Like the gaze exchanged in the gate room, this seemed to convey an entire conversation without words. He did not believe it was telepathic, anymore than his and Daniel’s conversations were. It was simply…..shared experiences, a language of mutual references. All that Tucker said aloud, for instance, was ``T’Pol.’’
``Indeed.’’ There was flicker of amusement as she used the word Teal’c had accustomed himself to using as often to break tension as to convey his opinion, understanding, agreement. It was a very accommodating word. ``I apologize if my statement appears offensive, Lt. Colonel. For a Vulcan, the recognition of competence goes without saying. It is assumed that you would not hold your position without a large degree of affectability. To state that you are competent…’’

``She’s tryin’ give respect.’’ Tucker put in. T’Pol inclined her head at him, and both looked towards Carter. ``She’s just not used to tryin’ to compliment people who don’t know Vulcans.’’

``Indeed.’’ Her repetition of the word had the desired effect. Teal’c made note of the lessening of tension with satisfaction. No one, save Dr. Lam, was paying any more attention to what the Vulcan was eating, or how she came to be eating it. There was a comfortable silence as everyone resumed their meals, or fiddled with the remains.

``Problem?’’ Dr. Lam’s question addressed the Vulcan as she raised an eyebrow at the bottle of tea, having taken her first sip.

``It is …peach?’’

``You’re not allergic or anything?’’ Dr. Lam made as if to stand.

``No.’’ It wasn’t the Vulcan Commander who answered. Everyone looked at Tucker, who was gazing with amusement and affection at his compatriot. ``She’s just surprised.’’

``Vulcan’s do not experience surprise.’’ T’Pol’s tone was flat, but Teal’c heard a quaver in it. From the expression on their faces, so did Dr. Jackson and Commander Tucker.

``Right.’’ Daniel Jackson looked over his tray as if to find a conversational subject there. ``What’s tea in Vulcan?’’

``Perhaps further lessons can wait until morning.’’ Teal’c could practically feel his friend’s frustrated irritation. ``I find that I am in need of meditation.’’ Knowing a cue when he heard one, Teal’c stood, and indicated that she should follow him. At the door, she paused, turning back to look at the table. ``There is a phrase that you should learn, Dr. Jackson.’’ Expectantly, he looked up. ``Nash-veh komihn-talsu.’’
``She always like that?'' Daniel tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. He knew he was failing, from the poke Vala gave him, but he couldn’t help it. Every time he got even close to finding out anything about their guests, something interrupted. He was supposed to be so adept at getting people to talk….didn’t anyone understand he couldn’t do that with these constant side issues? Although he knew that getting them home wasn’t a side issue.

``How do you mean?’’ Tucker wasn’t looking at him, or even at the door as he half-expected. Instead, he was looking over the remains on T’Pol’s tray. She had finished the tea, eaten half the salad, and most of the fries. She’d even spooned up some of the fruit mush. Tucker nodded once to himself in satisfaction.

``Well, distant. Evasive.’’

``That wasn’t distant or evasive.’’ Tucker smiled somewhat bitterly. ``You haven’t seen those, yet.’’

``What did she say? When she left?’’ Vala, for once, didn’t sound jealous of any female who even spoke to him. ``The phrase for Daniel?’’

``Oh. ‘I am an anthropologist.’ ‘’

``But I’m an archaeologist.’’

``T’Pol didn’t know that.’’ Tucker finished his meal, piling T’Pol’s tray with his before Sam indicated the airmen who would bus the table. ``An’ you said you were an anthropologist.’’

``I’m both.’’ Daniel smiled. ``And a linguist. And an explorer as well.’’

``Nash-veh mishek.’’

``Meaning..‘You are’???’’

``An engineer.’’ Tucker smiled at him. ``I got you somethin’ while the Doc was pokin’ me.’’

``I don’t …’’ Daniel recognized the rectangle from the bin of tech Tucker’d pulled from his pockets. The one that looked like a mini-laptop without the fold. ``What is this?’’

``A data padd.’’ Tucker pointed out how to access the information. ``It’s my copy of the Kir’shara. This is the English, this is the Vulcan …’’ the letters on the screen altered to obvious phonetic renderings, with footnote markers to access pronunciation guides ‘’.. an’ this is the Vulcan script…’’ Graceful, elongated treble clefs filled the screen slowly,

``It’s beautiful.’’ Daniel touched the screen, moving the lines to the next section. More Vulcan letters flowed over the screen. ``What does it…’’ Tucker showed him how to split the screen into three parts so that Vulcan, phonetic, and English displayed simultaneously. ``This is…’’

``I figure this’ll make up for the `distance’,’’ Tucker quirked his mouth at him. Daniel could only nod, too focused on the device to notice when the man left.

He was scrolling through the document, noting some phrasing uncomfortably like Oma Desala’s teachings, when Vala tugged at his arm. Not wanting to drop the treasure, he stood. Absentmindedly, he bid Sam a good night. He was in his room, hand scrabbling for a pen and notebook before he
realized her face had been a little jealous. An obviously advanced piece of technology, and they’d given it to him. Sighing, he ran his hand down his face and forced himself to set the... pad?...aside. He kicked off his shoes and got ready for bed.

Laying down, mind racing over the day’s events, he reviewed everything he’d learned about their visitors. Tucker had told him more than he’d thought during that conversation in his office. A recent reformation? Was that why the Vulcan was serving with the humans? Did it have anything to do with their relationship? And there was a relationship there, despite her denials, he’d bet the ‘gate on it. The problem was, what kind of relationship? On the one hand, she treated him like a subordinate, not even with the mild affection he’d always felt between Jack and Sam. Tucker, however, acted like she was ……what was she to him? He’d been protective of her, more so than a co-worker would be. That threat in the gate room, he was serious. He would’ve killed Mitchell, instantly, if he’d hurt T’Pol. Daniel knew that look of determination. He’d seen it in the mirror enough times during his search for Sha’re.

Was that the answer? Were they married? Neither one sported a ring, and he didn’t think that Tucker would’ve hesitated to make the fact known, if it was a fact. But then, the Vulcan said personal details weren’t to be discussed. And the way Tucker provided for her at dinner, silently insisting she eat, the way she’d given in. That was a established pattern of behavior, a married couple’s pattern of behavior. But the teasing banter in the infirmary, the longing in his gaze in the conference room, that had the feel of a courtship.

Turning onto his side, Daniel closed his eyes. His mind continued to work at the puzzle. Could the fact they worked together, no, served together, on a starship... a military vessel? Could that explain it? A secret relationship? He snorted. Not a very well-kept secret. No, Tucker was far too obvious in his affection to be in a secret relationship of any kind. The way he spoke of her people, for instance, that was telling, at least to a linguist. The way she avoided discussing what Tucker had said, the studied disinterest in his presence. Methinks the Vulcan doth protest too much, he paraphrased to himself. Sighing, he turned onto his other side. This was a mess. Almost as bad as me and Vala....

Pulling a pillow over his head had no effect on blocking those thoughts, he knew, but he did it anyway. He concentrated on the screens full of Vulcan he’d been reading, trusting the graceful lettering to push away any thought of the beautiful (irritating!) ex-thief. Who just might have stolen more than his artifacts. (shut up!) Sighing, he rolled onto his stomach and sought sleep; knowing from experience that even if he managed to purge thoughts of Vala from his conscious mind, she’d still invade his dreams. He entertained the thought of asking Tucker if he had the same problems in regard to T’Pol before finally falling asleep.
``Pregnant?!'' Landry heard Mitchell snicker into his coffee. ``Are you sure he wasn’t pulling your leg, Carolyn?''

``Positive.'’ His daughter frowned at him. Probably more irritated at his familiarity than the doubt he’d expressed about her story. ``He was quite forthcoming about his mishaps, said he had quite a reputation for it.''

``Away missions.’’ Daniel put in. ``He said that he was learning from his experiences on away missions. That’s why he had the med kit.’’

'Speaking of which.'’ Carolyn handed Carter a cd. ``He used my computer to do up some blueprints & instructions for the tech in the kit. Don’t worry…’’ she looked back to Landry ‘’.. I made sure the system was isolated.’’

``Last thing we need is for the computers to get compromised.’’ Mitchell agreed, sour look on his face. ‘’Again.’’

``So the alien DNA in his system is a result of …pregnancy?’’ Landry was still a bit disbelieving of the story. It sounded far too much like a plot. Next time, on Wormhole X-Treme……``And the anomalies on his cat-scan?’’

``You understand that if he hadn’t given me permission to share this information…..’’ Carolyn seemed hesitant, anyway.

``I understand, Doctor, but I have to know if there’s anything that’s going to cause a problem.’’

``Like her allergy to that metal. Tryllithium?’’

``Trellium-D.’’ Carter put in. ``The structure is very similar to Naquadria.’’

``We already knew the material is unstable. And that the radiation has a gradual debilitating effect.’’ Landry saw Jackson squirm out of the corner of his eye. ``It just appears to be a more immediate danger to a Vulcan.’’

``Thankfully, we don’t currently have any on base.’’ Carolyn said. ``As for the anomalies on the scan…..he says he had a ….procedure.’’

``Brain surgery?’’

``He says that he was injured, in a coma, and then they …..cloned his brain tissue and grafted it in to replace the damaged areas.’’ Landry knew only Teal’c wouldn’t have gaped like a fish at that statement, but he was busy hosting their guests at breakfast. Vala was ‘’helping’’ which was probably more like ‘’getting gossip material’’. ``He’s really uncomfortable talking about it’’ Carolyn continued ‘’and not because it’s brain surgery, there’s something else about that incident. Something he doesn’t want to talk about.’’

``I got that feeling, too.’’ Jackson added. ``That there was more to certain statements than he was willing to share.’’

``T’Pol only discussed scientific facts.’’ Carter had a regretful expression. ``I’m afraid I got a little distracted with the sheer magnitude of her intellect. I mean, she’s talking about this science, and the
``I think we get the idea, Colonel.`` Landry put a stop to it before she could start using the BIG words. ``No harm done. I don’t think we’ll have much luck getting Commander T’Pol to talk to us. Commander Tucker, however….” He looked over at Jackson and Carolyn. ``You said he was keeping things from us, Doctors? Any idea what kind of things?``

``I think it’s more….personal information than something volatile.`` Daniel observed. ``He seems really….outgoing and friendly, but you’re recovering from the laughter before you realize that he hasn’t really said anything. Or he changes the subject to something you’re so interested in that you forget what you intended to ask."

``He’s good at it, then.`` Mitchell put in. ``Lot’s of experience.``

``That’s not to say we can’t trust them.`` Carolyn argued. ``Just because they don’t want to share the intimate details of their lives with us….``

``Pregnancy isn’t an intimate detail?`` Mitchell countered. ``How about brain surgery?``

``I believe we’ve wandered away from the topic.`` Landry declared. ``It’s not about how much we can get them to tell us…” he nodded at Dr. Jackson ``….anthropological information aside, Doctor. It’s about whether or not we can trust them."

``We can.`` Surprisingly, the statement came from Mitchell. ``I know, I know, but I just get this feeling…… Teal’c says we can trust them, too, so it’s not just me.``

``They just want to go home.`` Daniel spoke softly, but not soft enough that Landry had to strain to hear him.

``I can understand that.`` Landry nodded. ``In that interest, I’ll be contacting Dr. Weir to request……``

``General!``

``I’m sorry, Colonel Carter, but Colonel Mitchell’s right. Dr. Mckay does have more practical experience with deliberate dimensional rifts. The sooner we get them home, the sooner we can get back to integrating the Asgard database without alerting the Ori.``

``They might be able to help us with that.`` Mitchell put in. ``Y’know, while they’re here.``

``I can’t believe you’re suggesting that.`` Landry recognized the look on Carter’s face. That was the look she got when anyone asked about the trip to the alternate reality. ``Keeping someone here just so they can give us an advantage….``

``Who was talking about keeping them here?`` Mitchell looked genuinely confused. ``I was just thinking about Dr. Lee.`` Everyone looked at him askance. Make it march, son, Landry thought. ``He was saying that when he gets stumped on one project, it helps to work another, then another, then go back to the original with a fresh attitude.``

``That’s true enough.`` Carter sounded surprised.

Landry wasn’t He knew that Mitchell’s greatest asset was an understanding of the people under his command. Not just what they were capable of, but why they did it, and how their minds worked. His former commanders griped about how close he’d become to his people, but Landry felt that such closeness was more productive than disruptive. Look how successful SG1 has been, for instance. How much of that was because of the bonds of friendship between the four? Now five?
‘So, McKay will come, if he can, to give us a fresh perspective on the problem.’ Carter muttered under her breath, but didn’t interrupt. ‘Tucker and T’Pol will help us with technology when we’re not working on how to get them home. In between helping Dr. Jackson with his research, of course.’ Jackson gave a little self-depreciating smile. Apparently, the Vulcan bible Tucker had given him last night was enough to keep him satisfied for a while. ‘Okay, dismissed, then.’ Most of the group filed out.

‘General.’ Carolyn followed him into his office. ‘I didn’t mean to be disrespectful….’

‘Relax, Carolyn. I’m not going to chew you out for following ethics.’ He looked at her closely. ‘There was more to what Tucker told you, wasn’t there? Something he didn’t give you permission to discuss.’

‘I can’t ….’

‘Is it a danger to the base? Personnel?’

‘No.’

‘Do you feel it’s something I need to know?’

‘No, sir.’ Carolyn came to attention. ‘I just…’

‘You don’t like keeping secrets, I know.’ Landry looked at her fondly. He hated when circumstances caused a conflict between her innate honesty and her ethical standards. ‘Look at it this way, Carolyn.’ A look of irritation crossed her face. ‘He knows about military procedure, they serve in this ‘Starfleet’ after all. He trusted you with…..whatever this is, anyway. He’ll come to you if he needs someone to trust.’

‘I think it was more a ….warning. Like the allergy.’ Carolyn was obviously struggling to convey something without giving the whole thing away. ‘An explanation of certain things that showed up……’ She stopped, bit her lip. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything.’

‘Said what?’ Landry sat down and scowled at his paperwork. ‘Selective deafness is a fine trait for Stargate Command staff.’

‘General O’Neill?’

‘A surprisingly wise man.’ They shared a smile before he waved her off. ‘Dismissed, Doctor.’

‘General.’ Her tone was affectionate. Landry was amused. All it took to heal the rift between him and his family was an invasion of religious zealots, a top-secret installation that dealt with more weirdness on a regular basis then the Twilight Zone ever saw during a ratings sweep….. Humming the theme under his breath, he opened the first file on his desk. Back to the boring stuff. O’Neill was right. Deal with a few reality-altering incidents a week and paperwork becomes VERY attractive.
``….and now Muscles here won’t tell us anything about the time aboard the Odyssey.’’ Vala finished her summary of major events relating to the Stargate with a pout.

``Most wise.’’ The Vulcan inclined her head at Teal’c. ``Information about events in an alternate timeline may lead your companions to believe such events are ‘inevitable’. They may behave as if such things have already happened.’’

``That wouldn’t be so bad.’’ Vala said. She knew there was something about her and Daniel in what Teal’c wasn’t saying. She just wanted something to hope for, something to break through that stubborn ‘just friends’ wall Daniel had up.

`` ‘The saddest words ‘twere ever penned, are simply these: it might’ve been.’ ‘ Trip smiled sorrowfully at her.

Vala smiled just as sorrowfully back. She was sure there was more to the two of them than what they’d said. She was just as certain that T’Pol was being as stubborn as Daniel at his worst and that Trip was just as determined as she was not to give up. She swallowed the last of her milk, throat dry from all the talking. The Goa’uld, the discovery of the Stargate, the first mission to Abydos, the rise of Apophis, Teal’c’s defection and the Jaffa rebellion, the long war with the System Lords, the discovery of Atlantis and the destruction of Anubis; it’d been a very generalized rendition, but still lengthy. She’d given a little more detail when it came to the Ori, of necessity. Her theft of the Prometheus was vital, to show why Daniel hadn’t gone to Atlantis and why she had known to come to the Tau’ri with her treasure map.

That had necessitated telling of the bracelets, the completely mental journey to the Ori’s galaxy, the danger they’d awakened, the first super gate, her pregnancy, the beginning of the war, with Adria front and center. The discovery of Merlin’s device, and Daniel’s possession by Merlin’s spirit, his capture, and the final desperate gambit that may have destroyed the Ori, but left the war raging across their galaxy. Sometimes in her renditions Vala saw one or the other of them flinch, or look pained. It was far more subtle on T’Pol’s face, but years of dealing with bald-faced liars gave one a bit of an advantage. They’d appeared exceptionally, and mutually, upset when she spoke of Adria’s death/ascension. Difficult as it was for her to speak of, she had no intention to pry into their equivalent pain.

``So, still think we pulled you here on purpose?’’

``I discarded that hypothesis during our medical exams.’’ T’Pol declared. ``If you had malicious intent, it would have been a simple matter to render us unconscious at such a time.’’

``Indeed.’’

``Nice to see everyone getting along.’’ Mitchell came up to the table, Sam and Daniel trailing after. ``We’re sending for another Brainiac, so things should get better.’’

``Provided we don’t strangle him. ’’ Sam looked sour at the thought of including McKay in anything. Vala thought she was overreacting. The arrogant man wasn’t THAT annoying, really. Of course, he wasn’t romantically interested in HER, so maybe she couldn’t really sympathize with Sam’s dismay.

``Sounds like a fun guy.’’ Trip put in. ``How’s it comin’?’’ The last was addressed to Daniel.

``Very interesting. The Kir’shara is similar to some Earth texts, especially Gandhi’s work.’’
``‘And eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.’ ’’ Trip nodded. ‘‘Deep stuff.’’

‘‘You were studying the Kir’shara?’’ T’Pol sounded surprised. ‘‘Since when?’’

‘‘Fer two years.’’ There they went again, exchanging a significant look of deep communication. Really, if the Vulcan woman wanted people to think she wasn’t desperately in love with her human friend, she might want to stop the deep, soulful looks.

‘‘I do not …. Why did you never tell me?’’

‘‘You never asked.’’ There was a level of hurt and anger in Trip’s voice that got even Mitchell’s attention. Teal’c raised an eyebrow.

‘‘I….’’ T’Pol looked down at her tray, then raised her gaze to Sam. ‘‘I assume we will be working in the same lab as yesterday?’’

‘‘After breakfast.’’ Sam nodded. ‘‘Vala can show you the way if you want to get started…’’

‘‘I remember the way.’’

‘‘Maybe Dr. Jackson can go with you. ’’ Trip’s voice was now heavily bitter, staring at the wall over Teal’c’s shoulder. ‘‘He can ask you his thousand ‘n’ one questions ‘bout the Kir’shara on the way.’’

‘‘That would be acceptable.’’ T’Pol stood. ‘‘Dr. Jackson?’’

‘‘Sure.’’ Daniel pulled the device he’d gotten yesterday out of his jacket pocket. ‘‘The first thing I wanted to ask…..’’ The two scientists went out the doors.

‘‘Daniel missed breakfast, too.’’ Sam’s voice held a note of censure. Vala nodded in agreement.

‘‘Tryin’ to say he isn’t ecstatic havin’ T’Pol to himself for a little while? I think he’d count that as worth a missed meal.’’ Trip looked at Vala sympathetically. ‘‘I was meanin’ to say …. I’m sorry for your loss.’’

‘‘What loss?’’ Vala brushed off the attempted sympathy. She really didn’t want to think about Adria. ‘‘She ascended. She’ll probably be back.’’

‘‘She was in this universe when she did it?’’

‘‘Yes.’’ Vala really wished he’d get the hint and drop it.

‘‘So she’s with the Ancients. The Oma Desala people, right?’’

Vala gaped at him. She’d never really thought of that.

‘‘That didn’t stop Anubis from coming back and wreaking havoc.’’ Mitchell put in.

‘‘Anubis was a mistake Oma made. Adria was an enemy dangerous to the Ancients directly.’’ Teal’c inclined his head towards Trip. ‘‘I believe Commander Tucker’s theory to have merit.’’

‘‘So she’s never coming back.’’ Vala wasn’t sure how to feel. Relief that she wouldn’t have to face that enemy again? Sorrow for a daughter that was never really hers? Anger? At whom?

‘‘I grieve with thee.’’ Trip had a more than sympathetic look on his face. It wasn’t like the others’ ‘I know how you must feel’ look. It was true understanding.
Thank you.” Vala didn’t know what precisely had happened to him, but she knew there was at least one person on the base who could understand her confused emotional state. Feeling a little exposed, she tried to deflect attention. “You and the Vulcan commander seem really close? Something we should know?”

“Vala …..” Sam started.

“It’s okay.” Trip smiled at the Lt. Colonel. “I get more personal questions than that ever on Enterprise.”
``So you’re in love with her.’’ Subtle wasn’t invented for Vala.

``Vala….’’ Sam tried to reign her in again.

`` ‘ M’ I that obvious?’’ Trip gave the brunette a self-depreciating smile.

``Only a lot.’’ Cam commented.

``Hunh.’’ Looking suddenly worried, Trip set his coffee cup back down before drinking. `Ya can’t say anythin’.’’

``Why not?’’

``I spent two years gettin’ her back as a friend, I’m not startin’ over ‘cause you wanna help or have a joke or express sympathy…..’’

``Don’t you think you’re exaggerating a little?’’ Sam was worried about how stable this man was. He seemed kind of……emotionally chaotic. ``If she doesn’t want a relationship, you might want to give up, anyway.”

``I’m not givin’ up.’’ Trip’s face hardened and Cam leaned back a little. Sam was struck by how much the man suddenly seemed like Michael. `` I’m also not kiddin’.’’

``Again, why not?’’ Sam could understand Vala’s interest. Maybe she was hoping for ideas on how to win Daniel over.

``Yer word ya won’t say nothin’ ‘’ His jaw clenched. ``Promise.’’

``You want the needle in the eye speech or will pinky swears do it?’’ Cam looked disbelieving of how serious Trip was taking this. Sam tried to kick him under the table. Teal’c shot her a mild look & she knew she’d missed.

``I promise, bro.’’ Vala shrugged as everyone stared at her. ``He SAID I reminded him of his sister.’’

One by one, everyone else chimed in, although Sam couldn’t keep the confusion out of her tone.

``Thanks.’’ Trip relaxed, running his hands over his face. ``Means a lot.’’

``Why?’’ This time, Sam asked. ``If you’re trying to …..what are you trying to do?’’

``T’Pol an’ I had a relationship. Fairly serious.’’

``How serious?’’ Vala was rapt, leaning forward with bright eyes.

``It was my great-grandma’s ring.’’

``He was going to propose.’’ Sam explained to the ex-thief.

``You lost your nerve?’’ Vala sounded sad ``She said no?’’

``Never got the chance to ask.’’ Trip looked sorry he’d said anything, but forged ahead, taking a deep breath and avoiding anyone’s eyes. ``We lost the baby.’’
``BABY?!'' Sam saw that even Teal’c looked stunned, although he was the only one who hadn’t shouted. She waited until the rest of the breakfast crowd looked away before asking, ``You two had a…’’

``It was a clone. An’ the only reason Ah’m sayin’ anythin’ is so ya know what subjects to avoid.’’

``Daniel….’’

``Won’t know ta ask, will he? An’ after this, ya’ll warn him, right?’’

``I do not understand.’’ Teal’c raised an eyebrow and voiced the question on Sam’s mind. ``If you created a clone for a child, why before you were wed? How did the child come to be …lost?’’

``We didn’ create ‘Lizabeth.’ Trip seemed fascinated by the Formica tabletop. ``It was a xenophobic buncha…..we broke in ta rescue her, stopped ‘em from holdin’ the planet hostage ….’’ Sam felt her eyes tearing up at the raw pain in his voice. Taking a deep breath, he finished, ‘‘… they didn’ know what they was doin’, see. Didn’ sequence the DNA…..she lived six days.’’

A silence descended over the table, much like the one the night before when T’Pol had revealed her home world didn’t exist in their universe. Cam concentrated on his meal and Sam hesitantly did the same. Teal’c looked over at Vala, who was wiping her eyes on a napkin.

``I grieve with thee.’’ Teal’c intoned. It had the air of a ritual phrase. Trip’s head jerked up as if someone’d shouted.

``Two years a’ her shuttin’ me out and down ‘cause she doesn’ want to risk ever bein’ that hurt again.’’ Trip shook his head ruefully. ``Last time someone said somethin’, casual comment in passin’, even; she put herself on night shift so she could more easily pretend I didn’ exist.’’

``Ouch.’’ Sam sighed. ``Sounds like you’ve got your work cut out for you.’’

``It has gottin’ better.’’ Trip sounded hopeful, now. ``She doesn’t avoid me ….as much. She’s not pushin’ me away.’’

``She’s not letting you in, either.’’ Cam really knew how to stick his foot in his mouth, Sam shut her eyes. ``I mean…’’

``’S’Okay. I know how pathetic it looks.’’ Trip shrugged. ``But I jus’ can’t give up.’’

``She’s your true love.’’ Vala sighed. Sam felt a little mushy herself. Especially when Trip shook his head and said:

``She’s my universe.’’
Agent Richard Berman reviewed the information once more. A weapons engineer and science officer from 150 years in the future. The possibilities were amazing. All they had to do was retrieve the resource. He dropped the file on the …Vulcan into the shredder without a second look. With all the problems Baal’s and now Athena’s influence were causing, not to mention the infiltration of their group by the Goa’uld, well… Aliens weren’t a problem he wanted to deal with. They could eliminate that problem after this… Tucker fellow gave them the weapons.

He reached for the phone, but hesitated. Maybe it would be better to wait a few days. Let them get settled in, lull Stargate command into a false sense of security. Gain more information on what made this man tick, find the key to unlocking his secrets …. Feeling more certain, he reached for the phone again. Time to call Doctor Braga. Let him know to prep the interrogation room. A century and a half’s worth of weapons technology, and the Stargate people didn’t even intend to TRY and gain that advantage. This is what comes of letting sentimentality cloud one’s judgment.

``Hello, Brandon? Good news …..”
McKay walked through the event horizon with Beckett. He was more than nervous. Flattering as it was that Stargate Command had requesting his assistance in this matter (really, who else would they get?) he was unsettled by the briefing. A human man much like Michael? What was that? And an alien woman who didn’t have emotions and couldn’t be touched? Acid skin? Beckett was, of course, chattering happily enough about meeting a new species, but McKay’s imagination kept throwing up scenario after scenario. Aliens, in his experience, weren’t the best people.

There was the usual meet and great in the gate room. He wanted to jump right in, insisting that he didn’t come across the galaxy for nothing. Col. Mitchell offered to escort him to Sam’s lab, Beckett took off to the infirmary, Dr. Lam apparently had some fascinating scans or something. McKay was more interested in the devices the two were rumored to have had on their persons. He wasn’t getting much from Mitchell, though. The Colonel babbled on about how the woman was very reserved and to watch his manners, more military nonsense he didn’t listen to with more than half an ear.

``… an’ how are you so sure that I’m wrong? ‘Cause the math certainly doesn’t support …’’

``These equations are accurate, if you would only reign in your emotions…”

``In which universe do those equations have anythin’ to do with…”

``Looks like they’re at it again.’’ The Colonel sounded amused.

McKay stepped forward into Sam’s lab and stopped. In addition to the usual devices, there were three dry-erase whiteboards with advanced mathematics scrawled across them in three different colors and handwriting. Sam was at her computer, large headphones blocking all sound. She seemed to be scanning through satellite logs. Her worktable was covered with printouts of energy readings. His attention was caught by the dark-haired woman near the board.

``In any universe. You are being loutov, Commander.’’ She was wearing the standard blue jumpsuit without patches any refugee was issued. She was phenomenaly attractive; petite, curvaceous, stacked … The ears came as something of a jolt, though. Her voice was flat and cold, face expressionless. The man arguing with her had no such restraint.

``If that ain’t the pot calling the kettle…” McKay could see the back of the man’s neck getting red, contrasting with blond hair. There was something familiar about the shape of his head ……..

``Commanders!’’ The Colonel’s shout startled McKay as well, he couldn’t help but jump a little. The jump turned into a giant step back as the male turned to face the door.

``Holy shit!’’ He stared. He knew it wasn’t Michael, it couldn’t possibly BE Michael. But it looked just like ….

``Enjoyn’ yer little joke, Mitchell?’’ The man’s accent was Southern, thicker than Michael’s had been. His eyes were a brighter blue, his face more relaxed. Blinking a bit, McKay stepped back forward. After the first shock wore off, anyone could see this WASN’T the Wraith.

``Take what I can get, Tucker.’’

``Dr. Rodney McKay.’’ He stepped forward, sticking out his hand. ``Landry said you needed my help.’’
``I wouldn’t put it quite that way…” Mitchell muttered.

``Truth hurts, Colonel.” McKay quipped as Tucker gripped his hand firmly and briefly. A callused and worn hand, but none of the macho crap most military men engaged in. His theory was that his intelligence intimidated them so much they felt the need to attempt to physically establish dominance. ``There seems to be a question with equations?’’

``More of a disagreement.’’ The woman stepped forward as he released Tucker’s hand. She made no move to extend her own hand, just as he’d been briefed. ``Many of the energy readings appear to be beyond the capacity of mathematics to define them.’’

``Maybe YOUR math.” McKay stepped up to the boards. ``Yeah, I can see where you’re going wrong, here.”

``Nice ta see the shoe on the other foot, for a change.” Tucker muttered.

``I was attempting to explain that this reading ..’’ The alien held out a page of diagrams ``..is best described by this equation…” She indicated the green writing on the board.

``Only if you define it with this equation..’’ picking up a black marker, McKay made several adjustments to the calculations ``..it’s a layered delineation, altering with multiple variables….” Comfortable in his element, he continued to lecture, making corrections to the blue and yellow lines as well. The woman tilted her head, taking up the green marker to follow along with his theorems. Tucker picked up the blue and started scribbling on one of the other boards. McKay ignored him. Obviously, the woman (introduced belatedly as Commander T’Pol) was the brains of the outfit.

``Dr. McKay?’’ He rested a hand on the worktable. He shook off the mild dizziness with irritation. Great. He hated having people be impressed with his (truthfully) amazing intellect and then be disappointed to discover a physical weakness. Like that mattered, really.

``Just a little dizzy. How long have we been at this?’’

``Six hours.’’ Oddly, enough, Tucker’s look wasn’t pitying or disdainful. McKay looked over at the man and gaped. The board he’d been `scribbling’ on was covered with a schematic of an Ancient altar device. There were question marks near where he’d placed the power source in the diagram, as well as other areas where he apparently didn’t know what they contained. ``When did ya eat last? I’m feelin’ hollow myself.”

``Breakfast.”

``That is most illogical. You must remember to eat. Our research will progress more effectively if all of us are at our best.’’

`` ‘S’at why ya tried to skip all three meals yesterday?’’ Tucker was scowling at T’Pol even as he extended an arm for the two of them to precede him from the room.

``Vulcan’s can go several days without sustenance.” McKay had the feeling he’d walked into a long-standing argument. They seemed to forget he was even there.

``Jus’ ‘cause ya can, doesn’ mean ya should.” Tucker smiled mischievously. ``Now who’s bein’ loutov ?”
``Glory.'' Carson Beckett looked up from his dinner as three people entered the cafeteria. Carter had walked in a few minutes ago stating that the three were absorbed in their work. She hadn’t wanted to interrupt, since Rodney seemed to be getting along so well with the two. Carson was amazed at the feat, himself. On his best days, the egotistical scientist was annoying. Dragged away from his projects to help out cross-dimensional refugees, no matter how flattering he found the request, may well have brought out the worst in his friend. ``Tha’s …’tis unsettling a resemblance, I’ll gie ye that. ‘’

``Medically speaking, T’Pol is much more interesting.’’ The pointed-eared woman gave Carolyn a look, as if she’d heard. To his surprise, Carolyn blushed. ``Speaking as a medical scientist, I mean.’’

``Aye.’’

``Carson.’’

Rodney plunked himself down at their table without asking. Carolyn looked offended. Carson was well used to the man’s antics by now. Besides, the fascinating visitors had followed him. There was a wave of silence that preceded them through the room. Carson was reminded of Ronin’s first days in Atlantis. He was dismayed to find xenophobia so prevalent. Although, given what Carolyn had told him, it may have more to do with the two’s privacy issues.

``And how goes the science, Rodney?’’ He was curious to see that Tucker’s meal was as meatless as the Vulcan’s. He’d thought only the woman was vegetarian.

``Amazingly well.’’ Rodney perked up, as always, when someone asked a personal question. ``We got a lot of the energy waves defined and broken down. We may be ready to start giving the construction a try within a day or two.’’

``I wouldn’t want to start that until we don’t find the original device. What ya were sayin’ about the Ancient tech bein’ purpose driven … wouldn’t want ta hook the gate up ta somethin’ that was intended as, say, an atomizer or time machine or somethin’. ’’ Tucker seemed very practiced at eating neatly without mangling his speech.

``I don’t think that would be a problem, not if we …’’

Rodney went off on one of his rapid-fire scientific theories. What amazed Carson was that Tucker and T’Pol seemed not only comfortable with his speech, they appeared to be following it. One or the other would insert a question or viewpoint, making the doctor blink when Rodney took no offense, merely corrected the direction of his pattering to include their contribution. The man didn’t even notice when he got up to go sit with 3/5ths of SG-1, lingering over their dessert. Carolyn just nodded at them and took her leave for the evening.

``I never thought I’d see the day.’’ He commented. ``I mean, he’s …’’

``He didn’t even notice when I left the lab.’’ Carter was smiling happily. ``I never thought I’d be grateful to be ignored.’’

``It’s good to see Rodney enjoying himself.’’ Carter commented. ``He’s under so much pressure at the city, and no one really follows what he’s trying to say, sometimes.’’

``I know what that’s like.’’ Carter said. ``I mean, the science we encounter is so fascinating; but
whenever I try and share it with anyone ...."

``With respect, Lt. Colonel, I don’t think you really understand.” Carter frowned. “What I mean is … people actually like you. You’re a soldier as well as a scientist. You’ve saved the planet several times. Your social skills are as advanced as your science. Whereas Rodney...”

``Is most known for being a pain in the ass.” Mitchell interrupted. “I think I see what you mean.”

``He’s abrasive and obnoxious and lascivious ....”

``Maybe here he is.” Carson cut in “but I know a different Rodney. He’s courting a fine lady in Atlantis. He’s courageous, given half the chance. We treat him as you do for the simple fact that if we gave him full encouragement, he’d get himself killed trying to live up to it.”

``I think Trip likes him.” Vala put in. Everyone looked over at the table where Tucker and Rodney were passing Rodney’s laptop back and forth. T’Pol looking over from Tucker’s right. Tucker picked up a forkful of food, making a comedic face. Rodney laughed and began to eat again. T’Pol did the same, minus the laugh. “He’s a genius, too.”

``Aye, I got that.” Carson watched the way Rodney interacted with the two. The closest he could remember such a sight was one of the Canadian’s late night sessions with Zalinka or Sheppard; debating Ancient technology. Or perhaps one of the recovery conversations he’d had with him as a patient, arguing over philosophy and ethics.

``Hey, Carson.” The three rose from their seats, T’Pol inclined her head at the two men and exited nearly regally. “Trip’s got a Go set someone abandoned in the rec room. Coming?”

``I don’t think so, Rodney, you enjoy your game.”

``Your loss. Makes chess look like Tic-Tac-Toe.”

``Don’t get him started on chess, again.” Mitchell pointed at Tucker. “Man whupped me rotten, then trounced me on the basketball court. I may never recover.”

``Poor baby.” Tucker sneered sarcastically. He clapped McKay on the nearest shoulder, a physical familiarity Rodney allowed few people. He didn’t even twitch. “Comin’, Rod?”

``Sure, Trip.” He caught up with the taller man. “So, what’s Trip short for, anyway?”
Daniel strolled towards his office five days after their visitors had arrived. He’d gotten the Kir’Shara completely translated and was working towards a more fluid understanding of the Vulcan language. A purely academic endeavor, given the lack of Vulcans in this reality, but he couldn’t help himself. Every time he thought he’d gotten to the bottom the culture, a stray comment by Trip or T’Pol would spark a hundred other questions. Turning into his office, he was startled to see Trip at his computer, lifting a disk out of the hard drive.

“‘What are you doing?’” He was glad his tone was more curious than accusatory. Although…. what was he doing? The two had access to a hard line in Sam’s lab, mostly used to render diagrams and schematics for medical equipment. Dr. Lam was ecstatic.

“‘Vala said she…..hell.’” Trip ran a hand through his hair. “‘She forgot to clear it with you, didn’t she?’”

“Clear what?” Daniel stepped closer. The program the other man’d been using was still up. “‘You were burning a music disk?’” He certainly hadn’t been expecting that.

“‘For T’Pol.’” Trip secured the disk in it’s jewel case. “‘Gonna sneak it into her quarters fer her ta listen to durin’ meditation. It was Rod’s idea.’”

“‘McKay?’” Daniel was stunned. Of all the people to go to for dating advice……. “‘Doesn’t this seem a little ….juvenile?’”

“‘If you grew up in twentieth century America, prob’ly.’” Trip shrugged. “‘She’s Vulcan. Makes it a little hard ta romance her when they don’t have any courtship rituals.’”

“‘Arranged marriages.’” Daniel shook his head. “‘I couldn’t believe it.’”

“‘S’logical when ya think about it.’”

“I guess.” Daniel watched him close down the program, gathering up a stack of disks and setting them onto a shelf. “‘Vala let you use her music?’”

“‘She was listening to some stuff yesterday …..struck a nerve.’” Trip ducked his head, smiling a bit. “‘Rod said that if the song was that ….appropriate, I should make a disk.’”

“‘And here you are.’”

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk ta ya personally, but Vala…”

“It’s okay.” Daniel didn’t think for a minute Vala had really forgotten to warn him. She was just annoying him again. He was relieved for a chance to talk to Trip, though. As fascinating as T’Pol was, she wasn’t the only source of anthropological information about. The two men just hadn’t had a chance to spend any time together since that first day. “‘What song was it, if you don’t …?’”

“No, it’s okay. “‘Trip held the disk up to the light, squinting as if he could see through to the music on the disk. “‘Um, I don’t know if ya’ll know all the songs…I didn’t exactly stick to one type.’”

“That’s easy enough.” Daniel sat his notes on his worktable and seated himself before his computer. “‘Let’s see …”’ He called up the list off the most recent activity. “‘Okay…”’
Trip had been right. The songs wandered from one genre to the next, interspersed with sound files he assumed the engineer had recorded himself. On Fire by Switchfoot started things off, White Flag by Dido. Told You So by Keith Urban was next; Accidentally in Love by Counting Crows, You and Me by Lifehouse, I Love You by Nickelback, Dance by Garth Brooks, something called Ashokan Farewell …the Sleeping Beauty waltz? Only You by some band from the sixties, All My Life by the Beatles, Dare You to Move without the band listed, and Don’t Want to Miss a Thing by Aerosmith. He turned away from the computer towards the now lightly-blushing other man. Trip shrugged again.

“What can I say? I’m a hopeless romantic.”

“I’m surprised you’re able to limit your help to Vala.” Daniel thought of some of the nurses, amazed Sam wasn’t knee-deep in this plan. Whatever this plan was. He was a little disappointed to be left out, truthfully. He was the cultural expert, wasn’t he? Shouldn’t he have been consulted?

“I think helpin’ me helps Vala ta…” Trip bit his lip, reddening. “Um….I should…”

“Go ahead.” Daniel sighed. “Everyone else has chimed in, why not?” He was truthfully hoping for a little objective input. Then he remembered that this man claimed Vala as a ‘sister’ in much the same way he was ‘brother’ to Sam.

“It’s kinda ….well, it ain’t polite.”

“I’m giving you permission to pry.” Now he was curious. So far, Trip hadn’t hesitated to share his opinion on anything, no matter how trivial or important. “Let’s hear it.”

“Yer bein’ a coward.” Daniel sat back in his chair, frowning. He certainly hadn’t expected THAT.

“A coward.” He shook his head. “Because…?”

“Yer scared.” Trip leaned against the worktable, warming to his subject. “Ya know she’s perfect for ya ……not perfect, y’know, but perfect fer YOU. But yer gonna let it slip away. An’ ya’ll be kickin’ yerself every day for the rest of yer life if ya do.”

“Because I was afraid to take a chance on VALA?” Daniel scoffed. “She doesn’t ….it’s just a game to her, she ……it’s not….”

“Game, huh?” Trip ran his tongue around his mouth. “Yeah, that’d be why she’s taken up with…..oh, right, hasn’t taken up with anyone, has she?”

“She was in my quarters!” Daniel was exasperated. Usually people were amusedly sympathetic. Dr. Jackson gets chased again.

“How many times?” He left his mouth open, lacking a response. “How heavy has she been comin’ on, lately? Since ya turned down a ‘merely physical’ relationship?”

“She hasn’t stopped, she’s just toned it down, that’s all. Trying to ….?” What was she trying to do? Lull him into a false sense of security? “…she’s trying to fit in.”

“Or maybe she’s alterin’ her behavior so she can get what she REALLY wants.” Trip shook his head ruefully. “Must be something about us geniuses leads us ta be total morons when it comes ta ladies.”

“Hey, now….”
``Think about it, Daniel.'' He held up a hand. ``Just think about what I’m sayin’. From the second time ya met…’’ Daniel inadvertently smiled. This was more ammunition for HIS point of view. Vala comes in with a get-rich-quick scheme. ``In all the galaxy, t’only scheme she could come up with was one where she HAD to have yer input. A treasure map damn near guaranteed ta get yer attention? Seem a little…coincidental? Don’t ya think?’’ Daniel’s smile faded as he thought, really thought, about the reasoning behind the surface of Vala’s visit. ``Maybe one a’ the reasons fer thebracelets an’ her goin’ ta yer quarters were tests? If ya were just like all the fellas she’d known, just wantin’ somethin’ physical…’’ Daniel started. Could that have been…? ``She came here fer ya, decided ta change, because she saw in ya someone who’d catch her, trust her, believe in her as a person. Now she’s just waitin’ fer ya ta notice she’s a woman.’’

``I know she’s a woman.’’ His voice was too defensive.

``An’ yer scared.’’

``Of what? Vala can’t do anything to me that..’’

``She could leave.’’ Daniel felt his heart constrict at the thought. He looked away, trying to control his reaction. Where had that come from? He felt a sick despair, a pall over any thought of Vala not being there, annoying as she was. ``See, that’s what yer scared of.’’ The voice was accented, but it sounded so like the voice that haunted his sleep, mocking him for a fool. It sounded like Jack’s voice, a little. It softened, as if detecting his sudden turmoil. ``Yer scared if ya reach out, and it’s as amazin’ as ya know it will be ……if she ever leaves, if ya ever loose her…..it’ll kill ya.’’

``I think you’re projecting, just a little.’’ Daniel gathered his defenses, looking back up. ``The situation with Vala and I isn’t anything like yours with T’Pol.’’

``No, it’s not.’’ He wasn’t expecting the quiet acknowledgment. ``Y’see, I’ve had a month.’’

``A …month?’’ Was this some kind of code? A cultural saying or euphemism?

``Before we lost….before. When she admitted she loved me, when we were together. A whole month.’’ He smiled in reminiscence for a bit, then blue eyes pierced blue with icy calm. ``An’ if we never have it again, I’ll at least have that. You won’t have anythin’ but regret.’’

``What makes you think we’d …..what….’’

`` ‘Cause she makes ya laugh. Cause ya make her think. ‘Cause ….’’ Trip shrugged a third time, shaking his head. ``Cause yer perfect fer her. Two geniuses.’’

``Vala’s very intelligent, but it’s not…..’’

``Who taught her ta read English?’’ Daniel felt his mouth hanging open, again. ``She used computer translators on Prometheus, but who taught her ta read English when she came back the next time? It’s not the easiest language fer a foreigner, I’m told.’’

``No, it’s not.’’ He was frowning, thinking. Who HAD taught Vala to read English? She hadn’t known it when she arrived to scam him into finding the Ancient treasure trove of Avalon. He took a chance, asking ``Did she tell you?’’

``Same person who tries ta keep this base from dissolvin’ inta despair. Who keeps reminding ya ta take a break an’ live every now and then.’’ Trip smiled, straightening. ``Vala Mal Doran.’’

``Vala.’’ He didn’t know what to think. He’d had more stunning revelations in this conversation than he’d had while ascended. He wasn’t sure which to examine first, which long-held assumption to
He sat for some time, turning the conversation over and over in his mind. Following each thought to it’s eventual, logical, conclusion. This thing is having a definite effect, he thought, looking to where he’d dumped his Kir’Shara notes. He wasn’t sure if he was referring to his research or the visitors. He couldn’t let go of the thoughts Trip had sparked, as wrapped up in this personal puzzled as he’d ever gotten in his work. Vala. Just thinking about some of her more outrageous statements made him smile. Some of her more outrageous fashion choices …… He shook his head, trying to knock the thinking loose. Now was not the time to be blushing in his office. He stood, intending to take his notes to T’Pol, continue his research into Vulcan culture. The polished surface of one of his artifacts caught his reflection, the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. His expression stilled his mind into brief epiphany. Vala’s words in the gate room, weeks ago. He spoke to the empty room.

Life’s too short.’”
“….and this is what powers most Ancient technology.” Sam set two ZPM’s on the table. The two visitors looked suitably impressed. “This one is depleted. The other is coated with an explosive residue.”

“Frustratin’.” Trip commented.

“We were able to get some more recently, but our energy needs seriously outweigh what’s available.” McKay called up schematics on his laptop, pulling Trip away from his examination of the ZPM's. “Atlantis is actually a city-sized ship, but we can’t run anything really useful, like the engines, because we’re stuck with only one ZPM and several naquada generators.”

“Unfortunately, it is apparent that your galaxy has as much dilithium as ours does naquada.”

“Unfortunately.” Sam agreed. She was still getting used to the disappointment that there was very little the two could offer in terms of technology. Metallurgy, chemistry, medicine, and some tool designs seemed all that was of any use. Everything else they had was either of equivalent level of what they currently had, or a little behind. If she hadn’t heard from Daniel about the tendency towards stagnation in the Vulcan culture (and the anarchy of nearly a century of world war for the human’s) ; she would’ve thought they were deliberately withholding things. As it was, Trip was trying to find a way to adapt their shield technology to Starfleet tech with little success. “The Ancients used crystals, but mostly as data storage…”

“I thought that was the Go’auld.” McKay interrupted. Still had to be the center of attention, she thought sourly.

“Yes, but them snakes stole their stuff from the old guys, Rod.” She couldn’t believe the level of familiarity Trip got away with. The two were nearly inseparable. She’d heard they were even working out together, and she knew McKay hated physical exercise with a passion usually reserved for quantum equations. “So goes to figure they’d just use it whole hog, not making any changes.”

“I believe they altered several pieces of technology for their own purposes.” T’Pol observed. “The healing device was perverted for their use, becoming addictive no doubt due to some flaw in their alterations. The hand device was most likely intended as a telepathic or emphatic tool to create connections to lesser developed minds…”

“That they turned into a device for torture and death. Yeah, I see where you’re goin’ with this.” Trip frowned. “Bastards.”

“I can see the Ancients creating the Zats.” Sam put in. “The blast lances were probably altered off the Zat design.”

“No need for two or three shots, instant execution.” McKay shook his head. “It’s depressing how many species will twist a good technology into a weapon. Makes you wonder if anyone has any right to exist.”

“The worth of a species is determined by their actions as a whole, not the behavior of one or two individuals.” T’Pol spoke before Sam could. “Go’auld have displayed their inability to move past their more selfish impulses. Ancients have shown their complete disregard for any but their own. Ori display their arrogance and fanaticism. Humans….” She inclined her head and Sam was struck once more by her unconscious grace. “Humans have shown a varied and astounding potential. They can
become the galaxy’s greatest explorers and protectors or it’s harshest tyrants.”

``Thank you.” Sam didn’t know what else to say. It was as close to an impassioned speech as she’d heard the woman make.

``Vulcans, of course, are well regarded by everyone as prime examples of logic and reason.”

``For the most part.” Trip agreed. Uh-oh. Sam thought. Please don’t let them start up again. She cast about for a distraction.

``So, any ideas on how to get the explosive off the Zed Pee Emm, Trip?” McKay jumped back into the conversation.

``Well, ….” Sam exchanged a look of relief with her associate.

``Why do you refer to these devices as Zed Pee Emm?” T’Pol asked

``He’s Canadian.” The human woman explained. At the lifted eyebrow, ``He says Zed instead of Zee, so…”

``What does it stand for?” Trip put in, not looking away from the device before him.

``Zero point energy module.” Both visitors looked at her in surprise. ``It’s true. These are….”

``Why do you believe them to be depleted?’’

``Because they ARE.” McKay was using his sarcastic voice. ``You hook them up to the equipment and everything just sits there. So…depleted.”

``Maybe that’s ‘cause they’re in user mode instead a’ chargin’ mode.” Trip commented absently, still examining the sabotaged device.

Sam gazed at McKay in sudden comprehension and rising chagrin.

``SON OF A BITCH!’’ He shouted. Sam agreed wholeheartedly with his uncharacteristic profanity. ``Son of a bitch!!”

``Is such forthright speech really necessary?’’

``Absolutely.” Sam rubbed at her forehead. ``We never even considered a charging mode. We just thought .. . once the power was gone….. it was gone.”

``We should have known.” McKay was already at the kicking himself stage. ``Zero point energy doesn’t run out. It’s infinite. That’s what makes it so powerful.”

``And dangerous.” She couldn’t help but add. ``We’re going to have to be very careful when we try this. If we can figure out how to try this….” They stared at the depleted module as if it would speak the answers.

``These devices are crystalline.” T’Pol observed.

``Yes….. oh, I don’t….’’

``SON OF A BITCH!!” McKay pushed himself away from the worktable. ``Of course, of course. They store date on crystals, they make a power generator out of crystals……the controls are in the crystals.”
``I hope they included a surge protector.'’ Sam hooked up leads to the module, scanning deep into the crystals. This time, however, she was scanning for information instead of power. ``I can’t believe we missed this.’’

``I believe the saying is `forest for the trees’. ‘’ T’Pol backed away, yielding the table to her human colleagues. ``I must meditate.’’ Inclining her head. ``Doctor. Colonel. Commander.’’ There it was again, a slight vibration to the tone of voice, whenever she addressed Trip. Sam watched the woman walk away, wondering.

``I might do the same.’’ Trip rubbed the back of his neck. ``After I get something for this headache.’’ Frowning at the second ZPM, he asked ``Did you try harmonics?’’

``Harmonics…..’’ McKay groaned and put his head into his hands. ``Using sound on the crystals at their natural frequencies to vibrate the explosive off.’’ He pulled at his hair. Sam felt like joining him. ``No. We were apparently too busy picking out stone knives and bear skins and…’’

``Rod.’’ Trip placed a hand on his should and caught Sam’s eye. She smiled at the sympathy there. ``You’re in the middle of two wars, either of which has potential to destroy the planet.’’ He shrugged. ``Cut yourself some slack. I’ve had my share of caveman moments, believe me.’’

``Okay.’’ McKay didn’t look convinced. Sam decided to distract him.

``Here it is.’’ She called the retrieved information up. She deliberately didn’t flinch when the shorter man leaned over her shoulder to view the data. ``You ready?’’

``Let’s take some precautions.’’

McKay moved the other module away, surprising her with his common sense. She disconnected the leads and picked up a tool to make the alteration. She was relieved to see Trip had stepped as far back as the lab allowed, letting them perform the test themselves. They set up scanning meters and video cameras. Finally, they were ready. They used the tools McKay had brought from Atlantis to make the adjustments, then stepped back, looking at the screens. Nothing.

``It didn’t…. ’’

``Look!’’ McKay pointed to the readout. The scan was registering an infinitesimal amount of energy. As she stared, it increased by another tiny amount. ``It must charge slowly for safety purposes.’’ His voice was awed.

``A surge protector.’’ Sam felt like crying. She felt like cheering. She had to strangle the urge to jump up and down and hug McKay. The very thought halted her euphoria.

``Well, at least the problem of how to power our trip home is solved.’’ Sam looked over to where Trip was standing, hands in his pockets. He looked depressed and, for the first time since she’d met him, really tired. ``I think I’ll turn in early.’’

``Trip.’’ McKay didn’t reach out, but the fact he’d picked up on the other man’s depression was miracle enough. ``Thanks for this.’’

``Anytime.’’

``Poor guy.’’

``Ah, she can’t hold out forever.’’
``I was talking about getting him home.’’ Sam picked up the phone to give Landry the good news.

``That’s no problem. Once we give up the search for the altar, we just build another from stuff at Atlantis, that time loop table your lot found…”

``I doubt it’s gonna be that easy, McKay.’’ She waited for the General to pick up.

``Nothing ever is.’’
``You appear distracted, Colonel Mitchell."

``I am.`` Cam scanned the gym again, frowning. ``Tucker isn’t usually this late."

``Indeed.`` He allowed Teal’c to pull him to his feet, dusting himself off from his most recent tumble. ``Perhaps he is indisposed."

``Sick?`` Cam considered the possibility. ``Could be. He’s been having a lot of headaches lately.`` He pulled the protective helmet off decisively. ``C’mon. From what I’ve seen, the guy’d be on death’s door before he went to the infirmary for so much as an aspirin."

The two yielded their sparring area to a couple of marines and headed for the guest rooms. Cam felt dread growing as they walked. Tucker had been in the gym on a very regular basis from the first morning after his arrival. Early morning workouts had become part of their routine, the Commander showing them some moves he’d picked up from the armory officer on his ship. He had to admit, that Malcolm guy knew his stuff. There was a move he’d learned that’d tossed Teal’c on his butt. The victory was short-lived, the Jaffa had recovered quickly and retaliated with his customary efficiency. He’d savored the moment, though, knowing he’d never be able to use that move again. At least, not on Teal’c.

Teal’c reached the door to Tucker’s room first, knocking lightly, then more heavily. Cam felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. Reaching out, he was unsettled to discover that the door was unlocked. Opening the door, he called out to Tucker, chilled when there was no answer. The room was clean, no signs of struggle or foul play. The bed was mildly rumpled, as if someone had just gotten up. A glass of water sat on the nightstand next to an empty pill bottle.

``Shit."

``Agreed.`` Teal’c’s gaze was roving the room, probably picking up more than he was.

``I’m going across to McKay’s, call out security.`` Mentally, he cursed his oh-so-wonderful idea of making Tucker bait.

Teal’c inclined his head, stepping back out into the hall with him, leaving the door open behind them. The last person Cam wanted to see at that precise moment turned the corner and started down the hall towards them. One of her eyebrows described a delicate arch over her right eye. Cam was thankful he had the excuse of calling security. He pounded on McKay’s door.

``Wha..."

``Later.`` Cam pushed his way into the room and grabbed the phone.


``Tucker’s been taken. Lock it down, secure all intel, you know the drill."

<<Yes, sir.>>

``I’ll notify Landry."

<<Yes, sir.>>
Hanging up, he was conscious of McKay darting into the bathroom to get dressed. T’Pol walked into his line of sight, eyebrow still raised. He couldn’t meet her gaze, and concentrated on his conversation with the General’s aide.

``Walter, listen. Tucker’s been nabbed. We need to have the marines doubling the security force. This went down without a peep; someone, somewhere, was compromised.’’

<<Yes, sir.>> The man hung up.

Great. The one time I need him to take up my time, he doesn’t babble. Cam hung up the phone with the sensation of facing a court martial. T’Pol was looking at him in a way that reminded him forcibly of his sixth grade math teacher. He felt eleven again, trying to convince Ms. Thompson there was a good reason his homework wasn’t done. Just as it had then, his mind went entirely blank.

``Am I to understand that Commander Tucker has been abducted?’’

``How’d that happen?’’ McKay came out of the bathroom, sat down to put on his boots. ``I didn’t hear a thing when I crashed.’’

``When was that?’’ Thankful to have something to do besides shuffle his feet and face the Vulcan, he turned to the Canadian. ``When did you last see Tucker?’’

``About 9 last night. He said he was turning in early, had a headache.’’

``His pain must have been immense for him to have mentioned it.’’ T’Pol commented. ``He does not usually consider his own health to be of importance.’’

``Sam and I were running the charging program on the ZPM….’’

``Charging?’

``….we turned it over to Lee about midnight. I didn’t hear or see anything when I came in.’’ McKay looked ashamed. ``I just went to sleep.’’

``It is not your fault, Doctor. It is the responsibility of those who have abducted Tr. … Commander Tucker.’’ The relief he felt at this attitude disappeared when she pierced him with a sharp look. ``I must wonder, however, how you came to the conclusion he was abducted so quickly. Would it not be more probable to assume he is merely ….elsewhere?’’

``Well….’’ This wasn’t going to be fun.

``When you first arrived, it was thought that certain factions on Earth could be flushed out using Commander Tucker as bait.’’ Teal’c made the whole idea sound reasonable. Of course, he couldn’t see the Vulcan woman’s face. Her eyes were darker than he remembered, burning with a sudden fire. ``It was implied that he was a weapons engineer who could design powerful instruments of destruction.’’

``It was my idea.’’ Cam confessed, resisting the urge to step back at the look that flitted across her face. ``I thought it would force them to reveal themselves, we’d grab them and find out where the device was that brought you here.’’

``Logical..’’ The tone was cold, ice-cold. He stood his ground as she approached him. ``If anything happens to Trip, Colonel, I would hold you accountable.’’ She stated, piercing him with her dark stare. ``You will be made to pay, should he come to harm.’’
``Who can hurt him more than you have?''

Cam closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to actually see her rip McKay to shreds. When there were no screams of agony, he risked opening one eye. T’Pol was standing in front of him, all energy seemed to be sucked out of her. She was staring over his shoulder at the wall, looking for all the world like she might cry. He cleared his throat, startling her gaze back to his face. He was struck by how suddenly vulnerable she appeared. Unthinkingly, he reached out.

``Tor ri!’’ Almost snarling, she smacked his hand aside. She turned to pierce McKay, then Teal’c with her gaze. ``I will expect to be kept informed.’’

``Indeed.’’ Teal’c inclined his head at her, watching as she strode off down the hall.

``That went……well.’’ Cam shrugged at the look of disbelief McKay shot him. ``We’re still alive, and no one needs to see Lam.’’

``Do you recall when I mentioned she reminded me of someone?’’ Teal’c was still staring down the hall.

``Sure.’’ He stepped out into the hall, nodding at the arriving Security Police to start their forensic study of Tucker’s room. McKay went down the hall to bang on Beckett’s door.

``Ishta.’’

``Ishta?’’ Cam racked his brain for the name. ``Jaffa warrior princess? Ra’yac married one of her people?’’

``Yes.’’

``Isn’t she blond?’’

``I did not say the resemblance was purely physical.’’ They started towards the security office. Mutually determined to solve this mystery.

``Yeah.’’ Thinking of what he’d seen in her gaze as she promised retribution for her …boyfriend? ``I got that too.’’
Agent Berman stepped into the interrogation room with a sense of satisfaction. Dr. Braga was lining up handles over a grill-like arrangement. A standing tray of sharp objects and other instruments sat nearby. A hospital cot surrounded by several pieces of medical equipment was against the wall. A tarp covered the floor near the center of the room, angled so that it would feed into the drain in the center of the floor. One of the techs nodded at him, setting up a laptop and camp table facing the ‘guest’ on top of the tarp.

Tucker lay unconscious on the tarp, hands bound together with a thick metal sheath that had a cable running through it up towards the ceiling and the pulley system there. His only other ornament was a pair of blue boxers.

``That explains the warmer air in here.’’ He commented. ‘’Place is usually like an icebox.’’

``We’re going to be strapped for time. Otherwise, I’d be attempting the usual: temperature variations, sleep deprivation.’’ Doctor Braga responded, more interested in checking over his equipment. Something occurred to the agent.

``Yes.’’ Berman frowned. ‘’Still, isn’t this a little …primitive?’’

``You’re not second-guessing this, are you…?’’

``Of course not.’’ He waved a hand at the branding irons, cattle prod, and cutting tools. ‘’But what’s wrong with drugs? Electro-shock? Neural …’’

``We don’t happen to have one of those memory machines, not even the adjusted one that was used on Vala or the alternate that Mitchell brought back.’’ The doctor sighed. ‘’That would really be nice.’’ He seemed satisfied with the selection and crouched down to feel Tucker’s pulse. ‘’We weren’t able to access his medical information, and can’t trust that he’ll tell us if there’s any allergies or other problems with giving him the kind of drugs you’re talking about. Besides…..’’ He stood up, taking out a cloth to wipe his fingers. ‘’…those things always leave the brain more scrambled than not. Same with electro-shock. Not bad if you’re trying to break the will or want to completely alter a personality, but when what you want IS the mind …..Sometimes old ways are the best.’’

``Hard to argue.’’ There was a movement from Tucker, both men stepped back. ‘’Looks like it’s show time.’’

Lights dimmed, the door was sealed. A mechanic’s work light was lowered to head level. Berman took his seat at the camp table next to the tech. Braga nodded to a man across the room, who hit the switch running the pulleys. Tucker was yanked to his feet, waking and struggling almost
immediately. Richard smiled as the man stiffened, looking around the room and squinting into the
darker areas. Dr. Braga gripped the handle of the light and tilted it so it shone into the prisoner’s
eyes. Tucker flinched away with a curse.

``You’re a smart man, Commander.‘’ Even though he knew the man couldn’t see it, he smiled.``I
don’t have to tell you what happens now, do I?’’

``Nothin’ I’m gonna like.’’ Tucker muttered.

``Bright boy.’’ Dr. Braga picked up the cattle prod and applied it to the man’s side. Tucker yelped
and jerked away.

For half an hour, the doctor applied the prod to alternating areas of the body, occasionally touching it
to the cable and letting the current flow thru the restraints. Tucker avoided some of the jolts, twisting
as best he was able. Standing barefoot on tarp, however, with his hands bound together over his
head; he started getting hit by the jolts more and more often. Berman was impressed with the man.
So far, he hadn’t screamed. Just yelped and cursed. The language was pretty inventive. He was
particularly found of the one about a diseased monkey and a drunk whore. Or was that vice versa?
Tucker drew a sharp and gasping breath at the latest touch, what in the agent’s experience was a
prelude to a scream, when the prod was yanked away. Dr. Braga turned the device off and laid it on
the equipment table. He walked over to where the grill was set up.

``Aren’t ya supposed …ta ask me questions?’’ Tucker was getting his breath back, gaze more
incensed than painful.

``Questions at this point are a waste of time, m’boy.’’ Brandon was never more tolerant than when
he was working. Berman hoped he’d remember they were working on an unknown time table.``All
questioning would reveal right now would be how good a liar you are. First we have to sensitize the
nerves …… ’’ He trailed off, murmuring to himself.

``We’ll get to the questions, Trip, don’t worry about it.’’

``Considerin’ the situation, asshole, I’d really rather ya called me…..’’ His voice trailed off as Dr.
Braga stepped forward again, one hand securely gripping the handle of a red-hot fireplace poker.
Tucker licked his lips.``I…. ya don’t…..’’

``You have a comment, Trip?’’ Berman enjoyed the bargaining most. When they tried to pretend they
still had some control of the situation. The sudden hard glare the man shot him was new. As if he
could see every detail of the agent’s face. A look of determination flowed over the engineer’s
features.

``Tu tevakh dungi-nam-tor bosh-t’kusut lu putelsu tal-tor vu.’’

``Yes.’’ Not comprehending what was said anymore than Richard, the doctor aimed the poker
towards Tucker’s left thigh.``The brave ones usually break soonest. This shouldn’t take long at all.’’ He
laid the poker’s head against the man’s skin.

And Tucker began to scream.
Teal’c looked around the conference table noting the subdued air. He hadn’t witnessed silence this oppressive since Daniel was retrieved from the Ori. General Landry was arguing with someone on the phone in his office. Colonel Mitchell was fidgeting with a pen, avoiding everyone’s gaze. Doctor Lam opened a folder and closed it repeatedly, glancing out of the corner of her eyes at Commander T’Pol. The Vulcan sat with her customary stillness, although the air of fragility was new.

“Shouldn’t we be out searching, or something?” Doctor MacKay put in. “Tracking down leads?”

“If we had any.” Mitchell flinched at Samantha Carter’s tone. “It’s a waiting game, now.”

“I’m still not sure how they got him out of here.” Vala Mal Doran twirled one finger in her hair, eyes betraying her unease as she tried for a unconcerned attitude. From the look on Daniel Jackson’s face, she wasn’t convincing. “It’s a secure facility, after all.”

“The analgesic he asked for was actually a strong sedative.” Doctor Lam flushed with embarrassment. “We’re still trying to track down the nurse who made the switch.”

“One of the computer techs was in on it. They looped the vid feed so that the halls looked empty. Opened one of the emergency stair wells ……”

“Another team on the surface had a harness with a pulley arrangement. They pulled him straight up the stair well and used an all-terrain vehicle to circumvent the front gate.” Teal’c showed the pictures of the tire treads and abandoned harness to Vala, then T’Pol. She stared at them unseeingly as he continued. “From there we surmise they accessed the interstate. It is unclear where they went after that. The agent we apprehended during Vala Mal Doran’s disappearance gave us several locations. Those, however, have either been destroyed or abandoned. The information he has given us since has proven … outdated.”

“So we’re back where we started.” Daniel frowned at the table. “We don’t know who has him, where they have him, or what…..”

“They are hurting him.” T’Pol whispered.

“What?”

“They are hurting him.” Her hand shook as she returned Teal’c’s photo to him. No one else spoke for several long moments. A tear rolled down the Vulcan’s face. Not since Daniel Jackson realized that he must return his wife to her servitude to save the people of Abydos had the Jaffa seen such a look of utter despair in someone’s eyes. Doctor Mackay cleared his throat.

“Look, about what I said, earlier …..”

“There’s no movement on any of the NID facilities, or anyone else we’ve got under observation.” Landry strode into the room and began the meeting without preamble. “There’s been no stellar activity nor any international movement either. Ms. Mal Doran was probably right, it’s an earth-based operation. Most likely an American operation.”

“Terra Prime.” T’Pol’s gaze was unfocused, pupils dilated. “We must contact Mr. Reed, Starfleet Intelligence may be compromised….”

“Mr. Reed isn’t here, T’Pol.” Daniel’s voice was gentle as he held his hand over her arm, just
``Of course.''

Of course.‘’ The Vulcan placed her hands palm to palm, stilling the shaking. Teal’c wondered if anything else was wrong with their guest. Aside from obvious distress, which she usually didn’t show, the woman looked……ill.  ‘’Stargate Command.’’

``Doesn’t he have an implanted tracker?’’ Vala Mal Doran asked. ‘’I know I was given one, after…??’

``We couldn’t convince him to take one.’’

``Then it will be very difficult to find him.’’

``We must.’’

``We will do everything we possibly can, Commander…’’

``It is NOT your concern, Colonel.’’ There was a snarling, sarcastic quality to T’Pol’s voice. She had slammed both hands onto the table as she stood. There were several small fractures in the wood’s veneer. She glared at Samantha Carter as if she would attack her. ‘’You should not even be here. You have what you wanted.’’

``I don’t …..’’

``Do you believe that Samantha Carter is only interested in what technology you and Commander Tucker can provide?’’ Teal’c injected as much disdain into the question as he could. There was definitely something wrong with the other alien.

``No.’’ Taking deep breaths, she lifted her hands from the imprints she’d left in the table and sat back down. She placed them palm to palm again, touching her fingertips to her lips in an attitude of prayer. ‘’Of course not. My apologies, Colonel.’’

``It’s okay.’’ Samantha Carter reached forward, then pulled back, obviously remembering the Vulcan distaste for touch. ‘’We know you’re worried.’’

``Vulcans do not experience…..’’

``It may be more than the stress of the situation.’’ Doctor Lam put in. She was looking at Commander T’Pol with her full gaze now, seeming to have concluded the decision she’d been struggling with. ‘’There’s another factor.’’

``Care to share with the rest of us, Carolyn?’’

``Commander T’Pol?’’

``Yes, Doctor?’’

``You said they were hurting him?’’ She waited for the Vulcan’s nod. ‘’Can you tell where they are holding him?’’

``They both said Vulcans weren’t telepathic.’’ Daniel Jackson sounded more tired than angry.

``Not in the manner you mean.’’ T’Pol opened her eyes to return Doctor Lam’s gaze. ‘’How did you know?’’

``Trip told me.’’
"When?"

"That first day." Doctor Lam shifted slightly in her seat, apparently uncomfortable with the directness of the other’s stare. "There were some … anomalies in your brain wave patterns."

"This is that thing you were talking about? The secret that wasn’t dangerous?" Doctor Lam nodded. "I think telepathic ability in our guests is just a little risky, Carolyn. You should’ve…"

"Trip is not telepathic." T’Pol shifted her stare to Landry. "And neither am I."

"That statement is inconsistent with your assertion that Commander Tucker is being ‘hurt’." Teal’c leaned forward. "The humans would say that you cannot have your cake and consume it as well."

"We are not telepathic." The air of doubt in the room was heavy. "With anyone else."

"This changes things." General Landry shook his head at their guest. "You should’ve told us."

"It is a private matter."

"Not when it touches on the security and safety of this planet, it isn’t."

Teal’c wanted to stop the General, sure there was a good reason that the two visitors hadn’t shared this intelligence. He was doubtful, however, that the impulse was his own. What if they had altered his thoughts? What if she was doing so now? They had done nothing but help, he felt they were sincere in their desire to return to their own reality, shocked to be here in his. If he began to doubt his senses, he could do nothing. Yet, if General Landry took the reasonable route of caution and imprisoned the Vulcan, how could he protest without seeming to be under her control?

"Is it the katelaya tel?"

"How do you….." T’Pol turned around to stare wide-eyed at Daniel Jackson, then narrowed her gaze. "The Kir-Shara."

"Anyone gonna explain what the kettle yodel is?"

'Mating bond?' Vala was hurt that they’d keep this from her. ’You’re married?’ Trip at least could’ve told her. They could’ve had private quarters, a bigger bed, a party, maybe. ’Why didn’t you….?’

’It is not a marriage…..’

’According to …’

’….if you do not work at it.’ T’Pol tilted her head towards Daniel. ’Is this not true of human relationships as well? That if one no longer works at it, it fades?’

’Someone will explain.’ General Landry’s tone had changed from the concerned patriarch he projected to an angry warlord. Vala reminded herself that the memories she had of this man consigning her to prison were false. ’Now.’

’Vulcans are empathic by nature, they suppressed their emotions to survive their more savage eras and continue the practice today.’

’This was in the first report.’ Cam pointed out. Vala wanted to remind him that Daniel was, after all, a teacher by nature. If he wouldn’t interrupt so often, he might learn something. ’They pushed their emotions down so they wouldn’t kill each other. Now they’re all scientific and logical, no emotion.’

’A common misconception.’ T’Pol turned her head to glare at Cam, who flinched. ’If Vulcans had no emotions, there would be nothing to suppress.’ She shifted her gaze to the General. ’Vulcans form their first bonds in the womb, with their mothers. It is a biological drive, a genetically linked imperative. Elizabeth…..’ She looked away, staring into space for a long while.

’So you were linked to your daughter, even though she wasn’t ……born?’ Vala sighed. ’That’s gotta hurt.’

’Yes.’ T’Pol inclined her head gracefully. ’When one is born, the bond grows stronger through physical contact and, when one is old enough, training in meditation and emotional control from one’s parents. A family bond is deemed essential to a Vulcan’s mental and physical well-being. As we believe in encouraging our bodies to heal themselves, the family bond is usually the first step in treating any illness.’

’That’s all very well, but what does that have to do with Commander Tucker?’

’I’m not sure.’ Daniel frowned. ’Vulcans have arranged marriages, for the most part. A betrothal bond is established then, the two kids encouraged to spend time together until the time of marriage. Then the bond is strengthened into the marriage bond.’

’You said it was a `mating’ bond? Sounds like fun.’ Vala hoped that the arranged thing wasn’t what was going on. She thought Trip was a better man than that.

’My ….marriage was unsuccessful. Largely due to the fact that I had already bonded with Trip. I was unaware of that until after the marriage had dissolved, however.’’ There was a faint greenish tinge to her skin. ’I did not inform Trip of the matter until months after that.’

’So what does all of this mean, exactly?’
"Those within a bond can communicate with each other." Daniel said. "If the bond is strong enough."

"It was, once." She dropped her eyes to the table. The flush hadn’t faded. "Thoughts, emotions, dreams, all could be shared. But, as I said, if one doesn’t work at it… the strength of our bond has faded."

"So you can’t talk to him." Vala didn’t want that defeated tone in the woman’s voice. "What can you do?"

"We have a sense of each other. An … awareness of each other’s … presence and state of being." T’Pol raised her eyes slowly to the Doctor’s. "I was unaware there was anything detectable in our brain scans."

"They were very similar. One would expect the patterns to be that close in twins, maybe, but not two people from different species and genders."

"So you can tell us his general physical condition, but other than that…"

"She can do a little better than that, General." Cam looked excited. "If we can get her close enough, she can zero in on him like a homing pigeon."

"Your analogy…""

"That is too risky…"

"I don’t think…"

"That’s a good idea." Everyone turned to look at Daniel. "T’Pol said that she can detect his presence. If she goes around to the sites, she can tell immediately if he’s there or not."

"It’s too dangerous." General Landry shook his head. "I don’t want to think about what would happen if someone spotted her or …"

"It is more dangerous to leave Trip in their hands. The technology he can relate…"

"You said your technology wasn’t compatible." MacKay sounded put out. Like he thought his new friends were holding out on him.

"Starfleet or Vulcan technology isn’t." T’Pol stated. "Xindi technology, however, …"

"Xindi? Those are the ones that lived in the Expanse, right? With the anomalies?" Sam asked. "The weapon was destroyed, right?"

"Not before Trip had an opportunity to study the diagrams of the prototype."

"Wait a minute." Cam paled and swallowed hard. Vala felt a little light-headed herself. "Are you telling me that I painted a target on a guy who can build a Death Star?"

"Indeed."

"Oh shit, we are so screwed."

Vala could tell, as the meeting became a planning session for roaming the Vulcan around like a tracking device; that everyone agreed with MacKay. If they didn’t find Trip in time … everyone was so screwed.
TwentyThree

Dr Carolyn Lam entered the cafeteria with a sense of satisfaction. They’d tracked down the nurse who’d drugged Trip. She had, unfortunately, gotten some warning and neglected to report in for work nor was she to be found at her apartment. Teal’c and Cam were searching the place now. Sam was working on a theory with McKay regarding satellite recording that she, frankly, hadn’t paid much attention to. The way T’Pol had been glaring at Sam throughout the briefing was more worrisome.

Worrisome was the word, all right. Carolyn plunked a couple sandwiches on her tray disinterestedly. Worrisome that they’ve had him three days and we’re still no closer to finding him. Worrisome that T’Pol seemed to be getting more and more emotional. Worrisome that Cam seemed to blame himself for the crisis, snapping at everyone in a manner as unlike his usual easy going nature as possible. Turning to find a seat, she noted another event for the list. It took her a couple of seconds to determine why she was so unsettled by the Vulcan eating French fries. Until she lifted another to her mouth and Carolyn realized what was off. She was eating them with her fingers.

``May I sit here?'' Carolyn remembered how T’Pol had moved from table to table when others had seated themselves uninvited. It would’ve been amusing if not for the look of rage on her face.

``Yep.’’

Now the doctor was truly worried. She’d never heard the Vulcan use slang, use anything less than cultured and precise speech. She should’ve gotten a graceful nod, the kind Teal’c was wont to use, or a simple ‘you may’. Feeling very uneasy, she searched around for a topic of safe conversation.

``Are you fee ….doing alright?’ Just in time she remembered how hostile their guest had gotten when McKay tried to apologize for hurting her ‘feelings’. She’d ranted at him for a good fifteen minutes, denying that Vulcans had any feelings at all.

``Yep.’’

At a loss for anything to talk about that wouldn’t set her off, Carolyn began to eat her lunch. She didn’t really want to, but she knew, unlike some of her co-workers, that neglecting to eat or sleep helped no one. Of course, her good behavior in taking care of herself may have had more to do with her lack of a useful task than actual superior thinking. T’Pol was looking at her. Worried that the smell of her lunchmeat was setting her off, the doctor moved the tray further away.

``Do you have a mate?’’

``Uh…’’ Well, it was fortunate she hadn’t been chewing at the time. That was a spit take question waiting to happen.

``Carter doesn’t.’’ T’Pol nearly growled the name. ``That’s why she wants mine.’’

``Who told you that?’ Carolyn wished someone would give her a road map for this conversation. She felt like she was performing surgery blind-folded.

``I’m not stupid.’’ The brown eyes narrowed in a very hostile manner. ``Trip’s a very attractive male. You’ve seen him. You’ve spoken with him, ….privately.’’

``I’m seeing someone.’’ It blurted out a little more desperately than she’d like. ``Don’t tell my father.’’
``Do I know him?"

``My father is General Landry. He gets a little … overprotective. And it could be bad for … well, he is under Hank’s command.’’

``Who is it?’’ T’Pol’s gaze was very suspicious, weighing.

``Cam.’’ Carolyn hoped he’d be smart enough to play along if the Vulcan confronted him on it. There was an attraction there, nothing like what Sam and General O’Neill had, nor what Daniel and Vala were struggling with. More of a `something could be here if we wanted’ kind of thing. ``We’re keeping it discreet.’’

``Wise.’’ Her answer seemed to satisfy whatever suspicions T’Pol was being driven by. The air around the table was much less tense.

``No offense, Commander, ” formality was always safe “ but you seem to be … not your usual self.’’

``I haven’t meditated.’’

``But…’’

``It’s too dangerous.’’

``It’s dangerous for you not to meditate, isn’t it?” Carolyn felt a chill up her spine. It was like Teal’c suddenly declaring that he would, for safety, now wear a pink tutu. ``I mean…’’

``I’m ill.’’ The green flush she’d come to identify as a blush covered her face. ``If I don’t meditate, it gets worse. If I do, I could infect Trip. It’ll get worse, faster, if he’s got it too.’’

Every word was ringing danger bells in her head. She realized with a mild shock that T’Pol wasn’t wearing her usual jacket. Her bare arms seemed to glow copper in the light. How could I have missed this? The doctor in her pointed up several signs of illness, things any intern could’ve seen.

``Is there any treatment? Is it … contagious?’’ The memories of the Ori plague were still horrifyingly fresh.

``No one else besides Trip could become infected.’’ T’Pol looked very uncomfortable. ``I don’t wish to discuss this.’’

``If you’re sick, you need…’’

``There’s nothing I need you can provide.’’ Softening her tone somewhat, she stared at the table top. ``I need Trip, even though I no longer deserve him.’’

I think he might disagree with that.’’ It wasn’t contagious, only Trip could get it? Sounded like some kind of Vulcan bond thing. Reminding herself to talk to Daniel later, she tried to soothe her patient. ``He loves you, you know.’’

``It’s amazing.’’ T’Pol traced a pattern in her ketchup with a fingertip. ``After all I’ve done……’’

``So make it up to him.’’ Carolyn smiled. ``He seems easy to please. All he wants is you to love him back.’’

``It is easy.’’ She shook her head, hair falling over her pointed ears. ``If I had realized that before, we wouldn’t be in this situation.’’
``How do you mean?''

``If I hadn’t try to deny our bond, they wouldn’t’ve been able to take him without my knowing. He wouldn’t’ve had a headache, nor gone to sickbay to get drugs for it. I would’ve been there, in his bed. I….''``

``Hindsight is twenty/twenty. '' Carolyn wanted to derail the litany before it got more personal. Or started in on how it was one of her nurses that had doped the engineer.

``What’s that mean?’’ Like Vala’s, the alien’s expression suspected that the humans were putting her on.

``Well, twenty/twenty is what we call perfect vision. So, looking back with the knowledge you have now…..''

``Hindsight is twenty/twenty. '' Carolyn had never been so relieved to see someone nod regally.

``I’m sure all you’d have to do is apologize and…’’

``No. ’’ There was an honest to god smile pulling at the corners of T’Pol’s mouth. ``I don’t have to say I’m sorry.’’

``I…’’ Something to do with the bond?

``And he will not say `I told you so’. ‘’

``Okay. ’’ That sounded familiar. She definitely had to talk to Daniel. ``I think we should go to the infirmary…..''

``I got it!’’ Sam burst into the cafeteria, causing one airman to drop his dish caddy. ``I found them!’’

``Some other time, doctor. ’’ T’Pol seemed to pull an air of serenity around her as she stood. Carolyn would’ve been more reassured if she hadn’t sucked the ketchup off her finger as she did so.

Something was wrong with their Vulcan visitor. Before she spoke to Daniel, she had to talk to Hank.
General Hank Landry was listening with half an ear as Carter laid out her discovery. Something about the Stargate putting out a distinctive energy signature when used (he seemed to remember something like that from George’s early reports) and the signal crossing dimensions to activate the table that their visitors had been investigating.

``…so, looking for both those signatures, including the cross-dimensional wave, we found a surge on the satellite record at the precise moment the gate activated…’’

``It’s not on our list of Trust hideouts, so it’s very possible. Even if Trip isn’t there, the table thing is, and we can take prisoners.’’ Mitchell looked a little over-eager to get his hands on prisoners. Hank couldn’t blame him. He wanted a few minutes alone with the personnel who’d betrayed the SGC himself.

``We should be careful not to damage the ancient device. It’s their only ticket home.’’ Dr. McKay shot a look towards Mitchell. ‘’No shooting near the technology.’’

``We know our jobs, Rodney.’’ Carter snapped. ‘’We’ll get it done.’’

``You’ve done enough.’’ T’Pol snarled at her.

``T’Pol.’’ Teal’c’s voice was calm. ‘’You are being illogical.’’

``I’m …’’ A deep breath, ‘’Apologies, Colonel.’’ There was still a sharp edge to her tone.

``She shouldn’t be on this one.’’ Carolyn interrupted. ‘’She’s sick.’’

``Tor’ri stariben!’’

``Commander?’’ Hank waited until the Vulcan shifted her glare from his daughter to himself. ‘’Something’s wrong, isn’t it?’’

``We do NOT discuss it.’’ She was breathing in large gasps, gripping the arms of her chair. The look he shot Dr. Jackson was met with a slow shake of a dark blond head. Whatever was going on, it wasn’t something the anthropologist had learned. ‘’I need Trip. Trip can help.’’

``We’ll get him back.’’ Vala patted the shaking copper hand. ‘’You’ll see.’’

The ex-thief sounded as if she was soothing a child. The plaintiveness of T’Pol’s voice, her despair, obviously struck a nerve with the dark-haired flirt. Hank was amazed that she was being allowed to touch her. Previously, only Tucker had been granted such liberties. Perhaps because he’d declared Vala his ‘adopted’ sister? The relationship between his visitors was at least as complicated as T’Pol’s biology or the technology they’d shared.

``You have a go, SG-1.’’ Hank ignored the dark look his doctor gave him. ‘’Bring him home, retrieve the device, you know the drill.’’

``Sir,’’ Mitchell began laying out his plan, Colonel Makepeace looking over his shoulder at the satellite pictures. Calling the marines in on this had to have been one of Mitchell’s better ideas.

``Sir, you can’t send her into the field.’’ Carolyn was whispering to him, T’Pol being soothed by Vala further down the table. ‘’She’s not stable.’’
``She’s the best resource we’ve got to find Tucker quickly.’’ Hank tried to look sympathetic. ```I have noticed that she’s been a little……off… lately. Don’t you think rescuing him will help?’’

``I don’t know.’’ Carolyn shot a look of concern down the table. ```I just wish I had a clearer idea of what’s wrong.’’

``Punishing those who’ve taken him will be helpful.’’ T’Pol interrupted. Vulcan hearing, Hank mused. ```Their deaths will be painful, but quick.’’

``We’re not going there to kill…..’’ Carter tried to reason with her.

``It isn’t your decision, human.’’ T’Pol snarled at her, starting to rise.

``Of course not, she just means getting Trip home is more important.’’ Vala stepped between the two scientists. ```You’d rather help him than kill people, right? He’s still …alive?’’

``Yes.’’ T’Pol closed her eyes. ```He lives.’’ She turned her head and snapped her eyes open. Hank had thought her eyes were brown. These were obsidian chips, frozen by the vacuum of space. ```Should he cease, so will everyone involved.’’

The threat hung in the air, no one wanted to argue with her. The general could see sympathy for such an attitude in more than one face including, surprisingly, Doctor Jackson’s. He sent up a prayer to any god listening, real or not, that Tucker would survive this. Things were bad enough without a grief-stricken alien going on a rampage.
Dr. Brandon Braga was impressed. Four days and Tucker hadn’t given them anything. Well, not unless you counted the rather inventive cursing. That had ceased about day two, however, leaving screams and groans of pain his only expressions. They’d paused several times to allow their guest to recover his strength, to give him water and wipe him down to prevent infection.

Yesterday they’d had one of the guards use him for a punching bag, leaving vivid bruises over much of his torso. They’d been lucky only to crack ribs instead of breaking them. Robert had yelled, terrified they’d damaged their prize. Really, the man should have more faith in his partner’s expertise. Brandon stepped closer to his subject, surveying the results of his handiwork.

The back was a mass of cuts from the whip, Robert’s idea when the branding irons hadn’t yielded any answers. There were burns on his arms, legs, and torso, both from the irons and the cattle prod. He’d been creative with the application of the cuts, the longest and deepest crossed over several burns and tended to congregate where sweat would pool. The boxers had been cut off when they grew filthy enough to prove a infection hazard. He’d noted with amusement the female tech’s eyes widen when she saw how large Tucker was, locally speaking.

Perhaps that was were they should concentrate their next efforts. Breaking his legs this morning certainly hadn’t yielded any cooperation. Tucker’d bit through his own lip and spat in Robert’s face. Quite rude of him, actually. He turned to order the techs to bring him a clean tray of tools when Tucker smiled. Startled, he took a step back. The man opened his eyes, gazing at him with vicious calm satisfaction. His lips moved.

``What?'' Leaning closer, but not close enough to be bitten, as one of the techs had been when washing him. ``What was that?''

``yer a dead ‘an’' Tucker whispered, eyes glittering through the bruising on his face.

``How courageous.‘’ Brandon shook his head. ``You should really be thinking of ways to get on my good side, Commander.‘’ Anyone who’d survived some of his best work deserved a title of respect. ``Now, we’re going to……’’ The lights flickered, the computer on the table went down. ``See what that is.‘’ He flipped a negligent hand towards the guard who’d entered the room with him. Since the tech had been bitten, no one had been allowed alone with Tucker. ``A man such as you, Commander, will no doubt …..’’

``Step away.‘’

Pausing mid-reach for the prisoner’s genitalia, Brandon looked towards the door. From the files, he recognized Colonel’s Mitchell and Carter as well as Teal’c. There was a fourth person in black, one
not listed in any file he’d read. Her skin was a greenish-copper flush, ears gracefully pointed through her wild brown hair. It was she that had spoken, he surmised. Pity they hadn’t taken her. Now that would’ve been almost as great a challenge as Teal’c would be.

``I don’t think so.’’ He stepped so that Tucker was between him and the armed intruders. He placed a hand on the man’s hip, smiling when he hissed in pain. “I think the Commander and I have a great deal more to talk about.’’ He tapped the headset to activate it. opened his mouth to request `beam-out’. A blue arc reached out from Carter to envelope him and Tucker both. Darkness claimed him.

``You had no right!’’

Richard froze in the act of slipping down the hall. He’d avoided capture thus far, dressed as one of the SGC marines, acting like the others. Good thing he’d had several outfits stashed in case they were compromised. He pushed down the rage. Time to retaliate later. He’d planned to put a bullet in Tucker on his way out, customary way to cover one’s tracks. The presence of most of SG1 in the doorway to the interrogation room gave him pause.

Colonel Carter was being held against the wall, hands trying to break the grip of the smaller woman who was strangling her. The pointed ears made it obvious that this was the alien visitor. He raised his weapon.

``He is MINE. Mine is the right to…..’’

The shot echoed in the hall, hitting the alien just under her left arm. There was a pained shout from the room as she crumbled to the ground. Richard lowered his weapon, keeping the satisfaction from his face.

``What have you done?’’

``She was going to kill you, sir.’’ Richard avoided Carter’s eyes. The woman was kneeling, applying pressure to the wound. Dr. Jackson and his alien whore came charging down the hall. His prospects for escape were narrowing. He couldn’t’ve resisted the need to exterminate an alien, though. Time to try and bluff his way through. Hopefully none of them would realize he was a little old for a sergeant.

``We heard …’’

``Oh, shit.’’

``She attacked Colonel Carter.’’ He was a little shocked at the profanity coming from Doctor Jackson. “I had no choice.’’

``You idiot.’’ Vala hissed at him.

``He’s more than that.’’ There was a coolness in his right ear, barrel of a P-90. “He’s not on our team.’’

``Very good, Colonel.’’ Richard cursed the man’s observation. He should’ve been distracted by the state Tucker was in, trying to get him cut loose. Eyeing the number of weapons aimed in his direction, he allowed himself to be disarmed.

``Save it, jackass.’’ Mitchell freed one hand to call in the medical staff. “You’re lucky they’re still alive.’’

``She won’t be.’’ He smiled into Dr. Jackson’s hostile look. “I shot her in the heart.’’
Unable to believe what he was hearing, he turned his head slowly to the door. Mitchell didn’t move the weapon, so he ended up with a P-90 barrel in his cheek. Both Vala and Carter gasped when they saw the man Teal’c had cradled in his arms. From the bleary expression, Tucker was in extreme pain, legs hanging unnaturally due to this morning’s interrogation. His voice was weak, but the fact he was speaking at all was nothing short of astonishing. Richard saw his own shock in the eyes Mitchell wouldn’t take off him.

“He hit her just under the left shoulder, Trip.” Carter sounded as if she wanted to cry. “Unless she was very lucky.”

“Tha’s na … her heart is” Tucker sucked in a breath, started to shiver.

“She’s Vulcan.” Dr. Jackson motioned to the approaching medical personnel. “She’ll be fine.”

“We should’ve listened to Carolyn.” Mitchell groused. “She said T’Pol was sick.”

“One alien less.” Richard smiled. “It’s almost worth it.”

“Shut up, Dr. Evil.” Mitchell poked him with the P90. Given the position, the sensation was equal to a harsh slap T’Pol was put onto a stretcher and hauled off.

“‘ay g’nit”

“Wha….” He felt Tucker’s clammy hand on his shoulder, a sharp pinch, then nothing.
I get a bunch of medical stuff wrong in this one. It's fanfic, okay? Just flow with it.

``We have to wake him.’’ Dr. Lam sounded both aggravated and despairing.

``Look at him, Doc, he looks like he’s gone a couple rounds with a wood chipper.’’ Cam waved a hand towards Trip’s bed. Both legs were suspended in casts, bandages covered his face and arms; he didn’t even want to think about the gel-packs they’d layered under the engineer’s back. ``Does he look like he’s in any condition to give medical advice?’’

``Both he and T’Pol have lost a lot of blood. I don’t think the bullet nicked any of her organs, but I’m not sure. We’re extremely fortunate that I sent that med kit of theirs along. I wouldn’t want to operate on someone when I’m not even sure of where their internal organs are.’’ He flinched back from her glare. ``If you’d just listened to me when I said she wasn’t in any condition to go..’’

``If we hadn’t, Trip would be missing his ..’’

``We did what we had to.’’ Thankfully Jackson interrupted Vala. Cam didn’t want to think about what torture the Trust operative had been about to try.

``Her fever is still rising. Adrenalin and endorphin levels are dangerously high. Just when I think I’ve pinned down the set of neurotransmitters that are causing this, a different batch spikes and the ones I thought were responsible drop. It’s like trying to handle smoke.’’ Carolyn sighed. ``I don’t have any choice.’’

Everyone kept back as she injected a stimulant into one of the three bags hooked up to Trip. Cam didn’t know which part of his face to look at. The stitched up lip, the oxygen leading into the recently broken nose, the blackened eyes blinking warily up at the doctor.

``Hoshi?’’

``crap’’ Cam muttered.

``It’s Doctor Lam, remember, Commander? From Stargate Command?’’ She tapped a few keys on his monitor, frowning. ``How do you feel?’’

``Doctor Lam. ’’ Trip’s eyes fluttered closed. ``Stargate. Ancients. Vala. Rod.’’ Each word puffed out with obvious effort. ``Missed morning workout with Teal’c and Cam.’’

``Yeah, you missed getting your butt whupped by me and the Jaffa Juggernaut, again.’’ Cam tried to smile. Teal’c inclined his head from the left side of the bed.

``Put ‘im up against T’Pol. She’ll kick his..’’ Eyes snapped open. ``Where’s T’Pol?’’

``She’s in quarantine.’’ Vala stepped up next to Teal’c. ``She tried to strangle Sam. Y’know, bro, next time you decide to make your woman jealous, you should really warn..’’"
``I never …'' Trip was trying to sit up. Jackson went around to Carolyn’s side of the bed, holding the engineer down while she checked the monitors. ``Tha’s ridiculous.’’

``T’Pol seemed to believe it.’’ Sam stood at the foot of the bed. The way Trip squinted to see her past his casts would’ve been amusing if not for how he got them.

``Ya know yer not interested.’’ He had stopped trying to sit up, breathing harshly, hissing as he settled back. ``It’s stupid ta think ya might be. She jus’ …she thinks I’m irresistible. It’s flatterin’, usually.’’ A small smile played at his lips. ``She jus’ talks herself out of it, most times.’’

``Well, this time she decided to go Mortal Kombat on Carter.’’ Cam crossed his arms and joined Sam at the end of the bed. ``She’s been yelling at Sam ever since you went missing.’’

``She said she was sick.’’ Carolyn laid a hand on one of the few undamaged areas. ``She said you could help, but she wouldn’t tell me what was wrong.’’

``She’s been very emotional, I don’t think she’s been meditating.’’ Jackson put in. Cam saw the customary tongue start roaming in his cheek, then Trip flinched and stopped, brow still furrowed.

`` ‘S familiar…’’ He closed his eyes.

``She’s been eating with her fingers and telling Sam to stay away from her mate…’’

`` … in English…?’’ Trip’s hand clamped onto Jackson’s wrist in chilling desperation. ``She’s been speakin’ English?’’

``Aside from a few words here and there …’’ He was answered. ``I think she’s been using the Vulcan for emphasis.’’

``So there’s time…’’ He tried to rise again, with even less success than the last time. No one had to restrain him.

``Tell me how to treat this, Commander.’’ Carolyn snapped. ``You’re in no condition to get up, so I’ll …’’

``Ya can’t.’’ Trip smirked a bit, face tightened in pain. ``Ya don’t have the equipment.’’

``So tell us what’s needed and we’ll build it.’’ Sam put in. ``Or we’ll have MacKay bring it from Atlantis.’’

``Tha’s not…’’ He sighed. ``I’m t’only one who kin help.’’

``Because of the bond.’’ Trip nodded at Jackson’s comment, then shot a suspicious look at the physician out of the corner of one eye. ``T’Pol told us. She was picking up on your…distress.’’

``She said that no one would get it besides you. Is that because of the bond, too?’’ At his nod, she sighed in exasperation. ``But we can’t treat it and you won’t tell us what it is.’’

``I kin treat it.’’ Trip opened his eyes, determined set to his features. ``If’n ya heal me with one’a them sarco-things.’’

``Even if we had one, we couldn’t take that risk.’’ Cam declared.

``There’s the hand-devices.’’ Vala put in. ``Sam or I…’’

``I won’t authorize that.’’ Carolyn interrupted. ``Only in a life or death…’’
``This is life or death.'’ Trip hissed. Everyone looked at him. The silence dragged on, expectant. He sighed, eyes finding Jackson. ``She’s gonna kill me.'’

``She’ll be alive to do it.’’ Minutes crawled by as the engineer struggled with his choices and his breath. Finally, he closed his eyes.

``It’s the pon farr.’’ His voice was resigned, accent thickening as he continued his revelations. ``More ta the point, it’s the plak tau that’ll kill her.’’ Cam frowned at their linguist.

``First one, I don’t know. Second…..blood heat?’’

``Blood fever.’’ Trip licked his lips. Vala held a cup of water and straw for him to drink. ``It’s……she’ll get emotional, her appetite’ll start fluctuat’r Either eatin’ a lot, or nothin’ at all. Eatin’ with her fingers. It’ll get harder fer her ta meditate……’’ He shifted and caught his breath. ``She’ll start runnin’ a fever, gettin’ headaches, snappin’ at people….Then she’ll start with the jealousy, illogical possessiveness……’’ He opened his eyes to look at Sam. ``It’s actually a good sign she didn’’t kill ya……’’

``For more than one reason.’’ Sam’s voice was dry.

``How did she get this? Why didn’t she mention she had it when ….’’

``It’s not …..it’s a natural process of Vulcan biology.’’

``What?’’

``It’s …..it’s like… puberty. We didn’ know her time was comin’. Wouldn’a been anythin’ ta do if we had….’’

``Puberty?’’ Okay, this was getting a little ridiculous. ``She looks pretty grown-up to me.’’

``Touch her an’ I’ll turn yer spine into a pretzel.’’ Trip snarled, actually managing to gain a few inches off the mattress as he reached one hand towards Cam. His eyes were blazing fury.

``Maybe it’s time for a sedative.’’ Carolyn motioned to her nurses.

``NO!’’ Trip flopped back onto the bed, yelping when his back impacted the gel packs. ``It might block the bond.’’

``It hasn’t so far.’’ Carolyn accepted the needle and reached for the IV.

``I said NO, Doc, or don’ this world’s oath include the right of the patient to refuse treatment?’’

``No, and given your adrenaline levels, you’re in no condition to……’’

``Idn’ that a little strange in my condition?’’ She paused, looking back at the monitors. ``I’’m tellin’ ya, Doc, T’Pol could die from this. Ya gotta …..’’ He hitched a breath in pain.

``So far your description of her condition does not appear life-threatening.’’

Cam agreed with Teal’c. Except…..now Trip was showing the same irrational symptoms T’Pol had. Stranger things…. "

``…..not yet…..’’ More water from Vala and he continued. ``She’ll lose her English, start talkin’ in Vulcan. Fever’ll get higher……adrenaline, endorphins….. her neural chemistry’ll be all over the map……’’ Those were her exact symptoms. He couldn’t possibly have heard that when he was out.
Cam traded a look of growing realization with the doctor. "...an’ then it’ll get really bad...." He opened his eyes to stare pleadingly at Carolyn. "...she’ll lose the ability to talk at’all ....she’ll get even more violent, deadly this time ...... if it still idn’ ......she goes into a coma, a brief one, but that’ll be the sign it’s beyond fixin’.....tha’ happens, ya might as well give her three zat shots....."

"That would..."

"...when she comes outta t’coma, anythin’ that made her sentient, that made her T’Pol will be gone ... she’ll be an animal, irreversible brain damage..... an’ her blood...." Trip’s voice choked up, tears slipped out of his eyes. "......her blood’ll literally BOIL in her veins until massive organ failure kills her...."

"You gotta be kidding me...."

"Do I look like I’m kiddin’?!" Trip snarled at him. "It’s her first, we didn’ know it was comin’ ...."

He turned a begging look back to Carolyn. "Please.....it’s the only way...."

"Would it be enough to put the two of you into the same room?" Doctor Lam sounded like she was giving in. "Can the bond...."

"Only if ya don’ want me to survive." Trip flushed completely purple. "It’s.....it’s more complicated than jus’ meditatin’ with her or focusin’ the bond’s energy on healin’ her bullet wound."

"How’d you know she was shot?" Cam answered his own question. "The bond. That’s why ....."

"I thought the fever was from your injuries, the pain levels." Carolyn checked her monitors again. "Your endorphin and testosterone levels are climbing. I don’t ...."

"It’s the bond." Trip nodded at Jackson’s statement. "She said that thoughts could be shared, that it could be used for treating medical conditions."

"But she’s not treating him." Sam said. "She’s infecting him."

"She’s choosin’ me." There was a satisfied smile on his face. "Two years’a doubtin’ an’ wonderin’ .....she’s choosin’ me."

"For what?" This didn’t sound like much of a choice. "To die with her?"

"Ta......" The purple flush was back. His accent was thick enough to make him barely understandable. ".....it’s.......ya either fight ta t’death, meditate, which ya kin see didn’ work, or......"

"Or......?" Jackson prompted when he didn’t finish.

"Well ...." Trip’s gazed roamed uncomfortably around, unable to look anyone in the eye. "... it IS a matin’ bond."

"You mean...?" Vala sounded delighted. Cam supposed she was planning how to become infected. He could almost hear her now: Daniel, I’ve been infected with this virus that says I have to have sex with you or die. You don’t want me to die, do you?

"Commander." Carolyn shook her head. "You’re not in any condition for .....that kind of activity. I would risk it, maybe once......"
``It wouldn’ be jus’ t’once.’’ Vala’s smile got bigger. ``It’s a MATIN’ drive, Doc. Their biology is all set up t’make sure tha’ …..well, given it’s T’Pol’s firs’ Pon Farr …..I don’ think it’d take more than … three weeks…”

``Three weeks?!!"

``Talk about girls gone wild.’’ Cam muttered. Not quietly enough given the glare the doctor gave him. What was it with this doctor and height? He wondered if she’d be half as intimidating if she were taller. Or if he was any shorter. Thankfully, Trip didn’t appear to have heard him.

``Now I see why you want to use the healing devices.’’ The doctor commented.

``I don’t think I could….’’ Sam started.

``Vala should do it.’’ Jackson shrugged at the looks he got. ``Given how T’Pol’s been reacting to you, Sam, maybe his `sister’ will get a free pass. Besides, ‘ He looked apologetically at Vala ``` with Qetesh’s knowledge of the effects of torture….’’

``s’only logical.’’ Trip lifted a bandaged hand to rest on Vala’s. She wasn’t looking at anybody. ``Vala…..’’

``No, it’s okay.’’ She smiled at him, then over at Jackson. He was surprised to see the man smile back. ``I won’t even insist that you name the baby after me.’’

``Don’ think she’d be able ta live up ta it if we did…..’’

``I’ll start disconnecting.’’ Carolyn looked down at the engineer. ``This is going to be pretty painful.’’

``Jus’ don’ let her stop.’’ Trip shifted his gaze to Jackson. ``No matter what.’’

``I think I’ll get one of the quarantine chambers set up.’’ Mitchell started backing out. ``One Vulcan Honeymoon suite coming up.’’ It was the least he could do. Maybe later he’d get a chance to apologize.
Daniel looked over at the wheelchair where Trip was sitting. Vala’s efforts had been a rousing success, the man was as healthy as he’d been when he stumbled through the ‘gate. Not counting the effects of the pon farr, of course. He blushed as he remembered why Carolyn had insisted on the chair. It made the tent in the scrubs the engineer was wearing much less obvious. Just now, he was rubbing his face with his hands and looking around the lab with a rueful expression.

The archeologist looked around as well. Large drapes covered the viewing windows from the observation booth. Every piece of equipment had been removed. An airman was finishing the attachment of spare bulkheads to the wall facing the draped windows, blocking the view to the toilet and shower that had already been connected. The sink jutted out from the wall nearby, looking like it was hovering over the boxes of (vegetarian) MRE’s. A small box with a change of clothes for both visitors sat near the door under the intercom. He was trying not to look at the queen size mattress on the floor; unmade except for a couple pillows and one or two folded blankets. More blankets and some towels sat in boxes against the wall opposite the door. Everything was shades of military green or blue.

“Well, the feng shui is a mess.” Daniel turned back to Trip. “But what theme would you go for here?”

“Maybe Vala’s na s’good an influence, after all” Trip chuckled. He stood, began pacing.

“You should sit…” The look he got reminded him of the worst of Jack’s stubborn moods. He motioned to an airman to remove the wheelchair, watching the other man pace as the room emptied. Soon it was just him and the increasingly agitated … bridegroom?

“This’s takin’ t’long.” Trip moved towards the door. “She’s healed…wha’s keepin’ …..”

“She’ll be right here, you just have to….” Daniel stepped between the other man and the door, holding out his arms placatingly. He was grabbed by his shirt and slammed roughly into the wall next to the door. Waving off the airwoman who’d been posted as guard, he tried to break the other’s surprisingly fierce grip. Trip had never shown any violence towards him, only Mitchell. With Teal’c helping Vala with the stronger T’Pol, he’d thought he was the safer choice for the situation here.

“Vu tor’ri nem-tor tu kosu. Nash tor’ri tan-tor vu to-tanlar l’potau ve s’putelsu.”

You do not claim your woman. Daniel’s mind translated. This doesn’t give you the right to keep me from my bond mate. He was thankful no one else could speak Vulcan. It was bad enough that people put him and Vala together….. what was bad about it? Really? He took a breath, letting the realization that had been building for months now wash over him. It was time to stop lying to himself, to her. Time to step up……after he got loose. The truth will set you free……Vala’s voice teased his memory.

“That’s going to change.” He whispered, ceasing his attempts to struggle. He stared into Trip’s eyes, hoping there was enough clarity left for the man to understand. Hoping the nervous tentativeness of his newborn decision wouldn’t be detected. He sighed in relief when he was released. A sigh that turned into a grunt as he was shoved aside by someone’s very warm hand. He
looked towards the door. **``Wha….‟**

``She started running as soon as I finished.‟‟ Vala was looking over his shoulder with a smile in her grey eyes. **``I think…..‟‟**

He didn‟t want to turn around. He didn‟t need to turn around. Not with that smile on her face. Not with the sounds he could hear from the two Commanders. Ripping cloth, moans…. He grabbed Vala‟s arm and exited the room, nodding for the door to be sealed. His face was bright red, he knew. He didn‟t need Teal‟e‟s amused glance as he shoved his hands into his pockets, turning away towards the wall. He tried to get himself under control. Tried not to think of that time on the Prometheus, when, for a split second, he‟d kissed her back. Of what her body looked like as he put her into the spare uniform. Of what her skin felt…….

``Looked like they were off to a pretty good start.‟‟

Daniel fought the urge to smack the ex-thief as her smug comment inspired his mind to paint a picture of just what the two had been doing as he left. Other images were called up; a woman in his quarters, his arms…….dark hair and light eyes as she smiled at him and kissed him and touched him…….He shook his head a little violently. It was as if, sensing his new state of mind, his subconscious was making up for all the time he‟d wasted.

``Sometimes having a good imagination is a real bitch.‟‟

From the quickly muffled snicker of the airwoman on guard, he knew he‟d said it aloud. So much for being able to stop blushing anytime soon, he sighed. Vala was smiling at him, eyes dancing. He knew if he gave her the slightest opening, she‟d be more than happy to regale him with the graphic details of what he‟d missed by having his back to the couple. Maybe even make a few suggestions as to what they could…….

``I will report to General Landry.‟‟ Teal‟e declared. Daniel didn‟t know if the Jaffa picked up on his sudden desire to be alone with Vala. Of course, the minute his friend bowed and took his leave, he wanted him to stay as a buffer. God, he was pathetic.

``Let‟s talk.‟‟ Blunt, much? He could almost hear Jack‟s sarcastic comments. Real smooth, Danny boy. **``Please?‟‟**

``Um….‟‟ Vala‟s eyes darted around the hall. And now, of all times, she didn‟t want to be alone with him. **``Don‟t we have a briefing to get to?‟‟**

``Please?‟‟ He tried to hold her eyes, tried to convey the connection they‟d had in the warehouse when he‟d bet she wouldn‟t shoot him and won. **``Just for a minute.‟‟**

``Okay.‟‟ She switched moods with her customary quicksilver smile. Would anyone else have spotted the flash of uncertainty when she took his arm, the brief glance of surprise when he didn‟t pull away? He could practically feel the curiosity eating her alive as they went down the hall to another, smaller lab. Her eyes widened in disbelief when he shut the door. **``Daniel?‟‟**

``It‟s okay.‟‟ He tried to smile at her, failed miserably. He took off his glasses and fidgeted with them. **``I…..we……‟‟** He cleared his throat. **``I just….well, things are…….‟‟** For a linguist, all of a sudden, he couldn‟t find any words. His mind raced, trying to find something to say before she got bored and left.

``Did I do something wrong?‟‟ Vala sounded like a little girl awaiting a scolding. Sitting on the stool, swinging her legs as she bit her lip and fiddled with one of her pigtails. Their eyes met. Suddenly,
words were the last thing on his mind. Actions spoke louder than words, right? He put his glasses carefully in his pocket.

He saw her pupils dilate as he stepped closer, now very sure of himself. He reached out, cupped the side of her face in his hand. His thumb stroked her cheek as he gazed timelessly at her face. He felt surreal, intoxicated and nearly giddy as he leaned in, feeling her hands on his shoulders as he brought his lips to……

``Doctor Jackson, General Landry….. oh.’’

``..fuck….” Daniel saw Vala’s eyes widen as he dropped his hand and stepped away. He’d used more foul language lately than he customarily used in a year. He wasn’t sure if it was Trip’s influence or too many years in military company. He started to turn to the door the General’s aide had opened. ``Alright, Walter, what….” The rest of the sentence was cut off.

Vala, apparently just as frustrated at the interruption as he, had taken her usual innovative approach. Her hands were threaded into his hair, a good grip on his head to keep him in place. Only he didn’t want to go anywhere. His arms were around her, pressing her to him. God, she tasted even sweeter than he remembered. Why had he been denying this? He opened his mouth on a moan, feeling the surge course through him like electricity as she deepened the kiss, their tongues dancing ……

``Um, Daniel?’’ Sam. Oh god, Sam was in the doorway, too. They broke apart. He dropped his gaze, unable to meet her eyes even as he chided himself for his cowardice. It was only Sam. It wasn’t as if……

``Whenever you’re ready, Jackson.’’ Mitchell. His day was complete. The story’d be all over the base in an hour. With the requisite embellishments, of course. The man was a worse gossip than Jack, almost as bad as the nurses.

``Oh, we’re ready now, right, darling?’’

Vala jumped off the stool and made her escape. He heard the fear under her light tone and barely managed not to wince. Now he’d have to really work to make her understand that he was sincere. It wasn’t a sudden thing, a brief urge inspired by the Starfleet people. He turned around and watched Mitchell and Walter follow Vala out. Sam stood looking at him for the longest time. Her expression warred between amused, sympathetic, and exasperated. He said the first thing that came into his head.

``This is so messed up.’’
TwentyEight

Sam was worried about Daniel. He wasn’t really the type to act impulsively, not where his personal life was concerned. And then there was the blush. She looked over to where he stood pretending to prepare coffee. That much blood rushing to someone’s face for that long couldn’t be healthy? Vala stood, uncharacteristically quiet, staring out the window at the Stargate. Cam caught her eye and tilted his head questioningly towards each. She nodded towards Vala. He slumped and looked towards their other teammate with a defeated expression.

“Hey.” Sam spoke quietly, they didn’t need to be overheard. She let the silence go on for a little while. “So, I’m sorry we interrupted.”

“I don’t even know what you interrupted.” She turned to Sam, eyes stormy. “It’s not like he said anything or…..anything…..” The look she shot towards the coffee table was mischievous, though she kept her voice low. “Not that I didn’t appreciate…”

“He’s like my brother.” Sam put in, hoping to derail a repeat rendition of Daniel’s ….attributes. Once was more than she ever wanted to hear again.

“He’s….. well, for someone who makes their living with words……”

“One of his many paradoxes.” The two women shared a grin. “Brilliant and eloquent to the point of awe-inspiring. Until he’s talking to a woman.”

“He seems to be alright talking to you and Dr. Lam and T’Pol and…..”

“He’s not in love with us.” Sam enjoyed the stunned look the ex-thief shot her. “It’s true.”

“How do you….has he said…..?”

“I’ve lived and worked with Daniel for a decade. We’ve been through a lot. I’ve seen just about every aspect there is to him.” She smiled with her best version of Vala’s own smirk. “And I am a woman.”

“As I’m sure General O’Neill appreciates.”

“We’re not talking about that.” She looked nervously around. No one gave any signs of being able to hear them. Daniel was sitting at the table, still blushing. Cam sat next to him, fiddling with a pen as he obviously searched for words. Men. “We’re talking about you.”

“And the most stubbornly exasperating male in the universe.” Vala scowled at the top of his bent head. “Who can kiss me like that and then will tell me later that it was…… oh, pheromones from the pon farr or something.”

“He kept your scarf.”

“What scar ….”

“The scarf he took from you when we went to Kalana? When you destroyed the first super gate?” Sam was encouraged to see the rise in the other woman’s spirits at the reminder of her own heroism. She was worse than Daniel at seeing her own positive traits. “I saw him with it.”

*** flashback ***
Sam nodded at the crew as she searched the hallways for her wayward friend. After he’d been discharged from the infirmary, no one had seen him. She was a little worried. Not about the bracelet’s aftereffects, but about Vala’s aftereffects. She’d been fooled for a minute by his quips, but then realized that the comments were more like Jack than Daniel. He was pretending not to be upset, hoping to convince himself as well. She was passing one of the empty labs when she stopped and looked back in.

He was sitting in the dark, looking out at the swirls of hyperspace. He ducked his head and her gaze was drawn to his hands. There was something….Vala’s scarf? He was pulling it through his fingers, stroking it gently. She raised her eyes to peer at the profile of his face. There were no tears, just as there hadn’t been tears when he’d lost Sha’re. Just …. just this bereft, resigned expression. Now, why had she thought of when he lost his wife? A smile quirked at his lips and he spoke.

``Who else is looking for me?’’

``Teal’c. Cam doesn’t know you well enough to spot the signs.’’ She carefully entered the room. This was a new thing. He hardly ever talked when he was like this. Of course, there wasn’t anything to work on aboard. No distractions.

``Do you think I’m crazy?’’ He looked at her reflection in the window, balling the scarf into his hands, hiding it. ```That I believe your theory and think she’s still alive?’’

``No.’’ Sam knew better than to go for the physical contact. She just met his eyes in the glass and smiled gently. ```Stranger things have happened. And you were ascended. Maybe you sense something?’’ Daniel stood and stared out the window. He gave every impression of not being present, despite the fact he was right in front of her. ```We should keep her room open, just in case.’’ Why did she feel so chilled? So scared?

``Maybe we should keep some rooms open in the psych ward.’’ He gave her a little half-smile. ```If she’s half as annoying to the Ori….‘’

``Daniel…..’’

``She can’t mean anything to me, Sam.’’ The scarf was stuffed roughly into a pocket as he turned away. He hunched into himself, arms crossed. Very bad sign, she stepped closer in response to his posture and the tight flatness of his voice. This is why she was scared. The e-mails where he’d nearly constantly complained about this woman …. For him to have spent that much time thinking about her……``She can’t. I saw her die. I…’’

``Daniel, she….’’ God, why hadn’t she picked up on this sooner? What could she say?

``When we used the communicator. When her heart stopped. She was DEAD. Sam. Burned alive, she…’’ He hunched tighter. ```And I wanted to kill them. Not the Ori. I didn’t even know about the Ori. The villagers. I just wanted……. I felt…..’’ Sam was horrified and heart-broken. It wasn’t as bad as she thought. It was worse. Daniel’s rage after Sha’re had been focused on the Go’auld exclusively. This….to want to strike out, indiscriminately, at innocent dupes…. ```She has to be just an annoyance. She HAS TO. I can’t …. it’s just….it’s too much…. it’s…..’’

``Daniel…..’’ A silence stretched out as she desperately racked her brain for words. What could she possibly say? She’d convinced him to return, and now he was losing, again, someone he cared for. That she didn’t even notice he cared for. Guilt and shame and fear swirled around, making it hard to speak. He finally broke the silence, facing her fully for the first time.

``She’s alive, Sam.’’ The false cheer was sickening. There was no expression on his face, no light in
his eyes. God, what’s happening to him? “She’s alive and taking the battle to the Ori.” He shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “Everything’s fine.”

She was paralyzed with shock, horror, depressed sympathy. She didn’t know what to say, to do. He walked past her, patted her gently on the shoulder, and strolled away down the hallway. She hung her head in defeat and hoped that Vala Mal Doran, if still alive, would hurry back. She didn’t want to lose him, not like this. She didn’t think they’d ever get him back from this.

*** end flashback ***

“Do you think he still….”?

“‘If that kiss I saw was any indication? I’d say yes.’ Sam threw an arm around Vala’s shoulders. ‘And he is the most stubborn man in the universe, right?’”
``You’re in my seat.’’

Teal’c raised an eyebrow as he entered the conference room. Daniel Jackson sat with his head bowed next to Colonel Mitchell. Vala was standing next to the Colonel’s chair, poking him the shoulder. Samantha Carter seated herself across from Daniel, trying to catch his eye. The Jaffa noted the flush to the back of his friend’s neck and determined that the rumors he’d heard on his way here hadn’t been unfounded. He felt a small sense of relief at the thought that Daniel Jackson and Vala Mal Doran might finally be moving towards a relationship. It made his silence on the Odyssey matter much easier to bear.

Colonel Mitchell moved across the table as General Landry entered, slightly flushed. Doctor Lam followed him in, blushing as well. Apparently, giving her father the briefing on the situation with T’Pol and her mate was embarrassing for both. He took a seat on the other side of Colonel Mitchell from Samantha Carter, unwilling to disturb the fragile nature of the tension between his other teammates. General Landry began the briefing with a commendation to the quick thinking of all involved. The agents taken into custody would be most helpful, when convinced. He focused the majority of his attention on the two sitting across from him.

Vala Mal Doran shifted every now and then so that she sat a little closer to Daniel Jackson each time. It was a subtle game she played at every meeting. Sometimes she added in attempts to touch his leg under the table, or laid her hand on his arm. Today was different. Today, Daniel Jackson didn’t flinch every time she moved, didn’t glare when she touched his shoulder as she spoke, didn’t remove her hand from his arm when she rested it there. The flush was fading from his features as the briefing continued.

``That’s good news.’’ Samantha Carter was saying. ``Now that we have the device, it’ll be a lot easier to send them back.’’

``There’s a slight problem.’’ General Landry handed the scientist a picture. Teal’c let a displeased air enter his expression as the photos were handed around.

``They took it apart.’’ Daniel Jackson shook his head. ``Not good.’’

``Don’t be so pessimistic, darling.’’ Vala Mal Doran propped her head up with her right hand, patting his arm with her left. Teal’c noted he didn’t flinch or glare as he usually did. Colonel Mitchell and Doctor Lam traded a significant look. ``Both our guests have perfect memories, remember? And we’ve got Sam and McKay and you and…’’

``We don’t, however, have the ZPM’s.’’ Teal’c felt a sinking sensation as General Landry folded his hands together. ``They were shipped somewhere, probably the rest was going to be shipped as well.’’

``It does look like moving day.’’ Colonel Mitchell gathered the photos together. ``So we psych the prisoners a little, Teal’c’s good at that.’’

``That still doesn’t solve our assembly problem.’’ Samantha Carter frowned. ``It’s like a giant Ancient jigsaw puzzle in three dee. Trip and T’Pol only saw the exterior. It’s going to be a lot of work.’’ Silence reigned for a short while. Teal’c was surprised when it was Daniel Jackson who spoke into the quiet.
"So, translation will take a couple days. After that…..” He turned hopeful eyes to General Landry. ".. I was wondering ……..” Teal’c eyed the suddenly nervous demeanor of his friend. " Well, if I could have the weekend off.” He cleared his throat and didn’t look to his right. "And take Vala off base."

Teal’c wasn’t sure which was the more surprising. Or who in the room was more surprised. Daniel Jackson had a tendency to over-work, he practically lived at the base and had to, occasionally, be forced to leave. He remembered one incident, under General O’Neill’s command, when security had actually escorted the young man to the front gate. And been instructed not to allow him back for forty eight hours. Doctor Lam frequently complained about his tendency to exhaust himself. Actually asking for time off….. let alone, time off with Vala Mal Doran? He still remembered the stuttering way Daniel Jackson had declared that the dinner was ‘merely friends and co-workers’. Stunned didn’t begin to describe the look on the ex-host’s face. After so much time chasing, was she about to achieve her goal?

"I don’t know, Doctor Jackson.” General Landry had apparently recovered. Teal’c detected a teasing glint in his eyes. "The Trust is extremely active these days. We never did apprehend Athena or any of her team save that one operative. I don’t think it’s a good idea for Ms. Mal Doran to go off base without a heavily armed escort.”

"Oh, come on!” Daniel Jackson threw his hands up in frustration. "You let Mitchell drag her halfway across the country for a high school reunion, of all things! I’m just asking for a weekend and ….and why do I feel like I’m asking your father for a first date?” Everyone hid smiles as the archeologist focused on Vala Mal Doran.

"And we’re still cleaning up the fall-out from that.” General Landry outright grinned. "What are your intentions, Doctor?”

"My intentions?” Teal’c again saw the hiding of smiles as Daniel Jackson’s voice squeaked a bit. "Are you serious? Do you hear yourself?”

"Do you hear your self?” Vala Mal Doran had an uncharacteristically serious expression on her face. "Or don’t you think it would’ve been a good idea to ask me if I wanted to spend the weekend with you?”

"I …” Daniel Jackson gaped, then recovered. "It wouldn’t do me any good to ask you if you’re being restricted to base.” He shot a dark look at General Landry. Teal’c was immensely amused. He felt that things would definitely ‘go smoother’ in this manner, than if the two got together through a ranting match followed by apologetic intimacy. "I was going to ask you right after.”

"Hmmph.” Vala Mal Doran tossed her hair. " I don’t know that I’m interested in another ‘friends and co-workers’ dinner. Why don’t you ask Cam or Teal’c?”

"I’m up for it, Jackson.” Colonel Mitchell was losing the battle to hide his grin. "I figure we could hit the courts, go for….’

"You shut up.” Daniel Jackson glared harshly across the table. "It’s…..I …..” The man sighed heavily and Teal’c feared that he would, given the public nature of the setting, ‘chicken out’. A strange description for such a courageous man, but accurate where the ex-thief was concerned. The linguist turned his head slowly to stare at the woman next to him. Everyone fell silent. ‘Holding their breath’ was the expression, he believed. ”It’s a date. And it’s not.”

"That doesn’t make any sense.” She tilted her head at him. "How can it be both?”
“I thought Sal and Detective Ryan might appreciate knowing you’re still alive.” Daniel Jackson spoke softly, soothingly. “And I thought you might need cheering up after having to lie to them. And since they’re a three hour drive away, it’d be late by the time we got back, IF we are allowed…” General Landry’s nod was sharp, no further attempts to either tease or hide his own smile. “So it’d make more sense for you to stay in my Guest Room.” The emphasis he placed on the last two words was accompanied by a glare to Colonels Mitchell and Carter. “Or a hotel. Or I could drop you at the base.” Daniel Jackson paused to swallow. “I ….I just thought we should talk.”

Teal’c felt suddenly ashamed of his amusement at the man’s expense. He himself knew how difficult it was to overcome the loss of a woman he’d expected to love the rest of his life. To admit to loving another, even years later, even if only to oneself…… especially one so different……he well knew the effort involved and emotional turmoil. He knew the others were starting to feel guilt as well. Colonel Mitchell shifted in his chair and cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Have a cover story?”

“She’s an information resource involved with national security and we’re sorry, but we really can’t say anymore.” Daniel Jackson didn’t break eye contact as he tossed off the explanation.

“You sure you don’t want to claim I’m your girlfriend? It worked for Cam.” Vala Mal Doran’s look was challenging.

“So well we’re still trying to clear things up.” He returned, somewhat sarcastically. Teal’c was enthused to see the light in the blue eyes. He appeared to be enjoying the conversation, now. “So? What do you say?”

There was an undercurrent of fear to the teasing note. Again, breath was held. Pins were dropped. Vala Mal Doran tilted her head one way, then another, then nodded.

“Okay.” The relief in the room was nearly physical. Teal’c felt the urge to smile.

“On that note….” General Landry stood, dismissing them. Vala Mal Doran flounced up from her seat, heading for the door. Daniel Jackson remained seated, looking as if he might faint.

“Oh, Daniel?”

“Yeah?” Fear and uncertainty colored his tone.

“You better not be messing with me.”

Teal’c determined that he should meet with a security technician. A still photo from the surveillance footage of the conference room was essential. It was absolutely necessary that he have a physical reminder of that precise moment. And the look on Doctor Daniel Jackson’s face.
‘What do I have to do to get some service around here?’

Sal knew that voice. He turned to see dark hair, flashing grey eyes and, when she saw him turn, a dazzling smile. Val.

‘Val!’ He dropped the spatula onto the grill and went over to where she stood in the kitchen doorway. She backed up, laughing, so that they ended up in the dining area. ‘You’re all right!’

‘And gorgeous as always.’ She held up her hands to stop him from hugging her. Behind her, he could see Detective Ryan and a few more of the regulars smiling at him. Terry the waitress looked like she was gonna cry. ‘You’re all over grease or you’d get a hug, you big softy.’

‘Okay.’ He nodded and smiled. When she dropped her hands and turned away, probably to introduce the tall guy with glasses, he grabbed her in a quick hug. ‘Got ya.’

‘You certainly did.’ She mock-frowned down at her sweater, then shrugged and pulled it off over her head.

‘Vala, don….’’ The guy with the glasses sounded panicked for a second, then shook his head. Under her sweater, Val was wearing a nice sleeveless blouse with a v-neck.

‘Problem, darling?’ She teased the guy, dangling the sweater from one hand before dropping it on an empty chair.

‘You’re insane.’ The guy sounded amused, still shaking his head.

‘You love it.’ Val teased. Sal was surprised to see the guy blush a little, but he didn’t deny it. Hunh.

‘Do I get my explanation, now?’’ Detective Ryan asked plaintively.

‘We’re closing early, folks.’’ He was flattered by the groans. ‘‘C’mon, leave your names with Terry and I’ll give you a discount for tomorrow, all right?’’ There was some mild complaints, but everyone pretty much accepted the deal. Terry rang up the people who’d already ordered and turned the sign around while he went in back and turned off the grill, stored the perishables. Several customers paused to say ‘hello’ to Val, to say how glad they were that she was doing better.

‘You know, we can reimburse you for….’’ The glare he shot the guy with the glasses was one he used on his kids when he wanted them to shut up. Worked pretty well here, too; he’d have to remember that. Terry bustled about, cleaning up, and he and the glasses guy joined Detective Ryan at the breakfast bar.

‘So…..’’ The officer prompted. He sat towards the end, leaning one arm onto the bar. Val’s friend sat next, then the lady herself, and Sal seated himself on her other side.

‘Oh, well, it’s a really interesting story.’’ Val started cheerfully, twirling her hair around one finger.

‘Vala.’’ Glasses guy spoke with heavy warning in his tone. She pouted at him, eyes widened artfully. ‘‘I know.’’ He patted her knee and she grinned triumphantly at him.

‘What can you tell us?’’ Ryan asked resignedly. ‘‘Last I heard, you were all charging after her in a warehouse. Then…..nothing. Not even a report on it. ‘Classified’ they tell me.’’ He snorted in
disbelief. “You some kind of secret agent or something, Val?”

“‘Yes, that’s it exactly, however did you guess? That might be a bit dangerous, actually, having you know so much…” He recognized nervous patter when he saw it, his wife had done the same thing when one of the boys had been in the hospital for a fever. Sal thanked God, as he did every time he remembered the incident, that his son had recovered.

“Vala…” Her guy was warning again. On a hunch, Sal checked for a wedding ring. Okay, so much for that theory; they weren’t married. They sure acted like it, though. Time to speak up and get more info.

“So your name is Vala, not Val?” He asked her. “You got your memory back?”

“‘Oh, yes, I certainly did.’’ Funny, she didn’t sound very happy about it. She shook the mood off, smiling at him and sticking out a hand. ‘‘Vala Mal Doran, pleased to meet you again.‘‘

“Good to see you’re all right, Vala.” He shook her hand between both his meaty ones. “You are all right, aren’t you? This guy…..” Val, no Vala, burst out laughing.

“This is one of those Air Force people I told you about, Sal.” Detective Ryan explained. “The ones who were looking for her.” Vala nodded, snickering as she got control of her amusement.

“Doctor Daniel Jackson. I’m not really Air Force, I just work with them.” Daniel shook their hands. Good grip, calloused hands. This guy might look like an academic, but his hands had seen hard use, hard work. He’d do to take care of Vala, Sal decided. “I wanted to thank you for putting out that fax, by the way.” He was saying to Ryan. “‘Until then, we were at a dead end. Some people wanted to give up.’” Sal noted the way Daniel’s eyes flicked back to Vala, the hand that briefly touched her shoulder, as if to reassure that she was there. Yeah, they may not be married, but he gave it a month, tops, before they made some kind of announcement.

“Well, it’s good to know I didn’t completely screw up, not believing that amnesia story.” The officer responded.

“I was very offended, you know. You ask me to tell you the truth and then don’t believe me.” Vala tossed her hair over her shoulder.

“It turned out all right in the end.” Daniel was warning her again. What were they into that they had to be that careful about what they said? National security, Ryan had told him at the time. He was beginning to think that was only the start of it. “‘No harm done, really.’”

“Did that guy ever get his car back?” Vala switched topics, lighting quick. Sal was starting to realize just how subdued she’d been when staying here. She must be a handful, he thought, starting to feel more than a little sympathetic for Daniel.

“Sure. The Air Force returned it to him with a nice gratuity for it’s use.” Ryan smiled and quipped “‘Too bad there wasn’t a reward for information leading to your safe return.’”

“There was, but department policy wouldn’t allow ….us to give it to you.” Daniel said softly, fiddling with his ice water. “’We donated it to the police community fund.’”

“There was a reward?” Vala asked, frowning. “’You never told me that. Ge …. Landry actually approved the expense?’”

“It wasn’t offered by Landry.” Daniel corrected her. She gaped at him, then looked down at her
hands, twisting them together. Sal cleared his throat.

"Is that where the ‘damages incurred’ payment came from? Because my insurance company said they didn’t know anything about it.” Sal watched as Vala’s head shot up and frowned at her guy.

"How much money was this? Can you afford it? Is…”

"If I can afford you maxing out my credit cards, I can afford a few expressions of gratitude.” Daniel shrugged, blushing a little.

"Now that, I believe.” Ryan quipped. ‘I swear, my wife must think those things are magic, the way she runs the charges up.” He drained his ice water. ‘I guess wedding rings are a little too dangerous for your line of work, huh?” Daniel choked on his water. Terry glared at him and came over to wipe up the water from his spit-take.

"We……we’re not……” He gasped. Sal grinned, then mock-scowled at the guy.

"You’re not going to make an honest woman out of Vala?” He loomed up over the seated man, arms crossed. “You might want to reconsider that, Dr. Jackson.” He threatened in a joking manner.

“Yes, Daniel, you might want to reconsider.” Vala chirped, smiling.

“I’ve got to be out of my mind.” Daniel groaned, putting his head in his hands. “One too many …..missions or something.”

“You’re not?” Ryan asked, then looked surprised when the guy shook his head ‘no’. “Oh. It’s just, the way you act……” He looked from one to another of them, confused.

“Yes, we get that all the time, don’t we, darling?” Vala linked arms with him and rested her head on his shoulder. “Remember the bracelets? And when we had to pretend to be newlyweds?” She sighed. “Good times.”

“I’m remembering more the beating you gave me when we met.” Daniel turned his head to look at her face resting on her shoulder, his affectionate expression at odds with his words. “And the amount of aspirin I go through a week. Carolyn’s starting to use words like ‘dependency’."

“There are better ways to relax you than aspirin, darling.” Vala purred, pecking him quickly on the lips. Then she jumped up to help Terry with the dishes. “Girl talk, now.”

“Isn’t that kind of thing against some sort of regulation?” Ryan asked the once more blushing Daniel.

“Neither one of us holds any official rank within our organization.”

“You sound like you’ve given this a lot of thought.” Sal commented.

“Unfortunately, that’s all I’ve been giving it.” Daniel muttered, mostly to himself. Detective Ryan frowned at him. “Look, all we can really say is that we work for an organization involved in national security and that Vala is an important part of it. We’re grateful for all you did to bring her back to m…to us.”

“I don’t feel right, keeping your money.” Sal protested. “I mean, I figured something was up, so I didn’t spend it. It won’t take much to return it, I’m sure.”

“I’d rather you use it for your kid’s education.” He was determined, the other man saw. If the
money was returned, he’d probably find some sneaky way to give it again. Maybe slip it into my tax refund, Sal thought. “Donate it, if it makes you that uncomfortable. I just wanted to …..you gave Vala a place to stay, someplace safe until we could find her. That’s important to me.”

“I just wished you would’ve told me sooner she was all right.” Sal groused. “The wife was worried, so was Terry.” Laughter erupted from the back. Surprisingly, Daniel didn’t blush this time. He looked questioningly at Vala’s guy.

“I’m going to have to get used to it.” He shrugged. “Our …..co-workers are going to have a field day with this,” Daniel looked resigned, face pulling into a frown. “Good thing there’s a lull in… the work. Lets them get it out of their system.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath on that.” Detective Ryan put in. “I’m still waiting for my buddies to get tired of razzing me about marrying a traffic cop. It’s been seven years and I’m still waiting.”

“Terrific.” Daniel’s voice was heavily sarcastic. “Can’t wait.” The three men sat in silence for a while, listening to the female chatter from the back. They couldn’t make out the words, but the tones were light and happy. Sal shifted, uncomfortable just sitting there when his habits told him it was ‘work-time’. Daniel spoke just as he was about to go check on the girls. “I had to get clearance to tell you even what I have. Otherwise…..”

“We understand.” Ryan assured him. His pager went off and he cursed. “Sal?”

“I’ll say goodbye for you.” He told his friend. The guy nodded and hurried out the door. Daniel didn’t seem to think anything odd of it, wished him luck, even. It wasn’t the understanding of a person who’d seen cop shows, either. This was the understanding of someone who lived the same kind of hectic knife-edged life. If Vala didn’t look so happy, he’d try and convince her to come back, so she’d be safe. “I don’t suppose she can keep in touch.” He sighed.

“I can’t make any promises.” Daniel was honest about it. He appreciated that. They exchanged contact numbers; the other guy had five numbers, all to be used only in direst emergencies. He didn’t put the same restriction on his e-mail, though. Sal found the directions to contact a sixth number if ‘anything weird’ happened a little odd, but then, the whole situation was a little odd. A penniless amnesiac he’d taken in out of compassion had turned out to be involved in national security. Then she shows up months later with a boyfriend he never in a million years would’ve pegged as her type. Life was one surprise after another.

“Goodbye, Terry!” Vala called out, backing into the dining room. “Thanks!” She whirled around, came over, and stood next to Sal; hands on her hips as she glared at Daniel. “You’ve been holding out on me, Daniel.” She accused. Uh-oh. He really didn’t need a domestic dispute in his diner. Her guy just looked confused, though.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s apparently this fantastic book called the Kama Sutra” Daniel went completely crimson and Sal couldn’t help laughing at the look on his face. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about it?”

“Ah, Vala…..” The guy looked at him desperately and Sal shook his head, still chuckling.

“Keep in touch, huh, Vala?” He pecked her on the cheek. “Terry worries about you.”

“I’ll be sure to keep ‘Terry’ informed.” She pecked his cheek back and linked arms with her nearly catatonically blushing friend. “Now, Daniel, what say we find a bookstore?”

Sal watched them leave with a smile on his face. He was glad they’d emptied the restaurant, no one
needed to see what a softy he was besides his wife. He couldn’t help it, though. He was a sucker for a happy ending.
“You’re angry at me.”

The visit with Sal and Terry had gone wonderfully, she’d given them a safety house address to ‘keep in touch’. They were such kind people, taking her in and befriending her as they had. They were who she thought of when she thought of protecting this planet from the Ori. Sal was a better father than hers had ever been and Terry was a little more open to hearing about Daniel; which was a good thing. Sam didn’t want to hear any details and the other women on base were far too likely to be competition, so having a woman to talk to about his more appealing physical traits was nice. And she just couldn’t resist teasing Daniel about that book, it was such a habit by now she really didn’t think about it. Besides, he deserved to be flustered for all the confusion he was causing her with his recent activities.

He tried to kiss her, tried to move them closer; a plan she supported with her whole heart. The way he’d kissed her back when she refused to let their moment be interrupted….she’d heard his soft moan, felt it. She wanted him to make that noise again, wanted him to make it because of her. More, she wanted him to want to make it, because of her. She thought he did, especially after Sam’s story; but now …..Now they were two hours into the drive back to Colorado Springs and he hadn’t said a word. He’d started to. He’d shot her several looks, opened his mouth several times to speak. Vala decided it was either speak, or hit him, and considering that he was driving…

“I’m not angry at you.” His voice didn’t sound angry. He sounded like …Daniel. She couldn’t decide if her occasional inability to read him was one of the things she loved or hated about him.

“I thought we went on this trip to talk.” She crossed her arms and pouted at him. She didn’t have to fake the hurt in her voice. Why was she so hard to talk to? Did he resent her that much? “Teal’c talks to me more than you have, lately.” She didn’t want to ruin this new attitude of his, not with as close as he was letting her get; but she was desperate to know what was going on. And patience wasn’t exactly one of her strong dresses.

“I…” Daniel cleared his throat. Here we go again, she thought, the great, stuttering Doctor Jackson. “…okay…..” He shifted his hands on the steering wheel nervously. “I’m just a little …..uneasy.”

“Because of that book? I was just joking, Daniel, you should be used to it by now.” She hadn’t been more than half joking, but she didn’t want him to stop being her friend. She was really starting to fear that ‘friend’ was what she’d have to settle for, sour as those grapefruits were.

“No, not because of the Kama Sutra.” He grinned but kept his focus on the road. “I actually have a copy, you know.”

“You do?” He did? That was totally at odds with his Steven-pure reputation around the base. Of course, he probably kept it at his house. She’d have to search the place while he was sleeping. The thought they’d be sleeping under the same roof thrilled her. The opportunities……

“In the original Hindustani. It’s not really a sex manual, you know.” He didn’t even blush on the word ‘sex’. Her hopes for the conversation died a bit as he told her all she didn’t want to know about the true purpose of the book and this Burton fellow who was apparently an actor as well as an anthropologist.

“Daniel?” She let a plaintive note enter her voice, interrupting what was probably a fascinating lecture. He stopped talking, profile expectant. “Why ….what ….” Terrific, it was catching. She
blew her breath out through her lips in annoyance. If neither one of them could talk, she’d never figure out what was going on.

“Vala.” That was new. Usually, when he sighed, it was on a tone of exasperation and frustration, not remorse or affection. The reasons he could be remorseful scared her, quite frankly. She didn’t think she could handle his rejection. “I guess …… I just thought……” Not again. “…..I thought if we were in a car, neither one of us could run away from the conversation. Then I thought it might not be a conversation we’d want to have in a car…..” He shrugged. “I’m sorry if you thought I was angry, I’ve just been trying to decide how to do this.”

“From what I’ve seen, dinner out is the standard method of ‘dropping’ someone; but considering the way our last dinner turned out…..” She wasn’t going to cry, she wasn’t. It hurt so much, though, far more than the false memories of his betrayal ever had. She’d spend the night at Sam’s, she decided, rather than force him to endure her presence in his house.

“I’m not ….Vala, I’m not trying to ‘dump’ you.” Daniel protested. “For starters, we’d have to already be in a relationship to be…..It’s not that, okay?”

“Then what?” She turned to face his profile, seeing him look at her every now and then as traffic allowed his attention to be divided. “You’ve been acting very strange, lately. Ever since the Starfleet people got here, you’ve been…..”

“This has been building for months, long before Trip and T’Pol got here.” He shook his head thoughtfully. “See, this is why I thought we should talk after the drive, because I want to look you in the eyes when I ……” She interrupted, not willing to let him come up with some Daniel-reason to put this conversation away a moment longer.

“Waiting isn’t something I do well.” She informed him, poking him gently in the shoulder.

“I’ve noticed.” He was grinning, just a little. “All right. On the road, then.” He cleared his throat, obviously trying to organize his thoughts. She just stopped herself from rolling her eyes. She loved the guy, but sometimes…. “Try not to interrupt, okay?”

“No promises.”

“Best you can, then.” He shot her a look out of the corner of his eyes, an approving, affectionate look. When had he started looking at her like that? She wanted to hold her breath, she wanted to cross her fingers. She wanted to shake the words out of him. “First time we met, heck even the second time we met; I thought you were materialistic, exasperating, self-involved, annoying, opportunistic, …..” Not those words, though.

“Daniel…”

“…..thrilling, beautiful, intoxicating, dangerous, intelligent, and sophisticated woman I’d ever met.” She gaped at him in utter shock. What had he just said?

“Excuse me?” She’d heard him, she just wanted him to say it again.

“You heard me.” He knew her too well, damn it. “It was ……well, to tell the truth? It was terrifying. You made me feel…..alive, awake.”

“Some parts more than others?” Vala quipped, unable to resist the temptation. She immediately regretting the line, jokes didn’t belong in this conversation. She was about to apologize when he
laughed. She smiled, loving the rare sound.

“On occasion.” Daniel’s eyes slid slyly sideways toward her, a little grin hovering around his lips. Did he just say….? Down girl, she thought, let him finish the talking, then attack him. She was beginning to think she was going to get everything she wanted on a saucer and didn’t want to blow on it.

“News to me, I was beginning to think Mitchell stood more of a chance.” He snorted disdainfully.

“Not likely.” His expression turned wistful. “Jack, now…..” She sputtered in shock, then smacked him on the arm when he started laughing.

“That’s not funny!” She giggled, smacking him again. Maybe Mitchell was right, maybe she was a bad influence on the man.

“Oh, come on. It’s one of the more prevalent rumors out there. Only the one about Teal’c and I is more common.” Vala tilted her head, making a big show of thinking. She let the silence stretch out, deliberately not responding to his tone of amusement. “Vala?”

“I dunno, Daniel, I was just thinking……” She frowned in mock-seriousness, then took her revenge. “You think maybe that’s why Muscles has been acting so strange? You and he…..”

“God, I hope not.” The fervent nature of the statement made her laugh out loud. He shook his head again, laughing with her. They entered the outskirts of the town, threading the streets towards his home.

Quiet reigned again, more comfortable than before now that he’d gotten that major admission out of the way. He found her attractive, always had! She ran the list he’d made of her positive traits through her mind once more and frowned. It was terrifying, he’d said. Damn it. More talking. Despite her experience at charming people and conning her way out of trouble, she really wasn’t good at talking, not the kind of talking they were attempting tonight.

They got out of the car and Vala stretched, arching up on her toes to reach over her head. She twisted from one side to the other to ease her sore back and saw Daniel, resting his chin in one hand, leaning his elbows on the roof of his car; watching her in obvious appreciation. She turned to fully face him, hooking her hands behind her head and stretched again; locking gazes with him. He didn’t blush, or stammer, or run away or do any of the things she’d come to expect from her archaeologist. He smiled at her, a slow smile full of promise and satisfaction.

“Uhm…” All of a sudden, she didn’t know what to do next. She was used to him squirming, she was used to his flustered, faltering avoidance. Vala let her arms fall to her sides, flapping her hands. “Guest room?”

Daniel handed her the bag she’d packed oh-so-carefully (only six or seven times, really) and she retreated to his spare bedroom. She needed to regroup, take back control of the situation. Of course, the situation was exactly what she’d been hoping would happen for so long: Daniel, all to herself, with no apparent reluctance in going further. She stood, staring at her bag on the bed, wondering why she was in here, fidgeting; instead of out there, taking what she wanted. Maybe it was because she, for once, didn’t want to take what she wanted. She wanted him to give it to her, to want to give it to her.

“I can drive you to Sam’s, if you want.” She turned around at his quiet, regretful tone. He was leaning against the doorframe, hands stuffed into his pockets and eyes burning at her. She bit her lip, shook her head. He breathed a small sigh of relief.
“I just don’t understand you, Daniel. I mean, if you felt all those things, if you wanted…..” She crossed her arms at him. “Why didn’t you say something? Why keep avoiding me, pushing me away? If what you said in the car is true, it just doesn’t make any sense.”

“It is true and it makes perfect sense.” He dropped his eyes to the floor between them. “I was afraid.” She frowned, a little confused.

“What you were describing doesn’t sound like anything to be afraid of. I made you feel ‘alive’? That’s scary?”

“It’s the most terrifying thing in the universe.” This from a man who’d faced Goa’uld, Unas, Anubis, human Replicators, Wraith (at least as a concept), and Ori. And been ascended. Twice. When he said something was the scariest thing out there, she believed him; even if it went against common sense to be afraid of something good.

“Why?” He hitched a pained breath at her simple question.

“Because everyone leaves. Everyone.” There was despair in his voice, desperation. As he continued to speak, she slowly sat on the bed with growing, horrified realization. “My parents, my grandfather, any friends I made, all the foster families I lived with. Sarah, all my ‘peers’ in the field, anyone I ever worked or studied with. Sha’re, Skaara, Shifu; all the Abydonians. Oma, and she was supposed to be eternal. Everyone leaves.”

“SG one….” She started to point out that his friends were still here, when his bitter voice cut her off. She’d never heard such a tone from him before and it shocked her silent.

“Teal’c went to forge the Jaffa Nation, Sam went to Area 51, George and Jack got promoted. Everyone leaves.” He snapped his head up, eyes blazing with remembered pain. “Why do you think I took Oma’s offer of ascension, why I was so eager to get to Atlantis? I could see it coming, I could see it…” He closed his eyes, voice going even softer. “If I left first, you see; if I was the one to walk away… I thought it would hurt less, not more.”

“Daniel….”

“And then you came, and you just….” He opened his eyes again, standing straight in the doorway. “I didn’t want to feel anything, and you just……and you were already leaving, so I told myself, I told everyone …..that it didn’t mean anything, that you were just an annoyance……” He was walking towards her, she felt mesmerized by his cautious approach.

“I wasn’t, was I?” Vala whispered.

“No.” He whispered back, standing right in front of her. He reached a hand to touch her face and paused. “Then I saw you die.” She flinched from the memory, turning her head to stare at the bedspread. The heat, the smell of her own burning flesh…..Daniel’s voice screaming, pleading, despairing. She shuddered. “I couldn’t handle it so….”

“You locked it up.” She knew that technique. She’d locked more than half her life away, after all, trying to escape Quetesh. “You stopped feeling.”

“Well, see that’s where there’s a problem.” He sat on the end of the bed, making no further moves to touch her. His lighter tone pulled her gaze to his face. His blue eyes pierced right into her, their tender honesty unnerved her, made the walls she’d erected around her own feelings flimsy and transparent. She couldn’t look away. “I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”
“I can’t stop.” He reached out, brushed some hair out of her face, hooking it behind one ear. “It, much like you, won’t be contained, won’t be ignored, and definitely won’t be stopped.” The air was charged, just as it had been the afternoon they’d locked the Commanders in their honeymoon sweet. She couldn’t breathe, all of a sudden; noting with an electric thrill that his hand was resting against her cheek.

“What won’t?” She whispered, gazing at him in eager anticipation. She thought she knew, she hoped she was right.

“This.”

Daniel leaned forward and kissed her, softly and oh-so-sincerely. His lip pushed against hers gently, almost tentatively. She lifted her hands and grabbed his shirt, pulling him towards her, against her. She felt his arms go around her, the kiss becoming deeper, hungrier. Desire flooded through her and she pulled, ripping his shirt open; heedless of the buttons that popped off. He made no protest of her actions. In fact, he was the one who tossed her bag almost violently off the bed, lowering them both to lie prone.

“Vala…” He murmured, gasping for air against her jaw, trailing kisses to her ear. She barely heard him over the blood pounding, burning in her veins. She was distracted, anyway, kissing at his neck, trying to get that stupid shirt OFF. “Vala…” He moaned, pressing her aching body against him so tightly she couldn’t move. She nearly screamed in frustration. She wanted to kill him when he pulled his head back to look into her face. Only the fact he wasn’t letting her go saved his life.

“Don’t stop.” She begged him, pleading with her grey eyes for him not to turkey out now. She dug her fingers into his back, pushing herself into him fiercely, desperately. Why was he stopping? She could feel how much he wanted her, it was pressed firmly against her hip. “Daniel…”

“Vala.” He stroked his thumb gently over her bottom lip, expression tender and wondering as he gazed into her face. “I love you.”

“Then don’t stop.” Vala ducked her head to kiss the hollow of his throat, smiling at the groan the action engendered. Despite the ache pulsing through her body, she felt more at peace than she’d ever felt in her life. He loved her. The long wait, her uncharacteristic patience, was finally vindicated. She was happy, nearly deliriously so. “I love you, Daniel Jackson.” She murmured against his skin, trailing her lips along his collarbone.

“Then don’t stop.” He growled, pulling her head back up to kiss her fiercely, wildly. He gave her blouse the button-popping treatment and she thrilled at the effect she had on him.

It was terrifying and beautiful, wild and calm, ecstasy and pain, insatiable, satisfying, tender, violent, eager, hesitant, demanding, giving; all the contradictory things she’d been told it was and never thought it could be, all at once. Finally, for the first time in a longer life than she wanted to admit to; Vala Mal Doran reached an understanding of the difference between sex …...and making love.
Carolyn stood in the line for breakfast and stifled a yawn. Last night had seen the end of their visitor’s quarantine (three days early), the call coming in just as she was wrapping up her daily paperwork. There’d been tests to run, Doctor Jackson to call, her father to notify; and now someone over his head (her guess in the pool was General O’Neill) had called for a debriefing. She’d been given time to grab breakfast, but it didn’t look like she was going to get to sleep anytime soon. She hadn’t been run this ragged since she was an intern, or the last time someone had brought a crises through the ‘Gate. The ‘crash-out’ cot in the back of the infirmary was looking like heaven, and just as unattainable. Caffeine, I just need caffeine, she thought to herself, overheard conversations flowing through her ears before one finally caught her attention.

‘…..seen Daniel?’ Sam was standing by the table where Mitchell and Teal’c were finishing up their breakfast. She was holding some papers, probably copies of the Ancient writings on the device the science teams were still trying to assemble. The I.O.A., in it’s infinite ‘wisdom’, had sent the heavily protesting Dr. McKay back to Atlantis. Dr. Beckett was still emailing her everyday (no doubt at his friend’s urging) for updates on the status of her very foreign patients.

‘You try Vala’s?’ The blonde woman winced at her teammate’s question. Carolyn didn’t blame her. Ever since Daniel and Vala had come back from their weekend together, there’d been several ‘incidents’. Oh, nothing on duty; the two missions SG1 had gone on (no sense hovering around while the Starfleet people were incommunicado, Landry had decided) weren’t without complication (per usual for the team) but there was no, as one marine had labeled it after busting the couple in a storage closet (of all places), ‘inappropriateness’.

‘It’s not that important.’ Sam sat with her friends, looking at her papers with a rueful expression. Carolyn loaded her tray, moving more briskly through the line now that she’d actually reached the food. ’They’re not technically on duty for another half hour, anyway.’”

‘Like that stops them.’ Mitchell snorted, earning a glare from his second in command. ‘Oh, please, like you haven’t caught them in the act. It’s becoming a rite of passage around here.’

“I could do without the melodramatic cries of people claiming to go blind.” Carolyn joined the conversation, seating herself at the table. Teal’c inclined his head at her regally as the other two greeted her more verbally, but just as succinctly. ‘For your information, Daniel’s in the infirmary.’”

“Oh, I don’t even want to know.” The Midwestern colonel complained, covering his face with his hands. ‘Having him tell me that he was just explaining the cultural relevance of ‘Love in an Elevator’ was bad enough, not to mention seeing it. I really don’t want to know how she put him in the hospital.’”

“Indeed.” Teal’c was still managing to look tolerant and approving, rather like a successful matchmaker; but he’d lost the gleam of amusement after finding his two friends wrestling around on the practice mats in one of the lesser-used gyms, late one night. Carolyn was just glad that he wasn’t one of the many personnel who complained (melodramatically, she thought) of ‘going blind’ whenever they ended up witness to the two’s passion.

“He’s there for the Commanders actually.” Sipping her coffee, Carolyn tried to organize her thoughts. Maybe after she’d eaten, things wouldn’t seem so chaotic. ‘They called last night, just before I left.” They’d gotten to sleep, she thought somewhat resentfully, unlike those of us running test results and lab work all night long. It seemed like she’d finish up one batch, only to have her
father call down with another set someone from the pentagon wanted run. Some of their
‘suggestions’ had been invasive and unnecessary, so she hadn’t run them; but she was going to have
more than a few choice words for them when she got to the meeting. ‘‘There’ll be a debriefing after
breakfast.’’

‘‘They okay?’’ For someone who’d started out so hostile (to at least one of their guests), Mitchell had
taken a sentimental interest in their welfare. Try and tell me he’s not a romantic at heart, she thought.
Most flyboys who lack the ‘asshole’ gene are. She nodded (mouth full of ‘eggs’) and he gave her a
pleased grin, to which he added a teasing glint. ‘‘So, I hear we’re dating.’’ Thankfully, he waited
until she’d swallowed before saying it, so she didn’t have to cite him for endangering a fellow officer
by making her choke.

‘‘It was all I could think of to keep T’Pol from…..’’ She trailed off at the grins (well, in Teal’c’s
case, the small curve at the corner of his mouth) from the other people at the table as he raised both
hands placatingly.

‘‘I figured.’’ Did he look a little wistful? Maybe even ………regretful? No, not possible. Either she
was far more exhausted than she thought, or the air of sentimentality that had arrived with the
Starfleet people was finally affecting her.

Or maybe, just maybe ……………

--xxx—
General Hank Landry was an easy-going man, most days. You couldn’t ride herd on the collection of strong-minded individuals who worked at Stargate Command (some of them not even in the military) without a very mellow attitude (and a very strong sense of the ridiculous). Right now, though; he was seriously considering how much damage his career would take if he threw the son-of-a-bitch IOA liaison through the glass window that looked down into the gate room.

Or gave him an up-close inspection of the ‘kawoosh’ effect, when the gate next opened.

“Doctor Jackson is not compromised.” He finally snapped, narrowing his eyes at the dark-haired man who’d introduced himself as Mr. Smith with a straight face. The name fit, because he’d never met someone who instilled in him the impulse to yawn before punching them. “His personal life has never interfered with this program….”

“This program has been involved with little else, General.” Damn, he never thought he’d miss Woolsey this much. Being forced to stand there and listen to the stocky visitor blame every failing of the past nine years on a man who’d saved the planet more times than he could count (and literally died in defense of it……five times at least, he thought) was starting to grate on his last nerve. “The I.O.A. is concerned about the influence alien personnel, and alien ‘guests’, have on the staff of this facility.”

“My people’s only concern is for the safety of this planet.” Landry got into the face of the dark-eyed suit, wishing he dared wrap his hands around the thick neck. The amount of paperwork such an action would cause, though…… “Their professionalism is without question; their loyalty and sense of duty unchallenged. Anyone who wants to make a formal accusation…..” He doubted it, this type worked by innuendo and vague threat; making an actual charge wasn’t their style. “…can take it up with the Pentagon. Until I get a call on that phone…..” He pointed to the presidential line; a man he knew had the utmost faith in every member of SG-1. “………no one on this base will be restrained, confined, run tests on; or in any way inconvenienced by your committee. This is United States soil, Mister Smith; and we don’t do the kinds of things you want done. Not on my watch.” Nor on Carolyn’s, either, he thought proudly. The scathing complaint his daughter had officially filed was sure to cause more than a few brows to lift, when it was read. He’d have to make a copy for Jack; the language was inventively just shy of insubordinate. “Is that clear?”

“Of course, General.” Mr. Smith soothed, his lack of sincerity disgustingly obvious. “Perfectly. I never meant to imply we had such intentions.” I’ll bet, Landry thought wryly.

“We have a briefing to get to.” He finally stated, brushing past the liaison and holding the door to the conference open for the man pointedly.

Mitchell, Carter, and Teal’c shot to their feet as he entered, the two military officers throwing in a salute, the Jaffa gave his usual nod of respect. Vala smiled at him, fiddling with her hair, dropping her feet off the table when he frowned at her.

“Dr. Lam and Jackson are escorting the Commanders up, sir.” Mitchell reported. Landry took the opportunity to introduce their unwelcome visitor around. Carter and Mitchell showed no reaction, but Teal’c lifted an amused eyebrow, and Vala tilted her head curiously.

“Well, well; a government man named Smith.” She tilted her head the other way. “You didn’t bring Jones with you?” The Jaffa looked amused and Mitchell actually snickered.
“That’s a myth, Vala.” Jackson walked in, Carolyn looking even more delicate next to his lanky height; and positively fragile with Trip a solid presence behind her. T’Pol looked calmly regal, more serene than she’d appeared even on that first day.

“Mornin’. Good to see……” The human commander’s voice trailed off, the grin that threatened to split his head open slipping from his face as it went deathly pale. Landry frowned, seeing where his gaze was locked.

“It is impossible.” The Vulcan’s voice was breathlessly soft, shaking a little with some emotion; the calm briefly pushed aside in her confused fear. She actually took a step back from the table where Smith sat, her……husband? If he understood Jackson’s brief correctly, they were married, right? Trip put one hand on her shoulder, looking like he wanted to shove her behind him.

“Koss?” The blonde engineer whispered, looking horrified. Jackson and Vala both looked with surprised eyes at the liaison before turning to reassure the Starfleet couple.

“It’s just an uncanny resemblance; like you and Michael.” Jackson put in.

“There is not that much of a resemblance between the Commander and the Wraith-human.” T’Pol protested, seeming to pull her calm back around her with little effort, although she did select a chair a good distance from the government man.

“I’ve seen the pictures, darlin’.” Trip took a seat next to hers, setting himself between the perceived threat and his ……wife? He really needed to get that briefing Jackson had given clarified. “We look exactly the same.”

“A good scientist can tell the difference.” The way the two were gazing into each other’s eyes, that had to be some sort of private joke; although they looked more wistful than amused.

“What differences would those be?” Smith asked, leaning forward aggressively, tone attempting to be snide but coming off flat and lacking any emphasis.

“The commander is more physically appealing.” A smugly delighted look burst over the human’s face and most people around the table hid a grin at the compliment. The only one who was scowling was the liaison. “You wish to question us.” It was a statement of fact, and T’Pol’s disdainfully expressionless look was far more effective than the man’s attempted bluster.

“Yes……Commander.” The rank was said nervously, and the man sat back nervously, swallowing. Landry wished he knew how she did that, intimidated the jackass with just a look. Maybe he should ask Carolyn, she often did the same with recalcitrant patients. Pity it didn’t last. “I would prefer to question your ……associate……” the emphasis he put on the word was suggestive, replacing the room’s earlier amusement with wary resentment “….without your presence. At what distance does your control ……?”

“Control?!” Tucker was on his feet, Jackson’s hand on his arm. Landry wasn’t sure whether he wanted to stop the man from going for the irritating official’s throat, or not.

“We must become accustomed to the charge.” T’Pol commented mildly, hands folded on the table before her. The General admired her aplomb, his own temper was boiling; although that was probably more from the earlier conversation than any current insults. “Our timeline has it’s own selection of xenophobes, as you are well aware.”

“Ah, the ‘Terra Prime’ that Tucker mentioned.” He’d been on the receiving end of enough dark looks from his ex-wife to see that the human Commander was now in whatever the Vulcan version
of ‘the dog house’ was. “Inept, but not entirely misguided. Pity they weren’t more effective.”

Landry had never, in all his wide experience with aliens (and pissed-off women), actually seen someone’s soul ‘catch fire’ before. He had no other words for the glaring hate that scorched the air between her obsidian eyes and the thick-necked (and thick-headed) man seated at the table. Trip had burst free of Jackson’s grip and now had both arms wrapped around his ….. wife (until otherwise briefed, he’d stick with the marriage theory), barely holding her back from leaping over the table and ripping the IOA’s liaison limb from limb. As much as he’d relish such an action, this loss of temper wasn’t helping the Starfleet people’s case any. She was supposed to be back in control now, after this ‘pon farr’ business; not panting with obvious rage as her husband murmured to her in Vulcan.

“Very well.” T’Pol inclined her head, stepping free of her human companion’s embrace and extending two trembling fingers. Trip met the gesture (it had the look of a ritual, and his archaeologist’s smile told him that thought was likely correct) with his own two fingers. The tips touched briefly, the two seemed to regain most of their composure from the contact. Interesting. “I must meditate.”

“Commander……” It was too late, she was out the door and gone. He caught Teal’c’s eye and the Jaffa nodded, following their Vulcan guest. Landry didn’t think she’d take out her ire on the base’s staff but, then again; he’d never expected her to become so irrationally jealous of Colonel Carter. Better safe than sorry had saved at lot of lives at this facility, he wasn’t about to change such an effective policy now.

“Just fer further reference……” Trip was saying, taking a seat across from Agent Smith, this time. “……there’re two crimes that Vulcans consider punishable by death. Interference with a mate-bond…….” The man smiled sheepishly at the female Colonel, shrugging his apology as he held up a demonstrative finger. “…..an’ hurtin’ a child. It don’ matter how that child came to be.” The Commander glared across the table and aimed his two fingers at the agent like a gun, making it apparent (to the General, at least) that his wife wasn’t the only one who was livid at the other man’s callous attitude. “All that matters is harm done a child, any child; is considered ta be an unforgiveable act. So yer sayin’ that you approve………” With a shake of his blonde head, the man made an obvious attempt to keep his temper in check. “So! You were wantin’ ta ask me some questions.”

“We can start with this Xindi weapon. What can you tell me…..” Smith opened his folder casually, as if he was conducting a normal conversation; and not a grossly mishandled interrogation.

“Is he serious?” Tucker’s voice cracked a bit, Vala made a motion as if to place a calming hand on his arm.

“Mr. Smith, you did read our reports, right?” Mitchell sounded just as enraged as their visitor. Landry didn’t really blame him. It was irritating him as well, the way Smith seemed intent on making the easy-going young man into an enemy.

“Commander Tucker has already shared a great deal of technology with us.” Carter put in, leaning forward to look down the table at the oblivious agent. “Both he and Commander T’Pol have given us more than enough breakthroughs in medicine, metallurgy, data storage…….”

“The IOA doesn’t agree with your assessment.” The tone was, no other word for it, ‘snippy’. The General kept tight control of his temper, shaking his head at his premiere team (outraged on the female colonel’s behalf) when they would’ve defended her. Generals O’Neill and Hammond had advised given the fool enough rope to hang himself, and await one (or both) of their arrivals. “We feel that your ……guests have much more to offer; provided with the proper incentive.”
“I’ve about had ma fill of what yer type considers ‘proper incentive’. ’’ Trip’s gaze was blue ice, his face set with a look that made his resemblance to Michael Kenmore even more marked. ‘’Look, I’ll say it again; like I tol’ Sam: our systems ain’t compatible. We ain’t got naquada in the amounts we’d need ta make yer tech work; an’ you ain’t got dilitium at all. From what I’ve heard about yer ship’s systems, mosta yer stuff is better’n ours anyway.’’ The thickness of his accent had increased, and Landry wondered whether it was due to anger or lack of patience with Smith’s obstinance.

“I wasn’t asking about your technology, Trip…….’’

‘’ ‘S’Commander, if ya don’ mind.’’

‘’Whatever.’’ How had this idiot gotten his position? Landry had seen better debriefing on ‘Wormhole Extreme’.

Not that he watched the show, of course. It was purely to keep on eye on the alien involved in it’s production, that’s the only reason he’d picked up the special edition boxed set. To make sure no actual secrets were being compromised, that was all.

‘Commander, then. You will notice that I was asking about the Xindi technology. What sort of power generation would be required for something like the probe? How did it cloak itself to get close enough to…….’’

‘’Yer outta yer mind.’’ That was delivered on a hiss, and the man’s grip on the table was white-knuckled and shaking. ‘’I wouldn’ tell my own people about that, what makes ya think I’m gonna talk ta you?’’

‘’You’ve kept things from the human government of your time? Was that on the orders of your………companion?’’ Again, Smith’s tone was suggestive, and the General knew that, if something wasn’t done; it wasn’t Tucker’s temper he’d have to worry about. Vala looked like she was about to spit nails, the others of the team not far behind her in levels of annoyance. Even Jackson appeared ‘ticked-off’, an achievement few beings in this galaxy were capable of. ‘’I’m amazed they allowed you to retain your commission.’’

‘’Oh, I’ve been given to un’erstan’ that I’d better make myself comfy in the engine room.’’ Trip relaxed his grip on the table, leaning back with an obvious effort to control himself. He even winked at Vala in a teasing, brotherly fashion.

‘’I thought you said you didn’t want command.’’ It looked like the former thief had had a great deal more luck getting personal information out of their human guest than anyone else. Never underestimate the effectiveness of familial bonds, Landry thought with forced amusement; even assumed ones.

‘’Sssshhhh.’’ He wasn’t the only one to be forcing amusement, he saw; watching Trip put a finger in front of his lips as he winked at the brunette woman again. ‘’They think they’re punishin’ me.’’

‘’Commander Tucker.’’ The agent should really work on his voice control, the General thought to himself. He reminded the older man of nothing so much as a substitute teacher attempting to reign in an errant student. ‘’If you ever wish to return home, you will comply with…….’’ The threat landed right on his last nerve, sending him to his feet. He was about to let the agent have it, advice from George and Jack be damned; when he was stopped by a strange sound.

Laughter.

Commander Charles ‘Trip’ Tucker the third was laughing as if being threatened by the IOA
representative was the funniest joke he’d ever heard.

It was contagious, if confusing. He saw Mitchell unclenching his fists, Carter leaning back in her chair. Even Vala smiled, giggling a bit; which of course made Jackson more relaxed.

That wasn’t a place he wanted his mind to go.

He traded a blank look with Carolyn, wondering if their human visitor had fully recovered from his ‘pon farr’. With blatant effort, the blonde man regained control, shaking his head as he slumped into his chair with every indication of a person without a worry or care in the world.

‘Yer an idiot.’ That was delivered in such a matter-of-fact, calm demeanor that it took the liaison a few seconds to realize he’d been insulted. By then, Tucker was continuing. ‘Ya really have no idea, do ya?’ Landry re-seated himself, letting Trip handle things for now. He’d have to intervene eventually, he knew; but for now……. Let’s see what the kid’s got, he thought in anticipation.

According to Carter and Mackay, the man has a truly impressive vocabulary. ‘These people yer disregardin’ an’ insultin’, ya owe ‘em yer worthless life. Oh, not fer anythin’ ta do with me an’ my wantin’ to snap yer lousy neck. No, I’m talkin’ about the last; what’s it been? Ten years?’ Vala nodded, smiling smugly; as proud of SG-1’s accomplishments as if she’d been directly responsible.

‘So ya really should be a touch more respectful. Not ta mention………’ All amusement vanished, the Starfleet man leaned forward, palms flat on the table. ‘……they’re as professionally honorable as the crew of Enterprise.’ Trip flinched minutely at the inadvertent revelation, but continued with his point, standing to loom over the IOA’s jackass. ‘That means that, while they will do their duty; they also won’t compromise their principles fer whoever’s yankin’ yer chain.’ The human Commander pushed back from the table, crossing his arms defiantly over his chest. ‘I got faith that Stargate Command, and its people; will do the right thing.’

‘They can’t send you home without the approval and permission of the IOA.’ Smith made a snake’s smile, folding his hands together as if he wasn’t (which Landry could tell he was) terrified of the engineer. ‘And that depends on how cooperative you’re willing to be.’ Hank didn’t protest the inaccuracy of the statement, spotting a new arrival out of the corner of his eyes with vast relief.

Now things would get really interesting.

‘Ya think?’

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