Shadows Amidst Twilight

by NebulousMistress

Summary

Three years ago R'lyeh sank beneath the waves, leaving the world reeling in chaos.

Three weeks ago the stargate opened.
Three Years Later

The *Daedalus* dropped out of hyperspace near an open collection of red stars.

Three years. Three years ago Atlantis left Earth, stolen by her crew and her citizens in a desperate attempt to distract Great Cthulhu, to quell the Deep One uprising, and to keep the peace on Earth.

It was a daring gambit and it almost worked. Great Cthulhu went back to sleep in his house at R'lyeh but that secret was blown. Delta Green was forced public as people demanded answers, protection, and assurances. New industries began, new avenues of research started, new interest in the old magics, and along with it a new distrust of science. Nyarlathotep must be having a field day in the Void between universes.

Colonel Caldwell stood on the bridge of his ship, finally returning to Pegasus after years of waiting. General Landry was impossible to convince, insisting that their single reconnaissance of the Pegasus Galaxy was enough. They hadn't found Atlantis on Lantea or on New Lantea therefore they must not want to be found. That or they were all dead.

The SGC changed their tune when General Landry retired and Brigadier General Carter took his place. But it wasn't until the wormhole came in from Atlantis with news that the *Daedalus* was allowed to go. Now they knew where to look.

This was not where he'd expected to find life at all, much less Atlantis.

The cluster remnant was part of a diffuse disk of stars trailing behind Pegasus as the galaxy traveled through the Local Group. Why or how the stargate network stretched this close to the Void no one knew.

Maybe Atlantis could answer that.

“Are we here?”

Caldwell looked behind him to see Dr. Jackson. He gestured to the bleak starfield. “I think so,” he said. “I'm not sure I believe it though.”

“Well their planetary data did seem a little... extreme,” Daniel allowed. He looked out at the starfield before closing his eyes. He could feel the filaments of the wormhole network stretching into this system and even beyond it, further out toward the Void. “But I'd say they're here.”

“Intuition?” Caldwell asked.

Daniel shook his head. “No. They're here.”

“I think I have them, Sir.”

Caldwell turned to Major Frank. “Report.”

“The planet is outside the standard habitable zone but there's mitigating factors,” Frank said. “It's tidally locked but in a resonance with an outer neighbor. The atmosphere shows high concentrations of CO$_2$ and sulfur. I wouldn't want to live there, Sir. But they're there. I have energy signatures, artificial lighting, and they have their shield up.”

“Well, it has been awhile,” Daniel allowed.
“We're receiving a message.”

“Put it on,” Caldwell ordered.

The message was audio only but he recognized the voice immediately as the technician Chuck. “Approaching vessel, identify yourself.”

“This is the Daedalus, Atlantis,” Caldwell said. “You have no idea how good it is to hear from you.”

“Daedalus, we acknowledge. It's been a long time. Please maintain orbit until we have further instructions for you.”

“Okay... can't we just beam down?” Daniel asked despite Caldwell's dirty look.

“Only if you want your lungs to collapse,” Chuck said. “I wouldn't recommend it.”

“Acknowledged, Atlantis, awaiting further instructions.”

The transmission ended. Only then did anyone realize it wasn't a subspace comm. It was simple radio.

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“Well, they're here,” Woolsey said. He stood in his office overlooking the gateroom, the city's ruling council sitting at the conference table behind him.

The past three years had been difficult. First there was this planet to contend with. Then food, trade, medicine, how to stretch what supplies they had until new ones could be acquired or synthesized. The Battle of Five Armies against Queen Death gained them new allies in the form of the Wraith Alliance, lost them friends as Ronon left to help rebuild Sateda. The restructuring of Atlantis's governance had seemed like an afterthought. But here he now stood, the counselor representing the city's day-to-day administration. Military, science, medicine, and the Deep Ones were all represented here along with a visiting ally.

“Now what?” Sheppard asked.

Woolsey turned to look at the assembled. Sheppard still handled city defense even after three years. Zelenka took over the sciences after Rodney accepted the position as counselor for the Deep Ones in the city. Dr. Biro took over after Carson retired and walked through their gate the final time. And the Wraith called Ember sat as the voice of the Lady Alabaster.

“I would not have voted in favor of opening the wormhole to your former world,” Ember warned. “It is a poisoned field, burned and salted by its own gods.”

And we chose exile to quell the Great Old Ones, I know. We all know.

“Then why open your own fields to such corruption?” Ember asked.

“Burned and salted and poisoned though Earth may be, it was still our home once,” Woolsey said. “Three years seemed like long enough. If humanity had fallen to Great Cthulhu they would not have answered our call, it wouldn't be allowed. They're here, meaning Great Cthulhu has been quelled. He may even be dreaming again.”

“And now we must deal with them,” Zelenka said.

“How so?” Biro asked.
We allow them to land on our terms. They acclimate to our world. They defer to our laws and our rule. We will not be enslaved by a 'resupply' agreement, not again. If needs be we will trade with them. We treat them as any other culture seeking our favor.

“And if any of our people want to go home?” Woolsey asked.

Zelenka shrugged. “This is home. I say they had their chance in the Exodus.”

“If it comes to that I suppose I can make a case for keeping them here for health reasons,” Biro said. “We’ve had time and opportunity to adapt to this world. Sending someone back might cause some serious protein imbalances, chronic decompression sickness, nutrient deficiencies, physical changes, depression...”

“I agree with Rodney,” Sheppard said. “If Earth wants to be a part of what we’ve accomplished here then they need to follow our rules. We treat Earth like a potential trading partner, nothing more. We owe them nothing. If they can't accept that, they leave.”

“And if they won't leave?” Ember asked.

“We retain the right to impound any vessel that attacks us under a banner of peace,” Sheppard said. “If they decide to cause trouble we offer them whatever world they want through the stargate, give them an IDC in case they want to be civil in the future, and we get to keep their stuff.”

“We'll send them the standard docking contract,” Woolsey agreed. “If they agree they can land.”

“I second this,” Zelenka said. “A vote?”

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Colonel Caldwell looked over Dr. Jackson’s shoulder at the strange spiky writing on the screen. Atlantis had sent them what they claimed was a standard docking contract and list of rules they would be expected to follow in the city. That wasn't what this looked like.

For one thing it was in Ancient.

For another, it looked like it was written by a lawyer. Which, knowing Mr. Woolsey, it probably was.

Daniel sat at the communications station translating as he read. “We will be instructed to land on one of the piers. ‘Magnetic locks will engage both as a precautionary measure to prevent damage to ship or city and also to prevent such misunderstandings as are known to arise in port situations. All individuals in the city are to be treated with civility as per local penal code.’ Atlantis has a penal code now? Interesting. ‘Infractions will be dealt with swiftly by a council of arbiters including but not limited to members of the council, peers of the wronged, or visiting legal experts.' Wait, so Atlantis doesn't have its own judge. It's more of a communal justice thing. Either they don't have much crime or minor problems aren't taken seriously. 'In the worst offenses punishment is exile through the stargate which may result in the seizure of any vessel the accused possesses.”’

“Wait, wait, back up,” Caldwell said. “They reserve the right to steal our ship?"’

“Seize, not steal,” Daniel said. “I think it's only if we fuck up. So just don't fuck up.”

“Easy for you to say,” Caldwell muttered. He looked around the bridge. There were 145 crew and two passengers on board who would all need to keep their hands and words to themselves. He figured Daniel would be allowed leeway but their second passenger...
“What'd I miss?”

As if on cue their second passenger came onto the bridge. The SGC sent their Archivist to determine what if anything should be done about the potential Nest of Deep Ones living in Atlantis. Dr. Kavanagh was known on Atlantis for his talent at antagonism.

“We're here,” Daniel said.

“Great,” Kavanagh said. He adjusted the gold jewelry that hung loose on his wrists, tugged the gold collar and pectoral into alignment, and tried to smooth his oily hair. “So what's the holdup?”

“Docking contract,” Daniel said. “It's in Ancient and it looks like it was written by a contract lawyer. If we go down there we'll have to behave or they're within their legal rights to impound the Daedalus and exile us to some planet.”

“How do they expect to enforce that?” Kavanagh asked.

Daniel shrugged. “There are magnetic locks holding the Daedalus in place. They had a dozen Deep One hybrids at last count and that looks like a Wraith ship docked on the South-West Pier. I'm guessing they've had some interesting events out here and I have no doubt they've had to exile visitors before.”

“I can deal with Todd,” Caldwell allowed. “I just hope that's all it is.”

“So... do we agree? Or do we head home and say we didn't want to sign a contract?”

“I have orders to agree,” Caldwell admitted. “And I hope they follow their own rules involving 'civility'."

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Chuck watched the screens around him as he talked over the radio. This corner of the gateroom had long ago been converted to a flight traffic control station where visiting ships were talked down through the buffeting winds of the upper atmosphere, directed to their correct landing pier.

“Daedalus, you're confirmed for landing on the East Pier. Be advised you have a headwind of 2000 Newtons per square meter at ten kilometers, 450 Newtons per square meter at sea level. Magnetic docking clamps will deploy upon touchdown. Do you need me to light the running lights for you?”

“Negative, Atlantis, we see you just fine. Landing in five, four, three, two, one.”

“Magnetic clamps engaged. Daedalus, cut your engines.”

“Engines are offline, Atlantis. Landing was successful.”

“Confirmed, Daedalus. I recommend cutting your artificial gravity now. We have a bit more than you're used to.”

“Cutting gravi-- holy shit!”

Chuck held back a laugh. Most first time ships had the same reaction. “Also recommend increasing your atmospheric pressure. Equalize at 8.3 bar.”

“Do you have any idea how long that'll take?”

“Standard equalization time is six hours, Daedalus. I don't recommend rushing it. Cases of high-
pressure syndrome have happened.”

Muffled grumbling came over the radio.

Chuck decided to stick to procedure, knowing it would add to the misery. “I also recommend reducing oxygen,” he warned. “Atmospheric oxygen at sea level is at 17%, carbon dioxide is at 1.6%, sulfur dioxide is at 0.3%.”

“With all due respect, Atlantis, those number suck.”

Chuck stopped holding back his laughter. “You get used to it, Daedalus. Ground control will contact you in six hours.”

He waited until the Daedalus acknowledged before shutting off the radio.

The gate room had changed over the past three years. A series of airlocks separated the gateroom from the rest of the city, keeping the pressure here down to 2.1 bar. Every gate team carried oxygen masks in case of low atmospheric pressure on the other side, a safeguard against the bends. The gate room had its own small cafeteria and bunk room for technicians who didn't want to go through a compression cycle after every shift.

The gate alarm activated. “Offworld activation,” Banks shouted. “Receiving Teldy's IDC. Dropping the shield.”

The gate team walked through, stumbling for a few steps as gravity suddenly shifted, adding nearly half-again their weight. They all took deep breaths and popped their ears.

“How did it go?” Sheppard asked from the balcony.

“Good, sir,” Teldy said. “The Satedan Air Corps is coming along nicely. They found another river village. The tlak-tcho monere seem a little wary that we might be trying to steal their attract but they accepted our gifts of orichalcum. The river villages have joined the rebuilt city in an economic confederacy. It'll make trade easier.”

“Don't let Zelenka hear that,” Sheppard jokingly warned. “The last thing the scientists need is more caffeinated weed.”

“I dunno, sir, we are running low,” Chuck called from his post at flight traffic control.

“And whose fault is that?” Sheppard asked. “Teldy, write up a full report and have it ready for the next council session. We have visitors acclimating on the East Pier.”

“Will do, sir.”

Sheppard headed toward the airlock. A transporter there would take him to a staging area lower in the tower where he could recompress before exiting out into the open atmosphere of Atlantis proper.

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This sucked.

Kavanagh tossed a rubber ball at the wall of his cabin. Sixteen days in hyperspace with only the engine's Song to entertain him and now that he was here he was still trapped in a room. It wasn't even padded so he couldn't throw himself around. At least, not if he wanted to be allowed off the ship.
But this planet wasn't entirely quiet.

Yes, Lord Cthulhu's dreams were too far away to hear. Yes the Songs of the Thousand Hydras couldn't reach him here. No, this world had not been taken by the Great Old Ones. But there was still one Song. One single Hydra to Sing to stars that would never go right, to Sing to a semi-aware city that answered in an eerie echo heard by all with the ATA gene.

McKay's Song was strange, echoing, lilting. It disobeyed certain rules the Earth Songs followed, rules about who was allowed to hear and who would be affected. He itched to compare it to the Lonely Song of the Arctic but he wasn't allowed to seek that out in case he didn't come back.

As if the SGC had to worry about him not coming back. Kavanagh snorted as he gave his rubber ball a particularly vicious throw. It flew back at his head with the same angry force. He'd always come back to the Archive. He always had before.

He alone had stood waist deep in the ocean, waves threatening to drag him down as he chanted, called upon those Deep Ones who remembered the missing histories. He alone came back from those forays to the edge of sanity. He alone added to the Archives while all previous Archivists had only destroyed. And if he'd sometimes have to order himself locked in the straitjacket or the padded room so his mind could process the knowledge without interruption, well...

A voice over the Daedalus intercom interrupted his thoughts. Kavanagh threw his ball at the speaker. “We have clearance to go ashore. Colonel Caldwell, Dr. Jackson, Dr. Kavanagh, please report to the cargo bay.”

Kavanagh groaned and lifted himself off his bunk. His back hurt from this world's obscene gravity and they hadn't even been allowed into the city yet. He stretched, realizing it wasn't going to get better. Maybe once he was in the city he could cajole some sort of local cure out of the infirmary. He adjusted his jewelry, the cultist's collar and pectoral that draped over his shoulders, the bracelets he considered a personal gift from a Nest in the Bahamas. He had a tiara but decided against wearing it; the thing was heavy under normal circumstances.

He found Dr. Jackson on the way to the cargo bay. “Archivist,” Daniel greeted, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

“We've been here before, you realize,” Kavanagh said, scowling at Daniel's exuberance. “Ancient technology, heretic Deep Ones, and, ugh, and the stench of sulfur.” He wrinkled his nose as he felt the oppressive wind coming from the open cargo bay doors. The air stank of sulfur, sulfides, and sulfates. It smelled like an acidic mix of bad eggs and half-burned coal smoke.

“Behave,” Daniel warned before meeting Caldwell at the ramp leading down. “There are civility laws we have to follow.”

“Five bucks says they don't apply to McKay,” Kavanagh said.

“Shut it, both of you,” Caldwell ordered. He led the three of them down the loading ramp to the Pier.

The first thing they noticed was the wind. It was a slow wind yet it blew with hurricane force, dragging them incrementally to the left with every step. It was a constant wind, tugging on the city and the ship and everything it could grab. It made Caldwell glad for the magnetic locks even if it ensured they were trapped here. At least the Daedalus wouldn't be blown off the pier into the creepy black ocean.

The next was the light. The sky burned with green, red, white fire in long tongues of aurorae that
outshone the small red star bathing everything in blood red twilight. The ocean lapped pitch-black waves up onto the pier, staining the coppery metal with streaks of grainy blackness. Atlantis’s external lights glowed as strong as ever before but the interior lights, those they could see, seemed dim somehow.

The smell, the cold, the tightness in the chest, these were all small things compared to the realization Daniel voiced aloud.

“We're in Hell.”

Caldwell turned to scold him but paused as he saw the single figure waiting for them near the door. That figure wore black that billowed in the wind, their face obscured by darkness and distance. They held aloft a single glowing lantern, silently waiting for the approach.

“Just don’t say that in front of anyone,” Caldwell said.

Kavanagh grinned. “I dare you to.”

“No.” Caldwell's tone held no leeway.

Kavanagh sneered at the Colonel behind his back.

“So does this mean the locals are demons or damned?” Daniel wondered aloud.

“Deep Ones have been called imps, demons, devils, and worse since writing began,” Kavanagh said. “Maybe the humans are the damned and the Deep Ones are their demon keepers.”

“I said shut up!” Caldwell snapped.


Caldwell growled and approached the door with its strange doorman.

Daniel grinned as he and Kavanagh lagged behind. Kavanagh grinned back as he realized and they both started fishing in their pockets. Kavanagh had a rubber band and a power bar while Daniel pulled out a bar of chocolate. Neither of them had two silver coins but this would do.

Caldwell ignored the strange billowing figure by the door, heading inside. Daniel and Kavanagh paused in front of the figure. It was a man, nothing more. He wore a dark weighted cloak, the wind billowing the fabric despite the weights sewn into the hem. He held a single hand-lamp like he was used to door duty. Brown eyes looked black in the eternal twilight as he gestured for them to head inside.

“Greetings, O Charon,” Daniel said, handing him the chocolate bar with a grand gesture and a bow. Kavanagh bowed as well and handed him the power bar. Their tolls paid to the ferryman, both men headed inside trying not to laugh with a manic glee.

Watchman Roberts looked at the 'tolls' he'd been given. It took him a moment to dredge up the memory, of Greek and Roman myths and the ferryman Charon who escorted souls to the underworld. He rolled his eyes but stuffed his 'tolls' in a pocket. If people were going to give him food he wasn't going to argue. Rather he wrapped his weighted cloak around him, switched the hand-lamp to his other hand, and held his post. Someone needed to keep watch to make sure the visiting crew didn't try anything funny.
Caldwell stepped into customs.

There was no other word for it. The room had no windows but it held an oddly iridescent painting of the planet's strange aurorae dancing in the twilight skies above a line of volcanic isles. A receptionist's desk sat in the back while a marine with a tablet gestured him over and began asking rather customs-like questions.

“Name of ship?”

Caldwell gave the marine a confused look.

“Name of ship, sir?”

That confusion expanded to annoyance. “You know who I am, soldier,” he warned.

“Yes, Colonel, I know who you are.” The marine sounded simultaneously annoyed and emotionless. It was a talent Caldwell had found in many customs officials across many worlds. “I still have to ask these questions in order to put your ship in the system. It will make any subsequent visits easier.”

Caldwell took a deep breath and suppressed a growl. “I still command the Daedalus,” he grumbled.

“Thank you, sir. And are you in fact Colonel Steven Caldwell?”

“Yes...”

“It is an inconvenience, sir, I know. But the sooner we get through this the sooner your crew will be allowed to disembark. Crew compliment?”

Caldwell sighed heavily. “One hundred forty five at current plus two passengers, maximum of two hundred.”

“Very good, sir.”

Caldwell heard the doors behind him open, or rather he heard the wind howling in the corridor outside and felt its oppressive shove. He glanced back to find Drs. Jackson and Kavanagh looking around with interest.

“It's like an airport,” Kavanagh muttered.

“A spaceport,” Daniel agreed. “It explains how they managed for three years without resupply. But why not just trade through the gate?”

“We managed the one year with stargate trade. Okay, fine, it was horrible,” Kavanagh admitted. “No one in this whole galaxy has invented coffee.”
Daniel shuddered.

“Please have a seat and I'll be with you shortly,” said the marine before turning his attention back to Caldwell. “Colonel Caldwell, what is your business here on Atlantis?”

“Ascertaining the status of the expedition,” Caldwell said with a level blandness. “Negotiating the possibility of a return to Earth oversight. Assessing possible threats to Earth.”

The marine gave him a suspicious look. “You will want to take these concerns up with the Council,” he said. “You may petition for an audience with any member of the Altantean Council or its visiting Representatives. Remember, you do not have the right to demand an audience and any such demand may result in sanctions. You have the right to appeal a Council decision, though this requires a petition to a visiting Representative not present during the initial judgment. Is that clear?”

“Not really,” Caldwell admitted. “Is there someone I can talk to about this?”

“That would be me.”

Caldwell turned to face the newcomer.

The man wore a red tunic underneath a soft grey robe or coat or maybe it was another of those weighted cloaks. Draped over his bald head lay a bright copper-red circlet with a design eerily similar to some of the Archive's Deep One jewelry. He seemed shorter than the last time Caldwell had seen him but what made it weird were the eyes. The man's eyes shone in the dark like Kavanagh's did, like McKay's had, like the Wraith's did in all his nightmares.

“Mr. Woolsey?” Caldwell asked. He had to make sure.

Woolsey smirked. “Counselor Woolsey, now,” he corrected. There was a definite dose of smug fueling that smirk. “Colonel Caldwell. Still commanding the Daedalus?”

“For some reason I haven't been allowed back on Earth,” Caldwell said. “Someone raised a question about my loyalties when Cthulhu awoke.”

“How unfortunate,” Woolsey said. “How does Earth fare? Did they fall to their new masters? Or has humanity gone back to the safety of blank obliviousness?”

“Neither,” Kavanagh said, interrupting without shame. “Great Cthulhu slumbers once again. Delta Green was forced public. Earth believes they know their monsters. And of course science is taking advantage.”

“Of course,” Woolsey agreed. “Archivist, Dr. Jackson, I should have expected to find you here. Come with me, all three of you.”

The marine at the customs desk waved Woolsey over. “Counselor, first you need to see this.”

Woolsey glanced at the tablet screen. Its spiky Ancient letters hid their meaning from visitors. “I expected this development,” he said. “As did the others. It will be dealt with.”

Caldwell looked at the screen. He didn't read Ancient, nor had he realized a mere enlisted marine might. Come to think of it... “Have you abandoned English?” he asked.

“For some purposes,” Woolsey admitted. “We had to be open to new ideas these past three years. It's been profitable, I think. At the very least it has been useful.”
“How have you gotten past the language barrier?” Daniel asked. “Nobody here speaks Ancient as a first language, how have you made the switch without native speakers? Is there a trade language based on Ancient? If so, how does it stay maintained with constant use of the stargate’s alterations of the linguistic centers?”

Caldwell walked a step behind as Daniel accosted Woolsey with questions. Kavanagh stalked behind them all, eyes half-closed. Caldwell ignored them both, trying to focus on his breathing as a dull ache began to grow in his lungs.

“We have native speakers,” Woolsey answered. “Though not from Earth of course.”


“They’re called the Travelers,” Woolsey said. “They’re a loose association of generational ships with people from all manner of origins. Although their society doesn’t have a standardized language, there are ships among them that have been flying since the First Wraith Wars. While they no longer identify themselves as Ancients, their ancestors did and they still keep the language.”

“So there are still Ancients in the galaxy?” Kavanagh asked.

“Of course not, no more than Counselor Sheppard,” Woolsey said dismissively. He ignored Kavanagh’s growl. “Think about it. In order to maintain a viable breeding population they’d need to intermingle so much with the Pegasus humans that they’re lucky to still be ATA-active. During the lead-up to the Battle of Five Armies we entered talks with them, asked them to help us in ridding us of our dependency on English.”

“The Battle of Five... Armies...” Kavanagh leveled Woolsey with an unimpressed look.

“Yes, the Battle of Five Armies,” Woolsey defended. “Dr. Simpson is responsible for the name.”

“Interesting,” Daniel said. “You brought in native speakers to aid in your transition, then. That makes sense, a spacefaring society wouldn’t rely on the stargates and so they wouldn’t suffer the same effects of the gate accent.”

“Yes,” Woolsey said absently. He was distracted by the soft sound of labored breathing. “Colonel, are you all right?”

Caldwell was not doing well. There was a burning pain in his chest and the overwhelming urge to start coughing and never stop. On top of it his eyes itched terribly. He fixed Woolsey with an unfocused gaze.

“Ah,” Woolsey said. “I know what this is. Come on then, all three of you to the infirmary.”

“What’s going on?” Daniel asked.

“Your Colonel is having a bad reaction to the sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere. His lungs are filling with acid.”

“This isn’t a medical emergency?” Daniel wondered.

“No, of course not,” Woolsey said dismissively. “Not unless he passes out.”

Caldwell looked back and forth between the two men, gasping for air and not entirely sure what they were saying. The voices around him grew muddled as darkness crept over the edge of his vision. He felt hands on his torso, holding him up and thought he heard someone calling his name.
The next thing he knew he was in an infirmary, a mask over his face.

“Breathe, Colonel,” said a voice he didn't quite recognize.

Caldwell looked around, saw this strange slight woman with short red hair. Her eyes shone like Woolsey's behind glasses rimmed with black metal and a copper-red circlet adorned her brow. “Where's Dr. Beckett?” he asked.

“Carson retired almost two years ago,” she said. “Walked through the gate and never came back. I'm Counselor Biro, head of medicine. Carson hand-picked me to take over.”

“What does... 'Counselor'... even mean?” Caldwell asked between deep breaths. "I keep hearing... that title..."

Biro talked as she listened to Caldwell's chest with a stethoscope. “We don't have a single administrative head anymore,” she explained. “It just doesn't work out here. Instead we have five Counselors, one for each department. Science, defense, administration, medicine, and the Deep Ones. Each Counselor is responsible for handling the day-to-day operation in their own department but big decisions require a meeting of all Counselors and any available Representatives. The Representatives are, well... Each allied ship or group has the right to elect a Representative who will speak for them during a Council meeting. That way not only is Atlantis never left alone in our decisions but all of our allies have a vested interest in the smooth operation of the city. There's always at least one Representative on Atlantis at any given time. Right now that would be Ember, speaking for the Lady Alabaster.”

Caldwell sat on the gurney, breathing slowly as he marveled at the sheer amount of words she'd just spoken. She was like McKay but with less of a headache.

“Breathe slowly, Colonel, that's it. You're doing fine. It's the sulfur dioxide, it converts to sulfurous acid in the lungs. But don't worry, we have plenty of people come through here who never get used to it. We have filter masks that can take out most of the sulfur or you can try a basic system to neutralized the acid as it forms.”

“You're not wearing one.”

“Me? Of course not. The hybrids adapted first, even before most of them took to the water. Counselor McKay allowed Carson to do some tests and he developed a gene therapy. It's really simple, it just activates the GLS genes you already have. Makes it so you're able to resist the low-level acid burning on your own, no need for protection. We have it in an injectable for full-body exposure, an inhalant for treatment of the lungs only, or an eyedrop for the eyes only. Of course, it requires aspartate and glutamine supplementation and the injectable makes non-acidic environments taste really weird...”

“I'll pass,” Caldwell said. “How many masks do you have available?”

“We can have a couple hundred made up,” Biro said. “They're easy to make.” She tilted her head, listening to something. “Ah. Colonel, there's a radio call for you.”

Caldwell nodded. “Is there somewhere I can...”

“Oh! Yes, here.” Biro took out her own earwig and handed it to him. “Just take the mask off while you speak. Control will relay everything.”

Caldwell put the earwig in. “Caldwell here,” he said.
“Colonel, we have a distress call from your ship,” came the voice. It sounded like a technician he’d met once. “The sulfur in the atmosphere is reacting badly with your crew.”

“I’m not surprised,” Caldwell drawled. “It’s no better on this end.”

“What’s the problem?” Biro asked.

The technician gave the problem and Caldwell relayed it to her. “Lung acidification,” he said. “The *Daedalus* doesn’t have the capacity to maintain 8 atmospheres of pressure on our own internal mix.”

“Oh! Oh that’s no problem,” Biro said. She took the earwig from Caldwell’s ear despite his protests. “Chuck, relay this to the *Daedalus*. I’m going to instruct them how to build a sulfur scrubber.”

Caldwell sighed and suppressed his urge to cough by holding the mask to his face. He would have preferred Carson to this strange woman.

He was still catching his breath when Woolsey came in, tailed by Kavanagh and Daniel. Both of them wore goggles that looked like they were made of leather and glass.

“I see you’re breathing better,” Woolsey said.

Caldwell didn’t answer. He was too busy staring at Kavanagh who wore no mask at all.

Daniel looked between the two of them. The moment he realized showed on his face. “The Archivist has been around Deep Ones for too long,” he explained. “He’s a little more... mutable than we are.” As if to punctuate, Daniel took a breath from a small mask in his hand. The mask was connected via a hose to a machine on his waist. “This, on the other hand, is a basic mix that keeps the acid from getting too bad. It’s less creepy-looking than that thing.” He pointed to the mask that covered most of Caldwell’s face.

“We can discuss that later,” Woolsey said. “First order is your presence here. The Council is eager to hear what you have to say, Colonel.”

“Then I guess I’d better get ready,” Caldwell allowed. He waved down Biro and pointed to the apparatus Daniel wore. “Could I get one of those?”
A Formal Rejection

“Offworld activation. Receiving radio transmission.”

The screen crackled to life. A sound stage came into view, Ladon Radim and his advisers seated before a tapestry backdrop of smiling workers, grand shining weapons, a flying space cruiser, and saluting soldiers. “Atlantis,” he greeted.

The gateroom was busier than normal. There were two ships in orbit, both requesting instructions. The stargate had been connecting all day, the acclimation areas were full of people mulling about like this were some sort of party. But then, it might as well be.

Sheppard was hiding from social obligations, Woolsey and Biro were both dealing with their guests from Earth, Radek was off in the labs, that left Rodney as the voice of government.

This presented problems.

Rodney bleated and barked at the screen, dorsal spines half-raised.

“Counselor McKay,” Ladon said. “Is there... Do you have a fata available?”

Rodney snarled, tail lashing as while trying to find someone human who wasn’t abysmally busy. The search was not successful. Fine. Rodney pulled up to full height and hissed, one hand raised.

“Very well,” Ladon said. “News has reached us that your Earth-ship has returned to you. Is this correct?”

Rodney nodded, giving a short purr.

“And we were not notified?”

Rodney hissed, clicking jaws and rustling spines. Hands were raised to convey meaning, one reaching out and one pointing up with two fingers. A short arc with the pointing hand represented the passage of very little time.

“I see,” Ladon said. “News must travel fast.”

Rodney's dorsal fin flared, spines held aloft. It was a smug gesture.

“Tell me then, Counselor Monere, has the first vote taken place?”

Rodney gave a gesture, hands patted together once then both pulled inward in a welcoming gesture.

“Good. Our representative is finishing preparations. I imagine the appeals may take some time.”

Rodney hissed in laughter and nodded before laying one hand flat in offering and gesturing to the floor with the other. A tap of the tail against the console lowered the shield.

A few minutes later Dahlia Radim walked through the gate. Rodney bowed to her, muring softly, before bleating at Ladon on the other end of the radio transmission. The gate shut down.

“My, you are busy,” Dahlia said. The gateroom was a mess run on a skeleton crew. Many of those running the actual gate were Deep Ones, just as unable to talk as Rodney was. Chuck was busy with flight control, trying to make sure Atlantis had enough berths and ballast to handle the load. Already
the piers hosted the *Daedalus*, two Traveler ships known to Atlantis as the *Bellerophon* and the *Red Tide*, the Wraith cruiser *Night's Pride*, and now the Wraith hive *Starburst* was looking to unload passengers while the Traveler ship *Day's Relic* demanded landing clearance.

Rodney murred at her, padding down to the gate floor. Rodney purred and nuded her in a short nuzzle.

“With this much commotion you must have too many representatives for the conference room,” Dahlia realized. “Ugh, that means we have to acclimate, doesn’t it. No wonder you don’t have anyone to speak for you, they’re all pressurized.”

Rodney nodded, padding along with her to the transporter that would take her to the first pressurization level. The door opened with the proper code.

She turned and put both hands on Rodney’s face, fingers brushing the edges of gill plates. “Our offer still stands,” she said. “You’re all welcome to join the Genii. We have everything you need: normal gravity, decent air, no acid bubbling in your lungs, and a vast ocean for yourself and your kind. The Genii would be honored to accept the Deep Ones as our Monere.”

Rodney blinked at her. It was an old offer, always met with the same answer. A nuzzle, a purr, an embrace in the form of a tail wrapping around her waist and pulling her close. One hand went up to pet her hair, the other reaching down to grab her belly as a pressure bloomed behind her eyes.

She pulled away with a familiar smile, the answer she always gave. She stepped into the transporter without another word and disappeared.

*****

“I was hoping this would be handled without outside interference,” Caldwell said warily.

The room was not the small, cozy, intimate conference room that had seen so many of Atlantis’s decisions. It wasn’t Woolsey’s office overlooking the gateroom. It wasn’t even the intimidating boardroom that held the large mahogany table. This was an auditorium.

A stage overlooked seating for over a hundred people. That stage had been used recently, there were still strange musical instruments and costumes in the wings. A podium was set up in center stage while two technicians checked crystals and hooked up wires backstage.

“To be fair, we didn't say anything,” Woolsey said. He stood on the stage overlooking the empty house. “The representative present when we made the decision to contact Earth is known to us as the Mad Sheriff, of the Traveler ship *Nottingham*.”

Caldwell was about to take a breath from the basic mask when he paused. “What.”

“The Travelers do not give their names easily,” Woolsey explained. “They prefer to take on pseudonyms common in the culture with whom they're trading. I'm afraid it was movie night and, well, the version we showed has such a boring Robin Hood.”

Caldwell stuffed the mask over his face and inhaled to quell the burning in his lungs and to avoid thinking about what he'd just heard.

“Travelers are known for dealing in information,” Woolsey continued. “It's part of why so many of our representatives are Travelers. If someone tries to take advantage of us the entire galaxy knows within weeks. I suspect someone's been keeping an eye out for you.”
Caldwell couldn't help the glare. He held it even as his lungs felt tingly and slimy from an overdose of the basic mixture. He pulled the mask away, his expression revealing just how he felt about the situation.

The door to the auditorium opened. “Counselor Woolsey, I was hoping I'd find you here.”

“Dahlia,” Woolsey greeted. “Shouldn't you be with the others?”

Dahlia walked in, her own mask of basic mixture dangling from her neck like jewelry. “I've compressed,” she said. “Besides, factions are forming among the representatives. I've heard enough wild speculation from spacebound ninnys.”

“Fair enough. Dahlia Radim, this is Colonel Caldwell of—”

“Of the *Daedalus,*” Dahlia interrupted Woolsey's introduction. “I'm familiar with your ship. Small, unassuming, yet unbelievably fast and powerful. You have done well for yourself, Colonel, to have kept her for so long.”

“Thank you, Ms. Radim,” Caldwell said gracefully. “Your brother leads the Genii, does he not? A difficult task in such a mutable society. A testament to your cunning that the both of you have kept your stations for so long.”

“Yes, shifts in power are common among both our peoples,” Dahlia said. “Only a fool forms an opinion without information. Tell me, Colonel, is Earth looking to retake control of Atlantis? Or is that just a rumor circulating among pretenders and sycophants?”

Caldwell considered his words carefully. “'Retake control' are such strong words,” he said. “I'm of the opinion that Earth never had control over Atlantis in the first place.”

Dahlia chuckled politely as the auditorium doors opened and people began mulling toward the direction of seats.

*****

Caldwell removed the glass and leather goggles to give himself a better view of the assembled. The vast majority of them were human to a degree. Tattoos were commonplace as were the ornate headdresses that took up the entire back row. Most of them wore goggles, many of them took breaths from apparatuses or wore decorated masks. Five wore copper-red circlets twisted in sanity-bending patterns.

There was a child in the front row. Two Wraith sat near the back, braiding each other's hair while they waited. A bird sat on a seat back. The bird yawned. A bald woman sat on the stage before him, feet kicking idly as she looked up at him expectantly.

What sort of council was this?

Caldwell took a deep breath, twinged in pain, then took a second deep breath through his breathing mask. He might as well get this over with.

“Counselors, representatives, people of the Pegasus Galaxy, I am Colonel Stephen Caldwell of the United States Air Force.”

Caldwell then realized why the bald woman was there. She was there to translate.
“Consilia, legatia, populus et ad 'Pegasus Galaxy', sum Colonel Stephen Caldwell autem United States Air Force.”

Caldwell continued on with his words, pausing after every sentence to allow for the translator to do her work and to collect his thoughts as he tried not to be distracted by the Ancient spoken so openly.

“Eight years ago the people of Earth sent an expedition through the stargate to what we hoped was the lost city of Atlantis. This city has been a major part of Earth's mythology since the beginnings of our civilization. The legend has sparked the minds of geniuses and madmen, of magicians and scientists, of philosophers and kings. One of our great oceans, the Atlantic, is named for this city. And now, because of you we know why.

“Ten thousand years ago the Ancients abandoned this city and returned to their main outpost. That outpost was on Earth. They brought with them the legend of this city and passed it down through the generations. This is the city of Earth's ancestors.

“Eight years ago we sent an expedition of volunteers, you, to claim this city and you did that. For five years you answered to Earth and in return we gave you food, medicines, supplies, and battlecruiser support for the defense of this city from the Wraith, the Replicators, from Michael and his abominations. But three years ago that all changed.

“The Wraith integrated a ZPM into a hive ship and descended upon Earth. The Daedalus was damaged, our other ships were nearly destroyed. The Wraith knew exactly where we kept our defenses and they would have culled all six billion people of Earth if not for Atlantis. And that's when everything changed.

“Atlantis came to Earth, returned to the oceans named for it. But in saving us from the Wraith, Atlantis awoke something else. Something that lives beneath Earth's oceans, that remembers the Ancients firsthand and knows what this city sounds like when it Sings. I understand why you felt the need to commandeer Atlantis and leave Earth. I would have made the same decision, and for that my superiors have ensured I will never set foot upon my homeworld again. I know what lurks beneath Earth's oceans and I would have done anything to ensure it stays asleep. But three years have passed and it has returned to sleep. Earth is safe again, perhaps a little wiser than before, but safe. And now Earth would like to reopen relations with our lost expedition.

“We offer supplies, medicines, food, regular contact with your families and friends. We offer battlecruiser support when the Daedalus is available. We can even help you find and relocate to a planet that isn't... this. All we ask is that we return to the previous arrangement. Atlantis returns to Earth oversight. None of your actions over the last three years, including secession from Earth, mass kidnapping, and theft of military property, will be held against you. We can go back to how things used to be.”

As soon as his translator finished Caldwell winced at the din of the assembled. This was why he'd wanted to keep things small, to only discuss the matters with Atlantis and the city's four department heads. Four people could be reasoned with. This was impossible.

*****

The council session was over almost as soon as it began. The verdict was clear, Atlantis would not be returning to Earth control. To be honest, Caldwell wasn't surprised. Still, it meant he had to put up with the pointing and talking and ribbing and gossip of the after-party.

“That was embarrassing,” Caldwell muttered.
“But it was necessary.”

Caldwell turned at the familiar voice. “Ms. Emmagan?”

Teyla smiled. “Yes, Colonel Caldwell. It is good to see you again.”

She wore a bracelet of the same red-copper as Woolsey and his Counselors, though the design was less disturbing. She also wore a delicate translucent mask and a set of goggles decorated with that same strange red metal. “You're looking...” Caldwell trailed off, unsure how to say it. “You don't stay on Atlantis, do you?” he asked.

She shook her head. Her smile was visible even through the mask. “I do not,” she admitted. “I found this world less than ideal for myself and my son. We returned to my people after I aided in the development of the city's new government. I am Representative of the Athosian people among other roles.”

“I am... sorry Atlantis hasn't been...”

“I do not regret the past,” she assured him. “I will always miss Rodney's Song as he used to sing it but now that he has adapted to this world... His Song is different now and it unnerves me. I would not raise my son here though I hope he will visit when he is old enough.”

“I didn't see Dr. McKay among the other counselors,” Caldwell admitted. He hadn't seen the sleek grey-green Deep One anywhere.

“I am sure you did,” Teyla countered. “Though you may not have recognized him. As he is fond of saying, the waters are cold.” She bowed to him and left to mingle.

Caldwell looked around the room again. Just how adapted could a Deep One get? This was why he brought the Archivist, to answer these questions, but neither Dr. Jackson nor Dr. Kavanagh had been allowed into the council auditorium or this strange yet familiar political dance Woolsey had called ‘refreshments in the lobby’, translated to ‘vinum verum concilio’.

There was a creature bleating and shaking its dorsal spines at Dr. Zelenka. It even wore the same red-copper circlet worn by the other counselors native to Atlantis. But it wasn't grey-green and sleek like McKay used to be. For one thing, it was fat. It was fat and flabby and it had no real scales, only the suggestion of where scales should be. Its skin was waxy, red-black on its back fading to a strange iridescence on its belly that almost glowed in the dim light. Its tail was long and fat and the spines near its tip might instead be called flukes. Its gill plates shone with the same eerie shine Caldwell recognized from the painting in customs.

At least its claws hadn't changed. Nor had its eyes, the same bright pure blue under nictitating membranes.

This... was what Teyla had meant. This was what the Deep Ones became when they adapted to this world.

A nightmare.

A hand tugging at his sleeve brought him from his thoughts. Caldwell looked over then down.

The child wore leather pants, a linen shirt, a sleek fur cloak, wooden sandals, and what looked like a thick iron collar. Despite the collar the child didn't look mistreated. Rather he looked well-fed, his eyes bright and inquisitive. “Can I help you?” Caldwell asked.

Caldwell looked around for a friendly face. He understood two words of that and this kid looked to be about eight years old. An eight year old with a collar like he was owned by someone. It wasn't right. He caught Woolsey's eye and tried not to seem frantic.

“What is it?” Woolsey asked as he came over.

“Civili non est 'Earth'?” the child asked. “Qui loqu'untur lang'civilis?”

“Earth est... aliud civili,” Woolsey said, answering the child. “Fingere lang'sua.”

“Quod est inconvens.”


The child nodded. “Ut cognoscant'e. Tu nosti monoculi latro? Habet mixturis.”

Woolsey pointed to Zelenka and the red-black mockery of a Deep One. “Ipsi scitis.”

The child threw his arms around Woolsey's legs before running off toward the scientists.

“What was that?” Caldwell demanded.

“The child was sent by the tlak-tcho as their representative,” Woolsey said as though it weren't strange. “We recently opened negotiations with them and the Satedans invited them to Council. The child is their fata monere. I think he's looking for someone to trade booze with.”

“So you sent him to the scientists.”

“Dr. Zelenka runs a still, Dr. Rowan brews beer. They're both scientists. Either way, it's Zelenka's department.”

Caldwell tried not to admit that it made sense, though it did make him wonder what exactly was in these 'refreshments'.

*****

Most of the representatives left over the next two days. It seemed like a waste to Caldwell to host so many for so short a session. Earth's proposal lasted fifteen minutes in debate before being shot down by a vast majority.

A rush of feathers shot in front of him as he stood in the gateroom. He resisted swatting at the bird. After all, the bird had voted in his favor.

That thought made his eye twitch. Seven years on the Daedalus had taught him how wrong he was to cling to Earth's ideas of intelligence and morality. Yet there were some constants in the Milky Way. Children were not supposed to be collared like that, for one, nor were they supposed to be collected by what looked like a giant river otter with a chain leash to attach to that collar. And then the otter and its pet child didn't even return through the stargate, they sought out a scientist with an eyepatch who led them in to compress.

Maybe that's why there were so many 'representatives' here for such a short session. Atlantis had supplied a staggering amount of booze, food, strange drinks and dishes Caldwell had never seen even here in Pegasus.
Finally the gate closed and the gateroom was quiet. Quieter, anyway. Lorne was at the flight control station, arguing with someone on the other end. At least, it sounded like arguing.


At least Lorne still spoke like Ancient was a second language, Caldwell thought. Lorne’s cadence was halting and he enunciated the words like he was trying too hard.

“Etiam, ilicet.” Lorne turned away from his console, covered the mouthpiece of his headset, and shouted to the room. “Can anyone tell me if Teyla's still here?”

There was a loud shrieking snarl that Caldwell's mind informed him was a yes.

“Well can someone get her decompressed and down here?” Lorne demanded. “I got a call for her.”

That was one way to put it.

“Qui est,” Lorne said, turning back to the ship on the other end of his station. “Tam... quam sunt omnia?”

Painful-sounding small talk kept the channel open for almost ten minutes before the transporter doors opened to reveal Teyla in her delicate metal mask and goggles. She had donned the same weighted cloak of the Counselors over a simple soft silk dress that seemed wrong to Caldwell's eyes. It wasn't overly revealing or strange in its design, it just felt wrong.

“I am here,” Teyla said. “What does Guide want with me?”

Lorne handed her the flight control headset. “Ask him. I think it's to do with...” Lorne looked at Caldwell. It was not a comforting look.

Teyla took his seat and put on the headset. “Salve, mi Praefector. Q'est pignus Domiv'ferralilia? V'trum Domiv'alastraum probare?”

She listened to the answer. Caldwell found her words harder to follow as she dropped endings, combined words, and in general spoke like a native speaker. It was unnerving, especially the accent she used. It wasn't her gate accent and it wasn't Athosian but it was something he'd heard before.

“Domiv'id est?” Teyla laughed. It was a dark laughter. “Ill'est fillia tua. Su'bire de Domiv'fillia. Adtendite m'ette, mi Praefector.”

She paused before handing the headset back to Lorne. Lorne simply nodded and began speaking halting Ancient again.

“What was that?” Caldwell asked, catching Teyla before she could leave again.

Teyla smiled. “The Lady Steelflower has sent a representative,” she said. “Someone who understands the ins and outs of long negotiation. He will hear your appeal when it is ready.”

“I get an automatic appeal?”

“Normally, no,” Teyla said. “But there are too many interested parties who wish to see what Earth will do. You are expected to indulge them. Or, if you wish, you may leave empty-handed. With luck you may be able to pry Dr. Jackson from the North Pier.”

Caldwell sighed then fell into a coughing fit. He took a deep breath from the basic mixture to ease his
lungs. “I can't go back empty-handed,” he admitted.

“Then ask yourself. Were you sent to fail?”

Caldwell watched as she sauntered off toward Woolsey's office. As she left he had the strangest thought, that the silks she wore looked Wraith.
The North Pier

The council session was going on without them.

Daniel and Kavanagh both had some experience with being left out of decisions like this. At least, Daniel was willing to pretend acceptance and Kavanagh was not surprised.

Still, that left them with who knew how many days alone in a strange space port that only held a structural resemblance to the Atlantis of a few short years ago.

“It's changed,” Daniel allowed.

“It's changed a lot,” Kavanagh agreed.

The hallways were the same, though dim with the twilight of the red dwarf star and the sconces kept unlit. The people were strange, hidden behind goggles with masks in their hands or staring with eyes shining green like predators or Deep Ones. But these weren't hybrids, these were humans. At least, they were human once.

The sounds were different. There were all the old sounds, the talking and laughing and footsteps, but there were new sounds. The city Sang in tune with the Deep Ones, a soft sound that plucked the nerves of even the ATA-negative. The voices weren't quite right either, the shrieking and bleating of a dozen Deep Ones combined with the Ancient that was slowly replacing English. The ocean was quiet, no sounds of fish or whales or sea snakes, only the quiet surr-surr of cephalopods jetting below the black sea-plants and the ever present howling winds.

The smells were different. Sulfurous, acidic, sour, the city smelled like a volcanic vent left out to ferment in the sun. The city's smells had changed, no longer the rotted salt and clean ocean smells of Lantea or the hot sea and baking purple plankton of New Lantea, now it smelled like acid, like copper-red metal and a living blackness that lapped at the piers.

It even felt different. The city felt a lot like knee and back pain.

Kavanagh leaned against the corridor wall, stretching his spine as he tried to unknot himself. He popped his neck and groaned in relief, short-lived though it was. He never dealt well with high gravity and the way Dr. Jackson stood there lightly bouncing on his feet was a personal insult. He glared at the man, ignoring how Daniel's eyes flashed red as he grinned that smug grin of his. It just wasn't fair. “We have got to find what the locals use,” Kavanagh muttered.

Daniel shrugged. Despite the basic air mixture he had to breath for every fourth breath he felt rather good. “We should probably head to the labs,” he said.

Kavanagh shook his head. “I am not going down there,” he said. “The last time I was here I made a fool of myself in those labs. I will not allow them the pleasure of reminding me.”

“You did?” Daniel wondered. “I wouldn't have thought they'd let you into the labs last time.”

Kavanagh sniffed and pulled himself up to his full height. “I prefer not to remember that time,” he said. “I wasn't myself.”

Daniel snorted.

“Shut up, neither were you. But at least you weren't dragged here in a straitjacket by the real-life
Men in Black.”

Daniel couldn't help the grin. “That was your decision, Archivist,” he said before heading off toward the labs. He didn't wait for Kavanagh to follow, he knew the man would.

*****

The labs were familiar and yet not. Laptops sat on every desk though they seemed to have been altered, upgraded with crystals and copper-red metal. Tablets sat on every other available surface, linked together in a local network as they all played Go with each other. At least, it looked like Go if Go were played with six different teams and the pieces could jump.

“Peter, Dr. Jackson, I didn't expect you so soon.” Miko Kusanagi looked over at them from where she was checking a simulation on an augmented laptop. “I figured you would come on perhaps the third Daedalus run.”

“I'm not so sure there will be a second Daedalus run,” Daniel said carefully. “The rumors coming out of that Council are not promising.”

Miko waved dismissively. “Ignore that,” she said. “The formalities always sound so harsh. You will find many here willing to accept Earth as a trading partner.”

“After all, we have coffee,” Kavanagh said, grinning.

“Coffee is not as missed as you would hope,” Miko said. She reached for a silvery-metal cup and sipped tea through a metal straw. “We have found alternatives.”

“Yes, if you like dirt-blueberries,” Kavanagh said, making a face.

Miko showed him her cup. Leaves floated on the surface, the straw sticking down into the murk. “It tastes like kombucha,” she said. “Many of the others prefer to dry and smoke the herb but I like the flavor.”

Kavanagh sniffed the cup. He pulled back and snorted, shaking his head to try and dislodge the smell. “No thank you,” he said.

Miko smiled and sipped from the straw.

“Well, we're here for as long as Council is in session at least,” Daniel said. “What do you recommend?”

Kavanagh shifted his hips and spine uncomfortably. “And what does everyone do around here about the gravity?”

Miko smirked. “The two of you should visit the North Pier,” she said. She laughed as Kavanagh blushed. “No, not for that,” she clarified.

“For what?” Daniel asked.

Miko’s smirk turned dark as Kavanagh took a step away from her. “Why don't you let Peter here tell you all about it?” she purred.

Kavanagh fixed her with a level stare before pretending ignorance even as he dragged Daniel out of the labs.

“So what's the North Pier?” Daniel asked.
Kavanagh grumbled under his breath.

Daniel stopped in the middle of the corridor, took off his goggles, and fixed Kavanagh with a dull red glare.

Kavanagh sighed. “Fine,” he allowed. “The North Pier started as a way to share porn. It grew from there into a whole network, both on and offline. When I was last involved they’d turned into a cartel controlling illicit substances, alcohol, chocolate, all sorts of things.”

“Involved, were you?” Daniel asked.

Kavanagh waved dismissively. “All the scientists were involved,” he said. “It was the only way to keep it safe from the military and their fragile sensibilities.”

Daniel snorted. He hid his smirk behind a breath of mixture. “So where would this ‘North Pier’ be?” he asked. “Atlantis doesn't have a north pier.”

Kavanagh didn't answer.

*****

The mess hall was at once strange and familiar. Platters of native foods warmed under lamps next to dishes with strange black leaves and what looked like steamed tentacles. People filled the tables, speaking and shouting and discussing the Council in a strange melange of Ancient, English, and a dozen native languages that all sounded like they used Ancient as their root language.

Kavanagh shrugged and picked up a tray before standing in line and looking affronted at the wait.

Daniel rolled his eyes. The Archivist hadn't been standing there five seconds and already he was expecting service. If Kavanagh were serious Daniel would have to do something. As it was he felt free to observe the room.

The visitors all wore protective gear to guard against the atmosphere but Daniel had to question some of its effectiveness. The delicate metal mesh masks that some of them wore looked downright useless, especially as Daniel watched a woman stick a straw into what looked like a beer milkshake and then thread the straw through her mask. Goggles were not as ubiquitous as he would have thought though the ones he saw were ornately decorated glass and the commonly-seen red-copper metal.

The metal seemed familiar, like he'd seen it before.

Here in the lights of the mess hall he saw it. The copper walls of Atlantis gleamed in the acidic atmosphere, a shining red-gold-copper color that Plato had called...

“Orichalcum,” Daniel said aloud.

“What?” Kavanagh asked. He'd moved a few feet along the line.

“I heard it was a myth,” Daniel said. “Or a mistranslation of brass. The amount of oxidation the city must have collected over ten thousand years, otherwise I would have seen it before...”

“Yes, yes, new pretty metal,” Kavanagh said dismissively as he got to the food. He pointed to the black leaves and tentacles. “What's this?” he asked.

“Twilight kelp and twisted nautaloid,” the cook behind the counter said.
“You have Deep Ones here, don't you have fish?” Kavanagh demanded.

“No fish here. This planet doesn't have anything with a spine but we've got plenty of squiddys and snails and the like.”

Kavanagh poked at a tentacle with tongs. It seemed wrong on some level, more wrong than the strange black plants that did indeed look a little bit like kelp. “Twilight kelp?” he asked.

“Well it's not really kelp but it grows around several of the island chains in the twilight band between the day side and night side. You should see the midnight slimes, those things are weird. Stink, too.”

“I bet,” Kavanagh agreed, still looking down at the odd dishes. He picked up something less unnerving even though he never did like tuttleroot. At least it was familiar.

Daniel didn't bother with food as he thought of the MREs on the Daedalus. They had a whole hold full of the things as a bribe and it looked as though that bribe would be less than successful. Instead they took a table and Kavanagh attempted to eat.

“It tastes a little sour,” Kavanagh complained.

Daniel didn't bother asking or using a utensil, instead he dipped a finger in the bowl of soup despite indignant objection. “It is,” he agreed. “What do you think does that? Is the air turning it sour?”

Kavanagh took another spoonful and contemplated. “It is an acid sour,” he agreed. “But not that bad. Maybe it's buffered?”

Daniel shrugged then looked up and waved down someone he recognized. “Colonel Sheppard!”

Sheppard stood in the middle of a group of marines. He looked over at the pair and seemed to sigh before waving off his comrades and making his way to their table.

“It's... Counselor Sheppard now,” Sheppard said. He took the seat Daniel offered.

“Then shouldn't you be in the thing?” Kavanagh asked.

Sheppard shrugged. “Probably,” he admitted. “I got out of it. This way I don't have to tell Colonel Caldwell to suck me if he tries to order my vote.”

“He wouldn't do that,” Daniel said. At Sheppard's leveled stare he had to admit the lie. “Okay, maybe he would. Aren't you curious, though? Why we're here?”

“You're here because we sent that message,” Sheppard said. “Which I was against from the start. Earth does not have my loyalty and I have no reason to go back there.”

“I'm sure there are others,” Daniel allowed.

“I know there are,” Sheppard said. “There are people here who would leap at the opportunity to bring people here, families or friends they left behind. But I don't know a one who would willingly move back to Earth, even if we could. Which I'm not sure we physically can anymore. There's been too much drift from gene therapy and Deep One Song and other things I don't know of or like to think about. This planet has made us its own.”

Kavanagh licked his spoon while he considered Counselor Sheppard and his words. Sheppard wore the same orichalcum circlet as the others who called themselves 'counselors'. His clothes were an iridescent black that draped and clung in an almost Wraith-like design. His eyes shone with the
predatory green that marked all of the former expedition members and he allowed his grey weighted cloak to dangle from one shoulder before spilling on the floor. This planet had altered all of them, though he thought the planet had help. The Deep Ones he'd seen were fat creatures heavy under a layer of protective blubber. They had no armored scales to protect them and their skin was a shining black that looked red and purple and green under all of the wrong light. “McKay's Song is strong, isn't it?” he asked.

“Very,” Sheppard admitted. “Even when he's off-world the city takes up his Song for him. Everyone can hear it, ATA gene or no.”

“Counselor Biro offered a gene therapy to allow us to endure the acid atmosphere,” Kavanagh said. “How many people here actually needed it? How many simply changed with McKay?”

Sheppard held Kavanagh's eyes in a cold glare.

“I figured,” Kavanagh said. He turned to Daniel. “Well, that part's done. It's unsafe to take them off Atlantis.”

Sheppard stood up, chair scraping loudly in the din of the mess hall. “If you'll excuse me, I should get going.” He left.

“Wait!” Daniel called. It didn't help as Sheppard stormed out of the hall. “Dammit, we still don't know where the North Pier is.”

“We'll find it,” Kavanagh said. “I have some ideas.”

*****

The North Pier was ironically on the end of the West Pier. The floor sloped almost imperceptibly downward in that direction, the city itself tilting underneath the weight of every landing berth filled. That tilt unnerved Kavanagh on a primal level.

It wasn't called the North Pier, at least not visibly. There were no signs advertising services, there was no title proclaiming its identity. It was simply there, a constant movement and concentration of life signs amidst the smell of steam.

It was simple enough. Counselor Biro and Dr. Beckett before her all recommended an hour in the hot waters every day to stave off joint pain and damage due to the gravity. This 19th century cure had been leapt upon by the cabal behind the North Pier and an economy developed.

The hot waters were a medical necessity. Anyone could come in and enjoy the waters for up to an hour a day at their leisure. It was the other services that incurred... charges.

There was also an issue with clothing.

“Caldwell isn't going to like this,” Daniel said as he stuffed his clothes in a locker.

“Caldwell's a prude,” Kavanagh drawled. He still wore his jewelry but nothing else. “He's why we kept the North Pier hidden.”

“Caldwell's military,” Daniel defended.

“Exactly.”

Daniel rolled his eyes before they stepped out into the main area.
The waters were hot, clear, and smelled of sulfur. It reminded Daniel of a bathhouse he'd visited once in Russia. There was a steam room with lively conversation, there were baths of thick clay that seemed to be dominated by off-duty scientists, there were several occupied tubs, and the only people who wore clothes appeared to be the attendants who carried towels, gave massages, mopped floors, and consulted tablets.

“Dr. Jackson!”

Daniel looked over to find Major Lorne in one of the tubs of water, more like an artificial hot spring. There was room for at least six people. Lorne waved them over.

“Major Lorne,” Daniel greeted as he came over, dragging Kavanagh with him. Kavanagh had been eying the mud baths with interest. “This is certainly an interesting cultural development.”

Lorne smirked. “That's one way to put it,” he said. “Come in, sit, enjoy.”

Kavanagh gave one last longing look to the mud baths before resigning himself to the hot tub. He stepped in and groaned as all his knee pain seemed to fade. He ignored Lorne laughing at him.

“So the hot water is considered a medical necessity?” Daniel asked as he got in the water.

“It is,” Lorne said. “We’re allowed an hour a day every day or two hour blocks every three days. Dr. Beckett made the original recommendations and the rest of it, well, it just sort of grew over time.”

“I bet,” Daniel agreed. “So what about the rest of all this? We were warned at the front about charges for everything else.”

“Oh, that. You see everyone working here? The masseuse, the attendants, the towel guy, the lady in the front? When agreeing to use any of the other services here you agree to work here for a set number of hours.”

“So if I were to head over to the mud baths how long would I have to...” Kavanagh trailed off.

“Two hours of work and you’d have to remove your jewelry.”

Kavanagh scowled. “Well there goes that plan,” he muttered.

“He can't remove the jewelry,” Daniel said at Lorne's curious expression. “He's sealed in to some of it.”

“Ahh.”

“So everyone participates in this economy?” Daniel asked as he looked around. He watched a marine disrobe and approach the massage tables. A Deep One followed him, tasting the air.

“Everyone,” Lorne said. “Counselors, Deep Ones, visitors, scientists, military, everyone. It's a great equalizer.” He followed Daniel's gaze. “However, I don't recommend that service unless you know exactly what you're getting into.”

Kavanagh looked over as well, watching with interest as the Deep One pushed the marine down onto the table and bit him on the back of the neck. Then it began to get strange.

“Oh my,” Daniel said.

“Relax, only females bite to subdue,” Kavanagh drawled.
Daniel pointed to a faint scar on the back of his neck. “McKay did this, Peter.”

Lorne snickered. “Only females bite to subdue,” Lorne agreed. “And McKay.”

Kavanagh nodded. “I always knew McKay was no Dagon.”

Daniel ignored the discussion around him as he took in the entire culture of the North Pier. Atlantis had relaxed over the last three years, leaving behind much of their own humanity in the process. They could never return to Earth, not permanently. It wouldn't be safe for them.

Or for Earth.
The council session was over and Atlantis was quiet.

Quieter, at least.

The city floated higher in the water without three Traveler ships weighing down her piers. The *Bellerophon* remained in orbit, keeping watch on the Wraith hive *Starburst* that still lurked near the system's icy outer world.

Now that Caldwell knew what to look for in the flight control displays he could easily see the radio chatter between Atlantis and each ship, could watch their maneuvers in real-time, minus delay due to light speed. The Traveler ship was not a warship but they seemed to enjoy baiting the much larger hiveship into lazy maneuvers. What surprised him was that the hive allowed it. Perhaps even Wraith grew bored.

“A word, Colonel.”

Caldwell looked up from the displays to find Woolsey standing there looking as strange as before. “Yes?” he said.

“In the conference room,” Woolsey said. “Now that the circus is over there are matters to discuss.”

Caldwell looked curiously at the conference room. A half dozen people mulled around behind the glass overlooking the gateroom. Caldwell sighed, straightened his flight uniform, and headed up. He hoped this wasn't a council meeting disguised as a 'discussion'.

It was.

Teyla sat serene and weird with her wire mask and goggles. Sheppard lounged in his seat, didn't stand at attention. Drs. Zelenka and Biro looked interested and worried. Woolsey sat at the head of the table next to a Wraith and an eight year old boy. Dahlia Radim smiled at Caldwell as he walked in, it was not a pleasant smile.

“Now then, as Counselor McKay has business to attend to, we are all here,” Woolsey said.

Caldwell stood uncomfortably near the wall until Teyla pointed to an empty chair. He had the feeling he did not want to displease her so he took a seat.

“Your current crew compliment is 145, is that correct?” Woolsey asked.

The Wraith Ember whistled.

“It is,” Caldwell confirmed.

“Surely you do not expect us to leave them trapped inside their ship,” Teyla said.

“They are ill-suited for our atmosphere and gravity,” Dr. Biro said. “We cannot install sulfur scrubbers throughout Atlantis even if we raised the shield and stopped all circulation.”

“Now that council fiasco is over with, we do have enough masks,” Zelenka said.

“I am more concerned for their conduct,” Ember said. “They did not suffer as we did during the Wraith Civil War or the Battle of Five Armies. They see the Wraith solely as an enemy to be

A Formal Declaration

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“They are not the only ones,” Teyla warned. “The Satedans have not joined this council since its inception after the war.”

The child perked up. “Sateda irat’est,” he said. “Facta sunt Larua hic.”

“Tlak-tcho et sapientes,” Teyla said, addressing the boy. His worry did seem to lessen. “Ad comprimendam ira.”

Caldwell looked confused.

Sheppard leaned close to Caldwell. “The Satedans are pissed we allow Wraith here,” he explained. “Ronon's been elected to their parliament so I don't think that'll be changing soon. That's why we're in talks with the Satedan monere, the tlak-tcho.”

Caldwell nodded. He was familiar enough with politics to see the maneuvering here.

“Regardless, Colonel Caldwell, can you vouch for the civility of your men?” Woolsey asked. “Will they abide by our rules and customs?”

“I will speak to them,” Caldwell offered. “However, many of them still think of Atlantis as an Earth base. They believe the rules haven't changed since the last time we were here.”

“And therein lies a problem,” Sheppard said. “Especially once your military realizes ours won't follow your command.”

“That might be a problem,” Caldwell admitted.

“How does your military handle contact with warriors of other cultures?” Teyla asked. “Surely Earth does not expect every soldier you meet to follow your command.”

“Of course not,” Caldwell defended.

“Then the solution is simple,” Teyla said, sitting back and looking serenely smug. “Your crew must be informed that Atlantis is not under the control of your world and cannot be treated as such.”

Caldwell looked around the room. There were so many SGC policies that said the exact opposite, policies nearly as old as the SGC itself. And yet the people around him seemed to be accepting that solution. Even the Wraith seemed to as it adopted Teyla's exact posture and expression. Caldwell couldn't figure out if he was being mocked or not.

“I second,” Zelenka said before Caldwell could object. “A vote?”

The vote was unanimous. Caldwell felt entirely out of his element as Atlantis's council declared themselves to be an entirely separate culture and military right in front of him. If his crew was to be allowed off of the *Daedalus* during any of the time they'd be stuck here they would have to abide by that sovereignty.

And they were well and truly stuck here. The magnetic locks ensured they were trapped unless they wanted to blow Atlantis and themselves up in an attempt to escape.

*****

The Wraith shuttle *Snow's Lament* descended through the wind and storm toward the South-East Pier. The ship's landing pads descended as the magnetic locks opened and then clamped down,
trapping the ship on the Pier. The ship's engines cut and then there was a rush of gases that sounded almost like a gasp.

The hatch opened into the howling winds and a single figure stepped out, his eyes shining in the half-light of the red sun's twilight. He stepped carefully, pride causing him to keep hidden the aches and twitching of sudden compression.

Guide was Wraith, he would heal.

A Watchman stood next to a single figure that crouched on three limbs, tail lashing behind as the wind rattled dorsal spines and the burning aurorae danced shimmering colors over wet skin.

“Queen Heretic,” Guide greeted as he ignored the Watchman and stood before Dr. McKay. “I trust your Nest has not been disrupted by the sudden excitement.”

Rodney snorted. *Your concern for my Nest is touching.* The tone was less than sincere.

“But not unfounded,” Guide said. “A whole mess of representatives, it's a wonder any of the counselors had their voices heard. We can't allow the tyranny of the majority to take control of what is rightfully yours.”

Rodney purred at the implication. It was a wonderful thought to imagine that Atlantis belonged to the Deep Ones but it wasn't so. Not yet. *Hence why you're here. How did you pull that off? The Lady Alabaster already has Ember here to speak for her.*

“Oh but the Lady Steelflower has no voice in this city,” Guide said, yellow eyes shining with mirth. “I so helpfully offered my services.”

Rodney snorted and hissed with laughter. *And your daughter went along with this? My she is indulgent toward her father, isn't she.*

Guide bared his teeth. Rodney responded by snapping jaws and hissing.

Guide's posturing turned to amusement. There would be plenty of time to get the usual greetings out of the way once they were inside.

*****

The conference room door opened. Chuck stood there, his headset still to his ear. “Sorry to disturb the council,” he said. “But the *Snow's Lament* has just docked. Counselor McKay is meeting the Lady Steelflower's representative as we speak.”

“Of course, thank you, Chuck,” Teyla said. Chuck gave an oddly formal bow and went back to the flight control station.

“We may continue this later,” Woolsey said. “But I think we've made great progress. Colonel, if your people can agree to our terms, we would be happy to allow them the same rights and privileges as any visiting crew.”

“It's a start,” Caldwell agreed. He wasn't fond of the restrictions but his crew needed to get off the Daedalus before they went stir-crazy. Already he was getting reports that their infirmary was running low on NSAIDs due to the gravity.

“We should pressurize back into the main city,” Teyla suggested. “We have time. The usual greetings between Dr. McKay and the Lady Steelflower's representative can take an hour or more.”
Sheppard winced and made a face. Zelenka elbowed him in the ribs and glared at him. Sheppard responded with a long-suffering sigh.

“Who is this 'Lady Steelflower'?“ Caldwell asked. He noticed as far too many eyes glanced at Teyla.

“The Lady Steelflower is a Wraith Queen,” she said, taking Caldwell’s arm as the conference room emptied and they all moved toward the transporter. “No one knows which hive she commands or what territory she claims but all agree she is powerful. She was there alongside the Lady Waterlight during her duel with Queen Death. She was there, advising the Lady Alabaster when Dr. Beckett and Ember perfected the retrovirus that allows the Wraith to feed without aging their prey. She was there, whispering to Guide of Old when his alliances faltered and his own court rose against him. She was there when Queen Coldamber moved against Atlantis for the second time, when the Lady Alabaster returned from exile, when the Lady Snow gave her life and her hive for the defense of others.”

“She sounds like some sort of legend,” Caldwell mused.

“She is,” Ember said, grinning with a maw full of sharp teeth. “And yet I have known her. She is the warrior-queen in armor and silk. She is the voice of serene vengeance.”

“That's one way of putting it,” Sheppard said under his breath. This time Biro elbowed him in the ribs and glared.

“I would have gladly offered her my life to taste, had she wished it,” Ember said, a growl of pride coloring his voice.

Caldwell got the sense he was missing something. It was a common sensation these past few days so he ignored it.

The transporter took them to a staging area where they could pressurize up to around 5 bar. It reminded Caldwell of a hundred other waiting rooms with reading material (tablets that only displayed in Ancient), bland refreshments (a water cooler and what could almost pass as a vending machine), meaningless small talk (Torren does well thank you for asking, have you considered siring children?), and chairs with uncomfortable armrests.

He was warned that heading out into the main city too quickly would likely result in a pounding headache and perhaps mild hallucinations from the pressure sickness but Caldwell felt the deep-seated need to do something other than sit here and make small talk.

The city warbled a bit in his vision as they took a second transporter into the main city and its heavy atmosphere. Caldwell's head pounded while the others seemed used to this punishment. Or perhaps there was something else going on, some gene therapy he hadn't heard about.

“So who's stationed on the Snow's Lament?” Woolsey asked.

“Watchman Singh was on the rotation but it's Rodney's discretion,” Sheppard said.

“Is 'watchman' a rank?” Caldwell asked, not even pretending he wasn't listening in.

“It's more of a posting,” Sheppard said. “There's at least one Watchman on every active Pier. They make sure no one unauthorized leaves or boards a ship. Johnson and Renault are stationed to the Daedalus this shift.”

“The Daedalus needs more Watchmen than a Wraith ship?” Caldwell wondered.
“During the main council session there were issues with a couple of troublemakers trying to get onboard your ship,” Sheppard explained. “We upped security for the protection of your ship and your crew.”

“Ah.” Caldwell wasn't sure what to say about that. It didn't seem right to thank Sheppard for doing his job especially since... “I should have been informed of this earlier,” he said.

Sheppard shrugged. “It wasn't a big deal,” he said dismissively.

Caldwell sighed. “So what now?”

“I vote we hit the North Pier,” Sheppard said. “It's been a long few days and I think we all ache.”

“This has nothing to do with the gym being occupied, does it?” Teyla asked with a strangely evil grin. Maybe it was the red-copper mask.

Sheppard's grumble was his answer.

“I didn't think Atlantis had a north pier,” Caldwell said.

Zelenka snorted.

“I will explain along the way,” Teyla said.

Very quickly Caldwell found he was sorry he'd asked.

*****

The North Pier's steam room was connected via a short passage to a pool of water drawn fresh from the ocean. It was streaked black with native algae, it smelled sour with sulfur and acid, and it was bracingly cold.

Kavanagh still thought his debt of time owed should be reduced by an hour just for the screaming that came out of him when the traitorous locals dragged him from the nice hot steam room and dumped him in here. It was hazing, it was some sort of payback for all the times he'd magnetized their furniture to the ceiling, McKay put them up to this, that had to be it.

Kavanagh resolutely ignored Dr. Jackson as he jumped in the freezing water, as did the marines.

“Nearly every culture that experiences a cold climate has some variation on the theme,” Daniel explained to vaguely interested locals. “I believe on Earth it's often called 'polar bear-ing'. There's a physiological reason for the practice's universality: the sudden drop in temperature constricts the blood vessels and shunts all of the blood back into the heart and brain. It awakens the individual and forces thoughts to flow faster and stronger than they otherwise would have. Of course not all cultures have constant access to snow or even cold water. Often they’ll incorporate flagellation, stereotypically with birch branches due to their flexibility and their ability to cause pain without real damage.”

Kavanagh shivered as he tried to huddle in on himself for warmth. The black algae was itchy as it clung to his skin both above and below the water. He didn't care about any so-called health benefits of this strange practice, he just wanted back in the steam room where he was warm and he wasn't being crawled on by any weird black algae. Ugh, and it was crawling on him, he could feel it seeping up his neck like a gigantic amoeba, tangling in his jewelry and his hair. He rubbed at his head, trying to deter it.
“You, ah, got a little something right there.”

Kavanagh glared at the owner of that voice, some marine jarhead without the IQ points necessary to realize how wrong this was. Algae did not crawl, it waved and drifted in currents and it certainly did not drip down his hair!

“What? Oh.” Daniel stopped his impromptu lecture. His eyebrows raised as he looked at the black algae that had crawled up Kavanagh’s head and dripped from his hair. “Does it always move like that? Are we in any danger here?”

“Nah, he’s fine. It tends to give up after a few minutes.”

“And if it doesn't?” Kavanagh demanded.

“Then we’ll just head back into the steam room. It dies in the heat like most daytime things. Shower afterward to get it off and you’ll be fine. Of course, you might find some residual staining...”

The far door opened and a small group came through. That in and of itself wasn't odd. What was odd was their clothing. They wore clothing.

“Through here we have the chill ponds secondary to the steam room. Now, not everyone partakes but those who do swear by it.”

“And, is best for ideas.”

Daniel and Kavanagh both perked up as the group came closer. Daniel smiled easily and lounged back in the freezing water. “Colonel Caldwell, I take it the council session was a disaster?”

Caldwell looked down at the archaeologist, on loan from SG-1, and at the Archivist, on loan from the SGC. They were both integrating into this strange society with little problem. He wrinkled his nose at Kavanagh, who appeared to be in the middle of integrating with some of the local wildlife as well. “I hope we can let the Daedalus crew off the ship by the end of today,” he admitted. “If they'll behave themselves.”

“That's good,” Daniel praised. “They must be going nuts. Colonel, you have got to try the hot tubs, the knee pain just dissolves.”

Caldwell sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“We should get back to the steam room.” The two locals with Daniel and Kavanagh both got out and headed back in, neither of them showing any shame over their nudity.

Once they were gone Kavanagh started combing his fingers through his hair. “This stuff is gross get it off of me.”

Daniel merely quirked an eyebrow.

With great effort Caldwell turned to the amused counselors. “Let's continue,” he said, hoping to get out of there.

*****

Caldwell stood in the open door to the East Pier. The wind howled, swirling and tearing through the open door with near hurricane force.

Outside the door stood two Watchmen, lanterns in hand. Their weighted cloaks flapped in the wind,
lending them an otherworldly quality. They each leveled shining green eyes on him as he stood debating his course of action.

There was no debate, not really, but he still felt the need to prolong his decision. He could disobey the SGC, order Drs. Jackson and Kavanagh back on board, and call for clearance to leave. The Lanteans would not begrudge him that.

They were Lanteans now, there was no denying it. The people belonged here with their Singing city and their Deep Ones.

Caldwell took a deep breath and stepped out into the maelstrom.

The wind nearly blew him off his feet. He steadied himself and walked to the Daedalus, her cargo door open to the atmosphere. He paused when he reached the ramp, looking back at the city, at the twilight sky, and at the dull red star. It hung low in the sky as the winds and currents dragged Atlantis toward the night side of the planet. The city's lights were low, kept dim for the comfort of its natives. Black plants drifted on the sea's surface, long fronds hanging down from leafy gas floats that bobbed on the waves and sailed on the winds. Tiny flashes of bioluminescence shone from under the water, from the innumerable squid attracted by McKay's Song. A small red glow on the night's horizon spoke of a distant volcanic eruption.

No, this place did not belong to Earth. It could never be.

Caldwell walked up the cargo ramp into his ship. He'd made his decision.
Incentives

Caldwell stood on the balcony, the wind blowing all around him as he watched the red star hanging low on the horizon.

His quarters were well-suited for the high force winds. Between the balcony and the main rooms there was an antechamber that functioned much like a pressure lock. When he stood on the balcony the inner door stayed sealed. When he came inside and made to open the inner door, the outer door automatically shut before the inner door opened. It kept the winds from wreaking havoc on the main rooms.

Now if only there was a cure for the ringing in his ears he had when he stepped inside. These winds were not quiet.

He heard the antechamber's outer door close behind him them open again. He looked back to see...

“Counselor Sheppard,” Caldwell greeted.

Sheppard nodded, giving him a slight wave before joining him at the balcony's edge. Sheppard's weighted cloak merely billowed in the high winds, his shining eyes pale green under the cloak's hood. He stared out at the setting star then turned toward the encroaching darkness.

“How long are nights on this planet?” Caldwell asked.

Sheppard shrugged. “Depends on our latitude,” he admitted. “There are eddies around the midnight isles, we could be caught in them for months. Or we could zip along in the circumpolar current. Our planetary scientists are predicting a 73% chance of a long night.”

“What will you do about food?” Caldwell wondered. “I can't imagine there's plant life on the night side.”

“We have greenhouses,” Sheppard said. “There's animal life around the volcanic vents. We have trade. We'll be fine.”

Caldwell nodded, thinking of the pallets of MREs in the Daedalus's hold. Earth had outfitted them with supplies and a mission on the assumption that Atlantis would be just as desperate as they were after that first year. Instead they found a city that prospered, a functioning spaceport on the edge of the Pegasus galaxy, a neutral hub for enemies and allies to involve themselves in the future of their varied worlds.

Atlantis didn't need Earth. Yet they were willing to allow the Daedalus to stay docked here while a compromise was reached. Perhaps even trade. But then, what did each have that the other wanted?

It was a conundrum of his own making. He could have simply declared the mission a failure, loaded up the Daedalus and left. Atlantis would have allowed it and it wasn't like the SGC was ever going to allow him back on Earth anyway. He was a liability, a danger in the post-R'lyeh world. He'd opened his mind to the Deep One's Song and that made the IOA and Delta Green unwilling to risk him turning cultist and disappearing off the coast. He would command the Daedalus for as long as he wished it, the SGC's guarantee made in compromise with other more paranoid organizations. But he would never see Earth again.

Caldwell was unsure what the SGC planned to do with him once he gave up his commission. Surely they wouldn't turn him over to Delta Green for study. More likely he would be assigned to the Alpha
Site and its increasingly insular contingent of marines all clustered around the hybrid Dr. Sandra Frank. Either option was not one he relished, but if he had to pick he would rather be a gate nomad barely following SGC orders than be a test subject.

But instead of returning to the Milky Way empty-handed Caldwell had announced Atlantis's sovereignty to his crew and told them all that any who disagreed were free to stay aboard the *Daedalus* while negotiations were ongoing. Those who were willing to follow local laws were assigned masks, goggles, quarters, and allowed the same freedoms of any visitor.

There were some issues at first, a few who were sent back onto the *Daedalus* before they could cause lasting problems, but overall the allure of the hot tubs at the North Pier kept disagreements to a minimum.

“So Woolsey says I should be offering you something Earth can use,” Sheppard said, breaking Caldwell's thoughts.

“I've been wondering that myself,” Caldwell admitted. “Though I'm wondering what exactly Earth can offer you.”

Sheppard shrugged before leaning against the wall. The shadows brought out the shine in his eyes, made him seem more inhuman than normal. “We have some ideas,” he said. “There's talk of opening Atlantis to immigration from Earth. Many of us left family or friends behind when we fled. Then there's Earth's Deep One situation. I can't imagine all Deep Ones relish the idea of serving a sleeping god for eternity. Atlantis offers a different Song.”

“And what would Atlantis offer in return?” Caldwell asked. “I'm not going to assume you've kept up with the mission of finding and cataloging Ancient technology for Earth's use.”

Sheppard smirked. “I have one better,” he said. “There's a neutron star in our cluster. It has planets.”

Caldwell thought for a moment. Planets around a neutron star. Why was that important? He remembered it was but that was...

Oh...

He stared wide-eyed at Sheppard. “You mine neutronium?!” he demanded.

Sheppard's smirk grew disturbingly wide. “Let me show you.”

*****

The puddlejumper dove into the water, docking in the underwater bay. Its flight records were set to download and the insides cleared out, ready for a radiation sweep and thorough cleaning. Its occupants waited patiently, listening to the city's Song again.

There were no words between the pair, no words needed as they listened. No words were possible, trapped as they still were within the environmental suits that protected them these past six weeks.

Hours were nothing compared to the time spent with only each other's Song for company as the hatch was opened, as the jumper's interior was swept and found clean. Only then could they remove their helmets and open their suits to feel the home waters against skin and gills.

In an air-filled observation room, Sheppard and Caldwell watched as the two Deep One miners shucked off their armored environmental suits and swam freely for the first time in weeks.
“The Deep Ones are uniquely suited for mining neutronium,” Sheppard explained. “We kept those suits from the rogue Asgard and reverse engineered them.”

“Why not have humans do it?” Caldwell asked.

“A human wouldn’t survive it. Even with the suits the radiation load can be immense if the beam happens to hit. Filling the suit with water reduces the rads by 64%. Luckily these planets formed from the post-supernova debris cloud. There’s low grade neutronium ore even outside the beam.”

“But outside the radiation beam is dangerous as well.”

“Exactly, it gets unimaginably cold. Water’s a good insulator but it isn’t perfect. Deep Ones can taste the water’s temperature so they know when to head back inside the jumper for safety. Even so, we’ve had some close calls with ice crystals inside the suits.”

“And they do this willingly?” Caldwell looked at the two creatures that swam in the jumper bay, stretching and purring and swimming loops just because they could.

“Deep Ones like to collect things,” Sheppard said. “Collect it, turn it into something beautiful, then give it all away. The Deep Ones at Y’ha-nthlei did it with gold, collecting the metal and spending years working it into art just to toss it ashore to be smelted by us humans. It began after we landed here when Rodney found the Ancient’s research on gravity manipulation. He created a box about yea big.” Sheppard mimed the size of the box, 10 by 10 by 10 inches. “It could hold up to ten metric tonnes in real space but only if that mass had the volume of a grain of sand. We had Deep Ones scrambling for weeks trying to find something to fit in it.”

“So they mine neutronium... because they can?”

Sheppard nodded.

Caldwell stared out at the monsters in the water who were now swimming back into the jumper to collect some personal effects before entering the main city. “Do they... bring it here?” he asked.

“No. Too dangerous in case of containment failure. There's a facility hollowed out in the ice of the outer planet, Rodney makes them store the neutronium there.”

Caldwell couldn't help the want that he felt. Neutronium was the basis of the Asgard's technology. Without a supply the SGC couldn't make full or even partial use of the knowledge the Asgard granted them. But with even ten metric tonnes, an amount smaller than a mote of dust, they could begin experimenting with the technology in the Asgard database. “Can I... see it?” he asked.

Sheppard grinned, teeth bared. “For that... you'll have to ask them.”

*****

Dr. McKay no longer had a lab. At least, it wasn't just a lab and it wasn't in the middle of the central tower anymore. It was a lair.

That was how Sheppard described it, anyway, as he led Caldwell down the staircases into the base of the central tower. Below the main power room, below the ZPM room, below the waterline. As they descended the very walls began to change, shifting slightly from the pale blue and orichalcum Ancient design to something that seemed more alive. It didn't make sense to Caldwell, walls were static things that should stand unchanging and unmoving. But there was a definite sense of the place being alive.
Maybe it was the strange low hum that pressed on his mind.

The corridors grew damp, cold. Water seeped from the walls, dripping in thin rivulets that puddled on the floor and splashed under their feet. The lights grew dim, the Ancient sconces missing or simply dark without power. Caldwell took off his glass goggles and tried to see into the gloom.

It was oddly less dim this way. He kept the goggles off.

The walls lost their smoothness, taking on the organic feel of a Wraith hive combined with a strange black growth that Caldwell didn't want to touch. Dim blue and green lights flickered in the blackness, an eerie phosphorescence that seemed viscerally familiar.

“The only explanation we have is that Atlantis herself will adapt to her inhabitants and her climate,” Sheppard was saying. “We found a lot more balconies on New Lantea after the first move but nobody ever thought to question it. After all, it sounds nuts that the city would change due to sudden warm weather. But after the trip to Earth and when Atlantis began to Sing, well, we went over our own observations with more of an open mind.”

“What did you find?” Caldwell asked.

“New Lantea caused a lot more windows,” Sheppard explained. “More airflow to keep the inhabitants cool. Which was weird since in the future there were no windows at all. Of course, it was hot then. Like, runaway greenhouse hot.”

“Hmm.”

“Here we have the wind locks on all the balconies, of which there are fewer than before. The gateroom is completely sealed from the outside save for the pressure locks, there’s speculation that the stained glass windows in the gateroom could handle an extra 30 bar if we had to. There’s both passive and active windbreaks at the entrances to each of the landing platforms. And then there’s McKay’s lair.”

They came to a window. Soft blue-violet light shone through from the water's surface above them. Black plankton drifted like clouds through a translucent sky. Caldwell could see shapes in the distance, tentacled shapes that sputtered along, dangling shapes that hung from the surface, a single Deep One that swam about. He reached out to touch the glass.

It yielded under his fingertips.

Caldwell quickly pulled his hand away and took another look at this window. It wasn't the decorative stained glass windows of Ancient design, this one was more like a large plate glass window. And it wasn't even glass. From what little he'd felt it was more like a rubbery bubble.

“It took a year and a half for Rodney to perfect the sea gates,” Sheppard said. “But once he did... There are several here in the base of the central spire. I've never tried it myself but I hear there's a mental component, much like Ancient tech.”

The Deep One that swam outside grew closer to the window, the sea gate. It blinked in at them before baring its teeth and swimming toward the gate.

Caldwell was sure he'd seen something like this in a horror movie. The Deep One's claws pushed the bubble of the sea gate inward before the bubble snapped, sealing around the creature's arms. Then its head came through and it continued swimming, its legs kicking against the water outside as the creature laid webbed paws against the floor and pulled itself through. It shook itself even as the bubble of the sea gate warbled and grew still.
“Hey,” Sheppard greeted. “Is McKay in his lair? We need to speak to him.”

The Deep One barked and bleated, diminutive dorsal fin raising in a pitiful display.

Sheppard growled.

Caldwell looked between the two, unsure what was happening. He knew about Deep One Song but since when did Sheppard growl like that? How much had he been changed by this place?

“He's in,” Sheppard said, clearly annoyed. “And he has... company.”

The Deep One clacked its jaws then hopped up the stairs.

Caldwell had the ridiculous notion that this was romantic company. He tried not to think about it. New hybrids were not something he wanted to report to the SGC.

“Come on,” Sheppard growled. He led Caldwell deep into McKay's lair, into the monster's den.

It was a den of sorts. There were also labs incorporating Wraith displays and Ancient tech, Earth computers with their crystal augments. A smooth black wall seemed to act as a whiteboard, though the organic nature allowed for a multitude of colorful markings including several colors that glowed. Items were halfway deconstructed, others were in production, tools were scattered about, crystals in racks and held suspended by tendrils, and in the middle of it all was a cleared area seemingly constructed for entertaining.

At least, that was its current function.

The Deep One that was Dr. McKay was indeed in. And not alone.

Caldwell looked on in something akin to horror as he realized what Rodney's 'company' was.

It was a Wraith.

Rodney lay on the floor, flank sinking into a thin layer of ocean silt that squished underfoot. Rodney lay behind the Wraith, tail draped over its waist. Monstrous claws slid over its pale flesh as it lay curled in the embrace. It was stripped to the waist, at least Caldwell sincerely hoped it still had pants, and it was leaning back into Rodney's touch, arching up into the Deep One's purr.

And then there was a snarl.

Caldwell almost didn't believe Sheppard had made that noise. But then, the Wraith also looked surprised before its expression changed into something all too familiar.

The Wraith was Todd.

McKay pulled off of Todd, allowing the Wraith to get to its feet and snarl a challenge back at Sheppard. Silt clung to its side and hair as Sheppard began to circle it, the two of them posturing like they were dogs about to fight.

*I've never understood it. I can't seem to get involved with one without the other barging in to posture. Not that I mind, it is amusing...*

Caldwell's wide eyes went to Rodney. The Deep One stayed put, lounging in the ocean silt, purring as though these two were posturing solely to put on a show. “You're not going to stop them?” Caldwell asked.
Rodney huffed. *I suppose I should.* Still, little move was made to stop them. Instead Rodney purred and stretched like a contented cat, tail flicking with a distinct amusement.

“McKay!” Caldwell shouted.

Rodney turned on him, snarling, spines rattling. Rodney climbed to all fours, tail lashing as Caldwell got the idea that he'd done something very wrong. The sudden lack of sound or movement from Sheppard or Todd added to that realization. Instead the two of them were staring at him, eyes wide and surprised at the interruption. They were paused in mid-wrestle, Todd with Sheppard in a headlock and Sheppard with his fists raised to punch Todd in the stomach repeatedly. Silt smeared over the both of them, it almost obscured the fact that Todd only wore a pair of pants.

Caldwell turned his attention to Rodney. The Deep One had advanced, was looming over him on two legs. He leaned backwards, trying to look the creature in the eye. Since when did Rodney get so large? Surely this was a new development...

And then it was over. Rodney pulled away with a wet hiss and a flick of tail. *I'm sure you have some reason for being here.*

Caldwell glanced over and watched as Todd and Sheppard disentangled themselves, as Todd draped a black leather jacket over its shoulders. He turned his eyes back to the creature that was now fiddling with a machine.

“I told him about the neutronium,” Sheppard said.

“Now why would you do such a thing?” Todd asked. “You know better.”

Sheppard glared at the Wraith. “Counselor Woolsey suggested it,” he defended. “He said we need to find something to trade with the Tau'ri as a sign of good faith. Besides, what are we going to do with it? None of us use nanites and it's not like our local Asgard are talking to us.”

Rodney snorted. *They'd steal it all while claiming 'for the good of their race' or some such nonsense.*

“Yet you couldn't have asked,” Todd drawled. “How typical of you.”

“I'm asking now,” Sheppard said, drawling right back. “No one has to say 'yes'.”

“And there's no guarantee I will.”

*Both of you...*

Caldwell watched in morbid fascination as both Sheppard and Todd eased their posturing and relaxed. What power did the Deep Ones have in this place that McKay could command a Wraith?

Todd smiled, teeth bared. “I suppose we could allow the humans to see the facility,” he said, leering. “As for the neutronium, well, that belongs to the Heretic Queen and her brood.”

“Who?” Caldwell asked. The others simply smiled. It did not comfort him.
The Frozen Sentinel

Chapter Summary

Wraith history taken from the *Legacy* series, lightly twisted to fit my needs.

The Wraith owned the facility.

It was an Ancient facility, eleven thousand years old, carved out of the native ice crust of the small outer world. Cut off from the vacuum of space by airlocks and a mile of ice, the facility had slept alone and undisturbed for millennia. Then Atlantis came and followed the energy signatures.

The secrets found there were amazing, damning, frightening. There were logs, experimental notes, memos, complaints, plans, all of it detailing the main experiment conducted here.

The attempted creation of an immortal Ancient.

There was precedent. Their allies, those five angled sentient plants known only as 'Elder Things' came from a world where bodily immortality was possible. The upright apes the Ancients brought from that world to experiment on had evidence of genetic manipulation that could allow for physical immortality under certain circumstances, though the humans that evolved from those apes lost these qualities over time. It could be done.

All these humans needed was a little genetic incentive and they were malleable.

Experiment on the humans first. They needed to ensure the procedure worked and none of the Ancients were willing to risk their lives for something so base as 'testing'. Besides, the Council still wasn't sure if these humans were sentient or just parroting their betters, so it wasn't like they were experimenting on thinking creatures.

Their willingness to cohabitate with the base animals of their given planets was not a mark of favor toward sentience.

Thus the Ancients hollowed out this facility, used human slaves to drill and dig and melt the ice until an atmosphere could be pumped in. And then those very slaves became the first test subjects.

Ascension wasn't for everybody. That was the whisper condemned by the Council. Ascension was unattainable by some, by a select many who couldn't or wouldn't devote themselves to the rigorous training and introspection necessary. They were those who worked for a living instead, who kept the cities running smoothly so the Council could dictate policy and contemplate their navels.

There had to be a different way.

There was.

The human stock they'd brought from that long lost world ruled by Great Cthulhu proved to be the key.

The Ancients mixed their humans with various animals, insects, even some of those creatures called 'monere'. The Iratus insect proved the most promising. A new batch of humans were kidnapped and
purchased and lured into the experiment. One hundred males and one hundred females.

All but one male survived. Only nine females lived.

The first Wraith.

Now the facility lay empty, a silent reminder of that past. The Lanteans offered the world to the Wraith, arguing that it was their history, their past, theirs to do with as they wished. The Wraith did not want to remember and so the world sits empty even now.

Empty save for the Deep Ones who come to store their treasures.

But the databanks, the consoles, the information. All of that is left alone. That belongs to the Wraith and they do not share.

*****

The *Snow’s Lament* made the journey in minutes.

Equalizing pressure with the facility took hours.

Caldwell really wished for a book to read. Barring that he watched the others. Todd and Rodney played some strange game on a hexagonal board that existed not physically but by consensus. The game pieces looked like intricately carved glass or maybe gems and that was an odd thought, game pieces carved from 3 inch tall gems. Daniel watched the game intently, asking inane questions about its rules, its history, its purpose. Not even Todd’s answers shut him up, the realization that it was a semi-cooperative Wraith game about culling strategy.

Caldwell would have stopped asking at that point but Daniel didn’t, instead his questions grew more bold, more accepting of casual cannibalism.

Sheppard dozed in some sort of alcove or maybe a nest. He was no help.

Kavanagh sat in the background, typing notes into his laptop. He kept glancing between Todd and Sheppard before staring at Rodney with the strangest calculating look. Must be research. Caldwell approved, he brought the Archivist to help him make sense of whatever they might find here. Thus far there hadn't been much sense to be found, but then the Archivist hadn't had the opportunity to observe Rodney up close for long periods like this.

Caldwell glanced at the strange sleeping-nest with envy. Sleeping through the boredom was a great plan but it wasn't one he could partake in. There was too much at stake. He had to stay alert, though he wasn't sure why.

“So what is this place?” Daniel asked.

Rodney rattled gill plates, annoyed at the interruption. All available attention was used in contemplating the game board, deft hands drawing out various moves, countermoves, and counter-countermoves.

“It is where we began,” Todd answered. He leaned back and stretched, realizing he had time while Rodney contemplated the game. “The facility and its knowledge belong to all Wraith and only Wraith.”

“I see,” Daniel said. “May I--”
“No.”

Daniel pouted. He glared at Todd before sitting up to his full height. “Perhaps an exchange of
information,” he offered.

“Your information does not interest me.”

Daniel’s pout turned indignant. “And what do you do with the information here? You’re letting Deep
Ones use the space for neutronium storage!”

Rodney hissed and moved a piece, growling playfully at Todd.

Todd waved dismissively at Daniel before contemplating the board.

_Danny, shut up._

Daniel turned his glare on Rodney.

_It's their information to do with as they wish. That includes forgetting it._

“But that's...”

Rodney turned to face Daniel, dorsal spines flattened and teeth bared. _I understand what it's like to
want to forget something._

“And I don't?” Daniel snapped. “You have no idea!”

Rodney snarled, rising up to hind legs.

“Domiv'aereticus!” Todd snapped. “Tu'mperiam.”

Sheppard snapped awake with a snarl Caldwell didn't expect. Nor did he expect the odd glee of the
Archivist as Kavanagh sat back, hiding his mad grin behind his hands.

The air was thick with tension as the stalemate vibrated. Daniel's eyes burned red as he faced down
the Deep One, Todd and Sheppard both looked ready to throw themselves in front of Rodney's
wrath, and Kavanagh was in the corner trying to hold in his giggles. Caldwell didn't know what to
do.

He didn't have to. There was a tone from the cruiser's control system and the air in the ship shifted.

“Domiv'aereticus,” Todd said, running his words together like water. “Stabili'sit. Forte nos'amus.
Ignorare infect'est.”

Rodney growled once more before slithering away. Rodney paused at the doorway, raising up to full
height to hiss a warning. _You have been told 'no', Dr. Jackson. The Wraith do not care if you are
Chosen of Yog-Sothoth. If you disobey them they are within their rights to kill you and I am not one
to interfere._

Daniel's anger turned to curiosity, his eyebrows raising in surprise.

And then Rodney was gone.

“Beautiful!” Kavanagh crowed, applauding as though it was all a show for his amusement.

“Absolutely beautiful. And none of you have any idea!”
Caldwell grabbed Kavanagh by his shoulders and lifted him, pinning him against the wall. Caldwell didn't say anything, merely glared. Kavanagh kept giggling and squirmed, almost a wiggle. “It's perfect, Colonel,” Kavanagh stage-whispered. “They don't even know what's happening. And I can't say anything because I don't want to alter the results. It's like the Lonely Nest all over again.”

Caldwell let go of Kavanagh and sighed, eyes rolling. It would be safest to keep the Archivist here where he couldn't do any damage. But he wasn't brought here for ‘safety'.

Sheppard stretched, his spine popping. “If you're finished, Guide did mention we've equalized atmosphere,” he drawled. “If we don't move he and Rodney are likely to fetch a cube of neutronium and return for liftoff before any of us are off this ship.”

That got Daniel going. He was on his feet and out the airlock before anyone could tell him again.

Caldwell kept a hand on Kavanagh's bicep, leading him around like the madman he was. Sheppard brought up the rear.

This planet was smaller than the twilight world, its gravity barely half of Earth's. It left them all light on their feet, bouncing with each step. It took effort to maintain control over where they went, how they moved.

The air smelled sweet and clean after the days of acid and sulfur. The walls were once carefully laid orichalcum and Ancient paneling but time had dulled the metal and this world's ice had begun slowly reclaiming the corridors. A thin film of ice covered the walls, slicked the floor, dripped from the ceiling in stalactites.

Lights reacted feebly to Sheppard's ATA gene, glowing from behind ice cages and frozen walls. It was just enough light for a Wraith or a Deep One or maybe the changed Lanteans.

Caldwell resolutely refused to think about why he could see as well.

They found Daniel in what looked like a main control room. He was just about to initialize a console.

“Dr. Jackson, step away from the console,” Sheppard commanded.

Daniel glared at him.

“Dr. Jackson, think about what you're doing,” Sheppard said. “You're going to antagonize the Wraith. Guide will eat you for this. That sets Caldwell off because it's his job. We all then step back and watch a lawful maiming. The crew of the Daedalus gets involved. We have to exile an awful lot of people. The Wraith may claim them as penance from us for letting you in here. We keep the Daedalus and Earth never hears from any of us ever again. Do you want that?”


Not bad, Sheppard.

Everyone turned toward a second entrance to the control room. Rodney stood there holding a strange item. It looked like a wire frame cube, thin lines of orichalcum along the edges. Along those edges there were delicate crystals all pointing inward to the box's center. It didn't look like an invention that could hold ten metric tonnes. Yet in the center of the box a solid sphere was held encased in a crystal globe.

Follow me.
Sheppard got behind Daniel and shoved him out of the room. Daniel went, but only under protest. Caldwell and Kavanagh followed.

Deeper in the facility there were halls of cells, observation chambers, medical rooms, something about this place sent a chill running up Caldwell's spine, a chill that had nothing to do with the cold. Finally they reached the end of Rodney's meandering, a chamber that should not be called 'medical'. The consoles and screens here were active, or perhaps their images were so burned into the glass that they could never be erased.

“Oh...” Daniel whispered as he saw the vague images blurred by ice and time.

Caldwell finally knew that chill. This was not the first torture chamber he'd entered.

“The Wraith are a created race,” Daniel realized, flitting from image to image. “This is where it happened, isn't it?” His foot caught on a crystal and orichalcum cube and he tripped, hitting the floor hard. “Ow.”

Only then did Caldwell recognize the cubes all around them. This room was filled with more than just history. “How... much neutronium... have you mined?” he asked.

The room was once hexagonal. Now it was more spherical from the drip of flowing ice and the stacks of containment cubes lining every wall, sculpted and arranged to draw the eye to the past on display. The cubes seemed to merge with the ice and the architecture, invisible unless one was looking right at them. Caldwell looked closely at the side of a cube to see a rune etched on its side. So it was solid, despite its appearance. The rune hurt his head as he tried to look at it, twisting and curling in on itself.

“It is, Dr. Jackson,” Todd allowed. “That is why we allow the Heretic Queen and her Deep One monere to store their treasures here. This is not history we would care to remember and if only a single cube were to let slip its cargo, well, then we would not have to remember.”

Caldwell picked up a containment cube. It was surprisingly heavy for its size yet unimaginably light considering what it contained. He looked into its depths, seeing the rune on its surface uncoiling and glowing with a faint blue light. “What does it say?” he asked, showing the rune to Daniel.

Daniel looked at the rune, blinked and shook his head, then looked again. “I... don't know,” he admitted. “Do they each have... they do...” Daniel looked into several cubes, forcing himself to see the varied runes on each surface. “Does each cube have a name?”

A... purpose, I suppose...

“Premonition or self-fulfilling prophecy?”

Both. Neither. I'm not the one who names them all. Lilith handles the naming.

“Lilith?”

“Lillian Olmstead,” Sheppard said. “She was one of the hybrids O'Neill sent over during our escape from Earth. She prefers the name 'Lilith' now.”

“So you are taking new names,” Kavanagh whispered, almost purring. “Good. Your Nest is stabilizing. Of course, there's one more thing you'll need to do before your Nest is truly yours. Only one...”

Todd and Sheppard both looked at Kavanagh like he was nuts. Rodney put on a show of ignoring
him. Kavanagh merely giggled at his private thoughts, the thrill of knowing something no one else could.

It was glorious.
Two Deep Ones met at the base of the central tower. One had a long tail, dorsal spines that rattled and a spinal fin that rose and fell with each breath. The other was much less adorned, only a pair of short barbels under her chin, vestigial fat deposits on her chest, and a pattern of iridescent green spots down her back.

*I would give them this one.* Rodney held out the containment cube, its twisting and curling rune picking up ambient light. The light made the rune appear to glow.

*Let me see.* The Deep One called Lilith took the containment cube in webbed paws and held it near to one eye. Her lips curled and she purred. *Yes, this one is for them. You choose wisely, Mother.*

Rodney purred and nuzzled her snout. *Your runes make no sense to me, what does it say?*

Lilith hissed her laughter. *That's because you studied astrophysics to bring you to the Black Book. This is 'folly'.*


*That... I don't know.*

*****

Guide lurked outside the conference room, extending his senses to try and listen in to what portion of the Lantean discussion he could. It was difficult, the humans were as yet still unable to speak in a civilized manner. Regardless, he still made the effort. He could sense Rodney's mindspeak, could tell it was deep in discussion with the other Lantean Counselors. But he couldn't make out the words.

“I would speak to you.”

Guide was pulled from his efforts by one of the humans of Earth. Guide hid his disgust. This human reeked of poisoned oceans and salted fields. It wore the trappings of servitude, precious metals and intricate carvings doing nothing to hide the collar around its neck or the shackles around its wrists.

Guide sneered at the servant's presumption.

“There is something you would know,” Kavanagh said, teeth bared to match Guide's sneer. “Sheppard knows it. McKay knows it. The Counselors know it. Whether they believe or whether they've made the connection, that's another matter.”

Guide hissed, mimicking one of McKay's contemplative sounds. He ignored the servant's obscenely pleased noises.

“Every Deep One Nest has two leaders, not one,” Kavanagh said. “Father Dagon is the great warrior who defends the Nest, Mother Hydra is the sorcerer who Sings the faithful home. Yet every Nest is different. Each Dagon has his own style, every Hydra has her own Songs.”

“Dr. McKay is the one who Sings,” Guide mused aloud.

“And indeed,” Kavanagh purred. “McKay is this Nest's Mother Hydra. Her Song is powerful enough to twist the humans of this city into something more, something capable of living here. She deserves a Dagon of equal strength, don't you think? Who will it be, I wonder?”
Guide hissed. He didn't like what the servant implied.

Kavanagh sighed happily, looking up into the conference room where McKay bleated and snarled amidst lively discussion. “It will be a Deep One, that much is certain. But he won't begin as one, it will be the Mother's Song that twists him into his new form. I wonder... how strong must a Song be to twist a Wraith?”

Guide stared openly. He snarled, claws splayed as the servant fled giggling.

It was lying. It had to be.

*****

It was any other trade negotiation. It had to be treated as such otherwise emotions would get in the way.

They were already in the way.

“This is horrible idea,” Zelenka said.

“I agree,” Biro said. “Anyone we send through that gate is liable never to come back. You heard the talk from the Daedalus, Caldwell hasn't even been allowed to set foot on Earth since we left! If he does Delta Green will take him in for 'study' and he'll never be seen again. Do we honestly expect anyone we send to be treated any differently?”

There's also the matter of Earth's safety. I can't go of course. Rodney murred and flared the longer dorsal spines. But what about another? How temperamental are the Mother Hydras of Earth? If we send someone affected by my Song will they set off R'yleh again?

“I doubt that,” Woolsey said. “The most another Hydra would do would be to try and claim us as her own.”

“So we can guarantee Earth's safety but not our own?” Sheppard asked. “A great situation that puts us in. Are we sure we want to open trade with Earth at all?”

“Chocolate,” Zelenka mused.

I thought you said this was a horrible idea.

“It is,” Zelenka admitted. “But now they know where we are. Thus I say to you: chocolate. Coffee.”

“And whatever they'll demand from us,” Biro said. “I wonder what that'll be. Fealty? Oversight? The rights to everything we've built here?”

“Surely not,” Woolsey said. “We won't allow it.”

“You remember what Caldwell said,” Sheppard said. “If we agreed to their oversight all charges would be dropped. Charges! They'll arrest whoever we send, Delta Green or no.”

“Then we just have to make it worth their while,” Woolsey said.

“You're not honestly thinking about,” Sheppard realized.

“I'm the most expendable,” Woolsey said. “We all know I'm just a figurehead on this Council anyway. 'Administration' is not a necessary branch of government.”
“You're not expendable,” Biro said. “You've negotiated us out of a host of tough spots.”

“We all have seconds who could take our place,” Zelenka said. “You, you do not.”

I have my aides,” Woolsey said.

We don't even know how neutonium will react to the wormhole.

“Now you are looking for excuses,” Zelanka accused.

“It's ten metric tonnes,” Sheppard scoffed. “Worst case scenario it'll put a hole in the floor.”

“And I can negotiate us out of this one,” Woolsey said. “What do you think Earth will do now that they know we're here? Will they accept our refusal to deal? Or will they send the Apollo next time with a naquadah-enhanced incentive? We made the decision to contact them knowing that if they responded it would be in this manner. They expect to dominate us as they did once before. That cannot happen.”

“Ego dolor the decision to contact,” Zelenka said.

“Et ego,” Sheppard muttered.

“Regardless, we have, now we have to deal with it.”

Rodney hissed, tail lashing in thought. We could sink the city. There's the sunken continent on the dawn's edge near the underwater volcanoes. The bottom is less than 900 meters, if we shape the shield properly...

“Ano, it would work,” Zelenka agreed.

“Let's hope it doesn't come to that,” Woolsey said. “We don't know if we'd have enough power to maintain the shield underwater.”

The Ancients built a drilling platform to take advantage of geothermal energy, we could do the same. The dawn edge volcanoes are fed by tidal subduction, we could--

“Rodney!” Sheppard growled at the Deep One, stopping Rodney's thoughts in their tracks. “Long term projects are all well and good but that's not what we need right now!”

Rodney snarled, puffing up to full height, spines rattling. Sheppard stood his ground, growling low in his chest.

“As soon as you're both finished,” Woolsey drawled.

Rodney backed down first, leaving Sheppard to gloat quietly.

“This is bad idea,” Zelenka said. “But it is best idea we have. A Counselor must negotiate trade contract with foreign power. We must negotiate with SGC directly. Therefore we send someone through the wormhole.”

“I'll take the neutonium,” Woolsey said. “An offering in good faith.”

“If you fail you will not return,” Biro warned. “They won't let you go.”

“I know what Delta Green does to prisoners,” Woolsey agreed. “I know what might happen. I don't intend to fail.”
We'll send the *Daedalus* back after you've left. If any other Earth ship comes this way we'll sink the city and sic the Travelers on them.

“There's no need to be mean,” Sheppard said. “Nobody deserves the Travelers after them.”

“I'll make sure the SGC knows,” Woolsey said. “Either I return on the *Daedalus* or no one else comes here.”

“I hope you return,” Biro said.

Rodney nudged the back of Woolsey's head and purred warily.

“I'll be back,” Woolsey promised. It rang empty and hollow.

*****

“These goggles will protect your eyes from their overly bright sun but they won't do anything about the alkaline sting. I'm sorry, but unless you can get their medical to assign you some acid drops...”

Woolsey put the dark glass goggles over his eyes. They blocked out the light from the twilight red sky almost completely. He pushed them back off. Black glass and decorative orichalcum, these would help to separate him from what the SGC expected.

“Also, their atmosphere is less dense than ours. I expect you'll get the aches and itchies from the decompression. I'll fit you with a mask and an oxygen extractor, it'll use their own air to extract oxygen for you. Also, what kind of mask should you take, let's see...”

Woolsey stood in the gateroom as Counselor Biro fussed over him under the guise of 'medical advice’. He took a fine wire mask from the assortment she'd brought, fitting it like a decorative cage over the lower half of his face. Delicate orichalcum designs twisted and cavorted, thin tentacles and drifting tendrils of nightweed that matched the circlet of his station. There were similarities to Earth's Deep One jewelry but it was clear the two styles had diverged.

He wore his best silks, a blood red runic over black pants with a coal-grey weighted cloak. Black silk gloves and black leather boots accented with red-copper orichalcum completed the look he was going for, that all-important first impression. He needed to convince the SGC that he no longer belonged to Earth, that Atlantis no longer answered to Earth, and that there would be no going back to the subservient relationship of before. Things had changed.

They had all changed.

Woolsey pulled his cloak around him, seated his goggles and mask, and picked up the delicate containment cube. The cube's rune shone bright blue, coiling and uncoiling with the ambient light.

The wormhole opened.

“Sending IDC,” Chuck called. “They're not lowering the iris without... Sheppard? You might need to take this.”

Sheppard nodded as he moved over to the technician's console. He tapped the crystals that kept it an audio only conversation. “SGC, this is Atlantis,” he said.

“Atlantis, we read you,” said a familiar voice.

“Colonel Carter,” Sheppard greeted.
“General, actually.”

“Congratulations, General,” Sheppard said and he meant it.

“Colonel Sheppard, we were under the impression the *Daedalus* should have gotten there by now. Two weeks ago, in fact.”

“They did, General, they're here safe and sound. It's just... We've had a bit of an impasse with the whole negotiating with Earth thing.”

“Why? What happened to Caldwell?”

“Nothing. Why, do you think we should do something? I could arrange it...”

“Sheppard, shut up.”

Sheppard grinned. “Yes, Ma'am.”

“If the *Daedalus* arrived then why are you contacting us?” Carter asked. At least she sounded more amused than exasperated.

“Caldwell is a poor negotiator,” Sheppard explained. “He got off on a bad foot here and many of our allies, um, what's a good term for 'laughed at his proposal and told him to jump in the ocean'? If we relied on the *Daedalus* to ferry messages we'd be in negotiations with you for a year. So we decided to send our own negotiator, get this all over with.”

“Your own negotiator? Teyla?”

“That would be me,” Woolsey said. “It's good to hear from you again, General. Congratulations on your promotion.”

“Mr. Woolsey...”

“General, I am prepared to bring with me a gift, a token of our good intentions. I hear from Caldwell that you might like it. I'm sure the SGC would appreciate it, certainly.”

“And if we can't come to an agreement?” Carter asked,

“Then I will happily return on the *Daedalus's* next run,” Woolsey said.

“If we can't agree how can you be so sure there'd be a next run?”

Sheppard grinned and Rodney purred in the background. “I'm sure we can arrange something.”

“That is not reassuring,” Carter said.

“General, if we can't come to an agreement I'll leave and you will keep my offering for what it is,” Woolsey said. “If it comes to that Atlantis is willing to sever ties with Earth and we won't trouble you any further. You'll never have to hear from us again. General, we chose to contact you. We could have chosen not to. That alone means something.”

Carter sighed over the radio link then spoke to someone away from her microphone. “The iris is down, Atlantis. This had better be worth it.”

Woolsey picked up his containment cube, nodded his final goodbyes to everyone, stood up straight, and walked through the event horizon.
“He's on his way,” Sheppard said.

“Acknowledged,” Carter said. “Regardless of how this goes, it was good to hear you're okay out there. We've been wondering for three years.”

“We wondered about Earth too,” Sheppard admitted. “But we didn’t feel it was safe to contact you until...”

“Yeah, I know,” Carter said. “I'm glad you... what the hell?”

On Atlantis Rodney began to hiss, barking hissing laughter that matched the dawning grins and amused smirks all around. They would not be underestimated again.

The wormhole collapsed and the gateroom went dark.

*****

“What the hell?” Carter demanded.

From her seat in the control room she could see the man who walked through the gate. That... was not Richard Woolsey. It couldn't be. He was short and bald, draped and wrapped and encased in silks that shimmered even in the flat dull lights of the gateroom. A dark grey cloak trailed behind him like he was Darth Vader. There wasn't a single patch of skin visible below the neck and even above the neck it was sparing.

He wore black glass goggles, their lenses set with some sort of metal she had sort of seen on Atlantis but it hadn't been this bright, this red, this pure. The mask and circlet both looked to be of Deep One make but their designs weren't anything close to the pieces in Delta Green's archives, nor were they gold. Even his clothes seemed adorned with this metal, threads woven into his tunic, a ring that seemed to crawl all over one finger, clasps that wrapped around his ankles halfway up to the knees.

In his hands he carried a red metal and blue-clear-pale crystal contraption. He walked down the ramp to the gateroom floor with a lightness to his feet that didn't match his clothing in any way. It was a silent saunter, each footstep barely making a sound on the metal grating.

He ignored the squad of marines with guns raised, ignored the flashing warning lights, ignored the fact that there was a pane of glass between him and General Carter. Instead he stopped at the bottom of the ramp, stopped where he could still see up into the control room, where she could look down at him. He dropped easily to one knee and held up the crystalline metal cube, held it above his head in distinctive supplication.

“I bring a gift,” he said. Carter's eyes went wide as she recognized the voice. Despite it all he really was Richard Woolsey. What had that world done to them?

“A token of our willingness to negotiate,” Woolsey continued, voice clear and even, almost serene. “Ten metric tonnes of unrefined neutronium in a unique storage device.”

The wormhole closed.

“Ten metric tonnes?” Carter whispered. The cube Woolsey held couldn't have been more than a foot on each side and he was holding it as easily as an offered engagement ring. The neutronium was amazing in and of itself but this storage device...

“We accept your gift,” she said, her voice echoing in the gateroom comms. “Welcome to Earth, Mr. Woolsey.”
Woolsey stood up, his head still bowed.

She watched him with discomfort. What had Atlantis been doing these past three years?
Woolsey carried the containment cube in one hand as he followed his marine escort to the medical level. He expected this, had counted on it. Earth knew what sort of planet Atlantis drifted on, they would learn what that did to a person. They would understand what the people of Atlantis had had to do to themselves to stay alive.

“Ten metric tonnes in that little box,” Carter breathed.

Woolsey glanced in her direction. The metal structure of his goggles blocked her from peripheral view but she wasn't quiet. He could hear her just fine. “Give or take a few kilos,” he said. “Ten metric tonnes is the containment cube's capacity. I believe this one contains closer to 9.3 tonnes of unrefined ore.”

“All in that little box...”

Woolsey held the box out for her to take. “I warn you, it's heavy.”

“I would expect it to be-- OOF.” Carter tried to hold the box in one hand but couldn't. She grabbed at it with both hands, just managing to keep it from slamming into the floor. She lifted it with difficulty. “This thing feels like it's made of lead.”

“I did warn you,” Woolsey said, smiling easily. It seemed sinister behind the mask.

Carter hoisted the cube with effort, holding it up to gaze into it. Her eyes smoldered red as she looked past the writhing blue rune into the center of the cube. In its center there looked to be a single glass bead, within sat the tiniest speck of dark material. “How did they...”

“The Deep Ones like to collect things,” Woolsey said conversationally. “There's a neutron star in our cluster. The Deep Ones take it upon themselves to travel to its planets, seek the ore, and bring it back.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Carter mused, awe still thick in her voice.

“Atlantis has not suffered from their whims,” Woolsey said as though it explained things. “We benefit from their discoveries as surely as Earth has benefited from ours before.”

Carter looked torn, like she wanted to get to studying the neutronium right away, but also like she wanted to continue the conversation. Logic won out over desire as she realized Earth would not be safe for a processing unit. Neutronium needed microgravity for proper processing and that meant sending this to the exiles at Edgeworth Station. She sighed and handed the cube off to a burly guard. “Log this for the Daedalus's next run to Edgeworth,” she said.

“Yes, Ma'am.”

“How is Edgeworth Station?” Woolsey asked. “Caldwell had not been the most forthcoming. All he would say was he gets dropped there every time he's in the Sol System.”

“It's running,” Carter said. They walked in tandem to the elevator. Woolsey was shorter, the man had to have lost several inches of height. Medical would be the ones to verify it but she used to be able to look him in the eye. Now she felt like she loomed over him.

“It's running?” Woolsey prompted.
“The IOA neglected Edgeworth for years,” Carter said. “Then we exiled Caldwell and suddenly they’re getting supplies, raw materials, ideas... We can't prove the Daedalus is smuggling them anything but it's obvious. Personally, I approve, but unfortunately Congress has been shifting our funding over to Delta Green. Cthulhu rises once and suddenly He's more of a danger than anything we face?”

Woolsey chuckled. “Your enemy will only attack if he sees you are there.”

Carter wondered about that. It sounded like a quote from somewhere. “Confucius?” she asked.

“Old Wraith proverb.”

Carter hummed. That was something else to get used to, Wraith words being tossed about like they weren't a predatory species that nearly culled Earth with the intention of eating everyone.

The elevator ride up to level 21 passed in a silence that should have been uncomfortable. It seemed to be so to the guards that followed them but Carter felt no danger and Woolsey seemed to be quietly exuding an inhuman aura of superiority. Carter wondered if it was an act or if he really did feel it, that predatory instinct that placed him higher on the food chain. She did sometimes, especially when the gate idled and Daniel was there to goad her into picking at the threads.

The door opened onto the medical level. Carter gestured for Woolsey to go first. The guards followed, tension bleeding off of them like a boat's wake. Then Carter brought up the rear to observe.

No, Woolsey wasn't human anymore. That was the only explanation. Every step carried a careless grace, every movement a sinuosity that reminded her of Rodney after his Change. The red metal conformed to him, moving with him, the Deep One designs seeming to flow and bend. She watched the metal, seeing representations of extra-terrestrial flora and fauna hiding among the sanity-bending lines and curves. Rodney had learned much before leaving Earth behind.

They had all left Earth behind. Which begged the question. Why had they returned?

*****

At Mr. Woolsey's request he was convalescing in a decompression chamber while General Carter and Dr. Lam discussed the results of the preliminary exams.

“He's lost about three inches in height,” Dr. Lam said. “There's bone deposition indicative of a higher gravity environment though less cartilage loss than I'd expect. The height loss seems to be actual loss of length in his long bones but that makes no sense. His x-rays show no evidence of Deep One taint therefore he shouldn't be experiencing osseous changes like this.

“He does have thickened eardrums, common in people who go through compression and decompression cycles on a regular basis,” she continued. “Also he's gained twenty pounds in increased muscle mass and a subcutaneous fat layer. He's already asked for acidified eye drops to combat what he calls our 'poisonously alkaline atmosphere.' You said Atlantis's current world has 0.3% sulfur dioxide in its atmosphere?”

“That's right,” Carter said.

“Holy God,” Dr. Lam swore. She laughed nervously, or perhaps manically. “Our atmosphere might be poisonous to him. How did they adapt? They had to or they'd all be dead. Dr. Beckett is an amazing geneticist, I would love to see what gene therapies he came up with.”
“How do you know this is normal gene therapy?” Carter asked.

“Well, I don’t.” Dr. Lam admitted. “There’s no way to know for sure where any genetic changes came from, not unless I can find the inactive retrovirus in his system. Which, at this point, is a laughably remote possibility. His immune system would have degraded any method of delivery long ago.”

“What else is different?”

“He’s slightly nearsighted, a side effect of the tapetum lucidum. He’s exhaling a large amount of carbonates and I expect we’ll find more in his respiratory mucosa. His blood is on the acidic side. I’d like to run a stress test to determine lung efficiency, oh, and a full blood panel to get kidney and liver function.”

Carter took the offered tablet and scanned through its contents. She compared the medical data to what she knew a planet like that could do. The pressure was high but manageable, the winds were hellish, the acid was worse...

“I won’t know until I get those test results but I think we need to seriously consider whether or not he can stay here,” Dr. Lam said. “I don’t think he’d survive Earth long-term. Unless some of his adaptations ‘wear off’ somehow...”

“You think they’re caused by Deep One Song?” Carter asked.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

*****

General Carter walked the third story hallway of the Aspen building, Pike's Peak College. She heard snippets of lectures as she walked past closed doors, heard the frantic scratch of chalk on chalkboards from the math center. It had been ages since she set foot on a college campus, ages still since she’d been a student.

She’d never been a student at a community college. It made her wonder why Delta Green used this place to educate their agents.

Or perhaps it made more sense at second glance. Nobody would suspect anything important going on at a community college. It was one of the country's great prejudices.

The walls were less blank than the ones at the SGC. Each classroom had a bulletin board in the hallway detailing resume and job workshops, announcements for club meetings, and of course articles on research that interested various professors. She knew she’d reached the correct classroom not by the small brass numberplate over the door but by the bulletin board outside.

Delta Green hid in plain sight. There was a flier for the UFO club, an article on the Kepler Space Telescope, and an interview of a scientist on the *USS Hi'lalakai* done by the *Weekly World News*. Carter rolled her eyes and opened the classroom door.

She stepped into the middle of a lecture. “General,” said one of the students, loud enough to disrupt the professor.

“At ease,” Carter said. She sat in the back of the classroom, folding herself into an uncomfortable college chair. “Continue, Professor,” she said.

“Thank you, General.” Professor Kaleb Miller turned back to the overhead projector where a film of
a letter was displayed on the wall. “As we just covered, Lovecraft kept all of his letters. This is a
copy of one of them. The original is presumed to be a part of the Lovecraft Collection at Brown
University though there have been rumors of a 'misplacement'.

Kaleb fiddled with the projector, jury-rigging the old equipment into a passable zoom. The writing
was curling, sprawled, cramped, but legible. “Robert Olmstead wrote to Lovecraft in the summer of
1931 concerning the events at Innsmouth, Massachusetts in 1928. What I have here is Olmstead's
second letter in their correspondence. There's no record of Lovecraft's side of the exchange.
Olmstead became the unnamed narrator in The Shadow Over Innsmouth. Lovecraft admits in letters
to August Derleth and Donald Wandrei that the story was not his idea but that for the safety and
sanity of the world this fact can never be widely known. As you can imagine, neither man took him
seriously.

“The exact letters where Olmstead presumably tells the true story of Innsmouth are considered lost
and up until three years ago were dismissed as fiction. Yes?” Kaleb pointed to a hand raised in the
front row.

“Why did Olmstead contact Lovecraft, do you think?” The man would not have been mistaken for a
student in any other classroom. Here, though, the neatly pressed suit and blank black tie marked him
as a trainee agent, Delta Green.

“There is reason to believe Olmstead knew about Lovecraft's connection to Great Cthulhu,” Kaleb
said. “The Call of Cthulhu, detailing R'lyeh's rise in 1925, was published in February of 1928. If we
consider the events of February of that year, Olmstead would have been psychologically fragile and
impressionable. The story and the letter we have here detail his attempt to put everything out of mind
and live a normal human life but when that became difficult he likely sought out Lovecraft as a sort
of kindred spirit, or at least as someone who might possibly understand what he was going through.
Like any human who felt his death approaching, and Olmstead does use the term 'death' when
talking about his humanity, we can presume he wanted to tell his story while he still could. I doubt
Olmstead knew Lovecraft would then twist that story into a novella for publishing.”

“What do you mean 'twist'?" This question came from a different agent.

“Lovecraft was a product of his time,” Kaleb said. “He was a eugenicist, an anti-semite, and a racist.
He viewed the Anglican race as the highest pinnacle of humanity and the majority of his works are
painted with that brush in some way. Entire courses could be taught on racism in Lovecraft's works.
This caused him to write Deep Ones as monsters, as animalistic brutes with no language, no Song,
and no civilization. His story mentions the city and the curious gold jewelry because these are
necessary plot points, not because he wants to attribute invention or art to them. Yet even with
Lovecraft's editorializing the astute reader can see the fairness and civility of those creatures he
would call monsters.”

“How so?” A third agent.

“When Zadok Allen tells his story of the town's past he says he's protected unless a jury could prove
he told secrets deliberately and with malice,” Kaleb said. “Innocence until proven guilty is a
cornerstone of any fair justice system.”

“For bringing the upper-earth men's death I must do a penance but it would not be heavy',” Sam
said, quoting the book from memory. The quote was nearly correct. “Deep Ones practiced
forgiveness and rehabilitation of their criminals. Vengeance would have taken the form of sacrifice or
execution.”

“Forgiveness is one of the highest virtues of a civilized society,” Kaleb agreed.
An uncomfortable silence descended on the students, on the twenty trainee agents who were here on campus pretending to be students while their professor, who according to widespread rumor had enthralled himself to his hybrid wife, lectured them on the dangers of taking Lovecraft at his word. Nobody wanted to say anything with General Carter sitting in the back row, not with the rumors around her career of alien artifacts and wormholes and thwarting invasions with nothing but a roll of duct tape and a spanner.

Professor Miller dismissed the class after another half an hour of lecture. He looked confused as his students filed out quickly and with a minimum of grumbling. He waited for them all to leave before addressing Carter. “Usually two or three of them stay behind for an hour trying to convince me I’m wrong,” he mused.

“Sorry about that,” Carter said.

“No, no, it's just that now I have a free hour before I have to be anywhere,” Kaleb said. “What brings you here?”

Carter took a deep breath. “We found them,” she said.

Kaleb looked confused then wary then shocked then he sat down in one of the student chairs. “You... found them?” he asked. “How?”

“They contacted us,” Carter said. “Eight weeks ago. We didn't want to get anyone's hopes up so we waited until it was confirmed.”

Kaleb looked down at his hands then up at Carter's eyes. He swore sometimes they shone red same as Jeannie's shone green. Now was one of those times. “You... confirmed it?” he asked.

“We sent the Daedalus to go check it out. They sent back word.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked. “Why not tell Jeannie? He's her brother.”

“Because they're not agreeing to our oversight,” Carter said. “They're willing to open trade agreements like any other foreign power but they have some hard limits. Nobody gets transferred off, no charges are brought, we don't attempt to take over, they retain all control over their city and their achievements. The IOA already doesn't like it and nobody's even met face-to-face yet.”

“Will there even be a face-to-face meeting?” Kaleb asked, voice incredulous. He couldn't see Delta Green agreeing to be that hands-off when it came to the Heretic Nest.

“They sent a representative to us. Richard Woolsey is in town until and unless an agreement can be made.”

Kaleb looked down at his hands. This was... He wasn't sure how to feel. Three years...

“They've already put the idea of immigration on the table,” Carter said. “Atlantis is willing to take in any family member who wants to go. Think about it, Kaleb. She could be safe. They could be, Jeannie, Madison, Robert, they could all be safe. You wouldn't have to work for Delta Green to keep them safe. You could do anything. You could even go with them.”

Kaleb took a deep breath. He knew his contract with Delta Green was a particularly nasty deal with a devil. Jeannie and their children were safe so long as he did what he was told. For now that meant teaching classes, disassembling Lovecraft's work, trying to make some sense out of the Archivist. For now. But who knew what else they'd ask later? How long until they went back on their word and demanded he submit himself, his family, his children for testing?
“But there's a problem,” Carter said. “Their planet is... not what I would call habitable.”

Kaleb gave her a confused blank look. He had no idea what she meant.

“You need to see this to believe it,” Sam said. “You need to come to the mountain.”

*****

Richard Woolsey stalked through the corridors of the SGC, a pair of guards behind him. He paid no mind to their real mission, instead incorporating their presence into the air of alien command he was trying to cultivate. It was easier given he was back to wearing his silks, his orichalcum, and his cloak. The smoky glass goggles shielded his eyes from the harsh brightness of the hallway lights, the gloves separated his touch from any other he might meet, and his jewelry marked him as something definitively Other.

A storage room on level 17 had been converted yet again. Woolsey wondered why the SGC didn't just keep a room on level 17 for negotiations. There had been enough before the Ori, surely that hadn't changed once the Priors were cleared out and the holy books burned.

Woolsey came to the correct door. He glanced back at his guards. They stood up straight, almost like they were daring him to dismiss them. Woolsey smirked. He would do no such thing. They added to his intimidation. He opened the door to face his opponents.

Conversation in the room stopped. Four sets of eyes stared openly at what was once a colleague. He didn't look so familiar anymore. They could tell it was him, there was no mistaking that face regardless of black glass goggles or strange red-copper jewelry. But he didn't carry himself the same, not anymore. He moved differently, more fluidly, more deliberately. His hands moved slower as they wrapped around the back of a chair, black silk shining in the fluorescent lighting. He seemed shorter, broader, almost decadent in an obscene way.

And then he spoke and all doubt left their minds. Woolsey had changed.

“Representative Shen,” he said. “Representative Coolidge. Counselor Strom. Representative Nechayev. It's been a long time.”

“It certainly has.” General Carter stepped out from the side. She offered her hand to Woolsey. He looked at it, cocked his head, then seemed to remember. Only after that display did he shake her hand. “Welcome to Earth, Counselor Woolsey.”

“Thank you, Domiv'ondas,” Woolsey said. He was gratified when she accepted the term with a nod. He did not look forward to admitting where it came from, that it was the name the Wraith had for her.

Sam Carter took her seat at the head of the table. On one side sat Woolsey, alone but unfazed. On the other sat four members of the IOA. This was going to be a long day.
Teyla sat in her old quarters. The rooms hadn't been changed, kept reserved and untouched for her despite the weeks and months between visits. This was her space and no mere planet would take that from her, not even the twilight world.

Candles burned around the low shelves and tables, giving the nightside’s darkness an orange-yellow glow. She sat on the floor, on pillows and rugs woven of soft furs and fabrics that resisted the acid of this world. Yet their softness was lost on her at the moment. She didn't notice the wire mask, the glass goggles, not even the soft silks that adorned her.

This was not meditation. She was not allowing thoughts to rise unbidden then collapse under the sea of her raging mind. This was different.

She was Listening.

The Wraith blood that coursed through her veins had once been nothing more than a slimy feeling that curled in her throat and her mind when the Wraith were near. But years of practice had changed that, had given her the courage and opportunity to expand on her talents. She was not just Teyla Emmagan anymore, not like this. The mind of the Lady Steelflower reached out through the halls of Atlantis to touch the minds who lived and lurked there.

She could feel the purring comfort and swishing tail of Rodney as his mind touched hers back. There was something playful there that he himself didn't fully embrace, she could feel it lurking below the roiling surface of his thoughts. She followed that gleeful feeling to John, to the man who right now was in Rodney's lair hovering and poking and in general being a delightful annoyance. From there her mind spread to the various Deep Ones, to Lilith and Mara, to Anzu and Saka, to the others who had not yet taken names for themselves and still answered to their human names as Rodney did. They swam the oceans, they lounged in ballast tanks, they stalked the corridors, they watched as the Daedalus readied to leave.

And then something called her attention.

It was an ancient presence, old and older still. Yet that age was not a comfort to it as its thoughts were jumbled, disturbed, worried, unsure. And coming this way. Teyla could hear them growing stronger as their owner came closer, close enough to hear words.

Can't be. Must be a mistake. The servant is insane. That must be it. I will not fear the insanity of a servant. I will not. But what if it speaks the truth? I need...

Teyla opened her eyes. Guide was outside her door, unsure if he should impose himself. She could sense the warring impulses, the insistence that she was merely a human, though an augmented one. Against that was the need to serve a queen, the instincts telling him he must defer, he must submit, he must not bother her with such trivial problems as the words of a mad servant.

She got up and opened the door before he could leave.

Guide's eyes went wide as he took in her scent, her clothing, the oppressive sensation of her mind on his. He took a step back.

Teyla smiled behind the wire mask. She reached out to his mind, speaking with a voice that was as
much hers as the sounds that might come from her throat. *Come in, mi Praefector.*

Guide bowed his head and followed. The door shut behind him.

Teyla sat back on her nest of pillows and furs, curling her legs below her as though she were merely meditating. “Your mind is troubled,” she said, slipping back into human speech. She ran a hand over the furs next to her, inviting him to take a seat by her side.

Guide shifted from foot to foot. “It is nothing, my Lady,” he said. She was not his queen, he could not call her that, but he could still use the title the Lanteans used for allied Wraith.

“Trivialities do not trouble you so,” Teyla said. She leveled her eyes at him and added pressure.

Guide felt the unvoiced command. He sagged before folding himself on the furs next to her. He allowed himself to be manipulated until his head was in her lap, her hands gently combing through the wild morass that was his hair. “I serve my Queen Alabaster,” he said. His statement seemed incongruous and unconvincing.

“Was there any doubt?” Teyla asked.

“No,” Guide said. Then he sighed. “I do not know. The heretic servant, their Archivist, he has suggested something that unnerves me.”

“It is a talent of his from before his service,” Teyla said wryly.

That got a deep chuckle out of Guide. “You knew him before.”

“He once possessed all of Dr. McKay's human arrogance but none of his genius.” Teyla described. “He did not adapt to Atlantis and so he left. This was before you and I met.”

“Ah.”

“What unnerves you?”

Guide grumbled, leaning his head against her belly. He didn't want to say it. Now that he was here his concerns felt foolish, unnecessary. He should leave before he wasted any more of the Lady's time.

Teyla's hand went to his chin and tilted his head so she could look into his dull yellow eyes. His pupils were wide in the darkness, their inner shine a comfort. *You are troubled,* she thought to him.

This troubles me. What is it you dwell on?

Guide stared into her eyes. They could so easily be mistaken for brown but in this light he could see the deep gold within that betrayed her heritage. *I am Wraith,* he thought. *I am Wraith and I would not change that.*

*Of course not. You are Wraith, you always have been.*

*Domiv'aereticus would change that.*

That shocked Teyla into speech. “That would be quite a change.”

Guide snorted. “The servant tells me every Nest is led by a Queen and her Consort. The Heretic Queen seeks a consort.”

“I had not heard this,” Teyla said. But then she had not been told why the Archivist was here. She
had heard, inferred, Listened, and found. She was not told but she knew he was here for his expertise on Deep Ones. If anyone would know that of Rodney it would be the Archivist.

“She seeks someone of equal power and strength,” Guide said. “Her Song will twist her choice into a moner’abyssus as she is, a Deep One.”

Teyla allowed Guide's projected thoughts to wash over her. She was hit with a dozen memories of what Rodney called 'the usual greetings', of Guide and Rodney mock-fighting then exchanging scents through bodily contact. There was a sensuality to these memories she had not expected and now a fear of losing oneself. A fear of sinking too deep, of being unable to resist, of not even realizing the danger until it was too late. *You fear he has chosen you.*

_I do, my Lady._ Guide leaned into her belly again, averting his eyes as he wrapped his arms around her waist. He didn't want to see the condemnation there, the accusations of weakness. He was Wraith, the Wraith did not convert themselves to a different species in order to become the consort of a sea-locked monere.

Instead he felt her hands on him again, stroking his hair. *You are still Wraith,* she murmured in his mind. *You are no one's consort.*

Guide braced for the old pain that statement should have induced. Memories of Snow were still bittersweet. But Steelflower was right, he was no one's consort. His Queen was born of his blood; she indulged him as a father, not as a consort. He kept to his own counsel and that had served him well. He would keep to his own counsel now. _No male who values his life would dare reject the advances of a Queen._

“Then it is good you do not value your life,” Teyla said.

Guide burst out laughing.

*****

John opened his eyes.

The waters were murky dark, the dim rays of the angry red sun caught above by the black plankton that drifted the endless oceans of the twilight world. Yet even through the darkness he could see, could see the endless abyss to the dayside of him where the world's crust succumbed to tidal forces and subducted under the sunken continent. The darkness of it was total even for him, he could swim down and down into the center of the world, never reaching the sea floor.

But that was not his destination. He turned from the abyss toward the nightside and the sparkling city of red-copper spires and dull shadowed glass. She sat with her central spire just barely touching the surface above as her piers spread out into the silt and sand and cracked pillow lavas of the sea floor. His friends, his colleagues, his children darted among the spires, swam the tainted-black waters, entered and exited through those ingenious sea gates into the air-filled central spire.

This was his city.

And he was not alone.

He could hear her Song. Not the city but the Mother, his Hydra, he could hear her even now. He always heard her. The abyss itself heard her. The stargate carried her Song through the galaxy, a hundred worlds stopped and listened to her Song.

His crest raised in pride. She was his. She would always be his.
And she was nearby.

John swam, effortlessly cutting through the water to find her. Ah, yes... There.

She was beautiful. Her back was adorned with long rows of delicate spines that shone and shimmered in the dim light. Her tail was long, thick, agile, flicking lazily in the water. Her eyes were blue, the only pure blue left in all of Atlantis.

John swam up behind her and flicked his claws down those spines, tugging gently on each one until she deigned to pay attention to him. He hissed a playful challenge as she turned and snarled at him. He waited for her lunge before beginning the chase, darting enticingly before her. She snapped and snarled, tail whipping behind her. She was much faster than him, more maneuverable, he didn't have the chance to flee for long. She grabbed him around the middle and dove, ramming them into the silty sea bottom. A cloud of murk rose around them, blocking his vision even as he felt her teeth on the back of his neck.

He arched into the bite and purred.

Sheppard opened his eyes.

The ocean was gone, mostly. The silt was still there. He lay on the floor of Rodney's lair, Rodney's tail draped over him and Rodney's tongue slowly licking the back of his neck.

What is it?

It took Sheppard a moment to return to reality, to realize the voice in his head was Rodney's. Also that he was currently lounging on the floor, that there was silt getting into itchy and uncomfortable places, and that he was half laid-on by his Deep One friend. “Was I asleep?” Sheppard asked.


Sheppard did not feel better about that.

What's wrong?

Sheppard wiggled his way out from under Rodney and only then noticed he was missing most of his clothes. No matter, he was silty enough that no one would notice. Besides, this wasn't the first time this happened. And that thought suddenly did not make him feel better. “I need to go,” he said, leaving quickly. He didn't even look back.

Okay... What's going on?

Rodney's question was met with silence.

*****

After a shower and a fresh change of clothes Sheppard radioed the gateroom. “Gateroom, this is Sheppard,” he said. “Anything I should be apprised of?”

“Guide has announced his departure,” Lorne said on the other end. “He wanted to talk to you before he left. He's waiting on the South-East Pier.”

“Good to know,” Sheppard said. He put the circlet of his station on his head, brushing his hair out of the metal with his fingers. “Wait...” If Guide left that would put a damper on the whole issue with Earth. Atlantis wouldn't be able to renegotiate because so many representatives showed up for the
initial vote and would not hear an appeal. Dammit, that meant he had to go do something. “I'm equalized, I'll be on the Pier in fifteen minutes.”

“I'll let him know,” Lorne said, sounding amused.

Sheppard cut the link and scowled at his own mirror. Then he grabbed his cloak and left.

Ten minutes later he was on the South-East Pier. The Snow’s Lament sat waiting for her commander, engines humming in the wind. Guide stood nearby, arms crossed over his chest. As Sheppard came closer he could sense the discomfort coming off of Guide. It was a foreign sensation, a frightening feeling. After all, Guide was never apprehensive.

What was this?

Sheppard sent the Watchman back into the city with a dismissive wave. Then he approached.

Guide's worry was quickly covered by a mask of delighted indifference. “Ah, Sheppard,” he said. “You're leaving early,” Sheppard said. “Doesn't this interfere with your plans?”

Guide's mask faltered for a moment before it was put back into place. “Plans have not changed but the circumstances have,” he admitted. “I cannot stay in this city.”

Sheppard smirked. “For all the talk of the 'adaptability of the Wraith', you're just as fragile as your prey.”

Guide growled. Then he stopped, brushing a windblown strand of unruly hair from his face. “I am Wraith and I would remain Wraith,” he said. “Thus I must leave the Heretic Queen and her influence.”

“He's,” Sheppard corrected.

“She is your Queen,” Guide snapped. “Do not insult her.”

“I'll insult him all I please,” Sheppard argued. “He's my friend, that means I can. And his name is Rodney!”

Guide snarled, teeth bared. Then he took a step back and the veneer of civilization oozed over him. “I will not argue with you, Sheppard,” he said. “The Heretic Queen has played us both for far too long. I will not provide her entertainment any longer. I will not fight for her affections, I do not want them. If you value your humanity you would be wise to join me in fleeing her Song.”

Sheppard gaped, feeling confused and insulted.

“The servant, the one you call the Archivist, he knows more than I. I will return after your ship of thralls and fools returns with Counselor Woolsey. Until then, consider your humanity. How precious is your form to you?”

Before Sheppard could come up with a comeback Guide was gone, disappeared into the belly of the Snow’s Lament. The Wraith ship's engines surged, squealing in what sort of sounded like joy before the magnetic locks disengaged and the ship ascended into the sky.

Sheppard stood on the Pier, his weighted cloak flapping in the omnipresent wind.

*****
The whirr of the sulfur scrubbers was a constant drone inside the _Daedalus_. It was worth it, though, for Caldwell to be able to walk the corridors of his own ship without the constant burn of the planet's acid or the slimy feeling at the back of his throat from the basic mixture.

He was never forgetting that feeling. It reminded him of a particularly bad shore leave from his early career.

The _Daedalus_ was returning to Earth with almost everything they'd brought. The chocolate and coffee stores had been decimated but the flats of MREs, the computer equipment, even the naquadah generators were returning unneeded and unwanted. Rather they were laden with information. Atlantis had gifted them with terabytes of cultural information, enough to keep the anthropology department at the SGC busy for years.

But they were missing two passengers.

It was an assurance that the _Daedalus_ would be back, they said. Consider it a cultural exchange, they said. Consider it a chance for the Archivist to do his job properly. Consider it a hostage exchange. The SGC would get Drs. Jackson and Kavanagh back when the _Daedalus_ returned with Counselor Woolsey. The Council assured him of this, especially the Archivist. They might even give the Archivist back if the _Daedalus_ didn't return with Woolsey.

Caldwell knew the SGC would do anything to get Dr. Jackson back. The Archivist, much less. He also knew neither man seemed disturbed in the slightest that they were being held hostage. Dr. Jackson refused to even consider himself a hostage, saying 'hostage' meant he was being kept against his will, while Dr. Kavanagh merely lamented the fact that the ocean here was 'cold and gross, really gross'.

Colonel Caldwell went to the bridge and settled in his chair. He did not envy Lieutenant Colonel Bishop his task of explaining to General Carter why they hadn't returned with her precious Daniel.

“Seal up,” Caldwell ordered. “Begin the depressurization sequence.”

“Yes sir.” Major Kevin Marks tapped out the preprogrammed sequence that would decrease internal pressure to 2 bar. From there they could take off and continue depressurizing to the space standard 0.75 bar before entering hyperspace. The entire cycle would take six hours on the ground, 18 more in space before they could truly leave.

It would not be time wasted. The _Daedalus_ would take in as much information as they could manage, scanning the outer planet, surveying the open cluster, peeking in at the neutron star. Only then would they truly leave, beginning the long trek back to the Milky Way.

Caldwell still wasn't sure if this trip had been worth it or not.
Opening Negotiations

“Unacceptable.”

Woolsey sat back in his chair. Across from him the three IOA representatives and their counselor worked hard to reign in their anger, confusion, and distaste. On the far end of the table, unaffiliated with either party, General Carter looked on with interest as did Professor Miller beside her.

“What part of that was unacceptable?” Woolsey asked.

Strom looked to Coolidge who took a deep breath before answering. “You want us to agree to zero IOA oversight,” Coolidge said. “Zero interference from Earth. Zero transfer of personnel from Atlantis. Zero military oversight. These things cannot happen. Atlantis is an IOA project. You are head of that expedition due to our decision, a decision we have the option to change at any time. You will submit to Earth oversight and that is final.”

“See, that's where we differ in opinion,” Woolsey said, much calmer than his former colleague. “We haven't belonged to Earth for three years and we have benefited greatly from the lack of interference. The entire Pegasus Galaxy has seen the beginnings of an unprecedented peace once thought impossible and a free Atlantis was key in negotiating that peace. A malicious genocide of all human life in that galaxy was stopped by a coalition of allies: Wraith, Ancients, Genii, and others, all brought together by a free Atlantis. Counselor, representatives, you would ask me to destroy all a free Atlantis has done for millions of human beings simply because those humans do not live on Earth. They have never seen Earth, they do not recognize Earth as their progenitor world, they have no loyalty to Earth and neither do I. We in Pegasus do not care about the affairs of Earth.”

“You are from Earth!” Coolidge shouted.

“Ego ani Lantean,” Woolsey snapped. He took advantage of their shock to remove his goggles, blinking at the sudden brightness of the fluorescent lighting. “Terra'ni deductavum. Vos lacu'no.”

Shen's eyes were wide and a hand over her mouth. Nechayev looked uncomfortable, almost ill. Coolidge twitched visibly and Strom sat back in shock. Kaleb leaned forward in interest while Carter hid a grin of utter delight behind her hands.

Woolsey had no idea what was so shocking. He knew his eyes shone even in this bright light but that hadn't seemed strange in years. He knew he was getting twitchy, the tremors from blood alkalosis were beginning, but that wasn't strange either. Perhaps it was a curse of the Milky Way, its monsters pressed into hiding, into obscurity, into extinction by the Goa'uld and the four so-called 'great races'. Maybe that was why even the slightest hint of inhumanity was causing such a reaction among the IOA's council and their observers. Or maybe they'd simply never heard Ancient spoken aloud before.

Woolsey forced himself to relax, orichalcum and black glass goggles sitting before him on the conference table. He glanced over at Carter who nodded, her own eyes shining red as she tried to suppress her own smile. Then he turned his attention back to the IOA council, letting his inhuman eyes linger on each of them.

“What happened to you, Richard?” Strom asked. He sounded... awed? Disturbed? Frightened? Unnerved?

“We had to adapt to our world,” Woolsey said. “Atlantis has changed. All of her citizens have
changed. We had to adapt or we'd die. This is just one difference, the easiest difference you can see. There's more I assure you and it is not pretty.”

Shen made a small noise, hand still over her mouth. That noise got worse and she was up from the table and running down the length of the room. The retching echoed nonetheless.

Carter looked in the direction Shen ran. She motioned for Kaleb to go check on her then gave Woolsey a questioning look.

“She expressed interest in my position during an evaluation,” Woolsey said. “I think she just realized what would have happened if...”

“Oh,” Carter said, nodding sagely.

Woolsey turned back on the two remaining representatives and their counselor. “We came from Earth, that is true,” he said. “But we are no longer of Earth. We cannot stay on Earth. Before I came here our doctors warned me this could be a one-way trip, that I might die here because our world is so different from Earth. That Earth’s atmosphere might kill me.” He held up his shaking hands. He was having a hard time feeling his face. “I'm not entirely sure our doctors were wrong.”

Carter tapped her radio. “General Carter to medical, we have a problem.”

*****

Shen Xiaoyi stood in the medical bay, arms wrapped around herself as she watched a screen. On the other end of that connection Richard Woolsey lay in a decompression chamber. The chamber was not pressurized or oxygenated, it was sealed to allow carbon dioxide to build up inside. Already there was an indicator warning of 5%, the red flashing was enough to tell her it should be dangerous. It would be dangerous for a human being, at least. Richard, on the other hand, was breathing deeply, slowly, serenely, his tremor had stopped and he was relaxed.

That could have been her in there. If her initial review of Atlantis had gone as she’d planned it would have. Instead someone had meddled, whether it be spirits or the SGC's vaunted Ancients or Woolsey's orders that tricked her didn't matter. If she hadn't been tricked she would be the one in there.

Instead she was here. Earth was only a prison if she thought it one. But at least here her body was her own. It would not be altered by alien forces or gene therapy or whatever horrors Richard had put himself through to survive on that dreadful world.

The little red number ticked up to 6%.

“We'll cap the CO₂ levels at 8%, see what happens.”

Shen turned to see Dr. Lam watching her. Shen nodded. “He's not human anymore, is he?” she asked.

Dr. Lam shook her head. “No, he's not,” she admitted. “Eight percent is fatal in humans, death by blood acidification. Even at 6% he should be violently ill, barely able to breathe. Those are not human reactions in there.”

“So if we move any of them back to Earth...”

“They'll die,” Lam agreed. “Anyone you transfer here will die. Anyone from here you transfer to Atlantis will never be able to come back. They'll they'll end up like him or worse.”
Shen nodded.

“We're setting something up with the mask he brought with him,” Lam said. “It's an amazing piece of technology, it uses electromagnetic fields to exclude nonpolar molecules. If we can modify it correctly then maybe we can come up with a gas mixture that won't kill either party.”

“Either party?”

“His world has a potentially fatal concentration of sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere. No one should have to suffer ill effects from second-hand breathing.”

Shen didn't answer. A mask to separate him from Earth's air, goggles to separate him from Earth's light, and full-body clothing to separate him from Earth's gaze. His very nature had been changed and his body twisted into something else.

Something alien.

*****

The negotiation chambers on level 17 were depressingly familiar. The difference this time was the mask Woolsey wore and the small tank medical was making him carry around. That was amusing, though, watching his guards look uncomfortable when he ignored the wheel cart and simply lifted the air tank like it didn't weigh 25 pounds. It felt more like 12 pounds.

“I admit I did not expect to give a practical demonstration but my point stands,” Woolsey said before he even sat down. “Anyone you transfer here will die.”

“And yet you're here,” Strom said. He, Nechayev, Shen, and Coolidge once again sat on one side of the table while Woolsey sat alone on the other. Carter sat on an edge pretending to be impartial while Kaleb Miller sat next to her taking notes and observing.

“It was a calculated risk,” Woolsey said. “If we were to rely on Caldwell's negotiation skills the Daedalus would burn out her engine core before we might reach an accord. The IOA would continue to insist that somehow Atlantis belongs to Earth while we would ignore such nonsense and continue to accept bribes sent by Earth. By the way, General, Counselor Zelenka wanted me to extend his gratitude for the coffee and chocolate.”

“No problem,” Carter said. “How’d they like the generators? They're the new Mark IIIIs.”

Woolsey cleared his throat before answering. “We... decided not to partake,” he admitted.

“Counselor McKay and Dahlia Radim of the Genii have developed their own design. It is physically larger but comparable in power and more stable during controlled overload.”

“The IOA feels we should have access to that design,” Strom said.

“I'm sure the Genii would object to that,” Woolsey said. “The Radim Administration retains control over the distribution of that technology. I do not have the authority to negotiate that distribution.”

“It was a discovery made on Atlantis by a Canadian scientist in the employ of the SGC,” Strom growled.

“It was a collaborative effort between two major galactic powers developed on a neutral world by a team of multi-planetary scientists led by a Deep One and a member of the Genii government, overseen by a cabal of interested third parties. I fail to see where the IOA has any claim over their work given you didn't provide funding or materials or scientists or incentive or location.”
Strom's face was red with anger.

“Counselor, representatives, Atlantis did not make the decision to contact Earth lightly,” Woolsey said. “We did not do it out of desperation or need or even homesickness as you might imagine. We do not need your resources, your personnel, or your oversight. The decision to contact you was not unanimous nor was it a quick and easy one. We debated this in and out of Council for weeks. In the end we had a one vote margin in favor of, not out of necessity or obligation but out of curiosity. We wondered if Earth survived R'lyeh. We knew once our curiosity was satisfied you'd send someone to come 'reign us in' as it were and we prepared for that event. We hoped we would not have to defend ourselves, we still hope for that, but the IOA's insistence that we owe you allegiance is unacceptable. Atlantis is a free city-state and will remain as such for as long as the Domiv'aereticus wills it.”

“Then why are you here?” Coolidge demanded.

“We view this as a trade negotiation with an unknown foreign power,” Woolsey said. “No more, no less. We have brought a sample of our goods for trade; the SGC is now in possession of approximately 9.3 metric tonnes of unrefined neutronium ore mined from neutron star planets in our star cluster.”

Nechayev's eyes went wide.

Woolsey grinned. It looked sinister behind the wire mask. “We have the technology to accomplish this safely, we have personnel willing and capable, we have little use for the neutronium itself at this time other than to test the limits of the gravitational manipulation technology used to store it. We offer the initial 9.3 metric tonnes as a gift of good faith, we offer additional neutronium as a trade good. I hear it would be instrumental in understanding and utilizing the information within the Asgard database. I understand they based their construction and technology on the element.”

“That is true,” Carter said. She resolutely did not wipe away drool, she merely stroked her chin while thinking. “What would Atlantis request in return?”

“We would take coffee, chocolate, samples of their parent plants,” Woolsey allowed. “Several citizens have expressed an interest in bringing in family members.”

Shen squeaked. She looked on in disbelief. “You would ask we condemn people to your fate?” she demanded.

“Of course not,” Woolsey said easily. “However, if they were to volunteer knowing full well what would happen to them... That's not condemnation at all.”

Shen did not look convinced. Rather she looked horrified.

“You would trade neutronium for plants?” Coolidge asked. “There's a catch.”

“Why would there be?” Woolsey asked. “Our caffeine comes from a plant we dry then smoke. It tastes like fermented skunk. It's not much better as a tea and it's completely disgusting raw.”

Kaleb snorted. “Sorry,” he said.

“And of course there is the simple exchange of information,” Woolsey said. “Wraith worshipers make beautiful music but it's all of the same theme. Movies are unheard of and Satedan epics are far too long to sit through. We are running low on unique films and the Travelers have begun expressing their displeasure.”

“So the Travelers offer you cruiser support, then?” Sam asked.
“Linguistic services, actually,” Woolsey said. “There are Traveler groups who still speak Ancient as their native language. They've been most instrumental in integrating Atlantis into Pegasus society. They are consummate dealers of news, information, entertainment, the best way to get the whole galaxy involved in anything is to tell a Traveler ship they'll get a cut of the proceeds. When necessary the Wraith Alliance provides most of our cruiser support.”


“The Wraith can be most accommodating when faced with a common enemy,” Woolsey said. “Mutual extinction is the most common of enemies. Those Wraith who refused to see reason were defeated at the Battle of Five Armies.”

Coolidge twitched.

“The name was not my idea,” Woolsey said.

Kaleb couldn't help the grin. Nor could Carter.

“Nevertheless, Queen Death left behind followers, daughter-queens who squabble for power in the shadows. The Wraith will be a problem again and this time they know where Earth is. You need us. We do not need you. Remember that when you speak to the rest of the IOA.”

*****

Woolsey sat in the commissary on level 22. He didn't care that he sat alone or that the food was all wrong or that the Tau'ri were staring at him. He had something he hadn't seen in three years, hadn't allowed himself in a decade more than that.

A milkshake.

Sort of. It was an institutional milkshake, more like a large styrofoam cup of cheap soft-serve ice cream. It was an artificial vanilla, the only flavor available. Sharp ice crystals threaded through the whole confection like it had been frozen and refrozen for at least the past couple of days.

It was delightful. He hadn't had this much sugar or fake flavor in years, not since the last jello cup had been ceremonially auctioned off almost three years ago.

Woolsey stirred the milkshake, breaking up the clumps and the ice so he could slurp it through a straw. Once it was decent he licked the spoon, humming as he did. He'd missed this.

“Are you sure you want to eat that?”

Woolsey looked up at his visitor. Professor Miller had a tray with a salad, an applesauce cup, and a mug of tea. Woolsey gestured to the empty space across from him. “Absolutely,” he said.

Kaleb sat down and picked up his fork. “I wouldn't...” he warned.

Woolsey scoffed. He stuck a straw into the mushy milkshake and threaded the straw through the wires of his mask. “We don't get sugar on Atlantis,” he said. “I know I'll be paying for this later but right now I don't care.”

Kaleb nodded, a look on his face like he'd heard this argument before from Madison. Many times.

Woolsey ignored him and slurped his milkshake. It was sweet and fake and cold and all sorts of
horrible things and it was delicious. “You're Madam McKay's husband, are you not?” he asked.
“What brings you here?”

“Delta Green,” Kaleb admitted. “I have an agreement with the NID. If I train their agents on
Lovecraft's works and its deeper meanings they'll leave Jeannie and our kids alone.”

“So they say,” Woolsey said. “But what happens when the NID goes back on their word? I was
there during the Kinsey affair, factions are inevitable in an organization of that size and with so little
transparency there's no incentive to remain civil.”

Kaleb looked into the depths of his tea. “I don't know,” he admitted. “It was the best idea of the time.
You don't know what it was like after R'lyeh sank. Delta Green went public, we were being
followed, there was a civilian backlash against anything 'abnormal', hate crimes against pagan
religions skyrocketed. They're calling it the 'Cthulhu Panic', only this time there's a real dead god
who dreams. The Vancouver city council was discussing putting thorazine into the water supply to
'protect' us from Great Cthulhu's dreams when I was, ah, made an offer.

“Delta Green picked me off the street. It was all very obvious, I was dragged into a van in broad
daylight. They told me they knew about the Stargate Program and that Jeannie was involved. They
knew she's a hybrid. She was pregnant with our second at the time. They said they could protect her
if we left Vancouver, left Canada, moved to Colorado Springs and I worked for them. After Jeannie
was kidnapped I thought I'd be safe, I'm just an English major, right? English is supposed to be a safe
field. I figured I'd be left behind or at most used as a bargaining chip.”

“You agreed, didn't you?” Woolsey asked.

“How did you guess?”

“You're alive.”

Kaleb huffed and picked at his salad. “I agreed. My PhD was rushed through and now I'm teaching
at the Pike's Peak Community College. It's an obvious cover, more than half the people in my classes
are agents or in training. There's a line somewhere I'm supposed to toe but I don't even know where
it is. Jeannie's still afraid to leave the house, what if somebody recognizes her? It's driving her to
madness. General Carter got Madison into a special school and she tries, I know she tries, but Earth
just... It isn't safe here.”

Woolsey nodded. “We weren't sure whether to open the wormhole to Earth. There were good
reasons not to. But all those who left behind family here... Atlantis is open to the idea of immigration.
The city is different, the planet is harsh, and the Deep Ones are not what you think they are but we
would be willing to open our doors to anyone from Earth who doesn't feel safe here.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Counselor McKay insisted on it as a condition for his vote.”

“He insisted on open immigration?”

Woolsey slurped the last of his milkshake. He pulled the straw out of his mask and put the styrofoam
cup on the table next to his empty tray. “He insisted on his sister and on Madison. We had to
convince him that you would be part of that package and from there open immigration evolved
organically.” His stomach gave an odd rumble.

Kaleb found himself with that parental 'I warned you' look. He consciously shook it off. “I'll speak to
Jeannie about it,” he said.
“Good, good…” Woolsey's stomach made an ominous sound. He wrapped his arms around his belly and looked around nervously.

“Bathroom's that way,” Kaleb said.

“Thanks.” Woolsey got up and tried to escape but his air tank was caught under the table. He unhooked the mask, grimacing at the bitter-tasting air before heading out of the mess hall at a near-run.

General Carter took the vacated seat. She reached down and turned the air tank's valve off before lifting it onto the table. “What was that about?” she asked.

Kaleb held up the empty styrofoam cup. “I think he needs to stick to real food.”

Carter grimaced sympathetically.
The city spread wide before and above him, her spires reaching up to the shimmering surface above. Her orichalcum shimmered deep and dark in the water, glowing red at the spire's tops. That red faded to an iridescent black as the spires turned to piers, shining black piers that glittered like obsidian amidst the black plants that dangled from the surface.

The dangling forest of black plants entangled in the city's spires, long stipes of thick blades catching and entwining with the spires. Gas floats bobbed on the surface above, caught between the howling winds and tugging currents and the tangle below.

For a moment everything changed. The ocean was blue, clear, he could see forever. Atlantis still reached out into the silt with her piers, her spire still reached up to the surface, but she seemed to be made of blue glass. The city shone bright in the clear deep blue waters like a star sapphire glinting under the light of a yellow sun.

And then the image was gone. The waters were dark again, the red sun barely reaching halfway down central spire. Only the shimmer of darkness, of aurorae, of orichalcum that looked burnt black in an ocean that consumed red light.

This place was wrong somehow. But it was his, all his. The city, the world, the wrongness, all the strange shapes that lurked and swam in and around the city.

Then he blinked and he was inside. Wait, how?

“You should have come with me.”

He turned to see the owner of that voice, pale green skin and white hair the only spots of bright in the entire world of dark orichalcum and shining night-green eyes.

Guide bared his teeth. “I could have saved you, John Sheppard.”

Sheppard opened his eyes.

He sat up. He was in bed in his quarters on Atlantis. The window outside was blanketed in twinkling stars, the bright icy outer world painting a bright swathe of the only true white light this world ever knew. Night had fallen as Atlantis drifted in her course, beyond the limb of dusk. This night would last weeks, months, no one really knew, before the red sun would rise as the city crested the dawn's edge.

The city wasn't sitting on that dawn's edge, sunken on the ridge of the submerged continent. The abyss did not stretch out toward the dayside, did not descend in a trench clear to the mantle's heat. The dawn's edge volcanoes did not crest behind him. Atlantis was not nestled in the silt among active pillow lavas.

It was a dream.

It disturbed him on some level though he didn't understand why.

*****

The council seemed empty. Woolsey was gone, off to Earth on a mission of trade negotiation. At least, that was what everyone hoped. If things went wrong Atlantis would have to defend herself...
from an invasion from Earth, Woolsey would be declared dead, and they'd be stuck with Kavanagh again.

“I, for one, do wish for his success,” said their new representative. He called himself Abe no Seimei from the Traveler ship Rising Sun. “Dr. Kusanagi assures us Earth has many more of these ‘anime’ stories. I look forward to those negotiations.”

Biro twitched but held her tongue.

“They do appreciate their giant robots,” Sheppard allowed.

“Has there been any word from Earth?” Seimei asked.

The council grew quiet. There had been no word. This was unusual, but then the entire situation was unusual. A negotiator was never sent alone, they took with them three ‘aides’ filling out a standard gate team. Two stayed at the gate or in the village, one stayed with the negotiator at all times. It ensured an environment was never deadly, a double-cross wasn't immediately fatal, Atlantis could be contacted without stopping negotiations, it just worked better than sending a man alone or sending an inexperienced or ill-suited team.

That wasn't what they'd done with Earth.

Woolsey insisted he would go alone. Once on Earth he'd have no way of contacting Atlantis unless the Tau’ri allowed it. A double-cross would be fatal for anyone involved. Better to go alone, Woolsey had said. That way I won't get anyone else killed.

“There has been no word,” Teyla said. She still sat in on Council as the Athosian representative. “But we do not expect word for some time.”

“Earth won't be contacted until we are sure their ship Daedalus returned with word we have... allowed their scientists to stay here,” Zelenka said.


“One of them,” Sheppard said. “The other less so.”

“We will send Kavanagh back even if Earth does not deal,” Zelenka said. “Let them put up with him.”

Biro snickered.

“I see,” Seimei said. “Then I hope I'm still here when you contact Earth. I am curious to hear how negotiations are going.”

“So are we all,” Teyla said.

*****

The sea hummed and he darted back toward the spires. The city's shield raised as the dawn's edge volcanoes vented pressure high above, rumbled and rustled below. The very magma vents that gave them all their power were the city’s greatest weakness. She could not rise for long, not without separating from the access shafts that ran their city, the shield, the stargate...

But if the eruption was bad she would suffer again.

ZPMs were a distant memory, a dream of an age past when blue was a color and welcome cultists
still landed on the city's piers. The city was different now, shining black glass rising from a bed of cooled and cooling lavas, her piers nestled into rock that made her scream as it flowed.

ZPMs were... not that long ago? There was one running the city now? No, that couldn't be. There hadn't been a ZPM in the city since she sank. Not since they stopped counting time.

He shook his head, trying to fling the bubbles from it. What was wrong with him? Something was wrong.

“Something is wrong with you.”

He was inside. The air tasted like Wraith, a scent he'd not tasted in a long, long time. Not since...

Guide?

“It's not too late,” Guide said. “You can still escape. Take my hand.”

He reached out toward the Wraith's hand, its feeding hand. But he had no fear of the feeding hand, the Wraith would never dare...

He looked down at his hand in horror. This was not his hand. Not at all. It looked like a human hand.

Guide snatched that human hand and dragged him forward. “Come with me, John Sheppard.”

Sheppard jolted awake.

Another weird dream. Sheppard sat up in his bed, arms wrapped around himself. Another dream of the sunken Atlantis, another glimpse of black orichalcum and the eternal abyss at the dawn's edge. One or two dreams he could dismiss but this...

He'd been around Rodney enough to know what the Great Old Ones could do. He needed an expert opinion.

*****

“Get Yog-Sothoth to stop screwing around.”

Daniel Jackson looked up from his tablet. He'd been reading a fascinating story of the Traveler's Heresy, a sensationalized and likely fictional accounting of how the Ancients in Atlantis fled through the stargate and left their ships and all their crews behind. The cowards and the wicked fled the galaxy however they could, aboard ship or into stasis or ascension, while the brave Travelers stayed behind on their ships, constantly on the move as they watched the Wraith take the galaxy and then sleep. The reading took effort and concentration since it was written in Modern Ancient, similar to the language he knew but different enough to be a delightful challenge.

Then Counselor Sheppard stormed in like a living non sequitur and demanded he exert control over the Great Old Ones.

“What?” Daniel asked. He put the tablet down.

“You heard what I said,” Sheppard snapped. “Get Yog-Sothoth to stop screwing around and leave me alone! And turn off that damned light.”

Oh, right. Daniel looked around like he was only just seeing his surroundings. He had a bright reading light on to combat the nearly empty starfield outside, the lack of any moon, the outer planet was beyond the view from his balcony. This planet's current field of view was facing away from the
galaxy and the starfield showed a few globular clusters, a dark matter galaxy, a smattering of stars from Andromeda's outer disk, and very little else. Not even enough to form good constellations. Daniel clicked off the light and he couldn't see a damn thing. He could hear Sheppard's sigh of relief.

Daniel turned the light back on.

Sheppard hissed, sounding almost like a Deep One, and held his hand to his face to try and shield his eyes.

“I need to be able to see,” Daniel said. “Now then.” He put the tablet down, gestured to the second chair in his quarters, and turned the reading lamp so it wouldn't shine so directly at Sheppard. “You want me to what?”

Sheppard sat down heavily. Even in the shadows cast by indirect lighting the bags under his eyes were visible. He looked exhausted. “You're in with Yog-Sothis, He's the only Great Old One with a presence here,” he said. “Therefore these dreams have got to be His doing.”


“Dreams. Weird dreams. Atlantis underwater near the dawn's edge volcanoes, all of her orichalcum burned black by lava and darkness. Deep Ones everywhere. Rodney is...” Sheppard trailed off. He didn't want to admit that one, not even to himself.

“Sounds like Deep One dreams.”

“They didn't start until you got here,” Sheppard accused.

“They started when the Daedalus landed?”

Sheppard paused. No, they started several weeks after that. But what could be causing these dreams if not for Yog-Sothis? It couldn't be Nyarlathotep, nobody was laughing at him. Might these be Wraith dreams? The Wraith could implant thoughts like a Deep One, maybe that's why Guide kept showing up in these weird dreams.

It never even crossed Sheppard's mind that Rodney might be at fault.

“Thought so,” Daniel said. He picked up his tablet again. “Talk to the Archivist, he'll know more than I.”

Sheppard sat, unsure and unnerved. He flinched when Daniel readjusted his reading lamp, flooding the room with bright yellow light. Fine. He could take a hint. He got up and left.

Daniel stretched and settled comfortably in his chair, feet up on the low table before him. A slow smile spread across his face and he began to laugh.

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“And so you've come to me.”

Sheppard growled as he avoided the shining green gaze of the Archivist. It wasn't the same shining green of the Lanteans, this was something stronger, weirder. Rumor said it was Great Cthulhu's influence and Sheppard tried not to slump at the realization. These dreams could be Cthulhu's doing somehow. If Kavanagh were some sort of conduit through time and space...

No, that sounded dumb even to his ears. There would be evidence in the local spacetime.
“You're supposed to know these things,” Sheppard said. “That's what the Archivist is.”

Kavanagh had the audacity to preen and smile as he paced the empty floor of his quarters. The faint starlight from the window glinted off his gold jewelry, the collar that marked him as owned.

Sheppard leaned against the wall near the door. He was tempted to leave and not come back, to just blame Yog-Sothoth and ignore the dreams.

“Tell me,” Kavanagh said, weaving back and forth in place like a dancing drunken serpent. “What do you think you know about the Heretic Nest?”

“McKay Sings the Mother's Song,” Sheppard said. “He changed his Song when we landed here. The first few days were a nightmare. He ended up throwing himself into the ballast tanks even though the acid water burned him. He dove deep and Sang and most of us lost awareness for a while. Carson Beckett, Teyla, Ronon, little Torren, the pain never stopped for them. Carson figured out the first gene therapies while Rodney Sang, before the rest of us... woke up, I guess. They were the only ones who didn't... change.

“His Song's been different since then. All the Deep Ones look like that now, adapted to cold black seas and red light. We all adapted to this world. Carson left, he's doing humanitarian work out in the galaxy now. Ronon went back to Sateda, Teyla and Torren to New Athos. The rest of us... We still have active gate teams, Rodney collaborates with several scientists around the galaxy, Queen Death was defeated.”

“You know its history, then,” Kavanagh said, grinning. “I know its future.”

“Really now,” Sheppard said, unimpressed.

“You don't believe me,” Kavanagh purred, still weaving from side to side. “You will. Oh, you will... Every Hydra has her Dagon. Mother McKay is no different. She chose her candidates, made them fight for her affections, and now that the Wraith has fled only the winner remains. She has her champion, Sheppard. She calls to him, shows him their glorious future together, their beautiful Nest on this wretched world. The question is, will he go to her willingly? Or will he try to flee as the Wraith did? There's still time to flee. Flee Atlantis and never return lest she take offense to his rejection. She will have her Dagon.”

Sheppard found himself wanting to flee this room as Kavanagh advanced on him, weaving and purring and moving so much like Rodney did under the Veil.

“What will he do, I wonder?” Kavanagh asked. He was almost close enough now to embrace Sheppard and he could feel the man's discomfort. It tickled. “Will he flee? Will he blunder blindly into her arms, never understanding his choice? Will he decide? It's fascinating to be able to see it all this... close...” Kavanagh bit his lip and looked Sheppard up and down. “So close...”

Sheppard took a step back.

Kavanagh laughed, a soft lurid chuckle. “I never have had the... opportunity to see a Hydra choose her Dagon before. New Nests are so rare on Earth and the SGC won't even let me go to the Alpha site anymore. It makes me hope the negotiations with Earth take their time, all the time they need...”

Sheppard thought the door open and fled.

That... was not the answer he was looking for.

He was exhausted, the dreams kept him from getting any real sleep, but he couldn't risk another one.
He let his feet take them where they would. He ended up in the mess hall, the remains of that night's dinner re-imagined as midnight snacks and small portable pastries. He found Teyla sitting awake, her night-blind eyes looking out into the bleak blackness of the dim sky and black ocean. A purple glow seemed to rise from the distant horizon, the midnight isles and their burning sulfur seeps. She held a cup of coffee in her hands, real coffee stolen from the hold of the \textit{Daedalus} as a failed bribe or perhaps as docking fees.

He went to the counter and poured himself a cup. It took him a moment to recall how he took it, two sugars, no cream. He took a sip and remembered why he took it that way. There was a bitterness to the drink that reminded him of the basic mixture, of inhaled poisons, it just wasn't the same anymore. He added more sugar and made his way over to Teyla's table. “May I?” he asked.

Teyla smiled up at him. “Of course, John.”

Sheppard dropped into the chair across from her perhaps more heavily than he'd planned. Her expression turned worried. “Are you well?” she asked.

“I'm fine,” Sheppard said out of habit. He took a deep draught of coffee. Ugh, still bitter. Bitter and sweet, it wasn't a good taste. He hoped chocolate's taste had aged better. He glanced at her, saw that look she gave him when she didn't believe him. “I haven't been sleeping,” he admitted.

“Then perhaps tea would be a better choice than coffee?” she mused with a smile.

She was mocking him, he just knew it. He shrugged and took another sip. It wasn't so bad this time. “I'll manage.”

Teyla didn't even hide her smile. Instead she threaded her straw through the wires of her mask and sipped. “What troubles you?” she asked.

Sheppard put his coffee mug down on the table and looked into it. His own face reflected back at him, shining green eyes in a human face. Still human enough to travel the galaxy, still human enough to be prey to the Wraith, still human enough to look like it. Not human enough to return to Earth. What was he? Was the Archivist right? If so then what would he become? Would he allow it or would he take Guide up on his offer? “Do you know why Guide left?” he asked.

“I do,” Teyla said. “He came to me about it before he made his decision. Why do you ask?”

“He asked me to go with him,” Sheppard admitted. “I didn't. Now... I don't know if I'm regretting that or not.”

“The Heretic Queen seeks a consort,” Teyla said. “Guide feared Rodney would choose him and he would cease to be Wraith.”

Sheppard nodded. “I wonder if Rodney was pitting us against each other. Wait and see who won. Then Guide leaves and... I can't sleep. When I close my eyes I see what Rodney wants for me. I see myself twisted and Changed and... I don't know if I can do that...”

“Ember was to do 'research' in the facility until the \textit{Daedalus}'s return,” Teyla offered. “I wonder if Guide told him to wait for you to change your mind.”

Sheppard huffed. Even after six years of tenuous alliance he wasn't sure if he could give Guide the satisfaction of 'saving' him. But what was his alternative?

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Sheppard stood in the labs facing a window. This window used to open. On New Lantea this window was almost always open, gentle breezes ruffling papers and rolling white board markers off of tables. Rodney used to get into arguments with the city herself, long ranting arguments spoken aloud. Pleading, threatening, bargaining, it never worked. The city would wait until Rodney was distracted with food or math or a crisis and then the window would slide open again.

They should have figured out the city's nature then. On Lantea this room had no window at all. And now here on the twilight world the window was sealed, never to open again. But no one thought to ask. They'd all been distracted by other things: Michael, the replicators, Rodney's own transformation...

After Rodney Changed no one ever argued with the window again. And now Rodney rarely ever came up here. The base of the central spire was Rodney's new private lab and the city accommodated. The city allowed new types of technology to grow, biological in origin. Glowing gelatinous corals brought in from the midnight isles, floating plants from the dawn's edge and the twilight bands, Wraith tech brought in first as research then allowed to spread. Deep One inventions that replaced windows, walls, that changed the very structure of the city herself.

Sheppard found himself laughing under his breath. He supposed Rodney finally won that argument. But there were things that he wouldn't, couldn't allow Rodney to do to this city.

He had no idea how long he'd stood there, the stars wouldn't tell him, when he felt a large presence behind him. He sighed, slumping in on himself as his ears and mind filled with an unsettling hiss.

You haven't been down to see me.

“I've had reason,” Sheppard said.

Oh? What would that be?

Sheppard didn't have to turn around. He didn't even have to open his eyes. He knew exactly who and what lurked behind him just out of reach. Then it grew closer. Long-fingered claws wrapped around his arms and a purring throat laid on his shoulder. “I know what you want,” Sheppard whispered. “I won't let you do it.”

The purring stopped then began again, this time different. Demanding. Do what?

“I won't let you sink this city on the dawn's edge. I won't let Atlantis burn in lava just to satisfy your need for power.”

A snout nudged the back of his neck. That's an odd idea. Why would I let her burn?

“Why wouldn't you? The geothermal potential on the dawn's edge must be difficult to ignore. How strong will that urge get when the ZPMs run out? When there are none left to find? I don't care how long it takes, it will happen.”

A wet tongue laved up the back of his neck. And how will you stop me, I wonder? Humans have such short life spans. I have to think of the future. What happens when tidal forces bring the dawn's edge into midday? Will I allow this city to drift bereft and dead? Or will I transform Atlantis into something more permanent?

Sheppard took a deep breath. “I won't let you cut this city off from the galaxy,” he said. “You won't sink her into lava. You won't let her fall back into legend. I'll make sure of it.”

Oh you will, will you?
Sheppard could feel teeth on the back of his neck, a gentle scrape that felt almost seductive. “I will.”

Rodney hissed, long and low. *I'll keep you, then...*

Teeth sank into the back of Sheppard's neck. He arched into the bite, mouth open in a scream with no sound. Then he relaxed, falling backwards into waiting arms.
Woolsey's stomach growled. He sighed, glancing at the buffet table on the far wall but none of it was truly edible.

The IOA had called a three day recess to allow some of their representatives to return home and others to take their places. Woolsey knew it was a ploy to get Shen and Nechayev away the negotiating table, to replace them with other representatives who were less willing to agree to Atlantis's sovereignty. Taking their places were Jean LaPierre and Luthor Dovelock.

That three day recess ended tomorrow so the SGC was holding a small gathering of the council members and various other personnel who were here to attend the negotiations.

“Eat something, Richard, you're making me feel bad.”

Woolsey stopped gazing forlornly at the food and turned toward the man speaking. “Consoc'ondas, non vide...” Woolsey paused then switched to English. “General O'Neill, I wasn't aware you were coming.”

“Where's Daniel when you need him?” O'Neill asked. He wore his dress uniform under protest, carried a small plate of canapes and cheese cubes. He deliberately held the plate where Woolsey could see it, trying to tempt him into joining this excuse for a party.

“Exchanging stories with the Travelers, no doubt,” Woolsey said. “They trade stories like currency. I imagine Atlantis will be paying down Dr. Jackson's debt for some time.”

O'Neill hummed, a neutral sound. He waved the small plate back and forth in front of Woolsey, trying to get him interested.

“I can't, General,” Woolsey admitted.

“What? You on a diet?” O'Neill speared one of the cheese cubes with a toothpick and made a show of eating it.

Woolsey despised General O'Neill in that moment. He pushed the feeling away. This wasn't new behavior on the General's part.

“There's cake later,” O'Neill tempted. At least he tried to be tempting, he hadn't swallowed yet.

“Si qivenenum poterat ad vescen...” Woolsey took a deep breath and drew himself up to his full height, nearly 8 inches shorter than General O'Neill. “General, as it so happens Stargate Medical has found precious few Earth foods to be safe for my consumption. I don't need to poison myself on a milkshake again. If that means I can't eat any of this spread you've so helpfully had the mess hall prepare then so be it.”

O'Neill looked horrified. The idea that a milkshake could be poison was a nightmare of his. “What can you eat?”

“A lot of Italian food,” Woolsey admitted.

“Oh!” O'Neill's horror lessened. “Well that's not so bad.”

Woolsey smirked before reaching for his mask. He pulled it down to dangle around his neck as he
caught the scent of something edible. “Excuse me,” he said, following the server with the tray of caprese with basalmic. He piled a plate with caprese skewers and poured himself a glass of wine. Wine hadn’t been on the approved list of foods but he wasn’t going to pass up the chance to get at LaPierre’s stash.

He took a sip and suddenly he knew he was going to fight tooth and nail to make sure wine went on the approved list.

“Enjoying my Merlot?”

Woolsey turned around to find LaPierre looking down at him and not in a figurative sense. Everyone on Earth seemed to be taller than they used to be. “It tastes like home,” Woolsey admitted.

LaPierre smiled. It was a calculating expression that didn't reach his eyes. “I suppose it's been years for you,” he said. “Such a pity.”

“It's been three weeks,” Woolsey corrected. “Your Merlot isn't as acidic as Lantean spirits nor as complex as ruus wine. Still, it's like a little taste of home on this alien world.”

LaPierre looked like he had no idea what to say about that.

“The Genii have a drink they call 'sporae' that they brew from a type of mushroom that grows in their nuclear facilities,” Woolsey said. “It is one of the sweetest, most delicately spiced things you will ever drink and quite dangerous. A small flute contains enough radiation for a month but the Genii insist it adds to the flavor. I can never bring myself to partake without a potassium iodide dose.”

Woolsey hid his smirk behind his glass as LaPierre excused himself and fled.

“Was that necessary?” General Carter asked as she came up behind him.

“Yes it was,” Woolsey said. “I can't have them believing I belong on Earth. They'll get it in their minds that I need to stay here.”

“They already have that in their minds,” Carter warned.

“Then I just have to show them how wrong they are.” Woolsey smiled before draining his glass of expensive wine and drawing his mask back up over his face.

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“Mr. Woolsey, consider the Outer Space Treaty,” Coolidge said. “No celestial body is subject to appropriation by claim of sovereignty. The IOA cannot accept Atlantis’s claim as a sovereign city-state.”

Woolsey couldn’t help the delighted grin that spread over his face. Across the negotiating table the five IOA representatives hid their confusion even as Dovelock edged his chair away. General Carter and Professor Miller looked on curiously from one end while General O’Neill ignored the proceedings from the other.

“The Outer Space Treaty?” Woolsey asked.

“Yes, the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 explicitly denies claims of sovereignty over any non-Earth body by any state.”

Woolsey suppressed the urge to giggle. Or perhaps it was more of a cackle. “Representative
Coolidge,” he said once he'd reigned in his glee. “The IOA should not be attempting to use the Outer Space Treaty to shame Atlantis into submission. Remember, every member state of the IOA is a signatory of that treaty. And every ship you have violates Article 4, banning the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in space. Why, I believe the SGC violated that in 1994 with their first trip to Abydos.”

“Be that as it may—” Coolidge was cut off as Woolsey continued.

“You're also looking at a violation for every Alpha Site, every military camp, every exercise, even the initial setup of the Atlantis project. None of it was, is, will be, or could be legal under the Outer Space Treaty. The classified nature of the entire program is itself a violation. Are you honestly going to invoke a document your organization has ignored since its inception in an attempt to shame me into following laws you yourself don't believe in?”

“How dare you—” Coolidge began again.

“No, how dare you, sir,” Woolsey said. “Invoking laws you break every day. The IOA itself is a violation. Tell me, has the Secretary-General of the United Nations been read into the program? If I remember correctly, the only way to settle grievances associated with the Outer Space Treaty involves negotiations through the UN. Which would then demand declassification. Are you prepared for that?”

Coolidge glared at Woolsey and that creepy grin of his before ripping up a sheaf of papers. “Moving on,” he said.

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“Counselor, if the IOA truly thought it had a claim of ownership over the actual city of Atlantis they can choose to take it up with the other five claimants,” Woolsey said.

The table went quiet. Everyone looked at Woolsey with varying levels confusion and worry. Even O'Neill had paused in his folding of a paper airplane.

“Other claimants?” Strom asked.

“Yes,” Woolsey said. “Other claimants. The first were the Athosians. We brought them to Atlantis in the first days of the expedition. They officially colonized the planet Lantea within three months with the establishment of settlements and farming. Their belief is that since the city was found on Lantea that grants them some degree of salvage rights that they graciously allowed us and Earth to benefit from under the watchful eye of their leader, Teyla Emmagan. They are open to the idea of trade with Earth but against Earth oversight as they believe Earth has taken advantage of their hospitality on occasion.”

“On occasion?” Carter asked.

“It may be a personal bias as Teyla Emmagan was present on Atlantis during its stay on Earth and was critical of this committee for delaying our attempts to return to the Pegasus galaxy. She was quite concerned for my safety before my trip here, insistent that I would be delayed here indefinitely.”

“It's a weak claim,” Strom said.

“The second were the Genii,” Woolsey said. “We have disagreed with their claim in the past but they are nuclear-capable and they have shown themselves willing and able to take Atlantis by force. Our alliance with them now includes a written clause recognizing their historical claim over the city. Our scientific and military collaborations with them represent the terms of a lease in which the Deep Ones
have permission to build upon the city as they so wish and to keep as many human attract as they deem necessary.”

“Who brokered this treaty?” Strom demanded.

“It was a compromise mediated by the Coalition of Planets,” Woolsey said. “It has been ratified by both parties and is recognized throughout much of the Pegasus galaxy.”

“Who is this ‘Coalition of Planets’?” O’Neill asked.

“The Coalition of Planets is a treaty organization of worlds under the military protectorate of the Genii, the Satedans, and Atlantis. It is recognized by the Wraith Alliance but not the Travelers. And next would be the Travelers.

“The IOA never questioned the Ancient’s claim to their own city. That certain expedition members went pirate and stole the city back from replicator control does not change the fact that the IOA recognized the Ancient’s claim to their own city. The Travelers are those Ancients. However, they consider salvage rights to be sacred and until they can find the ZPMs necessary to fly the city, and as long as we’re willing to share the city's secrets with them, they have no objection to our squatting there.”

“Squatting’?” LaPierre asked.

“Yes. They consider us ‘squatters’ who pay protection in the form of stories, secrets, and an open seat in city government. They are in favor of trade with Earth but in terms of oversight they feel they are the only ones qualified.”

“Do I want to know who the fourth ones are?” O’Neill asked.

“Probably not,” Woolsey admitted. “Atlantis's current planet is owned by the Wraith.”

The room exploded in protests. Woolsey sat back and waited as he was shouted at, as Dovelock ranted, as LaPierre began insulting people in French, as O'Neill threw a paper airplane at him. It lodged in the wires of his mask. Woolsey pulled the airplane from his mask and made a face at O'Neill.

“The Wraith eat people!” Strom shouted as the noise began to die down.

“They do,” Woolsey agreed, maddeningly calm. “The Wraith claim the entire system due to cultural and historical reasons. Atlantis is allowed to stay in our system, on our planet, by the leave of the Wraith. They recognize Dr. McKay as a queen in his own right and deal directly with him.”

Carter snickered. Professor Miller kicked her under the table.

“Domiv’alabastrum et Domiv’aqualumen ducit foedus...” Woolsey pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Paenitet, ego...” He shook his head and took a deep breath. “The Lady Alabaster and the Lady Waterlight are the current queens of the Wraith Alliance. Both were against contacting Earth in the first place. However, the Lady Alabaster is curious as to what you will do now that you know we're alive.”

“So how's the rent?” O’Neill asked.

“The Athosians have asked for a percentage of chocolate shipments,” Woolsey said. “We helped the Genii salvage an Ancient warship so we're paid up for the century. The Travelers accept payment in anime, giant robot movies, socket wrenches, and gossip. We gave the Wraith a retrovirus that lets
them feed on a single human multiple times without permanent damage and promised to let their secrets die with entropy. However, all of them have agreed that terms will change if the IOA decides to steal Atlantis from any of them, especially without permission. And you, sirs, do not have permission.”

“You mentioned a fifth claim,” Carter said.

“Yes,” Woolsey said. “Domiv’aereticus, the Heretic Queen. As the Mother Hydra of his nest, Dr. McKay lays claim to the city of Atlantis, its immediate environs, and traditionally he could lay claim to the humans in those environs.”

“Professor Miller?” Carter asked, turning her attention to Kaleb for assurance, confirmation, anything.

“The Archivist would know more than I do,” Kaleb admitted. “But that matches with what I’ve heard of Deep One nests. Deep Ones claim stretches of coastline near their territorial waters same as humans claim sovereign waters off their shores. A Mother Hydra considers any human being living on a claimed coastline to be her property to do with as she wishes. It's the basis for their breeding contracts and their trade with the surface. Has there been any resistance among your allies to the idea of Deep Ones owning you and your people?”

“It's the basis for many of our strongest agreements,” Woolsey said. “Monere culture runs deep in the Pegasus galaxy. Perhaps we can discuss it later.”

“I would appreciate that,” Kaleb said.

“Dr. McKay has always been reasonable,” Strom said.

Woolsey bit his tongue as Carter snorted and O’Neill openly laughed.

“Perhaps less reasonable than you hope,” Woolsey said, voice wavering with suppressed laughter.

Coolidge rolled his eyes and ripped up another sheaf of papers.

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They were all back on level 22, the officer’s mess having been converted into a place where the visiting dignitaries could unwind and discuss the negotiations in an informal setting.

Woolsey made a beeline for the bottles of wine. He poured himself a glass as he tugged his mask down around his neck. “Vinum verum concilio,” he said to himself.

“What does that mean?” LaPierre asked as he poured his own glass.

“The true decisions of Council aren't made at the negotiation table,” Woolsey explained. “They're made over drinks in small rooms where governments can be ignored and secrets can stay hidden.”

“I'll drink to that,” LaPierre said, raising his glass.

Woolsey returned the toast and drank.

“Tell me honestly,” LaPierre said. “What are the chances of getting Atlantis to submit?”

“None,” Woolsey said.

“They’re willing to keep you here in negotiation forever, then?”
“I volunteered. I'm the one member of Council not necessary for day-to-day governance.”

LaPierre looked into his glass of wine, seeing his reflection in the deep red color. “They must have some plan for your return,” he said. “I'm sure they didn't send you on a one way trip.”

Woolsey looked uncomfortable.

“Richard, no...”

“They have a plan,” Woolsey admitted. “General O'Neill is not going to like it.”
“We developed gene therapies that allows us to live on our planet without protection,” Woolsey said. “We would offer these therapies to anyone who chose to immigrate.”

“And anyone who returned would...” Coolidge trailed off, gesturing to Woolsey across the table. They were all back at the negotiating table and the IOA was having to admit to some horrifying realizations.

“Yes,” Woolsey said. “Anyone who returned would find your alkaline atmosphere painful and poisonous. Every citizen of Atlantis has accepted some degree of gene therapy. There are other factors, of course, but that would be the easiest to reverse. If, of course, the SGC chooses to research the necessary therapies.”

“You can't?” Carter asked.

“Why would we put research and resources into making our own planet unlivable again?” Woolsey asked. “We venture onto Earth-like worlds often in our galaxy, we have developed technologies to make those places livable for reasonable amounts of time. We don't need to be turning genes on and off for fun. If the SGC chooses to follow that route then the cancerous side effects are your responsibility.”

General O'Neill ignored most of the proceedings. He doodled on a spare sheet of paper, drawing little stick figure Asgard flying F-22s. The door opened and he allowed his attention to focus on the messenger. The man leaned down and whispered his message to O'Neill. O'Neill nodded and stood up.

“General Carter, a word,” he said.

The negotiations stopped as O'Neill and Carter both stood up. “Gentlemen, continue,” O'Neill said as he and Carter left the room.

“What's up?” Carter asked once they were in the hallway.

“The Daedalus just got in,” O'Neill said.

“Oh, good, I'm hoping to get Daniel's take on this whole situation,” Carter said. “Let me guess, people are waiting in my office?”

“Just one,” O'Neill said. “Lieutenant Colonel Bishop. Apparently it's urgent.”

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'Urgent' was not a word O'Neill would have used. 'Dire' was more apt. 'Devious' was another. And yet, 'not unexpected' also fit that bill.

“Caldwell left them there?” Carter asked while O'Neill rubbed his temples to ward off the headache.

“He did,” Bishop said.

“Did he give a reason?”
Bishop took a deep breath, visibly trying to steady himself. “General, Generals... The Lanteans...”

“Don't call them that,” O'Neill said. “They're still humans.”

“Of course, sir,” Bishop said. “But they extended what they called a 'mandatory invitation'. Drs. Jackson and Kavanagh were not permitted to leave with the Daedalus at this time.”

“What.” O'Neill did not phrase it as a question.

“They told us to consider it an opportunity,” Bishop said. “A cultural exchange, ample time for both men to conduct their chosen research.”

“A hostage exchange,” Carter said.

“That is a valid description,” Bishop allowed. “However, Dr. Jackson rejected the idea that he was a hostage.”

“Of course he did,” O'Neill grumbled.

“Hostage' implies some unwillingness,” Carter said, a sigh signaling her implicit agreement with O'Neill.

“Dammit, Caldwell,” O'Neill said, not quite shouting at the ceiling. The ceiling didn't answer. “I give you one chance to prove your loyalty but no, you can't even do that!”

“Prove his loyalty, sir?” Bishop asked.

Carter shrugged.

“Does Edgeworth even have a subspace transmitter?” O'Neill demanded.

“Nope,” Carter said. “Light speed, sir. You send a message, they'll get it in four and a half, five hours.”

“Then he'll hear from me in five hours,” O'Neill growled as he left. “I'm heading up to NORAD.”

Carter waved him off as he stormed out. Colonel Bishop looked concerned.

“Don't worry about it,” Carter said. “I'm sure Caldwell will have a good laugh in about five hours.”

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A little icon flashed on the old CRT screen. A message had come through via the Deep Space Network and the computer automatically recorded and decoded it.

Today's communications master scowled at the icon. It was probably another mistake, commands for the New Horizons probe sent through the wrong dish again. Grab the keyboard before it floated away, pound at it to get it working, bring up the contents of the message.

Oh. Ohhhh... This was not for New Horizons. The comms master tapped a command for the PA. “Message for Steven Caldwell. Bring snacks.”

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O'Neill stalked back into Carter's office. “Feel better, sir?” she asked innocently.
O'Neill grumbled and dropped into a chair.

“So how do we plan on bringing this to the IOA?” Carter asked. “Do we plan on telling them?”

“The Lanteans are holding Daniel hostage, Sam,” O’Neill said. “We have to tell them.”

“I thought they were still human, sir,” Bishop said, a touch of insubordination in his voice.

O’Neill glared at him. “You’ve been under the command of that traitorous exile too long.”

“Now, now, I wouldn’t call Caldwell a traitor,” Carter said.

“If he’s not careful I’ll call him a thrall like Delta Green does,” O’Neill threatened.

“I don’t think he’ll care,” Bishop said. “The Lanteans offered him gene therapy.”

Carter whistled.

O’Neill looked confused.

“Woolsey was discussing it earlier,” Carter explained. “It means the Lanteans would be willing to keep him.”

Bishop grinned.

“No,” O’Neill said, glaring at Bishop until the man's grin faded. “I’ve a mind to transfer you off the Daedalus right now. You couldn’t even bring Daniel back. I’m thinking Caldwell needs someone to keep him in line and you’re not it.”

Bishop humphed.

“We’ve had an eye on Colonel Genevieve Sobel,” Carter said.

Bishop looked from one general to the other in disbelief. “You’re going to force Colonel Caldwell to give up his command for this?”

“Of course not,” O’Neill said. “There are always choices.”

*****

O’Neill threw the door open and strode purposefully into the negotiating chamber, Carter on his right, Bishop on his left. He waited until he could feel all eyes turn to them.

“General O’Neill, General Carter,” Strom said in bored greeting. “How good of you to return. And Colonel Bishop, welcome back to Earth. Will Dr. Jackson and the Archivist be joining these discussions?”

“They will not,” O’Neill said. He glared at Woolsey. “The Lanteans are holding them as hostages.”

The entire room went silent. Then all eyes turned on Woolsey.

“You’re keeping hostages,” Strom accused.

Woolsey felt the mood of the entire negotiation chamber turn against him. It was not the first time he’d felt it, though it was the first he’d felt it here. “We’re keeping guests,” he clarified.

“Guests who are not allowed to leave,” Coolidge amended.
“They can leave,” Woolsey defended. “They are guests of the city of Atlantis. They can follow a gate team, petition to join a ship, visit our allies, and rely on Atlantis to keep them safe from local dangers. They have the same freedoms of any citizen of Atlantis. They were simply barred from boarding the Daedalus and Council maintains control over the gate's ZPM access.”

“You're keeping them,” Carter said, emphasizing the word.

“It is not my call to say whether they're being kept,” Woolsey said, giving the same emphasis. “But I assume they're not. Could you imagine any Hydra keeping the Archivist?”

“Point,” Carter said. She dropped her intimidating air and took her seat at the table.

O'Neill fumed quietly as he took his seat but he seemed more resigned than angry. Carter looked at him across the table and cocked her head.

“If Daniel realizes he's a hostage I don't think he cares,” O'Neill admitted. “There's too much there for him to study.”

“He could always ascend and come back here,” Carter agreed.

“Hostages!” Strom insisted.

“If you're going to insist welcome guests are being held against their will then I'm going to insist on some terms for their release,” Woolsey said. “When negotiations are finished, success or failure, I will leave on the Daedalus to Atlantis. Drs. Jackson and Kavanagh will return in my place. That is, if they wish to leave. They are, after all, guests.”

“Your people are keeping an eye on him, right?” O'Neill asked.

“Of course,” Woolsey said. “I heard he'd already antagonized the Wraith before I left. Sheppard and McKay saved him from being eaten. They'll keep your archeologist safe.”


“You're keeping hostages,” Strom repeated.

O'Neill and Carter exchanged looks. Carter nodded even as O'Neill sighed and slumped in defeat.

“The SGC sees no need for alarm,” Carter said. “Atlantis is keeping Drs. Jackson and Kavanagh as guests until we return Counselor Woolsey. Dr. Jackson has been a ‘guest' of many alien cultures during negotiations of this sort. This is not new, Counselor.”

“This is completely out of line,” Strom said, standing up to storm away from the table.

“And yet, Counselor, you insist a sovereign alien culture submit to your imperial will for the good of your planet,” Woolsey said. “Your planet, not mine. I'm just here to trade.”

Strom left. Coolidge dropped his head in his hands and sighed before ripping up another stack of papers.

*****

“I can't believe you, Jack. I just can't. He's your friend.”

Woolsey glanced up to see Counselor Strom and General O'Neill walking into the officer's mess. Woolsey sat in a corner, his sad and starchy attempt at spaghetti and meatballs mocking him from the plate. He pushed the tray away and listened.
“Carl, if I took the hard line against everyone who kidnapped Daniel we wouldn't have half of the alliances we have now,” O'Neill said.

“And so you're willing to negotiate with terrorists?!”

“The Lanteans aren't terrorists any more than the Unas are,” O'Neill said, rolling his eyes. He headed over to the KP staff on duty. “Hey, can you guys turn these into milkshakes?” He handed them a plastic bag.

“Why not?” Strom demanded. “What makes Atlantis so special? If Dr. Jackson were kidnapped by humans on Earth you'd agree with me.”

“The only person they're terrorizing is you,” O'Neill said. He looked up, locked eyes with Woolsey, then smiled sweetly and waved.

Woolsey arched an eyebrow, confused. His people were holding O'Neill's friend hostage and here the man was being nice. It was odd. Suspicious.

“Um, sir, we don't have the equipment for that.” The kitchen staff all looked into the bag, each man pulling out a pint of ice cream of various flavors: mint chip, chocolate cherry, banana fudge.

“You'll think of something,” O'Neill said before turning back to Strom.

The KP staff grumbled as soon as O'Neill's back was turned. They silently brought out a round of rock-paper-scissors to see who would be saddled with the task of trying to hand-stir milkshakes using big steel spoons.

“We can't give in to demands,” Strom continued. “We can't possibly trade with them. How can we trust them?”

“Carl, they kept Daniel because they don't trust us,” O'Neill said blandly. “Why is that, do you think?”

“Well, surely I have no idea.”

O'Neill rolled his eyes.

Woolsey slipped off his mask, wrinkling his nose at the bitter-tasting air. He turned off his air tank, preserving the mix and silencing the quiet hiss so he could listen in better.

“The Lanteans thought we would kidnap Richard,” O'Neill said. “They thought we'd decide they're still Earthlings and keep him here until he died of pH imbalance.”

“Well if they'd explained their world's... peculiarities...”

O'Neill stared blankly at Strom. “They sent everything but an air sample,” he said. “Gravity, sulfur concentration, orbital period, their own physical adaptations, they sent it all. Your organization decided to ignore the data, not mine.”

Strom looked affronted. “I must not have seen it.”

“Bullshit.”

“How dare you?”

O'Neill ignored him as a member of the KP staff handed him a spoon and a malt glass filled with
what could have been milkshake if it was stirred more. He took it and stirred the concoction. “Hey kid,” he said. “You forgot the whipped cream and cherry on top.”

O’Neill got a glare in return as the staff member stood up straight, stormed back into the kitchen, then returned with a can of spray cream. He made a grand gesture of topping the milkshake with a dollop before disappearing back into the kitchen. The sound of muffled ranting drifted from the kitchen as O’Neill purposefully tried to drink the milkshake, getting whipped cream all over his nose.

Woolsey watched them, the lights glinting off of the black glass of his goggles.

Strom shuddered as he tried not to notice Woolsey staring.

O’Neill wiped his nose poorly, not actually managing to get all of the cream off. He looked over at Woolsey again and gave him a broad grin, toasting the man with his milkshake.

Woolsey felt his chest rumble with the growl within.

“I’d say it was self-preservation,” O’Neill said. “The Lanteans knew if they contacted us we’d do everything we could to bring them back to Earth. They took that chance and protected themselves as best they could. Why not take a single hostage to avert a war?”

“They have two hostages,” Strom said.

“Yes, but as far as I'm concerned they can keep Kavanagh.” He ate a big spoonful of lumpy minty milkshake and hummed audibly.

Woolsey knew this was a display. It was all for his benefit, if one could call it a 'benefit'. O’Neill was doing this on purpose. Fine then. Woolsey saw no reason not to respond in kind. He slid off his goggles, rubbing his eyes at the sudden bright lights. Yet even with the brightness his eyes still shone pale green in the few wan shadows of the officer's mess.

Strom caught a glimpse and quickly looked away, shuddering. “There's no reason to believe it would come to that,” he said. “They'd see reason eventually.”

“And how would we ensure that?” O’Neill asked. “Send the Daedalus? That didn't work. So let's send something bigger. How about the Odyssey? If Atlantis doesn't have a ZPM that fight would be over quickly. What kind of allies would they call to that fight? Wraith? Travelers? The Travelers use generational ships, would you be the one to tell Colonel Davidson he needs to destroy ships full of kids? Why, he could finish what the Wraith started, destroy every living Ancient in the universe down to the last baby.”

Strom looked ill.

“And what if Atlantis still has three ZPMs? That fight would be over just as quickly and we'd lose the Odyssey. What else would you insist we throw at them?”

“What about diplomacy?” Strom asked, his voice wavering.

“Carl, this is diplomacy.” O’Neill slurped his milkshake, spoon clinking in the glass as he finished it. He smiled sweetly at the KP staff who brought him his second. This one looked pale, smelled like bananas and chocolate. “You studied history, you know empires lose colonies all the time.”

“But we're not an empire,” Strom protested.

“And I'm sure you believe that,” O’Neill said, picking up his spoon. “But the Lanteans don't. What
you believe isn't important here, Carl, what they believe is. Because they're the ones with hostages. And if we want those hostages back we need to negotiate. That means listening to Richard when he says they can't survive here anymore. They're not asking for UN recognition, they want to set up trade routes. Maybe bring in family members. You've heard about the Miller's son, right? The mother was pregnant when Cthulhu rose, you think a kid like that can be allowed free reign on Earth? Or would you rather be the one who tells Jeannie Miller her son needs to be kept in a cage?"

“I don't know if I can do this,” Strom admitted. “Richard was my friend. This... this thing isn't him. What do I do?”

“Hand the negotiations over to someone who can,” O'Neill said. The KP staff came out with a third milkshake and spoon. “I can't,” O'Neill said, smiling easily. “This is enough for me. Maybe Richard would.”

The KP staff looked over at Woolsey, visibly unnerved, before stepping close. He pulled away as Woolsey bared his teeth and growled before snatching the glass with a snarl of ownership. Then the sound was gone as Woolsey settled back into his corner and elegantly, daintily began spooning chocolate cherry milkshake into his mouth and humming.

“I guess he would,” O'Neill said as though this was all normal.

The KP staff ran back into the kitchen.

Strom looked disturbed.

“Don't hurt yourself,” O'Neill said in an almost sing-song voice.

“Non curamuus,” Woolsey said, almost purring the words in between spoonfuls of delicious poison. “Quis te mala, Consoc'ondas.”

“Somehow I think I've been insulted,” O'Neill said, satisfaction plainly written in every line of his body.

“Ut semper subridens, consocia,” Woolsey purred. “Et erit tib'hoc...”

Strom got to his feet and fled the room. Whatever Woolsey said in there it sounded like a thinly veiled threat. Or worse. But most of all, it didn't sound human in the slightest.

Chapter End Notes

Consoc'ondas - Wraith name for O'Neill, essentially "Queen Sam's consort"

Woolsey's last lines translate as: "I don't care. You are an evil man, Jack. Yeah, laugh it up. I'll get you for this."
The city rose around her, black stone and black corals jutting out of the silt of the sea floor. Jagged edges reached up toward the sun, still sharp after all these years. Tiny little lights swam in undulating lines, dangled from lures, floated above terraces, sat upon edges slowly regrowing.

Slowly repairing.

The city was alive. Nothing could take that from them.

Her people all made their way to a central amphitheater, to the wide raised stone in the middle. They clustered around, pushing and shoving and snarling, all wanting to get a good view, nobody wanting to get too close.

She came too close.

There was someone there, waiting on the raised stone. A long tail flicked behind, lines upon lines of spines rose and fell in unending chaotic non-patterns, blue-green scales shone in the wan phosphorescent light.

“Meredith?”

A single blue eye turned to look at her and her mind reeled with the force of presence behind that glance.

“You're not Meredith...”

Lips pulled back from jagged teeth as sharp as the broken towers of Y'ha-nthlei around them. Mother Hydra hissed in hideous laughter.

She tried to get away, swim away, but something was wrong, horribly wrong. The water was cold, painful, she couldn't see anymore, she couldn't breathe...

She felt a clawed, webbed hand at the back of her neck as Mother Hydra pulled her down onto the altar. She heard a low voice in her head, mocking and powerful.

*Only human.*

Then teeth at her throat and pain.

****

Jeannie Miller sat up with a shriek. She gripped at her own throat in the dark, still feeling the agony of the sacrifice. But there was nothing there. She was alone. Kaleb wasn't even home, still at the SGC on some errand. That irked her, that once she would have been the one under the mountain. Now he was the favorite, called down by Delta Green and disappearing for days while she tried not to worry about him.

Tried not to worry about the black car parked outside their home, the eyes that always watched.

Consulting money had netted them a nice five acres outside of Colorado Springs. It had everything they needed: privacy, access to the mountain, access to the college, a bus stop within a mile so Madison could go to school and at least pretend to be normal, even a small pond hidden behind landscaping, low hills, and a lack of neighbors.
The air began to feel constrictive, sharp and grating like sandpaper. She could get the salt and draw a bath or...

The pond was lovely this time of night.

*****

Kaleb Miller pulled up the gravel driveway to his house. He refused to look at the black car that was parked on the road nearby, instead holding his back straight and his head high as he gathered his things and his wits and pulled out his keys.

The front door opened and a little girl ran out. “Daddy!”

Kaleb caught Madison as she bounded out at him, enveloping her in a squeezing hug. “Hello, Mads,” he said. “I'm home for a little while. Where's your mother?” He grew serious as he finally deigned to look at the black car. “Where's your brother?”

“Robert's inside,” Madison said. “Mom's in the pond again. Can I go over to Becky's house?”

“Not today, sweetie,” Kaleb said. He took her hand and led her back inside. “We all have something to talk about.”

Madison glanced back at the black car. “Do we have to invite 'Uncle Frank’?” She didn't make air-quotes but they both heard it all the same.

“No,” Kaleb said. “They'll know soon enough.”

*****

Kaleb stepped out onto the short dock that hung over the small pond. He wore a pair of swim trunks and flip flop sandals that he toed off. He dropped a towel next to the sandals and stepped carefully to the edge of the dock.

The water was a deceptive murky green. Thick sedge grasses grew along the shoreline. The splash of a small fish drew his attention before he took to gazing back into the opaque water. He took a deep breath and stepped off the dock.

The water was nearly solid green, impossible to see much more than shadows. Cold, wet, dark. Strings of pond weeds curled around his legs as he kicked, trying to get his bearings.

Jeannie was in here somewhere.

He'd never find her, not like this, not unless she wanted to be found. Still he tried, or at least tried to let her know he was here, he was looking for her.

His lungs began to burn. He swam toward the brighter green, up toward the pond's surface.

Hands grabbed at him from behind. Webbed hands, clawed hands, familiar hands slid along his bare torso, scratched lightly at his skin. He shuddered and lost a few bubbles. He grasped one of those hands, held it to his chest, but he couldn't stay here. He needed air.

Kaleb breached the surface, a green blob of algae stuck in his hair. He gasped, taking deep breaths as he lazily treads water.

Something underneath rumbled as scaly arms snaked their way around his waist from behind. Something nuzzled his back and then the world went green again as he was pulled back underneath.
He reached out for her, fingers brushing something in the water, smooth and scaly, a shadow in the oppressive green.

Then it was all gone again and he could breathe. The sun glinted off of the green-tinted water. Chunks of algae and moss floated just below the surface. Kaleb picked plant matter out of his hair and pulled long-stranded pond grasses off of his arms. He heard something in the water behind him and turned around.

Jeannie's eyes were nearly as green as the pond around them. She blinked in an odd three-note beat. Her hands were webbed, tipped with black claws and peppered with small green scales amidst pale skin, paler on her belly. Her face was twisted toward something that might become a snout, her thin hair tangled with pond weeds, and her neck was creased with forming gill slits.

She was as beautiful now as the day he met her.

“We should get in the house,” Kaleb said, pulling her close to him. He could feel satin-smooth skin rubbing against his, the occasional rasp of random scales adding sensation to the softness.

“Something's come up.”

Jeannie purred questioningly, nuzzling the soft skin of his neck.

“They found him,” Kaleb said. “They found Meredith.”

She pulled away, eyes wide in shock. “Mer...edith?” she asked, the word a whispered rasp.

“Yes, Jeannie,” Kaleb said. “Your brother.”

Jeannie dipped back below the water. She surfaced at the shore, pulling herself onto land among the sedge and darting through the underbrush to the house.

Kaleb pulled himself onto the dock, slipped on his sandals, and tried to towel the worst of the algae out of his hair.

He needn't have bothered as a small creature barreled out of the kitchen door toward him. Kaleb knelt down and braced himself as his son came running and jumped, climbing up onto his shoulders.

“Hello Robbie,” Kaleb said, trying to wrangle the toddler while attempting to stand up. The child wiggled and burbled, both things he was particularly good at.

Robert was a casualty of Great Cthulhu's rise, at least that was what the SGC scientists had claimed. He might never be normal. Only time would tell and time was cruel. Two years old and he was still completely nonverbal, communicating instead by wiggling and making strange nonhuman noises that only grew more complex and less mammalian over time. Other than that he seemed a perfectly happy two year old, especially as Kaleb wrestled his son onto his shoulders and carried him inside.

“Robbie says he's glad you're home,” Madison said without looking up from her homework at the kitchen table.

“Mmph,” Kaleb said. He reached up and pulled Robert's hand off of his mouth. “I can see that.”

Robert burbled. It was almost a giggle.

“So what's going on?” Madison asked.

Jeannie came into the kitchen. She'd found a dress that clung to her wet skin awkwardly. “Gen... ral
Carter... They found Mer... edith.”

“They found Uncle Meredith?” Madison squealed.

Robert trilled.

“No, you never met Uncle Meredith,” Madison said.

Kaleb suppressed the familiar feeling that she was answering questions, Robert's questions, that no one else could hear.

“So when can we see him?” Madison asked. “Will he be coming here? Mommy said he'd Changed when last she saw him, I never saw a Deep One fully Changed before, I've only seen Mommy.”


“Duh, of course.”

“We think the other Deep Ones woke Great Cthulhu because of Uncle Meredith,” Kaleb explained. “He can never come back here. Ever.”

Madison's excitement fell. “Will we ever see him again?” she asked in a small voice.

“That... is what we need to discuss,” Kaleb said. “As a family. All of us.”

“But what about...” Madison pointed toward the front window.

“Not Uncle Frank. They'll know soon enough.”

*****

“That plassse... it ssoundsss... horri... ble...” Jeannie spoke slowly, deliberately, forcing words past a throat that tore with every syllable.

Robert sat on Madison's lap burbling. “Acid pools burn green under the blood red sun,” she said softly. “Orichalcum glows in the darkness. The midnight isles loom in the distance, sulfur flames in the night.” She shook her head to dislodge the thoughts. “Robbie says we should go.”

Kaleb and Jeannie both looked at them. “What?” Madison asked.

“You'd both be safe there,” Kaleb said, choosing to ignore that weirdness. “We'll all be safe. And there are gene therapies to help with the transition. But... we could never come back here. Not really.”

“You men... tioned... Missster... Woolsssey... isss he?”

“He's different,” Kaleb said. “Earth is poisonous to him now, he needs goggles and an air mix or things get bad. Negotiations are in a recess until the IOA figures themselves out but... Atlantis made it clear, they would welcome family members immigrating. The IOA can say whatever they want but you're Meredith's family. You can decide we're going and there's little they can do to stop us. General Carter would help and from what I hear about Colonel Caldwell I doubt he'd mind.”

“Exiled to deep space,” Madison whispered. “Nothing but the core's Song for company. Nothing to remind him of Earth. No reason to listen to them anymore. Finally free.” She shook her head again and glared at Robert. “I wish you could talk to other people.”
Robert gurgled.

“When... do we have... to decide?” Jeannie asked.

“We have until tonight,” Kaleb said. “The Daedalus can beam us into the SGC from here. We should only take what we can carry, and only if it's acid-resistant.”

Robert burbled.

*****

A flash of light and everything changed.

A yell of surprise, the charging of weapons, calls to stand down, wide eyes staring in suspicion and fear.

Jeannie huffed. It seemed every visit to the SGC since Great Cthulhu awakened had started like this.

“Jeannie, dear,” came a delighted greeting and then Sam Carter was hugging her. Jeannie purred, returning the hug.

Only then did the frightened guards stand down. If General Carter approved then everything must be all right.

Level 17 was their generally approved spot for beam-down. The active negotiations did not change that fact. Nor did the reality that the day's negotiations were still wrapping up.

Kaleb realized the IOA group were all staring at him, General O'Neill was resolutely not looking, and Woolsey merely waved amicably. “I apologize, I'm late,” Kaleb said.

“No problem,” Woolsey said. “You didn't miss anything.”

“Unfortunate,” Kaleb said. “I was hoping we might get somewhere.”

Carter finally let Jeannie go then had to extract herself from the purring hybrid. She turned toward Madison, who was holding Robert and trying to look unobtrusive. “Why hello there,” she said.

“Hello Ms. General,” Madison said. Robert curled up in her arms and whined. “This is Robbie but he's scared.”

“Aww,” Carter said, kneeling down in front of the two children. “You don't have to be scared.”

Robert chanced a look at Carter then huddled closer to Madison, hiding in her neck.

“Red and black and stitched together,” Madison said. “The key and the gate. The time is coming. The door behind the diner, no reason to go in.” She shook her head. “Robbie, not now.”

Carter smiled and let her eyes smolder red as she reached a hand out to Robert. “Such a smart child,” she said. “You see much. Would you like to see more?”

Robert pulled his face out from Madison's neck and looked at General Carter. He burbled questioningly.

Carter's smile grew wide and strange.

“Um,” Madison said.
Carter reached out and took Robert from Madison's arms. Robert wiggled and curled up in the General's embrace even as the fire in her eyes faded. “You have a beautiful son,” she said, looking at Jeannie.

Jeannie purred and Kaleb put his arm around her. “He isss... beloved...”

“But you see why we can't stay on Earth,” Kaleb said, addressing most of the room. “Jeannie will be taking to the water soon. She was pregnant with Robert when Great Cthulhu rose and it changed him. What will we do with him when she's gone? He needs special care. And what if the Archivist is right? What if his human guise is even more fragile than a Deep One's? What will he turn into? Will he grow up looking like a little star-spawn? I'm sure the Archivist could find a Nest willing to take him in but there are two problems: one, the Archivist isn't here and two, is giving him up to Deep Ones really in Earth's best interest?”

“Delta Green would willingly take him,” O'Neill said.

“And then they would kill him,” Carter argued even as she pulled him away from her face. He was trying to lick her. “No, hon, that's a bad idea. Yes I know I taste interesting. Yes I would be the one to know.”

Madison giggled.

“I can... take him...” Jeannie offered, reaching out with webbed hands.

“He's fine,” Carter said. It was unconvincing as Robbie chewed on her ear.

“Atlantis could take him and your family,” Woolsey offered. He didn't even bother hiding his bemused look as General Carter was crawled all over by a two-year old. “Your brother would be delighted to see you again, Mrs. Miller.”

“We haven't agreed to allow emigration to Atlantis,” Coolidge said.

“How can you not?” Woolsey asked. “You have volunteers. Refugees, if you will. A man who works for Delta Green solely to keep his family safe, a Deep One nearly fully Changed, a young hybrid, and the boy. Is Earth safe for them?”

“We keep our people safe,” O'Neill snapped.

“I'm sure you can protect Mrs. Miller until she takes to the water,” Woolsey conceded. “But what of her son? Can he have a fulfilling life here? Or will you simply put him into protective custody? A special facility? How long will it be before someone wants to run tests? Will he have the right to say no? Will he have the ability?”

O'Neill looked at the small boy who was tracing lines like stitches all along Sam's face and neck, a pattern that no one else could see.

“We'll take them in,” Woolsey said. “I have no doubt Colonel Caldwell will be agreeable.”

“Colonel Caldwell is at Edgeworth Station,” Coolidge warned. “He has no jurisdiction here.”

“His Adjutor, then,” Woolsey said. “His, ah, second in command. Bishop, I believe the name is.”

Carter suddenly turned serious. Robbie went silent as he curled up in her arms and whined. O'Neill looked blank.
“What?” Woolsey asked.

“Colonel Bishop is no longer assigned to the *Daedalus,*” O'Neill said. “He's taking a few months leave.”

“Then who is?”

“Colonel Genevieve Sobel.”

Woolsey had no idea who that was. This... could be bad.
“Unscheduled offworld activation.”

The alarms were still blaring when General O'Neill, General Carter, and Woolsey finally made their way into the control room. “Who is it?” O'Neill asked.

The iris was closed but the wall behind shimmered with the wormhole's event horizon. Carter could feel the length of the wormhole extending out, far out, out across the Void. “Atlantis,” she said.

“It's Atlantis,” Harriman agreed. He tapped a button. “We read you Atlantis, General Carter's right here.”

A screen went blank. Odd, it was supposed to provide a video link to the other side. Instead it showed darkness broken by emerging shadows and...

Tiny pinpricks of light came into view within those shadows. Paired lights, eyes, people watching and listening in the darkness. In the foreground a single pair of eyes shone in a shadow with just enough detail to show the form of a man.

Or what was once a man.

“General Carter,” the man said. Faces all around took on varying shades of dismayed and disturbed as they all recognized the voice. All but Woolsey, who seemed rather pleased.

“Counselor Sheppard,” Carter greeted. “We've been informed you have two of our people held as... guests.” She let the word linger as an unspoken threat. “We would appreciate speaking to them.”

“You have a member of our Council as... guest,” Sheppard said, using the same tone she threw at him. The same threat dripped from his words. “Perhaps they could trade words.”

“I'm hoping a trade of words can grow to something more substantial,” Woolsey said. “Wouldn't you agree, General?”

“Oh absolutely,” O'Neill said. “A trade of personnel would be nice. We can begin right now.”

“Do you have a ZPM?” Sheppard drawled. “I'd offer you one but its owner might object.”

O'Neill scowled. The shadowy image on the screen seemed to laugh but it was mostly silent. Instead of laughter a strange hissing sound came from the connection.

And then the screen flooded with light. Shadows scattered and shouts of annoyance came from outside the camera's field of view. Atlantis's control room looked dull and red, the stained glass windows black with the night outside. A figure moved into the field of view, took a deep breath from an apparatus mask, and leveled his orichalchum-goggled eyes at the people on the other side. “Hello Sam,” Daniel said.


Daniel grinned back. “Oh, it's amazing here,” he said. “The Travelers have a delightfully complex society with records going all the way back to what they call the 'Heresy' when they broke off from the Ancients who fled to Earth and... Sam, the Wraith are a created race! The Ancients made them, our Ancients, the ones who fled!”
Woolsey winced. He had a horrible feeling. “Quid enim deber'os?” he asked, voice deceptively level.

“The Traveler captain Abe no Seimei said he'd be willing to negotiate price when you returned,” Daniel answered, almost bouncing with glee. “However, you might be looking at the entire catalog of James Bond movies, plans for a working giant robot, an explanation of Jurassic Park, and/or a living kitsune. Not entirely sure. Seimei will discuss price in front of me but he won't commit to anything.”

Woolsey groaned.

“Plans for a working giant robot?” O'Neill asked, eyeing Woolsey as he spoke.

A voice drifted from the distances on Atlantis, perhaps from one of the balconies overlooking the gateroom. “Do not forget the legends of your hunter of crocodiles!”

“Who told the Travelers about the Crocodile Hunter?” Woolsey demanded.

“I did,” Daniel said. “They wanted something new.”

“I think we can get those,” O'Neill said. He then continued his glare at Woolsey. “Giant robot?”

Woolsey hissed under his breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “And where's the Archivist?”

Daniel smiled. This grin was something that promised more than debts to be paid. “What do you think?” he purred. “This is a half-formed Nest outside the reach of Great Cthulhu. There are opportunities here for him to make his mark on eternity. She chose her Dagon, Sam. She will not be denied.”

“That's not ominous,” Carter said, deadpanned.

“Not at all,” Woolsey said, glaring into the screen as Daniel Jackson began to laugh.

*****

“This is a boring Nest,” Kavanagh said. He stood on the balcony overlooking the midnight isles. Purple flames flickered on the slopes of the rocky shields. Sulfur fueled the flames, bright yellow patches that were forced to a pale black by the eternal night, that occasionally shone washed-out white under the light of the icy companion world. Strange lights flickered beneath the waves, gelatinous corals that glowed for their own strange reasons.

“Should I be apologizing?” Sheppard snarked.

Kavanagh huffed. The sound was lost in the eternal winds that pushed the city against the midnight eddies. Soon teams would disembark to the isles to harvest the pure yellow sulfur, to scrape the midnight slimes of lithotrophic bacteria off the rocks, to do whatever research the planetary scientists felt they needed dry land to accomplish. There would be nothing, no celebration, no sacrifices, no remembrance, no chanting prayers to the Great Old Ones. It was a good thing this planet was outside Great Cthulhu's influence or he might awaken solely from the insult.

“This is your Nest now, as much as it is hers,” Kavanagh said. He couldn't help the self-satisfied smile as he thought of how he'd caused that.

“His,” Sheppard corrected.
Kavanagh hummed. “When 'he' breeds you might rethink your insistence.”

Sheppard shivered.

“Your Nest has a pathetic lack of revelry,” Kavanagh said. “There hasn't been a sacrifice yet. No festivals, no feasts, no seductions, no chanting, no nothing.”

“Should there be?” Sheppard drawled.

“Generally yes.”

Sheppard stared out at the water and the faint glint of starlight off the waves. The disk of Andromeda was coming into view over the horizon, its light a welcome reprieve from the near total darkness of the empty Void. “We could sacrifice you,” he offered.

Kavanagh shrank back as he wondered if Sheppard meant it. “Not necessary,” he said.

Sheppard laughed under his breath. Ever since he'd accepted Rodney's offer the Archivist had treated him differently. Gone was the sneering laughter, the glorified half-truths, the mocking swagger. Now there was a deference that Sheppard found himself liking. It made sense that Kavanagh should defer to him, this was his city. He held power over this place, especially above the water where Rodney allowed visitors, humans, and attract to roam free without supervision.

But with that power came responsibility. The Archivist was an expert of the Nests of Earth. Rodney's knowledge came from half-remembered human dreams and instincts barely listened to. Everything they knew about a Deep One Nest had to be invented or discovered themselves, there was no Mother Hydra or Great Cthulhu to dream them the instructions. Sheppard didn't even have that, only the dreams Rodney fed him, the visions gleaned from the silt of the Lair, Guide's taunting from across the stars.

“Tell me about the Earth Nests,” Sheppard said.

*****

Great Cthulhu lies dead and dreaming.

He awoke three years ago, yes. And before that it was eighty years. Before that it was centuries. He awakens for a short time now and then when the stars go right during brief conjunctions but it's never for long. It's said the Deep Ones work to Sing the stars right and they can, we both experienced it. But they don't often. If they did the stars would never be wrong.

The Thousand Mothers of Earth Sing for themselves and their own glory.

Mother McKay Sings for her own purposes. She Sings to draw her Dagon to her. She Sings to unveil the secrets of the universe. And once she has those, for what will she Sing?

A dull Nest is a Nest that doesn't Sing. A Mother who doesn't Sing has no Nest. A Deep One with no Song goes insane.

Your Nest will go dull if you're not careful.

You're seeing it now, aren't you, Sheppard? That's why the hybrids of Earth worship their Father Dagon and Mother Hydra as gods. That's why the Deep Ones offer chanting and revelry and sacrifices to their Father and Mother who sit at the head of every Nest. Mother Hydra Sings the Song that keeps them all coherent. She keeps them alive. Father Dagon protects the Nest by making sure
she Sings.

It's standardized on Earth. Two festivals a year, Mayeve and Hallowmass. The midpoint of the transition seasons. That... doesn't work here, not really, but...

But it does, doesn't it?

Your world has transitions same as Earth. The dawn's edge and the twilight bands.

*****

The soft scent of acid water seeped from the walls as Sheppard descended into the central spire. Motes of phosphorescence shone as he trailed his fingers along the slimy black walls, tiny lights outlining the power conduits within the walls or remembering where sconces used to be. Doors opened where once there'd been solid walls, sea gates shimmered black against black as the ocean outside beckoned.

But there was more for him further down.

Sheppard stripped off his shoes and socks, wiggled his toes in the cold silt that seeped out from Rodney's private lab. He took off his shirt to bare some skin but paused at anything more. This was enough.

The lab was in use.

Rodney ignored the door, instead focusing on the containment cube on the lab bench. The design of this one was different, it felt larger despite its standard size. Rodney had claws digging into the floor while working, tail wrapped around a conduit next to the wall like a safety-line. Snarls and growls seemed muffled somehow, like the sound was focused on or perhaps in the cube rather than its proper projection.

Sheppard grinned and stepped closer. Then he felt it. This cube was different. It had a pull to it that he found he had to resist. Worse, this pull was mental as well as physical, he found himself wanting to approach it, touch it, stick his hands in it, let it consume him...

Wait, what?

"Rodney, what are you doing?" Sheppard asked. His voice sounded strange, like it was being pulled from him.

Rodney looked up, blinked quizzically. Oh. I didn't hear you come in. Let me close this up.

Sheppard sighed in relief as the sensation faded. But it never really left. He still found he wanted to wrap himself around the containment cube and let it... something. "What's in there?"

Rodney's tail unwrapped from the wall and claws released their death drip from the floor. A sigh brought on a wave of relaxation that was comforting to see. Spines fell with ease, no longer threatened. Big lump of neutronium. I think it's close to collapse.

"Close to..."

Rodney grinned, baring sharp teeth in a silent snarl. Triumph. It'll be a black hole.

"Why do you want a black hole?" Sheppard asked. He wasn't sure if he should be worried or annoyed.
Reasons. Look, you said no to sinking the city for geothermal purposes. If this works it'll be better. The Ori used singularity drives, why not us? If I can make a black hole we'll have virtually unlimited power! We could... Rodney turned wide blue eyes on him, blinking at him in wonder. Sheppard, if we wanted to we could fly the city again.

“Fly the city,” Sheppard breathed. The stardrive was missing crystals due to damage during the flight from Earth. What was once irreparable was no longer a problem as they had an eternity to recreate or re-engineer any part necessary. Now they would have the power to... “We could go somewhere else.”

We... Rodney sighed, spines rattling. I don't know if we could anymore. This place is ours now. We have ages of the universe open to us if we stay here. If we leave we'll be nomads jumping from yellow dwarf to yellow dwarf until we end up right back here at the end.

Sheppard stepped closer, letting his hands do what they would. They slid over smooth skin, waxy from too much time spent out of the water. He ran his hands over Rodney's arms to belly and then up, sliding under neck and jaw to gill plates and finally the ruff of spines around Rodney's neck. “You don't know that we'll live that long,” he said. “We might only have thousands of years. Isn't that long enough?”

Rodney nuzzled him, purred. Nothing is long enough. We have forever.

“We could have forever,” Sheppard allowed. “If we take it.”

We will.

“You will,” Sheppard said. “The rest of us need more than your discoveries. We need something to unite us. To keep us sane.”

Rodney growled. You doubt my Song? You doubt Atlantis?

“I doubt your ability to pay attention to an entire Nest when you're too distracted by your work to even eat.”

Rodney's growl fell flat before morphing into a haughty expression complete with rattling spines and flared gill plates. That's what you're here for.


Rodney snarled and slithered off, weaving on all fours like a lizard toward the open area in the lab and the silt wallow there. Of course you spoke to the cultist. He's not even my cultist.

“You could get cultists,” Sheppard suggested. “He had some good points.”

Let me guess, May Day and Halloween. I remember it. In the Esoteric Order we used to hold symbolic sacrifices, usually an animal someone found. There was chanting and food and... Rodney looked disturbed, stared off into the distance. I just realized what my father did with my dog.

Sheppard shuddered. “I'm not saying we sacrifice anyone,” he said. “Or anything. And the traditional days don't matter here. But what about sunrise and sunset? 'Year' doesn't mean much when we take several orbits to complete one circuit around the planet. The dawn's edge and the twilight bands mean something. It means food, transition, the passage of time in the only way that makes sense on this world of ours.”

Rodney curled up, still lost in thoughts of the past. Sheppard stepped closer, felt the soft silt give way
beneath him. He sprawled out next to Rodney, felt Rodney's tail wrapping around him. Claws scraped along his skin and drew him in.

The distressing notes in the Song faded as Rodney began to purr.

“So O'Neill promised he'd get the Travelers our legends of the Crocodile Hunter.”

Rodney murred and nuzzled the back of his neck. Sheppard sighed and closed his eyes.

The red sun would rise over the dawn's edge in a few short months. And they could begin to mark their own years properly.
The conference room overlooked the gate sitting inert and alone on the level below. The black and red table held a tray with glasses of water, untouched by anyone present. Instead all eyes were on the large display of the AV unit. The lights of the room were turned down low so as not to interfere with the video.

The screen was dark but it was not uniform. Movement and shadows in the background betrayed the location of people, or what were once people, by the eerie green glow of their eyes. A single figure lurked closer, sitting in front of the console that recorded video feed on their end.

Those present had heard his voice before but never like this. Still, it was unmistakably sentient. It might even have been human once. But those eyes were not human. The undercurrent of his voice was not human. There was a sibilance there that instinctively jarred the psyche, disturbed the listener.

It was so much more distinct than the same notes behind their visitor's voice.

"You have a member of our Council as... guessst..." The pause between words was distinct, measured, the word 'guest' was drawn out in a mocking mimicry of General Carter's words. "Perhaps they could trade... wordssss..."

That same pause, added where it wasn't expected. How could such an innocent suggestion sound so much like a threat?

"I'm hoping a trade of words can grow to something more... substantial... Wouldn't you agree, General?" This voice, so familiar over the past weeks, but so unnerving when taking on the tones and pauses of its natural speech. It had never occurred to the assembled that Richard Woolsey was playing a part, that he might be pretending to be something they remembered. Instead they took the man's near-humanity at face value, choosing to ignore those events that tore at his veneer of Terran culture. Now one of those events was being played for them, irrefutable and undeniable.

It made General O'Neill's words that much more jarring, like hearing brashly-shouted English in the midst of a delicately quiet French film. "Oh absolutely. A trade of personnel would be nice. We can begin right now."

That familiarity all crashed down as Sheppard's voice grew haughty. "Do you have a ZPM? I'd offer you one but its owner might.... object..." That line meant so much more than it seemed, none of them good things. Atlantis had access to at least two ZPMs, one to power their wormhole and one to dangle in front of Earth in an insincere gesture. But these ZPMs didn't belong to Atlantis. Who could say who owned them? What sort of deal had Atlantis made to use these ZPMs? What had they paid for the privilege?

And then Sheppard began to laugh.

Those assembled had not heard Woolsey laugh, not like this. Mild calculated chuckles, hums of amusement, a low hiss when pleased, but not this. Not this unabashed, inhuman, sibilant rise and fall like a Deep One's purr.

Thankfully it ended, cut off by the sudden bright light. It didn't seem very bright, not from this end. A fraction of daylight, subdued sunlight, dull orange like a candle flame. But it was enough.

Woolsey handled light much brighter than that but even he did it only under protest or through goggles or when it suited his agenda. The creatures on the screen scattered like animals, like mice or
insects or other unsavory nocturnal animals who hid themselves from view. Did the light hurt them so much? Or did they not wish to be seen? What could have happened in the few weeks since Woolsey stepped through the gate? Or was this what Atlantis had become? The *Daedalus* didn't mention any of this, what was Caldwell hiding?

And then a comforting figure. A familiar face who confirmed all the horror stories of that world with the goggles he wore and the mask he breathed from. Dr. Jackson sat down heavily, looked tired and perhaps a little pained. His skin was pink and raw in patches, especially his neck. On the screen he could be seen absentely scratching it then catching himself and stopping. The acid of the air must be affecting his skin. Or maybe there was something else. There was no way to tell without the Archivist to divine the Deep One secrets of Earth and Atlantis.

No, the Archivist was trapped there along with the man they saw, bowed and tired and yet still ecstatic about his plight and all he'd learned.

And then the recording ended.

Professor Miller stood up at the end of the table like this was his presentation. “They’re not human anymore,” he said.

Around him the room shifted uncomfortably. The IOA representatives Coolidge and Strom were there, as were Generals O’Neill and Carter. Colonel Sobel rounded out the room.

“How can we know that?” Coolidge asked.

Professor Kaleb Miller pulled up the video again and brought up a specific timestamp. Sheppard's broad, low, hissing laughter filled the room until it was paused mid-breath. The screen showed his shadow stopped in the middle of movement, the suggestion of something human-shaped beneath the darkness and the eerie glow of green eyeshine.

“They’re not human anymore,” Kaleb said again. “That is not a human being.”

“What makes you the expert?” Coolidge demanded.

Kaleb couldn't help himself. He laughed. He laughed just as deep and dark and wrong as Sheppard might have while he was still human. “My wife is a Deep One,” he said. “My daughter is a hybrid who speaks for my nonverbal son altered by Great Cthulhu's own dreams. They both look human, as human as their mother looked once. If anyone here could be considered qualified to judge the Lantean's humanity it's me.

“I watched my beautiful wife descend the evolutionary ladder as she tore away her human disguise in patches of still-living skin. I saw bones twist and limbs break and scales cover the flesh she didn't scratch away with her own claws, claws she has used on me. Counselor Sheppard sounded like she did, back when she could still speak.”

“Maybe he's changing into a Deep One,” Strom suggested.

“unlikely,” Kaleb said. “Delta Green did in-depth genealogical research on all of the Atlantis personnel after Dr. McKay first Changed. There's some evidence of sorcery in the Sheppard family, likely due to their Ancient bloodline, but nothing to associate his family with Great Cthulhu or His Deep Ones.”

“Sorcery?” O’Neill asked.

“They found a relative hanged at Salem,” Kaleb explained. “There was also evidence from 15th
century France concerning his family's ownership of *Cultes des Ghoules* and the expected fallout from that. He may be distantly related to the ghouls who still haunt the Paris Catacombs.”

O'Neill shuddered.

“So he's not a Deep One,” Kaleb concluded. “Not unless Dr. McKay is Singing one hell of a Song.”

“Could he be?” Carter asked. “Singing one hell of a Song?”

Kaleb shrugged. “There may be no way to tell through the wormhole,” he said. “I'll ask Jeannie, she might be able to hear something over the recording.”

“Or we could send you both,” Carter said.

“Absolutely not,” Coolidge said.

“James, they're family,” Carter said tiredly.

“If those things out there aren't human anymore then how can we send people to suffer that same fate?” Coolidge demanded. “How do we know they won't all end up like Dr. Jackson out there, breathing from a machine with their skin rotting off? How can we do that to people?”

“You're all but demanding it from Woolsey by keeping him here,” Kaleb said.

“If they're not human they're not under your jurisdiction,” Carter said. She glanced over at O'Neill who was slowly showing a grin of realization. “They're another culture the SGC has the right to decide treaty with. You're allowed to advise us and you can choose whether or not to ratify any treaty we negotiate but by your own admission they're not human. They're not ours anymore, nor are they yours.”

Coolidge realized what he just said and he scowled. “I said 'if,'” he snapped. “It still hasn't been decided. They all began on Earth, how can you honestly say Earth shouldn't decide what happens to them?”

“Should we bring them all back then?” O'Neill asked. “Let Dr. McKay run free in the ocean, have all the other Deep Ones call forth Cthulhu to deal with him? That went so well last time.”

“Deep Ones evolved first,” Kaleb said. “They shaped our evolution, not the other way around. If Earth were to have any claim over any of them, wouldn't the strongest claim be to the Deep Ones?”

“It's too dangerous to let them back here,” Coolidge insisted.

“So Earth's claim over her children only matters when it's safe? Or when you decide it's convenient?” Kaleb demanded.

“Stop,” Strom said, voice betraying notes of hysteria. He held his hands up to hold back the argument. “Just, stop it. It's too dangerous to allow any of them back here, human or otherwise. They want to stay there, fine. Leave them there. In fact, I'd rather we lose their address, get rid of Woolsey, get our people back if we can, and keep the *Daedalus* in the Milky Way where it's safe.”

“And they keep all of their research?” Coolidge demanded. “Research we funded for years? We sank millions of dollars into that project.”

“And we benefited from millions of dollars worth of R&D over five years,” Carter said.

“We got more from the Asgard than Atlantis,” O'Neill said.
“That's because the Asgard liked you, sir,” Carter said.

“There's got to be something between tossing away the key and recalling everyone back,” Sobel said.

“That would be what Woolsey's been negotiating for,” Carter said. “Independence from Earth with a healthy trade agreement. They're even willing to take immigrants.”

Sobel nodded.

“We can't force people into that,” Strom whispered.

“You're not forcing anyone,” Kaleb said. “My family and I have volunteered. Dr. McKay is Jeannie's brother. That's family out there and they're willing to take us in.”

“You're willing to leave Earth for that creature you call a wife?” Strom demanded. It wasn't quite a shriek.

Kaleb looked at him, shocked, then growled. “How dare you…”

“Gentlemen,” Carter said smoothly. “This is neither the time nor the place.”

Strom sat back and shuddered, hiding his face in his hands. Kaleb growled under his breath and then ignored him. Instead he turned to Colonel Sobel. “You're the one commanding the Daedalus?” he asked.

“Until Edgeworth,” she said. “I'm Colonel Caldwell's new second in command.”

“We'll be going with you when you next head to Atlantis,” he said.

“There's been no decision,” Coolidge said.

“You can't insist Woolsey die here,” Kaleb said coldly. “That'd be... inhuman.”

Coolidge's smirk fell to shock then quiet fury.

“As I said, we'll be going with you,” Kaleb said. “My family and I have verbal invitation. We intent to take them up on their offer, whatever the IOA's decision.”

“Well, I'm glad you're telling me before we leave,” Sobel said. “Anything else I should know?”

“Have you spoken to Counselor Woolsey yet?”

*****

Colonel Sobel knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

She heard the words from behind the door and found it unlocked. She opened it and stepped inside.

These VIP quarters looked very much like her own here in the SGC. A bed, a desk, a small dresser, a couple of chairs, furniture the type and quality she remembered from her college dorm. The bed was bigger, though, no feet hanging off the edge of the bed here.

The lights were off. But the room wasn't dark. A half-dozen candles sat around the room, their dim
flames lighting the room with a soft orange glow. Sobel's hand went to the light switch.

“Leave it off.”

She could see him. He sat in a chair that pretended to be a comfortable lounge chair but that she knew from experience was more like a hotel chair. His goggles sat on the desk nearby, still within arm's reach. His eyes shone green in the candlelight, striking in the dancing shadows of flickering flames.

“Counselor Richard Woolsey,” Sobel said, letting the door fall closed behind her. With the hallway's bright fluorescent lights missing she found her vision adjusting to the candlelight.

“Colonel Genevieve Sobel,” he said in response.

He didn't seem overly alien to her. Maybe there was more to it, something she didn't see. After all, she had no experience with Deep Ones or their hybrids. He seemed human enough, though maybe she was expecting to hear some sudden deep resonance to his voice to go along with that eerie eyeshine.

“Why did you come here?” she asked.

Woolsey cocked his head as he watched her. She stood at attention before the door, her hands in plain view. She wasn't threatening to escape nor was she itching to reach for a weapon. She was waiting for... ah. “Sit,” he said, gesturing to a chair. He felt more comfortable when she nodded once and took a chair. At least she didn't sit at attention.

“Why?” she asked again.

Woolsey looked at his hands as he steepled them before him, his bent elbows resting on his flat belly. “We wanted to know,” he allowed. “Some of us left friends behind, family, Nests. There was no way to know what had happened. But we knew if we did anything, if we made any contact of any kind...”

“Earth would respond,” Sobel realized.

Woolsey nodded. “They would welcome us back into the species without question but then they would begin to insist. They would demand. Then they would start to take. I can barely breathe your air with help, how would transfers fair?” He gestured to the air tank half-hidden behind his chair, barely visible among the shadows.

“So, what, this is all some sort of test?”

“Oh, no, you failed that test long ago,” Woolsey said with a smile. “This is an attempt to prevent a second test. We have something we want from Earth, I'm sure you'd be willing to accept payment for it. But first, you have to accept our inability to return. You have to realize we won't be coming back. We're not yours anymore.”

Sobel nodded. “If we believed all humans belonged to Earth the Jaffa High Council might have a few choice words,” she admitted. “Teal'c was less than impressed with Earth's handling of Dr. McKay's transformation.”

“The incident with the Third Archivist?” Woolsey asked.

“That,” Sobel agreed. “A scientist undergoes a transformation entirely native to our world and we shun him for it? General Landry ordered a search and destroy during the Third Archivist's takeover.
He wouldn't believe a human being might be responsible for what the Third Archivist did but he was more than willing to blame Dr. McKay.”

“I read the report,” Woolsey said. “The stargate was saved by two cultists and a hybrid invoking Yog-Sothoth while Dr. McKay and Colonel Sheppard kept the Archivist distracted.”

“Cultists?” Sobel asked. “I heard it was General Carter and Dr. Jackson.”

Woolsey smiled. “As I said, two cultists.”

Sobel sat back, eyes wide as she thought.

“You'll find Delta Green has a number of unsavory names for many members of the SGC,” Woolsey said. “Colonel Caldwell is a Deep One thrall, Dr. Jackson is a cultist, who knows what they call Archivist Kavanagh behind his back. And General Carter, oh, I imagine they call her names to her face.”

“I haven't heard,” Sobel said.

“You will. They'll find something to call you, some insult based off of your perceived connection to Atlantis. Thrall, sympathizer, cultist. Worse.”

“And why do you want to trade with us again?”

“Some of us have family here,” Woolsey explained. “Some are hoping we can convince them to make the journey to Atlantis. Some just want to say goodbye. Some want to know if they survived Great Cthulhu. And some like knowing there are still people here, even if they could never appreciate what we gave up to keep them safe.”

Sobel had to admit it made sense.

“Besides, you have chocolate.”

Sobel snorted. That made much more sense.

*****

Level 17 was getting all too familiar. Woolsey stood outside the door with his loaner tank in hand, his wire mask over his face. As per Carter's request he'd donned the orichalcum jewelry of his station, the circlet on his head, the adorning greaves, the single claw. His cloak draped over one shoulder, its dark grey bringing out the shine of his blood red silks.

He'd spoken to Atlantis. Colonel Sobel was willing to ferry him to Edgeworth and beyond. He was growing tired of the IOA’s refusal to see reason. Perhaps some time away from Earth and this wretched galaxy would give them the space they needed to come to a decision. Or perhaps a decision was hopeless and he should take the opportunity to leave.

The guards opened the doors for him and he walked in. And stopped in his tracks.

This... was new...

The negotiation chambers had always been somewhat stark. There was no need for adornment when everyone was from Earth. Did this change mean something? He didn't dare hope, instead kept his expression carefully neutral as he appraised the room.

The room was adorned now.
Gold and red were the preferred colors of the SGC. They were once the preferred colors of the System Lords and the SGC adopted them in an attempt to show power. The Asgard had taken these colors as an aesthetic choice rather than a political one and ever since then the SGC and by extension the IOA had been expected to take these colors for their banners during negotiations.

Gold and red adorned one side of the room, the SGC insignia in those colors along one wall. On a second wall was something else, a single standard of black fabric with a green delta. Across from Delta Green was a third symbol in gold and red, something else meant to represent Earth. But the patterns here reminded him of the designs in Deep One jewelry. And on the fourth wall, black and red. On the black banner the red snowflake of Atlantis.

Counselor Strom sat at the table with a look of subdued fear on his face. Beside him stood General O'Neill and General Carter.

“I believe negotiations began on the wrong note,” Carter said. “Unfortunately it's taken us a long time to find the right one. Counselor Woolsey of Atlantis, welcome to Earth.”

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