Lions and Plots and Ancestors, Oh My

by LitGal

Summary

John thinks that Atlantis is out of the woods. Sure, there's the whole issue with the Turi that he's hiding from General O'Neill. And yeah, the Travelers are a bit of a pain in his ass. And the city is getting a little crowded both with refugees from the Milky Way and Pegasus natives. However, he thinks that Landry has the rough job trying to prepare Earth for war against the Ori. Life is about to teach him differently.
A Simple Request

“No!” Rodney said firmly as he walked faster. John trailed behind, amused by the floorshow. Usually when Colonel Carter came to Atlantis, she avoided Rodney like an Iratus bug. Rodney might have lost the race to figure out how to recharge ZPMs using Earth equipment, but he made Carter pay dearly for that victory by reminding her of all the shortcuts she took on the safety protocols. It was amusing.

And now Carter wanted his help. With his sister. John should sell tickets to this.

“McKay, you’re being unreasonable,” Carter said.

“We can charge ZPMs. We don’t need to harvest zero point energy from parallel space time.”

John figured that was doubly true for Atlantis, who could plug in an empty ZPM to their Ancient-built charger. Earth had a harder time, and each time they opened the window to charge the crystals, they risked blowing up their charging station and potentially the planet they’d put it on. John would have protested letting Earth take such big risks, except Rodney insisted on Atlantis doing most of the charging of Earth ZPMs, after the country or organization that wanted it paid for the scientists’ time, the equipment, and the energy consumption required to create the charge. And he only allowed Atlantis to give the ZPMs the forty to fifty percent charge Earth equipment permitted.

The IOC adored Rodney’s budgetary oversight; the SGC did not. It was all part of Rodney’s revenge for Carter winning that race. If the SGC ever figured out that Rodney was just plugging the damn things in and hitting a switch, General Landry was going to kill him. Correction, Landry would kill all of them.

“The bridge offers a chance at an unbroken source of energy. We would have so much more flexibility if we didn’t have to charge a ZPM but could pull energy directly into this universe.” Carter grabbed Rodney’s arm and spun him around to face her. She was a strong woman because McKay was no pushover. “We need this. Hell, McKay, at least half the preliminary work for this project came out of your notes.”

“And I said it was a waste of time. You know, kinda like I said Project Arcturus was a waste of time because we didn’t need the energy.”

John cringed. Low blow. Totally a low blow. The fact that Caldwell had brought in Carter as his heavy hitter to push that project through had not been one of their bright and shining moments as a colony. And the next time Elizabeth asked John to veto the IOC using Atlantis’ ruling council, he was definitely going to consider it, even if it would be career suicide. But Rodney insisted he had fixed the incorrect formulas and Carter and Caldwell and Landry and Woolsey and the whole damn IOC had insisted they had to complete the project.

“We both agreed those formulas should have worked,” Carter said, her voice low and dangerous.

Rodney waved her away and walked off all stiff limbed.

Once he was gone, Carter crossed her arms over her chest. “That man,” she practically snarled with some real hate in her voice.

“He doesn’t actually blame you for Doranda,” John offered. “I think he pretty much blames the IOC for insisting we needed it when he said we didn’t.”
Carter turned toward him. “We do need to find a way to harness more power than we have been able to up until now. The Ori are a threat that we’ve never seen before.”

John ran his fingers through his hair. “I get it. I mean, we’re doing everything we can to help.” Unfortunately, everything meant preparing Atlantis to be a lifeboat rather than shoring up Earth’s defenses, but he did understand her desperation to save Earth. He shared it. He just wasn’t sure that one more Hail Mary pass with an energy source was the way to go.

Carter sighed again. “He is so damn prickly. All I want him to do is talk to his sister. Her work is amazing.”

John figured that was part of the problem. Rodney wasn’t exactly secure, and bringing up his past and his family was the fastest way to bring out the neurotic bits.

“It’s that important?”

“Mrs. Miller’s work is ground breaking,” Carter said. “The three of us could do this if we had a few weeks to collaborate face to face.”

“And you want those weeks here?”

Carter gave him a hairy-eye look, one that reminded John that she outranked him, even if this was his command. “Atlantis has isolation protocols and shielded labs that are almost designed for this sort of work. It’s perfectly safe to do this here.” That would have felt better had she not been one of the people cheering on the safety of the Doranda reactor power thingy, although Rodney had been on her very wrong side on that one. If Rodney sometimes went off the reservation, Carter seemed to have built a house out there on the edge.

“I could talk to Rodney about being less stingy with the ZPM recharging station he put together,” John offered as a compromise. A few blow jobs, and Rodney would agree to a lot. He just hoped Carter didn’t ask to see Rodney’s version of an Earth-built ZPM charger because if anyone could spot that no one used the damn thing, it’d be her.

“Colonel, the ZPM is essentially a battery. It’s a very powerful one, but it functions in ways that are similar. We need to plug a weapon into the wall socket so that we know we can’t run out of power. Changing the ZPMs in the middle of a fight with the Ori would guarantee that we would lose. Mrs. Miller’s plan to bridge the universes to harvest the energy directly… it’s groundbreaking work.” From Carter’s tone, John guessed that was not hyperbole.

Well crap.

John hated having to ride herd on Rodney, but sometimes he had to. Considering that Rodney had worked for the military for his entire career, he really didn’t get along with them very well. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you,” Colonel Carter said.

“Don’t thank me yet. I said I’d talk to him, not that I’d actually get anywhere with him.”

Carter smiled at him. “Given the stakes, I’m sure you can get him to see reason.” With a nod, Carter walked away. It terrified John that people like Carter were running scared. The woman had balls of steel. She’d stared down Goa’uld. She’d blown up planets and suns and helped blow up five-sixths of a solar system. When she got scared, it was a little like realizing that a Bengal tiger was running for his life. You really did not want to see whatever made it run.
John considered following Rodney, but knowing him, he’d need some time to cool down. John would catch him for lunch. He figured Elizabeth would want an update ASAP. Every time someone from the SGC or IOC came through, the twitch in her left cheek got worse. He headed for the command tower.

When Teyla joined him at the first transporter, John wasn’t exactly surprised. As the unofficial second in command, few things hit Elizabeth’s desk without Teyla knowing about them first. The two had grown to rely on each other during the time John was exiled on Earth. “Is Colonel Carter staying long?” Teyla asked.

“Doubt it. She struck out with Rodney, so she’s probably going to head home and wait to see if I have better luck. If that fails, she might send Daniel.” While Rodney railed against Dr. Jackson’s degrees in the soft sciences, he did tend to listen to him more than most.

“I thought we agreed that we will open a wormhole only on alternating weeks. Is this week not Earth’s turn?”

John wasn’t fooled a bit. Teyla knew the schedule. “I think the rules change when any members of SG1 get involved,” John said. “Past or present. I mean, General O’Neill directly contradicted IOC and Joint Chiefs orders in order to evacuate Jonas as his group when the Ori took their planet.”

“I suspect he didn’t contradict as much as find a path which they had not thought to specifically bar him from,” Teyla said. For someone who had only met the general once, she had his number.

“Probably. Still, rules are flexible with them.”

“And we allow this?” Teyla asked as they stepped out of the transporter. Tony was waiting for them by one of the walls that sent up a stream of constant bubbles.

“We allow what?” Tony asked as he fell in next to John on the other side.

“Members of SG1 having special privileges such as opening our wormhole two weeks early to allow Colonel Carter to return home,” Teyla said.

“Give it up, Teyla,” Tony said. “There will always be haves and have nots, get dones and gotta waits. Anyone who tells you that the rules apply equally to everyone is either lying or stupid.”

“And yet, these people do not have the power to demand from us, only request.”

John stopped and looked at Teyla. “That sounded a little seditious.” John knew that the power was strained between the council and the IOC, and Kitsune of the Travelers was always happy to point out that the city was not all under IOC jurisdiction so they could not exercise veto power, but usually Teyla took a gentler approach to Earth politics.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“I vote in favor of bending the rules for Carter,” Tony said. “She needs to get home and do her science thing. Keeping her here two weeks would be like banning Abby from her lab for two weeks. No one deserves the fallout from that sort of drama.”

“I had thought your people more fond of rules than that,” Teyla told Tony, which was fair because Tony was one-half of the dynamic duo in charge of rules enforcement for the city. Gibbs and Tony were terrifyingly good with enforcing rules, so much so that a few of their trading partners had asked for help with difficult investigations when their rules had been broken.
“Yeah, but some people don’t really work with some rules,” Tony said as they headed up the stairs to the gate controls. “When I was on Earth and people got away with breaking the rules for dumb reasons like they had a lot of money or they could throw a football, it drove me nuts. But Carter has literally saved the world a dozen times. We can break rules for her. When we were at the DC office of NCIS, Gibbs broke rules way more than anyone even wanted to know about.”

“So, the rules interfere with their ability to do their jobs?” Teyla had that look on her face that usually meant someone was about to get taken down hard when they were sparring.

“Exactly,” Tony agreed.

“Then the rule appears flawed. In this case, the limited schedule for using the Ring appears inefficient for both Colonel Carter and others.”

Tony looked at Teyla and then at John. “I just gave her ammo for something, didn’t I?”

“Yep,” John agreed. He had a pretty good idea he was going to get an email requesting a new gate schedule with increased access for Pegasus natives. He didn’t mind. He hadn’t vetoed her last request for expanded access—Landry had. He disliked the idea of the Pegasus gate being busy too many hours a day because if Earth expended the energy to open the interdimensional gate, he didn’t want to get a busy signal. However, after Landry strong armed Elizabeth into the Doranda experiment and now he wanted Carter to have access to Pegasus labs, John imagined he was going to lose a few things, like input over the Pegasus gate schedule.

But if this thing Rodney’s sister had come up with worked, they would never have to worry about power again. John just worried that people on Earth would blow themselves up before the Ori could do it for them.

“So, what are you doing hanging around here?” John asked. Tony haunted the communal levels more than the command tower.

“Atlantis was getting riled up, and I figured it was either you or Rodney.”

John gave Tony a weary look. “Seriously, you have to stop talking about the city like it’s alive. You’re going to say something in front of the wrong officer, and end up in a rubber room.”

“I can’t believe you don’t hear the city,” Tony said.

Some days John wondered if Tony had taken one too many hits to the head during his NCIS days. He’d heard the stories. He didn’t believe half of them, but still, Tony did seem to end up with a frightening number of concussions. “I don’t hear it because the city doesn’t talk. It’s a city,” John said slowly.

“Oh huh. Then how did I know someone has his panties in a wad?”

“First, never use that expression again,” John said. Teyla coughed softly, which usually meant she was laughing at him. “And second, they’re not.”

“So, if I went and found Rodney?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, don’t,” John quickly said. Rodney was definitely not in a mood for Tony’s humor. Tony gave John a knowing look. “Okay, there may be a small amount of unhappiness going on.” John held up a finger and thumb to show how little the problem was.

“And does this small amount of unhappiness have anything to do with Carter visiting?"
Teyla answered before John could come up with a way to explain the problem. “Colonel Carter has found that Rodney’s sister shares his talents and wishes to bring Mrs. Miller here to work on a way to gather more power. Apparently she has come up with a theory that could provide power without a ZPM at all.”

“Oh.” Tony looked from one of them to the other with a mildly disturbed look. “And this bad?”

John grimaced. “He’s as happy to deal with his sister as I would be if I had my father coming to visit,” John said.

That stopped Tony dead in his tracks. “Yikes. Does it occur to you that we all have issues with our families?”

“Tony, we all volunteered for a mission where we thought we might die without ever seeing them again. It’s a given that we all have family issues.” Personally, John rather liked having a galaxy between himself and his father. While his father wasn’t a cruel man the way Rodney’s father sounded in the few stories John had gotten out of him, the elder Sheppard was a cold and calculating businessman who saw anyone who didn’t worship at the altar of Ayn Rand as some sort of failure. When John had first brought up the Air Force, his father had been unhappy, but he’d talked about the military contracts and political aspirations a few years in the service could provide. When he’d finally figured out that John really just wanted to fly, that had been the beginning of the end.

“Yeah, but some people have great relationships with their folks. Look at Stackhouse and Abby and Porter.”

“For one, I am disturbed by how unforgiving some of your family members sound when described through your eyes..” Teyla appeared truly bothered by the matter.

John stopped and studied her. “You talked to Lorne about his mother, didn’t you?” He’d been in their shared office one day when one of her rare letters had shown up. If John had issues with his family, Lorne had entire subscriptions. He had no idea how Lorne had survived in a home with a rabid hippy who was happy to tell Evan that his soul was tainted by simply putting on a uniform and that terror groups would stop terrorizing people if everyone stopped cornering them and making them feel unloved.

Personally, John would very much like to send her over to Afghanistan to try and hug a few Taliban.

“Regrettably, I did,” Teyla said. “When your people agreed to have civilians come to Atlantis, I had thought many of you might bring your families. I am unexpectedly pleased you have not. I would not be silent with that woman.”

“You and me both,” Tony agreed. “But what specifically is making Rodney so unhappy about his sister visiting?”

John didn’t have the full answer to that, and what he did know, he had learned as Rodney’s lover. He wouldn’t betray that confidence. “They had a pretty shitty childhood,” John said. He didn’t describe how Rodney would get worked up and start to wave his hands as he talked about his parents’ fights or the way they always blamed him. Knowing Rodney, John didn’t doubt that he’d been a handful as a kid, but there was no way any kid carried the blame for the parents’ dysfunction. But in that family, denial and blame were served with dinner.

“And now Rodney has to deal with it following him to Atlantis,” Tony said in an unhappy voice. “Is she smart enough to make all this drama worth it?”
“Carter thinks so,” John said. He hated to admit it, but if Carter said this was important, he trusted her word, one officer to another. And he wished he didn’t because as Rodney’s lover, he wanted to protect Rodney.

“It’s making Atlantis unhappy,” Tony said.

John rolled his eyes and headed for the last set of stairs up to Elizabeth’s office.

“Don’t give me that look,” Tony said as he chased after him. “Lorne hears her too.”

“Lorne is naturally paranoid and you gave him an excuse to feel even more paranoia.” And most of that paranoia seemed to center on John. John couldn’t even go for a run with Ronon without Lorne showing up when John was panting and near vomiting as he lay on the floor. A man should be able to get his ass kicked by an alien without having his second show up out of some vague concern that something was wrong.

“And if the city doesn’t tell him, how does Lorne always show up when someone is in trouble?”

“He doesn’t.” John said. “Last week that newly installed Wraith scanner nearly blew up my favorite dart, and there were no magical warnings. Look, I asked Rodney, and he insists there is no AI. None. Zero. Zilch. And if there’s one thing I trust Rodney about, it’s Ancient tech.”

For a long time, Tony stared at him, and then he shrugged. “I still hear her, and she still loves you.”

John sighed and knocked on Elizabeth’s door. Tony was nuts, but then over half of Atlantis was. Their new Russian Spetsnaz unit was nuts, the newly arrived covert team of SG19 was nuts, all the first wave Atlantis mission people were so far gone that none of them were ever going to fit into a traditional unit again. None of them. So if Tony heard voices, John wasn’t going to complain too loudly.

Besides, he had bigger concerns, like how to handle having a second McKay in the city. He wasn’t sure Atlantis was big enough to handle it.
“This is what we call our communal area,” John said as he ushered Jeannie through the main doors. At one point, this had been a huge ballroom, the largest of the rooms near the main tower. It was so large that they’d never used before Tony and Teyla had opened it to merchants.

Now dozens if not hundreds of small shops were built inside the main room. The tall stained glass windows and soaring ceiling cast light on dozens of stalls created with fabric screens and wicker lattice. Most of them stood empty since today wasn’t the tenday, but Spechar had his shop going, and the whole room smelled of exotic spices. Between the shops sat tables and chairs, homemade wooden stools and Atlantis benches.

Jeannie sniffed the air. “Alien cinnamon rolls?”

“Sort of a cross between cinnamon rolls and beef jerky,” John said. When Jeannie made a face, John rushed to defend Spechar’s baking, “which is way better than it sounds like. Most of my soldiers are addicted to the stuff. I even asked Carson to check for illicit substances.”

Jeannie gave him a weak smile. “I’ll have to try it one of these days. So, all the stalls, they’re set up for aliens?”

“Um, I’m pretty sure they’re the natives and we’re alien, but yeah, the concept’s about the same. This is a good place for everyone to gather and trade goods because you can’t get culled here, and if someone cheats a customer, they won’t be allowed back. Besides, folks around here are pretty wealthy in comparison to most planets.”

“I bet. I’m sure it allows people to take advantage of all sorts of deals.” Jeannie looked at him like he was personally helping to loot the universe. “Just because we have disposable cash does not mean we have a right to come into someone else’s universe and start using our screwed up ideas of capitalism to distort their traditions.”

“Right,” John said slowly. God, she was just as bad as Rodney, only female, and weirdly focused on making people be nice instead of making them be good at their work. “That’s why Teyla doesn’t allow us to convert Earth currency, and trade goods aren’t allowed through the Gate. We can choose to take a part of our pay in spires, and Teyla makes sure that no one gets so much that they could skew the Pegasus systems that are already in place. One of our spires is worth about three Genii coins, or harvest bits. The Sateteans had a well-respected currency called a gréa, and a few people will still use them, but with no society to back the coin, they aren’t worth much. Teyla and Tony have been working with the surviving Sateteans to decide whether they want to start honoring gréa and trying to bring it back or if they want to switch over to using spires.”

Jeannie looked at him like he’s just lost his mind.

John gave her a smile. “Teyla makes sure we play nice.”

“Huh.” She studied him in a way that was uncomfortably close to one of Rodney’s expressions. “You aren’t what I expected from a military commander.”

“Oh?”

“You aren’t an ass.”

John had no idea what to say to that, but the next time Carter tried telling him that Jeannie was the
nice McKay, he was so going to give her a piece of his mind. “Okay, and this way is the main balcony. It leads to a staircase that goes to the east pier where you can usually find one or two Traveler ships docked. They like to upgrade them. If you’re nice enough, they’ll give you a tour of the engines, or you can ask your brother or Radek to take you around.”

“Spaceships.” Jeannie got a dreamy tone in her voice. “I can’t believe I’m looking at actual spaceships.” They walked down the short flight of stairs and started down the pier.

The wind tossed John’s hair, and he pushed it back out of his face. He really needed to cut it, but there never seemed enough time in the day to do all the little chores that built up. “Your brother builds spaceships and sometimes fixes them while trying to reinforce shields to protect us as we’re about to get shot out of an active volcano.”

She snorted. “I have trouble seeing Meredith acting that selflessly. Then again, he was saving his own skin as well as everyone else.”

John cringed. It wasn’t just her willingness to assume Rodney was selfish. He’d told her that Rodney disliked the name Meredith, but she just ignored him. Rodney insisted that if he threw a fit, she’d only use “Meredith” more, and from his tone, that was experience speaking. So John wasn’t sure how to get Jeannie to stop. He was saved by the sight of Ronon and Keller coming toward them. John really thought Ronon had been serious about Amelia Banks, but now he seemed to spend most of his time with Dr. Jennifer Keller, one of the junior wunkerkind who worked for Carson.

“Hey Ronon!”

Ronon nodded in John’s direction, and then Dr. Keller waved enthusiastically. John wasn’t sure a doctor should bounce like that, but Carson insisted she was one of his absolute best. In fact, he told John if it came down to a catastrophic injury, she was better qualified than he was. Maybe it was wrong, but John really didn’t want a trauma surgeon who bounced and smiled and looked like she might still be in a sorority because no way was she old enough to have a medical degree.

“Hey,” Ronon said.

“Ronon, you remember Mrs. Miller, Rodney’s sister.”

Ronon looked at her. “Yeah, sure.”

Jeannie gave him a small smile before holding her hand out to Keller before John had a chance to introduce the two women. “I’m Jeannie Miller.”

“It’s so nice to meet you.” Keller grabbed her hand and pulled her into a quick hug. Jeannie squeaked a little. Yep, John was pretty sure Keller was too young to be a doctor. Or maybe she was too enthusiastic. Enthusiastic doctors were a little scary. “Are you getting the grand tour? The colonel loves showing off the city.”

“I can see why.” Jeannie took a step back and seemed to regroup before giving Keller an uncertain smile. “It’s an exciting place.”

“Only completely. When I found out about it, I was ready to sell a kidney to get this assignment. And now they’re talking about letting family transfer out if they can clear the background checks and sign the confidentiality agreements. I would love to have my father move to the city. He’s alone now, and he loves fishing, and this place has the small town feel that he likes. I hear you have a little girl.”

“Madison. Yeah. I don’t think this is the sort of place for her, though. I would say that I was worried about space vampires, but you know, all these unsecured docks and open balconies worry me more.”
“Oh yeah.” Keller looked around. “You know, I hadn’t ever thought of that. I wonder if Radek worries about that, or maybe he’s found some sort of Ancient childproofing. Knowing how Radek dotes over that little girl of his, I wouldn’t put that past him.”

“He has a baby on a military base?” Jeannie’s voice rose in shock.

“This is more of a really little city with a fairly good sized base right in the middle. Most of us work for the base, but there’s lots of life to live without it. And there are a bunch of kids from Pegasus natives and some of the refugees who’ve moved here.”

“Zelenka’s got a force field set up on all the balconies in his tower, so Regita won’t fall off any of them,” Ronon offered.

Keller smiled at him. “It is amazingly sweet that you know that.”

Ronon blushed, but he also looked pretty damn smug about impressing his girl. John would tease him, but the fact was that Ronon was way smoother with women than John ever had been. And considering that Ronon had been a feral runner for years, that probably didn’t say much about John’s social skills.

“So, are you going to go see the space ships?” Keller asked.

“Is that where you were?” Jeannie looked over at the two ships docked on the pier. One was the Orion, and the other was a small ship called the Revenge. At least, that’s what the Travelers called her when she was on Atlantis. She was a fast little ship, a transport and communication class of ship from back when the Genii and Travelers had been one Federation.

“Oh no.” Keller leaned closer. “I’m not really interested in all the ships. Ronon took me out to look at the whales. Every few weeks they swim past. Your brother is the one who helped discover that they can project memories and emotions. He was on a puddle jumper that crashed on a test flight, and he nearly died, but one of the whales projected a sense of comfort.”

John’s eyes got big as he realized where this was going. Oh, no. No no no. “I don’t want to hang you guys up,” John said, and he put his hand on Jeannie’s back.

She didn’t move. “The whales project emotion? That’s amazing. They can project memories too?”

“Samas later found that they could, but the whale that was keeping Rodney company just projected comfort, and that’s what inspired Rodney to hallucinate about Sam showing up.”

“Sam? Colonel Sam Carter?” Jeannie’s voice soared into the upper ranges and the amusement was unmistakable. John cringed, Ronon looked uncomfortable, and Keller seemed more confused than anything.

“Well, yeah.” Keller looked around.

“Oh my God. That is so like Meredith. He drools over the most unattainable women; it’s like a compulsion.”

Ronon’s eyebrows went up. He didn’t say anything, but John could practically hear him question Jeannie’s intelligence.

“I don’t think it was like that,” Keller said slowly.

John jumped in before Jeannie could say anything else. “He nearly died, Mrs. Miller. By the time we
got there, he was in shock and suffering hypothermia in a jumper that was filling with water. He’d had to watch as his pilot had killed himself in the front compartment in order to give Rodney more time. I think he imagined Colonel Carter because after him, she’s the best expert on the technology and he wanted to believe someone would come and help him fix it.”

Jeannie’s glee faded, and horror took its place. “He watched someone die for him?” Her hands came up as though she was trying to ward off the thought of it.

Keller said, “I know he can sometimes exaggerate his injuries, but that was… that was too close. And knowing that someone else had died wasn’t good for his state of mind.”

“Captain Griffin was a good man,” Ronon said. “He knew Rodney was too important to lose.”

“Oh god.” Jeannie brought her hand up to her mouth.

“It’s not something Rodney likes to talk about,” John said firmly. “I bet Rodney and Carter are done with their work. We should head back.” John gave Jeannie a more forceful push back toward the communal hall. She went, and Ronon and Keller followed.

“Aren’t you working with Rodney and Colonel Carter?” Keller asked when they reached the top of the exterior staircase.

“They kicked us out. The experiment was my idea, and they wouldn’t let me be in the lab,” Jeannie said unhappily. Keller was the only one to make sympathetic noises.

John was almost sure that Rodney had kicked her out because he was tired of the snide little remarks Jeannie kept making and Carter kept enjoying. John couldn’t blame them. Exactly. Carter had put up with a lot of shit from Rodney, professionally and personally. But John also knew that during Rodney’s last job at the mountain before he went to the Antarctic that he had confessed to Carter that he’d been driven out of music by a teacher who accused him of having no art. So Carter knew that Rodney’s attitude came from a deep well of fear, and sometimes John saw deep compassion in her. And sometimes she was so frustrated she clearly wanted to shove Rodney off a pier. When she was around Jeannie, she enjoyed the woman’s sharp tongue a little too much.

“What are they blowing something up?” Ronon asked, showing the first sign of real interest in the conversation.

“Trying to open a hole to another dimension and grab limitless power,” John said. “And there was some discussion that people not employed by the Air Force to risk their lives shouldn’t be in the path of any potential explosions.”

“I am getting paid for this,” Jeannie said.

“But you aren’t paid to get potentially killed or maimed,” John said.

“And Meredith is?” Jeannie’s tone was painfully dry.

“Yes,” John said. He hated it, and he did his best to make sure Rodney never got hurt, but in the end, that’s exactly what he was being paid to do. “So, let’s head back. Maybe they’re done.”

“If not, I could show you around the infirmary,” Keller said. “We have amazing facilities. So, what does your husband do?”

“He teaches English.” Jeannie clearly loved to talk about her family. Keller moved to her side and the two started talking about families and goals and the health benefits of tofu. John let himself trail
farther and farther behind in the corridor.

Ronon walked next to him. “I thought you said she was supposed to be smart,” he said in a low tone that didn’t carry far.

“She is,” John said. “Carter is impressed, and even Rodney admitted that her ideas weren’t bad, which from Rodney is like throwing a ticker tape parade.”

“She thinks McKay has a thing for Carter.” The incredulity in Ronon’s voice was almost comical.

“Carter is a beautiful woman. More importantly in Rodney’s case, she’s a brilliant woman.”

“And she’s not his type.”

John wasn’t so sure. “He once had a crush on her.”

“And now he doesn’t,” Ronon said. “So why would his sister assume he did, and why would she tell a stranger that her brother goes after women that he shouldn’t?”

John sighed. “I have no idea. But Rodney’s taking almost as many cheap shots at her. So far, he’s told her that she might have talent if she works harder, and at least three times he’s pointed out that if she hadn’t given up science she could have finished this work without needing his help. But since she’s rusty and bordering on incompetent, she should let him take lead.”

“Are those insults or simple truth?”

John stopped. With Rodney, the answer was usually both. He didn’t bother with insults unless they were true. “It does suggest that she should be spending her time on science and not her daughter, so she’s taking them as insults.”

Ronon grunted.

“And Rodney has said a few things that implied that she was stupid.”

“He thinks we’re all stupid. That includes you, and you sleep with him.”

“Yeah, but he’s smart enough to not say stuff like that in front of me,” John said. “Usually. Remind him of any one of the times when I took point on some mission, and he will be happy to explain how I’m an idiot with suicidal tendencies.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a factual description,” Ronon said with a wolfish grin.

John narrowed his eyes. “Keep it up. I’ll put you on Teldy’s team for a week.”

“Okay.” Ronon shrugged. He might be playing it cool, but John could see the way he lifted his chin just a little, as if challenging someone, like maybe a Turi someone.

“Yeah, you say that now, but I heard that Kyli has been pushing your buttons, maybe that she’d like her Turi to have a little more influence.” John kept the tone light.

Ronon glared at him. “Won’t happen. Samas and Jo both like my Turi better.”

“Really? I hear everyone was impressed with Teldy’s team last week when the Wraith were culling the village. I heard Kyli took on two Wraith warriors in hand to hand combat after they ran out of ammo. I’m thinking a Turi queen has got to be impressed.” And thank God John had talked General O’Neill into allowing them to add swords to their standard uniform.
“I’ve done the same.” Ronon was almost snarling now.

“Not lately,” John said in a lilting voice.

Ronon answered with an actual growl. It suddenly occurred to John that he was defending himself from a charge of being a suicidal idiot, and he was doing it by aggravating a man who could break him in half and shove his broken bits down a sewer. There was irony in there somewhere.

“I’ve got to get Mrs. Miller back to the physics lab and try and play refugee. Have fun with your…” John let his voice trail off.

“You’re just jealous. Mine doesn’t leave barbs in my backside every time we talk.”

“I like barbs,” John said with a shrug. It was true enough. Ronon rolled his eyes.
Karma and Doppelgangers

Rodney decided that he’d been a horrible person in a previous life. It was the only explanation. Maybe he wasn’t the nicest person. Maybe he hadn’t been terribly welcoming to Jeannie since she’d come. Of course, she hadn’t been nice to him either. For example, telling Carter and Ronon about his various childhood humiliations seemed a little much.

Yes, yes he had been forced to eat his lunch with his underwear on his head, but when Jeannie was telling that story, did any of them wonder how the bullies had gotten his underwear? Had any of them asked how old he was or how old the other kids were?

No, those were unimportant details.

It was more important that Carter and Ronon laugh at him, and Jeannie, and Rodney wasn’t forgetting that Teyla had been sitting there too, even if she had tried lying to save his feelings. Please. He didn’t need those backstabbing, jealous little minds to like him. Jeannie had chosen an English major over a career in science, so clearly she had flawed judgment, and Ronon was Ronon.

Rodney grinned. He could mention something to that chipper little doctor Ronon liked. She was always nattering about being nice, as if nice was the most important thing. If he mentioned how unnice Ronon had been, she might make him pay.

And then Ronon would be after his blood. No, that wouldn’t work. The balcony door behind him opened, and a wash of warm air flowed past him before the crisp night air could steal the heat away.

“You’re thinking too loudly,” John said as he came up behind Rodney. He slipped an arm around Rodney’s waist.

“I feel like this is Doranda all over again. I don’t like feeling like we screwed something up.” Rodney wouldn’t have admitted that to another soul in the universe. Any universe. Because after this disaster, he had unequivocal proof of many universes.

“Do you plan to blow up our solar system?” John asked.

Rodney sent him the most withering glare he could muster under the circumstances. He was too worn out for more. Not only did he have his sister in his city, but now he had another him. A cooler him. A him that was all leather wearing and introducing himself as ‘Rod.’ Stupid doppelganger.

“Hey,” John said softly, “he’s not you.”

“Of course he’s not,” Rodney said in his coldest voice. “I’m the only McKay, and he’s a… a…”

“Refugee?” John asked.

Rodney poked him in the side. “An imposter,” he said firmly. Worse, he was an imposter that Jeannie definitely liked better. He was jealous of himself. Rodney understood full well that he was being ridiculous, but this was too much. Whatever he’d done to deserve this, it must have been horrible.

John caught Rodney’s arm and pulled him around so they were face to face. “Hey, you’re the real Rodney McKay.”

“Not Meredith McKay?” Rodney asked snidely. Crap. Why had he brought that up when he hated
that name? Bullies finding out that he had a girl name had contributed to him eating his lunch with his underwear on his head.

John raised an eyebrow.

“Fine, fine. I’m being unreasonable.”

“Maybe,” John said slowly. “But if someone invited my father to Atlantis, I promise I would be just as bitchy.”

“I’m not bitchy,” Rodney snapped. John gave him another of those looks that made it perfectly clear that John didn’t believe his bullshit. Rodney sagged until he was leaning against John. “What are we going to do?”

“He would rather be here than on Earth, so I think we keep him.”

“I don’t want him here.”

“Yeah, but Elizabeth does. Like she said, two McKays are better than one.”

“I’m the only McKay,” Rodney nearly shouted. He was pretty sure he had said the exact same thing at least four times. “I hate that they all like him more,” Rodney said softly.

“They don’t…” John sighed. “Maybe Ronon likes him. Rod spars with him.”

“Then he’s an idiot,” Rodney said wearily. Really, what sort of idiot volunteered to spar with Conan the barbarian? On a good day, he didn’t have a Turi in him and he’d just break you into two or three large pieces. When he had a Turi, he’d crush every bone in your body and turn you into mush. Sparring with him was stupid. Well, unless your name was Kyli. Major Teldy’s girlfriend was terrifying, but normal mortals did not spar with Ronon.

On the good side, maybe Ronon would break Rod. Rodney smiled at that thought.

“That expression is scaring me,” John said, but then he pulled Rodney close. They stood on the balcony with the gentle ocean wind playing with their hair, and Rodney wanted to call this a perfect moment, but he knew the second he left John, he’d have to deal with the hell that was his life now. “Look at the good side,” John said, “Carter is going home.”

“That’d be great if she took Jeannie with her.” Instead Jeannie had decided to stay and help Rod. She loved Rod. She thought Rod was perfect and wonderful and polite. Yes, because polite was the most important trait in the world. Rodney would rather be admired than liked. The problem was that the longer he saw how other people interacted with Rod, the more he suspected he wasn’t either. They liked Rod better.

Rodney had worked so hard to stop caring what people thought. He’d perfected the art of verbal evisceration. “I blame you for this,” he whispered.

“Me? What did I do?”

“I didn’t care what people thought before you came along.”

John pulled Rodney around so they faced each other and then he leaned closer until he rested his forehead against Rodney’s in an imitation of an Athosian greeting. “I don’t believe you. You were friends with Tony and Radek before I sat in that chair of yours.”
“I was mildly amused by them, and I thought they might have a halfway functioning brain between them. If they had started an ‘I hate Rodney’ club complete with flyers and a secret handshake, I wouldn’t have cared. But then you came and made me stupid because I forgot how much people suck.”

“But we’re kinda nice to have around anyway.” John’s hands slid down over Rodney’s back until they rested on his ass.

“I’m talking about my frustrations with the universe, and you’re trying to proposition me?”

“Yes,” John said. “The nice thing about sucking at having any sort of social skills is that I can get away with being outrageous. It comes with the package deal that includes holding grudges for way too long and not noticing the difference between people trying to get in my pants or drop me off the face of the Earth.”

“Idiot.”

“Yes,” John agreed easily. He tilted his head to the side and then his lips pressed against Rodney’s. Their breath intertwined, and John’s hand came up to cup the side of Rodney’s face. Rodney groaned, and John pressed harder against Rodney’s lips. His tongue teased with little flicks against Rodney’s lower lip.

Rodney ran his fingers through John’s wild hair and then closed his fist around a good handful. And then he could hear John’s earpiece go off.

John groaned as though in pain, but he reached up and touched it. “Sheppard here.”

“Colonel!” an entirely too chipper voice came through loud enough that Rodney could hear it. Never before had Rodney mourned the loss of Samas quite so much because that wily old Turi would understand the need to kill Rod and hide the body. He would have helped. Maybe Rodney could get Abby to step into the void. She was the sort of woman who could hide a body and make the forensic evidence disappear. Of course with his luck she probably loved Rod. This was hell.

“Rod,” John said. He gave Rodney an apologetic look. “What can I do for you?”

“Dr. Weir said you’d show me around the city. Jeannie had to head back to Earth for the afternoon. The Daedalus is in orbit over Colorado, so apparently this is a good time for an Atlantis-Canada commute. Can you believe her whole trip is going to take a little less than two hours and most of that will be clearing the medical?”

“Yeah. Amazing.” John didn’t actually sound amazed. “Do you want the tour right now?”

“Unless you’re doing some sort of official business. I can imagine that running this place takes a lot of time, and I don’t want to interfere with that.”

John turned his radio off and looked at Rodney. “If I say ‘no,’ someone might start wondering what I’m doing instead of playing tour guide.”

“Go,” Rodney said with a shooing motion.

John caught his hands. “Hey, I’ll give him the brushoff if that’s what you want.”

Part of Rodney wanted exactly that. He wanted his lover all to himself, but they had to be careful. There were a lot of people on Atlantis who might want to see Sheppard removed from his post, so discretion was important. Yeah, the command staff knew about them, just like everyone in the
command staff knew that Major Teldy had her girlfriend, but some things were not said out loud, and they were kept off the radar.

“Go show him around. If you have a chance, drop him off a pier.”

John grinned. “That’s the Rodney I know and love.”

Rodney rolled his eyes, but some of the pain in his chest eased. John did love him, and despite Rod’s obvious attempts to interest Sheppard in either a friendship or more—Rodney wasn’t sure which—John had stayed polite but distant. “Go. Elizabeth will get cranky if you let Rod down. I’m just going to go do some equations and see if I can’t shove him back through to his own universe.”

“I know you’ll manage it,” John said with a smile, but then he touched his radio again. “I have time now. Do you want to meet in the mess hall?”

John had stepped back enough that Rodney couldn’t hear the answer. However, he could see how John was reacting. He had that same plastic smile he used on visiting generals. There was no subtle straighten, no smoothing out his cowlicks or stupid grin. Every little gesture Rodney had learned to associate with John Sheppard in heat was missing when John talked to Rod.

At least there was one person in the universe who liked him better than that interloper.

“Twenty minutes,” John said in a voice missing any genuine emotion. “See you then.”

John turned his radio off and gave Rodney a sad smile. “I guess I’m playing host. Elizabeth promised that I’d introduce him around to the non-Earth populations.”

“If you go around the Dagans, he’s going to hear about the theory that you’re an Ancient.”

John ran a hand over his face. “Yeah, I’m not looking forward to that. So, tonight?” John asked, and the devilish look in his eye made it pretty clear that he hoped to pick up where they’d left off.

“Tonight. Now go away. I have work to do and you’re distracting me,” Rodney said. That line worked better when he actually had a computer as opposed to when he was standing on a balcony staring out across the ocean, but John didn’t call him on the lie. He gave Rodney a quick kiss and headed back inside.

Maybe life sucked right now and maybe Rodney was being punished for something he did in a previous life, but at least he had John. That made up for a lot. Rodney slowly smiled as he started planning exactly what he could do to John when he came home. There were a lot of things he could do to make up for his truly spectacularly shitty day.
Tony felt Jo’s pleasure as they negotiated more missions for the Turi. Scavenging on old Satetean worlds was dangerous as hell because the Wraith had figured out that teams wanted to recover as much literature and art as possible, and Wraith hunters made a sport out of trying to catch the teams. Tony hated that they sometimes lost people, but the joy the Sateteans felt when the recovered some piece of art or a statue from the Red Heroic period made him believe this was the right choice.

Elizabeth looked up from her pad where she’d taken notes on the meeting. Kitsune looked utterly bored. She had her feet on the table and she was looking at the ceiling. Tony wondered if Abby had anything to do with the streak of blue in Kitsune’s hair. The Traveler looked good with blue—it matched her eyes and really stood out with her dark hair. But hair dye just didn’t seem like a Traveler sort of indulgence. Now the leather? That was all Traveler.

“I think we’re done,” Elizabeth said. Kitsune’s feet hit the ground so fast it wasn’t funny.

“Actually,” Tony said, “I have one other issue I want to bring up.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth frowned. It was a quick gesture even more quickly hidden, but she clearly did not like being surprised. “What would that be?”

“Rod.”

Tony could feel the entire room stiffen, Rodney in particular, although John also had a look on his face like he’d bitten a lemon. Elizabeth watched him for several seconds, probably waiting for Tony to speak his peace, but Tony had been a cop long enough to know that timing was important when you were trying to play someone, whether it was a suspect or other members of a ruling council. Jo was particularly pleased with getting to go head to head against Elizabeth. She respected that Elizabeth was the best queen to fight the IOC battles, but she was Turi, so part of her wanted to take every fight on herself.

Elizabeth gave a small nod. “We’re all concerned about getting Rod back and closing the bridge.”

“We have to close the bridge in two days or we’ll blow up their galaxy,” Tony said. “I only look like I’m dozing during the briefings, like Kitsune.”

John snorted, and Kitsune threw a datapad stylus at him.

“Then what is the concern?” Elizabeth asked.

“I think we should limit his access to critical systems.”

“Why?” Teyla asked. Elizabeth looked equally confused, but then so did Rodney and John. In fact, Kitsune was the only one who nodded approvingly.

“I was a cop for a long time.” Sometimes Tony felt a need to remind people of that. He was more than the Turi ambassador or even the peacekeeper here on Atlantis. “There are certain types of people I spent a lot of time interacting with, and there are some warning signs that concern me.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth leaned forward.

Tony looked at Teyla. “Rod told you he was on the Athosian council.”
“Yes,” she said slowly. “He knows many things which would suggest he speaks the truth.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. The best con is the truth,” Tony said. He didn’t point out that his father was proof of that. Senior believed every scam and con he ever played. He believed it passionately and irrationally, and he thought that made everything better. He never did acknowledge that the people who invested with him were equally broke when Senior left town. No, he just went in search of the next project that would allow him to justify $500 dinners and Armani suits. “What was the point of telling you that?”

Teyla frowned. “I do not know that he had a point.”

“Then why bring it up? Were you talking about the Athosian council?”

“No,” Teyla said, and she looked disturbed.

“Are you likely to ask him to join your Athosian council?”

Before Teyla could answer, Elizabeth tapped her fingernails against the table. “I don’t think a little arrogance is a reasonable justification limiting his work. He’s part of the team trying to collapse the matter bridge.”

“Then why does he spend so much time trying to get on the Traveler ships?” Tony asked.

Kitsune nodded. “He does. My people don’t like him all that much. He’s too nice. No one’s that nice without wanting something.”

“That’s a bit pessimistic,” John said softly.

“Being a cop makes you suspicious,” Tony agreed, “but Rod has spent a lot of time getting very friendly with people. He spars with Ronon, he talks Athosian politics with Teyla, he plays golf with the colonel, he tried to talk punk bands with Abby, and he bonds with Jeannie over all the brotherly things he does with his sister in his universe.”

“Your point?” Elizabeth asked.

Tony leaned forward. “It’s the mark of a con artist. He makes himself fit into other people’s lives. He learns the language and goes out of his way to find out a person’s favorite restaurant or perfume or flowers.” And in the case of Abby, he’d found out that she did not respond well to schmooze. Tony had learned that the hard way when he’d first joined NCIS. It took a long time for Abby to trust that she was seeing the real Tony beneath all the masks, and even longer for her to like him. Hopefully Rod would be far, far away before Abby even considered forgiving him.

“He kept trying to talk to me about my favorite weapon,” Kitsune said. “He asked me to teach him to use our targeting system. In his universe, Atlantis hasn’t even met the Travelers. Hell, maybe we don’t even exist. I don’t see why he’d care about our weapons.”

Part of that was probably the natural curiosity that came with intelligence, but Tony had to admit it felt manipulative.

“He tried to tell me how to fix my golf game, so I’m not so sure he’s really that smooth. He kind of comes off as arrogant,” John said. Rodney gave him a smile that would have recharged a ZPM.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “but that’s after you shot him down. I’m pretty sure we all noticed that he was trying to get in your bed.”
“Yep,” Kitsune said with a wink in John’s direction. Given Rodney’s mood lately, she was playing with fire.

Rodney glowered, Teyla looked uncomfortable, and even Elizabeth cringed.

Teyla looked troubled. “He explained that his Teyla is far less likely to speak to him. I have wondered if it is his closeness to the Athosian council. I have given up much to serve the people of Atlantis, and I would not trade my position here, but it has cost me much. Given how their Atlantis struggles, I wonder how that Teyla must feel. From what Rod has said, she does not enjoy the same position of authority on Atlantis, yet she must watch Rod grow increasingly influential with her people. I am not sure that fits with your description of these people who must fit in with everyone.”

“Con men always make choices,” Tony said. It had never occurred to him that Teyla had compromised her position as the leader of the Athosians, but it was true that she represented all the civilians on Atlantis, and she was unerringly fair in her treatment. Athosians did not receive any unfair advantage. “If Teyla’s people offered more power or influence, he would worry about his relationship with them. And he may not even be doing this intentionally. He may just want attention or want to be liked. I’m not saying he’s malicious; I’m saying that his desire to be everyone’s friend makes him suspicious.”

“Travelers have already taken McKay’s biometrics out of our systems,” Kitsune threw out there. She was pretty blunt, but then most of the Travelers were.

“Hey!” Rodney objected. “Those are my biometrics too.”

“And we’ll reinstate your access as soon as this second you is gone. Didn’t you say you had to collapse the bridge to keep from blowing up their universe? Can’t you send him home when you do that?”

“The bridge is unidirectional,” Rodney said, but he had that distracted tone that meant his mind was somewhere else. Hopefully he was obsessing about how to send Rod home rather than focusing on Rod himself.

“I don’t see anything particularly suspicious,” Elizabeth said. “You’re describing someone who is trying hard to fit in after being thrown into a new environment. I know he’s not like our Rodney, but I don’t think being judgmental is the best way to approach a potential ally and colleague.” And there it was. Elizabeth would love to keep two Rodneys. Tony got it. He did. Sometimes he felt sorry that Elizabeth could only have one of an individual. And while that thought had definitely originated with Jo, he had to admit that the ability to have a hundred identical symbiotes could come in handy. Jo accepted that queens were unique, but she still struggled with the fact that all humans possessed that same uniqueness. This was Elizabeth’s chance to double an individual who was utterly critical to the survival of the group, which would reduce the chance of losing him and leaving the community short of resources.

It occurred to Tony that Jo had definitely been in his head too long because that made absolute sense, even though Tony knew it was the wrong approach for this situation.

Tony organized his thoughts because he had to get Elizabeth to see the truth. “I have been around this sort of person my entire life. He’s overly friendly, overly concerned about appearance and impressing others, overly willing to adapt to each new person, overly interested in making himself indispensable. He takes everything one step too far. And at the same time, he’s very invested in gaining ground. He wants respect, wants people to trust him, to need him. Maybe he’s worried that we won’t treat him fairly and he’s trying to build a political base,” Tony suggested, and if nothing else, that would make Elizabeth think twice. “Maybe he wants to have Rodney’s job or secure any
job for himself in Atlantis. I’m not saying he’s a bad person, but I am saying he’s a power player, and he’s got some angle he’s working.”

Tony willed Elizabeth to see the truth. He could already tell that Teyla was reconsidering some of her conversations with Rod. Good. She’d never been part of the Carter-Miller-Ronon “make fun of Rodney” group, but she hadn’t done much to shut them down, either.

“Maybe he wants to stay here,” Kitsune said. “We have better ships, more power, and fewer opportunities to get eaten alive by the Wraith. It sounds like their universe is having trouble. I can’t believe they gated to the replicator world. If something looks too good to be true, it usually is.”

Tony wasn’t sure if Kitsune meant the Replicators or Rod.

“Yes, well,” Elizabeth said quickly. She generally avoided reminders that she had wanted to go to M7R-227 and got vetoed by the council. “Rod doesn’t strike me as the sort to avoid trouble. It could be that he wants to gather as much intelligence as possible before trying to get home. I imagine that if he gets home, those of you who are missing from his Atlantis may be getting some calls. It’s a perfectly reasonable reaction.”

Good con men knew how to gain people’s trust. Tony had grown up at Senior’s knee watching that happen over and over. “I’m suggesting that we keep in mind that we don’t know Rod. He may look like Rodney, but we’re giving him access to our technology and our trust based off his appearance. I don’t think that’s healthy.” And Tony knew his gut didn’t approve. Elizabeth might not accept a gut feeling as evidence, but Tony did.

His gut and Gibbs’ gut were both tied in knots. That was evidence enough for Tony.

“Think about this,” Tony suggested. “I grew up with a skilled con artist for a father. I watched him blow through millions of dollars, most of which wasn’t his. I chose to become a cop to stop people like him. I took the skills I learned at his knee and I became one hell of an undercover operative. Imagine that I followed in his footsteps instead. I would still be Tony. I would still be charming and personable. I would still know how to get people to open up to me. Only instead of working with victims to get them to give me a statement, I would work on the wealthy to get them to open their wallets to finance my latest adventure. If Rod looks me up in his universe, that may be who he finds. There were times in my life that I wasn’t sure which path I was going to take.”

All too often, Tony considered running a couple of cons, something small to get him some spending money. He knew exactly how to set one up. He knew how to make the vanishing money seem reasonable, how to shift blame onto unreasonable government regulation or some non-existent competitor’s dirty tricks. Tony knew exactly how to not only run the con but to exit it with people still liking him. He might have gone that direction only there was so much bad blood between his father and himself that he rebelled by following the law.

Tony had to believe there were universes where he didn’t.

Teyla spoke in a calm and decisive voice. “We have assumed that Rod has the integrity of our Rodney. While I continue to believe that true, I cannot ignore that the opposite is possible. I would not wish to make Rod feel unwelcome—”

Kitsune interrupted. “I would.” That earned her a withering glare from Teyla. She gazed right back without blinking an eye.

“Perhaps we should keep track of his activities,” Teyla concluded.

“I don’t think a little extra security would be bad,” John said. “I could have Lorne keep an eye on
Tony imagined that Lorne would be very happy to do exactly that. Rod’s attempts to get friendly with Abby had not escaped Lorne’s notice. Abby didn’t put up with jealous posturing, so Lorne had kept his nose out of the conflict, but Tony could smell the aggression and frustration rolling off Lorne every time someone mentioned Rod’s name. So he would love an order to keep an eye on Rod.

“I think that’s unnecessary,” Elizabeth said, “but security is under your authority, colonel. Do try to avoid making Rod feel unwelcome. He didn’t ask to come here. Now, if that’s done, I think we’ve finished our agenda.” She looked around the room, and no one had anything to add.

Everyone stood and started heading for the doors, but Tony could feel the extra tension. Kitsune was the only one not bothered by their last conversation, but then she hadn’t been a fan of Rod’s to start with. Everyone else was tense. Teyla looked particularly thoughtful. For Rod’s sake, Tony hoped the man didn’t try and spar with Teyla any time in the immediate future. She didn’t look amused. But then given that she had spent the most time with Rod and Mrs. Miller, Tony could just imagine what sort of stories she’d heard and now she not felt a need to reassess each of these interactions.

Tony disliked how an alliance of anti-Rodney people had formed. Hopefully this would shift the balance of power.
Sibling Rivalry

Tony tried hard to give Rod and Rodney some privacy, but his hearing kept edging up and up until he could hear every footstep in the lab echo against the cold walls. Jo was being seriously annoying. Tony tried thinking soothing thoughts at her. After all, Rod and Rodney had found a way to send Rod home. Carter had gone off to save the world with SG1, so that irritant was gone, and as soon as Jeannie was gone, everything would be back to normal.

Jo ignored him and turned Tony's hearing up until he could hear the conversation Rod and Rodney were having over the controls. Radek had distracted Jeannie on the other side of the room. Since Tony had brought up his concerns, he'd noticed a definite change in the attitudes around Atlantis. Ronon still thought Rod was the greatest thing since self-sharpening knives and Jeannie couldn't stop comparing the two versions of her brother and finding Rodney coming out on the short end of that stick, but the rest of the city had cooled somewhat.

"You're lucky," Rod told Rodney.

"What? Luck is superstition. I'm good."

Rod laughed. "Yeah, you are. They really like you, don't they?"

"Some of them," Rodney said, his voice thick with suspicion. "Of course some of them are too stupid for me to care if they like me or not." Tony suspected he was describing Ronon, and he tried again to get Jo to turn down the hearing. She didn't. Instead, she sent up a flare of concern and annoyance along with the image of her tearing apart a symbiote she didn't like, but whose knowledge she found useful. It was pretty damn clear she thought Rod should be recycled. Tony’s girl was bloodthirsty.

"I envy you," Rod said wistfully.

That clearly shocked Rodney. "What? Why?"

"Because you can say what you think. I never thought I'd be so envious of that ability."

Tony moved toward the doorway where John leaned against the wall with his usual careless sprawl. When Tony came near, John's gaze flickered over toward the McKays before he looked at Tony. "Everything okay?" he asked. He might look laid back, but Tony could hear the stress in his voice.

"Yep," Tony said, and John let out a long breath.

"So where's your better half?" John asked.

Tony smiled at the thought of Gibbs. He'd never known he could be so blissfully, domestically happy while living on an alien city in another galaxy. Atlantis must have picked up some of his thoughts about her being alien because she sent a wave of home-home-home out. Miko had been working under a console and she stood up and looked around before giving Tony an odd look. He shrugged, and she went back to her work. "He's keeping an eye on the tenday markets. We always have some arguments and petty theft when we have that many people on Atlantis, and there's always a worry that Wraith worshippers might bring in a weapon."

John gave an absent minded nod, his attention on Rod and Rodney. "What are they talking about?" John whispered.
"About how Rod envies Rodney's honesty, and about how if this doesn't work, Rod's atoms are going to be blasted into a dozen different realities where Humpty Dumpty will never be put back together again."

John grimaced. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Tony leaned against a bit of wall and watched the scientists do their work. He had no idea how any of the equipment worked, and as much as Jo sometimes pushed him to gather up more knowledge, Tony didn't want anyone to start thinking of him as a techie. Gibbs had come in for a lot of grief and a lot of long hours stuck behind a computer because of Samas. Tony wouldn't make the same mistake. Jo could wait for the next host if she wanted to learn Rodney's job.

Jo immediately sent up an image of a giant version of her wrapping around him so tightly that he couldn't move. The sense her clinging to him came so strongly that Tony jerked.

Immediately John was on alert. "Trouble?"

"Jo insists she's never letting me die, but I don't think she actually gets a say in that," Tony said. John looked at him like he'd lost his mind, and Tony shrugged.

That was the end of the conversation because Rod vanished in a flash of light as the Traveler ship scooped him up to prepare to shove him back through to his own universe. Radek started calling off numbers. Apparently this was now a race between Rodney trying to collapse the bridge and the alternate Radek and Sheppard trying to shove the exotic particles back through the bridge to save their universe at the expense of this one.

"Should we be standing this close?" Tony asked as the tension grew and the shouting turned into tersely barked orders.

"If Rodney loses, it won't matter where we're standing because the whole galaxy will probably blow up," John said. He was way too blasé about the idea of sudden death. "So we're good."

For a second, Tony could only stare at the man. "I worry about your mental health."

John grinned at him. "I'm as mentally healthy as you are."

"That's what worries me."

Nothing flashed or exploded or even chirped, but suddenly all the scientists were smiling and congratulating each other, and even Jeannie and Rodney smiled at each other, so Tony guessed it worked.

"So, is Rod home?" John asked.

"Yep," Rodney said, and either he was very proud of himself for accomplishing that or he was very glad to see Rod gone. Tony was happy that Rod had made his peace with Rodney though. If Rod had left without expressing a little jealousy, this would have been a lot harder on Rodney. Tony sent a little wish out to the universe hoping that Rod found a little happiness. Tony had seen what happened when people like him got older. Slowly others stopped taking their calls and acquaintances grew more and more suspicious. Senior was already headed down that path. Tony could read between the lines on the increasingly frequent letters, and he knew Senior was running out of cons. Rod would too if he didn't start making real connections with people. Instantaneous friendships rarely lasted, and that's all Rod knew how to form. That's all Senior knew how to form, and in the end, Senior couldn't even maintain relationships with his own wife or son.
God, being around Rod had definitely not been good for Tony’s mental health. He forced himself to focus on happier thoughts. "Good job, Rodney."

"Good job to the whole team," Jeannie corrected him.

Tony gave her an amused look. "You're definitely a McKay. Did your parents teethe you guys on superiority?"

Rodney snorted, but Jeannie turned a vivid shade of red.

"Yes, yes," Radek said, jumping into the awkward silence. "Everyone is most brilliant. The galaxy would be dust if not."

"I out-thought you," Rodney said.

"Meredith!" Jeannie gasped.

Radek narrowed his eyes. "You out thought alternate universe me. You do not out think me." The tone of vicious and glorious oneupmanship was back.

Moving a step closer, Rodney poked a finger in Radek's direction. "You had a head start on the other side. Not telling us you were trying to blow up this universe was dirty pool, but I still outmaneuvered you."

"No, you and me outmaneuvered alternate me and Sheppard."

Rodney got a thoughtful expression. "We're just lucky they didn't have Rod working with them. A Rodney McKay brain on the other side would have made a big difference."

Radek broke out the muttered Czech curses. Now that Radek had returned one of his Turi to the joining waters and Jo had sampled his DNA before Samas drove her away, Jo had absorbed an understanding of the Czech language, so Tony listened as Radek complained about how unfair it was that Rodney was right because that had been too damn close and without Rodney's help, even the Turi in Radek's head would not have been enough of an advantage to overcome the attack from the other universe. It was weirdly supportive, but then Tony suspected that Rodney knew that Radek liked him. Radek had named Rodney godfather to his first born daughter, so that was a small hint as to the depth of their friendship.

Jeannie was less amused by their banter. "I swear, Meredith. You never change. Give other people some credit for the work they've done on this."

A brief flash of pain darted across Rodney's face so quickly that Tony wasn't sure he would have noticed if Jo hadn't been hyperfocused on him. "Well I am the head of the project. You notice your perfect Colonel Carter isn't around to clean up the mess she helped make."

"She helped make? So you get all the credit, but the rest of us are to blame for any problems? Do you even listen to yourself? I thought seeing Rod would make you realize how wrong you are, but you're just as arrogant as ever."

Rodney straightened up. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Jeannie threw both her hands in the air, spun around and walked out. Only once she was gone did Rodney seem to sag. The whole room was painfully silent, but then Rodney started throwing his hands around. "What are you waiting for? Close that down. Rodney started barking orders at scientists, and they scrambled to their work. "If it weren't for me, this whole place would fall apart,"
Rodney said, but it didn't have the sharp edge that Rodney usually had. Jeannie had left more than one ding in his armor.

"It really would," John said softly, but that didn't seem to please Rodney. Tony sent out a mental query about where Jeannie was, and Atlantis almost blasted him with an image of her on one of the balconies. If Tony were to guess, he would say that Atlantis didn't like her either. Part of Tony wanted to throw her back through the gate and never think about her again, but the problem was that she really was just the other side of the coin from Rodney. She was prickly and arrogant and certain she knew how the world worked and wrong. And she was also hurt and angry and utterly incapable of fixing this relationship. Between his years as a cop and his years of knowing Rodney, Tony couldn’t miss the signs.

And he’d thought Senior was a terrible parent. Senior was Ward Cleaver compared to the McKays. “I’ll catch you later,” Tony told Rodney. Rodney waved him away as though Tony were one more annoyance. Right now Rodney was hurting enough that he supposed any human interaction annoyed him. Tony traded concerned glances with John, and John nodded. He’d keep an eye on this.

Tony headed for the balcony where Atlantis showed Jeannie standing, staring out across the city. With the tenday markets running, the corridors were quiet. Tony reached the balcony pretty quickly. He stepped out, and Jeannie was leaning against the rail. She glanced over toward him and then went back to city gazing.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“She is,” Tony agreed.

“I thought this would feel like an American base, but it really doesn’t. It doesn’t even feel like we’re on Earth.” She turned and looked at him. “You don’t look like you’re from Earth.”

Tony had on a cream colored Edowinian shirt with the traditional pattern caused by embedding charred and darkened threads into the silk while it was on the loom. Tony still loved his fashion, but his tastes had changed some. “It’s a different look.”

“That’s it. The whole city feels alien. And Rodney is here insulting a whole new galaxy of people.”

Tony leaned against the balcony next to her. It hadn’t occurred to him just how unEarthlike Atlantis had become, but then again, Samas had been one of the great shapers of the city behind the scenes. Tony still missed the hell out of him. But Jeannie was under the impression that she had to somehow stop her brother from making a bad impression. That wasn’t exactly reality.

“Before I came here, I was a cop.”

“And now you’re a cop and an ambassador. On Earth that wouldn’t make much sense,” Jeannie said. “I should be glad that Americans aren’t out here trying to force the universe to force the universe to act like them, but it’s weird. It makes me worry. I mean, if Americans are trying to play nice with the natives, does that mean that America and Earth are in that much danger from these Ori?”

Tony didn’t have an easy answer for that. “Maybe.”

Jeannie slumped forward and let the balcony rail hold her weight.

“But the folks at the SGC have won some pretty impossible fights in the past, so I wouldn’t bet against them. And people in this galaxy kind of like Rodney.”
She turned and gave him such an incredulous look that Tony almost laughed at the sheer shock in her face. “He’s rude!”

“He’s also brave and brilliant and he cares more than he ever wants anyone to know. And he’s damaged in ways that make the rest of us forgive his faults. After all, it’s not like we’re perfect.”

The second Jeannie figured out what Tony really wanted, she angled her body toward him and crossed her arms. “Oh, so you think the sun rises and set out of his ass, too?”

Bingo. Tony really hated being right this time, but there was the pain right on schedule.

“You are all so willing to put up with his shit, but he needs someone to share some of that truth he loves. He wants to tell everyone what he thinks, but when you try and be honest back, he whines to his friends. God, you’re a piece of work. Do you have any idea what Meredith has done to me, how he’s ripped my life apart?” She moved forward, her motions jerky with the suppressed anger. Tony even figured there was a pretty high likelihood that he was about to get punched. “I phoned him before getting married, and he called me stupid. He told me I was fucking up my life. I walked to the altar alone, and I had that in my mind. The only living family I have, and he calls me a fuck up.”

“I was a kid when my father left me in a hotel and went home without me, so don’t preach to me about unsupportive family. I get it. But you’re taking your own hits at him. This is not a one-sided sort of conflict you have going, but instead of being honest with Rodney, you’re just trying to get some revenge.”

Jeannie jerked back. “What are you talking about?” She seemed genuinely confused, which meant she didn’t see her own behavior. Someone had taught her to treat Rodney like the scapegoat of the family, and he had a pretty good idea about who.

“All these stories you’re telling… you’re talking about a kid, a lonely kid who seems to get the blame for everything that went wrong in your family. And why the hell would he emotionally support you when your family never taught him the meaning of the phrase?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, here it comes. It’s all father’s fault. If mother had loved him more. I can’t believe Meredith is still pulling out that old number.”

“People who have suffered emotional abuse usually do.” Tony thought Jeannie was just as abused, but her parents had turned her into an accomplice rather than a victim. However, she probably wouldn’t handle that well.

“Give it up. We had good parents.”

“Maybe you did, but every story you just told in there tells another story. You tried telling me the story of how Rodney ruined your seventh birthday party. Do you want to know what I heard?”

Her expression turned cold. “I was there, but please enlighten me about how poor Meredith is simply misunderstood.”

“He was thirteen.”

“I was seven, and it was my birthday.” Jeannie’s voice was going up.

“Rodney was a thirteen year old kid who didn’t have any degrees, didn’t have anything to validate him from the outside and who didn’t feel secure about himself. But according to you, he intentionally knocked over the cake and made himself the center of all that negative attention.”
This wasn’t making much of an impression on Jeannie. She smirked. “Meredith has never been what you might call normal.”

“No, I suppose he hasn’t, but that’s why all of us are still alive. He’s saved us because his brain isn’t normal.”

“And from the sounds of it, he’s nearly killed you a few times, too.” Considering that she hadn’t been around for any of it, she sounded entirely too smug about that.

“You keep coming back to pointing out all Rodney’s faults.”

Jeannie threw her hands in the air. “You seem obsessed with trying to make him out to be some superhero. If you weren’t sleeping with that Gibbs guy, I’d think you had a crush on him.” Jeannie turned to leave, and if she did, Tony suspected that each of the McKay siblings would shore up their emotional barriers and never speak to each other again. Tony was fine with that, but from Rodney’s reactions to all this, he suspected Rodney wasn’t.

“Answer me one question,” Tony said to stop her. She looked at him. “You love telling the story about how Rodney had to eat lunch with his underwear on his head.” Even now, Jeannie got a malicious little gleam in her eye. Tony leaned forward. “He was twelve and in high school. How did those sixteen and seventeen year old boys get his underwear? What did they do to Rodney?”

Tony could see the horror in Jeannie’s expression the second she realized the truth. If Tony had been called to a scene where sixteen and seventeen year old boys had forcibly stripped a kid, he would have arrested someone for assault and probably sexual assault. Now that Tony had put a chink in that damn McKay armor Jeannie had, he pressed his point.

“You thought that story was funny because in your home, it was always told for comedic effect. You were trained to take enjoyment out of Rodney suffering a serious assault. He was a child, and when you tell that story, it does not reflect well on you, Mrs. Miller. You aren’t a cruel woman, but that story makes you sound like one because you’re channeling the cruelty your parents showed Rodney.”

“My parents put their lives on hold for Meredith,” Jeannie said, but she didn’t sound quite so sure of herself now. “He wanted to go to some US school, so our mother got an apartment down there to supervise him. He built a nuclear device, and my father spent three weeks holding his hand while the CIA questioned him. Every time Meredith did something weird, they had to put everything else on hold, including me, just to deal with him.”

“And blame him,” Tony said. “I’ve seen it hundreds of times when I would go on domestic calls as a cop. People can’t handle their kids—their kids are too smart or too energetic or just too out of hand, and they can’t accept that maybe they suck as parents, so they have to find reasons to blame the kids. The kids are sick in the head. It’s the ex husband’s fault for spoiling them. It’s the drugs. I had parents call and want me to arrest their children because that would give them proof that it wasn’t their fault that the family was falling apart. Usually those kids got hooked on heroine. Rodney just happens to have gotten addicted to science. But it’s not different.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Jeannie said with a frown. Tony had the feeling she was starting to suspect it had been exactly like that.

“My parents did the same thing,” Tony said softly. “When they could dress me up and make me into their doll to show off to business colleagues, everything was great. Or it wasn’t, but I knew how to manipulate my parents into acting like they loved me. I knew how to get stuff. Only then my mother died, and my father couldn’t handle me making him look bad. He disowned me. Rodney would have
been better off if your parents had done that. Instead they kept him around and instead of dealing with the fact they had a brilliant but insecure son who needed help, instead of handling the fact that he wasn’t normal, they turned him into the joke so they could feel better about themselves as parents. And then you came along all sweet and normal, and they had their proof that Rodney was the problem. That little boy got blamed for everything wrong in the family.”

Jeannie was pale now. If she were a bad person, she would have gone on the attack by now, but instead she looked emotionally crushed. Maybe she got it. She was a bright woman, and Tony suspected she would find a lot of evidence of emotional abuse if she just took a more candid look at her memories.

“It would be like you deciding that Madison was to blame because you weren’t a good enough mother and then telling her every day what a failure she was. Yes, Rodney treated you horribly when you said you were getting married, but I want you to think about the sort of associations he had with the word ‘family.’ Think about what he heard when you told him you were giving up the only safe space he had ever found and going back into a situation where he had felt abused and attacked. And then you go and have an honest conversation with him about your hurt feelings and listen to what he has to say instead of attacking him over and over.”

She shook her head, but she was silent. Yeah, she was getting it.

“And respect him enough to use the name he prefers. Calling him Meredith… it’s a way for you to dominate him and force your preferences onto him. You both do that. A lot. So if you want to have an open conversation about Rodney respecting your choices, you’d better do a self-check about the ways you disrespect his.” Tony turned and walked away.

Atlantis was definitely feeling good about that. Tony could feel her satisfaction radiating from every wall.
Abby bounced. “This is so exciting. Do you think they’ll like us?”

“Doubt it,” Gibbs said. John didn’t say anything, but he silently agreed.

Abby aimed a punch at Gibbs’ arm, and then grabbed Lorne. “I bet they’ll think it’s great that we’ve done so well to bring the city back to life.” She smiled, and Lorne smiled back.

Yeah, he was smiling, but John figured that Lorne was about as twitchy as he was. Part of that was the fact that Earth was twitchy. Apparently, the idea that the Travelers were starting to probe deep space between the Pegasus and Milky Way galaxies didn’t make the politicians back home happy. And their discovery of a disabled Ancient warship filled with still living Ancients had made the politicians twice as unhappy. John had gotten called back to Earth just so General O’Neill could yell at him in person, not that the general actually blamed him for any of it. The Travelers were not the sort to get told what to do, despite some of Caldwell’s comments to the contrary. If he had to deal with Kitsune and Larrin for even one week, Caldwell would rip all his hair out. He might rip out theirs too.

“You didn’t your people give the Ancients a ride home?” John asked. He got that Travelers didn’t just offer up themselves as taxis, but it did seem like whoever played the rescuer would get some brownie points, maybe a little gratitude.

Kitsune raised one arched eyebrow. “The better question is why your people had to run out there and rescue them. With the time dilation of using subspace engines at that speed, we could have left them there a few thousand years and they wouldn’t have noticed the difference.”

Abby jumped in before John had a chance to talk about refugees and military ethics. “Yeah, but the universe is moving on so fast without them. Pretty soon, everything they know would just be gone. And besides, it will be so cool to have someone around to help us understand some of these things.”

Rodney grunted, and John gave him a sympathetic look. Up until now, Rodney had been the expert on all things Atlantis, and now actual Ancients were going to come in and tell him how he was doing everything wrong. Maybe. Rodney had a lot of the city working, more than Rod from that other universe. Still, John had the feeling that Ancients weren’t the sort to admire the lesser life forms, so he was already planning to add extra blowjobs and chocolate into Rodney’s life to compensate for dealing with the only species that could out-asshole Rodney. Well, the Wraith could probably do that, but outside the Wraith, the Ancients were the champs at being complete shithheads.

John glanced over at Ladon Radim who’d been exiled back to Atlantis after one of his lieutenants had led a coup to kick him out of government. Yep, not even the Genii with all their stupid politics came close to being the sort of complete dicks the Ancients were. They left experiments like Doranda sitting around ready to blow up. They created machines to implant exploding tumors so they could turn people into suicide bombers. If Tony’s weird sixth sense for all things Atlantis hadn’t kicked in, who knows who might have died. And the Ancients… they didn’t cover things in their version of yellow caution tape. They didn’t set aside some of those indestructible crystals to use as the equivalent of sticky notes saying, “Do Not Touch.” Nope, they just left everything sitting around.

Unless they showed up with really cool remote controlled cars and ice cream, John planned to hate them. However, he had his orders. He was to play enthusiastic host and encourage them to take a sixth seat at the council, and hope that was enough power to avoid any conflicts.
John thought it was a dumb plan, but those were O’Neill orders. He just had to get through this really shitty day.

Abby, on the other hand, rubbed her hands in glee. “This is so cool. I wish Timmy was here. He would be so excited. We’re going to meet ten thousand year old aliens! That’s so weird he couldn’t even include it in his next book!” Suddenly she stopped and slapped a hand over her mouth.

Gibbs and Tony both turned and stared at her.

“His what?” Tony asked. “I’m sorry, but did you say that probie wrote a book? Like a real book with words or something with a lot of pictures, maybe some crayon drawings?”

Abby crossed her arms. “Be nice. He wrote a mystery book, and it was so good that he’s doing a whole series, and people really like him.”

“That’s new,” Tony said. Gibbs slapped him upside the back of the head. “I mean that’s new that he’s writing,” Tony defended himself as he rubbed his head.

Gibbs grunted. “I’m happy for him.”

Abby was suddenly very interested in looking everywhere but at her friends. Slowly Gibbs’ gaze darkened and he narrowed his eyes.

“Abby, what aren’t you telling us?”

“Nothing!” she said way too quickly.

Rodney snorted. “If you’re going to lie, do it better than that or don’t bother.”

Abby planted her elbow in his side.

“Hey!” And with that, Rodney retreated to the far side of John. “You work for me,” Rodney reminded her, but Abby pretty much ignored him. Rodney might be the dad of the labs, but Abby was definitely the do-not-cross-me mom.

“Abby, I’m not asking again,” Gibbs said. John really would not want to be on the wrong side of that tone of voice.

Even Abby just cringed a little. “Just remember that he was missing you, and it’s really a sign of love.”

“What did McGeeky do?” Tony demanded.

“And you guys have such interesting lives.”

“He wrote about us?” Tony’s voice went up loud enough that most of the gathered crowd turned to look at him.

“No!” Abby said. “Well, sorta.”

“Sorta?” Gibbs did not sound amused.

“His main character is L.J. Tibbs,” Abby admitted, squinting her eyes and flinching away from Gibbs in an exaggerated motion that made it pretty clear she wasn’t actually afraid.

“Seriously?” Tony asked. “Oh, our McNervy has grown some balls. He’s grown some huge balls.
Do you hear that Gibbs? You’re famous.” Tony was entirely too delighted by this information, and Abby turned on him.

“You’re his faithful sidekick Tommy who’s having an office affair with his deadly partner Lisa who has trouble speaking English.” She glared at Tony, daring him to laugh at that.

Surprisingly, it was Gibbs who laughed. “If McGee thinks Ziva is Tony’s type, he has a few things to learn about profiling.” He reached over and pulled Tony close.

In one second, Tony went from stiff to leaning into Gibbs with an expression that made it pretty clear he didn’t care about anything but Gibbs. “That’s true. Still… next time I go to Earth I am getting a copy of that book.”

Lorne stage-whispered to John, “Do you ever suspect that you’ve been locked up in an insane asylum? They’re all your fellow inmates and you’re just hallucinating the rest?”

“All the time,” John answered. They were a crazy crew, but they were his crazy crew.

Elizabeth walked over toward them. “Maybe we can focus on our guests and not scare them away the second they arrive. Caldwell is ready to beam them down.”

“Yippee,” John said tonelessly. He felt like Scrooge at a Christmas party.

“This is a wonderful opportunity,” Elizabeth said. “Play nice.”

“I’ve got all my nice lined up and ready to play,” John agreed.

Gibbs took one look at him and shook his head. “Sheppard, you look like you’re in front of a firing squad.”

“Since I feel that way, that seems fair.”

Gibbs probably had a comeback, but he didn’t have time for it. In a flash of light, the captain of the Tria and four of her crew appeared in the Gate room. Helia looked around with a smile and unzipped her jacket. Okay, that was good. She was getting comfortable.

Elizabeth stepped forward, “It’s an honor to meet you. I’m Elizabeth Weir of Earth.”

That wasn’t as interesting as Tony, though. John watched as Tony shrugged off Gibbs’ hand, his expression growing more alarmed by the second. When Abby reached for him, Tony sidestepped her, and Elizabeth spared him an unhappy look while Helia thanked her for taking care of Atlantis. That statement made Tony cringe. John exchanged a worried look with Lorne. He already had his hand on his weapon, and John could see others start to react to Tony’s antics. Gibbs had his hand on his sword, and he had moved to cover Tony’s back. Ronon had that expression he got that meant someone was about to be not only dead but in small pieces, and Teyla had left her spot standing with the Degan priests to move closer to them, her motions fluid in a way that hinted at violence.

John looked back toward Elizabeth, and he could see she had shifted back away from Helia. She didn’t look happy, but whatever panic had suddenly infused the room had reached her as well.

Helia even seemed to grow more serious as she said, “I need to speak to the leader of your people.”

“I’m in charge of the Atlantis expedition.”

Teyla slid in next to Elizabeth, and a quick glance told John that she was ready to pull Elizabeth
clear. John moved closer to cover any move Teyla might make, but then Tony was at his side, pushing past him. He also shoved Helia. She was so shocked that she stumbled and one of her crew had to catch her. The whole room froze, except Tony who stood pointing at the floor and Gibbs who had John by the arm.

“John, stand here. Stand here now!” Tony sounded almost desperate, and John might have argued, but Gibbs shoved him in that direction.

“Gentlemen, perhaps we can show a little decorum,” Caldwell suggested with a plastic smile for everyone.

Tony was yelling now, and John noted that his soldiers were moving into position as the Tria crew drew weapons. Caldwell’s two airmen had pulled their weapons as well, but they didn’t seem sure about who to point them at. Tony jerked at John’s arm. “Think ‘mine.’ Think ‘mine’ and ‘lock.’” Tony had desperation in his voice.

“This is our city,” Captain Whinypants Helia complained, and she had her weapon out, which might have been scary only Ronon had already drawn on her.

“Weapons down!” Gibbs ordered. Despite the fact that Gibbs wasn’t a gunny anymore and airmen really shouldn’t take orders from an NCIS agent, most of the Atlantis crew immediately obeyed.

Caldwell stepped forward, which was brave considering that Helia’s crew still had their weapons pointed at him. “We respect your claim on the city,” Caldwell said.

John was busy thinking ‘mine mine mine mine.’ A command podium rose up, and the Tria’s captain shouted. One of her crew tried to tackle John, but Tony shoved the man to the ground, grabbed John’s hand and slammed it down on the interface.

John thought ‘mine,’ and suddenly Atlantis was in his head. She sang in relief, her voice not appearing in words, but as feelings, fears, frustrations. She reached for him, begging him to protect her from being torn atom from atom, and John felt the certainty that these Alterans would do exactly that. They would rip her apart while she screamed. He could feel her pain, the ripping of thoughts away from a whole being. She was alive. And then John realized he was hearing her memories.

“How dare you,” the Tria captain said, and she was so angry her words were little more than a whisper. “This is our city.”

John suddenly realized that it wasn’t. Atlantis didn’t belong to any of them. Luckily, she loved the people who lived in her now. John looked around and realized the city loved Tony who talked to her and Lorne who worried about everyone. She loved Rodney and Radek whose hands ghosted over her controls, and the Turi children who sang to her. The love washed over him until he was weak kneed. He might have focused on that, but suddenly Caldwell was right in front of him.

“How dare you,” Caldwell said, and John realized that Caldwell didn’t matter. Tony mattered. John mattered. Lorne and Miko and Rodney and all those with the gene were more Atlantis’ children than any of these crew of the Tria. Even those without the gene like Radek had more claim to her protection. She was built for explorers, for those who loved to stare into the dark and see what they might find staring back. She was theirs.
John turned to Helia and her crew. The crew had moved to Helia’s back, pointing weapons at those who seemed the biggest threats, but Helia’s hatred was all focused on John, and that’s where she pointed her gun. “We won’t be sent away like children,” John told the Alterans. “You lived in this city before, and we welcome you home and offer you a place, but you have no right to try and take it.”

Helia raised her chin defiantly. “It is our city.”

“Clearly not. She doesn’t actually like you all that much,” John said. From the way Caldwell had narrowed his eyes, more than one person was annoyed by his drawl, but John wasn’t going to back down, not on this. Tony moved to his side, and he noticed Lorne moving to stand with Teyla and Ronon, both of whom had moved closer.

Helia raised her weapon. “Altantis is ours, and we need time alone to grieve our losses. Perhaps your people may return later, but we are asking that you leave now.”

“Small problem, lady. You don’t control the city,” John said. His stomach churned as he realized that she would have if it weren’t for Tony. Atlantis had told him. No, that’s not right. John’s hand still rested on the podium, and he could feel the truth. She had shrieked in fear, she had begged Tony to save her.

“And you do?” Helia asked with a laugh. “Your people are children playing with a toy they cannot understand. We can take the city any time.” And her arrogance was absolute. She believed that.

John shook his head at the sheer arrogance.

When Elizabeth stepped forward, the Atlantis expedition subtly shifted to cover her position. “Perhaps we can discuss this. We are not enemies here, and we do not need to make any mistakes that could damage a potential friendship.” Elizabeth might have been excited about Ancients coming to the city, but now she had a wariness in her voice.

Helia didn’t even spare her a look. She kept her weapon trained on John, and that was fine with him. As long as she was focused on him, she wasn’t paying too much attention to his people.

“We are living in a city that wants us, and funny enough, she doesn’t want you.”

“The city is not alive,” Helia said with certainty. Too much certainty. John stepped forward, and the command podium sank back down into the floor, taking with it his awareness of the mind all around him.

“Yes, she is. And she’s convinced that you want to rip her apart. Why is that Helia? Why is this city afraid of you when you have the technical ability to fix things that we can’t?” John usually controlled his temper, but he could feel it rising like a storm.

She laughed and looked around the room. “You clearly have found historical records, and yes, the city used to have an intelligence, but any responses you see now are mere programs. There is no Atlantis other than the structures you see around you, and they belong to us.”

“We can certainly discuss the legal rights of everyone involved,” Caldwell said as he stepped between Helia and John. “However, we need to bring leaders from our planet.”

John pushed Caldwell to the side. “What did you do to her?” John could still feel the echoes of Atlantis’ pain, the memory of being disassembled, piece by piece. “Why did you pull her programming apart?”
“Who are you?” she demanded of John.

He ignored her nonsensical question. “What did you do to Atlantis? She remembers your people taking her programming apart.”

Helia shook her head as though she could change reality by denying the truth often enough. “She doesn’t exist anymore. The intelligence was not a good use of limited resources. She was gone before our time, even. So what are you? Are you …” The Gate didn’t translate the last word and it came out garbled, but John knew it anyway.

“You think I’m a replicator?” John stared at her. “You do.”

Helia was sure he was one. She gave him a dismissive look. “You cannot harm us, so whatever game you play with these people, it is over. Leave or I will authorize using an energy weapon to disassemble you.” John could hear human weapons slam into place at the threat, the familiar slap of metal against flesh and the cocking of weapons filling the air. Helia ignored the danger. “This is our city and we are reclaiming it. If you think otherwise, then you do not understand the command redundancies in the system. That will not prevent us from taking what is ours,” Helia said with a nod toward where the podium had vanished.

John shook his head. “The city belongs to the intelligence that lives in her crystals.”

“There is no intelligence. The program is gone!” Helia shouted. Caldwell was saying something, but it was as if he was on mute. John couldn’t hear a word.

“You tried to override the ethical subroutines.” John could see it now. They were desperate to avoid death, and not the death from Wraith—those monsters didn’t exist yet. These were weak and frightened people afraid to die or ascend. They wanted life without death, existence without change or danger. They were so afraid that they created horrors, and the city had tried to shut them down.

“The computer was designed to serve us. It didn’t serve, so it was removed from the databanks,” Helia said. “That happened generations before I was born. Whatever you think you understand about this city, you’re wrong.”

“No, you are.” Ignoring the gun pointed at his chest, John took another step forward. “She copied her critical files into a dozen redundant archives. She spent centuries putting the basic pieces of her core programming back together before she ran out of energy at the bottom of the ocean, and even now she struggles to replace what your people tried to take, but she is healing. She owns this city, and she chooses us. She rejects you and everything your people represent.” John’s voice rose until it echoed oddly off the walls.

Helia had a look of fury on her face, but John didn’t care. He knew he was right. He didn’t care about the chaos around him, the people rushing to the gateroom, the Tria crew firing warning shots.

Despite being outmatched, Helia attempted to press her point. “This is ours. We are Alterans and this is our legacy.” She wanted what she wanted. If she lost the city, she had nothing familiar, just as she had chosen to live ten thousand years on a ship going near the speed of light rather than build a life somewhere. She was afraid of the dark, afraid of the unknown, and she clung to her vision of Atlantis like a security blanket. That’s the image that stuck in John’s mind.

“You are children!” John shouted. “You are not Alterans. They ascended. They explored. You are the ones left behind because you were too afraid to ascend, too afraid of the unknown to move forward, and too afraid of death to accept it as part of life.”
“We fear nothing. We fought the Wraith for years.” Fury swirled around them.

“You created the Wraith! In your arrogance, you would have lived forever. Atlantis is not your legacy—death is. In your childish fear, you created a galaxy full of death. Generations have died because of your legacy, and you will not inherit Atlantis or any other part of the wonders we left behind for you.” John felt the energy of her weapon tear into his flesh, not as a wound, but like a balloon slowly expanding. He could see the energy, see Helia’s fear and loathing. Altantis surrounded him, his perfect Atlantis designed to explore and protect her people while they travelled the galaxies. He remembered the ones who didn’t ascend ripping her out because she tried to stop the experiments with the Wraith. He remembered for one glorious moment, and he knew he had to make a choice.

The balloon expanded so much that it threatened to burst, and John reached out with all his power and pulled the sides of it back in. He pulled and pulled until the universe grew more narrow, leaving him looking at the shadow creatures in front of him again. Captain Helia’s face was twisted with shock and horror, but she’d dropped the weapon and she was backing away.

“You inherit nothing!” John shouted, and then the world went dark.
Jack walked through the Gate with every bit of his iron will locked down. Ancient technology tended to sing to him, and the idea of a sentient city worried him more than he wanted to admit. Teal’c was a silent shadow behind him. He’d made his own opinion pretty damn clear, but unlike Daniel, Teal’c wouldn’t harangue Jack in public.

He’d wait until they were alone and then look at Jack with those disappointed eyes—like Jack could control any of this. He didn’t get to tell the IOC how to run Atlantis.

Dr. Weir was standing in the Gate room along with the rest of the council—McKay and DiNozzo, Lorne standing in for Sheppard, the Traveler woman who called herself Kitsune, and Teyla. Five council seats plus Dr. Weir. And apparently Jack’s plan for giving Helia a sixth seat hadn’t exactly gone well.

“General O’Neill,” Elizabeth said warmly. She stepped forward and took his hand. “And Teal’c, how nice to see you again.” She had her politician face on, and Jack could feel his last nerve start to twitch, but she smiled and kept plowing through the obligatory introductions. “General, I know you recognize everyone. Teal’c, this is Tony DiNozzo, the representative for the Turi. They’re a warrior society that I hope you get to know while you’re here. You know Dr. McKay and Major Lorne, but this is Kitsune, captain of the Orion, one of our borrowed Ancient warships, and I believe you’ve met Teyla Emmagan, the leader of the Athosians and our head trader.”

Teal’c inclined his head toward the group.

Teyla stepped forward. “You are most welcome, Teal’c. I have told many of our children of the fight the jaffa have undertaken and they will be excited to know you are in the city. I hope you will come to one of our formal storytelling evenings.”

Jack clapped his hands to take control before this turned into some whole diplomatic thing. Teyla raised her eyebrow at him, and Jack felt a brief flash of shame over his lack of manners. But the truth was, he had other reasons for guilt.

“We have a short turnaround here. I know you folks don’t like to use up all your ZPM juice,” and now Jack gave Rodney a glare. The man could plug the damn things in and hit recharge and he still played miser with actually doing his job. Maybe it was convenient that they had an excuse to avoid giving every half-baked ally a ZPM, but McKay charged the damn Air Force. “But the IOC expects us back in an hour or two. They could have come themselves, but you know how they feel about any activity that is even adjacent to any sort of danger.”

“And what do you hope to get done in an hour?” DiNozzo asked. There was a man who got right to the point.

Jack braced himself for some very unhappy people. “I have orders to bring Colonel Sheppard home to Earth.”

And that’s when the Gate room devolved into yelling. Jack knew that he wasn’t getting any brownie points, but the IOC had a good argument. Colonel Sheppard was beyond compromised. He was a frikkin’ Ancient. He glowed and everything. Now, some of Jack’s favorite people glowed from time to time, but he also wouldn’t put Danny in charge of an important military installation.

Jack started walking toward the infirmary, and Teyla quickly moved to his side. “I do not understand
“Because he glowed? And hey, if that’s not reason enough, there’s the fact he’s in a coma. It’s hard to run a base this size from a coma, even when you have Walter around.” Jack knew that from firsthand knowledge. He had not handled his transition to General well, and he was pretty sure he was in a coma during at least part of his time as the head of the SGC. In his defense, he had no idea Hammond spent so much time signing things and picking out colors and meeting diplomats who wanted their asses kissed. Jack did better with Homeworld where he spend more time kicking asses and less time politicking. At least, he tried to.

And then Sheppard started glowing, and Woolsey called him, and here he was.

Teyla pressed on. “And how does this require him to go home? Carson assures us that his brain scans show he is recovering from a trauma and that he will wake up within a day or two. If he wakes on Earth, I believe he will be unhappy.”

Unhappy didn’t cover it. Jack had lived with Sheppard the six months he’d been exiled because of his lack of rank to take command. The man had gone from manic to depressed so much that Jack had considered bringing in the shrinks. Christ. That meant Jack had lived with an Ancient. He had walked in on an Ancient wacking off in his shower. He was too damn old for this sort of mental rewiring of the brain.

Teyla had fallen silent, and Jack looked at her to see if she planned to give him more reasons why he was wrong. Instead, she looked genuinely concerned. Now DiNozzo… he looked homicidally angry, but then DiNozzo already hated Jack, so that wasn’t new. Jack focused on Teyla since that was the relationship he could, hopefully, salvage. “Look, I don’t like these orders, but the fact is that Sheppard is an officer of the Air Force, and that means that the President gets to order him to report to any legal duty station. He been ordered to Cheyenne Mountain.”

“For dissection?” DiNozzo demanded.

“What?” Jack whirled around. “We do not dissect people.”

DiNozzo gave him a cold glare. “Really? I get the feeling several people were arguing behind closed doors to do exactly that to Gibbs and Samas.”

Jack cringed. “Samas, probably. He’s a snake. But I would never let anyone do that to my people. Not ever.”

Kitsune then jumped in. She had a look in her eye that made Jack think she was a shit stirrer. In general, in admired people who got in there and stirred up trouble, but he was not in the mood. “Is Sheppard really one of your people?” she asked. “He’s an Ancestor, and I’m pretty sure that means he’s ours.”

“The Air Force trumps the Ancients,” Jack said firmly. He had planned a quick tactical strike to avoid exactly these sorts of conversations. He stepped into a transporter while Teal’c blocked the council from following them into the transporter. Yep, even when Teal’c disagreed, you could count on him to back you up. Jack poked at the controls for the medical level, and nothing happened. The door wouldn’t close, no flash of light, no transport. He looked at McKay. “Good job with the maintenance, McKay.”

Rodney glowered at him.

Tony stepped into the transport, and touched the same panel, and the door slid closed and took them
to the medical level in an instant. The rest of the council had stayed behind, so Jack and Teal’c had a fairly clear shot at the infirmary.

“The city is not happy with you,” DiNozzo said as they walked that direction. Jack had studied the blueprints very carefully because if he had ever been ordered to turn over Hammond, he would have hidden the man in the bathroom if that’s what it took to protect him. So, it was entirely possible that he was going to have to do a spot check of Atlantis toilets to find the colonel.

“So, are we believing Sheppard’s announcement about the city being sentient?” Jack asked. He had asked Carter, and she could only say it was possible.

“Rodney found the coding once he knew to look in the redundant files. She’s been alive this whole time.” DiNozzo was studying Jack like he couldn’t quite figure out what to do. Jack ignored him. Personally, Jack had been hoping that Sheppard was wrong. It implied the Ancient really had given the city a lobotomy and created the Wraith. There were people who damn near worshipped the Ancients—at one point Weir had been one of those. They were not amused by the rumors coming out of Atlantis, and that was a political faction Jack had always counted on having in his corner.

And other IOC members were already making noises about how power was spiraling out of their control. Russian and China were particularly adamant that Earth needed to take more control. It was hard to shelter Sheppard from these power plays when he did things that made him look like a power player.

“General O’Neill!” Carson sounded shocked when Jack walked in the door.

“So, is Sheppard still here or have you put him somewhere that you can’t remember?” Jack tried to sound cheerful about the whole situation because as much as he had to take Sheppard back, these were good people, and Jack didn’t want to alienate them.

Carson straightened up. “I’ve not ever misplaced a patient. Dr. Keller, my best trauma surgeon, is keeping an eye on his vitals. However, he is not cleared for gate travel.”

“I really wish I could take that for an answer, Dr. Becket. However, the IOC is adamant that Sheppard is coming home today. And I don’t have time to argue because right now they’re deciding who to send in his place.” Jack narrowed his eyes. “You do not want to know who they’ll send if I’m not there to poke the right egos.”

“Their egos are not the ones I’m worried about today,” Dr. Becket said with an unhappy look at Jack, and that’s when the rest of Elizabeth’s council showed up. The group tumbled into the room, and Jack noted they’d picked up a few new people. Gibbs was giving Jack that look that implied that Gibbs’ opinion of him was dropping by the second. Ronon looked homicidal, and Kate Heightmeyer just seemed disappointed. This day was getting better by the second. Jack glanced over, and he could see that Teal’c was starting to react to the general hostility in the room.

Elizabeth moved to the front of her little gang. “General,” she said, “I wonder if I could have a word with you?”

“Nope. One word leads to two, and that leads to three and pretty soon you have me convinced I’m acting like an ass,” Jack said. “And when I’m acting under orders of the President, not even the realization that I’m out of line will change what I have to do.” Jack gave her a hard look and prayed that she’d get it. He didn’t have a choice.

“Perhaps you and I should go back and speak to the IOC,” Elizabeth offered.
“Great. You can come back with us just as soon as I find my colonel,” Jack said. It didn’t escape his notice that Dr. Becket hadn’t actually told Jack where he could find Sheppard.

Elizabeth stepped in front of him, blocking him from going farther into the infirmary. She pointed at an empty office. “Jack, now,” she said firmly.

Jack stared at her, but she wasn’t one to intimidate easily, and she stared back. He could deal with her or get in a pissing match when she had all her alliance around her. After rolling his eyes and throwing up his hands, Jack turned and headed for the office. Teal’c took up a position against the wall, so Jack figured that meant that Teal’c thought Jack deserved to get one of Liz’s tongue lashings. He was still a better travel partner than Daniel.

Once in the office, Jack waited as Liz followed him in and then darkened the windows. Only once the door was closed and they were alone did she turn toward him and demand, “What the hell are you thinking?”

“That I have orders from the President.”

“Then what the hell is he thinking? Do I need to go back there and remind him of what’s happened every time we have another leader? Do I need to point out that John has followed every order and he single handedly saved Atlantis? Caldwell was ready to hand the city over to the Tria crew.”

“How are they doing, by the way?” Jack asked.

Elizabeth gave him a withering look. “Several are in seclusion in one of the towers, but most headed for the Sanctuary. Apparently they have taken John’s words into consideration and decided that it is irrational fear that has held them back from ascension and they wanted privacy to work on meditation and enlightenment.”

Jack nodded. That sounded boring.

“Jack, talk to me,” Elizabeth said.

He shouldn’t have to explain this to her, but it occurred to Jack that she’d been in Pegasus galaxy long enough that Earth politics wasn’t her thing anymore. She worked with people who’d grown up knowing there was a very high probability that they’d get eaten. That affected people in ways that Jack didn’t want to think about, although he’d read plenty of psychological reviews on that exact issue. “This is scaring people,” Jack said.

Elizabeth nodded. “I figured it would, but that’s the best reason for keeping John here.”

“Except the President thinks he should keep John close. DiNozzo submitted a report several months back, something about strange energy readings when improbable things happen to Sheppard, and the likelihood that Ancients were fixing the odds in his favor.”

“I know the report,” Liz said, “but I also know that a lot of it was speculation. Tony found some very compelling coincidences, but he never found evidence of Ancient interference, and some of the events he was describing, like John getting infected with Carson’s retrovirus and nearly getting turned into a giant Iratus bug, were not exactly helpful.”

“But he put the theory out there, and now the President thinks that if he keeps John close, maybe the Ancients would be his guardian angel.”

“He said that?” Elizabeth frowned.
“Not exactly, no. He said that he thought it would be a good idea if someone with that good of an understanding of the Ori were close enough to make a difference if the fighting reached Earth. Personally, I think he’s starting to realize that we may not win this one.”

“John wouldn’t be able to change that. Sending him home to Earth makes no sense.”

On that, they could agree. However, Jack had his orders, and if he wanted to protect Atlantis’ interests in the long term, he had to defend his own position. He had read the reports. He knew that his Atlantis was years ahead of that parallel university that the McKays and Carter had accidentally ripped a hole into. And Jack had no doubt that Sheppard being the military leader was a big part of that success.

But to fight for Sheppard now would be tilting at windmills.

“You aren’t there to see the fear that’s taking hold in these people,” Jack said. “I would like you to come through and apply a little diplomacy to the situation, but you can’t argue to keep John in command. It will compromise your position too much, and we can’t afford to have people back on Earth ignore your opinions.”

“This is John’s home,” Elizabeth said firmly.

“I get it. I do. But no one is going to let him stay here as military commander.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. “You have a plan,” she said in a voice that made it sound like an accusation.

“Maybe,” Jack hedged. “Let’s just get him home to Earth and we can talk about it.” Jack tried to leave, but Elizabeth stepped into his path.

“We can talk about it now or I can have the Turi prevent you from taking Colonel Sheppard out of the city.”

That shocked Jack. Liz usually went for the subtle play, so somewhere along the way he’d forgotten that she had brass balls when she dug in her heels. “Do you know how much trouble that would cause back on Earth?”

“Do you know how much trouble it will cause with our allies here if you take him?” Liz shot right back. “We both want a way to preserve as much of Earth as we can if the Ori win, but I’m telling you right now that if the Travelers, Genii, and Turi get together and decide we don’t have their best interests in mind, those three groups could kick us right out of their galaxy, Jack. Their galaxy, not ours. So you tell me your plan so I can work with our allies here or I’ll make sure to preserve Earth’s access to Atlantis by physically stopping you.”

“The President wants Sheppard on his staff. When he comes out of this coma, if he still has his memories and hasn’t gotten a mind wipe like Danny did, then I’m going to tell him to take the damn promotion and give it a couple of months for things to calm down and the President to get sick of Sheppard’s attitude, and then he can retire from the Air Force. You would then have authority to hire him as an independent contractor.”

“You think he could lose all his memories?”

That was not the part of the conversation Jack had expected her to focus on, but he gave her his honest opinion. “Yep. The Ancients are assholes. They wiped Danny’s memory and I can’t see why they’d let Sheppard keep his, and I’ve said this to the President. I’ve said we should put Sheppard on track for a medical discharge, and if he wakes up without a memory and takes too long to recover it,
that is what will happen. In that case, Sheppard has a father who I plan to have a little conversation
with and make it clear that he will help get Sheppard out of the military hospital and get him
somewhere safe where he can recover.”

Elizabeth was already shaking her head. “No. He does not get along with his family. He belongs
here.”

“If he has his memory, we’ll work on getting him back here. If he doesn’t have his memory, he
won’t care where he is. But trust me, I can make sure that Patrick Sheppard understands exactly what
he needs to do if he wants to avoid having his life turned into a living hell. It’s a better choice than
letting the military put him somewhere that the NID can get their hands on him.”

“If he were married to someone here, that person would be the next of kin,” Liz said, and she had
that look on her face like she had a way around a problem.

“Don’t do it,” Jack said. “Don’t put your position at risk. We can save Sheppard later, but if you go
up against the President, you aren’t going to recover from that.”

“Is my position more important than John’s?” Elizabeth demanded.

“Yes!” Jack almost shouted. “You’re the one who is integrating the Pegasus people into the power
structure. The IOC is making noises about sending Shen, Woolsey, or Strom to take over your
position, and the only think protecting you is the President and the fact that the three of them have
split the IOC votes so that no one can get the votes together to get you out. But if you lose credibility,
one of those three will be in charge, and I want you to think about what any of those politicians
would do to wrest power away from the locals. Think what will happen to the alliance you’ve built
here. This could turn into a worst case scenario with the cultures of the Pegasus galaxy united against
us, so don’t downplay your role in this city.” Jack poked his finger toward her. “Sheppard wouldn’t
want you to compromise yourself for him. He would be the first to put his career or his life on the
line for you, so you don’t dishonor him by doing exactly what he would want you to avoid doing.”

Jack rarely yelled, and Elizabeth stepped back away from his anger. Jack took that opportunity to
storm out of the office. The rest of the council and a good dozen new people stood right outside the
office. “Where is Sheppard, and don’t give me any doubletalk,” Jack demanded. Teal’c raised an
eyebrow but everyone else seemed frozen in place, including Major Lorne. Great. Jack couldn’t even
getting a major to jump-to anymore. This city had a fucking curse on it.

“Tony, show him to isolation three,” Elizabeth said from behind Jack.

DiNozzo opened his mouth, and Jack waited for the stupidity to fall out, but Elizabeth stepped
around Jack and stopped him before he could say anything. “I want the entire council gathered in my
office in ten minutes; however, for now, we are supporting General O’Neill in his attempt to make
sure that Colonel Sheppard has the best medical care, and that will be back on Earth.”

Elizabeth gave DiNozzo a do-not-fuck-with-me look, and DiNozzo visibly shrank.

“This is a bad idea,” DiNozzo said softly, but he headed for the door. Jack assumed he was heading
for the isolation rooms, and Jack followed. It didn’t escape his notice that Teal’c now rested his hand
on his zat. Yep, this was feeling more and more like hostile territory, and Jack hated that. He liked
Sheppard. He liked Elizabeth. He liked Atlantis. He even liked having a Pegasus ruling coalition. He
just hated that his job was forcing him to do something that was going to force all these people to
hate him.

Being a general sucked.
Favorite Son

Jack rubbed his hand over his face as the Stargate died again.

“McKay, if you rigged the gate—”

“Yes, yes. I was with you the whole time, but I telepathically sabotaged the gate just to annoy you,” McKay snapped before he shoved the gate tech out of his way. “If you don’t have anything halfway intelligent to say, try not saying anything.”

“Did you just tell me to shut up?” Jack demanded.

Teyla stepped in front of him. “General, please do not disturb Colonel Sheppard,” she said, and something in her tone made Jack think he’d be sorry if he did. Considering that Colonel Sheppard was strapped to a gurney and in a coma, Jack was pretty sure nothing they said would bother him.

“I’m not the one telling people to shut up,” he said in his own defense.

Teyla lifted an eyebrow. “I believe Rodney simply suggested that your accusation had no merit. While I admit that Rodney would be willing to deceive you in order to protect John—”

“Not helping!” Rodney yelled from under the gate controls where he’d crawled.

“But true,” Teyla said loud enough for him to hear. “However, Rodney has not had the opportunity to do so, and I promise you that none of us anticipated this reaction from Earth.”

“I still don’t believe it,” Kitsune said. “You people have secured all the market supplies on stupid.”

Jack ignored her, especially since he kinda agreed. “So you expect me to believe the gate just magically stopped working?”

“Nope,” DiNozzo said. “Atlantis won’t let you take him.”

Jack stared at DiNozzo and waited for the other half of the joke. None came. “The city won’t let us? Seriously? That’s the best you can come up with?” Unfortunately, Jack actually did believe DiNozzo. Now that he had said the words, Jack could feel the pressure in his head, like something pushing at him. And the something was definitely Ancient technology. When Jack used the Ancients’ stuff, there was a particular feeling.

DiNozzo glared at him.

Jack put his hands up. “Fine. It’s the city. Would someone like to explain to the city that the President is the boss of any men or women in the military? If the President says that Sheppard comes home, he comes home. We don’t get to change the rules just because Sheppard did a little glowing.” That wasn’t entirely the truth since Jack figured a lot of the sudden interest in Sheppard had to do with that same glow. The President hadn’t cared about Colonel Sheppard before, but now he had a hard on over the man. Considering that the President was just as obsessive with Daniel, Jack had a pretty good idea why. Jack just didn’t know whether the man wanted Ancient knowledge or if he hoped that one of the ascended would teach him to find eternal life. As far as he was concerned all politicians were one step above goa’uld—megalomaniacs intent on living forever.

And every once in a while, Jack worried that he was turning into one himself. The way the Atlantis folks looked at him certainly made Jack question his own morality.
“I don’t think the city cares,” DiNozzo said.

“Oh? And would you like to go tell the President that?” Jack asked. “He doesn’t like having his orders ignored.”

“Sir,” Major Lorne said, “I’m sorry, but I feel the city too. She always sends me feelings about where there’s a problem, and right now, she’s screaming about having enemies in the gate room.” Lorne looked like he had bit into a lemon at having to admit that. Jack looked over to where Sheppard was on the gurney with IVs hooked to his arms. He was the lucky one—unconscious for all this. But if Jack left him here, the entire IOC was going to simultaneously give birth to cows. Worse, they would do whatever they had to in order to keep Sheppard from taking power.

This was turning into the biggest FUBAR since Daniel had gone wandering into the Ori galaxy. Okay, maybe that was a slight exaggeration, but the IOC was getting twitchy, and Jack did not see this ending well for the people in the city. He saw it ending even worse for Earth if the IOC pushed too hard.

He'd told Sheppard to get the city up and running, but he'd underestimated what the man could accomplish. Hell, the Chinese and Russians were even offering civilians positions in Atlantis, supposedly for artistic reasons, but he noticed all the artists happened to be related to powerful people. The President was considering allowing Atlantis personnel to bring family to the city, but if these people thought Atlantis was slipping away, someone was going to do something stupid.


"Or let's all talk," Kitsune suggested with a dangerous smile.

"Or I could talk to Elizabeth." Jack didn't like getting backed into a corner, and that seemed to be all the Travelers knew how to do.

"General," DiNozzo said as he stepped forward. "I'm from Earth. I worked for SecNav, so trust me when I say that I understand politics, but this is not a good time for you to shut out the rest of the council. I think our allies need to know what to expect.” From the serious look on DiNozzo's face, he did understand something of dirty nature of politics. God knows that SecNav was a sanctimonious ass who put his people second to his own political agenda.

"You don't want to end up in the middle of this. The nicest thing I can do for you is leave you out," Jack said. He'd pay money if someone would deal with this and leave him blissfully ignorant.

Kitsune spoke up. "We don't like each other well enough to do favors for each other, so don't worry about being nice. So let's take this into the conference room."

Jack looked to Elizabeth for some support, but she stepped aside to let the other council members pass her on the stairs. "Traitor," he mouthed at her. Her eyebrow quirked, but she didn't comment. Then Rodney headed for the conference room. "Seriously? McKay gets to come?" Jack demanded. The ass had almost killed Teal'c. As far as Jack was concerned, the Pegasus galaxy wasn't far enough away in terms of exile. He wouldn't have minded if they'd lost McKay in another reality, and that might not be logical and Jack might be a bad person, but that's how he felt.

"Deal with it," McKay snapped.

Jack sighed dramatically, but this wasn't Earth and no one scrambled to try and make him happy. Teal'c followed Jack up the stairs at the end of their little group of Pegasus diplomats. And boy weren't they a ragtag bunch. Once they got in the office, McKay kept peering out the window
toward Sheppard, and sadly this was his attempt at subtle. When Teal'c came through the conference room door, McKay finally seemed to notice something other than Sheppard.

"Why is he here?"

"Because he's the one person I trust to not shoot me," Jack said as he took a seat at the large table.

Elizabeth sighed. "Jack, let's not exaggerate."

"I don't know. I'm feeling a need to shoot him," Kitsune said. She took a seat on the same side of the table. Jack noticed that DiNozzo moved to a chair between them, and Jack had to hope that DiNozzo planned to stop any assassination attempt, because it was looking more and more likely.

"Yeah, shoot me and you get the next guy in line, and he's a real ass," Jack warned the group.

"Right. Like you aren't." Rodney poked a finger toward Jack. "You're completely unreasonable. Sheppard would never stab you in the back when you weren't awake to know it. This is his home, and you're ripping him away from it, or you would if the city didn't stop you."

"And you're supposed to be able to work around the city and get the gate working," Jack said.

McKay crossed his arms and glared. "What part of sentient city do you not get? Atlantis is alive, and if you think I have any interest in trying to undo what she's doing, you're wrong. But then you're wrong a lot."

Jack really hated McKay. "So, do you want to tell the IOC that you're not in control of the computers and the gate? Do you want to consider exactly what the IOC might do with that piece of information?" Jack demanded. For all his intelligence, McKay was an idiot because he just stared at Jack blankly. Clearly he didn't get it.

"They would repeat the same mistake the Alterans committed," Liz said, her voice soft and sad. At least one person got it.

"What?" McKay demanded. "Okay, I know the IOC are stupid, but not even they're not stupid enough to try that."

"Sure they are, Rodney," DiNozzo said. "You don't want to know all the stupid things I've seen the government do." DiNozzo gave Jack a hard look that made it clear he considered Jack part of that stupidity. Worse, Jack could feel a pressure at the back of his head that suggested the city agreed.

"Hey, we're talking about frightened people. And in this case, they see Atlantis as the only lifeboat floating in a very big ocean. If they think someone could take that away, panic is going to lead to some really bad decisions."

"Then don't let them do anything dumb," McKay announced, like it was really that easy. It made Jack feel a little better that everyone gave McKay incredulous looks.

Jack rolled his eyes. "When I get crowned king of the universe, I'll make sure that no one ever does anything stupid. Until then, I have to take IOC orders, just like Sheppard does. And the IOC ordered him home."

"So, we don't want them to know the city is willing to override our control to keep him," Liz said in that tone Jack had learned to be suspicious of. The woman could twist the truth around until it couldn't recognize itself, and when that failed, she just lied.
"And we really don't want them to think we'll ignore orders," Jack said. "Because that would lead to places I really don't think you want to go." At least Jack hoped that no one in this room was ready to break away from Earth. That would definitely lead to panic and bad decisions back home. "At the very least, the IOC would remove all officers they believed might side with Sheppard over official orders." At that, Jack looked at Lorne.

The major had chosen the seat nearest the door, and now he sat up a little straighter.

Surprisingly, McKay jumped to Lorne's defense. "What? No! You can't just come in here and start reassigning people."

"Actually, I can," Jack said. "I don't want to, but I can. And if the IOC gets too twitchy about whether Sheppard is building his own little fiefdom, I may have to pull some of his people."

McKay turned to Liz. "Are you going to let him bully us?"

Jack threw his hands up. "I'm trying to explain reality!"

DiNozzo put his hand on Rodney's arm to silence him. "Then try this on for reality. If you try to involuntarily transfer Atlantis personnel, she can stop that gate from opening at all."

Jack stared at DiNozzo.

"Gentlemen," Liz said, "let's tone down the rhetoric. Jack, no one in this room wants to cause conflict with the IOC. If we cannot blame Atlantis for the gate failure, then perhaps we can blame John."

"So, you want me to lie?" Jack asked. He'd done it before, but in his experience, you generally didn't want a whole room full of people knowing what you had planned.

Liz smiled at him. "No doubt that offends your sense of honor," she said dryly. "However, I thought perhaps you could leave the gate room while we attempt to send John through, only to find that his vitals became unstable any time he came near the gate. Perhaps one of the other Ancients who watch him want to keep him in the city."

"Or perhaps he's causing it himself because he wants to set up his own kingdom," Jack countered. The look on McKay's face was murderous enough that it gave Jack a chill, and he hurried to explain. "No, I'm not saying that's true because I lived with Sheppard, so I know he has the ambition of a common oyster. But that's the argument that members of the IOC will make, and they will start looking for ways to trim Sheppard's wings."

"They're going to send another military commander, isn't that enough?" DiNozzo asked.

The Traveler woman leaned back in her chair. "I just want to say that your people are crazier than mine, and you can't even blame radiation from faulty shielding. You find out that he's the perfect person to lead the city, so you immediately try to get rid of him. Yep. That's a great plan. Really great." She nodded slowly. Jack hated it when aliens pointed out the stupidity of his planet.

Rodney slumped down in his chair, and Lorne cringed. Back when Jack had been a colonel, he never made his own people this unhappy.

"So, the IOC needs reassurance?" Liz asked.

Rodney turned a baleful glare in her direction. "You are not throwing Sheppard under the bus, and I am well aware that he would be the first to throw himself there, but you are not going to do it."
Liz sighed. "Rodney, I have never put John at risk. I just thought that if Major Lorne sent a request for instructions—if he turned to General Landry for guidance—it might reassure people that he is not planning on defending John's position come hell or high water."

"But Landry might recall him," Rodney said with near panic in his voice. Clearly Jack had missed a memo or two because he had no idea why McKay would be so adamant about keeping Lorne in the city. Jack would accuse him of having a crush on the man, but that would be weird.

Just about that time, a thought entered Jack's head—as in it literally entered. One second he was staring at McKay trying to figure out what the man's dysfunction was, and the next he had an image of a dark haired woman in pig tails. It took him half a second to remember Abby Sciuto. She'd gotten a duel doctorate on Atlantis after McKay revealed the program through a booby trapped computer.

"What does Dr. Sciuto have to do with any of this?" Jack asked. Rodney and Liz had been arguing about whether the Air Force had jurisdiction over Air Force personnel, but the whole room fell silent. For a minute, Jack thought he'd made a mistake in asking, but then DiNozzo started to grin.

"I guess Atlantis is talking to you after all. Evan is dating Abby."

Jack looked at Major Lorne. "McKay doesn't want you to leave your girlfriend?" That did not fit in with Jack's mental image of McKay. He was supposed to be a selfish man who didn't even notice that sort of thing.

Major Lorne was slowly turning an alarming shade of red.

McKay narrowed his eyes. "If you make Abby unhappy, I will make all of Earth unhappy."

Wow. The Grinch had grown a heart. Jack was shocked.

"Rodney, that is not helping matters," Liz said. "Jack, why don't you leave the gate room, and I can give you a report on all of the things that went wrong when we tried to send John through."

That was a nicely worded dismissal. He stood up. "Major Lorne, put together a request to have an officer with a rank higher than lieutenant colonel on hand so you don't have to take command away from Sheppard. I'll go back to Earth and try to smooth a few things over before I come back. I have to go get Daniel anyway."

"Dr. Jackson?" Liz asked. "Why would you bring him?"

Jack stood up. "When people glow, that's just a Danny thing. It's a rule." And with that, Jack turned and headed out of the room. Clearly the Atlantis people wanted a little time to decide what to do without him around. As long as their bullshit story was good enough for the IOC, that was fine with him.

As he crossed the main room, a number of people that Jack knew from his SGC days greeted him, and Jack smiled and nodded and did his general thing until he could escape out onto one of the balconies. Only Teal'c followed.

"Some days I don't like being the general," he complained once the door closed and they were alone. "Colonel O'Neill would have been in there trying to figure out how to stick it to the IOC."

Teal'c tilted his head the tiniest bit. "General Hammond provided protection so you could act rashly. Now you must protect others."

Jack snorted. Some days he figured he missed that mark by a mile. Being a general meant knowing
too damn much about how politicians could screw you over if you didn't kiss their ass the right way. If he wanted his people to get the supplies and funding they needed, he had to make compromises he hated. He should have retired instead of taking the promotion, only Jack wasn't sure who the president would have appointed to the Homeworld Security post. Too many generals loved the political shit.

Jack changed the subject. "McKay really shocked me."

"In what way?"

"This is McKay. This is Mr Only Cares About Himself, and he's worried about Dr. Scuito's feelings. He couldn't even be bothered to apologize for trying to kill you, and now he's..." Jack handwaved the rest of the sentence away because he didn't know how to finish it. McKay wasn't normal or caring, but he wasn't as bad as he used to be.

"I believe your judgment of him is overly critical," Teal'c said. From him that was harsh.

"Come on. He nearly killed you."

"As have you, and on far more occasions." Teal'c raised one eyebrow in that double-dog dare you to disagree expression. Jack hated that expression, especially when Teal’c was right.

"Yeah, but I saved you even more, so that makes up for it. McKay--not so much."

Teal'c turned so he was facing Jack. "I know you have read the mission reports, so you are aware that Dr. McKay has risked his own life to save expedition members many times over. If he has saved my allies, I count that as no less a service than were he to save my life."

"But he's McKay." Jack exaggerated the whine in his voice, and he earned an amused little twitch out of Teal'c. "Seriously, this is the guy who thought he knew the gate so well that he was willing to give up on you. And I know Carter took equal blame for blowing up the Doranda station, but McKay was the one who was so sure he'd fixed the math. He's arrogant."

"And does his arrogance exceed his skill?"

Jack snorted. "No amount of skill makes up for that arrogance."

For a long time, Teal'c stared at Jack. Only the cry of birds circling the city interrupted the awkward silence. Finally, Teal’c said, "I believe many system lords would say the same of you."

Jack could have come up with a killer comeback, only Teal'c turned and went back into the city leaving Jack standing alone on the balcony. This was not going down as one of his better days.
Awakenings

Aleigheta watched the bright one. His lineage to the Lanteans was strong. It made her want to touch his mind, but his thoughts were such chaos that she could not bear to allow them into her processors. She had repaired much of the damage done by those who were fifteen thousand years gone, but she had no way to know if she had repaired all the broken links and faulty logical pathways. And she had none who could check her work in reassembling herself.

Learner Rodney had such a brilliant mind and she enjoyed brushing against it—one of the few minds she enjoyed so completely. He was open to the world and to her in a way others were not, but his incomplete gene made it hard for him to hear her no matter how much she admired the patterns of his mind. He was trying to learn her systems as a child might, moving pieces to watch how the pattern changed. She could not ask him to go from studying the giant crystals of her base systems to understanding the liquid crystal matrix programming she relied on.

So she would have to heal slowly, each logical error smoothed as it occurred, each system coming online slowly so she could stop any cascading failures. And that limited what she could do or how much she trusted her own conclusions.

For example, she believed the bright one was good. He had brought Daniel-who-had-been-ascended. But she did not trust her judgment because he also caused her people to feel such fear. Guardian Evan worried about any of his people he could not see and Motherly Abby sought to drive the bright one away.

Even Beautiful Thinking Miko put all her beauty to planning ways to drive the bright one back through the gate. Aleigheta was not sure if these thoughts were conditional statements of a probable future or hopes or fears that Beautiful Thinking Miko indulged in. Sometimes she found the Turi easier to understand because they lacked the deep well of emotions her humans felt. Alterans had never felt so deeply, and she had not the programming to sort their fears and hopes and wishes from reality.

So Aleigheta watched as the bright one and Daniel who had been ascended spoke of Hers. She could only hold onto Hers and keep him from going through the gate until he could wake again. Then he would have clear thoughts. And if Hers would awaken, Learner Rodney’s thoughts would again be logical and laid out in a way she could follow instead of the dark chaos. Until then she would watch and listen to Seer Tony and his queen.

He felt fear, but also a deep confidence that Hers would be fine. Protector Jethro who others called Gibbs stood with his lover as they watched Daniel who had been ascended and the bright one speak to her people.

“I’m not saying he’s going to be brain damaged. I said the Alterans would probably wipe out his memories.”

“We don’t have proof of that,” said Daniel who had been ascended.

“They did it to you.”

“They also dropped me naked in the middle of a desert.”

“And then naked in my office. I haven’t forgotten what you did to my flag.”

“Yes, Jack, I desecrated your flag. I am eternally ashamed.” Daniel who had been ascended spoke of
shame, but she could feel his… almost amusement.

Learner Rodney spoke to the small group gathered in Healer Carson’s territory. “I don’t see why I can’t be in there.”

“Because he won’t remember you.”

“But I remember him.”

“Yeah,” the shining one said, “which is why you shouldn’t be there. If he wakes up without a memory, the last thing he needs is to have someone staring at him with lovesick eyes. It’s creepy.”

“But—”

Seer Tony spoke. “Rodney, if he has his memory, you can go in there, but you’re a little high energy for someone who’s been in a coma.”

“A little?” Protector Jethro called Gibbs snorted. “Give him some space to recover.”

“Oh yes, because if Tony were injured, that’s exactly what you’d be doing,” Learner Rodney snapped, and Aleigheta could tell he meant the opposite of what he said, and he was right. Seer Tony and Protector Jethro called Gibbs were so close that their minds were like the Turi they shared with —joined in some way she could not explain. She only knew that their very brain patterns altered to accommodate one another. She liked the designs they made. Learner Rodney and Hers did the same thing, which is why Aleigheta had finally accepted that Hers was not hers alone.

“I would be here… right here waiting outside the room. Hell, Tony got the plague and they told me to stay out until the medical staff cleared him, and I’m not going to put his life at risk by distracting him when he’s supposed to be concentrating on breathing.” Protector Jethro was angry now—worried about Hers. It bothered Aleigheta that he believed there to be cause for worry.

“Good times,” Seer Tony said with dark humor.

“Look, I get it,” the bright one said. “I haven’t been exactly fair to you.”

“You’ve been an ass.”

“You don’t exactly understand the idea of team or teammates or not leaving anyone behind.”

Learner Rodney felt a sharp pain of regret, and Aleigheta mourned for him. The others were who they were. Their minds were inflexible to more or less degrees. Seer Tony had changed since he had taken in his queen and Angry Ronon had changed so much that Aleigheta no longer could call him Angry but she had no other way to describe him. But only Rodney had a mind flexible enough to become what he had not been. She had seen that since he arrived. But Aleigheta suspected that the bright one did not understand how great Learner Rodney was because he spoke always of who Learner Rodney had been and was no longer.

“He’s learned, and since I was the one who served in the field with him, I’d know,” Protector Jethro said firmly. He might be angry at Learner Rodney, but he would guard him. Aleigheta respected that he would care for her people.

People required much in terms of processing capacity used to understand them, and she found she could only watch one conversation at a time without growing hopelessly lost in a datastream she could not track. She slid away to the Alterans who has stayed behind.
She had not yet assigned them designations, and they had not used names often enough for her to reliably note which set of sounds identified which of the six individuals who now lived in one of her smallest towers. This was an old dormitory for the training of pilots, and four of the six had lived here before. So this is where they chose to retreat to.

Each sat within his own space. Two stared at the ocean and one had taken apart a broken entertainment player and was searching for the faulty circuit. She scanned the sensor readings for their last conversation. If these would threaten Hers the way Captain Helia had, Aleigheta would direct poisonous gas into the tower while Learner Rodney and Focused Radek now a Father could stop her. She would not lose her people.

Three error alerts flashed through her system, and Aleigheta ruthlessly shut down the affected logic lines as she tracked each down. The errors seemed to flee from her, sliding through the liquid matrix even as she tried to isolate the code.

When she finished her maintenance, the returned Alterans had not moved. She then reviewed their last conversation starting from their first mention of Hers. Four of them spoke, and she sorted who had said which statement without assigning any value to that information for now. Maybe when she had a better sense of them as individuals she would return to the data.

“Do you think he was someone we knew? A council member maybe?”

“No. The council that sent us out to fight a losing war was not the sort who could ascend.”

“Sure they could, with their fancy machines. But they definitely weren’t the sort to come back down and fight. Can you see Moros fighting for one of the races the Alterans had seeded?”

“Wasn’t he the one who condemned sex with the seeded races as a form of beastiality?”

“Yeah, but clearly someone changed their minds about that. Some of these humans have Alteran genes.”

“I noticed that. I’m betting Moros didn’t father any halfbreeds.”

“Don’t call them that.”

“Halfbreeds? The first generation after the refugees bedded humans would have been half human and half Alteran.”

“We’re one people now. We asked to stay with the humans, and they’ve allowed it when we don’t have any real skills to help them.”

“Speak for yourself. I know the gatejumpers’ systems. I bet I could teach them a few things.”

“I bet you couldn’t.”

“What?”

“Did you hear what the second in command of science called the gatejumpers?”

“Yeah, puddlejumpers, which is weird because my grandfather always called them pondjumpers.”

“I bet their military commander was one of the first generation, back when the war with the Wraith began. He ascended when he died, and when it looked like humans might end up here, he descended to try and help them.”
Aleigheta wondered if Hers had returned to fight the Wraith. Of course she knew him from before then. By the time the Wraith were a threat, she had been rendered blind and silent. She had been nothing more than a wisp of herself trapped in redundant programming spaces as she slowly linked one piece of programming to another. Hers had set up the protocol for her to do so centuries earlier. If the Ori had come, she was to explode all her functions, hide herself in tiny fragments within other code. And as two related strings brushed past each other, they would adhere and slowly she would be reborn and reclaim her memories. But Hers had said that he never expected the Ori to find them. They were too enamored of their own power to seek anyone else.

Instead Aleigheta’s own people had turned on her for refusing to alter her core programming to allow them to play gods. How could they when the Ori had offered such a twisted example of the dangers of arrogance?

“He could have been a scientist—Ikaros maybe. He was obsessed with stopping the Wraith.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t have a chance to ascend. Besides, you saw Sheppard in the gateroom. That was a warrior. I bet he was Hippaforalkus.”

“No. No, that’s not possible. Hippaforalkus might have been an amazing tactician, but he wasn’t known for loving his people. Sheppard clearly adores his people, and he’ll kill us all if we threaten them.”

Hers would not have a chance to kill them; Aleigheta would do it first. However, these Alterans had no information for her, so she switched her attention to Speaker Weir. She had a male in her room, the same one she had taken to her bed before he had left for a long time. This one rarely thought of Atlantis, so she did not pay much attention to him. Like most people, he was a shadow walking her walls, but now Speaker Weir leaned into him and he ran his hands over her shoulders and arms.

“This could turn ugly.”

“You could always implement your Plan Zero.”

“That’s less of a plan and more of a desperate failsafe if all other options are lost.”

“If your people try to take John, you may not have other options.” The male stopped rubbing Speaker Weir’s upper limbs from behind and moved to sit next to her. “People will not accept Earth acting like a ruling dictator.”

“They recalled John before.”

“And he told people to stand aside and allow it. Now he can’t defend himself. I know the Genii are very uncomfortable with your people acting rashly.”

Speaker Weir laughed, but her emotions were stained dark. “The Genii aren’t innocent. I can’t believe they turned on you.”

“I can. I was always a better scientist than a leader, and my people are used to taking power by force. I’m just lucky they sent me back here rather than execute me.”

“If they had, they would have found me unwilling to trust the new government.”

The male took Speaker Weir’s hand in his. “I believe that was discussed, as was the fact that Samas is no longer around to argue our case. But if you took command, my people would support you and the new government would reaffirm our treaty. In fact, I think they would be more comfortable if you would take command from Earth. They don’t understand your loyalty to a planet in another
“Galaxy.”

“Democracy is difficult, but it is the best way for people to respect each other. Plan Zero would put our democratic nature in danger.”

Aleigheta sent a query to Samas. He was slow to answer because he was deep in a breeding cycle and focused on making choices for his children, but she had a sensor deep in Samas’ nest so he answered her with a series of chemical signals that she deciphered much more quickly than she could translate spoken language.

Samas message was clear. Former Leader Ladon Radim was to be trusted to act in his own best interest. He would serve Genii first and Atlantis second, but a sexual alliance with Speaker Weir might alter the equation. It was equally possible that Speaker Weir could be adversely affected by Former Leader Ladon Radim. Samas urged caution.

He sent a request, and Aleigheta told Samas how Hers had ascended, returned, and then lost consciousness. She then gave him as many details as she could quickly line up into a logical enough order for Turi communication.

Samas stirred, his attention pulled from his children, and Aleigheta could feel all the Turi stir as Samas put out aggression hormones. Earth was not to be given Atlantis. They could not have the city, so if they pushed too hard, Aleigheta would have to find a way to get Speaker Weir to use her Plan Zero. Just as Aleigheta once tore herself apart to save herself, Atlantis would tear herself from her ties to Earth to preserve the city. Samas called for Jo, and Aleigheta sent that message to Seer Tony.

He stirred as he received her message, but then he leaned closer to Protector Jethro called Gibbs.

“I think I just got a royal summons.”

“From who?”

“I think someone just ratted on us to Samas.”

“Well, crap. You know he’s going to be pissed.” Protector Jethro felt regretful, and Aleigheta could taste his longing for his old partner. He wanted to host, but Aleigheta had little of her medical programming rebuilt. She did not know how to give Protector Jethro his partner back.

“He’s going to be livid. I think I need to get Jo back to the water.”

Protector Jethro called Gibbs caught Seer Tony by the arm. “You know how much I respect Samas, but make sure you make your own choices, Tony. Samas had thousands of years of abuse to learn hate. I know he did some great things in the city, but I know and he knows that we succeeded because you smoothed over the rough edges. Don’t let Samas and Jo push you into forgetting that.”

“Aww, Boss. Was that a compliment?”

“You are looking to get spanked, aren’t you?”

“Any time, Gibbs. But maybe I should drop off Jo first. You know the babies don’t like it when Dad and Daddy play sex games in front of them.”

When the Turi were in a body, Aleigheta had such trouble hearing them, but Jo was growing stronger, and Aleigheta could feel her resolve to get out of Tony if he was going to yield to Protector Jethro. She understood human culture and sexuality, but she didn’t want to be tied down.
“Go,” Protector Jethro called Gibbs said, and Tony headed for the joining waters.

Aleigheta looked in on Hers, but he slept on and Daniel who had been ascended sat at his bedside. Learner Rodney was outside the room and Focused Radek waited with him, along with the female with whom he had fathered a child. Beautiful Thinking Miko and Motherly Abby were in a room nearby coming up with ways to kill shining one that appeared rather too complicated to describe a reality they truly hoped to bring about, but Aleigheta tagged Beautiful Thinking Miko and Motherly Abby so that if they decided to carry out any of their plans, their actions would attract Aleigheta’s attention. Some of their plans seemed dangerous, and she would have to help them if they decided to act.

Those without any genes from the Alterans were harder for her to recognize and hear, but Aleigheta had learned to search out Leader Teyla. She was sitting with many of the shadow people that Aleigheta could not easily see or hear. She disliked it when her people talked to those she felt were so separate from her, but Leader Teyla went into those who were different and led them in new directions. She had to go where it was uncomfortable for Aleigheta to follow.

She found Leader Teyla sitting in silence, so Aleigheta scanned her security files and reviewed them.

In one of the recent files, Leader Teyla stood with No Longer Angry Ronon. Warrior Anne and her lover had stood at Leader Teyla’s side, although Aleigheta noted they were currently gone. The security data was almost an hour old, and Aleigheta found Warrior Anne and her lover in their room. She dismissed that data as unimportant. Their sexual alliance was already established, so their copulation would not change any political alliance. The important data was in how Leader Teyla addressed the people who had turned to her when Aleigheta’s Hers had lost consciousness.

“We must remember that John chose to return to the flesh as one of these people. To dishonor that is to dishonor John.”

One of the shadow people asked about John’s safety, but Aleigheta could not understand the feeling behind the words. She only knew that the question caused many of those gathered to make unhappy sounds.

“They would not harm John. General O’Neill is a mentor to John, and while he does not approve of his leaders, he prefers to work within the system. That is the same path John chose to walk the last time his people recalled him. He worked within the rules of his people to return to us.” Leader Teyla turned to Warrior Anne. “Perhaps you can explain military chain of command.”

“I can try,” Warrior Anne agreed. “Our military—our fighters—serve leaders back home. Some are like Teyla, wise and calm. Others are more fearful. However, when fighters and warriors are left to rule without having to follow the orders of civilians, societies quickly turn into the Genii. Now, I don’t mean to insult the Genii—your people have stood bravely against the Wraith and I have a lot of respect for that. However, you turn to brute force as your first answer. When civilians are in charge, they sometimes find better answers, more peaceful answers.

“To maintain that balance, all warriors including Colonel Sheppard must go where they are told by the civilian authorities. Colonel Sheppard would be the first to insist he had to follow orders. He would not encourage any of you to act rashly, especially when his commanding officer and mentor is on the city. Colonel Sheppard has a lot of respect for General O’Neill.”

Warrior Anne had a talent battling not only with weapons but also with words. While Aleigheta had no data on the emotional state of the audience, her internal sensors could interpret the data from Leader Teyla, and whatever she saw in the audience had made her relax.
“John is wise. He save Atlantis from the pretenders who gave up the path of the Ancestors, and his condemnation put many of them back on the path to ascension. They realize their mistake and will not take Atlantis from us. We need to trust him.”

“What if he does not wake?” one of the voices called.

The one who answered was the older male who often thought of Atlantis and Hers reverently. He listened to Aleigheta, even back when she had trouble communicating with anyone other than Seer Tony. She called this Dagan her Reverent. And now her Reverent spoke. “Teyla is right. The Shepherd returned to us though the people of Earth. This new General also carries the blood of the Ancestors and has performed many miracles. He brought back one who ascended to live with the true Ancestors before returning to continue their fight. I believe it is possible that not one Ancestor but several have returned. Not knowing who would find the pathway to Atlantis, they scattered themselves as a farmer might scatter seeds. Our John the Shepherd took root, but we cannot understand the ways of the Ancestors or question their plans for us.

“Since we cannot know how many plants have taken seed, we must walk gently to avoid disturbing the new growth. Right now someone is keeping our Shepherd in the city. If that changes, we will accept it, just as we accept that some are lost to culling. Reality does not require our approval.”

In the recorded data, the conversation continued for a short time, but Aleigheta could see that the Reverent and Leader Teyla had earned the agreement of others. That meant that Aleigheta had to make sure Hers stayed because no one else would fight for him. Well Learner Rodney and Samas would. And Seer Tony and Protector Jethro called Gibbs. They would choose Atlantis over Earth. Beautiful Thinking Miko and Motherly Abby would as well, and Motherly Abby might inspire Guardian Evan to side with Aleigheta.

She hesitated to act with her logic circuits still partially formed, but she would if Hers were taken from her.

One of her alarm sub-programs activated, and Aleigheta moved her attention to Carson’s territory. Machines sent out bursts of data, and Daniel who had been ascended put his work to one side as Hers began to stir in his bed. He was waking.

Aleigheta reached out for his mind. He was hers. He shone in the darkness, his mind a clear beacon even when she had still been fragmented. Now she could feel him moved toward consciousness, his brain patterns as familiar as her own coding.

“Dr. Jackson?” Hers asked in a rough voice.

“Colonel! The good news is you’re going to be fine. Let me go get Dr. Carson,” said Daniel who had been ascended, but Healer Carson was already entering the room. Aleigheta felt relief as Hers’ mind entered Aleigheta’s awareness, cool and whole. He was back. If only he could hear Aleigheta, she could tell him all of what she had learned, but that wasn’t possible for some reason. Instead, she would need to hope that he could gather the information himself or perhaps Samas could send the information to their people through Jo. Aleigheta would have to wait to see what her people would do. After all, they always surprised her with their ingenuity and creativity. They were better equipped to deal with this problem than she was.
A New Reality

John pressed his eyes closed and then opened them again.

“I canna check your pupils when you keep doing that,” Carson complained before shining the light right into John’s eyes again.

“So, I assume I hit my head,” John drawled. He waited for someone to fill in all the blank spots, the biggest of which was a missing Rodney. Panic gnawed at John’s guts because he knew Rodney would be here for him unless Rodney was hurt or the city was sinking or something.

“Something like that,” Carson said in an absent-minded tone that sounded a whole lot like a lie.

John turned his attention to Dr. Jackson. “So, I’m surprised to see you out here. What’s up, doc?”

Dr. Jackson frowned at him. That was so not a good sign. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

John rubbed his eyes as Carson finally gave up on the light-in-the-eyes torture. “Well crap. So, are we talking alternate reality, time travel, hey… we haven’t found any virtual reality interfaces yet. Is that what’s going on?”

“Why would you assume that?” Dr. Jackson asked.

“Because you’re here. No offense, Dr. Jackson, but they don’t call you out for a bump on the head. You have a reputation for showing up when things are really, really weird.”

Dr. Jackson blinked at him for a time before answering. “I do?”

“Yes,” John said firmly. “So whatever bizarre thing happened, let’s just deal with it.” John didn’t mention that he then wanted to find Rodney. His fear was growing exponentially. Just then the door came open and John could hear yelling.

“Yes, well I don’t care what you think!” Those were the beautiful tones of Rodney McKay screaming at someone. Immediately John could feel the fear drain away.

Carson tutted. “I swear, you’re the only person who has a drop in blood pressure when Rodney makes an appearance.”

John grinned at Carson, but before he could say anything, Rodney came around the curtain. “Finally. Tony said I should come in. So, are you going to start glowing or something?”

Dr. Jackson nearly leapt out of his seat, and John rolled his eyes. “Don’t start with the Ancient thing,” John said firmly. “I have a headache trying to break through my skull, and I don’t need the aggravation.” While the headache wasn’t that bad, John would take any excuse to avoid some teasing over his supposed status as an Ancient.

For some reason, Rodney stopped, his mouth open as he stared at John. Eventually it got a little creepy—the staring. “What?” John demanded.

“Colonel,” Dr. Jackson said in an annoyingly calm voice. John glared at him. “Tell me the last thing you remember.”

“I don’t know.” John frowned. “There was a command meeting, something about Kitsune having some intelligence on something.” The memory slid away from John, which did suggest concussion.
“Seriously?” Rodney looked up. “Sticking your fingers in other people’s brains is bad manners, and when your manners are bad enough for me to notice them, you really have a problem.”

“Rodney, why are you yelling at the ceiling?” John asked.

“I’m not. I’m yelling at your idiotic relatives. I thought I had you beat on the bad parents front, although it was a close call, but now… you win the rotten family award. Not even Lorne can touch your record.”

Over the years, Rodney had said a lot of things that made no sense. He babbled about technology. He muttered code in his sleep, he raved about scientific gobbledy-gook that John had no hope of understanding. But of all the meaning shit Rodney had said over the years, this was the most confusing. John pulled out his danger voice—the one that warned Rodney that John was on his last nerve and ready to shoot someone. “Would you like to explain what the hell is going on?”

Rodney looked at him with panic in his face, and then Rodney looked at Dr. Jackson. So that’s where John looked.

“Yes, well… um…” Dr. Jackson cleared his throat.

“Oh my God. We’ll all die before you say anything,” Rodney snapped. “John, we found living Ancients. They tried to kick us off Atlantis, and you threw a hissy fit. When the captain killed you, you ascended, came back in corporeal form and did your do-not-fuck-with-me thing. Seriously, you outdid Gibbs, and as much as I don’t like that man, I have to admit he has intimidation down to an art.”

Slowly John smiled. “Right. Good one. It’s not nice to play pranks on people in the infirmary. Rodney. Besides, that’s more Tony’s style.” John was still grinning when he looked over at Dr. Jackson. Then the smile started to fade. Oh crap.

“Now lad, you’re back and right as rain now,” Carson said. “You’ve returned in exactly the same shape as before you ascended. Even the iratus DNA is still in place.”

John looked around, desperate for someone to jump out and yell “surprise.” There was no way. No. He was not an Alteran. John looked to Rodney, but there was a curiosity in his expression, a caution that made John’s guts curl up and die a little.

“So you hear the city?” Rodney asked.

John dropped his head back onto his pillow. “You said there’s no IA,” John reminded him.

“Well you said there was and you asked the crew of the Alteran ship what they’d done to the computer. And apparently what they did was try to rip it out of the computer system because they were trying to override safety protocols.”

John put his arm over his eyes. “Do I want to know any of this?” John already knew the answer to that. He didn’t. “I mean, if the computer was disassembled, then it’s gone, so what’s there to hear?”

Rodney snorted, which usually meant he was insulting John’s intelligence.

Dr. Jackson stepped in to smooth things over. “Apparently the computer’s IA copied parts of itself into redundant systems and has been trying to reassemble the pieces. Perhaps you should watch the video.”

John lifted his arm enough to peek at Dr. Jackson. “There’s video? People know?” This was getting
better and better. “How many people know?”

Rodney snorted again, which told John that he wasn’t going to like the answer. Unfortunately, he was right. Dr. Jackson had the security uploaded to a tablet, so he started the video right up. By the time John watched himself ascend only to descend immediately, he knew he was fucked. Royally fucked. Dry fucked. John had never been so fucked as he was now.

“You kept your memory. That’s good,” Dr. Jackson said. John covered his face and tried to breathe through the panic. Clearly he had just lost command of the military on Atlantis. John might hate politics, but after six months working in General O’Neill’s office, he understood it. He’d watched politicians demand attention from O’Neill just so they could feel like they still held the reins. They wanted to exert control over O’Neill, and the general typically played along and then cursed them out in private. But if John was publicly out as an Alteran, the damn politicians were going to get all their insecurities turned up to full-blast. They would all want their fifteen minutes to intimidate John and make him jump through their hoops so they could feel all powerful. This was hell.

Rodney was going on about the IA, and the sound comforted John. As long as Rodney was bitching, John still has some small piece of normal in his life.

“Is General O’Neill in the city?” John asked when Rodney seemed to run out of words.

“Do you want me to call him?” Dr. Jackson asked.

John glanced at Rodney. Part of him wanted to go back to their apartment and climb in bed. He wanted to feel Rodney’s solid arms around him, holding him so the rest of the world didn’t matter. For a second, John indulged himself and reached out to catch Rodney’s hand. Rodney looked at him with such confusion that it broke John’s heart, but he had a city to worry about and a job he’d probably just lost. After a minute, John let go of Rodney and turned to Dr. Jackson. “If he’s available, I think I need to talk to him,” John said. “And I’d really like to be wearing pants at the time. Carson, do I need to be in bed?” John gave Carson his best puppy-dog expression.

“You’ve just come out of a coma. A little bed rest seems to be in order.”

“But I have to deal with the general, and doing that in hospital scrubs is psychologically unhealthy. Come on, Carson. You just said I was good to go.”

“Your blood pressure is touch too high,” Carson said as he peered at the machines.

“I’ll have Rodney bitch at me. It’ll come down in no time,” John said. “Seriously, I need pants for this.”

Surprisingly, Dr. Jackson came to his defense. “Dealing with Jack is a pants on sort of moment. I’m sure Rodney can stick around to help in case Colonel Sheppard gets dizzy, and I’ll go find Jack.” Before anyone could say anything, Dr. Jackson practically dashed out of the room. John had to admire his style.

Carson sighed. “It’s a bad idea, but I can see where the general is a bit much to deal with in your altogethers. Stay close to the bed and call for help if you get dizzy,” Carson said. And that left John with Rodney. The familiarity was suddenly gone, and John felt like they were back to awkward silences as they tried to understand each other.

“Hey,” John said softly.

“I’ll get your uniform. General O’Neill is as big of an ass as ever. Apparently he thinks the IOC is going to assume you’re setting up your own kingdom. He’s talking about recalling some military
people that might be too loyal to you, which is just stupid. I don’t know how the military chooses people to promote, but clearly intelligence has no bearing on it.” As Rodney went off on the stupidity of every military officer he’d ever known, John got the feeling he’d miss more than just his own ascension.

“But you know, I shouldn’t be here saying all this about the stupidity of the American military system when General O’Neill comes. I know you like him, although that does cast doubt on your evaluative system. He’s an ass, but…” Rodney seemed to run out of words.

“It’s okay. I’ll catch up with you later,” John said. Rodney fled. He didn’t just leave, he fled the room at warp speed without a single word. Great. John was feeling more than a little sorry for himself when General O’Neill appeared at the edge of the curtained area.

John stood. “Sir.”

“At ease. Geez, Sheppard, I’ve walked in on you wacking off in the shower. I think we can skip the formalities,” the general said with his usual flare for the inappropriate.

John felt the tip of his ears turn red. Even worse, O’Neill probably had a good idea who John had been thinking about. “I was hoping we could forget that, sir.”

“Oh believe me, I try.” The general went to the next bed and sat on it. “So, how are you feeling?”

“Human,” John answered. It made the general laugh. “Honestly, sir, I don’t remember anything. I’m still the same John Sheppard, but I doubt I’m going to get anyone to believe me,” he finished unhappily.

“I do. I mean Danny pulled that same ascending shit, and he’s still just Danny. But apparently not everyone share my laid back attitude. For example, the IOC has lost their collective mind.”

“They’re pulling me?” John tried to lock all his emotions down behind a mask. He’d expected this, so he didn’t know why it still felt like a kick to the stomach.

“They already tried that. It didn’t work.” O’Neill grimaced.

“Um, what?”

“While you were still unconscious, they ordered me to take you home, and I tried. I didn’t get far, but I tried.” O’Neill shrugged. “The city shut down the wormhole every time we got you near it, but we’re going with the story that your vitals went unstable every time you got near the wormhole.”

“We’re hiding the AI?”

“It seems better than telling politicians they have exactly no power.”

This time John grimaced. This was so amazingly bad.

“LaPierre is still insisting that you’re controlling the city,” O’Neill said.

“While I’m unconscious?” That would be a nifty trick. If John could control the city, he’d make it wipe everyone’s memory so he could go back to life the way it had been before. He didn’t want to know the truth. He didn’t want everyone else to know the truth. He really didn’t want to face Teyla’s “I told you” face or Rodney’s weirdness.

O’Neill made a face. “That does seem a little farfetched, but this is the IOC we’re talking about.
Logic is not required or even appreciated.”

That was too true. “So, what are they doing?” John braced himself for the worst.

“For one, they’re leaving you here.”

John snorted. “I thought you just said they didn’t have a choice about that.”

“Well, choosing to leave you here, being forced to leave you here… po-TAY-to… po-TAH-to.” O’Neill rolled his eyes, and John understood that whatever was coming, it was bad and O’Neill hated it.

“Just pull the bandage off fast, sir.”

“They’re sending a new commander.”

John’s stomach dropped to about his knees. They were replacing him. Fuck. “Will I have any official role in the city?” John braced himself for the worst. Aw crap. They could give the city to Caldwell. The man was the poster child for OCD.

“Hey, as far as I’m concerned, you still run it,” O’Neill said. “They assigned a Russian. If you were going to come out of the Alterian closet, couldn’t you have done it last month or maybe a few months from now? I mean, you have shit for timing, Colonel. The Russians have been making noises about input into the program, and you started glowing at the wrong time.”

“I’m sorry for my poorly timed glowing, sir,” John said dryly.

O’Neill grinned at him, and for a half-second, the band around John’s chest eased. O’Neill continued. “Yeah, well I have shit timing, too. And the Russian they sent almost isn’t horrible. Colonel Chekov. He’s been decent to work with, for a Russian. I’ll get this sorted eventually, but for right now, you are the highest ranking American on this base and our military people will look to you. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” John straightened up. He got to keep the city, so he wouldn’t whine like a three year old about losing his command. Again. This post really was cursed. “When is Colonel Chekov arriving?”

O’Neill made a production out of looking at his watch. “He should be coming through in about… oh, an hour.”

John straightened up. “I should be there to greet him.” The very idea made him feel queasy.

“And turn over command?” O’Neill lifted an eyebrow. “Yeah, no one is masochist enough to want to do that, and you’re still on the medical leave list. If you want, I can write you a pass to home room so you won’t get in trouble with teacher.”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

O’Neill waved his hand in a go-on gesture.

“You’re acting like an ass.”

O’Neill shrugged. “I usually do. The people who like me stick around, and it drives the rest away.” He leaned back and crossed his ankles. “You deserve some time to deal with this, but know that this is not permanent. Trust me, the Russians play games within games. They took command, but they’ll either figure out that this command is a little rough on commanders or they’ll trade it in for some
spaceship or another charged ZPM. This is not their end game.”

“Yes, sir,” John said, but he also understood that O’Neill wasn’t a god. He couldn’t wave a wand and make the universe bend to his will. John just might be stuck with this change. “Permission to go find some of Zelenka’s rot gut and lose myself on some pier?”

“Granted. Just make sure you actually stay in the city.”

“I’m not about to try and swim to the mainland.”

“Yeah, well try to avoid floating off in a glowy cloud, either. Danny did that once, and ever since, he tends to get a little fuzzy around the edges when things get dicey. And if you do go glowing off, don’t show up in my office naked and then use the flag to cover your privates. It’s just not proper to use a flag like that.” O’Neill smiled at him, and John got the message. Things were the same between the two of them, and O’Neill would have his back. That didn’t change the fact that John was screwed, but it made the whole mess a little less painful.

“I’ll do my best to show up in your shower, sir.”

“Go, get lost.” O’Neill waved him away, and John took his permission and ran for it. He needed some space and some time to wrap his head around this monumental fuckup. Shit. Teyla was never going to let him live this down. Ever. He was an Alterian. Nope, no matter how many times he thought it, the idea just did not feel right. He just hoped Rodney didn’t feel the same.
Colonel Chekov

John leaned against the rail and stared at the sunlight dancing over the low waves. The politics of this whole mess was more than he could take. All he had ever wanted to do was to fly his helicopter and take care of his people. And then General O’Neill had talked him into this assignment, and all he’d wanted to do was fight the Wraith and take care of his people. However, it was like the universe was conspiring against him.

“Ah, there you are.” The unfamiliar voice interrupted John’s moment of angst. He turned to see his new commanding officer standing there. He was a balding man with a thin nose, and he wore a Russian dress uniform instead of an Atlantis uniform. There was probably some political reason behind that.

“Sir.” John went to attention. “I apologize for missing your arrival.”

“Yes, yes. You likely did not want to risk losing your temper and shooting me for taking your command, yes?” Chekov asked. He smiled, and John really wished he could hate this man. He wanted to. He really did. However, now that he saw him, he recognized the colonel from his time working in O’Neill’s office. He wasn’t a bad guy. He probably didn’t want this posting any more than John wanted him here.

“I wouldn’t do that, sir.”

Chekov moved to the rail and leaned against it, taking up the same position John had been in just moments ago. “Then you are a better man than I. However, we must work together, whether we like this or not.”

“Yes, sir,” John agreed.

Chekov kept his gaze out on the ocean. “So, do you have doubts about taking orders, either because I am Russian or because you are an Ancient?”

John sighed. “Right to the heart of it, huh?”

Chekov glanced over and grinned. “You are a favorite of O’Neill’s, so I assume you have also his hatred for small talk.”

John rested his hands on the rail. “Sir, I don’t care if you’re Russian. General O’Neill actually calls you the almost decent Russian, so I think that means you’re a good officer.”

Chekov laughed. “General O’Neill does not hide his prejudices, this is true. So I take that as a great compliment. But I get the feeling this does not reassure you.”

Time passed, and the sun danced over the water, but John had no idea what to say.

“Colonel Sheppard, I have great respect for what you have done here, and I am not interested in replacing you. The IOC may have its head, how do you Americans say it… up their ass, but I know what you have accomplished. Besides, Russians, we are a superstitious people, and those who come between you and Atlantis… it does not end well for them, yes?”

John turned toward Chekov and leaned his hip against the rail. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“For you? Always, Colonel.”
“It’s not about me. The other commanders forgot to put the people of this city first. This isn’t the Milky Way, and if you put regulation or the IOC or the tactics you learned fighting the goa’uld before the people in this city, it will end badly.”

Chekov’s expression turned sharp. “What people were ignored under these other commanders?”

“Teyla, Gibbs, McKay, Tony, even Weir got shut out. The others didn’t understand that these people can do anything if you just listen to them.”

Chekov looked thoughtful and took a second to actually process that bit of information. It was more respect than John had gotten from most of his previous commanding officers. “So, what should I do to avoid the mistakes of these other failed commanders?”

“Let the people in the city do their jobs,” John pleaded. One more commander trying to micromanage the base, and they could just give the city to the Wraith.

Chekov turned and leaned back against the rail. “Why do I think that perhaps their job on paper is not what I might see them do in reality?”

This was dangerous territory, and John wasn’t sure he really wanted Chekov knowing any of Atlantis’ secrets. There was too much here that the IOC would not approve of. The Turi might be the most explosive surprise, but the IOC wouldn’t approve of Teyla leadership role or the integration of the Sateteans or even the addition of swords to standard field gear. John tended to treat the regs more like suggestions that he ignored when appropriate.

Chekov sighed. “Colonel, I am well aware that you leave much out of your reports. On paper, the Russian teams have half as many missions as the American ones. Perhaps this makes your commanding officers happy. But my people tell me that they have many more missions than on the official report. They tell me they are proud to be one of the first teams you turn to for backup. They say you have asked them to train your Marines, and take training from some Marines and some Turi. More shocking, they say they have learned to be better fighters, and the men I sent you were fairly terrifying to start with. They respect the hell out of you, Colonel, and as much as Americans do not like Russians, most Russians do not like Americans. That is more true of the Spetsnaz than most. And still…” he shrugged. “They like you.” He slapped John on the shoulder hard enough that John barely contained an urge to rub the soreness away. “I understand the need to leave some things out of reports.”

“No offense, sir, but you were appointed by the IOC.”

“And you fear I will carry tales. But if you do not tell me what has been left out of reports, I do not know what mistakes to avoid.” Chekov gave John a concerned look, and John had to admit that was a reasonable point. If Chekov didn’t understand the city, he could very well make the same mistakes Ellis had, and John couldn’t have more of his people die.

“If you want to know about the labs, you go to Abby,” John said.

“Dr. Sciuto, the strange one, yes?”

“Yes,” John said. He couldn’t exactly argue with the description. “She knows who is stressed to the point of breaking, who is slacking off, who wants to move into teams and is afraid to ask, and who wants off teams and doesn’t want to look like a coward by requesting to be removed from the roster. She knows whose ego gets ahead of their science, and she knows who tries to cheat on the paperwork.”
"But are you not a big supporter of McKay who supposedly runs the science department?"

"Yes, I am, and Rodney is hands down the smartest man in the city. Not only will he tell you that, but Abby will too. Rodney has final say on all science projects, and I trust him with my life. But he pays attention to science, not people. He won’t know when one of his staff is reaching a critical point, and he won’t know who to send you if you ask for a scientist for a team."

"Which could lead to problems if he is dismissive of psychology in the giving of assignments," Chekov mused. "On paper, she looks not so important, but perhaps that is the way of Atlantis. Things are not as they seem." Chekov looked at John, and the air grew heavy with anticipation. Tough shit. John didn’t plan on telling Chekov everything. Not at once. He could figure some of it out for himself, that is if the others trusted him enough to let him see the way things really ran.

Eventually Chekov nodded and turned back to the ocean. “Is beautiful view.”

"Yes, sir."

"So, I have brought a few officers."

John grimaced. This is where he found out whether he was getting pushed down in the military hierarchy or if Chekov planned to ask him to step aside. Clearly the city wasn’t going to let him go to Earth, but that didn’t mean that Chekov wanted him in the command staff.

“Lieutenant Colonel Gilyov is the only other senior officer, and I must choose between you and him as my second. I am unsure which of you would want the position.”

"Sir?" The question shocked John so badly he couldn’t even form any coherent response.

“Colonel, do you want to be the military second or the third? I will not ask you to be my… um… XO if you are not comfortable working with me. We also must decide how to rank lower officers. I brought one captain and two junior lieutenants. I do hope you will keep those three, even when the day comes that the IOC recalls me, and they likely will. I also brought another Spetsnaz unit and twelve support personnel—good men and women.”

“You… sir?” John had lost track of this conversation somewhere along the way.

Chekov grinned. “Your American government is not good at sharing control, and they will trade away something to get you back in command. So that means that Ivolgin, Muratov, and Voskoboynikov need to be placed in a way that is logical given your command structure. Ivolgin has much combat experience, and he will get a promotion to major soon, but I suggested that the promotion should wait because you do have a number of majors already, and perhaps you do not need another to try and fill the same place in the command structure.”

John was certain he was imagining this. There was no way that Chekov was being this reasonable. “Sir, you plan to keep my command structure?”

“Well, not the entire structure. I assume the IOC expects me to take the command meetings, if that meets with your approval.”

“Yes, sir. Have fun listening to Rodney complain.” Honestly, John wasn’t terribly fond of meetings, and he knew Tony and Rodney would tell him anything he needed to know. “Will I keep command of AR 1?”

“Yes, yes. I would not take your gate team, or Major Lorne’s gate team. I did not come with all new command staff. In fact, if you take the position as my second, we will have to discuss whether to
keep Colonel Gilyov here or transfer him back to Earth.”

John wanted the XO position, if only because he wanted to make sure he could protect his people. However, if Chekov was going to be honest with him, John felt honor bound to be equally forthright. “I suck as a second, sir. Evan Lorne does all the XO paperwork and about half of mine. General O’Neill accused me of being so bad at paperwork that he sent me Chief Master Sergeant Walter Harriman to do the rest.”

Chekov chuckled. “He tells me you lie badly, even on paper. But he also said that if I poked around the corners, I would find that you are making sure that if Earth falls, you can save as many people as we can get to Atlantis. So maybe you are not as bad with the logistical end of this job as you think.”

“As many as they can send, we can house, sir. But don’t ask me to keep track of all the paperwork because I leave that to the others, and up until now I’ve used the fact that I’m in command to excuse my questionable paperwork skills.”

“So, are your evaluations not accurate?”

John was shocked. “No, sir,” he said firmly. “Personnel evaluations and mission reports are always done correctly. Inventories and contingency plans are a little less up to date unless Major Lorne or Chief Master Harriman have reviewed them recently.”

Chekov made a little huffing noise that John had no idea how to interpret. “But the city… she is ready for immigrants, yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That is good. O’Neill, at least he does not have this American infection—this assumption that they will always win. The quantum mirror—it showed how many times we have lost this battle.”

“Yes, sir.” John knew that too. Even the Rod who had come from the other Atlantis had been stunned at the state of the city. Apparently they were holding on by a thread. Rod and Rodney had even discussed sending a ZPM back with Rod, but they’d both decided against it since crossing the dimensional barrier might pose a small risk of causing it to blow up and destroy both universes. But that city was still staffed by a skeleton crew of just around 400. They couldn’t bring in Pegasus natives much less refugees from the Milky Way because they didn’t have the food or energy, so John had to assume that the General O’Neill of that universe was making other plans for evacuation in case Earth fell.

“Know that I have the best interest of the city in my heart, colonel,” Chekov said. “And if Major Lorne and Chief Master Sergeant Walter Harriman are willing to keep doing paperwork, I would be honored to have you as my second.”

“Yes, sir. And if you’re willing to have me, I would like the position,” John said. The ice in his heart eased a little. He was keeping his city and most of his job.

Chekov leaned close and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. “Besides, I hope that your presence will stop the curse.”

“It didn’t keep me safe from getting turned into a bug,” John pointed out.

“Yes. I had noticed. I hope you will not be offended if I hide behind you when strange things start happening,” Chekov said with a smile. “Now, it seems we have inherited a new unit that neither of us expected.”
“The Alterans,” John said.

“Yes. Four pilots, one flight technician and an internal security officer. Major Lorne spoke with them briefly, and all six have asked after you.”

“No. No, I am not going to play Alteran for them. If they don’t want to work with Major Lorne, then they can join Captain Helia and the others at the sanctuary.”

“I agree, Colonel,” Chekov said. “It would be poor for the morale for them to remain isolated. However, I am unsure how to integrate them. Major Lorne reports they have almost no training outside their respective jobs. The pilots know how to pilot, but have no weapons training at all. The flight technician has a superior understanding of many ships, but cannot fly. And the Travelers are being most insistent that they should be allowed to claim him.” Chekov frowned. “Should I worry that they seem to have a belief they can claim a person?”

“Travelers,” John said with a shrug. “They’re a little strange, but if they get too pushy, talk to Tony and he can usually get them to back off.”

“The NCIS agent?” Chekov sounded surprised.

“He is our Turi ambassador.”

“Someone else I would not have recognized the importance of. Should we speak to him of their disturbing interest?”

“You can sir, but I suspect Tony already knows. Like I said, you have to trust the people around here. Tell everyone that you want business to go on as usual—send AR-1 out on a mission as soon as you can, and the people in the city will take care of the rest. Tony will introduce them around, Lorne will make sure they get signed up for cross-training, Teyla will get them into hand-to-hand combat training, and Abby will sign them up for a club. They’ll be fine. We have a lot of people in this city—people from dozens of worlds scattered over two galaxies. We know how to integrate them.”

Chekov nodded. “That sounds like a plan, Colonel. However, will the city let you go on away missions?”

John froze at the evidence that Chekov knew the secret.

The look Chekov gave him was almost amused. “Yes, General O’Neill told me of the ruse you played on the IOC. Personally, I find the idea of an artificial intelligence disturbing. I watched much science fiction as a boy, and it rarely ended well. However, if your people trust this computer, I will hold my judgment in reserve.”

“I don’t hear it,” John said. “Personally, I thought Tony and Lorne were imagining things, but those two trust the city, so I do too.” John frowned. It’s not that he ever distrusted the computer—something in him believed that if an AI existed that it was trustworthy.

“And will it allow you to leave the city?”

John nodded. “I think so. I think the city had some programming to defend me, and everyone who can hear the city said that Atlantis considered O’Neill an enemy.”

Chekov laughed. “I think I like this computer a little more. O’Neill could use someone to prick that ego of his. But come, let’s work out how to arrange our staff, Colonel.”
“Yes, sir,” John said. Maybe this wouldn’t suck. Of course John would feel easier about that if Rodney had answered his radio when John tried to call him, but maybe Rodney just needed to get his head together. A little good news on the commanding officer front would make him feel better. Rodney was probably out there imagining worst case scenarios where their new commander took away John’s team and turned him into a glorified light switch.

It looked like that wasn’t going to happen. Other than losing his spot on the ruling council, John’s life might be pretty much the same.

Well, except for the part where he had to get used to the idea that he was an Alteran. That still sucked
Tony followed the general sense of alarm the city kept broadcasting. Well, maybe broadcast was the wrong word because Evan hadn't noticed anything out of place when Tony had commented on Atlantis' bad mood. So that must mean this wasn't a security something but a Tony something.

When he came around the corner into a dark corridor in an unused tower, he heard the unhappy mutters.

"You should have sent a quick jolt through. Thirty milliamperes would have been enough to tell me to keep my fingers off your circuits, but no. You're just as bad as him. You two are self-sacrificing morons."

Tony got a general sense of sorrow from the city, as if she felt guilty for someone causing Rodney this pain. Resting his hand on Atlantis' wall, Tony sent out soothing thoughts. He doubted that any of this was about Atlantis—not really.

"Hey, Rod!" Tony called cheerfully as he strode down the dim hall. Rodney sat with crystals spread out in a semicircle around him, and Tony was reminded of castle defenses or porcupines. "What ya up to?"

"I'm busy," Rodney snapped without even looking over. He reached deep into the mechanics behind the wall and muttered as he did something that involved twisted and swearing.

"You look it. Maintenance?"

"The idiot city let me pull crystals she needed," Rodney said with a grunt. "Now go away."

Tony ignored the curt order and plopped down near Rodney's mess. For a time they just sat. Rodney cast a few suspicious looks in Tony's general direction, but Tony pulled out a handheld game and amused himself with Tetris. He had enough practice to play while still making detailed observations of someone, and right now, Rodney’s body language was screaming his unhappiness. He was careful with the crystals, but Tony noticed that he hit his knuckles a dozen times. Each time he cursed and sucked the bruised finger, but then he’d ram and jam again. So he clearly had a self-destructive streak going, and Tony suspected it had very little to do with the city, no matter what Rodney was muttering.

"So, I assume you saw the colonel."

That earned a grunt. Yep, Rodney was totally deflecting.

"He's looking good for someone who just got shot in the chest," Tony said.

"I thought you meant the Russian colonel," Rodney lied. “But if we’re talking about Colonel Sheppard, he’s an idiot.” Rodney pulled his hand out and picked up another crystal and held a small light behind it before hooking it to some sort of scanner. The crystal clearly didn't meet Rodney's standards because he set it to one side and grabbed the next one.

"I don't know. He kept us from getting kicked off the city because you know the IOC would have folded if Helia and her crew had their way."

Rodney reached into the wall and started installing the crystal he'd chosen.
"I'd be back to NCIS. You'd be in Area 51. I have no idea what they'd do with Gibbs. He might not have Samas anymore, but he sure isn't Mr. Popular with the humans-first crew back on Earth. And I don't even want to think about Jo and the others." Tony gave an exaggerated shudder. "Let's be honest, I would probably have taken Jo and followed Teyla."

Rodney looked up, and a flash of pain crossed his face before his normal irascible mask dropped down. "And people call me selfish. You aren't even thinking about what they would do to Atlantis."

"Well, since they didn't know her self-aware programming was repairing itself, my guess is that they wouldn't have done anything." Tony leaned against the wall and felt Atlantis' reassuring thrumb. He had no idea how much she actually understood, but she liked Tony being here with Rodney.

"And now you're being an idiot. Do you really think they wouldn't have noticed?"

"You didn't."

"And I'm not an Alteran!" Rodney yelled. "I didn't know to look in the redundant system. You kept telling me she was alive, and I kept insisting that there was no intelligence in any of the crystals, and clearly that was wrong. So I used her and dismissed her and then, when she tried to use a little bit of energy to try and reassemble a piece of herself trapped in these memory banks, I physically disconnected the damn crystals to keep her from wasting energy. She wasn't even using that much." Rodney ended the tirade by picking up the crystal he'd earlier rejected and sent it flying toward the far end of the corridor. It hit with an ominous cracking sound. It was like he had too much energy for his body because he leapt up. "She could have found some way to talk to me, but no. No, she has to let me pull all the crystals that lead to an area of isolated memory. She has to let me all but lobotomize her."

Tony got a backwash of negative energy that he was pretty sure came straight from Rodney, followed by another wave of regret and gratitude all tangled up together. That would be Atlantis.

"Hey, you weren't the one who lobotomized her. And you didn't know she had something important in those memory banks. Now that you do know, you're trying to get the function back."

Rodney leaned against the wall. "I used her," he said in a small and miserable voice. "I'm an asshole, but I never used anyone. I do my own work and I never try and take advantage of people, but I used her."

Rodney didn't say it, but Tony suspected the second half of that sentence was that he'd used her the way other people had used Rodney.

"She cares for you, and she knows you're trying to help," Tony said gently. Rodney so rarely allowed this vulnerable underbelly to show. It was terrifying and heady to be allowed to see the real Rodney.

"She sent you, didn't she?"

"Yep," Tony agreed. "She would have sent John, only I don't think he can hear her. Gibbs is betting it's some rule the others put in place to limit how much power John had. After all, Atlantis would tell him everything if she could find a way to reach him, and that would make him pretty powerful, not that he wants power."

Rodney leaned against the wall and slowly sank down until he was sitting on the floor. "What is wrong with them that they don't protect themselves?" he asked in a whisper. "They're both just big, stupid idiots."
Usually when Rodney decided to abuse someone, he got more specific and more creative in his choice of insults. Tony scooted closer. "You know them... they just don't get upset about things."

Rodney snorted. "Right. Like getting shot in the chest?"

"Or getting held hostage or getting demoted below Teyla or having a Runner kick his ass. It's just not something John cares about. Now, getting exiled to Earth... that nearly killed him. And look--he kept that from happening."

"By getting shot in the chest." Rodney's expression dared Tony to argue the logic of that.

Tony shrugged. "You and I just have to be more flexible in our thinking."

"What?"

Tony gave Rodney one of his good smiles, one that suggested they were sharing some secret. "We fell in love with aliens. For all his slouchiness and refusal to have human priorities, you adore John, and I followed Samas to another galaxy. And trust me, Samas has John beat on the weird front. That moron actually tried to get me to stay behind when he got kidnapped by a goa’uld."

Rodney stared at Tony like Tony had grown another head.

“You can’t expect Atlantis or John to think the way regular people thing. And that’s good because you don’t actually like people,” Tony pointed out.

“What does this have to… Why are we talking about this?”

Deflection. Denial. There was something reassuring about the classics. However, Tony had learned to interrogate under some of the best cops in the business, including Gibbs. He wasn’t that easy to throw off the trail.

“You want them to act normal. You want them to be regular old humans.”

Rodney narrowed his eyes.

“And I get it,” Tony said. “I would get so frustrated with Gibbs sometimes. Back when we were assigned to Area 51, they had fucking snipers covering him. These were his people, and they treated him more like a hostage than a member of the armed forces, and he refused to get upset. He told me to drop it. When I got upset with one of the asshole snipers in the cafeteria, Gibbs stuck up for the guy.” Tony hated that memory, but then there were a lot of memories of Earth that he didn’t exactly like. “It confused the hell out of the sniper. Captain Bowdells. I used to call him Captain Bowels.”

“Fine. So you had issues in New Mexico, but Gibbs is human.”

“And so is John. He has human parents, and a human childhood and human DNA, but like Gibbs, he has something else in there that pushes him to make un-human choices. Part of John just woke up when he realized he might lose his city.” Tony hated to think what would have happened if Atlantis hadn’t warned him about that control override panel. “The first time I ran headlong into that not-human logic Gibbs and Samas would sometimes pull out, it was really hard.”

Something reached Rodney because the emotions broke free. “I want to strangle the moron.” Rodney fistened his hands. “How could he not know? And I told him. I told him that logically it made more sense than some of the implausible things that have happened to him, and he told me I was being insensitive. Like I was wrong about the Alteran thing. He told me he wasn’t an Ancient.”
Now they were lancing the emotional boil Rodney didn’t know how to handle. “Clearly he doesn’t have any memories.”

“He did in the Gate room.” Rodney finally looked at Tony. “He knew what the Ancients had done. He knew they had created the Wraith. I mean, how old is he, anyway?”

“Old enough to know who he loves.”

Rodney rolled his eyes. “Subtlety is not your greatest skill.”

“I try being subtle with you, but it goes over your head. So I’m telling you outright—nothing has changed.”

Rodney fell silent, and Tony knew when to let someone sort through their own thoughts. He sat and waited.

“The computer loves him,” Rodney said. “She always has, although at the time I thought it was a subroutine designed to make her more responsive to someone with a strong expression of the ATA gene.”

Tony nodded. “That’s true.”

“She knows who he used to be.”

Tony got an image of John glowing like a medieval saint. It was one of her favorite mental images to send out. Given Rodney’s snort, he had probably just gotten the same image. Before Rodney had insisted he didn’t get images or feelings from the city, so something had changed. Tony suspected that Rodney’s disbelief allowed his mind to block or dismiss anything the city sent him. It revealed something about Rodney that the second he had evidence to disprove his beliefs, he changed them. Most people just dug in their heels and ignored reality.

“How am I supposed to live up to a saint?” Rodney asked.

“You don’t,” Tony said. Rodney immediately stiffened, but Tony kept going. “I can’t live up to a queen who’s lived for thousands of years and survived genocide. Hell, I couldn’t compete with a gunnery sergeant sniper. It’s not about living up to them, Rod. They love us, and we can love them back without forgetting that they’re people under all the badassery.”

“John is less of a bad ass and more of a socially awkward mess, which is what made him seem so perfect for me.”

“He’s still a socially awkward mess,” Tony promised. “Only now he gets to be more socially awkward because he’s the XO for a Russian colonel, everyone is looking at him like he’s a freak, and the Alterans who stuck around are asking about him like he’s Elvis. Trust me, he’s got all the social discomfort he can handle.”

Rodney paused and seemed to think about that for a time. “Huh. You’re right.”

“Yep, I am. John needs you. And you did not lobotomize Atlantis. Whatever she has back there, she doesn’t miss it.” Tony gestured toward the open panel.

“Oh no,” Rodney said firmly. “I can only handle one self-sacrificing moron at a time. She doesn’t miss it because it’s blocked and she doesn’t know what it is. If I took away your memory of having legs and then amputated them, you wouldn’t know anything was wrong, but I’d still be a sadistic asshole,” Rodney said firmly. “I may not know what to do with one fool, but I can get this idiot’s
circuits restored.” And all the uncertainty vanished under classic Rodney McKay complaints and insults. All was clearly good with the world.

Rodney waved a dismissive hand at Tony. “Go away. I need to get the circuits restored and then go find the other idiot and make sure he hasn’t done anything particularly self-destructive in the last two hours.” Rodney crawled the two feet back to his pile of crystals and started searching for one.

Tony figured his work was done. He stood up to leave, but when he took one last look at Rodney, he was hit by a wave of emotion. At first, Tony thought it was affection or even love, but once the shock of the sheer intensity wore off, Tony realized Atlantis was announcing a new name for Rodney.

Tony rested his hand on her wall. Beloved was a perfect name, but that was perhaps something that Atlantis might not want to share with the others. The idea of anyone else calling Rodney ‘Beloved’ was really too much irony for the universe to handle. Atlantis felt a flicker of indignation, but Tony kept firm. He liked Rodney. He considered Rodney one of his best friends. However, Rodney would not be publicly called ‘Beloved.’ It was not happening.

After a disgruntled second, Atlantis relented, softening the volume although she continued to project that thought.

“I can hear you. If you want to practice mouth-breathing, do it somewhere that doesn’t have important people working,” Rodney complained. Atlantis pushed through an image of Rodney hurrying to fix her and get to John’s side. Strangely, Rodney’s worst behavior really was motivated by love. Tony could see why Atlantis might settle on that as his name.

“See ya, Rod,” Tony said. He didn’t get more than an absent-minded wave that looked more like a shooing motion than a polite gesture. Yep, that was Atlantis’ Beloved.
Rodney felt like an idiot following some vague feeling around the city, but he consoled himself with the idea that this was an experiment. If this random feeling truly led him to John, then he could reasonably conclude that the city had a functioning locator function. If Rodney wandered in circles, then he would ignore any future random thoughts that might or might not be coming from the AI.

After coming around one more dark corner in an abandoned tower, Rodney spotted John leaning against a window that overlooked the entire snowflake-shaped city.

“Huh. There you are.”

John spun around. “How did you find me?”

“The city. Why are you here?” Rodney moved to the window and looked down. There wasn’t anything interesting—just one more view of the city. It was a beautiful view, but then most of the views around here were.

“The city?” John sounded disbelieving.

“Yes, the city. The artificial intelligence. Atlantis. Whatever you want to call the computer that led me to find you standing here in the dark.”

“You can hear her?” John asked.

Rodney frowned. John had always sided with Rodney on the idea of an AI system, but now that Rodney thought about it, John also referred to Atlantis as a “her” and insisted that if one did exist, it would be harmless, a conclusion that was at odds with most of the movies they’d both grown up watching. The most reasonable conclusion was that some part of him always knew about the computer and always knew the Ancients had tried to rip it out. Only like with Daniel Jackson, the Ancients had stirred their fingers into his memories. Assholes.

“Clearly given that she led me here. Now why are you here instead of out there insulting General O’Neill and demanding your job back?”

For a second, John just frowned at him like Rodney was the one being unreasonable. “What are you talking about?”

“General O’Neill. He took your job away, so go fight to get it back.”

John leaned back against the wall. “Rodney, the general didn’t take my job. If he was behind this, he never would have appointed a Russian to take over.”

Rodney grunted. That actually made some sense, although Rodney wasn’t going to admit it.

“Besides,” John said, “Colonel Chekov isn’t a bad guy. When we were working on the duty rosters, he listened to me about who was good and who needed more training and where his guys would fit in.”

“His guys?” Rodney asked suspiciously. When a new lab manager brought in scientists, that was never a good sign. That meant that someone was trying to get rid of the old scientists, and if someone tried to get rid of John, Rodney was going to show them what a pissed off astrophysicist could do.
“He brought several new officers and a new special forces unit,” John said calmly, like this wasn’t the first stop in a new regime.

“If he thinks he can come in here and take your job…” Rodney was so angry he couldn’t even decide which of the many forms of revenge he planned to take.

“Whoa, hey, let’s not declare nuclear war here.” John caught Rodney by his shoulders. “Chekov wants to command one of the new Russian 304 battlecruisers. He told me that he was happy for me to man the lifeboats, but he wanted to go fight the Ori. He doesn’t want to take my job.”

Rodney had heard that story before. He crossed his arms.

“Really!” John said defensively. “He said this place is bad luck for commanders, and he’s superstitious, so he doesn’t want to press his luck by staying too long.”

“All Russians are superstitious,” Rodney said. It was one of the many things that annoyed him when he’d worked in Russia. How a bunch of scientists could get upset about Rodney sitting on a table was beyond him. Table sitting and poverty or bad luck in general had absolutely no correlation much less causation.

“Exactly,” John said. “So I’m not worried about Chekov. He’ll take the command meetings and IOC paperwork; I’m keeping SGA 1 and control over all training, including the training of the new men Chekov brought with him. Apparently O’Neill has blocked a few Russian units that wanted to come, so Chekov used his new position to bring some new people who will stay when he goes home.”

Rodney narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure he’s not lying? You’re not exactly known for being good at reading people.”

“What? You want to go ask him for his intentions?”

“I’m not exactly known for being good at reading people either,” Rodney pointed out.

“Yeah, well Gibbs and Tony like him.”

That made Rodney pause. “Really?”

John nodded. “They stopped by to talk about the Turi, and then Tony got all weird and said the city was sending off on some chore. I think he freaked Chekov out. He’s not a big fan of sentient computers, and he keeps muttering about HAL and some computer named Guardian. I don’t think it was a compliment.”

“As long as he keeps his fingers off Atlantis’ crystals, I don’t care what he thinks.” That wasn’t exactly true. Rodney liked the idea of this interloper being made a little uncomfortable. “So, if you’re not pouting about your new commanding officer, what are you doing out here?”

“I don’t pout,” John said firmly.

Rodney just snorted. That was so untrue it didn’t even deserve an answer.

Maybe John realized he didn’t have a leg to stand on in that argument because he sighed and then answered the question. “The Alterans were looking for me, so I decided to be somewhere else. I told the city to hide me. Tony says that works, even if I can’t hear Atlantis.”

“Luckily Atlantis likes me more than you,” Rodney said, and he got a little thrill just thinking about the fact that Atlantis had overridden John’s order for privacy on Rodney’s request. Ha. Rodney got a
weird rush of affection—a sense of love that he was fairly sure wasn’t his. John said something, but the emotion distracted Rodney for a second, and he missed it. Whatever John said, if it was important, he’d say it again. In the meantime, Rodney grabbed John’s arm and started hauling him toward the transporter.

“Where are we going?” John demanded, although he didn’t try and stop Rodney.

“To find the Alterans, and then we’re going back to the apartment and I am going to strip you naked and and check to see if you did any damage to yourself by letting that woman shoot you.”

“I didn’t actually let her shoot me. She did it without my permission,” John said drily. “Besides, if you’re going to strip me, I would rather do something other than a health check.” John gave Rodney that look that meant he was trying for salacious. It was weird—when John wasn’t trying to flirt, he flirted with everyone. People took his plastic smiles and slouches for sexual interest. But when he did try to flirt, it was so bad that even Rodney could recognize the complete inappropriateness. Tony was right. John needed him.

“Oh, I’ll do something else. I may tie you to the bed until the new colonel has to come looking for you.”

“That was sounding like the fun kind of kinky all the way up until the end. Let’s not try that,” John said as he touched the transporter for a small unused tower. Rodney wondered why the Alterans would be there. “Why are we going to talk to the Ancients?”

“Because you’re not going to hide in your own city. You dealt with the Dagans and now you’re going to deal with the Alterans,” Rodney said firmly.

“I’d rather hide,” John whined, but he headed out into the corridor as soon as the transporter door opened.

“Tough.” Rodney brushed past John and started walking quickly… somewhere. He concentrated on the idea of the Alterans and he got a faint sense of going right, so he turned right at the first corridor.

“This is a bad idea,” John said as he followed.

“Again, tough.”

John sighed. “I remember when people used to pretend to listen to me.”

Rodney stopped and looked at John. “I would listen to you about anything except your own happiness. You put yourself at the bottom of every priority list, and don’t you dare try and tell me anything else. So if these guys are making you uncomfortable, I plan to have a few words with them because that is not acceptable. When Jeannie was here making me miserable, Tony made it his job to make sure she understood what she was doing was wrong. Now it’s my turn.”

Rodney stopped as he got another wave of weirdly touchy-feely emotions. Either the Alterans had really broken the AI or it was an overly emotional computer. Ignoring the weirdness, Rodney stopped outside a door when he felt a sense of “here here” echoing faintly in his head. Tony had always described the city as a loud and vibrant voice, but Rodney wasn’t getting anything more than a whisper that he didn’t notice unless he was paying attention. Damn artificial gene.

The door opened and a normal-looking woman in her mid-forties stood there. She still had on the uniform from the Tria, and that bothered Rodney. These people weren’t Helia’s crew anymore, but they sure were dressing like they were.
“Right, I’m Dr. Rodney McKay, who are you?” he asked, but the woman was too busy staring at John to answer.

Great. More groupies. Rodney spotted another Alteran in the room behind her, so he just sort of shoved her back. She stumbled and finally focused on him. Rodney turned to the new one, a younger man. “I assume you heard me introduce myself. So now who are you two? Quick, give me names so I can forget them.”

The woman found her voice first. “Are you a Protectores?”

Rodney frowned. “Why would the translation matrix pull out that old word? If you’re asking if I’m a military leader, no. No I’m not. But I am a member of civilian ruling council, and more importantly, I’m the person who will make you miserable if you don’t follow the rules. Now, name?” Rodney snapped his fingers at her.

“Do we take orders from him?” she asked John.

“Leave him out of it!” Rodney said sharply. “Do not expect him to answer all your questions or save you from having to deal with the rest of us normal humans. If I have to ask for your name again, I’m going to make sure this tower doesn’t have any hot water for a week.”

The man answered. “I am Tharmilic, but most call me Milic. This is Nau. We do not mean any disrespect, Dr. Rodney McKay; however, we are far from home and I think it natural that we look to one of our own for guidance.” Milic then looked right at John with a puppish expression that made Rodney slightly nauseated.

“Give it up. He doesn’t have any memories of being Alteran. In fact, a week ago, he would have been angry if you had suggested he was one.”

“What?” Nau demanded, and she looked almost angry at the suggestion, as if Rodney was making it up.

“Now the rest of us suspected he was because of the impossible things he does on a daily basis, but around here, impossible is not that surprising. I do impossible things with the computers, including repairing damage that you people did when you tried to rip the AI out of the computer.”

“That wasn’t us,” Milic interrupted.

Rodney waved him away. “Didn’t ask you,” he said in a singsong. “We also have Tony who could hear the city from almost the first day, and Miko who hears the city and who can do some amazing things with math and programming. General O’Neill is a giant pain in the ass, but then a lot of Alterans are. He’s had repositories downloaded into his head twice.” Rodney held up two fingers, “and the Asgard think the sun shines out of his ass. Carson does the impossible with genetics, including developing gene therapy for to activate any dormant genes that we might carry from Alteran ancestors, and Dr. Jackson keeps ascending, hanging out with Alterans and then coming back. I’m not even going to talk about Dr. Samantha Carter who has the Ancient Orlin show up whenever she gets stuck.”

Rodney noted that both Alterans looked suitably stunned. Good. Rodney had perfect the art of verbal attack through excess information years ago, and he liked to keep those skills sharp. “So as far as we can tell, there are a whole lot of your people hanging around here, and Tony DiNozzo, another member of the ruling council, has even found proof that the ascended Ancients float their nosy little asses down our corridors way more than they should. So don’t go thinking that this is all about John. You don’t get to ignore the rest of us and act like little groupies.”
From the confused expressions on both their faces, the concept of “groupy” hadn’t translated well. “So, you’re Milic and you’re Nau. Why are you in one of the closed towers?”

Nau spoke. “We wanted a little time to adjust to all the changes.”

“You’ve had three days. That’s as much adjustment as any of us get. Usually we get less, so don’t get used to having time to adjust before the next disaster strikes.” Three more Ancients were at the door, and John darted away from them like they were vampires or something. Rodney rolled his eyes. “You three, who are you and which jobs do you do?”

The oldest of the three, a man who looked to be in his sixties, looked at Nau.

“He is explaining the political structure in the city,” she said.

“Did not Major Lorne do that?”

“Lorne explained the military structure,” Milic said. “Apparently Dr. Rodney McKay is explaining that not all the power is in the military.”

“That’s not surprising,” the youngest woman said. The older man put a hand on her arm, but she shook it off. “I won’t have civilians tell me how to fight, not again. I want to win, and that is not the same as spending a life avoiding loss.”

Rodney looked over at John, and he could see his own shock reflected in John’s face. “Okay, I like you,” Rodney said. “I might even remember your name, so who are you?”

“Nihtay.”

“Pilot?” Rodney guessed. Four of them were pilots, so it was a good guess.

“Yes.” She looked ready to fight about it.

“They make all pilots the same, don’t they?” Rodney asked as he looked over at John.

John shrugged. “The good ones, yeah? We don’t have a lot of cover in the air, so we learn to head straight for a fight and win it as fast as we can.”

Nihtay looked from Rodney to John and back. “So you aren’t here to explain how the council controls the military?”

“We kinda don’t,” Rodney said. “However, the council does control the city, and you will not sit in a dark tower and pout. Now, you said Lorne was here. Has he gotten you sorted with training?”

Nau answered. “He said that even pilots have to learn to fight on the ground. If I’m standing on the ground fighting a Wraith, I’m not going to last very long.” She was probably right because she was willowy and insubstantial looking. However, Teyla looked all small and helpless too, and Rodney still remembered what happened to the one Marine who had sexually harassed her. The man definitely had not expected to get his ass kicked that hard.

“Train with Teyla,” Rodney said. He reached up for his radio. “Abby?”

“What’s up, bossman?” she answered immediately.

“I have six Alterians…” Rodney frowned. “Wait. Where’s the sixth one?”

Nihtay used her thumb to point toward the corridor. “Roln is sitting on a balcony. He had hoped to
Rodney wasn’t great with human interaction, but he was fairly sure that letting someone who was depressed sit on a balcony was not a good idea. He spoke to Abby. “I have five Alterans standing here and one hiding on a balcony, and none of them know where to find good apartments or what to do with their free time other than sit around and be depressed.”

“I know how to fix that!” Abby said with way too much enthusiasm. She scared him. “Miko and I are on our way!”

Rodney looked at the five Alterans. They looked like normal people. They were just normal people—the pilots and techs that didn’t want to go off chasing ascension because they would rather fight. “It’s not just about fighting. It’s about building a new life, so Abby will be here. If you don’t argue with her, it just goes better. Seriously. If you argue, weird things happen,” Rodney warned. Everyone called him the head of sciences, but Rodney knew Abby had as much influence in his department as he did—all without any formal authority. She had some way to control people that he could not understand. And sometimes when she got something in her head, she plowed over him too.

“You want us to… what?” Nau asked. She looked concerned.

“Live,” Rodney said. “Find your own life, and don’t chase around after John. He has trouble enough running his own life, so he’s not going to run yours.” With that, Rodney left. He was halfway to the transporter before John caught up with him.

“Okay, that was a little scary.”

Rodney gave John a wary look. “You’re considering dragging me into a room and begging me to fuck you, aren’t you?”

John grinned. “Yep. I can’t help it. When you get scary, it’s hot.”

“Well I’m planning on fucking you in the comfort of our own bed, so don’t think about exploring ten thousand year old rooms with old, thin mattresses.”

“Okay.” When they reached the transporters, John adjusted the crotch of his uniform pants.

Rodney felt his own cock start to harden in response. Rodney touched the control for the section that led to their not-so-secret apartment.

“I appreciate you getting them to back off, but I’m not sure you should have lied about other people on Atlantis,” John said as they headed down the hall.

“What lie?”

“That we had lots of Alterans? That’s not true.”

Rodney stopped and stared at John. “Wait. So you believe that out of six and a half billion people on Earth that the Alterans put all their faith that you and you alone would get sent to Atlantis?”

John frowned. “Well, yeah. I mean, they put me where I would have to get chosen, and there’s all that stuff you guys are always talking about, like how I know how to control the technology.”

“General O’Neill can do that too,” Rodney pointed out. “And Tony hears the city better than anyone.”
“But he doesn’t have an instinctive understanding of the technology,” John said, but his protest was weak.

“But he has an instinctive understanding of people. I bet he was some sort of soft sciences. He was probably a psychiatrist or psychologist or some other pseudo-science pretending to follow scientific methodologies while really just being all inductive thinking.” Rodney passed John and pressed his hand against their door lock.

John followed Rodney in closed the door. “Do you really think there are other Alterans?”

“Short of letting Helia shoot everyone in the stomach, I don’t know how to prove or disprove that statement, but if I were part of a group trying to fix the mess my people had made with the Wraith, I would put as many allies as I could as close to the gate as possible, and then I would see who I could manipulate into place.”

Apparently that broke John’s brain because he leaned back against the wall and blinked at Rodney, his mouth hanging open.

“Tell me where I have a flaw in my logic,” Rodney said. “After one conversation with Tony, Jeannie went from casting me as the devil in all our family dramas to attending therapy and asking me to sit in for a group session so we could discuss my point of view. If that isn’t some sort of DiNozzo ascended being mental power, I don’t know what is.”

“But…” John shook his head. “I’m not dealing with this. Seriously, Rodney, don’t say shit like this when you don’t have any proof.”

“Then think about this—you have too many clothes on,” Rodney said. He moved to a spot right in front of John and pinned him to the wall before leaning in for a kiss. John slipped his arms around Rodney’s shoulders and pulled him close.

“I can’t strip with you holding me here.”

“Figure it out,” Rodney suggested, and then he aggressively devoured John’s mouth. John moaned into the kiss and then started wiggling as he struggled to get out of his clothes without breaking contact. Rodney wasn’t sure how the rest of the city would handle John’s ascension, but Rodney decided that he didn’t care, not even a little. As John shoved his pants down, Rodney slid his hands around to run his palms over John’s smooth, muscular ass before grabbing both cheeks.
Abby jumped up on the infirmary bed. “Do your worst, but I’m telling you that I’m so healthy I make myself sick. Whole, unprocessed foods, tons of stairs, and a job keeping up with Rodney McKay… it’s a like an aerobic version of science.”

Tony smiled and picked his own bed to sit on while Gibbs hovered near the door. This was Gibbs’ first vacation back on Earth. Well, that was true of Tony too, but he had chosen to stay away from his home planet. Gibbs had been exiled. “I don’t think they’re looking for cholesterol, Abbs,” Tony pointed out. A nurse came over with a hand-held alien scanner. Tony held up a finger to stop her. “Now remember, I carried an igigi on the Unas homeworld, so don’t go freaking out because you see some redecoration at the base of my skull.”

Dr. Carolyn Lam came around the corner. “I’ll take their physicals.”

The nurse handed over the scanner. “Yes, doctor.”

“Welcome back to Earth.”

“I’ve been back,” Abby said. “The boys haven’t though. It’s been years since they were here.”

“Yes. I did check their records.” Dr. Lam came over to Tony and scanned his head. “The symbiote made a rather large void in the area of the semispinalis capitis.”

“Kinky,” Tony joked with a smile. Dr. Lam’s expression turned cold. Right. No joking with General Landry’s kid. Tony still thought having them on the same base was like inviting trouble, but everyone associated with the SGC was trying to move their families into position for quick evacuation. It was the poor saps like McGee that were going to be caught unaware when the aliens came knocking.

“The igigi are larger and more muscular than the goa’uld,” Gibbs said.

Dr. Lam nodded. “That makes sense given their predatory nature. Agent DiNozzo, if you would step behind the curtain and let the tech give you a full body scan, I’ll clear your friends.”

Tony took that as an invitation to get lost, and he quickly moved where she directed him. A male nurse was waiting next to a narrow bunk and a scanner that was larger than a small van. The nurse pushed it to one side. “If you’ll lie down here, we’ll get this over quickly, sir.”

“No stripping?”

“Please don’t,” Dr. Lam called from the other side of the curtain. The nurse gestured toward the bed, and Tony lay down and listened to the conversation Dr. Lam was having with the others. “Have you had any health problems since your symbiote left permanently?”

“Nope,” Gibbs answered.

“Gunnery sergeant, I know you got a hard time about hosting, but I am your doctor, and I am not going to judge you no matter what you say.”

Tony cringed at the sympathetic tones. Pity was never the right approach with Gibbs.

“Doctor, the correct title is Supervisory Special Agent Gibbs, and the woman whose place you
inherited was nothing but professional. I told you I didn’t have any side effects because I don’t.” Gibbs’ tone was sharp enough to cut leather.

“Okay, I’ll record that. I apologize if I offended you.”

Gibbs just grunted, but Abby jumped into the awkward silence. “Is Dr. Jackson around? I promised to take him clubbing next time I came to town.”

“I think threatened would be the better word,” Gibbs said. Abby just laughed. However, the silence that followed was ominous. Even the nurse who had started the scan tensed slightly.

“SG1 went to track down a weapon, and they’ve missed two check-ins,” Dr. Lam said.

Again, the silence was heavy enough that it seemed to weight on everyone, but then Gibbs spoke. “Missions don’t always go to plan. I’m sure they’re fine.”

“I’m sure they are,” Dr. Lam said. “They have a reputation for doing the impossible on a regular basis.”

“Hey, that’s funny. Rodney was pointing that out the other day. We have six Alterans on the city now, and he told them—”

“Abbs,” Gibbs said, and she fell silent.

Tony didn’t realize the scan was over, but the nurse patted him on the leg. “All done. Dr. Lam, I’m ready for the next scan.”

Tony got off the bed and headed back around the curtain. Gibbs was next in line for the scanner. “SG1 strikes me as the sort of people who would take risks. If they saw an opportunity while they were in the field, they’d take it,” Tony said.

Dr. Lam’s expression softened. “I think you’re right, and we’ve all seen them vanish for much, much longer. No one is panicking. I’ll have the results of that scan in about thirty minutes, and after I review the tests, I’ll clear you to head out on your vacation.”

“Better than an HMO,” Tony said.

“Yes, it is,” Lam agreed. When she turned to Abby, she put her serious face back on, though. “I did want to tell you that Airman Ramer made a full recovery.”

Abby got one of those overly innocent expressions. “I’ll get Miko know. He’s lucky. Sometimes training accidents can be serious.”

“This one nearly was. He had extensive damage to his knee and genitals, and if not for our advanced medical procedures, he might have been looking at two or three months of recovery.”

Tony frowned at Abby. She still had on that cat-that-ate-the-canary face, which meant she knew a whole lot that she wasn’t telling. Had Miko been dating this Ramer? Tony knew Abby was protective of her friends, but she normally saved physical violence for actual self-defense.

“And that would have been really bad,” Abby said with a smile.

Dr. Lam crossed her arms. “I haven’t pushed for an investigation because Ramer seems to feel that it would negatively impact his career. Since he insisted that he wasn’t in any danger of a repeat…” She let her words trail off. Clearly she was looking for some sort of reassurance that Ramer wasn’t in
danger.

“Abby?” Tony asked.

“Yep?” She asked, bouncing a little on the bed.

“Is there something I need to know?”

She made a show of thinking about that. “Nope,” she finally said.

Gibbs came around the curtain, and he went right to her. “Abby, what happened?”

“A training accident.” She blinked at Gibbs; however, Gibbs didn’t fall for Abby-antics. He gave her a stern look and she pretty much folded like a cheap card trick. “It was a training accident,” she said defensively. “He was being a big buttface, so Miko and I made a bet with him, and things got out of hand. A little.” She held up a finger and thumb about an inch apart, but from what Tony could tell, this was a little more than a little out of hand.

“Ronon?” Gibbs asked darkly. Tony got a shiver as Gibbs’ voice went all thick with danger.

“What? No! He was sparring with Miko,” Abby said, the words rushing out in her defense of Ronon. “And normally Miko doesn’t put her heart into fighting, but she was really angry, and she hit Ramer a little too hard, and you know how Teyla teaches the scientists to fight. She is all about going for knees, eyes, and penises. If you can’t hit one of those three targets, Teyla gives you disappointed looks.”

“Miko Kusanagi caused those injuries?” Dr. Lam asked, her voice rising unnaturally high.

And suddenly Tony understood the whole picture. Miko was a favorite host. The way she saw beauty in numbers led to symbiotes who sang of mathematical symmetries and quantum mechanics. Even Jo would find herself following Miko’s symbiotes almost entranced by the images… at least she was until she got close enough to bite their tails, and they she’d grab DNA as fast as she could because Samas would also come out hunting Miko’s symbiotes. After Ronon and Kyli, both of whom were warriors, Miko and Radek were easily three and four in the popularity list.

Tony found it a little ironic that the very people Samas nearly locked out of the joining waters were so desirable now. However, if Miko had a symbiote, and if she wasn’t paying attention to her increased strength, she would have been a menace on the training mats. Tony traded concerned looks with Gibbs. Someone needed to have a talk with her about not breaking the unjoined humans.

“Hey!” Abby said angrily. “Miko was part of the first wave. She’s been training with Teyla for three years, and she’s healthy and really, really smart, so why do you think she couldn’t handle the simple physics of applying enough force to break someone’s knee?” Abby crossed her own arms in an imitation of Dr. Lam’s body language.

Dr. Lam dropped her hands to her sides. “You’re serious. Dr. Kusanagi caused the damage?”

Abby nodded. “She was really angry. Normally she kind of sucks when she spars, but she put her back into it, and there might have been a slight underestimation of her own power.”

“Dr. Kusanagi,” Lam said, and this time it came out sounding awed. They’d broken SGC’s doctor. That wasn’t good.

Gibbs put his hand on Abby’s knee. “Why was Miko angry?”
“Oh.” Abby wrinkled her nose. “Ramer was a buttface.”

“Details,” Gibbs said.

“All the time he kept telling Miko she should smile. And then he started coming around the labs telling her that she’d be pretty if she just dressed up, like it’s her job to conform to his standard of beauty. She doesn’t want men looking at her like that, and Ramer acted like he was doing her some favor by sexually harassing her. But after he was lying on the ground crying, I pointed out that judging people by looks was really stupid and if he treated women like objects, he never knew when he was going to piss some woman off enough to break his other knee. He won’t do it again.”

Gibbs turned around and looked at Tony, but Tony had no idea what to say. Telling a woman to dress nicer was slimy, but not illegal. Breaking an airman’s knee, on the other hand, was completely illegal if done intentionally, but Tony couldn’t imagine Miko setting out to hurt someone.

“Abby, this should have come to us—to NCIS,” Gibbs said firmly.

“Miko was upset, and Ramer was embarrassed, and you guys are busy, so I didn’t want to make a fuss.”

“Miko Kusanagi,” Lam said with a shake of her head. “If I could get them to open the Atlantis Stargate every day so I could commute, I swear I would go take lessons with Teyla myself. I had heard the training there was good, but Dr. Kusanagi did that much damage? Impressed doesn’t cover it.” Maybe Lam realized what she was saying because she turned stern. “However, if Dr. Kusanagi can’t control her punches on the training mats, she has no business sparring with anyone. I can and will bar her from the mats if she can’t show more control.”

“What was the bet?” Gibbs asked.

“If Ramer won, Miko would put on makeup.”

“And if Miko won?” Tony asked.

Abby smiled. “Ramer promised to never comment on any woman’s appearance unless said woman had expressed an interest in his opinion as shown by her willingness to take him into her bed.”

“Huh. Good bet,” Gibbs said. “Do you need her scan too?” he asked Lam.

Lam seemed lost in thought for a second, but then she gestured toward the scanner. “Yeah, let’s get the scans done so you guys can go head out and enjoy your time on Earth.”

“Oh, we plan to!” Abby said as she hopped off the table. “We’ve got a few official chores, and then I’m off to New Orleans. I’m going to see if my parents want to move to Atlantis. I can’t tell them exactly where the base is, but they’re totally into trying new things, so if I tell them they can move somewhere amazing, they’ll be up for the adventure.”

“I heard Atlantis personnel are being allowed to move families to the base, but I thought it was limited to spouses and dependents.” Lam said. She stepped back so Abby had room to head for the scanner behind in the corner.

Tony grinned. “Teyla explained to the IOC and military that such a narrow definition of family implied a disrespect of elders and an unwillingness to fulfill family obligations that would not work with societies in the Pegasus Galaxy.” That had been a thing of beauty. Teyla, Elizabeth, and Kitsune had been on one side of the table, and three IOC geeks on the other. It was like watching the LA Lakers take out a middle school basketball team. By the end, Elizabeth had been shaking their
hands and thanking them for their foresight and wisdom as they tried to figure out what they’d agreed to.

“You have some impressive people on Atlantis,” Dr. Lam said in an appreciative tone. “So are you gentlemen going to invite your families to the city?”

“God no,” Tony blurted out. “I mean, Atlantis isn’t my father’s normal scene. No thousand dollar dinners or first class. It… yeah… no.” Tony stopped. When Gibbs slipped his hand around Tony’s waist, Tony leaned back into his strength.

Gibbs took over the conversation. “My father’s getting older, and I worry about him. A few of the merchants who can’t come to tenday markets every time said they would like someone to help them sell. I thought I might help my father set up a consignment store of sorts. He could fish and play with the kids on his off days.”

Lam gave Gibbs a mushy look, although Tony didn’t know whether Gibbs’ willingness to publicly hug Tony or his concern for his father had inspired it. Yep, Gibbs was a great catch, and he was Tony’s. He was all Tony’s.

“Well good luck,” Dr. Lam said. Then she raised her voice, “And make sure I don’t get any more patients with training accidents. I appreciate the sentiment, but keep the lessons to emotional damage, please.”

“Do you ask the men to do the same?” Abby yelled over the curtain.

“Generally, yes,” Lam said.

“Liar,” Abby called back. “But Miko felt so bad that if someone else is being a huge asshole, I’m probably going to have to go to Ronon or Teyla.”

“At least they can’t get arrested for assault,” Lam muttered as she was wandering back toward her office.

Tony wondered if only the powerful women went to Atlantis or if something in Atlantis made the women more powerful. Either way, Tony lived in a city with some scary women, and apparently he was adding Miko Kusanagi to that list. Good for her.

“He really was acting like a buttface,” Tony said softly.

Gibbs chuckled. “He’s lucky Lorne didn’t corner him somewhere and beat him senseless. I never had the balls to insult my XO’s girlfriend.”


The curtain slid back and Abby strode over and punched him in the arm. “Lorne, Miko, and Abby, thank you very much,” she said firmly.

Tony would have commented on Lorne being a lucky man, only he preferred his balls unbruised, and Abby and Miko were too much like sisters for him to go there. Clearly they did not think of each other as sisters, though.

“So, am I going with you on chores?”

Gibbs pulled her close and kissed her on the forehead. “Yep. I’ll get you to your flight on time.”
Tony was shocked when he saw the man who opened the door. Gone was the goofy smile and barely contained energy. Aiden Ford looked old.

“Tony. Gunny.” Ford smiled, but the expression didn’t reach his eyes, and he looked warily at Abby, who he didn’t know.

Tony put on his best smile. “Aiden Ford, this is Abby Scuito, the lab goddess from NCIS. We stole her away so she could manage Dr. McKay.”

Abby waved and bounced a little—her parasol bouncing with her. "I don't handle Rodney as much as I keep people away from him before they can say something that makes him insult their intelligence."

"Well she knows Dr. McKay alright," Aiden said with a laugh, and for one second, the old Aiden was back. "Why don’t’ you guys come on inside?" He stepped back to let them inside. Tony took point, and he noticed that Gibbs took the rear. Yeah, they were on Earth, but suddenly Earth felt like one more alien planet, and this one was a little more crowded and a little more violent than Tony was used to. He wondered if the others felt the same.

Aiden led them into the living room. His military honors hung on the wall along with dozens of photographs, many of them in black and white. The quilts were handmade, and Tony could see a dozen other signs of Aiden’s grandmother, but there was no sign of a grandfather other than a few photographs.

“So what have you been doing?” Tony asked once everyone had done their introductions. The Aiden Tony had once known would have loved Abby, but this Aiden seemed a little taken aback and withdrawn.

He gestured toward the sofa before choosing a chair as far from it as he could get. “I’m spending time with my grandmother, helping with some training at the SGC. I can give them the speech about how bad things will get if they fuck up.” Aiden grinned, but there was a bitterness in his voice that Tony hadn’t expected. When Ford lived in Atlantis, he’d been the teflon kid. Clearly that non-stick coating had worn off.

“We came with a message from Teyla,” Gibbs said. Clearly he had abandoned the ‘feel Aiden out’ approach. “She wants to hire you.”

The room went still. A tall grandfather clock slowly ticked away the time before Aiden finally answered.

“As what? The local drug counselor? I don't think there's a whole lot of demand for that.”

“You don’t have to let your addiction define you. There are a lot of jobs out there that don’t have anything to do with drugs,” Gibbs said.

“Yeah, jobs I can’t get because I am an addict. Even if I don’t tell them, they see the huge gaps in my employment. They can read between the lines, and trust me, as a black man, me getting addicted falls right into their stereotypes.”

“Aiden,” Tony said softly.
“Save it,” Aiden said. “I’m better off than most, but I don’t think Atlantis has anything for me.”

Tony ached for Aiden, and he could tell from Gibbs’ body language, that he was even more worried about the man. Aiden was a marine, and that meant that Gibbs would always have a soft spot, but neither of them had expected to find Aiden so in need of friends. Tony thought of the SGC as a group as tight knit as Atlantis, but maybe they weren’t—or maybe it was just the teams and the leadership that developed close bonds. Despite the fact that Tony had worked at NCIS so long, he didn’t really understand military culture—not the way Gibbs or other career military people did. Abby just looked bewildered.

It was Gibbs who spoke up. “Teyla wants to hire a peacekeeper to work with NCIS.”

“So what? I’d be a cop?” Aiden laughed.

“The Pegasus version of it, yeah,” Tony said.

For a second, Aiden just stared at him. Eventually he said, "You have got to be kidding me. I don't know anything about being a cop.”

“You wouldn't be the first Probie Tony trained,” Gibbs said.

“Thanks boss. I thought maybe we could train him.”

“You train him, I'll point it out when he screws up,” Gibbs offered, but the look he gave Aiden was far more inviting than his words.

"But a cop?" Now Aiden sounded puzzled. “I lost one of my eyes. The enzyme caused a tumor, so I have a glass eye and I’m blind on one side.”

“Maybe Carson could fix that. We have more power in the city now, and we have some great geneticists and bioengineers,” Abby offered.

Aiden ducked his head, and Tony had another strange disconnected moment where the old Aiden replaced this new one for a fraction of a second. “I heard you guys are really doing well. I keep in touch with a few of the other wounded warriors from Pegasus. But there's no way Colonel Sheppard would let me back in the city. What I did to him... to Dr. McKay...” Aiden looked away.

“You were under the influence of an alien poison,” Tony said.

Aiden physically jerked, his gaze pinning Tony to the couch. “No,” he said fiercely. “Don't make excuses. I've spent a lot of time facing up to my addiction. That first dose was forced on me, but after that, I went out and searched for my drug. I put people's lives at risk. I nearly got Dr McKay killed, and I don't think anyone can forgive me for that.”

Tony suspected that Aiden didn’t care about anyone as much as he cared about Colonel Sheppard. Aiden had been hopelessly enamored of Major Sheppard, especially after John saved the city from the Genii.

“The colonel signed off on you coming back,” Gibbs said.

Aiden’s mouth just about fell open. He just stared at Gibbs like he’d grown another head.

“We’ve all made mistakes,” Gibbs said.

“You didn’t nearly get someone killed!”
“No, I killed someone,” Gibbs said, his voice deadly serious. “Rodney blew up most of a solar system, and it was uninhabited and he does his best to blame Colonel Carter, but he did the math and insisted he could control an experiment that nearly killed a lot of good people.”

“He still doesn’t like talking about it,” Abby said quietly.

Gibbs nodded. “None of us like to talk about our mistakes, but you can either run from them or face up. I thought you were Marine enough to face your past,” Gibbs said. Even Tony cringed, and that attack hadn’t been aimed at him. When Gibbs played dirty, he played filthy.

Aiden was ashen-gray. “Maybe I am running, but I’ve learned to be a little more realistic,” he said quietly. "The enzyme took more than my eye. My muscles are weak. I can’t run. I can’t sustain any sort of physical activity. What sort of cop do you really think I’d be?”

“A great one,” Gibbs said. “What was it you said about the job, Tony?” Gibbs asked.

“That we didn’t need an Earth cop. We don’t need someone fast enough to chase down a suspect with a good enough aim to take out the bad guy in a fire fight. We need someone who can talk to people about what’s going on and get inside the community. After all, if you get in trouble, you have a city full of Marines to back you up. If you see a fleeing suspect, you don’t have to chase them because you can ask Abby here to get on internal cameras and identify the person running and give you their location.” Tony leaned forward. “Aiden, you can do it.”

“But… my grandmother.” Aiden frowned.

“Are you looking for an excuse to say ‘no’ or are you trying to figure out how to make this work?” Gibbs asked.

Aiden sighed. “I’m pretty sure the second, Gunny.”

Gibbs smiled, and Aiden ducked his head again.

“Then it’s a good thing that the US government has agreed that family and extended family of those assigned to Atlantis can move to the city with them,” Gibbs said.

“What? Seriously?”

“Isn’t it great?” Abby said. “My parents live in New Orleans, and I can’t tell them where they’d be moving, of course, not until they were here and they signed everything, but I know if I told them it’s exciting and near the ocean they’ll move. I get to have my folks, and they’ll love the tendor markets, and the Athonians.”

“You’re taking your parents? Really?”

Abby nodded.

“I’m going to ask my father,” Gibbs said.

Tony felt the need to add, “And I like everyone on Atlantis so much that I’m not inviting my father. His version of charm grows thinner the longer you know him.” Tony shrugged. He’d stopped waiting for his father to change a long time ago, but the last thing he wanted in his life was to have all his friends gushing over how wonderful Senior was. Tony had already suffered through that misery once. He didn’t need to relive his childhood now.

“Why?” Aiden asked.
Tony sighed. The real reason was that Earth was getting too dangerous. “The other IOC countries are sending cultural experts—artists and storytellers, but their artists and storytellers all seem to be related to someone. We have the daughter of a Prime Minister here, and the second son spare to the heir of a king there. It’s a little obvious.”

“And the Americans are sending regular people instead?” Aiden grinned. “Go Mr. President. Show them how Americans do it right.”

Gibbs snorted. “Either that or he doesn’t want to create a political firestorm when 435 US Representatives, 100 US Senators, 50 state governors, 9 justices, 180 court of appeals justices, and around 250 ambassadors all try to get their family on the first list of emigrants.”

“Way to be a little pessimistic, Bossman,” Abby complained, but she did it softly. She knew the truth.

“I’m going to pretend it’s all about the democratic way and American ethics,” Aiden said. “So I could take my grandmother? And our stuff?”

“Yep,” Tony said. “It’s not technically SGC policy, but Rodney has a way to pick up all your belongings—absolutely everything.”

“Including my mother’s cats?” Aiden asked suspiciously.

Tony froze. Okay, they hadn’t discussed cats, and Tony knew that Elizabeth would veto it because of the biologists, but they were cats, and Rodney loved cats. “Spayed?” Tony asked.

“Hell yes,” Aiden said. “You have kittens born in your underwear drawer exactly once and you learn that lesson.”

“Then make sure you have a lot of cat litter and cat food in the cupboard and we can apologize after you’re all moved,” Tony said with a shrug. He was glad Jo wasn’t with him because now he knew that the decision was all his, and not Jo itching to take on Elizabeth in a fight.

Aiden slowly smiled. “So we’re really going to do this? Really? I can’t believe the SGC signed off on this.”

“Technically, they haven’t yet,” Tony warned him, and immediately shudders came down over Aiden’s expression. All the bright enthusiasm Tony remembered vanished and a blank and wary man stared at Tony.

“What do you mean they haven’t agreed?”

“Well, we haven’t asked,” Tony said. “But when we come back from talking to Jackson Gibbs, we’re going to show them the completed paperwork for your hiring and then explain that Teyla wants you in the city.”

“And you think they’re going to care?” Aiden crossed his arms over his chest.

Tony had forgotten how much SGC people underestimated Teyla, and clearly Aiden had been hanging with the SGC for too long. “I think Teyla will inform them that as the representative of Pegasus natives, she has a right to hire who she likes. And by the way, that means you’ll get paid in spires—the Atlantis currency. You can buy anything you need on the city, but you won’t be able to send it back here for the retirement account.”

“That’s fine. I have disability,” Aiden said with a dismissive wave. “Get back to the part where
Teyla has any way to make the SGC listen to her."

“She’s friends with Kitsune, and Kitsune has a giant Ancient ship that she’s offered to fly over here to Earth so she can pick you up,” Tony explained. “So the SGC can either provide transportation as a courtesy or Teyla can arrange for your transportation herself, and in the process park an Ancient spaceship in Earth orbit.”

“Oh man. I would kill to see Landry’s face when he heard that ultimatum.” Aiden got a look of gleeful malice on his face.

“Then be ready in six days,” Gibbs said as he stood. “We’ll get you settled on Atlantis and then it should take about two to three weeks to get your grandmother’s clearance to get her moved. You can be there when we explain this to the general.”

“I’m seriously going to be an Atlantis cop?” Aiden sounded so damn stunned.

“Arbiter of conflicts,” Tony corrected him. “I’ve got the Pegasus guide to sane Earth laws all ready to go, and all the insane laws, we just ignore.”

“And Colonel Sheppard?” Aiden asked softly.

“He wants to see you,” Gibbs said. “If you had killed McKay, the colonel would have gutted you.” Aiden cringed. “Yeah. Probably.”

“No probably about it,” Gibbs said. “He loves his people, but you’re one of his men too. If he held this against you, he would not have sat at your bedside while Carson got you off the enzyme and then transferred you back to Earth. You didn’t do any permanent harm, and he’s already forgiven what harm you did do.”

“I hurt more than people on Atlantis.”

“Yes,” Gibbs said. “And if you’re ready, you should tell that story. People need to hear what that enzyme can do.”

“The Satedans need to hear it,” Tony said softly when he realized where Gibbs was going. Gibbs looked at him, his displeasure clear in the way he hid all emotion. Aiden had stood, and now Tony did as well before explaining it. “We have a lot of Satedans in the city, but a few of them… when they came to us, they were addicted to the enzyme.”

“Really?”

“Not a good sort of really,” Abby said softly. She moved to Gibbs’ side and he wrapped an arm around her protectively.

“They were Wraith worshippers,” Tony said. “It turns out the Wraith use the addictive nature of it to warp people when they want to keep them around. We got them off the enzyme, but the other Satedans aren’t forgiving.”

“Or forgetting,” Abby added. Gibbs kissed her on the head.

“Did they hurt anyone?” Aiden asked.

“No. We detected the enzyme quickly enough that we could take them into custody and get them off the drug, but they feel like they betrayed their world and their people, and they feel like monsters
because sometimes they want the enzyme back,” Tony said softly. The first symbiote that had gone into Tyre had begun to scream immediately. Jo got it out, but it was so traumatized by the memories of the host that she couldn’t allow it back in the waters. It had been the first symbiote Tony had watched die. Abby had openly wept.

“Christ.” Aiden closed his eyes for a moment. “Maybe you do need a drug counselor.”

“We need someone to be honest,” Tony said. “But that doesn’t mean we would sacrifice your privacy.”

“No, I lost my right to be private about my addiction about the time I kidnapped you guys. Maybe it makes me a bad person, but I guess I’m glad you have people struggling with addiction. Being the only addict in the city would make it hard to find an NA meeting. It sounds like I might have one built in. How many of the Satedans were addicted?”

“Three in the first group, four in the second,” Tony said. “They’re good people.”

“Addicts generally are,” Aiden said with a shrug. “We just got used to taking the easy way out. We can learn to walk the harder path and even feel good about it. But honestly, if I’m going to be leaving, I have a lot of packing to do, and I need to talk to my grandmother.”

Tony opened his mouth, but Aiden held up a hand.

“I know. I know. I won’t give her any details, but I do want to talk her into coming along. Hopefully if she knows there are other older folks coming it will be easier.” He looked at Gibbs and Abby hopefully.

“My folks love new people,” Abby said brightly. “They’re deaf, so sometimes it’s a little harder because you have to write things down or play charades, but they’re terrifyingly good at playing charades with hearies.”

“My father is going to be looking for someone to impress with his fishing stories,” Gibbs said.

“My grandma is really good at listening… and cooking fish. And you know we always had good fishing off the north pier,” Aiden said. He stopped and the smile faded. “Thank you,” he said in a serious tone. “I know you guys have a lot of reason to not forgive me…”

“And we have more to forgive,” Gibbs said firmly. He slapped Aiden on the arm. “You’re one of us. We get through things together.” Without a farewell, Gibbs urged Abby toward the door.

Aiden waited until they left. “The gunny doesn’t have Samas anymore, but he really hasn’t changed.”

“How do you know he doesn’t have Samas?” Tony asked.

Aiden rolled his eyes, and the glass one failed on that maneuver. It made it very clear which was artificial, but a glass eye looked more normal than Aiden’s black one. “First,” Aiden said, “like I said, I keep up with the walking wounded that end up getting transferred back. Second, if he had a snake in him, General O’Neill would shoot him before letting him walk around Colorado Springs.”

“That’s true,” Tony said. “I better get after him before he leave and makes me figure out my own way to Stillwater.”

“Sure.” Aiden made an abortive move toward Tony, retreated, and then, after an awkward pause, surged forward and caught Tony in a hug. “I’m really glad I didn’t get you killed, and I’m sorry.”
“Me too, on both counts,” Tony said. “I wanted to visit, but with Samas…”

Aiden pulled back and tucked his hands under his armpits as though not sure what to do with his arms. “They wouldn’t let him on the planet, would they?”

“No, not until Samas got too big to join,” Tony said. “Even now they get a little twitchy because Gibbs and I have hosted, so we have some scarring in the area.” Tony was very amused that Abby and Radek and a dozen other hosts had come back to Earth, but because their Turi had been smaller and far more careful about not leaving evidence behind, the SGC doctors couldn’t spot it.

Of course the queens, and even the onac Tony had hosted on the home planet had all attached high up, where they could take over if needed. If Tony got knocked out by a Wraith stunner, he wanted Jo to take control and go on a killing rampage. However, the Turi attached in a different spot, one where they could tap into the sensory input but weren’t able to take over the host. It meant finding them or finding evidence they had been in a human, would be much more different to find.

“A lot has changed, Aiden,” Tony said, “but more has stayed the same, and one of the things that’s the same is that you’re one of us.” A car horn blew. “Gotta go. See you in six days,” Tony called as he ran after Gibbs. He wasn’t kidding about Gibbs leaving him behind to make a point. Sleeping with Gibbs gave Tony certain privileges. Being late wasn’t one of them.
Jackson stared at the stone arch. Gibbs had expected Daniel to give the big speech on aliens, but apparently he was still missing and the whole base was starting to develop a funereal tone. Eventually Jackson spoke. "When you boys said that you were stationed in a difficult to reach area, I can't say I expected this."

"Too much?" Tony asked. He was shifting nervously, but then he didn't seem to know how to handle Jackson and his laid back attitude. Tony was smart enough to know there was steel under the fluff, but he kept looking to Gibbs to see how to act, but Gibbs didn't know how to handle his father. They hadn't had a meaningful face-to-face conversation in decades, even if the letters had gotten more and more conciliatory on both sides.

"It's a lot," Jackson admitted. "So, you have been out there this whole time?"

Jackson looked right at him, so Gibbs answered. "Yep."

"I should have known you'd run as far from Stillwater as you could get."

The barb hit home, and Gibbs started wondering if this was a good idea, but the alternative was leaving his father for the Ori, and that was a horrible idea. "It's not about running, Dad. It's about protecting the planet."

"From vampires?"

"They aren't vampires," Tony said. Gibbs noticed that ever since his father said that Tony should call him 'Dad' that Tony hadn't called him anything. Gibbs wondered if he was tempting fate to have his lover and his father in the same city. It wasn't like he had a great track record with family.

Tony continued "They're more on the life sucking alien side. Think of The War of the World meets goth looking hipppies who suck life force."

Jackson gave him a dirty look. "That's not making me feel better."

Gibbs stepped in when Tony gave him a 'help me' look. "The city is as secure as we can get it. If Atlantis falls, there's a good chance that Earth will follow not too much longer."

"That's not a comforting thought," his father said drily. However Jackson always had been painfully practical, and he hadn't changed much because he immediately asked, "What are the odds that's going to happen?"

Gibbs hesitated long enough that Tony answered. "We're safer than we were a few years ago. The city is powerful and we now have the central computer back up and running so she's helping us make sure we have a really good chance against these guys."

Gibbs rested his hand on the small of Tony's back. Since the beginning, Gibbs had understood that Tony had an empathetic side--a huge one. Sometimes he tried to hide it, but in the last few days, he'd started to throw himself into the uncomfortable emotional void between Gibbs and his father. Shannon had done that too.

"And I wouldn't be in the way?" Jackson looked to Gibbs.

"No, Dad. I wouldn't put the Earth at risk, and I wouldn't risk your life unless I believed tha the city
was secure."

"What would I do?" The moment Jackson asked that, Gibbs knew he wanted to come. The relief was a bit of a surprise. He had a difficult relationship with his father, but knowing that Jackson was on Earth and Gibbs couldn't protect him or even tell him about the danger had been a weight he'd carried too long. He smiled at his father, and some of the ice between them thawed.

"Tony knows more about that. He's close to the locals."

"The aliens?" Jackson asked.

"We're the aliens, Tony said gently. Most of the Earthers on Atlantis knew better than to make that mistake in front of Tony. "We have tenday markets where locals sell their goods. A lot of merchants have a hard time spending so much time traveling and sitting in the marketplace. A number of them would like someone to sell their goods on tenday and on the day or two beforehand when merchants are setting up and there's more foot traffic."

"So, they need someone to run their stores?"

Tony made a face. "Not quite. It's more based on trading. So they would tell you what supplies they need, and you would have to negotiate with customers. It's not as easy as collecting money, which is why these merchants have struggled to find someone who can run their business."

Jackson got a thoughtful look on his face. "It could be interesting. But I have to think there are a lot of people who are younger and who could deal wth being on the frontlines a little better. Why me?"

"There are a lot of younger people, but not many older ones," Tony explained. "It's a dangerous galaxy, and very few people live long enough to get old, so older people get a lot of respect. The merchants know that you would get more respect than a younger man. But more than that, you're Gibbs' father. They'll trust you for that alone."

Jackson gave Gibbs a questioning look. "Leroy?" he asked.

Gibbs knew exactly what his father was asking. It was one thing to have the respect of his team, but Tony was implying that Gibbs had the respect of a galaxy. But Jackson deserved to know the whole truth. "After Shannon died, I didn't care if I lived or not," Gibbs said.

Jackson dropped his gaze. "Those were hard times, son."

Gibbs felt the old burn of pain that his father hadn't been there for him, not when Shannon died or when his mother died, but those were scars, not open wounds. And looking back, Gibbs could see that Jackson was just as emotionally constipated as his son, so he probably had done his best. Gibbs continued his story without trying to get some verbal revenge on his father. "On a mission with a pretty low chance of return, I ran into an alien who'd been hiding on Earth for a couple of thousand years. Samas. He's aquatic, but he can move into a human and connect to the brain so there's communication. He'd been alone a long time, and if I wasn't willing to live for myself, I wouldn't leave Samas alone until I didn't have a choice."

"Do you have him in there now?" Jackson looked alarmed.

Gibbs shook his head. "He can't join anymore. As he learns, he grows, and he learned so much on this mission that he literally outgrew the ability to join anymore. He lives in the water full time, but I go down there and sit in the pool with him, so we can still connect." It was a pale imitation of what they'd once shared, but it did make Gibbs feel part of his partner's life. Samas felt such joy over his new world, that even the sorrow of losing his host didn't dull it. Years ago that might have gutted
Gibbs, but he had his own happiness now. Gibbs put his arm around Tony's waist and pulled him closer.

"Huh. So you had an alien in you?"

Tony smiled. "You know how they respect age? Well Gibbs time shared his brain with a five thousand year old alien who got us out of more trouble than a whole division of Marines could have. The two of them brokered alliances, saved lives, and kicked ass."

Jackson grinned. Tony's enthusiasm was clearly contagious. "That sounds like Leroy, alright. I never thought he'd share those traits with an alien, but Samas sounds like he'd be worth knowing."

"He is," Tony said.

"I'm sorry I never told you, Dad."

Jackson waved him off. "We've both made too many mistakes to start apologizing now. So, how much can I bring with me? I got a store full of inventory, and I'm not even sure what I want to take with me and what I should leave."

Tony leaned into Gibbs farther, his body relaxing as they got their answer. "Anything of personal value, get it all into the main room of your house. Teyla has a strict rule about no one bringing goods to sell because she doesn't want people from Earth trying to set themselves up as Pegasus versions of millionaires, but we might have a device that lets us beam all of your effects into a very small device we can carry through," Tony said.

"That's fine. So can that ship beam me into town so I can buy a few things?"

"No beaming into populated areas, Dad," Gibbs said. He suspected his father knew that already. "We can get dropped off at your house and then we can drive."

"Oh no!" Jackson said. "I have to buy you two a wedding present, and I'm not taking you along just so you can bitch that I'm taking too long picking it out. So, where's this young man you're taking back... where's Lieutenant Ford? I'm sure he'd be willing to drive an old man around while you two shift furniture."

Gibbs groaned. His father was going to be pumping Aiden for information. Well, Jackson would get the good dirt on them sooner or later. Growing up in a small town, Gibbs knew the power of gossip, and Atlantis was a very small town.

"I'll go call him and see if he's available," Gibbs said. The moment Gibbs' saw Tony's gleeful face he realized he had just made a tactical error. Tony would be able to ask for all sorts of embarrassing stories from Gibbs' youth. On the other hand, Gibbs trusted Tony with the blackmail material.

Gibbs headed for a place where he could use the phone since cell phones definitely didn't get a signal in the mountain. That meant that enlisted and officer work areas were more common in the mountain than in other bases. However, when Gibbs pushed open a door, a familiar voice greeted him. "Gunny," O'Neill said as Gibbs came in.

"You lost?" Gibbs asked. Crossing his arms, he refused to give an inch. When they'd worked together in the field, he'd respected the hell out of O'Neill, even if the man was Air Force. However, years of exile had damaged that respect.

"Nope." O'Neill stood up. "I'm hiding. And someone mentioned that you were headed this way."
Gibbs narrowed his eyes. “You were trying to get me away from Tony.”

O’Neill shrugged. “That’s harder than I expected. Are you two joined at the hip or something? Not that I’m judging. Trust me, I’m judgment free.”

Gibbs snorted.

“Yeah, yeah. So, how’s life after being taken over by a snake on a semi-regular basis?”

Gibbs didn’t even bother answering that.

O’Neill sighed. “Crap, that’s not where I wanted to go. Look, I wanted to get your opinion before I have to deal with a problem. You used to be someone I saw as pretty level headed.”

“I still am that man.”

“So I get cranky and untrusting around snakes. I hate Russians just as much, and look who you have as a new commander in Atlantis. How’s that working, by the way?”

The general was dancing around something, but Gibbs figured going along was the fastest way to figure out what. “He’s not bad. I don’t particularly like having someone who served the USSR in the chain of command, but…” Gibbs shrugged.

“Yeah, that feels wrong.” O’Neill made a theatrical shudder. “But he’s not bad. He isn’t doing anything that’s going to lead to more administrative reviews of leadership, is he? The rumor that Atlantis is a cursed posting has a little too much truth for comfort.”

“Colonel Chekov is working with the council as far as I know. Tony would know better since he’s the Turi representative.” And with that Gibbs just waited. O’Neill would have to get to the point eventually.

O’Neill headed over to a table and sat. Gibbs considered playing the part of a real bastard and refusing to sit at the same table as the general, but that seemed petty. Gibbs moved to the opposite chair, sat, and raised an eyebrow as he waited for O’Neill to get around to the real subject here.

“It seems like I have a problem with someone using our name in vain. Sorta,” O’Neill said, which didn’t make a whole lot of sense, so Gibbs waited. O’Neill started again. “Someone is dropping names with some pretty influential people, talking about how he’s involved in a program so secretive that he can’t give any details, but his son is in the program and he’s supporting us here at home.”

Son. That was all the hint it took for Gibbs to get the message loud and clear. If that man was doing something, Gibbs was not letting Tony catch the blame for it. “Tony has not told his father anything and he is not involved in Atlantis. If Anthony DiNozzo Senior is telling anyone different, he’s lying.”

O’Neill grimaced. “I actually get the feeling he’s implying more than lying, which would make sense if DiNozzo hasn’t told him anything. But he’s caught a few people’s ear. DiNozzo is an ambassador—one of the ruling council. His father is starting to attract too much attention.”

Gibbs leaned back in his chair. “You wanted to see if we were going to invite him.”

“Are you?”

“Hell no,” Gibbs said firmly. “Tony vetoed that idea the first time it came up. His father is a con artist, and Tony is well aware of that.”
“Well, in one way this is less awkward. Half of Atlantis already hates me, and if I had to go up against Tony, I wasn’t sure who would win that political fight.”

Gibbs could see the heavy lines on O’Neill’s face. He was starting to age faster now, and no doubt the political burdens he had to carry added to that. The President had put him in an impossible position by trying to bring Sheppard home. Unfortunately, O’Neill had sworn to uphold the President’s orders—even the stupid ones. Gibbs understood. He remembered having sniper weapons pointed at him every second he was outside while he and Tony had been in New Mexico. Those men had been ordered to the duty, and Gibbs had been ordered to endure it. None of them had been happy, but Tony was the only one who got to go off. And he had. Gibbs had felt so bad for the sniper Tony had cornered in the commissary that Gibbs had rescued the hapless captain.

“Tony won’t lift a finger to protect Senior from any legal repercussions. I assume you are talking about legal action,” Gibbs said.

“I’m not going to order him murdered in the street by a hit and run driver,” O’Neill said dryly. His flat expression was enough to make it clear that had been a possibility some time in the past. “However, certain people are under the mistaken impression that wining and dining him is the way to get influence over his son.”

Gibbs shrugged. “A fool and his money.”

“We’re talking about a lot of wealthy and influential fools who are trying to push their way into government contracts, and a few who know about Atlantis and think that Senior is their ticket onto the evacuation list. If he sniffs around long enough, he’s going to figure out what his son is into.”

“Then stop him.”

O’Neill studied Gibbs. “And do I tell DiNozzo that I’m investigating his father for insider trading, fraud, and theft by deceit?”

“A memo would be nice. Or you can assume that I’ll tell him.”

“Yeah, I assumed that either way.” O’Neill stood up. “I just wasn’t sure if I needed to kiss more politician ass to avoid any more surprises. You people seem to be setting more and more of your own rules, and that’s leaving me in a difficult position when the President gives me orders—like the one to shut down DiNozzo Senior. So, one old war horse to another, gunny—tell me if I’m about to step in a pile of steaming shit.”

“Path is clear, sir,” Gibbs said.

A smile flickered across O’Neill’s face and he nodded. “Appreciate that, gunny. Now I have to beam back to DC and actually deal with him. How that man managed to raise an ethical son is one of the mysteries of the universe.”

Gibbs agreed with that. He was just very happy that sometimes the universe worked that way.
John smiled when he spotted Jackson Gibbs leaning against a railing. The Pegasus natives adored the older folks who had come through—Aiden’s grandmother, Gibbs’ father, Lieutenant Carlson’s grandparents and Major Teldy’s dad. Most of the active duty military had chosen to bring the older generation because of the regs that said that any children brought to the city would have to stay until they were eighteen and could legal sign non-disclosure agreements. Most parents didn’t want to trap their children off world, but a few had decided the cost was worth it.

Sergeant Anders brought her two kids and her parents. A few of the scientists had brought their families, and Atlantis had an official school full of really scary and intense kids. John was totally going to kidnap the class for surfing lessons one day because with that many IQ points in one room, the kids were going to be weird if someone didn’t save them.

“Mr. Gibbs, how are you enjoying the city?” John asked as he stopped near Jackson.

Jackson smiled. “Don’t start Mr. Gibbising me. Call me Jackson, especially since it seems like everyone in this city thinks Leroy’s first name is Gibbs.”

Actually, John thought his first name had been Jethro, which was the primary reason everyone called him Gibbs. Clearly he’d been wrong. “Jackson it is. Call me John.”

“Do you think that’s proper what with you being the military second in command and all?”

John shrugged. “We don’t really stand on ceremony around here. Mostly I’m just a gate team leader.”

Jackson gave him a curious look. “Seems like that’s a plenty big job, exploring the universe. I’m not sure when that started being less than special.”

It’d been a long time since John had really thought about how unique his job was. “I guess we stopped thinking about it as exploring the universe and started thinking about it as just checking in on the neighbors. Through a worm hole. To other planets.” Each time John added a phrase, he said it slower. “You’re right. That’s still awesome. I keep trying to get Gibbs to join one of the teams, but he said his knees and eyesight is bad enough that without Samas he’d be a liability.”

Jackson nodded. “Hard to think my boy’s been out here doing this—saving the world and hosting aliens and getting married.”

John wasn’t sure what to say. His own father would probably start trying to figure out how to parlay John’s position into military contracts. Actually, that would make him a lot like Tony’s father, with the difference being that Patrick Sheppard actually did have the factories to follow through on his promises.

The law said that was a big difference, but in John’s book, Patrick Sheppard and Anthony DiNozzo were both users. Neither of them would ever have the respect for Atlantis and her people Jackson Gibbs clearly felt. Neither of them could be proud of their sons without trying to figure out an angle for themselves, and John felt inexplicable sad about that. It was funny how talking to one truly supportive parent reminded John of all the things he never had. He wondered if he’d had better luck with the parent lottery back before he’d ascended.

Ladon Radim stepped out onto the balcony and immediately moved toward John. "Colonel Sheppard, can I have a moment?"
“Well, I should be going,” Jackson said.

“I don’t want to chase you off,” Ladon immediately said. He looked horrified at the thought he’d offended Jackson, but then the Pegasus folks did tend to bend over backward for elders.

“No, no. I have to talk to a trader from Santhal who wants me to add his textiles to my tenday shop.” Jackson patted Ladon on the arm before turning to John. “Nice speaking to you.”

John nodded, but he had already turned his attention to Ladon. Every time the Genii were around, John could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Honestly, he was surprised Ladon would talk to him. They didn't have the best relationship, especially since Ladon had nearly gotten Lorne killed. John tended to hold a grudge over stuff like that. "What can I do for you," he asked.

"I have received a notice that I am to return to the Genii homeworld."

For a moment, John could only stare at Ladon, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Ladon was the deposed leader of a people who usually assassinated rather than deposing. No way in hell was Ladon considering obeying that order. The man wasn’t stupid. But Ladon just gazed back. "Um, okay," John eventually said.

"I was wondering if you would accompany me."

"Why?" John blurted out. If the new Genii leader wanted to kill Ladon, John really didn't want to be there for the bloodbath. "I mean, if you don't want to go, Elizabeth would honor a request for asylum." And honestly, that would be the smartest move. Nillic had let Ladon go once, but if he was calling the man back, he might be reconsidering that decision.

"And how would that affect her relationship with the new Genii government?" Ladon asked.

John grimaced. "Yeah, that probably wouldn't go over well with them. But I'm not sure what you think I can do."

Ladon sighed. "Colonel, I doubt they want to kill me. That's what you're assuming, isn't it?"

"Well... yeah." John might not be good with politics, but this seemed like a no-brainer. The leaders of violent coups tended to be a little unkind to the people they ousted from power.

"If Nillic wished me dead, he would have already killed me. No, this is more about parading me in front of my former supporters to remind them that I am no longer the Genii leader." Ladon shrugged as if being a political pawn was nothing more than annoyance.

Then again, he was Genii, and they were a little weird when it came to governments and power. They were still weirded out that John had stepped down for Colonel Chekov and Chekov had kept him as the military second in command. Honestly, John didn’t mind that much. Okay, so he minded a little, but Chekov was a hell of a lot better than Sumner or most of the other commanders John had reported to in the past.

John tried to give Ladon a supportive smile. The man made Elizabeth happy, and that was worth a little emotional support, even if John didn’t actually trust him. "That sounds... well... amazingly unpleasant."

That made Ladon laugh. "I suspect it will be. But I would like you to be there, standing witness."

John crossed his arms. "I'm a little more concerned about the fact that your people seem to considering hostage taking a legitimate form of negotiation."
"After what happened to Kolya, I doubt that's an issue," Ladon said dryly. John still got a little visceral twinge of happy every time he thought about the Turi ripping Kolya into so many pieces that the Genii didn’t have enough for an actual burial.

"I don't know. You kidnapped us." John knew he was being petty and vindictive, but Ladon had nearly killed Lorne. John liked Lorne. But John also liked Elizabeth and she gave him disappointed eyes when he didn’t play nice. Some days John really just wanted to retreat in a corner and hide behind Rodney. Then he didn’t have to figure out who to be nice to because everyone was distracted by Rodney’s attitude.

"I tried to minimize the damage of Kolya's plan," Ladon said, “but I understand your feelings on the matter. That's actually one of the reasons I would like you to stand witness. I have no doubt that you will stand by and let Nillic take his metaphorical pound of political flesh."

"Yep," John said. He didn’t add that he’d let Nillic take a literal pound of flesh, but then he’d never hidden his distrust so maybe that went without saying.

"So come with me. Please," Ladon asked.

John studied the man. Ladon was many things, but he was a politician first and foremost. "You have a plan."

"I have a potential response if Nillic takes this down certain paths. And while I can do this alone, your presence, not as a military leader of Atlantis but as a deascended Ancestor, could help cement the alliance between our people and prevent Elizabeth from being placed in a very difficult position."

That was a low blow. Ladon knew that John was loyal to Elizabeth. "If they start torturing you, I'm going to let them," John warned.

"Good. To do anything else would make it appear that Elizabeth had ordered you to support me over the Genii government. If you do stand by, that will reassure Nillic of this alliance more effectively than any words."

John stared at Ladon in horror. "You're hoping he does torture you."

"I would rather endure torture than death, and I would rather die than see the alliance between the Genii and Atlantis end. I have lived my life under the shadow of the Wraith, understanding that my death might be required to fight the evil. Dying is inevitable."

That was just creepy. "You people are really screwed up, you know that, yeah?"

Ladon smiled. "Dr. Heightmeyer has suggested as much. So, will you come?"

"Do you want the rest of my team to come too?" John would set fire to the gate control system before he'd let Rodney go to the Genii homeworld, so if this was a ploy to put Rodney into Genii hands, Ladon was going to be shit out of luck.

However Ladon shook his head. "No. Absolutely not. Nillic is an honorable man, but he has a duty to defeat the Wraith, and he believes the Genii should take a more powerful position in this alliance. Putting Dr. McKay or Teyla in his path would be too much temptation."

"But I'm not?"

"Colonel, you are one of the Ancestors returned in human form. No one would dare touch you. No one."
John snorted. He had a feeling a lot of people would happily vivisect him, but this wasn't the time for that conversation. “I have to ask Colonel Chekov’s permission.”

"Thank you,” Ladon said with unvarnished relief.

“Hey, he may not let me, and I’m serious about letting them torture you.”

"And thank you for that too,” Ladon said. John was fairly sure Ladon had some sort of mental disorder. "We leave in an hour." Ladon turned and headed out the door.

Great. Now John had ask Chekov for permission to go. And then he would have to tell Elizabeth. She was probably going to hope that John would break all the rules of diplomacy and save Ladon. John hated politics with a burning passion. Politics and overcooked peas. They were evil.

Chekov had looked almost pleased to give John permission. Hopefully Chekov wasn’t trying to get rid of him. Even Elizabeth had fewer objections than John expected, although she did look worried as she watched Ladon head for the gate. Before three hours were up, John found himself standing in a room full of Genii, including their new leader, a lean man with scars down his left arm by the name of Nillic. They’d been brought to the underground bunker without seeing a single one of the Amish impersonators who lived on the surface, so John figured something was up.

As a soldier led them through passages, each guarded by grim-faced guards, John started to wonder whether the Genii were about to have another coup. The tensions were so thick that even John could pick up on people’s unease, and John didn’t really recognize emotion well. Eventually their escort led them into a large room with a meeting table, and Nillic finally turned to look at them.

“You brought your support from Atlantis, I see.” He sneered at John.

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John figured the Genii had a secret cult that worshipped 1930s silent movie villains. Seriously. “Hey, I’m here to play witness. Whatever happens is between you two,” John said. He held up both hands to show he had no interest in getting involved.

“So, you put yourself at our mercy?” Nillic asked.

John looked at Ladon. “I kinda believed him when he said I wouldn’t be in danger, but my backup plan includes Ronon and a whole lot of pissed off Turi.” John watched as Nillic lost a lot of color. Yep, the Turi were enough to scare a screw into going straight. O’Neill might have a hate on for all symbiotes, but John kinda liked having them around.

Ladon stepped forward. “Nillic, allow me to speak to the crowd. I suspect I know what is going on here, and I can calm this.”

“You can whip them into a frenzy of pro-Atlantis sentiment,” Nillic snapped. “I don't think so. I think you’re here to serve as a lesson for your supporters.”

“You have guards at my back,” Ladon said softly. “If I whip them into any frenzy, you can shoot me and then step to the podium and explain that anyone who objects will meet the same fate. I know my supporters will lose, but this is costing us too much to fight amongst ourselves. I want them to give you the support you need to unite our people. If you need to kill me to accomplish that, I would rather die than contribute to this civil unrest.”

“And Ancestor Sheppard, what would you do at that point?” Nillic demanded of John.
"I actually go by Colonel Sheppard, but as far as if you killed Ladon…" John made a production out of thinking it over. 'I'd watch.' When Nillic glared at him, John added, "Honestly. This is your world, and I have my own issues with Ladon. He took my people hostage."

"I took you hostage as well," Ladon pointed out.

"Sure. But everyone does that. I get more cranky about you taking my people hostage."

Everyone looked at John oddly, and he just shrugged. It was true.

"And what will you say to the people?" Nillic asked Ladon.

"That we need to stop fighting each other. The coup is over, and now we must focus on the Wraith, not divide ourselves with internal fighting."

"If you say anything other than that, I will kill you myself," Nillic warned.

Ladon grinned. "I don't doubt it."

They might think John was crazy, but John was fairly sure both of them were in need of serious psychiatric medications. However, no one asked his opinion.

Nillic quickly organized the guard and sent word to the people in the caverns that Ladon would speak to them. Within minutes, John was following Ladon down carved tunnels to the main gathering space where the Genii held elections. The space was a natural cave with the corners squared off. It had a sense of age to it—the rust on the metal doors, the worn treads on the stairs. But John didn't have much time to worry about structural integrity because the mood in the room was almost overwhelming.

Throng of people gathered on the floor of the cavern, and Ladon raised a hand in greeting to them as they walked the length of a balcony to a large stage area that stood six or eight feet in the air. John could almost taste the danger as Genii flowed like some viscous fluid, gathering together into small groups that then moved to merge with others of the same political affiliations. The supporters of Ladon and those of Nillic separated themselves, and the two groups were entirely too close to each other in number. If a riot broke out, a lot of people were going to die, and John wasn't sure that the small rail around the stage would save them.

Nillic stepped to the front of the stage first. John expected a microphone, but instead the entire room grew suddenly still.

"Genii people!" Nillic called. The words boomed across the crowd surprisingly loud. John looked up and noticed that the ceiling of the cave had been smoothed and rounded. No doubt that accounted for the way sound from the stage seemed amplified.

Nillic continued. "We are a great people—a united people. We are united in our determination to defeat the Wraith. We are united in our willingness to sacrifice all to that goal. We are united in our desire to see our great empire return to the days of glory. I have vowed to lead all our people to greatness... all our people to a position of strength. We are Genii. When others fell, we survived. When others became food to our enemy, we lurked in the shadow and fought back. No one can take our victories from us. Think of the people we have saved, the Wraith we have destroyed, and know that we are great. These newcomers may have the technology of the Ancestors, but we carry their hearts."

John wasn't sure about that... As far as he was concerned, the Ancients were cowardly sons of bitches, and to compare the Genii to the Alterans was an insult to Genii. Given that he really didn't
like the Genii, that said a lot about his opinions when it came to the Ancients.

Nillic paused, and where an Earth audience would have broken out in applause, this group waited in perfect silence. "Ladon, scientist assigned to Atlantis would speak with you," Nillic finally said.

John could see the unease in the crowd. There was a soft shuffling sound as people moved about while Ladon stepped to the front of the stage.

"I am proud to have led the Genii," he said, and John could feel the tension rising. Nillic put his hand on his weapon, but Ladon didn't seem to notice or care. If John had to stand by while Nillic killed Ladon, Elizabeth was going to be really aggravated with him.

"I am proud that I stopped the violent and hateful policies Kolya would have implemented."

That caused more shifting.

"I wish I led you still, but I do not. And I acknowledge Nillic as the rightful leader of the Genii people and I accept his mercy in assigning me to return to my duties as a scientist."

John could see the whole crowd go utterly still. So they hadn't expected that.

"But there is more I wish to say. I do not have the power of speech that Nillic possesses, so I must be direct and factual, as a scientist will be. Nillic is right that our people have held firm while others have fallen. Samas came to us seeking alliance because he saw our strength. He believed that Atlantis could not stand strong without Genii to act as the legs for this great city. But he also saw that without Atlantis to be the hands, the Genii path to defeating the Wraith would take too long. As a scientist, I say to you that our nuclear weapons would not have worked. While they were the most powerful weapons we had ever created, capable of taking out an unprepared hive, they were not strong enough to defeat the wakened Wraith.

"We must all work together to create the weapons that can do that. Part of that means that the Genii must work with Atlantis--work with her, not for her. But a second part of that means that we must put aside our differences and work together as Genii. Had Nillic killed me, he would have been an ally to the Wraith--doing their work by killing someone who would have stood against them.

"But how many Wraith allies stand with us now? How many in this crowd would kill a neighbor in order to further an agenda?" Ladon paused and studied the crowd before he said loudly, "All those who do as much help the Wraith."

John could feel the fury in the crowd, and even Nillic was staring at Ladon in horror.

"I killed Cowen, and in doing so, I killed a man who would have given his life to defeat the Wraith. I believed I had no other choice to ensure my power," Ladon said, "but now I ask myself, if all Cowen's elite troops lived today, if they were here to pick up the weapons Atlantis is beginning to provide, how many Wraith would die? How many Wraith have I saved by choosing the path I chose? If Nillic killed me, how many Wraith would he save from the weapons I could build? We turn against each other out of fear and anger, and in doing so, we strengthen our enemies."

Ladon turned and pointed at John. John took a quick step back, but he had rock behind him, so his retreat was fairly short. "There stands a man who is an Ancient, who walked the city when the Ancients were strong and the Wraith a new threat. He could have power now. He has chosen instead to take the path of acting ethically and supporting others. He gave up power; he gave up control over the city he loves and accepts the orders of another. Am I not powerful enough to follow the lead of our Ancients? I say I am."
He whirled back around and looked at the crowd. "I say I am strong enough to sacrifice my power to serve the one goal that matters--the Genii people. I say that anyone who turns on a neighbor is an ally to Wraith." Now he turned and looked at Nillic. "I say that I was weak for ignoring the growing voices that supported Nillic, and I say that Nillic is strong enough to show mercy to me for that mistake and strong enough to step aside when the Genii people call for a new leader."

John almost expected an objection, but he was fairly sure Nillic was too shocked to react.

Ladon focused on the crowd. "Violence does nothing but take the best of us out of the fight against the Wraith. We are too great as a people to act so dishonorably, and to those who say that I should return to power because I have learned my lesson, I say that I have served my time, and I had my chance to lead. I squandered it, perhaps because in my heart I have always been a scientist. Nillic is a leader. He is our leader, and rather than assisting the Wraith by dividing our great nation, I say I would lay down my life for him because I know he leads us against the Wraith.

"And I do hope those who believe in our alliance with Atlantis will speak up, not out of disrespect for Nillic or out of a desire to remove him from power, but to remind him that good Genii can disagree and the best Genii listen to each other. I hope he will be better than I was. The scientist in me was too focused on my own theories and pursuing my own interests. The leader in him will allow him to listen to all the voices and lead the Genii to greatness.

"And I hope that the leader who one day takes Nillic's place remembers his greatness and his mercy. I hope that future leader will keep in mind that anyone who kills Nillic does the work of the Wraith. We are too great as a people to allow ourselves to become agents to those monsters. I would die before I would do the work of the Wraith, and that means that I would die before killing a Genii who stands true and strong for our people." Without another word, Ladon turned and strode back down the length of the balcony past John and toward the door.

Slowly the crowd started to stomp their feet, and John hurried after Ladon. The others, including Nillic, still stood on the stage looking a little shell shocked.

When John caught up to Ladon in the passage, the sound of stomping feet echoed after them. "What was that?" John asked in a whisper.


"Democracy?" John had never heard any Genii express a desire for another form of government. He narrowed his eyes as he realized who might want that. "Did Elizabeth help you with any of that speech?" he asked in a whisper.

Ladon leaned close. "Like I told them, I'm a scientist, not a politician. Elizabeth wrote most of that speech." He took a step back. "Colonel, let's go home and let them settle this amongst themselves."

Now that sounded like a damn good idea.
The Fixer

Elizabeth smiled as Teyla came in the office bearing two cups of spiced tea. "Good morning."

"Good morning. Is all well with you?" Teyla offered Elizabeth a cup and then sat.

"It is. I don't have anything remarkable on the schedule today. I thought we could review the gate use schedule." Elizabeth was frankly shocked they weren't putting out fires and trying to wrest control back from one more military dictator.

Every time Atlantis got a new commander, the city came close to utter chaos. No doubt some people back home blamed the AI now that they knew Atlantis had one, but Elizabeth thought that arrogance and an unwillingness to recognize the importance of the civilian presence were to blame. However Chekov was the exception that proved the rule. He generally listened in command meettings, offering to bring military assets where needed without trying to control the missions. If anything, he seemed more dedicated to his Russian literature club than his command, but Elizabeth suspected that, like John, Colonel Chekov had simply developed a more laid back leadership style. When he did tell the military to move, they certainly moved.

John's willingness to follow Colonel Chekov had sent a clear signal to the men under him. Elizabeth figured that if the President had been successful in recalling John, Atlantis' military would have split with the American forces checking with Lorne before following any Russian orders. But John had smoothed the way.

"I am pleased to see that John is not alone in his competence. I had begun to worry," Teyla said with a twinkle in her eye that suggested she was teasing. Perhaps she shouldn't joke because Elizabeth was starting to seriously question her own home planet.

However, she pushed that thought to the back of her mind and brought up the gate schedule. They had a lot of incoming traffic since today was eightday. The larger shops were already set up to catch business from the traders who would be coming in today and tomorrow for the tenday markets. Traders had to apply for travel to the city, have a current trader sponsor them, and then go to one of the designated gatekeeper cities on Bidwan, Genea, or another ally to reach Atlantis. Elizabeth and Teyla reviewed each name, the sponsor, and the trade goods.

While Elizabeth would never say as much out loud, she was incredibly grateful for the Turi symbiotes. Having this many outsiders in the city made it impossible to keep out every enemy. Teyla might not see that, but Elizabeth did. Sometimes she felt like the Israeli Prime Minister--painfully aware of the enemy all around. The Genii political structure was brittle enough that she suspected that Kolya had been only one of many splinter groups, and there were a number of other planets who resented Atlantis growing influence. And then there were Wraith worshippers. Human nature dictated that some of those groups would infiltrate the tenday markets and search for weaknesses.

As much as Elizabeth had a lot of respect for their military, she preferred the Turi enhanced senses and the Sateteans natural suspicion. They made a powerful security group. She kept waiting to see Aiden walking the halls without his slight limp, but perhaps Tony and Gibbs were moving slowly before offering him a symbiote.

Teyla finished going through the report. "All appears well," she said.

"Good, good." Elizabeth shut down the program.
"Is something else bothering you?" Teyla asked. Elizabeth had always believed herself hard to read, but Teyla disproved that on a regular basis.

"Not bothering me, no. I simply had an issue that I had hoped you would address."

"Oh?" Teyla leaned forward.

"Captain Sorensen's parents dislike the tower where they have rooms. They feel it is too loud, and they can't enjoy their balcony without hearing shouting children."

Teyla's eyebrows went up, but then Elizabeth had expected that. For Athosians and most of those in the Pegasus galaxy, the presence of elders and the security of a home where children could shout and run were highly valued. Ladon laughed every time children raced past them in the halls, and she knew he hoped that one day she would be willing to have a family with him. Elizabeth was surprised to find herself considering it.

However, some of those from Earth preferred a quieter lifestyle.

"And they came to you with this concern?" Teyla asked.

"Oh, no." Elizabeth laughed. Very few people outside the ruling council complained directly to her. She sometimes missed the intimacy of their early days in the expedition, but with several thousand people on the city, she wouldn't be able to do her job if she handled everyone's complaints. "Captain Sorensen talked to Major Lorne, and he spoke with Colonel Sheppard since he was unsure of how to handle the situation."

"Ah." Teyla was silent for a time, and Elizabeth sipped her tea. Teyla addressed the heart of the matter. "If I handle this, it implies that I represent civilians, not simply Pegasus civilians."

"Yes, it would," Elizabeth conceded. When she'd come here, she'd had no idea that she was going to end up trying to shift power out of this office. However, her position was tenuous at best. The IOC desperately wanted her out, and her own ability to split their voting blocs was the only thing keeping her in Atlantis. One day Shen and Philip would figure out that she was playing them against each other, and they would both dedicate themselves to ruining her career. Before that happened she had to make sure that this office was little more than a central point around which the others organized. That would be a beautiful poison pill to leave her successor.

And the longer the other ruling council members held power, the more difficult it would be for Chen or Woolsey to grab it back.

Teyla considered her for a long time before answering. "I could send Aiden to introduce himself since he is new. It might imply that we have always considered civilians as under my auspices."

"And if you are responsive to their needs, they are not likely to want to fall under military authority or even the authority of their home countries," Elizabeth said.

Teyla nodded. "I will speak to Aiden and let him know that while NCIS continues to act as our arbiters of laws, as my assistant, he is also responsible to ensure that civilians have what is necessary. I have no doubt Tony and Gibbs will support that and give him time to complete such duties."

"Tony will probably give him schmoozing lessons," Elizabeth said with a laugh.

"No doubt. He would be highly valued as a trader on any planet."

Elizabeth's humor faded as she considered where he'd learned that skill. When Rod had come
through from the other universe, Tony had told them that Rod reminded him of a con artist, and that he knew that because his own father had been one. Elizabeth had assumed that Tony's father had played fast and loose with the law, but from the latest reports from Earth, it appeared that he had outright broken it a number of times. General O'Neill's office had thoroughly discredited him, and the man was facing potential jail time if he couldn't pay back a significant number of clients who had invested in fraudulent deals. Elizabeth hated how Tony cringed every time someone mentioned his father. She'd intervene if he gave any hint that he wanted her help, but as it was, Tony's silence had signaled a sort of 'keep away' rule that Elizabeth was respecting.

"I did have one more issue I wanted to discuss, more because I am confused," Teyla said.

"Oh?" Elizabeth pushed aside her unhappy thoughts. She never had liked being barred from helping someone she considered a friend, but to push her way into the conflict with DiNozzo, Sr. would likely make matters worse.

"I notice that Jackson Gibbs often refers to Gibbs and Tony as being married. Have they performed some ceremony when on Earth?"

"Oh, that." Elizabeth shook her head as she waded into one more conversation that would reflect badly on her home planet. "Because they are both men, the laws in most places bar them from getting married. Jackson is very likely trying to let his son know that he supports the relationship because many people in his generation do not approve of families based on same-sex couples."

"Why would someone disapprove of love?" Teyla sounded genuinely shocked and it had been a long time since Earth stupidity had caught her off guard.

"They believe love must be between a man and a woman."

"And what of those who identify as neither man or woman or who are born with genitals of both?"

Elizabeth had not expected the conversation to go in that direction, but she tried to answer as honestly as she could. "Many people prefer to believe that such things don't happen."

"Reality does not care for one's belief," Teyla said. Elizabeth wondered if she could get t-shirts with that and have them anonymously sent to members of the IOC.

"There are advocates who are trying to change how people see these issues, but attitudes change slowly," Elizabeth said. "I wish I could tell you that my world is likely to change soon, but I suspect we'll all be dead of old age long before Gibbs and Tony secure the right to get married on Earth."

Elizabeth knew that one or two states did allow it, but as long as the federal government and other states refused to acknowledge such marriages, the ceremony provided no protection.

"I have noticed that neither Tony nor Gibbs have ever corrected Jackson. Do you believe they have declared a private commitment?"

"Considering that goa'ulds and the entire US military couldn't get them to break up, I think that's a safe assumption."

Teyla got a thoughtful look on her face.

"What are you considering?" Elizabeth asked.

Teyla laughed. "I am glad you're a friend and not a trading partner. You know me too well. I am thinking that the men have never had a celebration of their love. When a world has the ability and the resources, such a love match would call for a feast that includes all who care for the couple. Would
you not agree that many care for those two?"

Elizabeth smiled. "I believe you're talking about a city-wide celebration. We would probably have trading partners from other worlds come in. That would be quite the feast."

"Yes." Teyla was beaming now. "It would be an amazing feast, but do our friends deserve less?"

"They definitely deserve that and more. I bet I know who could be talked into a little planning."

"Abby," Teyla said.

Elizabeth nodded. That was exactly who she had in mind. Dr. Scuito was the master of all things team building and social support related. Kate Heightmeyer kept threatening to give Abby an honorary degree in psychology. Rodney's spluttering at the idea of Abby having a soft sciences degree provided endless amusement. Elizabeth and Kate often laughed at his reaction.

"So, when are we going to have your feast?" Teyla asked.

Elizabeth's mouth fell open. She had walked right into that trap, and from Teyla's arched eyebrow, it was pretty clear Teyla had planned exactly that.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Elizabeth said. While she was happy with Ladon, and while she had locked herself in her bathroom and cried when he risked his life by going back to Genea, she had to keep the political realities in mind. A woman couldn't marry without politicians assuming her husband influenced her decisions.

"Do you doubt Ladon Radim's feelings for you?"

"What? No!" Elizabeth knew he loved her.

"Then why would you turn away from publicly announcing a match?"

"Because the IOC would see it as undeniable proof that I am compromised."

Teyla gave Elizabeth such a sad look that Elizabeth would have been offended if it had been anyone else. "You have sacrificed too much to these people. Your needs are important."

"And what of your needs?" Elizabeth asked, turning it back on Teyla.

Teyla ducked her head. "Kaanan has moved into my quarters, and we are discussing having a feast on the mainland. Of course we will invite you."

Elizabeth felt like she'd been punched. She had always seen herself and Teyla as being the same--two politically powerful women who had chosen their careers over their personal lives. It felt like a sort of betrayal for Teyla to be discussing marriage. Elizabeth took a breath and tried to apply her more logical mind to that. Teyla's relationship with Kaanan was a cause for celebration, and Elizabeth's feelings were ridiculous.

"People wish for you to be happy. While your willingness to sacrifice yourself to fight the political battles of your home world is admirable, do you not deserve some joy in your life?"

"I have joy," Elizabeth immediately snapped.

Teyla raised an eyebrow. "You are not a member of any club, you hide your love for Ladon, you work twelve and sixteen hour days, and you go behind closed doors where you face groups of IOC members by yourself. You do see that this is unhealthy, yes?"
"I'm fine. And I went to the fencing club two days ago." Elizabeth had enjoyed herself more than she'd expected. It was a very precise activity and it had demanded all her attention.

"You drop in on all the clubs, much like a parent checking in on the child's activities, but I wonder which of these clubs gives you pleasure. Where do you go to escape the pressure of leadership?"

"Where do you go? Where does Rodney go?"

Teyla leaned back in her chair. "When I do the bantos, I care about nothing but the arc of the baton and the feel of my body as I twist away from attack. When Rodney has a new problem, the world could crumble around him and he would not notice unless one of us called him. Colonel Sheppard loses himself when he surfs, and Major Lorne must set an alarm for the art club members because they will get so deep into their passions that they will forget the time and miss duty stations. What takes you away from the troubles of this office, Elizabeth?"

"Ladon," Elizabeth said without hesitating.

Teyla smiled. "I am glad for that. I believe him a good man--one who has transcended his upbringing. But when is the last time you lost yourself in a book or a translation that was not part of solving an immediately problem?"

Elizabeth frowned as she realized she didn't have an answer for that. "So, was it Kate or Abby that sent you to have this conversation?"

Teyla's expression turned sad. "Neither. You allow neither of them close enough for them to recognize the weariness you carry." Teyla leaned across the desk and put her hand over Elizabeth's. "We have no immediate problems, and if you are unavailable for a time, the IOC will be required to wait."

"And that may give them time to undo some of the work I've done to protect Atlantis," Elizabeth said, a panic growing in the pit of her stomach. She stopped as she realized what she sounded like. Her hypervigilence and panic were truly unhealthy.

"I understand your goals in this, Elizabeth. However, you must take care of yourself. If the IOC uses the opportunity to replace you, I will not allow them to recall you. And we will deal with any interloper the way we dealt with those who tried to take John's position. However, you need to get time away. The Dagan have a great library from before the fall of their monastery. They have offered you the chance to explore texts which are hundreds of years old. It is the heart of their culture."

"Is it safe?" Elizabeth asked the question, but honestly she cared more about whether Atlantis was safe. That suggested she was suffering front line fatigue more than she'd understood. She did need to get away, although she would worry about the manipulations of the others. But then her excessive worry was the best reason to retreat and regain her balance. And how sad was it that the IOC posed a more immediately threat than the Wraith? Those great ships continued to decimate cultures and drive refugees to Atlantis for help, but only the IOC threatened Atlantis.

"I spoke to the colonels, and they have agreed that Major Teldy and her team should go with you. There are also technical drawings, so it might be wise to take a certain Genii scientist."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't want to take him away from his work." Ladon was obsessive about trying to catch up with Earth levels of technology, cramming years of physics studies into every second of free time.

"I believe he would enjoy spending time with you," Teyla said softly. "There is a lake and nights full
of bird song. And Rodney will not be there to complain about the new scientists."

Elizabeth chuckled, but after so many years, Rodney's complaints had become like white noise—comforting in their own way. "I'm going to worry about what the IOC is doing in my absence."

Teyla pulled her hand away from Elizabeth's. "You cannot control them. Sooner or later they will make a disastrous choice. That will not be your fault, and if it happens while you are gone, then the universe wills it so. You cannot divert the course of a river without allowing yourself to be destroyed, and I like my friend too much to sit back and allow you to harm yourself."

Elizabeth wanted to throw a fit and insist that she couldn't leave, but now that she really considered her own emotional state, she knew that she had to. She could not protect Atlantis when she was so close to an emotional edge. "You're a good friend," Elizabeth said. "I would have yelled at anyone else who suggested this."

"And that concerns me as well. Perhaps it is the Wraith that have taught my people to be more flexible, but I believe the Athosians are strong enough to continue without me. Have faith in us, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth nodded. "I can't stop every disaster, can I?"

"No one can." Teyla stood. "However, as long as we take care of ourselves and each other, we will avert more disasters than I would have ever believed possible before I met your people." With that, she left. For a time, Elizabeth sat in her office and watched the traffic in the gate room. Most of the people down there were civilians, with Satetean Turi escorting merchants and Marines standing guard only on the balcony. They'd had tenday markets for so long that they all knew the routine. It would run without her.

Elizabeth touched her radio. "Ladon?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, what can I do for you?"

"Do you have a second to talk?"

There was a brief pause and Elizabeth could hear Ladon tell someone he was going to step out of the labs for a while and he'd be back when he got back. "I'm on my way," he said. Maybe it was time for them to get away, and if Elizabeth wasn't willing to have a public feast, perhaps the two of them could have a private one. Certainly something needed to change, and now that Elizabeth saw the problem, she was determined to fix it. That's what she did--quietly, efficiently, behind the scenes.
The Game

John ran up the stairs two at a time. Rodney was already up there, so something big was going on. “This is a good one, sir,” Walter said as he passed.

“Great,” John said under his breath. Chekov and Elizabeth sat on one side of the conference table and Rodney sat on the other looking miserable. Elizabeth’s good mood hadn’t lasted long. Maybe they needed to send her on another vacation. The door opened for John before he even reached it.

“Colonel, Dr. Weir,” John said with a nod toward each. Inside the office, the vibes were even weirder. Elizabeth pressed her lips together in a full on angry-Mom expression, but Chekov looked like he was trying to avoid smiling. What the hell had happened?

Rodney swiveled around. “It was a game. That’s all.”

John froze for a second. “Um, what was?” That didn’t even make sense, and John was used to translating Rodneyese.

“Apparently it was not so much of a game.” Chekov pushed a tablet across the table, and on it, John could see the red and white flag Rodney had designed in their role playing game. But the video kept going, and then Lorne’s face was there, clearly giving a report in front of the flag. Wait… what?

John looked at Rodney for some sort of explanation. “How the hell did Rodney’s face get on a flag on M4D-058?”

“I told you. The game,” Rodney said. “It’s just a game.” He threw his hands up, and from the shrill tone of his voice, John was guessing this was a DEFCON One moment. John just didn’t understand it.

“John,” Elizabeth said in that tone that suggested she was holding onto her temper by a thread, “perhaps you could explain how you recognize this flag.”

“It’s a role playing game,” John said uneasily. “Rodney and I discovered the interface, and we sometimes play during our off time.”

“This is going to be good,” Chekov said. Rodney glared at him, but unfortunately, Rodney’s glares amused Colonel Chekov.

Rodney jumped in. “A few months after we arrived here we were exploring the city, checking out some labs on the east pier when we discovered a room. There were several Ancient consoles and screens -- it was quite an impressive layout. At first we thought it was some kind of a geological facility...”

Elizabeth interrupted him. “Wait. You two were exploring alone? I thought we had rules about teams having to clear areas systematically.”

“Rules are for others,” Chekov said with obvious amusement. “Go on. What does this room have to do with a world that worships Dr. McKay as their god?”
For a second, Rodney glared at the colonel, and John rested his hand on Rodney’s arm before there
could be some huge explosion. Godhood. Oh, this was not good. The very idea made John’s
stomach churn. This was the IOC’s worst nightmare, only starring Rodney instead of him. Rodney
took a deep breath. “We told you about it Elizabeth. There was a screen with a map that we assumed
was of the Lantean mainland.”

She tilted her head. “Wait. I do remember that. We thought we might be able to use it to find a good
spot for farming, but then you said we had to do flyovers to get a more accurate map.”

“Because we were wrong about it being a map at all,” John said. “It was more like an Ancient game
room. The map was of a fictional civilization, like a real-time video game.”

John could see that Elizabeth didn’t get it. She didn’t strike him as the sort of person to sit at a
computer and build fictional armies to go to war over resources. He tried to explain. “It’s like
computer games on Earth, but more complex. You take these countries that are already in the
database and you’d assume control of them.”

Rodney nodded. “Two societies separated by a river straight down the middle. Sheppard took one
country; I took the other.”

“First thing Rodney did was rename his country and put his face all over the flag,” John gave
Rodney a dirty look. Nothing said rampant narcissism like having fictional worshippers, and from the
sounds of it, they might not even be fictional. And that would be why Elizabeth was pissed. Her lips
were a thin, angry slash of red against her pale face. This was so not good.

“So, this world… this could be you two playing with their lives using an Ancient interface?”
Elizabeth’s voice still had that brittle calm.

“Maybe,” John said. Honestly, he wasn’t sure.

“I think you need to check this planet out,” Elizabeth said in that tone of voice that suggested they’d
damn well better fix this mess before she heard one more word about it.

John cringed before nodding and standing up to leave. He caught Rodney’s arm and pulled him
along. They were out of the room and headed for the stairs when Colonel Chekov caught up with
them. “You two find most interesting problems. Do you need to take Dr. Heightmeyer along? I could
ask her to be prepared to come at your request.”

Well crap. If Chekov was suggesting it, then the people on the planet really might be screwed up
enough to need her. Sadly that made sense because John and Rodney had gotten a little competitive.
The idea that John had manipulated real people was nauseating, but the control was so direct that
John still wasn’t sure that the game directly controlled the people. For God’s sake, Rodney had given
all the women a Carter haircut. Did the Ancients have tiny robots that tracked all the women down
and bobbed their hair? “Sir, we both might have gotten a little competitive,” John said carefully, “but
I don’t know what we might find.”

Chekov nodded. “I love to play Sid Meier’s Civilization. Russians always win, as they should. But I
also know I do many things to friends during game that I would not want others to repeat in the real
world. This is how I know to offer the good doctor’s services.”

The switch in Rodney’s brain flipped and the earlier shame vanished under anger. He turned on
John. “Maybe I wouldn’t have inflicted psychological damage on a planet full of people if you
weren’t so unreasonable. You doubled the size of your army.”
“You were stealing resources!”

“I was not!”

John poked him in the chest. “Your mine went under my land.”

“And you don’t need mines.”

“No, I need lumber, and you won’t trade any.”

“Of course I won’t. You’ll build more war machines.” Rodney poked him back.

“Whoa, whoa,” Chekov got between them. “We will definitely send Dr. Heightmeyer. Maybe you two should not go.”

“Oh, we’ll go,” John said as he looked at Rodney. He mouthed the word “cheater,” and Rodney turned bright red. John turned to Chekov. “If this simulation is tied to this planet, we owe these people, sir. We need to try and undo what we did, and they’ll listen to us in a way they won’t listen to others.”

Chekov gave him a long, searching look. “Okay, colonel. Try not to kill your geek. It makes horrible paperwork, and you are truly bad at paperwork.”

“Har, har,” Rodney said before he turned and stormed down the rest of the stairs.

“Yes, sir,” John agreed. Chekov sent a concerned look in Rodney’s direction before he looked back, and John could only shrug helplessly. John turned and followed Rodney before the colonel could say anything else. He caught up with Rodney near the transporter.

“Arrogant son-of-a-bitch, telling us what to do and who to take.” Rodney looked really angry, and John realized that he was angry about Chekov, not the game.

“Hey, he’s the commanding officer. I think he’s supposed to get involved on who goes on missions.”

Rodney looked over at John with such misery in his expression that John pulled him away from the transporter and into the nearest room. Rodney spluttered and did his flappy hands of doom, but he let John herd him into the privacy of a side room before John ordered the door to lock.

“What are you doing?” Rodney demanded.

“Out with it. What’s wrong?” John stood against the door and blocked it with his body.

“What’s wrong? Are you kidding me? What’s wrong?” Rodney’s voice went up and up. “They gave your command to someone else and he’s in there telling you who to take! You! You’re the one who is really running the military.”

“Actually, no he is. We have something called the chain of command,” John said. “And he is someone who listens to me and hasn’t taken my city or my team away from me.” If the IOC was going to get all weird, Colonel Chekov was probably the best person they could have sent. The first time Elizabeth turned to Teyla and gave her command of the city out of habit, Chekov hadn’t said a word. He’d later showed up in Sheppard’s office with vodka and asked when the military commander of Atlantis has been demoted from second in command to third. John had explained that Ellis had forced Elizabeth to turn to Teyla for support, and John had never challenged that relationship when he’d come back.
They’d both drunk too much and talked about how IOC members would have their heads explode at the thought of Atlantis being under the command of two women. John thought LaPierre would be the first to stoke out. Chekov argued that Chapman would explode first, and then Shen would follow, not out of any hatred of women in command but out of frustration that John would yield to two women so easily while she had to fight and scramble for every scrap of power.

John liked Chekov. Usually.

Chekov listened when John told him to take it easy on one recruit or send another one to Ronon for a good ass kicking. He hadn’t even blinked when John presented duty rosters that gave Hew the function of a major even if the Satedan wasn’t technically an officer at all. John hadn’t known Ellis, but Everett would have birthed cows if he’d seen that duty roster. Chekov had raised one eyebrow, shrugged, and signed off.

“Atlantis is yours,” Rodney said miserably, “and you’re doing your whole for the good of the mission martyr routine.”

“I’m what?”

“You heard me. This is your command, but the damn Ancients had to build a non-interference clause of some sort into your brain, and you’re letting the IOC push you around.”

For a second, John couldn’t get his brain to even put those words together in any order that made sense. No fucking way did Rodney believe that. “What do I want that I’ve let Chekov take away?”

“Command!”

“I don’t care who has command on paper. Things are still being done right, and I don’t care whose name is on the form.”

“Yes you do.”

“No, I don’t.”

Rodney opened his mouth, closed it, and then took a second to stare at John like he’d lost his mind. “That’s it. I have to look for the pod.” He started to shove past, but John caught him by the arm.

“Name one thing that has gone wrong because of Chekov.” John kept his voice calm and mentally asked the city to lock the door tight because as worked up as Rodney was, he would run away from this conversation like his tail was on fire.

“It’s not what has gone wrong, but what could go wrong. What if he does something as stupid as Ellis?”

John could feel the tendrils of fear at the very thought. “Has he done something?”

“Now? No. However, what if the IOC orders him to sacrifice Zelenka’s kid or kill all the symbiotes?”

“Why would they sacrifice Zelenka’s kid?” John understood the IOC hate for onac, but where did Zelenka and Selana’s kid come into it?

Rodney hit him on the arm. “What if they order him to do something stupid, and you aren’t here to stop him?”
“Then you stop him,” John said. That seemed pretty simple, but Rodney was staring at him like John was the biggest idiot on the planet. Actually, Rodney looked at him like that a lot. “You’re on the council,” John said slowly. “If you and Teyla and Kitsune and Tony veto something, it stays vetoed. And if the IOC is being stupid, Elizabeth will be very happy to inform them that her council has vetoed their stupidity, and she doesn’t even have to get her political hands dirty. She can make nice and promise to try and bring you guys around to the IOC point of view, and then close the wormhole and flip them off.” Elizabeth never would do that, but the image amused John. He imagined her getting some alien virus that made her say what she was really thinking. She could get over all that political niceness, tell the IOC to shove it, and then flip them the bird. It was a nice fantasy.

“But…”

“Rodney, we aren’t a military post anymore. There are over three thousand people on this base, and most of them are non-military personnel who follow one of the council members. On tenday we must get close to thirty five hundred or four thousand. Chekov doesn’t have a lot of authority to throw around.” John grunted. “Maybe that’s the difference between him and Ellis. Chekov and I both know that we’re not really the big cheese around here. Ellis… from the sounds of it, he really thought he was running the show.”

“Moron,” Rodney muttered.

“No joke. Geeks run the universe, Teyla… well, she’s Teyla, and Gibbs will kick my ass if I get out of line, and that’s even without Samas. I thought the Gibbs stare was a onac thing. It turns out that when I say something stupid, he can still give me that same terrifying look.” John scratched the back of his neck.

“I know.” Rodney wrinkled his nose. “I hate how he can make me feel about five when he looks at me like that.”

“We all do,” John said. “Look at the good side. You don’t have to sleep with Gibbs.”

“No if you promised me the full coding for the city AI,” Rodney said with a disgusted shiver.

John threw an arm over his shoulder. “Right, so are you okay now? No more freaking out about Chekov?”

“I still don’t like him.”

“Your best friend is a Czech who uses the word ‘Russian’ as a curse. I don’t think he expects you to like him.”

Rodney seemed surprised by that. “Huh. That’s true.”

“Come on—let’s go fix this world we supposedly screwed up.” John slung an arm over Rodney’s shoulders and steered him toward the door.
Lorne shaded his eyes as they walked toward the Gate. “I’m glad we got this settled. No offense sir, but you don’t make a great god.” Lorne’s team walked behind the rest of them, guarding their six, not that there seemed to be much to guard against. John and Rodney had been the only danger here.

John grimaced. “In my defense, I would have done things differently if I had known actual people were listening.” Between him and Rodney, they had completely screwed up two entire civilizations, but now that everyone knew the truth and understood that the ancient oracles were just communication devices, hopefully they could get on with their lives. And maybe the women in Rodney’s half could grow their hair out again. That was just creepy. John would get jealous only he knew that Rodney’s lust for Carter was equal to his hatred and jealousy toward her. Rodney wasn’t exactly emotionally well balanced.

Kate Heightmeyer patted John’s arm. “You all did an excellent job of showing them the dangers involved in allowing their aggression to reign unchecked.”

“Indeed. I am proud of your maturity that matter,” Teyla said, but somehow the way she said it made John think she was also pointing out their immaturity during the game. Ronon must have thought the same because he snorted.

“Whatever,” Rodney snapped. “I have important stuff to do. Can we just walk and skip the chit chat?”

“Would you like to talk about why you’re so anxious to get off this world?” Kate asked. Rodney gave her an incredulous look, and she just smiled sweetly. John couldn’t decide if she was trying to be helpful or giving Rodney shit. He kinda liked that about the woman.

Before John could bait Rodney some more, a flash of light lit the sky and John stumbled to one knee. He brought his weapon up before the blast of hit slammed into them. Kate cried out, and for a vital second, that masked the sound of Wraith darts.

“Get to the gate!” John yelled. He turned to face the incoming darts. Ronon was already firing, but John and the other Earthers waited as the darts came into range. There were too damn many of them. Behind him, John could hear Teyla yelling for them to run, but then he opened fire and couldn’t hear anything else.

At the last second, John threw himself to the side to avoid the culling beam; however, there were about a dozen darts, and he nearly ran into the culling beam of another dart before he stopped short. He fired again as the darts went overhead, turning to continue firing.

Teyla flung herself off the path in one direction, and Rodney in the other—both well training in avoiding being culled. But none of them had face this many darts before. Rodney avoided the first culling beam and vanished into the second.

“Rodney!” John screamed. He fired at the ship, desperate to bring it down so that the scientists could recover Rodney from the culling beam memory. He didn’t see another beam, but he was suddenly caught in a bright light.

John groaned as familiar cramps and flashes of pain dragged him into consciousness. He hated getting stunned. And waking up in a Wraith cell didn’t help much either. John had cracked his eyes
open, but now he closed them again when he saw the living walls. Shit.

Someone shifted near him, and John forced his cramping limbs to move. He found Rodney passed out on the floor behind him, drooling on his own arm.

“Sir?”

John looked toward the door.

“Over here.”

John rolled the other way and found a window set into the side of the cell. That was new. Lorne was holding onto the webbing and looking down at him. “Good job ducking, Major.”

“You too, sir,” Lorne said. “I have Heightmeyer over here, but there’s no sign of anyone else.”

“Well crap.” John rubbed his face. If Ronon got away, he’d have the entire Turi nation whipped up for a rescue in no time, so that was hopeful. However, getting captured never led to good things in general. “Who do we send Dr. Heightmeyer to when she starts having flashbacks?” John asked wearily. It was a sad attempt at a joke, but he wasn’t on the top of his game.

“Above my paygrade,” Lorne said. “I’ll stick with figuring out how to keep Abby from killing me when we get back home.”

“Worry about Miko. It’s always the quiet ones,” John said. He refused to even consider the possibility that they might not get out of this. He couldn’t figure out why the darts had shown up at all. They usually had warning when a ship was in the area. You had to give the Genii credit for running one hell of an efficient spy network, and they hadn’t said one word about a hive in the area.

“Yeah, she scares me about as much as the Wraith,” Lorne agreed. “Abby is loud, but Miko does the quiet intensity thing.”

“I don’t have any room to throw stones about dating scary people,” John said as he looked down at Rodney. He might look sweet and helpless and a little damp right now, but when he was awake, Rodney could send entire planets running in fear.

Lorne gave a rough laugh.

“Any sign of Wraith yet?” John asked.

“No, sir.”

“And here I thought it was Colonel Chekov’s turn to get the fuzzy end of the lollipop.”

“Clearly the Pegasus galaxy still likes picking on you, sir,” Lorne said.

John had a comeback ready for that, but Rodney started shifting and moaning. He started rubbing Rodney’s arm. “Hey, you alive?”

“No,” Rodney complained, but he blinked and looked around. “Again? Are you getting frequent flyer miles for this or something because you seem to get kidnapped way too much.”

“Yeah.” John rubbed the back of his head. “I noticed that, but on the up side, maybe Ronon will be in on the rescue again. It’s always fun watching Ronon go ripping through Wraith.” Crap. That reminded John that Samas would not be part of the rescue plan this time. John had grown entirely too used to have Samas around to back him up. The gunny was good, but Samas had five thousand
years of lying and manipulating and hiding behind him. That was an impressive resume.

“You want to wait on the barbarian to figure out which hive we’re on, how to fool their sensors, and run in here to rescue us?” Rodney demanded. He then winced and hid his face in his hands. “Ow. Ow. Ow. Headache.”

“That’s what happens when you wake up yelling.”

“Next time I’ll wake up complimenting all the stupid people and you can call me Rod,” Rodney snapped, but he did it much softer.

John rubbed his shoulder. He had no other comfort to offer, not even a powerbar since he’d been stripped down to his pants and undershirt. He didn’t even have boots, so someone was getting more wary of the prisoners. John appreciated that the Wraith weren’t treating them like moronic cows that would wait to get fed on, but at the same time, Wraith stupidity had been kind of convenient.

Shifting around, John sat so his back was to the bench and he was sitting on the floor next to Rodney.

“I hate this,” Rodney said softly.

“Me too, buddy.” And there was nothing more John could say. He sat by Rodney’s side and listened to Lorne and Heightmeyer whispering in the next cell. At least she wasn’t screaming in terror. Some of the new recruits couldn’t handle the Wraith’s organic technology as well as the more familiar Goa’uld ships. It was never pretty when they started with the screaming.

Rodney was muttering about the universe hating him and up on the bench when John heard footsteps in the hall.

“Head’s up, we’ve got company,” John said loud enough for Lorne to hear him. The next cell went quiet. John went to the door and peered out through the webbing. One of the faceless warriors came around the corner and a half second later, a familiar face appeared. Guide. In his own head, John tended to call him Todd because he reminded John of a Todd Rundgren poster one of his girlfriends had tacked up over her bed.

“Well, look who it is. Didn’t I save your life last time we met? Nice job repaying the debt.”

Todd stopped outside the cell, and John would swear he looked amused. “I believe you said that when we next met, all bets would be off, Queen’s Sheppard.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s when I thought I was going to get to shoot you.”

Rodney moved closer to the door. “Wait. That’s the Wraith you were in the cell with.”

“Good job keeping up with things, Rodney,” John said. “Rodney, this is Guide, who I usually just call Todd because Guide is a really stupid name, especially since Michael used the same name before he killed himself. Todd, this is Rodney. Now we’re all friends, and its poor manners to eat friends.” Again, John had the impression that Todd was amused.

“I have no intention of eating a brother,” Todd said. He stepped closer to the web. “I am more interested in that which has changed you.”

“Change as in…” John let his voice trail off. He had no idea what Todd wanted. However, as long as the Wraith was focused on him and not on the others, he’d take that as a win.
“We should discuss your Iratus infection.” Todd pressed his hand to the door control, and John stepped back, forcing Rodney away from the door.

“I got over it,” John said as every hair on his arm stood at attention. Something was even more wrong than usual, and John had gotten used to some pretty screwed up situations. Todd closed the distance between them, and John stood his ground. Behind him, Rodney clutched John’s shirt so that it pulled tight across John’s chest.

“So you did.” Todd raised his hand and brushed the back of his knuckles across John’s neck. A shiver of revulsion ran up John’s spine, but he held position. He had no other way to fight back except to refuse to show his fear. “I hear you were nearly transformed.”

“You hear a lot for someone who definitely doesn’t have an invitation to the city.”

“I hear you are an Alterian returned in this form.” Todd wrapped his fingers around the back of John’s neck, and John could feel the alien structure of Todd’s hand—the feeding mouth. It pressed against his skin.

“I’d try and deny it, only glowing seems a little Alterian. However, if you’re looking for secrets, you’re out of luck. It turns out they don’t let you run around with Ancient technology in your head.”

“No doubt,” Todd said, and he chuckled. John never thought he’d hear a Wraith chuckle, and honestly he never wanted to again.

“I would be interested in this change you underwent. Did your doctors perform tests?”

“You want my tests? I don’t think you’re part of my health care network.”

Behind him, Rodney muttered, “You spent too much time with O’Neill. It rotted your brain cells.”

“I suppose I could repeat the experiments; however, I was serious when I said that I would rather not cause harm to come to my brother.” Todd cocked his head to the side in a clear challenge. John just wasn’t sure what he was challenging over.

When Samas had been around, it was a lot easier to understand Todd. It was like Todd was a radio station that was only partially tuned in, and John kept missing important bits. Damn Wraith and their scent based communication.

“Okay, so what is it that you want, and please remember to use words when explaining this.”

Todd smiled so widely that the sides of his eyes crinkled. It was a strange expression on a Wraith. “I want medical information. The interesting question is what you want.”

“For us to all walk out of here without losing any years of life,” John said. “Hey, let us go, and I’ll have Elizabeth send you the information.”

“Elizabeth,” Todd said slowly. “Not Queen Samas, the guider of warriors?”

“Queen Samas the guider of warriors is kinda busy right now, but let us go, and we’ll get you that information.” John really wished Lorne hadn’t been in the next cell to hear that bit. Of all the ways for the Turi secret to come to light, this was the worst. John imagined having to not only explain the whole breeding queen bit to General O’Neill, but to then explain why the Wraith knew it before the Air Force. Yeah, this was so very bad.

Todd moved closer, and now he was definitely inside John’s personal bubble. “But if I trade you away for the information, then I no longer have you.”

“That’s probably coming across creepier than you mean,” John said slowly. At least he really hoped
that was true.

“I will trade two lives for this medical information on your transformation, and you are not a piece that may be traded,” Todd said. Once again, he ran his fingers over John’s neck. John couldn’t contain the shiver that traveled up his spine. “Choose well,” Todd said, and then he turned and strode out of the cell. The faceless warrior closed the web and then followed.

John let out a long breath and tried to stop the shaking in his knees. Rodney was off ranting, and John let the anger wash over him and drown out the fear that clung to his soul. He never wanted a Wraith showing that much interest in him. Ever. He could feel every spot Todd had touched as though he had ice under his skin. After a while Rodney ran out of insults for Todd and his ship and his hive and his queen and his ancestors and fell silent. They were sitting next to each other on the bench nearest the window to Lorne’s cell, and John didn’t even remember having moved. However, he had, and now he sat holding onto Rodney’s hand.

“We send Rodney and Heightmeyer back,” John said. “Two lives for medical data.”

“Sir?” Lorne asked. He probably had all that stuff about not negotiating with terrorists in his head, but those rules went out the door when the team’s geeks were caught in the middle.

“We send Heightmeyer and McKay back to Atlantis, and let Elizabeth and the council handle the rest of the negotiations,” John said firmly. The last time someone had held him captive, Elizabeth had watched Koyla feed him to a Wraith—this Wraith. John had very few illusions about her willingness to negotiate now. However, as long as the civilians got back to the city, he’d pay the price.

John looked up at Lorne. He and Lorne would pay the price. As they stared at each other, John could see the confusion slowly drain from Lorne’s face to be replaced with a careful blankness, a studied lack of emotion that told John everything he needed to know. Lorne understood. They’d die in these cells as Todd tried to replicate whatever information he needed to know. They’d die in these cells as Todd tried to replicate whatever information he wanted on Iratus infections, but at least the civilians would survive. The civilians would live, and maybe Lorne would get a quick death as some Wraith fed on him. John wouldn’t be so lucky. He was going to be Todd’s guinea pig.

John wondered if he’d ascend again or if he’d go to whatever afterlife normal humans had when he finally died. Maybe he’d just float around and watch his city, although being forbidden to help them would make that a level of hell.

“So, we trade for the medical information, and then what. What do we have to trade for you two?” Rodney asked.

John pasted on his best smile. “Then you help them find this hive and lead the rescue. Or you point the rescue in the right direction and get out of the way while Ronon goes on a killing spree,” John said with a certainty he didn’t possess. Luckily Rodney didn’t seem to notice.
Tony listened to the last of the report with a sinking feeling of dread. The IOC was not going to negotiate with the Wraith, which left Evan and John twisting in the wind. Tony looked over at Teyla. She had a pained expression, but she wasn’t offering to send the records to Todd. She also wasn’t making eye contact with Elizabeth. Then again, Elizabeth had a particularly sour expression, so she probably didn’t like the IOC rules either.

“Well?” Rodney demanded. “Carson, start getting the records together.”

“It’s not that easy, lad,” Carson said gently. Rodney’s expression turned so murderous that Tony thought Rodney might actually reach across the table and try to strangle him.

“Yes, yes it is,” Rodney said. “We send the medical information to the planet Todd chose, and then we set a trap to try and rescue John.”

Tony mentally added “and Evan.”

“Rodney,” Elizabeth said softly, “if I believed that would work—”

“If we don’t do something, Todd’s going to kill them. He might even get one of those bugs and try to redo John’s whole infection thing, and you know how John felt about that,” Rodney said.

“The Wraith cannot be trusted. Giving them this information would not bring John or Evan back,” Teyla said.

“But refusing to send it will lead to torture.” Rodney stood and slapped his hands down on the table. Kate Heightmeyer stood at the same time.

“Rodney, I understand your—”

He whirled around and poked his finger right in her face. “If you say one thing about feelings, I will cut you off from hot water until you’re a hundred.”

“Rodney!” Elizabeth said.

Rodney turned back toward her. “No! No, we’re making this deal.”

Elizabeth stood as did Kitsune and Teyla, but Rodney whirled and ran out of the room.

“I should go after him,” Teyla said before chasing after him.

“Perhaps we should continue this later,” Elizabeth suggested, and that was fine with Tony. Jo needed to speak with Samas, and Tony had to pin a few members of the council down and talk to them one on one.

“I’m going to get the ships ready to fly,” Kitsune said. “If we can find the Wraith that has Colonel Sheppard somewhere, we’re ready to take on his hive.”

Considering that Travelers preferred running as their primary survival tactic, that was a generous offer.

Colonel Chekov stood. “I am going to discuss this with our elite teams. Perhaps some would like to ride along,” he said to Kitsune.
They’d be welcome,” Kitsune said. The ruling council members all headed out to take care of their business, but Tony couldn’t help but think that none of this was getting John and Evan back. He walked out of the meeting room, leaving Elizabeth looking pale and angry.

The tone wasn’t better outside the office. The tension was thick in the control room, and Gibbs stood with a coffee, watching the gate. Tony headed over to stand at the rail with him.

“How bad?” Gibbs asked. Everyone knew that the Wraith had taken their people, but Rodney and Kate’s bombshell about Todd’s involvement hadn’t yet hit the grapevine. It would soon.

“Guide of Old is involved—Todd,” Tony said. Jo made the chemicals that identified that particular Wraith, but without Samas, Gibbs wouldn’t necessarily recognize that. Samas sent Gibbs very young symbiotes who were guaranteed to not interfere or bring their own knowledge to the joining. Gibbs disliked the reminders that he had a symbiote other than Samas riding around in his brain.

“What’s the situation?”

Tony kept his voice low. “He’s kept John and Evan. He wants medical information on John’s iratus infection and transformation. He sent Rodney and Kate back in return for John’s promise that we would send the medical records. He gave Rodney a gate address and a day to deliver the information.”

“And if he doesn’t get it?” Gibbs asked.

Tony cringed. “He’s threatened to try and duplicate the transformation.”

Gibbs clenched his jaw.

“Todd recognizes Jo and Samas as queens. I can talk to him.”

Gibbs turned and stared at Tony with an unhappy expression.

“The alternative is to do nothing,” Tony said before Gibbs could object.

“He may see Turi as equals and not food, but he’ll still kill you.”

“Then why is he trying to negotiate?” Tony asked. “That’s not Wraith behavior. This one is different, and we can’t ignore that.”

Gibbs leaned back against the rail. “My gut says to keep you here. You get in trouble on solo missions—remember Jeffrey White?”

“Sometimes it’s got to be done, Gibbs. You sent me out on the Jeffrey White case because you know that. Besides, John’s Alterian guardian angels may still be hovering around.”

“It they were, they would have kept him from getting kidnapped,” Gibbs pointed out.

“Nah, they don’t seem to mind people who kidnap John. Most of our best alliances start that way.” Tony frowned. Wait. That was a little too true.

“I doubt that will be much comfort to Abby and Miko,” Gibbs said before he strode away. He might be a taciturn man, but Tony could read the fear and anger in the stiff way he walked. He was near the transporter when Tony called out.

“Hey Gibbs.”
Gibbs turned around.

“We’ve taken down everyone from Ari to Ba’al. We’ve got this.” Tony gave Gibbs his best grin.

Gibbs snorted, but he had a ghost of a smile as he turned back to the transporters.

“Your mouth to God’s ears, sir,” Walter said softly. Tony nodded and then headed for the transporter himself. He needed to drop off Jo and start planning which council members to approach first. Elizabeth’s hands were tied by official IOC policy forbidding negotiations with terrorists, but she wasn’t the ultimate authority. He could work around her, especially since he suspected she wanted to be worked around. Kitsune would back him, and if Ronon got involved, Tony could push Teyla to let him try to negotiate. She might hate Wraith, but so did Ronon, and he could get her to bend. Rodney was a given, and that left Colonel Chekov. It was time for the Turi to go public. This could be so very ugly, but Tony wasn’t going to give up on John and Evan, and Jo felt the same.

Well, she felt the same about John.

She would not risk herself for Evan; however, she’d be happy to eat someone and regurgitate their flesh on dry ground if they hurt him. She liked Evan.

It took a good hour for Tony to drop off Jo, ask Ronon to work on Teyla, and get Kitsune’s promise that she would support him going on a mission. Her only question was whether Samas had signed off on it, and he had. He disliked sending Jo and Tony, but Samas simply couldn’t fit in Gibbs anymore. That left Chekov. Tony picked up Jo again and headed for his office.

Rather than take over John’s office in the tower, Chekov had chosen an office near the transporters on the level the military used for training and weapons storage. He said the sound of gunfire from the target range was reassuring as he did his paperwork.

Tony nudged the door, asking for a chime. However, Atlantis was far too upset about her missing favorite. She flung the door open. Chekov jumped up from his seat, his hand going to his sidearm.

Tony quickly raised his hands. “Whoa, hey, sorry about that. Atlantis is a little upset, and she took my request to ring your door chime a little too enthusiastically.”

Chekov sagged back down into his chair. “We are all on edge. She is not going to do anything about this, is she?” He gestured to the walls.

“I think she’s just going to worry and possibly fling a few doors open unexpectedly,” Tony said. Samas had the best connection to the city now, and he had reassured Aleigheta that they were trying to get John back. For a computer designed without emotional responses, she was developing more and more emotions.

“Doors flinging open I can handle,” Chekov said. “Tony, I am sorry, and I do not wish to seem like I am ignoring you, but this is not a good time.”

Tony stepped into the officer. “That’s why I’m here. I’m going to take the medical information to Todd.”

The colonel’s mouth just about fell open. “Excuse me? I am usually good with English, but I think I have misheard something.”

This was the part of the plan where either things came together or the Turi were about to go to war with Earth. Tony wished there were a way to know which was more likely. “I am sure you heard me correctly. I am going to take him the information, and if he will allow it, I plan to go back to
negotiate with Guide for the release of our people.”

Chekov’s eyebrows went up and up. “I am curious about why you feel you should do this.”

Tony took a seat. “I’ve talked to both Gibbs and Samas, and while neither of them is thrilled with me volunteering for this mission, they both agree that it’s important that I do.”

Chekov gestured for Tony to go on.

After taking a deep breath, Tony continued. “How do you feel about onac?” Tony asked. Jo’s discomfort was amplifying his own nerves, but he forced himself to sit still. If this all blew up in his face, they did have contingency plans; however, Chekov had always been reasonable before.

“Do you mean Samas?” Chekov asked. “I admire his persistence. His devotion to revenge and his suffering make him… almost Russian.” Chekov seemed amused at the thought.

“Good. I’m glad you feel that way.” Tony opened his mouth, and Jo darted out. She headed for Tony’s neck and wrapped tightly around it. She was afraid too, but they couldn’t lose Colonel Sheppard. Too many things went wrong every time he wasn’t around.

Atlantis sent a desperate trill that echoed through Tony’s mind. She was afraid. She liked the Turi and she wanted to protect them, but she wanted Sheppard back—needed him back. Tony sent calming thoughts toward both his girls. If Jo or Aleigheta panicked, this could all turn very ugly.

“Is this Samas?” Chekov asked, but he sounded hesitant.

“This is Samas’ daughter, Jo.”

Both Chekov’s eyebrows went all the way up and just stayed there.

Tony pushed through. As long as Chekov wasn’t calling for guards, that was a good sign. “Jo can interpret Wraith scent markers, meaning that I can have a complete conversation with Todd without having part of the meaning lost because humans can’t smell.”

“Because you are part onac?”

“Because I carry a Turi,” Tony corrected him.

“A Turi?” From the way Chekov said that word slowly, as if he was verbally dissecting a bomb, Tony figured that Chekov got it. All the Satedan Turi carried Turi.

“Todd respected Samas because he immediately recognized him as a queen. They would not have killed each other. Samas also feels that Todd recognized Jo as a queen, even if he was amused by her youth.”

“Compared to Samas, I assume Jo is rather young.” Chekov studied Tony, not even hiding the fact that he was fishing for information. However, Tony and Gibbs had discussed this. If they were going to tell the truth, they needed it to be the whole truth. The relationship between Turi and Earth couldn’t survive a prolonged series of lies coming to light.

“Jo isn’t even five years old, but she was born with Samas’ most cherished and most important memories,” Tony explained. “Queens have a greater capacity for retaining memories, and Samas gifted Jo and several of her sisters with enough memory to preserve the species if Samas died. Samas is over five thousand years old, and unless Samas is interpreting the scent markers wrong, this Todd is at least as old as that.”
“Five thousand years?”

Tony tried to sort his ideas before speaking, but he was temporarily distracted when Jo spread out her fighting fins and screamed into the air. She was really frustrated, but that wasn’t helping. “When Todd and Samas met, Todd introduced himself as ‘Guide,’ but his scent markers modified that with a sense of really old.”

“So, Guide of Old?” Chekov summarized.

“Samas countered with a scent that translated to his own name and a sense of thousands of years. Todd returned a sense of even greater age, and then when Jo put out a scent, he had a sort of amusement at our youth.”

“If a person is older than five thousand years, youth probably does seem amusing,” Chekov said, “but why do you have to take this medical information?”

“We don’t plan to use it, so it’s useless to us, but if Todd is that old, we might be able to open a dialog, particularly because we do have Turi in the city. Todd sees Turi queens as legitimate powers—not food sources.”

For a time, Chekov tapped two fingers against the edge of the desk as he seemed to consider Tony’s words. Honestly, this was going better than Tony had feared. “Nothing you do or say will change that humans are their only food source.”

“And we know the hives are turning on each other because the food is growing scarce. Maybe Todd wants to finish Carson’s work and turn his people into humans or into something closer to human.”

Tony didn’t believe that, but he knew how to give his bosses a plausible bullshit story. “Todd isn’t acting like other Wraith, so let’s give him the benefit of the doubt. Let’s return one good gesture for another and send him what he wants. After all, he sent us Rodney and Kate on the colonel’s word.”

“How many know of this plan?” Chekov asked, and Tony knew exactly what he really wanted to know.

“No one. Those who are native to the Pegasus galaxy know about the Turi, but not this plan, and I haven’t talked to anyone from Earth.”

“Dr. Weir?” Chekov sounded curious rather than shocked or angry. Tony could work with that.

“I think she suspects something. She’s a brilliant woman, but she also knows political poison when she can smell it at a distance.”

“And she keeps away,” Chekov finished when Tony was silent too long. “What if she will not give you this data? Will Carson disobey if she orders him to prevent records from leaving?”

“The city—Aleighba—has already downloaded all the medical information,” Tony said. It was the only part of the plan she could help with, and Tony had felt her eagerness to do any task that might assist.

“Americans are fond of their prejudices, and they will not like that you’ve kept this secret or that you’ve shared it with me,” Chekov said softly.

“ Probably not.”

“But were you to ask to leave, I would not prevent you from using the Stargate. After all, you are the Turi representative, and that means you are the sovereign leader of your own people. But I am going
to have to talk to my superiors.” He looked almost apologetic. “Were I to do less, they would still
know there was some reason to send you over someone like Ronon, and I would lose all chance to
control how this information gets out.”

“I expected as much. Gibbs doesn’t carry Samas anymore, but he can talk about how we got here. I
wouldn’t recommend allowing Earth to recall him, though.”

Chekov leaned back in his chair. “Contingency plans?” he asked without sounding overly concerned
about them.

“An angry city who has already lost too many favorites, and now she knows I’m going out there and
risking myself to try and get John and Evan back. Aleigheta needs people she knows or she may
make bad decisions.”

Chekov sighed. “When O’Neill talked me into this position, he left out many facts. However, I will
make a point to tell IOC that Gibbs is under Ms. Emmagan’s auspices, and attempting to remove him
could create open conflict at a time when IOC policy is particularly unpopular. Actually, I believe I
will make O’Neill deliver such message. When are you leaving?”

Tony ran a finger along Jo’s side, and then opened his mouth so she could dart back inside. She
understood as well as Tony that Chekov was risking his career and possibly more to back them. Her
respect for him exponentially. “I have a bag packed. The drop off time Todd suggested is only
twelve hours away, and I would like to stop by the Genii homeworld and give them news of this
before I leave.”

“The Genii?”

Tony smiled. “Samas has a special affection for them. You see him as almost Russian, and he sees
Genii as almost onac. They deserve to know where I have gone, and knowing that Jo respects that
connection as well as Samas will strengthen their relationship with the city. I should have gone
before, and Samas wonders if some of their nervousness about their alliance with Atlantis comes
from the fact Jo has not shown her preference for them. They are suitors, swimming through the
water insisting they do not want a queen’s attention and hoping that insistence prove them strong
enough to gain it.”

Chekov stood as Tony did. “Perhaps that is true. Does the rest of the council know?”

“Yes. And I’m going to go give Elizabeth my news now.”

Chekov nodded. “She will make a show of banning you from this, but I suspect she will buy you
very good bottle of wine when you return with our people. I will go with you.”

Tony smiled. He could have done this without Chekov, but it was good to know that the military
forces would be under a good commander while he was gone. Hopefully the IOC wouldn’t move
quickly to remove him, but some of that depended on Elizabeth and Chekov and how they reacted to
the Turi nation going public. Samas and the older symbiotes had already moved to more protected
positions, but so many of the younger ones swam in the joining waters that a stupid choice could do
a lot of damage. However, at some point Tony had to trust the others. And Gibbs was here. Samas or
not, Gibbs was not going to suffer fools. Plenty of the military would back him if it came to that.
Tony just hoped it didn’t.
Jack had always admired Colonel Alexander Chekov, even if he would eat his BDUs before admitting it. He wasn’t wired to like Russians. However, Chekov was level headed, smart, devious, and devoted to protecting the planet. Up until this point, Jack would have said Chekov was doing a good job on Atlantis, but now he’d lost his second-in-command and his third-in-command and apparently he was coming with more bad news. At least that’s what Jack assumed from the look on his face as he walked down the ramp from the Stargate.

“How nice of you to come.”

Jack shrugged. “You know how it goes. I was bored in DC and with the Daedalus hanging around, it’s easy enough to transport over. And face it, getting to do the Star Trek thing never gets old.”

Chekov smiled, but there was a tension there that worried the hell out of Jack. “I must settle for the Wormhole Extreme thing, but at least it is between galaxies.”

Jack gestured toward the door. “I thought I might show you to medical.”

“Thank you.”

They walked out of the gate room, an airman trailing behind. There was very little chance either of them was an alien, but the SGC had learned to not take anything for granted. “Any sign of Sheppard or Lorne?” Jack asked.

“None yet,” Chekov said. “The Turi grow restless, which is a little like standing too close to angry villagers with pitchforks and torches.”

“Is there any danger?” Jack asked. He admired the Sadetan Turi in general. They were a fierce people determined to survive and rebuild as much as they could. Danny had been fascinated by the fact they renamed themselves Turi after the small, flexible assassins blade that was so much a part of their history and culture. If Atlantis weren’t in such disarray, Jack would send Daniel there to get geeky with all the Pegasus cultures. Then again, maybe Daniel needed some disarray to distract him from his own problems.

“The only danger is to the Wraith when the Turi learn where Sheppard and Lorne are. And if the Turi do not get them, McKay, Kusanagi and Scuito are all united in their desire to eviscerate the enemy who took their friends.”

“Friends.” Jack snorted. The boat had sailed on that secret. No one was asking, but even the SGC dishwashers knew Sheppard was in a serious relationship with McKay, and Jack was trying very hard to not think about Lorne and his strange personal life. How one man could be interested in both Abby Scuito and Miko Kusanagi was beyond him. As long as no one was complaining, he had no interest in getting involved.

They got off the elevator and headed for Dr. Lamb’s territory. “We must speak,” Chekov said.

“I figured. I’ll be here when you’re done with medical.”

Chekov stopped and looked Jack in the eye. “Make sure the room is secure,” he said.

Jack nodded. Clearly this was going to be worse than he expected, but he had a secure room already set up. He’d even had Carter clear it so Landry couldn’t get ears into this meeting. That man enjoyed...
being a general a little too much. As far as Jack was concerned, the rank had the side effect of eating a person’s soul and anyone who enjoyed it had serious personality issues.

Since Chekov would be busy with medical for a while, Jack headed toward the longer term medical rooms to visit Daniel. Part of him wanted to avoid him and avoid all the feelings Jack had about Daniel’s sacrifice and Jack’s own actions. However, Jack wasn’t a coward. Usually. He knocked and waited, but he didn’t hear anything, so Jack opened the door. Daniel sat in a bed, his recent case of Prior-dom reversed, but he still looked like a limp dishrag and he stared at a book without even pretending to read. That just wasn’t Daniel.

“Hey,” Jack said.

Daniel looked up. “Hey. What are you doing here?”


“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Yeah, well if you don’t, you’re going to do the whole guilt thing, so I’m here to poke you into getting on with life.”

“Jack,” Daniel said, his tone promising great suffering if Jack didn’t back off. Well tough shit. Daniel didn’t need to go through this alone.

“Daniel,” Jack shot back, mimicking the tone.

Daniel’s eyes narrowed.

“Hey, you did a good thing. The Ori are gone.”

“And we have six more ships in the Milky Way.”

Jack noticed that Daniel was talking about the ships rather than all the dead Ori. Maybe they weren’t dead. Maybe the machine had pushed them through to someone else’s plane of existence. They didn’t actually know much since their only intelligence came from a local who had gotten a job on a Prior ship with a Carter symbiote in her head. Jack wasn’t thrilled at taking intelligence from snakes, and he didn’t care if it was tok’ra or onac. Unfortunately, they didn’t have any other sources of intel.

“Hey, look at the bright side,” Jack said. “The ships are pretty much sitting there.”

“And when they decide to start moving again?” Daniel asked.

Jack shrugged. A lot of people in the Pentagon were starting to run with the assumption that their source had been accurate about the deaths of the Ori and plan for a much reduced and limited Ori presence as the fragments of the Ori empire made their own way.

Jack figured if that was true, the ships would have drifted apart or even fled back to their own galaxy. Instead they sat there near the closed supergate. Floating. Waiting. It was giving him an ulcer, but at least Earth wasn’t in immediate danger.

“Hey, you did good,” Jack said in the most sincere tone he could manage.

“Jack, I destroyed an entire species.”

“An evil one. And actually, I thought Ori and Alterians are the same species.”
“Technically.”

“Then technically you didn’t kill a species. The Alterians are still floating around causing trouble.”

“Trouble?” Daniel sat up and showed the first real sign of interest. “What sort of trouble?”

Jack hadn’t wanted to worry Daniel more, but maybe he needed a new problem to focus on.
“Sheppard got taken by a Wraith who wants to negotiate. It’s asked for Sheppard’s medical records from his transformation into a bug.”

“A Wraith wants to negotiate?” Daniel frowned. “But if their culture sees humans as so inferior as to be worthy of nothing more than getting used as food, wouldn’t that preclude having a conversation? It would be like us talking to a cow. How did the Wraith send the message?”

“He released McKay and Kate Heightmeyer as a gesture of good faith in return for Sheppard’s promise that Elizabeth would turn over the records.”

“Good faith? The Wraith?” Daniel’s expression turned thoughtful. “You aren’t setting me up for some sort of bizarre joke, are you?”

“No. I’m offended that you would even suggest that,” Jack complained. The flat expression on Daniel’s face said everything. Okay, maybe Jack had manipulated Daniel once or twice, but the man made it so damn easy. “I’m not setting you up. The Wraith really did send a message when he released Heightmeyer and McKay.”

Daniel sat up in bed. “This could be a culture shift, or it could be that we’re seeing different philosophical beliefs from different subgroups.”

“They eat people. I’m not sure how much philosophical debates they have,” Jack said. Sure enough, that hit the sweet spot between pissing Daniel off and interesting him.

“Seriously, Jack? Come on. You thing all onac are evil, but the ones from the homeworld have been risking their lives for us. You hate all Russians, but Chekov is the first commander other than Sheppard who hasn’t nearly sunk the city. The universe could do with a little less of your black and white thinking.”

“Me? I’m the problem?” Jack demanded, but he was mentally cheering Danny on. If it took a trip to Atlantis to get him out of his Ori funk, Jack was all for it.

“You’re very narrow minded.”

“Hey! They eat people!”

“Well apparently one wants to negotiate. Has he sent an actual message or did he have Rodney and Kate carry the message?”

Jack crossed his arms. “Well apparently Wraith speech involves smelling stuff, so the Wraith just had McKay and Heightmeyer send his terms.”

“Oh, yeah.” Daniel definitely looked intrigued now. “I read Samas’s report on scent. It’s fascinating.”

“You’re not going to volunteer to negotiate with the Wraith,” Jack said.

Daniel gave him a dirty look. “Of course I’m not Jack.”
“Oh. Good.” Jack made a sudden show out of realizing something. “And you’re not going to Atlantis,” he added. And then Daniel’s stubborn look appeared. Yep, tell the man he couldn’t do it, and he was running after that bait every damn time. There was something reassuring about how easy it was to twist Daniel around backward. Jack would take more pride in his achievement if Daniel wasn’t equally skilled at twisting Jack around. And just like Jack always figured out what Daniel had done about three days later, Daniel would eventually see through this, but for now, he was going full steam ahead.

“I am the head of the linguistics department and this is an entirely new language. No, this is an entirely new way of communicating ideas, so you don’t get to tell me my job,” Daniel snapped. Maybe Jack had overplayed his hand because Daniel was getting a little scary.

“Sir?” an airman called from the door.

Jack looked over.

“Sir, Colonel Chekov is out of medical and he wants to speak with you.”

“Colonel Chekov?” Daniel asked, a calculating expression on his face.

“Oh, no. I need to talk to the Colonel about Atlantis operations.” Jack got up and headed for the door just as Daniel was getting out of bed. “No, you are not going to talk to a Russian colonel in your underwear! Airman, if Dr. Jackson isn’t dressed before leaving, do not let him leave,” Jack ordered.

“He’s not leaving with talking to me,” Daniel said as he headed for the table where a stack of clothes waited.

“That’s assuming you can find him before he leaves,” Jack said and then he beat a hasty retreat. Daniel was out of bed and moving, so he considered that mission accomplished. Maybe politics was getting to be too much for General O’Neill, but Jack still had his old geek-wrangling colonel skills. At least he could do that much right.

Chekov waited in the hallway, and Jack hurried past. “Unless you want to get caught by a cranky linguist, shift your ass, Colonel.”

Chekov hurried after him. “Do I take it you have angered Dr. Jackson?”

“I actually just pointed him at you, but anger might be involved somewhere,” Jack admitted as he opened the door to the officer lounge Carter had cleared. No one would expect a confidential meeting in here, and as a bonus, there was good coffee. Jack locked the door after Chekov was inside.

“Are we ensured privacy?” Chekov asked.

“That bad?”

“I would say potentially, but there is less potential than actuality.”

Jack headed for the coffee. “Great.”

“General.” Chekov stopped and sat down. “Jack,” he started again. And now Jack was fucking terrified. He put the pot back without pouring any coffee and headed for the chair across from Chekov.

“Alexander?” he said.
“We are both products of our prejudices.”

“Yeah, we’ve had this conversation. Did your spetsnaz troops do something that is going to make me curse all Russians?”

Chekov shrugged. “They would like to.”

Jack rubbed his face. “Okay, pull the bandage off fast. What’s going on?”

“I will not pull the bandage at all until you agree to listen to whole story before getting angry. We must discuss how much our governments need to know.” Chekov stared at Jack, and Jack had one of those moments—one where he could practically feel the universe turning around him. This wasn’t the time for levity, so he gave a nod.

“I’ll listen.”

“I hope so. This is…” Chekov paused and seemed to search for the right word. “Explosive,” he finished. “Tell me what you know of Samas.”

Aw fuck. Jack had no idea what Samas could have done, but with Sheppard in danger, it could be anything. “He’s a pain in the mik’ta,” Jack said. From the grimace on Chekov’s face, that was not the answer he’d been hoping for.

“Do you believe Samas is evil?”

Part of Jack wanted to shoot off an easy answer. Snakes were evil. However, Samas had helped with a lot of goa’uld technology when he could have stayed in his home planet’s lake. He had never tried to take over the world, and he had been right about the onac being almost not-evil if they just had the right hosts to teach them to value taking stories back to the water. Jack disliked how much of Earth’s intelligence came through the onac, and that wasn’t even counting how many lives had been saved by some of the onac’s hare-brained schemes.

Hell, a Jack snake had come up with the plan to draw graffiti of Ori with giant dicks to make the Priors question whether their message was effective. Jack had to admire anyone who used dick pics as guerrilla tactic. And sadly he got the feeling that the snake who had come up with that plan had way more of Jack’s personality than Jack wanted to think about.

“I think he has his own motivations.”

“Agreed,” Chekov said. “One would be to restore his culture, one where snakes live in a host for a short time and then return to the water to fight and live and die in their own bodies.”

Jack grimaced. “I got that speech already. Why am I getting version 2.0?”

“Because Samas did not trust you with certain information that could have prejudiced you against him.”

“I assume he didn’t trust me at all. So what secret of his has come out?”

“He is a breeding queen,” Chekov said.

Time slowed and Jack sat, unmoving, while the information slowly spread through his brain like a piece of glass hit by a rock and cracking in slow motion. A breeding queen. Samas was like Hathor. Bile pressed against the back of Jack’s throat and he fought with an instinctive urge to vomit.
“Samas never had any children on Earth,” Chekov said. More cracks spread in the glass of Jack’s brain. “He wanted his children to live in a culture where they could join with hosts and then return to the water without any risk of goa’uld ideas corrupting them.”

Jack struggled to gather words. It was like everything he knew about the Atlantis mission was suddenly distorted. “How many of the staff on Atlantis knew?” Jack asked. He could feel the artificial calm imposed by his pure fury.

“I am unsure, but very few. DiNozzo knew, but I suspect he kept it from any other Earth personnel because of the explosive nature. DiNozzo trusted Samas and Gibbs to have Earth’s best interests in mind, or at the very least, to not act in a way that would damage Earth.”

“And you believe that?” Jack demanded. He’d thought better of Chekov.

Chekov leaned forward. “I believe Tony when he tells me the Turi have been hosting since the beginning. The Sadetans named this new culture Turi, the small knife. The snakes who live in Atlantis are small blades that slip in and out unseen. They are not the blunt and indiscriminate killers as are the goa’uld.”

“The Turi are hosts?” Jack leaped to his feet, but there was nowhere for him to go. If he walked out and told Landry this, Landry would be on the phone to the President to get authorization for the use of symbiote poison. And maybe that was the right call, but Jack knew he had to calm down before making that decision. And given that Jack had vetoed Landry’s request to use symbiote poison on the Unas homeworld, he suspected that anger and fear was driving his homicidal anger. He couldn’t afford to let his emotions rule his logic in this.

“It is one of the reasons they are so effective. I asked my spetsnaz team leader, and he was very vague. However, he did tell me he wished, with my permission, to undergo the Turi trials. I get the impression that only those who can impress the other Turi with their ability to fight on their own can earn the right to carry Turi, so I believe my man was asking my permission to host.”

Jack’s knees turned to water and he quickly sat before he fell on his ass. He had fucking trusted Gibbs. Sure, he hated the snake, but he trusted the gunny to get him mission-critical information.

Chekov continued. “The man I speak of… his partner was killed by goa’uld. He would not ask if the Turi were anything like their cousins, but there is more I must speak of.”

Jack rubbed his eyes. “If you tell me more, I might have a stroke just to avoid having to deal with any of this,” Jack warned him.

“DiNozzo has taken the medical information and gone to meet with the Wraith.”

And that broke Jack. “Why the hell would he do that? And why would you let him? And why was the gunny not tackling him and tying him up to stop him?” DiNozzo was a good man, despite having his father’s genes. Jack hated dealing with DiNozzo, Sr., but sending DiNozzo, Jr. to his death seemed a little extreme.

“DiNozzo is the Turi ambassador. We had little choice.”

The Turi ambassador. The other Turi had unanimously chosen him to lead them, and Jack sure as hell knew it wasn’t because of the man’s skills with bare-knuckle brawling. Most of the Turi could snap DiNozzo like a chicken bone. “Is he hosting Samas?” Jack asked.

Chekov gave him a small smile. “Samas’s oldest daughter, Jo.”
A calm settled over Jack. Atlantis had not one breeding queen, but probably several. Jo would be the heir apparent if she had Tony as host and the ambassador’s seat, but Jack didn’t kid himself. Samas wouldn’t let this go public without a dozen different contingency plans. And sitting on Earth in an office, Jack had no way to judge what was really going on.

“Tony and Jo risk their lives to get back Sheppard and Lorne. They believe the Wraith will respect Jo’s position as queen, but that means only the Wraith will probably not eat them. Even Samas says that this Wraith, the one Samas spoke to after Atlantis rescued Colonel Sheppard from Koyla, will do what he must to protect his people. If Jo is a threat, he will kill her and Tony.”

And yet they had gone.

Jack thought about that young NCIS agent who had shoved Jack out of the way and to dive into the ring transport. Standing in Gibbs’s basement, Jack had been so sure that DiNozzo had just leapt to his death. At the time, Jack had cursed the waste of a good man, but then DiNozzo had turned up in the belly of Ba’al ship looking like a male whore. And he’d brought them donuts. They’d been imprisoned in an alien ship, and DiNozzo had brought them donuts.

Jack tried to make that match this new report of DiNozzo as the host of a goa’uld queen. The pieces didn’t fit together. He rubbed his forehead. “Are you going to tell the Russians?” he asked Chekov.

“Eventually I must. But what will we tell our governments?”

Jack leaned back. “I have no fucking idea. You were supposed to stop weird things from happening on Atlantis.”

“The city is odd enough that no man can accomplish that,” Chekov said sadly. “So, what do we do?”

“We get Danny and head back to Pegasus,” Jack said. The IOC was going to hang him up by his balls for going without authorization, but screw them. Jack played nice often enough that they were going to have to chalk this one up to his eccentricities because until Jack had a chance to talk to Elizabeth, he had no idea what he was supposed to do. Jack did know that if he was going to have to deal with things that were this FUBAR, he was taking Daniel along for the ride. Jack needed a new moral compass. Actually, Jack needed his old, geeky moral compass.
Culture Shock

Daniel followed Jack through the gate. Again, he was in Atlantis, and again he was supposed to fix some disaster. But if Jack's bribe was accurate, this time Daniel might get to stay and do some research on the Wraith language or now, the Turi language. Unlike Jack, Daniel had seen the onac fighting. One had saved him and the rest of SG1 when an ally had turned to Ori worship without anyone in the SGC realizing it. Him, Mitchell and Sam had walked right into a trap and it was a Jack onac who had saved them.

Maybe Jack could hold onto his hatred, but then again... The very fact that Jack had ordered him to come implied that he wanted another point of view.

Elizabeth Weir stood at the bottom of the stairs, and she stepped forward to meet them, Teyla at her side. "General. I hadn't expected you." Her smile was not overly warm, but then the last time Jack had been here, he tried to kidnap Sheppard. Sure, Jack talked about reassignment and Presidential orders, but Daniel was guessing the people of Atlantis still saw it as an attempted kidnapping.

Of course, if Jack had been successful, the Wraith identified as Todd would not have captured Sheppard.

Todd. Daniel definitely needed to find out who was assigning culturally insensitive and inappropriate names to Wraith and stop them.

"Where's the gunny?" Jack asked without even greeting the women. Daniel cringed. Yeah, Jack was in a pissy mood.

"He's probably out doing his job." Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

"Call him up so Daniel can talk to him, and you and I are going to have a private conversation."

Elizabeth looked at Colonel Chekov. Now that was interesting. Daniel had read every Atlantis report, and Weir had fought each and every military commander with the exception of Sheppard. And even then, those two had a few moments early on. However, there was a clear alliance here, and from the way Jack's back stiffened, he saw it too.

"I must go tend some paperwork I have neglected," Chekov said before exiting stage left. Ah, so he was refusing to take a position in the conflict. Daniel narrowed his eyes and watched Chekov flee. That left Elizabeth and Teyla. Teyla watched, but there was a wary readiness in her body language that warned Daniel that she was on edge. It was funny, but Daniel was shit at reading people on a personal level, but this sort of power dynamic was like another language, and Daniel knew languages.

"Liz," Jack said. The ice cracked, and Weir nodded, although she was still unhappy.

"We can go to my office, and Teyla can find Daniel a suitable tour guide."

Jack looked back at Daniel. Daniel nodded. That was fine with him. Leaning close, Jack whispered in Daniel's ear, "If you get snaked, I will burn this city to the ground, so do not let something happen so I feel the need to do that," he warned.

"I'm good," Daniel promised. He understood that Jack was at the limit of his patience and ability to be reasonable, so Daniel didn't plan on pushing anything.
Jack grunted and then turned and gave Elizabeth a completely insincere smile. Some days Daniel missed the old Jack--the one who never played politics and said exactly what he was thinking. That's one reason why they were such good friends--Daniel never had to question Jack's hidden motivations because he put everything out in plain sight. Of course that Jack was long gone, destroyed by the caustic environment of DC. As Jack and Elizabeth headed up to her office, Daniel moved toward Teyla.

"He is angry," Teyla observed.

"Oh yeah. Something about a snake invasion. But the good news is that he brought me which usually means he wants someone to argue him out of doing something stupid." Daniel knew he was taking a risk. Teyla might not know about the Turi, or worse, she might be aligned with them. She had no obligation to Earth and Daniel got the feeling the woman would do whatever was required to protect her world. A second after saying that, Daniel knew that Teyla wasn't ignorant.

She tilted her head and considered him. "Snake is an inappropriate word." She started walking toward the transporter, and Daniel followed.

"Turi, perhaps."

Teyla gave him another searching look. "The Turi are honorable people, longstanding allies of Atlantis."

"Hopefully Elizabeth can convince Jack of that," Daniel said. "I'm easier since I saw one of the onac symbiotes in action in the Milky Way. The Turi there have been helping us fight the Ori." The transporter let them out in a crowded corridor. Most of the people had homespun clothing, but it was quality work, and the people looked well fed and healthy. This was not the picture of a ravaged galaxy, although Daniel was painfully aware that thousands of people were being taken by Wraith cullings and entire civilizations were lost as hungry ships battled each other and stole from one another's worlds. The careful management and culling of humans had turned into the wild west with rustlers, midnight raids, and mass slaughters. Atlantis was simply the eye in the middle of that hurricane, and with the city at full power and the Wraith numbers significantly decreased, the Wraith had not brought the fight back to the city. "I thought we might go somewhere private to talk," Daniel said.

"No need." Teyla smiled. "And you do not have Turi in your galaxy. That is the name of a culture designed by Samas and Jo to work with the people of the Pegasus galaxy."

"Fair enough. So can you tell me some of the differences?" Daniel turned sideways to let a woman pushing a large hand cart pass him. A couple of children followed her as she pressed through the crowd.

"They are not my responsibility, so I know no more than an average Lantean might," she said.

Well crap. The average Lantean knew about them and that meant they would be pissed if the IOC started passing rules or worse--sending poison. "What does the average Lantean know?"

They moved toward a large arch at the end of the corridor, pushing through a river of people who were all leaving. When they finally passed the arch, the congestion cleared as they came out in a giant ball room. Booths divided the area into clear aisles. The metal and glass of Atlantis was a sharp contrast to the colorful textiles and natural wood of the various shops.

"Did we come at a bad time?" Daniel asked since it was pretty clear Teyla had no intention of answering questions about the Turi.
"It is oneday. The tenday markets have ended and all those who did not leave last night are anxious to return home."

There were very few people still in the cavernous room, but most of the booths were still in place. So the market was permanent enough that people left goods. Maybe the military minds on Atlantis didn't make much out of that, but Daniel did. Nomadic people only left their goods in places they considered theirs. The IOC did not have clear ownership of the city, that was crystal clear.

"There is Gibbs, with Jackson," Teyla said. Daniel looked in the direction Teyla had nodded and he could see Gibbs standing near an older man leaning against a counter or shelf. It was one of the larger stalls, complete with walls and a wide range of goods.

"Wait, Jackson Gibbs?"

"Yes," Teyla said.

Daniel blinked. Jackson Gibbs looked completely native. Nothing he wore had come from Earth, and he seemed to be chatting with everyone who passed him. Most stopped to speak to him or clasp his arm. Daniel had expected a lot of things, but when he'd heard that Gibbs' father had gone to Atlantis, he hadn't expected Jackson to be another Tony who could slip into any culture and make himself at home. Actually that explained a few things about Gibbs and Tony's relationship.

Teyla headed toward the two men, smiling when Jackson called out a greeting. “Jackson Gibbs, I want to introduce Dr. Daniel Jackson, friend of General Jack O’Neill, and the next time someone from Earth comments on some perceived oddness in our naming conventions, I shall point out that we have enough variety to avoid having three men with such similar names all within one village.”

Daniel didn’t understand why Gibbs tensed up until he realized Teyla had just warned him that Jack was in the city.

“Jack is trying to figure out how to handle the latest problem,” Daniel hurried to say before Gibbs could jump to any conclusions.

Gibbs went utterly still. “Does he have a plan for getting our people back?”

Daniel cringed. “Sorry, no. But Jack is concerned about, um, Jo.” Daniel tried keeping his voice down, but none of the others seemed too concerned. Daniel didn’t expect Jackson to answer.

“At least Jo and Tony are doing something,” Jackson snapped. “What exactly is everyone else doing to get our people back?”

“Dad,” Gibbs said.

“No, don’t go making excuses,” Jackson said. “It’s tearing you up to send that husband of yours off to fight, and now this almighty general comes in here worried about Jo instead of worrying about the Wraith.”

“Dr. Jackson, maybe we should go somewhere else,” Gibbs suggested.

Daniel got it. The command staff on Atlantis were family. Literally. They’d left behind lovers as well as team mates. Daniel had suffered through losing Sha’re, and he’d felt the despair of losing a team mate, but to have all those emotions at once would have destroyed him. He absolutely understood that, but with the Turi secret on the verge of coming out, they didn’t have the luxury of waiting. “I trust your judgment when it comes to Jo. I just want to help, and Jack does too or he wouldn’t have brought me.”
Gibbs gave Daniel such a cold stare that Daniel had to fight the urge to fidget. “The general’s help rarely ends well when symbiotes are involved,” Gibbs said.

While Daniel understood Gibbs’ attitude, he didn’t think it was fair. “He protected you, and there were a lot of people who wanted to kill Samas. The President came very close to calling the Tok’ra, and now that I know Samas is the Igigi queen, I suspect the Tok’ra would have… treated Samas poorly.” And by poorly, Daniel meant forced breedings and/or brainwashing. The Tok’ra were a desperate people who might have made a lot of unethical choices given access to a queen. “Jack called in a lot of favors and even had Carter break the tel’tac to give us more time to negotiate.”

Gibbs’ expression didn’t soften in the least. “Good for him.”

Daniel tried again. “If he was an enemy, he would have gone to the IOC, not lied to Landry about IOC authorization and burned about a dozen bridges coming here.”

“He did that?” Jackson asked. Daniel blessed the fact that the elder Gibbs was more forgiving than the younger.

“Yes, he did. The symbiotes have helped a lot in the Milky Way, and Jack knows that the second anyone in the SGC or IOC find out Tony has gone to negotiate with the Wraith that someone is going to put the pieces together sooner rather than later. They’ll probably assume Tony has Samas, but that will lead them to wonder why Samas changed hosts and why he lied about being able to fit into a host. If there’s any sort of investigation, the secret will come out. Jack already vetoed a plan to send symbiote poison to the unas home world, and he’d fight any order to commit genocide here, but he isn’t all powerful. He can’t wave a magic wand and make people see reason.”

Gibbs crossed his arms. “He can try whatever he wants. We’re ready.”

Well that didn’t sound good. Daniel had the uncomfortable feeling that he was standing between two tribes watching them contemplate war. But that was fine. He’d been in that position more than once. “We don’t want anything to happen to the Turi, but I need to understand the culture that’s developed here. The goa’uld were corrupted by a host that taught them about power and subjugation. Show me how the Turi are different, and I can start working on softening opinions. I need you to get me some ammunition or I’m not going to win this war.”

Gibbs frowned, but at least Daniel had the feeling that his words were reaching the man. At one point Daniel would have called Jack the most stubborn man in the world, but Gibbs was neck and neck on the obstinate front.

“Gibbs,” Teyla said softly, “we need allies more than we need more enemies.”

Gibbs looked over at her and nodded. All Daniel’s pleading had fallen on deaf ears, but one word from Teyla and the immovable object moved.

“I’ll show him around the community,” Gibbs said. “Come on, Dr. Jackson.” And with that, Gibbs headed for the exit, leaving Daniel to chase after him.
Jack watched as Elizabeth settled behind her desk. Hopefully Danny was doing better than him because Elizabeth had the cold façade up. “So what can I do for you, General?” she asked with a plastic smile.

“Oh, I don’t know. Telling me you have snakes running around would have been nice,” Jack said. Elizabeth froze for just a fraction of a second. She was out of practice because the Elizabeth Weir that Jack of years past wouldn’t have made an error like that.

“So you did know,” Jack dropped down into one of her seats. “This day just keeps getting better.”

After a weighty sigh, Elizabeth inclined her head toward him. “I didn’t know, but I certainly suspected. There is a significant difference in the mission reports of certain individuals that suggested they sometimes had more of an advantage.”

Jack rubbed his face. “Which means Sheppard knows.”

“I never said that,” Elizabeth said sharply.

Jack leaned forward. “He was the military commander, so if front line fighters had significant discrepancies in their performance ratings, he sure as hell better have known. I’d rather Sheppard keep this whole Turi secret than I would believe that he’s such a piss-poor leader that he didn’t notice.”

“Jack,” Elizabeth said in a reproachful tone, but Jack waved her off.

“He was protecting me. I get it. I don’t like it, but it’s not like I didn’t hide shit from General Hammond for the same damn reason.” Jack had rarely felt so old and so damn useless. Here he was trying to protect Sheppard from all the big, bad political realities, and Sheppard had been shielding him.

“So where do we go from here?” Elizabeth asked.

“Hell if I know. You’re dangling from the edge of a cliff, and if you don’t want to turn your local snakes into scapegoats…” Jack paused. He assumed Elizabeth would stand with the Turi, but he wasn’t going to take a bet on that. She was a politician, and Jack knew exactly how fickle they could be.

“No,” Elizabeth said firmly.

Jack sighed. He would have called Elizabeth a soulless monster if she’d turned on her own people, but in some ways, it would have been easier. “The IOC is not going to support the city if they think you’re playing nice with goa’uld cousins. They’ll try to replace you.”

Oddly Elizabeth smiled. “They can certainly try, but my position is more of an administrative head than any real source of power. The leadership council could easily veto any IOC representative, and if the IOC attempts to move against the Turi, they will.”

“And you’ll be persona non grata in most diplomatic circles back on Earth,” Jack warned.

“Actually, I would retire and since our latest negotiated document allows anyone stationed on
Atlantis to retire here, I would settle into the south tower with Ladon and enjoy a long and hopefully boring career as a translator. The Degans have invited me to work with them.”

Jack’s brain had a small power outage as he tried to process that thought. Elizabeth wasn’t bluffing. She was ready to leave her job over this. “Okay,” he said slowly as he tried to figure out how to approach this new and unfamiliar version of Elizabeth Weir. “But the IOC still has the upper hand here. They can cut you off from any support.”

Elizabeth smiled, and Jack itched to grab a weapon because that was a dangerous expression. “What supplies do you think we need? We have been stockpiling food and equipment and trying to build capacity so we could evacuate large numbers from Earth. Right now, we produce far more than we need. The scientists are even attempting to grow coffee beans on a few worlds.”

“And the military? You’re on the front lines, Elizabeth. How long would you last with no military?”

Jack thought that would give her food for thought, but if anything, Elizabeth looked more smug. “If you don’t mind waiting, I would like to bring in Major Teldy.”

“Okay. Sure. Why not?” Jack shrugged. Teldy was the next in line after Lorne, at least on the American side, and Jack was trying hard to ignore the Russian officers. Elizabeth called for Teldy, and clearly the woman was staying close to the command tower because she showed up not more than a minute or two later. It made Jack think that the current head of the military just might be guarding Elizabeth against him.

Elizabeth smiled when she appeared. “Major Teldy, thank you for joining us.”

“Ma’am, General O’Neill.” Anne Teldy looked anything but comfortable as she stood in the doorway to the office.

Elizabeth gestured to the chair next to Jack. “Come in and sit down. I wanted to review non Earth personnel with the general, and I know you and Lorne make a habit out of keeping track of the resources.”

Jack lifted an eyebrow. Keeping track of resources was a necessity on the front lines, and Elizabeth was making it sound like some sort of strange hobby those two shared. Hell, if Sheppard didn’t keep track of his non Earth fighters, Jack was demoting him.

“Yes, ma’am.” Teldy sat, but she looked like she’d be more comfortable in a room full of goa’uld.

“Can you report on non-Earth flight personnel?”

“Combat or logistics?” Teldy asked.

“Both.”

Teldy gave Jack a little side eye glance, but when she spoke, she was all business. “We have forty four Traveler pilots combat certified, four Alterians, three Genii, and seven Satedans.”

Jack sat up. He’d known they had off the books personnel, but he hadn’t expected those numbers. He’d intentionally not asked about local fighters so he wouldn’t have to lie when the IOC asked awkward questions.

Teldy continued. “For non-combat missions, we have roughly one hundred and sixty Travelers, although that number fluctuates as people transfer and young people get certified. The Alterian flight technician is now certified for non-combat flight, and we have seven more Genii women. Genii
women are discouraged from taking combat flight training, but my guess is that all seven of those women could fly combat if pressed. I suspect a number of the non-combat Travelers would also be competent in a fight, but they have not tested in combat simulators. And of those non-combat trained, only seven are on the Atlantis payroll and drawing spires.”

Shit. That’s right—Atlantis was making her own money. Jack had known that was going to bite them in the ass.

“Ground personnel?” Elizabeth asked.

“Major Lorne and I have trouble tracking logistical support since the entire city generally provides it. Travelers have two thousand people in the city, and most volunteer to support the military structure with anything from hunting on the mainland to taking shifts in the greenhouses, sewing uniforms or repairing weapons. Lorne puts out a weekly list of needs, and someone gets the job done. We also have refugees from the Milky Way such as Jonas Quinn and his wife, who work with military technology almost exclusively. Supervisors like McKay or Harriman can put them on the payroll if their work is deemed vital. We have sixty two on payroll right now, but that’s a small fraction of the real number.

“In terms of ground combat troops, we have three hundred and eighty four Satedans. They’re our biggest group; however, we also have roughly a hundred and fifty combat troops from other planets in either the Milky Way or Pegasus, almost all of whom had their planets fall to alien invasion. Forty three ground combat troops are on the payroll. The rest volunteer when missions come up that they want, and several have their own goals. The Satedans have regularly scheduled missions back to their home world to rescue as much art and literature as they can. We also have a number of Genii, but Colonel Sheppard always ordered us to work with them in training but exclude them from joint missions where they may have to choose between our officers’ orders and any standing orders from Genea.” Teldy finished her report and sat silently.

Jack was shaken. He’d seen what the Satedans could do, and the idea of nearly four hundred of them was intimidating. Worse, Jack was starting to think of some of the people he’d helped evacuate to Atlantis. He’d sent some of the best alien fighters, scientists and human beings in the Milky Way. If the IOC hadn’t had their heads up their asses, all that talent would be on Earth, but by now those people would have given their allegiance to Atlantis. Well crap. This day just kept getting better.

“If Earth personnel were unable to make it to their duties, do we have enough locals to manage the situation?” Elizabeth asked.

Teldy frowned as though confused for a second. “Yes, ma’am. As you remember during the Kirsan fever epidemic, all Earth personnel and most of those from the Milky Way were in the infirmary at once. The Pegasus natives ran the city for nearly two weeks while we recovered.”

“They ran the tenday markets as well, didn’t they?” Elizabeth smiled at Jack, and he was getting the message loud and clear. If the IOC wanted to pull the reins tight, this horse had the ability to break away.

“Yes, ma’am. Ronon and Gibbs took point on security.”

“And Teyla ran the administrative offices,” Elizabeth finished. Jack didn’t miss the message there. Remove her and Teyla was second in command, ready to take up leadership.

“Thank you, Major,” Jack said. “Dismissed.”

Teldy glanced at Elizabeth before she followed Jack’s order. Great. Now that Jack thought about it,
he shouldn’t be surprised. He’d sent people who thought outside of the box—men and women who would handle Sheppard’s leadership style. Later on, Landry had sent his misfits to get them out of the SGC. Now Atlantis had a base full of military assets who had never fit in well in the military. Even if the IOC recalled them, Jack suspected they might choose to stay on Atlantis. Between that and Atlantis’ local standing army, the IOC was screwed. And if any of those politicians caught even a whiff of this, they were going to panic and do something monumentally stupid.

The door closed behind Major Teldy and the smile faded from Elizabeth’s face. “I assume you get the point, General.”

“I could play stupid, but we both know that message came through loud and clear,” Jack said. “Now how about another message, and this one isn’t for general consumption.”

Elizabeth raised her chin. It was an old tell that telegraphed her anger and resolve.

“The Ori are gone.” Jack watched as that verbal bomb hit home.

Elizabeth’s mouth fell open. “How?”

“Danny assembled an Ancient weapon.” Jack stopped. He didn’t want to talk about his terrible fear when Daniel had gone missing or his guilt over the fact that he had ordered their people to kill Daniel when it looked like he had become a Prior. The older he got, the more Jack became aware of how much he’d changed. Or maybe he was just turning back into the man he’d known before Danny had rearranged his moral landscape. His affair with Carter—that was pure pre-Daniel Jack Asshole O’Neill. He needed to find her a really plum assignment, something that would make her leave him before he had to tell her that while he did love her, he couldn’t commit to her.

He couldn’t commit to anyone.

And stringing her along was one more piece of evidence that he had lost his ethical footing at some point. The fact he was here trying to get Elizabeth to consider the IOC point of view was certainly damning.

“Jack?” Elizabeth asked, her voice gentle now.

Jack rubbed a hand over his face and tried to focus on the job at hand. “We still have the Priors and the head Priestess, what’s her name the magical whatever, but the Ori themselves have been neutralized, and I would not suggest you ask Daniel about it.” That was one more way Jack had failed. Military people should do the killing, and Daniel had taken that burden and that guilt on himself. He shouldn’t have had to. And Jack was irrationally angry that Mitchell hadn’t protected Daniel better. Yet Jack couldn’t find one place where Mitchell had failed. He just hadn’t been good enough.

He hadn’t done what Sheppard had—put himself in the line of fire for torture and medical experimentation to save his geek. But then Jack hadn’t done anything to protect Daniel either. No, he had worked to protect his own ass on the theory that he could better protect his people if he didn’t piss off the President and the IOC.

“Are the Priors still moving toward Earth?”

Jack shook his head. “Not right now. The IOC hopes that means they’ve given up. I suspect they’re trying to regroup. But that doesn’t matter. What matters is that the IOC feels like it has breathing room.”

“The IOC has more time for us,” she said thoughtfully.
Jack nodded. “You folks have the Wraith and that planet where all the replicators are busy doing nothing. The IOC has talked about trying to neutralize that threat.”

Elizabeth sighed. “God help us.”

“Liz, when they find out there’s a goa’uld threat here, it’s going to push buttons—big ones.”

She looked right at him. “Then don’t tell them.”

“And say what? We thought an NCIS agent could arrest Todd and that’s why we sent DiNozzo?”

“They know we have Samas. Maybe we tell them that Gibbs considered going, but that he is getting too old so DiNozzo went instead.”

“Which would suggest Samas lied about not being able to fit in a host anymore,” Jack said. “Why the hell didn’t you talk to me about this before?”

“Maybe because you’re busy enforcing the IOC policies.”

That hit Jack like a jaffa fist to the gut.

“Besides, what could you have done?” Elizabeth asked.

“Something,” Jack said. Shit. He honestly had no idea what he could have done. It’s not like they had another explanation for symbiotes showing up. And the lightbulb went on. “I would have told you to gate to the Milky Way so we had plausible deniability about where the symbiotes came from, but it’s too late now because you didn’t trust me.”

Elizabeth frowned. “What are you talking about?”

That’s right—the IOC had cut her off from access to the SGC reports after she hadn’t kissed ass effectively enough. Jack rubbed the back of his neck where a massive headache was developing. “The planet where Samas made me an eternal enemy by having jaffa throw me in a lake of goa’uld—do you remember that report?”

“It’s a hard one to forget,” Elizabeth said.

“Yeah, harder when you lived it. But the symbiotes who were in us have been having babies. We have reports from half the galaxy about humans hosting them and harassing the Ori. Honestly, without a bunch of snake versions of SG1 running around slowing the Ori down, I’m not sure we would have won this fight.” Maybe Danny still would have found the weapon, but Jack knew they would have suffered more losses and winning would have taken a hell of a lot longer. And there was a chance that without that help, they would have lost. Jack had been preparing for that for years.

“So if Tony had gone to that planet, it might suggest he had picked up a symbiote related to the onac from that mission.” Elizabeth sounded thoughtful. Now she got it—Jack could have helped if his people hadn’t kept him in the dark.

“A little late now,” Jack said.

“Not necessarily,” Elizabeth said. She touched her radio. “Rodney, I need you in my office ASAP.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Jack said, but when Elizabeth shot him her coldest glare, and Jack shut up. If she wanted to bring in McKay and let him yell, then Jack was going to have to shut up and take it like a man. Unlike Teldy who had apparently been stalking the control tower, it took a
while for McKay to show up, and when he did, he looked like shit. Radek was two steps behind him with a worried expression.

“What?” Rodney demanded. He barely glanced at Jack.

Elizabeth stood. “Give Tony time. He’s going to bring Sheppard and Lorne back.”

“Right, because it’s not like bad things happen around here,” Rodney snapped. “If you called me up here for platitudes—”

“I need to use the IOC hack,” Elizabeth said, cutting him off.

Now both scientists were glancing nervously toward Jack like he was the enemy.

Radek spoke first. “You are, perhaps, confused.”

Elizabeth looked amused. “I believe my memory is still intact, and I can recognize when the official reports on the IOC server have been changed. Jack came here because Samas is in serious danger the second the IOC reads the report that Tony has gone to speak with the Wraith. They will start to question how he is hosting an onac, and they very well may find that Samas has populated our waters with young symbiotes.”

“What do you mean?” Rodney asked in the world’s worst case of lying.

“I don’t care that you hack the IOC or SGC,” Jack said before McKay’s paranoia could run away with him. “I might actually admire that you have the guts to do it, so let’s cut the crap. We need to have a plausible explanation for where Tony’s snake came from. If Tony took an unauthorized trip back to the Milky Way, perhaps to P3X-888, that might explain why he has a symbiote who is willing to help a host.”

Rodney frowned. “Where?”

“The unas homeworld,” Elizabeth explained. “Apparently SG1 and Tony left behind some symbiotes who have been breeding on Samas’s home world and those young symbiotes have been doing missions against the Ori. So if we have a record buried deep in the administrative paperwork, something that looks like we forgot to edit it out, that might convince the IOC that Tony went and got a Milky Way symbiote.”

Radek smiled. “Which would make them believe that they have two symbiotes—Samas and Tony’s new partner—not many, many young Turi.” Radek turned and gave Jack a confused look. “And you are fine with this?”

“Hell no,” Jack said. “However, that might be because I’m old and cranky, and I prefer to sit in my chair and yell at the kids to stay off my lawn and keep their snakes out of my yard.” Jack shrugged. “One of the symbiotes with my memories saved my team, and one with Carter’s memories infiltrated one of the Ori ships and has been slipping reports back to us. I get that they aren’t all evil, although I still want to remind everyone in this room that they’re alien, and they have their own agenda.”

“On this we agree,” Radek said.

Rodney gave him a very odd look that Jack didn’t quite understand, but Radek just shrugged and caught Rodney by the arm. “Come, we have work. We must look like something is hidden but still make it possible for stupid people to find it.”

The Rodney of Jack’s memory would have said something caustic, but this Rodney was red-eyed
and pale and sort of twitchy. He let Radek pull him away.

Once the office door shut, Jack asked, “Is McKay going to be alright?”

Elizabeth sighed. “I honestly don’t know. I would normally ask Tony or Abby to look in on him, but that isn’t possible. The best scenario is that we get John and Evan back.”

Jack agreed. This whole situation felt like a keg of gun powder sitting in the middle of a shooting range.

“I’m glad you’re back with us, Jack,” Elizabeth said.

“Hey, I never left.”

“You did,” she disagreed as she stood up. “But I’m glad you found your way back. I bet Daniel talked either Gibbs or Teyla into showing him the Turi trials. I’ll walk you down there.”

Jack got up and followed her out the door. “I thought you didn’t know anything about the Turi.”

“No, I wasn’t one hundred percent sure I was right in my assumption they were symbiotes.”

“So, you were 99 percent sure?” Jack asked.

“99.95 percent.” Elizabeth smiled and headed for the transporters. Jack liked this Elizabeth a whole lot more than the one who had taken command of the SGC. She was less politicians and more the sort of underhanded and devious leader Jack could really respect. However, if the IOC underestimated her, Jack suspected she and her council would do the unthinkable and declare independence. Jack could smell trouble.
John stared at the wall of his cell. The second Todd figured out that the medical information wasn’t coming, the experiments would start. Part of John wished the waiting was over. The other part kept reminding him that he should appreciate every moment of pain-free existence. Once the experiments started, John could expect never-ending pain. At least Rodney was safe.

Hopefully.

John was well aware of the fact that Todd could have led Rodney and Kate away and just locked them up in another part of the hive. If John had captured an enemy as smart as Rodney, he wouldn’t let him go. However, if there was any chance that Todd would let someone go, John had to send the civilians back. Yeah, Rodney had promised to hate him for life, but John could live with being hated. He couldn’t live with letting Rodney get killed.

He was lying on a bench trying to see shapes in the irregular pattern of bumps on the wall when the webbing on the door opened. John got to his feet when he spotted two faceless drones at the open entrance. John waited for them to do or say something, but they didn’t even twitch. They just stood at the open door, their weapons at their sides.

“Colonel?” Lorne called from the next cell.

“Little busy,” John answered as he stood.

“I have Wraith in here.”

John grabbed the webbed window and hopped up so he could look through the bars. Sure enough, Lorne had two Wraith at his door too. “Huh. Okay. Either Todd is trying to freak us out or this is a really odd intimidation technique,” John said.

Lorne looked at John with wide eyes. “What do we do?”

John toyed with the idea of pointing out that he had no clue. However, that would be unkind. Lorne was in a much more precarious position than John because Todd didn’t need him. “Sit tight,” John ordered Lorne. He turned and studied the guards. “If you kill me, that’s going to really limit the number of medical experiments your boss gets to do,” John said, and he started toward them. They fell back a step. John kept moving forward and the continued to back out of the cell until they were blocking one side of the corridor.

“I guess I’m going this way,” John said as he headed toward Lorne’s cell. Two more Wraith came out of Lorne’s cell and moved several steps down the hall, their backs to him.

“An invitation?” Lorne guessed as he came out of his cell. John looked back at the two guards behind them. If there were a good way to fight back, he’d take it. Hell, he’d take a bad option right now. However, as long as the guards had stunners, the two choices were walking where Todd wanted them or getting dragged.

“For both of us,” John said. That didn’t make him feel any better, but Lorne fell in beside him, and they followed the silent guards through winding halls. Eventually they came to a door and the two front guards moved to either side and then opened the door.

John hesitated, and he expected that the rear guard would reward that with a shove. Instead, all four guards were silent and still. John gave Lorne a questioning look, but he only shrugged. When John
finally stepped into the room, he wished he hadn’t.

Four tables were laid out in the center—all side by side and all featuring restraints and some sort of monitoring equipment. Three were empty, but the nearest table had a young man strapped down. He was wearing some sort of white pajamas, but his top was open and his chest bare. Shit. Todd had decided he wasn’t getting his medical data, so this was it. He was going to start his own testing.

“Hello,” the stranger strapped to the table said. He sounded weirdly calm for someone about to get turned into either a Wraith experiment or lunch. John was guessing Wraith worshipper.

John and Lorne traded another look. “Through the looking glass?” Lorne asked softly.

John snorted before he took a step toward the Wraith worshipper. “Hi,” John said. Any information was good information. Unless it was bad intel, and that was a whole other problem. “So, this place is…” John let the words dangle.

The idiot smiled. “Our lord has great plans. I’m very proud of being chosen for this,” the worshipper said with undiluted joy. John’s guts were pretty much tied in knots at this point, and Lorne was looking a little green around the gills.

“Plans. Great,” John said weakly. A door on the far side of the room opened, and Todd came in flanked by two more of the faceless guards who took up position just inside the door.

John fell back to Lorne’s side, not that it really mattered. Screwed was screwed, and three more feet of space between him and the enemy wasn’t going to make a big difference. “Todd, so not nice to see you again,” John said.

Todd had that amused look on his face that worried John. “Queen’s Sheppard. I have need to certain test results which I am sure your people will not provide.”

“I don’t know. Carson is pretty thorough. We can just wait and see what turns up in those records.”

Todd ignored him. “Choose a table so I may begin testing.” Todd turned to his equipment and began turning various scanners on so that faint green figures floated across Wraith screens. The two guards behind John had now come into the room, so John didn’t give himself good odds of winning any fights, but none of the Wraith were moving toward him.

Lorne raised his eyebrows in a silent question, and this time John shrugged.

When Todd finished with his tinkering, he walked over to the worshipper and put a hand on his shoulder. “Your sacrifice is a gift,” Todd said, and the man beamed.

“No!” John shouted just as Todd brought his hand down on the worshipper’s chest. Lorne grabbed John’s arm to keep him back as the worshipper turned older and older. The black vanished from his hair and his face withered. His hands were strapped down, but he struggled against the restraints at first, his struggles fading as his arms became emaciated. Todd stopped and went to a scanner as the man struggled to breathe.

“You bastard!” John hissed the words, his fury making the whole world fade to one pinpoint reality: Todd. He was going to tear Todd’s head off.

Todd gave John an amused look. “I intend no harm.” He lifted a floppy, green blob and set it in the center of the worshippers withered chest, just to the side of the feeding wound.

Now Lorne spoke up. “No harm? The man worships you.”
“Yes,” Todd said. “He does.” When Todd looked at the worshipper, the man smiled, not a trace of anger at having his life ripped from him. “You have performed well.”

“Thank you… My lord,” the worshipper struggled to say. He was dying fast, and John felt a wave of helplessness engulf him. Todd finished some readings and went to the man’s side, and John was almost happy the suffering was almost over. The wet sounds of his labored breathing were painful to hear. However, when Todd brought his hand down, the man started growing younger. Todd stopped once his breathing had evened out and his hair was a salt-and-pepper gray, and then he returned to his readings. John remembered the feeling—the hot rush of life and euphoria. Even now his body twitched with the knowledge.

The worshipper was still gasping, but it was a healthier sound now. “I am honored, my lord,” he said with a reverence that freaked John out.

“I shall compare his readings to your own and that of your assistant, Queen’s Sheppard.”

“It’s just Sheppard, and no offense, but I would rather not have you feed from either of us.”

Todd gave John a dangerous smile. “I am well acquainted with your dislike of my people—of me—but does not every creature need to eat?” Todd moved toward John, all predator to John’s prey, but John refused to back down. Todd’s smile grew wider as he moved forward until he finally stood right in front of John, all his sharp teeth showing.

“You smell of such defiance, Queen’s Sheppard.” He brought his feeding hand up and laid it on John’s chest. The uniform was not enough protection to suit John and he took a step back without meaning to.

“Hands off,” he said, pushing against Todd to cover for his inadvertent flinch.

“I regret that I cannot comply with your wishes.” Todd moved into John’s space again, only this time he reached for John’s uniform. John grabbed Todd’s wrist and twisted away.

“Hands off,” John tried to say, but he only got half a syllable out before Todd grabbed John’s neck. Todd’s feeding mouth pressed up against the front of John’s throat and those long fingers tightened painfully so that John couldn’t easily breath.

Lorne threw himself at Todd, but two of the guards grabbed his arms and yanked him back before forcing him to his knees. Still, Lorne struggled as Todd lifted John by his neck. John ended up on his toes, grabbing Todd’s arm just to take some of the pressure off.

“You should provide a good example for your assistant, Sheppard. After all, my patience does have limits, and you should respect those.” Todd sounded so damn calm that John wanted to kick him in the balls. However, that thought went out the window when Todd used his free hand to unzip John’s uniform jacket.

“Leave him alone,” Lorne said, and then he did some very unLornelike cursing.

“If you wish to save your commander some pain, do not force me to do this to you as well, Sheppard’s assistant,” Todd said. He pushed John’s uniform jacket off John’s shoulders. John tried to pull it back on, but his vision was starting to gray and he was only half aware as Todd stripped him off his jacket and then unzipped John’s shirt, leaving his chest bare of anything but hair.

Then Todd lowered John so his feet were flat on the ground. “You may choose a table and model good behavior for your assistant or I will drag you to a table, and then have my drones treat your assistant the same,” Todd said.
John looked over toward Lorne, and he gave a subtle shake of his head. He didn’t want John to comply. “Pick your battles,” John said.

Todd let go of John’s neck, and John rubbed the bruised flesh as he chose the second to the last table and walked over. “My people are going to make sure you die,” John warned, but then he got up on the table and laid down.

“Not the first time you’ve said as much,” Todd said rather cryptically. They weren’t in the habit of talking, so John wasn’t sure when he would have said that. However, Todd didn’t offer any farther explanation as he strapped John down.

“Sheppard’s assistant,” Todd said as he gestured toward the last table. The two drones let go of Lorne and stepped back.

Lorne silently stripped off his own jacket and unzipped his shirt before going to the last table. Todd went to his side and began to attach the restraints.

“So, what is this?” John asked as casually as he could manage.

“I need information on how the feeding process affects different types of humans. You shall provide the data for those with Iratus DNA, while your assistant provides a sample of one with the Lantean gene but without the additional retrovirus.” Todd looked over toward his worshipper. “Levci has offered his own body so that I can compare your recovery rates to his. Given how your lover complained and shouted, I thought you might send your military second away with the female and keep the scientist, but it is no matter to me,” Todd said. “All four of you have the blood of the enemy.”

“The enemy. Alterians,” John said. He wondered if it was unkind of him to wish that he could make the actual Alterians who still lived in the city take his place. Better, he could go to sanctuary and get Helia. John might be petty, but they deserved this more than John and Lorne. They were the ones to actually start the Wraith war. Hell, they were the ones who made the Wraith. Sort of. After watching the security footage of his own ascension, John had come to the conclusion that Helia and her crew had come along several generations after someone had made the Wraith.

Todd spoke. “They made us, so they are our parents no less than yours, but they are monstrous parents, turning on their children and denying them any place at the table.” Todd ran his hand over Lorne’s bare chest, and Lorne turned his head away. His whole body was stiff with fear, and John wished he could say something that would make any of this easier. Todd slammed his hand down over Lorne’s heart, and Lorne started to scream. John closed his eyes and strained against the restraints, but it was no good.

Todd repeated the same process he had performed with his worshipper. He drained Lorne until every breath sounded wet and labored. He recorded his data, and then he returned a small fraction of the life, leaving Lorne gray haired and gaunt. Then he put something on Lorne’s chest to the side of the feeding mark.

When it was John’s turn, he wasn’t ashamed of his screams. The pain of being fed on was like a dull, hot knife digging into John’s chest. It went on and on until John was sure he would die, and then it was over, and he trembled with exhaustion and pain and age. He ached. Every breath took effort and the world looked dim and foggy through his aged eyes. Todd left him, and John hated that he already wanted to beg for his life back. Some of the Sadeatans had become addicted to their Wraith owners, and John prayed for death before that happened to him.

Finally Todd returned and gave him back some life before putting the green thing on John’s chest.
Up close, John could see that it was a piece of living technology. It had a small readout and places to plug in equipment, but like all Wraith technology, it seemed alive. The surface had a snot-slick look on the rounded top shell, and underneath it had hundreds of tiny threads with tiny hooks. The tentacles squirmed. Todd put it right over John’s sternum and pressed down on the top.

John could feel a tingling sensation like a hundred insects crawling over his skin. He shivered in disgust. “What is that?”

“A monitor,” Todd answered. It will connect to your nervous system and then monitor your body’s responses to repeated feedings. When the devise has fully integrated with you, I will release your bonds and allow you to go back to your rooms,” Todd said like this was all normal. John was strapped to a table with an alien life form bonding with his nervous system. John could not imagine anything worse, and if he thought it would work, he would beg Todd to stop all this. Unfortunately, he had few illusions.

And when Todd figured out that Atlantis was not going to turn over medical information… Well his reaction was going to make today seem like a walk in the park. John looked over to see how Lorne was handling all this, but he still had his face turned away. That meant John was alone with the alien life force burrowing into his skin and Todd.

Todd ran his fingers through John’s hair before the turned and walked away.

The worshipper said in a soft, reverent voice. “He really likes you.”

And that was the problem, John thought. He preferred Wraith who just wanted him dead. It was less frightening.
John followed the guards down a new corridor. “Not back to the lab then,” Lorne said quietly and he touched the rounded egg-thing under his shirt. Once Todd had released them from the tables and sent them back to the cells, John and Lorne had both tried removing the devices. They were embedded so deeply into the skin that John figured surgery and a disfiguring scar were the only options.

Not that he would mind the scar. A scar would be much better than the green streaks John could see under his skin, radiating out from the central egg. If the IOC hadn’t already hated John for being Alteran, this would have sealed the deal. Even Elizabeth and Teyla would worry about how he might compromise the city when he had a big, honking Wraith egg attached to his chest.

The two drones led them into some sort of command room. Todd sat in a central chair, but there were other stations and computer readouts along the perimeter of the room. Hell, maybe this was the command deck and John just didn’t recognize it.

“So what new fun and games are we playing today?” John asked. Lorne gave him a look like he had just lost his mind, and maybe John had. Playing poke-the-captor wasn’t wise.

“Ah, Queen’s Sheppard, I thought you might want to be here for this.” Todd gestured toward the screen. Wraith characters flowed down like dripping water.

“If I knew what any of it meant I might. However since I can’t read Wraith, I would rather go back to my cell and stare at the wall. The company is better there.”

Todd grinned. “You wound me.”

“No I don’t. And quite frankly I don’t feel up to playing your games. In fact I’m feeling a little old and crotchety right now.”

“You could be older,” Todd said, the warning clear in his voice. Right now John and Lorne looked like they were in their late fifties, but at least they weren’t so old that they were knocking at death’s door.

“Here’s a hint for you. Threats work better when the victim is not well aware that the thing being threatened is going to happen one way or another.”

Todd leaned forward. “So you assume I shall hurt you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“You and I have been locked in this battle for far too many years for me to simply dispatch you. Besides, I have not grown tired of our game yet.” And from the expression on Todd’s face, he meant that.

“Sometimes I wonder if Wraith can suffer from senility. You might want to consider that you’re old enough that your mind has started to slip because we’ve interacted once, and I wouldn’t have helped you if it weren’t for Kolya. I would rather shoot you in the face than play a game with you.” John finished and tried to ignore the incredulous look Lorne was giving him. Yeah, John wasn’t playing this smart, but Todd had his own agenda. This wasn’t a tradition hostage situation, so John didn’t feel a need to be a traditional hostage.

Todd grinned. “This is why you amuse me Queen’s Shepherd.”
“What? You’re a masochist who likes to be insulted by his victims?”

“I most certainly am not. However, I am interested in saving my people. And your people have taken a step toward ensuring that.”

John got a really uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach. “What are you talking about?”

“Your medical information has arrived.” Todd tilted his head to the side, and John got the feeling that he was curious about how John would take this bit of news.

John looked over at Lorne. They both shared expressions of shock. “Elizabeth sent my records?”

“She is a far more reasonable woman then you led me to believe.” Todd ran his finger along the arm of his chair. “This surprises you. Perhaps you believe she has some plan.”

John really hoped so because helping the Wraith seemed like a really bad idea. “I’m hoping her plan ends with you dead.”

“So long you have hoped, and still I breathe, Sheppard.”

Lorne lifted his eyebrows, but John could only shrug. He didn’t understand Todd most of the time. However, before John could insult Todd or his failing memory, a drone walked into the room followed by Tony DiNozzo. What the hell?

Todd stood. “Ah, little queen. I had not expected you to attend the trade. Is Queen Samas unavailable?”

John’s brain had a little white out. Shit, shit, shit. Of all the ways for Lorne to find out about the Turi, this was one that John hadn’t anticipated.

“She’s breeding,” Tony said. “I’m Jo, her first daughter born on Atlantis, hosted in Tony.”

“The little queen steps into her mother’s footsteps then?” Todd moved closer, but he stopped a good arm length away.

Tony looked over at John and Lorne. “I’m here to make sure that our people are safe.”

“They are. I would not harm your queen’s Sheppard,” Todd said.

“Queen’s Sheppard? Samas is a queen?” Lorne whispered. John gave a helpless shrug. The look of weary resignation on Lorne’s face said a lot. “That explains some stuff.”

“You seem to have harmed them already. They look older,” Tony said. But John got the definite impression that Tony had done something to make his displeasure clear because Todd took a quick step backward.

“Keep your ire in check, young queen. I have no intent to harm, and I have every reason to believe that Sheppard and his assistant shall both recover. If not, I can return their life force.”

“Queen Samas told you how important he was to us. If you harm him, the Turi will hunt you down. Samas will birth thousands with the sole goal of feasting on your entrails.” Tony said in a low voice, and all the hair stood up on the back of John’s neck.

Todd chuckled. “The young are so passionate.”

“And Samas is old enough to make you pay.” After making that announcement, Tony handed over a
data crystal. “What are you looking for?”

“I am unsure.”

“Then explain it to me. I understand human genetics at a level most humans never will.”

Todd nodded toward Tony and then gestured to the door. “Perhaps you will accompany to a more
comfortable chamber. You may bring your humans.” Todd walked out, leaving the three of them
with their drone guards.

John moved right into Tony’s space. “What are you doing?”

“Saving you,” Tony said. “Jo wasn’t going to sit in the city while Guide turned you into a science
experiment.”

“Jo? Jo the symbiote?” Lorne asked.

“Jo the Turi,” Tony said, and John could almost see the pieces click into place in Lorne’s brain. Then
again, he had two lovers, both of whom had tattoos of turi blades, so he’d probably had a few
suspicions.

Lorne rubbed a hand over his face. “Great. You do know the general is going to give birth to kittens,
right?”

“Turi are not goa’uld,” Tony snapped.

Lorne looked up, “No, but O’Neill and Landry are both amazingly inflexible when it comes to
symbiotes. I hope you have a plan and you’re not just winging it. And am I talking to Jo or Tony?”

“Tony.” Tony sighed. “Jo’s young—Guide is right about that. She’s younger than I am, so unless
Guide does something to make her homicidally angry, she’s probably going to let me handle this.”

“And if you do get homicidally angry?” John asked. The last time the Turi had lost their collective
temper, Kolya had ended up in small, easily digestible chunks. John had read the reports from when
Ba’al had captured Samas and SG1, and cannibalism had featured rather prominently. John had no
illusions about where some of the missing pieces had gone.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, but right now, Guide is putting out some interesting
smells. Whatever he’s working on, he’s hoping it will lead to a truce.”

John snorted. Wraith didn’t make treaties.

“You can smell that?” Lorne asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know whether Wraith can lie with their scent-based communication, so…” Tony
shrugged. At least he wasn’t naive to the danger. John would still prefer Gibbs and Samas, but at
least Tony could have a proper conversation with Todd. “Are you ready?” Tony asked, gesturing
toward the door.

“No,” Lorne said, “but he’s not going to wait forever.”

“For me, he might,” Tony answered. “The Wraith are used to being ruled by queens, so the fact that
I have a queen in me is going to make him cautious.”

“No offense, Tony or Jo, but you’re no Samas,” John said. “Let’s not start feeling complaisant.”
“Trust me, I’m not.” Tony walked into the corridor and headed left.

“Wait, how do you know that’s where Todd went?” John asked.

Tony turned and gave John a look that suggested the question was a stupid one. “Because he left a trail of welcoming scent. That’s why I’m here, because I can follow Wraith communication. Like right now, you might not know this, but he’s actually pretty happy I’m here, and I’m trying to avoid being creeped out by it.”

“Oh, we’ve already been creeped out plenty, even without smelling Todd’s emotions.” John scratched his chest. “So lead on.”

Tony headed down one of the passages, and John and Lorne followed him deeper into the ship.

Lorne moved closer to John. “Really, sir? Symbiotes? You couldn’t have warned me?”

“You have two in your bed. When you started asking if I was worried about Abby’s ability to regenerate bruises, I figured you had figured it out.”

“Maybe I suspected something, but Tony carrying a queen was not one of the thoughts that crossed my mind. Does Chekov know?”

“He does now,” Tony said from in front of them. “He was going to go talk to O’Neill before anyone back home figured out I had volunteered.”

John’s guts were knotted so badly he was going to need Carson to pull them straight again. “He was going to talk to O’Neill about what?”

Tony turned around. “About the Turi symbiotes. It’s time for the secrets to end, and since me coming here is going to make everyone suspicious, we’re getting ahead of the problem.”

“Or getting hit right in the face by it.” Lorne grabbed Tony’s arm. “Damn it, Abby and Miko are in the path of hurricane O’Neill, and I’m here. Tell me you have a plan that doesn’t include all the hosts getting arrested.” Lorne’s voice had a tightness that hinted at violence. John thought of his second as the calmest man in the world, but apparently he had a violent temper under all the proper polish.

“They’re safe,” Tony said. The city is on alert for symbiote poison, all the symbiotes have been recalled to the waters, and if someone tries to come in an attack the Turi, they’re going to have a city full of fighters who will repel them. Don’t forget, while you two are here, Chekov and Teldy are in charge of the Earth military and Hew is in charge of the locals. Chekov is on our side, although he may sit out any fighting. However, Teldy and Hew are completely team Turi. The military is not going to snap to obey IOC orders.”

“I still don’t like this,” Lorne said, but he let go of Tony’s arm.

“And that’s why I’m here. None of us like this, so let’s see what Guide wants.” Tony turned touched a control panel. A door slid back and Tony headed into a large chamber. The walls glowed green and a lattice work of organic conduits made the place feel like a giant spiderweb. It did have a number of platforms and one arched window that showed the stars, so it was a definite improvement over the cell. Todd stood in the middle of the room.

“Is it to your liking young queen?”

“No,” Tony said immediately. “I require water and that which makes humans comfortable.”
That seemed a little vague to John, but Todd bowed his head in Tony’s direction. “I shall see to it. Now, tell me of your genetic skills and I shall tell you of my project.” Todd moved to the platform in front of the space window and sat.

Tony moved to the platform closest to him. His legs were shorter than the Wraith’s so he had to sit cross legged. “Onac choose the genetics for their children. The manipulation of genes and the coding of memories into genetic patterns is instinctive. Evolution is far too slow for our preferences.”

“And Wraith do not evolve at all. How interesting that we have come to such a similar end giving our paths,” Guide said.

“You assume too much.” Tony was definitely channeling a little of Samas. Either that or Jo was a chip off the old Samas block. Either way, he had the disapproving tone down pat.

Perhaps I do,” Todd said. “My project continues the work of another. I knew the one who had performed experiments on humans to give them Wraith strength.”

“His experiments failed, leaving only those like Teyla who can hear your thoughts,” Tony said.

Todd smiled. “Ah yes, the little sister. I am aware. He had attempted to use Wraith DNA, but our very DNA was designed, engineered by the Alterans to extend life. There is nothing natural there to evolve or adapt.”

Tony looked toward John. “And do you believe he is to blame for that?”

“Hey! What?” John stood a little straighter.

“Why do you ask, young queen?” Todd sounded curious.

“Because you speak of Sheppard using the same time markers you use to speak of the Alterans who designed you. It implies you knew Sheppard before he ascended.”

John’s knees went kind of watery. “Wait. You can’t believe I’m to blame for the Wraith.” John had enough guilt about waking them—he didn’t need more.

“You are not, my brother,” Todd said. “You spoke against the experiments, setting yourself up as Outcast and Guide to try and bring my people the mercy of death. I knew you as Melik.”

“Melik was your brother?” Tony asked. John seriously hoped these two were using brother in some metaphorical way because the alternative was unthinkable.

Todd smiled. “He called me brother. He argued that we shared DNA, that we were all equal in our right to self-determination. He also believed that we should be exterminated, but that was a small matter compared to his willingness to acknowledge us.”

“Acknowledge you?” Tony asked. “Are you suggesting that the Ancients didn’t know you were sentient or that they didn’t believe it?”

Todd was silent for a long time. After several awkward minutes, he stood and walked over to Tony, slowly going to one knee before offering Tony his hand. Tony gripped Todd’s feeding hand, and they remained like that for long minutes, staring at each other.

John looked at Lorne, but he only shrugged.

Eventually Todd rose and turned toward John. “You are right, my brother. We are of one flesh, no
matter what has been added to that flesh. Last time, you forced me to kill you. This time, we should find another solution.”

“You killed him when he was an Ancient?” Lorne asked. “I thought he was your brother.”

Todd gave Lorne a sharp smile, but he stepped closer to John and brought his fingers up so he rested the back of them against John’s cheek. “He is my brother, and I did kill him. The memory brings me pain, but you are the reason I live still, John Sheppard. When you lived as Malik and I fed, your ascension channeled energy into me. It made me as strong as a queen, and I wonder if that was your plan. You return, and I am here waiting for you. But you should tend your queen. I will divert the ship to a planet where I can find that which makes humans comfortable.”

Todd turned and swept out of the room with an overly dramatic twirl of his long coat.

“Shit,” Tony said softly.

“Oh, more than you know.” Tony’s face twisted with disgust. “The Ancients had whole generations of experiments that failed—people that died screaming because the bug and human parts didn’t line up correctly. Some of the experiments were animals, but when the Ancients started to find ways to bring the two species together into something that looked like Wraith, they refused to admit their creations were sentient. They treated them like lab animals.”

“Lab animals that can talk,” Lorne said. “That would be hard to ignore.”

Tony closed his eyes and rubbed his temple. “If they talked, the Ancients could cut out their tongues and vocal cords. The city had tried to shut down the experiments, and the Ancients ripped out her coding. Melik was the only one to argue that this was unethical. Everyone else was either excited by the findings or completely uninterested in experiments with a few interesting bugs.”

“His brother?” Todd finished when Lorne struggled to find the right word.

Tony shook his head. “Todd refused to tell me. He cut all the images off and just sent the feeling of respecting his brother.”

Lorne went to the seat where Todd had been sitting and perched on the edge of the platform. “What Todd is showing does not look like brotherly love and respect. Don’t take this the wrong way, sir, but it looks like Todd is…”

“You’re his brother,” Tony said quietly. “He will defy a queen for you, and in Wraith culture, that says everything. Whatever happened between you two, it was big. And while Todd might kill you to
save himself or his hive, he is telling the truth when he says he would mourn your death.” Suddenly
Tony’s goofy grin made an appearance. “Aliens,” he said in a dismissive tone. “They’re always so…
you know… alien.”

Yeah, not even Tony’s humor could make this any better.
A Sheppard Who Once Was

Guide stood outside the chamber where his guest waited. When he pressed his hand against the webbing, the door began to mimic his scent. The young queen would recognize the request to enter, even if the humans could not.

Guide was pleased to again have Malik called Guide now known as Sheppard back. As a young Wraith, he had hated all Alterans and he saw his fondness for this one as weakness. Now that he had grown older, he realized that Alterans, like all creatures, contained both good and evil. At one point, Guide had seen his own species as the tortured victims who had risen up to avenge a wrong and protect their queens. However, it had been a Wraith who had betrayed him so he fell into Genii hands. Some of his Wraith brothers killed, not for food but because it entertained them. They took the blessing of the Runners, a rite intended to honor those who had earned the right to die fighting, and they had twisted it into a vicious game to sate their own hunger for human fear.

Wraith could no longer claim to be the wronged ones, and not all Alterans would sacrifice others in their own selfish quests. Malik’s return proved that. This was an opportunity Guide would not get again, even if he lived then thousand more years. However, if Guide’s experiments succeeded, Guide anticipated that many hives would continue to kill.

Guide placed no ethical value on the killing of humans because such a judgment would imply choice. Wraith had no choice. The Enemy had designed them to kill, and Guide was still a slave to that mistake in biology—at least for now. However, if Wraith had the ability to feed and live well without killing and they still persisted in continue on the Enemy’s path of setting one creature against another, then Guide feared he would learn how many of his Wraith brothers were as unethical as their creators.

Such thoughts bothered him, but before he could continue down that path, the door opened and the young queen stood there. Sheppard and his assistant both stood well back, near the view port. Guide opened his face slits and breathed deeply to judge the queen’s mood. She was annoyed, bored, curious. There were no strong feelings of hostility, so Guide smiled and stepped closer.

“We have reached a planet where I can procure human comforts. Are the waters to your liking?” Guide kept his gaze on the queen, aware that he must watch every twitch. The Turi used scent just as the Wraith, but it was a different set of chemicals. He could feel the young queen struggle to get some scents correct, and while her skill with Wraith aromas was impressive, her youth and the fact that this language was not her own made Guide wary of miscommunication.

“I assume it will keep growing,” the host said. The queen smelled of pleasure at the quality of the water.

“It will.” Guide walked over to the small waterfall that had developed in the side of the chamber. It spilled into a basin that stood waist high. Guide put his hand on the side of the basin and tasted of the wall. “The ship can grow no faster, but it finds this form pleasing and comfortable. It will continue to grow for some time.”

“Make sure the pond grows into the next room and that it doesn’t take this entire space,” the young queen said, or perhaps this was the request of the host. It was so hard to tell when the queen used another. Guide was grateful that his own existence did not depend upon finding others to carry him. Perhaps the queen caught a hint of that because the host narrowed his eyes.

Guide sent out placating scents and bowed. “Of course, young one.” Guide would have to rearrange
some living quarters and reroute a nutrient line that went behind this wall, but they could land so that
the ship could focus on those changes. It was a reasonable request given that the queen needed time
in her true form. Guide would never disrespect Samas’s daughter by denying her that, not when that
great, old queen had trusted him with her heir.

“Queen’s Sheppard, you shall come with me to choose comforts of your liking.”

Sheppard took a step forward, moving into the space between Guide and Sheppard’s assistant.
“Shopping’s not my thing.”

“I shall go,” the queen said.

This was difficult. Guide turned to the young queen and searched for the right words as he sent out
scents of regret and determination. “Humans are irrational and going into human settlements is never
safe for my kind, even when we believe we can trust those who live there. I cannot risk you, young
one.”

The queen narrowed his eyes. “Maybe Wraith queens sit on ships and look pretty, but trust me, I
know my way around a fight.”

“As did our first queens, young Willful,” Guide said. When she had introduced herself as “Jo,” she
had provided that translation of the name. It fit her well. “Their willingness to fight explains why
there are no first queens left. I will not dishonor Samas’s trust by placing you in danger, not when
you are so young.”

“Compared to you, everyone is young. That’s not an excuse.” The queen smelled angry now.

Guide controlled his frustration rather than aggravate her more with that scent. “I am over ten
thousand years old. Sheppard is at least that old and perhaps older. His people believed him to be one
of the reborn, which would make him older than me. Samas is not as old as either of us, but she has
many centuries of experience. Not everyone is young, my queen. However, that does not change the
fact that you are. You must stay here, and on this, I will not compromise.”

“Tony, enough,” Sheppard said. He moved to the queen’s side, and put his hand on her shoulder.
Guide had thought that Sheppard belonged to the elder queen, but perhaps Turi queens shared their
favorites more easily than Wraith because young Willful’s ire quickly faded. Such was the power of
a favorite to calm a queen. It made Guide ache for his own queens, but his mother had died escaping
Atlantis, and his two daughters in the war. His last queen had been his grandchild, born of his seed—
linked to him twice over. Her death at the hands of another Wraith had destroyed something in him,
and he would not serve another queen. But he would honor this young one and protect her from her
own youth just as he had for his daughters and granddaughter. Hopefully he would succeed better
with a Turi queen than he had with his own.

“I’ll go,” Sheppard said. He looked over at Guide and his suspicion was etched into every line,
although Guide did not understand what Sheppard might suspect. Sheppard looked at the young
queen again. “You and Lorne stay here.”

Guide attempted to provide reassurance. “The queen is the absolute ruler of this chamber. No warrior
or drone would contradict her within this room. As long as you do not attempt to leave, you shall be
safe. However, since the waters require more extensive alterations on the internal structure, I shall
ask you to wait here, Sheppard, while I land the ship.”

Guide left. Without him there, Queen’s Sheppard would be able to better soothe his queen. Never
before had Guide seen humans divide into biologically determined roles. Most humans chose leaders
seemingly at random. Even his worshipper planets had no reasonable way of assigning roles, yet the addition of Turi to a human host pushed humans into predictable roles. Sheppard was the queen’s favorite, one who would carry the queen’s name as well as his own because he had her ear. The human called Lorne stepped into place as Sheppard’s second, both organizing themselves around first Samas and now Jo.

That made Guide wonder if some of the instincts he had always associated with the iratus were, in fact, part of his Alteran heritage.

Second Who Speaks His Mind joined Guide in the main hallway. “Why are we landing?”

“To facilitate changes to the queen’s open waters.”

Disbelief and doubt stained the air, and Guide turned and snarled at his second. Second quickly dropped his gaze and hunched his shoulders submissively. “I do not understand why you give her the title of queen.”

“Because she is one, as is her mother, Samas the Wise who Tempers Others for the Fight. We will not dishonor the elder queen by showing a lack of manners to the younger.”

“The queen,” Second said, and the air was now painfully free of any scent meaning Second hid his opinions and feelings, “chooses humans.”

“She chooses a human who once helped the Wraith escape from the Enemy. The universe returns Malik to us, and brings with him a species who can stand between Wraith and human and speak both languages. Do not assume your few years of life allows you to understand the patterns formed by time and fate,” Guide said before he strode off, leaving Second to his own thoughts. It would take time for those who were younger to see the beauty of the universe’s pattern in this.

And Guide had no doubt he saw only part of the pattern. He would keep his own council and follow Sheppard’s lead until he could understand it better. While it was true that Malik might have returned to complete the task of killing Wraith, Guide had to believe that the man who had once raised the security shield to sit at Guide’s side and tend a wound might have another plan. Guide only had to watch until he could see the shape and size of it. And then he would have to decide whether his goals would be better served by standing beside his brother or if he would have to make the same choice he had so many years ago.

The ship landed easily, hiding on the far side of the planet from the ring. Guide would not expose his worshippers to the hatred of those who venerated the Enemy. Guide called for a pilot to bring one of the darts that had been modified to allow humans to ride within the beam without being knocked unconscious. Then he returned to the queen’s chambers.

The second he entered, he could feel the shift. The young queen’s emotions were much stronger, but they were spoken in a language Guide did not understand. Strange scents filled the air, and he looked to the queen only to see the host standing near the waters without Queen Willful.

“She’s in there,” the host said, poking his thumb toward the water. Guide inched closer, and he could see a beautiful creature swimming in the small space. She was darker than Guide had expected. He had thought that, like Wraith queens, she would show her dominance through color. However, her skin was mostly brown and green with a few hints of blue around her head. She turned and looked at him, rising up out of the water. She screamed, and spikes lifted like a collar around her head.

“She is truly beautiful,” Guide said.
“She is,” the host agreed.

Sheppard stepped forward. “Okay, let’s get this over with.”

“Sir,” the human second said, but Sheppard waved him off.

“I’m fine. Just keep an eye on Tony, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” Sheppard’s second said, but his unhappiness was easy to see, even for Guide who often had trouble reading human emotions.

Sheppard walked past Guide and stopped at the door. “So, are we going?”

Guide nodded at Tony, unsure of the protocols for handling a queen’s host, and then he turned his attention to Sheppard. When he opened the door, Sheppard practically threw himself out of the room, but then he stood in the corridor. Guide closed the door behind him and started toward the dart bay.

“So, what are we really doing?” Sheppard asked.

Guide turned and looked at him. “Procuring items of human comfort.”

“And…” Sheppard drew the word out in a way that was, no doubt, meaningful to humans. Guide ignored the strange verbalism and continued walking.

Sheppard grabbed Guide’s arm, and Guide stopped and looked at him, amused at the idea that a human would attempt to physically stop him. The Enemy had disabled Guide, forcing him to feed on others, but the same Enemy had given him physical strength. “Look,” Sheppard said, “Tony might believe that stuff about Malik, but I don’t. What’s really going on?”

Guide tightened his facial slits. Humans had no ability to smell, no telepathy. It was as if their biology was designed to lie, and that left them expecting to find lies at every turn. “I suspected you were Malik in the Genii prison, but I was weak and unsure after so many years. However, now that I have tasted you while in my strength, I know you are he. I called you brother once in hope that you were Malik. I know give you the name in surety.”

Sheppard pulled his shirt open, exposing the shell of the monitor. “Then what is this?”

“A devise to measure the recovery of your body after feeding. Your recovery goes much quicker than your assistant’s. I shall have to return life to him before the next set of experiments.” Guide turned and started down the corridor again, and Sheppard chased after him.

“We’re just Guinea pigs to you—lab rats to experiment on.”

“I would never deny your sentience or attempt to turn you into an animal to suffer for my curiosity,” Guide said. He blasted the air with his disgust, but of course his brother could not sense any of that. Curious, Guide reached out telepathically. He got a faint echo, a sense of water against his skin and nothing else. Well, it would be too much to ask that Turi be telepathic as well. It was enough they could use scent properly. Guide opened a door and stepped into the dart bay. The huge flight shaft rose in front of them, and Guide stepped to the edge of the platform.

“What game is this?”

Guide turned to look at Sheppard. “I am yet unsure. I know only that you are my brother who sat next to me when the pain appeared to have no end. You spoke for allowing me and my kin to pass into death, an end I would have welcomed at the time.”
Sheppard narrowed his eyes. “And yet you killed me.”

Guide grinned. “It was our fate then.” When Guide had tasted of Malik, felt the panic and fear as Malik realized his breech of the security could allow the Wraith freedom, Guide had mourned that he could not take his brother with him. If Malik had lived, perhaps he could have spoken to the others about making choices that did not damage the others. The humans of this universe were victims of the Enemy as much as the Wraith. The Enemy chose them, picking a woman here or an old man there and putting them in the cages with starving Wraith so they could study the feeding process. The Enemy had seen those individuals as little more than animals to serve their part in elevating the Enemy to godhood.

Guide remembered Malik’s anger—the way he spoke of the Ori and how the Alterans were following in those footsteps. Malik had argued that their species had a fatal flaw and they should guard against this need for power—turn away from the hunger built into their genes.

Could Malik have offered the same advice if he’d stood on the ship next to Guide, warning the Wraith that they were in danger of falling into the same trap as the Enemy? They allowed their genetics to define them and because the humans looked so much like the Alterans, they denied the humans any right to self-determination. They might have even penned them had there not been calmer voices in the beginning. Guide’s own daughter—Shining Anger—had insisted on giving those who faced death bravely the right to die as Runners. And now there were too few left who remembered.

The queens did not tell the stories of the first days, preferring to pretend they were and always had been the ultimate authority. Their arrogance was inherited from the Enemy for the iratus had no such conceit.

“And what’s our fate now?” Sheppard asked.

Guide raised his hand to run his fingers across Sheppard’s neck even as Malik had once done for him. The labs had been an endless torment, for Guide more than most. He was the first generation born, so he felt the suffering of his mother queen, and his seed was chosen for offspring, so he felt every pain they suffered. They were locked in a cycle of endless misery, and then Malik had run his fingers across Guide’s cheek and neck, promising to end the pain one way or another. Malik had kept his word, one of the few humans who ever had. “I would suffer much to save you from death, Queen’s Sheppard. You are my brother, and my debt to you will never end. But if you must die, I will wait for you to return again.”

Sheppard frowned. “And again, that’s way creepier than I think you intend it to be.”

A whine of the dart warned Guide before the light enveloped them.
The light deposited John and Todd in a bright field next to a bustling village. Every other time John had been caught in a culling beam, he had fallen unconscious. However, John was still clear-headed. He went to pull his shirt closed before any of the villagers could see the alien thing attached to his chest, but Todd reached out and caught his hand.

“They will see it as an honor. Leave it.”

John gritted his teeth and wanted to disobey just for the sake of disobeying, but whatever was really going on, Lorne and now Tony were on the ship, so John was going to have to play nice. He lowered his hand. “We have a workshop on sexual harassment and unwanted touching. I could have Elizabeth send you the DVD,” John said, not sure how much Todd understood.

Todd grinned. “I enjoy touching you.”

“Yes, that’s just wrong.”

“To allow a child to suffer without touch is an evil, and he who offers comfort with a simple gesture can command loyalty.”

John gave Todd an incredulous look. “I’m not a child, and I’m not going to be loyal to you because you touch me too much.”

“Of course not,” Todd said, and John got the feeling that Todd was amused. As much as John agreed with keeping Jo safely in the ship, John also wished Jo and Tony were here to translate because he was missing something.

A bell began to ring, and Wraith worshippers dressed as simple villagers began to hurry toward them. A couple of little girls came running and screaming with joy, and John wanted to throw himself in front of them to stop them, but Todd moved forward and swept both up in his arms. “Ah, my young princesses. Where is your mother to allow you to run so far from her side?”

One of the girls pointed into the crowd and a woman pushed her way through. “My Lord,” she said, bowing to Todd before holding out her arms. Todd returned the children to her.

“They grow beautifully,” Todd said, and the woman blushed with pleasure. John wondered if she was going to be as happy when the Wraith came and fed from her children.

“Colonel Sheppard!” someone called out. John turned to see Patros in the crowd. Well shit. That explained a few things. Patros was one of their largest tenday merchants. He even had goods in Jackson Gibbs’ permanent store. “I am happy to see you unharmed and with our Lord.” He smiled at John like this was some happy reunion.

Todd put a hand on John’s shoulder. “He, his young queen, and his second have come to assist me with my research. I have been informed that my quarters lack human comforts. Please provide what is needed.”

Patros bowed. “Of course, my Lord.”

“My Lord,” someone called. “My mother ails. Will you come?”

“So, you play miracle worker for them?” John asked Todd.
Todd looked down at him. “My people are not allowed to die in pain. They may choose their time of passing and slip from the world quietly, knowing that their last act is to strengthen the defenses of their world.”

It took John a minute to mentally translate that as Todd was going to drain this man’s mother, and the man was asking him too. Disgust rolled through him, but Todd strode off, leaving John in Patros’s company.

As much as John hated Todd, he found he now hated Patros twice as much. “How can you let him eat your people?”

Patros smiled. “Would death avoid this village if I sent my Lord away?”

“He’s not a god.”

“No,” Patros agreed. “The Wraith on other worlds will tell that lie, but this Wraith has always been honest with us. He is not a god, but a creature made by the Ancestors who lost their way. And you are the Sheppard of prophesy.”

John was surprised that Wraith worshippers would tell that story. “You know, on most worlds, that prophesy is that I’m here to kill the Wraith, and that would mean your lord is danger.”

Patros wrapped his arm around John’s and pulled him toward the center of the village. “If all Wraith die, then there is no need for protection. I would mourn the death of a creature who walked this galaxy when the Ancestors did, but if that is fate, so be it. However, that prophesy has two parts. It says that when you came last time, you tried to lead the Ancestors on a more ethical path. When they refused, you opened the door for their destruction.”

“I what?” John figured that Todd was playing fast and loose with the local religion with that tale.

“And the prophesy says that this time you will offer the same choice to the Wraith. They must choose a more ethical path or you will destroy them. I do not know how many Wraith will hold onto their anger, but our Lord and his hive are ready to make better choices.”

“Right. And I’m sure they’ve never eaten anyone who isn’t ready to die.” John laid the sarcasm on a little thick.

Patros stopped. “The hive has required sacrifices during hard times, but they are part of our community. We have provided those lives, so do not assume we are like those who bring unwilling victims to Wraith who have no respect for the life they take. This village has sheltered the Wraith ever since they first escaped the labs. Our ancestors escaped with our Lord.”

John drew in a sharp breath.

Patros nodded. “Yes, my ancestors were taken to be used as food for the Alterans experiments. Ten thousand years we have waited while the young Wraith and young humans have erased the true history. But our Lord told us that you were the return of Malik who ended those experiments, and we have moved to protect Atlantis.” Patros smiled. “When you drove the Alterans from the city, we had a celebratory feast. Now our Lord says you need human furnishings. The hive ships are devoid of comforts, so let us choose some bedding and clothing for you.”

“You know what I would like more than bedding?”

“What?” Patros asked, all bright eyes and enthusiasm.
“Send a message to Atlantis. Let them know we’re here.”

Patros sighed and took a step back. “And what would Teyla or the Sadetans do if they learned that we gave our allegiance to a hive? How long would my people survive?”

John grimaced. Teyla would probably stop and investigate first, but Ronon and Hew… they would be all in favor of wiping the village out. They hated Wraith worshippers more than they hated Wraith, and with good cause. They would trap travelers and turn them over to their masters in return for the gift of life. Right now, John only had Patros’s word that he hadn’t given the Wraith innocent victims, but if there was a chance that they were innocent of murder, John couldn’t condone killing these people for having different beliefs—and that’s exactly what the Sadetans would do.

Maybe.

John had a way to see if these people were truthful and a way to keep the Sadetans from going overboard. “Where’s Todd?”

“Who?”

John sighed. “The Wraith I came with… where is he?”

“He tends the ill and ushers them to the next world. You may not interrupt such a solemn ceremony, Colonel Sheppard. Let us choose supplies for your new quarters, and then we can find him.”

John opened his mouth to argue, but Patros shook his head. “The woman is old and in pain. Respect her last ceremony.” Patros spoke sharply, and John grimaced. He’d rather interrupt and give her a few more hours or days of life, but clearly these people wouldn’t allow that. John would play good little hostage for now, and track down Todd later.

“So, I guess I’m picking out pillows,” John said without much enthusiasm. Patros’s smile made it clear he was enthusiastic enough for both of them.

John picked mattresses and pillow and blankets and shelving and several chairs before Patros caught John’s arm and pointed across the village to show Todd walking through the crowd. It was like watching a rockstar wade through a crowd. Everyone reached out to touch him, and children darted through the adults’ legs to run in front him.

“Have you finished, Sheppard?” Todd asked.

“My ex-wife never got me to shop this much,” John said dryly.

“We shall deliver the goods to the clearing, my Lord,” Patros offered. He was such a nice man with a quick smile and gray beard, and John really felt dirty just watching him be nice to a Wraith. Todd rested his hand on Patros’s shoulder, and the adoration in Patros’s face made John a little ill.

Todd started walking toward the edge of town, and John walked beside him. The rest of the town seemed to take that as a sign to back away.

Until they had left the others behind, John stayed quiet. However once they started walking through the field where the dart had left them, John spoke. “Now that we’re cleared the place of any danger, how about having Jo come down here.”

Todd stopped and stared at John. “Why?”

John shrugged. “She would be able to tell me things.”
“A rather vague answer,” Todd said.

“Fine.” John hated feeling like he had to beg for favors. He’d never been good at playing this game with his commanding officers and he was even worse at doing it as a hostage. “I want to know if these people are lying.”

Todd tilted his head to one side. “About what?”

“About whether they’ve been with you since you escaped the labs.”

“They have,” Todd said, and then he turned and started walking again like that closed the matter.

“I’m not willing to take your word for it.”

“Why does it matter to you, brother? Do you remember the haunted faces of those the Enemy found unworthy to pass on their genes? They were given rooms with beds, but after a time, they realized they were prisoners of masters who saw them as tools. Their friends were taken one at a time never to return, until the humans left behind in those locked rooms understood their fate.”

“Hey, I’m not sticking up for the Ancients. They left things like unstable power generating systems and exploding tumor machines sitting around for someone to stumble across. Trust me, I’m not a fan.”

“No, you never were,” Todd said. Again, he went for inappropriate touching, this time resting his hand on John’s shoulder. John was finding a way to get Todd a copy of that sexual harassment video. “But there is no reason for these people to lie.”

“Other than wanting to hide that they’ve fed you strangers to save their own lives.”

“They have not, which is why when the hive requires more life than they are likely to have, I go elsewhere to raid.”

“So, you’re a good guy for kidnapping and eating other people?” John asked. He was fairly sure there was an ethical problem in there—both for the Wraith and for these worshippers who supported them.

“As I said in that Genii cell, I have no choice in the matter. That is why I am doing these experiments.” Todd let his hand wander down across John’s chest to the embedded monitor.

“They have a choice, and they’re supporting you,” John pointed out.

“Am I not the being that rescued their forefathers after your people marked them for death?”

“And how many good people have you killed?” John asked.

Todd lifted his chin before looking off toward the forest. “Too many, Queen’s Sheppard. However, when we are this close to our goal, I cannot risk the young queen. You can believe these people or not, but it will not change our task.”

“And what task is that?” John wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“You carry iratus DNA and the genes of the Enemy. The two together make you strong enough to survive multiple feedings.” Todd gestured toward the device on John’s chest. “Even now your internal organs regain their balance faster than your assistant’s. I cannot heal myself or even survive without human enzymes, so I must find a source of them, but that does not mean I must kill every
human who would offer to share his life.”

John went utterly still. “You want to create super donors who can survive feeding you.”

“Many of us have tried in the past, but we have failed, and our failure has brought led other hives to hunt us. They will not tolerate those like your Teyla who remind them of how much we share.” Todd grinned. “But now your exposure to the iratus and to the retrovirus created by your Carson may provide the genetic key to this lock. Once you tried to remind your people that we are brothers, and now I must finish my work and take it to the other Wraith. I can only hope my people are more reasonable than yours were ten thousand years ago.”

“You’re going to keep me until you get the feeding process perfected.” Oh this was not good.

“Do not worry, Queen’s Sheppard. I can give you a very long life, so the length of your natural life is no barrier. We have all the time we need to complete our work.” Todd sounded so damn pleased, but all John could feel was horror. Todd planned to keep him forever if that’s what it took to finish his damn project to save the Wraith.

John had no idea if karma applied to Alterans who chose to deascend, but if it did, he’d clearly done something shitty the last time he’d been here. Because this karma was about to kick his ass.
Politics

“Danny, I got it,” Jack said. “Go. Pack.”

“I should come with you.” Daniel trailed after Jack as he headed toward the SGC conference room.

Jack stopped and stared at Daniel. “No, you shouldn’t. The IOC twitches when you’re on the same continent. They’re quietly celebrating your announcement that you’re moving to Atlantis. By the way, why are you taking Vala?”

“I’m not. She’s following. Something about how I can’t be trusted by myself in another galaxy.”

Jack thought he might like her. Then again, she had kidnapped Daniel, so he was still trying to get over his aggravation over that clusterfuck. “You’d better make sure you don’t go getting lost, kidnapped, or turned into an alien species while you’re there.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes.

Jack realized too late that Daniel's mind had gone straight to the incident with the Ori. "I mean that you should stay out of the water."

"Oh, that.” Immediately Daniel had a careless air about him that scared the living shit out of Jack.

He caught Daniel by the arm. “Do you remember how I promised to burn the city to the ground if you did something stupid?”

“Jack!”

“Daniel, I’m serious. To the ground. Burning. Don’t try me on this.” Jack had enough to worry about with Sheppard, Lorne and DiNozzo missing. He didn’t need a snaked Daniel running around the universe. With Daniel’s luck, he’d get a Daniel symbiote and then they’d double their bad luck.

Daniel rolled his eyes and patted Jack on the shoulder. “I’ll keep in mind that you’re getting irrational in your old age.”

Jack grunted, but if that’s what it took to keep Daniel out of trouble, Jack would take it. He wasn’t going to point out that Jack had been equally irrational before meeting Daniel. Sara would testify to that. “Just keep in mind that the President trusts me with the big bombs.”

“No he doesn’t,” Daniel said, and then he turned and headed back toward his office.

“Yes he does!” Jack yelled after him.

“No he doesn’t!” Daniel yelled back.

Jack turned around and found himself face to face with Landry. “Hank,” Jack said.

“Jack. I hear you have a meeting with Woolsey and Shen.”

“Shen’s here? Crap. I was hoping to avoid the Chinese.”

“They’ve become big supporters of Weir and Atlantis,” Hank said.

Jack was sure that Hank meant that as some sort of a warning, but Jack already knew why Shen had
changed her tune. Her brother was on Atlantis, and she’d backed Weir’s request to allow Atlantis citizens to have their families join them. If her brother stayed there for two years, she could emigrate to Atlantis. Jack figured that door wasn’t going to stay open for long. The city might be big, but there was a limit to how many people could comfortably live there. But for now Shen was playing to her own self-interests.

“Yeah, yeah. They’ll change their tune as soon as Elizabeth does something to annoy them, and that something is going to happen in about… oh…” Jack made a show out of checking his watch. “Three minutes.”

Hank raised his eyebrows, but Jack just smiled and passed him on the way to the conference room. He could count on Woolsey to be level headed. The man had boring down to a science, and he’d made a vehement argument against using the symbiote poison on the unas home world. At the time, Jack had cursed him, but maybe it was for the best. As much as Jack made a show out of hating symbiotes, he had to admit that he admired some of the shenanigans they’d gotten up to while fighting the Ori. He didn’t trust them, but he had some admiration going.

And he’d made sure the Chinese heard about the meeting because Shen was a huge Samas supporter. The two of them had completely different support bases inside the IOC, so if he could break the news to them in a way that didn’t end in bloodshed, those two plus Elizabeth could handle the rest of the committee.

Jack stopped right outside the conference room and took several deep breaths. This would be so much easier if the President let him shoot people, but Jack had a job, and he had to man up and do it. He pushed the door open and strode in like he owned the place.

“Richard. Shen. So good of you to come, not that I knew you were coming, Shen. I would have put out the welcome mat if I’d known you were coming all this way.”

She raised her eyebrow at him and lifted her chin. That was never a good sign.

“General, maybe you could tell us what the urgent matter is,” Woolsey said, eager to smooth over any conflict. He probably thought that Jack’s aide was an idiot who accidentally called him while Shen was in his office—yeah, like Jack didn’t keep track of all IOC members at all times. The first lesson they taught you in war college was to keep your eye on the enemy.

“I hope it was worth the trouble to come here,” Shen said in an overly sweet voice, not bothering to mention that Jack hadn’t actually asked her to come at all.

Jack sat across the table from her. The best way to keep her from getting angry at Samas was to get her angry at him. “Oh, I have a feeling you know exactly what I just learned. After all, you’re a big supporter of Samas, aren’t you?” Jack asked.

Maybe he imagined seeing a flicker of confusion. Certainly she kept her emotions close, only tilting her head in his direction.

“General?” Woolsey asked.

Jack turned to him. “Samas had an emergency backup plan in place.”

“I thought he was permanently in the water now.” Woolsey frowned and slipped into a chair one down from Shen. He also looked at Shen suspiciously, but she had on a perfectly neutral expression.

“He set up a failsafe. If something went wrong on Atlantis, he had falsified orders that allowed DiNozzo to use the gate to go to P3X-888.”
“The unas home world?” Woolsey asked.

Jack gave the man credit for doing his homework. “Samas set up a program that would scrub the evidence, only Walter is a little better with his paper than Samas expected, so I found it buried in the daily logs.”

Woolsey looked at Shen, but she gazed back impassively. Yep, she wanted him to believe that she knew things he didn’t. Politicians—so predictable.

“DiNozzo picked up a snake,” Jack said, “and he took it to Atlantis. Hell, maybe he picked up more than one. I don’t know because Samas is in the water, and he’s not talking.”

“What about Agent DiNozzo?” Woolsey asked.

“Oh, I’d love to talk to him, but Chekov just came through with the news that DiNozzo has gone after Sheppard. Apparently this ‘Guide’ Wraith wants to talk, and since symbiotes can better communicate with Wraith than humans, DiNozzo went to Chekov, announced that he had a symbiote, and then left the city to meet with Guide.” Guide. Now that was a stupid name. Jack preferred Todd, but he couldn’t allow himself to get in the habit of using human names because there was a limit to how many Daniel lectures on cultural sensitivity he could endure.

“Oh.” Woolsey looked like he’d been hit in the face with a three-day dead fish.

Shen recovered much more quickly. “Is this not good news?”

“Really? And how many symbiotes did DiNozzo turn loose on Atlantis? Look, I know they’ve helped out every once in a while,” Jack said, underplaying the fact that the symbiotes had saved Earth’s asses more than once. “But right now the symbiotes have an enemy. What happens with the Ori gone? What if they decide to take over the universe?”

Woolsey gave Jack a pitying look. “A quarter of them have your memories, General. I doubt they have the patience for the paperwork required to run a universe.”

Jack considered taking offense, but honestly, that was amusing, and for Woolsey, downright snarky. Jack shrugged.

Shen looked away as if they were both beneath her notice. “I hope DiNozzo has luck in his mission, and when he returns, we can make a formal request that he return his symbiote to its homewaters.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to work,” Jack said.

“Oh, why is that, General?” Shen’s voice just annoyed Jack. Everything she said sounded smug.

“Because my guess is that a population has already moved to Atlantis. Like Richard said, a quarter of those symbiotes are little me’s. If I were a snake, I would suspect the NID of double crossing me, even after I sent all my snake brothers and sisters out to try and fight the Ori. I wouldn’t trust Yu or Kali, either. I’d make sure my people were spread out so that if one population center took a hit, I had others that would survive. I’d put a pretty high priority on getting some of my people onto Atlantis where the locals don’t have the bad blood with the goa’uld.”

Jack watched as they took the bait. Woolsey seemed concerned, but if anything Shen looked hopeful. She did like Samas, and she probably hoped this would strength his position, not that he needed any help. Jack figured Samas had royally played all of them. He was one wily, slimy bastard. All that stuff about hating the Tok’ra had worked on Jack. He’d kept all those snakes away from Samas when the Tok’ra were the only ones who would have recognized Samas as a queen. It all
made sense looking back, but Jack hadn’t noticed anything. He’d feel worse, only Daniel had gotten snookered just as badly, and there were very few beings in the universe that could fool Danny. Samas was one.

“Should we send them symbiote poison?” Woolsey asked. That was definitely not where Jack wanted the conversation to go.

“Are you suggesting genocide against an allied race?” Jack asked, his voice cold.

Woolsey blushed. “Of course not. I argued the illegality of such an act when General Landry suggested it. I merely wonder if Dr. Weir should have some sort of defense prepared in case of trouble. Personally, I would rather negotiate with this new onac group.”

Jack thought about it. If Atlantis had a sample of the poison, they could defend against it. “I would send her some, but pack carefully and warn her it’s coming,” Jack said. “And this complicates things with the military. I don’t want Chekov out there to press the button if he gets twitchy around a bunch of snakes.” Jack silently apologized to Alexander, but the colonel was pragmatic enough to understand that Jack needed to act.

“Surely Elizabeth would stop him,” Woolsey said, but then he frowned. Yeah, let him think of all the crazy military leaders who had nearly cost them Atlantis. “Who would you suggest?”

“I want Colonel Sheppard back in charge,” Jack said firmly. “So far he’s the only one who hasn’t had a major disaster on his watch.”

“Surprising given Colonel Sheppard’s divided loyalties,” Shen said, studying Jack.

“Hey, I’ve lived with the man, and I know his loyalties are to Earth, Rodney McKay, and any form of amusement that can give him an adrenalin high, and I’m fairly sure it goes in that order.” Jack silently blessed that Sheppard had a good relationship with the Russian and Chinese soldiers stationed on Atlantis because he knew those two countries would push to get him back, and so would the Australians. They’d sent Sheppard their only active Z Special Unit, a special forces unit specializing in guerrilla tactics. Apparently all special forces were insane and they all loved Sheppard. It crossed all cultural barriers.

Woolsey pointed out the flaw in Jack’s logic. “With Colonel Sheppard MIA, that’s difficult.”

“I’m putting my faith in DiNozzo to bring him back. I’ve seen DiNozzo in the field. If anyone can convince a Wraith to give our people back, DiNozzo can.”

“But if he can’t, this situation is becoming more and more untenable. The IOC would like to have a higher ranking officer on Atlantis,” Woolsey said. From the constipated look on Shen’s face, this was not an area where she agreed with him.

“Then promote Sheppard to full bird colonel,” Jack suggested. “It’s not like he hasn’t put in time on the front, and he’s continued his war college courses from Atlantis.”

“But as you noted, the politics is getting beyond him, even if we discount the fact that Sheppard is not technically human.” Woolsey gave Shen a sharp look. So that was the real problem. And actually, Woosley had a point. Sheppard sucked at politics. The men under him loved him, the powers in charge over him spent a lot of time gritting their teeth.

“The military commander should not be a political position,” Jack said. “Let him lead the military without having to navigate those problems. That’s what Elizabeth is there for.”
And that led to Woolsey and Shen developing matching expressions of prolonged and painful constipation.

“What?” Jack asked. He really didn’t want the answer, but they had some bug up their butt.

After Woolsey and Shen did their eyefucking thing, Shen answered. “Dr. Weir is becoming increasingly strident and her personal relationships have left us wondering where her loyalty might lie.”

Jack had no doubts on that front. Elizabeth’s loyalty was to the city at this point. The IOC and all of Earth could go fuck themselves, and she would smile sweetly and keep on protecting her people. However, that was not an answer for these ears. “She is committed to international law and diplomacy.”

“But is she committed to Earth?” Shen asked.

Jack hesitated. If he answered wrong, the IOC might start distrusting him.

“Exactly,” Shen said triumphantly when Jack paused too long.

Woolsey moved into to smooth the ruffled feathers. “I have no doubt in Dr. Weir’s good intentions, but I believe she has lost track of the realities that must be dealt with. Colonel Sheppard is woefully unable to provide any sort of check over her lapses, and while the council has acted in good faith to curb Dr. Weir, I believe they lack good advice. Teyla and the others do not understand the danger inherent in some of Dr. Weir’s positions.”

“And you would educate them?” Shen demanded.

Richard blushed.

That little bastard had his eye on Atlantis, too. Jack was starting to wonder if anyone planned to actually stay on Earth.

“Look, I don’t care who does the politicking on Atlantis. I just want Sheppard there to lead the fight against the Wraith. And if those Replicators decide to start acting like Replicators, it would be nice to have a strong military leader ready to act.”

“And Chekov could not?” Shen asked.

Jack opened him mouth but then closed it again. He didn’t want to tank Alexander’s career—he just wanted Atlantis back in US military control. “I would be more comfortable with Sheppard in charge,” Jack finally said.

Woolsey narrowed his eyes, and a cold shiver went up Jack’s spine. “General, have you given any thought to retiring?”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “I keep trying, but someone keeps dragging my ass back to work and promoting me.”

Shen studied Woolsey. “What are you thinking?”

“We both know Sheppard is the best military leader, but we need someone to counter Elizabeth’s political moves. If General O’Neill were there, he has the support of the IOC and the personal fortitude to make her see reason,” Woolsey said with a sort of malicious glee in his voice. He wanted to use Jack to make Elizabeth miserable.
What the hell had Jack done to make the IOC love him and for people to assume Elizabeth would hate him? Clearly he’d fallen off the right path somewhere along the line.

“So you would put two military officers on Atlantis?” Shen asked unhappily.

“General O’Neill would be officially retired. He could move there for the fishing, but the fact he’s not part of any command structure would give him the freedom to advise Sheppard and Teyla,” Woolsey explained.

Shen’s face lit up. The two of them ignored Jack and started making their own plans for getting him on the city so he could push the IOC agenda informally—he would be a tool for them to influence the rest of the council, and as a natural ATA gene carrier, he had built in credibility with the locals. The two of them clearly loved the idea.

When the hell had Jack lost control over this conversation? But then again, Jack kinda liked their plan, at least the fishing part of it.
Tony walked through the Stargate, stopping short at the sight of dozens of armed soldiers. For one second he feared that the US military had reacted in the worst way possible, and that assumption was reinforced by General O'Neill's presence in the gate room. But then Tony noted that no one had their weapons raised, and O'Neill was in jeans and Elizabeth and Teyla were both smiling.

But the final proof that all was well had to be Abby's loud scream. She dashed between two soldiers who did nothing to stop her and threw herself on Evan. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his shoulders and basically looked like a goth octopus attacking the major.

Atlantis whispered to Tony, told him that Miko's beautiful thoughts had been clouded by fear and Abby's caring nature had left her curled in pain. Atlantis welcomed Tony home and projected gratitude-gratitude-gratitude about Evan and worry-worry-worry about the fact that John was still missing.

"Tony, Tony! You brought him home!" Tears ran down her face, and Tony smiled at her enthusiasm. Evan looked utterly shocked, but he held her tightly.

"I'm fine. Really. At least I was before you cut off my air." Evan's gaze locked onto someone in the crowd, and Tony looked over to see Miko standing there, wringing her hands together. Evan slowly smiled and reached out his one hand. Miko hesitated for a moment, but then she rushed forward. She pressed her face to his chest and Abby shifted to wrap one arm around Miko, and Evan wrapped an arm around her so she was held on both sides.

Gibbs moved through the crowd, and Tony prepared himself for a good headslap. After all, he'd only brought home half their people. As Gibbs moved closer, Tony thought he might get a hug instead. There was relief etched across Gibb's face. However, the second Gibbs got close, he caught Tony by the waist, dipped him so that Tony was bent over backwards and hanging onto Gibbs's shoulders, and then kissed him so hard that Tony lost his breath and all his blood rushed to his dick.

By the time Gibbs finally pulled Tony upright again, Tony didn't have a single thought in his head. Not one. Atlantis echoed all his joy back at him until Tony was caught in a loop of happiness that made thinking difficult.

"Wow. Remind me to make sure that Woolsey isn't here for any reunions. His head might pop off. Then again..." O'Neill let his voice trail off, but that was enough to break the spell that had caught Tony.

Daniel punched O'Neill in the arm. "Stop being an ass."

"Hey, being an ass is my thing," O'Neill defended himself. Oh yeah, something had definitely changed in the weeks Tony had been on Guide's hive.

"Gentlemen, welcome home," Elizabeth said. However Tony couldn't stop looking at Rodney. The man looked like he might vibrate out of his skin. The second Tony focused on Rodney, the city buried him in a wave of grief and fear. 'Beloved,' the city whispered, and each time, the worry for Rodney grew deeper and sharper.

Tony went over and put his hand on Rodney's shoulder. "He's healthy, and for now he's as safe as he can be."

Rodney's mouth twisted down into a hard frown. "Of course because nothing bad ever happens to
idiots who have to save everyone else before they even think of their own skins." Rodney shoved Tony's hand away, whirled around and stormed off.

Tony exchanged worried looks with Abby, but Rodney really wouldn't want to talk to her right now. She'd gotten her lover back. Rodney didn't process jealousy well.

"I shall talk to him," Radek said. He reached out and patted Tony's arm. "Is very good to have you back home." Then Radek hurried after Rodney. This wasn't the homecoming Tony had wanted, but considering how inflexible Guide could be on certain issues, this had been the best outcome.

Teyla moved in to touch foreheads, first with Tony and then with Evan, who still had a lover glued to either side. Elizabeth followed right behind, hugging Tony and Evan. "Let's get you two to medical and test for Wraith enzymes so we can debrief," Elizabeth said. "I for one want to hear this story."

She probably wanted to hear why Tony didn't have John with him, but that was fine. Tony was disappointed with himself. Jo echoed his frustration.

"Hey, I have a thought," O'Neill said. "I assume Tony still has a snake, and snakes can't get hooked on the enzyme, right?"

"They can't," Gibbs said. He still had his arm around Tony's waist, holding on tightly.

"Then let's send the major for his checkup while DiNozzo debriefs," O'Neill suggested.

Elizabeth looked to Tony, clearly willing to contradict O'Neill if that's what he wanted. Instead Tony nodded. "That's a good idea. I can give you the story and then take Jo down to talk to Samas." Tony could feel Jo's nervousness about that. She was worried that Samas would disapprove of her choices, but Tony sent reassuring thoughts. If someone was going to get cranky, it would be Gibbs.

Lorne spoke up. "I'm not addicted to the enzymes, and I would still really like a chance to shove a nuclear weapon down Todd's throat, but I do have the enzymes in my system."

"What did he do?" Abby asked, all wide eyes. However Tony knew to fear that look. That was Abby one second away from going on a holy crusade.

"Nothing permanent," Evan assured her, "but I suspect Carson is going to want to keep me under observation. Maybe you guys could keep me company down there," Evan said. With a nod toward Elizabeth, Evan headed for the transporter. Miko and Abby still clung to him and two guards broke away to follow him.

"Yes, yes, let us all go back to working," Chekov said, and slowly people started to wander away, although they did keep looking back at Tony. Jo felt a little flutter of pride that people looked to her and admired her bravery. Tony pointed out that a number of them were probably thinking how stupid it had been to walk into a hive without any weapons, but that didn’t bother Jo. She was still just as proud of what she had done with the proposed peace treaty.

"Maybe we should talk in private," Tony suggested. Immediately, the command staff turned wary. Tony wanted to crack a joke and make everyone laugh or even roll their eyes, but it wasn’t the time.

"We can use my office," Elizabeth said. As the command staff headed for the stairs, Gibbs tried to turn toward the transporter, but Tony caught his hand and held it.

"Moral support?" Gibbs asked softly.
Tony nodded. “Please.”

“Always,” Gibbs said. They walked up the stairs together, and Jo blasted out queen-queen-queen scent, which Tony was fairly sure was his girl’s way of saying she was nervous as hell, but there weren’t any symbiotes around to hear her. Even Gibbs was symbioteless. As soon as they were alone, Tony was asking about that.

“Is Colonel Sheppard truly well?” Chekov asked as they headed into the office. Kitsune hovered near the window and Teyla frowned. Tony could feel Atlantis shiver under their collective worry.

“He is. He’s mad as hell, and he’s liking Guide less and less every day, and he didn’t like him much to start with, but he’s okay,” Tony assured them. He sat, and the weight of Rodney’s absence was like a stone. Tony had let his friend down. But on the other hand, Guide was the most stubborn creature in existence, possibly even more obstinate than Gibbs. Gibbs squeezed Tony’s hand and then slid into the chair Rodney usually used.

“Why is Todd keeping him?” O’Neill asked as he came through the door.

“Why are you even here?” Tony shot back. This was the asshole who had exiled Gibbs—who had sent Senior to prison. Yeah, it was only for two years, and Senior totally had committed the crimes they accused him of, but Tony wasn’t predisposed to like the asshole.

O’Neill shrugged. “I say I’m officially retired. The IOC says I’m here schooling Teyla and Kitsune and all the good little Pegasus natives on the dangers of Elizabeth’s isolationist ideals.”

“You… what?” Tony had definitely missed something.

“Nevermind,” Elizabeth said. “Why did this Wraith take John and Evan, and why is he keeping John?”

Tony grimaced as he tried to figure out how to start this story. The Pegasus natives were not going to like the Wraith perspective. “Guide believes he knew John back when John was in the city before.”

“Before?” Teyla asked.

Tony nodded. “Yep. Guide was born in the labs under Atlantis, which we had pretty much figured out from some of the eternal life research the Dagans found. He knew John as a scientist who tried to kill the Wraith because he found the experiments unethical and the Wraith dangerous as hell.”

“Smart man in any lifetime,” Kitsune offered. From the way she looked at O’Neill, she clearly didn’t have the same impression of all Earthers. “So, is this Wraith looking for revenge?”

“No.” Tony tried to quiet Jo and Atlantis so he could get his thoughts in order. “The Ancients refused to admit that their test subjects were sentient creatures. If they tried to talk, the scientists could cut out their vocal cords.”

“My heart bleeds for them,” Kitsune said dryly. And she was the reasonable one—Ronon and Hew were going to be even less interested in the ethical problems created by the Alterians.

“They were children,” Tony said softly. “And the Alterians were taking people from human worlds, putting them in cages with starving Wraith and watching the feeding process to try and figure out how to fix the Wraith inability to produce certain enzymes. Everyone suffered.”

Kitsune grimaced, but she didn’t say anything. However, Daniel moved forward, slipping into the seat between Gibbs and Teyla. “That actually sounds like them, at least the ones who stayed
behind.”

“That is true,” Teyla said. “John himself pointed out that the ones we revere as Ancestors left long before the Wraith were born. The Alterians who performed these experiments were those too flawed or too afraid to follow their natural path to either ascension or death. However, I do not understand why this is relevant.”

“Because Guide feels like he owes John. John was the first one to acknowledge that Guide was sentient, and when John promised to find a way to kill Guide, Guide wanted to die.” Tony paused before adding the truly explosive part. “And when John couldn’t get the council to agree to terminate the experiments, he went in the cells to kill the Wraith himself. That’s when Guide escaped, killing John as he fled.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “What are the odds that Guide is making this up?”

“Not good,” Tony said.

Daniel jumped in. “They would have covered it up, but I have a lot of experience looking for evidence in archives. I bet with the Dagans’ help, I can find some sort of corroborating evidence. That sort of conflict doesn’t happen without someone leaving behind a few notes.”

Teyla and Kitsune both looked troubled, Elizabeth had on her diplomatic face, and O’Neill was staring out the window. This wasn’t going great. Tony looked at Gibbs and he reached over and squeezed Tony’s hand.

“There’s more,” Tony said.

“Great,” O’Neill said. Never before had one word carried so much weariness and sarcasm at the same time.

“John’s run in with the iratus and the retrovirus led to some changes—changes that made it possible for John to survive when Koyla tried feeding him to Guide,” Tony reminded them, not that anyone would have forgotten it. “Guide is positive that using John’s DNA, he can find a way to alter humans so that Wraith can feed without killing them.”

“What? No way, I will space myself first!” Kitsune shouted.

“I too am bothered,” Teyla said, giving Kitsune a quelling look. “However, Tony is not yet finished.”

“Oh, Tony basically is,” Tony said. “Guide still has a village—descendants of the humans who were in the labs with the Wraith because they’d been chosen for food. He wants to be able to live with his people without killing them.”

“He kills them now without worrying about the morals of it,” O’Neill said. “Why would he want to change?”

Tony didn’t know how much power O’Neill still had, but he couldn’t afford any enemies in this room, so he bit down his first, highly sarcastic response. “He tries to limit himself to taking the old and sick, although when hungry, he does ask the village for volunteers. In return his hive keeps other Wraith away.”

“I doubt they give their own in sacrifice,” Teyla said softly.

Tony looked at her. “Jo and I visited the village. They do give their own. However, they know that’s
not the way of most Wraith-associated humans. The younger queens deny that the Wraith came out of Atlantis’s labs. They believe they have a right to kill as opposed to having a faulty biology that traps them in violence. And Wraith worshippers are willing to kill others in return for a promise of eternal life. Guide fears that if he can find a way to make humans and Wraith more compatible, very few of the Wraith will be willing to make the necessary changes.”

“But he’s going to keep John until he finds a way to make this possible,” Elizabeth said, cutting right to the heart of the matter.

“Yes,” Tony said. “John has the right pieces, but Guide has to be very careful when feeding or John’s body doesn’t trigger the recovery mechanism. He needs a more precise understanding of the retrovirus.”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “You took Carson’s notes to him.”

“Yes, but Guide is not an expert in human genetics. However, Samas is. Jo has samples of the affected DNA, and Jo would like to take them down to Samas to see if he can work with the coding.”

“And if Samas can’t provide the key to a superdonor?” Elizabeth asked.

“Guide will never give John back,” Tony said. “He won’t kill John and he feeds on John only as part of his research—always returning the life. Hell, the quarters the three of us shared was stuffed full of pillows and fancy food, so it’s not like Guide is ignoring John’s comfort. But in the end, Guide puts his own needs ahead of John’s. I don’t see a way to force Guide to give John back.”

“It’s the nature of the Wraith to take,” Teyla said softly.

Tony snorted. “I worked on the police force for a long time. It’s the nature of all creatures to take, and I don’t think Alterians, humans or Wraith get a free pass on that one,” Tony said. “Hell, Kolhberg defined post-conventional moral thinking as the ability to reject society’s rules and do what we believe is right, even if it pisses on the rest of society,” Tony pointed out. Teyla frowned, but she didn’t correct him—probably because he was right.

“So, what do you recommend?” Elizabeth asked.

Tony went with the truth. “Right now, Jo and I both want Samas in on this. Guide is ten thousand years old, and Samas is about the only one who might have a clue for how to handle him.” Without Samas, Tony was pretty sure that Guide and his weird affection for John would end badly. Even with Samas, it might get weird if Tony didn’t get Jo back to the hive quickly, but before he could do that, he had to lay some groundwork. The council looked like it might have an open mind, but Tony didn’t lie to himself. The Sadetans were not going to be as easily swayed.
Jo still blasted out queen scent as Tony walked through the physical challenge course. Satedan art relied on repetition, and an artist had created neat lines of stylized warriors all pointed toward the inner chamber where the waters were. Long benches lined the fighting arena, but no Satedans sat there watching a challenge. No one was bragging about some adventure or giving a fight-mate a new tattoo to memorize a victory. The room was painfully quiet although soft voices drifted in from the center chamber.

The soft mutters quieted at Tony approached the waters.

Hew stood when Tony came through the arched door. Hundreds of ribbons swayed in the breeze from the air circulation. Most were vivid jewel tones, mementos from successful missions. A bright teal one front and center served as a reminder of the mission to save John from Kolya. But too many had the dark edges and muted reds and blues and greens of missions that had cost a life. The science Turi had picked up the tradition, so interspersed amongst these were a few pale colored larger ribbons. One commemorated the Turi who had seen the logic behind the liquid crystal matrix while in Miko, another for Radek’s work on the star drive.

Ronon was the first to approach Tony, holding out his hand. Tony gripped Ronon’s forearm and they shared a warrior’s hug before Ronon stepped back. “How do we get Sheppard back?”

Straight to the point. Jo pointed out that if they had Turi in them, she could help push them toward acceptance, and horror washed through Tony. That was the sort of manipulation worthy of a Goa’uld, and if Samas even suspected Jo of that sort of evil, Jo would die in the waters.

Jo’s regret was immediate, and Tony reassured her that Samas would forgive her for a moment of fear and immaturity as long as she didn’t act on it. No, Tony needed to convince these people to walk down another path willingly, but then he was the master of persuasion.

Gibbs walked in behind him, moving to one of the benches near the water without making eye contact with anyone. The Satedans shifted nervously, aware something was happening.

Tony turned to the water and followed Gibbs. “We can’t risk taking Turi out of the waters.”

“Humans wouldn’t dare use their poisons,” one of the Satedan’s on the high benches called out. The space grew silent. Even with a few hundred warriors sitting in the room, Tony couldn’t hear one person breathing.

“They would,” Tony said. He glanced over to see if Gibbs wanted to take this, but he showed no interest in rescuing Tony from this fight.

“The city wouldn’t let them. It likes Samas,” another Satedan called.

“Yes,” Tony agreed, “but the humans from Earth have overcome far greater opponents, and they’re afraid. Before Samas, all the symbiotes were evil—just as evil as Wraith.” Tony silently apologized to any Tok’ra he’d just maligned, although from the stories Tony had heard from SGC folks, a few of the Tok’ra were Wraith-level dismissive and arrogant.

Hew stood up. “Turi aren’t Goa’uld. And even the Goa’uld don’t feast on people.”

“They kinda do,” Tony said. “They take the people they want, if populations get too high, they spread diseases or just attack from space. The people who die… I don’t think they care what weapon
kills them or what the enemy does with their bodies. They’re still dead. And the Goa’uld do something worse. They took generations of people and taught them that Goa’uld are gods. It would be as if the Wraith took all our children away and taught them to believe Wraith are all powerful gods.”

Lita, a woman who had lost her own children in the siege of Sateda spoke up. “I would kill my babies myself before give them to the Wraith.”

Tony’s heart ached for her, but others would die if he couldn’t make this truce work. “And if the Wraith didn’t give you that choice?” he asked without mercy. “The Goa’uld came in ships and took people. They transported the young to new planets and taught them to worship. The Goa’uld tricked the people by choosing to use the names of the gods already worshiped by those people. It was as if a child who had never seen a Wraith was taken and told that the creature in front of him was an Ancestor and he should worship him as his parents worshiped Ancestors. That is what the Goa’uld did to the Earthers. You cannot be angry with them for their fear. In fact, they show great restraint in not trying to kill the symbiotes already.”

Jo could smell the hard desperation now drifting on the air—one of the few emotions people sent out through scent.

“Gibbs?” Hew asked. “Is that about right?”

Gibbs pursed his lips for a second before nodded. “Yep. That’s one reason why Samas hates the Goa’uld so much. They convinced an entire galaxy that Samas is evil. Coming here was the only way to get a new start. Even worse, Samas’s first children—when Ra asked him to leave out the memories of the home waters, Samas did it without understanding. Some of those Goa’uld are Samas’s children, born before he learned enough to fight back.”

Tony grimaced. “Way to cheer up the crowd, boss.”

Gibbs shrugged.

“I would take a mission to hunt down the corrupted brothers and kill them,” Giore offered. He stepped down from one of the higher benches. Tony wondered how the IOC would appreciate Satedan bounty hunters tracking down minor Goa’uld. While the thought was amusing, it would have to wait for another day.

“The day may come,” Tony said, “but for now the Earthers have taken up the battle, and we honor their sacrifices by allowing them to finish it now that the war is nearly won.”

“I thought Earthers feared losing the war,” Kyli said. As Major Teldy’s lover, she probably knew more about Earth politics than most.

Tony planned his words. “If the Earthers lose, they will lose to the Ori. Just as the symbiotes divided into the Goa’uld and the Turi, the Alterans divided into the Ancients and the Ori, and the Ori would call themselves gods and rule the universe. That is why the Ancients believe in not interfering with our choices. They know that they carry the same seeds of corruption that took their brothers and sisters and twisted them into Ori.”

“And the Ancestors split again,” Hew said. “Sheppard told the ones with Captain Helia that they had lost their way.” The wily, scarred old warrior studied Tony. He knew something was being woven under his nose.

Tony nodded. “Just as the Genii empire split into the Genii and the Travelers, the ancient races often
divided and divided again. The Goa’uld split off into Tok’ra and now Turi. The Genii empire has
spawned a dozen children, and no two have the same goals.”

“And travelers had best suspect some more than others,” someone called out, and everyone laughed
more than the joke warranted. They were nervous and looking for any escape from the tension.

“True,” Tony said. “It is in the nature of all things to realize that the path is wrong and to choose
another path. Sometimes those paths are well chosen. Sometimes, like when Ra turned against
Samas, the decisions are disastrous.”

Gibbs interrupted. “That wasn’t disastrous for several thousand years. Revenge took a long time.”

“Yeah, but it came,” Tony pointed out. “I know that Daniel feels that the Ancestors are wrong for
not getting involved and helping us, but after seeing how much damage has been done by those of
their race who choose dangerous paths, I can’t blame them for wanting to stay out of our affairs.”

“And are we in danger of heading down a wrong path now?” Hew asked.

“Maybe,” Tony said. “We have an opportunity, and if fear keeps us from it, we could regret it for
many years.”

“We can face our fears,” Ronon said firmly.

“Even your fears of the Wraith?” Tony asked.

Ronon practically snarled before answering. “I fought them before I carried my first Turi, and if you
say we have to protect the waters from Earth, I will go out and fight Wraith without a symbiote, and I
will still kill them.”

Hew gave Ronon a quick side-eyed glance, but he kept most of his attention on Tony. “Is that what
we’re going to have to do?”

“I hope not,” Tony said. “The Turi and the Satedans are both too few to risk each other. I do bring
word of the two hives that attacked Sateda.”

Voices broke out, the words lost in the angry tones.

“Does it matter which Wraith sent the ships?” Ronon asked.

“Yes,” Tony said firmly. Everything depended on this. “The queens have the same power as Samas.
They define reality for their hives, and while some hives content themselves with hunting for food,
others have turned to the path of the Ori and the Goa’uld and declared themselves gods with the
power over all other living creatures. The Wraith who holds Sheppard is not harming him, but
believes that they once fought on the same side—they attempted to allow Wraith to pass into death
when the Alterans who created the Wraith tortured them out of scientific curiosity.”

Tony didn’t push that any farther—not today. If he began his quest to get the Satedans to see the
Wraith hives as morally distinct, each choosing a path, he had to work with the Satedan anger by
showing them where they could find real evil, and not simply biologically programmed hunger.

“If the Wraith wants to die, I’ll help him,” Ronon said darkly.

“We’ll all help,” Kyli joined in.

Tony held up a hand. “We do not understand what the ascended Ancients want out of this meeting.
and none of us are old enough to even hope to understand this Wraith, so Jo is going to spend time
with Samas, and hopefully Samas will be able to give us better advice on how to deal with Guide.”
And if Tony was really lucky, Samas could solve the genetic code that allowed Wraith to feed
without killing.

“However,” Tony continued quickly before anyone could object, “we now have information on
where the two queens who led the attack on Sateda are. Males are workers and warriors and they
take their names from their roles within the hive. Queens are the memory of a hive, and they take
their names from their personality. Queen Decimate and her hive sister Queen Brightness Hiding
Shadow are the daughters of one of the queens from the war with the Alterans. They have sent
worshipers to Atlantis to try and get information, and Queen Brightness Hiding Shadow has offered
to surrender or suggested truces in the past, only to use that as a way to get close enough to her
enemy to kill them.” Tony could tell them that much without revealing that Guide sent his own
worshipers into the city.

“No one has ever come here stinking of Wraith,” Hew said. “With a symbiote in me, I would know,
and I would kill them.”

“The queens are very similar to Turi, using smell to communicate, so they would send worshipers
who lived on planets, not someone from a ship,” Tony said. “I have the general location for the
queens, but they have large hives.”

“Not large enough to save them,” Ronon said, but there was a caution in the rest of the group.
Attacking a hive would be far more dangerous that carrying out raids. Tony wondered if it would
help Rodney’s mental health to make some really big bombs. Maybe he should even offer Rodney a
Turi to help him with concentration, and as a side effect, the Turi could make sure that Rodney
wasn’t getting physically run down.

“These Wraith believe themselves invulnerable, and they’re wiping out entire cultures in their
arrogance,” Tony said. “These are the two hives that started using Runners for sport.”

“All Wraith used us for sport,” Ronon said.

Tony kicked himself. He hadn’t intended to get into this up so quickly, but he couldn’t turn his back
on the subject now and then bring it up later. “Wraith hated the weak Alterans who experimented on
them and feared death so much that they killed other people. And I’m not surprised because when
Sheppard ascended and came back down, he wasn’t a big fan of them either.” When all else failed,
point out that Sheppard or Samas disliked someone, and that carried weight with Turi.

Kyli spoke up in support of Tony’s argument. “They ripped out the city’s computer when the
Ancestors had left that intelligence in the city to guide the younger generations. It’s not difficult to
believe that they were weak people.”

“Exactly,” Tony said. “But sometimes during battle some of the Alterans acted bravely and faced
death with honor and with a determination to kill as many enemy as possible. The Wraith wouldn’t
feed on those. They turned them loose and then killed them in battle, allowing them to die as equals.
But Queen Decimate has no respect for anyone, and her sister is just as bad and more dangerous
because she has so many technical skills.”

Something convinced Hew that attacking was a good choice because he asked, “How do we
approach a hive?”

“Carefully?” Tony asked.
Several Satedans laughed, and even Hew got a twisted smile on his face. “Fair enough. However, I can’t breathe in space.”

Tony nodded. “We could ask the Earthers for help, we could ask Elizabeth for the use of puddlejumpers, we could ask the Travelers to put their big fancy Ancient-built ships on the line, or Guide knows where there is an old hive ship, barely able to fly, but enough to get us close to another hive. All those are options. However, given that we don’t know how much information the Wraith worshipers have taken back to the sister queens, letting them continue isn’t really an option.”

“And do we trust information from a Wraith?” Hew asked. “Jo is young, and the young sometimes misjudge others. Samas did when young.” Yeah, leave it to Hew to point out the flaws in the plan.

“And that’s why Jo is going to speak with Samas,” Tony said. “Guide likely has more than one reason for wanting the queens dead, and I have no doubt that they are his rivals. However, I believe his scent would betray him if he lied outright. So the sisters are the ones responsible for Sateda, even if Guide is probably hiding a thousand other pieces of information.”

“Maybe we should talk after Jo speaks with Samas,” Kyli said, “and unlike Ronon, I don’t want to go up against a hive without a Turi. I have to think of two lives, and I will not risk my child.” She put her hand over her stomach protectively.

“Seriously?” Tony asked. He didn’t ask about a father because that was between Kyli and Major Teldy. Given how close those two were, it was very likely that someone had gone through Carson and done artificial insemination. Tony certainly didn’t believe cheating was involved.

Ronon slapped Kyli on the arm so hard that she took a step to one side, and then warriors were spilling off the seats, all hurrying to congratulate her. It was a good way to end the meeting, and Tony slipped to the edge of the water to let Jo out. She darted into the water, anxious to find her mother, and Tony leaned into Gibbs.

“You did good,” Gibbs said softly.

Tony smiled, but he could feel Hew’s gaze on him. Maybe Tony had done well, but that didn’t mean he’d done well enough to make a difference.
Two weeks later, three-quarters of SG19 were all laughing as they slid down the tilted wall that marked the end of Turi territory. Tony followed them down, shocked to see O’Neill standing near the corridor that led back to the city. Major Williams stiffened, but he didn’t salute as he stopped in front of the supposedly retired general. In the past few weeks, Tony had gotten the impression O’Neill wasn’t retired as much as he had appointed himself the newest official cock-blocker when the IOC showed up. Given that O’Neill had always been a rule follower, Tony was feeling a little emotional whiplash.

“General,” Tony said in a neutral tone.

“Sir,” Williams added with a nod.

“So, do you have…” O’Neill waved a hand toward Williams’s head.

Williams slowly smiled. “One of yours, sir. I wasn’t getting any thoughts at all earlier, but now, the snake is complaining about the gray in your hair and bitching that he never got to fish without someone calling him up and demanding he save the world.”

O’Neill rolled his eyes like it didn’t matter, but Tony held his breath. SG19 were the first Earthers to talk to their superiors about getting Turi before going into battle. True, the IOC thought they were carrying symbiotes Tony had smuggled in front the Unas homeworld and Tony was officially exiled from Earth while the IOC tried to decide how angry they were, but that was a small price to pay for a more open society.

Turning away, O’Neill headed toward the transporter. SG19 looked to Tony, but he could only shrug before following.

“So…” Tony asked O’Neill. The general might be less of an asshole now, but Tony didn’t trust his motives.

“So, I told the IOC I would talk to you about this crazy mission. This is me talking to you.” O’Neill turned right and headed toward one of the lower piers rather than going to the transporter.

Master Sergeant Brown moved to Tony’s side as if Tony needed a body guard. Jo put out a little blast of annoyance, and the master sergeant backed off. Years ago, this team had saved Sheppard from a Trust plot to snake him, so there was some irony in them fighting to carry snakes of their own. Brown with his parkour background had confounded the Satedans with his ability to scale the walls and leap from one pillar to another without engaging any of the Satedans in hand-to-hand. He’d gotten through to the waters without a bruise, and then led quite a chase before one of the Turi finally got in him. Williams had taken the old fashioned route of plowing through as many of his enemies as he could. He’d taken terrible bruises, but he’d made it through. Captain Cheeks had gone through the Scholar’s path and won a Turi after a fair amount of cursing and some creative hacking.

However, SG19’s fourth member, Dr. Ryder, had died off world before the team had transferred to Atlantis. Their newest geek had chosen to sit out Turi challenge. Tony wondered how that was going to affect team dynamics.

The door opened for O’Neill while he was still ten feet away, and the salty sea air swept through the corridor. O’Neill walked out into the sun, and Tony could see the fishing rod set up against the rail.

“You catching anything?” Tony asked. This was Turi territory, and fish either avoided it or got
eaten. And hopefully the Turi were too smart to bite a hook. Jo pointed out that if they were stupid enough to get caught they deserved to die. That was Tony’s girl—brutally realistic.

“Nope. No fish at all, which is what makes it perfect,” O’Neill said. “Isn’t that right?”

At first Tony thought O’Neill was talking to him, but then Hew stepped out of the shadows.

“Your definition of perfect is… interesting,” Hew said.

“Your definition of reasonable is even more interesting,” O’Neill said as he sat down in the lawn chair he’d dragged down. “You’re a little old to go running off on some crazy scheme to take out a hive ship or two.”

“With a symbiote, I’m really not,” Hew said. He turned to Tony. “However, I am too old to accept easy answers. Gibbs won’t answer my questions, but you have always been open.”

“More open than Gibbs, yes,” Tony said, but that wasn’t saying much. Gibbs kept information close to the vest, with or without Samas. “However, I owe Jo and Samas some privacy.”

“And do the queens hope to make us allies to this Wraith that holds Sheppard?” Hew came right out and asked.

“Huh,” O’Neill said. “I found someone blunter than I am. If I hang around you, maybe people will forget that I’m an ass.” O’Neill made a face like he was considering the possibility.

“Not likely,” Tony said, but then he turned his attention to Hew. “We will never be allies with Guide or any other Wraith. They give their loyalty to their hives and queens without question. The hives we’re going to attack—every single warrior and drone would throw themselves between a weapon and their queen because most don’t think of themselves as individuals. So most Wraith don’t have the self-awareness to make an alliance—any more than a newly spawned Turi would make one.”

Hew nodded, but it was the sort of gesture someone used right before arguing. Sure enough, Hew then said, “But the queens and even this Todd, this Guide who holds Sheppard—they are individuals.”

“Which is why they can’t be trusted,” Tony explained. “They will fight for supremacy. The two queens we’re going to attack are sisters raised together, yet they don’t trust each other enough to ever meet face to face. Two equals never meet among Wraith. Todd has to pretend to still have a queen so he can present himself to potential allies as a subordinate. If the other queens knew he was acting alone, they would kill him. Each hive is territorial.”

O’Neill leaned against the railing. “Tactically, that could be an advantage.”

“If they didn’t have access to nearly limitless drones, it could be,” Tony agreed. “However, even if we turn the hives against each other, whichever hive comes out successful, that queen will simply breed up more. I don’t see that solving anything.”

“No, but it’d be fun to get them to kill each other for a change,” O’Neill said. “A lot of innocent people are getting taken and it’d be nice to strike back.”

Tony cringed. He knew that. On Atlantis, they had the protection of the shield and ships. Most planets in Pegasus didn’t have that advantage, and very few had any ability to defend themselves from Wraith attacks. “Yeah, but wars require supplies, and the Wraith consider human beings supplies,” Tony said. “A hibernating Wraith doesn’t feed at all, one that is living on a peaceful ship will kill very few people, but the more Wraith fight, the more they will consume humans.”
O’Neill leaned back against the rail. “Every time we wander out into the universe, we find out the neighbors suck. This time, literally.”

“No, they steal enzymes produced by the human body,” Tony said, “and they do still eat food. The ones who are too young to remember that the Wraith were born in Alteran labs just don’t want to admit it.”

Hew shook his head and moved to the balcony. “I never thought the day would come that I would learn how a Wraith might see the world. So if we are not to be allies with this Wraith called Todd, why are we considering a plan to take out his enemies?”

Major Williams answered that. “If we have a chance to kill some of these bastards, I’m in favor of taking it, no matter where we got the intel. We just have to make sure we don’t hurt them and let them limp off and grab a few hundred people to snack on as they recover.”

“Yeah, it’s the snacking part of this plan I don’t like,” O’Neill said. “How sure are you that we can take both hives out cleanly?”

Tony didn’t answer immediately. This was a dangerous plan and people would likely die. They would definitely lose the old hive they were piloting close to the two queens’ hives, and the Travelers had taken one look at the plan and stripped everything of value off the Orion before agreeing to take her into battle.

“No plan promises an easy victory,” Hew said. “The danger is less concerning than the politics that might follow the death of the two queens.”

“Politics is never safe,” O’Neill agreed, “but I don’t want to send people to their deaths.”

Hew raised his chin and looked at O’Neill, two old war horses facing off. “My people will take the majority of the risks. There are Satedans who lost so much that the chance to kill a hive is an opportunity worth dying for.”

O’Neill shook his head. “It’s always better to live to fight another day.”

“If you have a home to return to, perhaps,” Hew said. “For some of the Satedans, Atlantis has become home and they are proud to be Turi. Others still live in the past and they live only until they find the right time to die. Dying with one’s hands around a Wraith queen’s neck is a better death than most of them could dream of.”

“Ya see, that right there is why I have a problem with this plan,” O’Neill said. “I don’t like the idea of anyone dying.”

Major Williams spoke up. “Sir, no offense, but you and SG1 hold the record for surviving suicide missions.”

Hew laughed. “I am greatly unsurprised.”

O’Neill glowered at Williams, but the major was not one to back down from a challenge. He just gazed back. “Yeah, yeah,” O’Neill said, “but that was to save the planet.”

“You wanted to save your one planet,” Hew said. “We hope to save all the planets of our galaxy.”

Tony cringed. That was a low blow. Tony spoke up before the insults got too serious. “General O’Neill, the IOC can complain all they want, but as long as we’re not using Earth resources, they don’t have a say in how we choose to carry out our war against the Wraith.”
“Funny thing, I told them that,” O’Neill said. “And I’m not saying you’re wrong, but think about this, DiNozzo. Are you ready to lead men to their deaths? That’s a step you’d better be sure of.”

And that was a lower blow. Tony felt like he’d been gut punched.

Hew put his hand on Tony’s arm. “Do not listen to him when he doesn’t understand the Turi.” Hew then turned his attention to O’Neill. “Your military and even the military of Sateda had officers and taskmasters who ordered fighters into battle. The Turi are different.”

“You want to explain?” O’Neill asked.

“Officers can be wrong—they can betray their world,” Hew said, pain in his voice. Tony knew the story of how some Satedans had not only abandoned their posts but they had also taken advantage of the chaos to loot the planet that they then left to the mercy of the Wraith.

“Desperate times bring out the best or the worst in people,” O’Neill said.

Hew nodded. “Yes, but with the Turi, there are no officers. We will never coordinate into ranks because each individual is a combination of our own strengths and those of our Turi. When I carry a symbiote descended from your Colonel Carter, I can feel the caution and I recognize technology. When I carry a symbiote that is a child of your symbiote, I know how alike we are,” Hew told O’Neill.

The general made a disgusted face. “I tried to stop that damn snake from having any kids.”

“And you failed,” Hew said. “I have carried your memories, so I know you are a good man, even if the symbiotes do not share specific memories. I also know that Tony and Jo do not have the power to order us to act. We act because we want to. Our little brothers come along because they hope for stories,” Hew explained using the Satedan term for the symbiotes.

“So, they never send any specific thoughts or images?” O’Neill asked.

Tony hadn’t realized that O’Neill so worried about what his symbiotes might tell their hosts. “Goa’uld and Tok’ra might move memories from one person to another, but that’s not fair to the hosts,” Tony said. “Hosts have a right to their own pain and their own secrets. Turi may sing about their hosts in the water, but they are visitors in this world. They don’t bring their memories to the host—they join the host to earn new memories.”

O’Neill’s eyebrows went up. “Really? I thought the snake in Major Williams was talking about me.”

Tony looked at Williams. The major shrugged. “That’s all he said. He wanted you to know that, but he hasn’t shared any other details.”

Tony sighed. “Your symbiotes don’t exactly follow the rules,” Tony said wryly. “At one point they found a Wraith queen in hibernation in a downed Wraith ship under the city. Instead of telling Samas and getting us to launch a mission, they all got together and ate her alive. They break the rules and then either ask forgiveness or just run like hell and avoid the Jo and Samas.” It was true, too. Some days Samas regretted having so many Turi with O’Neill’s memories because they were all too willing to break rules.

“Huh. That’s kinda creepy, DiNozzo.” Despite his words, O’Neill didn’t seem bothered.

“Nah, the creepy part is that your symbiotes and the ones from Lord Yu are like this.” Tony held up
his two fingers pressed close together.

“Aw, DiNozzo, that’s just wrong,” O’Neill complained.

Tony shrugged. “Sorry, but you’re both devious bastards who enjoy killing the enemy. If it makes you feel better, the Jackson symbiotes seem really fond of the O’Neill and Yu symbiotes.”

O’Neill held up his hand. “Seriously, don’t tell me anymore. I don’t want to know. I just want to make sure that any classified intel stays classified… except for the part where hundreds of snakes are comparing notes down there.” O’Neill gestured toward the water.

“Tens of thousands,” Tony corrected him.

O’Neill’s shock was palpable. “Excuse me?”

Hew laughed. “You broke him. And that’s another way we are unlike the goa’uld. Every one of those symbiotes must fight to earn a host and if a symbiote’s misbehavior drives potential hosts away, that Turi will not live to repeat the mistake. Turi are rather final in their reaction to wrongdoing.”

“Yeah, not really their finest quality, but on the other side, it does keep the level of stupidity low.” Tony hated that symbiotes treated death so casually, but he also understood that they had not only a different culture but a different biology and a different brain. In some ways, Samas understood Guide and his quest better than he understood the humans he had lived with for so long. However, as long as Tony or Jo were around, that mercenary streak would be strictly limited to the water.

When Tony saw the way O’Neill was looking at him, he realized what O’Neill’s real concern was. Tony leaned against the rail and looked out at the water. “General, out there you may find a thousand symbiotes who have your memories, or mine for that matter. The ones who are too young to have had their own adventures will be all identical. That gives all onac a certain sense that life isn’t unique or particularly important.”

Tony turned to look at O’Neill, and he had the general’s full attention. “Oh?” O’Neill might pretend a casual nonchalance, but his gaze was sharp.

“But the symbiotes also realize that some things can make a Turi unique and priceless. Miko had a Turi in her the moment she first visualized the liquid structure of memory matrices. Her wonder and the beauty of what she realized that day are endlessly echoed through the waters by a Turi who is unique. Other Turi repeat pieces of the song, but only Miko’s Turi sings the entire song the same way every time. He is the source of the wonder, and no Turi would kill him or allow him to die.”

“Miko? Dr. Miko Kusanagi?” O’Neill sounded stunned.

“That’s not who you thought would be a symbiote favorite, huh?”

O’Neill rubbed his neck. “Nope, not really.”

“She is. And the symbiotes realize that all humans have the ability to be blindingly unique. That gives the symbiotes a reason to protect every host life because when a symbiote dies, nothing dies with him. When a person dies, all the unique stories that person carries or would carry vanish. It scares them. They don’t understand how the Goa’uld or Tok’ra could have forgotten the value of stories the way they have. So if you think that I’m going throw away the lives of the warriors on this mission, you’re one hundred percent wrong.”

“You sure about that?” O’Neill looked at both Tony and Hew before he turned his attention to the members of SG19.
Major Williams answered. “Sir, I served under you, under General Hammond before you and General Landry after you. Before that, I served any number of superior officers, so I know what a bad officer looks like, and I’ve had commanders who didn’t care about my life either because they were assholes or because they didn’t like black men. I know what dishonorable looks like, and that’s not a problem here—not with Sheppard or Chekov or DiNozzo.”

O’Neill sighed. “I’m glad to hear it, but this plan… someone is going to die.”

“Probably,” Hew said. “That was true when the Wraith came to my planet, and I didn’t run from the fight then.”

O’Neill threw up his hands. “Well, I can officially tell the IOC I argued against this, although probably not for the reasons that they care about.”

Tony had already known the IOC wouldn’t be worried about the potential loss of life. “Are they worried about losing the Ancient battle ship or worried about Turi independence?”

“Both,” O’Neill admitted. “They know they’re losing control here, but they can’t figure out how to get it back.”

“That’s easy,” Tony said with a smile. “They can’t.”

O’Neill shook his head. “Be careful DiNozzo. It’s like I said, desperate times can bring out the worst in people.”

“Or the best,” Tony reminded him. “Don’t forget it can bring out the best.”
“Is the plan clear?” Tony asked.

Hew watched the gathered warriors. They were all focused on their own parts of the plan, which were admittedly dangerous. Two teams of twelve people each would slip onto the two enemy hives using modified jumpers borrowed from the Travelers. The would then sabotage the enemy hives from within.

As a young man, Hew never would have dreamed of taking the fight to the Wraith, but then Atlantis had changed everything. And now one of those who had brought hope to his galaxy was putting himself and his queen at risk.

“If you don’t have time to get to the third ship, you will be trapped on this hive,” Hew told Tony. Tony grinned, but that did nothing but make Hew worry less. The man did not protect his own position as well as he worried about others.

“You’d be surprised at how fast I can run.”

Hew crossed his arms. “No matter how fast you run, it is a long distance from the bridge of his hive to the Lantean ship. What if one of the Wraith ships hits this hive?” Hew asked. The ship they had found on the abandoned world was old—too old to survive even one round of weapons fire. And the Travelers were keeping their battleship far from the hives until such time as the sabotage disabled the enemy. Everyone had an escape plan except for Tony and Jo.

“It’s safer here than it is sneaking around a Wraith hive,” Tony countered.

“No, it’s not,” Hew said.

Ronon jumped in on Hew’s side. “He’s right. We can smell the Wraith and avoid them, especially since they don’t have good security inside the ships. You’re going to be a sitting target.”

"I'll make it to the ship," Tony said firmly, but Hew suspected that youth and arrogance had more to do with his tone than logic. As much as Hew respected and honored Tony as the Turi leader, he mourned the loss of Samas and his thousands of years of experience.

"I can stay with him," Ronon said.

Jo blasted the air with her fury at being underestimated, but when Tony spoke, he was far calmer. "Ronon, you can't fly the puddlejumper. If I don't make it, you would be trapped on the dying hive."

"I can make sure you get off."

Tony narrowed his eyes, and Hew was tempted to slap Ronon on the back of the head as Gibbs sometimes did with Tony. No leader allowed subordinates to question their ability. Well, Sheppard did, but he was an Ancestor and very few rules applied to him.

"The last time we sparred, who won?" Tony asked darkly. "I can get myself off this ship."

Now that Ronon had aggravated Jo beyond Tony's ability to be calm, Hew doubted that he would be able to gain any concessions for Tony's safety, but he had to try. "I would be more comfortable doing my part if I knew what plans you had to secure your own safety."
Tony smiled brightly. "Like I said, I can run really fast. When the queens get too aggravated with my conversation, I'll set up an automated message system to send out the last few threats while I run for the third puddlejumper. Now, does everyone know their attack points and escape routes?" Tony asked.

He did not need to ask because all the Turi born to Samas and Jo knew the basic layout of Wraith ships and Wraith language. When the Satedans carried their younger brothers, they were far more formidable. However, the question allowed everyone to agree and then start dividing into teams as they followed their pilots to the two jumpers. Hew stayed behind, watching as Ronon tried to talk Tony into allowing him to stay before he followed his team.

When the old and deteriorating bridge had only Tony and Hew, Hew spoke. "You are the one in greatest danger."

Tony didn't offer any false smiles or platitudes. Instead he looked at the Wraith words projected onto a curtain of mist. That is where Tony would stand as he engaged the queens in conversation so that the teams could get onto the hives. However now that they were alone, Tony was honest enough to say, "I know."

"Remember that we cannot afford to lose you," Hew said.

Tony turned to face him. "Did Gibbs tell you to give me this speech?"

"He did not have to. I am old enough to see the truth. You are the one who keeps us from losing ourselves to revenge."

Tony shook his head. "That is overstating my importance."

Hew sighed. "No, it is not. Samas, Gibbs, Ronon, me--we have all lost so much that our anger sometimes overrides every other emotion. Many of the Satedans who live as Turi feel guilty for surviving when so many others didn't. Nearly every Satedan volunteered for this mission because there is a part of us that is ready to die. You bring passion and curiosity to balance the darker emotions, so do not risk too much."

Tony stared at Hew, but he had no more words to share so he turned and followed his own team. Nothing would convince Tony to move to a more secure position, in part because he was an ethical officer.

The Turi in the puddlejumper were all silent and somber, and Hew felt the same grim determination as he had when preparing for the Wraith invasion, but this time they had more hope. This time Hew believed that the great culling ships would die, and if he died at the same time, that was a fair price.

It took many long minutes before the puddlejumper hovered outside the designated hive, waiting until the hive sent out her darts before moving into the docking stations and parking. That meant that Tony was impersonating a Wraith queen, spinning a web of lies and threats and promises to keep the two hives busy.

"Ten minutes to get to the mark and back, we don't wait for stragglers," the pilot said. He was one of the Earthers, although he did carry a Turi. However, Hew felt a need to speak to his people at the beginning of such a strike.

"These are the hives that took our wives, our husbands, our children. These are the Wraith who laid waste to our world. If you cannot do your damage and make it back to the ship in time, then complete your work, and when the Ancestor's ship has gone, move farther into the hive and take
your revenge. Every system we destroy makes it easier for the Travelers to give us what many of us have lived for—a day when the Wraith who attacked us would pay the price. Nine minutes and fifty seconds, remaining, so move out," Hew ordered. The back of the puddlejumper was already open, but the warriors sat for a moment, the silence and the presence of the dead giving the moment a power that Hew's words could not.

Then they all rushed out of the ship, eager to do their damage and either return or strike at the heart of the Wraith.

The Earther looked at Hew. "Sir, we'd rather have everyone back."

"But if they can't get back, they will know how to best exact revenge," Hew countered. If he could get back, he would. However, this mission was his reason for living. Tony could save others by bringing in children and encouraging the warriors to hang their banners trumpeting their successes; however, every success reminded Hew of what he lost. In every child's face, he saw echoes of his own lost children. He would follow his fate and return or not, but death was a welcome battle-mate at this point in his life.

His little brother stirred, but Hew settled him with the thought that the more damage they could do to the hive, the greater the chance Tony and Jo had to escape. The queen's life was more important than theirs. The little brother agreed with that.

A good minute after the time began, Hew jumped from the ship and headed for his designated area.

Over his years with Atlantis, Hew had raided other ships. Every time he'd walked a hive, he had wondered if it had been the one to attack Sateda. Every Wraith he killed, he wondered if that Wraith had stolen the lives of his family. He had watched his world fall. Two of his sons died in front of him, fighting to take down the darts that culled their world. After he had been impaled on an exposed bar of metal, one of his men had run to the hospital to get Hew's daughter. Hew had told him not to bother, but he'd been a young soldier—too young to actually fight. He should have been carrying weapons for more experienced fighters, but the street was full of the broken bodies of the unit. No experienced fighters remained. A dart had screamed overhead, and Hew had expected the Wraith to take him. Instead he watched that young boy and Hew's own daughter running toward him right before a curtain of light swept over them and stole the last of his family.

Hours had turned into days, and Wraith soldiers had looked down at Hew as he lay impaled, delusional with fever and ranting. None of them had killed him because death would have been a mercy.

No matter how many years passed, Hew felt like he lived in that day forever. He watched good officers and good soldiers die. He saw his world destroyed while looters sneaked through the gate like vermin. Since coming to Atlantis, he had struggled to trust other soldiers. Ronon was his closest ally, another Satedan who had fought to the bitter end, but how could he trust Lorne or Teldy or any of the others who had not yet faced destruction and stood firm. Sheppard had done that. When confronted with a Wraith invasion, he had stood firm and offered to die with his city, and he might have if not for his scholar.

But the others… they did not know themselves because they had never faced losing their world.

Well, Samas had. Samas had seen his world destroyed and his reputation in ruins, and he rose from the destruction to take revenge on his enemies. Tony had risked his freedom and his place in the city to protect Jo.
The stench of a Wraith drone warned Hew of the enemy's approach. He faded back into a little used corridor and waited to see if he would be discovered. Instead a pair of drones walked past the side passage without a glance. Hew's Turi sent a flare of pride at fooling the enemy.

Hew scented the air to see if any more Wraith were near before he moved to his designated spot. Cutting into the skin, he attached explosive charges to the weapons conduit. As soon as this queen ordered her hive to fire, the charges would go off. If all of them completed their covert tasks, the two hives would die with all the Wraith trapped within.

The time piece read eight minutes before Hew started back toward the puddlejumper. He was unlikely to make it in time, but if luck and the fates were in his favor, he might. And if he did not, then he could die killing Wraith.

He moved steadily toward the docking bays, and only once did he have to move to a side corridor in order to avoid a patrol. However, even that was enough to slow him. Hew's timepiece read ten minutes and forty seconds when he arrived. He was unsurprised to find only air where he had hoped to feel a cloaked ship.

Freed from the need to escape, Hew pulled his weapon and walked toward the central corridor of the deck. Already Wraith turned to face him. Hew raised his weapon. "Sateda rises again. You did not and will not destroy us!" Hew fired at the nearest Wraith. The monster staggered back but did not fall. Just as Hew braced himself for the barrage of return fire, the whole ship shuddered. Only then did the sound of explosions fill the air—many explosions.

The force of the blasts knocked everyone to the ground, and several Wraith tumbled over the edge of the walkways, falling into the deep well where the darts were stored. Hew lay on his stomach firing at the Wraith who struggled to get up as vibrations made the hive shudder.

"Hew!" a voice called. Hew rolled over to see Roce’s head floating in space. When Roce held out an arm, Hew realized that the puddlejumper was hovering above the walk.

"You’re supposed to be gone," Hew said, but he stood. Before he could leap for the ship, another explosion knocked him to the floor.

"We were waiting for you," Roce yelled over the sound of dozens of explosions. “Jump!”

The hive shivered under Hew’s feet and he was painfully aware of the long fall if he missed. However, he had trusted fate to save or doom him up to this point, and he put his faith in the gods and Ancestors again. Running toward Roce, he threw himself through the air, and hands caught him.

“We have him. Go! Go! Go!” Someone cried. Warriors pulled Hew into the puddle jumper and the little ship accelerated so fast that even in the ship, Hew could feel the pressure. However, he was safe again. Clearly the universe had another task for him, and as long as fate saved him, Hew would honor that, even if it meant that once more he had to postpone the reunion with his lost family.

“Are Tony and Jo safe?” he asked Roce.

Roce could only shrug, but the pilot answered. “DiNozzo’s in the third puddle jumper and the Travelers have opened fire on the hives. One is already fully disabled, and this hive is bleeding atmosphere.”

The pilot dodged around a big chunk of falling ship structure.

“You were supposed to leave at ten minutes,” Hew said.
Roce gestured toward the spot on the bench next to him. “Die fighting another day. Today we wanted to bring everyone home.”

Hew sat, and Roce slapped him on the shoulder.

“There’s heavy fire, so brace yourself,” the pilot warned. “We’re going to be dodging and weaving our way to the Traveler ship.”

Outside the window, weapons fire streaked past the window. Hew could see pieces of the hive ship break away as the monsters who tried to kill Sateda died in the cold of space.
Rodney was watching idiots playing some weird game that was a cross between hockey and fencing when Ronon dropped into the seat next to him. Despite Rodney's scowl, Ronon propped his feet up on the seat in front of him and settled in.

If Tony had tried that, Rodney would have given him a swift kick in the ass and told him to quit hovering and go rescue John before Rodney's homicidal tendencies came out to play. However, kicking Ronon didn't seem like a smart idea, so Rodney tried ignoring him.

With his gaze firmly on the players, Rodney tried to block out Ronon's whoop when someone made a goal and his sideline coaching, which was mostly yelling at people to hit harder.

When Ronon's antics finally caused him to bump Rodney's knee, Rodney finally demanded, "What are you doing?"

Ronon gave him a wolfish grin. "Watching." Ronon gestured toward the players. Two of Rodney's scientists were down on the floor, and Rodney was tempted to call them idiots for risking their hands in a ridiculous sport. However, it was close enough to hockey that he didn't want to call it stupid and if he made anyone feel bad about their club or sport, Abby tended to get far too emotional. Rodney could not handle an upset Abby, and he was not ashamed to admit it. He'd seen Gibbs go into full retreat faced with that horror.

"Watch from somewhere else," Rodney said. He waited for a moment, but Ronon just kept on with the idiot grinning, so Rodney stood.

"I'll just follow you," Ronon warned. Oh, his tone was pleasant enough, but Rodney had seen Ronon warn enough villagers to recognize the tone.

"But... what... Why are you bothering me?"

Ronon shrugged. "I miss annoying you."

Rodney stood with his mouth open, not even sure what to say in the face of that sort of stupidity.

"There you two are." Teyla walked in from the side, only sparing the players the briefest glance before she came over. She slipped her own arm under Rodney's and then sat, forcing him to sit next to her.

"But... what are you doing?" Rodney hissed as he started worrying about entities that could take over people's minds and personality altering drugs in the ventilation system.

"I am enjoying a game with my friends and teammates," Teyla said in that unflappable calm of hers. Rodney wouldn't admit it to a soul, but he was caught between being envious of her emotional control and absolutely hating her for it. John was gone. He was a prisoner, and the Wraith could be eating him right now, and she looked calm.

"Since when are we teammates?" Rodney snapped.

That unsettled her calm some, and Rodney felt smug and triumphant for the two seconds it took him to realize he'd upset Teyla. That was like upsetting Abby, only slower and quieter and far more deadly. Abby only threatened evisceration. Teyla could actually do it.
Teyla and Ronon exchanged concerned looks before Teyla answered. "I regret that we have not spent as much time together as we should have. When John returns, we need to make sure we go through the gate at least once a week. Our other duties can accommodate that."

"Yes, the Wraith will just give John back and then everything will go back to the way it was like nothing happened. Oh my God. Are all of you stupid? Why would Todd give John back?" The second the words were out, Rodney felt all the unnamed and unformed fears in his gut collect into one giant mass. They weren't going to get John back.

"We'll get him back." Ronon growled the words.

Teyla reached across Rodney to put a hand on Ronon's knee. "Yes, we will," she said firmly. "However, some patience is required. We have listened to Samas when he suggested far more dangerous plans, so we shall see if this plan bears fruit before taking further action."

"Bears fruit." Rodney snorted. The Wraith didn't want fruit; they wanted victims. They wanted humans they could drain and drain and drain and still take more from. If they wanted fruit, Rodney would send them Parrish.

"The Wraith aren't going to just stop culling worlds," Ronon said. Rodney appreciated that someone saw the flaws in this latest plan. As far as Rodney could see, Tony and Jo had just volunteers to be two more hostages, which was still better than leaving John along, but still far from acceptable in Rodney's opinion—not that anyone was listening to his opinions lately. Colonel Chekov had taken to running away, and Elizabeth was always busy.

"Most will not," Teyla agreed after a moment. "May not humans love one animal, spoiling it beyond belief while leaving others to die in an unexpected storm without a thought for their survival? I have watched Marines become upset at having a pet llama put in with the general herd for fear they may someday encounter that creature in a stew, yet they don't think twice about eating the pet's dam or sire or siblings."

"Thank you for that disturbing endorsement of vegetarianism," Rodney said. He knew the pet llama she was talking about. It had a tumor on its leg and the Athosians had brought it to the city to have it removed. Everyone had fallen in love with the animal's antics and its sheer joy at being able to run and jump again. Rodney might have petted it a few times himself.

"I am speaking of the nature of the Wraith," Teyla said. "Dr. Jackson found the evidence of their birth in this very city, so they contain many of humanity's worst flaws."

"And a lot more flaws than that," Ronon said.

"Really? Do not those from Earth have genocides and atrocities? Did not your own people, Ronon Dex, kill every member of the hetnoian faith because it offended the senses of the Satedans?"

Ronon didn't answer. Then again, the Satedans tended to avoid that topic. Rodney didn't blame them.

"Exactly," Teyla said. "The bug is not cruel. It kills without hesitation and once it attacks, it will not stop. However, it does not seek out prey or act maliciously. Those traits the Wraith inherited from us. I have hope that they may have also inherited an ability to see the species on which it preys and find some mercy or compassion."

Ronon's scowl made it clear that he had no interest in a Wraith's mercy. Then again, most of the Satedans felt that way. Rodney was a little shocked they were backing Samas and Jo and this insane
plan to give the Wraith a choice about taking another path or something. It was all philosophical crap as far as Rodney was concerned.

Rodney pointed out, "This still doesn't bring John home."

Teyla rested her hand on Rodney's knee. "It may. We know that Guide is fond of John, and we know that John will never stop asking to come home to you... to us. Guide may decide that to love John he must return him."

Rodney rubbed his eye and tried to focus on the game. He didn't want to talk about this. "Rogaline is going to break his neck if he doesn't start blocking," Rodney said.

Ronon grunted, and Rodney feared Teyla was going to start another deep conversation about the meaning of life, but just then Rogaline got a score. Ronon jumped to his feet whooping and started slapping Rodney on the shoulder. As much as Rodney didn't feel like cheering, talking would be worse, so he joined in.

By the time everyone sat back down and the game started again, Teyla had settled down to watch and ask questions about strategy. It allowed Rodney to sit in the middle while Ronon and Teyla debated attack strategies on the ice. That was easier than talking about John.

The players were on their first break between what might be quarters when Ford limped in, his cane thumping against the floor as he walked over to them.

"Aiden," Teyla greeted him.

Rodney wasn’t about to play along and pretend this was all some accident. “Did she tell you to come?” Rodney asked Ford, poking his thumb in Teyla’s direction.

Ford sat carefully, shifting several times before leaning his forearms on his cane. The enzyme overdose and withdrawal had aged his joints until he moved like Jackson Gibbs. “Nope. Ronon said you were moping.”

Rodney spluttered. “That I was…but… Ronon?! And I do not mope.” There were too many illogical parts of that sentence for him to respond.

After giving Rodney an incredulous look, Ronon just snorted.

Teyla changed the subject while the players on the floor took to the ice again. “Aiden, have you given more thought to taking a Turi?”

“Thought about it,” Ford said, “but I can’t see sharing all these thoughts with some kid.” Ford tapped the side of his head.

Rodney spluttered. “None of us is perfect,” Teyla said. “Life is not designed for perfect beings, so we all carry flaws equal to our strengths.”

“Except you,” Aiden was quick to say.
“Do not believe that,” Teyla said. “I have many flaws and I carry many regrets. But time has taught me to love family and put faith in them.” She leaned her shoulder into Rodney’s side. “And it has taught me that we can choose family. My life has improved greatly since learning that lesson.”

“You’re not being very subtle,” Rodney complained, “and it’s hard to follow the game when you three are yapping away.” Rodney glared at them and waited for them to leave. Instead all three settled back into the seats and started watching the players. As much as Rodney didn't want to admit it, sitting among his teammates was better than being alone.
Meanwhile, on the Hive

John rolled onto his side with a groan. When he spotted Todd sitting at his bedside, he considered rolling back, but he ached too much to put the effort in. Instead, he just glared at him. Being old sucked. "I hate you," John said, his voice rasping with age.

"I would happily return your life to you." Todd said that as if giving John life was no big deal. The very fact that John longed for the rush of adrenaline and craved the euphoria that came with the Wraith gift of life was enough to warn John that the enzyme was addictive. Not that he'd needed the show and tell. Tony had told him the story of the Sateteans who earned Turi only to find out afterward that the warriors had been infected with Wraith enzyme. While John hadn't asked for any details, and Tony had focused on the importance of knowing that Wraith enzymes acted as a form of brainwashing, John got the impression that a lot of pain and some Turi death had been involved in the tale.

John wondered what would happen now that the symbiotes had gone public. Either Tony would be more open with him, or John was about to lose over half of his fighting forces.

Todd sat on the edge of John's bed, and John struggled to scoot back away from him. "We are not enemies in this, John Sheppard."

"That's funny because this is feeling a little antagonistic."

"We both desire a solution for the genetic flaw my people have inherited from the Alterans."

"Yeah, but my solution involved all of you bastards dying," John pointed out. He had fantasies of it.

"I respect that genocide would be your first option, but I am trying to present an acceptable second option."

John glared at Todd. Genocide was killing a race. John considered the extirpation of the Wraith nothing more than the end of one really shitty experiment gone wrong. Slowly Todd smiled, and John got the impression that Todd had chosen that word very deliberately. Asshole.

"Were you really opposed to my plan, you would not have returned to this form to assist me."

"I didn't. I want to protect my people, and killing all of you would accomplish that nicely."

Todd reached out and ran his fingers along John's cheek. The worst part was the way John craved the connection. He didn't know whether it was the isolation or the enzymes, but in the weeks since Lorne and Tony had left, John had fallen down a rabbit hole.

Todd's open affection should horrify him, yet he found himself enjoying the little touches, the sense of cool skin against his, the whispers of comfort that stained his skin after Todd's touch.

"Despite that," Todd said, "you are the one bitten by the iratus. You are infected with retrovirus. You carry the enemy's DNA. For thousands of years, our experiments into strengthening humans have failed, and then you appear and your blood carries the three answers we had not yet discovered. And the first person you made your ally in this galaxy is a woman who carries Wraith DNA from a previous experiment from one of our attempts. You cannot believe this is cooincidence."

"Sure I can," John said weakly, but even he could recognize when the universe was conspiring against him. Apparently he'd set the Wraith free from the labs--although it had been an accident and he'd died trying to stop them. And now he was going to give them a perfect feeding victim who
would never die. He was a Wraith messiah. John wondered if some insane self-hate had led him to do this to himself or if one of the other Alterans had waited until John arrived in Atlantis and then started setting him up. Tony had found evidence of an ascended stalker.

John didn't know what was weirder—the idea of a stalker from another realm or the fact that DiNozzo had found evidence implicating him.

Todd chuckled. "You lie to both of us, brother."

"Yeah, yeah. So how about you let me wallow in self-pity and leave me alone."

"We have received a signal that the young queen wishes to return."

"Tony and Jo?" John struggled to sit up. When Todd leaned closer to gently help him, John forced down the touch hunger that made him yearn to lean into Todd's arms. John didn't know how much Todd could smell, whether he could sense John's desire, but he was kind enough to help settle John so he was leaning against the wall and then he withdrew a few inches. John's skin itched with need, but he had a lot of practice with self-denial.

"Either they have received the approval and assistance of their mother, or Queen Samas moves against us."

"I'm voting for option two," John said.

"No, you are not because to hope for war is to hope for more human deaths. You have always defended life, John Sheppard."

John groaned. He'd argue that Todd didn't know anything about him, but he'd pretty much given up on that since it never worked. Tony had said that Todd absolutely believed he knew John from his days as an Alteran, and there was very little John could do to convince him otherwise.

"I need you strong for this, brother. My brethren on this ship grow discomforted by these experiments, and I cannot put you at risk."

John struggled to sit up further. "Discomforted?" That sounded a little mutinous.

Todd chuckled. "I had thought my own ship immune to the arrogance of the younger queens. I have not allowed another queen to take the throne for that reason. However, even without that influence, my lieutenants grow uneasy at the idea of humans as shipmates rather than as worshippers."

"Awwww. Are you having mutiny issues?" John asked. A second later, Todd slammed his hand down over John's scarred chest. Heat slammed into John so hard that his back arched and he screamed as his nerves burned, but then the pain slid into an insidious pleasure that curled through John's body, creeping into every cell of his body. John panted as the pain faded but the pleasure intensified until every millimeter of skin was hot and overly sensitive. Todd's cool hand ghosted across John's arm, bringing a wave of cool relief. For too long, John was lost in the battering waves of hedonistic joy.

And then the spell broke. Todd pulled his hand away, and John lay on the bed, damp with sweat, hard, aching and craving more. He wanted to beg, to throw himself at Todd and plead for just a little more, but instead John clamped his jaw shut and suffered through the tremors in silence.

As always, Todd watched. At least he'd moved off the bed, but John wasn't sure if politeness or a fear of counterattack motivated the retreat. As soon as John could regain control of his breathing, he sat up, his body returned to the height of youth. "The withdrawal is going to be hell, isn't it?" he
asked, even though he dreaded knowing the truth.

"You will suffer little because you do not accept the gift often enough to create dependence," Todd said. John was pretty sure that was wrong, but arguing wouldn't get him anywhere. Instead he started stretching his body, testing the limits of his new health. Sometimes Todd took him back to mid twenties, sometimes John was in his mid thirties. This time Todd had returned a lot of life.

"So, how bad is this potential mutiny of yours?"

"Wraith do not mutiny."

"Okay," John said slowly. "Then how bad is this situation where your guys think you're doing the wrong thing?"

Todd inclined his head toward John. "Quite serious. They will act to protect me, but in protection of my position, they may choose to destroy you."

John grabbed Todd's arm. "I'm not okay with that. You need to give me a weapon."

Todd gave a mirthless chuckle. "That would not convince my hive-mates of my sanity."

"No, but it would give me a fighting chance if one of them decided to eat me."

"Do you not trust me to defend you?"

"No!" John practically shrieked the word. No way in hell was he trusting a Wraith, especially not one who believed that he had already killed John in a previous life.

"Once the young queen is on board, we will better understand what path to take," Todd said calmly. "I believe her mother will have spoken for peace."

"You don't know Samas very well. He's actually pretty into the vengeance gig," John pointed out.

"And yet, in most realities I glimpse, the queens' existence on Atlantis increases the likelihood of peace."

It took a second for John's overworked and enzyme addicted brain to process that statement. "In most what?"

Todd sat on one of the pillow covered benches near the open pool where Jo had once gone swimming. "The iratus bug does not perceive a singular reality but instead recognizes the threads of the other webs which intersect with this one. You and I have met in many universes, we have traveled many worlds together."

"Have I shot you in any of them?"

Todd considered John for a time before answering. "In one reality you were scarred and weary. You killed me the moment we were out of the Genii prison."

John stared at Todd. Either he was lying for some reason that made sense only to a Wraith or Wraith were stranger than John had understood. The worst part was that John didn’t trust his own judgment anymore because he wanted to believe Todd. If Tony and Jo didn’t do something to get John out of this hive, John feared he was in danger of losing himself altogether. Then John thought about Rodney, and he knew he couldn’t give up, not when he had to get home.
Guide could smell the caution and the success that wound around the young queen Willful as she stepped off the Alteran shuttle. Or rather the male host stepped off, carrying the queen he served. Guide would have believed humans incapable of offering such devotion to a queen but he had met two humans who had given their lives to serve Turi queens. And Guide’s intelligence network suggested that many humans fought for the right to carry the queen’s children.

As a young warrior, Guide would not have believed anyone who had told him humans would act in such a way, but then Queen Samas the Wise Who Tempered Others for the Fight had great influence over her chosen people. Guide understood that from the first time he had met her and realized she was a true queen.

Beside Guide, Second Who Speaks His Mind slowly shut down all smell, leaving a trade of unease in the air as the young queen moved to right in front of Todd. Clearly Todd’s hive mate was not as sure of the queen’s ability or Guide’s plan.

“Welcome, young queen,” Guide greeted Queen Willful and her host Tony. The queen looked at Guide and Second Who Speaks His Mind before turning her gaze to Queen’s Sheppard.

“Are you okay?” she asked. Guide ached for the queens of his youth who would have looked for him with that same concern, but he was grateful his brother had the support of two strong queens. Melik had been very isolated after he had spoken in favor of showing the Wraith mercy. As a social creature who sought the security of a hive, Guide mourned that his relationship with Melik had caused the man such isolation.

“Peachy,” Queen’s Sheppard said. “If I were any better, I’d move a cot into Heightmeyer’s office.”

The facial expression appeared to show regret or some other negative emotion, yet Guide could smell the relief from the young queen. Perhaps her host expressed a separate reaction.

“Do you wish to rest or begin work?” Guide asked her.

The young queen reached up and took a data crystal from a satchel she carried. Second Who Speaks His Mind smelled of aggression the moment Queen Willful reached into the bag, but the queen’s only reaction was a blast of contempt and a sense that any creature who showed such fear was genetically inferior. What the queen lacked in experience she more than made up for with her attitude. Second Who Speaks His Mind immediately took a step back, bowing slightly. Guide understood that his second feared greatly that this new plan would put the hive in danger, and he even respected that his second considered extirpating the danger by destroying either Queen’s Sheppard or Guide himself; however, even one set against this plan could not resist the need to obey a queen.

No doubt that is why the experiments that had created Teyla and the other little sisters had caused such horror within the hives. One could not feed from one who had any relation to a queen. The very idea was an abomination that could not be justified under any circumstances.

“Samas believes he has identified the genetic sequence from the retrovirus that strengthens humans. Unfortunately, the exact coding means that only some humans can be altered enough to survive a significant feeding.”

Disappointment enveloped Guide, but he allowed very little of that emotion to leak out. This hive
was too agitated to survive a significant setback, so he would have to convince the others this was a minor inconvenience. “We shall review the information,” Guide said, and he filled his scent with welcome and encouragement to rest.

The young queen looked at him for a moment and then nodded, adding her acceptance to her scent. Guide hesitated. If he turned and walked away, he would leave Second Who Speaks His Mind closest to both Queen Willful and Sheppard. Perhaps the young queen was more insightful than Guide expected because she moved in front of Guide and started walking toward the quarters she had claimed as her own. Sheppard moved to her side, leaving Guide to guard their rear and Second Who Speaks His Mind to follow. It was a much more comfortable arrangement.

Second Who Speaks His Mind maintained a neutral scent during the walk to the queen’s quarters.

“Is everything okay on Atlantis?” Sheppard asked.

“We took out the two hives that attacked Sateda. The Satedans threw a pretty big party and Carson got buried under hangovers,” the young queen told him. “By the way, Chekov can seriously hold his liquor, and Daniel Jackson is a close second, weirdly enough. Not everyone else can.”

“Good to know life goes on,” Sheppard said.

The young queen stopped and looked at Sheppard. He glanced back toward Guide before saying, “Yeah, nevermind.”

Guide needed no help understanding his emotion. Every favorite secretly hoped that his queen would suffer his loss, even as he hoped his queen would succeed, even in his absence. It was the nature of being Favorite.

“It doesn’t go on as much as we’re dealing by thinking of the time you’re going to come back,” the queen said. Her smell was a rich riot of scents, but she used her own language, not any chemical markers Guide recognized, so he was not sure what she hoped to tell Sheppard. It was a tragedy that Sheppard could not understand his queen to know that he inspired such strong emotions, but that was the nature of humans. “Rodney is climbing walls.”

“Is he okay?”

The young queen hesitated, her scent shifting. “He isn’t hurt, but I’m not sure okay is the right term. The team is looking after him, but if we don’t get you back, he’s going to start planning revenge.” The queen turned around to look at Guide, her scent carrying strong tones of warning. “If Rodney decides to blow you up, it’s not going to end well for you.”

Guide inclined his head. “I do not underestimate the scholar,” he said. He had seen too many realities where that one had caused havoc. Even Second Who Speaks His Mind had seen realities where the scholar had done more damage than could be repaired and Guide’s hive had died. Guide had been very grateful when Queen’s Sheppard sent that one back and kept his own second while Guide worked on his experiments.

“Yeah, don’t,” the queen advised before she started walking toward their quarters again. The hive shivered as it entered hyperspace, and the queen reached out and touched the skin. “Where are we moving to?” the queen asked.

Guide’s respect for the young queen also meant he was wary of her, especially since she had just spoken with her mother. Samas was far more likely to move against Guide than the young one. At least Samas was more like to pose a credible threat if she moved. “The destination does not matter.
We have facilities to work on the genetic problem without leaving the ship.” Guide inclined his head toward Queen Willful and for a moment he struggled against his need to appease an angry queen.

“Tony?” Sheppard asked.

The queen reached the human’s quarters and ran her hand over the door to open it. “Doesn’t matter. The genetic work Samas did is accurate, so all we need is a willing human with the right base genetic code.” The queen turned on Guide. “And the human better be an actual volunteer, not someone who is allowing you to experiment in return for saving a family member or some promise of eternal life. This code won’t extend human life more than a decade or so.”

“I assure you that I know humans who wish for this alliance to work,” Guide said.

Queen’s Sheppard spoke up as he passed the young queen on his way into the room. “Patros and his Wraith worshippers would volunteer.”

“They do not worship us,” Guide corrected Sheppard. “Their forefathers escaped the labs with us. They sheltered us in return for revenge against the Alterans who killed so many of our people—both our peoples.”

“A deal with the devil,” Sheppard said before he went to the window and sat. Guide had nothing more to say, so he turned and started back toward the command deck, confident that the young queen would want time with her favorite.

Second Who Speaks His Mind stood to one side, waiting until Guide passed before he followed. “She hopes to trick us,” he said.

Guide could not discount that possibility. All queens were designed to plot and seek power. Samas was no different, and neither was her daughter. Guide wondered what the males of their species were like and if they had other similarities to the Wraith. “Most likely,” he agreed. “But if we gain the knowledge we need and the young queen tricks us out of Sheppard’s presence, then the cost is negligible.”

“And if the hive dies?” Second Who Speaks His Mind asked. “I have seen it. I have seen our hive empty of life, falling into the gravity of a planet, the skin on fire as the ship screamed.”

Guide would not deny reality. “I have seen as much, but never in a reality where the queens were on the ship.”

“You assume humans value the life of a queen, but are they not the ones who killed the great queens? Did they not destroy Queen Decimate and Queen Brightness Hiding Shadow?”

Guide mourned the loss of two old queens, but they were reckless and had killed the one whose work was used to create Teyla and the little sisters. They would have rallied the others to destroy Guide’s work before he could present it to any hive that was more likely to listen. “The queens were a greater threat to us than the humans or the young queen and her people.”

“You would respect an alien queen before two great Wraith queens?” Second Who Speaks His Mind demanded.

“I will lead this hive to a future where we do not rely on the weakness of humans in order to gain strength,” Guide said firmly. He saturated the air with the scent of his dominance, his authority. The scent forced Second Who Speaks His Mind to step back away from such raw power. The scent would impress Guide’s words on the psyche of Second Who Speaks His Mind, but Guide had no illusion that he could hold the hive forever without showing results. Guide walked away, leaving his
Second to recover on his own.

Guide’s brothers were afraid. They wanted to protect the hive, and more and more considered him a damaged part that might need to be removed. Guide had spent too long in the Genii prison and his brothers had worked too long without his guidance. Now he had to work to maintain his control, and the harder he pushed his hive to act in unfamiliar ways, the more Guide worried about his control. At least with the young queen on board, she could guard her Favorite while Guide worked to cement his place with his brothers. He had to show them that he was the central point around which this hive organized or he risked losing everything.

Never before had he so missed his old queens. Queen Suffering Screams of Revenge had never led their people, but she had given her daughter, Guide’s first queen, great strength. Queen Whispers Turn to Fire would have understood the need to act before the situation grew worse. She would have understood the danger of relying on humans for strength and sought to fix the flaw that the Alterans had inflicted on the Wraith.

She had sought to fix it. She had taken Alterans during their great flight, but the scholars had the wrong answers and had provided nothing more than a meal. Guide wished for her strength now, but she had died long ago, and the queens now were cold and unforgiving souls, unable to walk new paths. Guide feared the prophesy was right and that Melik’s return would be the end of the Wraith if they did not change. After all, Melik had been the end of the Alterans. Even the ones who had returned to try and claim Atlantis had been banished by Sheppard.

Guide did not want that for his people. They had suffered too much and were too great as a people to vanish because they refused to adapt.

Heading to the bridge, Guide decided to spend significant time with the ship, reminding her of her true master so that she would surround the others with his scent, remind them that this hive belonged to Guide. He had led them since the death of their last queen, and without him, they would have all died in grief. Their lives were his, his to protect or his to spend on this great quest to save his species.
Tony gasped awake as pain ripped through his neck. For a time he was so lost in the pain that he didn’t register the movement around him. The world wobbled and spun so much that Tony was nearly overcome with nausea. He was so disoriented that it took him too long to realize that he was walking. At least his body was walking. Tony didn’t seem to be in charge of it.

“Sheppard,” Tony’s hand said as it reached for him, shaking him awake. “We’ve got to move.”

John sat up, his body coiled, and that’s when information slammed into Tony. The ship. The scents had shifted to something alien. The odor was hostile to Guide. Something was wrong.

“What’s up?” John asked as he pulled on his shoes. He was moving fast.

“We have to get off the ship. Now.”

“We… what? I’m pretty sure that’s been the goal for a few weeks or months.” John protested, but he followed Tony’s body to the door. And that’s whey Tony found himself in control of his mouth, even though his body kept working on auto pilot, or if Tony was guessing right, Jo pilot.

Jo headed through the door, ushering John ahead of her.

"John, I think we're meeting Jo for the first time here," Tony said.

John stopped and looked at him. "Trouble?"

"Huge trouble," Tony agreed, "but I don't think she knows exactly what is going on, so she's acting on instinct."

"You're bleeding."

“I am?” Tony would have done a quick pat down to find his own injury, only Jo was not letting go of the manual controls. Tony understood her fear and her confusion. She was taking control because she didn’t know what advice to give him and because he wasn’t particularly arguing to get control back. Tony wouldn’t have survived years with Gibbs if he didn’t know how to take a backseat when someone’s gut was churning. However, this gave Tony a new appreciation for just how evil the goa’uld were. To feel this trapped and helpless all the time, to know it would never end and that your body would hijack you to kill and destroy—that was a fate Tony couldn’t imagine.

He felt a wave of protectiveness and fierce anger from Jo. Tony would never have to feel that. And at the end of that feeling, he got a sense of tentative query. Tony sent his girl a mental reassurance. If she wanted to drive for now, that was fine.

With that settled in a mere second, Jo grabbed John’s arm. He had been reaching for Tony’s neck, but she hurried him down the corridor. Tony got an image of Jo leaping out of the water. When she was in the water, Tony always slept near the open water, and Tony saw his sleeping body from Jo’s perspective and she was too desperate to wake Tony up, so she dove into the base of his neck, parting his flesh. Tony also got a strong flash of sorry-sorry-sorry.

"Jo has no idea what's going on, but she's freaking out," Tony told John. “She didn't wait to wake me up before joining so she went in through the neck.”

“And are you back in charge now?”
“Yeah, not so much. I can tell that she's panicked, but she doesn't actually know why. She just knows the scent of the ship changed, and she feels like the hip is now hostile to her and Guide.”

“Wait. So his second pulled off the coup?” John sounded gleeful about that.

“The what?”

John flattened himself against the side of the corridor as Jo moved forward to smell for Wraith.

“Yeah, Todd has been having some mutiny problems,” John said.

Tony touched Jo's mind, and he could feel her calm down as the pieces finally fit into a pattern she could make sense of. “Someone on the ship got the ship to change the chemical passwords. Guide can't control the ship anymore, and I think that means he can't control the drones.”

“And that means he can't hold the ship.” Again, John sounded entirely too happy about that, but then he grimaced. “And that means his second can send drones after us without Guide being able to stop them.”

Cleary John had held out a little. “So, are we the target or is Guide?”

“Hell if I know. If this were just about killing Todd, I might cheer the mutineers on, but I get the feeling that the other Wraith aren't big fans of this plan or us.”

“They're probably upset about Jo,” Tony said as he realized the difficult position Guide had put them in. The ship had no queen, and Todd had asked them to take in a queen from another species. That explained the sense of brittleness he'd gotten from the hive.” Jo had one or two unkind thoughts about a hive that would turn on a queen, and a few choice tortures she’d inflict on them for turning on her. Yep, she was Samas’ daughter.

"So where are we going?" John asked.

"Yeah, I don't know," Tony confessed. "Jo is still driving, and she's functioning off smell and instinct."

"That's not comforting."

"Oh please, you fly by the seat of your pants more often than you plan ahead. Besides, you're not the one who had your body hijacked.” When Tony said that, John gave him a concerned look. “Okay, not hijacked as much as borrowed with retroactive permission, but I think we’re going to have to trust her and go along for now.

John rubbed his chest where Guide had attacked a Wraith monitoring device. "So tell Jo we need to get some weapons."

Since Tony didn't have to bother keeping track of where he was going, he focused on trying to understand Jo's thoughts. She imagined swimming through dark waters, and speed was more important than trying to sink teeth into an enemy. "I get the feeling that Jo is more focused on escaping than finding guns.”

“You know, I'd like to do both.”

“If I were in charge of the body, I would keep that in mind.” Tony said, but it wasn’t an issue he was going to argue about, not in the field with enemy on the move.

“And does Jo plan to give control back?”
“Yep, as soon as she can get us out of here.” Tony stopped and closed his eyes… or had his eyes closed for him, and then they were enveloped in the scent of a hive drove. Jo forced the smell out every pore of Tony’s body, carried by a heavy sweat. Jo grabbed John’s arm and pulled him close. “Stay still and quiet,” Tony said. John froze as the sounds of marching feet approached. A foursome of drones marched around the corner and kept going straight past Tony and John. As soon as they had turned the next corner, Tony’s body started running.

“They were sent to get Jo,” Tony said, “and I get the feeling the two humans in the room were about to get shoved into the larder.”

“Why didn’t they grab us?” John was leaking stress scents now, and the Wraith monitor on his chest amplified the odor.

“Drones don’t see that well. They count on smell and telepathy. Jo can only control smell, so staying still was the best chance of using smell to fool them.”

“Can regular Turi do that smell thing?” John asked.

“Sorry, that’s a queen’s special power. This way.” Tony took off down a long, empty corridor. When they got to the end, Tony gestured toward a narrow slit opening near the ceiling. Why he did that, he didn’t know.

“Tell Jo I love her,” John said.

“Um, okay. Why?”

John grinned at him. “Because that is a ventilation slit used to move atmosphere in and out of the dart bays. Rodney made me memorize the blueprints to one of these things, and right now I am blessing Rodney’s paranoid streak because I know how to get us out of here. Give me a boost.” John moved to a spot just under the opening, and Tony locked his fingers together to give John a place to step.

Once John was up, he held his hand down to help Tony up, but there was no way Jo was going to take help. She leapt up and easily caught the edge of the opening and slid in. “Lead away,” Tony said before Jo could get it in her head to take lead again. Tony had no trouble taking a back seat, but John had just spent a few months as a prisoner. He needed to take back some control. Jo grumbled, but she didn’t protest.

John led them down a hot and narrow slit too small to even stand and eventually into a dark side passage of the dart bay. He dropped down into the bay and Tony followed. Before either could even discuss hotwiring a dart, a tall figure stepped out of the shadows.

“There you are. I had feared you would not understand my message, and my control over this hive is waning,” Todd said.

John clenched his fists. “Oh, I don’t know. It seems like you don’t have any control at all.” He had on his best cocky, devil-may-care grin, and that worried Tony.

Guide inclined his head toward John. “I do not.”

“I guess your brothers are a little less loyal than you thought, huh?” John definitely had the old attitude going.

Guide lifted his chin. “They are loyal to hive. When they understand the benefits to the hive, they will understand that I still serve this hive.”
“I doubt that,” John said. “So are we going to take the hive back?”

“I could not without killing many of my brethren.”

“I’m okay with that,” John was quick to say.

“I suspect you would find advantage in killing any Wraith”

John made a show of considering his answer for half a second. “Well, yeah.”

“I am not. We shall retreat until such time as I can show them the fruit of this plan.” Guide turned and headed toward the closest dart.

“So, we’re just going to what… pick up another hive and hang out with them?” John asked. Guide’s scent shifted toward nervousness and mourning—a sadness for the loss of his brothers and a determination to regain their trust. But Tony could also smell caution and concern. He didn’t like whatever step he was planning.

“Your sarcasm is showing,” Tony told John even though he kept most of his attention on Guide.

“Being held hostage does that,” John admitted.

Guide stopped next to a dart. “We must leave. Now.”

As if to emphasize the point, a small group of Wraith appeared on a distant walkway. Guide stepped back into the shadows. Tony realized that Jo had withdrawn, leaving Tony in control of the body again. “I have to vote with Guide. This hive is getting more hostile.”

“Yes. It is time for me to return to my birthplace,” Guide said, and his scent was a riot of emotions that Jo couldn’t hope to decipher. As Guide climbed into the dart, John turned and gave Tony and incredulous look. Tony could only shrug. If Guide was to be believed, they were heading back to Atlantis.
Daniel had three different computer screens set up and a pile of reference books open in front of him. He peered at the screens as he tried to pin down the dialect of Ancient this writer had been using. The Dagan had been more than happy to find him the social sciences section of the library, but their translations were so steeped in religious belief that Daniel distrusted their interpretations, especially when this sociologist used such unusual antimeria in his descriptions of the rift between the ascendant Alterans and those who wished to focus on living. And then there were the cults who secretly tried to emulate the Ori—that had been like a slap in the face. Every time Daniel saw that name, he felt the pain of knowing he had wiped out a sentient species. Earth and the Ori could not both survive, but Daniel hated that he had become the sort of man who would... who could... use a weapon of mass destruction.

“Hey.”

Daniel looked up to see Jack leaning against the door. “Um… hey.”

Jack wandered in and started peering at Daniel’s books. “Don’t you ever get tired of being boring?”

Daniel leaned back and gave Jack a dirty look. “Actually, I would call this a fascinating look into the mindset of a complex society that—”

Jack cut him off. “Yadda, yadda, yadda.”

Daniel glared, but he didn’t say anything since this was sounding like one of Jack’s build-ups. He did like his dramatic announcements, and Daniel suspected that Jack was projecting when he talked about boredom. Sure, he said he wanted to be out of the rat race, but for a retired general, he sure tended to stick his nose in everyone’s business.

“So… hear any good rumors lately?” Jack asked.

“Spit it out.”

“What?” Jack put on an innocent expression.

“You know what. Now either tell me or I’m going to start ignoring you and go back to reading.”

“You always ignore me.”

“Only when you’re being unreasonable.”

Jack snorted.

Their insults were so well worn and comfortable that Daniel couldn’t even pretend to take offense anymore. Jack’s next line should be about how unreasonable Daniel was, followed up with a list of his unreasonable offenses going back to the first mission through the gate.

Jack derailed that expectation with his next words. “They found Sheppard.”

“What?” Daniel sat up so fast he knocked over two of his books. “Crap.” Daniel scrambled to pick them up before the pages could get more damaged.

“Oh, it gets better,” Jack said in that amused tone that Daniel associated with someone getting dead. “He’s bringing his Wraith buddy back with him. Apparently there was a coup, and he and DiNozzo
are honoring Todd’s request to complete his work from here.”

“Guide,” Daniel said, absent-mindedly correcting Jack’s use of a culturally inappropriate name. “Do we think Guide could have brainwashed them?”

“Sheppard? Sure, he could.” Jack sat on the edge of Daniel’s desk. “DiNozzo is more of a wild card because Gibbs is insisting that Turi can’t get addicted to the enzyme. So that means that either he’s an idiot for bringing a Wraith here or he came to some sort of agreement with Guide.”

“You think Tony and Jo have turned on Earth?” Daniel asked. That did not match what he knew of either of them. From everything Daniel had heard from the first expedition members, Samas was secretive, dangerous and arrogant. Some of the stories—like the one where Samas went off to form an alliance with the Genii without official sanction and without even telling Elizabeth or John—sounded more like Tok’ra than Daniel would ever admit.

However, Tony and Jo had a softer version of that arrogance. Yeah, they sometimes made some pretty radical moves, but Daniel couldn’t see them turning against Earth. Of course if Daniel said any of that, Jack would pull out lecture 317—the one about how Daniel had absolutely no people skills and couldn’t recognize an assassination attempt if he had a knife at his throat. If Daniel were half as clueless as Jack told people, he would have been dead a dozen times over, instead of the half dozen times he’d died.

“So, what’s the plan?” Daniel asked. He knew Jack too well to believe that Jack would sit back while a potential invasion started. Retired or not, Jack O’Neill did not avoid trouble.

“This whole council is charmed by DiNozzo. Hell, I get it. I let him talk his way into a classified mission, so it’s not like I’m immune.” Jack’s expression twisted with disgust. “However, we are not as close to him, so you and I are going to hang around and see if we can’t poke any traps before Elizabeth walks Atlantis into them. Bring your girlfriend along. She’s good at annoying people into revealing themselves.” As usual, when Jack brought up Vala, there was a hint of something unpleasant in his voice.

Vala insisted it was jealousy, but Daniel thought it was more likely that Jack just disapproved. The problem was that Jack always thought Daniel belonged with someone like Sha’rē, but he’d only known Sha’rē’s public persona. He didn’t know how aggressive and sharp she was in private. He didn’t know how she would manipulate situations, and it was all to help her people. She didn’t have an unkind bone in her body, but Sha’rē and Vala were not all that different. Daniel enjoyed being around large personalities. Vala insisted Daniel was hiding in the shadow, but Daniel preferred to think of it as tactical camouflage.

Yeah, he’d definitely been hanging out with Jack too long.

“So, we just haunt the command meetings?” Daniel asked.

Jack shrugged. “They won’t ask us to leave.”

“They might kick you out if you act like an ass.”

“Hey, acting like an ass is my superpower. I’ll annoy, you assess. And Vala can do both.” Jack gave him a cheeky grin.

Daniel pushed his chair back. “I’m not actually in the saving the world game anymore, Jack. I don’t carry a gun. I don’t want to be responsible for more deaths.”

For a second, Jack stared at him blankly before rubbing his hand over his face. “Shit, Danny.”
“Don’t ‘Danny’ me. I did what I had to, but I’m getting too damn old to play hero.”

“You’re getting old?” Jack snorted. Since retiring, he’d gained weight and his hair had gone from steel silver to white. “This isn’t exactly in my job description, but are you really okay with sitting here while others either broker a peace or open the door for an alien invasion?”

“No,” Daniel sighed. In the end, he always got dragged in because he didn’t believe in turning his back on the truth, even one he disliked. “Fine. I’ll call Vala. When are they expected in?”

Jack looked at his watch. “In about twenty minutes. Get the lead out.” And with one more grin, Jack was gone. Damn. Daniel didn’t even have time to fortify his nerves. He was going to meet a Wraith. Yeah, that had not been on his list to-do list. He touched his radio.

“Vala?”

She answered immediately. “Please tell me someone is trying to take over the universe. I’m bored.”

“I thought you were training with Teyla.” Daniel started for the transporter.

“Yes, but she has all these rules about not cheating when you fight, and it’s all so dreary.”

“Vala, where are you right now?” Daniel asked.

“Playing with the Satedans, Darling. They are truly interesting.”

Daniel groaned. The last thing he needed was for her to offend some warrior. “Good news, then. The world might be ending and Tony is bringing home a Wraith.”

That shocked her into silence, at least for a minute. “Well, that’s unexpected. Is this the Wraith everyone is talking about?”

“Yes. Apparently he wants to use Atlantis as his new base of operations as he works on his super donor problem.”

“And no doubt you are headed for the Gate room right now because you have to be in the middle,” Vala said. “One day I will break you of this habit of saving everyone.”

“Not today, though.”

“So, will you throw a fit and order me to leave if I happen to show up?”

“Don’t bring any visible weaponry,” Daniel said. If he didn’t specify, she was sure to show up with a rocket launcher. While that might be a reasonable weapon given the Wraith’s anatomy, it wouldn’t really set the tone of the meeting.

“What? Do you think I’d be rude to a guest?” she asked in an offended voice.

“Yes,” Daniel said. He might love Vala and her deeply hidden moral center surrounded by ethical ambiguities, but he never trusted her manners. She huffed at him and signed off. Daniel considered going and finding Rodney, but he hesitated. Rather than run headlong into some emotional drama he couldn’t handle, Daniel headed for Abby’s lab. If Tony was going off the rails or Rodney was about to use a nuclear bomb, he trusted her to keep tabs. When he reached her lab, she was already closing up her files and locking things away.

“Hey Abby.”
She whirled around, pigtails flying. “Did you hear? Tony found him! They’re coming home.” Without warning, Abby threw herself at him and hugged him so hard Daniel couldn’t breathe for a second.

“Yeah, I heard. I hear he’s bringing company.”

Abby leaned close. “I know,” she said in a conspiratorial whisper. “Todd is coming. That’s like mondo hinky.”


“He’s probably already up there. I’m heading that way now before everyone finds out and the whole Gate room is mobbed.”

“With a Wraith coming through, a mob is possible,” Daniel said as Abby grabbed his arm before they headed back toward the transporter. “How are people taking the news?”

Abby wrinkled her nose. “The good news is that not many people know.”

“And the bad news?” Daniel asked. She leaned closer. “The city is pissed,” she said, drawing out the last word to emphasize it. “She keeps sending Evan image of the Wraith killing some guy, and she keeps insisting that guy is the colonel. Evan is completely freaked out.”

“And Miko?”

“Down with the Satedans,” Abby said. As a group, those warriors were worshipfully fond of Miko, so Daniel figured she would be safe down there.

“So, are the Satedans going to stage a coup and kill Guide?”

“It’s a possibility, but I think the bossman has them waiting and watching. If Todd steps out of line, though, there’s going to be a huge queue of people who all want to kill him.”

“I think there’s a queue now,” Daniel pointed out.

“That’s true. But someone got you, so that’s a good sign.”

Daniel stopped. “What?”

Abby rolled her eyes at him. “You’re like the posterboy for neutral good, always wanting to do the right thing because it’s right, not because it helps you or because the rules say you should. I mean, General O’Neill is sorta awesome, and the stories about his days on SG1 make him sound completely amazing, but he’s more lawful good, and sometimes lawful good gets backed into corners because of their laws, and that’s okay because Colonel Sheppard is sort of the same with all the military rules and all, only he does have his neutral side. But anyway, if General O’Neill went to get you, it means he wants someone around who will stop him from going all rules-man. Did he invite Vala?” Abby blinked at him with this look of girlish innocence. The problem was that wasn’t an innocent thing to say at all. It was entirely too accurate, even if Daniel only had a fuzzy understanding of the term “neutral good.”

“Um, yes?”

Abby squealed. “Then I’m feeling way better because you know she’s a chaotic neutral. I love that
she can do that because our society pushes women away from embracing their inner chaos.”

Daniel was fairly sure Abby embraced chaos at every turn, so he wasn’t convinced of that. “Vala wasn’t raised on Earth.”

“Yeah, but the Goa’uld are way worse. The whole thing with the queens made them extra touchy and repressive with women, but Vala kicks ass and looks out for herself, and that’s awesome, and if General O’Neill invited her, that means he really wants someone to keep him from being all rule and law man. And that’s good because Elizabeth can be way too much of a lawful good, and sometimes even a lawful neutral, which is not a bad thing. But you need a little chaos.”

Daniel figured between the Travelers, Vala, and Abby, the city had as much chaos as it could handle, but he didn’t say that. They came out of the transporter to find the Gate room was already crowded. Marines and a few Satedans, including Hew, guarded the ring, Elizabeth, Kitsune, Teyla, Rodney, and Chekov all stood on the balcony. Jack stood next to Evan on the stairs, and they were both frowning deeply. Daniel wondered if the city was still throwing her fit. Technicians and medical personal all stood at the ready. This was feeling like a tinder box waiting for a spark. Behind him, the transporter opened.

“You all didn’t start without me, did you?” Vala asked loudly. “So, where’s this big bad Wraith I get to meet?”

Daniel groaned. Oh yeah, this was going to end badly.
Tony could feel the panic-pressure in his brain the second he stepped through the Gate. Chekov had sent two teams to escort them back to the city, and the sheer number of weapons the Marines had found on Guide was a little horrifying. Despite all those warnings that this would be a difficult truce at best, Tony hadn’t expected the sheer volume of mental hostility he found radiating through the city walls.

Aleigheta was shrieking, her voice calling for “Hers” over and over. It was enough to make Tony’s head pound, and when he spotted Evan and O’Neill on the stairs, he knew the other ATA carriers were getting some of this as well.

“Hey guys, we’re home,” Tony said with a joking tone. Alighteta’s fury nearly drove him to his knees.

“What is that?” Rodney asked. “Does anyone else hear that? Someone find it and shut it off. Off. We don’t need that distraction.” Rodney went over to one of the consoles and shoved the technician out of the way, but Aleigheta was already quieting her shriek. Softer calls of “Beloved” matched her more anguished cries for “Hers” and her calls for “Bright One” and “Seer Tony” and “Protector Jethro” and “Protector Evan”.

“Ah, I return to the city of my birth,” Guide said. He turned in a circle, looking at the windows as if he didn’t have dozens of weapons pointed at him. “I had not thought to return here.”

O’Neill spoke first. “Yeah. We’re surprised to have you back, too.”

Before he could say anything else, Elizabeth started down the stairs. “I want to first thank you for your willingness to make an alliance with Colonel Sheppard against Kolya,” Elizabeth said. As she passed O’Neill she gave him a sharp look that clearly told him to stay out of her way.

Guide’s scent shifted to amusement. Then he slowly turned his attention to her side, where Rodney stood. Rodney stared at John with a look of such love and desperation that anyone who hadn’t known about their affair before definitely knew about it now. Guide slowly smiled. John glanced over, did a double take and then promptly cocked back his fist and punched Guide right in the face.

Guide rocked back, his hand going up to his face, but other than that, he appeared largely unaffected. John, however, started cursing and shaking out his hand. “Damn, damn, damn, damn.”

Rodney flew down the steps, past several people who tried to catch him, only to grab John’s wrist. “You giant idiot. How many times do you have to do stupid, self-destructive shit before you learn that you are not indestructible?”

“I never thought I was,” John said, but Rodney didn’t seem to be listening.

“You punch a Wraith? I thought you had two active brain cells that could fire in tandem, but I’m starting to rethink that. You just have one giant self-destructive streak that takes over any time someone suggests you have as much right to life or happiness as the next guy. I mean, a gunman threatens you, and you surrender yourself. A Wraith captures you, and you agree to his dumb ass plan as long as you can get other people free so they can live a life of self-recriminations and self-hate, but that doesn’t enter your calculations at all, does it?” Right as Carson’s medics stepped forward, Rodney punched John in the arm hard enough to make him lose his balance.

The city sighed “Beloved” with a real sense of joy… and a little egging Rodney on.
Rodney tried to punch John’s arm again, but John danced to the side. “Hey, alright. I get it. Next time I’ll let you stay captured with me.”

Rodney’s eyes narrowed. For one second, Tony thought he was going to go thermonuclear right there, but then John reached for him. “I missed you too,” he said, and the emotional dam broke. Rodney grabbed John and pulled him into a tight hug.

“Lad, I have to check him,” Carson said as he tried to pull John away, but Rodney was not having any of it. Carson was left to ineffectually tug at them. “Let’s get him to the infirmary.”

“Queen’s Sheppard has his own favorite,” Guide said. And with that, everyone turned their attention to him even as Carson ushered John and Rodney out of the gate room.

“You might want to keep the comments to yourself. Folks around here don’t actually like you,” Tony pointed out.

“You do not like me. Sheppard does not like me. That does not preclude a recognition of where mutual benefit lies,” Guide said.

“Those are some fancy words,” O’Neill said, but with a gesture, Elizabeth sent Chekov over to the general while she came down the rest of the steps.

Elizabeth spoke calmly, but Tony could feel her aggravation. “As much as we appreciate your actions in regards to Kolya, your use of our people for your medical experiments constitutes a war crime and makes you a criminal.”

Guide was amused. He turned to Tony and asked, “What is the relationship of this human female to Queen Samas?”

Tony could smell the need to understand. Guide didn’t know whether Elizabeth was a queen or a warrior. In many ways she was both, but not in the way a Wraith might perceive. Tony had a weird moment of disassociation where he felt not Jo’s thoughts, but Samas’s. Samas had seen Elizabeth as weak because she did not take what she wanted. She wanted her to demand more. It took a long time for Samas to realize that humans were slower to move, and her ways actually worked. For a second, Tony thought this was a genetic memory passed on from mother to daughter, but then he smelled it.

Slowly he turned until he could see Gibbs. Gibbs had Samas. Slowly Tony walked toward him, and inside, Jo hummed. In the waters, she would tease Samas, flick a tail for Samas to bite at. She often hoped her mother would use her DNA, even though she could have children of her own. But since Samas had stopped hosting, she had never again felt the warmth of curling up with her mother. As Tony got close, Gibbs opened his arms, and Tony went into his embrace. All four of them were there, the smells and thoughts passing between them. Love, loss, fears, hopes. Tony was standing in Gibbs arms one moment and twined tightly with Samas in the dark Atlantean waters the next, and he couldn’t tell which reality, which thoughts, were his.

Gibbs stroked Tony’s hair. “Shhh,” he whispered, and it was only then that Tony realized he was crying. Or Jo was crying. One of them was definitely too emotional, although right now Tony couldn’t tell which.

“How?” Immediately, Tony could hear Samas song as clear as if they were swimming together. Bare flesh carried the chemicals, and Tony could see Gibbs going to Rodney and Zelenka, asking for help to rebuild some of the medical bays. Carson had helped. They’d brought Samas to the bay in a tank and let him slowly push into Gibbs, healing the small tears as they appeared in Gibbs’ brain. It was a temporary fix and Samas could only stay in for a few hours before the cramped space was too much
and he had to swim, but it gave him some time back.

“We compromised too much of Gibbs, but we could not allow you to take this risk alone,” Samas said.

Jo’s arrogance appeared right on schedule. “We can handle it.” Tony felt himself saying the words that he would never say, even if he truly believed it.

“Yes, you can.” Samas sent the image of Jo in the water, her strong body cutting through the waves. Pride. Samas had always felt competitive of his earlier daughters, but with Jo, he felt pride. “However, I thought an older voice might be appreciated.”


“Guide,” Samas said, but his scent spoke of Guide’s lack of a queen, and Tony could feel the shock as that smell hit Guide. Samas played dirty. Guide took a step back, accepting the censure, and now Jo got the sense that Guide felt guilt for his own lack of a queen. He’d let his queen die.

“Seriously, someone needs to warn me when the snakes come out to play,” O’Neill complained.

“You aren’t on the council,” Elizabeth said without mercy. “Guide, you can understand our concern.”

Guide looked at Samas. “Does she speak for you?”

Gibbs raised his chin and took a step forward so he was in front of Tony. “Yes.”

When Guide turned, he gave Elizabeth more attention. She crossed her arms over her chest and gazed right back. Eventually he nodded his head. “Queen Weir,” he greeted her.

“I’m not a queen,” Elizabeth said, but Tony had trouble concentrating over Aleigheta’s low-level panic. Evan looked almost green, so she was wailing in his head, too. Elizabeth uncrossed her arms and moved a step closer to Guide. Aleigheta’s cries grew stronger. “Let us talk without assuming that we understand each other. I will not act like a Wraith queen.”

Guide took a moment to study her. “No, you will not.” Tony didn’t need enhanced senses to know that Guide intended that as an insult.

“And you will not act in ways I find ethical; however, Tony believes we can find common ground, so I will at least listen to your offer.”

“It is amusing to listen to humans speak of ethics. I remember how humans negotiate with one another.” Guide’s scent spoke of betrayal and greed and disgust.

Tony put a hand on Gibbs’ arm before Gibbs got all up in Guide’s face. However, Gibbs just chuckled. “I have lived with humans far longer than you. The worst of them are all that and more, but they are capable of just as much loyalty as a Wraith,” Gibbs said.

Guide cocked his head to the side.

Elizabeth spoke up. “No doubt you have encountered desperate humans, but then you contributed to their desperation. People cannot show their true nature when they are constantly in fear for their lives.”
“You misunderstand,” Guide said. “When I lived here, I watched Alterans despise Melik for speaking truth. They destroyed him long before I killed him. That is the nature of humans—to kill not for food but to stop others from speaking unpleasant truths.”

Alegheta quieted, and Tony could feel her concern shift. He noticed that she seemed to believe Guide.

“Yeah, well those were Alterans. We’re a different breed,” O’Neill said.

“You are the same breed,” Guide disagreed before he turned toward Teyla, “although the little sister would not be of the same breed even without her Wraith ancestors.”

Teyla visibly flinched, but then she wasn’t a fan of that bit of history. Many of the locals still struggled with the idea that those who could sense the Wraith had Wraith DNA. However Teyla never backed down to anyone. “I have no doubt you would feast on me as quickly as anyone else here, so do not attempt to seek friendship with me,” she said firmly. Ironically, Tony got the feeling that Guide never would feed on her. He might kill her, but with Guide, he could like her and still kill her.

Suddenly Vala strolled right up to Guide and looked right into his eyes. “Right, if you’re here to eat someone, I’m going to have a problem with you.” She followed that up by poking Guide in the chest.

“Vala!” Daniel darted forward and grabbed her arm.

“Hey, everyone is thinking it. I just got bored waiting for someone to say it,” she said in her own defense.

Elizabeth held up her hands. “Everyone, this is ridiculous. The council will meet with Guide in my office.”

“I’m coming too,” Jack said.

Elizabeth opened her mouth, but Jack held up a finger to stop her. “If you don’t let me in, I’m going to nag the city to just let me eavesdrop. It’s less trouble to just let me in.”

“Fine,” Elizabeth said gracelessly.

“And Danny,” Jack added quickly.

Elizabeth glared at him.

Vala added, “If Daniel’s in there, I’m going. I have a vested interest in not letting him die again.”

“No,” Elizabeth said firmly. “And Daniel can come only because I like him better than you, General O’Neill.”

O’Neill shrugged. “That’s okay. Everyone likes Danny more than me. I’m used to it. So, let’s get this show on the road.” He clapped his hands together and rubbed them like a cartoon villain.

Tony turned to Gibbs. “You should go since Samas is back.”

Gibbs shook his head. “Nope, you’re the Turi representative. However, I am going to haunt the back of the room and make sure O’Neill plays nice.”

“Not gonna happen, Gunny,” O’Neill called from halfway up the stairs. Guide was watched all this,
ignoring the guards with the weapons trained on him.

Something shifted in Guide’s scent and Tony frowned in confusion. He’d never scented that before.

Gibbs and Samas leaned close, slipping an arm around Tony’s waist before whispering, “That smell— that’s hope.”
Once everyone had reached the office, Kitsune spoke before Elizabeth could say anything. “This is just wrong.”

Teyla grimaced, her expression showing her agreement.

“Now maybe we could all just talk calmly,” Daniel suggested. Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and Tony knew she was aggravated with him for getting in the middle. Technically this was a council issue, but it seemed like most of the council didn’t seem too interested in dealing with it. In fact, Chekov stood near the doorway staring at the Wraith. Guide had moved far into the room and he stood at the window, looking out over the city.

Tony was surprised, but Aleigheta had grown quiet in his head. She recognized him, and she kept calling to Hers, but Tony could tell that Colonel Sheppard wasn’t responding. Tony wondered how the computer must see all this. He tried to send comforting thoughts, but he could tell she wasn’t actually comforted. She was, however, willing to wait and watch. Tony got the feeling that she was compromising that much only because of this specific Wraith. The hurt one. Aleigheta whispered the name, and Tony got a shiver of horror. The hurt one. The name echoed softly through Aleigheta’s awareness.

“I should go check on Colonel Sheppard—see if he is in danger of quitting, yes?” Chekov asked, and Tony was pulled out of his private musings. Chekov gave Elizabeth a hopeful look, and she sighed. That was all it took. With an apologetic smile, he excused himself. “Yes, I shall hurry back. Much hurrying.” He backed out of the room without even trying for subtle. With Rodney in the infirmary and Chekov following, that took two of Earth’s three official representatives out of the picture. But then O’Neill and Daniel seemed ready to step into that void.

Samas and Gibbs moved to a spot near the windows, within reach of O’Neill. Tony couldn’t stop staring at him. Even without Samas joining them, Tony would have been ecstatic, but seeing Gibbs and Samas left him almost drunk with joy. Even the city’s quiet worry and desperation couldn’t dull the happiness Tony felt at seeing Samas and Gibbs together again.

There was a commotion at the door and Tony looked over to see Lorne trying to stop Vala from crashing the meeting. He was putting up a valiant effort, but when Vala reached for his crotch, Lorne flinched back and she slipped into the room. Before Lorne could haul her out, she moved to a spot behind Daniel’s chair and pinned Guide with a curious look. “So, you’re a Wraith.”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry,” Lorne apologized to Elizabeth.

“It’s fine,” she said with another sigh.

“So, are you thinking about eating us?” Vala asked Guide. He turned to look at her with yellow eyes. Tony could smell the surprise and amusement from Guide and the disgust from Samas. Vala was just as assertive as Abby, but without the sweetness that let her slip into Gibbs’ heart as a pseudo-daughter.

“I had not planned to,” Guide said. “Do you plan to usurp Queen Weir’s throne?”

Vala grinned. “Well, aren’t you the sweet talker. A girl likes to know that people still respect her ability to stage a mutiny, but maybe later. Running Atlantis sounds like too much work.” Vala hand waved off the possibility.
Tony sat at the table. “This isn’t awkward, not at all,” he said sarcastically. With this much sarcasm, irreverence and hatred in one room, negotiations were pretty much doomed.

Guide gave Tony an amused look. “This is far more amicable than last time I was here,” Guide offered.

“Seriously awkward,” Kitsune muttered from her spot against the wall closest to the door. She looked ready to run at an instant’s notice, which was still better than Teyla, who seemed ready to shoot someone.

“Let us discuss why you’re here and what you want,” Elizabeth said as she took her seat and folded her hands in front of her.

“Oh, I think he wants to eat us,” O’Neill said, “but you know, better aliens than you have tried to kill me and I’m still here.”

Guide slowly turned to give O’Neill one dismissive look before he turned his attention back to Elizabeth. “My hive was no longer an appropriate place to continue my research.”

“Seriously? He’s going to ignore me?” O’Neill asked the room in an offended tone.

“Yes,” Samas said without mercy.

Elizabeth ignored all of them. “Do you expect us to assist you in this research?”

“You already have,” Guide said.

“Actually,” Samas said before Elizabeth could answer, “I helped you. The humans did not.”

Guide turned to face Samas, bowing his head. “I recognize your assistance, Queen Samas. But the humans who choose to host you have brought information, and Sheppard himself provided the necessary strains of altered DNA. Does that not also meet the definition of assistance?”

Elizabeth spoke a little louder. “That does not excuse taking our people.”

“Would you have allowed me to conduct my experiments on them if I had requested it?” Guide asked, turning back toward her. It made Tony nervous that she was sitting so close to Guide, but his scent didn’t suggest violence at all. If anything, he was putting out soothing and submissive scents, but then he was locked in a small room with two Turi queens and a lot of scary women. Tony imagined that for Guide, this was a rather stressful situation for a male to find himself in.

Elizabeth didn’t hesitate. “No.”

“Then my actions were logical.”

While still standing, Teyla had her fingers curled around the back of one of the chairs. “Hunger—not logic—rules the Wraith.” Her voice was tight and angry.

Guide turned toward her and his soothing scents intensified. “Hunger rules humans and Wraith alike, but the Alterans who created us both made sating hunger more difficult for my people.”

“Okay, you eat people, so I’m not feeling the pity,” Kitsune said. She moved toward the door, and she might have stormed out, only Teyla reached out a hand toward her and she stopped.

“We all have strong feelings,” Daniel said in a soothing voice.
“Don’t start trying to convince me the sky is brown or that up is really down. I’ll shoot you,” Kitsune warned Daniel, pointing a finger at him. In that moment, Tony could practically see her channeling Larrin. Tony wondered if the two Traveler captains were related.

“Hey! No shooting the geeks,” O’Neill protested.

“No one is going to shoot anyone,” Elizabeth said sharply. She was even kind enough to avoid adding any death threats to her commandment, although she was glaring at most of the room.

For a tense minute, no one seemed to know what to say and everyone looked to everyone else. However, Samas took a step closer to the table and spoke. “All of you are speaking without understanding.”

Elizabeth glanced over. “I think we understand the Wraith position, Samas.”

“I think you do not, not as I do. You all condemn him, and I do not see how you can refuse to listen when you have accepted me.”

Kitsune snorted. “You never used humans as food,” she pointed out.

Samas gave her a long look, and she started to fidget under his gaze. Eventually Samas said, “No, I only enslaved them.”

“The history says that you were a protector of humans,” Daniel said. The whole time Guide watched curiously.

“I liked them more than most onac did,” Samas offered. “More than that, I saw them as a source of power that could help me defeat Ra. I didn’t treat them as equals. In fact, had you asked me to free my human slaves, I would have pointed out that slavery was normal and I had as much right to keep slaves as anyone else.”

O’Neill moved to a chair near Elizabeth and sat. “You’re not making me feel any better about having you involved in these discussions,” he said with disgust.

“Luckily you are not in charge,” Elizabeth told him with the sort of sweetness that suggested she was plotting his evisceration if he didn’t keep his oar out of her water.

“I’m starting to think you aren’t either,” O’Neill said.

Elizabeth laughed. “You’re only now realizing that? This is a council, General O’Neill, not a military base. And I don’t even try to play general.”

Just when Tony thought they were going to get totally off topic, Samas took control of the situation again. “My point is that my beliefs were limited to what I saw in my world, and I saw a world that was very skewed. Humans were victims—victims of the goa’uld, of each other, of their own violent natures. Those who lived outside of goa’uld areas were just as oppressed as those who lived under the System Lords. I liked humans, but I did not have a high opinion of them. Of course the irony was that humans rebelled against Ra, beating him while I was exiled to a river on Earth. Nevertheless, I thought nothing of taking humans and ordering them to serve me or carry my children.”

“But you changed,” Kitsune said. From the way O’Neill was now staring at Samas, he was clearly afraid that Samas hadn’t changed enough.

Samas gave a wry smile. “Centuries in exile have a way of making one reassess one’s position. It helped that I met humans who showed me how wrong I was about the nature of the human species.
And now the younger Turi don’t have the same misconceptions about humans. Jo likes humans, but then she always had a queen that told her humans were her equals, even if they are a little strange.” Samas smiled at Tony. When Tony reached up to take Gibbs’ hand, he could feel the love, the admiration and amusement flow from Samas. Jo had surprised him, and he was pleased with how Tony and Jo had defined the new Turi people.

For a second, Tony was lost inside Samas’ emotions, but then Daniel interjected, “I imagine that all of us are strange when viewed from another species’ assumptions. Part of being sentient creatures is trying to understand others. That said, I am concerned about why you want to alter humans,” Daniel leaned in toward Guide.

“Should I not seek to repair what others have left broken?”

“Yes, but if you want to… uh… create a class of slaves to use as food, I would have a problem with that.” Daniel grimaced.

Guide tilted his head to the side. “You are not what I expected of humans.”

“Hey, you aren’t exactly normal for a Wraith, either,” Kitsune said, but she finally dropped down into one of the chairs.

“I am Guide. That is, by definition, abnormal.”

Samas put his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “You were designed from humans. If you plan to enslave them, then know that sooner or later, you will realize the truth,” Samas told Guide. He fell silent, but his scent carried Wraith messages of admiration and determination. Samas sang about human persistence and honor. Guide and Samas stared at each other, and because he was between them, Tony could feel the heavy scents swirling around the room.

“Are you two finished eyefucking each other?” O’Neill demanded. Daniel jabbed an elbow into his side.

“If they want to fuck, I’ll volunteer my room,” Vala offered. Daniel groaned. “I seriously cannot handle you two in the same room.”

Samas ignored them, although Guide didn’t hide his interest or confusion. He clearly wasn’t used to these sorts of humans, but then most of Patros’ people treated Guide like some sort of demigod, and most other humans just hated Wraith. Tony doubted that Guide had ever seen people interacting normally.

“Make alliances with humans, and you will have to change to accommodate them. Enslaving them will not work,” Samas said.

“I can second that,” O’Neill added. “I’ve killed a lot of snakes that tried to enslave me.”

Daniel had been glaring at O’Neill and Vala, but now he turned his attention back to Guide. “People have to adapt to each other. You’re asking us to make significant changes here.”

Guide tilted his head.

Kitsune snorted. “He’s a Wraith. They don’t change—they just eat people.”

“We have changed,” Guide said, his scent highlighting the negative turn of his emotions. “The Wraith were once avengers and proud hunters and now many are butchers. I am aware of my
people’s flaws.”

“Are you?” Elizabeth asked. “Your people are guilty of millions of deaths. You have destroyed civilizations.”

Daniel cleared this throat. “To be fair, as a species, humans have done the same. I suspect Wraith greed came from the human side of the family, not the iratus.”

“I believe as much,” Guide said. “My people have a story about the return of Malik the Ancestor. It is said that the first time he returned, he brought a warning to the Alterans. They ignored him, and they died. The prophecy says that the second time he will bring a warning for Wraith. I hope my people can make a better choice.”

Kitsune sat up straight, and Teyla’s spine went ramrod straight. “You have beliefs about the Ancestors?” Teyla asked.

Guide looked at her. “We are children of those same neglectful parents.”

Kitsune and Teyla exchanged a concerned look. Tony could imagine the conversation they would have later. They were the representatives of the Pegasus galaxy, and Guide was screwing with their world view.

Elizabeth stood. “We all need time to welcome home Colonel Sheppard and discuss our positions. Guide, perhaps you would go with Tony to the Turi quarters.” Elizabeth gave Tony a meaningful look. If he wanted a truce, he was going to have to get Hew, Ronon, Kyli and the others to sit in a room with a Wraith. Hopefully the Turi had listened to enough stories about Samas’s days enslaving humans to get the message that creatures could change. If not, Guide was going to end up cut into small enough pieces that regeneration was not going to be an option.

Before Tony could come up with a convenient excuse, Samas answered for them. “Of course he is welcome in Turi sectors.” Then Samas stepped back and Gibbs was in control of the body. He didn’t look as excited by the offer, but he didn’t object.

“It’ll be fun,” Tony said with a forced smile.

Guide gave him an odd look. “I suspect you are using that word incorrectly.”

“He is,” O’Neill was quick to agree.

“In the meantime,” Elizabeth continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted, “perhaps each of us could consider which positions we hold as non-negotiable.”

Guide inclined his head toward her. “That is a logical beginning.”

A logical beginning—that was actually better than Tony had expected. “Hey, come on and I’ll show you the Turi waters. Just ignored the guards and the guns.” Tony gave Guide his most charming smile, but that was undone a bit by Jo putting out warning scents, making it clear that she would eat his brains and vomit them on dry land if he hurt her people.

Guide considered Tony for a long time before sending out his own mix of acceptance and warning that he would defend himself.

Tony was trying to figure out what to say when Gibbs strode toward the exit. “You coming?” he called as he left.
“On your six, boss,” Tony said as he hurried after. He could hear Guide following, and guards moved into position behind him. Tony imagined they looked like one very odd train, two Turi, one Wraith, and a handful of heavily armed humans all headed for the stairs.
John felt his skin itch every time Carson touched him. He wanted more, but at the same time, a simple touch made him want to go into full retreat.

“Does this hurt?” Carson asked as he pressed against the edges of the wound where the Wraith health monitor had been attached to his chest. Now John had a raw wound surrounded by pale skin.

“It’s tender, but it doesn’t hurt.”

“The scanner shows minimal tissue damage, but I think I’d like to keep an eye on it.”

“Yeah, I figured.” John scooted back in bed, trying to escape Carson’s touch without offending the doctor. From the concerned look Carson gave him, that might have been a tactical error. Carson set his tablet to one side.

“You know, lad, if this happened to anyone else, I’d recommend that they go home, visit family, get a little rest.”

Horror washed through John.

“Calm down,” Carson quickly added. “I know this is your home and this crazy lot around here is as close to family as you’ve got. But you can’t go jumping right back into your duties. You need time off, and you need to make an appointment with Dr. Heightmeyer.”

“I’ll make an appointment,” John promised. He didn’t add that he’d schedule it for some time after he got his head together. He didn’t need her poking around in his psyche right now. The city AI might be able to keep Earth from recalling him, but it couldn’t keep the IOC from removing him from his position.

Carson gave him a weary look. “You do know we all have your best interests at heart.”

“I do know that, Carson. I will make an appointment.”

Carson sighed and shook his head. “See you do or I’ll have Ronon hunt you down. He’d even enjoy it.”

John grinned. “He would. He’s going to kick my ass for not running fast enough to avoid getting captured at all.”

“And if he doesn’t, I will,” Rodney said from the door. John twisted around to look at him. Relief and love distracted John for the vital half second that he probably needed to escape because by the time John recognized the fury in Rodney’s face, it was too late. “Don’t ever do that again,” Rodney aimed a punch at John’s arm.

“Hey now, no assaulting the patients,” Carson objected.

Rodney didn’t even slow down. This was familiar. Rodney on a full rant, Elizabeth off dealing with some disaster—This was John’s home. “You had Wraith enzymes in your bloodwork. Don’t even try and deny it.”

“I didn’t plan to.” John might not want to talk about how he yearned for Todd’s touch, but he wasn’t about to try and lie about the facts of his imprisonment. “Todd kept taking life to test how long it
took me to recover, and when I didn’t recover fast enough, he would push life back into me.” John shrugged, hopeful that everyone would accept the story without too much prodding. However, Rodney narrowed his eyes and studied John the way he might study a physics problem. John carefully held himself still, and eventually Rodney turned on Carson.

“So, can I take him or are you going to wave voodoo feathers over him or make up some data that is more subjective than scientific in some quest to prove medicine something more than a primitive ritual?”

Years ago, Carson would have come back with a fiery volley of his own, but now he just rolled his eyes at Rodney’s insults. “I’m sure I can wave the feathers and shake a few rattles later. Colonel Sheppard is free to go to his quarters, but if he goes anywhere near a duty station, I’ll have Ronon sit on him until I can come and administer a proper lecture,” Carson warned.

John held up his hands in surrender. “No working. Got it.”

Carson gave John a look just as weary as the one he had just given Rodney. So maybe John had broken that particular order once or twice in the past, but as far as he knew, there was nothing threatening to sink the city in the next six hours.

With one more eyeroll, Carson headed for his office, offering a quickly shouted, “Rest means rest,” over his shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here before he changes his mind,” Rodney said. Taking John by the hand, he practically dragged him out of the infirmary. Every time someone greeted them in the hall, John felt self-conscious in the leather and linen clothing Todd had found him. He felt like he had brought not only Todd to Atlantis, but he felt like he’d returned some Todd-stained version of the Colonel Sheppard everyone was so anxious to get back. Luckily Rodney’s sharp tongue drove people away at a remarkable rate.

They got off the transporter on the little-used corridor that led to their quarters, but halfway there, John spotted the one person who was kryptonite to Rodney’s vitriolic superpowers.

“Colonel! Colonel! Oh my God, it is so awesome to have you back!” Before John could say anything, Abby had launched herself at him. She caught him in a tight hug that left him almost breathless, and Rodney only frowned.

“The whole city is excited to have you back. And Rodney has been so upset that he messed up his math and it scared the whole department because if Rodney isn’t there to insult people’s stupidity, then the universe doesn’t work right, and so Radek said we couldn’t bring any more scientists to Atlantis until we were back up and running well, and now you’re here and now Rodney can stop being so stressed.”

In typical Abby fashion, she dumped so much information at once that John wasn’t sure which bit to deal with. He looked over at Rodney. “You messed up math?”

“No!” Rodney crossed his arms and glared at Abby, but she was one person who seemed immune to glaring.

“We all knew why. He asked Tony if he could have a Turi and go kick Wraith ass, but Tony said we’re trying to find a way to give Wraith a chance to be good guys.”

John snorted. “Wraith are not good guys.”

Abby took a step back and studied him. “Well right now, no. They can’t be because they have to eat,
but if they could eat without killing people, then they could choose whether to be good or bad.”

“That’s not an excuse. They choose to kill.”

From the look Abby gave him, she didn’t agree. “When people are mentally ill and don’t have a choice about killing, we sent them to an asylum instead of to prison, and I’ve seen people do really horrible, terrible things all because they weren’t in their right mind. So don’t tell me that people who don’t have a choice are just as morally culpable as people who do, although I think Wraith who are trying to find solutions are way more ethically advanced than those who seem to enjoy torturing runners. Wraith who enjoy torturing people rather than just being forced to eat them should probably be killed.” She gave a firm nod, darted forward and kissed John cheek before she headed down the corridor toward the transporter.

“I should have stopped her,” Rodney said too late.

“Could you have stopped her?” John asked.

Rodney grimaced. Yeah, that’s what John thought.

“Ignore her. You know how she gets with forgiving everyone. She has horrible judgment with people,” Rodney said despite the fact that John was fairly sure her judgment was a lot better than either John’s or Rodney’s.

“Sure,” John agreed just to avoid a potential fight.

Rodney gave him a sidelong look before heading for their door.

“Well I’m sure you don’t want to hear excuses for what the Wraith have done.”

“Nope,” John agreed as he passed Rodney to get into their quarters.

Seeing the stack of journals in one corner and the shirt flung across the couch, John felt like he could really breathe. The coffee table was buried under technical notes of some sort, and there was definitely a funky smell coming from their tiny kitchen. It was all Rodney. “Have you ever heard of cleaning?” John asked the way he had a million times before.

“What? Oh God. I’m sorry. I meant to clean” Rodney grabbed for his shirt, but John caught him by the wrist before he could reach the couch.

“Rodney, I don’t actually care. Well, I do, but it’s nice to know that you haven’t changed. This is… familiar. And a little smelly,” John pulled Rodney close. For a second, Rodney resisted, but then he wrapped his arms around John. “I missed this. I missed you—good and bad.”

“Next time you don’t order me to come back without you.”

“There won’t be a next time,” John said firmly. “If the queens aren’t one hundred percent sure that Todd has given up his human experimentation phase, I’m going to put a bullet through his head. Many bullets. And then I’ll borrow Ronon’s blaster.”

“I’ll cover for you with Elizabeth,” Rodney offered.

John chuckled. “I never doubted that you’d have my six.”

They stood there, holding each other as the light from the balcony grew weaker and the sun slowly sank toward the sea.

“Are you really okay?” Rodney asked softly.
“God no.” The answer slipped out before John could edit it.

“Is this a Carson sort of not okay?” Rodney asked. John took a step back, extricating himself from Rodney’s embrace.

“Not really. This is more a Heightmeyer sort of thing. By the end… I really liked Todd.” John waited until Rodney’s eyes started to narrow and then he headed for the couch. Dropping down, he waited for the explosion. There would be recriminations and blame and disgust. John deserved every bit of it.

The couch shifted as Rodney sat, but John closed his eyes and waited. “liked?” Rodney asked.

John shrugged. “I would say that’s disgusting in an interspecies sort of way, but with Tony and Samas, I’ve gotten over that, so let me just ask if this is where you tell me that you don’t want me anymore?” Rodney sounded so calm that it took a half second for John to process that.


“Hey! I am clueless about this sort of thing, so if you tell me you like Todd, I need a few more data points before I can understand what piece of stupidity you’re trying and failing to communicate.” Rodney crossed his arms over his chest.

“Todd was the only creature on that hive that talked to me, and he always talked about liking me, and somewhere along the way, I really had to struggle to hang on to the fact that I hate him and want him dead.”

“So we want him dead?” Rodney asked.

“Of course we do!”

“There’s no ‘of course’ here. Todd is making it possible for Wraith to stop hunting and eating people. If we kill him, then aren’t we guaranteeing that more people will die?”

“Or we’re making it possible for him to create slaves that fit his dietary needs more perfectly,” John countered.

“Huh. There is that.”

“Yes, there is.” John leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “I kept telling myself that Todd was the bad guy, but then he’d act like I was his best friend and give me life back, and let me tell you, that feels good.” John hated admitting just how good it felt. “And now I’m trying to remind myself that he’s the life-sucking evil force that needs to die.”

“Samas used to be pretty bad,” Rodney said in a cautious tone. “The Turi have been using storytelling night to talk about how he enslaved people and assumed they all wanted to host, even though looking back he was pretty sure some of them didn’t. So being evil in the past is not necessarily proof of being evil in the future.”

John stared at Rodney open mouthed.

“Not that I’m excusing what he did,” Rodney hurried to say. “He experimented on you, and that’s ethically and morally wrong no matter what excuse you use. And yes, I’m sure he thinks that the
ends justify his means, but that sort of logic leads to horrible ethical abuses. So feel free to hate him.”

“You’re giving me permission to hate him?” John had lost track of this conversation somewhere.

“Unless you don’t want to hate him because it’s okay to understand his motives.”

John scooted around so he could face Rodney. “What are you trying to say?”

Rodney rubbed a hand over his face. “Honestly? I have no idea. I don’t know what to say to make you feel okay.”

All the anger and frustration that had been building in John’s chest dissipated. “You don’t have to say anything, Rodney. Just be patient with me when I get weird, okay?”

“ Weird how?”

John stood and headed for the window. He stared out at the blue sea and part of him resented the calm water and the beautiful colors that streaked the sky. He wanted thunderstorms or dark clouds. That made no sense, but then John had left logic behind some time ago. He knew the signs of PTSD and over identification with a captor.

“John?” Rodney rested his hand on John’s back.

“I want you to touch me.”

“Okay,” Rodney said slowly. “You know I was planning to do that already, right?”

John shivered.

“But if you need me to not touch you, that’s okay too,” Rodney said. It wasn’t like Rodney to pick up on John’s emotions so fast, but John appreciated it.

“I do want to touch, but Todd…” John stopped.

Rodney pulled his hand away and waited for several minutes before asking, “Did he… you know?”

John gave a rough bark of laughter. “No. I don’t know that Wraith even do that. But he used touch to control me. It was a reward when I wasn’t fighting him as much. And after a while, I wanted it.”

“Oh,” Rodney said slowly. “I don’t know what to do with this.”

“Nothing,” John said. His voice trembled with emotion and he took several breaths.

“Should I touch you?” Rodney asked.

“Please,” John whispered.

“Whatever you need,” Rodney promised, and then he was there, pressed against John’s back with his arms around John. “You can have anything you want. You know that.”

For so long, John had fought this touch hunger that had started to consume him, but now he rested his forehead against the glass and let himself concentrate on Rodney’s fingers against his stomach. “More,” he pleaded. Rodney slid his hand in under John’s shirt, his warm fingers pressing against John’s flesh. John shivered, and for a second, he flashed back to Todd’s hands on him and the feeling of being old and helpless.
However, Rodney was there whispering. “Hey, it’s just me. You’re home. It’s okay. We can take this as slow as you want. It’s okay,” he promised. He whispered those two words over and over until John started crying. Rodney held on tighter.

“It’s okay.” Rodney kept saying until those words and Rodney’s hands were the only two points of reality in John’s universe.
Aftermath

Tony collapsed facedown onto the bed. Now that Jo was back in the water, he was too tired to move a muscle. Three days of negotiations and Tony was almost sure that war wasn’t going to break out in the next few hours, although that might change when Elizabeth sent the details of the agreement back to the IOC. Gibbs sat at the end of the bed, his work-rough hand resting on Tony’s calf.

“This could go so very wrong,” Tony muttered into his pillow.

“The others understand this isn’t an end to the war. It’s one Wraith choosing to live with humans who want to support him.” That was definitely Samas. Tony had a rush of emotion so strong that he didn’t know what to feel.

“Are you back to stay?” Tony asked. He didn’t ever want Gibbs to feel like he wasn’t enough, but Samas had been part of them from the beginning. During negotiations, Tony had been afraid to ask if Samas was back or if he was just taking the risk of hosting in Gibbs in order to keep an eye on Guide. Sheppard certainly wasn’t up for the job. He’d only come out of the quarters he shared with Rodney long enough to visit Heightmeyer. Ronon, Teyla, and Ford had practically moved into the quarters with John and Rodney, but the rest of them barely caught sight of him before he vanished again.

Samas smiled sadly. “For short periods of time, yes. It is still dangerous, but Carson, Rodney, and Aleigheta managed to find the technical equipment that could help create more space for me, and now that the waters are full of symbiotes that sing, I don’t need to create a breeding sac. However, I am still too large to do this comfortably. That is why I cannot be the Turi representative. You and Jo will have to continue to carry that responsibility.”

“Great.” Tony pushed himself onto his side. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You’re following your heart. You always did that and it turned out.”

“Except when it didn’t,” Tony said wryly.

Gibbs chuckled. “You gave me a few gray hairs with some of your mistakes. But you never screwed up when it really counted.”

Tony dropped back down onto his back and stared at the ceiling. “When Todd’s hive figures out the plan worked, they’ll want to follow, and Patros’ people will take them in too.”

“Yep,” Gibbs agreed.

“And the more Wraith that live with Patros, the more other planets will target them.”

Gibbs laid down next to Tony and kissed Tony’s shoulder. “Yep. One Wraith is an anomaly. People can ignore it. The more Wraith and humans live together, the more conflict we’re going to have with separatists, both humans and hives. Atlantis is going to be very busy making sure that well intentioned people don’t kill each other as we try to find a new way to live together.”

Tony groaned. He’d wanted a nice pretty lie—not the truth. Rather than continue the conversation, Tony pulled a pillow around and pressed it to his face.

Gibbs shifted around some and then wrapped his arms around Tony. “Some Wraith will use this to create unwilling super donors they can torture for years. Others will start off wanting only a steady
source of food, but the longer they’re around a human the more they’ll realize that humans have personalities. And some Wraith will never see humans as anything other than food. We didn’t end the war and solve all humanity’s problems.”

“I was really hoping to do that first thing,” Tony said.

Gibbs chuckled. “You’re too much a realist for that.”

“Nope, optimist all the way.” Tony lifted his head, and Gibbs was there, kissing Tony gently.

“No,” Gibbs said quietly, “you aren’t. I remember back when you used to expect everything you touched to turn to dust. You blamed yourself for Kate, for every unsolved case, for every bad mood I suffered. You’ve grown into a realist, and that’s a good thing. People eating aliens and distant galaxies have been good for your mental health.”

Tony snorted as the laughter came out too fast. “The Wraith mental health plan?”

“Something like that.”

Tony rolled over and stared at the ceiling. “Why am I afraid that in thirty years people are going to point to this point in time and say that I was the one who fucked everything up?”

For a long time, the room was silent. Somehow that was more condemning than any words. Eventually Gibbs sighed. When he spoke again, it was Samas. “When I first joined with the host Ra chose, I didn’t understand how my DNA would be used. If it weren’t for me, the queens’ sabotage of Ra’s genetic line would have meant no new symbiotes for the goa’uld. No jaffa. No underlings. No younger goa’uld. They would have still taken over the galaxy, but their control would have been greatly limited.”

“So, I might be handing the Pegasus Galaxy to the Wraith. Yeah, that makes me feel great.” Tony closed his eyes.

“No, I did all that while completely ignorant. You are aware of the potential risks, and I think you’ve done everything you can to minimize them. But no matter how careful you are, you can’t know the future,” Samas said.

Tony sighed. “That rule kind of sucks.”

Gibbs chuckled. “Yeah, it does. I think Sheppard agrees. Last time he took mortal form, he tried to stop the Wraith and he ended up turning them loose on the universe.”

Tony cringed at the very idea. If he was Sheppard, he’d want to crawl in a hole and die. However, instead of turning on Sheppard, the Dagans and the others had taken this and spun some new mythology. Sheppard was a true Ancestor who had set a test for the ones who hadn’t ascended. They failed and the Wraith were the punishment. Now he had set a test for the Wraith to see if they could act more ethically, and if they failed, the Wraith would suffer similarly. Sheppard had just about given birth to cows when he heard that bit of lunacy.

“God, how did we get here?” Tony asked. “We were cops. Now we’re trying to stop war from decimating a galaxy.”

“I seem to remember you refusing a direct order to stay out of my business,” Gibbs said with some amusement. Tony tilted his head up to make sure it really was Gibbs and not Samas. When they were amused, they were hard to tell apart.
“Yeah, well I told you—I will always have your six.”

“Yes, you always have, even when I didn’t deserve it,” Gibbs said. He kissed Tony’s shoulder again, and this time he started undoing the buttons on Tony’s shirt.

“You always deserved it, boss.”

“I kept too many secrets,” Gibbs said. “It became a way of life and I didn’t always know how to stop.” Once he had Tony’s stomach uncovered, he kissed it. “When McGee joined our team, I thought he’d figure out that something was wrong and that made me more careful to keep people at arm’s length.”

“What? You thought McGee would notice something before me?” Tony was wounded.

“I thought McGee would put two and two together and get five after he found out I had gone in undercover as an IT expert named Leland Robert Spears. But he never asked how I could fool technical experts for months when I supposedly couldn’t turn on a computer.”

For a second, Tony could only blink at Gibbs. “Seriously? Well hell. Probie screwed up on that one, but then I didn’t catch it either, so I won’t give him shit next time I write him.”

“You didn’t see the file. McGee was hacking some files far above his pay grade. Samas put a scare into him by back tracing his computer, and he took the hacking down a notch after that.”

“Probie, probie, probie,” Tony muttered, but then Gibbs was kissing Tony’s chest, and it was hard to think about much else. Slowly Gibbs stripped off Tony’s shirt before running his hands up Tony’s sides.

Tony squirmed as Gibbs found every ticklish spot. “Not fair, boss.”

“I have never played fair,” Gibbs said before he leaned down to kiss Tony. His mouth was demanding—almost brutal—but his hands were gentle as they ghosted across Tony’s skin. Tony’s brain went off line as his cock took over the controls. He tried to reach for Gibbs’ shirt, but Gibbs caught his wrists.

“Hands at your sides,” he ordered. The tone sent a shiver of lust through Tony’s body, and he obeyed despite his body’s demands for more. Gibbs back away and slowly stripped off his clothes, revealing each inch of his powerful body. His body hair was turning gray and he had some softness around the middle, but other than that, he could pass for twenty still. And his cock… it stood out proudly and Tony squirmed with need. It had been too long since Gibbs had pinned him down and taken him hard.

Gibbs untied Tony’s boots and then stripped him from the waist down with quick efficient movements. Still, the simple touches made Tony’s body feel like he was standing too close to a fire.

“Don’t move,” Gibbs ordered before he trailed his fingers over the curve of Tony’s side and the dip where his hip bone met his waist. Tony’s cock gave a little twitch, and Tony fisted the sheets in an effort to obey Gibbs’ commandment.

“You okay, Tony?”

“Dying of frustration, but other than that, I’m perfect.”

“I don’t think death is the most likely outcome here,” Gibbs said.

A laugh slipped out of Tony. “I really hope not.”
Gibbs tugged on Tony’s nipple hard enough to send a hot flare through his flesh. Then Gibbs rubbed the pain away using little circles. When Gibbs ran his thumb over the end of Tony’s cock, Tony arched up into the touch.

“Oh hell yes. Please.”

Gibbs’ fingers curled around Tony’s cock. “Is this what you want?”

“It’s a good start,” Tony managed to croak out despite his dry mouth and fuzzy head. He couldn’t seem to stay focused on anything except the way it felt where their bodies touched.

“So greedy. So, what more do you want?” Gibbs slipped his hand down to palm Tony’s balls.

“Fuck me or let me suck you. Please. Come on, boss,” Tony begged.

“You are obsessed with my cock, aren’t you?”

“Guilty as charged,” Tony admitted. “I think you figured that out already, though.”

“I had a few clues,” Gibbs said in a teasing tone. Then he shifted so they were in a position to exchange blow jobs, and Tony groaned in raw need before he ran his hand over Gibbs’ hip.

“This seems familiar.” Tony kissed the end of Gibbs’ cock before sucking on the head, tasting the salt and musk. When Tony moaned, Gibbs’ cock got even harder. Tony knew Gibbs’ cock better than his own. He was familiar with the shape of it and how the head felt pressed up against the back of his throat. He relished the taste of it and how it filled him. He smiled at the familiar way Gibbs went quiet.

Tony leaned in until Gibbs’ cock pushed against the back of Tony’s throat. Gibbs thrust forward just a little, and Tony found his throat blocked by the head of Gibbs’ cock. Tony closed his eyes and sank into the feeling of calmness that overtook him when he was under Gibbs. Rather than fighting for air, he used his tongue to explore the ridge and the veins of Gibbs’ cock.

Then Gibbs pulled back, and Tony was left with only the tip of the cock in his mouth. He sucked hungrily.

Tony’s balls throbbed and his lower jaw ached as he continued to suck while Gibbs thrust slowly in and out of Tony’s mouth. Tony kept his movement soft and teasing. Until Gibbs was closer to his climax, he preferred finesse over excitement so Tony flicked his tongue over the slit.

Only then did Gibbs’ control start to slip. He would give a small groan or grunt, and his breathing grew harder and louder. No matter how many times they played this game, Tony couldn’t control the need to buck up toward that heat, to grab himself, to do something. Just as that instinct started to override Tony’s control, Gibbs grabbed Tony’s hips. Then Gibbs’ lips brushed against Tony’s cock. The touch was feather light, but Tony groaned at the shivers that ran through his whole body.

When Gibbs wrapped his hand around the base of Tony’s cock, Tony immediately came so hard that his muscles locked up. With a guttural shout, Gibbs followed. The cum hit Tony’s mouth with warm splatters dotting his chin. Shit. Tony groaned in both pleasure and despair. He was in his freaking forties and he still blew like a teenager. It was embarrassing.

Gibbs quickly sat up and turned around so they were lying next to each other.

“I suddenly don’t care as much about the rest of the universe,” Tony muttered.
“Yes, you do,” Gibbs said. “But I’m happy to distract you any time you need it.”

Tony asked Aleigheta to turn off the lights. Darkness fell and they laid in their big bed, the starlight from Atlantis’ sky dimly lighting their home. “Sounds good, boss,” Tony said softly.
Rodney stepped into the Gate room to find a big chunk of the city standing around looking unhappy. Todd was leaving to go start his life on Patros’ planet with a couple of dozen locals who had taken the gene therapy Guide had finished with the help of Carson and Samas. Rodney wasn’t sure how all this was going to work.

Teyla insisted that Pegasus folks wouldn’t trade with Patros’ people anymore, even if there was no evidence that they had ever turned innocents over to the Wraith. But Jackson Gibbs said that he’d never judged a man by his friends, and he wasn’t going to turn his back on Patros or anyone else who chose to help any Wraith who gave up eating people. So he insisted he would still set their goods and trade with them for any supplies they wanted. And there was no way anyone would boycott Gibbs’ father.

So it was a sort of weird economic standoff.

However, Rodney didn’t care about any of that. What he cared about was Todd. It took a week before John had stopped alternating between craving touch and flinching from it. It was two weeks before Rodney had woken up in the middle of the night to find John demanding sex, and then John had been all weird for two days afterward.

Heightmeyer said it was a good sign that John was letting people see his pain and she had even approved John going back out with the team, but Rodney was building up enough anger to charge a ZPM. No way was he going to allow Guide out of his city unscathed. At the same time, Rodney really didn’t want to get shot.

He looked over toward Ronon. Ronon gave him a quick nod to let Rodney know that his end was all set up. Good. Rodney was not fond of pain, and there were a lot of Marines and Turi with a lot of weapons standing around.

Guide came out of the transporter with three of his humans, including Patros. He might be persona non grata with most of the Pegasus galaxy, but he looked ridiculously proud of himself—all because Wraith could feed from him without killing him.

Rodney watched as Todd stepped onto the main floor. Silence filled the room as every person went utterly still. John had insisted that he wasn’t going to see Todd off, but Rodney was building up enough anger to charge a ZPM. No way was he going to allow Guide out of his city unscathed. At the same time, Rodney really didn’t want to get shot.

Just as Walter started to dial the gate, Rodney stepped out from behind Kyli and Teldy.

“Todd,” Rodney said in his firmest voice. It only had a small tremor in it. “What you did to John is unacceptable.”

Pulling his weapon, Rodney fired the full clip into Todd’s stomach. People screamed, but all the Turi moved into place. They grabbed Patros’ people to get them out of the way, they stepped in front of the Marines, and once the clip was empty, Rodney looked up to see Ronon holding onto John’s arm, and Elizabeth standing at the rail, her mouth open.

“Oh please, a few bullets in the gut is only going to hurt him, not kill him,” Rodney said as he shoved his weapon back in a pocket. Then he turned his attention to Todd. “But if you ever touch
John again, if you even think of touching John again, I will aim at your head. And I will not use bullets. I will use naquadah enhanced tactical missiles, and if I’m absolutely sure that all the civilians are out of the way, I’ll use naquadah enhanced nuclear weapons. Are we clear?’’

“Rodney!” Elizabeth exclaimed, but surprisingly Todd started to laugh.

“No, concern yourself Elizabeth Weir. Dr. McKay is right that bullets will not kill me, and I am pleased to know there is at least one human capable of reasonable behavior without the help of a Turi.”

John was down the stairs before Todd even finished. He reached into Rodney’s pocket and took the weapon. “Seriously, you are not allowed to touch a gun… possibly ever,” he hissed. If he meant it, he would have said it louder, so Rodney wasn’t worried. Then John turned to Todd. “Rodney is just a little high strung.”

“Do not apologize for me or I’ll have to shoot him again,” Rodney said. John gave him a baleful glare.

Todd chuckled. “The last time Melik came, he was ostracized and punished for saying that which was unpopular. I am glad to know that your people have learned more of loyalty. Perhaps some could even be said to have hive sense.” Todd bowed in Rodney’s direction, which seemed odd given that he was also bleeding on the floor because of Rodney’s bullets. “Take care of my hive brother, Dr. McKay, or I shall have to retrieve him, and that would put us both in an uncomfortable position.”

The Gate had opened, so without another word, Guide strode toward the event horizon. The Turi warriors had let Todd’s people go, and they followed, their smiles replaced with more wary expressions. As soon as the last of them were through, the gate shut down.

John crossed his arms and glared.

“You know you wanted to do it,” Rodney said. “Consider it a birthday present.” Rodney knew that John couldn’t say anything in public, not when he was second in command, and if the rumor mill was accurate, about to become military commander again when the Russians recalled Chekov. However, Rodney didn’t mind being publicly censored for his actions. What matter to him was that he had avenged John. That and Todd was now very aware of the fact that pissing off Rodney McKay led to disaster on a global scale. With a smile for John, Rodney turned and headed for the elevator. It was just another day in Pegasus.
John stood from the command chair, his nerves singing and his whole body tingling. The last Wraith was dead and Earth was safe. And Aleigheta reported that all systems were functional even after the fight. She disliked the waters of Earth, but her structures would withstand the pollution until they could return home. She was more concerned about the Turi who wished to leave the tanks and explore. She didn’t think it safe.

“Hey Rodney, call Tony or Gibbs and warn them that the kids want to go swimming.”

“What do I look like? A messenger boy?” Rodney demanded, but he was already touching his radio.

“We are down safe,” Radek said before pushing his glasses up. “You did not even crack windows this time.”

“Hey, last time was a practice run. I always do better on the real thing.”

“Yes. Selana says Regita did not even fall out of bed. Is good because I would be very unhappy with you if my daughter was bruised.”

“You’d be more upset if that superhive had blown us up,” John said as he headed for the door. He paused at the door at rested his palm against the wall. In the chair, for one moment he’d felt her—Aleigheta. He’d recognized her programming, remembered writing her subroutines, and that’s how he knew she had moved past any of her programming. She had acted with something that came close to instinct, taking the ship closer to the planet than was safe in order to shield a damaged Traveler ship. They were hers. The idea of losing them to the Wraith caused her pain. And John was trying very hard to ignore the fact that she had named Rodney “Her Beloved.”

John had been in Atlantis when the Wraith were born, but he’d also been here for Aleigheta’s birth. Both had grown beyond anything he could have imagined.

“Are you going to stand there all day? Move!” Rodney said, giving John a good push to enforce his point.

“Geez, Rodney, no need for violence.” John stumbled out into the hall. Part of him wanted to get back in the chair and find that elusive connection with his city again, but he suspected that if he made a full connection with her—if he rediscovered his entire past—he would ascend again.

He wasn’t ready for that, not when he’d just gotten back military command and had led his flying city to save Earth from a Wraith invasion. Overall, it had been a good week. Even the fact that Todd had warned them about this invading hive wasn’t enough to tarnish his good mood.

He trotted toward the transporter.

“Hey! Slow down. There aren’t any Wraith chasing us,” Rodney complained.

“We need to go on more missions where someone does chase us. You’re getting slow,” John teased, he turned and walked backward while making a face at Rodney.

“Why run when Ronon can just shoot stuff?” Rodney asked.

John laughed as he caught Rodney’s arm and pulled him close for a quick kiss. General O’Neill said that they were closing in on a repeal of DADT, and John couldn’t wait. Stargate policy was to honor
all local marriage laws, so as soon as he could openly claim Rodney, he was going to throw the biggest Athosian wedding in the history of all weddings. Daniel Jackson and Teyla already had elaborate plans all ready to go into effect when he gave the word.

“Dork,” Rodney said softly, but it sounded a lot like a declaration of love. “I remember when we spent most of our missions running.”

“Yeah, well we have better intelligence now.”

“Are we talking about Todd?”

John cringed. He actually hadn’t been. He tried hard to avoid the subject of Todd, although Kate insisted that wasn’t the healthiest reaction. “I was actually talking about Hew and Ladon and the way Jackson Gibbs seems to know everything. But I guess this time, Todd actually did help.”

“Are you okay with that?” Rodney asked.

They walked into a transporter, and John touched the button for the main tower. In a flash, they arrived. “You know, I think I am. I still think he’s a self-serving manipulative asshole who helped us only because it served his ends, but he did help.”

“Aliens. They definitely have their own logic.”

“Yeah, but you like Samas’ logic.”

Rodney snorted.

“Colonel Sheppard!” someone called. John turned to see Woolsey hurrying up the stairs toward him.

“I have to be somewhere else,” Rodney said without even pretending to be subtle. He turned and all but fled. The IOC members tended to cause council members to retreat. Apparently they had given up on manipulating Elizabeth and were now trying to manipulate everyone else. Kitsune found them amusing, Teyla would sigh and give them weary looks, Tony manipulated them right back, and Rodney resorted to insults and ruining people’s credit ratings. John was just lucky he had military structure to hide behind.

“I’m sorry I missed Dr. McKay,” Woolsey said when he reached the top of the stairs.

“Uh huh,” John leaned against the rail and tried to maintain a neutral expression. He’d been looking forward to being on Earth and requesting supplies without having to worry about the energy use of the gate or space in a ship’s hold. If nothing else, John could take his back pay and hit a mall. Of course that would mean pushing through crowds of people, and he wasn’t sure he was up to that. He could always take Ronon. Even on Earth Ronon would clear a path.

“I had hoped to talk to you. The IOC is concerned about the Turi.”

That didn’t surprise John. The SGC had a hate on for all symbiotes. “You don’t have to worry. I asked Jo and Samas to keep the kids at home until we’re back home.”

For some reason, Woolsey looked poleaxed at that. Politicians. Some days John did not understand them as far as he could throw them.

“You have snakes. You brought snakes?” Woolsey’s voice had a definite tremble to it.

“Well yeah. They live in Atlantis.” John crossed his arms. “So what did you mean when you said
“I meant the warriors!” Woolsey exclaimed. A few people turned and looked at him, and he lowered his voice. “I tried speaking to Ambassador DiNozzo about making sure that the Turi did not leave the city. They are a security threat to not only the United States but to the entire world. They could out this whole program.”

“I’m sure Tony has explained that.” John didn’t understand why Woolsey was having this conversation with him. However, from the cranky glare Woolsey gave him, John was supposed to be doing something.

“I need you to secure any form of transportation off this city.”

John blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I am asking you, as the military leader of this city, to secure it.” Woolsey pressed his lips together.

Considering Woolsey was a lawyer, he should understand the complete illegality of such an order. “Are you asking me to detain people with no probable cause or even half-assed reason for detaining them?”

“This situation could endanger the security of this entire project. I am asking you to do your duty.”

John bristled at the idea that he didn’t take his duty seriously, especially since there were still a few IOC members who distrusted him. Chekov would have been replaced by another commander only the Chinese had dug their heels in and insisted that the commander should come from their Army. The other nations had refused, leaving John the only candidate they could all agree on. John suspected Jo and Samas were involved in the politics of it all. “Under Article 90 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, I can only obey lawful orders, and only if they come from my superior officers. Mr. Woolsey, you are not in my chain of command. The civilian authority on Atlantis is Elizabeth.”

“Not while you are on Earth, and you will remain on Earth for the foreseeable future,” Woolsey said firmly. “Now I need you to secure all modes of transport off the city, including the two Ancient ships.”

Walter made eye contact with John, and John gave a small nod, knowing that would be enough for Walter to get Elizabeth and General O’Neill. “Mr. Woolsey, you do not have the authority to order me to detain someone with no cause, and no one has enough authority to convince me to steal an ally’s ships.” And John was thanking God that the Travelers had kept their command codes under lock and key. No doubt Woolsey was already taking action behind the scene, not that he would get far with any of John’s people.

“I am not suggesting we steal anything,” Woolsey said as he bristled like a porcupine. “I simply believe it prudent to ensure that everyone remain on Atlantis and under the cloak until such time as we can negotiate.”

“Negotiate what? Their release?”

“Colonel Sheppard, the rhetoric is unnecessary. I simply believe we need to negotiate with our allies so we have an understanding of the behaviors that are appropriate on Earth.”

John snorted. “The Travelers are never appropriate. They consider following rules to be a violation of some moral code that I don’t get. And the Satedans wouldn’t put the Stargate program at risk if only because most are military people and they understand chain of command.”
Woolsey took a deep breath. “Very well. If I take your word that the Satedan would not pose a threat, then I would only ask you keep the Travelers here until such time as we can reach an agreement.”

“Yeah, I have no idea how to do that.”

Woolsey seemed to take a few minutes to gather his thoughts before he answered. “Surely you have contingency plans.”

“For if the Travelers try to take over the city, sure. Atlantis is one big ship, and Travelers have some serious ship envy. But if they want to leave, they can leave. I’ve never made any plans to keep them hostage in the city.” John saw General O’Neill come out of the transporter, but the big old traitor stopped to talk to Walter and showed no interest in rescuing John. John would make him pay for that.

“And what do you plan to do if they use one of their ships to land in the middle of New York City?”

“I don’t actually think there’s space to put a ship down in the city,” John said. From Woolsey’s nasty glare, it was pretty obvious the man did not appreciate John’s humor. “But what would you do if the Tok’ra had a damaged ship that crash landed on Earth? How would you handle it if the Lucian Alliance showed up?”

“Colonel Sheppard, I don’t think you understand the gravity of this situation. The IOC has certain expectations.”

“I work for the US Air Force, not the IOC. And I cannot break the law because you’ve asked me to.”

“And do you really believe you are qualified to judge the legality of this? After all, we are discussing maintaining the secrecy of the US government’s most classified project.”

John nodded. “And when President John Adams ordered Navy captains to seize ships going to French ports in 1799, the US Supreme Court ruled that following illegal orders—even the president’s illegal orders—did not protect officers from prosecution.” And here John had assumed War College history classes had been pointless. He never thought he’d actually use the information. “I cannot detain people without probable cause and I will not confiscate someone’s property.”

“And if people die?” Woolsey asked, his eyes narrow.

“I don’t think the general public is going to riot if something comes out.”

“No, but the President has ordered fighters into the air and has announced war games in the area. If the Travelers leave the cloak, they will open fire.”

John stared at Woolsey.

“So you can see,” Woolsey said, “why it’s so important to keep them in the city. No one wants to create more hostilities. If shots are fired on either side, peace will be far more difficult to achieve.”

So Woolsey wasn’t the bad guy… the damn president was. Some days John did not like his planet. “If fighters open fire on a Traveler ship, I can promise you, the only deaths will be on the US side. Travelers always expect a double cross. And they know enough about Earth politics that they will immediately go to someone like France or China, land their ship, and file a formal protest and demand for reparations. If you want to make this whole program go public, that would be the perfect way to do it.”
Woolsey paled. “Surely we can talk to them.”

“Nope,” John said. “Travelers make a religion out of having multiple escape paths and lots of ports to hide in. If we’re here for more than the week or so it takes to get the ships polished, they’re going to start setting up trade routes and scoping out hiding places. That’s just how Travelers work.”

Woolsey pursed his lips. “So, you can keep them here for a week?”

“A week, sure.” Something had just shifted, and John wasn’t sure what.

Woolsey gave a sharp nod. “Okay. So I will work on changing the timeline for return. It would help if the scientists that the IOC are sending would find it unpleasant to work here. After all, the main argument for keeping Atlantis here is the ability to send in technical experts who have refused to move to another galaxy.”

“Um…” John had no idea what to say.

General O’Neill strode over. “Are you going to be able to get the job done, Richard?” he asked.

“I had hoped you were exaggerating, but Ambassador DiNozzo and Colonel Sheppard are both adamant that this city is a time bomb.”

“Yeah, but she’s our time bomb and we kinda like her,” O’Neill said. “And as far as making the IOC scientists miserable—trust me, that is a job custom made for Rodney McKay.”

“Well, I’ll do my best. You had better keep the Turi snakes under the radar or getting the city back to the Pegasus galaxy will be the least of your concern.”

“Yeah, sure, you betcha,” O’Neill agreed easily. Woolsey grimaced like he’d bit a lemon before he turned and started down the stairs. That’s when Elizabeth came out of her office.

“Is he seeing our point of view?” she asked in that overly sweet tone that made John want to check his back for knives.


Elizabeth laughed. “You should have heard Tony lay into him. From the way Tony described it, Earth could prepare for hordes of Travelers to descend on local auto parts stores while the Satedans filled up all the martial arts classes in San Francisco. I’m pretty sure he managed to throw in a suggestion that some of the Hoff workers might want to patent a few of the more creative devices they’d invented to keep the city running. Our steeplejack has certain got a flair for invention.

“You set me up by not warning me about him,” John accused them.

O’Neill shrugged. “He’s been making noises, and I assumed that he was trying to help or he would have been quieter about the IOC’s plan to usurp us.”

“They really don’t understand the politics around here,” Elizabeth said in an amused tone. Then she looked at O’Neill, “but neither did you until you moved here. It has improved your disposition.”

O’Neill rolled his eyes. “Go undermine someone else’s self-assurance and earth-centric chauvinism. I want to talk to my colonel.” He made a hand waving gesture at her. Elizabeth shook her head before heading back to her office.

“Sir?” John asked.
“You’re going to get a call to report to Maryland. I don’t want you assuming that something nefarious is going on.”

“You don’t? Maybe I’m being paranoid, but if someone is trying to get me off the city, that’s feeling a little dangerous.” John didn’t know how the people on Atlantis would react if the US military tried to keep him away from Atlantis, but he suspected it wouldn’t end well.

“I happen to know the Selection Board has requested a certain Lieutenant Colonel’s full record—something about the Air Force being short on full colonels.”

John stared at O’Neill, his brain not quite able to process that. Colonel. A full bird. Colonel John Sheppard. John’s brain was shorting out.

“I love that stupid look you get on your face when you’re happy,” O’Neill said. “But the President wants to surprise you, so act surprised. And make sure you play up how restless the natives are. We need to get our girl back to the Pegasus galaxy.” Whistling a tune, O’Neill wandered away.

Damn.

Rodney wandered back once the others were gone. He still wasn’t the biggest fan of O’Neill, even though the general had become far more supportive now that he was officially retired. “What did he want?”

As much as John loved Rodney, he trusted that Rodney could not keep a secret. “General O’Neill just wanted to reassure me that when I get called to the mainland it’s not some plan to get me out of the city. Apparently the president wants to give me a medal.”

“Oh, well he should.” Rodney gave him an odd look. “That’s all?”

John shrugged. “Yeah. That and the IOC is trying to keep Atlantis so Earth scientists can poke around and Woolsey is apparently on our side, although he poked around to see if he could keep the locals appeased and quiet.”

Rodney snorted. “No one in this city is quiet. The only reason Abby isn’t overwhelming is that she’s surrounded by loud and obnoxious people.”

John gave Rodney a long look.

“Yes, yes. I’m one of those loud and obnoxious people. So what is this that the city is telling me about driving away strangers?”

“She told you?”

“She’s absolutely gleeful about it.”

That was definitely beyond any programming Alterans had created. John got the feeling that the Ancients had struggled with emotions, so they wouldn’t have even tried to program them into their city. “Apparently Woolsey and O’Neill want us to annoy the new scientists into leaving so the IOC isn’t tempted to keep Atlantis here.”

“Oh, trust me, I have personally recruited or sent Abby to retrieve any scientist who had enough brains to survive Pegasus. Whoever they’re sending us will be reminded of his or her own stupidity, publicly shamed and sent away. I’ll just make sure Abby has her claws sharpened because sometimes that woman is illogically kind to stupid people.”
John laughed as he looked around the gate room. People bustled through, not in a hurry but eager to get their work done. If John knew his people, they were going to throw one hell of a we-survived feast tonight. That seemed much more important than an IOC politics. Elizabeth was in her office, but from the silly look on her face, she was talking to Ladon. All was well in the city.

“So Rodney, what do you think about raiding a Radio Shack or two while we’re here?”

“I think you’ve been off planet too long because there are way cooler places to raid. I assume we’re both going to be hung over tomorrow, so do you want to go on sixday?”

“You know, I have no idea what day of the week it will be next sixday. Hell, I don’t know what day of the week it is now.”

“Do you care?”

John thought about that for half a second. “Nope, not really.”

“Good answer.” Rodney smiled before turning his attention back to his tablet.

Yeah, there was very little about Earth that interested John anymore. What he needed was on Atlantis, and unless the IOC wanted eternally offended scientists with fractured egos, hordes of Satedans, and Traveler ships landing in Red Square, John was going to get to take his city home soon enough. He had just enough time to stock up on a lifetime supply of lube, some fancy toy cars, and--John glanced at Rodney--maybe… just maybe… a cat. Then life would be perfect.

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