Apocalypse Rising

by sian1359

Summary

The Goa'uld are not the only ones who covet Earth.

Notes

auburnnothenna saved my bacon again; any subsequent mistakes are solely my own.

gottalovev chose to illustrate my story. Please check out her art and tell her how wonderful she/it is: http://gottalovev.livejournal.com/263842.html

This story turns away from canon soon after Chimera (SG1 Episode Fifteen, Season Seven); additional liberties with the timeline and occurrences have also been taken.

Prologue.

0430 Zulu; September 20, 2002
Stargate Command Control Room, Sublevel 28
Cheyenne Mountain
Colorado

The blaring alarm that signaled an unscheduled off-world activation of the stargate wasn't unusual.
At oh dark thirty, though, that nebulous time after midnight and before dawn when the majority of gate techs, command personnel and even the bulk of the scientists had gone home to dream about their next leave, their potential advancement (or retirement), and of bigger and better discoveries waiting for the right combination of inspiration, deduction and luck, it also wasn't usual. None of the SGC exploration teams currently off world were scheduled for check-ins or returns at this particular time, although there was always the possibility of something untoward having happened on a mission to require an early return – or to require assistance – either for one of those teams or any of Earth's allies.

As several enemies had on more than one occasion attempted to breach the gate – and had successfully done so, albeit rarely – Marine and Air Force Defense Teams took their positions throughout the control room and the gate room observation deck. A double handful moved to spread out in an arc before the ramp connected to the massive gate before the chevrons along the outer ring finished the sequence of someone dialing in to Earth's stargate. They stood with a healthy level of alertness and anticipation, their guns raised and trained on the interlocking sheets of trinium-titanium that acted as a shield to prevent anything's arrival through the gate that didn't first have permission to come across.

The seventh chevron engaged. No sound or muted glow signaled that the gate was open and ready to transmit, however. Those soldiers most veteran to the duty tensed a little more and brought their weapons more directly in line with the shielded opening. The shield's iris would remain closed until a proper identification code was transmitted from the dialing end, but it hadn't been all that long ago when the Goa'uld, Anubis, had found a way to penetrate that shield and launch an attack. No one relied on its inviolatibility any longer, even if the SGC had managed to thwart the alien invasion with little loss of life or even property.

When an eight chevron lit up, even the veterans looked puzzled and maybe a bit more than simply tense. Everyone knew it took seven symbols to dial between stargates.

The whoosh, when it finally came, showed as a mesmerizing glow that crept around the edges of the shield iris and then steadied in the flickering of an opened wormhole. No greeting followed, no signal of any kind, except for a large boom and whump of something that shook the gate and everyone standing guard. Someone or something had started the transit without knowing they'd be blocked and then torn apart as their composite atoms were converted to an energy that couldn't be reintegrated while the shielding was in place.

Two more impacts followed in quick succession, and then nothing, until finally the lit chevrons went dark and then dormant as the gate shut itself down when no more matter crossed into the wormhole. The soldiers waited another half an hour before standing down and the anomaly was noted, debated and second-guessed by scientist and soldier alike throughout the next day. It would take four days and the return of SG1 for all to be reminded by both Colonel Jack O'Neill and Major Samantha Carter that an eight digit address had been needed to dial the Asgard's home galaxy. Then it took four more weeks to confirm that it had not been the Asgard, however, who had made the fatal contact.

It took four additional months to discover who had.

1.

1648 Zulu; January 13, 2003
East of Death Valley
Near the border between California and Nevada
"So, I'm thinking the Mandalay Bay," Dexter Cusiak's voice sounded over their internal communications channel as soon as he finished acknowledging the switch over from Oakland's air traffic control zone to the L.A one. LA would keep track of their helicopter until they got within McCarran Airport's direct control.

"No way," Mitchum Rogers' voice sputtered back over his own headset.

"Yes, way, Jose. That or the Bellagio. The Venetian is supposed to be real nice too," Dex plowed on through Mitch's protests and the punch against his shoulder. "Do you have a preference, Shep? After all, he bet against you."

"Isn't the Mandalay Bay owned by Wynn's Circus Circus group?" John ignored the escalating slugfest going on between his co-pilot and passenger with the ease of long-suffering familiarity with their antics more than out of any real need to keep his attention on his instruments or on the sky outside the cockpit despite the growing darkness of the clouds and the increasing winds. After flying HH-60 Pave Hawks for the last year in combat search and rescue operations over the deserts of Afghanistan, piloting this little A-Star though a bit of turbulence was something John Sheppard could probably do blindfolded if not half asleep.

"Anyone who thinks clowns are an appropriate theme for a resort has to have more money than taste," John continued as he adjusted the cyclic and a foot pedal to bank them north to ease away from the direct glare of the sun that broke momentarily through the clouds. He twisted his head to give both Mitch and Dex a look even though it was mostly hidden behind his sunglasses. The three of them had served and flown together long enough that neither of the other two were dumb enough to tease John about his disdain of clowns. Or maybe it was just that at this point in the afternoon, they were both too tired to come up with something John hadn't already heard from them or one of the others in their squad after they'd first learned of John's stupid phobia.

John's own fatigue from the morning had more or less evaporated once he'd settled into the cockpit and gotten them into the air. It was always that way when he was behind the controls. That he was flying ahead of a storm front made the flight more entertaining. As did his friends antics.

This was the eighth day of their return to the States for two months of leave before redeployment. During the first night and part of the following day, all of John's flight crew had been with them, sharing a last lunch in New York before they split up to visit friends, family and loved ones throughout a handful of different states. John, Mitch and Dex had chosen to spend the first couple of weeks together, leaving JFK for Las Vegas, and then immediately from Vegas for the ski slopes of Southern California.

They'd intended to spend four more days skiing and snow boarding, but a forecast of a volatile storm on its way had convinced them to cut that portion of their trip short. After a reasonable number of runs from a very early start, they left Mammoth's ski resort once visibility was virtually gone for all of the falling snow, grabbed a late lunch, then hurried with packing and took a cab ride to the airfield before they got snowed in. While they were considering trying Tahoe or Brian Head as a replacement, Dex had suggested Vegas first.

Personally, John could take or leave the gambling; it was hard not to count cards and calculate the various odds to the degree that would invariably get him asked to leave by the management. He was looking forward to watching the other two be stupid, however, and looking forward to spending a couple of days relaxing in a spacious hotel room with a comfortable bed and ESPN broadcasting real time, instead of a cot and two week – or two month – old videos. Maybe toss back a couple beers. He'd so far been avoiding that on the slopes, not wanting to end up doing something stupid that
would fuck up his next deployment.

It wasn't that he was looking forward to a return to Afghanistan or Iraq, but better there than cooling his heels stateside. Plus, he wasn't about to let his team go back into a war zone without him. Not even Mitch, who in doubting John's abilities, had lost to Dex's stupid bet.

John further pretended to consider their options. Six months of continuous combat duty pay over the last twelve had all three of them flush. Mitch's protests – and Dex's insistence on a five-star restaurant – were really more reflex chain yanking than a genuine dispute.

"No doubt the Mandalay Bay, like the Excalibur, is tacky instead of tasteful. The Bellagio or the Venetian, in contrast, sounds classy."

"And expensive," Mitch wailed, planting a friendlier hit against John's shoulder than he had on Dex's. "I know I was stupid to assume Shep couldn't sweet talk any gal, much less Holland's little sister, but we were talking about a helo! I mean, who the hell lends three strangers their helicopter, even if it is the off season and it needed a maintenance check flight? Are you sure we should call Ms. Holland when we get back?" Mitch continued whining. "Sure, she'll want to know we've brought her chopper back, but we're a few days early and she probably already has plans for dinner. I'll buy for us tonight, someplace reasonable then, Shep, you can take her out tomorrow or something, someplace really nice, since we all know that's what she really meant as payment."

"I think I should – "

Mitch wasn't finished yet and spoke over Dex's interruption. "How about the buffet at Treasure Island? No, we should go to the Rio! The Rio has showgirls that walk the floor and provides that free Masquerade Sky thingy where they throw the beads into the crowd. They've got the Chippendales there, so there's something for Shep – "

"Sorry, Mitch, but baby oil and steroid-laden hard-bodies aren't my type," John took his own turn at interrupting. "I prefer my men to be real, with more than a brain cell or two to rub together." He resolutely did not flinch in hearing himself. After all, Mitch and Dex had been keeping that secret of John's for years.

Still, John's sex life (or lack thereof) – like anything personal – wasn't a typical subject for conversation. Not even with these two. They'd accepted that from the beginning and actually went out of their way to run interference for John now when such conversations came up amongst the other flight crews. Fortunately Dex had enough family and exes to brag about that rarely did anyone realize that John never offered much in exchanges of life stories.

"Jesus, Shep, you mean you like geeks?" Dex snorted then half-turned in his seat so he was more or less facing both John and Mitch.

"But what about that knockout redhead nurse?" Mitch protested. "I always assumed you were bi, 'cause I mean she was ... Are you saying she was cover? That ... that somehow she wasn't your type?"

John shrugged. "I didn't encourage her pursuit; it was just easier to go along with her since it seemed that everyone expected it, including my team," he shot them both a glare over his shoulder.

"Sorry, bud, but I'm with Mitch on Helena," Dex shook his head while outlining her most obvious attribute with a common hand gesture. "That body has to be everyone's type. But, hey, you probably aren't interested in Holland's sister either then, right? So if she's expecting one of us to sleep with her as part of the payment for letting us use the helo... I mean, if she's going to want more than a few
hundred bucks to cover the fuel, plus a nice dinner and all that good karma for helping out her brother's Air Force buddies, I suppose I could take one for the team – "

"Why in God's name would she consent to sleep with the second string?" Mitch gave Dex another punch, this one hard enough to make Dex wince. "With a lousy co-pilot? If anyone's going to jump into the danger zone, at least I have the proper experience – "

"Pilots are much sexier than PJs," John and Dex chorused to shut the pararescueman's boasting down.

"We get the cool jacket," Dex continued.

"And shades," John added with a gesture to the ones that weren't currently doing a whole lot against the lowering sun off to his right.

"I have a maroon beret – "

"Which makes you look gayer than John's hair – "

"Hey – "

Any further sniping was abruptly cut off by a FAA override coming across their headsets.

Attention! Attention! This is a verbal Notice to Airmen. Repeat, this is a verbal NOTAM to all pilots, commercial and civilian. The Department of Homeland Security has raised the Threat Level to Red. We have been directed to inform all aircraft to land immediately as is safe. Your local ARTCC will switch all craft to their nearest TRACON to coordinate traffic and landings. Attention! Attention! This is…

"Holy shit!" Dex swore as the warning notification began to repeat. "I can't believe those al Queda fuckers hit here again! Do they really think our build up in the Gulf is just saber rattling?"

A build up the three of them were waiting for orders to rejoin, their extra couple of weeks leave having pretty much guaranteed it was soon in the offing.

"Christ on a crutch, John! We've got to get to base – well, to Nellis at least!"

Mitch's involuntary clutching was pulling back on John's seat. Not enough to really distract him, but then his own speeding heart rate was doing that, along with the uncontrollable rush of adrenalin. It was one thing to be on active duty in a war zone, and quite another to be on leave when war might very well have come to their own soil. At their current, normal cruising speed, both Vegas and Nellis were forty or so minutes out, and John knew which one he'd prefer; Mitch was dead right about them needing to connect with the Air Force instead of being relayed to someplace civilian, like McCarran International.

Running the speed differentials in his head for taking the copter up to maximum speed, John decided he couldn't shave off enough time to warrant the additional fuel consumption, especially if they would have to wait behind a significant number of other craft for a landing slot – at any airport.

"Dex, isn't the Nellis' Gunnery and Bombing range near here?" he asked of his co-pilot. John had done some training out of Nellis, but had never served here and only had a passing familiarity with all of the restricted airspace that blocked out the bulk of Nevada's interior. Dex, conversely, had an unnatural interest in the entire country's spate of military bases – Air Force or not – plus he'd been the one to file their flight plans to and from Mammoth and so was most up to date on what lay along their route.
"It's been renamed the Nevada Test and Training Range, and yeah, it's maybe ten minutes away," Dex acknowledged with a quick double check of their GPS device before pulling out one of the navigational chart books stored behind his seat.

If there had been a West Coast attack this time, search and rescue operations would no doubt be as (if not more) necessary as fighter jocks, so if they got permission to land at TTR, it was possible they could get assigned to a real bird – at least as back-up if not lead. It certainly wasn't as if they hadn't put in their time after Bosnia doing domestic SAR as members of the 563rd Rescue Group out of Davis-Monthan AFB in Arizona with the National Guard and the Civil Air Patrol, before their more recent overseas deployments. While that had mostly been fire fighting support, they'd also done their share of medivacing in and out of crowded urban locations as well as rural ones.

"Dex, see if you can get the FAA to connect us to NORAD," John ordered.

While the FAA had control over all civilian aircraft, the US Military could and would take over control when necessary. John was damn glad that NORAD's own responsibilities in this had expanded after 9/11 (so there could be a better marshalling of assets in times of emergency), since the sooner he got them under the Military's umbrella, the better.

"Mitch, figure out what types of airfields are around," Dex instructed in return, promptly handing the aviation charts over his seat to Mitch while he picked up communications control. "I want to try to get us to the Gunnery range, but they might insist we put down elsewhere like Nellis or McCarran, so see what our options are."

John frowned upon running another quick calculation between speed, distance and fuel consumption rates. "Tell them there could be a fuel issue with McCarran if we're too far back in the queue."

He hoped they'd get clearance at the remote Nellis range. The thought of getting grounded in one of the little bumps off the highway that dotted the Nevada high desert country was one of the worst things that could happen if their country was really under some sort of attack. Certainly the chances of renting a car from someplace that probably boasted only of a gas station, a fast-food joint and a bar/casino would be nil, unless they managed to talk one of the locals into something. He seriously doubted the three of them had enough money to do that after their long week at Mammoth anyway. He hadn't gotten back into the habit of carrying his ATM card instead of cash, and figured neither Mitch nor Dex had either.

At the same time Dex was identifying their craft and themselves to air traffic control, John switched his radio independent of his co-pilot's, feeling extremely grateful that Debra Holland hadn't been so enamored with her brother's buddies to give them her touring company's top-of-the-line helo. That one had been factory-ordered according to a boasting Holland, so it had never been a part of the fire rescue service first, thus outfitted for two pilots, with two communications systems.

Between the nearby Air Force bases at Edwards and Nellis, plus the Marines out at El Toro, John figured he could pick up some of the military air chatter independent of NORAD's oversight. Considering the number of commercial flights using LAX as a hub, not to mention all the flights going into and out of Vegas, if all non-military flights were being forced to land there would have to be coordination underway across the VHF band between military and civilian air control.

Only the military found them first. Twin sonic booms split the air above them, the edges of the pressure wave from F-16s, or the like, slamming into them. John compensated automatically and kept them in the air as well as basically level, while Dex tried to get radio specifics. Mitch had plastered his face against the plexi to see if he could spot the incoming craft. Used to racing under fixed-wing jets and around rotor gunships, John quickly began dropping his helo closer to the ground and away.
from what was going on above them.

The next set of sonic booms seemed to hit them from multiple sides, which didn't make much sense until Mitch's "What the fuck is that?" cut across on the intercom.

Double fuck, they were caught right in the middle of an engagement! Only that didn't make sense; terrorists generally didn't have fighter planes. Even if they had somehow managed to get their hands on a couple of old MiGs or something similar, they certainly couldn't have gotten into them US air space, not unless they'd stolen them directly from somewhere local. Like the graveyard at Mohave.

The glimpse of what John saw as he banked and took their bird lower wasn't a MiG, however. In fact it wasn't any sort of plane he'd ever seen before, not even on a Syd Mead or Hollywood drawing board.

The odd craft reflected a blinding white that John's sunglasses had no hope of blocking. There were four of them, all looking to be about twice the length of the engaging F-16s. Off the elongated delta shaped body, they had down-swept wings coming off the sides starting behind some sort of cockpit, and a needle nose in front of the cockpit that ended in a point like a spear or a dart. Their maneuverability seemed on par with the fighter jets and the pilots seemed pretty damn good too; in the first past neither side managed a successful hit on the other.

"Screw air traffic control, I'm landing us now," John growled and pushed the collective lower while cutting back on the speed and keeping the cyclic stationary. A Pave Hawk could drop just under two thousand feet in a minute at this altitude, and this little A-Star was holding up her end as John calculated comparisons. They'd be landing rough, going about 65 knots when he put her down, but while they then might be a sitting target, they'd be a damn sight smaller one once on the ground, and then smaller still if the three of them ditched from the craft.

"Dex, give the Feds our GPS position and let them know the combat is going on directly above us," John then commanded. "Mitch, gather up the first aid kit and whatever food and water we have left. Our jackets too; there's snow on the ground here and the storm will likely hit while we're making the trek toward the nearest road."

Dex's, "Roger," and Mitch's, "Shit," came simultaneously, as did yet another pair of sonic booms.

"I don't fucking believe this! There's a third type of bogie up there now!" Dex looked out too.

Although the downdrafts and bow waves being given off by the fighters were creating havoc against the rotors, John spared himself a moment to take a look, and could only agree with Dex's surprise and amazement. This new craft looked as unlikely as the bogey; leaving John feeling that somehow they'd not flown into the middle of a reenactment of Twelve O'Clock High, but instead Independence Day – or maybe Star Trek. It looked more like the top half of a horizontally sliced Romulan Warbird after all, with the cockpit on top of the sloped wings instead of sticking out in front of them.

"The newest craft is one of ours!" Dex suddenly shouted out before leaning over to switch John's radio for him, as John had his hands full in trying to keep them properly aloft to be switching through radio frequencies again.

"Civilian chopper, this is Major Cameron Mitchell of the US Air Force. Get the fuck out of here! The darts are hostile, I repeat, these dart-shaped bandits are -- "

No shit, John would have liked to reply. Not only hostile, but better armed – or at least the dart's missiles seemed to have a more rapid fire rate than the F-16s – or the funky, sci fi friendly craft he noted in dismay. In mere seconds the amount of flack darkening the sky above them outpaced the
storm front and the setting sun.

The screech of something inhuman and inhumanely loud suddenly cut across the Major's transmission – and John's thoughts. He wasn't sure if he heard the heart-stopping sound relayed over this Mitchell's comm system, or if the high pitched whine one of the craft made came from the outside over the sounds of explosions and the noise from his rotors. The screaming tone cut straight into John's brain. It also made John feel curiously lightheaded, not to mention partially deaf; his abrupt headache becoming literal as well as figurative.

"Mother fucker!" To John's aching ears, Mitch now sounded as if he was under three feet of water, yet his growing anxiety came through clearly. Until the clamor surrounding Major Mitchell suddenly overloaded their earpieces – a rush of white noise abruptly followed by dead air.

"One of the friendlies has been hit, but I've got two chutes," Mitch then announced with a calmness granted by too much experience in seeing this type of thing. "At our five o'clock and – Jesus!" his voice suddenly broke.

"One of the chutes just disappeared! I was looking straight at it, there was a flash of silver and an air distortion and then he was fucking gone! It was like a Martian heat ray or something"

So John wasn't the only one thinking they'd somehow flown into a sci fi film – or the Twilight Zone. It might have been amusing except John never heard Mitch sound so shaken.

"What about the other chute?" Dex tried to pull Mitch's focus back as John reversed their descent and rotated the cyclic to swing them around toward the downed airman.

Before Mitch could answer, the Military again co-opted their transceiver. "Civilian helicopter, we're going to try to draw them out of range," someone other than Mitchell spoke now. "Can you assist with spotting until we can get a SAR underway? Over."

"Combat Control, this is Major Dexter Cusiak in the civilian copter. We are three fifths of a CSAR from the 55th Rescue Squadron, including one PJ. We can handle the search and rescue if you can keep the damn bandits off our asses. But we're going to be bingo fuel in about – "

"Thirty-five – " John answered Dex off channel.

"– in about thirty-five minutes so we're either going to need to be picked up ourselves, or make for the TTRA once we have your man. Please advise further. Out."

John figured they were all three holding their breaths in the minute or so of dead air time that followed. While the enemy they found themselves involved with didn't seem to be… conventional, if this was somehow some elaborate ruse by al Queda or North Korea or some other terrorist, the Air Force wasn't going to want to let one of the pilots of an experimental craft fall into potential enemy hands. There would also be the concern of whether John's crew was who they said they were too; prudence would have them denied access to any part of a nearby military base given the top secret nature of the craft on both sides. Most likely they'd be shuffled to Beatty or Tonopah proper –

"Roger, Major Cusiak," they finally heard. "We do not have the assets to assist the recovery at this time. You are cleared to land at the Tonopah Test Range Airfield, authentication code Papa Papa Bravo Whisky One. Over."

"Roger, Papa Papa Bravo Whisky One. Out."

John didn't bother to meet Dex's gaze. An authentication code transmitted over an unsecured channel
meant shit. Using PPBW1 would get them shot down once they breached restricted airspace. November November Alpha Niner, conversely, should at least grant them an escort over the remote Nellis range.

"Mitch, what's the status on our airman?"

"I've got him in sight, but we're going to lose him behind the nearest hills in a few seconds."

As expected – hoped and wished for – thank god, Mitch was back on track, calm and already assessing what needed to be done.

"God only knows if you're going to find a place to land this baby, though," Mitch added. "Looking at the topo maps, there isn't anything flat enough for an LZ, even if it wasn't also scattered with scrub."

"Well, we've got the rope from our rock climbing," Dex suggested. "If we knot it around one of the seats, you can hot rope down – "

"But we wouldn't be able to get them back on board," John protested, knowing Mitch would do exactly that if it meant a good chance of saving the distressed airman. Same as he knew he'd let his PJ take the risk even if it meant leaving the two of them until a later extraction could be undertaken.

Worst case, he and Dex could drop all the food, water, coats and blankets along with the first aid supplies. Mitch would have his cell phone with it's GPS technology – even if he couldn't get a call signal – along with the fighter jet's locater beacon, experimental craft or not. It wouldn't be a comfortable wait, especially if the changing weather included snowfall in addition to the rising winds already hitting the mountains in California, but Mitch had toughed out worse. The real question was whether the airman could survive his potential injuries and the winter temperatures without Mitch's assistance.

"That others may live, buddy," was all that Mitch said; the motto of the pararescuemen as ingrained in Mitch's soul as leave no one behind was in John's.

"Let me help you get prepped," Dex disconnected his seatbelt and his radio before moving between the two front seats and into the back where they'd dumped all of their gear on the empty seats when they'd initially bugged out, instead of bothering with loading the storage area.

Thank God they were all three avid rock climbers in addition to being proponents of skiing, snowboarding and most every other strenuous outdoor activity. They'd bought the repelling equipment without expecting to get much time in during this leave, then gotten lucky with a couple of day trips over to Yosemite, despite the park rangers thinking them crazy for climbing in the dead of winter.

"See if you can fashion a harness too, in case it's viable to haul him up" Mitch instructed.

Being fully a fully trained paramedic meant Mitch never went anywhere without a full EMT kit stowed nearby. He wouldn't have a helmet, but a pair of snow goggles would offer Mitch's eyes some protection on the way down, and sturdy half gloves would keep him from shredding his palms as he lowered himself down. Their biggest difficulty, John figured, would be the lack of communications between them other than hand signals.

John brought the bird up over the ridge the parachute had disappeared behind and confirmed that Mitch had been right about the lack of a landing zone. Even hovering was going to be a bitch; the canyon was narrow enough to worry about catching his rotors with an unlucky wind gust. He'd not be able to descend as low as he'd prefer for Mitch's sake either, although his hover height shouldn't
exceed Mitch's capabilities – or their rope.

"I've got his canopy in sight," John confirmed. "I'm going to have to hold at about two-fifty." The silk spread over the desert bushes and stunted trees, with no sign of any movement underneath or nearby, other than a billowing from the wind. It looked like the airman was either dead or unconscious, and either way, Mitch would want to take a closer look.

John really wished he had the rest of his crew with them. Mitch would normally have his fellow PJ, Donovan Harper, going down with him for back-up and protection, while Nicky Zako oversaw the rope, since a flight engineer's duties weren't exactly on call during this part of the search and rescue. In this instance, not only would Dex not be available in assisting John as co-pilot, but Dex wasn't as familiar with that end of the operation to intuitively know what else Mitch might need on the ground with him, nor would Mitch be able to call back to the chopper to explain it.

Well, that's why John was the lead pilot and got paid the big money. It wasn't particularly boastful to say that he was one of the best – he was. He had eighteen years experience in the Air Force and had been courted out of special ops to fly search and rescue because he could fly almost anything. He would even admit that if not for his flying skills, the Air Force would have booted his insubordinate ass to curb years ago ... and if the Air Force hadn't been the best place to use those skills, he'd have resigned rather than put up with its shit.

Well, that, and because being gay and being in the Air Force really, really pissed off his old man.

Dex tapped on his shoulder. John nodded in return to the hand signals that followed, but couldn't take his eye away from his constant struggle to keep his position to watch Dex move beyond his peripheral vision over to the passenger door on the craft's left side and opposite from John's position. Another tap, followed by a thumbs up thrust over John's shoulder came from Mitch. They were ready for Mitch to jump.

John released the kiddie locks and gave Dex a go motion. He'd set the chopper hovering at two hundred feet from the ground, about fifty feet to the right of the downed chute and maybe forty from the closest hillside. While it would make them an easy target if the air battle drifted back over their direction, he still turned on all of the exterior lights since visibility was going to be a problem for Mitch even with everything they had. At least Debra Holland had kept the old medivac flood lights as she'd also kept the dual pilot communications system when she'd replaced the sliding lateral door and added the comfortable seating for the tourists.

A sudden blast of cold air loosened and caught up some paper when Dex popped the door open, but the quick shifting of Mitch's weight as he headed over the side gave John more of a challenge in keeping his helo level. Nothing he couldn't handle. He spared a quick look to his left to make sure everything was on track.

Dex had fastened a quick release tether around his own waist, as he leaned out of the opening to keep the down-line from getting tangled in the landing struts. He'd put on his own set of snow goggles and climbing gloves, and had hooked a foot around the nearest seat to stabilize his position. It was all make-shift as hell, scary to look at or really think about, but their equipment was all top of the line (and proven), Mitch and Dex's skills were certainly up to the job, and all John really had to do was keep things steady – and wait.

It wasn't sonic booms that heralded the return of the air combat overhead this time, but that mind-numbing scream cutting through the air from the unidentified bandit. John only just refrained from clutching at his head. Covering his ear or pulling the headphones off wasn't going to help.

He couldn't see the dart, nor any trace of friendlies in pursuit – not radio traffic either. That didn't
have to mean he'd been targeted, but John didn't doubt the opportunity to blow them out of the sky wouldn't be taken. He could only hope his bird hadn't been spotted yet, as there was nothing he could do as long as Mitch was going down the rope –

Well, he could take them lower, exchanging one risk for another. If he dropped another ninety or a hundred feet, the hillside would be less than ten feet from the rotor, but the wind should drop in its intensity and the screeching might lessen to the point where John didn't feel like he was about to bleed from his eyes and ears. Also Mitch could then let go if he had to…

"Dex, tell Mitch to hold tight for a minute," John yelled out. "I'm going to drop us through the safety margin. Send over everything else useful once Mitch's on the ground, and then follow him down. There aren't any friendlies coming to get rid of this bandit unless I go out and find them."

It was a toss up to wonder if Dex's blanching came from the thought of having to hot rope thirty or so feet himself, or in letting John off to go play cat and mouse with a hostile without Dex to back him up. Instead of arguing or hesitating, Dex gave him a quick nod and reached over to drag at Mitch's EMT bag with one hand while he signaled Mitch to hold with his other.

John eased the helo down further, quickly setting them back to hovering. Instantly the weight load shifted and lessened. Uncomfortable with taking his attention away from his instruments to check, he guessed Dex was dumping all of their luggage, not just the things that might be useful for his and Mitch's digging in overnight.

Another pull on the craft's stability was Dex's evac, and almost before John could make note of it, the drag disappeared. He really wasn't sure if Dex had stayed connected long enough to have landed safely, nor did he have the time to check; a scream and a fucking huge shadow announced that the dart had not only circled around, but all too obviously had a bead on his position.

With a silent apology to the men on the ground for not only having to abandon them, but for the havoc his own downdraft would cause, John rotated the cyclic over to tilt the left side of the helo downward before pulling the collective to nearly ninety degrees up while pressing on the throttle pedal for speed and a demand of pretty much everything this little bird could give. The only flaw in his normal Pave Hawk was its ascent rate, but John had enough years of experience in flying to know every trick that could be coaxed out of any helicopter and this A-Star was already proving itself a real trooper.

His biggest hope was that this bandit was like every other fixed-wing craft, as well as its pilot being like every other hotshot, top-gun wannabe. The jet jockeys might ultimately have the speed and distance, but no plane could match a helo in maneuverability, and fighter jocks thought linearly, while John had all three dimensions of movement at his disposal.

Once up and away from his men, John flared the rotors to hang in the air while the dart screamed past him without firing. He then turned in a full one eighty and began flying backward, to keep an eye on the dart's flight path before swinging around again and heading for the deck until his landing struts might catch the top of the scrub if he wasn't careful. He killed all of his lights except for those on his instrument panels, with a hope (but no expectation) of disappearing into the shadows. He had no weapons, no real radar capabilities to keep track of his pursuer other than the tingle on the back of his neck and the Doppler shift of the screech that he was sure was turning his brain into liquid goo. At the speed he traveled currently, and the distance from the ground, he'd have to be on top of his game to react quickly enough to the altimeter readings, but it wasn't like he had any countermeasure to throw out once the other's missiles or whatever started flying. His only hope for stopping incoming weapons fire was the hills surrounding him, and his ability to slalom through them.

In reality, John figured this was it, and while he'd never imagined going out during air combat over
his own country's soil, he could only laugh a little as he juked the A-Star sideways before throttling up and then backward again to try and fool the incoming weapon's lock from the impossibility of the maneuver. Three dimensions over two, John's mind filled with vectors and sky, and he had no regrets.

Remarkably the missile did overshoot same as the dart had, when its target stayed on the same plane until the very last second while still cutting the distance between them exponentially. John had a suspicion that the missiles were pilot-navigated, or maybe their computers weren't very imaginative, though he didn't think he'd be able to pull the same trick again. The only way to overcome superior firepower was better flying – and a fuckload of luck.

John had played chicken against HINDs and HAVOCs, the former being tougher and more brutal than a Pave Hawk and the latter as maneuverable. He'd raced toward and away from MiGs and Sukhois and every other Soviet aircraft the despots and warlords of the world could get their hands on. But never with absolutely no support; no co-pilot, no wingman, no ground troops, no air cover, not even a fucking AWAC. Still, he was doing okay, was keeping ahead and away while he attempted to draw them both toward Edwards instead of Nellis, since there were much fewer chances for collateral damage on the ground below them in the California desert than over the Strip, and surely the US Military had every fucking asset in the air that could fly –

The hit jerked him hard enough that John smacked his head against the plexi despite his harness. When he could actually draw two thoughts together again, he decided it had actually been a near miss, had been one of the dart's missiles impacting against the hillside and he'd simply flown into the blast and debris field since his helo had stayed intact, if sluggish to respond to his actions.

Or maybe the sluggishness was his reactions, though he hadn't let go of either the cyclic or the collective. His head certainly hadn't needed a knock in addition to whatever sonic weapon thing they had going.

Nor did his craft need any holes punched into it, spewing debris proved as effective as any damn bullets. But what John wanted and what he got hadn't matched up for, well, pretty much his whole damn life. One more thing to compartmentalize and put out of his conscious thoughts.

His fuel tank was intact – not that that miracle would matter in about twelve minutes – but something had happened to the oil line. The pressure showed an appreciable if slow drop, with his twelve minutes of airtime now being more like eight – or four if it had been holed instead of some sort of crimp from something else being damaged. He was also drifting left despite adjusting the cyclic, which meant the tail rotor had been damaged despite it being integrated within the tail instead of external to the craft.

Well, unlike fixed-wings, helicopters could maneuver sideways as well as backwards, and maybe –

John flared the main rotors and let his speed drop, skittering sideways yes, but then throwing everything into maintaining a hover as the copter slewed into a slow, 360 degree spin he didn't bother to compensate for. Tom Cruise had made the slamming into reverse maneuver part of the public's lexicon, but not even a top gun could have actually stopped without stalling (and falling). Not only did the dart overshoot once more, but in the distraction of his target hanging suddenly stationary, the bandit's pilot was also distracted away from the change in his own terrain, and had no chance of pulling up in time before he impacted against the hillside.

Turning his head from the explosion, John pushed the cyclic sideways again while pulling back on the collective and stomping on the throttle to try and race above the shockwave. He was partially successful – in that he didn't immediately stall and begin to drop.
One more diagnostic showed he had lost more than half of his avionics this time, including any updating of his fuel or oil pressure gauge. Knowing he couldn't stay in the air long enough to reach any legitimate landing zone— and no chance of returning toward Mitch, Dex and the downed pilot— John cast an eye out for any area level enough to allow a survivable landing. Shadows fully engulfed the ground with the sun now obscured by the hills he'd stayed within, and even if he had power for the lights he wasn't sure he should turn them back on— or if he could. While it might be nice to catch the attention of a friendly again, he wasn't up to engaging yet another bandit if one came looking.

Having moved westward instead of east and into restricted air space during his game of catch me if you can, John was confident he'd passed over a paved road at one point, which should have been Highway 95, or that other one that ran down into Death Valley. Being over foothills, he decided he was north and west of both of them, but didn't think he'd strayed too far. While he might not be able to coax the failing craft the entire distance to an actual road, going eastward and maybe a bit south should be his best chance for finding a semi-flat landing zone, not to mention the likelihood of finding some help. He figured he had about two minutes and one shot at walking away.

1711 Zulu; January 13, 2003
Southbound on Highway 95,
13 miles North of Beatty, Nevada

Dr. Rodney McKay couldn't believe the week he was having. While he would never complain about being recalled back to the States after his eighteen month exile in Russia, he certainly would have preferred to have had more than an hour's notice that his employer had sent someone to retrieve him. He'd been given no time to do anything but stabilize his current experiments and turn over his notes to idiots who would never be able to understand them. No time to gather his belongings, which had, no doubt then been picked over by the criminals he'd been working with, and anything they hadn't stolen had likely then been destroyed by the United States Air Force and Marine Neanderthals who'd been charged with packing up his apartment.

Instead of being grateful— gracious— that he'd been willing to disrupt his work and life to bail their butts out for a third time, Rodney had instead been subjected to more inconveniences, one right after another. With no luggage, nothing he'd call food, and after ten hours on his feet already spent in the Russian lab, his American-bound flight had been diverted instead for a twenty-seven hour flight to Antarctica.

Okay, he wasn't one to pass up any opportunity to get his hands on real alien technology. Except that what the SGC laughingly called a remote base was little more than a few rooms chipped out from the ice, rooms with no amenities, with barely anything that could be called a bed, and a canteen mess that seemed to feel citrus was a requirement. Like rickets was really going to be their biggest concern.

Not that he'd been given much time to spend in eating— or in bed— anyway.

You should have slept on the plane, McKay.

Like anyone normal could.

Of course, Rodney had been allowed to stay at the Antarctic base only long enough to completely have his circadian rhythms screwed up. Not that spending more time would have helped enough, given the twenty-four hours of constant daylight. Not that he'd seen the sun; the lab he'd been whisked to had been several stories under the ice and he hadn't been about to take a walk outside.

Thirty-four hours later he'd been back in the air, in one of the most uncomfortable and noisy Air
Force transport planes he could imagine. With only fuel stops taken in Christchurch, New Zealand, Pago Pago, and the Hickman Air Force base in Hawaii, they’d then finally landed at Edwards out in the middle of the Mohave Desert after another thirty hours of flight time. They’d come in during the dead of night and it seemed he’d only just collapsed onto a real bed before someone woke him and shoved him into another fucking plane for the final leg to Area 51.

Like what they needed him for couldn’t wait six hours, much less eight or, oh, ten. So he could get some fucking sleep.

After yet another aborted attempt to sleep, not even five hours this time, just enough for Rodney to be assigned his new quarters, his lab and to meet with some of the people he’d be working with before being allowed to crash, he was once more awakened and told he needed to be traveling again. Which was where he was now, this time crammed between two Marine officers in the second bench seat of a van careening down treacherous mountain roads at totally unsafe speeds, especially as it was dusk and winter and the road would soon be succumbing to the inevitable black ice.

Some drunken hick had claimed he’d found a piece of a UFO out in his back forty. The initial Air Force investigation had been passed on to the SGC, where they found the possibility credible enough to send out a team. The fact that Rodney was one of them now being sent either meant it truly was alien technology (and that Samantha Carter was obviously off-world to not be able to claim it), or it was all a great big hoax and although they’d brought him back from Russia, Rodney was still being punished before they got around to telling him whatever real reason they’d needed him for.

Even if this trip wasn’t punishment, his military escort obviously was.

While the Air Force had operational control of the Stargate Program, the Marines served the bulk of the security positions. On the one hand, he could suppose he was being treated like a VIP, with a lieutenant and a colonel heading up his security.

But with it being this colonel and that lieutenant…

The colonel was the most humorless man Rodney had ever meant, and that was saying something after spending eighteen months with the Russian equivalent of the SGC. The man’s only expression seemed to be perpetually pissed off. His only redeeming feature was that he stayed quiet; he’d introduced himself and his team, had given Rodney his instructions before issuing instructions to the other grunts, and then had said absolutely nothing else in the hour plus they’d now been traveling.

The lieutenant, in contrast, seemed to be trying to make up for her COs dourness. Her inane cheerfulness was more annoying, however, than being ignored was demeaning. Except she had stepped up on Rodney’s behalf when he’d requested a quick stop to get a drink and some food at the first public gas station they’d come across.

Rodney didn’t expect she believed his impending hypoglycemia, as the so-called experts also generally ignored his life-threatening condition, but she’d still convinced Colonel Sumner to authorize the stop. No doubt to pick up one of the colored water rip-offs for herself. The upside was that while she was downing something called dragonfruit, she wasn’t asking Rodney idiotic questions.

Not so the other two enlisted jarheads who rode up front, however.

The marine next to the driver kept trying to engage Rodney into conversation, as if Rodney had anything in common with some small-minded soldier. The fact that both of them had spent time in Russia held no interest for Rodney. Neither did the small talk the driver tried to engage Rodney in; as if the soldier boy was really interested in (or understood) the field of astrophysics.
As if he had a chance of understanding even the most basic science behind the enormity of what Rodney researched.

Then there was the fact the driver kept looking away from the road whenever he responded to the conversation the lieutenant and the other jarhead took up after Rodney had made it clear he wasn’t going to spend the rest of the trip entertaining them. And the fact that the colonel kept ignoring them all as he instead read over some report he’d pulled out of his briefcase.

As a result, Rodney was annoyed and terrified, but mainly he was dead tired, both physically and from being around members of the American military, even if the ones now were part of Stargate Command and so he didn’t have to censor his occasional comments.

"Holy shit, sir! You had better take this," the passenger jarhead suddenly sat up ramrod straight before twisting around and pulling off the earbud he’d been wearing to monitor their radio transceiver.

Rodney hesitated in reaching for it – who knew what sort of unseemly and unsanitary things might be shared – except, apparently, Rodney wasn’t the ‘sir’ that the marine meant, as he dropped the earbud into the colonel’s hand.

"And Markham, maybe you had better pull off to the side of the road for a few minutes," the jarhead spoke his next words to the driver.

Before Rodney could protest the annoying delay stopping would engender, or from being kept out of the loop, the sky overhead erupted into a clamor of sounds Rodney had only ever hear before coming out of the fifth-rate speakers installed in the third-rate computer he’d been given to use in Russia. The shitty equipment had seemed fitting for a shittier selection of movies, both of which Rodney had availed himself of, since the alternative had been watching his lab assistant's vodka freeze or actually having to listen to Kavanagh's sniveling about how his girlfriend didn't appreciate him enough.

Watching every testosterone laden action/adventure and war movie Hollywood had produced over the last forty years, though, had in no way prepared Rodney for the reality of actually being caught up in one. Even his previous experiences with the SGC had been research and not field work, so he'd never been caught up in some sort of air battle. The jets now screaming mere yards over their heads were loud enough that Rodney could feel the noise pressing against his chest. He certainly didn't need to be able to hear the colonel's choked off curse to know that they were suddenly in a lot of trouble.

Not when the lieutenant grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him over toward the window she'd plastered her face against. He’d first seen one of the SGC's ultra-secret F-302’s during his first recall from Russia, when the aircraft's first experimental test flight had gone horribly wrong, they'd been attacked by the Goa'uld Anubis To see one flying now, in open air and over a semi-populated area…

Markham's driving had kept Rodney in a constant state of panic. Realizing a new threat existed so great that the President and the IOA had authorized the use – and now the unavoidable disclosure – of the F-302 program caused Rodney's brilliant mind to actually stutter and blank.

Well, the cat's out of the bag now, was all he could think before realizing that being anywhere near a fragile window while a fighter spacecraft flew overhead was suicidal. The SGC had managed to cover up their own existence and that of real alien races for seven years and barely weathered the fallout from their limited disclosure of the program to the other major industrial nations. Rodney wasn't sure what was going to happen now, but he had no doubt that someone, somewhere was filming this and was already in contact with a news department. UFO sightings could only be
suppressed when folks weren't actually killed by them.

He hadn't actually spotted any alien craft yet, but what else could it be for the SGC to have unveiled the F-302's in US airspace?

"Dr. McKay, are you by chance armed?" Colonel Sumner suddenly asked him while handing the radio receiver back to the jarhead.

"Of course not," Rodney answered, his defensiveness coming automatically when dealing with the typical military mindset of shoot first, think after. And maybe because of the look of disdain Sumner gave him from having tucked himself down as small as he could in the middle seat.

"Why?" Rodney asked in a sudden spike of personal concern. "What's going on? Who's attacking? It can't be the Goa'uld, because of that Asgard treaty, right? So is it – "

"No one is sure who's attacking, Doctor," the colonel said rather firm and calmly, considering how pale his complexion had become while listening to whatever information he had received. "All I know is that the entire US Military is now at Defcon One, that Homeland Security has raised the Threat Level to Red, and that there are firefights underway over several cities all across the globe. The information is sporadic and incomplete, probably by some sort of jamming within the combat zones."

"Or the aliens have knocked out some of our satellites," Rodney brought up, rather surprised at how forthcoming the stern colonel had become.

"Or that," Sumner nodded grimly. "Orders are to insure your safety and get you back to Area 51, except they were interrupted and all we've got now is white noise, so combat is possibly headed this way, or is actually already over Groom Lake."

"Then why aren't we moving?" Because they weren't, although Rodney supposed that had its advantages as his driver had elected to check the status of his handgun instead.

"Whoa, Doc," the lieutenant suddenly clamped her hand on the arm that might have flailed from Rodney's agitation.

It wasn't as if he'd actually hit her or the colonel. It certainly hadn't hit the driver hard enough to stop him from getting the van back in motion and maneuvering them back the way they'd come – with liberal use of the road's soft shoulder.

For a moment that was okay. For a moment, Rodney appreciated the warm contact of another person, who also happened to be a hot redhead.

The passenger jarhead suddenly backed away from the windshield he'd pressed against. "The F-302s have moved out of sight, Colonel. I can't see any of them any longer. There were a couple of flares that could have been missile fire. Action is now to the north of us, and they were moving mostly eastward."

Area 51 was eastward and a bit to the north if Rodney had his directions straight. The base there would certainly be a viable target for any alien race aware of Earth's Stargate program. Major parts of the facility were underground, but there were also the hangers and warehouses above ground, visible to anyone who chanced flying into a restricted zone.

"We need to get somewhere undercover," Rodney suggested. "Somewhere close. The hick who found the UFO, he's here somewhere right? Or the town he gets his hayseed from?"
"Beatty's about fifteen miles behind us, sir," the driver piped up, but again Rodney wasn't any surer he was the sir being answered despite it being his question. Behind them, with the driver continuing north and east so Beatty was only getting further away.

"We've no early indication that the SGC is being targeted over anything else," Sumner actually seemed willing to explain why he wasn't ordering them to safety. "We should – "

"Fuck me!" the driver and his front seat companion abruptly exclaimed in tandem.

Leading Rodney to wonder how close friends those two were as he jerked his head up and toward the front of the van to see what had so caught them off guard. To see what caused the driver to slew them almost completely around before bringing them to an abrupt stop which threw Rodney into the comfortable resting place between the lieutenant's surprisingly ample breasts that her uniform was totally hiding. She didn't hit him when he groped her a little more in trying to pull away and regain his bearings, but then, no doubt, she was pretty shaken up too by what lay before them.

They'd come out of a blind curve – and apparently, somehow, they'd been deaf to what had happened here too. Military jets practically strafing you certainly could make enough noise to cover the sound of another aircraft's crash.

Okay, the crash had probably happened at least ten minutes earlier, considering they'd driven down this road no more than fifteen minutes previous –

Rodney had to work to keep from hyperventilating at the thought that if they'd hadn't stopped for food, that twelve or fifteen minutes could have meant they would have been directly under one of the rods impaled in the. Rodney decided they'd hadn't come from an F-302 – or any fighter jet. Maybe from a helicopter? That looked like pieces from some kind of landing strut.

There was also the twisted piece of metal now sticking up at a thirty degree angle in the asphalt that Rodney was sure had once been a rotor blade. The piece was both too long and too wide to be from a single or twin-engine propeller, and, anything larger, they would have heard crashing regardless. No doubt that blade had been what had dug a trench down the last few feet the mountainside rising eastward.

Of the main body of the craft, the only sign was a patch of melted road and a large trench that led off the western drop. Obviously the pilot had been attempting to land on the road and something had gone wrong – or maybe partially right since there didn't seem to be evidence of a massive fireball.

Shit, maybe this hadn't been a helicopter at all! Who knew what the debris field from one of the alien craft would look like?

"What are you doing?" Rodney asked, although it was obvious when the colonel opened the sliding door and jumped from his seat to land in a crouch on the road, gun in hand.

"Lieutenant Cadman, stay with Doctor McKay," the colonel ordered from the door while taking a careful glance around. "Sergeant Stackhouse, you're with me. See about clearing the road while I check for survivors. Sergeant Markham, if things go pear shaped, head on into Beatty and see if you can raise Nellis. And Laura," he leaned back into the van to catch the lieutenant's eye, "try Area 51 again. If the transceiver isn't working, see if you can reach someone in there or at the SGC by cell phone and let them know our situation."

The look the colonel gave the lieutenant had Rodney reaching for his own phone in his laptop case that he'd set beneath his feet, remembering only at the last moment that he hadn't been here long enough to have been issued a new one for use in the States. The piece of crap he'd had in Russia
wouldn't have worked with any US system, even if it hadn't been confiscated before his departure.

His laptop, conversely, was state-of-the-art and had a satellite modem connection, as the Russian internet providers worked with worse equipment than their cell phone counterparts. No one at the SGC or Area 51 might have wanted to talk to Rodney more than once or twice over the last eighteen months, but they sure as hell had needed to be able to receive the results of his research, so he'd had access to the internet no matter where he'd been housed.

Rodney wasn't sure they were enough out of the mountains to make the link, but he figured it was worth checking since he'd already pulled his case onto his lap.

While he waiting for the computer to boot up, he slid over on the seat and leaned out to take a look through the opened doorway. The colonel had signaled the sergeant to stay put while he headed toward the down slope. Rodney grudgingly gave Sumner credit for not moving immediately to the melted ditch, instead the colonel had moved out past the front of the van before creeping over to the shoulder; staying quiet and maybe also staying out of sight from whom – or what – ever might be waiting over the edge as he approached the melted area obliquely.

So, of course, neither soldier was looking in the right direction when the man Rodney quickly assumed had been the pilot managed to reach the road. Listing and limping, the newcomer that at least appeared to look human, had come out of the shadows near where the gouge had been taken out of the hillside instead of from the drop off. Rodney had only been looking back there as it seemed to be the direction he received the strongest signal from (although he'd yet to actually connect with the satellite). Only years of storing practically his entire brain in whatever laptop he had at hand kept Rodney from dropping it in his sudden panic.

"Lieutenant Madman!" he called out to his escort. "There – the colonel – Oh shit!"

In the next moment Rodney found himself flung back from the opening, the laptop spinning from his hands anyway, to clatter against the asphalt. Before he could protest or berate, Rodney then had a mouth and lap full of the perfectly formed ass of a female marine as she climbed over him.

Rodney wasn't sure if he was happy or sad that she wore pants; the slacks hugged her more fully than a skirt would, and she was obviously fit enough to beat the shit out of him if he said anything, but it might have been worth it to find out if she wore regulation undergarments or not – and if she was a natural redhead.

"It's Cadman, not Madman!" she corrected with an all too cheeky grin before rolling off of him and out of the van, her own gun held in a two handed grip as she came up in a ready stance.

So maybe she wouldn't have kicked his ass ...

"Hold still!" she then called out to the new arrival. Her yell of, "Colonel!" wasn't really necessary as hers and Rodney's earlier shout had caught everyone's attention, including the new guy's. He'd stopped moving in the face of three guns pointed at him, other than slowly putting his hands on top of his head like maybe he'd been the center of attention of soldiers holding guns before. Stopped but for a bit of swaying, as if he was having trouble staying upright from maybe having recently been in some sort of accident. Like a fucking helicopter crash.

He certainly looked a bit worn around the edges now that he'd come close enough for Rodney to make out a few details; dark hair sticking straight up and horribly mussed, dark smudges of dirt or possibly blood covering his hands and a side of his face. Probably covering his clothing too, but they were also dark colored if not actually black – jeans and what looked to have been a long-sleeve Henley that was now missing most of both sleeves although part of one looked to be wrapped
around a wrist. No jacket, however, in fact nothing remotely appropriate for the winter air and approaching nightfall, like the down-and-fleece jacket Rodney pulled tighter over his orange fleece in subconscious response. Otherwise the guy really did appear completely human, near Rodney's age and height, and probably thirty pounds lighter.

Of course, every report Rodney had been able to get his hands on stated that the Goa'uld looked human initially. Right up until their eyes glowed golden and they tortured you with some sort of device that harnessed and magnified some sort of psychic energy or mental will.

Lieutenant Cadman pushed Rodney back into the van when he tried to get a better look at what was happening. There didn't seem to be any evidence of a weapon in the man's possession, and Sumner had actually gone so far as to lower his own as he approached. Rodney couldn't clearly make out the words the two exchanged, but he did see a glint from the last of the sun coming off of something the man handed over to Sumner before the guy then reached behind his back.

Cadman and the other jarhead, Stacksomething, both brought their guns higher in alert, but it became immediately obvious that the other man only reached for his wallet, and then whatever ID he provided was enough for Sumner to signal his marines to stand down.

Sumner and the guy started back toward the van while Sergeant Stacksit went back to dragging metal off of the road. Cadman left her position in front of Rodney when it became obvious one person alone wasn't going to be able to remove the rotor blade from where it had become buried and now served as a significant road hazard.

"Dr. McKay," and for a moment Rodney thought Sumner was calling for him to help with the somewhat humorous example of the deplorable state of the US school system science classes those other two were showcasing in trying to work the blade out, only to realize that Sumner was gesturing for Rodney to join him instead. Just in time to keep the – wow, pretty hot looking despite the circumstances – newcomer from doing himself further harm when his knees buckled.

"Sorry about that, sir," came a slurred mumble as hot guy's head lolled against Rodney's shoulder before they got him mostly upright again.

"Don't worry about it, Major," Sumner returned with surprising gentleness, and well, that sorta cleared up why Sumner had holstered his gun, and why the unexpected solicitude. Not that Rodney imagined this guy could be a marine, not with hair that would be too long without it looking like it had been caught up in an explosion – or a helicopter crash. But the US Military did seem to have a built in camaraderie…when they weren't caught up in branch rivalry pissing contests.

Like who should be in control of Stargate Command.

"Dr. McKay, get Major Sheppard into the van," Sumner ordered and, of course, was already shifting most of Sheppard's weight onto Rodney before he had a chance to say anything. Sumner gave Rodney a look like he figured Rodney intended to protest, then: "The enemy is overhead, Doctor, and while we really need to get you back to base as quickly as possible, I am not going to endanger civilians or anybody else who may be driving through the area by leaving such a hazard in place, so unless you'd rather pick up road debris –"

"Colonel." Hot guy suddenly pulled away before Rodney could solidify his grip. He caught hold of Sumner's sleeve – to stay upright as much as to stop Sumner, Rodney discovered as he fumbled to get a better hold on hot guy while trying to ignore the firmness under his fingers. Lieutenant Cadman's uniform wasn't the only one hiding secrets.

"I was part of a SAR underway to the west and north of this position," hot guy said, the slurring
mostly gone under his intense need to be heard. "I'm pretty sure I remember seeing a turnout off this road that will get us back to within a couple of miles of where the … friendly went down. Two of my men are with the airman, but there aren't any other assets nearby to finish the evacuation, probably until morning, and with the storm coming in…"

Rodney took a moment to place SAR as search and rescue while he also got a more firm (and less molesting) hold on hot guy.

Sumner nodded. "Dr. McKay, see if you can do something to keep our Major here awake long enough to get us there," as he gestured to the blood caking the side of hot guy's head. "But Major, you had better pass on every landmark you can remember to Markham just in case."

Hot guy twitched, like he considered nodding back but managed to stop himself and only slumped back into Rodney's hold instead of aggravating his head injury by moving it and likely passing out. Good thing, since hot guy was heavier than his lanky frame suggested. Rodney had done his share of moving and lifting heavy equipment in Russia since it was that or watch multi-million dollar electronics be destroyed by ham-fisted idiots, but his back certainly wouldn't be up to dead lifting one hundred and eighty or so pounds.

"I'm a real doctor, not a medical one," Rodney found himself apologizing while Sumner moved away and he helped hot guy stumble toward the van. The hot – the major was remarkably composed about being manhandled roughly due to Rodney's own flustered awkwardness, or maybe he really was that out of it. "I can hold a bandage to someone's head if I have to as long as I can't really see the blood, but I don't give shots, or – "

"Don't worry about it," the major responded softly and then gave himself a little shake which caused him to almost fall out of Rodney's grasp again, but also seemed to turn a returning slur into a more decipherable drawl. "I take any morphine now and all of my directions will come out in colors instead of compass points." His sudden smile seemed to say in other circumstances that wouldn't have been a bad thing, which had Rodney offering a bit of a grin himself.

Rodney's only experience with morphine had come during University, after breaking a leg during skiing. At the time it had been needed, of course, and the subsequent experimenting had been solely for science's benefit – or so he and Davie Geller had claimed when they'd turned in their lab notes.

"I'd kill for some water though, both to drink and to get this shit out of my eye," the major continued with a personable grin that Rodney might have suspected to be flirting under other circumstances. But male US Majors didn't flirt with other men in public, not even those in the Coast Guard. Certainly no guy this hot would be trying to flirt with Rodney, even if they'd happened to be the only two people in a gay bar.

The 'shit' was the blood that, in addition to painting his face from temple to stubbled jaw line, had also covered most of a rather pointed ear. Not as pointed as Orlando Bloom's had been as Legolas, and certainly not as hot as Mr. Spock's, but –

"I'm not sure there's anything other than the lieutenant's overpriced, colored water," Rodney apologized yet again, starting to freak himself out. He rarely apologized even when he was at fault, and berated people who attempted to gain attention by feigning guilt for things completely out of their control.


"But it's probably cherry flavored, and I'm already covered with enough red." The slurring returned,
and Rodney figured it was easier to let the major prattle on inanely than to try and correct him, especially since the mention of Kool-Aid had brought a sweeter type of smile to the man's face. There were obviously good memories there, that Rodney decided weren't about alternating with vodka shots.

Fortunately, the remaining sergeant, Marxist or whatever, had laid out a first aid kit across the second bench seat before reclaiming the steering wheel and his position of get-away driver should it become necessary. While Rodney wasn't happy the sergeant expected Rodney to continue with his Florence Nightingale routine, there wasn't really going to be room for a third in the back bench seat, and the major definitely wasn't letting go as they ducked into the van. Even so, a few pointed words came to mind before Rodney noticed Sergeant Marxist had also stolen Rodney's laptop (which, hurrah, worked), and the nature of the diatribe on his lips shifted to begin a full berating smackdown.

Except then hot guy suddenly proved that he, too, had skipped over the portion of his science education that covered Newton's laws. For some reason he stopped in the midst of climbing over the folded seatback. This not only derailed Rodney's rant, but caused Rodney to bash his head against that nicely solid shoulder and bicep Rodney had already discovered, before Rodney managed to steady them both.

Rodney forgot to say ow when he caught sight of what had claimed the other two's attention.

Apparently his internet satellite had connected despite the laptop being dropped, because the video Marxist was watching wasn't something Rodney had ever – or would ever – voluntarily download.

The broadcaster seemed to have no idea which camera feed to stay with, but maybe it didn't really matter since they all seemed to be showing the same scenes of various cities scattered across the globe. A daylight Moscow was obvious, so too the Golden Gate Bridge at dusk, and Sydney, then Tokyo (or at least somewhere in the Far East given the kanji signs all over the buildings behind the people). Scenes of typical, normal cities filled with the traffic of cars or people. Normal, except that these commonplace views were suddenly being bisected by a white shaft of light with a spread of twenty or so feet at its nadir, being beamed down from the sky. When the beam blinked out or swept further away, nothing of the people remained but abandoned belongings, empty bikes and cars rolling into one another or being pushed inward from the vehicles further out on the streets that contained their drivers.

Someone had caught footage of an F-302 too. Yet the concern of the SGC's experimental spacecraft being made public didn't matter in the face of watching a beam of light sweep over it, and then seeing it spiral and fall from the sky as if the pilot was no longer conscious behind the controls.

"That's not al Queda," the major whispered and yeah, the crowds shown from Cairo and Baghdad looked as terrified and disappeared as thoroughly after the sweeping beams covered them.

Earth was being attacked. Not by the Goa'uld or the Asgard, not by any other race or civilization that Rodney had read about in SGC’s files. While the Asgard had teleportation technology and the Goa'uld had their rings to displace matter from a planet to a ship, these whitish beams weren't manifestations of either –

"There is more I downloaded," Marxist abruptly whispered in his own dismay and disbelief.

Rodney took in a deep, dragging breath. The sergeant looked so damn scared with his head twisting back over his shoulder so he could meet Rodney's eyes. Although an off-world veteran even at his twenty-something years, at the moment he looked more like a little boy who’d discovered the bogey man was real, and suddenly Rodney was right there with him in panicking.
They were being invaded.

"All of our connections are dead," Marxist continued with an audible gulp. "No more satellite internet, no cell phone coverage and nothing over our transceiver either," with a gesture to the under the dash set up Stacksit had been monitoring … fuck had it been even a half an hour ago?

The sergeant then turned his attention back to the computer and clicked on another file. "This is what's doing it apparently," Marxist then said and another video started playing. It showed to be only a few seconds. "It's from an IM from Major Carter that I tried to download along with the news footage. This is all I got before the connection cut off."

This was seven or so seconds of several huge, alien ships hovering out toward the Moon. They looked like nothing Rodney had ever seen, nothing real, nothing from Hollywood, although there was that one animated Star Trek episode that had an organic ship that looked something like this –

"It's got be somebody's idea of a joke," Rodney forced out, his voice hoarse, but then his throat was so damn dry. "Some hacker or hackers out of Eastern Europe who are perpetrating a massive Wellsian hoax or something while they sit back and watch the idiot public overloads the net and the phone wires – "

"That's one of the motherfuckers that tried to shoot me down," the major interrupted with his own choked off tone when Marxist returned to the first video and it showed a different alien ship that had dipped down low enough near Big Ben to be caught by a BBC camera. "That's the same type of ship that shot down the guy we need to go rescue – Fuck the road if they haven't cleared it yet," he suddenly gripped Rodney's arm hard enough to raise bruises before pretty much collapsing onto the back benchseat and pulling Rodney over with him.

Once more Rodney had a face full of someone else's ass (one as tight as Cadman's), but he had less of an opportunity to enjoy it before the major's twisting ended up shoving Rodney against the levered seatback, until this time he was the one needing to hold onto hot guy's arms to not fall over.

"Sergeant, get your men back here and show Colonel Sumner what you were able to get before you lost the link," the major then ordered almost directly into Rodney's ear. Even if he wasn't a marine, he obviously had enough military experience to have The Voice, as Marxist didn't hesitate to slide out of his seat and start hollering for the others.

"If we really are in the middle of a remake of Independence Day, I sure as hell hope that computer up there is a Mac." This was said much quieter but adrenalin clear, despite hot guy slumping against his own seat back and closing his eyes. His grip also remained strong enough for Rodney to finally be able to maneuver into a seated position next to him without further harming – or embarrassing – either of them.

"Mine is a unique platform that combines the best of every type of personal computer and can run any type of software. It's absurd to think that some stupid cable television technician could write a suitable virus to overload the alien's processing core, much less make any two wildly divergent computer systems compatible," Rodney huffed as he leaned over the major to reach the first aid supplies.

It was Nevada, so, duh, they did have jerrycans of emergency water stored in the cargo space behind them despite Rodney's earlier comment. Not that he was in a position to crawl any further back, given how his hands were shaking as he reached over hot guy's body for some gauze. Except he didn't have to, upon seeing a couple of small, clear bottles already tucked into the opened kit bag.

The major roused himself up enough to pull on the seatback in front of them to make it ready again
for the passengers no doubt now running back their direction. And then it became Rodney's turn to show off his ass by having to root down below the seat for the gauze roll that he, of course, dropped when hot guy moved. Thankfully hot guy had closed his eyes as he sipped at the first bottle.

"So engineer or physicist?" the major asked with only the slightest wince when Rodney tackled the swath of blood nearest his eye with part of the gauze.

"I don't think they ever mentioned what type of scientist he'd been before taking the job for a New York cable company," Rodney frowned and bit back a huff of frustration at how little of a dint he made. He was going to need a flashlight in addition to the interior dome light shining because of the opened side door.

"Not Goldblum's character," hot guy grinned, his eyes remaining closed, probably out of self-protection from Rodney's less than stellar attempts at coordination – or in trying to get control of the pain no doubt also resulting from Rodney's less than stellar attempts at coordination. "You, Dr. McKay. Are you an engineer or a physicist? Not biology since you're a real doctor instead of a medical one. So are you Aerodynamics or Satellites, or do they really give out doctorates in alien technology?"

"Who said anything about alien technology?" Rodney sputtered. "I could be – "

"One, though he only said base, I don't expect that Colonel Sumner was talking about the Marine one at El Toro, because that's hours away, so not a viable exfiltration point given the current circumstances. Which means the base he spoke of with more than a passing familiarity is either the Tonopah test range or, more likely, Groom Lake, both of which are under Nellis and the Air Force's purview. Two, this is an Air Force van that is being used by Marines – and one doctor who isn't a native-born American –

"I'm guessing Canada, by the way," at this hot guy opened the eye that Rodney had carefully washed clean with one of the pads instead of the worthless gauze. "Since most Brits don't lose that much of their accents even after years. Nor Australians."

"Yes, I'm Canadian," Rodney finally answered while glowering under hot guy's not-near-as ingenuous-as-he-probably-thought stare, unsure if the major was trying to distract him with this inane bit of conversation, or if he was trying to distract himself. Hot guy definitely flinched under Rodney's touch and squirmed in general as if unable to settle into a comfortable position. He wasn't making any sort of vocal complaint, though, so Rodney guessed he was being gentle enough.

"So because I'm a resident alien, that must mean I'm an alien expert?"

"Well, you could be a big shot foreign defense contractor, but they don't usually carry around scratch-built computers, and Sumner isn't the type of Marine I expect they pull out to baby-sit politicos." Hot guy gave another little grin. "Now, you could be that aerospace engineer I first suggested, but frankly, I don't remember us buying too many Canadian airplanes. If you were some sort of satellite expert or a mission specialist for the space program, you probably wouldn't have been heading to Area 51 with an escort of Marines, even if there is some sort of secret store of technology there. I'd sure like to not think my – or your – government is keeping secrets from us about aliens, but given what we've seen here tonight – "

The wink meant that hot guy hadn't passed out when his voice dropped off, but Rodney wasn't sure what was going on and was about to ask since he did appreciate the distraction, regardless of whether it had been for his benefit or not. Except then he heard what the major must have already, just before the van rocked and doors slammed shut on both sides, plunging the interior of the van into deep shadow now that the sun had set behind the lowest valley. Rodney didn't turn to look and see if
everyone made it back on board (of course they were since Marxist put the van into gear and slew them around once more). Nor did he have any desire to see that they might have been unsuccessful in clearing the road enough that someone else wouldn't later come to a crashing halt. And the thought of rewatching the broken bits of video saved on Rodney's own computer –

Before he could make the request, someone flipped the dome light back on despite Sumner's grunt and angry mutter about losing his night vision, giving Rodney the opportunity to return his attention to working on hot guy. He'd cleaned off enough blood to see that the major wasn't bleeding any longer from his head injury, and to see that a spectacular bruise was setting in to surround the cut. While the major also had some scratches along his bared arms, what Rodney has assumed was a piece of a wrapped sleeve was actually a black wristband that had a corresponding watch on the other side, and so was obviously some sort of weird fashion statement or something else Rodney had no hopes of intuiting. At least it didn't appear to be another injury the major had attempted to treat already.

Rodney couldn't see any other evidence of an injury significant enough to warrant that off comment about morphine, but the major had been limping initially as well as being generally unsteady. People didn't just get up and walk away from crashing a helicopter.

"There's some Acetaminophen and Codeine in here, but I don't think with your head injury we should really use the morphine." Rodney kept his voice quiet so as not to interfere with Sumner straining to hear the bad audio, nor to invite any sort of backseat administering from someone like Cadman.

"Yeah, probably not a good idea," hot guy agreed. "There should be some regular Tylenol there – No, see if there's some Ibuprofen since I'm going to need to move when we get to the end of the turnoff."

"You're not moving anywhere, Major Sheppard, except maybe to stretch out more on that seat," Sumner suddenly called back without taking his eyes from the video he had set on the back of Marxist's seat so Stacksit could see it too.

"I appreciate that, sir, but I know where I left my men, and I'm probably going to need to lead you in if we're going to find them in time."

"Son, you've just crashed your copter and could barely walk 100 yards without help. You're only going to slow us down from reaching your people if you expect to make it over a couple of miles."

"Not to mention that you've probably got a concussion, and you dressed for a walk along the beach at Santa Monica, not anywhere around here," Rodney added his own reasons why hot guy – Sheppard – was an idiot to think about participating any further in the rescue.

"You wouldn't share your coat, Doctor McKay?" Sheppard asked in a barely mouthed whisper against his ear that left Rodney flustered and as ham-fisted as any stupid grunt, so that the hand reaching for the packet of Ibuprofen instead ended up coming down on the outside of the major's thigh before he lost his balance completely and ended up sprawled across Sheppard's lap along with shoving the entire kit off the seat and down into the well.

Rodney wasn't sure if the strangled groan masked laughter, surprised arousal, or barely contained pain, but the damp spot suddenly spreading between them had to be one of the water bottles being upended. It didn't keep Rodney's face from flushing a deep red, but before he could apologize for a third time –

"I'm coming up on a road that heads east," Marksist called out from the front seat.
"How many miles have we come from the LZ, Sergeant?" There was only the barest trace of something in Sheppard's voice, although he'd definitely tensed up under Rodney's weight.

"Three point seven, sir."

Rodney could now feel Sheppard's hand shaking as he tried to steady Rodney's attempt to gather up the fallen items. And when Rodney finally drew up and back with a handful of pill packets and the remaining half-filled bottle of water, Rodney saw Sheppard shake his head, his lip caught tightly between his teeth and his eyes closed in an expression that looked nothing like amusement or pleasure – or embarrassment.

Knowing he'd managed – if only barely – from elbowing the major in the groin, Rodney knew that wasn't what had stolen Sheppard's breath and steadiness, but … He felt like hitting himself once he got it. The helicopter had been confirmed, and crashing one that didn't end up in a ball of flame still meant impacting the ground at a speed no shock absorbers or padded seats could hope to curtail. Especially in a crash hard enough to snap off the landing struts. Rodney's own bad back tightened in shared misery. If Sheppard was lucky he'd only pinched a nerve or three, and since he had been able to walk, he probably hadn't actually fractured any vertebrae. But a spinal compression injury was pretty likely.

"Not the right one," Rodney informed them on Sheppard behalf as he quickly tore open two of the packets and pressed them into the hand not quite clenched into a nail-cutting fist. That earned him a squint of glassy hazel and sight of a bloodied lip before Sheppard blocked both by leaning his head back and dry swallowing all four pills at once. Rodney only stopped his own reflexive gag by concentrating on opening the new water bottle and thrusting it into Sheppard's dropping hand. At least he didn't have to insist Sheppard take the drink.

He absolutely wasn't watching the long line of Sheppard's neck as he swallowed.

"There should be another turn off somewhere around mile six, Sergeant," the major finally rasped out. "Then in another five approximate, there should be a new debris field, although I think the side of the mountain caught most of it."

Sheppard's words slowed and started slurring again, leaving Rodney to think that he'd end up worrying about loaning coats or someone traipsing through two miles of high desert wilderness –

"Shit, probably some sort of fire started, but even the military comm channel went down –"

"The rain will take care of it, Major. Assuming a fire managed to start given the cold and snow already present," Cadman quickly leaned over her seatback and put a hand against Sheppard's shoulder, despite her own face matching Sheppard's in paleness, now that she'd turned her attention from the shutting down computer.

Rodney found himself wanting to slap her hand away, and then had to bring himself up short from offering his own touch of comfort. What in the world was he thinking, being surrounded by military – being that Sheppard was military? There hadn't been any flirting, just someone grateful to be getting some help, someone who would have appreciated the aid of Colonel Chekov or even Kavanagh, for Kepler's sake! He had no reason to feel proprietary or jealous and, fuck, obviously he'd been in Russia too damn long!

He instead gave Cadman a wan upward tilt of his lips in appreciation for her assistance, since Sheppard had relaxed into the seat.

"Yeah, sorry, not thinking too clearly, Lieutenant."
Resolutely again not watching Sheppard as he let his head drop back and his eyes close once more, or watching Sheppard lick his blood off his lips, Rodney fixed his gaze out past Cadman's outstretched arm to see the rain she mentioned. Not coming down hard enough to make noise against the steel roof over Sumner's low, growled orders into the front seat, it still fell steady enough to become a factor they would have to deal with outside the van. The range of mountains they needed to cross over to get to Groom Lake would take them high enough that they'd see snow accumulating on the ground.

He began to think he'd been better off in Siberia.

1748 Zulu; January 13, 2003
Eastbound BLM Access Road off Highway 95, 22 miles Northeast of Beatty, Nevada

John wouldn't swear to it, but he didn't think he'd fallen asleep. The adrenalin rush of being in combat – and in the helo crash – had worn off to the point where he definitely felt the aches of the landing as well as the accumulative exhaustion from having already spent six previous hours skiing. Concern for Mitch and Dex, not to mention apparently being in the midst of an alien invasion, should be enough to keep him awake for now. So, too, did the curiously amusing and attractive Doctor Rodney McKay, despite his lack of talent in the whole first aid thing. Actually, his prickly fumbling was not only endearing, but comforting all on its own. John had known people like Rodney McKay all throughout his school days, the kids – especially boys – with brains too big for their bodies. They floundered at all the things that would have let them fit in with the rest of the kids. Called spazz and nerd or geek and fag until it became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

McKay's geekness was obviously a badge of honor for him, at least at this point in his life. His instant identification of himself as a doctor was a dead giveaway, as had been his defensiveness when John had pegged him as a Canadian. John wasn't sure if this real doctor was an engineer, but he figured it was something like that. He also wasn't sure on the gay part; any guy who showed they actually enjoyed school when he was a kid, usually got slapped with the fag label unless they also competed in sports. McKay didn't look like he'd gone that route like John had.

It didn't help that McKay's touch – when not jerking and letting John know what he'd fucked up on his body – felt a hell of a lot more intimate than John remembered from Mitch or any of the other PJs' work. McKay's fingers didn't so much linger, but he touched John when it wasn't exactly warranted. McKay also hadn't moved to put a more respectable distance between them once he'd completed his first aid ministrations, like other men would have. Of course, John's own gayness could be coloring everything – that, or they simply were reacting to quite possibly the end of the world, seeking and giving compassion and warmth.

Even thinking about whether someone else might be gay while in a van full of Marines, spoke to the seriousness of the blow to the head he taken earlier. Of course he'd known a couple of gay Marines (one even in the biblical sense) during his years in the Air Force, but of all the branches in the US Military who preferred a public image that did not include their soldiers sucking one another off (or, god forefend, actually fucking one another), the Marines were the most gung-ho in their portrayals of their manliness. While John wouldn't presume Sumner to be one of those who'd actively encourage his men to 'uphold the Marine traditions' with their fists or combat boots, he also couldn't know if the colonel would turn a blind eye if it happened under his command.

Okay, his mind was definitely wandering. Plus there may have been some sleeping in there too; when he opened his eyes John found the sergeant and the colonel had disappeared with him having no memory of them getting out – or even of the van stopping. Somehow, too, he'd ended up with
McKay's jacket, or John assumed that was what was wrapped around him, since McKay now wore only a long-sleeve, orange fleecy zip-up.

John shifted to free his left wrist from where he lay on it and flicked on the illumination of his watch dial. 1752 hours. While he unsure of the timing of anything that had happened after the first sonic booms, he did remember that they'd been nearly two hours into their flight from Mammoth to Vegas, and that sunset relative to Nevada's elevation above sea level had fallen at 1734 hours. So he'd been out of it fifteen or twenty minutes, certainly long enough for them to have reached the proper turn off and have Sumner and his men on their way to Mitch, Dex and the downed pilot. What he couldn't be sure was whether they should be already on their way back.

"Hey," he called out to the two in front of him as he also grabbed hold of their seat to pull himself upright.

Twin cries of, "Major" didn't disguise the sound of a laptop closing, but John accepted the bottle from the lieutenant instead of commenting – or really thinking – on how long they'd been rewatching the invasion footage. The drink was indeed colored – a pale piss yellow – and tasted like something resembling lemon-lime but with the standard bitterness John had found in pretty much all sports drinks. Full of electrolytes then, and something that would hopefully put a dent in his headache.

"How long?" he finally started to ask.

From McKay, "you've been asleep for –"

But the lieutenant's: "They've been gone for," a quick check of her own watch, "twelve minutes," was really what John had been asking, and even McKay seemed to recognize that once she answered.

Twelve minutes. The average adult walked somewhere between eight and twelve minutes per mile. Marines would be more fit, of course, but in questionable and unfamiliar terrain, as well as in the rain and in the dark, very likely thirty more minutes would pass before John could expect to see them coming back. Too damn long. He started to slip on McKay's jacket.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" came the expected question and then, when John refused to answer something so obvious, "you can't possibly be thinking of going out after them!" was huffed sharply enough to add to the ache in John's head.

"I'm not going to just sit here and wait, McKay. If my directions sucked and got them lost –"

"What, you'll help by getting lost too?" McKay blustered. "Or maybe you have an internal GPS superpower to go along with your ability to see in the dark?"

"Actually, there should be a couple of flashlights strapped over the wheel well," the lieutenant offered.

John nodded toward her and took a deep breath before he twisted himself around. Bending over the back of his own seat hurt like he expected and his head swam from being upside down. But with effort he could reach for the clasp holding a flush piece of metal that extended the diameter of the wheel well. Once he pulled that away, he found two heavy-duty flashlights which he then released although he had to take another quick break before he could pull himself back up.

He handed one of the flashlights to the lieutenant, not because he expected them to join him but because they'd end up burning out the dome light or the battery if they kept it and the headlights running for the entire rescue.
"Colonel Sumner said – "

"Colonel Sumner might be in your Chain of Command, Lieutenant, but he isn't in mine. Those are my men out there in the snow, waiting for my return."

"Colonel Sumner said that he trusted my judgment on how long to wait for them," she tossed back to him with a surprisingly conspiratorial grin. "No doubt his intention was for how long I should wait before leaving them to get Doctor McKay back to Area 51, but since he didn't actually say that –– "

"No!" McKay actually tried to tug both flashlights from their hands. "We are not going out there. You both are obviously brain damaged." He jabbed his fingers in their direction when his effort proved unsuccessful. "Not so surprising, since you both volunteered to be in the military. I, conversely, am neither reckless nor suicidal, as I am the smartest man you will ever meet." This time he simply folded his arms over his chest and set his face in what had the makings of a great temper tantrum.

"I get that you're concerned about your men," McKay then added with a surprising amount of decency for all of his vehement posturing. "But really, what are you going to be able to do?"

John could feel his own expression tightening into something less than affable or understanding. Being honest with himself, though, he knew his anger was displaced in McKay, that he was angry at himself for getting injured and for being more of a liability than an asset.

For leaving Mitch and Dex in the first place.

"Sometimes, Doctor, it's not so much about taking a risk as it is in not being warm and safe while others are at risk," the lieutenant spoke before John could argue. Or capitulate.

"Can you really just sit and wait while other people figure things out?" John then put forth. "When maybe it's only your knowledge or experience that can turn the tide?"

For a second, something dark and vulnerable crossed over McKay's face, leaving John to again wonder what a Canadian Doctor of Science did for the United States Government.

"My knowledge and experience doesn't fall to individual rescues," McKay finally scowled bitterly and made a broad gesture encompassing the van and obviously something beyond John's understanding, given the softness now in the lieutenant's expression as she regarded McKay.

"Doctor McKay – "

"What if my knowledge and experience is all that is standing between us and them," he interrupted her with an embittered tone and another gesture then toward the van's roof – no, probably outside and up, toward the alien ships.

"Should I sacrifice my – "

"Hey, let's not get ahead of ourselves here, McKay," John stopped him from finishing that thought. A conscious refusal of accepting the big picture, of not being able to make those kind of decisions with other people's lives had served John fine throughout his career; he wanted to fly, not to command. He got that something huge was going on beyond them, something that McKay might feel he should be involved with. But there was nothing that John did or knew that a thousand other Air Force pilots didn't also know or couldn't also do.

Except maybe find Dex and Mitch in time.
"Doctor McKay, if you need to stay here in the van, I'm not going to think any worse of you, okay?"
John didn't try to grin his way through this, although he did give a little bit of a deprecating shrug.

"Like I care what you think of me, Major," McKay snarled back. "If I cared what people thought of me, I never would have gotten exiled to Russia."

Except his expression said of course he cared, at least in general if not actually about John's opinion. That exile comment was all geek badge of honor again, defensive and belligerent, which made John feel something more protective than pitying. Entirely inappropriate for the man or the situation, except that John knew this type of man. He so very easily could have been this type of man, had he had the courage to tell his father to fuck off years before he finally did.

"Oh…kay, well it's like the lieutenant said," John tried again. "I can't sit here in relative comfort when Mitch and Dex are out there freezing their asses off. I know my being cold or tired probably won't help them, but there's always a chance that it will. Either way, it's a hell of a lot easier for me to sleep at night knowing that I did something other than sit on my hands."

"Well, we all want you to be able to sleep at night in comfort," McKay retorted, but without most of the rancor he'd previously displayed.

"Hey, this discussion has already killed another five minutes," the lieutenant said as she waved her hand between him and McKay as if encouraging them to chill. John felt more energized than threatened by his disagreement with the good doctor, though.

"How about we compromise and wait another five minutes and then we can all go out and meet yours and my people on the way back?" she suggested.

John bowed – and bowed his head – to the inevitable. Unless McKay and the lieutenant cooperated and moved in the first place, John couldn't exit unless he rolled over his seat and went through the back, which wasn't going to happen. "Good idea, Lieutenant…" and this time John drew out the word, because he didn't remember being introduced.

"Cadman. Laura would be fine, too, sir."

John was beginning to think that a shit-eating grin was her default expression. He hid his own smile when McKay snorted in exasperation as she offered her hand over the seat.

"John Sheppard, Major, with the the 563rd Rescue Group out of Davis-Monthan AFB in Arizona, although my last deployment was in Afghanistan," he shook her hand back.

"Wonderful, now that we've all exchanged friendship bracelets, can we get this over with?" McKay groused. "And if somewhere in your secret stash of supplies, Lieutenant, you can come up with another jacket, I'd be – "

"Oh, hey, no, take this one back, McKay," John offered and began to pull himself out of the artic heavy coat he'd inherited.

"Don't be more idiotic than you've already been, Major," McKay tried to push the jacket back into John's hands. "I've at least got long sleeves and have most recently been in Russia – in Siberia, whereas it was what in Afghanistan last, a hundred and twenty?"

"Afghanistan's seasons are same as North America's, and Kabul's at fifty-nine hundred feet. The thermometer read -2° Celsius my last time on the tarmac."

"Yeah, well, try -33°, Major! And I doubt you were standing around in minus 2° in what is now
essentially a t-shirt."

"Jesus, guys, is now really the time to start with whose is bigger?" Cadman interrupted. "McKay, take your damn jacket! Major, I've got the Colonel's tucked over here next to me. You're a couple of inches taller, but close to the same build, so it shouldn't fit you too badly." She tossed it into John's face while also pushing Rodney across the seat, and then simply leaned across McKay to open the door when he didn't get the clue.

John wasn't sure her and McKay's pissy little give-and-take meant any real familiarity between them, since he and McKay were basically doing the same thing and he'd only known the man for maybe an hour, but he got that Cadman at least knew about McKay. They both worked on the same operation, if not the same project; an operation that involved alien technology if not actual aliens, despite McKay's prevarication.

It took a couple more minutes before they stood behind the van, bundled up with pockets weighted down with refilled water bottles from one of the jerrycans. John figured they'd killed all of his calculated thirty minutes by now, with no sign of Sumner or any of the others returning. He vetoed grabbing the first aid kit (although he'd pocketed several more packets of Tylenol and Ibuprofen), since Mitch's kit had five times the amount of supplies and equipment this one did. McKay insisted on grabbing all of the energy bars, claiming hypoglycemia. They'd also discovered one of the sergeants had left a secondary service weapon behind. John had tucked it into the pocket not carrying the water in, along with half of the extra clips Cadman located.

Too cold for snakes, he was thinking, but there were both mountain lions and bears in the Nevada mountains. Not that they should run into a bear this time of year. He wasn't going to bet the others' lives on that assumption, though he really didn't expect to find anything bigger than an owl. Or a coyote, as he heard a couple of them yipping in the distance. His concern was for running into whoever (whatever) had invaded.

John reached for one of the packets of Ibuprofen, then remembered only an hour had passed since he'd hooked up with these people. Too damn soon –

No, his increasing headache wasn't from moving around or his concussion, it was one of the enemy craft coming back into the area.

"Get him out of this fucking wash and into whatever cover you can find!" he ordered as shoved Cadman into McKay, then lunged toward the front of the vehicle and killed all of the van's lights. "While I don't know what they're using to pick up their targets, don't make it easy for them."

Being a good marine, Cadman didn't waste time with questions. She also turned off her flashlight before John got his own dark. He could hear the two of them crashing into the scrub that lined the side of the hills and moved to follow, the adrenalin that pumped back through his veins temporarily wiping out the myriad little aches throughout the rest of his body. Well, not his head, which pounded with every step and breathe. As he reached the other two, the fingernails-on-a-chalkboard scream shattered through them. John threw himself over both their bodies and drove them down into the ground until the sound became a Doppler shift echo off the hillsides further east of them.

"Fuck!" McKay squeaked as the three of them extricated themselves and regained their feet. "The aliens have sonic weapons in addition to their white beam?"

"Missile or energy weapons of some kind too," John said thickly and pressed a thumb against the ridge between his eyes to try to regain his focus and shift the pain in his head to something manageable. He and McKay propped each other up at the moment, both panting. McKay got himself back under control first.
Lieutenant Cadman, John finally noted thanks to the faint light a nearly full moon offered, had a hand pressed against the shoulder of McKay's that John wasn't leaning against. She also had her gun out and her attention on their immediate surroundings and safety.

"Do you think they're looking for us?" she asked, with only the barest hint of something unsettled in her voice.

"Us, Sumner, or maybe Mitch, Dex and the downed pilot, but really, why would they bother?" John tried to think it through. "We're no particular threat to them, no matter what intel we gathered. They have enough ships to attack multiple cities around the world at the same time, and likely there are a fuckload of cities they haven't flown over yet with a hell of a lot more people than us if they've really got a use for the missing population." Finally able to move his feet without too much of a sway, John nudged McKay and got them moving eastward.

"Even if we were all together, could nine people really be worth some sort of hunt?" John further speculated. "Sure, maybe if we had SAMs or something, if we'd actually fired on them. No, probably just bad luck."

"Why would you say that?" McKay asked before stumbling over something in the dark and needing both John and Cadman to keep him from sprawling.

Cadman turned her flashlight back on and aimed it in front of their feet. John didn't question her action. Adding a broken ankle to their current mess wasn't the percentage play.

"I've flown in aerial combat, McKay. Some lone guy on the ground doesn't pose much of a threat beyond giving your flight plan to the guys who do have the SAMs or RPGs."

"That's a given." McKay groused. "So what about the rest of it? You reacted before the sound reached us. How did you know it was coming?"

"First time with these guys, I thought the noise had been the culprit, but thinking back now, I'm sure my head started up before I actually heard them. You don't have a head ache now?"

"My ears are ringing a bit, and sure, I wanted to pound my head until my brain squished out when it was overhead," Cadman offered a bit too cheerfully before she picked up her pace and took the lead as they began tracing over what should have been Sumner's route. "But I'm fine now, sir. How about you, McKay?"

"Well, considering I did bash my head thanks to both of you tackling my body into the ground, I have a headache, but I don't think it started before you sandbagged me — "

"You're welcome," John threw back.

"What? Oh, well, yes, I suppose you thought you were doing your job. But that only works if you actually manage to protect my brain and body."

"And did the aliens get you, McKay?" John actually turned around, and let his flashlight beam rise to better catch McKay's expression, although he made sure he didn't actually shine it into the other man's eyes — even if it might be deserved.

"You are not claiming that falling on top of me actually managed to do anything other than give me a set of very painful bruises — "

"Did the aliens get you, McKay?" he repeated loud enough to cover up most of Cadman's not so quiet sniggering from ten yards ahead of them.
"Fine. Thank you. Except it's a matter of by saving me, you've saved yourself since I'm the smartest — "

"Man I'll ever meet. Yeah, got that already, McKay. Do you think you might try not also being the slowest man — "

John let the gibe trail off as McKay picked up his pace and strode past John with a huff and both of his arms crossed over his chest – but only long enough to make the gesture meaningful since he needed to fling one of them out to catch himself once again as he tripped over a root or a rock or maybe just his own left foot. John lengthened his own stride until he walked alongside McKay. He brought the flashlight's beam a little closer to their bodies instead of ranging out for a heads up. Hopefully McKay would pay enough attention to Cadman's trail too, to better pick out his route.

The three of them fell into silence as the path got steeper and harder to navigate, which only reinforced how much the bantering had distracted John from his own worries. He figured at least another fifteen minutes had passed and still no sign of the others.

Even if he had sent Sumner and his men off-track from Dex and Mitch, the marines should have found them by now. The fact that his group had come over a rise that looked over another quarter mile or so of a valley before a new rise, and that there had been no sign of another flashlight, had to mean something had gone seriously wrong. John was pretty sure Cadman felt the same thing; she'd increased her lead by nearly twenty yards, but turned sideways every six or seven steps to make sure he and McKay followed.

John quietly called to her to stop a moment while he chivvied McKay up to where they could join her. While they waited for McKay's nosy bellows to soften into a more normal breathing pattern, John fixed his eyes on the sky, seeing vectors and coordinates overlaying the constellations dimmed by the broken cloud cover. John had learned to orient himself by the stars when he'd been seven or eight; one of the few good things his father had taught him. Once he'd taken trig and discovered the mathematical underpinnings of the universe, then found the perfect expression of all of it in flight, he'd been able to navigate as long as he had pinpricks of starlight and a longitude/latitude coordinate. In some ways, John did have a GPS-like super power, and right now it was telling him that he hadn't led anyone astray – and that Mitch and Dex and the downed pilot should be over one more ridge.

Once he got to them, got them back to the van, well, then John would worry about where Sumner and the two sergeants got themselves off to.

1837 Zulu; January 13, 2003
End of the Eastern Fire Road off Highway 95, 23.5 miles Northeast of Beatty, Nevada

Rodney had spent his whole life doing unimaginable, unbelievable things. As a child, he'd lived inside his books and within his mind, unable to find anything interesting in the words and expectations of his teachers, his councilors, – or his parents. University was slightly better. If others couldn't understand his work, at least there they encouraged him to dream, to make real the images within his mind. Even after Rodney discovered the others encouraged only to profit off of his imagination, he wasn't surprised or very angry, because the world – the universe – was unfolding before his eyes. That was worth more than money or fame.

In the time between University and being hired by the SGC, he had learned the value of money the first time he lost his funding. During that time he also began to understand no one could keep up with him, could understand a tenth of what he'd discovered. No one who could even imagine the things
that Rodney could prove. He didn't remain unemployed for long, of course, but when he returned to working, he made sure that his funding stayed secure, and that very few people had any say over which projects he chose to explore. It hadn't been perfect, but then nothing outside of math and physics was and, anyway, he'd become accustomed to disappointment at a very early age.

It wasn't until after he'd worked for a couple of years for the SGC – until Rodney was standing in front of the stargate and for the first time could actually see the physical manifestation of his theorems and ingenuity – that he'd finally found a project worthy of his genius. There, he'd also realized his understandings of the universe might not be all encompassing. More, that all of his understanding and intellect could be trumped by something as ephemeral as faith.

He supposed this little field trip was born more of faith than anything else – or faith's bastard twin, trust. That both words were defined as synonyms for truth only proved semantics to be useless. How could a belief in something that couldn't be proven – couldn't even be corroborated – have the same meaning as truth?

Undoubtedly, this was why Rodney was currently having trouble keeping up. He didn't understand trust, didn't have any use for faith, and all of his years living inside his mind hadn't particularly left him with a physical aptitude, much less the kind of grace Cadman and Sheppard, even injured, exhibited.

Snow dampened the ground and bushes, made the footing treacherous and muddy. It also made it damn cold. Rodney would have paid real money for a pair of gloves, which was maddening as he'd begun to sweat under his fleece. If he managed to get through this without twisting an ankle or adding to his already copious bruises, no doubt he would be looking at case of flu or pneumonia.

They neared the top of a rise. Rodney suddenly realized how unnaturally quiet the area had become. The birds and insects seemed to have gone silent, including the ones that shouldn't have been bothered by their (his) clumsy approach. At first he thought it might be he jets or the scream of the alien craft had impaired his hearing, that the animal life was still present. He knew he wasn't actually deaf; since he could hear Major Sheppard's muttering and Cadman's colorful curses as they dealt with the terrain, along with the embarrassing sound of his own breath sawing in and out of his lungs. The absence of any other sound, however, disturbed him.

The scream, ripped from someone's throat and knifing through the silence, wasn't what Rodney had been hoping for.

Cadman and Sheppard began racing up the last few feet to the summit, using the scrub for handholds to hurry their progress. Shouting followed the scream, then something that had to be gunshots. Maybe some of the shouts were Sheppard's, because whatever he saw had him outpacing Cadman and disappearing down over the side before Rodney managed to breach the ridge.

More gunshots – nearer and louder – followed, and another scream that Rodney knew he'd been hearing in future nightmares. Definite shouts from Sheppard this time, the names of the men they were out here to find. Rodney thought he heard Sumner now, too.

He crested the ridge.

They'd found Sheppard's friends, had come in at a dead reckoning in fact, whereas Sumner and the other marines obviously had not. The marines were down the slope not only to Rodney's position but also to the ones they'd come to find, lower and so coming up one hundred or so meters from the right, illuminated by an uneven mixture of flashlight beams and moonlight and the flicker of flames.

Others had found Sheppard's friends first.
If this were a Hollywood movie, the tableau would be all the way down into the valley, too far away to do anything but watch and die a little inside, to watch and wait for it to be your turn to die for real. Instead, a makeshift camp had been established halfway up the hill, maybe three hundred meters downslope, as if Sheppard's friends had contemplated trying to affect their own rescue only to give up when full darkness had overtaken them.

Obviously not all Air Force soldiers had an unrealistic view of their abilities.

Further down the hillside, he saw parachute material and string draped across bushes and rocks. The fire had started out contained, but now burned amongst the scrub, smoke and sparks spreading out unchecked. So, too, Sheppard's friends were spread out, along with their supplies and equipment, as if a whirlwind had swept through the camp and scattered it like bits of flotsam and jetsam.

Not a whirlwind: the enemy. The aliens. Three of them, all pale skin and pale, long hair. Rodney had never actually seen a Goa'uld in person, it hadn't been the video's fault that he hadn't been able to tell they weren't humans until their eyes flashed gold. These things, however, only resembled humans in that they were bipedal and were roughly of the same size and shape. Two of them had some sort of bony protrusion over the front of their heads, a mask or a deformity, while the third had normal enough eyes, a nose, a mouth – some sort of facial hair. The eyes though, were slit or maybe reversed coloring in pupil and sclera; Rodney was too far away make out more detail. He also had no desire to study them more closely; humanoid or not, they radiated an utter alieness that had him lurching back instead in atavistic fear.

There were three, and then only two, as one of the bone-faced ones went down under an onslaught of bullets from Sumner and one of the sergeants. The other sergeant, the driver, Marxist … Marky, Markwhatever, outran his fellows and raced toward the alien that had something like a coat, or maybe a body, hanging from its clawed hands. Even as gunfire continued, as Cadman and Sheppard, Sumner and Sergeant Two, plus someone Rodney assumed was one of Sheppard's friends, raced to help, Sergeant Markie – no, Markham – leapt in an attempt to sweep the alien away from the body. Rodney thought it might be the downed pilot, he could now see it wore a flightsuit, complete with something that looked like a Prometheus-shaped patch on his chest – not that Rodney could make out the actual image or words of the patch from where he crouched.

Relief spread through him; though a baby-face kid, the sergeant was still a Marine. Somehow Rodney couldn't see anything standing up to two hundred pounds of solid muscle flying towards it. Instead of twisting away in an attempt to avoid the sergeant, however, instead of ending up on its ass under two hundred pounds of marine, the alien straight-armed him and caught Markham around his neck, stopping the kid's momentum cold.

If Rodney had had any doubt they faced an alien invasion, that impossibility cinched it for him, even before the alien thrust his other hand against Markham's chest and Markham began screaming.

The sound turning Rodney's spine to Jello.

Rodney watched Sheppard speed up his barely controlled descent. The third alien, no longer content to watch as Rodney was (no gun and, while he might be two hundred pounds, his were definitely not a solid muscle mass), moved toward the bulky guy dressed in a ski sweater. Mitch or Dex, then, and of course Sheppard would want to help his friend. Sumner and the other sergeant, however, had no shot on the bone-head version; Markham's writhing body blocked any angle they might have tried.

Rodney felt sure the pain chasing itself across Sheppard's face had nothing to do with how he pulled himself to a complete stop while only shouting, “Mitch!” as a warning before turning from his friend. The major's angle on Boneface – who seemed to be sucking the life right out of Markham – was bad, but he and Cadman had the only shot. Sheppard didn't hesitate, nor did his arm waver as he took aim.
and then emptied his clip into the side of Boneface's head.

It shuddered, but didn't go down.

Not even when Cadman added her own clip, and maybe Rodney hadn't been so fanciful in thinking that the alien could somehow be absorbing someone else's lifeforce. Markham's screams had trickled down to broken grunts, his body curling in on itself from where it hung from the creature's claws. No, not curling. His body began shriveling and losing mass just like the end of every Dorian Gray movie, or that scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* when Donovan drank from the wrong grail cup and all of his lifespan poured through his body in the span of seconds. Only instead of being spent, Markham's lifespan was being absorbed by the alien, enough to counteract the damage from Cadman and Sheppard's bullets.

Rodney wanted to vomit, wanted to curl into a ball himself, and hide from the monsters that made the idea of living out his life as a Goa'uld slave almost palatable. There was fuckall else that he could do. Yet somehow his body started moving, not into a ball but instead into his own descent, sliding down the mountainside on his ass and hands, staying low, probably not staying hidden and certainly not staying quiet, because if he was going to die, it would be a better to not die alone.

When Markham's body hit the ground next to the pilot's, Sumner and Sergeant Two suddenly had a viable target again. This time the alien didn't have a body in hand. It went down, rose again to its knees, then toppled forward from the onslaught of four guns. Cadman and Sheppard then changed clips as they moved apart to take on a new target. The lieutenant slid on her stomach to end up thirty degrees to the right of Sheppard and in front of Markham and the pilot as she twisted enough to empty her second clip at the more human-looking alien. Somehow she managed not to shoot Sheppard as he charged toward that third alien, didn't shoot Sheppard's friend Mitch, either. Rodney could now see that two hypodermic needles stuck out of the alien's body; probably how Mitch still fought.

The needles and bullets barely slowed it though, so maybe it had already fed on Sheppard's other friend. This alien wasn't as large as the other two, wasn't nearly as bulky so maybe not as strong, but that didn't mean that Sheppard should try the same move that Markham had already shown to be useless. Rodney opened his mouth to yell his own warning or condemnation or –

Sheppard suddenly stumbled and went down on one knee.

Fuck, this was bad, this was worse than bad, although maybe not worse than –

What Rodney found himself screaming "incoming!" instead, split seconds before the inhuman screech of the alien's banshee craft raced across the sky above them. Rodney didn't think before he launched himself toward Sheppard, his shoulder hitting the major square in the middle of his back and bowling them both over to roll and slide and basically crumple into a heap right next to Lieutenant Cadman as the whitish shimmer of the beam swept over the alien and Mitch, then also picked up Sumner and Sergeant Two before roaring off into the night.

"Doctor McKay, Major!"

It took a couple of seconds for Rodney's brain to unscramble enough to realize that someone was tugging on his arm, was trying to pull him up or wake him up and –

"Stop it, I'm awake."

Rodney opened his eyes and jerked away from her clinging hands.
"Then make yourself useful, McKay, and stop screwing around!" Cadman shouted, her voice filled with anger (fear) and her face screwed into an expression of determination despite the tears slipping down her cheeks. "We've got to get the fuck out of here before they come back."

While that was a conclusion Rodney could get behind wholeheartedly, his body wasn't anywhere near as willing to move as was his brain. All of his groaning made his ears and head hurt, but when he started to complain about that too, he realized that not all the groans had been his. Also that the hillside should be lumpy and wet, yes, but the lumps should be harder than the ones he rested against.

Even as this started to make sense, two sets of hands started pulling and prodding him, which didn't help Rodney regain his balance or his focus. His balance collapsed first, sending him sprawling again and this time the lumps were neither soft nor hard. Brittle instead, giving way in a puff of cloying dust or ash and suddenly Rodney was completely focused and doing his best to scramble away from the desiccated corpse that was mainly cloth and dog tags.

"Fuck!" he screeched, not the least bit concerned that his voice was now higher than Cadman's.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Cadman offered with a little pat and a hand to steady him up onto his ass and elbows while Sheppard echoed his fuck from where he'd pulled himself into a sitting position, but in a flat, empty tone.

Rodney worked to avoid seeing what was left of Sergeant Markham, but the view that left him with wasn't much better. Another desiccated body lay beyond Sheppard, and though Rodney had already concluded Sheppard's Dex had been killed, it didn't make it any easier seeing it.

"Sheppard, I'm –"

"Lieutenant, what about the pilot?" Sheppard interrupted Rodney's attempt to offer comfort, although his eyes did hold something of acknowledgement before they passed on to Cadman.

"Somehow he's still alive, sir." Cadman straightened back up into a kneeling position from where she'd draped herself over the other unmoving body to check for his pulse against his neck. "It also looks like your … team managed to start treatment. I think there had been an IV bag and, well…" She simply pointed to the blood smeared against the back of the pilot's – Mitchell according to the tag on his flight suit – right hand, and the splints wrapped around his left leg.

Using the lieutenant's shoulder to brace himself, Sheppard also leaned over the downed pilot and took a closer look, actually going so far as to skim his hands down the top of the surprisingly intact uniform. "No breaks that I can feel, and no neck brace. Mitchell was conscious at some point to fill Mitch in on what hurt." Sheppard's voice caught for only the briefest second on his friend's name before he licked his lips.

Cadman frowned. "So it's probably his knee and we're going to need to carry him whether we can get him to wake up again or not."

"That's assuming we can carry ourselves," Rodney muttered, not really trying to be obstructionist, but…

"I'm sorry. It's just, um, I react to certain doom a certain way. It's a bad habit and… and…"

"And we all need to take stock of ourselves first, you're right, Rodney," Sheppard said with a surprising amount of patience, considering. "Are you two okay?"

Dirt and something darker that may or may not have been blood smudged Cadman's face, tear tracks
cutting through it like reversed mascara, but she mustered a grin and then bounded to her feet. "I'm right as rain, sir," she declared before she turned and offered Rodney a hand.

He was surprised – and grateful – that she had a strength that her petite frame belied. Rodney couldn't help but groan anyway. Once upright, though, he was steady and while he certainly had his fare share of aches and bruises, he wasn't actually injured.

"Major?"

"Yeah, just a second," he said. Rodney had to turn away from Sheppard sifting though what was left of Sergeant Markham to pull out his dog tags.

"I'll need to get Dex's too —"

"I've got it, sir," Cadman interrupted. She stepped away and left Rodney to help Sheppard regain his feet.

"Should we take one of the bodies?" Rodney couldn't help asking. Being able to perform an autopsy on an otherwise unknown alien lifeform would be invaluable not just for science, but in the type of defense they would need to mount.

"I don't think Major Cusiak's – Dex's – body will hold up to being moved," Cadman responded very quietly to Rodney's question after she handed the second set of tags to Sheppard. "It's – "

"Not the men's bodies," Rodney interrupted with a shudder and maybe more harshly than he should have given the narrowed look suddenly coming from Sheppard. "Sorry, I get that it's important, that they are important but, yeah, there are barely bones left of the sergeant, but – "

"Markham," Cadman corrected sharply.

"Right. Sorry." Rodney frowned and felt worse when Cadman patted his shoulder again instead of slug him. Not that he thought she'd really slug him.

"So you're talking about one of the aliens?"

Rodney found himself licking his lips before nodding. "As disgusting as it might be, bringing one back is more important. These aren't something we've ever seen before, and it's obvious they aren't a human variant like the Tollan, the Kelownans or the Abydonians — "

"Jesus fuck!" Sheppard exploded, his eyes only now, after the immediate threat was gone, going dark and wild. "Just how many aliens are out there, and how the fuck do you know about them? This can't be real, can't —"

"Major, I'm sorry, but it is," Cadman got to Sheppard first and tried her hand at comfort although touching Sheppard made him tense further and turn away. "It's all real, is more than you can imagine, and there's a group of us in the military, in the higher offices of government not just here but in a handful of countries that know. Along with some the world's leading scientists and technicians, people like Doctor McKay. It's so fucking classified that before today I would have been shot even hinting at it, but…"

She turned her gaze on Rodney when Sheppard didn't seem to acknowledge her words anymore than he had her touch.

"You're an Air Force officer and a pilot, so you obviously have a reasonable amount of intelligence, Major," Rodney sniffed as if he believed the contrary, hoping that an assault of logic might
accomplish more than an attempt to comfort would. "You can't tell me that at one point you didn't want to be an astronaut; that even now you're not keeping up with the Mars probes and the evidence of microbial life in meteors."

Ranting felt good, felt warm and normal, and Rodney so desperately needed something to be normal again.

"I'm sure even my sister's idiot of an English Major husband is aware that we've found water elsewhere in our solar system and exoplanets in other star systems. So if we've already proven that so much is not unique, is it really a stretch to imagine other lifeforms? Even sentient lifeforms? I mean, the sheer mathematical probability alone is — "

"Yeah, yeah, Drake's Equation has it currently at a thousand or so for communicating civilizations, assuming half the stars have planets around them, and half of those had some sort of life evolve. So how many of those thousand have you met before today, Doctor McKay?" Sheppard's posture hadn't released any of its tension, but he turned his head enough that Rodney and Cadman could see that his face wasn't quite so set in bleak anger.

"Oh, don't tell me that your computer runs the SETI search when you're not using it?" Rodney snorted.

"My last computer is setting in a Quonset hut out near Kabul, Rodney. I was lucky if I could get minesweeper or Tetris to play—. Not that any of that means anything now." Sheppard took a deep breath.

"Okay, the two of you are involved in some sort of extraterrestrial contact operation and the folks who've dropped in to do a little sightseeing aren't any of the known players. I'm sure you're right about someone wanting to study what we've found, Rodney. So, do we need the whole body, or will a few pieces do?"

2.

0122 Zulu; January 14, 2003
Area 51 Residential Quadrant One, Sublevel Three
Groom Lake, Nevada

John had never been one to spend too much time dwelling on the past. He'd had enough shit in his life, not to mention having to hide the real John Sheppard from pretty much everyone, to waste time revisiting the decisions he'd made. Sure he had issues: with his father; with his mother's death—abandonment anyone?—with his sexuality and his failed marriage; with the fact that he killed people as a part of his job, and probably would have even without joining the Air Force because the only other thing he could imagine dedicating himself to would have been the police force or the FBI. He needed to feel like he was stepping up to the plate and doing something for everyone who couldn't.

Overall, though, he was pretty happy with who John Sheppard had turned out to be; he knew that without those issues and decisions (and non-decisions), he might have turned out instead to be the kind of soldier that nearly turned their van away once they finally reached Area 51.

"My god," Cadman had screamed at the sergeant at the gate, "it's Arma–fucking–geddon, who really cares about his security clearances as long as he is human?"

He might have become a pro golfer or a scientist like Rodney McKay, although John was pretty sure there wouldn't ever be another scientist – astrophysics is only one of my post graduate degrees,
Major – like Rodney McKay.

Even now, he had little to complain about. He'd managed to find himself a place on the frontline instead of being stuck sitting in an apartment somewhere, wondering why his tv and his internet (and soon, no doubt, electricity and water) no longer worked.

No matter how much hot water he wasted while it pounded across his shoulders and down his back, it couldn't wash away the sin of abandoning – of losing – Mitch and Dex, though. Of surviving when they hadn't. Had he known their deaths would be the inevitable outcome no matter what he decided, the least he could have done was stayed and shared it with them.

It seemed a good possibility that John had only delayed joining his friends anyway, given the way the eggheads were running around like chickens with their heads cut off over the recent intel. It sounded like there was a good chance there wasn't going to be a military left to second-guess his decisions – or a tomorrow left in which to have the time to feel guilty about them.

Once John realized the pounding of the water was also a pounding on a door, he reached over to turn the dial all the way to cold for a couple of seconds before stepping out and turning the shower off.

"When I said you could shower in my room, I didn't mean all night," a strident voice that shouldn't sound as comfortingly familiar as Mitch or Dex's immediately replaced the pounding. "Did you drown in there?"

"The better question is probably whether I left you any of the hot water," John yelled back through the plastic curtain as he shook his head to rid his hair of the extra water. He found himself needing to lean a hand against the nearest wall to keep from falling over. "Oh, good one, John," he muttered to himself, but gave thanks that he hadn't grabbed the curtain instead. He'd probably have ended up tearing it loose and falling.

"Please, it's a base with anywhere from twenty to fifty sweaty Marines and Air Force personnel normally on hand, not to mention sixteen scientists who sometimes only remember to stop to sleep, eat or bathe because the biohazard alarms go off. We have water heaters the size of city blocks. I don't think it's physically possible to run out of hot water – unless we run out of water altogether."

With McKay's voice loud and close, he'd come on into the bathroom despite there being a practical stranger inside, leaving John no need to feel consideration in return. The military killed any trace of body consciousness before anyone ever left boot camp, so the sliver of self-consciousness or trepidation John might be feeling stemmed from being attracted to McKay. Not that he had enough energy at the moment to give himself away.

Besides, McKay seeing John naked was the point. If McKay got flustered or bolted like a blushing virgin, all the better. John needed to find out if he'd read the situation wrong now instead of making a fool out of himself later.

He opened the curtain and reached for one of the two towels he'd been handed in the Infirmary, noting that McKay had indeed come into the room, sitting on the closed toilet as expected. Any concern over McKay's reaction turned out to be for nothing, since McKay was nose deep and fingers flying over the keyboard to a much smaller laptop than the one he'd had in the van. John had time to wipe himself down, further dry his hair and fasten one of the towels around his waist while draping the other around his neck before McKay bothered to look up.

"Oh, hey, I guess it does that naturally and it wasn't because you crashed your helicopter?"

"What?"
McKay gestured toward John's head. "Your hair. When I first saw you, I assumed it was because you'd ripped off your helmet or maybe because of some kind of small explosion."

Considering John had heard comments all of his life about the unruliness of his hair, he was no more self-conscious about his cowlicks than he was about his body. He didn't even bother with the obvious comeback that at least he had a full head of hair. Somehow he didn't think McKay would be sanguine about such a comment, though he'd raised his chin as if preparing for some sort of return attack.

No one built up that kind of armor unless he needed it, and John wasn't one of those who propped up his own self worth by tearing down others. Not that that meant he wouldn't give as good as he got – in the right circumstances. These weren't.

When John didn't say anything, McKay nudged a pile of cloth down at this foot. "One of the marines is about your size and donated a pair of sweats. I didn't think you'd want to come to the big strategy pow-wow in scrubs."

"Thanks. Has it been scheduled?"

"I called it for five-thirty, out of deference to Doctor Frasier getting the opportunity to look at the alien bits we brought back." John wasn't sure if McKay's lopsided frown was because of the earliness of the hour – or the lateness, in seeing it was oh-one-thirty now. "Right now she's triaging the wounded. The hope is that Major Mitchell will have regained consciousness by then too. I figured you and I could do with a couple of hours of sleep."

John resisted asking if McKay was volunteering his bed along with his shower.

"That will also give a bit more time for more intel to filter in and to see if anyone from the Mountain figures out where they need to get to or finds a working landline. We've made contact with authorities as far as Grand Junction and Wendover, but nothing in Denver, Colorado Springs or even Salt Lake."

John had already overheard several people here refer to headquarters as The Mountain, which, given McKay's reference to the Springs and other points in and near Colorado could mean Cheyenne Mountain, but John was pretty sure they weren't talking about NORAD. Which was where he had a responsibility to report to if he could, but so far Pitbull Bates hadn't let John go anywhere other than the Infirmary and then to McKay's personal quarters when it became obvious that the beds they had in the Infirmary would be needed for people who had sustained significant injuries.

Major Cameron Mitchell hadn't been the only casualty who'd been brought in, and the feisty little doctor who made Lieutenant Cadman look big and butch had had her hands full. John had actually offered to lend a hand since, although he was a piker compared to his PJs, John didn't sit on his hands during their SARs and watch while Mitch and Donnie did all the work. Dr. Frasier had just shooed him off with a comment that if he thought he did have enough knowledge to lend a hand, then John would also know enough to see to his own welfare first.

"No contact with DC, New York, Boston or any other city folks here could remember an area code to," McKay continued, his laptop temporarily forgotten, while John decided to do as McKay suggested, put the scrubs bottoms back on, and left the sweats for the morning. Sleep was a good idea.

"Doesn't mean they or the people are necessarily gone, of course. The public circuits will be overloaded assuming they're working, and a portion of the load is routed through satellites anyway. If the Eastern power grid is off, most of the switching equipment would be down, disabling landlines
too. I've got Simpson running through frequencies on an old ham radio – wow, that's a nasty bruise!

Out of some semblance of courtesy, John had turned his back on McKay while he pulled up the scrub pants, and so whatever had caught McKay's eyes wasn't something he'd had a chance to see. The pounding water had hurt, of course, but it had been a hurt that brought its own sort of pleasure. Frankly, John felt bruised all over; he wasn't too worried about any particular spot. Except now McKay had gotten to his feet and stood close enough that he could feel McKay's breath against the damp skin of his shoulders and neck.

John could feel the heat McKay's hands starting below his right scapula and down across to the swell of his ass, although McKay wasn't actually touching him. If that was indeed the scope of the bruise… yeah, this wasn't the first copter John had come down hard in, and even when he hadn't ruptured a disc or pinched a nerve, he'd certainly popped a blood vessel or twelve.

"I know that medicine is more voodoo than science, but Fraiser shouldn't have ignored such empirical evidence of an injury. Why in hell did she let you out of the Infirmary?" The tone, the inflection was all temper and bluster, but the actual force and volume of McKay's words were a mere whisper that sent a shiver through John's body.

"Same reason she let you out and kept Mitchell in," John ground out and tried not to make it so obvious he flinched away from McKay's closeness. Or that McKay's additional wordless sounds ridiculing medicine and his misplaced concern threatened to wear down John's resolve.

He added, "Because we're both supposed to be smart enough to take care of ourselves so she can deal with the folk who can't. Because she has no idea of whether she's ever going to be able to replace the drugs she's got on hand, and there might be needier candidates."

That cooled McKay's jets. The other man turned on his heel and reached for his computer, then started out of the bathroom and on toward the door leading out of his quarters almost faster than John could gather his watch and wristband from the back ledge of the sink.

"Hold on a minute, McKay."

If John was going to go to sleep, he shouldn't be putting either back on, or bothering with the scrub top, but then it wasn't as if he'd be sleeping here –

"Dammit, Rodney!"

That got McKay to finally stop, though he'd already reached the open doorway leading out to a hallway. "Feel free to use my bed, Major," he offered stiffly and didn't turn back around. "As you've so aptly reminded me, there are hours of study and work I need to accomplish and someone might as well make use of it."

"Power down there, buddy," John said, trying to hustle his own steps although his body screamed at him for doing so. He needed to stretch to stop McKay's resumed departure, so grabbed on firmer than he should have, but he accomplished his goal and stopped McKay. Earning a look of utter disdain as McKay stared pointedly at John's hand clutching at his bicep.

"I'm sorry, McKay, I appreciate the concern and, yeah, I know I'm an ungrateful bastard." John tugged a little this time and McKay relented enough to step back into the room and let the door slide closed. "I'm also scared out of my mind. Cut me a little slack. I haven't had years like you've had to actually deal with the reality of alien vampires or prepare myself for the end of the world. And ... shit, you have Star Trek doors." John hadn't noticed the first time through, and that was really cool,
but also just another peg on the weird meter.

"Jesus, I could get whiplash from you going between all-about-the-greater-good, and I'm-really-a-fourteen-year-old-boy." McKay turned around without making any effort to remove John's grip on him, so maybe John hadn't screwed up everything.

"It's not like the doors are any big deal. Hell, they're the standard at Wal-Mart and Safeway, right? Only these, while also sensor activated, don't record motion but are instead biometrically activated by the chip in our badges. Which means that if you go out of the room without me, you'll be locked out. Residential corridors are all personally keyed. Okay, yes, so maybe it is a bit Star Trek." McKay suddenly grinned. "And since when are Air Force pilots geeks?"

John took a step back, but only so he could raise a single eyebrow – something he'd practiced daily as a child after seeing Spock do it – and that deserved to be seen. It earned him a glower and a huff, an expression also edged with a hint of a flush. McKay's pupils dilated and his breath picked up; Spock got them every time.

"So we get to play with all the cool toys that people like Gerry Anderson and Robert Heinlein got more right than wrong?" John responded as he stepped forward to match McKay's movement backward.

Why the door didn't open right back out from under them since McKay's biometric badge had to be in range of the sensor now that his back was pressed up against the door, John didn't understand. Maybe there was such a thing as too close a proximity. Maybe it also required some kind of mental component, except that was obviously too far into the realm of science fiction and puppet shows, and anyway, John had more important things to wonder and worry about than doors. He did spare a moment to be grateful for them, though, when McKay tossed his laptop toward the empty bed so that he had two hands to pull John forward. John needed something solid to support the both of them when he crashed into Rodney's body.

It was also nice to know that he was only outing himself to one person instead of maybe a cadre of Marines if the door had opened on them.

0520 Zulu; January 14, 2003
Area 51 Conference Room Four, Sublevel Two
Groom Lake, Nevada

Rodney hadn't expected he would be able to sleep, but apparently really good sex with really hot Air Force majors was everything he'd imagined, despite this major not being a short-haired blonde. Or female. Rodney couldn't regret it, not the sex or the better-than-fantasy Air Force major. Maybe his glow was from getting a taste of cock again or the excitement of actually winning over someone he would have thought unattainable to someone like himself. Maybe it had been two lonely, scared people making the most human connection they could in the face of Armageddon and alien vampires, because there would be no Jesus or Buffy to save them. But that was okay.

No regrets; not even for wasting two hours sleeping afterward that he could have spent sorting through information and coming up with undoubtedly brilliant solutions to how they were going to fight the invaders.

It hadn't taken Rodney long to remember that he'd been running under a huge sleep deficit, even if it felt as if it had been a year instead of a week ago that he'd been bunking with and wanting to kill Kavanagh. (And once again Rodney gave thanks to a God he didn't believe in that he wasn't in Russia now, during this.)
His bruises had made themselves known too – he might even have whimpered when he got out of bed, but it had been worse for John. Rodney had ended up calling down to the Infirmary for one of the nurses to come over with a muscle relaxant. If the corpsman had a comment to make over seeing Major Sheppard lying in Rodney's bed, one look at John's black-and-blue body and the bruise spreading over his tanned face from temple to jawline silenced him. Still, Rodney also mentioned concussion checks, effectively creating an acceptable cover story.

Rodney made his first round of check-ins with those who'd stayed working in their offices and labs and with the marines at the gatehouse while the corpsman helped John get dressed. The base had picked up another handful of soldiers who had wandered in, supposedly including an officer who had off-world SGC experience but, as far as Rodney had been able to so far ascertain, either John or the injured pilot in the Infirmary was the ranking military officer on the base with the loss of Sumner.

Even if Mitchell was off the Prometheus and therefore part of Stargate Command, that didn't guarantee he had experience with aliens before being shot down. Mitchell was only a pilot, after all. Hardly up from John's knowledge and, damn, but Rodney really hoped John and Mitchell didn't end up in a pissing contest over who should be nominally in charge. At the moment, Rodney was the one actually in charge, being the senior scientist in base, and until someone told him otherwise, he'd be looking to Lieutenant Cadman, and Sergeant Bates to keep the military side of things under control.

Shit, no. Undoubtedly, Doctor Major Janet Frasier was in charge – of both the military and science divisions here in Area 51 given her cross-discipline training. Voodoo practitioner, but Rodney had hacked her service record back when assigned at the Mountain and potentially subject to her care. She had degrees in Chemistry and Biology, so she had to have had some small talent in critical thinking. She was also reputedly Samantha Carter's best friend and Sam really wasn't any better at suffering fools than Rodney. Her best friend wouldn't be a slacker or a smart ass who looked as if she should be up on a catwalk.

Indeed, if Janet Frasier didn't delight in drawing blood and sticking needles in places they had no business being stuck, good old Sam might have had a rival for Rodney's affections –

Heh. Actually, it looked like good old Sam did have a rival, unlikely as it seemed, and a bruised and bed-headed brunet beat a sassy, pixie-haired blonde hands down.

Finally making his way to the conference room for the debrief he'd called, Rodney realized it wasn't going to be big enough. He couldn't keep this first meeting to a handful of people. Who in the hell knew what kind of information the janitor might have observed at some point during the initial attack or whose area of research might yield something useful in insuring them a future?

Also, he was starving.

The last time he had been housed at Area 51, it had been for only a week. As far as actually working here and keeping apprised of the projects and artifacts the others were involved in, he was twenty-eight months out of date, since he hadn't bothered to follow anyone else's research while in Russia except for Sam's and that Czech, Z-something. Not that he'd cared about anyone else's research, not unless it interfered or impacted with his own; Rodney had had far too many things on his own plate to waste time offering peer reviews or motivational atta-boys to the idiots the SGC invariably recruited.

Bates had appointed himself head watchdog again, so Rodney left it to him to pass on that the meeting was reconvening in the mess hall for 5:45. He also instructed Bates to send one of his fellow minions out to roust anyone currently awake, whether they were on duty or not. It being the end of the world, Bates had to obey, and that pleased Rodney almost more than the thought of being able to
get a muffin or something to go along with his third cup of coffee.

**0550 Zulu; January 14, 2003**  
**Area 51 Main Mess Hall; Sublevel Two**  
**Groom Lake, Nevada**

Rodney was happy to see that Dr. Frasier had been able to leave the infirmary to join them. He wasn't as happy to see that she'd brought Major Mitchell with her, or that the maybe slightly dashing *Prometheus* pilot moved easier on his crutches than his own major could on his own two feet. (He'd better stop thinking of John as his major, or comparing the two and instead go back to thinking *Sheppard*, because this was still a military base.) Bates and some female captain came in only seconds behind Frasier and her star patient, and from the other doorway Rodney could hear Cadman's incongruous laugh in answer to something that sounded suspiciously like Russian (Rodney had never bothered to learn beyond the basics), but was probably Czech going by who was supposed to be working here.

Obviously he wasn't going to be able to talk to Frasier about the whole chain of command thing without all of the other interested parties also following along.

Janet Frasier proved that she was a worthy friend of Carter – or at least was as smart as she appeared on paper – and addressed the matter herself, by correctly deferring it all back to Rodney.

“McKay. I've got too many patients to look after and an alien autopsy to complete. Until the SGC or someone higher tells me different, you're the senior scientist in charge here – do whatever it is you do.”

"I hope it hasn't screwed things up too much that we only brought back its head and the one hand," Cadman apologized as she dropped down her plate of eggs, hash browns and toast with a little moue of remembered distaste that didn't keep her from taking a large bite of the catsup-covered mess.

Both Mitchell and Bates set down their own forks and took deep breaths, but Rodney noted in appreciation that the female marine captain didn't pause before biting into the apple she'd snagged to go with her glass of milk. Now was not the time for squeamishness.

Rodney himself had already eaten a cinnamon-and-sugared waffle, a blueberry muffin and a banana, and managed a previous cup of coffee beyond the large cup he held in his hands to go with the apple and two slices of buttered toast he had now. Even though the poor kid drafted to be one of the morning's cooks had assured him the bowl of fruit had come straight out of a Del Monte can and contained not a drop of citrus, Rodney didn't trust any fruit he couldn't peel himself.

"Why the hand?" the Czechoslovakian engineer who nodded to Rodney before snagging a seat next to Lieutenant Cadman with his bowl of what had to be oatmeal and... oh, yuck, the compote of strawberries that had been opened for the waffles or pancakes. Or maybe it was extra crunchy yoghurt, but whatever it was, it along with Cadman's red eggs was almost enough to put several of the others off their food.

Not Rodney, of course. He was made of sterner stuff.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves and have to repeat things over and over," Rodney dismissed Dr. Zlinky... Zernike (no, Zernike was Dutch, and the co-author of the Örnstein-Zernike relation, not to mention having won the Physics Nobel in 1953). Maybe Zelda?

"As you've already heard since you're here instead of the conference room, I think this first exchange
of information should involve everyone, though I expect people to not waste our time with stupid questions," Rodney shouted the last phrase to reach the large group of people being led in by a baby-faced marine. Oh please, no, was that Dr. Simon Coombs, who was purported to be something of a genius in applied mathematics, but who only ever made bad *Star Trek* quotes and pretended that he was qualified to be on a gate team?. If Coombs represented the best of the scientists Rodney had at his disposal, the Earth was fucking doomed.

Fortunately, no more places at Rodney's centrally located table existed once the lead marine helped John over to the last two chairs. Before Rodney could ask who in the hell the marine was, the kid bounced up after a quiet exchange with Jo – with Sheppard, and moved through the breakfast line, filling two plates. Rodney couldn’t help the frown overtaking his face despite realizing John probably appreciated not having to get up again. The rather sardonic smile twisted Rodney's way meant that Sheppard had noticed Rodney noticing and, yeah, it was time to get the meeting started.

"Okay, good, glad all of you could make it. I'd appreciate it if you observe the only one person talking at a time rule," Rodney projected to the room at large as he stood up. "While I'm sure most of you know who I am, for those of you new to this whole thing, my name is Doctor Rodney McKay. I am the foremost expert on Stargate and Ancient technology, as well as having doctorates in three different, *relevant*, fields. By virtue of intelligence and circumstance, it looks like I'm the one who's going to be responsible for our little secret base, at least for the foreseeable future. Arguing and pouting is only going to increase my contempt for the bulk of you and won't make a lick of difference otherwise, since I have the backing of the military. Okay, fine," he nearly shouted when the grousing, both good-natured and decidedly not, threatened to get out of hand, "how many others of you have actually seen one of the aliens, one of the aliens' ships, or any of the aliens' weaponry first hand?"

That put an end to any noise when only Sheppard, Lieutenant Cadman and Major Mitchell raised their hands alongside Rodney's.

"Okay, you're king of the playground," Cadman snickered to the amusement of everyone else at the tables other than Rodney. And Bates, of course, who'd thrown away the sense of humor he'd gotten out of a Cracker Jacks box instead of playing with it like any reasonable kid would have.

Rodney ignored Cadman and said, "So let's start with the basics. Sergeant Bates, how many people do we have here in the faculty and how long can we maintain a presence here if it becomes necessary?"

The question was one that none of the present military would have volunteered to bring up, but Rodney didn't believe in sugar-coating anything, especially when it concerned his own welfare and well-being.

Bates stood up, which was probably a good idea since Rodney suspected fewer than a quarter of the scientists could name any of the military people unless they were still getting around by escort (and maybe not even then).

"For those of you who don't know him, Sergeant Bates here is in charge of base security. You would do well to listen to him since that means he's in charge of the guns, and the other grunts who carrying the guns."

Okay, maybe Rodney didn't have the *full* support of the military, going by a few looks being shot his way, including from Bates, but at least he had the officers. And Bates would be reporting to one of them.

"There are currently seventeen civilian contractors on base, eight support personnel, and fifteen
military, not counting myself, the majors, our sole captain, and the lieutenants here, or any of the personnel confined to the Infirmary." Bates' perpetual scowl wasn't so out of place, as they apparently had less than half the personnel Rodney remembered being assigned to the base the last time he'd worked on a long term project here.

"There are also three… locals who were stranded and brought in by one of the nurses. They are currently confined to guest quarters with two guards standing watch. I've established three rotations of duty, five people each, which is not sufficient to cover base security. I would appreciate it if the officers," with a nod that included the eager puppy who had brought Sheppard the breakfast he wasn't eating, "would consider standing a watch to increase our area of coverage, at least until we can ascertain that this facility is not under immediate threat."

"If the threat is the aliens targeting us in their ships, it's not going to matter how many people you have out at the gate," Rodney said, "but I suppose we'd better keep a couple of them there since disasters always bring out the anti-social and the loonies. Not that the loonies don't try to crash the gates anyway to see the Roswell aliens." Rodney only stopped himself from making finger quotes with that.

"Forget about guarding the locals," he added and had to tighten his fingers into a fist to keep from expressing his opinion of Bates' prejudice. "That will free up two more personnel to make rounds or whatever it is you do when you're not on gate duty." Rodney turned away from the deepening scowl on Bates' face to gaze out over the greater crowd. Out of the forty-five or fifty people Bates had identified being on base, it looked like thirty of them had come to the debriefing.

"If we're lucky one of them will be willing to help cook and maybe handle some laundry, and the other two can help out by carrying bedpans or whatever in the Infirmary." Rodney brought his gaze back to Janet Frasier. "I appreciate that you don't have enough hands to keep things running in shifts, but don't let your people run themselves into the ground trying to keep up around the clock. Janitors can watch patients sleep as well as nurses can, and mail clerks should be pretty handy at keeping track of treatments and charts."

Rodney again lifted his chin and his voice to the outer group. "We're talking Gilligan's Island as if envisioned by Irwin Allen in the 1970s here, folks, our very own Survivor: the Nevada Desert. We're all going to have to pitch in beyond our specialties. Can your egos. We need to worry about the day-to-day tasks as much as we need to figure out how to get rid of the enemy."

He turned back toward Bates.

"You need to inventory our food situation, our water, and, I guess, our munitions if we actually have an armory here. In fact, maybe your guards need to be set up in front of the stores, although I'd really like to think that all of us are beyond looting or pilfering."

"I'll inventory the armory," Sheppard's puppy said with a scary level of enthusiasm.

"And I'll interview our personnel and guests to find their hidden talents," Lieutenant Cadman volunteered though Rodney hadn't gotten that far yet and he wasn't sure she wasn't also making fun of him by volunteering to help.

He nodded, but thought that if he wasn't careful, coffee might very well be the first thing they ran out of. The waffle and toast also sat rather heavily in his stomach.

"Dr. Frasier," Rodney again addressed the woman on his right. "What about the situation in the Infirmary and the state of our medical supplies?"
She stood up, frowned, and then climbed up onto her chair so that the people around the outer edges of the room could see her and, no doubt, so she could better see them. "I'm Major Janet Frasier, Doctor Janet Frasier, the CMO out of Stargate Command for those of you who haven't come under the auspices of my office yet. I'm here giving your regular on-base doctor, Doctor Keller, a rotation over at the Mountain, so I'm afraid I don't know many of you unless you've been on a gate team." She offered a brief smile, exactly the type of thing needed right now.

"We currently have six people undergoing treatment in the Infirmary, three of them critical, two with incidental injuries, due to yesterday's attack, and one civilian scientist who didn't expect that an Ancient generator would have enough power to shock him after ten thousand years," she said with another smile that seemed to indicate it wasn't all that serious.

Rodney couldn't help rolling his eyes at that; for all the work the SGC had supposedly been doing with Ancient tech, most of them were worse than little kids with a new, shiny toy. And most of these toys weren't for kids.

"It's Doctor Peter Grodin," she added, more for Rodney's benefit he suspected, since he'd only stayed around long enough last night to deposit Mitchell and to make sure that Sheppard and Cadman got looked over.

Playing around with a live power source aside, Rodney had worked with Grodin before, and knew him to be someone not quite as stupid as most of the rest of the gang of idiots exiled out here in the desert instead of being invited to play directly at Stargate Command. He wasn't close to Rodney's own intelligence or experience, of course, not even on a level with Carter or Zelda, but certainly on par with Simpson, and so hands and shoulders above Coombs – or Brendan Gall, whom Rodney noticed was finally slinking in.

"I expect to be able to release Dr. Grodin and Lieutenant Kleinman within the next couple of days," Dr. Frasier continued, "and Captain Teldy should be able to get around about as well as Major Mitchell here, once she's recovered a bit more from surgery. As far as medicine and supplies, this base is equipped to handle sixty or seventy percent more people than we currently are housing, so I'm not particularly concerned with running out of anything yet, although I'd appreciate it if everyone would come by during your downtime in the next day or so and donate blood, just in case."

Her look of satisfaction turned to frustration.

"As you've alluded to, Dr. McKay, our biggest lack is in trained personnel. I'm the only trained medical doctor on site, although Technical Sergeant Wilson is a trained paramedic. As long as we don't have an influx of casualties all at once, I'm confident we can maintain a standard quality of care for as long as necessary. But if you decide to conduct field trips and can recruit from any of the civilian population, I would appreciate another qualified pair of hands."

No doubt that was her subtle way of suggesting one of those field trips get scheduled right away. It was a good idea – if Rodney had another handful of marines just standing around or sitting on their asses. As it was, not only did he not have the personnel, he also wasn't sure he wanted to risk sending anyone out even to somewhere like Beatty. Time and time again, for every heart-tugging story of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in times of crisis, the images of looting and pillaging, the whole Lord of the Flies and every man for himself were also standard fodder on the evening news. If he didn't have the personnel to conduct scavenger hunts, he certainly didn't have anyone to spare at playing sheriff.

Or target practice.

"What about the SGC, NORAD or the civilian government?" one of the soldiers who'd been
conscripted to cooking detail spoke up as Rodney considered what – who – should go next.

Rodney frowned, but decided this was as good as anything else. "I had approximately twenty-four seconds of contact with Samantha Carter before the satellites and the internet went down, and at that time the SGC was not a target. No subsequent contact has gotten through to the Mountain, but when we're successful in contacting them, you have to know that they're going to be dealing with evacuating people through the gate. I'm sure a call has gone out to our allies like the Tok'ra and the Asgard. As far as I know, we also have the Prometheus up there." Even as he said that, Rodney made a stay seated and quiet gesture toward Mitchell, as he wasn't yet ready to disclose the number of alien ships that might also be up in Earth's orbit. Even SGC-trained scientists and military might not be ready for absolutely full disclosure. Like if the Prometheus had been shot down along with their communications and defense satellites.

"We have been able to make contact through the short-wave bands to local law enforcement as far away as Lawrence, Kansas and Medford, Oregon, so it's not like we're the last fifty people left on Earth," Rodney mentioned. "We're just fifty of the best and the brightest, and no doubt everyone else is expecting us to come up with the solutions. As far as the military side," he looked again toward Bates, because Rodney had no idea how to contact the rest of the military through whatever secret and encrypted back channels they'd set up.

"That was Lieutenant Ford's assignment," Bates nodded to the puppy.

"Lieutenant Aiden Ford." The puppy popped up to his feet and took off the cap, making Rodney revise his age downward to about twenty, although that wouldn't be any more true here than it would have been for Sergeant Markham. Raw recruits didn't get asked to come into the SGC unless they were pet projects of someone like O'Neill or Carter, so those would have been Air Force, not Marines.

"Although it seems like ninety-nine percent of our communications are now run through satellites and computers, the military does have its own set of shortwave bands and there are bases all over the country." For a moment his face lost its standard glow of eagerness. "It looks like we've lost Coronado, Norfolk and probably Pensacola, and no one has a clue about what's happened with any of our fleets and deployments stationed overseas, but there's been some communications with Canada, and England by way of Iceland, and pretty much everybody is daisy-chaining their way as they can. No one's quite sure if we don't have any jets in the air because they've all been shot down, or if there's not enough personnel who've been able to make it to one of the bases. NORAD's confident that situation will change in the next few days, as people figure out ways around what the initial attack and panic left behind." He looked down at his ball cap again, and Rodney wasn't the only one whose breath caught in preparation for more bad news.

"It also appears that the largest cities have been hit the worst. Not so much like in Independence Day, with the hovering ships, explosions and rampant fires. They're more like ghost towns, or at least whole neighborhoods are, and the streets are said to be impassible, but that's probably par for the course with people all trying to get out and away and then abandoning their cars. The only word we've received from Homeland Security is for folks to stay off the streets, and to assist local law enforcement when asked. To basically hunker down with their loved ones and help each other get through this."

No doubt young Aiden Ford had a loved one or two himself somewhere out there, because Rodney refused to believe that anyone in the United States government would have used the word 'hunker' in an official announcement.

Not that the kid was going to show it despite that three quarters of the room's population seemed to
be in the same situation, given the watery eyes and watery sniffs that broke the silence. Rodney wouldn't have minded having the opportunity to see if Jeannie and her family was okay himself, despite not having spoken to his sister in almost ten years.

"So, better than we expected," Rodney said over the sniffs, even if it wasn't anything of the sort. "The other thing we know for sure is that this attack isn't the Goa'uld, which may or may not be good news for some of you. It's not the Nox or the Asgard or the Furlings, and yes, I know those races are all considered allies and not enemies, Coombs, so don't bother. It's not the Unas, the Unity, the Mimetic aliens, the Replicators or, frankly, any other damn non-human species that we've ever come across, or is listed in our database. I spent hours last night checking," he again directed toward Coombs' opening mouth.

"They are humanoid, with two arms, two legs and a symmetrical balance at least on the outside, but for all we know they might also have two hearts like Gallifreyans, or two brains like Steve Martin, well, no, I guess we do know about the two brains or not, right, Doctor Frasier?"

The meeting stayed orderly as Dr. Frasier took over the debrief about the alien, although more than one person gasped or looked rather pale and sick when she described their feeding process that was apparently conducted through a slit in their hand. Rodney certainly couldn't blame anyone for that, given his own reaction. He was actually rather proud that none of his scientists had to leave the room, especially when one of the marines did.

More muttering started when Mitchell got to his part about the alien ship capabilities, especially when he mentioned that the Prometheus had gotten its butt kicked going toe-to-toe against the larger alien motherships. Fortunately, he chose discretion and didn't mention how many larger ships there were, and made a point to assure them that the Prometheus wasn't out of the fight by any means. It was regrouping and reassessing – licking its wounds – out toward Jupiter or Saturn. Rodney doubted anyone was particularly encouraged by the Earths' chances in actual space combat however.

It was noon before everyone finished relating their eyewitness accounts and pooled their data gained through media sources – while they'd still had media sources. Rodney was tired of sitting and standing and sitting again, was more tired of talking about things instead of doing them. He itched to get into a lab and start crunching data. He'd decided that they'd all reached their limit of productivity in this format, and was rising one last time to start handing out assignments and dismiss the meeting, when Simon Coombs stood up.

"It sounds like this threat has the potential to spread throughout our galaxy."

Thank you, Mister Obvious.

"So, has anyone considered trying to contact the Goa'uld for help?"

The room descended into chaos.

1419 Zulu; January 14, 2003
Area 51 Lab Seven, Sublevel Four
Groom Lake, Nevada

John had paid cursory attention to the buildings that loomed up after they passed through two sets of checkpoints when they'd arrived. They were easy to dismiss as typical to most military bases. Several small, squat buildings that would contain the command post and administrative functions, another larger building that would likely be some sort of recreational area and probably the mess hall, and six
massive hangers the ones at NASA Ames on the old Moffett Field in Northern California. There
were roads and airstrips, staff cars, and vans visible, but no alien spaceships in sight, despite the
rumors surrounding the base since the 1950s.

The spaceships were underground, just like the conspiracy-minded public had always suspected, as
well as one up in orbit, he'd been told. Plus there was the possibility of aliens themselves being on
base, although in this case only the pieces they'd brought back with them last night. Maybe even live
aliens – they had allies? – if he'd understood McKay's briefing right, but none currently.

Finding out about all of this should have been a big deal – an earth-shattering deal. That it wasn't,
was probably less about growing up studying mathematical probabilities and reading science fiction,
than because the Earth actually was shattering. Apocalypse trumped aliens. Especially alien allies
that didn't seem willing to help them against the decidedly hostile version.

He couldn't stop thinking about them though – aliens and alien ships – especially in the aftermath of
the brawl that had ended the strategy meeting.

The resident anthropologist, along with a visiting sociologist, had put forth speculation that the
reason the attacking aliens had some sort of teleportation technology was so they could, in essence,
get their food to go. It made a kind of sense, John had agreed, as did there being variants of the
species. The bone-headed aliens were obviously warrior types: bulkier, slower moving, but a
magnitude stronger than the more human appearing version that appeared after them. So, an officer
maybe, with the others being the grunts.

Did that mean there was a third type? Pilots?

It wasn't as if the 'officer' had retreated to a landed craft during the assault or afterward. Nor did it
seem all that concerned with the loss of its two 'grunts'. The call for pick up hadn't come until its own
life was threatened.

Pilots often held favored status, but that wasn't necessarily the case here. Unless their ships were
totally automated, it appeared that their pilots didn't get to enjoy the pleasure of hunting down their
meals. So food would have to be brought in. They had video of hundreds of darts launching from the
carriers and from the size of the carriers (Mitchell said they could have landed three of Prometheus
on one of their flight decks) there were no doubt a hell of a lot of hungry pilots aboard them.

The sociologist proposed that a ruling class alien stayed on board, one that ranked higher than the
officers; someone who would never risk sullying their own hands. They couldn't know, of course,
because it wasn't as if these alien vampires lived in their galactic neighborhood. Otherwise the
Asgard or the Gou’ald (or apparently any number of other civilizations) would have run into them
before now, everyone had agreed.

So maybe a ruler and attendants, maybe a whole damn noble class, then the overseers who'd also be
the educated, the ones who actually made sure things worked, whether technology or tactics. Then
soldiers, plus the necessary server class comprised of actual slaves or maybe lower caste aliens but,
over all a large number of creatures who weren't taking their meals while standing on Earth.

Bottom-line was that it was possible that Mitch, Sumner, Sergeant Stackhouse and a whole lot more
of the missing people from the cities might still be alive. Which meant there should be a chance of
rescuing them, if they could only find a way of getting onto the carriers. Not, apparently, in the
Prometheus, or one of those Romulan hybrid X-Wing fighters Mitchell had bailed from, called an F-
302s, but –

"Are you going to stand in the doorway and watch, or are you going to come in?"
John was pretty sure Rodney couldn't actually see him – at least Rodney hadn't once turned his head in the five or so minutes John had been standing in front of the open door to the lab where everyone thought Rodney had retreated after the meeting, lost in his own thoughts. Maybe he'd shown up in a reflection on one of the four different computer screens arrayed before Rodney. Or maybe Rodney had a way of tracking those badge chips (John had been told that he'd been granted full access to all areas of the base when Rodney had given him one of the biometric ID cards), and really spent his time watching where everybody was wandering in and out of the complex instead of working on the Grand Unifying Theory or solving the next Millennium Problem or whatever it was that Rodney actually did as the galaxy's 'foremost expert on Stargate and Ancient technology'. Whatever those were.

John sauntered into the lab and took a look around. No one else there but Rodney, not that that surprised John, not after the explosion of tempers and fists in the Mess Hall. He'd been oddly pleased to see that Rodney had a pretty mean right hook, especially compared to most of the other pasty-skinned scientists; all of whom were obviously part vampire or at least had an allergy to sunlight.

John's preferred partners who could keep up with him during their physical activities, as well as hold his own in an argument.

"Am I interrupting genius or…"

Rodney pounded a couple more keys before closing one laptop lid, then slowly spun his chair around so they could look at each other. *Of course you're interrupting*, the downward turn of his lips seemed to be saying, but the softening around Rodney's eyes seemed to say John was welcome to do so. Or maybe John was reading a lot more into what might have been an *it's-the-end-of-the-world,-thank-god-I'm-still-alive* fuck.

The softness could also be a result of the bruising that was turning into a bonafide black eye.

Keeping a wince of sympathy off of his face since Rodney had pretty much deserved the punch Gaul had given him, John dipped his head and said, "I was hoping to brainstorm with you now that we've had time to digest all of the available data?"

Eyes crinkling warmer, Rodney nodded in encouragement.

*Bingo*, John thought to himself. While Rodney might not respect other scientists, he put full stock in their methodology. Even if brainstorming was a buzzword, it was one of the right ones. John's questions weren't going to be dismissed summarily, as had pretty much every one Bates' men had asked.

"So, aliens are real."

Rodney's whole expression narrowed into something sour and not at all welcoming before he saw something in John's own expression that let him relax and quirk his lips up. "Yes, John, aliens are real," he repeated, with a trace of condescension, but then Rodney probably took that tone with his own mother when she said something obvious.

John tried not to let it matter that Rodney had called him John again. All morning it had been Sheppard or Major and while John appreciated professionalism in public, he was glad to see Rodney hadn't decided it was necessary when it was the two of them.

"And someone's been investigating them, their technology and maybe their ships for …" John shrugged, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Okay, maybe not since the 50s, but obviously for years."
Rodney nodded again, as if he was indulging a very slow child.

Resisting the urge to stick his tongue out and prove Rodney right, John plowed on. "I'm not talking about the SGC or the stargate, or at least I don't think I am." He – they were brainstorming, and John always liked to start with as firm a foundation as possible.

"Those things, whatever they are, aren't part of here. Don't – " he held up his hand when Rodney's mouth dropped open. "Lieutenant Ford gave me a brief overview about the SGC and Cheyenne Mountain so, yeah, I know more or less what's going on there with the stargate. If I need more than that, I'll ask specific questions."

John licked his lips. "What I meant is that this type of research existed before we were using the stargate to 'seek out new worlds and boldly go', dot dot dot. Right?"

"Not me personally, of course," Rodney waived his hand in a way that John had begun to understand was as much a part of his form of communication as words were. "Yes, I am a genius and was a child prodigy who finished my first post graduate degree when I was twenty, but both of our governments are very particular about letting underage people get top secret security clearances and, until the stargate was relocated and they finally got around to figuring it out, there wasn't anything about the program I was really interested in anyway."

Promising himself to ask later what had been the key for Rodney to join the stargate program, John nodded and smiled. "Of course. But we had aliens before the stargate, right? As in maybe there was a spaceship that crashed, whether in Roswell or not, and we've had ten or fifteen or more years to study them?"

"John, while I would love to play Twenty Questions with you – okay, well, probably not, is this really the time? – you obviously have some question burning your tongue that you think might be stupid, so you're trying to get the answer without asking the question. I promise that although I will probably mock you, it won't be stupider than Coombs wanting to ask for help from the Goa'uld. And even if it is, I will not hit you. So ask your fucking question!"

"Like you could lay a hand on me unless I let you," John smirked and Rodney nodded his head in concession, so John took the plunge.

"How many types of spaceships are there here?"

For a moment Rodney's eyes widened.

"Oh, god, it's the fucking end of the world and you're upset because I haven't taken you on The Tour?" Rodney's tone implied the capitol letters without needing the added air quotes. "You goddamn pilots are all alike," Rodney continued, now muttering and spinning his chair back around as if John had disappeared at the end of his question. "Even O'Neill wanted The Tour despite being the only human ever allowed on an Asgard Mothership."

"What? Rodney, hey, no – "

John took the last steps he'd kept between them and put his hand on Rodney's shoulder. Although Rodney dug his toes in, he couldn't prevent John from turning him back around.

"Yes, I'm a goddamn pilot, but I don't give a flying fuck about any sort of tour. I just wanted to know if maybe you had a spaceship here that Mitchell or I might be able to fly and, no, not for a fucking joy ride," he spat, because that rejoinder was obvious on Rodney's face.

"What, so you can assuage your wounded pride because both of you got shot down? I already said
we don't have time – we don't have the people – to indulge bouts of ego or stupidity, Major. If you want to play Snoopy to their Red Baron, figure out a way to get to the other side of the testing range. I'm sure you could find a few shiny F-14s or whatever sitting there waiting for another red shirt to come along."

"Jesus, McKay, you might be a genius, but once you slot things in their individual cubbyholes, you can't imagine there could be something else outside of the box, can you? I'm not talking about dogfights or suicide missions and, by the way, the Navy flies F-14s, not the Air Force, asshole. Anything left on the field at Nellis or the Tonopah Testing Range is going to be an F-15 or F-16."

As if I care, Rodney waved, with a bit of *then what's your point* thrown in.

"Your eggheads seem pretty sure our people could be alive up there. So do you have a fucking space craft here that will let me go rescue them?"

John could read nothing but disdain and pity for the poor, brain-damaged Zoomie even if Rodney didn't know the proper parlance (and John hadn't actually graduated from the Academy). He had the expression John had seen for half his life down pat. Except, as Rodney opened his mouth to add a verbal flaying to go with his expression, something shifted, and his eyes actually showed his thoughts flowing inward. John could almost hear the flickflickflick of Rodney's virtual fingers sifting through his mental filing cabinet –

No, more the clickclickclick as Rodney sent his brain into a Boolean search algorithm.

"Even if you could launch without being seen – and we're making a big assumption that you or Mitchell or *anyone*, frankly, can figure out the controls – you'd be detected on your approach."

The breath John let out this time was pretty shaky, but Rodney didn't call him on it. "You mean you haven't figured out how to implement Romulan cloaking technology, Rodney?" he teased. "I'm so disillusioned."

"Even the Federation ended up sending their ship into the side of an asteroid during their first test, Major." Rodney's chin lifted, but so did his lips. "Besides, I've been much more interested in an individual-sized working model."

John cocked his head and affected a disappointed frown. "Everyone knows you can't use magic for personal gain, Rodney. The One Ring corrupts even the best of men – and hobbits."

"I'd be careful about making hobbit jokes," Rodney snorted before reaching up to actually flick his finger against John's ears. "I've already heard Cadman asking Janet Frasier about recessive genes and the viability of human/elf interbreeding."

John reflexively lifted a hand to cover the top of his ear, but only because Rodney had flicked it. Hard. "Fine. Maybe not a rescue, but is there at least something here that will let us do some recon? Everyone always said the B-2s stealth technology came from the Roswell studies, so does that mean you have something space and stealth capable? After all, assuming you and Zelenka manage to work out some sort of jamming device for the Prometheus to use against the bad guys, it'd be nice for them to know where to deliver their warheads. Not to mention we're going to need something that can get back up to the Prometheus without being spotted, since the F-302s have already proven themselves out of the running."

Rodney sighed, but it seemed more letting go than out of some form of hopelessness. Or maybe that conclusion came from the sudden snapping of fingers.
"Grodin's the one who's been working lead on the space craft, although the focus has been on the weapons technology."

Rodney rose to his feet, unmindful that with it being unexpected, John hadn't moved back and the two of them bumped their chests and then noses against the other. For a moment John was sure Rodney's hesitation was a prelude to a kiss – and was sure his own hesitation was the idiot side of him trying to convince the Air Force part that it would be okay – but then Rodney twisted to the side and started for the door, his hand moving in a Morpheus come on gesture.

"Well?" from Rodney when John didn't move. "Oh, please. Janet said she'd probably be releasing Grodin from the Infirmary tomorrow, so I'm sure that means he's up for visitors today."

1448 Zulu; January 14, 2003
Area 51 Hanger 4, Sublevel One
Groom Lake, Nevada

It turned out that Area 51 had been collecting spaceships for almost sixty years. Sixty years of collecting had allowed them to amass quite a number of craft. Or, more aptly, pieces of them. No one was quite sure if the thirty-five or so identified as unique were from thirty-five different species or were from upgrades to earlier models or different classifications of contemporary craft belonging to only a handful of species.

Peter Grodin's research partner, Doctor Radek Zelenka, held the latter theory. He purported the very existence of the stargates validated his supposition. As Zelenka explained in bare-bones the theory behind the gate system that Ford had already filled John in on in regard to use: why would the races aware of the proliferation of intelligent species through the galaxy waste their time creating slow-moving, resource-wasting, limited spacecraft when they could step through a stargate that could apparently bridge hundreds of thousands of light years of distances in mere fractions of seconds by stabilizing wormholes or some such? Rodney's pointing out that Earth's apparent closest ally, the Asgard ("who are one of the oldest, the most traveled and perhaps the most technologically advanced of the known species outside of the mythical gatebuilders themselves"), had spaceships, including ones that could actually transverse galaxies, set the two doctors to yelling and making grand gestures at the other, but it was obvious that this was an old, familiar and fun argument, so no blows were exchanged this time.

Zelenka and Rodney not only continued to argue, but switched sides in mid-argument, but they eventually led John to a mostly intact Goa'uld Deathglider. The F-302s that comprised the fighter wing for the Prometheus had apparently been reversed engineered from a Deathglider with the help of the Asgard. It was the Deathglider's cockpit that John got to sit in, with Rodney taking the RIO's seat behind him and making filthy promises over the closed circuit communication rigs in their helmets whenever John correctly identified one of the controls without any prompting.

This more or less convinced Rodney and Dr. Zelenka both that John would be able to fly one should Mitchell's blown knee not be able to handle the stresses of launch and escaping Earth's gravity well. That gave them a back-up plan for either making a run for Cheyenne Mountain or for the Prometheus, though it was also as good a chance of suicide as it was of success as long as the aliens had control of the skies.

"So that's more dead parts over there?" Rodney asked Zelenka with a snap of his fingers as he pointed to the tarp-covered, boxy shape that was maybe twice the width of a Winnebago and half again as long. It was cordoned off against the east side of the hanger, a couple hundred yards away from anything else.
At another time, John would be as fascinated to look through more bits and pieces of the crafts that had been scavenged over the years. Rodney had already remarked about how short-sided it was that Grodin's team hadn't ever brought in a real pilot to take a look until after they'd engineered working controls and modules. That John or someone like him might have been able to figure out a few things the scientists had given up on, going by how easily it had been for John to intuit the Deathglider's cockpit. But John's body had started to stiffen up again and he was looking forward to winding up the tour, or at least hoping for an imminent opportunity to sit down again for a few minutes, instead of poking around through more pieces of things that shouldn't exist.

Dr. Zelenka pulled off his glasses to clean them, frowning all the while before putting them back on. "That is great mystery. We know it is ship, pristine, undamaged and full of wonderful technology that we cannot get our hands on, because we cannot find door or hatch or gantry. SG13 found it on uninhabited PX something or other. We managed to convey it back through gate to a planet Prometheus could land on – PX something, something different, and push/pull it aboard then tow it back here hanging from cables affixed to mulitple F-302s. And here it has sat, for nearly two months. It is made of some metal unknown, and reinforced with naquadah, so we cannot drill or …" he cupped his hands and then spread them, "make boom, and so there it sits. Peter has put in petition to Colonel O'Neill to ask if Asgard can come look, but so far…" he shrugged.

Now that sounded interesting enough to put off a break. "Can we see?" John asked. Rodney also looked interested, although probably more because it was something unknown to him in general, not that it was an unknown ship.

"Is up to Fearless Leader. I have seen and have no interest in wasting further time, but maybe break is called for."

"I don't think it's something worth bothering Peter for."

Zelenka simply looked over the top of his glasses at Rodney and waited for the penny to drop. Rodney started looking flustered – and defensive – and John gave him a little nudge, shoulder to shoulder.

"Aren't you Fearless Leader today, Rodney?"

Even Zelenka seemed taken aback by the stunned look that overtook Rodney's bluster, and John had to wonder how often clashes like what had erupted between Rodney and Dr. Coombs had occurred. John had already heard quite a bit of trash-talking about McKay from some of the other geeks, including that Rodney had been banished from Area 51 two years previous, traded to the Russians to work on their own stargate program without Rodney being given a choice other than resigning. And how some of the techs weren't really happy that Rodney had come back.

John began to suspect that a lot of Rodney's arrogance came from not understanding why his genius wasn't enough to earn the respect of others. That although he had earned the right to be in charge in this instance, Rodney expected to have to fight the other scientists. John hoped at least the physical aspect of that fight was now over.

Zelenka seemed to be someone whose backing would help a great deal.

Rodney finally gave an abrupt nod and started for the tarp. John didn't miss the concerned look Zelenka gave, and tried to convey a maybe we should do something without actually saying anything, since John could only imagine how bad Rodney's reaction would be if anyone showed something that might be construed of as pity. Zelenka cocked his head in return and gave John an intense look of speculation that, on the surface, scared the hell out of John for what he might be giving away, but before he could dissemble, Rodney said:
"This tarp isn't going to remove itself." Rodney then scowled at Zelenka. "Don't look at me like that. You said it's been sitting here for two months. Do you know what two months of dust is going to do to my allergies? I'm already living in terror of running out of loratradine and EpiPens – "

"Wait, you carry an EpiPen?" John interrupted. "Do you need to?" During the only case of anaphylactic shock Mitch had needed to treat while they'd flown together, they'd not been able to get the crewman back in time to save him, even with the shots of adrenalin they carried. If John never had to witness someone dying from anaphylaxis again –

"I am deathly allergic to citrus," Rodney scowled. "The oil from the fruit's skin, the juice… so don't expect to be taken out for Mexican food once we get out of this. And I'd just as soon the people around me forego the pleasure, on the off chance you might spit when you talk or …"

Thank god Rodney didn't finish at least the obvious 'or', although John was pretty sure Zelenka had already figured out that there was something up between the two of them. John could only hope that the fact that he and Rodney had never met before last night would have Zelenka thinking he was mistaken.

"I've always felt Corona was overrated." John gestured for Rodney to go ahead and step away as he and Doctor Zelenka approached the covered ship. But as John's steps took him closer, he suddenly stopped because there was something that could have been a hum or hint of a melody that abruptly sounded in his head. Not the same jagged spike that he'd felt when one of the alien darts screamed overhead, and the outline was all wrong for what he'd seen of their craft but, conversely, it could be that whatever he'd felt during the aerial maneuvers had been a function of its working engine, and if this was based on the same technology but turned off…

"What is it?" Rodney asked, putting his hand around John's arm and actually holding him back with a hint of pressure. "Are the muscle relaxants and codeine wearing off? Do you need to sit down? I told you – "

"I'm fine, McKay," John growled, but knew that wasn't fair, because Rodney was only showing concern, something potentially warranted at that, given how difficult it had been for him to get out of bed earlier and how tired he still felt. John wasn't in pain, however, was almost feeling good, except he knew his body still hurt and that there really wasn't anything to feel cheerful or downright euphoric about. Except that was what he was now feeling. Not only an elevated mood, but also something else that was not anything his own body or brain should be producing. So it was also weird, awkward, maybe a little disturbing and wrong.

Having a lure that encouraged people to come toward a downed dart would make the aliens' hunt the proverbial fish in a barrel to twist a metaphor.

"Doctor Zelenka, are you feeling anything hinky?" John asked. Zelenka hadn't noticed John stopping and had now reached the other end. He looked up and then over in confusion, his hand already starting to pull on his end of the tarp.

"Hinky? You mean odd? Bad? With the spewing of food?"

"Well, I'm certainly not hoping for nausea, but yeah, odd." John shrugged. "There was this thing about the attacking alien ships that really bugged me. Neither Rodney nor Lieutenant Cadman seemed as bothered, so I didn't mention in the briefing. But it was enough to give me a heads up before they actually flew overhead. This isn't like that, except maybe it is," he shrugged again and looked back to Rodney before returning his gaze to Zelenka. "Not a bad thing this time, but maybe actually one that is good? And I'm talking too good, like all of the sudden?"
"I feel nothing, good or bad, odd or hinky. Just tired and maybe hungry – "

Although Zelenka had stopped tugging as John tried to explain his disquieted feelings, apparently the earlier pulls had been enough to get the canvas' momentum going. All of the sudden there was a sound that wasn't quite a snap and wasn't really thunder. John had heard it once before, back in 1995 when during leave, Donnie Harper had convinced the rest of their flight crew to take a Navy courtesy hop over to Coronado and San Diego for the finals of the America's Cup. This was the sound of a jib sail collapsing, the sound of nearly 400 pounds of canvas falling and, if the ship was dangerous, they were all threatened now as it became fully exposed.

It didn't look dangerous. For some reason John was reminded of Darth Vader's lightsaber hilt, although both ends looked sliced off along the bias and its color was more uniform gray than silver and black. The ship wasn't remotely related to those bringing the invaders; John knew that instinctively before Rodney breathed out a sigh of wonder.

"Jesus Fuck, it's Ancient."

John also somehow knew that Rodney wasn't referring to the ship's age when calling it Ancient. A melody definitely weaved through his head now, faint and also familiar, although not like a snippet of a song demon-looping over and over in your brain to the point of frustration or madness. Also nothing that John had ever heard before, so maybe it was madness.

The ship was actually almost ugly, with its basic cylindrical shape that had been planed across its undercarriage where it rested flush against the hanger floor. Each end of the cylinder with that steep bias cut made it look like two of them could be pieced together if one was flipped, and create a longer tube.

Taking a couple steps toward his end, John found a transparent portal covered most of the width and half of the height of what was obviously the nose because some sort of cockpit with seating for four was suddenly revealed beyond it. He couldn't make out too much in the way of controls when he stepped up on some sort of edging or lip and peered in closer. In Star Trek, this glass-like component had been constructed of transparent aluminum and, for all John knew, it was exactly that here too, because whatever it was, it didn't feel like glass or the space-aged plastic used to enclose a helicopter's cockpit.

John could make out a foreshortened bulkhead beyond the seating (and nowhere near the tail of the ship's body), could also see shapes and seams along its entirety, although nothing really looked like a door or opening. He needed more light. No, he needed to get in there.

"Zkurvysyne!"

John didn't exactly push Rodney behind him when the two of them raced toward the tail end in response to Zelenka's terrified 'son of a bitch', but John did dig down deep to convince his abused muscles to give enough that he could outpace their current fearless leader before they reached whatever had startled Doctor Zelenka so badly.

John was abruptly startled too, but mainly delighted by what they'd found.

Flowing lines and shapes that never quite translated into something recognizable filled the entire exterior of the ship beyond the not-glass, expressing an elegance that did much to compensate for the otherwise stubby little ship. During his first cursory glance and subsequently more detailed threat assessment before he'd actually climbed up on the nose, John had seen nothing that looked like a keyhole, latch, hinge or a handhold to suggest an opening along the ship's body, at least along the portside. But that was obviously because there were no openings along the portside, not since the
entire aft tail section turned itself into some sort of ramp and entry into a wide cargo or passenger bay.

"What did you do?" McKay screamed at Zelenka.

"I did nothing but pull on tarp. For three months we have put on tarp and pulled off tarp to tap, prod, poke and drill tiny hole, except no hole and now we need new drill bits. We thought ship was broken like drill, that maybe something had been damaged and now missing and so why ship had been abandoned on PX whatever. But you say it is Ancient? Then it is probably like other pieces of their technology and require someone gene active like Colonel O'Neill to make work."

"Don't look at me," McKay snarled. "If I could manipulate Ancient technology General Hammond wouldn't have dared to ship me off to Siberia, no matter what O'Neill or Carter wanted."

McKay and Zelenka's conversation became mere background noise as the melody in John's head culminated into something grand like a church choir, yet simple and perfect like his memory of his mother's voice. The melody now vibrated not only in his brain, but deep into his bones, filling him with an anticipation more intense that what he remembered feeling when his mother had finally acquiesced and allowed his father to take John up for his first ride in the company jet when John had been seven.

Once the ramp had fallen far enough that he could hop up, John did, ignoring the jarring he felt through his knees and all across his back. Ignoring too the repeated Czechoslovakian curses his brain couldn't help but translate, and also Rodney's' more strident shouting that was warning, curse and reprimand all at once. John had enough presence of mind to recognize there was indeed some sort of compulsion at work here, yet it wasn't the lure of an alien siren or _houri_. Nothing so foul as the alien vampires had constructed this ship, had stepped foot into this perfect ship that John knew despite never having seen it before – this perfect, pristine, _eager_ ship that knew John in return.

_Ancient_ or ancient, it contained a viable power source on board; the instant John stepped off of the ramp and into the actual rear compartment, light flowed along the seams and curls that also graced the interior bulkheads as they'd fashioned the exterior. The glow was bright enough to easily make out two sets of benches parallel to the port and starboard bulkheads, along with some kind of netting from something as flexible but obviously more durable than plant material twined into a rope or any Earth-based nylons to still be intact.

The air should have been stale if the interior was air tight to have kept things so well-preserved, but John breathed in nothing more than normal air with maybe a little higher oxygen content, given how nearly _giddy_ he felt.

The interior bulkhead separating the bay and the cockpit opened at John's approach, and this time he could feel the pop and pull of a vacuum seal being broken, although no rush of foul or stale air flowed past him here either. More lights flowed along the etched metal like liquid moonlight, not blinding, hot or particularly visible except for the output. Something that looked like leather stretched across the four cockpit seats, like the padded benches in the back. Like everything else within this ship, it showed no signs of deterioration, or even of wear and tear. It look and felt as if this little beauty had just come off of ILM's showroom floor, and now that John thought about it, he could imagine a hint of a new car/jet/copter smell.

Helicopters were generally flown from the starboard side, jets from the port if there were two seats widthwise instead of lengthwise. John had to hesitate here because it was too easy to image he could chose either seat and achieve the same result. This hesitation allowed the clumsy footsteps he'd barely noted earlier to catch up to him, but he didn't wait long enough or bother to turn to see if both men had followed him in or if only McKay had. For a moment he couldn't remember whether
Canadians drove on the right or left side of the road, but knew Czechs drove right – at least in Bosnia – and so slid into the starboard seat because he wasn't about to let someone else pilot this baby.

0245 Zulu; January 17, 2003
Area 51 Residential Quadrant One, Sublevel Three
Groom Lake, Nevada

John’s excitement when they’d discovered the Ancient spaceship had been contagious. While Rodney knew his emotions were as much because of John’s state as from the promise of the ship itself, that didn’t invalidate that first real feeling of hope he’d managed since the initial news reports of the invasion. Hope and excitement had spread throughout the base too, especially once it had been determined that Sheppard could indeed fly the little sawed-off puddle jumper as John was calling it. The optimism had grown when they’d discovered the jumper had cloaking technology to render it invisible not only to the naked eye, but also to any type of detection they could cobble together: radar, sonar, infra-red, x-ray…

After John had spent enough time to familiarize himself with the controls and Rodney figured out the best route to get the ship above ground, the senior staff had elected to try a couple of supply and local reconnaissance runs before heading for somewhere like Cheyenne Mountain or DC – or space. If they could find some more soldiers and lay in some more staples like clothes and bedding in addition to extra water, food and medical supplies, they'd also be able to look into bringing in more of the surviving local population to their protected base.

Well, such had been the plan.

Except Nellis, Creech and the Tonopah Range both proved empty of aircraft and soldiers. The first sortie, that had Lieutenant Ford serving as John's second, had at least managed to get their hands on more guns, ammo and a variety of explosive compounds, plus they'd brought back a pallet of MREs and more drugs and medical equipment to supplement what the base already had on hand. The team had quickly decided not to strip everything from the military bases, since evidence showed others had scavenged there and obviously they wouldn't be the only ones in need. As of yet, no one had managed to contact them through the short wave bands to indicate a secure military base was being set up, but obviously some of the soldiers had to have been able to evacuate before the aliens had strafed the ships they hadn't been able to get into the air.

Once John had flown a second trip into Vegas proper, however, they began to suspect a military recovery wasn't going to be happening – and that maybe they should go back and remove anything lethal.

In Vegas the survivors had not only availed themselves of whatever was at hand (Cadman reported that stores, casinos and many homes all showed evidence of looting and violence that probably had very little to do with the aliens), but gangs and criminals – or at least opportunists – had taken over control of some of the more intact casinos and shopping centers. Additional competition for the limited resources had not been welcomed.

This team had actually lost one of their few soldiers, to a terrified kid with a rifle when they'd elected to try and forage amidst one of the outlaying suburbs instead of downtown or near the Strip. As the kid had only been trying to protect his little sister and brother after losing his older sister to a different group of men with guns, no one had blamed the boy. And no one had complained when John had insisted they bring the trio back to Area 51, not even Bates though they'd already determined that they couldn’t start a significant rescue.
While no doubt sane people had survived along with the anarchists and the crazies who were claiming this was The Rapture, they hadn't found many of the sane ones yet, despite repeated trips to different parts of Vegas, Henderson and Boulder City. Including not finding traces of any of the people some of the personnel had known who lived in Vegas. Rodney had been surprised to learn that had included someone John had been looking for, since John hadn't mentioned he'd ever been based at Nellis. Rodney really hoped it hadn't been John's family, but wasn't brave enough to actually ask.

It quickly became obvious that if this little isolated part of the SGC was not only going to survive themselves but actually try to at least slow down the alien invaders long enough for someone like the Asgard or the Tollen to come through with aid, they simply couldn't take on the burden of trying to restore or maintain order. They didn't have the manpower nor could they take the chance on bringing one of the loonies onto the base to threaten the safety of the people like Rodney who were the only chance of restoring civilization – short or long-term.

A couple of the social scientists had started in with initial protests, but when Dr. Frasier also sided with military pragmatism over her medical compassion, even Coombs had stopped railing vocally, although he might have chosen silence over valor because Rodney had been more than willing to let him join one of the foraging teams and suggested that maybe Coombs ought to stay behind in Vegas and try to broker some sort of peace deal with a couple of the gangs if he was so fucking worried about them.

Trips into Beatty and over toward Barstow and Boron hadn't gone much better. Edwards and El Toro were as empty as the local military bases they'd investigated, and Barstow and Boron had proven to be ghost towns, although the consensus was that the majority of the locals had probably split to LA or Vegas instead of staying home when the end of the world had come. Beatty hadn't shown evidence of losses from the alien's beaming technology – there were no abandoned cars on the streets – but then it wasn't very populated; the aliens likely hadn't bothered with it. The locals hadn't been keen on strangers coming in to their territory; martial law, jungle law, ruled, with everyone they'd met so far either too scared to function or determined to protect whatever they had left. It would take at least a battalion of marines to make a difference, not the nineteen marines and airmen they had.

They needed another pilot too, if they were going to keep heading out to look for candidates to augment their own bunker fortress. Between the initial test flights to determine the Ancient craft's capabilities and then the sorties out into the local environs, Rodney had authorized twelve trips in the Ancient ship over the last forty-eight hours. John had flown every one of them, as so far no one else could even manage to turn on the lights. Major Mitchell had given it a try since you didn't have to be able to walk to be able to fly, to no success. So now everyone other than John expected Rodney to be able to come up with another way to make the ship work since he was the one with actual experience working with alien aircraft, but so far Rodney had nothing. Even with Sheppard taking the co-pilot seat, no one could get the ship to move, and if Sheppard left the vehicle the trial pilot couldn't get back out the door.

Something had to change despite John's reluctance to allow anyone else to fly his ship. John showed the same signs of fatigue that plagued Rodney, as Fraiser refused to hand over any stims. He also hadn't given his body the opportunity to recover from his injuries; while he got around better than Mitchell could in his crutches; he still had a limp and a stiff back. So Frasier was ready to ground John. Hell; Rodney was ready to ground him. Except they didn't have anyone else to fly Teldy, Cadman, Ford, and Kleinman, who were trading off taking teams of soldiers out to search and scavenge.

In the end, Rodney insisted everyone but the perimeter guards stand down for five hours of
mandatory rest, banning himself, too, from going into one of the labs. Not that he slept after he crawled into his damn uncomfortable bed. It wasn't so much that with everything else going on he hadn't gotten around to finding John any other quarters so the two of them were sharing (thank Newton is was not the single width he'd had in Siberia), but that Rodney couldn't turn off his brain.

In addition to everything else that had happened over the last two days, they'd made no progress in identifying the aliens or in making contact with those who could. Without that sort of knowledge it would be extremely difficult for him to come up with countermeasures, much less an attack plan that stood any chance of succeeding.

Rodney was also having trouble conceiving of an enemy that didn't seem to have any ambition or motivation in attacking, one that didn't tell them they were being conquered, that didn't bother demanding someone surrender. So far there hadn't been an acknowledgement that the people of Earth were even sentient. The aliens acted more like locusts, with no purpose other than eating everything in their path. Without the evidence of their space ships and technology Rodney would have doubted they were sentient.

He couldn't create something out of nothing – couldn't come up with some sort of save or fix if he didn't understand the nature of the threat – and while he'd always known ignorance was worse than impotence, experiencing the feeling of both at the same time was driving him to distraction.

It didn't help that he felt like he'd failed somehow in choosing Cheyenne Mountain for their next sortie instead of allowing John to try a trip up to the *Prometheus*. That he was giving up and maybe admitting that he couldn't handle the pressure and so was ready to turn everything over to someone else.

That there really was a part of him that very much wanted to turn over the responsibilities to someone else made it worse. For the first time in his life, Rodney’s decisions were truly the only ones that mattered and no one could gainsay him or send him to Siberia because he didn't genuflect before or kiss the proper asses. He stood now at the apex of his career and it fucking scared him to death. He wasn’t after funding or a Nobel prize with his research this time, but instead was expected to be the salvation of all mankind.

Even that business with Teal'c being stuck in the stargate buffer hadn't opened his eyes as had happened with this attack. He might have failed in his first chance to work with Sam and his exile to Siberia had been his punishment, but he'd accepted it and survived through the self-righteous knowledge that even though Sam's bad science had managed to come up with the preferable solution, Rodney's science had been right and that was what truly mattered.

Except now, here at quite possibly the end, being right didn't mean shit. Science might not be enough. He might deserve dozens of Nobel prizes, but having all the money or the respect in the world didn't matter to something that considered you food. Being the smartest person left in the world only meant Rodney could come up with dozens of scenarios in which they would fail – in which he would fail – and Earth would fall.

"Hey, Rodney, no."

Oh, fuck, he'd apparently whispered that last bit out loud. Suddenly, despite his frustration and exhaustion, the awkwardness of sharing a bed with someone took the forefront of both brain and body. He and John had started out on their sides, laying back to back, but John now turned – and reached – and Rodney couldn't exactly avoid him unless he got out of bed, but –

Rodney let himself be tugged over and enveloped within John's arms, glad on the one hand that they both slept in t-shirts and boxers – but on the other hand not. The kiss that touched his lips wasn’t
sexual in intent or delivery, yet being the recipient of comfort was as uncommon as being the object of someone's attraction and Rodney couldn't help the tension that stiffened his limbs. He squirmed a little, wondering if he should tug his hand from between them and try to touch John back, but John simply pulled him closer and rolled them so Rodney ended up with his head on John's chest while John lay on his back and stroked Rodney's head and shoulders. At first Rodney was confused by something hard and unyielding under his cheek; not remembering seeing any particular scars amongst the bruises when he'd first gotten a look at John's body, but then he got it and decided exhaustion and tension was a perfectly good reason to be so dumb. John wore his dog tags; the ones draped over the lamp on John's side of the bed belonged to his friend Dex, and to Sergeant Markham.

"I think I've only ever respected three men in authority over me," John began in his own whisper, apropos of nothing, except it probably was since John didn't tend to ramble or derail off on tangents. Rodney wasn't about to stop him anyway. John's low, lazy drawl was the antithesis of harsh Slavic accents or the sharp, strident tones of panic that even Bates had difficulty masking.

"Certainly not my father. We'd never gotten along and while it all came to a head when I joined the Air Force, I don't think that was what actually led him to disowning me. It wasn't so much that he expected better of me or, that in being gay, of course I was being hypocritical – "

Rodney knew John was gay, given the kisses and touches they'd exchanged once they'd gotten here that first night, but he hadn't expected John to admit it. That wasn't done in Rodney's experience with the US military, despite his share of giving and receiving hand and blow jobs. Rodney wasn't quite sure whether this meant something about the two of them or if John was simply offering something else. He wanted to ask, or at least acknowledge that he understood what a big thing he'd just been given, but he suspected opening up verbally wasn't something that John did very often, and he didn't want to interrupt and lose this unexpected closeness.

" – I think he really just thought I wasn't suited to any life that involved duty and commitment, since I was refusing my commitment to the family business. I know he was damn surprised when I got my wings. He said he was proud, although, of course, he couldn't make it to the ceremony. An old teacher did, though…"

For a second John's hand stopped along with his voice and Rodney used that pause to bring his own hand up to rest against John's neck instead of across John's waist. He listened to John's heartbeat under his ear and picked up a hint of John's nervousness when it spiked then returned to a slower rate as John resumed to his petting.

"If my dad did feel any pride, it was probably only ever for himself, for what he could brag about to his friends; that his shiftless son was going to be an Air Force pilot and make the Joint Chiefs one day. And then I had to go and choose choppers over jets, and combat over a staff position. War was for the grunts and the slackers, and even though that was all he ever thought of me, such deployments weren't proper for Patrick Sheppard's son."

That was too much for Rodney to simply ignore. He curtailed himself to only curling his hand and letting it rub along the stubble of John's jaw in time with the movements of John's own hand down Rodney's neck. The barest pressure of that petting hand when it extended its route back down across Rodney's shoulders let him know he'd gotten it right.

"Most of my COs were like my dad. To them, military service was all about the rank and the prestige you could get from it. It was all about winning, even more about someone else losing. Like we were all fucking chess pieces instead of people who could bleed or die."

John lifted his head up far enough to press a kiss to the top of Rodney's head. Rodney burrowed in
tighter. Despite his movements and John's words, both of their bodies were finally starting to loosen, their muscles starting to relax. Sleep, finally, wasn't far off; Rodney getting too caught up in the feelings John invoked to worry about his own failings.

"My last CO, however… he was different. He understood that wars are fought over ideals, but paid in blood. He didn't give a rat's ass about making himself look good because the only person he had to answer to – and the only person he really could control – was himself. He followed the chain of command, sure, followed his orders, and people died because of his decisions, but we always knew he made those decisions and followed those orders because he believed it was the right thing to do, not because someone else said it was the right thing."

This time the hand that had been so soothing gave a little tug and Rodney found himself being encouraged to scoot up so that he could look John in the eye, thanks to the faint light that came from the assorted electronics scattered throughout his room.

"You do what you have to do to survive, but only those things that you – that your soul – can survive past the doing. Maybe that's why some of the people here are looking to you to lead us. Because they don't want the responsibility or can't handle the consequences if they screw up. Maybe there are one or two who have ceded the responsibility to you because they want to see you screw up. But that doesn't mean you're going to, same as any decisions you've made in the past that didn't work doesn't mean anything now, either. In a war zone, the only thing that matters is what you're going to do next."

Wanting to ask who'd been telling stories but not daring to interrupt, Rodney had to admit that of course John would have asked about him. Rodney's actions at the SGC had earned him exile and return, although he doubted many of the scientists here would have mentioned he'd earned their respect too.

"I trust you, Rodney." John touched his lips against the tip of Rodney's nose while the hand that had tugged him upward now burrowed between them to press against Rodney's chest above his heart. "Not because you're the smartest person in all of the galaxy, but because if you do make a mistake, I know you'll learn from it and not make it twice. I trust you because you were willing to step up and you've been making the hard decisions because you know there are folks around here that want to see you fail. You'd be motivated if it wasn't the end of the world, and you are going to come up with things and give us chances that no one else can even imagine. And, yeah, maybe you being a genius is a big plus, not to mention a huge turn-on."

A kiss to Rodney's lips this time, one a little more carnal than comforting, although they were both feeling more drained than energized.

"Even if it all goes to shit for good, I can't imagine anyone else I'd rather be with when I go down."

"Me too," Rodney had to respond, his voice rough from forcing himself to stay silent for so long, as well as from his heavy emotions. He initiated their next kiss, and this one offered thanks not just for John's support but also his presence; for Rodney not having to go through any of this alone in all meanings of the word.

"So, don't you want to ask who the third man that I respect is?" John asked with a little more lightness to his tone and touches, and Rodney maybe melted a little when he realized why John said the third, though he'd already understood that John hadn't exposed himself like that just to make Rodney feel better.

"I expect it was your seventh grade gym teacher or your freshman football coach. Whichever one encouraged your masochistic streak for endangering your body while indulging your 'need for speed'
or some such rubbish," Rodney responded with a touch of asperity because it was expected from him and John had yet to take exception to Rodney's mode of interacting socially. He figured it was his turn to lie on his back and was pleased when John simply rolled with him and began making himself comfortable against Rodney's shoulder in turn.

"Nah, they were both dicks who were more interested in getting booster money and championing students who might get them noticed on the collegiate or pro level. I was always a little too scrawny to play football anyway. Track on the other hand, and golf – "

"You golf?"

"Hey, what's wrong with golf?" John protested and started lifting his head. He let Rodney press him back down again with only the faintest struggle, no doubt to make sure Rodney knew he'd acquiesced instead of being forced.

"You stay plenty fit walking around the courses all day and the only one you fuck up when you make the wrong call or the wrong shot is yourself. It's also all about vectors and velocity – "

"Do you bowl, too?" Rodney couldn't help himself.

"I have been known to once or twice," John said with a little huff that pebbled the flesh across Rodney's collarbone. "I spent more time at the pool tables than at the bowling alley than knocking down the pins, though. You can make a lot of money hustling pool as long as you don't get stupid or greedy. It's how I earned most of my spending money while I saved up for college." John's voice was getting softer, his drawl slowing along with the tempo of his breathing. Rodney's body and mind couldn't help but fall into the same pattern. He did have one question left, though.

"John," he asked before it was too late, "who is the third man you actually respect?"

His question earned him a sleepy laugh and a leg sliding under his own. "My math teacher, Mr. Wanamaker. He opened my eyes to the wonder of algebra and geometry. And to my own sexuality. He was like an older Val Kilmer in Real Genius with the looks, the brain and the fuck-them-all attitude."

"Of course your hero would be Chris Knight, when it was obvious that Jarret's character, Mitch Taylor, was the actual genius of the two," and Rodney broke off that statement quickly because if he was already making the comparisons between the two of them, John would be too, and Rodney empathized a little too much with Mitch's pain in that movie –

"Hey, didn't you think Chris and Mitch made a better couple than Mitch and Jordan, although Michelle Meyrink was plenty cute too?" Rodney knew that he'd stiffened up in embarrassment and was only now getting his body to relax again, so he appreciated John's discretion.

"Well, of course Chris and Mitch were the real OTP of that movie but – wait a minute," Rodney suddenly squeaked and tensed again. "You fucked your freshman math teacher?"

"He was my eighth grade teacher and, no, I didn't, although I tried like hell to get him to go there with me."

Rodney could feel the trace of John's smile pressed against his chest although John's tone was more poignant than pleased.

"He turned me down, but also sat me down and explained, so I wouldn't go out and find someone else and really fuck up my life – and maybe someone else's. He's the one who also came to my college graduation – and pinned my first set of wings on me," John finished almost too softly for
Rodney to hear.

Mr. Wanamaker sounded like that one special teacher that every eager student hoped he might one day find as a mentor. Also like one hell of a man, whether he'd been gay or not. Rodney found himself wanting to meet him and thank him for being there for John when it was obvious that John's own family had not; except it was as likely that Mr. Wanamaker was now dead or missing and –

"What's OTP mean, Rodney?" John asked as if he knew that Rodney's thoughts had dropped back into the spiral of invasion and loss and panic.

Rodney wrapped both of arms around John and let himself flash onto the comforts of make-believe movie couples from his own lonely past, and of the one he now held in his arms. A pliant and warm John Sheppard twined around his body was better than any previous lover – better even than Rodney's cat.

"It's been adopted, mainly by women on line, to mean One True Pairing, like… well, like Sam and Frodo," Rodney explained softly into the spikes of John's hair. "Despite Frodo leaving and Sam marrying Rosie and even if they were never actually together together, although there are those who dispute that, everyone knows and agrees that the most meaningful relationship in their lives was with each other. Many would argue that Kirk and Spock would fall into the same category – including the sexual relationship – along with Holmes and Watson and others too many to mention, of course."

"Cool," John breathed against Rodney's skin. "Like Bing and Bob. You'd make an okay Bob but a much better Frank to my Dino…"

'Cool indeed,' Rodney mouthed back as they both dropped into so very much needed sleep.

3.

1410 Zulu; January 17, 2003
10,000 feet above the Rocky Mountains
90 miles west of Colorado Springs, Colorado

While Rodney had intended to get a couple more hours of sleep in during John's next recon mission, he wasn't managing it. He was still tired; five hours sleep – even the best sleep he'd had in forever – hadn't made a dent in the week's worth of sleep deficient he'd accumulated since leaving Siberia. But this was Rodney's first trip in the Ancient craft and his fascination with what the ship could do trumped his exhaustion. As did watching John's face as he showed Rodney the mechanics like speed and altitude levels as well as the array of sensors, weapons and pilot interfaces he'd discovered on his own.

This was the flight they'd deliberated over choosing between Cheyenne Mountain or trying for the *Prometheus*. Colorado had won. Cheyenne Mountain, or more accurately the SGC, promised more valuable intel, as well as personnel and supply relief – and possibly good news from their off-world allies. And if Rodney was concerned that they misinterpreted the data that John had given them about the jumper's status, considering that it had been abandoned on the planet where it had been found so it might not be reliable in hard vacuum condition, well losing a craft that could cloak itself invisible meant also losing their only advantage, not to mention losing John. That wasn't acceptable to Rodney.

The route from Area 51 to Cheyenne Mountain hadn't taken them over many populated areas; John kept them within sight of the interstate over Utah and into Colorado since the jumper didn't have any
local aviation charts. Their only map was the one stored on Rodney's computer, which was a screen
save of a satellite view of the entire Southern US. Grand Junction had been the only city of note;
their course over Utah contained mainly small towns and freeway exits. Keeping the craft between
8,000 and 10,000 feet let them see cars and trucks below them, but all of the vehicles had looked to
be abandoned or a collection of collisions and wrecks.

John had figured out how to share the readings the jumper seemed to be translating directly into
John's brain by bringing up a heads-up-display. Rodney tracked sporadic readings of electrical
power; in this sparsely populated area of the southwest he couldn't be sure if it's absence was the
result of the Western Grid being off-line or just some of the local substations. Evidence of gas and
diesel generators abounded in the more mountainous areas, undoubtedly ensconced in the ranches
and homes of the folk who knew not to rely on the public sector. Like the swaths of connected
electricity, though, the readings didn't mean there were people down there using them. Complaining
about the uselessness of their information caused John to think about bioenergy and, sure enough, the
jumper could pick up traces of that too.

Rodney had no clue how many people were supposed to live in Grand
Junction, but there'd been
strong pockets of bioenergy in areas that didn't have electricity, so he figured the strafing hadn't been
so bad there. Travelers caught on the interstates could have gone to ground in the first decent,
habitable place they'd come across. Of course, the pockets could be gang strongholds, but surely
areas where people knew their neighbors and relied on each other during winter storms had had
emergency procedures set up? Or something? They couldn't stop and check, in case it was all Escape
From New York down there, but he noted it for a place to come back to… After.

"Oh, fuck," Lieutenant Cadman, sitting behind Rodney, found her voice before the rest of them. "Is
that –"

"Colorado Springs," John confirmed softly, his voice tight and low.

Colorado Springs was dead. No electricity, no people, no buildings. It was ground zero at the World
Trade Center spread out over an entire city. It was the Goa'uld destruction of Tollana writ on Earth.
What hadn't been blasted from the air had burnt or collapsed.

The other marines had come up to the front of the jumper at Cadman's exclamation, but they fell
silent as John took them past what was left of the Air Force Academy. Rodney wouldn't have
recognized it except he'd lectured there a couple of times. Part of the distinctive Cadet Chapel stood,
although the spires were blackened and pocked with almost as many holes as covered the pavilion,
the green belts, and the runways. All of the buildings were damaged if not outright destroyed, and
like the city itself, none of the few energy readings they could pick up were biosigns.

"The cadets and instructors would have made for Peterson or tried to get home to their families,"
Kleinman murmured as he crossed himself — as if he was trying to convince himself.

Like Sheppard, and Mitchell, Kleinman was Air Force and, by the look on his face, Rodney
suspected he'd at least spent time working at the Academy if he'd not graduated from it. When
Rodney looked over to John's face to see if he, too, might be an alumni, he saw only the profile of a
major in the United States military, a professional soldier — neutral expression and blank eyes —
and nothing of the man who was John Sheppard.

John kept the ship moving, and Rodney didn't think any of them were surprised to find that Peterson
Air Force Base was as decimated as the Academy. All destruction and debris, and no signs
remaining of life. Rodney couldn't be sure whether the planes had been destroyed on the ground or
in the air, but all of the hangers were leveled, and the runways so damaged that he wasn't sure John
could have landed on one.
"Should we bother with the Mountain?" Cadman asked from where she clutched at the back of Rodney's seat, her tone scared and broken and, yeah, Rodney could only imagine what they'd all feel like if they found this level of destruction there too. It was almost better not knowing, to be able to pretend —

"We didn't come all this way for a damn joyride," John's voice snapped with a harshness Cadman didn't deserve.

Rodney would have protested, but another look toward John showed the professional mask had disappeared under a fiercely clenched jaw and lips narrowed until they almost disappeared. This was the same expression John had worn when the three of them had limped back to the van with only the unconscious Mitchell, an expression and face of bleak and utter desolation, but also one promising frightening payback.

"We will get answers that we need to know," Rodney tried to explain with an awkward pat against Cadman's hand. "If NORAD is there, then the gate will be too, even if there aren't any people left. We could…if we have to we could start sending everyone off world. The alpha site would only offer primitive living, but we could keep coming back to salvage things and if there weren't many people left, the aliens would probably leave —"

"There's the Mountain, and there people are still registering," John interrupted.

For an instant Rodney was more pleased that the interruption had stopped his nervous babbling before he said something too egregious than he was at the good news.

"We can't take the chance of going right to the door before uncloaking in case the aliens are monitoring this area," John pointed out. "Additionally there will be NORAD guards if not also ones from your SGC standing watch, and none of them are going to be too keen on seeing a group of armed personnel appear out of the air."

Rodney studied the placement of the life sign readings as John swept over the parking areas nearest the North Portal entrance and agreed with John's reasoning …unfortunately. While normally none of the guards on duty were of the shoot first and ask questions later variety, all bets were off in this instance. Sure they all had their ID, and they'd managed to come up with some proper BDUs for John when they'd raided Nellis. Getting into the SGC levels would no doubt be easy enough considering most of them were known personnel, but getting past NORAD's people considering the country was at DEFCON 1…

"We should probably land down near one of the lower parking areas," Rodney finally suggested although he was not looking forward to hiking half a mile or more and all up hill.

"Do we keep our weapons?" one of the marines crowding forward asked.

Rodney deferred the answer to that question to John; his own experiences with the military mindset said they might need to, while at the same time screaming that approaching one of the last bastions of America's defense while armed would only get them shot.

"We leave the P-90s, assault rifles and shotguns behind," John said, picking up on Rodney's hesitation without knowing why Rodney had. John let the jumper come about slowly and drifted them down past the first couple of switchbacks until they found a flat area of pavement not only large enough to land on, but large enough that they could parked to the side and have it less likely to have anyone plow into their invisible ship.

Like anyone was out driving anywhere they'd yet seen — or would come here as their first choice.
"Sidearms only and if you are forced to defend yourself, try not to kill anybody," John continued as he set the ship down and then pointed to three different areas of blue on the HUD that stayed displayed while the rest of the craft powered down. "I'm not sure if these pockets are friendlies or haj – er, bogies, nor do I have any idea of what they're doing out this far from the North Portal entrance, but we should probably see if we can avoid them."

"I'm not real keen on walking up the middle of the road, though." Cadman frowned, then blushed. "Ah, sir. Not so much out of wariness about our guys, but it's awfully damned exposed to anyone viewing us from above."

"But going up the mountainside makes it look like we're sneaking up on them," Rodney protested. "Not to mention it would be that much harder. Maybe if we had some way to avoid the other people? I mean, one of us could stay back here in the jumper and monitor the HUD and let you know where to go and when to stop – "

"The HUD's not going to work if I leave the jumper, Rodney," John reminded him not unkindly. "But you're right about it being easier if we had a way to track – "

Next to John, a piece of the bulkhead suddenly slid down to reveal a compartment they'd not known about previously, and a hand-size piece of equipment that looked a little like a gameboy or bulky PDA more or less popped out into John's hand. Like the craft itself, the PDA lit up at his touch, showing a view screen inset with a grid not dissimilar to their HUD, although it was obvious the range was much more limited and showed only two clusters of dots.

"Is that – "

The center, brightest cluster disappeared, which led John to a quick smile and a low, "Cool."

"Those dots were us," he said with a finger pointed to the missing glow of blue that then flashed back on the display. "This is better than Hick's motion sensor in Aliens."

Rodney snapped his fingers and John handed it over with only the lift of one eyebrow. "Yes, well, let's hope our aliens don't have those aliens as their pets," Rodney grumbled, then frowned when the detector immediately went dead until he handed it back to John.

"Let's hope there aren't any aliens out there," came from Kleinman. "Or trigger happy soldiers or civilians. Should one of us stay with the ship, sir?"

John met Rodney's glance and Rodney gave a small nod to have him continue. As far as he was concerned, actual field work was the military's concern and Rodney wasn't so much of an egotist to not know when he needed to defer to the experts.

"None of you would be able to fly it out of here, and I don't fancy anyone's chances of making it anywhere alone if this does turn out to be one big Charlie Foxtrot."

"I am a marine, sir," Cadman gave John a little grin. "You don't have to make allowances for me, and you're the highest ranker officer here, so – "

Rodney didn't get it, which John seemed to pick up on.

"Charlie Foxtrot is another way of saying cluster fuck," he explained. "The Brass doesn't like it any better, but you can get away with it over an open mic."

Rodney nodded, but then shook his head as his brain moved from mildly amused and relieved that someone could find something to smile about during all of this, to the connection then as to why
John had said it in the first place. "You don't really think those are aliens out there do you?" he had to ask although he was pretty confident he'd kept the panic out of his tone… fairly confident.

John didn't really think they were walking into an ambush, did he? If that was the case, they really should turn back around or maybe head on to somewhere like SAC outside Omaha, although any surviving soldiers there would be as trigger-happy, and any aliens would no doubt still be looking for lunch.

"The aliens didn't really seem the invading then establish a stronghold type, after all – " Rodney tried to sound convincing enough even for his own paranoia.

"They probably aren't," John agreed when one of the marines snorted at what was only proper caution. "But we've also already seen two types of aliens, or at least two variations of the same lifeform," he continued. "And we've seen three types of ships, all or any of which could belong to one single race or be indicative of an alliance of races. So we can't assume they are here only looking for food. Until we physically do see something that isn't human while I'm holding this gadget," gesturing with the detector, "we will assume that every contact is hostile and act accordingly." He gave a pointed look to the scoffing marine. John then put the detector down on the console in front of him and pulled out another gadget from his BDU pocket.

Just how many pieces of tech had he found, Rodney wondered, and why hadn't he shared them before now?

"This is the remote locking device for the jumper," John held it up for the others to get a good look at it before handing it over to Rodney. "It can also trigger off the cloak. You're not going to be able to use it, but didn't you say there might be someone else able to use the ancient tech here, Rodney?"

Yes, but no, as Rodney absolutely did not want to think about why John would be handing it over. He promptly handed it right back. "There's at least one, assuming he's not off world. Keep it and show off later." The chin lift probably lessened the effect of his order, but John gave him a nod in return and tucked the locking device back into his pocket before standing up. The marines immediately stepped back and made room for him to move toward the hatch, and Rodney had to scramble to stuff his laptop back into the backpack Cadman had scrounged for him so it allegedly wouldn't get caught on anything or slow him down as much as his computer bag might have.

"I'll take point with this thing and," John looked between Cadman and Kleinman, "we're going to be dealing with the NORAD people first regardless of your secret base here, so Lieutenant Kleinman, you're with me. Rodney, you, Brent and Corpsman Stevens stay tucked between Privates Cole and Lewis. Lieutenant, you, Sergeant Cooper and Private Marsters have our six," to Cadman.

"Sir, yes, sir," she gestured with something a lot more like a finger gun than any proper salute.

Because Rodney was going out into the field, he'd been chivvied into carrying a handgun that hung like a dead weight in its thigh holster. John had also insisted on a half hour of practice with it before he'd considered getting the mission underway, but they'd both known anything less than weeks of training wouldn't make Rodney proficient. Rodney thought he'd gotten over his completely rational dislike of guns though, at least well enough to be able to pull it out and point it at someone that threatened him until one of the others could get there and take care of things. Rodney also understood the lesson of not drawing the pistol unless he was willing to fire; given the circumstances he was pretty sure he could pull the trigger to save John's life. Probably Cadman's too. He hoped if it came to that, he'd be shooting at one of the aliens and not a human, but still –

"Remember where we parked," John said a little too cheerily as he opened the hatch and let them out of the jumper. Of course, it was remarkably like Star Trek once they departed, although there wasn't
the evidence of divots in grass to show where the cloaked ship rested. Rodney could see nothing of
the ship, not a haze or distortion or a waver of how the lightwaves had to be bending around or
reflecting off the unknown energy field.

"Major, can your little detector pick up the jumper?" Rodney asked. Because a biosign reader was
useful, but a full on energy detector like the jumper's internal sensors would be way more cooler and
even the Kirk era tricorders could…

John pointed his hand with the device at the ship but shook his head. "Not being detectable with the
cloak on is kinda the point, though, Rodney."

Rodney nodded with a rueful grin. Of course, that didn't mean the equipment was limited, only that
the cloak was better tech –

"Whoa," John suddenly said and Rodney hurried forward to look over his shoulder.

"I thought about scanning for electricity like we did from the jumper," he explained and now Rodney
could see that the scale of the device had changed, and there were tracer lines leading from one set of
small squares to a much larger square that was near blinding until John must have fiddled with
something and the screen dimmed.

"The Mountain has its own substation, of course, but that's probably a shit load of generators,"
Rodney pointed to the smaller glow. "These lines have to be the connecting lines, but if they were
connected to the Western Grid any longer, we'd have a lot more lines snaking away. I wonder if this
can only pick up energy sources or if it can –"

Blue lines now replaced the gold ones, and these did snake in all directions off the screen.

"Water," John informed him. "Of course, with so much of the power grid down, that's also going to
fail pretty soon, although I suppose the Mountain has its own reservoir of tanks. Let's see if there is
anything else…"

Another blinding glow of white light flared this time, in the same location as the earlier large square
and Rodney was officially in awe of John's little detector. It had to be sensing the naquadah now, the
alien-inspired generators that the SGC had to keep things going even if NORAD's regular generators
failed. Maybe it detected the Stargate itself, which made sense considering the craft's builders and the
gate builders were the same people – assuming Jackson hadn't screwed up all of his translations.

Rodney hadn't believed the gate would be gone, but the SGC had sacrificed one in the past to defeat
an invader. Actually, it could be gone and just the generators remained. Even if it was intact, that
didn't mean the aliens hadn't also come through the gate as well as sending ships to attack and set up
a blockade. The whole base could be overrun and they were walking into a –

Fuck! How in the world did Jackson handle this kind of pressure?

1448 Zulu; January 17, 2003
North Portal Entrance
Cheyenne Mountain

John let them get picked up by one of the base patrols as he led his team through the last parking lot
across from the North Portal entrance into NORAD. The patrol carried the same type of assault rifles
John's team had left behind, all pointed at his people, so it didn't matter that they outnumbered the
patrol nearly two to one.
Cadman had speculated that any member of the SGC that had been caught outside the Mountain when the hammer had fallen would have tried to make their way here, same as any standard military in the area might have headed for Peterson first, and eventually to NORAD with Peterson's destruction. So while they were being carefully watched and quickly herded toward the first checkpoint, the patrol wasn't acting particularly hinky or threatening after they'd presented their military IDs. Since John didn't also have the SGC ID that the rest of them carried he'd been concerned about not being able to stay with Rodney and the others once they were processed, but his worry looked to be unwarranted. Rodney McKay refused to be intimidated by any soldier, and now argued with the general trying to latch onto John.

Being shouted over was embarrassing, even if Rodney was most likely right in that there was nothing John could do under NORAD command other than take a turn manning the perimeter. All of their observations of the aerial engagements and of the enemy's capabilities showed the aliens with clear superiority in air if not space, and that nothing was going to stay in the air that didn't have similar stealth capabilities to their little alien ship. John moved to intercede when the general threatened to have Rodney arrested (shot), but another officer suddenly appeared and took the general aside while waving off the MPs that had begun taking an unwanted interest in Rodney's performance.

"That's Major Davis," Kleinman whispered against John's ear while Cadman tried to calm Rodney down and the new major held his own private conversation with the general. "Davis is the presidential liaison between the Pentagon and the SGC, so I guess at the moment he trumps a Major General Chief of Staff."

John tried not to let his release of breath sound so much like relief and gave Kleinman a nod of appreciation for the intel, then stood waiting patiently while his fate was being decided. While he had been known to disagree with an order or two in his time and maybe challenge a CO's call, running afoul of the Top Brass would not be good for his career. Assuming he'd have a career in the military after all of this, of course.

Assuming he survived the next few days.

Major Davis returned to their little group with the general in tow. "Lieutenant," with a nod to Cadman, then, "Gentlemen, let's get you down below." He handed everyone back their ID and started leading them away. When not even one of the MPs followed them, John figured they weren't being taken somewhere to be locked up, and this time his breath might have been a little louder.

"It's about ti – "

"Rodney," John interrupted and Rodney stopped. Rodney's expression turned decidedly unhappy but, thankfully, he didn't leave John's side in a fit of pique to join Cadman or anyone else.

"Everyone's trying to cope the best that they can," John continued much more quietly in an attempt to smooth things between them anyway. "Deviating from tried and true procedures is pretty hard to do even in peacetime for the Brass. The middle of an attack is not the time to be thinking out of the box, otherwise all you have is chaos and anarchy. You may not like the military mindset, but you will always know what's coming next, and for ninety-nine percent of the people around you, that's going to be of comfort." He bumped his shoulder against Rodney's when he got another scowl. "Thinking outside the box is why we need and rely on guys like you to advise us."

John was pretty sure that got him a ghost of a smile, but then they were all required to step forward and place their thumbprint on a keypad near a huge metal door after Major Davis leaned forward and opened up a cover to have his eye scanned.
"Ah..." John began when his turn came up.

"Believe me, Major, if you weren't on file with the Armed Forces DNA registry, you wouldn't be proceeding any further despite what Doctor McKay might threaten," Major Davis said with a gesture for John to follow everyone else's example.

John decided he wasn't particularly surprised that NORAD had a copy of that database independent of the usual internet connection to the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology. While he'd never really thought through all of the implications and necessary steps that would be needed to keep things going in the event of an all out nuclear war or, say, an alien invasion, obviously somebody had; after 9/11 there had been plenty of changes in the military so it was only fair to expect there'd been a similar change in plans to continue the government. Workarounds for the loss of things like communication satellites, the internet and power grids had to have been one of the top priorities.

Davis then turned to McKay. "If you have any intel that NORAD can use, tell Sergeant Harriman to give me a call and I'll send someone down for it." He stepped back when the door before them opened to reveal an elevator. A really, really big elevator. Davis didn't get in with them; obviously he'd only been necessary to get the door to open.

"Not necessary," Rodney said with only a hint of smugness before handing over one of several flash drives John had seen him fill his pockets with. "All of the reports from the personnel currently at Area 51 are in there. I didn't include most of our speculations on the data we've observed because, frankly, the Pentagon won't know what to do with it, at least not until I've had a chance to integrate it with whatever they come up with down below."

Davis seemed familiar with Rodney, or at least knew enough not to bristle at how condescending Rodney was being. Being a presidential and Pentagon liaison would mean Davis had had more than a smattering of experience in dealing with egos anyway, so maybe such patience was part of Davis' skillset. "Well done, Doctor McKay."

That didn't sound condescending either, which John thought Rodney had been expecting from how his expression and shoulders suddenly relaxed at the praise.

"We have limited contact with our Russian counterparts, so I will make sure Colonel Chekov also gets forwarded the data."

Okay, it sounded like Davis knew enough about Rodney to know he'd last been consulting in Russia and might have formed some attachments. John wasn't sure if it was those attachments or the affirmation of his work that seemed to further mollify Rodney and put a little bounce into his steps as he entered the elevator. The door then closed on Major Davis and NORAD, and Rodney gestured for Cadman to do the honors and press the keycode to get them moving.

Down and then some. And then another fucking elevator.

Having never served at Cheyenne Mountain, John didn't really have much more knowledge about the base than what any Hollywood aficionado or net savvy citizen might have come up with. He certainly hadn't been prepared to discover that there were – shit – twenty-seven sublevels to the base, when the ride took them most of a minute to traverse and the doors opened up to a corridor clearly marked with large white numbers and no other identification. No doubt it was next to impossible to get here unless invited, but assuming someone did breach the perimeter, obviously they weren't about to provide a road map for the invaders to locate the most vulnerable or valuable areas.

A handful of marines and airmen holding better weapons than the patrol up topside met them.
"Doctor McKay?" one of the lesser armed airmen suddenly said and like magic, the rest of them moved their weaponry off point and the team was ushered out with expressions that might be welcoming.

"Siler," Rodney nodded back to the man who'd recognized him. "Is Major Carter –"

"She and SG1 are off world," the identified Siler shook his head in anticipation of Rodney's question. "Let's get you all up to General Hammond and let him fill you in."

As John knew none of the players, the protocol or even the base layout, he hung back to let the others proceed him. Rodney noticed, but gave a little nod like he didn't need an answer to come up with his own conclusion. He simply stopped until John caught up to him before walking again at John's side instead of trying to chivvy out any more information from Siler. John appreciated it, as he was starting to feel a little like Alice down the rabbit hole. Area 51 had been revelation enough, but more on what they'd been working on and had in their holds than the actual base itself. Here, though, it was a little harder to not be aware of what the facility represented, even without any aliens walking about.

While not particularly claustrophobic, John was a pilot through-and-through and they were way down within the Mountain, with only concrete walls and military drab surrounding them. He'd been given a basic précis on the whole Stargate program and while it had been impossible to deny the existence of aliens given the creatures and ships he'd been an eyewitness to, he still had trouble wrapping his head around there being a secret organization within his own government that had been conducting missions to other planets for seven years.

Analysis of radiotelescopic data was becoming accepted evidence outside of mathematic probabilities that exoplanets existed, along with blackholes, and that wormholes were more than the province of cheesy science fiction writers. Yet this group of people knew not only that all of that was more than theory, that alien races existed, that humans weren't alone in the universe, and that the United States had its own fucking spaceship and –

"Lieutenant Cadman, Doctor McKay, gentlemen, it is damn good to see you."

General Hammond had an accent that said he'd spent a lot more time in Texas than just an assignment to Lackland, Randolph or any of the other Air Force bases there. His tone was a mixture of genuine pleasure and no nonsense matter-of-factness that every CO strived for and few, in John's experience, pulled off. Hammond had to be close to retirement age and probably only just made his fitness regs, yet he wasn't soft or past his prime. He was, no doubt, exactly the type of man needed to be in charge of a secret front-line operation. John found himself instinctively straightening up.

"General Hammond, Sergeant Siler said that Carter is off-world?" Rodney got right down to business.

Hammond gave Rodney a look, then nodded and took his seat at the head of the table while the rest of them found their own places. "They are currently trying to contact the Asgard and the Tok'ra to see if we can get more ships into the fight than the Prometheus."

Rodney's nod meant something entirely different than Hammond's, John figured, but Rodney seemed unaware of the bare tolerance Hammond was exhibiting – or perhaps Rodney actually didn't care. Obviously Rodney couldn't be threatened with Siberia again and in the few days that John had known and observed the other man, Rodney had proven more than able to disregard anything that he had no control over, including people who didn't fit into whatever plans or theories his genius was working on.
"As you've probably guessed, we've come in from Area 51," Rodney started with. "Sam managed to get us a few seconds of one of your satellite transmissions before the 'net went down, and we rescued a pilot from the Prometheus, so we have direct intel on the invaders," Rodney continued, utterly oblivious to that fact that most generals preferred to run their own debriefings.

John suddenly found Hammond's gaze directed his way. He stiffened and began to shake his head.

"No, this is Major John Sheppard," and wow, Rodney wasn't completely oblivious. "He's the one who spearheaded the rescue of Major Mitchell, as well as helped us get Mitchell back to Area 51 despite the aliens' attempts to kill us all. Even more fortuitously, Major Sheppard here has the ability to manipulate Ancient technology, maybe better than O'Neill does. That's how we got here unmolested. The ship SG13 found a few months ago turns out to be Ancient in origin with a working power source and cloaking technology, all of which Major Sheppard has been able to use to our advantage."

"Good work, Major," Hammond gave yet another kind of head nod and John gave an embarrassed smile back. He'd spent his whole career staying under the radar of anyone higher in rank than his COs, and now he had two generals who knew his name thanks to Rodney. Hopefully Hammond's approval would counterweigh General Thurman's anger.

Rodney pulled out another one of his flash drives and set it down in front of him. "All of our observations and data are on this. We managed to pull one of the flight cameras off of Mitchell's F-302. So there is visual data on the attacking craft as well as a handful of eyewitness accounts. Someone needs to run a check against all known alien craft, but I doubt you're going to find any sort of match."

"It sounds like you are all doing fine work there, Doctor McKay."

Hammond's acknowledgement didn't seem to spark Rodney as much as Major Davis' had, although John did judge it to be as well meant as his own atta-boy from Hammond. John felt pretty sure this was not a general who blew smoke up your ass to make you feel good, but someone who knew the value of the occasional affirmation.

"If you want to get with Doctor Lee to get started on the data analysis, I'm sure the major can handle Colonel Sumner's debrief and – "

"Ah," Rodney started to interrupt and then shot John a quick glance without being able to say anything more.

John didn't think Rodney was actually going to go all the way to hyperventilation this time as he had when first briefing Janet Frasier, but Rodney was turning a bit red in either embarrassment or discomfort, and John didn't mind bailing him out even if he wasn't any more happy to have to repeat what had happened himself.

"Colonel Sumner was taken by the enemy during our rescue of Major Mitchell." John had delivered enough bad news to company commanders during his various deployments that the detachment and clipped manner came all too easy. "Sergeant Stackhouse was also taken, along with my PJ, while Sergeant Markham and my co-pilot were killed defending Major Mitchell."

Hammond looked first to Cadman, obviously well aware of the lieutenant's last assignment, and he gave her nod, an acknowledgement for the loss of her entire team, that Cadman accepted with only the faintest tremble to her chin.

"I'm sorry to hear that, son," Hammond told John and John might have felt his chin own wobble,
though he'd had too much practice making this sort of report to let it show.

Hammond finally turned back to Rodney in recognition that this was Rodney's show. "What is your personnel situation then?"

As a good XO, John stepped up again to further show they hadn't been bludgeoned by Rodney's personality, but actually supported his lead. "At Doctor Frasier's recommendation, Doctor McKay has assumed command of the Area 51 base, since we are not equipped with enough personnel to implement any sort of military presence in the local environs." He was pleased to see Rodney stop looking so headlight-struck and able to lean back in his chair, although Rodney's posture couldn't remotely be called relaxed.

"She ceded command of the military personnel over to me, as she has an infirmary full of injured and is splitting her time overseeing their care with doing what DNA analysis she can of the hand and head of one of the aliens we also managed to recover during the rescue." John kept his expression and tone as no nonsense as Hammond's. "At present, not counting Doctor Fraiser, Major Mitchell and myself, there are fifteen enlisted military, three Lieutenants and two Captains doing their best to look after seventeen civilian contractors, eight support personnel and six locals, five of which are under the age of eleven."

John took a deep breath himself and started recounting the rest of it, making sure to draw in the others to offer their observations and acknowledge their achievements. While there might not be a United States Military after this to worry about their careers and advancements, the people he'd been taking out on the foraging and intel runs deserved to have someone else hear how extraordinary they were, from their willingness and desire to actually fight back to the fact that none of them had given up.

Once he'd given the status of the military bases they'd checked out, Hammond shook his head, and when John got to Peterson and the Academy, the general looked as sick as John still felt. Being this close, no doubt the SGC had had the pick of the best cadets, and Rodney had mentioned Carter taught the odd course there.

Hammond responded by filling them in on what the SGC knew. "As best we can tell, the attack focused on large population centers, and we have to assume they did their best to wipe out our capability to meet them in the air, including taking out our civilian airports." Deep breath. "The attacks started in the Far East, which is why we were able to get some of our assets into the air. No one knows whether the various naval fleets responded – if they came under attack or not – and NORAD is still waiting for shortwave relays from the Middle East and our Allies. The Department of Homeland Security's last order out was for the remaining air assets to stay on the ground for a later opportunity, but…" The general shrugged and fell silent.

But…

Yeah. They could hope that the invaders hadn't located every base, except every military pilot would have been busting his or her ass to get in the air, no matter what country they flew for, and no doubt all working flight lines were targets of interest.

Had John still been deployed in Afghanistan, he would have been in a cockpit himself during the attacks and, quite likely, now one of the missing or dead. While he was glad he wasn't dead, he would have found it worthwhile if he'd bought the farm while protecting his world. Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.

"Well, our tarmacs are empty and I've got all of our people down in the lower levels," Rodney said to break the heavy silence that had gathered around them. "So if the aliens start bombing vacant
hangers, we should be okay, unless they have a lot heavier ordinance than we've seen evidence of so far. We're self-sufficient on food, water and power for now, plus we have our cloaked ship to make continued foraging runs if we start running low on essentials."

He suddenly raised a finger.

"The naquadah generators register on the Ancient ship's sensors," he reported with a frown. "We're going to have to figure out a way to mask them at both of our sites. Or hope the invaders won't pick them up, but how likely is that? Especially once the power grids fail completely. On the other hand, when the Ancient ship is cloaked, none of the normal methods can sense it, not even by its own portable detector. Since it was the Ancients who built them, we can maybe count on the invaders not being able to find it at least."

Rodney shot a glance John's direction and John tried to signal that Rodney was doing fine. Certainly Hammond's expression was open to more input and speculation.

"Ah, the problem with scavenging trips is we're not the only ones out there. It's pretty much anarchy and religious fanaticism in the locations where there are appreciable numbers of survivors. People have also broken into their local National Guard or police stations and have decided to declare themselves warlords of their own territories. Basically we need at least one more squad of soldiers. Right now we can only run two security shifts unless we stop making the trips outside the compound, and everyone's getting pretty f – pretty damn tired." His hand came up and this time pointed John's direction.

"Oh, we also need at least two people who can work the Ancient tech so we can train more pilots to use the ship."

No matter how sweet a ride the jumper was, John had to admit that Rodney was right in that he couldn't keep going at the pace he had been. He needed back-up or they were going to need to spread out the flights a lot more than they had been. While the neural interface made flying the jumper a dream, he'd pretty much had a headache for the last thirty-six hours that he didn't think was solely from running on adrenalin and caffeine pills.

"We also figured you would want Doctor Fraiser back, but you don't get her until we get Doctor Keller back ourselves."

"Do you have any other demands?" Hammond asked rather more indulgently than John expected from a three star general.

Rodney's frown turned thoughtful and he snapped his fingers. "Actually, yes. Of course you won't spare Jackson once he comes back, and I don't really want him, but I do need a competent linguist to come back with us if you've got one. Grodin's doing okay with translating some of the Ancient symbols for a mechanical engineer, but there are probably systems we're overlooking in the ship, and there could be a database or at least a flight recorder that might have data on the planets the ship's visited in the past, and of the other races or ships they might have encountered. We've also salvaged pieces from one of the downed alien craft and who knows what kind of language they've got and what we might be able to learn about the alien's ship configurations if we can break their language."

Rodney paused, but kept his hand raised to keep everyone else silent. "I'll trade you Coombs and Gall for the linguist, and, eh, the corpsman here for Keller if I have to, although we'd really like to keep him unless you've got another spare medical doctor available," he finished with a gesture toward Stevens.

Hammond's expression was almost amused, but John made sure to keep any similar emotion from his
own. He really dug that Rodney wasn’t intimidated, was in fact ordering around a general of the Air Force; Rodney was totally clueless as to what his conduct should be. But letting the others know of his approval wouldn’t be helpful here, despite Hammond not proving to be a hard-nosed bastard that refused to listen to someone who was either lower in rank or simply a civilian.

"Well, you're in luck, Doctor McKay," Hammond smiled, still indulgent. "I can give you not only someone able to activate the Ancient technology, but is also a trained pilot. Colonel Edward’s team is in house so I will have Major Evan Lorne reassigned to Area 51 for the duration. As far as getting a second person to help, I can't give you someone military, since we have our own concerns, but Miko Kusanagi has shown an affinity for working the technology and she's here pending the next scheduled ship out to the Antarctic base. She's a mathematician, I believe, one of our newest international participants from Japan."

Rodney looked marginally okay with that and John figured one more pilot would make enough of a difference. They were getting a little officer heavy but John had enough of an ego about fellow pilots to be happy that Lorne would also outrank any of the Marines, might possibly be the ranking officer. Certainly, he'd be higher than John, no matter his time in rank, given his SGC experience.

"Now, with regard to your linguist, I happen to have one of those on hand too," Hammond shook his head as if he was pretty surprised about that himself. "With Doctor Jackson due back within the next twenty-four hours, I think we can spare Doctor Weir. She came on board four weeks ago as the IOA's personnel liaison, since some of our international members were concerned about the Pentagon having direct access in Major Davis. In addition to working with Doctor Jackson on translations, Doctor Weir is also a renowned diplomat who has worked with the IOA and the UN in any number of high-level negotiations. In fact," and Hammond's smile was suddenly real and directed solely toward Rodney, "you have her to thank, Doctor McKay, that you were recalled from the Russian stargate program instead of simply fired."

Rodney turned a shade of red that was more fetching than embarrassing, since General Hammond didn't appear to be angry at Rodney, though it appeared that Rodney's departure from Russian wasn't due so much to the SGC coming to their senses as he might have given John (and the rest of the folk at Area 51) to believe.

"I'll…I'll make sure to do that."

"Let Major Fraiser know her daughter is here on base and safe," Hammond went on. “She'll probably prefer to remain with you until her patients are stabilized. Carolyn Lam can handle taking care of our people.”

Rodney nodded and Cadman voiced a soft sigh. John knew he wasn't the only one who felt better knowing at least someone's loved one was safe and well. Hammond's choice to tell them about Fraiser's daughter first ratcheted John's respect for him higher. One of the hardest decisions Rodney had made, with Fraiser's agreement, had been refraining from undertaking any personal search and rescues for family members of base personnel. Even if they'd had the resources, the time, and the space to house an influx of people, there had been the question of where to draw the line.

"Meanwhile, we can send Dr. Keller back, along Beckett. If you've got sample from one of the aliens, he can be more use with you than here, since he's a geneticist."

"We'll take Doctor Coombs off your hands and welcome Doctor Gall's arrival," Hammond continued in agreement with the crazy bit of horse-trading Rodney had decided upon. "In return, however, I would like you to turn your current plans over to Doctor Zelenka, so you can prepare to join the repair crew on the Prometheus. She's sustained enough battle damage that she's had to pull back except for overseeing reconnaissance missions with the F-302s. Before she became too crippled..."
to fight, *Prometheus* did manage to destroy two of the invaders and damage another to the point that it has also retreated. If you assist with the repairs, we should be able to get our asset back into the fight before they get finished with theirs. Then the enemy only has one more of the carrier-type ships left outside of the damaged one."

While having Rodney off somewhere in space while John flew resupply missions sucked, but the rest of Hammond's information was certainly good news. It didn't sound as if the general was going to actually commandeer their jumper for the SGC's own needs, which had been John's greatest worry other than being reassigned himself.

"There are also a number of their mid-size defender craft and thousands of the attack fighters," Hammond pointed out just as John was feeling optimistic. "But it's obvious that their fighters are short-range only, and the speculation by the people here is if we can eliminate or run off their remaining base ships, the other ships will either retreat with them or run out of fuel or energy and become impotent."

Rodney frowned. "Their ships maybe, but what's to stop the aliens themselves from landing here before they crash or run out of life support? Sure, we don't want to leave any base ships up there, but…" Rodney stopped and shook his head. "You should send Zelenka instead, with Gall, to handle the repairs. Zelenka is can handle anything that could come up with on that ship, including working with an Asgard, and Gall is a decent hardware engineer and likes to dabble in cutting edge aerodynamic designs, if his phenomenal offers from the private sector to get him to leave government contracting are to be believed."

"Doctor Lee has things covered here until Major Carter returns, Doctor McKay. There is no reason for you to stay –"

"What? No." Rodney waved his hand vaguely with an affronted look. "I'd be wasting my time and you my expertise. Look, it's obvious that the Ancient ship also has space capabilities," he changed tactics in the face of Hammond's displeased expression. "We think we can actually reach the alien fleet without being detected through the cloak. The intel that can gain us as well as the opportunity to see what they're doing with our people –"

"Even if I do decide to authorize such a mission, Doctor, why would that preclude you from assisting with the *Prometheus* repairs?" Hammond now looked totally surprised at Rodney's suggestion. "Surely you are not suggesting you're volunteering to participate in such a mission?"

John couldn't help but to bristle a little as Hammond's tone and expression turned condescending. Just because Rodney wasn't going out on the sorties didn't mean he was any sort of coward. The closest to any scientist John had authorized on the scavenging trips had been Stevens, and that was because they needed an expert to help pick out the necessary medical supplies and equipment and Stevens was a six-year veteran in the Air Force. Rodney had, however, certainly been right there on the front line when Mitch, Sumner and Stackhouse had been taken, helping as he could.

"Who do you think is going to figure out or interface with any of the invader's tech if I don't go?" Rodney bristled on his own behalf. "Your Doctor Weir or Coombs – who couldn't find his way out of the paper bag he needs to breath through, much less –"

John had purposely not chosen a seat next to Rodney as had been his wont, but fortunately Cadman had, and seemed to be able to reign Rodney in, in John's stead, going by the way Rodney abruptly stopped talking and by the careful way the lieutenant avoided the wounded gaze Rodney shot her direction before suddenly taking in General Hammond's once more darkening complexion and tightening expression.
John watched Rodney's chin lifted reflexively.

"You brought me in when Carter had trouble with both the stargate and the initial X-302," Rodney refused to back down from Hammond. "Okay, maybe the first was the Pentagon's idea, but in either case you didn't pick Lee or Gall or Coombs to help her either. You knew you not only needed someone who could work as her equal instead of as one of her sycophants, but also someone who refused to be intimidated by the technology as well." Rodney took a deep breath and when next he spoke, his voice held only surety and honesty, with none of the arrogance and bravado that had gotten him this far.

"Of course, I'm fucking terrified of what's going on, but I'm not so panicked I'll fall into the comfort of equations, pet theorems and the numbness of routine that I'd bet most of your scientists here are doing, outside of Carter. Even in panic mode, my brain can think rings around Lee or Coombs, and you need that ego as well as that genius — because I won't let myself be bested by alien vampires or Ancient technology. I might fail, but then at least you'll know that Carter would have too, and —"

"Alright, Doctor, you've convinced me," Hammond interrupted, the gravity in his tone and expression matching Rodney's, as well as containing what John interpreted as respect, despite being grudgingly given. "I'll reassign Doctor Zelenka so that you can stay at Area 51. And if or when I authorize a recon mission up to one of the alien craft, you can be part of it. In the meantime, I would appreciate it if you would brief Doctor Lee on your findings and speculations, after each of you spend some time in the infirmary getting checked out."

John wasn't the only one feeling that was a waste of time, going by Cadman's expression as well as Steven's more pointed affront, but Hammond wasn't being particularly charitable in his suggestion.

"We've already had one attempt by a Goa'uld agent to infiltrate this base during our first sweep of the local environs. No matter how useful or cooperative you've been with each other, or what you've provided to us, I am not going to jeopardize this base and the Earth's safety to any opportunistic enemy, be it Goa'uld, NID or al Qaeda."

Not much any of them could say to that. John made silent notes to perform their own checks back at Area 51 — once he found out how those checks worked. He knew the Goa'uld as one of the alien aggressors the Earth was frequently in conflict with, but it sounded like they were human appearing themselves, so they'd have to take even more care when bringing in people from the outside. John had no clue what a Neyedee was.

"Of course, General," Cadman answered for them all.

4.

1132 Zulu; January 19, 2003
Area 51 Residential Quadrant One, Sublevel Three
Groom Lake, Nevada

According to all the newest intel from the Prometheus by way of the SGC, the aliens still performed regular sweeps over Earth, snatching up prey caught under their eye. The wholesale destruction that had come in the first days had ceased, however. No one knew for sure if that was because they'd run out of targets or because no one was currently fighting back. A reprieve then, time to stop and take stock, to come up with plans about fighting back, to rest and recover.

You couldn't really take a day off after the apocalypse, not even to take a stroll outside, but John had been relieved of duty for the day. Keller's orders now that she was back in charge of the medical
needs of the base, backed by Rodney and their new in-resident psychiatrist, Kate Heightmeyer. In addition to Doctor Heightmeyer and the horse trading between Hammond and Rodney, they’d been given twelve more people from the Mountain; all soldiers (mostly Air Force), though none of them had known about the Stargate Program before the attack. The additional military had been a precursor to bringing in more civilians, as General Hammond had told them to start filling the base with people known and trusted, i.e. families, first. At least the families of those willing to find out whether they had lived or been taken.

So yesterday John had gone along on two missions with the new major, Lorne, gone as back-up since he’d already gone over the basics with Lorne and Miko Kusanagi about their alien ship on that first trip back from Cheyenne Mountain. Yesterday's first had been to Prometheu's by way of Colorado, to return Fraiser, Mitchell and Rodney's two disgraced scientists. From the SGC they'd picked up a couple more engineers and techs to join Zelenka and Gall, plus a cargo area jammed full of raw materials and equipment, all for Prometheu’s.

After Prometheu’s had come DC, to recover what they could of the United States government and get them to the Mountain so they could be sent off-world through the stargate, as a lookout for the future. That had afforded John an opportunity to check on family. They'd found Dave and one of his daughters hiding out in the stables with the horses at the Sheppard family home. Dave's wife and other daughter, John and Dave's father, most of the staff, and the Sheppard Utilities buildings were all missing. Same with Lieutenant Kleinman's family. Not so Elizabeth Weir's fiancee or General Hammond's wife and granddaughters, though, so the first part of the mission could actually go down more in the success rather than failure column.

They'd chosen to go after family members first, out of concern that once they connected with the government representatives, the politicians would have little patience to allow additional pick-ups when their personal safety off world awaited them. Would that that had been the problem.

Even now, John continued to be thankful that Doctor Weir had been along on the DC run; she'd been the only one available the DC politicians had a good chance of recognizing. Impressing the hell out of him, she'd stared down Vice President-elect Kinsey and without her presence and sheer brass, John doubted the final outcome would have been the same. Or rather, he knew it wouldn't have, and that he would now have trouble living with himself.

President Stuart and Vice President Mathews were dead. While, technically, that left the Speaker of the House next in the line of succession, the Speaker was absent from any of the safety bunkers dotting the greater DC metro (as were the President Pro Tem and the Secretary of State), but both the President-elect and Vice President-elect were present in the one they’d been directed to by the Pentagon, with Kinsey proclaiming himself the acting President, as President-elect Hayes had been injured during the evacuation with no guarantee that he’d ever awaken from his coma. Additionally, Kinsey demanded they displace the people they’d already picked up – and leave President-elect Hayes behind.

Kinsey had had his Secret Service security and a couple of pocket generals to back him. Elizabeth Weir had had little more than an air of righteousness and conviction to go along with her steel pair. She'd told the Secret Service they would have to shoot the civilians to get them off the ship, walking right up to one of them and holding the barrel of his gun directly against her chest. He’d backed down instantly, despite Kinsey's squawking, as the present military also lowered their weapons, until one of Kinsey's generals let Doctor Weir convince them that propping up a government-in-exile wasn't nearly as heroic as leading the survivors during the struggle. In diplomatic instead of cynical words, of course.

General Murdoch finally ordered Kinsey to stand aside while he personally helped load Hayes into
the ship, along with Hayes' wife, doctor, and two of Hayes' Secret Service detail. Only then did the
general let Kinsey board, with only one of his Secret Service guards, and none of Kinsey's cronies or
synchophants.

During it all, John, Lorne, and the two marines they'd brought along for security and people
wrangling, had been conflicted. Kinsey was claiming his authority as acting Commander in Chief,
with no one willing to gainsay him; Kinsey was also an asshole willing to abandon kids in favor a
bunch of REMFs. Without Elizabeth Weir…

The trip back to Colorado had been dead silent, even with a few kids aboard and the novelty of
flying in an invisible ship. Funny how humanity had a way asserting their own superiority in
inhumane treatment, even over the life-sucking aliens.

Once in the safety of the Mountain, John's only further interaction with his brother had come when
Dave had requested a place among the group leaving for the Alpha Site and John had escorted him
and Chelsea to the gate room. Maybe it made him some kind of monster, but he'd been relieved not
to have to spend time with them. They were both inconsolable in their grief, while John could only
mourn their losses in the abstract; he'd been estranged from his family too long for any of it to feel
personal. He'd walked with them through the stargate, but that had been as much because he wanted
to experience gate travel as from any familial feeling. Truthfully, Dave had seemed as relieved to see
John leave as John had felt over going when the group's escort returned to the stargate.

Feeling bad about not feeling bad enough, coupled with the shitstorm that had been Kinsey, John
had bowed out of the third trip, throwing Lorne and little Miko into the deep end when he suggested
Miko take over the piloting duties and Lorne the back-up. Even though the day's last excursion had
been to Canada for a rescue of the Canadian government and Rodney had added himself to the
manifest in order to check on his own family.

Given that Rodney had had the dubious pleasure of working closely with one of Kinsey's closest
cronies in the past, he'd forgiven John his cowardice after learning what had happened. He'd also
muttered something about not wanting witnesses to his own drama, though it had only been once
Rodney had introduced John to his sister that John figured out it had likely been fifty-fifty as to
whether Rodney hadn't wanted John to witness his grief or his reunion. John hadn't been the only
one shunning contact with his family for the last few years.

Rodney might not have been estranged from his sister as long as John had been from his own family,
but their parting must have been more acrimonious, because the end of the world hadn't persuaded
Jeannie McKay-Miller to be more than civil with Rodney, even if she'd agreed to stay and actually
come back to Area 51 to see where she could help out – as long as it wasn't directly alongside
Rodney. Yesterday's drama and this morning's resumed shouting match between the McKay siblings
had almost convinced John to disregard Keller's orders despite the consequences, and take over
Lorne's run to Reno with Lieutenant Ford's team to raid a mall or something and stock up on things
like children's clothes or toys that weren't part of Area 51's standard supplies.

"I need double security and a med team to Hanger One, Sublevel One," Lorne's voice suddenly
came over the command channel of the earbud John had gotten into the habit of wearing constantly –
along with his sidearm – during his waking hours. The team had returned earlier than projected and
straight from trouble so it sounded.

"Major, report." John's first inclination was to meet Lorne at the infirmary, but a call for two security
teams in addition to medical assistance implied much more than a run in with some local scavengers.
Bates, no doubt, would also be listening for Lorne's answer, assuming Bates hadn't responded as part
of the one of the security teams himself.
"We ran into alien hostiles, sir," Lorne said succinctly, under control, but then he'd had the flight back to come to terms with what might have happened. "No losses, but one of the aliens got his hands on Lieutenant Ford. The lieutenant is still unconscious, showing superficial physical injuries on his arms and chest. A couple more of us banged up but nothing a hot shower won't take care of," Lorne finished the medical report first.

So the security issue was currently under control, but then why –

"We were able to take Ford's alien prisoner."

Jesus fuck! Oh, and there went John's day off.

"Bates, do we have any place to contain prisoners?"

Bates sounded a little breathless; if he hadn't been part of a responding security team, he was now. "We have a brig, but I'm not sure – "

"Take him to one of the containment labs on level five," Rodney interrupted. "It's probably too late to worry about alien pathogens – "

"Shit, Doc, I didn't think about that – "

"Too late as in from the first moment one of them set foot on the planet, Major, not that you did anything wrong in bringing the alien here," John clarified, even if that hadn't been what Rodney meant.

"Yes, as I was saying, the labs on level five each have a separate security keypad that requires a code in addition to our badges. Some also have observation decks."

"I'll observe when I'm interrogating the fucker," Bates growled.

"I would like to observe," Elizabeth Weir was also apparently wearing a radio today. "This is our first opportunity to interact with the aliens, the first step in seeing if they can be reasoned with."

John had great doubts about that, but negotiations were a politician's way of life. They could always try for a prisoner exchange; saving one person from the horrors of being drained would be worth something.

"I'm thinking Kate Heightmeyer should observe too," Rodney suggested. "She might see something about its behavior the rest of us wouldn't suspect is useful."

Now was not the time to remind Rodney of his disdain for Heightmeyer's profession (not that he didn't have his own issues with psychiatry), but John was so going to bring it up later.

"Sounds like a plan," John put his stamp of approval on it. "Bates, Rodney and I will meet your teams at – "

"Lab Two," Rodney supplied without prompting.

"As he said. Major Lorne, look after your people, then get someone on the horn to the SGC to let them know of this development. We'd also better clear the halls right now while we're moving him. Doctor Weir, once we've got the prisoner secured, I'd appreciate it if you'd round up Doctor Heightmeyer and take up watch in the observation deck. Oh, Lorne," John added as he had another thought. "Was there anything on the prisoner to be looked over?"
"Yes, if you haven't stripped him yet, do so of everything but basic clothing," Rodney ordered. "We're already jamming every wavelength but the tight beam relay to the Mountain, but the alien could have some kind of failsafe suicide device or a hidden weapon."

"We zatted him, Doctor McKay. At the moment he's not able to activate or go for anything, as he's susceptible to the Goa'uld weapon like we are."

"Then strip him down and put him in base coveralls." John had been told what the Goa'uld were, had seen one of their Zats, though he hadn't seen it in use yet. Knowing their enemy could be taken out by a stun weapon was good intel. Good news, too.

*****

Sitting across from one of the aliens was undoubtedly the creepiest thing John had ever done. "Our prey call us the Wraith." He still thought that sitting across from an Afghani warlord a month ago had been scarier, but there was room for abstract reconsideration, not that John was scared at the moment. Mainly John was angry… no, furious, as he had been since the first sonic booms had almost swamped his helo. It was a fucking relief to finally have one in front of him to let loose some of his rage.

Too bad the alien wasn't acting concerned or fearful either, despite the four guns trained directly on him.

John also thought confronting the alien might the stupidest thing he'd ever done, in part because his wasn't one of the accounted for guns; he'd given over his holster to Rodney, not wanting to give the alien opportunity. No doubt the SGC had people trained in dealing with aliens, even alien enemies, but John didn't want to wait, nor did he want to chance transporting it to the Mountain since there were so many more people the alien could lunch on if it managed to escape.

Foregoing waiting or taking the trip, there weren't many other options. Certainly John wasn't comfortable letting someone else do it, not Bates, and especially not Rodney or either of the doctors they'd picked up when they'd lost Fraiser back to the SGC. For better or worse, John was the officer best equipped for the job, as he had done this kind of shit before: charming and interrogating the enemy.

Pissing off the enemy, if he was lucky. If he did it well enough and the Wraith came up out of his chair, the marines on guard had weapons free orders to shoot the fucker, despite that meaning they'd lose the possibility for gathering intel. At the moment, John wasn't prepared to believe anything they might get from the Wraith, wasn't prepared to believe they'd get anything from the Wraith to offset the danger of having him here. But the surviving members of the IOA they nominally reported to with their on-going contact with the SGC, were like Elizabeth. They needed to put a face on the enemy and needed more to have the hope of being able to negotiate. Some of the soldiers were also having difficulty in believing any sentient species could see another sentient species solely as food; to them the culling (as in culling their human herd to hear the Wraith explain it) and feeding were obviously just a damn effective terror tactic, a set-up for whatever the Wraith really wanted.

Personally, John didn't think the Wraith had any agenda other than gorging themselves. The locust analogy was still apt after meeting the alien, even if this one was proving unpleasantly coy.

When he'd come in, John had turned the chair set for his own convenience around, only afterward realizing the other might see it as a defensive move, putting the chair back between them, rather than as a measure of insolence and ease as he'd intended. To shift the chair now would only make him appear weaker, however, and it wasn't like John didn't have an arsenal of expression to better convey his feelings; he'd learned his ability to piss off the 'other guy' at his father's feet, and perfected it on
countless COs.

Mindful of the rest of his audience: the marine guards both inside and outside the room, Sergeant Bates standing stiffly behind him, Elizabeth Weir, Kate Heightmeyer and Rodney up a level and standing watch in the observation gallery, John made sure his body as well as his expression and tone conveyed only unconcern and maybe a little contempt. No fear here, which is why all of the marines present were the most veteran on base.

"So," John said as he leaned his chin on his arms resting atop the chair back, "you really expect us to believe that you, despite having the upper hand over Lieutenant Ford, surrendered instead of killed him?"

The Wraith's shoulders and arms bunched as if he wanted to turn out his hands. Instead he gave a very human appearing shrug when the set of flexicuffs he wore around his wrists stopped his other movements. He was one of the 'officer' types: tall, bad hair, with a complexion that was a cross between a dead fish and a salamander. He had a scraggly tuft of chin hair, some sort of tattooing or maybe ritual scarring, and whiskers like a catfish, plus slits across his cheeks that could have been some sort of gill. And a mouth full of teeth that would have done a shark proud.

A mouth that was now giving John an all too human smile, the type that was all teeth and threat. John had one of those smiles too.

"I could have killed your lieutenant, yes, but then the rest of his allies would have killed me," the Wraith responded as he sat back in his chair. "Like all intelligent creatures, I have no desire to die."

John worked hard to keep his stare directly at the alien while it answered him. He'd been told that gate travel did something to your brain that allowed an automatic translation of whatever language another gate traveler spoke; had he not gone through the stargate yesterday to see Dave and his daughter to the safety of another planet, it wouldn't have mattered that he had past special ops experience in dealing with the enemy, as he wouldn't have been able to understand any of the sibilant hissing, glottal stops and harsh clicks. Hearing words that didn't match the movements of the other's mouth, however, totally added to the creep factor. It might have been easier if it were out of synch like an old Japanese monster film, but this wasn't a guy in a rubber suit.

He made sure his tone and body language communicated his skepticism as he spoke, knowing some things didn't need translation. "Yet you have no problem in killing other intelligent creatures?"

"If they attain only the rank of prey, they can't be that intelligent, right?"

Another human-style shrug went with words John imagined a cockroach might use, had it the ability to speak. Frankly, the Wraith smelled a little like that too, like a nest of thousands of roaches or beetles, musty yet also moist, with a faint, underlying odor of decay. It would be overpowering in closer quarters.

"And you've attained what rank – hey, do you have a name for yourself? No?" John cocked his head when the Wraith simply stared at him. "Okay, then, how about we call you… Mikey. That sound okay? Mikey? Or should we call you… prey?"

Something like anger flared behind the Wraith's eyes and he made an aborted motion to rise up, but managed to check himself at the last moment, the P90 muzzles facing him no doubt reminding him of his situation.

"Wow, maybe you are smarter than you look, Mikey," John goaded him further, not expecting the Wraith to lose it, but pleased with the opportunity to tip things a little further. They'd gone into this
first session with no expectations of getting any useful intel from the alien; the point was to observe it, to get an idea of what it didn't want to tell them, what it lied about, all to better be able to predict its tactics and strategy.

So far, it was proving remarkably human-like, certainly in emotion and arrogance; more than John suspected made anyone comfortable, but for him that meant it could be goaded, whether into recklessness or rage, and that was good news. If they could get it mad, it wasn't too alien to understand. Maybe they could then find a way to control it.

"So… rry, Mikey, but something more important than you has come up," John twisted his initial words, when the radio in his ear suddenly clamored over the command channel. "You sit here and give a little think on what we're all going to do next, and I'll get back to you," he promised. He rose to his feet and gave the barest signal for the marines to follow him out of the room. Bates was already moving.

"Mikey, sir? Bates asked while they waited until the second airlock door closed and sealed behind them; no sense giving the Wraith a heads up on what else might be going wrong.

"Mikey as in 'let Mikey eat it? He hates everything?"

John shrugged. "He's the first finicky alien we've come across, given how he pulled back from Ford."

Bates looked dismayed, or maybe more like disgusted, but John wasn't about to explain himself any better. Especially not when they had matters more critical than trying to get Bates to understand the use for a sense of whimsy.

The same instant the lock to the lab reengaged, John tapped his transceiver. "This is Sheppard, repeat your last transmission." While Bates was in charge of the base security and technically Evan Lorne had more time in service SGC-wise, John had more time in grade and Lorne kept deferring to him. Not that John considered himself command material for anything other than his flight crew, but fortunately Lorne was the type of XO every CO wanted: he knew all the minutiae, but wasn't hung up on protocol for its own sake or exactly eager to trade field duty that came with occasional staff work for a base command and its administrative responsibilities.

"Lieutenant Ford just woke up and attacked Doctor Keller," the voice repeated promptly. It sounded like one of the Canadians they'd kept when the rest of the Prime Minister's staff had also chosen to flee Earth in the interim, the one who hadn't given his last name and just said call me Chuck. Seeing as he'd been someone the Canadian government had deemed worthy to save, and he'd been the one who'd overseen reestablishing their direct communications link with the SGC, John hadn't been about to turn down another skilled hand.

"He's fled from the infirmary. I've sent out a team, but they've lost track of him."

"Why aren't you tracking him through his badge?" Rodney's voice cut in before Bates could frame the same question. The access point to the observation gallery was from a different room than the airlock into the containment room. If Rodney was on his way to join John and the marines, it would take a couple of minutes.

"Because nobody told me how to do that when I took my station, and there's no one else in here with me at the moment," Chuck retorted with no hint intimidation.

"Why in the hell not?" Bates growled. "No one is supposed to be on duty alone."
"Yes, well, Reynolds needed a quick break to use the head." Chuck didn't sound intimidated by Bates either.

John could tell that Bates wanted to ream him out – to blame somebody – but it sounded like nothing more than piss poor timing. No one had been expecting internal difficulties, though with the influx of new people they had prepped for it. Trouble didn't have to come from someone with a personal agenda after all, not when there were so many odd and dangerous things being researched or stored on base.

"Rodney, can you talk Chuck through the tracking system?" John asked. "Or better yet, how to turn off Ford's badge?"

While nearly being a Wraith victim would freak out anyone, Ford had never struck John as someone who'd crack and attack his doctor. Something else had to have happened. Even if Ford had been disoriented upon awakening and had felt threatened by a too near body and reacted, the lieutenant should have then come to his senses once he realized he was back on base and no longer in danger. Worst case, he panicked and ran, but he should have been picked up by one of the patrols by now. Since that hadn't happened, Ford must be purposely avoiding everyone –

"Not from here, not easily," Rodney answered with a half-distracted air, like he was figuring out how to do so despite saying it would be a problem.

Background to John and Rodney's conversation, Bates directed two of the marines in with them and the two one room further out to join the search, then checked in next with those already out on patrol over the security channel. When Bates authorized waking the off-duty guard and sent them out looking too, John didn't object although he wondered if this was a set-up even if he couldn't figure out what the payoff could be. Having everyone tired and stressed would be annoying, but not particularly threatening, and though it might take a few more minutes, Rodney would be able to get to the security office and disable Ford's badge, so it wasn't like the disruption was going to go on for hours.

Unless the trap was at the security office, with someone wanting Rodney there. Or away from the observation room.

John was about to call Rodney off, to send Bates instead since he should have been able to handle the badge accesses too, when the door leading away from the lab opened. It wasn't Rodney, as John half expected, nor one of the security patrols.

Bates immediately got back on the radio, but John's attention was taken by Aiden Ford. The lieutenant looked distressed. In addition to exhibiting physical signs of strain: jerky movements, sweat darkening his scrubs, wild and wide eyes, he muttered to himself while completely ignoring the marines. Ignored them until the female sergeant, Mehra, approached Ford as a concerned friend, reaching out her hand to catch Ford's arm as she said, "Hey, Lieutenant." Instead of avoiding or fending her off, Ford grabbed it and twisted, not only torquing her arm and sending her to her knees, but also forcing back her wrist with a sickening snap.

Bates reacted before John could and the sergeant's partner moved quicker still – going for his gun. Ford countered with almost super-human speed.

Shoving and kicking Sergeant Mehra away, Ford raised up from his crouch, coming under the other marine's gun and closing too close for the marine to take his shot. A throat chop silenced the marine's warning and caused him to jerk in pain and surprise. Ford followed up with a sharp rabbit punch to the marine's diaphragm and before John could blink – or warn Bates – Ford had the marine’s gun and
began firing.

Pain, sharp and hot seared across John's bicep before he threw himself behind a shrouded lab bench. It felt like it had only gouged a row out of his flesh, like the bullet hadn't penetrated muscle. Not so for the marine, shot point blank in the chest, nor for Sergeant Bates, who went down in a spray of blood at John's feet.

"Lieutenant, stand down!" John ordered when Ford paused and wavered, now that he didn't have anyone trying to impede his advance toward the airlock that led back to the Wraith. John figured he didn't have a chance in hell of being obeyed, but sometimes responses and muscle memory could override conscious intent.

Ford ignored him, letting John slide out from behind his scant protection with nary a glance or any threat when John hustled over to check on the marines. He kept his voice low, in little more than a whisper, as he reported the action and called for a med team, hearing in return that somehow Ford had jammed and disabled the door from the corridor so that no one could follow him in.

Rodney was on his way.

The marine who'd pulled his gun was dead and Bates was on his way to bleeding out, but Sergeant Mehra crawled over to help John with Bates despite her own injuries.

"My left breast pocket," she told John.

Undoing the Velcro, John found a field dressing and a roll of gauze. Not really enough to deal with the through-and-through, but it was something. He found the same in Sergeant Cole's vest and fashioned a pressure bandage for both the entry and the exit wound gaping through Bates' shoulder.

Major Lorne's prompts and Rodney's bitching as they continued to be stymied by whatever Ford had done accompanied John and Sergeant Mehra's whispers and Bates' harsh breathing. John was glad that they'd been delayed, that no more people would be in the line of fire should Ford lose it again, but John wasn't sure how long Bates would last without proper attention. Plus, someone needed to deal with Ford, and John was the guy on the spot.

If he had to, he knew he could pull the trigger on the young Lieutenant, but John desperately hoped to come up with some other way to get Ford to stand down.

"I've got this, sir," Mehra said, letting him know she was following his thinking. She drew Bates up with her good arm against her chest so she could better apply pressure to stop the bleeding.

John nodded and removed Bates' .9mm, which he shoved it into his waistband under his pulled-out shirt behind his back. Mehra had her own weapon which she fumbled to remove and then fist in bloody fingers that resumed their press against Bates' wound. Despite the bleak look in her eyes and either a broken wrist or arm, her expression was resolute; as a Marine, she had the stones to do what was necessary too, should John prove unsuccessful in talking Ford down.

Rising and turning toward Ford, John could see that the lieutenant had run into his own door troubles, and that he wasn't thinking clearly enough to demand the key code from one of them. Rodney had accomplished that much, at least. Frustrated after several attempts, Ford fired his stolen gun at the door, and gave a yelp when he was almost tagged by a ricochet.

"Hey, Lieu – Aiden, slow down, okay?" John tried softer words this time when Ford dropped his gun to begin clawing at the air-tight seal. Whatever was driving him, the Wraith was definitely part of it, and that was almost creepier than Ford going off his nut in the first place.
John might as well have not been there for all that Ford paid attention this time; the lieutenant moved from clawing at the door to pounding on it, now breaking bones to go with the broken nails, and seemingly unmindful of anything but his need to get through the door.

He doubted he'd get a better chance to subdue Ford without having to significantly hurt or kill him. While John had a few moves that didn't exactly follow the Queensbury rules – or his Air Force training – Ford was a Marine in his prime and the ten years between their ages had been long and filled with too many hard landings.

"I've made the fix," Rodney whispered in John's ear. "It'll take me a few more seconds to reroute the power and reboot, then input a new security code."

So, a few seconds to keep Ford distracted until back-up arrived.

"Aiden, come on man, you're going to do yourself permanent damage."

Like before, Ford didn't seem to hear John. The lieutenant continued to pound and grab at the door seal, without regard to the blood collecting around his damaged fingers.

Despite the evidence that touch did register and set Ford off, the only way he'd be able to stop him from further hurting himself would be to do exactly that. So, instead of trying to curtail Ford's moments, John only reached out and applied pressure to Ford's shoulder. Not grabbing or pulling, just offering the weight and warmth, the connection.

It didn't work. The moment he registered John's touch, Ford once again exploded into violent action.

Once it had become useless, Ford had dropped his gun, so he only clipped John in a palm strike. Between dodging and the force of the hit, John's head snapped back and had he not been expecting it, the blow that nearly busted his jaw would have instead hit him straight on. John let his body fall with the momentum and hooked a foot around Ford's ankle to pull Ford off-balance.

Caught off-guard, Ford came down hard. John managed to roll so that Ford hit the floor instead of his body, but Ford barely noticed, despite a couple more of his fingers breaking. Ford pushed off of them with a grunt of what sounded like exertion, not pain, and launched himself after John. Distracted or not, Ford seemed aware enough to dig at the bloody furrow across John's arm.

John swung a fist in return while he also tried to pull free, finally needing to add leg action when Ford shrugged off the haymaker. Even getting kneed in the balls only succeeded in throwing Ford off; again the lieutenant didn't seem to register that he'd been hurt. He also crashed right back into John, with a feral growl, clutching at John's throat this time. If not for his broken fingers, that might have done it, but Ford couldn't exert sufficient pressure to completely cut off John's air.

John had little choice but to pull at Ford's hands, the damaged fingers obvious targets. It was Ford's turn to let himself fall, this time dropping his full weight onto John, including an arm across John's throat which was a lot more successful than the strangle hold had been.

At some point John had lost his earbud. No more Lorne, or Rodney justifying why the delay wasn't his fault, though he could faintly hear Mehra yelling, warning that she'd shoot if Ford didn't back off. John wanted to tell Mehra no, to wait as he wasn't beaten yet, only he couldn't gather enough air and he'd probably be lying. Christ, he'd seen soldiers high on steroids or PCP that weren't as fierce or focused as Ford right now.

The shot, when it came, wasn't from Mehra, and wasn't from a .9mm or any other standard issue. A nimbus of energy surrounded Ford's body, the spillover making John spasm too, but he didn't lose
consciousness as Ford did, which was too bad in its own way. John struggled to push Ford off before the black spots affecting his vision affected the rest of him, too. His arms responded slowly and with no muscle tension, but before he could panic – or pass out – someone lifted Ford's body away. Turning his head was a chore too, but worth it to see Rodney kneeling at his side.

"That was the zat'nik'tel. The Goa'uld weapon we call a zat. Lorne stunned him."

Rodney sounded and looked angry, but he carefully put his hands under John's shoulders and helped him up. By the time John got to a sitting position he could stay that way on his own, but he didn't pull away and Rodney didn't take away his support.

"It has a hell of a kick," John observed, not sure if the difficulty in speaking came from nearly being choked out, the earlier slug, or from getting caught in the residual energy that had taken Ford down. He checked for loose teeth, and wished to God that he had a bottle of water on hand to wash away the hoarseness.

"So it seems."

Oh. Now able to read the concern in Rodney's eyes, John got the anger. It obviously hadn't been any more fun watching John be shot than experiencing it. As, no doubt, it hadn't been any fun listening to the confrontation from the other side of the door.

John put his hand over the one Rodney tightened around his shoulder, and squeezed briefly before letting it drop in preparation for regaining his feet. Rodney looked like he wanted to protest, but he swallowed his words and moved instead to help, as did Major Lorne.

"The only fatality was Sergeant Cole," Lorne reported as he handed John back his earbud. "Ford took out two other teams on his way here, plus Doctor Keller, but it's mainly all bumps and bruises. Did he say anything to you as to why?"

John shook his head. "He was muttering as he came in, but nothing intelligible. All of his focus was in getting through to that thing." He pointed to the blood-streaked airlock. "Ford became violent when we tried to stop him."

"We found a foreign enzyme in young Ford's bloodstream," Doctor Beckett spoke up from where he worked to stabilize Sergeant Bates. "So far we've been unable to identify it, although its highest concentrations were around the claw marks on his chest, so we're confident that was the point of introduction. The enzyme then clustered around the lieutenant's heart. Its chemical structure is similar to adrenalin, with other unknown properties added to the mix."

So the Wraith didn't only feed when they laid hands on you, but also poisoned their prey? Most Earth creatures that excreted neurotoxins used them to paralyze or otherwise make the prey more docile, not hyping them up to where they could fight back… to where they could be a challenge.

Weird.

John stared at Ford and wondered. A single marine stood on guard near the gurney he'd been strapped into. The rest of Lorne's team were helping Mehra to her feet or assisting Beckett and his medic as they prepared to shift Sergeant Bates to his own gurney. Even unconscious, Ford looked restless. As if he was already throwing off the stun.

"How long do zat stuns affect someone?" John asked. Given what Ford had already shaken off, along with the abnormal strength and speed he'd shown in his fighting, John couldn't help but be concerned that the restraints weren't going to hold him if Ford reawakened.
"Yeah, that's not normal," Lorne said warily as he followed John's gaze to the lieutenant. "Ah, Doc –"

"I think it's the Wraith," Kate Heightmeyer's voice suddenly sounded in their ears. "I don't want to ascribe human emotions to an alien, but when the lieutenant first showed up, the Wraith reacted by raising his head and cocking it. Like he could smell or hear Ford's arrival. Then each time that Ford reacted to you, the Wraith reacted in turn, with smiles and laughter. Right now, he looks like he's concentrating fiercely on something, on whatever is going on beyond him."

"Could his reactions be for your benefit, Doctor?" John asked. "Could he know you're still observing him and be playing games that coincide –"

"He tracked when Doctors Weir and McKay left, but I don't think he knew there were three of us here. He's certainly never looked back up to see if someone was watching once the others left."

No matter how extraordinary a Wraith's hearing might be, at best the shouts and shots would have been muted through the thickened walls of the clean room. If Mikey had a sense of smell on par with search-and-rescue dogs, John supposed he could have smelled the adrenalin and blood, smelled Ford's arrival. But would that have allowed him to react as Heightmeyer implied? What would Mikey be concentrating on now? The new people in the room? Maybe, but why would he still be doing so, when nothing was really going on?

"What if the Wraith are telepathic?" Rodney proposed.

That… that would not be good. Especially if Mikey could somehow accelerate Ford's recovery through some kind of link. Alien manipulation could account for Ford ignoring crippling injuries.

"Can Ford handle another stun, Doc?" John asked, as Beckett hadn't left the room when he'd sent his team off with Bates and Mehra. "Would another stun actually put him under this time?"

It didn't make a lot of sense that Mikey would keep prodding Ford; Ford hadn't been able to override the security on Mikey's prison. The Wraith should know that Ford had been neutralized, unless Mikey's telepathy was just a super-sniffer. By this point though, regardless of how Mikey followed along, it should be obvious no jail break was imminent. Sure, he might be able to get Ford moving again, to do more harm and kill more people, but that wouldn't be enough to earn Mike his freedom. So why –

"It's too soon to use the zat again," Lorne cut into John's speculations in answer to his first question. "A second hit would kill Lieutenant Ford; it's the nature of the weapon. First shot stuns, second kills and third disintegrates the remains if they're done within a short period of time."

"I'll not be wanting to inject Ford with a sedative on top of what else is in his system," Beckett shut down the second option without it needing to be stated. "His heart rate is already erratic and his blood pressure elevated dangerously high. We'd need –"

"We need to do something," Rodney interrupted harshly. "His body is waking up, but I don't think Ford is the one who's at home in there."

The blankness in Ford's eyes had been replaced by pure rage, while the sounds he made now were primal grunts and howls. The efforts he made to free himself were akin to an animal caught in a steel trap – as if tearing apart his own limbs wasn't going to stop him from getting away.

John wasn't the only one who pulled his gun after a convulsion that almost overturned the gurney, though the restraints held. Not that being upended would likely stop Ford's efforts either. Nothing
was going to, unless –

Turning from the brutal view, John stabbed at the keypad. Lorne had already moved to pull Beckett away from hovering around Ford, and was calling for more reinforcements while taking his own sentry position across from the marine guard.

"John, what?" Rodney began, then fell silent when John slipped past the door the second the airlock opened enough to let him through. Rodney wasn't right on his heels, but maybe that was better; he'd know, sure, but that was better than witnessing.

The wait between the first door closing again so that John could open the other was interminable, despite it lasting no more than twenty seconds. Twenty seconds was enough time to rethink that Rodney might be safer with him than in a room with Ford, to imagine what types of hell Ford was putting his body through in his desperation to get free. Time to second guess himself too, but John didn't do that, not in the middle of a mission.

Again, John waited only until he could squeeze through the door, unmindful that he might have taken some skin off this time; that he had certainly set his bullet wound to bleeding again. The Wraith might not be human, but the arrogance and sheer amusement in his expression as he raised his head to greet John was human enough. And confirmation enough.

John didn't hesitate putting the first round into Mikey's shoulder.

Surprise wiped the amusement away, then pain the surprise, but Mikey rallied quickly, even when John's second shot exploded through his gut. "You haven't saved him, haven't saved any of them," Mikey crowed. "I volunteered this sacrifice to learn where your strongholds were, Lantean, where you are hiding from us. Now we will have you and your worshipers – "

"Well, since you volunteered, I wouldn't want to disappoint you, Mikey," John cut him off before moving forward and emptying his clip, this time putting every shot into Mikey's head. Telepathy shouldn't work in Swiss cheese brain, though John also hoped he'd killed the bastard. He'd worry about being called a Lantean and the worshipers remark later. Same for what Heightmeyer would be thinking of him killing a prisoner. If he properly understood Mikey, they were about to have company. Maybe Cheyenne Mountain too, depending on what all Mikey had snatched from their heads.

1213 Zulu; January 19, 2003
Area 51 Security & Communications Center, Sublevel Two
Groom Lake, Nevada

"Good luck, people, and Godspeed."

Rodney believed in neither; some people could indeed statistically be considered lucky, but it made no matter if someone 'wished' the luck or cursed it. Any deity who had no definition by any scientific basis, never mind that it didn't care if life turned into a living hell, yet still demanded faith, wasn't something Rodney could believe in. What he could prove was that for some, faith was their foundation, and given he was a man with his own weaknesses, he normally wasn't one to cast stones about someone else's crutch – when it didn't adversely affect their work. So while he might have frowned, he kept quiet after General Hammond's sign off and simply signaled Chuck to go ahead and kill their connection with the SGC.

Then looked around to see how the others were reacting. His advisors, the 'command staff'. Representatives from the military, security, sciences and medical, plus Doctor Weir. And Chuck,
"Well then, I'd best be helping Jennifer prep her patients for evacuation," Carson Beckett said in a surprisingly no nonsense voice, considering how he paled hearing the news they'd passed on. That, on the other hand, was something Rodney could react to; inane comments from people who were paid to think, were fucking fair game. "Evacuation to where?" he asked scathingly. "Or, for that matter, how? In our fleet of Winnebagos – no, wait, that was a movie!"

The kick to his shin was not deserved, but John could have castigated him verbally, Rodney supposed. He also figured the only reason John hadn't, was because of their nominal joint leadership roles, not because John was cutting him any breaks. Presenting a united front in face of adversity and all that; what a horror it would be if the people in charge told things like they were instead of sugar-coating everything so the minions wouldn't fall apart from hearing the bald-faced truth.

Of course, each of the people here in the room with him had just heard the truth, totally unmitigated, which was why Beckett's complexion wasn't the only one pale and slightly green.

"Though indelicately stated, Doctor Beckett, Rodney is right," John apologized for him. Fucking apologized. "We could possibly evacuate everyone in time, but we've no where to run. Vegas, Tonopah, Reno, we can count on the Wraith leveling any nearby city as well as this base if they've really been gunning specifically for us. More likely we would make it easier for them, catching us on the road."

"But the gateship –"

"Can hold at max, thirty people in additional to the flight crew, and that's if the rest are all standing."

Well, John wasn't pulling any punches here.

"If we're talking about the wounded, that's maybe six of the severely injured, plus one or two caretakers in the first flight. We have no idea how fast the Wraith base ships move, but it's likely we're only going to get two or three flights evacuated. And like Rodney said, where would you have us take them? The SGC's going to be dealing with their own base ship, so we'd be trading one target for the other, and end up getting in the way of their own evacuation."

What John hadn't pointed out was that three flights filled to the maximum would rescue only seventy-five people out of the near two hundred they'd expanded into over the last couple of days. Rodney might be in charge of them from an operational standpoint, but he couldn't make the call on who they tried to save and who they sacrificed, nor did he want John to have to live with that decision either.

"If we move everyone into the lowest two levels, there is a chance we can stand up to a concentrated bombardment, if their weaponry is equivalent to something like the Massive Ordnance Penetrator bombs," Peter Grodin offered, also with surprising aplomb given the circumstances, or maybe that was because his delivery came with an English accent instead of Beckett's Scottish woe – and because Grodin was their weapons expert, so knew all about weapon loads and capacities.

Rodney was good at making bombs, normally out of materials others wouldn't consider using, but he rarely had to worry about blast radii or penetration yields.

"Like Cheyenne Mountain, our facility was built to stand up to a low-level nuclear blast," Grodin continued, though only Beckett was looking skeptical. Chuck looked intrigued. "I believe we can
rule out the enemy using any nuclear weaponry, given they didn't do so in their first attacks when several surprise EMPs would have eliminated almost any resistance we could have mounted."

"There's also the probability that they prefer their food alive and healthy," Cadman spoke up. With Bates being one of the severely injured, John had appointed her his acting security chief.

Although hospitals hadn't been spared any more than any other building in the first wave, several recon runs had shown that the Wraith had subsequently learned to ignore the victims in the buildings with the red crosses. Even the bone-faced warriors the Wraith put on the ground disregarded those buildings to instead drain livelier prey.

It was a plausible assumption on Cadman's part.

"The walls might hold up, but it's not going to be a picnic for our people living under a constant bombardment," was Elizabeth Weir's contribution. "We have no weaponry to dissuade them from continuing or by which to fight back and send them off, so they can keep going until they run out of armament. Then, hell, they could drop asteroids on us, right? Just keep at it until we break."

John was treating her as their defacto government representative instead of as Rodney's linguist, something about representation for the real civilians they'd gathered to them, that everyone should have a say in how things operated since everyone had a stake in it. Rodney had agreed (when it looked like the rest of the 'command staff' was going to support John), and he could admit that she was as close to a neutral that they had who was also conversant enough with what was being discussed to have useful opinions. A third voice helped avoid the deadlocks between the military and Rodney's scientists, too.

Rodney, meanwhile, was happy to have someone take responsibility for the noncontributing people off his hands.

"Nor can we count on our security holding, not if the Wraith have had full access to Lieutenant Ford's mind," came from Lorne, who'd been slotted in as John's second, same as Grodin was Rodney's now that Zelenka had been reassigned to the *Prometheus*.

Fuck, to the potentially doomed *Prometheus*. Cheyenne Mountain's sacrificial lamb.

"We also can't discount that by me bringing the live Wraith here, he was able to scan everyone he came in contact with," Lorne continued. "If we go with the assumption he was telling the truth about him being specifically sent to get our location, that it's already too late and the information has been passed on, we're talking about a creature with a telepathic range that reaches fucking orbit. Skimming off from the guys across from him would have been a cake walk, and I know I've been running scenarios and responses through my head. I imagine all of us have, so we're going to have to come up with something we haven't already thought of to try as countermeasures."

"I am confident our people can handle a few days under attack. I've had a chance to talk to everyone at least once and… " Heightmeyer got that far, then cut herself off when not only did she have everyone's attention, but a couple of what the fuck expressions aimed at her. Rodney simply conveyed his standard dismay that some people classified psychiatry as a science. Heightmeyer wasn't anyone's second, nor really a first, as technically her office came under medical auspices and Jennifer Keller, but Keller was still in surgery with Sergeant Bates.

"Well, certainly, once the *Prometheus* takes care of the impending attack on the Mountain, it will head next to liberate us, hence we will only have to hold out for a couple of days." Heightmeyer spoke with the utter confidence of the totally clueless.
Bursting her bubble would be akin to strangling a puppy.

"You are assuming the Prometheus will be able to intervene in the first place." Someone had to do it and Rodney was more of a cat person anyway. "It already got its ass kicked going to head-to-head –"

"That was against multiple Wraith ships, Rodney," John interrupted, again working to soften Rodney's honesty. "Plus Zelenka's up there and you admitted he's almost as good as you are as an engineer when you recommended to Hammond he take your place –"

Rodney turned on John, all thoughts of maintaining a united front gone in the face of his craven insult. "I inferred that the systems on the Prometheus were not so complicated that Zelenka wouldn't be able to handle them! That in no way implies that Zelenka could wipe my ass with his degree –"

Self-censoring was not Rodney's style, but he'd expected John or Cadman – hell, Weir – to have intervened before he got that far, even if it was a hell of an insult. What he wasn't he expecting was that instead of outrage or dismay, the others in the room held expressions ranging from indulgent to fond – including Beckett and Heightmeyer, though Heightmeyer also had a gleam of calculation in her eye that had to mean she'd soon be amending his file: How Rodney reacts to certain death.

"Fine, Zelenka's a good engineer," he spat. "But you're only saying that because he introduced you to your precious invisible ship."

That earned grins all around, totally at Rodney's expense, but the tension and despair that Heightmeyer's naivety had exacerbated had lessened. Oh, they were still doomed, but the breath-stifling panic that Rodney had been trying so hard to keep at bay turned now into a weird optimistic fatalism in the face of John's affectionate smile. Even Beckett had relaxed the shoulders that had been up around his ears since the moment John had returned from shooting the Wraith.

"There is always the chance that SG-1 was successful," Lorne suggested, not with too much sarcasm despite the fact SG-1 were already a day overdue. "An Asgard ship would kick Wraith butt."

"So could the Ancient's little puddlejumper, if the Wraith didn't see it coming," John spoke slowly as he lost his smile, like he was working something out in his head – or as if he was already preparing his arguments for when Rodney ripped him apart.

Not that there could be any argument that John could offer that Rodney would listen to.

"No. Even if we had explosives enough to fill the bay – even if we had nukes to fill the bay –"

"Actually, I would think one or two Mark Seven Naquadah Generators would be enough, Rodney."

"Shut up, Peter. No one is flying a suicide mission out to blow up the Wraith. We don't know what it would require to take one of them out, and going for overkill could very well cause enough collateral damage on the ground that we wouldn't need the Wraith to attack. It would also mean we would lose the only advantage we have next to the stargate, whether the mission was successful or not."

Hadn't they already had this argument when they'd talked about taking the Ancient's ship up to Prometheus? They still didn't know for certain it would operate in a vacuum – would survive a vacuum.

"So you're advocating we wait until SG-1 and another group of aliens bails our ass out?" John's tone stayed calm, soft – deceptively so when coupled with his almost sympathetic expression, the both in deliberate contrast to his words which Rodney had no doubt were intended to cut him to the bone.
Like Rodney wasn't tired of sitting on his ass too, like Rodney *enjoyed* twenty hour days filled with utter shit, no matter what he tried.

"No, you know what? Go ahead. Go out in a Technicolor blaze of glory if that's what you're looking for. Successful or not, you won't have to deal with it any more, right? Forget about taking away our only safe means of scavenging and rescue, not to mention the potential for finding some alien artifact that might need your genetic material to operate. Beckett here can take your place for the latter, or maybe he'll finish his magic elixir that will bestow the activation gene on all of us, since that's what he's been working on day and night instead of something *useful* – "

"Rodney – "

"Now just a minute, laddiebuck – "

"Hey," John's voice won out over the sudden cacophony, aided by the rough hand that had grabbed Rodney's shoulder. "You want to be pissed at me, fine, but no collateral damage. They don't deserve – "

Wresting away from John by surging to his feet, Rodney ignored that his chair tumbled over, then blindly shoved at the other hands that reached for him until he was caught from behind, John again, only this time it wasn't just a hand on his shoulder but his entire body contained and pulled up against John's.

"Go," John's voice was low and fierce against Rodney's ear, but that made no sense, since Rodney was held tight, and why would he sound oddly protective instead of pissed –

Oh. 'Go' had been directed at the others. And John was now turning him around so he didn't have to look at their sympathetic and pitying faces. Several hands touched him, passing warmth against his back, with one small, delicate touch lingering until John dismissed Cadman in a now gentle voice.

"You, too, Doctor," John added, to either Beckett or Heightmeyer, no doubt. "I'll call you back if we need you."

Why hadn't Rodney noticed before now that John had ignored being shot? Maybe his arm wasn't bleeding anymore, but surely it hurt? Also, being drawn up with his head resting right next to it was actually rather nauseating and –

John must have picked up on Rodney's sudden queasy stomach, because suddenly it was all, "Here, let's get you sat down," and being manhandled until a hard edge hit across the back of his legs. Rodney's knees folded and once more he was sitting.

"Are you going to be sick?"

Yes, but not in the manner John thought. Rodney had been sick from the moment he'd seen the footage of his first culling (and he was *so* happy he had a name for it now). It was only now, though, that he'd stopped thinking long enough to acknowledge how he felt.

He waved John off and finally raised his head. "Does it hurt?"

John looked startled, then confused. As if he didn't understand what Rodney had asked about.

While befuddled was an interesting look for John, it wasn't fair to leave him as off-balanced as Rodney felt. "Your arm."

"Oh." The sheer relief now overtaking John's expression told Rodney John had definitely
misunderstood – no, that John thought Rodney had asked something else entirely, and had been searching for how to answer.

"Hell, I'd forgotten about it."

About the bruise developing up the side of his face and others Rodney couldn't see too, no doubt. Just as the fading bruises and injuries of a week past hadn't mattered to John very long. Shaving would be a bitch this time, though.

Assuming John ever got the chance to shave again.

Instead of getting angry this time, Rodney just felt cold.

"I'm surprised Beckett wasn't fussing over it during the meeting," was all he said. Keller certainly had fussed when she'd taken over for Fraiser, not that John had put up with her for long.

For a moment John looked pained. "Beckett's afraid of me."

Ah. Rodney nodded. The 'now' didn't have to be said; even Lorne had been disconcerted to find the Wraith dead when John had come out of the lab. He and the rest of the military had then closed ranks around John when news that the Wraith's surrender had been a set-up to compromise their base started spreading but, yeah, most of the civilians and some of Rodney's scientists were going to have difficulty reconciling the laid-back, affable Major with someone who could ruthlessly execute an alien – even an alien who'd been a direct threat to everyone's safety every further second it had lived.

Someone like Beckett – who'd been too long in the lab and too many years away from an emergency room and the decisions needed to be made in triage? Terrified of John was more like it. John no doubt had looked angry – or more likely hadn't acknowledged Beckett's approach to see to John's arm, which the good doctor would have interpreted as an order to back off.

Though he'd resented her authority and her unwillingness to be cowed by his genius, Rodney found himself wishing they still had Janet Fraiser on base; Beckett was too timid, and Keller looked – and acted – like she was still a med student, at least in all of the planning sessions in which she'd taken part. He could only hope that one of them found their backbone soon.

Rodney didn't realize he'd drifted, until he returned his attention to John and found that John now sat on the edge of the table right next to him, silently watching with an expression of neutral patience. Like he'd wait for Rodney all day, even with an attack imminent.

"You want to talk about it?" John asked the moment he recognized he had Rodney's awareness.

Rodney didn't bury his anger, but he didn't let it overrun him this time either. "You're not flying a fucking suicide mission."

"I'm sure as hell not going to order Lorne to do it!"

It was almost gratifying to see that John was less in control than he appeared. Not that Rodney wanted to see John lose it too, but this was more honest than the military mask John assumed far too easily. Rodney missed the unguarded John he'd first met; the one he'd gotten to know in their first night together. 'Take Responsibility' Major Sheppard was certainly comforting under most circumstances – even the guy who could kill without blinking and without obvious remorse had his place – but Rodney was damn tired of constantly stepping up his own game to keep pace with that guy.

"How about nobody flies off to their death and instead we figure out a way to survive? Wasn't that
the whole point of fighting back that first night?"

For a moment John looked broken, but as Rodney put a word to the emotion John hadn't been able to hide, the anger returned, a mask all its own. No matter. Rodney had his answer, even if it wasn't the one he'd wanted. Growing up, Rodney had learned to define himself by what he could do better than anyone else – by what he could do that no one else could. John Sheppard, it seemed, could only define himself by what he could do for someone else.

Rodney could work with that.

He drew on his own anger, though he didn't feel it any longer. "If I thought your death would save the rest of us, I'd make your damn bombs myself, John. But a close air burst isn't guaranteed to be effective. You'd have to somehow get inside the ship. I know when we fantasized about mounting a rescue mission we'd thought of doing that – "

"Maybe that could really work." John was completely in synch with him. "The base ship will no doubt release its darts. If we were cloaked, we could fly right into their open landing bay – "

"Bring along two strike teams, one to infiltrate and free the culls – "

"While the other figures out how to hack into the ship's controls – "

"Freed prisoners would certainly create a distraction." Rodney felt completely exhilarated. "Some people might die in the effort, but they were all going to if we did set off a bomb."

Alright, maybe Rodney shouldn't have gone that far, despite speaking the truth. But after an initial return to being pissed at him, John's expression smoothed out, his lips taking a rueful twist that laughed at himself.

"It might not work, Rodney," he said more soberly.

Rodney shrugged. "It's a chance. To fuck them up; to survive; to save the base; to maybe save a lot more people to boot. Hell, we can always prep and bring a bomb or two along as back-up."

5.

1237 Zulu; January 19, 2003
Area 51 Hanger One, Sublevel One
Groom Lake, Nevada

Although John felt a great sense of urgency, embarking on a mission ill-prepared only got people killed. Given he needed not only to pick and prep his team, but also to lay in the contingencies for the base, he wasn't surprised thirty more minutes had passed before they were ready, nor, overall, was he unhappy. Only a few minutes over an hour had gone by since he'd eliminated Mikey as a threat, they'd briefed the SGC of the further threat, and now his team was filling into the puddlejumper.

In the end, he'd gone with ten members for the strike force.

John had been surprised when Jennifer Keller had volunteered; the first time through Bates' mandatory gun handling safety session, she'd nearly dropped hers, she'd trembled so badly. Moments
ago, though, she'd been quick to point out that they had no idea what sort of shape the prisoners would be in, that a doctor needed to be with them. John hadn't had the heart to point out in return that anyone they found who couldn't walk and maybe run on their own, wasn't going to be rescued. Not unless they got control of the Wraith ship instead of disabling or destroying it.

Like the initial discussion about evacuating the base, they could chose no more than twelve or fifteen people to save alongside themselves if the worst happened, and that only as long as everyone could stand like sardines.

Keller would figure that out soon enough without him making her stress about it any earlier than necessary.

More surprising had been Beckett volunteering to go in her stead. He'd actually come to John directly with his offer, after John had gotten his arm treated. Beckett cited his work over the past forty-eight hours in analyzing the Wraith remains as the reason he was better suited. It was also the reason John turned him down; now that Beckett had an entire Wraith corpse on hand, he might have a better chance at uncovering a vulnerability or weakness in the aliens that could be exploited. Something the SGC and humanity in general would need to secure their future, regardless of what was about to happen.

Beckett wasn't heartbroken to be turned down, but John did revise his opinion on the man, just as he had Keller.

Evan Lorne, conversely, had been pissed when John told him no, to the point of threatening to pull his SGC experience card and take over command. John had taken him seriously, not the threat, but the genuine desire to be a part of it. He'd even agreed that Lorne was right and he needed totake a back-up pilot. Just not that Lorne should be that guy.

Under any other circumstances he would never have considered taking Miko Kusanagi into such a dangerous situation, but the Japanese scientist could fly the ship, plus she had the added benefit of being able to back Rodney up in the task of hacking into the Wraith's controls. She also wasn't afraid of guns, despite seeming to be afraid of most everything else – and she was a better shot than Rodney or Keller.

The main reason for denying Lorne, though, had been the need to have him be the one who stayed behind and take command. He was a Major, while Teldy was only a Captain, and sometimes rank really did make a difference. To civilians certainly and to Marines. Lorne was also the better choice if the base did end up evacuating. He was the only one with experience in living off the land on an alien planet (which, in essence, was what Earth had become under the Wraith's presence); a two week wilderness survival training course wasn't going to be enough to keep twenty people alive, much less two hundred. Especially not in Nevada, where water and game – not to mention cover – were scarce.

Lorne didn't like it, but he accepted it.

In addition to Teldy, Miko, Keller and Rodney, John rounded out the rest of the slots with Marines. With most of the Air Force guys on hand too green to the whole aliens-are-real thing, he couldn't predict how they'd react on an alien spaceship. Plus Marines were the best damn 'first-in' guys in all of the US Military, despite inter-service rivalry and barroom claims. The five he picked from the volunteers were all multi-offworld veterans, not just multi-year SGC veterans. They would take names and kick ass, but more importantly, they knew to keep the civilians alive while doing so. John couldn't want for more than that.

Well, other than being able to leave all of the civilians behind.
He didn't insult Rodney or Rodney's people, however, by making even one suggestion that the scientists should not be part of the strike force. In John's mind, they would very likely turn out to be the most important people on the mission.

Miko took the co-pilot's seat, with Rodney moving in behind John, and Anne Teldy insisting that Jennifer Keller take the other front slot. As Teldy got the rest of the marines sorted in the back, John began his preflight. He and the little ship had developed a mental checklist in lieu of the typical flight prep he used in other craft. Patterned more like the NASA launch teams he'd watched any time he could, he asked for a go/no go from each of the ship's systems as soon as he took his own seat and powered her up.

Not even Rodney was sure how the jumper refueled itself – if the ship used fuel at all. Many of the systems could have been run by magic as far as they'd figured out, and if Rodney did eventually take her apart, there was no guarantee he'd be able to identify anything without significant study and hair-pulling. So far, though, the little jumper had come back ready to fly each time John or Lorne had asked her. Their interface wasn't in actual words, of course, and the responses happened all at once as far as his conscious brain could tell – unless something was up with a specific system.

This time as he started by calling up the HUD and the various sensor systems he then turned over to Miko to keep track of, a sense of not just readiness, but eagerness flooded through him.

Until Rodney started swearing from over John's shoulder from something he saw on the HUD. "What the fuck?"

Now John 'saw' it too, bright points of energy plots sudden appearing beyond the shield barrier that covered half of the hanger's roof. Set up similar to the fighter bays on the Prometheus, the Area 51 hangers had a camouflage field in addition to the energy barrier, to hide openings from satellites and scans. They'd gotten into the habit of leaving the retractable steel barrier open during the days they planned off-site sorties, as no one should have been able to breech the base's perimeter far enough to notice the give of the 'floor' or the telltale hum and tingle of Asgard shielding.

At the moment, threading his way through those new energy readings that quickly resolved into people when the ship cleared the barrier, gave John more concern over how they'd gotten there.

"Was that Doctor Zelenka?" Miko asked breathlessly of one flailing blur.

John knew he hadn't hit him, but the man had likely been bowled over by his backwash.

Most of the energy points now scattered, probably in panic, but John had the ship up and hovering a good fifteen feet above the surface before Miko had finished her question, so no one else was going to get hit either.

"Prometheus is evacuating all of its non essential personnel," Rodney concluded in a voice of awe and dread.

John agreed: if Colonel William Ronson considered Radek Zelenka non essential at this point, obviously Prometheus' captain wasn't expecting to survive the upcoming encounter.

"I thought Prometheus was to set itself over the Mountain," Teldy commented from the standing position she'd taken between the cockpit and the hold.

It would take quite a bit of fancy or rough maneuvering to make her lose her feet with the ship's inertial dampeners active.

"The SGC put in safeguards to prevent even an Asgard teleport from penetrating the base," Rodney
responded, "after some sort of incident with a renegade Asgard. This would be the only viable location to stage his evacuation."

Considering Rodney's interest in *Prometheus* and any alien technology, the incident must have occurred while he'd been in Russia, otherwise they'd be hearing all the details of what had happened.

"Oh, that was when we all thought Colonel O'Neill got turned into a kid, but the kid ended up being a clone," Teldy filled in the missing information instead. "Man, was he pissed when none of us believed it was really him."

"Yes, well, Area 51 was scheduled for its own defensive upgrade… next month." Rodney now sounded annoyed, but whether it was because someone had scooped him, or because of the delay in getting their own goodies, John wasn't sure.

If they had had the same defenses, God only knew where *Prometheus* would have sent their people, so in this case it had been a good thing to be the afterthought, and Teldy would be thinking that too, so she'd brought it up to draw attention –

"If they had the time to drop their people here before needing to move on to defend Stargate Command, why aren't they taking up some sort of position equidistant between the two bases so they could protect both bases?" Keller asked in a small voice. "I mean, aren't we only certain that Area 51’s location was the one compromised by the Wraith? That the threat to the SGC is only worst case speculation?"

"The gate must be protected at all costs."

Now Rodney sounded cynical. John didn't blame him. It was obvious from the divisions between the personnel who'd been caught at Area 51 when the Wraith had come but were normally stationed at the SGC, and the people who called Area 51 home, that the ones in Nevada felt they were the red-headed stepchildren. They only got the alien tech that Samantha Carter's people couldn't figure out or weren't interested in, got the soldiers who didn't make it on gate teams – got the security upgrades last…

A lot of good people and research not just on the *Prometheus* were, in essence, being sacrificed if this mission turned out unsuccessful – or if they'd underestimated the Wraith's capabilities or their unwillingness to damage their food supply. But General Hammond had to be the 'Big Picture' guy right now, ensuring the potential for further evacuation of the populace as it was also the potential for preserving the survival of the Earth-based human race.

"I would have made the same call in General Hammond's place," John pointed out even if he did understand Rodney's bitterness; some of the marines in the back might not have appreciated Rodney's take on the decisions that had been made, no matter it being true; he needed everyone to be pulling together. "Same as you would have, right, Rodney?"

"I would like to think that I could have come up with an alternative plan to protect both bases had I the same access to all of the information and assets he has –"

"Right, Rodney?"

"Yes, fine, I would have made the same decision. 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few', and all that. I never said I disagreed," he added petulantly.

"If it's all the same, I'd rather not be the rescued princess here anyway," Teldy added her own support. "I grew up preferring to do the rescuing."
"Oooh Rah," one of the marines added the proper punctuation from the back.

"'S why we love you, Captain," another spoke up.

Okay, maybe it wasn't up there with 'winning one for the Gipper', but John could live with arrogance and attitude. Attitude could make all the difference between a successful or failed mission.

As he spiraled the jumper higher, the HUD registered the large contact of Prometheus, though it was there and gone quite quickly after the energy signs representing people below them stopped increasing. John hoped Zelenka and Cadman got the crew down in the bunkers as quickly. He expected the Wraith to launch their darts before the base ship made an attack, which meant a very short window of safety.

Their mission was dependent upon the darts launching and when, which was why John was taking his ship up in their own intercept instead of hovering and waiting over the desert. It wouldn’t do to make their run to the base ship after the Wraith locked down their launch bays.

While taking the opportunity to make it into space and see the Earth shining below them was no part of the decision on where to intersect the Wraith ship, despite the urgency and importance of their mission, when he crossed the Kármán line into a field of stars, John found himself reluctant to push on toward the new contact the HUD began to display. Answering his unconscious desire, the ship stopped all momentum and hung there in the thermosphere, the curvature of the Earth filling the viewport; clouds, oceans and continents slowing turning below them.

"Oh, wow. That is…"

Wow indeed when not even Doctor Rodney McKay had the words to convey his awe.

Miko Kusanagi, however, did. "That is why we are doing this."

"Amen," both Teldy and Keller responded, and John agreed silently, just stopping from crossing himself though he hadn't set foot in a church since his mother's death when he'd been fifteen.

He gave everyone a few more seconds to soak in the view and the moment, until the gentle nudge from the jumper turned more… not insistent but, well, purposeful was a good word for the feeling against the back of John's mind. Especially as it started drawing constantly updating intercept vectors in his mind's eye.

John released a deep breath and set them moving again.

If they were lucky, this Wraith ship would be the one that had fled after being damaged by Prometheus, but as they approached, even if that were the case, it no longer showed signs of damage. No obvious sporadic movements or fluctuating energy fields either. Maybe a few scorch marks and divots, but no hull breaches as far as John or his little ship could tell. Its ungainliness in its maneuvers was only a product of its construction or a pilot unused to descending into an atmosphere – or at least into Earth's particular atmosphere.

The ship was spectacularly ugly as well as ungainly. The darts had had an aesthetic to them at least, an almost elegant form as well as function, even if geared toward attack and destruction. The base ship, conversely, looked over-produced. Too big, too many wielded together – melted together – modules all covered in spines, spikes and sections that looked almost like stretched skin. Frankly, it looked like a creature, wearing its skeleton and circulatory system on the outside of its body.

There were no obvious openings – no visible gun ports or dart launch bays.
He'd have to approach closer. Now that he thought about it, the Wraith would be unlikely to launch the darts this high up this time around; the extra ships would only create a larger footprint to be observed, plus the ship would soon be hitting the Kármán line going the other way and concerned with the plasma and ionization storm of reentry. Open bays would destabilize the ship and throw off the calculations of velocity, equilibrium and angle of entry, resulting in higher aerodynamic friction heating. They'd also lose all radio contact with the darts from ionization, with both crafts in essence being blinded by the shock layer, though he supposed a species that had evolved a form of telepathy wouldn't need radios –

They were betting everything on the Wraith not being able to detect the Ancient's ship while cloaked, but in truth they had no verification that was the case. But if he closed in right as they both hit the Kármán line, his own shock layer would be masked by the Wraith ship's much larger profile – hell, he could use the Wraith ship to augment his own heat shielding since it was going to have to angle belly first and nose up to protect it's odd shape from being eroded around the points and edges. John's main concern then would be matching the Wraith's velocity throughout the descent and how much power he would be expending to keep his own shield in a blunt conical shape since his ship wasn't exactly aerodynamically shaped for reentry either.

John knew he was a good enough pilot for this, knew that the ship could handle it too. The stupid thing was they shouldn't have had to. He'd blown it by taking them into space in the first place; hadn't thought things through. More surprising, neither had Rodney, but then it wasn't as if John had given Rodney much of a chance or time to object since they achieved the thermosphere in scant minutes, faster certainly than the Space Shuttle could. He had two choices left in not giving away their position; a slow reentry that would eat through a significant portion of their own power and quite probably leave them too far away from the Wraith ship when it started it's attack, or piggyback the Wraith ship on the trip down like a burr to protect their invisibility as long as possible.

If a ship like Prometheus couldn't stand up one-on-one against a Wraith base ship, this little puddlejumper would have no chance.

No more second guessing.

"Hang on, everyone. This might get bumpy."

He ignored Rodney's noises, none of them coherent words anyway, and accelerated to match the Wraith's speed and trajectory at a distance to start with, then slide in over it in the moments the jumper computed the point of intersect at the Kármán line.

Now Rodney clutched at the back of John's seat, but he wasn't shouting any longer, wasn't doing anything but holding on and holding his breath.

Even with the inertial dampener system, bumpy was an understatement, between the jumper's own plunge through the atmosphere, and from being nestled in the lee of the Wraith's slipstream. The constant updates and readings now hammering his brain projected optimum systems, but also all of the potentials for disaster. John immersed himself deeper, actually closing his eyes to prevent being overwhelmed by the visuals through his viewport.

Given the heavy breathing now going on behind him, it was probably a good thing Rodney wasn't in the co-pilot's seat – hell, Rodney wouldn't be the only one uncomfortable to discover their pilot was literally flying blind.

He could feel the second Miko immersed herself into the jumper's systems too, then heard her voicing some of the data the jumper provided them. It was only noise, about peak shock layer temperatures and hull compositions, dissociated gases and surface catalycity. John tuned her out
though there was a part of him interested in the materials of the enemy's ship and the fact that they were discovering the existence of new exotic elements in the universe. The majority of his attention concentrated on more practical things, on whether they'd be detected and whether he could maintain the pace and the jockeying to keep from pancaking or burning up. Could he continue to anticipate the crazy-ass Wraith pilot who didn't seem to give a damn about kinetic energy or air temperatures, and keeping a flying anvil going at Mach 25?

If his little jumper hadn't had the inertial dampeners, John never could have considered this or survived it. It was at once terrifying and exhilarating, and there was a small part of him that really didn't mind that he was quite likely flying to his death (other than regretting taking the others with him). This was his Chuck Yaeger moment, piloting a flight that demanded all of his skill, training and artistry.

After an eternity that lasted for just an eyeblink, the Wraith ship began dumping speed and the ionization cloud was traded for simple atmospheric clouds. John had no clue where the ships had come in, and when he asked for a surface map comparison, he got decidedly unfinished details; their previous sorties hadn't taken them higher than thirty thousand feet, and they'd not remained in space long enough nor varied enough in their few orbital rounds to actually map all of the Earth. But the jumper did know where it had started from, and in another few seconds, Area 51 pulsed like a beacon, though being nearly five thousand miles away. Somewhere over Australia or Siberia then, John figured, after doing a dirty calculation of timezones since that wasn't ocean below them. Well, or Brazil or Greenland if they were in a counter rotation. If they stayed at above Mach 20, they'd be over Nevada in twenty minutes or less.

"Miko, I'm going to want a data dump of everything we just did."

Rodney's voice was anxious and right next to John's ear; only now as John could catch his own breath and begin to relax a notch, did he realize that Rodney had stayed on the edge of his own seat and stayed clutching at John's. Later John would want to review the data himself –

The HUD changed to a plot of the trajectory they'd taken, replaying the reentry in graphic form, complete with all the bumps and bobbles that showed how close John had come several times to impacting.

"Holy shit." Teldy said in more of a squeak than she'd most likely be comfortable with.

"How are we not dead, is more like it," Rodney grumbled, seemingly no longer fascinated but angry – or horrified – though the hardest part of the flight should be over. But he squeezed John's shoulder, then finally sat back. "Let's hope the damn Wraith have to slow down to launch their darts, or you're really going to have to earn your wings."

Rodney was right about that. They were already feet wet, over the Pacific Ocean and, yes, the Wraith were indeed following the Earth's rotation. And keeping their initial speed, although as he thought that, the Wraith cut its speed in half, to Mach 10.

The NASA hypersonic scramjet that could do Mach 10 was only in the initial testing phase, the Air Force's planned unmanned jet to do the same, not yet even to the prototype stage.

As the North American coast became visible on the HUD, the Wraith ship dropped to just under Mach 1 and launched their darts.

"Here we go," John warned and wasted no time letting the field ahead of him clear. Again, if the Wraith had the ability to see through the cloak, or had something that would disrupt the Ancient tech, it was very likely the jumper would be overlooked in the chaos of launch. At least long enough for
John to sneak inside.

John had chosen rotors for his career, but, like most pilots, he'd assumed he'd fly jets when he'd started. He'd gotten his pilot's license at sixteen, and before then he'd worked hard to get to know his father's pilots, to make sure they liked him and would let him occasionally take the yoke of the Learjets and the Gulfstreams over the years. His graduation gift from High School had been his own Cessna 172 Skyhawk. Between abusing his father's name at air shows and blowing a lot of his inheritance on simulator time, before he'd entered the Air Force, he'd logged nearly two hundred hours in various military jet cockpits and he managed to wheedle his way at least as a backseater now and again even now. Frankly, though, even if he had been flying daily sorties in an F-15, he wasn't sure he'd have the background and experience to thread this needle. Maybe if he'd been a Naval aviator and made traps on the deck of a carrier…

The Wraith ship didn't have arrestor wires or LSOs to call him in. It didn't have a fucking two hundred fifty foot wide flight deck, not even a single flat surface deck or tandem launch tubes like the original Battlestar Galactica. No, inside, it was a 3-D hell of simultaneously moving pieces that made his head ache like an Escher drawing. Or maybe that was because the darts made up most of those moving pieces and even here, they had their hellish screech.

In the next instant John thought being a rotorhead wasn't quite the drawback he'd initially feared; he was used to flying in three dimensions as well as flying in three-dimensional formations. Mainly, though, it was his sweet little jumper that did all the heavy lifting, following his lead, sure, but flipping nimbly or shifting sideways, backward, and, once, coming to a complete stop out of the path of two darts nearly on their own collision course with him only having to think about it instead of guiding it.

It was during that hover that they discovered another fallacy of their plan: where to put the jumper down on a solid, permanent surface out of the way enough that its invisibility wouldn't be discovered by an impact. The darts were coming out of honey combs, like those damn Japanese coffin hotels, and while he could see walkways or gantries and staging areas, John came close to experiencing acrophobia for the first time in his life.

Even as John began searching for a place less dangerous to put them down, the jumper suddenly registered that they were not the only craft coming into the base ship. He quickly flipped them around, wanting a visual in addition to the data streaming into his head, not quite sure to believe that it would be a dart returning so quickly –

"It must have already been on the surface and waiting," Miko explained what was obvious the moment she said it.

Maybe Mikey's own ship, though that would imply he hadn't been the pilot.

Mikey's or not, it also hadn't just been dropping off one of their guys to set a trap. While they hovered and watched, the dart dropped below the bay entry and John followed carefully as it headed toward one of the larger staging areas suddenly populated by more wraith. The white beam they'd observed on that first day apparently worked both directions, culling people and then spitting them out, and there was no way that ship was large enough to have held the thirteen bodies that suddenly lay scattered on the ground.

"They must be able to store the people they cull in a demolecularized state, suspending the reintegation in some sort of adaptation of the stargate transit. Clever, actually, and quite efficient, assuming they don't mix things up with multiple patterns."

"They're reading as alive," John pointed out, not just on Keller's behalf, since all of the bodies looked
dead from their position about a hundred feet above the deck. A couple of the bodies were Wraith, the ones with the covered faces, but they were as unmoving as the others.

The dart that had dropped them off began to lift, no longer concerned with its cargo, and sure enough, as John held them there in anticipation, several more of the Wraith grunts showed up from shadowed alcoves off the LZ, herding eight, no nine humans in front of them. The ambulatory humans approached the bodies and began to move them, a tall guy with dreads bending down to gently toss a woman over his shoulder and then dragging a second man, while one pretty healthy looking guy in US Army drab dragged the last two men by their wrists. The unconscious Wraith were avoided until three more Wraith soldiers joined their brethren and did their own hoisting.

At John's desire, the jumper tracked the path of the life energy readings, designating the Wraith in red and the humans in blue. It couldn't trace them far until something interfered, but it gave them the start of a map of the interior, and gave John an idea of where to put down the jumper. It might be that all of the shadows down there lead off somewhere, but there had been only three active trails, and those amongst the smaller areas of darkness. He hoped the larger shadows were a product of the nightmarish architecture that looked as inside-out as the exterior had. The dim lighting and tendrils of mist or smoke that rolled slowly out from some of those shadows, gave the walls the appearance of breathing, like the ship really was as organic as it looked, instead of having been manufactured.

Although it was obvious from the other humans moving without distress, John called up the atmospheric conditions surrounding them. A breathable mix, if light on oxygen; not Himalayan light, but to someone prone to high-altitude sickness, this would bother them pretty quickly – and make fighting in it a bitch. As none of the Wraith they’d encountered had shown any signs of respiratory distress in breathing in Earth's atmosphere, it was likely the difference was set for exactly that, an inconvenience to discourage rebellion, same as the slightly higher gravity field reading; about one and a third gees. The marines could handle it, but they'd have to keep a closer eye on the civilians.

Again John ignored his visuals, and landed the jumper as close to one of the walls as he dared by relying solely on the feedback and readings the jumper gave him. Together they picked a shadow that would fully engulf the ship and hopefully, therefore, not be a section later returning darts would disgorge their unwilling passengers into. The jumper also hadn't registered any variation in the thickness of the wall he nearly shaved; again leading him to hope that it didn't contain a door of its own.

He set them down, but before powering down, pulled out the portable energy detector only he or Miko could use, and configured it with the same delineations as the ship's scanners, Wraith in red, humans in blue, and their beginnings of a map. The jumper's position he denoted in green. He then handed it off to Miko and let her get used to it, while he tried to expand the ship's sensors to get an idea of how many Wraith they might come up against.

He really hoped that most of the crew was off in the darts, but didn't hold his breath.

"Captain Teldy, go ahead and arm the warhead," he ordered, working to keep the sigh from his voice when the number of Wraith in the nearby vicinity doubled their own.

Warhead was both a generous and totally disingenuous name. The explosive was actually a small C-4 charge that Lieutenant Cadman had rigged under Rodney's oversight, one fitted with an RF chip that six members of the team had a transceiver locked onto. The C-4 in turn was fitted into a small container that held some sort of exotic, non-terrestrial metal that increased the C-4s yield to something akin to a forty kiloton blast.

They planned to use the explosion only as a last ditch effort. Because anything could happen while they tried to get control of the Wraith ship, including out-and-out failure, the warhead operated on an
hour timer. Peter Grodin had set things up so that the timer could be reset any time someone sent a ping, so the six of them also equipped with his transceivers had split the hour into five minute increments; had the responsibility for sending the reset once an hour themselves. If someone missed their check-in, the next person would take up the slack. Well, that was the plan.

This system also had the added benefit of offering six connections to the jumper, in case folks lost their direction and it needed to be found in an emergency.

Teldy came back into the cockpit. "It's ready, sir," she said and made a point of triggering the first ping; John's turn was at the bottom of each hour.

Shutting down the jumper, John signaled for the civilians to follow him into the hold with the marines; Teldy began checking over both of the women's equipment, weapons and preparedness, while John did the same for Rodney.

"Okay, we've got nine potential allies beyond these walls, and only three Wraith overseeing them," John began when they were ready to move out. Before knowing what they would find in here, he and Teldy had planned on splitting the group, with him and a couple of marines keeping an eye on Rodney while they looked for a computer interface with the Wraith's systems, and Teldy taking the rest to search for survivors, but this was a fucking gift.

"Weren't there five Wraith?"

Keller sounded afraid to speak up; the fact that she had – and questioned him – made John feel better about having her along. She might not completely fold if things got dicey.

John gestured toward Miko's energy detector, keeping his frown hidden when he could see their target getting further away, but knowing an explanation was going to be necessary. If Keller, Miko or especially Rodney thought he was keeping things from them, while they might not actually balk at an order, they could hesitate and that could be as bad.

"The last two Wraith came out only to pick up their own, and aren't taking the same path as the three with the humans. Yes, there might be more Wraith at the processing or holding area, but so far they seem confident in controlling a crowd with a few soldiers and I'd like to take advantage of that. We'd get three more weapons and five or six new recruits, as we've also brought extra weapons for this."

"You're planning on abandoning the newly culled, then?" This time Keller's indignation countered her fear.

John, in turn, did his best to keep his voice level. "I plan on convincing five people to work with us, including someone who might have kept track of the ins and outs of this ship and can help us get to the areas we need to, to complete the mission, I'm hoping. That will leave the other five to look after the people unable to look after themselves. The goal is to save everyone, Doctor Keller. Up here as well as down below. But we don't have a lot of time to take care of that, so certain exigencies are going to have to be accepted."

Keller bit her lip in response, either biting back further argument, or a nervous tell, but then she nodded. John held her eyes for a few seconds longer, until she also relaxed her posture more convincingly, then John turned to Teldy with a nod of his own. Time to let the marines do what they did best.

"Right," Teldy took over on cue. "Sergeant Morrison and I are first down the ramp. When we've given the all-clear, the rest of you need to follow, swiftly and orderly, civilians in the center ranks. Keep the talking to a bare minimum, we have no idea how sound carries. We should expect that the
Wraith have security or listening devices set up, so we should also expect to be discovered, sooner rather than later. Fire without hesitation if you see a Wraith. Remember that they do not go down with just a couple of hits."

"Remember, too, that at least some of them are telepathic," Rodney added, his expression tight and almost angry. "If you can keep a demon-loop song going through your head while you're moving, you might not give our plan away."

Not so much a pep talk, but good advice just the same, even if it proved impossible. John quickly thought of and discarded One Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall. Too inane, even for this purpose. Johnny Cash's Folsom Prison Blues seemed more appropriate, anyway.

*My mama told me, 'Son, always be a good boy, don't ever play with guns.' But I shot a man in Reno ...

1358 Zulu; January 19, 2003
Wraith Ship Warrens
Somewhere over the Western United States

Rodney manfully shoved down the sense of despair he felt upon observing more than one marine mouthing the words to their chosen bar ditties; he supposed he should be thankful none of them felt the need to actually hum out loud. As for protecting his own thoughts, while he hadn't touched a piano in over twenty-five years, he still found the classics he once thought he'd be contributing to a solace, and he'd spent more than one summer translating the likes of Shubert, Grieg and Debussy into mathematical formula, trying to understand the secrets behind their artistry. Even if a Wraith could follow such thoughts, the math would be meaningless to them. And the darkness entwined in the 5th movement of Edward MacDowell's First Modern Suite Op. 10 sounded wildly appropriate as he followed John down the ramp, despite their surroundings smelling more like a rotting fishing boat on the dock than he imagined Hell would.

In addition to the overwhelmly cloying smell of mold and decay, the lighting around them was bad enough that Rodney worried about running into something. He could only think that if the something was one of the marines, he'd end up getting shot since he wasn't the only one showing his anxiety and discomfort in the few seconds the entire team clustered around Miko and her Ancient device while John and the female marine confirmed their course and relative, no doubt temporary, safety.

Apparently arriving at some sort of silent consensus with John, the woman then signaled the two twitchiest marines to take point, while she and one of the others stayed next to Miko and Keller. Since John didn't move to the front in a need to assert his authority, Rodney stayed next to him, keeping one hand on the Zat he'd been given (as had Keller), and one hand clutching his laptop against his chest.

Once they started walking, Rodney lost all sense of time and direction almost immediately. The ship's throughways didn't seem to follow any logical pattern, with some areas feeling like they'd been added on or opened up long after its initial construction. In a lot of ways it reminded him of the Winchester Mystery House his sister had begged their parents to let her explore during their epic trip from Vancouver to Tijuana; Jeannie had been going through her Goth and Ghostbusters phase, wherein she believed ghosts were real. That had been the last vacation Rodney had had to endure with his family before his escape to University.

No staircases leading nowhere here, but only because there weren't any stairs – just a seriously inclined corridor that soon had him puffing for breath, then biting his tongue when it led to a blank
wall. Miko's gadget showed their quarry had come this way; that they were on the other side of the weirdly damp bulkhead. It felt like a soaked leather shoe when he needed touch it to search for some sort of control panel, lock or switch, only there was nothing to wipe off when he drew his hand back, no moisture or oily residue despite how his skin felt. The rest of his skin started to crawl.

Nothing to find, either. No controls or gap/seam that might denote an opening.

"One of you is going to have to reconfigure the detector to trace the power conduits," he said quietly to John, though not quietly enough going by the glares he got from the marines. He ignored the glares and the men. "At some point there will be a convergence of lines, which should denote an access port, I hope. Otherwise, we're going to have to search this entire branch by touch, and still have to get lucky to find something."

Miko handed the device over to John, since he had the greater experience with it, and with the ship's more sophisticated sensor arrays. John had been right there with Rodney, doing his own searching by Braille, and now he wiped his hand on his BDU pants before taking it, so it hadn't only been in Rodney's head. Another marine stood to Miko's side, her watchdog he supposed, while GI Jane had stayed back a few feet with Keller, and the rest of the Brute Squad ranged down the full length of their corridor, keeping watch. So, of course, only Rodney had position to fire without hitting John or Miko when the wall disappeared in front of them.

Rodney, indeed, did not hesitate, although his first shot took out the similarly shocked human. The flare of the Zat's energy beam hit the Wraith gripping the human's arm, slowing it down enough that Rodney's second shot sent it down too. Then things were too chaotic for Rodney to fire, not to mention he suddenly found himself crouching on the floor behind John while very loud gunshots sounded over his head and drowned out MacDowell and his own shouting.

He didn't really have time to be scared before it was over, the shots now echoes hanging in the air along with cordite and the smell of Wraith blood, which was not unlike the lingering odor of Dimethylamine; the shouts now gasps of surprise and wonder. The three Wraith lay unmoving on the floor, as were two more humans than the ones the first had been dragging along. The marines – and John – had their weapons pointed, but as John rose to his feet and lowered his P-90 so it hung off the strap on his tac vest, the others also took it as a signal to relax their positions, though none of the marines actually put away their own weapons.

"We're US Armed Forces. We're here to rescue you."

John's greeting got them smiles and tears on more than one face in return. The three wearing some type of military fatigues reacted instead by putting their hands behind their heads, which was not a response Rodney had considered, but the SGC marines now moved in and amongst them, covering and then patting down the rest, and Rodney figured it out before GI Jane started explaining it to Keller, along with why she wasn't letting Keller in to check on the unconscious humans. Such worry would be more relevant in typical kidnapping and hostage situations, with the rescuers coming in and not knowing if the terrorists had put one of their own in with the prisoners as a trap; the marines as well as the other captured military personnel going through the routines that had been hammered into them despite it being obvious in this case who the bad guys were and weren't.

To stay out of their way, and because John was the one checking on the Wraith and Rodney had seen enough of their dead bodies in the one he'd had to hack up just a fucking week ago, plus Mikey's, Rodney moved back to the now parted wall, to see if he could figure out what had been accessed on this side to make the opening. Miko joined him, with the detector she'd picked up from where John had dropped it and together they got their first look at the inner workings of the Wraith ship.
The membrane-like substance of the walls slowly closed over a gleam of metal and circuitry. With a grimace of distaste, Rodney shoved his hand inside before they lost the seam, feeling all kinds of fool for not figuring it out before now. The ship was partially organic, the wall materials not like membranes and spines, but indeed exactly that: extrusions of some exotic polymer or resin and amorphous carbon fullerenes threaded through with manufactured tech and wiring. Someone would need to know where to cut through the bulkhead to find the controls, but then they’d only need to run an electrical current through the damaged section afterward to realign and restructure the nanotubes to have seamless skin again. Even the ‘doorway’s might just take a cutter and a knitter, though obviously things like corridors and equipment rooms would be carved out in a more permanent fashion. Berths, though, could be more like blisters in the wall, and if the prisoners were stored behind such things, it was going to be a bitch to find them… unless they could find someone that knew the layout.

Not the Wraith Miko's marine or John had shot, along with others, since they were both dead with half their heads missing. Not Rodney’s victim either, as GI Jane borrowed Keller’s Zat to give it two more shots before Rodney could mention they might want to keep one of the Wraiths alive. In the next moment he was glad she had, that he hadn’t made the suggestion as he remembered having one alive to get information from was more dangerous for them than the Wraith, and it wouldn't do to have been the one to remind the others about Wraith telepathy, only to forget about it minutes later. Too many of GI Jane's marines already looked at him like they were wondering why he'd come since he couldn't operate the Ancient tech like Miko and wasn't a medic like Keller, for him to reinforce their low opinion of him by saying something so ill-thought and stupid.

Hoping one of the humans might know there way around the ship wasn't stupid, though.

John apparently thought so too, he and GI Jane were getting histories and names from the rescuees. The three obvious military were shoo-ins for being asked to join their infiltration group; regardless that one of the men was a member of Saddam's Republican Guard apparently. He didn't get one of the few extra P-90s Rodney noted.

The Wraith weapons were also picked up and handed out, the overly tall guy with shoulder-length dreads explaining that the Wraith used stun technology, without also mentioning that they preferred their prey to be alive when they drained them. It was obvious that he and a much smaller guy, plus the woman leaning over the man Rodney had first zatted had been captive together for some time, as they kept looking to one another and making faces when John explained the barebones of the plan: free the prisoners and get control of the ship.

It was only as Rodney actually watched Dreadlock Dude explained something in return that he realized the guy wasn't speaking English though that was what Rodney overheard; that this guy and probably the other three were aliens themselves. Either the NID was operating its own stargate still and importing in agents, the Goa'uld or someone else was sneaking ships and people onto Earth somewhere, or the Wraith had brought a few snacks with them for their long trip. The latter made the more sense as the Wraith wouldn’t have necessarily known they were guaranteed to find Earth in a timely manner; they would have to have come from somewhere outside Goa'uld or Asgard Space for there to have been no knowledge of such a predator that also had space faring capabilities, thus they would have stocked a larder.

"You're not from Earth, are you?" Rodney asked as he knelt next to the woman since she was as small as Miko or Janet Fraiser, and prettier than Samantha Carter in an exotic, non-blonde, non-threatening way.

"I am Teyla, daughter of Tagan, from Athos," he heard as he made sure to concentrate on looking at her eyes instead of her mouth. For someone who could have been a prisoner for months, she had
kind eyes and a remarkably calm demeanor despite the bruising also in evidence. Her clothes looked patched, but not overly dirty, nor did what little skin he allowed himself to look at; a lot of her flesh was bared while the rest was encased in clothing that could be tightened and fitted with laces as the inevitable deprivations had incurred. Obviously the Wraith allowed their prisoners to maintain a certainly level of cleanliness and health, but then again, not doing so could contaminate their food source.

I'm… ah, Rodney McKay." His title would mean nothing to an alien, and his only connection to his parents he cared about was his birth. "From Earth. Or some people call it Terra. And call us Tau'ri, but most people call it Earth and call themselves Terrans when they're referring to coming from the planet, which most of us don't. We… ah… What I mean is Earth is the name of the planet this ship is about to bomb out a piece of. We're here to stop that if we can."

She nodded at him solemnly, as if she was considering everything he said and not considering it to be babble. She then looked over at the marines sorting out the people – and at John – with speculation in her eyes. Along with something that Rodney thought might be hope.

"The Wraith will punish the worlds that fight back, destroying the village instead of simply culling a portion of the people to keep the rest … controllable. It has only been in our history that we have heard of worlds with technology such as your people have described using, and many, many generations since any single world has held such numbers of people. Our … keeper is undecided as to whether to inform the other hives, or keep the bounty for herself."

Hives? Well, that explained a few things. And the rest of what she said was encouraging – that there wasn't necessarily a second fleet of ships already on their way.

"So no one fights back?" Because maybe they weren't going to get much help, at least not from those who knew the Wraith the best.

"We have the spirit, but not the means, Rodney McKay. We burn to fight back and some, like Ronon and Tyre there," she nodded a small, pointed chin toward Dread Dude and his sidekick, "continue to do so in the small ways that they can, but other of our people are held hostage to our … cooperation, so there is little we can do. Kanaan and I," now she looked down to the guy she crouched alongside, combing his hair back with a gentle touch. "We have all lost family to the Wraith, lost the hope of family. We are divided by our guilt, our fear and our anger."

She suddenly grabbed Rodney's arm and rose, pulling him up with her much more effortlessly than her stature implied, and causing him to rethink his initial impression that she wasn't dangerous. She also wasn't quite as short as she'd appeared, being more Keller's height than Frasier's.

"Ah – "

"I, too, wish to fight," she said as she walked Rodney over to John and the Dread Dude, taking one of the Wraith weapons from the two that Dread Dude had claimed after she released Rodney's wrist.

"Teyla," Dread Dude protested in a voice that rumbled to match his size.

It wasn't a contest. When she stared the guy down he looked away almost immediately, with a red flush highlighting how much younger he looked over what Rodney had initially assumed.

"They threaten and hurt us even when we do as they say, Ronon," Teyla said in a soft, reasonable tone. "The Athosians, too, would rather die than be used to harm others, including the youngest of us in Jinto and Wex."
"Ma'am," John began, looking highly uncomfortable as he switched his gaze between those two, then sent a quick anxious one Rodney's direction. "We appreciate your offer, but I think we have enough volunteers – "

Teyla's expression immediately tightened into something that Rodney would have called righteous anger if she had been a woman from a typical industrialized Earth culture. She said nothing though, as she glared at John for a long beat. Looking then at the Marines again, at GI Jane specifically it seemed, noting that none of the men were objecting to taking orders from a woman, when Teyla looked back to John, her expression had cleared and turned almost rueful. Maybe Rodney hadn't been wrong that she'd been about to attack an assumption of chauvinism.

John caught the looks too, and offered a weird grin that wasn't an apology or a challenge, something that was almost rueful itself but also sympathetic. Like he was used to being underestimated too. Then, despite the two of them being not just from different cultures, but completely different worlds, they seemed to reach an understanding without saying a fucking world.

"I am Teyla Emmagen. I would be honored to fight at your side." She then stepped forward, ignoring the gun that she held and the one that hung down from John's vest, to reach up with her free hand for one of John's shoulders. She continued to hold on while she tipped her head forward in an obvious gesture of ritual and formality.

After a few pregnant seconds, John put his hand on her shoulder in return and leaned until his forehead touched hers. "I am John Sheppard. I… ah, I am honored to have you as an ally."

The open and satisfied smile she bestowed in return showed that John had gotten in right.

"Before making their long journey," Teyla then said, "the Wraith culled several worlds to near extinction, my home of Athos being one, along with Belkan and Manaria, which I understand are just names to you. Their importance is that the Belkans who have survived the journey now look to these warriors from Sateda, Ronon and Tyre, to speak for them, while the Athosians and the Manarians look to me. Having the three of us involved will aid you in your call for assistance from the people who might otherwise be too frightened to stand up to the Wraith."

"How many Wraith are we talking about?" GI Jane asked as she finished whatever she'd been doing with the marines. "Hi, I'm Anne Teldy. I'm John's second in command." She offered her hand to the Dread Dude, with a definitely speculative look.

"Ronon Dex," Conan said, though he didn't respond with his own hand; right, shaking hands wasn't universal even on his own world.

"This is Tyre, and Telya Emmagen, who speaks for all of us who have long been under the threat of the Wraith."

"There is the Queen and her attendants, her officers, and the soldiers," the guy named as Tyre explained, giving the positions other names, of course, but that's how Rodney's brain translated what were titles or descriptions.

"With most of the pilots out culling, there is likely half left, maybe forty or so?" Tire looked to the others who nodded.

"Do cullings have an average length?" John asked. "Are we going to have time to make a difference here before the darts come back?"

"If we do not spend more time in discussions," Teyla said rather pointedly, Rodney thought.
"More will come this way when we have not shown up with the most recently claimed, so we need to move these people and leave weaponry with those who will protect them."

She wasn't making that sound too much like an option either. John looked ready to protest, but with seven more willing fighters, maybe it was okay that they left a couple of the marines behind with Keller, or –

"Anne's team will work with you in freeing the people who will be willing to fight back," John said instead, and it sounded like it was first names for everyone, military protocol be damned. But Anne was easier to remember than Teddy – well, not Teddy, but that's all Rodney could remember when he looked at her.

"If you have had involvement with the people taken from Earth, anyone you find in a uniform like ours," and here John pointed even to the Iraqi soldier, "I suspect they will be the first in line to volunteer."

"Regrettably, the Wraith have figured that out, too," Teyla said with a solemn expression. "They are often the first of those taken before the Queen, and few have been returned, although it is possible that they are being cocooned rather than killed outright."

John and Teddy Anne exchanged pained glances; that intel certainly didn't bode well for Sumner. Rodney found himself taking a step closer to John, in support or for comfort… did it really matter? John relaxed a fraction despite the news, and that let Rodney breathe easier too.

"I also need someone who is familiar with the Wraith ship, with the locations of the weapons system or propulsion, if that's possible." John once more turned his attention to Teyla, Ronon and the other guy. "Someone who might know of a place where a small team could work uninterrupted and maybe disrupt those and the flight systems?"

Teyla's glance turned to the guy she'd first stayed next to. "The Wraith have their own engineers, but the soldiers are not adept in some of the more intricate requirements of long space flights, so they have co-opted some of us to work maintenance duties. Kanaan was one, but I fear that he will not awaken soon enough?"

She made it a question, since it hadn't been a Wraith stun, but a Zat that had taken her companion out. Rodney started to nod, then shook his head given that although he agreed with her, he was confirming that Kanaan wasn't going to be waking any time soon.

"I know of a place," Tyre offered.

Teyla and Ronon both looked surprised.

"Hemi spoke of an alcove the keepers took him to once, to crawl amongst the conduits."

From the way Tyre spoke and the other two looked distressed, Rodney figured Hemi wasn't alive any longer. Hopefully not from having to 'crawl amongst the conduits'.

"Miko, on the off chance the Atoe – Athosians – recover from a Zat quicker than the rest of us do, you should stay with the group looking out for Kanaan," Rodney instructed her. "I don't think we'd be working to cross purposes if we approach it from two directions. "If we do?" He shrugged. "It should still serve our purpose in being disruptive."

Miko nodded, her eyes huge behind her glasses, but her expression was as resolved as the best of them.
Teddy Anne frowned, at his presumption of John's authority, Rodney supposed, but the scientists were Rodney's purview, not the military's. If that meant splitting the group up into threes now, she'd just have to cope. He wasn't wrong about the increase chances of being successful if the two of them could get at the controls in two different places.

"Tyre, thank you, yes. I would appreciate you guiding us. Captain al-Naeem, Lieutenant Hamilton, I'd appreciate it if you'd join Rodney, Sergeant Morrison and me with Tyre," John addressed the Iraqi and the Army guy – the two most likely to have problems with the current chain of command.

The two soldiers nodded and Morrison simply stepped toward John. It looked very phys-ed class, only this time Rodney had been the first kid picked, not the last.

And there were three teams, not two, as Teyla quickly reminded them.

"Ronon, I will take those Anne will trust with me, and those currently defenseless, to Halling, Ara and Hendon for watching, then join you in freeing the pens. John, once the Wraith understand we are rising up in rebellion, they will come in force to make examples of a few of us, stunning or cocooning the rest so as not to waste their resources. They will also begin searching for prisoners who might try to hide from them, and with those they are not gentle, so you will have to be very quick and very careful if you are to succeed."

If you are to not make our sacrifice in vain, she might as well have said, from the dire expression she and the other two now sported as they divvied up the rest of the people who'd been carrying off the recently culled. John looked pretty dire — and regretful — too, but Rodney knew if he couldn't crack the Wraith's flight systems in the time they'd have, no one could, not even Saint Carter.

Tyre made a showy ritual of clasping Ronon's arm, then did the head thingy with Teyla before heading over toward one of the three permanent looking corridors bisecting this 'room'. "This way," he said without looking back to see if Rodney or the others were ready.

John's only goodbye was a nod to the group at large. Rodney didn’t manage even that, as John tugged him along to follow the new recruits heading out after Tyre, with their SGC sergeant following them as the tail guy.

More creepy, dim passageways, with inclines and declines of slope and widths that widened until they could have flown the Ancient ship through them, to walls so close that Rodney's claustrophobia threatened to rear its ugly head. More than once they were cautioned back, once even shoved into a room so small he could feel all of John's body pressed against him. It might have been enjoyable, if he hadn't been holding his breath and if his back hadn't been pressed into one of the skin walls so deep that he felt as if he was going to be enveloped and suffocated.

Finally, though, Tyre led them into a new room, one not that much roomier than the nightmare one, with a console dominating its center and a floor filled with conduits than. Only one visible entrance, no wider than a typical doorway on Earth. It could be easily defended against the Wraith when they were discovered, with part of the group keeping an eye out to make sure there wasn't a hidden entrance, still leaving someone able to give Rodney a second pair of hands if they became needed.

Of course, what would work as a chokehold against the Wraith, also put the rest of them in close proximity as they followed after John and Tyre. Close enough that when Tyre shot John first he also caught the Captain in the blast, then had to only fire twice more to get the rest of them. Rodney thought he heard a gun shot being fired as he spasmed then collapsed, but Tyre remained on his feet when Rodney lost consciousness.

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Waking from a stun hurt nearly as much as getting hit by one. Pins and needles all over his body, plus a few bruises he didn't remember from before, caused Rodney to think he'd been dragged along to wherever he was now as they'd seen happen to the other humans. He supposed that beat being dead, though if that was only putting off the inevitable, he rather wished they hadn't bothered to let him awaken first. Especially not when he finally forced his eyes open only to see what was most likely in store for him – the body he was practically lying atop, totally desiccated though recognizable as belonging to the Iraqi from the uniform. Or a Iraqi soldier, if he wanted to think optimistically.

Rodney tried not to touch the body as he'd accidentally done to Sergeant Markham in much the same situation. In the next breath, though, he was more worried about being able to move, worried that his body wasn't willing or able to cooperate. He made it as far as getting his head turned, but that was almost worse, since all it got him was his first look at what he presumed was the Wraith Queen Teyla and the others had mentioned.

She was definitely female, mammalian too by the looks of her. Whereas all of the male Wraiths he'd seen so far had stark or dirty white hair, hers was dark, almost the color of iron filings, and surprisingly well-styled, though as long as it was, she probably did need it pulled back to keep it out of her eyes as she diva-ed her way in front of her subjects. A Cher impersonator wasn't as dramatic and gesturey as this queen.

That this Wraith also wore a long dress, white with a lacey pattern overlaid, was just creepy. She looked like a heavy metal bride, or a queen, he supposed, if dressed by a B-list Hollywood production company. Maybe he shouldn't have been expecting something straight off a Frank Frazetta book cover, or Jane Fonda's Barbarella, but finding a transvestite reject from an '80s video was disconcerting.

As was the smiling mouth overfilled with pointed, green teeth surrounded by the same basic facial structure as the more human appearing males: fish-belly complexion, check; gills or whatever the slits were across her cheeks, ditto. No tattoos, so maybe those were rank designations on the males and if there was only one queen/female per ship, everyone knew who she was.

Tyre suddenly moved into Rodney's view, bowing before her royal highness, and the resultant burst of anger and adrenalin pushed away more of his pain paralysis, though he didn't think he'd be able to stand and walk, and even then, where would he go? He used his new-found control to roll further back into the shadows he'd found himself in, and tried to take in more of the room, with the hope of finding something useful. Like a marine. Or John.

No such luck, though about half of the room was blocked by the appurtenance he'd been tucked away behind. His Zat was also missing, but they hadn't taken off his tac vest, and he could feel his Leatherman pressing against his thigh. He could also make out something that might be his laptop within reach too, but other than reminding the Wraith that he was here and now awake if he turned it on and flipped the screen up to use it, he didn't know what use it might be.

Before he could think of an alternate answer to that, or find anything more useful, Rodney's attention was drawn back to the Queen and his betrayer, who were joined by a new Wraith, one of the more human-looking Matrix rejects. Rodney couldn’t make out what words were exchanged – didn't know if they were speaking softly or if being stunned still affected his hearing. Until Tyre abruptly screamed something that could have been a name, could have been from both pain and ecstasy when the new Wraith slammed his hand against Tyre's chest. The chest that Tyre had bared himself.

Rodney had seen this before and had no desire to see a feeding again, even one happening to someone who deserved it. Only instead of further draining the years and life from the guy, Tyre
started to look younger, healthier, and his gasps now gave no question that he enjoyed it. All-in-all, this display was quite possibly the most disturbing thing he’d seen yet.

Until more of them showed up, dragging three bodies with them, one of which belonged to John.

Rodney was pretty sure John and the SGC guy were conscious and dragging their feet literally and metaphorically to show their disinterest in cooperating. Not that the Wraith seemed to care, or be bothered, and soon all three were dumped unceremoniously to the ground next to Tyre, though at a quick gesture from the Queen, she had them pulling John up to his feet once more.

Having John be an inch taller him than him had bothered Rodney much less than he'd expected, John had never used his body to intimidate Rodney like many military guys tried. Seeing that the Wraith Queen towered over John, even if part of that was her boots and him not being able to stand fully upright, was another matter entirely. John didn't flinch from her, though, not until she ran the back of her hand down his cheek; then Rodney could see John's revulsion as it so clearly mirrored his own.

He could hear the Queen too, not clearly as his ears were still not quite up to snuff, but he was much more motivated now.

" – waited for this moment, Lantean. Did you really think we would forget you? Forgive you?"

"Lady, I don't know who you think I am, but you've got a serious case of mistaken identity here," John responded to her with a bravado and flippancy Rodney was glad to hear.

Rodney desperately tried to keep a hold of his anger and sense of betrayal, but mainly he was terrified, and mostly on John's behalf.

She stepped closer to John, no doubt trying to intimidate him with not only her superior height, but with the bad touching John had already reacted against; though why she needed such theatrics when she was already the baddest ass in the room –

"I know you are the one who killed my schrek – "

Her final word didn't translate in Rodney's head because it was a combination of advisor/lover/scientist/favored and a few more shaded concepts, with no English analogue.

"Are you talking about Mikey? You and him? Seriously?"

Rodney didn't need to see the insouciant grin John offered her; it was obvious in his tone.

"Well, I hope you got a real eyeful when he died, sister," John continued with audible satisfaction as he cocked his head at her. "Or would that be mind full? Most people would consider the telepathy thing cheating, you know."

She hissed and stepped back, maybe from her own translation problems, though the context was clear enough, or maybe because she wasn't used to her prey not cowering before her. Whatever the reason, he'd thrown her, angered her, and while Rodney greatly admired John's attitude, he worried that the Wraith wouldn't take defiance well.

Sure enough, John was punched in the kidney by one of the soldiers that held him upright and now kept him upright as John's knees folded from the force. It hadn't been in response to a gesture from the Queen that Rodney had seen, but then, even if the grunts weren't intelligent enough to understand telepathy (Rodney had yet to hear any of them talk – or even react very strongly to being shot), no doubt they at least had some sort of empathy to be able to sense the moods of the other Wraith. And had learned enough about human anatomy to know where they'd get an agreeable reaction.
"Are you so unfeeling of your worshippers, Lantean?" the Queen looked at John contemptuously now. "I think not. I think even a creature such as yourself feels loss, feels guilt." Between one blink and the next, she shifted and dragged one hand down the SGC guy's BDU shirt, then plunged the other into the Sergeant's chest, her talon-sharp nails digging in and getting a good hold – and a good scream from the Sergeant – even before she began to drain him.

She did it quick, ignoring John's shouts and the army guy being sick next to John, not even looking like she savoried what she took, unlike the other Wraith seemed to when feeding. Rodney wanted to be sick too, to close his eyes as yet another person was turned into a husk and then dust. He wanted to, but didn't let himself.

When she finished, the Queen bent down to collect the sergeant's dog tags and then bestowed them to the Wraith that had hit John. Now in the proper context, Rodney could see that what he'd dismissed initially as ornamentation on the wrist guards the Wraith soldiers all sported, were instead more dog tags, at least a hundred split amongst the six with the bone faces. The Queen and her lieutenant or whatever the more human-looking one was to her, also wore a collection of dog tags around their necks and from their belts.

"I will kill all of the ones in your thoughts, Lantean; bring them before you and have you watch. Have you chose who will die first. How many will it take before you break? Before you tell me where the rest of your kind are hiding? Will it take even one more?"

The Wraith pushed the army guy to his knees, but she ignored him for now, moving back instead to stand nearly on top of John's boots and watch him, studying him intently, waiting for John to blink or say something else smart ass so she could slap him down, or –

Or doing none and all of that, baring down on John's mind instead, not only telepathically but invading, or at least that's what it looked like from Rodney's side. Like the telepaths in *Scanners* and *Babylon 5*, like every other bad sci-fi cliché, only real. John faltered… was being pressed down to his knees, though none of the Wraith were touching him any longer.

Rodney grabbed for something – his laptop. He might not be able to throw it far enough to hit her but it would make a racket when it hit the floor and surely that would distract her? As rescues went, it would be fleeting, he knew, and would turn their attention his way, but John would get a moment's respite and maybe Rodney could convince her there weren't any Lanteans any longer, that the Ancients were long dead, before she shredded John's mind for information he couldn't give her.

Only it wasn't his laptop Rodney's hand found. The Iraqi hadn't been drained as completely as Sergeant Markham and… Morrison? When Rodney touched him, he didn't crumble to dust. That perhaps explained why it took him a few seconds to realize that it wasn't just sinew and boney fingers he felt either.

The Wraith had taken Rodney's Zat when they'd thrown him here, but not the .9mm John had given the Captain. Rodney had no idea why they would have missed it, since it was much more obviously a weapon than Rodney's Zat, and they would have run across many of them before now going by the number of dog tags she's collected as trophies. He didn't know why, but he also didn't care right now, and took it for the miracle it was.

Rising to his own knees, Rodney began firing, glad in the first moment that John was on his knees too, as he could fire upward and hit only Wraith. Not that he hit any of them enough to do much damage; maybe six of the seventeen rounds he fired actually hit a target. But as far as shock value, it worked, and one of the rounds clipped the Queen in the chest, which at least caused her to fall back.

The army guy had enough wherewithal to take advantage of their surprise, lashing out with a boot to
take down one of the Wraith next to him. John reacted a little slower, but in a similar manner using his feet to put one of his on the ground and then rolled to avoid a return kick by the other. Even Tyre got into the action, not on the side of the Wraith as Rodney expected, and the Iraqi Captain wasn't the only one who'd been left with a weapon.

The knife Tyre produced from somewhere was more like a short sword, and Ginsu sharp, going by one Wraith losing his hand above the wrist guard with what looked like minimal effort.

A knife and some special ops moves by the others wouldn't be enough, not when the good guys were outnumbered three-to-one and outmatched even by the female. These Wraith weren't carrying weapons themselves, but then their strength was weapon enough, plus those damn feeding hands, even if the Queen wasn't going to let them kill John outright.

Rodney started digging for something else, only now realizing the Iraqi wasn't the only body he'd been thrown amongst, only now discovering that one of them was also alive when he groped her and she squeaked and then took a swing at him that missed even worse than his own would have.

Mostly dead or playing dead, none of that mattered if she wasn't going to be of any help; Rodney didn't have time to hold hands or babysit. He scrabbled through unresponsive limbs, pawing through pockets and belts and finally closing his hand around a cylinder with a distinctive flip lever and hanging ring on its top. Even in the dark, Rodney recognized an explosive, and barely paused a breath to think how easily he might have armed it in his fumbling. Since it was a cylinder rather than a pineapple or a small football, he was pretty sure it wasn't a standard shrapnel or a white phosphorous grenade, but that left it potentially being a smoker, an incendiary, or possibly a flash bang, and the last two could harm John and the others as much as the Wraith if he threw it into the brawl. If it was a concussion grenade, it might not matter where he threw it and, hell, if it belonged to a Russian or another Iraqi, it could have been manufactured by any number of foreign sources with the shape not conforming to NATO standards.

No. Even if it was a fragmentation grenade, that was a cleaner way to go than being tortured and fed upon.

Rodney carefully pulled it free, then more carefully explored the locking mechanism with his fingers. Too bad it wasn't likely a shrapnel type, given the nature of the walls and bulkheads of the ship, he could do a lot of damage with it if he knew where to find a power relay station or a console. If he had a knife he could stick it inside the wall and –

And why not? The battery powering his laptop had enough of an edge that he could probably make a slit – no, wait, they'd also left him with his Leatherman – and the Queen's chamber was actually brighter lit than most of the other areas they'd explored, so it had to have more power conduits running through the walls. He'd have to worry about priming it, and getting far enough away after pulling the pin.

Or not.

Sacrifice had never been his thing, but he'd also never cared enough about anyone to consider it before. Besides, the odds were more that the grenade wasn't explosive and wouldn't blow him up. Maybe not the wall and conduits either. Considering the sounds of the conflict were diminishing though, that the Queen was back to screeching and gloating, it wasn't like he had any more time to dither – or worry about what type of grenade he held. He'd been the one to fire the gun and somehow he didn't think she'd forget that, just because she wanted to play with John.

Playing with him in front of John would serve her purpose quite well, better than she could imagine, he wasn't being egotistical in thinking. That was definitely something Rodney would rather avoid. In
that light, choosing the manner of his own death was definitely preferable, especially if he was lucky enough to damage the ship at the same time.

Later, Rodney would never admit that he was almost disappointed when more gunshots followed, not just from another handgun, but from more than one P-90. Being the hero might not have been something Rodney had ever aspired to, but having come to terms with it and actually feeling good about being willing to make such a sacrifice, having it pulled out from under him in the form of Conon and Xena coming in at the last second, actually left him feeling bereft. Only long enough for his brain to catch up with his heart, however, until the fact that he wasn't going to have to blow himself up for John to survive a few seconds longer registered, as did the fact that they might have more than a few seconds, the both of them.

Or that John had already fallen, and while Rodney didn't want to know that, he had to look to find out. Only, as he very carefully began to set the grenade back down, back under one of the bodies so he wouldn't accidentally kick it or otherwise loosen the pin, someone grabbed him from behind. Any shout he might have made was lost in the chaos going on near the Queen. Then he was choking, unable to get in enough air to try again, and finally without enough air to stay conscious. The grenade rolled from his fingers.

1512 Zulu; January 19, 2003
Queen's Throne Room, Wraith Ship
Somewhere over the Western United States

John knew he was alive, because being dead wouldn't hurt this much and heaven was supposed to be filled with sun, sand, surf, and the crisp air at fifteen thousand feet, not an abattoir filled with screaming, blood, puke, and something more that smelled indescribable. No, John was pretty sure that was somebody's text book version of Hell, and if he'd ended up there -- somewhere exactly like the place he'd been in when he died -- then, Jesus, what was the fucking point?

He rather expected Hell to have a better cast and effects department, anyway.

John managed to push the dead weight off of him, saddened to note Lieutenant Hamilton, the ten year Army veteran who'd been culled while home on leave visiting his parents in Iowa, was dead. The lieutenant had deep claw marks across his back, but it had been the bullet hole in his neck that had killed him, the ricochet that would have killed John instead had Hamilton not tackled him out of the way.

That was two of his team dead because of him, with Rodney and Captain al-Naeem missing. Two men dead thanks to that piece of shit Tyre, and if Rodney was dead too, Tyre was going to wish the Wraith had fed on him, instead of whatever it had been that John had seen when he'd been dragged in with Morrison and Hamilton.

John might have his chance for payback, since bullets should mean rescue. He'd blindly fumbled at the radio at his belt to transmit with the bastard Wraith had hit him with the rabbit punch to the kidney. It must have worked. That, or someone other than the Wraith were psychic.

Someone was psychic enough. Teyla crouched by his side and put a hand on his shoulder to keep him still. Not quite soon enough for him to keep his head from exploding when he moved it, but the soft rubbing at his temple also implied she'd anticipated his response.

"The pain will pass if you do not try and rush your recovery," she promised, her eyes and touch the
polar opposite of the Bitch Queen's.

"You must be quite strong-willed to have been able to survive the Queen's interrogation."

More like a stubborn SOB, even now when her caution and his own head told him to stay where he was. He couldn't, though. Not to let others keep taking risks on his behalf, and not when Rodney was still missing.

Teyla must have seen something in his face, at once her hand changed from cautioning to supporting him, despite his gagging when he rolled over, the flare of agony in his head threatening more than his lunch.

"You are more stubborn than Ronon," she admonished, yet helped him steady to his knees – without him actually throwing up, thank you very much.

"The battle is over, John. The Queen is dead."

Long live the Queen, John couldn't help mumble in return. "It's not over until I've found all of my people," he then gritted out in a stronger voice; not much stronger, but she heard it. She understood him now, going by the way her expression changed, hardening not in anger or exasperation, but with purpose and resolve.

"Kanaan, Ronon, search for the others who were with John. Rodney McKay and – "

She stopped, but not because she hadn't remembered Captain al-Naeem's name. John followed where her attention had been drawn. Ronon was too busy, too distracted himself to be paying attention to her in return. Too busy trying to keep Tyre's guts in where he'd been disemboweled by his own knife.

John would have said it served Tyre right, if not for the stricken look on Ronon's face – at how young and lost Ronon now appeared – despite being surrounded by the bodies of the Wraith he'd likely killed alongside Tyre, including one that had had its neck snapped. With Tyre as good as dead, there was no point to mentioning it had been Tyre who'd delivered John's team up to the Queen; John's petty satisfaction seemed worthless in the face of Ronon's grief.

Only Tyre had his own notion of dying in peace, confessing all to Ronon between gasped breaths: his corruption, his betrayal, and his hope for absolution in seizing upon the arrival of John's people as a way to get close enough to the Queen with hidden weapons and motives. Explaining his plan for redemption.

Since the plan had worked, and considering how close he'd come to giving in to the Queen himself, John couldn't hold the deaths of Sergeant Cole and Lieutenant Hamilton against Tyre. Given the lack of choices Tyre had faced, John couldn't say that he might not have tried the same thing. Even if it had meant Rodney's death too.

God, please don't have it mean Rodney's death –

Wait. There had been the earlier gunshots, the distraction that had let him break the Queen's push against his mind. How could he have forgotten –

John twisted his body toward the shadowed section of the room, hoping to see something, to see Rodney or Captain al-Naeem because if one was alive, the other might be too. He tried to scramble to his feet despite swaying on his knees, and once more Teyla moved to help him, rising to her own feet and then pulling him to his. She was too small in height and stature to be able to support so much of John's weight for long, but the other guy, the one Rodney had accidentally zatted and Teyla had
shown a little extra concern for, moved quickly to pick up Teyla's slack – to basically pick John up and keep him there.

"There was someone back there," John tried to point both his chin and hand to where he thought the gunshots had come from. "Maybe Rodney, since it was one of our guns." Not that he'd fired it with any skill, but that supported it being Rodney even more. Too, Captain al-Naeem surely would have come out of hiding once the hand-to-hand had started.

John tried very hard to feel optimistic about the Wraith lying half in shadow, instead of panicked that one of the Wraith had remembered the source of the first gunshots before John had.

Panic moved clearly ahead with the discovery that the Wraith had been one of the more human-looking ones, even if it was clearly dead. The pile of bodies it lay amongst didn't help either, or the fact that it was too dark to make out the features of the other bodies.

"Ronon, we need a light," Teyla called back softly, kindly, since she was intruding on Ronon's grief.

Ronon unfolded from his crouch, Tyre's bloody knife gripped in one hand, one of the marine's P-90s in his other. Someone had given him enough instruction on how to fire and reload, and about the tactical light mounted on top, which wasn't necessarily as intuitive to someone perhaps used to semi-automatics. Teyla too, it seemed, since she'd asked him. No one pulled out any other sort of light. And while that didn't explain why none of the marines had come on this rescue, it went a ways toward letting John decide Ronon hadn't simply stolen the P-90 from Teldy or one of the others.

A double betrayal was possible, of course, with these guys deciding they wanted to be top dog and needed help in taking out the Queen, but John would bet everything he owned that Tyre's confession and need for Ronon's forgiveness had been real, and the same for Ronon's grief and anger. Plus, it would have been damn easy enough for any of these three to kill him even now. He couldn't think of any reason they wouldn't have if they were working an agenda contrary to saving everyone.

Ronon took over the grim detail of checking over the bodies with his hands as well as the light. Five of them it looked like, all of them in some stage of having been drained, and all of them dead. When Ronon came across Captain al-Naeem's husk of a body, he took a moment to straightened the captain's uniform and limbs though no one would ever be fooled to think he slept or that he died any way but horrifically. It was a measure of respect, a commonality between their two worlds and no doubt for John's benefit since Ronon wasn't taking the same time or care with the others.

John could only nod in appreciation in return, from the lump in his throat and the growing sense of dread on Rodney's behalf when none of the other bodies was his.

"Someone crawled away from this," Ronon spoke suddenly, his own voice thick beyond its normal gruffness. "Two, and one of them a woman. Pretty sure neither were Wraith."

John didn't ask how Ronon could tell – didn't care about anything other than if Ronon could also figure out where they went.

"The Queen's have a private chamber that no one but her favorites are allowed into," Ronon continued. "Could your McKay have been able to figure out the lock, like you said he could figure out stopping this ship?" he asked with a look up to John.

John nodded, though he wasn't sure why Rodney would have. He got that Rodney might not have thought he could do anything in a fight once he'd emptied his gun, especially if he was also looking out for another victim. But once he'd gotten her to relative safety, John would have thought Rodney would have returned, at least to spy on how the conflict had resolved.
"How about you? Can you bypass locks too?" Ronon stood as he asked that, and moved to a piece of bulkhead that didn't look any different than the rest to John.

He started to shake his head, but immediately thought better of it. "Not like McKay can. I'd just end up shooting it."

That got him a fierce grin from Ronon in return, and Ronon leveled the P-90, only Kanaan got a hand out to stop Ronon before he opened fire.

"Wait, Ronon. We…" He paused and exchanged a troubled look with Teyla, though whatever he got in return seemed to help him regain his composure. "One of us may be able to work the lock," Kanaan finished, sounding both repulsed and apologetic. "Teyla and I both have a certain… affinity for Wraith technology."

"You're both Wraith touched?" The way that Ronon said it obviously had a meaning that eluded John, beyond a certain understanding that the question was important wherever they came from. Symbolic probably, though thought of as more profane than sacred, given Kanaan's reluctance to mention it.

John suspected Ronon wasn't hung up about it as much as Kanaan and Teyla might be expecting.

"We are," Teyla confirmed, with only serenity in her voice. "Certain of our people have always been able to sense the Wraith's arrival. Although not always in time to prevent a culling," she added with a rueful gesture to their surroundings. "Being aboard this ship for so long, the awareness has grown to include some of their technology."

Kind of like John and the Ancients' things, it sounded like. And like, maybe, he really had been able to sense the darts in advance to hearing them; if by sense, that meant his headaches. He should probably ask Miko or Lorne if they'd felt the same things and to what extent, though that would no doubt lead to Beckett wanting to test them and that, that was a big NO.

But sensing the Wraith trying to sneak up on you; that would be a useful genetic trait in a people who constantly lived under the threat, one with a good chance of being passed on, assuming that sensing the Wraith instead of their ships didn't come with the migraines.

Not that a migraine right now wouldn't be a welcome respite from the way his head did feel.

Realizing that his thoughts were really going far afield, John brought himself under control, including taking the steps to keeping his own feet without assistance. When Teyla carefully slid from under John's arm to look at the wall herself, John pulled away from Kanaan too. There was no telling what they'd find beyond, and he wasn't about to endanger Kanaan by keeping them with the highest profile because he was a little unsteady from a headache.

What they did find when Teyla finessed the door open hadn't made it anywhere on the top one hundred worst-case scenarios John had off-handedly come up with. It might have been funny if it wasn't so damn unexpected after everything that had happened and, oh yeah, if one of the participants on the bed hadn't been the guy who's dick had been stuck up his ass a couple of days before.

Rodney gave a squeak that would have done a thirteen year old girl – or the clichéd blushing virgin – proud. It was slightly more gratifying to see how quickly Rodney twisted and pushed the woman off of him, then not funny at all when John saw that Rodney's hands had been tied behind his back with what could have been his own shirt.
"This isn't what it looks like," Rodney said in a tone he most likely counted on sounding indignant, but really sounded mostly desperate.

"You mean you aren't being held and assaulted against your will?" John couldn't help but respond with, his feelings of relief and anger racing neck-and-neck. "Lady," he addressed the brunette who'd, at one time, apparently had been wearing most of the clothing strewn across the floor, "do you want to explain yourself, or should I shoot you now?"

"You make it a clean death, and I won't complain," she answered, completely serious and completely unapologetic.

Unembarrassed either, sitting there on her ass in some sort of panties and nothing else.

"Your gun is a better death than what had been in store," she continued. "Though, as you can see, I'd rather live."

Her words and her gestures toward Rodney seemed to have some greater significance than John was picking up on.

"Excuse me?" Rodney twisted until he more or less sat upright himself. "What can you possibly mean by that?"

Oh, good, he wasn't the only one confused, so it probably wasn't because the Queen had striped him of a few brain cells when she'd been rummaging around.

"The Wraith will not kill females who are pregnant," Teyla gave them the big clue, her distaste and disapproval coming through clearly. "Larrin, if you have chosen this way, there are men who would couple with you willingly —"

"Not so many around here," the woman – Larrin – spat in return. She gestured toward the bodies piled outside the room. "It's been too many days to expect that I'd be returned to the pens. You would have been as desperate as I was, Teyla Emmagen."

"I would never curse a child to this existence," Teyla growled fiercely, taking a few steps forward before Kanaan stopped her with a touch to her arm, the expression on her face finally bringing shame to Larrin's.

"I was desperate," Larrin repeated, now looking like she was close to sobbing for all the vitriol she tried to instill in her words. "No one would have thought his friends would triumph."

John understood enough of the undercurrent to be almost sympathetic – though nauseous – while Rodney's expression waffled between murderous, affronted, and simply miserable. It was the misery that did it, that kicked John into getting his head into the game and moving forward instead of standing there like a useless idiot.

He stumbled off toward Rodney, reflexively scooping up the shirt that had nearly brought him down to drop it on the woman and her nakedness. Ignoring her as well as who's bed this must be, John started to kneel in front of Rodney, then put his knee on the bed instead, finally just straddling Rodney's lap when he couldn't figure out how to position himself to get to the back of Rodney's hands and still be able to hold on to him.

"I was really afraid you weren't going to triumph either," Rodney confessed in a whisper against John's neck as he leaned in close.

"That makes three of us," John admitted right back as softly. Of course, he should have turned
Rodney around, to better see and get at his bindings, but holding him felt so much better. Nor did it feel like the ties were complicated when he pawed around; she'd simply tied Rodney's thumbs together first, to keep him from getting any purchase. John freed him quickly, but made no effort to move them, especially not after Rodney's hands burrowed under John's shirt and around his ribs.

"You're not dead?" Rodney's whisper now held wonder.

"You neither," John chuffed a tiny laugh.

"So we won?"

"Well, we've got the clean-up to finish, but I guess, yeah, we have, at least here." John turned his head, resting it on Rodney's shoulder, but so he could call out to the room at large and be heard.

"We've won, right? Freed the slaves, control of the ship, and the Queen is dead."

Rodney giggled into his hair, "Long live the Queen," and John just lost it. He heard something that might have been, 'we've got it covered,' from Ronon, and something else affirmative enough from both Kanaan and Teyla about Anne Teldy and Miko and maybe finding a whole platoon of marines including their CO in addition to a secondary control room. That was enough for John.

It was time to check out. To giggle in return and press kisses all over Rodney's face. To let someone else take charge, if only for a little while.

Larrin's huffiness only convinced John further that they'd done enough for now.

"Well, that explains it."

It did indeed.

Epilogue

1609 Zulu; January 19, 2003
Bridge of the Thrudheim
Over Central Nevada, United States

The last thing Samantha Carter ever thought she'd end up doing was riding an Asgard ship through reentry prior to landing it in the middle of the Nevada desert. When she'd thought about disclosure, voluntary or involuntary, she'd pictured a solemn President speaking to the American people and the whole world, talking about the tremendous benefits to mankind despite the new and inherent dangers. Maybe from the UN, with General Hammond standing at his side, and maybe Jack too, though she'd never figured out if she wanted to be standing along with them or not.

She'd certainly never envisioned coming back to Earth after it was too late – maybe not too late for Earth's survival, but definitely she'd never imagined coming back too late to save the day. Foolish, she knew, not to mention full of hubris, but she was part of SG-1, dammit, and they always saved the day. Even when they had no business being so lucky.

Jack seemed a little put out too, though his scowl as General Hammond signed off could just be that, from the general's account, Rodney McKay had been the one not just instrumental in taking the fight back to the invaders, but was also responsible for the hijacking of the alien ship they'd been redirected to land beside, instead of getting to go in with guns ablazing to destroy the invaders.

The thought of McKay stepping up to save anyone other than himself, the reality that he'd stared down General Hammond and volunteered to go on a mission against the invaders… Well, obviously
there was more to the man than ego, as General Hammond had made a point to commend McKay's efforts while getting SG-1 up to speed.

"It's remarkable, to learn of a new race so inimical to the rest of us having gone unnoted by the Asgard, the Nox, or even the Goa'uld," Daniel remarked quietly as he came up to take a place next to Sam in front of the view screen.

"Frankly, it's more frightening than remarkable," Sam felt she had to point out. "There could be a race like that – that there could be more races like that out there – aliens that could prove to be bigger threats than these Wraith, or the Goa'uld, and we'll have no warning until they show up, here or at one of our allies. And now everyone on Earth is going to be thinking that too." She took a deep breath and turned her face away when Daniel moved closer and reached out his hand. She didn't want to be mollified yet. Not when she had so much to say and this would likely be her only opportunity, as once they got back into the thick of things, every hurt and slight would have to be swallowed – for the good of mission, the SGC, or the world.

"When the initial shock of what's happened wears off and people start putting some sort of life back together, they're going to want to blame someone. Somehow, I don't see the other IOA countries stepping up and sharing the responsibility for the decisions that have been made on everyone's behalf. They're going to point the same fingers at us, for starting the program in the first place and keeping the knowledge to ourselves for so long. Then we'll also have people like Senator Kinsey, who've also been on our ass from day one about expenditures and risks versus no quantifiable rate of return, getting to say I told you so."

"We can always hope Kinsey was one of the Taken," Jack proved he was listening in, despite his telling both her and Daniel that he needed to concentrate on flying the ship, and that their hovering and being underfoot was too distracting.

"Indeed," was Teal'c's contribution from Jack's side. "He is not a man many would miss."

Teal'c was never a distraction – or underfoot.

Too easy to joke about it, a form of gallows humor and an honest airing of the frustration the rest of them felt too, and not just over Robert Kinsey, Sam supposed. But the corollary to it all was that Kinsey, missing or not, was just one man and all of the initial reports were putting Earth's losses in the tens of millions, if not the hundreds of millions. There were going to be a lot of people missing, all important or loved by someone, and it would be weeks, if not months, before the real numbers and lists could be compiled.

Plus, who knew how many more would die in the time it took to restore basic services? Even with the aid of off-world allies, they were talking about rebuilding dams, electrical grids and roads, about building and launching replacement communications satellites… Coupled with the state of the world's militaries, especially the air forces and naval fleets… as wicked as it might be, Sam found herself hoping the devastation was spread out worldwide. Forget about worrying over the Goa'uld or other off-world enemies; there were plenty of opportunists and rogue states who might try to do a little expansion or extra disappearing of their own against certain neighbors, now that the eyes of the world had in essence been blinded.

"You would have said the same thing about Rodney McKay before today as you just did about Vice President-elect Kinsey," Daniel echoed Sam's original thoughts even as he also admonished Jack.

"Yeah, well, I'm prepared to offer this Sheppard a medal – or at least a promotion - for figuring out how to handle the guy," Jack retorted.
"Does that mean I'll get one too?" Janet asked as she came onto the bridge. "Either will do."

Cassie remained stuck like a limpet to Janet's side, the same as she'd been when they'd beamed Janet aboard, leaving Sam to wonder how long it would take General Hammond or someone else in the SGC to discover that Cassie was missing, and then conclude that she'd added herself onto her mother's mission.

"I managed Rodney first – the both of them, actually," Janet pointed out.

"Janet, you know that I would give you every medal imaginable, solely because you make house calls," Jack told her. "Not only for our little alien allies but to the scary space vampire ship that smells like Harry Maybourne's socks, if McKay wasn't exaggerating.

"Actually, sir, I believe that McKay reported it smelled like abandoned docks when he asked for air filters or rebreathers to be brought to him." Sam kept her gaze on the crisp image of the Earth turning below them, so that Jack wouldn't see the start of a smile at his expense. All the luck that SG-1 had ever had was due solely to Jack O'Neill, who'd never met a crisis he couldn't quip his way out of.

"Like I said, Maybourne's socks. Right, Daniel?" Jack's grin was in his tone. "You remember the locker room after that mission to P3C – "

"Hey, I thought we were talking about how wonderful I was," Janet interrupted, before Jack could really get going.

"I thought asking questions or just us talking was too distracting while you were playing pilot," Daniel did his own grousing.

"Oh, right. Everyone shut up for a few minutes while I land this pup – "

"Getting back to your original point, Colonel, Thor is resting fine," Janet interrupted Jack again, with an ease and familiarity that Sam envied her for.

Sure, she'd seen Jack naked a time or two on a mission, and had patched him up, but not to the extent that Janet had as their primary physician. Only Jack had done the reverse for her too, and that was her downfall, even more than the concern about acting with the proper comportment befitting two officers in the same chain of command. No matter how she felt about Jack, no matter how Sam might wish rank and chain of command didn't matter, it did. It always would and not just to Jack. Unless one of them left the SGC, and that was even more unthinkable.

"Well, let's see if I can manage not to give him another stroke or whatever," was Jack's response to Janet's news. "Everyone hang on, 'cuz we might bounce and we're touching down in eight, seven, six…"

No bounce when he reached zero, not even a bobble. Sam moved over to one of the sensor stations and called up the imagery of the Wraith ship they'd caught during the descent, studied it now for signs of something that might have changed since McKay had managed to contact the SGC with word that they had taken control of it. General Hammond had conveyed that McKay hadn't sounded entirely convinced that they could maintain control, that there was some dispute regarding the number of enemy on board but that they had killed the Wraith Queen, and supposedly the rest of the Wraith would be too disoriented and maybe too disheartened to put up much of a fight.

She supposed the fact that they hadn't been fired upon during their reentry and descent, and that for now, the darts and small cruisers that had accompanied the big hive ships were making themselves scarce was a factor in their favor. But the Wraith were also thought to be telepathic and, shit, this
could mean that McKay was under a Wraith's control.

"Sir, we can't rule out that McKay's been compromised," Sam blurted out the tenor her thoughts had taken without considering Cassie's presence at all until she caught the look Janet shot her.

"That telepathy thing, yeah, Carter, we haven't forgot. I figure if I shoot him, just in the leg or something, that will break any hold – "

"Jack!" Daniel sounded scandalized, though he knew Jack better than the rest of them and didn't really like McKay all that much himself.

"Relax, people," Jack said entirely too calmly. "We're not going to send everyone in at once, and anyway, Thor's got some sort of dooddad he'll loan us that's supposed to disrupt whatever wavelength ESP works on. I figure it'll be us and Kovacek's team going in, leaving Dixon and the extra commandos to bat clean up if necessary. I also figured we'd teleport over instead of walking, since I don't think they have a front door. That'll probably throw off any big plans or traps they could have made."

"That is as likely to get us shot by our own guys, given how jumpy they're going to be," Daniel commented only loud enough for Sam to hear.

She didn't necessarily disagree, but she also thought that walking across the distance between the two ships would paint them as an even bigger target if things weren't as under control as they hoped. Still, none of them, not even Daniel, had joined SG-1 to ultimately die in bed.

"Kovacek, get your ass up here," Jack's voice came from behind Sam like before, but now also over her headset.

"Dixon, do you have someone who can be trained to operate the teleport controls?"

"I can do that," Cassie offered and, of course, Janet wasn't going to let her cross over to the other ship until Jack declared it cleared and safe.

Sam turned around to assess Cassie's state of mind, and saw Jack simply nod and say okay, as he was two steps ahead of her. Not that Sam doubted that Cassie could handle the tech under normal conditions. For the most part she was a typical teenager, but Cassie had also made it a point to learn everything Sam and Janet were willing to teach her about tech and equipment, since she hadn't yet made up her mind which of them she wanted to emulate when she grew up.

"Never mind, Dixon, we've got it covered," Jack called back to their marines, before gesturing to Sam to take over showing Cassie what would need to be done.

Sam made a point of not thinking about Jack and Teal'c moving to join up with Daniel, relaxed and once more joking while she and Janet looked after Cassie. It wasn't so much of a misogyny thing with Jack, as it was a tech thing. He acted as if it were somehow beneath him or, more so, over his head, despite his two Master's degrees and the fact that he'd logged more time on an Asgard ship than the rest of them combined. But that was Jack in a nutshell, especially in front of marines like Kovacek and Dixon, part command distance, part one of the boys, and part pilot cool. It drove her absolute nuts even as she was also attracted by complete self-confidence that let him get away with so often playing the fool.

"We're ready, sir," she eventually called out. Kovacek's team had joined the rest of the boys; all of them standing around now, comparing guns or kill ratios – or more likely other ratios – while they'd been waiting for Sam to finish showing Cassie the controls.
"Well then get your butt over here, Carter," Jack chided her. "You, too, Fraiser, unless you want to wait to come with the second wave?"

As if his words were the signal, one of Kovacek's team moved away to come stand near Cassie, though he didn't try to take over; it looked like he was the one volunteered to stay behind and keep track of the bridge and their communications, the one who'd stay behind if they needed Dixon's crew so that Cassie wasn't left alone.

"I'm with you, Colonel," Janet answered after a flick of her eyes to Griffith, and something like approval showing up in them. "I started with this from the beginning and would like to see it through instead of reading about in the AARs."

Jack nodded, pride only evident if you really knew him, but that was Jack too. You had to look for his approval; he never just gave it to you.

Sam had never met a more confusing and contrary man, unless it was the one she now found standing about ten feet away, hunched over an alien console that was pretty much in pieces at his feet.

Jack hadn't said where he wanted to be sent, and Sam had figured the sooner they confronted McKay, the sooner they'd figure out if he'd been compromised.

Asgard teleporters made both a unique noise and a flash of light, not that Sam thought McKay had had much experience with them, but the surprise and the effects should have had him jumping back, or at least jumping a little to have it go off practically in his face. Instead he waved a bundle of what looked like dripping sinew their direction, and kept his attention on the person who belonged to the pair of feet he straddled.

The marines and the … irregulars who served as McKay's back-up were a lot more interested and wary of the nine new people appearing in their midst, but whoever was in charge of them had a good head on their shoulders, or these were the ones inured enough in working with McKay that nothing else could set them off either.

She recognized Stackhouse, one of the sergeants out at Area 51, give the signal to stand down but, surprisingly, it was one of the civilian irregulars who put a hand up to her ear and spoke.

"Major Sheppard, Colonel Everett, the guests you have been expecting have arrived. Here with Doctor McKay and Doctor Kusanagi."

"Roger, Teyla, I'm on my way," a voice Sam didn't recognize responded first, drowning out Jack's soft groan of, "Crap, Everett?" These peoples' radios, too, were obviously SGC issue, with them all on the same command frequency.

Not that someone having an SGC radio implied he was part of the SGC; Sheppard certainly wasn't, at least he'd never been so before the invasion. So it didn't have to mean the Everett who'd been called was Dillon Everett, one of the hard-headed marine bastards who often proved to be a thorn in the smooth running of SGC operations since he was one of the proponents that all of the gate teams should at least have marines as members, if not solely comprised of marines. Colonel Dillon Everett had butted heads with Bill Ronson, the commander of Prometheus, as well as with Jack, when Ronson had refused to allow a contingent of marines on board his ship as basically shock troops and enforcers.

"Who have they sent?" Everett's growl came over the headsets next and, yeah, Sam was pretty sure it was Dillon Everett although she'd never heard him sound so tentative, and trying so hard to cover it
"Jack, is that you?"

"Who else would be coming to bail out your ass, Everett?" Jack answered as he also gave the signal to stand down. "You got a report for me?"

"You'll have to get that from the major," was Everett's startling reply. "All I've got is a passel full of questions and some pretty disoriented and displaced people, myself included. Major Sheppard, out of courtesy has brought me into the loop, but I'm not really up for taking over command."

Not only was that a first from a marine like Everett, but also pretty damn scary. General Hammond had only given them the bare bones of what the Wraith had done and were capable of; it sounded like seeing it in person had been much worse.

Hating to stand around, Sam looked to Jack and got a nod. She moved toward McKay, slowing and making sure her hands were out and visibly away from any weapons when the woman who'd called Sheppard and Everett began moving to interpose herself before Sam was half way toward McKay's console, and another woman immediately raised an alien-looking weapon.

"McKay, can I help?" Sam offered quickly. Obviously General Hammond hadn't told McKay more than that reinforcements were coming, that he hadn't registered Jack's voice or given any thought to who would be making up the reinforcements, therefore not yet realizing she was one of them.

Sure enough, on hearing her voice, McKay looked up and zeroed in on her position, chest high, of course. Only instead of some snide remark or a smarmy, welcoming smile, McKay looked past her to the admittedly exotic and hot looking civilians.

"That's Carter," McKay identified Sam to the two women, then went on with a remarkably backhanded vouchsafe. "She's okay. Harmless."

Sam was never harmless, nor had she ever been so summarily dismissed before – at least not in front of other women. Especially not from someone like Rodney McKay. While she'd never enjoyed his clumsy flirtation and disastrous direct come-ons, she found herself bothered on behalf of her C-cup girls and womankind in general, even more so than in being called harmless, and even as she knew she should be happy – ecstatic – to not be being ogled or hit on, especially under these circumstances.

God, how shallow and hypocritical did that make her? How selfish and narcissistic, since her attention should be directed on the threat or the tech – on even the insult – and not on whether McKay had found himself a new girlfriend.

Fuck, no, not a new girlfriend, Sam discovered in the next moment when two men entered the room at something shy of a run and not only was Rodney's attention drawn like a magnet from his tinkering, but his whole body lit up and actually moved a step closer, if only for a few seconds. Then McKay shot her a look, one as animated, although this time with guilt and horror. Sam suddenly got that the new sun McKay had set his sights on wasn't the tall, muscled guy with the dreads, but instead the not-as-tall, sexy-looking guy in SGC BDUs.

Major Sheppard, she presumed, and, oh, that explained how he'd been able to wrangle McKay so well. Explained a couple more things she didn't want to know or ask.

Fortunately, the only other people who might have noticed were McKay's Amazon protectors, and the one identified as Teyla seemed unbothered. While the dark-haired one was definitely bothered, jealousy if Sam was reading her right, unless she was a real bitch, she wasn't going to be giving out secrets that could hurt the guy she was interested in more than the one she was jealous of. It also seemed unlikely she'd be part of McKay's protection detail if she really wanted McKay out of the
More importantly, though, none of the American soldiers in the room had noticed McKay's reaction, including the focus of McKay's attention. It was always possible that this was another – maybe not so harmless this time (given what could happen if the wrong people did find out) – crush on Rodney's part, with Sheppard totally unaware, even if Sam had always found McKay ridiculously transparent.

Possible or not, it also definitely wasn't any of Sam's business.

Hell, maybe one positive thing could come out of the invasion and the decimation of the US Military. If Hayes or Kinsey or whoever ended up as the new president condoned continuing to turn away and discharging military volunteers based on any reason other than a lack of useable talent, he, Congress and the other REMFs deserved to become Wraith food – or Goa'uld slaves.

Major Sheppard's salute to Colonels O'Neill and Kovacek was textbook perfect, though probably the last thing he wanted to be doing was performing for the Brass. Sheppard, like most of the other men in the room, McKay included, looked, frankly, as if he'd been in a war. Or had just stopped an alien invasion.

Bloodied and bruised, some wounds bandaged and others ignored, it was obvious that the fighting on board had been fierce and at close quarters, going by the streaks of decidedly not human blood that had mainly been wiped aside on more than one face – again, McKay included, much to Sam's amazement. There would be water here of some kind, the Wraith worked too well in Earth's atmosphere not have many of the same genetic building blocks and needs, but from what little Sam had seen of this room, she wouldn't have been willing to wash with it either, much less drink it.

That was something she could offer to McKay, even if he wasn't going to accept her help yet on the tech.

"Damn fine job you people did here, Major," she heard Jack praise Sheppard as she unslung her canteen and thrust it into Rodney's hand without bothering to ask if he wanted any; she wanted a drink from it from looking at the others.

"General Hammond has also asked me to convey his regards."

Sam noted that Sheppard stood up a little straighter, though fatigue and maybe injury obviously plagued him, and she found herself liking what she saw in him more than her initial grudging respect for him having wrested McKay's regard away from her. Sam had never met a more worthy officer than George Hammond. Jack thought so too, she was sure, as even he was buoyed to receive praise from the General.

"We got lucky, sir," Sheppard responded with a gesture that encompassed the civilian he came in with and Rodney's Amazons. "If we hadn't found people already on board willing to help us, at best we would have blown the ship up before it did any more damage. Teyla, Larrin and Ronon aren't even from Earth."

Sam had to think the awe as Major Sheppard had said the last came more from what was likely recent knowledge on his behalf that people not from Earth existed, and not because civilians had been willing to fight back. She remembered that awe, those first few days after her own reading into the SGC program. Even then she'd been more enamored of the technology and the new science than she'd been in learning that intelligent life existed elsewhere. Had more of that alien life been truly alien, she might have been more excited, only, so far, most of the non-human races they'd found also didn't like humans, which was why it was easier – and safer – to stay focused on the tech.
If McKay would just fucking share. Instead of fighting with him about it, he'd had a bad day afterall, Sam continued to watch Jack and the new guy.

Jack looked not only to the aliens, but acknowledged all of the people present and their contributions. This time McKay preened too, as he was watching as surreptitiously as Sam was.

"Do you know the status of Prometheuś and the other Wraith Hive ship?"

That question earned Sheppard a big smile from Jack and he didn't have to answer for Sheppard to show his relief.

"No one realized in time that destroying it like they had the others meant losing a bunch of our people and, I guess, other victims," Jack delivered the bad news with the good. "But Ronson was able to take it out and keep his own ship more or less intact with only a handful of fatalities in his crew. We won't know until Carter gets her eyes on it whether Prometheuś can be restored, but the gal did her job and delivered Earth and crew safely, so even if we have to retire her out, she served with glory."

"I guess you can say that about some of us here, too, sir," Sheppard said softly and might have wavered a bit, but the big guy was there quickly and had put a steadying hand against Sheppard's back. "Like Colonel Everett. He… the Wraith figured out pretty quickly which of their captives were trained soldiers, and they liked to make examples of them to keep the civilians quiet and compliant. Unfortunately, they didn't always finish the job."

From the tone in Sheppard's voice and the horror now on McKay's face, Sam knew whatever had happened to Everett was bad, and for the moment she didn't want to contemplate what would be worse than being fed upon until you turned into a mummy or dust.

She probably wasn't the only one who could use a distraction from those thoughts.

"Jeez, McKay, did you really have to take the whole thing apart to figure out how it works?"

"Oh, like you would have been able to do any different," McKay responded right on cue, indignation replacing the despair. If she wasn't mistaken, she could see she wasn't the only one relaxing as McKay started to work himself into a full head of steam. She thought Sheppard almost smiled before the officer's mask slipped back into place on his face.

"In fact, even if I talk you through putting it back together, you're still not going to be able to figure out what it does," McKay went on.

Yep. The world might be a different place, a much wilder and scarier place now, but some things remained constant, and there was a comfort in that. Not that she would ever had thought comfort and McKay belonged in the same room together, much less the same thought. Her being in the same room, though? Yeah, she could work with that.

– finis –

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