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Rock Happy

by ArwenLune

Summary

"You want to recruit me for what? You want me to go where?"

Sgt. Brad Colbert has been on a lot of strange missions, but this promises to be his most out there yet: Atlantis

This is not a story about falling in love. This is a story about falling in team.

Notes
**Rock Happy** - eccentric or mildly deranged as a result of long overseas duty at a remote station (traditionally an island).

**Author's wibble:**
I am completely ignoring any kind of date/year match-up. The Generation Kill characters are about 5 months back from Iraq. Portal is out. This is early-ish season 4 for Atlantis. Rock-Paper-Scissors-Lizard-Spock is already widespread among geeks. You'll have to deal.

Secondly, writing about Generation Kill strays uncomfortably close to Real People Fiction for me, so I am going to base this on the fictionalised characters we see in the series, only in my version there was no reporter, no articles or book, and nothing to make these guys any more well-known that any other Marine in Iraq at the time. No reflection on actual people is intended in any way.

Oh yeah, and in almost all my Stargate fic, O'Neall never leaves as General at the SGC. I like him there. Landry can go to Washington.

See the end of the work for more notes.
They were the weirdest pair of officers Sergeant Colbert had ever seen, and that was saying something.

An Air Force Major, not tall but solid. Perhaps mid thirties, and with the sort of grounded officer calm he'd never seen in a Zoomie. Usually those guys' feet rarely touched the ground even when they weren't flying. Hell, he hardly ever saw this sort of easy frostiness among his own chain of command.

Then, his contrast in any way you'd care to name, a female Marine Lieutenant in her late twenties, thirty at most. Her posture was unmistakably Marine-in-presence-of-superior-officer, but she was brimming with energy in that confident, comfortable way Lt. Fick was still growing into.

By his eye, they were both recovering from injuries. Major Lorne to his upper back, judging from the slightly stiff way he moved his shoulders. Lieutenant Cadman had the red shade of a healing burn on her left jaw and the side of her neck, like she'd been in a blastwave, and she held her head carefully. Either the damaged skin was pulling, or she was recovering from a neck injury.

The weirdest thing was that they seemed comfortable with each other, in a way he'd never seen any Zoomie and marine officer be. Like they worked together a lot. Like they'd been through a war together, whole worlds of meaning in a shared glance.

The Major had just finished telling - or perhaps more precisely, not telling - them about a highly classified project that was interested in recruiting them. It was remote, it was elite, it had a clear mission, and to Brad's very great irritation, he was curious despite the total non-information situation they had going on.

* * *

They stood looking out over the training field. Unsurprisingly, she drew a lot of attention, though Espera yelled at the guys to shut up and pay attention.

"Should have brought a rolled up newspaper," she said dryly when Manimal wolf-whistled and yelled an invitation to grapple with them.

It didn't seem to bother her though, her stance alert but at ease. He wondered what it would have been like to deal with that sort of thing every single day from bootcamp onward.

At this angle he could see the burn on her face a little better. The eyebrow was scorched and the skin definitely looked as if she'd had a burn incident recently. He idly wondered what could have happened at that top-secret place they couldn't tell him more about, until he signed papers.

"Anything in specific on the base you wanted to see, ma'am?" he asked when she didn't say anything more than her initial 'let's take a walk'.

"Not really, sergeant. Just thought you might like the opportunity to ask questions."

Ah. Okay, he hadn't expected that. Usually Marines weren't supposed to ask questions, and perhaps they had thought he would find it easier with a Marine officer than in the presence of his direct superior and a Zoomie major.

He was vaguely impressed by how personable she was while still undeniably an officer. Most people, when meeting the Recon Marines, felt the need to posture and insist on extreme formality to fill the role. Hell, a lot of their own officers were like that. That she, more than a head smaller and still recovering from an injury, could comfortably be in control of the situation while being this as ease, made him wonder what on earth they were facing at that top-secret base.

"Ma'am, given that you can't give us much to go on, I find it hard to decide if I want to do this," he said after a moment. She tilted her head slightly as if conceding his point. "Could you give me a reason why I should chose to agree to go?"

"Sergeant, have you ever worked in a chain of command that is sane and competent all the way to
the top?"

He contemplated this for a minute, mostly to resist his initial reaction of 'bullshit!'

"With all due respect, ma'am.. I don't believe such a thing exists."

She smiled minutely, never moving her eyes from the sparring men. "That's what I said."

The silence stretched comfortably while he weighed that. Both Lorne and herself seemed well-adjusted and competent, with the sort of deceptive relaxedness the best Marines he knew all had. Even without the recovering injuries he wouldn't have mistaken them for desk jockeys. So the question really was, did he trust their judgement of their chain of command?

Out on the field, Espera was showing the men a takedown. Shirts were coming off, and there was a bit more posturing going on than usual. He swallowed a grin, knowing he was going to get a hail of questions about her later.

"Think of it like this - every single person on that base has been handpicked because they are the best at what they do."

"Every single one? Down to the individual Marines?"

"Well.. it's more common to pick a particularly good officer and let them select the people they want to take with them," she admitted.

"That's what your Major is talking to Lt Fick about?"

"Probably."

"So why are you talking to me? If you don't mind me asking, ma'am," he added quickly. Damn, she was easy to talk to. Easy to forget himself.

"Because you were handpicked too - there's an SAS Captain who asked me to check you out for his.." she hesitated over the word, as if she couldn't say the actual title. "Strike team," she settled on.

SAS? Well, he supposed if he had to be lead by somebody who wasn't a Marine, the British Special Air Service made people he wouldn't be ashamed to follow.

There was something about her reaction to the Marines' catcalls though..

"Did he ask you to find out how I reacted to a female officer, ma'am?" he played a hunch.

"Nice," she said approvingly, as if that confirmed something about him. "Yes, that was part of the request."

He contemplated that for a long moment, thinking of some of the barracks talk.

"Fair enough," he conceded.

"There's about a 60:40 men to women ratio in the larger community there, and many of the military teams are mixed too."

"And Recon Marines aren't renowned for their levelheaded and respectful reactions to women," he said wryly.

"If you're going to sail a yacht across an ocean, you don't just want the best sailors aboard - you want the best you actually want to spend thirty days on a yacht with," she nodded.

He waited for her to continue, but she left it at that.

"Ma'am, is this the first time your program recruits from the Recon divisions?"

She nodded. "We've always had Air Force and Marines on the base, due to how the whole project started - you'll hear about that later. And there are a couple of Navy techs. Lately we've been restructuring teams, and the Colonel wanted all the team leaders to start looking cross-branch and more international."

Huh. He was almost irritated at how curious this all made him. He really didn't want to be this
"And do you do most of the recruiting, ma'am?" because she was damn good at it, and not just because she had a cute grin.

She chuckled.
"Actually, I'm the resident explosives expert. I just happened to be available because I'm still on light duty. We don't have dedicated recruiters - it's much more useful to talk to the people who actually work there."

That made so much sense it was almost un-military. He said so and was rewarded with a flash of her bright grin.

"It's not the most by-the-book place, which is why we look for people who have shown they can work without the book."

"It certainly sounds like an interesting place," he finally said.

"I don't really want an answer right now, sergeant. Think about it for a few days. We're off to Fort Bragg to talk to some Rangers, and we'll be back here on Thursday."

"Understood, ma'am."

* * *

"So," he said, looking at Nate.

"So," the Lt. replied, in a contemplative sort of voice.

"You gonna do it?"

"Thinking about it. They're offering me my own team - bring along a couple of the guys, ones I pick."

"Nice."

"Guidelines for selection are... " he ticked off on his fingers "The most experienced, dependable, inventive people. Able to find a work-life balance when on a base long term."

"What do they mean with that?"

"I took it as that we'd be living on whateverthehell that base is, and it's a community including people stationed there permanently, so our lives will be there. They don't want people who go into deployment mode. Apparently that doesn't go well."

Yeah, they both knew guys who became entirely different people when they were on deployment. To a degree it was unavoidable, even good, to close off parts of yourself during missions, but that wasn't something that was sustainable for a year, and not desirable if they'd be stationed in a city with permanent residents.

"Right. Stationing, not deployment. But there's leave, right? I forgot to ask details."

"Every seventh day is a rest day on the entire base, and on a year's time there you get three weeks of Stateside leave to schedule as you want, current situation on the base permitting. If you re-up, there's two weeks extra."

"That's not bad, actually. You could go home for a week every three months, if you wanted. What else?"

Nate continued: "Able to cooperate with, and take direction from, any branch of military and even civilians."

"Well, that rules out a few people..."

"And importantly, not too trigger happy. We wouldn't just do combat situations, though he couldn't really tell me much more."

"Yeah, I got the impression the Lieutenant found that a bit frustrating."

"Well, they weren't recruiters, just two officers still on light duty."
Colbert nodded. "I got that. She's their explosives expert, apparently. And he's the XO..."

What sort of base sent their XO on recruiting missions? One that valued the quality of new recruits and didn’t leave it to just anybody?

The Lt seemed preoccupied. "He knew about a bunch of ‘em, can you believe that? Suggested Espera and Person. I asked if I could bring my own corpsman, and he just looked at his PDA and said ‘That would be HM1 Timothy Bryan? Very much yes.’ like he had a shortlist of people he wanted, but he was going to leave it to me. What kind of top secret out-there program knows about our individual Marines?"

"And how the hell do they select them? It’s not like these guys have glowing records. They’re a pair of belligerent fuckers."

The time Doc had told Encino Man to his face that he was incompetent was legendary amongst the men. It hadn’t just been the fact that he’d said it out loud, but the calm, utterly serious tone had made it impossible to dismiss as frustrated enlisted talk. The Navy had deservedly promoted him to Hospitalman First Class, but the Marine officers weren’t fond of him. Any officer willing to take him on had to be pretty damn confident in his own abilities.

"A top-secret out-there program that values independent thinkers, if they want Tim Bryan and Ray," Nate cracked a grin. "Think they’ll say yes?"

"Ray? Probably, even if it’s mostly out of curiosity. Doc? If you can convince him the upper-ups there know what they’re doing..."

"Lorne seemed solid, but... you never know."

"Cadm was full confidence on the sanity and competence of the entire chain of command over there. We’ve only got her word for it, but..."

"You believe her?" Nate asked over his coffee cup.

"She’s an LT - you guys always know. Sergeants and LTs."

Nate nodded in agreement. They both knew all too well that their respective positions were the ones that had to protect the men from the incompetence higher up.

"Plus, she’s an explosives expert still on light duty after what looked like some kind of blast incident. If her upper-ups had the slightest doubt that she didn’t trust her commanding officers, they wouldn’t send her to recruit new people, right?"

"Point. Can you picture some of--” he made a vague handwave, referring to what between them they called ‘that clusterfuck in Iraq’ “-sending me out to recruit? Anyway, I figure, if everybody on that base is handpicked like we just were... well, the screw-ups would at least be of a higher level."

Colbert snorted.

"Signing up for properly elite, classified screwups."

"Something like that. Think Tony’d come?"

"I don’t know. His daughter is getting old enough to ask why daddy is away, and they don’t pay you that sort of combat pay for no reason."

"Maybe, then."

"Maybe," Colbert agreed. "Who else’d you want?"

"Garza, Christopher, Hasser, Kocher or Wynn, if they’re willing to go."

Colbert nodded.

"How about you?" Nate asked after a long moment. "He said they had other plans for you - I figured that’s what the ‘let’s take a walk’ was all about."

"Apparently some SAS Captain tapped me for his team."

"A Brit Para headhunted you? Nice." Marine Corps pride aside, an SAS officer wanting you on his team was a compliment.
"And the Lieutenant wanted to see if I would turn into a howling feral dog the moment I got near a female officer."

"Ah yes, the Major did mention a significant female presence. So," the Lt asked brightly, "did you?"

Colbert rolled his eyes. As if that merited an answer.

"Manimal did, nicely demonstrating it was a valid concern," he shook his head, irritated that the two officers had had to specify, if not in so many words, they wanted Marines who were decent human beings.

"Their strike teams are mixed, too - I think the team they want me for has at least one, since that SAS Captain asked her to look at it specifically."

"Interesting."

"You're telling me"

"So you're decided?"

Brad realised that he was. "I gotta meet this Brit who reads my record and decides I'm the one he wants for his team," he nodded. "You?"

"I need to sleep on it," Nate said. "It sounds damn tempting, but. Lorne said standard transfer is a year, but that there are a lot of people who are stationed there permanently.. and that if you do that, they have a lot of study and research options. Apparently Lieutenant Cadman is working on a Chemistry PhD, with the full support of base command. So it could be a good career move, but... I don't know. I need a little time to think it over. Maybe ask if there's any word on it floating around."

They sat in contemplative silence for the space of a few minutes.

"You know what's really weird about the whole thing?" Brad finally said.

Nate raised an eyebrow. "Apart from the whole highly classified, inter-branch, civilian and international, can't-tell-you-what-our-program-is-called-without-non-disclosure-paperwork, independent-thinker selecting, amiable Air Force and Corps officer cooperation thing?"

He snorted.

"Yeah - the out of contact thing. You and I have been to some pretty damn remote places, but at every base camp there's been some form of phone and internet connection, and semi-daily post. Where on Earth is this remote-ass base that they get one weekly mail delivery and email syncing twice a week? And no phone reception at all? Is there some crazy-ass top-secret war going on in Antarctica or something?"

"This is a lack of information torture. You want to know more to know if you want to sign the papers, but you have to sign the papers to get to know more,' Nate summarised.

"Fuck it, I'm going to do it," Colbert said. "If I end up in the ass-end of Antarctica, at least I'll know all about the top-secret war over penguins."

* * *

He had just signed a stack of paper nearly as high as his coffee cup, quite possibly giving the US military permission to deep-six him or consign him to a life of slave labour in the depth of some godforsaken mine somewhere if he ever spoke to anybody about... well, about what they had yet to tell him.

The fucked-upness of the situation struck him as mildly hilarious.

"Let's start with this," Lorne put a single sheet of paper in front of him. He didn't look at it, observed them for a moment instead. Lorne had taken the chair at the head of the table, with Colbert on his left side and Cadman on his right, opposite Colbert. He liked that they hadn't chosen to put the table between him and themselves like it was a tribunal.
Cadman noticed his glance from the thick folder of non-disclosure agreement to the single sheet in front of him, and flashed a grin. "Hardly seems fair, doesn't it?"

"We have more information for you, information that we're not permitted to print, only pass on verbally," Lorne clarified.

Right. Highly classified. Point.

He read the sheet.

He turned over the sheet.

There was no information about the psychological experiment they were clearly conducting with him here.

He wanted to punch somebody, or burst into hysterical laughter. Neither was acceptable under the circumstances, so he just looked up slowly with as incredulous an expression he could allow himself without saying 'What the fucking flying fuck' out loud.

"With all due respect, sir," he said dryly, aware he didn't sound all that respectful and not caring, "Did the information about the classified project I just signed on for get switched with the script of a sci-fi TV show?"

There, and he didn't even say fuck even once, even though he really really wanted to. Cadman had a glimmer of amusement in her eyes that reminded him of Nate. Like she was well aware that he just swallowed about nine instances of 'fuck'. Of course, she was a Marine.

The weird part was, Lorne looked like he knew it too. Of course, he was a Zoomie working with a Marine.

Then the major started talking, in a completely matter of fact tone. Talked about wormholes and travelling to other planets and other galaxies and a floating city that was usually, but not always, a safe place to live in between missions, and then he coughed to hide the 'what the fucking fuck?' when the man came to the part of the space vampires.

They both looked completely unruffled.

"Right. Space vampires."

"Nothing we say at this point is going to convince you, is it sergeant?" Cadman said. Still that glimmer of amusement.

"A sound assessment, ma'am."

"We can't bring along the things that would really convince you," she said. "So instead we'll rely on your innate curiosity, and you'll get your proof when you arrive at Cheyenne Mountain."

Huh. Damn it, and he'd been looking forward to their efforts to convince him. Lorne, who might not be a Marine but was definitely perceptive, smiled minutely.

* * *

"Lieutenant Fick and his team, once he has assembled it, will be stationed in Colorado Springs for about a month to get them prepared for the outward base," Major Lorne said. "We have some former Atlantis personnel that does our training, these days, put some gate experience on 'em. You, on the other hand, are getting thrown straight into the deep end."

"Captain Avery is chomping at the bit, don'tcha know," Cadman grinned, mocking a British accent. "We've been getting impatient emails."

"You live on base right now, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Three days enough to wrap up your affairs here? We do have a department that helps our people with long term arrangements."
"Three days should be enough, sir," he said. It wasn't like he'd built up any entanglements.

"Good. We'll arrange your transport to Colorado Springs for Monday morning - we'll make sure they're expecting you at the mountain. They'll put you through the medical screening and possibly cram in a little training, depending on who is available. We're shipping out on Tuesday, hopefully mid-day."

"Yes sir."

His only regret was that he couldn't be there when they told Ray about the space vampires. Maybe Cadman would be willing to tell him about it later.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Where Colbert goes to the SGC, and unknowingly meets his first alien

He called Nate on Sunday evening, not sure what to say. Nate had been briefed now, and he really wanted to share his mixed feelings about the whole thing, but they'd been told not to discuss the project at all outside of closed rooms.

"So what do you think?" he finally asked.

"I don't know what to think," Nate said. "If it's a... some kind of... well, they've put a lot of effort into it."

"Yeah."

"And I asked around, before I signed on - it's not new that sometimes people are approached for a top-secret program, it's been happening for the past ten years. Just not in First Recon."

"And those people come back?"

"Sometimes. Usually better trained, specialised somehow. Sometimes they turn up civilian later. But nobody comes back within a week, saying it's all a joke."

"Hmm." It was silent for the space of about a minute. "So when are you going? Have you figured out your team?"

"Tony said no," Nate sounded regretful. "I've got Mike Wynn, Ray, Garza and Christopher coming with me on Friday, and Tim Bryan will join us a few days later. Apparently it takes longer to push the top-secret paperwork through the Navy."

His voice turned a little gleeful there at the end, because apparently even very competent and serious Recon Marine officers got a little bit giddy over the prospect of taking part in something that really belonged in high-budget Hollywood movies. Colbert grinned.

"The guys don't know the ins and outs yet, do they?"

"Major Lorne decided that with the housing situation and the general excitement and curiosity going around, it would be better not to tell anybody anything that shouldn't be passed on, at this point. They'll be told when we arrive at the Mountain."

Yeah, Colbert could see why. Multiple people selected out of one platoon, most of which were housed on base - no way the guys would be able to keep it under wraps.

"Do me a favour and keep a camera handy.. I want to see Ray's face when he finds out what it's all about. Or just after."

Nate chuckled.

"I'll see what I can do. In return, I expect reports, sergeant. Consider yourself our advance recon unit. An email per databurst."

"Yes sir."

* * *

Colbert flew into Petersen Air Base and was collected by an aide. In the Jeep on the way to the Cheyenne Mountain Complex he skimread his way through the thick folder the man had brought for him. It was full of information about training he wouldn't be given because he was shipping out immediately. The Atlantis Induction Training Checklist made for interesting reading, with items like 'First Contact; Negotiating Alien Cultures', 'The Jumper Survival Package', 'Wraith 101' and 'Hostage Training and Negotiating'. 
There was still the slight tinge of hysteria in the back of his mind as he read those words, because *none of this could possibly be real*. But it looked like he was going to find out soon.

There was also something about the medical screening before he was allowed to go, which included a blood test for some freaky alien gene, and information about the transmitter they wanted to implant him with. Yeah, that was a thought that would take some getting used to, though he had been on enough search and rescue missions to see the point.

The aide had never been to Atlantis - and just saying the name was still bizarre, Atlantis! - but did tell him a few things about the Stargate program and it's celebrities, the main one being the General running it. Most of the stories had to be overblown. There was just no way the planet had to be saved that often.

There was a mountain of paperwork waiting for him at the entrance of the base, which was typical really, but they gave him a small private room and a cup of coffee while he worked his way through. So far exciting top-secret adventures had mostly involved initialing, really. Something for his recon report.

* * *

Nate,
You won't be able to read this before you get here and they set you up with a secure laptop and access to this email address, but I gotta write this shit down, so here's your first recon report. Arrived at 1100 today. Admin for most of the afternoon. Med check after that. Got implanted with a tracker chip, like a fucking pet dog. Paperwork on it mentioned one of its purposes was 'emergency extraction' so I asked an Lt what that meant and he said 'Beam-up from orbit'.

Do you know that moment where you're not sure if to laugh hysterically or punch somebody in the face? Yeah, expect that a lot.

There was a briefing on the history on the Stargate program and the core players. Apparently the first people to go to Atlantis had absolutely no clue what they would find on the other side of the wormhole, and at the time it was not known if there would ever be contact with Earth or a way for them to return. That's hardcore, I gotta say.

Was issued the tablet I'm writing this on and had a briefing on network security etc. Atlantis has an internal intranet for professional and social use - no internet of course - and gets databursts from Earth on wednesday and saturday. So you can expect reports twice a week.

There is a lot of info about Atlantis pre-loaded on the tablet - city diagrams, intel about the command structure and the different departments, evacuation plans etc.

They were kind of scrambling to get me some prep, because apparently their usual Pegasus trainers are on leave, so I got a First Contact talk from a Colonel (!) - the leader of their primary SGC gate team, no less. He's in the infirmary going stir-crazy, so I guess that got two birds with one stone. Nice guy. He's got nothing but good words for Colonel Carter.

The whole First Contact thing is not unlike what we do on missions, only you have absolutely no pre-knowledge of what a local culture is like. You have to establish a frame of reference first, and they have a system of classifying cultures that's vaguely similar to Hofstede. It was actually pretty interesting.

I gotta say, all these hints of competency are making me nervous. Surely there has to be at least somebody seriously fucked up in the head/dangerously incompetent/both? I always thought those were issued per base. Are we even still in the military here?

Got word that my new team is a 4-man unit. Don't know much but names, so far: UK SAS Capt. Avery, USAF SOC Lt. Brittner, and Dr. Fournier, PhD, PhD. Two officers and an egghead. Lucky me.

So far nobody has tried to convince me that this is all real, and actually that is probably doing the most to convince me. I've not been on the most classified levels of the base yet, but all this out-there stuff is so completely normal to everybody I meet that it's hard to keep rejecting the idea that it might be true.

Feeling kind of out of place here with all these zoomies, so I'm gonna go find the Marine's Ready Room. I hear tell they run a card game the General 'doesn't know about'. (I swear, I was told that including air quotes). Tomorrow I ship. gate out.

Tell the guys hi from me. Colbert out.
"Remind me again why we didn't take a jumper?" Major Lorne said, eyeing the stack of boxes in the Ready Room.

"Because Area 51 keeps trying to claim one, and Colonel Carter said she was damned if she was going to give them one," Cadman answered. "Let me see if I can scare up some kind of cart."

"Well..." Lorne said, moving some boxes to look at the labels. "Ah, most of this is personal."

"It is my responsibility that you are burdened thus, Major Lorne," said a large black man from the doorway. He wore green BDU's and had a strange gold symbol on his forehead. "I would be happy to assist you in transporting it."

"Hello Teal'c, good to see you," Lorne said. "And everybody will be happy with the packages, especially the PG Tips - it was beginning to look like we were headed for a British uprising. Do you mean help us to the midway station?"

"The General has authorised a two-day visit to Atlantis," the man said. His speech had an odd cadence to it, but Colbert couldn't place where he might come from.

Lorne grinned. "Sent to pry Doctor Jackson out of the city, were you?"

"Indeed."

At that moment Cadman returned together with a middle-aged man in coveralls, who was pushing a modified pallet jack with a few boxes on it. He also had a backpack on.

"Apparently sergeant Siler is coming along," she said, indicating the man.

"Knowledge exchange with the Atlantis tech department," the man nodded. "Sorry about all this stuff, I'm bringing them some new equipment."

Teal'c and Siler began to stack boxes onto the pallet, and Colbert put down his pack to help them. The two hard-shell cases he'd been given for his possessions went at the bottom of the stack.

He was surprised - and somehow also not really - to see both Lorne and Cadman lugging around boxes, despite their recent injuries. He'd never met officers who were willing to sweat when there were sergeants - and whatever Teal'c was - around to do it for them, but apparently he'd found some. Between the five of them, the pallet was packed and wrapped in record time.

"We have a ten minute slot to bug out," Lorne said after a brief radio conversation. "After that SG-2 is scheduled to check in."

Colbert tried to take it all in stride. Over the past week he'd been given a lot of information that had rocked his worldview, including what happened at 'the mountain' - but it was still all theoretical. If somebody had been giving him excerpts of an elaborate sci-fi novel, he wouldn't have known the difference.

Until now.

He trailed to a halt as they entered the 'Gate room' and was glad he was walking behind the pallet jack, not in front. The gate itself was turning like a giant rotary dial, with grinding and clunking sounds and symbols lighting up. Yup, still looked like sci-fi made for TV...

"Seventh symbol is locked," came a voice through the PA system, and then--

He recoiled a little as matter thundered into the gateroom like a giant stone had been dropped into a vat of water - then the gate had a shimmering surface.

"Really something, huh?" Lorne grinned at him.

"Alright kids, you have a go for Midway Station," another voice said through the PA. They looked up and Colbert saw a grey-haired General behind the window of the control room. It seemed like a strange thing for a General to say, but then again it seemed like a strange thing to step through a giant ring and travel via wormhole to another galaxy, so maybe he would just need to work on adjusting his definitions. "Remember, Teal'c - Daniel is coming back with you even if
Colbert filed that away. Daniel was presumably Doctor Jackson - who had been mentioned as one
of the scientific wonders of the Stargate program in the 'SGC 101' talk he'd had from an
enthusiastic young Lieutenant, and a member of SG-1. The General in the control room was
General O'Neill, CO of the original version of that team, Teal'c was the third member, and the
renowned Colonel Carter, under whose command he was about to be stationed, was the fourth.
He wasn't ready to declare anybody the second coming, but it certainly seemed to bode well that a
combined research/military base was headed by somebody with ten years of experience both with
recon missions through the gate, and the scientific side of the program.

The five of them faced the General, and Teal'c inclined his head while the rest of them saluted.
The General returned the salute and then gave a brisk jerk with his chin.

"Get outta here kids, we're waiting on SG-2."

They began to handle the pallet up the ramp, himself and Cadman pulling, the other three pushing
it assisted by a couple of airmen. He had no time to pause at the shimmering surface - the pallet
was moving him along, and he just heard "Tell Carter I said--"

--and he was swallowing down nausea, standing in a large bay that looked very much like the rest
of the Cheyenne Mountain complex had. Except there was another stargate at the other side of the
bay.

He must have looked a little incredulous, because Lt. Cadman flashed him a grin and waved a
hand to his right.
"Observation ports over there. Go ahead, this'll take a few minutes." She jogged up a flight of
steps to what was presumably a control room.

He hesitated, but Sgt Siler was easily taking the pallet across the smooth floor of the bay, and
Lorne was talking to Teal'c. Okay then. He could go check if they were actually out of the moun--
oh. Yeah, all right. They were in space.

Jesus. fucking. Christ.

"Cadman, there is a delivery for the SGC here, let's get that out first," Lorne said from behind him.
He noticed they had put in very small radio headsets.

There was a small stack of crates on a low cart in front of the far gate. It looked like it had been
pushed through from the other side and left there.

"While we're here we do relay delivery," Lorne explained as they two of them walked over. "It
saves somebody a trip."

"If I may ask, sir.." he hesitated.

"Of course, sergeant. We're not so formal that you have to ask permission for questions."

Curiosity had never been encouraged in his time as a Marine. You weren't supposed to ask
questions, you just did what you were told and you worked with what you had, be it tools or
material or information. The idea that you were free to question things felt a little radical.

"Given how fast and simple our travel here was, why wait until somebody passes through? Why
not just send somebody to deliver?"

"Ah, there are several reasons. Most importantly, gate travel is wonderful when it works - but
sometimes things go wrong. It has happened that people end up marooned, and given that the gate
is also what enables you to communicate, that's a crap situation all around."

Colbert tried to keep the alarm out of his voice. "Are you saying that if the gates stopped working
right now, we would be stuck here with both sides thinking we were on the other side, and no
way to tell them otherwise, sir?"

Lorne nodded soberly.
"Exactly. Though in the case of the midway station, that is not as bad as it could be - they would
know we hadn't arrived by the next databurst, which is tomorrow, and there is a ship that's never
more than three weeks away. But it has happened that people were lost that way, before we had
ships capable of interstellar space travel."

"you have to zat his ass and carry him through the gate."
"Shit."

The sheer scale of it all was beginning to sink in. Left on an alien planet, to live out the rest of your life. With no knowledge of it anybody was coming for you, if there would be a rescue tomorrow, next year or never.

"We have Atlanteans who aren't from Earth originally - people from allied planets in the Pegasus galaxy who live and work with us. To them gate travel is so normal, they go for an afternoon visit to their family," Lorne said, taking a list that was taped to the top crate and checking the crate contents. "To the rest of us, no matter how often we do it, going through the gate is always going to be a.." he made a vague hand gesture. "A considered risk."

"Understood, sir."

It fucked with the brain a little, other places both a step and a second away, and at the same time so unimaginably far. He could see that.

They began to roll the crates across the bay, to the Earth gate.

"Cadman, the Earth gate, please," Lorne touched his ear.

"Dailling the SGC," came her voice over the PA.

It was no less impressive to see the wormhole establish the second time. In fact, knowing for certain that it was real, that it wasn't some effect generated for a movie, made it much more impressive.

"SGC, this is Major Lorne from the Midway Station." He typed something on a device that was strapped to his wrist.

"Major Lorne," it boomed out of the PA, then the volume went down. Cadman must have lowered it. "This is the SGC, we read you."

"We have arrived at Midway. There is a delivery from Atlantis, we're putting it through."

The major gestured for Colbert to roll the crates into the wormhole.

"Delivery received," it sounded about five seconds later. "Thank you."

"A good day, then. Midway out."

Colbert was still standing an arm's length away from the gate as it shut down, and the bay was quiet again, seemed darker without the unnatural light of the wormhole. Earth had been right there, close enough to talk to, close enough to be with a step and a breath. If he'd changed his mind about the whole fucked up Atlantis mission thing, he could have stepped right along with the crates, and been back on Earth.

Now it was gone again.

Yeah, that definitely fucked with the brain.

The two of them went back over to the opposite gate, joining Sgt Siler and Teal'c.

"Dialling the Pegasus gate," Cadman's voice sounded over the PA. She sounded like she was making a lunch announcement, and he reminded himself to contain his amazement at the sheer sci-fi factor of it all. Apparently all of this was quite normal to these people, and they might be the most easy-going officers he'd ever met, a Marine Recon Sergeant did not geek out like a ten-year old boy.
The nausea faded faster, the second time. Colbert halted a few paces from the gate, taking in this new place. After all the grey concrete and underground spaces of the past two days, Atlantis was airy and light and open, the architecture impossible to describe. It seemed a lot less defensible than the SGC gate room had been, as it had been built in a time when no danger was feared to come through the gate. He noted that there was a team of Marines guarding the space, though their weapons were down right now.

A tall blonde woman had descended the stairs from the gallery opposite them, and though her greeting with Lorne and Cadman was hardly formal, he realised he was looking at Colonel Carter. She looked very much civilian in her neat slacks and dark grey jacket, though her posture was undeniably military. Colbert wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but she didn't look anything like it.

"Much as it pains me to claim you immediately, I would like the debrief right away, major. I have about 40 minutes available before the scheduled check-ins begin," she said to Lorne. "And Lieutenant, the Explosives Lab requires your attention within the next few hours."

"Yes ma'am. I knew I shouldn't have let them play with my toys while I was away, ma'am."

The Colonel pressed a smile, and her gaze landed on him. He saluted.

"Sergeant Brad Colbert, 1st Recon Marines, ma'am."

"At ease, sergeant, and welcome to Atlantis. AR-4 is in the mess hall - they should see you settled," she said, looking around, presumably for somebody to bring him. Cadman stepped into the gap.

"I will bring him, ma'am."

The colonel nodded in what was apparently a dismissal, because the Lieutenant grabbed the bag of PG Tips - whatever the fuck that was - from the pallet and began to lead him away. Behind them he heard the colonel greet Teal'c like a long-lost friend - which, slotting the faces and the names into the stories he'd been told, he was.

"They'll leave your crates in the Gate room, you can come back for them later," Cadman said.

As they walked off the arrival platform, a tall woman in a faded blue coverall charged past them in the opposite direction. "Sergeant Siler!" he heard her call out joyfully. And a moment later: "A plasma torch?!" like all her Christmases had come in one. Cadman smiled.

He followed her down the corridor, trying to contain his wonder, but trailed to a halt at the open doors to a balcony. He could look out over an endless sea, and the sun painted the sea colours of gold and deep red. There were three moons visible.

_Holy crap, I'm on another planet. In another galaxy._

"Go ahead, sergeant," Cadman broke in on his slightly manic thoughts. "The view doesn't get better than from here."

She joined him on the wide balcony, and he spent a few minutes looking at how large the city was, and how high this highest point was, but his gaze kept getting drawn to that alien sky.
"This is..." he trailed off.

"Really something, right?" Cadman sounded pleased, like she'd let him in on a cool secret. He supposed she had. "Now you see why I was feeling a little frustrated with how little I could tell you when we first talked."

"Yes, I do," he agreed. Though he didn't think any amount of openness could have prepared him for this. "Ma'am, if I may ask, what time is it here?"

He hadn't really considered before that though they may use a similar time notation, a different planet changed all sorts of things.

"Ah, good point." She fiddled with her watch for a long moment. "Nearly fifteen-hundred. But beware, this planet has days of 28-and-a-bit hours. We'll issue you with a watch that has the New Lantea hack - that's what we call this planet - so it actually tells the correct time here."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, trying to wrap his head around this concept. It was one thing to wish for more hours in a day, it was another to actually get them.

"Ready to go and meet your new team, sergeant?"

It was tempting to follow her lead in the level or informality, throw in a quip - but he hadn't even been on Atlantis half an hour yet, and personable as she seemed, informality was not a good start. Later, perhaps, it would be okay to relax into the respectful casualness he shared with Nate. But not for a while.

"Yes, ma'am."

** * * * **

She led him into the mess hall, which was sparsely populated. One side held the kitchen space and counter setup, with cafeteria style tables. In the back of the hall it seemed more a rec area, with large pillows and soft mats in a semi-circle where some people were lounging and playing a game he didn't recognise. All the way in the back there was a guy in a faded blue coverall building what looked like... a grand piano. Huh.

Cadman lead him to a table where three people sat with the remains of a meal, two men and a woman. The black man and the woman were in the dark grey BDUs the military members of the expedition wore, but the second man was in civvies. They looked up.

He was about to salute and present himself, but didn't get the chance.

"Here ya go, Captain Avery," she said cheerfully, gesturing at him. "One sergeant. Consider him a belated wedding gift."

"CADMAN!" the Captain barked.

"LAURA!" the female Lieutenant hissed at the exact same moment, mortified.

"Well, I gotta go save the Boom Room from certain doom," Cadman said brightly, flicking a smile at the rhyme. She put the bag of tea down and threw a casual salute in the direction of the Captain, who just rolled his eyes and waved her off.

"We're not married," the Lieutenant - had to be Brittner, he realised - said to him. "Anymore," the third person at the table, a tall civilian with closely cropped greying hair, said helpfully. He had a French accent. That would be Doctor Fournier, the scientist on the team.

"Anymore," the third person at the table, a tall civilian with closely cropped greying hair, said helpfully. He had a French accent. That would be Doctor Fournier, the scientist on the team.

"Welcome to the team, sergeant. I'm Darren Avery, this is Lee Brittner, and Michèl Fournier. And you've met Cadman."
"Yes, sir." He hesitated, but Lorne had said that questions were fine. Questioning orders wasn't, but questions. "Lieutenant Cadman also on AR-4, then, sir?"

"Part-time, sergeant. Our normal setting is this, but when we do search, rescue and extraction missions, Fournier switches out with Cadman."

"Understood, sir."

"Take a seat, Colbert. Have you eaten?"

There was no hope of going back to the comforting formality of an official introduction now. It was off the rails from here on out. He wondered if that would typify his time with this team. Looking at the large, green, definitely alien fruit the Doctor was dissecting with a large knife, his answer was probably a resounding 'yes.'

He resigned himself to a lack of any kind of steady ground. He was a Recon Marine. He could make do.

"Not since breakfast, sir."

* * *

They let him coast along in the conversation while he ate, discussing something they called the 'Sanity Society' and the meeting it had organised for Friday evening. It seemed to be some sort of recreational activity. The Captain was a member of the society, whatever it might be.

He tried to covertly observe them while he ate a somewhat coarse, strange tasting pasta with marinara sauce. Alien pasta. Huh.

It was hard to judge height when sitting down, but Captain Avery seemed about average. He looked mid mid thirties, and solidly built in that way that owed more to genetics than to weight training, though there was no doubt the man was fit. His hair was a buzzcut under his ball cap, and he wore his BDUs like a man who didn't often feel the inside of civilian clothing. He sounded like the BBC, and Colbert would have flashed back to being in the desert, listening to the British gospel about the war he was in, but the man in no way resembled the owner of such a voice as Colbert had always imagined. He'd pictured anybody who sounded like that as the stereotypically reserved stiff-upper-lip British white gentleman, and Avery was black, personable, and filled with a sort of winsome intensity whenever he spoke. Colbert could see how he was the sort of officer people would follow, if he was even halfway competent.

Lieutenant Brittner, the few times she spoke up, sounded like she was from the Seattle area. Her black hair was short and messy, and she looked about thirty. Average height, with a powerful build, for a woman - well-muscled arms coming out of her rolled up BDU shirtsleeves. She had a small medical symbol tattoo high on her right forearm, and battered looking hands. She was leaning back in her chair, mostly observing as the Captain and Dr Fournier made plans for something they were going to build for the Sanity Society. There was something of fond amusement around her lips, but there was reserve too, as if she'd been talked into something but was withholding judgement.

He was still trying to figure out what that marriage comment had been all about. Surely even here - he'd already caught that people were less reg-happy - they couldn't have been married and on the same team? The body language was familiar and comfortable, perhaps more so than he was used to between an Lt. and a Captain, but there was no trace of anything he would expect between people in a relationship, or a failed one. Didn't look like he was going to find out about it though, since the subject had very firmly been changed.

Doctor Fournier was unmistakably an egghead, but a lot fitter and sharper than he'd expected an academic in his mid-forties to be, with a wiry build and calloused hands. His grey hair was very short, with the beginnings of a bald spot. He was currently outlining some sort of construction plan with the help of his tablet computer and wide, enthusiastic hand gestures. His English was fast and had a French accent, though not so strong it was hard to understand.

While he ate and they chatted, several people approached the Captain with food storage containers, and each filled their container from the huge bag of teabags. Apparently he was the unofficial leader of the British contingent, or at least the safekeeper of the tea.
"How are you faring with the whole alien city thing, so far?"

Colbert snapped to attention. Apparently finishing his pasta had been the Captain's cue to draw him into the conversation.

"Fine, sir."

When that caused only a mild raise of eyebrows, he added, "It's still sinking in, sir. The concept of 28-hour days might feel the most alien at this point." Which wasn't true, but at least that was a place to start, a nice, clearly defined weirdness he could oversee. There were four extra hours, and the information on his tablet hadn't mentioned this. Where did they go? Were they night hours, or how did seasons work on this planet? How did that change shift patterns?

"Well, you're not the only one there - the last planet we were on had 21 hours in a day. We're still adjusting too," the captain said.

"Excuse me sir, I don't follow," he said cautiously. "The last planet?"

"It's a spaceship, sergeant," Dr Fournier said. "The entire city. It flies."

"Understood, sir."

Avery gave him a look that suggested he was well aware that meant 'I can't even begin to wrap my mind around all this shit', but he left it.

"I know this is a lot all at once, and it's about to become more," he said, vaguely apologetic. "There is a mission to MX2-620 tomorrow--"

"More usually called 'the planet with the really cool Ancient Museum,' Fournier broke in. "Or at least, that's what we think it is - it's the most fascinating exploration project we have, and I want to take the chance to wrap up some things there with Dr Jackson before he returns to the SGC."

"Yes, yes. In any event, Dr Fournier was already slated to go there together with Dr Jackson and AR-2, but I have requested that AR-4 goes in its entirety. It shouldn't be a particularly exciting mission, but it's a good opportunity to introduce you to our mission procedures, get you familiar with the jumpers, that sort of thing."

Colbert nodded.

"Of course, I'm not actually allowed to take you on a mission before you have the necessary training signed off, so after we get you quartered, we'll see how far we can get. Colonel Sheppard has said he'll give you a list of the minimum requirements."

He nodded again.

"Now I realise that we're probably flooding you here, so if you feel like you're not retaining, do say so. The mission tomorrow is far from vital - I had rather that we miss it, than that we send you offworld without adequate training."

"Understood, sir." Like he was likely to admit he wasn't ready for a mission. Unless he really felt it was going to be a clusterfuck.

"Splendid! Lee, if you could get the sergeant situated," he said to the Lieutenant, "I need to sort out some things for the day after tomorrow. Radio by the time you've met with the Colonel and I'll join you for the training part."

Brittner looked less than thrilled with this, but nodded and got to her feet. He wondered if she was actually being unfriendly or if it just seemed that way because everybody else so far had been so warmly welcoming. Maybe she was just one of those officers who didn't socialise with NCOs.

Just as they left the mess hall, two men came the other way with a cart that held a beer bottle xylophone. The cheerful clanging sounds followed them down the hall.

* * *
As they returned to the Gate room she explained a few things about the numbering and naming systems they used in the city - there was apparently an interactive 3-D rendering available.

"Don't use the one that came on your tablet, you need an updated one," she added. "There's still no-go and repair zones everywhere - we had a lot of damage when we arrived on this planet. This tower and the one you'll be quartered in are safe to explore, but outside of that, don't go wandering until you've had the city interaction talk."

He watched as she radioed somebody to cancel a climbing session, and the state of her hands twirled. They had to have a climbing wall in the city somewhere. He looked at the tiny radio headsets, almost unnoticeable, but everybody he met seemed to have them. He would have to get used to being able to use a radio without the bulky headsets he'd been using for years. No thick headstraps, what a concept.

They found a trolley and he loaded up his crate with personal stuff and the crate with uniforms and gear he'd been issued at the SGC. His new boots were still creaky new as they walked through endless, identical looking hallways. She pointed out the way to the gyms, laundry room, how to recognise toilets, that the colours of the bulkheads varied subtly per level and that it could help orient yourself.

"This is the Atrium - main accommodations." She led him out of the transporter - and he would have to take time out of his busy schedule to geek out over that later, because he was still trying to look as if he was taking this all in stride - into a hexagonal open space. Looking up, he saw that it was a five story structure, the middle column open all the way to the glass roof. Five hallways led away from the central space. It looked like a rec area, with a tables and another lounge area with pillows and colourful floor mats. A couple of people in what he was beginning to recognise as science department uniforms were constructing something complicated across three tables and via the chairs to the floor.

"There's a Rube Goldberg machine competition this coming Friday," Brittner explained. "That's the sanity society thing that the Captain and Michèl were talking about."

She still seemed a little cool and distant, but apparently willing to explain things, so he took his chance.

"Ma'am, sanity society?" he gave her a questioning look.

"The Atlantis Sanity Preservation Society. It's our version of the recreational commission, sort of like an open space slot every week where people present something they want to share. It's spawned all sorts of different clubs, there's a section on the intranet that lists them all."

"That competition sounds interesting," he admitted.

"Well, you should join us - we're entering as a team."

He couldn't figure out if that was an order or an invitation, so he just nodded minutely. Maybe he could ask Dr Fournier how this worked, how much he was expected to socialise with the team. The doctor had seemed approachable, and it was easier to ask questions to a civilian than to officers.

"This central space is a quiet zone outside of second shift hours," she went back to her tour explanation. "That's before 1000 and after 2000 hours. The rooms on this level are mostly smaller rec rooms and offices for people who don't use an office much. Mine is more a storage closet for paperwork and training material."

She led him to a different transporter, one that judging by its simpler control pad was just for this building, and they got out on the 4th level.

"The Captain's over there, I'm at the outer end, and Michèl is one floor up, same corridor," she said as they walked down a corridor. "And you are... here." She didn't have to look at the numbering when she stopped at a door. It wooshed open when she waved her hand over a blue strip of light.

"Are these the quarters of the team's previous sergeant, ma'am?" he asked, carefully neutral as he looked around. It was a nice room, especially compared to barracks - airy and light, with a desk, a
bed, some shelves, and a city view.

"Yes. They like to put up Gate teams near each other, and the next nearest empty room is in the corridor with third-shift workers. This made the most sense."

He thought it was a little on point to give him the quarters that had belonged to their previous NCO, but okay.

"Oh, we didn't lose Warszawski, if that's what you're asking. At least, not in that way," she said quickly. "He broke his leg and they sent him to the SGC for his recovery period. He was going to come back..." there was something in her voice, as if she regretted talking about this. "...but.. well, he decided he wanted to stay on Earth," she finished, quick and tight.

She stayed in the door opening as he put down his things and looked out of the window.

"Paul is a trainer at the mountain now," she said. "I'm surprised you didn't meet him, I'm sure he would have liked to give you a primer on us." He couldn't tell if that was a joke or not.

"I was told that the trainers were still on leave, ma'am. There wasn't really time for training because my departure got pushed up so much."

"Right."

She was silent while he checked out the little bathroom. The shower controls were obviously Earth based, somehow grafted onto whatever control system there had been originally.

"If you're ready, we can go back to the Gate room to see if Colonel Sheppard has time for you. Bring your training folder and your tablet."

* * *

_Nate, the CO here is so laid back he might as well be horizontal, he composed mentally. I think I've found the requisite nutball._

Colonel Sheppard was not what he had expected from the Commanding Officer of a large outpost. Or really, any outpost. He didn't look the part, with his unruly non-regulation hair, he didn't sound the part, with his lazy drawl, and he certainly didn't act the part. Colonel Carter, for all that Colbert wasn't used to female officers, commanded a lot more respect than Sheppard.

It didn't help that when they had gotten up to the control gallery, Sheppard had been subject to the cheerful harassment of three expedition members: a short, graceful looking woman, a very tall man with dreadlocks, and a very loud man Lt Brittner had identified as McKay. It had been hard to hear exactly what was being said, but it ended with a capitulating 'FINE! You can go! I'll just be here doing my paperwork all day, okay?' exclamation from the colonel. Then the guy with the dreadlocks had bodily picked him up for a sort of bear-hug, and the three of them had trouted out of his office looking like they'd just wheedled an extra cookie out of the jar.

Apparently it was his team.

Then he slouched back in his desk chair and waved them in, and Colbert kind of hated him for making perfectly normal introductions feel ridiculously over the top formal, but he didn't have an alternative he knew to be acceptable, so he saluted anyway, presenting himself formally.

"Sergeant Brad Colbert, First Recon Marines, sir."

"AR-4," Sheppard added helpfully, as if a few hours in this place could replace First Recon. Then, a little exasperated like he didn't want to have to say this, "at ease, Colbert."

"Sir." he went to parade rest, feeling the strange urge to be extra formal just to spite this bizarre zoomie excuse for a colonel. Maybe remind him a little what the military was supposed to be like.

"Training papers," Sheppard made a 'gimme' gesture. Colbert handed over the folder.

"I can't say I was enthusiastically in favour of shipping you out here this fast, sergeant," the Colonel said, perusing the training checklist with its very few signed off items. "We do have these
procedures for a reason."

Sheppard glanced up at Brittner, who was standing beside Colbert, and he couldn't quite pinpoint why, but he thought there was something that passed between them at that moment, some kind of sympathy or shared sentiment.

"But!" Sheppard continued brightly, "Captain Avery made a compelling argument for getting AR-4 back on the road ASAP, and here you are." He looked up as he uncapped a sharpie.

"Fortunately Captain Avery is my training officer, so I'll leave it to him to make sure you get all the necessary training before your regular missions start," Sheppard said, frowning at the induction training list. "First Contact talk from Mitchell? You got lucky. His briefings are a lot more interesting than the standard."

Colbert was silent. His opinion didn't seem required. It was true that it had been interesting though. Colonel Mitchell could relate to being the new guy on a long-existing team, and he'd been happy to talk.

"In any case, Dr Fournier is going to MX2-620 tomorrow - the last opportunity to work with Dr Jackson before he returns to Earth, something like that. Avery has requested that AR-4 join the mission. Providing that between you," he glanced at Brittner, "you can manage to get these training items signed off," He made a few markings on the paper, "I'll authorise it."

He handed the training folder back. Colbert saw marked as urgent 'Wraith 101' with a scribbled 'VR!' notation, and 'Gating, essential addresses and basic DHD operation', and the third was 'Don't Touch That - staying safe in the Pegasus Galaxy'.

"These items before you're allowed offworld. And I suggest," he looked at Brittner again, "you use the time on the planet for jumper familiarisation and so on. It's going to be boring - Dr Jackson and Dr Fournier are there for the Ancient ruins, Major Lorne is there with AR-2 for security, Colonel Carter and Teal'c are along to spend some time catching up, and the rest of you are pretty much along for the ride."

"Yes, sir." Brittner sounded a lot more respectful than he'd expected. He wondered why - she didn't seem like the sycophant type, and Sheppard wasn't exactly impressive.

"Right..." Sheppard waved a hand as if he was trying to will a thought to appear, then suddenly brightened. Apparently it had worked.

"Ah yes, weapons. Are you familiar with P90s?"

"Familiar, yes, but it has been more than a year since I shot one, sir," he said.

"And you're most used to a..?"

"M4A1 sir, or M16A2."

"We have some of those, so that will work for tomorrow. I'll have somebody notify the armoury. We can look into getting you onto a P90 later on," he nodded amiably.

"Yes, sir."

"And I will be checking tomorrow morning if I actually think you're ready," he finished, capping the sharpie. Colbert tried very hard to keep an even expression. Who the fuck did this zoomie think he was? Did they think he was a fucking green recruit?

"Scrape that look off your face, sergeant," the Colonel said sharply. He didn't seem quite so laid-back all of a sudden. "I know that face - you're a bad-ass Marine and you think all of this is bullshit. But you know what? We used to lose bad-ass Marines all the time, that's why we do more training Earthside these days. And I agree it would suck if I had to pull you off the mission tomorrow morning. But you know what would really suck?"

The Colonel nailed him with a hard stare.

"If two days after you got here, I had to send you back in a closed casket because you got sucked dry by a wraith or turned into an Iratus bug or any of the hundreds of other completely un-fun surprises Pegasus has in store for you. Yes, sergeant, you did hear that right. Turned into a bug.
"I'm sure there's still a photo floating around on the intranet somewhere."

He paused for the space of a few heartbeats, and then abruptly seemed to shift gears, back to the laid-back Colonel he had seemed on entering the room. All that intensity back behind doors. He thought that maybe now he understood the rumours about Sheppard being the one to save the city from improbably odds.

"Mission ETD is 0800 hours, so report here between 0630 and 0730. Clear?"

Colbert felt a little impressed - he hadn't felt this chewed out in years.

"Solid copy, sir."

"Good." A curt nod. "Now scram." There was an accompanying dismissive handwave, and he about faced to head out of the office.

"Not you, Brittner."

She halted in her tracks and turned back around.

"Sir?"

"Ops/Tech radioed that they will be doing wet welding at 1700 hours in the submerged jumper bay. I'd like you to go down with them to learn about the safety setup of their new equipment."

"Yes sir." She sounded as if her day had just taken a turn for the better.

"And see about getting Colbert onto the rescue divers roll, he's had training."

"Yes, sir."

"Off you go then," she was dismissed, Sheppard's attention already on something else.

* * *

"What sort of diving training have you had, sergeant?" she asked as they walked away from Sheppard's office.

"I'm a combat diver, ma'am."

She made an 'and that means..?' sort of hand gesture.

"Use of a rebreather, depth to 100 feet, mostly concentrates on stealth, orientation, and covering distance."

"Shouldn't be that complicated to get you up to Rescue Diver, then," she nodded.

Oh. Okay. That wasn't just 'know what the fuck you're doing' training she was talking about, like the Wraith 101 talk and the other stuff he'd be doing today and over the next few weeks. That was an actual certification, one that the US military didn't hand out to just anybody. The training was extensive and you only qualified if they thought you were really going to need it.

"I think you'll find that this place is big on developing skillsets, Colbert," she said after a moment. "Limited personnel means one person often fulfils the roles of several people on a normal base. Plus, if we're already doing regular drills, it's not any extra trouble to train people up. Then they can get their certification on Earth."

Yes, he supposed that made sense. It would probably be tricky to have 'Atlantis' on the certificates under 'base issued'. You wouldn't be able to prove your qualifications without a hefty stack of non disclosure paperwork.

"How many divers do you have, ma'am?"
"We used to have six, but we're down to three right now - myself, and two of the tech department. They are our underwater repair crew though, so they are actually the most likely to need rescue."

He nodded. If they needed more, Mike Wynn also had Combat Diver, so potentially a fifth member. He hadn't really worked out yet if she was the sort of officer to be annoyed by NCOs talking out of turn or volunteering information though, so he didn't say anything.

"We do drills every month, and I can see how we can fit in the rest of your training, if you're up for it."

He tried to figure out if he was being asked or ordered, here. Sheppard had certainly made it sound like an order, and he wasn't averse to the idea of more qualifications in any case, so he just said "I look forward to it, ma'am."

She nodded and went to talk to one of the control room techs, and then he spent the next two hours being passed around the room, asking any question that came to mind, learning about the radio protocols they had in place, base organisation, shift schedules, the different departments, and finally all about using the Stargate. By the time Captain Avery came up there to collect him for his next round of information overload, Chuck was just explaining about the gate shield, using the words 'bugs on a windshield'. He made a mental note to rehearse the IDC code another 50 times before it ever came to using it.

This was a fucking weird place, but he thought he might be able to get the hang of it.

Chapter End Notes

Yes! It's Avery and Brittener from Been There, Done That (A Whole Stack Of T-shirts).

Feedback would completely make my day :-)

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Chapter End Notes
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Where sergeant Colbert writes a recon report for Lt. Fick

Day 1, 26:31 hrs

Nate,

All right, here's your first report. Yeah, you read that time right. They have fucking 28-hour days here. Five moons, and 28-hour days. But hey, don't worry, it's okay if it takes me some time to get used to that, because everybody else is still adapting too - they've not been here long, because the whole damn city flies like a fucking spaceship.

Yeah.

I know you're picturing my expression right now. Stop it.

There was some shit about people controlling the city with their mind, but that must have been a 'Let's see what the new guy will swallow' joke.

* I met Colonel Sheppard and he seems seriously--I was going to write 'batshit' but then he does have an impressive ability to scrape it together, so let's go with 'rock happy'. Then again 90% of the people here probably are. Some talk about the city like it's some sort of giant pet.

* Colonel Carter, little as I've seen of her, seems blessedly sane in comparison. But as you like to say, it's all relative. I should see more of her tomorrow, as she is coming along on my first mission... a 36-hour exploration of a planet with some interesting ruins. Captain Avery doesn't fuck around! Though given that the Colonel is apparently mostly coming along to socialise, it shouldn't exactly be exciting.

* Except for the part where there's a chance the life-sucking space vampires might show up.

* Avery seems a stand-up guy so far, and he's certainly pleased to have me here. Fournier was friendly, but haven't talked to him much. Brittner is the diametrical opposite of Lt Cadman, at least so far - very reserved. I'll need to figure out how this is going to work - how the hell does a mixed gender team operate in combat?

* Spent most of the afternoon and evening doing training with Captain - the VR trainer is just wait until you get to play in that. Fucking hell, that thing is amazing. Why doesn't Recon have this sort of tech for training? I guess the whole alien technology aspect makes it tricky to introduce on Earth, but damn, think of the preparation you could give teams. Avery went into the VR with me for a Wraith drill, and those fuckers are... let's just say that when we first met Lorne and Cadman at Camp Pendleton, I wondered what the hell they were facing out there that they were that frosty. Now I get it. Motherfucking space vampires with fucking super healing powers.
* Other training module was about keeping yourself safe in this galaxy, mostly a list of known dangers and some guidelines on how to identify new ones - I get the feeling most of these things have been discovered by trial and error. Some seriously freaky shit, too. A chrystal that gives everybody deadly nightmares about you. A machine that turns people into bombs. Jesus H Christ. Bryan is going to have his work cut out for him.

* Food here is good - better than the usual base standard, if just outright weird because of the alien ingredients. The people here supplement it with Earth condiments, and there's some internal trade going on. If you have the chance, pick up a gallon jug of BBQ sauce before you get here. Good quality coffee grounds are also popular. I hear tell Botany is growing some awesome Habanero chilli though, so probably no need to bother with Tabasco.

* The missions run from here, from what I've seen so far, are a mix of recon, exploration of ancient ruins, humanitarian, diplomatic, and trade. Teams specialise to a degree: AR-4 is a Recon/Exploration team most of the time, but doubles as a Search, Rescue, Extraction team when Fournier switches out with Cadman. Or as the guy in the control room said, AR-4 is the 'Find you, free you, fix you up, blow shit up, get you home' team. I didn't get a full formal introduction to the team (because Christ, protocol? they do not do it here) but apparently this means Avery and myself mostly providing the first two Fs, Brittner is a Combat Rescue Officer/Medic, and Cadman is the explosives expert in that little party.

* Are women allowed to serve as CRO these days? I didn't want to ask.

* They like their high skill concentrations here. No extra bodies just for the manpower. Which may explain why I immediately got pressganged into the Rescue Divers team - you weren't kidding about people coming back better trained. I think it partly stems from the expedition's early days, when they couldn't afford to have people too specialised because it would have been a huge hit to lose somebody with a unique skill, and partly also just that this place is full of academics who are offended by the concept of having the opportunity to learn new skills and then not taking it.

* As for the missions, it should be an interesting mix, with enough proper recon to keep it interesting and occasional more chilled out missions to change it up. I watched a team come back through the gate laden with (apparently) Toba root and Kherr flour. As I understand it most planets here only have a small population (the Wraith cullings). The city has a couple of agreements with allies where they grow food for their own supply, trade, and for the city, and the city provides them with help - technological, help maximising crop yield or preserving food (there are biologists and botanists here) and sometimes manpower. Apparently there are some recurring helping-with-the-harvest missions that are very popular, and any gate team can end up on those. Still trying to stop scoffing at the idea of sending Recon Marines to help with the harvest, but even Sheppard's team does these missions, and the control room people were talking about it like it was some sort of holiday.

* It really is a community here, and there is a lot of social and recreational stuff going on. Tonight, even though it was a Tuesday, had a music gathering in the mess hall. I went along with one of the control room guys and there were about 30 people, some with guitars and such, but there were also a lot of improvised instruments. Somebody shoved a small steeldrum into my hands the moment she saw I didn't bring anything.

What they all call 'the intranet' is actually a giant wiki that has a shitton of intel on what is going on in the city. It says that tonight there was also: a polo game in the pool, a Quiqil competition (a
game introduced to the city by one of their allies, apparently), an Aikido class and a meeting of the homebrew society.

The list of Atlantis clubs and activities also has, among many others:

- Huge climbing wall (up against one of the towers)

- Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

- Greek Literature club

- three sailing dinghies (built here in the city)

- Monthly Calvinball game (used to be on the mainland of the last planet, now suspended until they find a suitable location)

- Monthly soccer game against the Athosian (allies) team

- a Swing dance evening

- a juggling club

- Bouldering Club (I asked about this and apparently, for lack of rocks in the city, a couple of people have covered the walls and ceiling of an entire level in one of the towers with climbing grips. Then they play 'the floor is lava'. I am not even kidding. Ray is going to geek his little monkey heart out.)

That's it so far. Let me know how the guys reacted to hearing what's really going on out here. Whatever they're expecting, it's at least twice as weird. Colbert out.
Colbert was used to sleeping on ships, but hearing the sounds of water out of his window was still strange, and he slept in snatches, still getting used to all the different sounds. He woke of the sound of soft talking down the hall around 27:50, and then again about half an hour later - the shift change, he realised. By 05:45hrs he started hearing the people in his own hallway, and after a quick shower got dressed in his new mission gear.

It felt strange and unfamiliar, still stiff because it hadn't been laundered yet. The brand new tac vest was stiff when he slotted in the SGC issued mission gear. Mini first aid kit, camera, torch, glowsticks, epi-pen, radio base unit.. some more things, some of which he saw the use of, some of which hinted at missions he couldn't even picture yet.

He filled his pack with the brand new mat, sleeping bag, and change of clothes and various other items for an overnight mission. Then he strapped on his own knife, added shades, and then as an afterthought packed a waterproof notebook and a couple of pens. If there was going to be training, he'd best make notes.

His tablet would be even better, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to bring it offworld.

The mess hall was quiet at 0600, just a few first-shift workers on a break, a brand-new looking Lieutenant contemplating the breakfast options on offer, the calm, efficient routines of the galley staff. As he sat down with his tray, Colbert found himself missing Ray, the inane chatter and bizarre rants so much soundtrack to his life that this place felt off without it.

Ray would be coming though, only a month from now. And he had Ray's introduction to the weirdness of the city to look forward to. That was a cheering through, especially because there was a compact camera in his tac vest pocket. It did video.

He was just starting on his food when two sergeants walked in, with the comfortable familiarity that suggested they were on a team together. They greeted the young Lieutenant amiably, grabbed food, and then made for Colbert's table.

"Hi," said the younger one, a black guy in his early thirties. "You're AR-4's new sarge, right?"

"Yeah. Brad Colbert," he introduced himself. They sat down, and he smiled inwardly at how sergeants everywhere were basically the same and how easy it was to get along with them.

"Will Meyers, and this is Mac."

"McPherson," the older guy corrected.

"We're part of AR-2. You just arrived yesterday?" Meyers said.

He nodded.

"Should be a fun intro today, then," Meyers took a swig of coffee. "I think they're stopping just short of taking a picnic basket."

"Got any intel on this mission? What's the planet like?"

"Well, we've spent most of the past four weeks on MX2-620 - also known as 'The planet that makes the scientists drool'. It has what they currently think is a museum. Though I think last week they called it a town hall."

"And before that, a market," McPherson said, digging in to a bowl of oatmeal.

"Yeah, Dr Jackson has been here for the past six weeks to help figure it out, but from what I overheard last time I think they're just getting to that point where they understand some of the questions they should be asking," Meyers grinned. "Has them all happier than centipedes in an arse-kicking contest."

Colbert nodded, half watching Lieutenant Brittner enter the mess. She was dressed for the mission, but she was clutching a travel mug and headed for the food counter with the air of somebody who was just barely awake enough to be upright.
"Morning ma'am!" Meyers called, excessively loud and cheerful.

Brittner winced, gave their table a vaguely acknowledging nod, and continued on her path.

Colbert filed 'Not a morning person' away with the other intel about his new team. He might not be concerned with becoming her favourite person, but there was no need to irritate teammates unnecessarily.

"One of these days she's gonna get revenge, man," McPherson said between bites.

Meyers shrugged.

"Three weeks and I'm still here. I'm beginning to wonder if she even remembers it later in the day."

Colbert recognised this - any sergeant would. The subtle pushing of an officer just to see what would fly, testing where the boundaries were. Each officer found their own ways to handle it. Nate Fick, as fresh-faced as he'd been, had faced more than his fair share of it, and come through it by participating in discussions about anything from race inequality to the political plans for Iraq. It hadn't taken all that long for the platoon to grasp that the LT might look like the youngest of them and was never going to beat Rudy at grappling, he could out-reason even Poke, and he had a way of seeing the good in people that made them all want to live up to that image.

Encino Man had just instituted regular football games and brutally tackled everybody he felt wasn't giving him sufficient respect. That had worked until the men had figured out which brands of subtle disrespect went right over the captain's head.

From the way Meyers and McPherson were looking at him, he was expected to join in with the bonding ritual. He watched Brittner move on automatic as she filled a small food container with sandwiches. He thought it was a little blatant for them to do this to his new Lieutenant, and something about the way McPherson was glancing at him between bites seemed slightly off. The thought occurred that it might not be Brittner being tested here, but him. He had no way of knowing if anything he said now would go further, and he wasn't about to ruin his chances with his new team just for a moment of bonding with fellow sergeants.

"Apparently Teal'c is mostly here to make sure Dr Jackson returns to Earth," he said after a moment of contemplation, remembering the exchange he'd overheard at the SGC. "The General used the words 'if you have to zat him and carry him back.'" He'd found out what a zat was. Alien weaponry, that was just cool.

"Yeah, and Colonel Carter will be sad to see him go, too," Meyers accepted the change of subject. "Anyway, the continent where we're going to be is uninhabited, predatory wildlife is no bigger than about the size of a German Shepherd, and there are some very pushy gull-like birds--"

"And large pig-like things that don't taste like bacon," McPherson broke in.

"Oh yeah, that was disappointing."

Colbert gave Meyers a questioning look.

"Basically Doctors Jackson and Fournier have been there almost fulltime for most of the past few weeks. With AR-4 working with temp NCOs and our Major on Earth, AR-2 and 4 have been the babysitting team, so we've done a bit of camping there. He paused for a bite, then gestured with his fork. "It's a hard life in Pegasus when your job is a week-long camp out with real meat on the fire and the sound of geeks having Archeologasms in the background."

"Real alien meat," McPherson muttered.

"Babysitting?" Colbert picked out the detail he didn't like the sound of.

"Ah, no big deal - the Brain Trust guys can take care of themselves, they just have absolutely zero situational awareness while they're geeking out over their latest priceless find. And so far there haven't been any Wraith on that planet, but there's always a first time."

He nodded, watching Brittner fill up second box from the basket of power bars before she wandered out.

"How's chow work on missions? MREs?"

"Well, if you want to," Meyers sounded surprised. "For short missions like this we bring real food.
Actually for longer peaceful missions like those weeks on that planet as well, they give us stuff to supplement the MREs with.

"The kitchen just likes Jackson," McPherson said. "And the Colonel is coming along."

"Anyway, MREs are part of the jumper inventory, so they're always an option, but we try to avoid eating them if we can."

Colbert wondered if that was a preference given the quality of MREs, which didn't usually rate above 'palatable,' or a reflection of the long-term nature of the Atlantis mission, which traded and cooked locally, and apparently saw MREs as emergency food.

"If I were you I'd bring some food from here for today. The kitchen'll give you a container if you ask. Write your name on it and stick it in the mission box - that's a crate for shit you bring along that you don't keep on you. Ours is always full with snicker bars, LT McSmartyPants's study books, Hot Tamales, the Major's e-reader, gum, coffee, Mountain Dew, that sort of stuff."

"Okay. Would I be allowed to take my tablet and put it in?"

"For a mission like this, I reckon so, yeah, but best double check."

"Thanks. Any intel on the weather?"

"It's late spring there now, so it should be pleasant enough. We have shelters there, and we'll be in the jumpers anyway."

"Jumpers are.. small spaceships, right?" He said is slowly, still incredulous that this was all happening.

"You haven't seen 'em yet? This'll be fun. They fit through the gate. Very cool."

"Right."

"I think your LT is going to want to use today and tomorrow to get you familiarised with the equipment and the inventory, so you'll be seeing lots of the things."

Colbert reminded himself that when they referred to 'his LT' they meant Brittner. It would take some time for that phrase to stop summoning Nate's face to his mind. Possibly even longer for Brittner to replace it, if ever.

"Speaking of LTs," McPherson nodded at the entrance.

"Ah yes, that factory-issue one just leaving is ours," Meyers said cheerfully, subtly indicating the young Lieutenant he'd seen earlier. "This would be our cue to go and prep the jumpers."

"Should I be doing that for my team?"

"Normally, yeah, together with the LT. But if you haven't been told about it yet, I reckon not today. We'll give Brittner a hand if she needs one, anyway."

"Thanks. I have to go see the Colonel - see you later."

They left with a wave. He prepared some coarse, alien-grain sandwiches with something that one of the kitchen staff helpfully described as 'Space Turkey,' and headed off to find Colonel Sheppard.

* * *

"Mehra submitted the security roster for the next two weeks, if you could have a look at it. Oh, and McKay expressly does not have permission to try out the new containment chamber for the zero point energy project. I haven't gotten around to double-checking his calculations."

"I know, I won't let him blow up any solar systems while you're enjoying your weekend off, I promise."

Colbert held away from the office, waiting to see when was a good moment. He was used to the realities of shipboard life, where privacy was often not so much privacy as people politely
pretending they couldn't overhear. Not that either of the Colonels seemed bothered by his approach. Colonel Carter was, to his surprise, geared up as if for a mission, completely comfortable in a tac vest that looked frequently used, all the pockets stuffed full.

She was standing behind Sheppard where he sat in the desk chair, and they seemed to be going over a list.

"Anyway, Teyla and Ronon are taking him along to a wedding celebration on New Athos, and most of the rest of the scientists are busy preparing for the Rube Goldberg competition, so I don't expect much in the way of trouble outta them," Sheppard said with a grin.

"Are you sure you don't want to go along to the celebration? I just feel--"

"Sam, you haven't taken more than a morning off since you got here," he said reasonably. "Go to the planet of the shiny ruins, catch up with Teal'c, sit at the campfire listening to the happy babble of excited archaeologists. The city is locked up, nothing is going to happen here, and you could use the break."

Carter smiled on a sigh, accepting this.

"It will be nice to go offworld, that's for sure," she admitted.

"Yes, it will," Sheppard agreed. "And I will just sit here, looking mournful as is expected of me, and oversee the repairs while catching up on the paperwork Lorne keeps pointedly leaving in the middle of my desk."

"Right," she said brightly. "I'll all be fine. Thanks, John."

"Have fun!" he waved as she left. Colbert smiled inwardly at the easy familiarity between them. Carter was still new to the base, but there clearly wasn't any tension between the two senior commanders.

He snapped to attention as she walked past.

"At ease, sergeant," she said, then there was a slight pause. She looked as if she wanted to add something, but changed her mind. "I'll see you in the jumper bay."

"Yes, ma'am."

Sheppard waved him in and into a chair before Colbert had a chance to salute. Despite the hour, the Colonel looked perfectly fresh and awake in his day to day uniform. His face was all business, with a sort of briskness that suggested that he was determined to make full use of his day in an office. Colbert wondered if he was about to face an evaluation before he'd even been here 24 hours.

"So, sergeant Colbert, how prepared do you feel for your first mission in Pegasus?" Sheppard just asked. "On a scale of," he handwaved, "one to ten."

Blinking, he contemplated that for a long moment. If anybody had asked him that on Earth, he would have said eight or nine, depending on under what commander he would be fighting. If there was one thing Recon was, it was prepared for anything. Out here though... should he be admitting to feeling overwhelmed by all the things Avery had told and shown him yesterday? He loathed the idea of being kept off the mission like a green private, but he saw the sense of it now.

"About a four, sir," he said cautiously.

Sheppard's expression did not change.

"And that's because...?"

"I know I can handle myself, sir," he began slowly, "and I think I can handle myself against a Wraith," Sheppard's eyebrows rose a little. "It's the unknown dangers that get me, sir, the ones we don't even know are dangers yet. I'm not sure anybody could feel prepared, no matter how much training they've had."

The Colonel thought that over for a long moment, nodding slowly. Then he made a notation on his tablet. When he looked up, there was a hint of approval in his eyes.

"Good answer, good attitude," he said. "You have a go. Take care."

"Thank you, sir."
There were different people in the control room at this hour and they all seemed busy, but one of the gate room Marines directed Colbert to the jumper bay. He wasn't actually sure where the hell in the city it was even after he'd gotten there - damn weird transporters - but it was a large hangar-like space with nine small... well, he supposed they were spaceships, in two levels along the far wall. Closer by were two more, parked at an angle with the open rear hatches together, stacks of crates and gear out in front of them. They were marked with a big 5 and an 8 with a red cross underneath it. Music was playing inside one of them, accompanied by singing.

_Sweet Caroline_
*Good times never seem so good*
*I've been inclined to believe it never would*

The interior of the number 5... spaceship.. - he supposed Jumper sounded less ridiculous - wasn't all that dissimilar from the inside of a truck. The forward compartment had four chairs, the after compartment two benches along the bulkheads. Gear was stowed overhead and inside the benches. The young Lieutenant he would now forever know as LT McSmartyPants was busy slotting boxes of gear into overhead brackets with the help of McPherson.

The Jumper on the right had apparently been adapted from the base model - it had extra racks built into the aft compartment. One side had them folded up against the bulkhead, the other side was folded open, and Colbert realised they were holders for stretchers. It wouldn't be comfortable, but the Jumper could hold six wounded like this.

"Hey Colbert, you got the go-ahead then?"

Meyers came striding out of jumper 5, a laminated list in his hand.

"Yeah. Forgot to ask about the tablet though."

"LT's in there," Meyers indicated the other jumper with his list.

Brittner was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the front compartment, an assortment of medical supplies spread out on a cloth in front of her. She was marking them off with a whiteboard marker on a laminated list while she packed them, singing softly along with the music. Her travel mug, holster and sidearm were in the co-pilot seat. She looked more awake, but only marginally so.

"Hey Colbert," she said as he stepped onto the ramp, her eyes never leaving her list. "Ready for your first intergalactic adventure?"

He was taken so off-guard by that greeting that it took him a moment to react, and she looked up, looking improbably young with her messy hair and still-sleepy eyes. He was hit by that sense of disbelief again, that she was _going with them_ into unknown dangers. It felt like they were letting the girlfriend of one of his men ride with them in the humvees across Iraq. Whether they got on or not, he couldn't help feeling protective, and there was a powerful urge that said she should stay behind.

He mentally kicked himself, because it was nonsense - she had years more experience facing the space vampires and whatever the fuck else was out there, and if he didn't shake this reflex in a hurry, things weren't going to go well for him not only in this team, but in the entire community.

He shook himself and tried to sound professional.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You eaten, packed, cleared with Colonel Sheppard?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good-oh. Epipen. Needles. 25 gauge.." she muttered, taking a packet from the cloth and putting it into the metal case she was packing. "21... 16 gauge.."

He wondered if she wasn't much inclined to give him orders yet, or if right now it would simply be more work to put him to work than it would be to handle things herself.
"Permission to ask a question, ma'am?"

"This is research base, sergeant," she said without looking up from her work. "If we made people ask permission for asking questions nothing would ever get done." She marked something off on her list.

He bit back his irritation. He was already struggling to find a way to handle the fact that he was about to go to an alien planet, possibly facing an enemy unlike any he'd faced before that wanted to suck the life out of him, travelling through a wormhole in a spaceship, AND doing it with people of unknown competence and character, not to mention the fact that he instinctively reacted to her as the sort of person who said a tearful goodbye and waited for them to get back safely and not as an officer. She could at least let him fall back on the comforting familiarity of formal address.

"Permission to take my tablet on the mission, ma'am?" he said instead, aiming for a civil tone.

"Yeah, go ahead. Stick it in the mission box," she waved her list in the direction of a bright red crate that was marked AR-4.

He stiffened to attention and then dismissed himself. It was 0710 hrs - he could make a run for his quarters and then see if he could make himself useful. With any luck Avery would have arrived by then, or perhaps Meyers could give him something to do.

* * *

He managed the run in about ten minutes, returning to see Simmons and McPherson work in quiet efficiency. The second jumper was gone, and he looked around as to where it would have gone when Meyers stepped out of nothing.

"...the fuck?" was the most eloquent thing he could say to that.

Meyers spotted him and flashed a huge grin, then turned around and called "All right ma'am, try it again?" into the emptiness he'd come from, and with a strange shimmery effect the jumper reappeared.

"...the fucking fuck?"

"No stutter this time, ma'am."

"Thanks, Meyers," Brittner sounded from inside. "Are you clear? Gonna check the pods now."

Meyers stepped away from the jumper, and the hatch closed. The whole jumper hummed slightly and then gently rose into the air a little, and sections rose out of the side. It moved away about ten metres, and he watched for a moment as nothing much else seemed to happen.

"Sergeant Colbert," Simmons gestured him over. He tore his eyes away from the alien spaceship.

"Sir."

"These tents were taken down in a hurry a couple of hours ago," the young man indicated five bundles of lightweight dome tents. "If you could quickly check if they have all the parts? There should be three poles and sixteen pegs per tent."

"Yes, sir."

He set to work, quickly unwrapping each bundle while wondering how the hell tent-sharing worked out with a mixed team. In this case, presumably the Colonel would share with the Lieutenant, but on missions where it was just AR-4? Would he ever be paired with her, and if so, would he be able to refuse? Next to him, the Lieutenant marked gear off on an email printout while the sergeants stowed each item away into the jumper, working together like a well-oiled machine.

"These three are complete, sir, but these are missing two pegs each," he reported. "And they are all wet."

"That's why we're taking them," the Lieutenant said. "AR-5 had to egress in a hurry, and it'll save the Quartermaster from having to dry them. And 14 pegs is acceptable, so in they go." he jerked
his thumb in the direction of the jumper.

*Returning with the MASH Jumper*, Brittner sounded over the radio. The men made space for it to land, and there was a gentle powering-down sound when it set down. *Simmons, do you want me to pre-flight yours while I'm at it?*

"Yes please, that saves the Major from having to do it while the Colonel is waiting." Simmons keyed his radio, then let go as the ramp opened and Brittner walked out. "I'll get your mission gear stowed in the meantime."

"Thanks." She looked at her watch. "Not bad timing. The armoury sarge is on his way up, and apparently the kitchen is going to deliver."

"Fancy."

"We should ask the Colonel to come with us more often," Meyers grinned.

Brittner walked into the other jumper and past where Colbert was stowing the tents, and a space-age sort of viewscreen sprang from the console as she entered the forward compartment. She hadn't touched anything when the air outside the ramp seemed to buzz for a moment.

He halted on the ramp. Everything outside the Jumper looked slightly distorted. Was he looking through whatever had made the other Jumper invisible?

"It's all right sergeant, you can just walk through," Simmons said. "It's the shield."

It tingled his scalp a little when he walked through, like a shiver. As he looked back, the strange bubble barrier winked out, and then the same shimmer effect as before made the jumper disappear completely.

"That is some strange shit," he summarised. "Is there an invisibility button or something?"

"No buttons, sergeant. Has nobody told you about the Ancient Gene?"

"With all due respect sir, I assumed that was a wind-up."

Simmons stifled a grin, and Colbert realised he found the young Lieutenant much easier to deal with than Brittner. He seemed to have the sort of eager USAF Academy-issue stiffness that hadn't had time to get worn down by reality yet, and in any other circumstance he'd find it mildly irritating, but right now it was just pleasantly straightforward to know exactly how to handle himself around the man.

"...so Colonel Sheppard really can fly the city with his mind," he said once they'd told him all about the gene. He tried not to sound like he was about to laugh hysterically, but wasn't sure he succeeded.

"Indeed. And all three your team mates have the gene to some extent."

"But Major Lorne has it stronger than all three of them put together," Meyers said with something of satisfaction. He carried a canvas bag full of rope bundles and climbing harnesses into the MASH Jumper.

"And he's a combat pilot, all the Jumpers like him better," Brittner's voice sounded out of the strange, empty space of the invisible jumper. Then there was the shimmering again, and it reappeared.

"The spaceships have preferences," he said as the ramp closed and the Jumper lifted off. "The spaceships have preferences," he repeated, to see if that improved it any. It didn't.

"Yup." Meyers sounded cheerful.

"Right."

* * *
"All right gents, how's it coming?" Avery's BBC voice boomed through the jumper bay. Everybody straightened up.

"We have full inventory and mission gear, pre-flights done on both Jumpers, food's in," Brittner reported. "Armoury is standing by." She indicated the sergeant and two corporals who had come up with the weaponry. "Just need to stow people and personal gear, sir."

"Good job - they are on their way now. Doctor Jackson will be riding with us in the MASH Jumper, and the Colonel and Teal'c will be in Jumper 5 with AR-2, since they have more space."

Avery went into the jumper to stow his pack in the top stretcher rack that already held Brittner and Colbert's packs, folding it back in so that the stretcher held them securely against the bulkhead. Colbert was a little impressed with how cleverly thought out the Jumpers were - they were equipped to sustain a four-man team for up to three months in any sort of environment. The MASH Jumper, which apparently really was called that, seemed to have been outfitted as a small mobile hospital complete with a way to transform the forward compartment into a surgery suite.

He watched Avery kneel down at the mission box to rifle its contents. He'd examined them earlier, curious what sort of 'personal, non-essential items' would be taken. It had turned out that apart from his and Brittner's tablets and food containers, there was a large jar of Marmite, permanent- and white-board markers, a half-empty jar of peanutbutter looking stuff that was labelled 'Speculoos', powerbars, a container with 'bogroll' written on it, a textbook called Trauma Case Studies For The Paramedic, a hot water bottle with a fuzzy polar bear cover, a few packets of sesame crackers, a can of sprayable chalk, a frisbee, a small container with teabags, sugar and long-keeping milk, a frisbee, a handful of chupa chups, a small box with band-aids and ibuprofen, and a small, battered map of the London Underground.

Somehow he felt he'd learned a lot about his new team just from that. He wasn't yet sure exactly what he'd learned, but nonetheless.

* * *

Major Lorne entered the Jumper bay at that moment, followed by the two doctors, who were absorbed in conversation, and the Colonel and Teal'c. Lorne briefly reiterated what Colbert already knew about the mission - explorative, expected to be peaceful but requiring alertness anyway, and the Colonel was along as a civilian, so command was his.

Despite that, the Armoury sergeant issued everybody with sidearms and P90s, down to Doctors Fournier and Jackson, who both accepted the weapon with comfortable familiarity, if not enthusiasm. They had brought an M4A1 for him, and accepting it he understood the expedition's preference for the P90s, which were far more compact. Everybody got into the jumpers, the doctors stowed their packs, and the hatches closed.

Brittner had picked the co-pilot seat, and Avery gave her a strange look before settling down in the pilot seat. Colbert waited a moment to see where the doctors wanted to sit, given that there were four seats for five people, but Fournier waved him into the forward compartment.

"We'll sit here, it will be more convenient anyway, sergeant," he said, sitting down on a bench in the back. Doctor Jackson, a surprisingly built guy for an egghead, was already completely absorbed by the ruin schematics Fournier had opened on his tablet and just grunted his agreement.

He watched in awe as the Jumpers rose effortlessly up through the roof hatch and out above the city, offering a view that made Colbert lean forward and attempt to burn it into his mind. In front of them Lorne's Jumper descended again into the main tower.

Wormhole engaged. AR-2, AR-4, you have a go, Sheppard's voice sounded through the radio. See you in 36 hours.

Thank you, Colonel Sheppard, Major Lorne answered.

Jumper 5 is away, you are clear to come down, Captain Avery.

Colbert threw a last look down on the city and then they were sinking down into the main tower, until they hoovered in the gate room right in front of the stargate. With a last greeting, they
smoothly moved forward into the wormhole.

Chapter End Notes

Lt. Simmons and sergeants Meyers and McPherson are original characters I have borrowed from Gelbes Gilatier, who will hopefully post the stories where they feature soon, as they are not on AO3 yet :-)

"Why is my Lieutenant falling asleep?"

Brittner jolted upright. They'd been flying across the planet's surface for perhaps fifteen minutes now, high enough in the atmosphere that the planet was reduced to a world-map view of continents and oceans. Colbert had mostly spent that time trying to commit the view to memory while resisting the urge to gasp every time they came across a new land formation battered by giant ocean waves visible even from up here. Avery, sounding pleased to be able to show it to him, explained that they were passing over the side of the planet where it was currently winter.

The Lieutenant had been having trouble stifling her yawns since the moment they'd finished setting scanners after they came out of the gate. Colbert was directly behind her, so couldn't really see, but judging by her stillness he thought she'd been properly asleep for at least a few minutes.

"What the hell, Lee?"

"Um, sorry sir."

"Any reason you're falling asleep on a mission? It wasn't poker night last night was it?"

"No sir," she sounded just slightly indignant now. "It was- I had to- I was working on getting the Jumper packed."

"Last night? Why didn't you do it this morning?"

She sighed, voice lowering as if this was not a conversation she wanted to have in front of him. He could hear the reproachful tone nonetheless, in the snatches he picked up.

"You wanted... last minute... what was I supposed to do? ....about 0130... inventory back out of storage..."

Avery glanced in his direction, and he got the feeling this was somehow about him.

"You should have told me." Avery's voice either didn't lend itself to lowering, or he didn't mind being overheard.

"You were off comms."

"Ah." Avery actually sounded a little embarrassed. "I was... busy."

She tactfully ignored that. Colbert wasn't so sure he would have.

"Ouseti and Ouderijn helped me out. I owe them a bottle from my next homebrew batch."

"Make that from my batch, then. And if you want to get some shut-eye before we arrive.." he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "ETA is about forty minutes."

"Thank you, sir."

She got up and gestured at Colbert that he should take the co-pilot seat. A few moments later the doctors took the two free seats in the forward compartment.

"There's a compact camera in your vest kit," Avery said, when he leaned forward to get a better angle on the front viewport. He sounded good natured once again. "And the Sanity Society organises photo shows every once in a while for the best work. It's just frustrating that you won't be able to show them to anybody beyond the city, isn't it?"

Colbert got the compact water- and shock-proof camera out. He'd been told it was mostly for documentation. He tried a few shots out the viewport, but the images on the preview screen never quite seemed to capture the sheer scale and colour and grandness of the planet below, or the gas giant looming over it.

"Would I be allowed to send photos to somebody at the SGC, sir?"

"Ah, your friends who will begin training soon, isn't it? Yes, to secure accounts that would be
"Okay."

"Doesn't seem to really come across to a photo though," he concluded, pre-viewing another attempt.

"No, I have tried it too. I don't know if it's because the cameras aren't that good, or if the window screen distorts things, but the photos never come out as good as the memories. One day I will ask one of the Anthropologists to come with the SLR camera and the fancy lenses, see if she had better luck."

\textit{AR-4, we are dropping down for the scenic route,} Major Lorne sounded over the radio.

"Copy that, we're on your six." Avery replied.

"It gets more scenic?"

"Do you see those dark areas there in the shelter of that mountain ridge?"

Apparently unbidden, the digital viewscreen they referred to as a HUD appeared from the console, overlaying what they could see out the viewport. It helpfully highlighted the sections of the grid that indicated the dark areas, updating them in real time as the Jumper glided down. On one side of the screen the dark area was enlarged and then changed angle so that Colbert could see it was a forest. A forest of giants.

"Think of Redwood trees, but then about twice the height and four times the diameter."

"Right."

The viewscreen disappeared again. They were still high up, but he could see the relief of the continent against the horizon now, the towering vastness of the mountain ridge, and how small it made the forest seem.

"It's all right to think this is cool, sergeant. I won't tell anybody," Avery grinned.

"It's just... a lot to take in, sir," he answered honestly. "Yesterday at this time- or at least he thought so, 28-hour days were already messing him up, -I was still on Earth, wondering if it was all part of some f*cked up psychological experiment."

"Fair enough. I suppose we do get a little blasé about it sometimes. Though as far as alien planets go, this one would probably be on the cover of the Pegasus tourist brochure."

"That's because it looks like Middle Earth," Dr Jackson put in from behind them.

"It certainly has a way of making me feel like a hobbit," Avery agreed.

Colbert smiled inwardly. It was hard to be a geek in First Recon - not exactly a culture that valued flights of fancy and creative thinking, so he'd buried that part of him away, only to be indulged during leave, and later the occasional discussion with Nate or Ray. Apparently it was very easy to be a geek on a gate team though, judging by the way they just assumed he knew what they were talking about.

\textit{AR-4, maintain your current flight path. I am going to take a closer look at the mountain range,} Lorne sounded.

"Copy that, Major."

They watched as the other Jumper veered off and skimmed a path close to the mountain tips, weaving across the jagged outcrops like a Shearwater over the ocean.

"Show-off," Fournier muttered on a grin. Colbert remembered that Major Lorne was the combat pilot, while Captain Avery most likely hadn't flown anything before he came to Atlantis.

"Probably Sam asking to take a closer look," Dr Jackson said.

"The Colonel's an Astrophysicist," Avery explained to Colbert. "As far as I'm aware though, not a Geologist. That's the Major's speciality."

Colbert wondered if every member of the military here had a specialism. He got the impression there was no such thing as 'just a grunt' on Atlantis.

"Ah, this is more like... broad-spectrum geekery on her part," Dr Jackson said fondly.
"My scanners are clear, Major."

_copy that, Captain. Set down at my three._

"Brittner?"

"Up!" she called from the aft compartment, already clipping on her P90. She looked a whole lot more alert than before.

Colbert watched as Avery carefully landed next to the other Jumper. The trees were too big to take in through the viewport of the little spacecraft, but on the final approach he'd gotten the impression of widely spaced trees gradually becoming denser forest in the direction of the mountains. Ruined structures were visible here between the outlying trees - once they must have been in the open grass plains they had just seen, until the forest spread.

It was hard to fit his mind around that time span. The trees out here on the edge were by no means the largest, according to Avery, but they were still so vast that the sheer time scale of it all overwhelmed him a little.

_all right people, establish a ground perimeter at 75 metre, Jumper five scans long range aerial, Jumper eight sets up a 1500-metre ground scan._ Major Lorne said.

"Colbert, you're with Brittner," Avery called back, scrolling through the digital interface of the jumper to set up the scan.

The hatch opened, and Meyers, McPherson, Simmons and Teal'c exited the other jumper and went off in various directions. On their own, Colbert noted with irritation. He knew he was the new guy and they weren't familiar with his field skills, but did he really have to be babysat?

Brittner nodded her head in the direction of the ruins, and he followed her into the network of crumbled walls and spaces. He focused on clearing the various spaces and managed to block out the whole alien ruins thing. They didn't speak, which suited him fine, and they worked together better than he had expected; familiar gestures and sure movements, covering one another's six in a surprisingly comfortable rhythm. They found some tracks Brittner declared to be from 'pig things' and then made their way back out of the maze of ruins.

"No trace of Wraith presence, but some pig things took shelter in those whole rooms on the far side. They might come back when it's dark."

"Good, we're established, then. Thank you, Lieutenant," Lorne said.

Fournier and Jackson headed off into the ruin complex together with Colonel Carter, Teal'c, Simmons and McPherson - he could hear Jackson's voice drifting back.

"...really have to see this, I think even Jack would be impressed, we have never..."

Colbert took a few steps back and looked up, and up and up - there really weren't any other words for this place than cheesy theatrical bullshit like towering and majestic and awe-inspiring. The trees were straight like Redwoods, but they had more prominent side branches, more like Oaks. The bark was knobbly, and it looked like it should be possible to climb one. The crowns of the trees were far overhead, spaced far enough to filter the low sunlight, making the forest feel like a vast hall. The ground was soft and springy, with not much in the way of undergrowth. It was the sort of place where you automatically lowered your voice.

"You know, I have spent the better part of a month here, and it still makes me do that," Avery came up beside him

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"Right, let's start with the standard one," Brittner said, leading the way to Major Lorne's Jumper.
"All of these are outfitted according to a standard list and layout, divided into three elements," she gestured to the ceiling racks, which had been packed full of gear. "Standard emergency inventory - rescue equipment, food, water and filtering equipment, shelters, a shovel, life-raft and drysuits for a water landing, closed circuit rebreathers, weapons and ammo, and so on - basically everything we can think of that a team might need to stay alive in or near a jumper for up to sixty days. That's this list."

She walked to the console and picked up a laminated list that had been printed on red paper. The back was chequered with white.

"Now this is all stuff we try not to need, but if we do break into it, we keep track of what we use, and after the mission we - you and me - go through the inventory and resupply or exchange things to make it all standard again. Then before the next mission, whoever is using the jumper is going to do another check. Sometimes everything goes to hell and pre- or post-mission protocol falls by the wayside, that's why the double checks. If it's all complete and ready to go, you sign off with a wipey marker and put this red side up on the console."

She handed him the list, which was itemised and, judging from what he recognised in the ceiling rack, ordered according to packing sequence.

"Now the second of the three elements is the med kit." She indicated two hard-shell containers with red crosses on them. "Checking it is the responsibility of the medic of the gate team, which in our case is me, but you'll still need to know your way around it in case I need an assist. This green list belongs with it," she took it off the console. It had been signed by Meyers. "You're only allowed to sign the med kit off without checking if you're 100% sure it hasn't been opened at all, which is why I keep a small kit with things like band-aids and non-prescription painkillers in our mission box. It sucks to have to spend 20 minutes checking the entire kit when somebody opened it because he cut his finger or something."

He nodded.

"The third part is mission specific gear - that's usually the most work. Things like tents, equipment, food, whatever else we'll need for a specific mission." She lifted the bench seats to reveal the storage where he'd stowed tents that morning. "Usually I discuss it with the Captain and we make a list on the AR-4 section of the wiki, so we can print it off and mark things off as we assemble them. For today's mission there was a lot of stuff, so it was fortunate that AR-2's guys could jump in to get it all ready in time."

He thought he caught that undertone again, the same she'd had in that discussion with Avery in the Jumper. The one that said there was something she wasn't happy about - and it was him.

"Ma'am," he said, "for future reference, I do prefer hearing about my responsibilities in advance, not in hindsight."

She visibly snapped out of her preoccupation with the systems she was explaining and fully focused on him for perhaps the first time since he'd arrived. It would have been nice to have the slightest clue what she was thinking, but he'd never been very good at reading faces, and she wasn't exactly expressive.

She drew breath as if to speak, then changed her mind, and put the list back on the console, solid green side up.

"Get all the gear on the red list outside, check to make sure you know what each item is, and then restow," she ordered. "Let me know when you're done, and we'll move on."

He was actually disappointed - if he was going to push an officer like that, he expected to be shoved back. He wanted some response, some handle on what the fuck was going on with her. But there could be no other answer than "Yes, ma'am."

***

"Hey man, how's it going?"

Colbert looked up from the neat line he'd made out of the equipment, attempting to keep it all organised. He knew it had all come out of the ceiling rack - he'd taken it out himself. But it still seemed improbable that he'd be able to get it all back in.
"My old RTO would say this is Olympics level Tetris," he admitted after a long moment.

Meyers grinned and picked up the red case containing the dry-suits.

"Lemme show you, there's a trick."

He lifted the box toward the far side of the rack and then angled it.

"See those two bolts up there? If you line up the case with those, it should just--" he pushed. "-slide in. Where's your LT, by the way? She's usually more hands-on than this."

He glanced at the other man, still not sure who had been the one being tested over breakfast.

"Went off to study," he settled on, voice neutral. He could see her on the other side of the camp, P90 at her side while she was bent over her book.

"Huh. Guess I'll help you, then."

"Is everybody here studying something?" he asked when they were slotting in containers.

"Well, not everybody," Meyers said. "Actually.. okay, maybe everybody. Command's always encouraged people here to develop diverse skill sets, because way back in the first year, if you got injured you had to find some other way to make yourself useful. That's how we ended up with a bunch of disabled grunts in Engineering and Tech. Since we have Colonel Carter it's been formalised - there's some official paths toward getting various academic degrees. And of course there's all sorts of practical skills you can specialise in, there's a sort of apprentice system."

"Nice." Actually, it was more than nice. It showed a genuine investment in people not just in what they could offer the expedition, but also in what the expedition could offer them for the rest of their lives. He'd already gotten the sense that ex-Atlantis personnel was still a fairly tight bunch - Lorne had mentioned they had visited a few during their recruiting trip - and he was willing to bet most of them were doing well.

He was enough of a cynic to think that part of the care probably had something to do with the non-disclosure agreements, and that the SGC was invested in not having a bunch of disgruntled or destitute veterans around the place, but still. It was better than other branches of the military were doing, even if it was partly self interest.

"I've been assisting LT Cadman with her chemistry research in the Boom Room," Meyers continued. "And Colonel Carter has given me the chance to figure out if getting a degree in that direction is something I'd want."

"Guess that explains all the training groups," he replied after a long moment. "I mean, they said I could train up if I wanted to, but I wasn't really expecting to be tapped for the diving team immediately."

"Hah! Well, you are with Avery," Meyers grinned. "He's training officer, and he's on the Sanity Society, so he runs a fair bit of the recreational stuff as well. Doesn't surprise me at all that you're immediately getting snatched up. Expect to be pressganged into the Captain's rugby league as well."

"Rugby?"

"We have a Kiwi in Geology who set it up in the first year - they used to do a game every Sunday. Don't think they've got it back on track since the big move - we kind of lost our Sundays. Maybe once the geeks establish a final calendar they'll reschedule the game."

"Wait, there's no actual calendar?"

"Breaks the brain a little, don't it? On the previous planet we tried to keep pace with Earth time a little - 8 days of 21 hours, and the odd leap day. On New Lantea it looks more like it's going to be six days and some leap hours and days, but they're still working on establishing a calendar. Until then, everybody's sort of making it up as they go along. The only thing we've really established is the shifts and the siesta hours."

"So when I know there's supposed to be a databurst on Saturday..."

"That's Friday about midday on Atlantis. There's a page on the wiki that shows you Earth time," Meyers grinned. "Now this planet, this is something else. 153 hour days, or something crazy like that. There's some kind of mini-eclipse every 17 hours, or we'd probably go nuts with that."

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midnight sun insomnia shit people get in the Arctic circle on Earth."

Colbert nodded, sliding the life raft into place. He glanced around, noticing that Lorne and Avery were talking about forty metres away, and Brittner was still reading out of earshot.

"What's this about Avery and Brittner being married?" he asked after some hesitation.

Meyers barked a laugh.

"Let me guess, Lieutenant Cadman just dropped that in and then un-assed the area, right?"

"Pretty much."

He shook his head, grinning.

"From what Warszawski - that's their former NCO - shared, they were on a planet where the locals were upset about the idea that a woman ran around with three men without being married to any of them. There was talk of keeping her there and some purification ritual to save her from the scandal, and that doesn't sound good, does it? Given that Warszawski didn't think they were the type of people to have sweat-lodges around."

"Not really, no," he agreed. Christ. With the internal complications he saw in a mixed gender team he hadn't even really considered the complications they could encounter.

"So Avery claims that they are engaged—" he saw the look on Colbert's face and grinned. "This seriously isn't nearly as out-there as it gets, bear with me, he claims they are engaged, hoping that'll make it okay, right? But then the locals decided that they should be married right there, and nobody is allowed to leave until it's done."

Meyers slotted in the last container and sniggered.

"They tried to word it nicely for the report, pretend it was a 'local bonding custom', but of course Colonel Carter has pretty much seen it all, done it all, and pioneered the euphemistically worded reports herself, so she saw right through it. Didn't help they still had the ink from the ceremony on their faces, that shit didn't wash off for about a week."

Colbert chuckled.

"So that's the story. In six months they'll probably find it funny, but right now, not so much. Don't let them know you know, or there will be surprise testicular surgery in my future."

"Man, there is some weird shit going on out here," Colbert said, looking up at the now packed ceiling rack, touching each container and pack in turn. He mentally drilled himself on their contents. Tents, life raft, MREs, water filter sets, drysuits, fire fighting equipment, radiation suits...

"Ain't that the truth."

"But they're not together, right?" He was fairly sure of that, but there was still some strange tone in their interaction sometimes - a hesitation before a command, just a beat too long before a response. A carefulness. As if there were landmines between them somewhere.

Meyers shrugged. "Not as far as I know. Rumour is that Avery is seeing somebody in Anthropology, and if Brittner is seeing anybody, she's doing it under the radar."

"All right."

"Let's get those tents up, guys," Major Lorne said from just outside the ramp. Colbert schooled his face carefully blank, unsure how much the major had heard of the conversation, but he gave no indication of it.

To Colbert's surprise both Lorne and Avery took a tent, and judging from the speed of erecting them and Lorne's somewhat triumphant grin when he grabbed the fifth tent, they'd made it a little race.

Atlantis officers were strange, that was for sure. As long as they were also competent, he figured he'd be able to live with it.
To what he suspected was mutual relief, Meyers offered to take Colbert through the contents of the med kit, leaving the Lieutenant to study. He was beginning to like the other sergeant, probably at least in part because Meyers was used to being The Talkative One. It made for easy company - the man was used to not getting a lot of response from the more taciturn McPherson, and Colbert found it comfortable to let Meyers' voice take up the space between them. It reminded him a little of hanging out with Ray, though Meyers' subjects were a lot less off the wall.

Most of the time.

"Are you married, Colbert?"

He blinked at the sudden question and looked up from the tray of medication bottles he was teaching himself to identify. Meyers hadn't stopped what he was doing, and his head and part of his torso were currently wedged into a storage nook under the console that he was emptying out to reorganise it. Colbert shook his head, then realised the other man couldn't see him.

"No."

"I think you're an okay guy. Could be a good fit for Avery's team," Meyers said, voice sounding preoccupied and a little hollow. "So I'll give you some sage advice... the kind every bachelor needs to hear when he starts to serve on a mixed gender gate team."

He shuffled back out of the gap and gave him a grave look. "And hope you take it more seriously than O'Dannough did."

"He was their last replacement?"

"Yeah. Not a bad guy, had all the skills, been on a gate team at the SGC for a couple months. He lasted about two weeks on AR-4," Meyers grinned.

"Huh. That's... not a lot of time. So what was the advice he ignored?"

"Keep your cracks about periods and hormones to yourself."

Colbert couldn't contain his snort.

"Really? That's what it broke on?"

"I think it was more a.." Meyers handwaved, "a symptom of his general attitude than the direct cause. And he might have come away with a warning and made it last another week, but he did it in front of Doc Fournier."

"Yeah?" he said, in a 'go on' tone. This was good intel right here.

"You know how some people shout and it clears the air and you can move on?"

He nodded.

"That's LT Cadman. Bit of a temper," he sounded kind of fond, "If she ain't happy with you, you'll know, which is a good thing in my book."

Colbert nodded. It was good to know where you stood with officers.

"LT Brittner... she doesn't shout. If she's done with you, she's done."

"Right."

"But anyway, neither of them were quite there yet, I don't think. Maybe they were just letting him dig a little deeper." He made a vague gesture. "But Doc overheard. Next thing you know, O'Dannough..." he made a motion as if crumpling a ball of paper and tossing it in the trash.

"No period jokes. Check," Colbert said, aiming for flippant. It wasn't like that hadn't already occurred to him, that he'd have to watch his language, especially if he got more comfortable. The rules for what was acceptable were very different here - no deployment mode where anything went. "Though I get the impression the LT is already done with me."

"What?" They both surreptitiously looked out the Jumper, but she was still sitting on the other side.
of the camp circle, studying with her back in the sun. "Nah," Meyers waved it away. "Just give it
some time."

"Right. Okay, I think I've got this down. Blue section is antibiotics, green here sedatives and
painkillers, orange section is for antidotes and anti-allergy medication," it was an entire tray, filled
with every conceivable option. There were eight epi-pens as well, perhaps backups for the ones
they all carried as part of their personal kit. The impossibility of preparing for the an unknown
allergy reaction to an unknown element on an alien planet struck him again. "...moving on to
wound trauma, IV supplies.."

* * *

Lieutenant Brittner came into the Jumper about half an hour later, bringing in the scent of suntan
lotion. She had her shades flipped up onto her head in a California beach kind of way, and the
combination of scent and shades and chewing gum reminded Colbert strongly of his neighbour's
teenage daughter. It made the way she was cradling her P90 look completely out of place.

"Sergeants."

"Ma'am."

"How goes?"

"We've been through the general inventory, and Colbert's getting pretty solid on the med kit,
ma'am."

She crouched down at the entrance of the cockpit. Colbert was vaguely amused that she didn't
take the opportunity to loom over him while she could.

"If I come in with somebody with an open fracture, what do you bring me first?"

He picked out the tray with gauze and other bandaging material, and then let his hand roam over
the bottles of painkillers.

"I don't need you to know every bottle, bringing me the entire tray would be okay. If I ask you to
give me the morphine and syringe?"

He picked out the bottle and the closest of the three boxes of syringes.

"The medication has white, grey and black caps - that's connected to the white, grey and black
coded syringes. It was Doctor Beckett's system to help prevent accidental overdose. So Morphine
is coded black, and is always given with the smallest syringes."

He nodded, and she asked a few more questions about the med kit and the emergency inventory.
He got the impression she wasn't unhappy with his progress.

"Can you -- have you prepared an injection in the last year or so?"

"I did learn, but it's years ago, ma'am."

"Okay, we'll get you a half-day in the infirmary to get some basic clinical skills in," she nodded.
"We'll run through this again later on, right now I want you two to come and watch the MASH
jumper conversion."

They followed her out, and Colbert wondered if he was going to stop feeling out of his depth any
time soon.

Chapter End Notes

Please review! Validate my existence, internet people!

Oh, and I have fallen madly in love with The Secret Life of Scientists and a few of its
elements are suddenly showing up in Rock Happy. You should go read that.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

*I swear, if somebody gets out a guitar and starts singing Kumbaya I'm gonna try my luck with the fucking space vampires.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Most of the day passed in a haze of cheerful information overload. To his bemusement the transforming of the MASH jumper, which could be built to have an operation suite in the forward compartment, was immediately after demonstration declared to be a competition. Colbert and Captain Avery raced Major Lorne and Meyers in setting up the surgery table, scrub station, drip stands and assorted equipment, which provides both practice in the routine and entertainment.

The Captain was competitive and fanatic in a good-natured way, and took the narrow victory by Major Lorne with grace. Colbert was interested to note how easy the captain seemed to be with his superior - respectful, but in a way that suggested they were also friendly outside of work. He thought that boded well for the chain of command. He'd already seen that Sheppard and Carter were on good terms. He didn't know how Lorne and Sheppard were together. So far, his personal chain of command seemed to mostly stick on the Lieutenant.

After lunch Avery and McPherson went out to hunt and Brittner and Meyers climbed up one of the trees, leaving Colbert with Simmons to guard the group in the ruins. Not that there was much in the way of guarding required, according to Lorne, since the jumper scanners would warn them of anything approaching long before the eye could.

Colbert couldn't bring himself to just sit there, so he picked a good lookout spot and kept his watch. With the peaceful view and the alien sky - the gas giant plainly visible as it filled the sky - that wasn't exactly a hardship, and he was good at being still. The geeks were walking around with some sort of measuring device, talking excitedly about the 3D rendering they could make of the ruins. Lieutenant Simmons was following them around in the name of security, though he also seemed to find it all quite interesting. Colonel Carter and Teal'c had settled on a high spot about fifteen metres away, and from the snatches of conversation drifting his way, Colbert made out that somebody called Vala had a habit of playing pranks on people. The stories seemed to give the Colonel a great deal of amusement.

After some time he noticed that even though they seemed deep in conversation, the Colonel and Teal'c were each keeping an eye on a sector of horizon behind the other. He wondered if it was something they agreed on or a deeply ingrained habit. When first learning about the make-up of the original gate team - Special Ops Colonel, Alien warrior, military scientist and civilian scientist - he had assumed that the first two were primarily the protective elements in that team, the last two mostly there to deal with alien technology and cultures.

Perhaps they had started out that way, but Teal'c was obviously both used to, and comfortable with, the Colonel watching his six. Colbert wondered if he came from a culture where female warriors were commonplace, or if they'd gotten past any initial discord a long time ago.

* * *

A couple of hours later the geeks called a break. Jackson sat down with the Colonel and Teal'c, and--

"Brad - sergeant!" Fournier climbed up to his position, radiating excitement in a way that was strangely endearing on a man in his forties. "Is it all right if I call you Brad?"

"Sure, Doc."

"You will please call me Michèl," Fournier replied. "Come, I have something interesting to show
"I'm on watch, Doc-Michèl," he said evenly. He couldn't believe he was explaining this to a member of a front line team, even if he was a civilian. "I can't really go off right now." Not even to look at really interesting things.

Colonel Carter, who had apparently overheard, met his eyes and gave a little 'go ahead' handwave. Colbert hesitated, not wanting to abandon his post in front of the base commander, of all people.

"It's all right, sergerant," Carter said with mild exasperation.

"...apparently I can come with you," he told Fournier, getting to his feet and shouldering his rifle.

"This is good - there is so much to see here, but knowing that it is your first time off worlds I thought you might be interested in..."

The Doctor's French accent got stronger when he was speed-talking about some priceless archaeological find, and Colbert couldn't follow everything because the man regularly forgot that he basically knew nothing whatsoever about the Ancients, but Colbert liked that Fournier didn't talk down to him. He just expected him to keep up, assuming everybody was as interested and as smart as he was himself, and that was very far from the way people with doctorates usually talked to grunts. During the half hour that followed, trailing the doctor through the different spaces and excavations, Colbert found himself fascinated with the ruins quite despite himself.

"...and also I must introduce you around the Linguistics department," Fournier was saying, concluding a list of about ten people Colbert absolutely had to meet. It seemed the doctor was the most well-connected man on Atlantis. "It would be good for you to learn Lantean--"

He was about to interrupt, because whoa now, diving training was one thing, but learning a whole new language? An alien language at that? But the doctor continued blithely, "--at least enough for you to recognise signs that say 'warning, this machine makes heads explode' and such things."

It was one of those moments that he expected to be followed by 'Just joking' and which wasn't.

"This, I thought you might find especially interesting," Fournier lead him to the base of the tree most nearby the ruins. Compared to some of the other trees it was small, though he figured it was still at least as tall as the tallest Redwoods he'd ever seen.

Coming closer, he noticed there was a wide ring in the grass, circling the base of the tree with about three metres of space all around between the trunk and the ring. Fournier knelt down and moved the tall grass aside. Colbert joined him.

It was a strange material, not cold, not warm. The symbols in it did not seem to have been made by any way he knew.

"It's not metal, is it?"

"We don't yet know what it is," Fournier seemed quite excited by this. "But we think it is some kind of organic matter, and that it was planted along with the tree, and has grown with it."

"What does it say?"

"It goes easier to French, for me, but the closest I can get in English is..." he moved along the ring, moving grass aside as he went, "Here are the bravest of us... - there are nuances of love and grief - may their power give rise to this tree... and then something I can only interpret as nothing is lost in full. It suggests they knew something similar to our first law of thermodynamics--"

"No energy gets created in the universe, and none is destroyed," Colbert said.

"Just so."

"A warrior memorial?"

"A reasonable assumption," Fournier nodded. "The first we have found - as far as we know, the Ancients did not often face the Wraith in person, not after the first great conflicts."
Colbert walked all around the ring, trying to imagine a sapling in this place.

"How old - do you know?"

"We know that the Ancient Lanteans left this galaxy approximately ten thousand years ago, but."

"On that scale is must be hard to be more precise," Colbert nodded.

"For having lived in their city for nearly four years now, we do not yet know very much about them," Fournier said, and Colbert would have expected that to sound regretful, but it didn't. "There is so much yet to learn."

"Thank you, for taking the time to show me this."

"You are welcome - to the team, also," the doctor said. He hesitated for a moment, but then clearly decided against what he'd been about to say.

That's when they heard the scream.

* * *

He'd half-watched Brittner shoot a line into the tree, haul up a rope, and then a little later as she began to climb. Some time later Meyers had followed her up, just a leisurely climb to the first real branch, a wide limb at perhaps 35 metres height. Now Meyers was dangling below that branch.

_Simmons, you're up_, Lorne's laconic voice sounded through the radio. If his tone hadn't given this away as an exercise, the way Brittner was still sitting cross-legged on the branch would have.

Lieutenant Simmons swore under his breath, and pelted for the jumpers.

"Ohhh, fun, Colonel Carter said, leaning back to look up. "Let's go observe."

That seemed to be the cue for the entire party to head to the jumpers, where Avery and McPherson had returned as well. Avery was standing with Lorne, while McPherson had begun to skin a large... well, he could understand how the expedition had arrived at the name 'pig thing'.

Simmons was already struggling into a full-body climbing harness, clips clanking together in his haste.

Avery gestured him over and adjusted the shoulder plate straps for him.

"You're allowed to ask for assistance, Lieutenant."

"Thank you sir," Simmons already sounded a little breathless. Then he rallied himself and looked around, assessing his gear. "Climb the tree or the rope, sir?"

"It's your call, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant went to get the line gun and a large coil or rope from the jumper. His audience tried not to look too audience-like while he shot the line over the branch. He looked around, realised McPherson was elbow-deep in blood and guts, and turned to Colbert.

"Sergeant," Colbert snapped to as he was commanded into the exercise. "Haul this rope up. I'm going to attach both ends down here."

"Yes, sir."

The Lieutenant came back a moment later with some tethers and hardware, and both ends of the rope ended up attached under a massive exposed root. He stared into middle distance for a long moment, apparently running through a mental checklist, then patted his pockets, secured his sidearm with two snaps - the P90 he'd taken off with his tac vest - and handed Colbert his shades. Then he clicked himself onto the ascenders and shunt, switched his radio to open channel, and began to climb up the rope.

Colbert had done this sort of climbing, which was always slower than you wanted as you slid up
the hand ascender, put weight on it while you slid up the foot ascender, stepped weight onto it to
go higher with the hand again - and the uneven, diagonal strain on the body was never pleasant. If
it was him being tested, he would have preferred to scale the tree itself like Meyers and Brittner
had done, but perhaps Simmons was simply more comfortable with this method - it did have less
margin for error unless you were a very good climber.

Given that the Colonel was watching, Colbert could understand staying within a comfort zone.

"Be on standby with the stretcher, sergeant," Simmons called down to him as an afterthought. He
was making impressive headway, though judging by the rate of breathing they could hear over the
radio Colbert thought he would probably slow down in another few metres.

Once he'd collected the scoop stretcher he backed off to where he could follow the proceedings a
little more easily. After a moment of hesitation, standing with Fournier seemed the best option.
The doctor flicked him a smile and resumed looking up.

Brittner was getting herself into position to look at Meyers, down over the edge of the branch.
Apparently she'd also set her radio to open channel, perhaps so she could talk to Simmons with
her hands free. Meyers' radio was off.

Well, be glad I told you to use a full-body harness, or you'd be way more uncomfortable, they
heard.

And then, Shut up, Meyers, in a conversational tone. You're unconscious.

Hey sergeant, what happened? Simmons was only a few metres away now.

Well sir, LT Brittner shoved me off--

I did not! Amused indignation.

--and also, I'm unconscious, so I can't have said that, Meyers finished.

Lorne and Avery burst into laughter. McPherson was shaking his head, chuckling.

Colbert could see how Simmons prepared Meyers for a dual descend. There were only the sounds
of laboured breathing and gear clanking over the radio, with an occasional groan from Meyers -
who was either uncomfortable, or couldn't resist theatrics - and once a brace yourself like - yeah,
that's the way from Brittner.

Simmons listed his actions out loud, presumably half for his own mental checklist, half to give
Brittner the opportunity to stop him if he'd forgotten something. She just made an approving hum,
and then they were on their way down.

Colbert laid out the stretcher at the bottom of the ropes.

"Steady his head, sergeant, he might have spinal injuries," Simmons instructed as he lowered
Meyers the last few metres.

Meyers groaned loudly as he was set down on his back into the long grass.

"Fuck. A nutsack injury is what I have."

Major Lorne cleared his throat meaningfully.

"Right, yes, unconscious," Meyers said, letting himself go slack.

Colbert had already began assembling the scoop stretcher around him, and once Simmons had
detached himself and Meyers from the lines, he kneeled in to help strapping the man in. He
 glanced up at Avery once, perhaps to see if the exercise would end here, but apparently it didn't.
They carried Meyers to the Med Jumper.

"Oh, crap," Simmons said under his breath. "Sergeant, you'll need to do the conversion - I haven't
been shown yet."

Right, he could do that. Even with an audience. It took a few more minutes, but he got it done fluidly enough, with only one moment where Meyers murmured 'inner door clamp' from where they had parked him on the bench in the cargo space. Nobody told him to shut up that time - Colbert wasn't the one being tested.

"Right. Nice work," Avery said when they'd put Meyers on the examination table. "Let's do an evaluation on that," he gestured for them to come outside. "You too, Colbert."

Colonel Carter, Teal'c and the doctors were already returning to the ruins while the circle of five formed, Brittner still unbuckling her harness.

"So, how did that go?" Avery asked Simmons, and Colbert hid a wince in sympathy. Always a cruel way to begin an after-action.

The young man hesitated a moment, then rallied, spine straightening.

"I was able to strike a balance between speed and caution and evacuate the sergeant in an effective and safe manner, sir."

OK, McSmartyPants had more balls than Colbert had given him credit for. Avery's questioning glance to Brittner, and her minute nod, said that she agreed with his self-assessment.

"It was good that you used the method you are most comfortable with," Avery said. "I thought it was interesting that you picked sergeant Colbert, who has a skill set you're unfamiliar with, to assist you over the two well-trained officers who were just standing around," he indicated himself and the major.

Simmons clearly hadn't considered that.

"If you're in charge of a rescue scene, you get to order everybody around," Brittner said with the hint of a grin. "Up to and including the Colonel."

Lorne nodded, and Colbert realised that if she functioned as Combat Rescue Officer, it was likely that Avery and perhaps even other officers ceded to her sometimes during rescue missions. What a strange situation.

The evaluation went on for another few minutes, and then Simmons and Brittner went off to clear the climbing ropes from the tree.

Avery turned to Colbert.

"Perhaps you should see to sergeant Meyers now."

* * *

McPherson had apparently had the same thought. He'd cleaned his arms in the stream and was drying them when he walked up the ramp.

"Told you she'd get revenge," he smirked slightly, watching Meyers still strapped in the stretcher.


Colbert wondered what he meant with that last, until he realised how smoothly Avery and Fournier had lead the attention away from the fact that Meyers was still strapped into the stretcher. Up till that point, it had all been easily within the limits of what a training officer could ask a sergeant to do, because somebody had to serve as victim in rescue drills, and even then it could be explained with a moment's forgetfulness. He doubted Lorne and Simmons were even aware of anything. Subtle and devious - he was maybe a little bit impressed.

"Only team fucks with team."
"Apparently, even when they're hacked off with each other," Meyers grunted, sitting up. Colbert steadied the stretcher while he undid the last straps.

"The rule is kind of that team members can fuck with each other, but nobody else can," Meyers explained. "Like, we mess with our LT a little--"

"--somebody's gotta get the starch outta him," McPherson muttered

"--but anybody else does it, and it's on."

* * *

It wasn't evening at all, the sun was high in the sky in a position Colbert associated with summertime mid morning, but it was nearing 1900 on his watch when they all sat down to eat. He'd built the fire while McPherson and Meyers dealt with the not-pig meat, cutting off enough for a generous evening and breakfast meal, and putting the rest into large storage bags provided by the kitchen for this purpose. The bags were stored in the nearby stream to keep them cool. They all sat around the fire eating chunks of not-pig - which tasted unlike anything he'd ever had, not unpleasant but undeniably alien - and roasted tubers with ketchup. The chatter was lively, and he learned a great deal about what passed for normal on Gate missions when stories of SG-1's adventures were swapped for stories by Avery and Lorne. Avery was a very good storyteller.

Later on, when the mood had become more subdued, Fournier told them a few things about the first year of the expedition, and though Colbert suspected he picked the light-hearted stories, the underlying tone of desperation was hard to hide. The city itself had been compromised several times, inside dangers, weird fucking diseases and killing machines kept popping up like zits on a teen girl's face the day before prom, and they had had a weekly 'we're not dead yet' celebration. That pretty much said it all.

Then Jackson got talking about how they'd discovered Atlantis in the first place, and there were some stories about near-apocalypse events that would have sounded improbable if Colbert hadn't been sitting on an alien planet eating alien meat, waiting for the regularly scheduled eclipse while keeping watch against the space vampires.

All these stories made him feel like it should be twilight, and he found the morning sun disorienting.

After dinner the people who had not done the MASH Jumper conversion yet ran through it, and Colbert joined them just to make sure he could do it on his own - judging from the stories, AR4 would use that Jumper a fair amount of the time. He drilled himself on the contents of the med kits and the emergency gear for another hour.

By that time, Fournier and Jackson had disappeared back to the ruins with Teal'c to stand watch, Meyers, Avery and Simmons were playing a spirited game of frisbee, and Colonel Carter and Brittner looked like they were having a serious conversation. He retrieved his tablet.

* * *

Location: MX2-620, AKA 'Planet with the cool ruins' (see pic)

Wednesday, 2152hrs New Lantean Time

Nate,

If I've got this right then 2200hrs NLT is early morning thursday for you. I hope you enjoy your last day of normality.

This mission is really an Archaeological geek session combined with a weekend break for Colonel Carter. There's been a lot of training too, and a climbing rescue exercise. I've met some other sergeants, got some general intel. I'm feeling like a rock guitarist who turned up at a string quartet rehearsal, but I'm hoping that will fade.
What really strikes me is how schizophrenic these missions are. Here we are with our tents and our cooler full of food for around the campfire and our fucking frisbee, like it's a camp-out in a National Park. But all the while it can become Muwaffaqiyah levels of fucked-up in .5 seconds.

There’s no 'in theatre' here, and no safe zone. There's just sitting around the campfire eating alien pig-thing meat and trading mission stories, while the P90s stay in arms reach and you keep an ear out for the proximity alarms. Everybody seems to be used to that - this is a relaxing mission to them. I swear, if somebody gets out a guitar and starts singing Kumbaya I'm gonna try my luck with the fucking space vampires.

Here comes the apocalypse. Brad out.

* * *

"All right, eclipse is about to start, people," Lorne announced. "It's all the darkness we'll get while we're here, so let's pretend it's night. We'll get about eighty minutes of half-light, three hours pitch black, and 80 minutes half-light again. Avery, if you can provide the watch officer and the first shift?"

Avery just pointed at Brittner, who nodded like she'd expected it.

"Good. Lieutenant Simmons and sergeant McPherson take second, and I believe I had volunteers for third?"

"I wish to see the end of the eclipse anyway, Major," Fournier said.

"As do I," said Teal'c.

"I... yeah, okay, last chance before I'm dragged back to Earth," Jackson sighed. "Sure."

Everybody broke away to stow the things that had been taken out of the jumpers during the day. Avery came up to him.

"First watch with the Lieutenant, Colbert."

"Yes, sir."

"And I suggest you stake out a spot to sleep," the captain flashed a grin and disappeared into the jumper to retrieve his pack.

Colbert watched as Doctors Fournier and Jackson disappeared into one tent, presumably so they could continue their low-voiced conversation. Meyers and McPherson picked a tent, Lieutenant Simmons claimed a bench in Jumper 5, and Lorne and Avery took a tent each. The Colonel claimed one of the racks in the med jumper, Brittner spread out her sleeping bag in another. Teal'c took the final tent, with a gesture toward Colbert that seemed to indicate he was welcome to share. He hesitated. Sharing with Teal'c would be okay, but the man was getting up scarcely two hours after Colbert came off watch. While the women had apparently claimed one of the jumpers, he figured Simmons probably wouldn't mind if he took the other bench in jumper 5.

Within ten minutes the camp had gone silent. Apparently, having decided it was night, everybody just switched off. Colbert wondered if the skill came from years of visiting planets with completely different day/night rhythms and adjusting to what he'd heard called 'gate lag'. He himself could only do this in a battle zone, though he was tired enough now that he figured he'd be able to sleep at the end of his watch.

* * *

He walked the perimeter, just giving himself a feel for the place in the low light. The half light
made the crowns of the trees disappear into darkness overhead, giving the place a strange quality - it looked like open space, but it still sounded and felt like a forest hall. There were strange bird calls high up, drifting down with a odd sort of resonance.

When he returned, the Colonel was sitting on the ramp of the jumper with Brittner. Apparently they were continuing their conversation from earlier. Colbert tended to the fire and couldn't help but overhear them in the hushed silence of the forest.

"...General is personally going to... next time he's in D.C."

"...appreciated, ma'am. I know it's a difficult case politically. If they acknowledge me, they'll be forced to..."

"...board will just have to catch up with reality, Lieutenant."

"...hadn't expected that I would care so much. Asking the exam committee for another... embarrassing. In their eyes I've... on some base, doing scheduled MEDEVAC..... failing my exams."

"...the run-up hasn't turned out as you.... need more time to study..... send you to the SGC a few days early?"

"... no interruptions? Yes please, ma'am, that..."

He went for another perimeter walk, feeling naked and on edge without his kevlar on, without a berm to hide behind, without at least five members of his platoon scoping the horizon. He understood that the jumper scanners were doing that work, Avery had shown him how they worked, on the basis that even if he couldn't operate the system because he didn't have the gene, it was useful to be able to interpret what he saw.

It was just that his subconscious wasn't convinced that any of this was real. He could reason his way into believing it, because he trusted his own perceptions enough to accept that he had definitely come through a wormhole to an alien planet - he'd seen the three moons - and had flown in a spaceship. But apparently his hindbrain was lagging and thought he was about to wake up any moment with hajis shooting at him.

At least he wasn't the only one on alert - by the time he returned the Colonel had gone to sleep and the Lieutenant had chosen a spot opposite the open jumpers, where she could see that entire side of the camp including the jumper HUDs. She was sitting on a log, huddled in her coat, P90 cradled in her arms. She seemed to be singing softly to herself - he thought he caught the edge of lyrics.

"high, high, I'm a bird in the sky"

It was a good hour into his watch, and he was trying not to watch the sky too much as the twilight turned into full darkness. The view was spectacular, but he was on watch here, not taking in the views. A cloud cover was coming in from - fuck it, he had no clue about directions here. The wind was picking up a little.

"Smell that?" Lieutenant Brittner said in a low voice when his trajectory took him past her position. "You oughta get your coat."

"Rain?"

"Squall, more like." She got up to quietly walk into the jumper. He watched her call up the HUD and scroll through a few different interfaces before he went to get his jacket.

"Looks like we're just getting the edge." She carefully banked the fire and tossed low-level glowsticks under the open ramps of both jumpers just as it began to rain. "Hey look, I get the urge to do perimeter checks. It takes some getting used to trusting the jumpers. But it's about to get darker than a crappy metaphor, so stay within visual range."

He'd half expected an 'okay?' at the end there, but no, it was definitely a command. He understood why she'd said it when the last light disappeared a few minutes later. He'd thought of this as night, but there was no ambient light, no moon, and it was as dark as the inside of his eyelids. The glowsticks, faintly outlining the jumper ramps, were the only light.

When it really started to pelt down they took shelter in jumper 5. Apparently Lieutenant Simmons
was a heavy sleeper. They crouched down just out of the rain, each against a side of the entrance.

"Do you always have first watch, ma'am?" he asked after a small eternity of slightly tense silence. It seemed like an unfair luxury to him.

She nodded.

"It's always been me first, Michèl last, and the Captain and Warszawski arranging the middle watches between them. Michèl likes to do yoga early in the morning, and I'm not so good with being woken, so it works out that way."

He wondered at how she phrased that, given that from what he'd seen, she clearly had problems waking up, not being woken.

"If you do ever need to wake me, try not to loom." She threw him a wry, sideways glance, "though I realise that might be tricky in your case."

"Does anybody else have special waking instructions I should be aware of, ma'am?"

"Well, Michèl only wakes up when he's sung the full version of La Marseillaise," she said seriously. "...and the Captain doesn't get out of his rack for anything less than a cup of tea and a rendition of God Save The Queen. That, or the full parrot sketch from Monty Python."

Houston, we've got sarcasm, he thought to himself. Until now her main identifiable personality trait had been pissed off, so that was something. If he gave sarcasm, he got it right back.

"Noted," he said. And then, because he felt a perverse urge to see how far he could push this, "I'm assuming the lyrics are on the intranet somewhere?"

She pulled her hood up and walked into the downpour.

Right. Okay, given that she seemed to just about tolerate him, maybe he shouldn't push.

She reappeared a few minutes later and dropped her tablet in his hands. It had a cover of thick red neoprene with reflective patches - looked like somebody had made it out of an old immersion suit. He looked at the folder that was open on the display and found three video files. godsavethequeen-fulltext.avi, lamarseillaise-lyrics.avi, and MP-parrotsketch.avi.

She moved past him into the jumper to rap at the bulkhead next to Simmons' head.

"Joe? Your watch, five minutes."

"What? Yeah."

She went into the cockpit to check something on the viewscreens. Colbert looked back down on the tablet and was 99.8 percent certain that she was fucking with him. However, common sense said that NCOs wanting to tell their officers that had better be one hundred percent iron-clad certain of it, and of its reception. With the 'when she's done, she's done' warning still in mind, he just put the tablet on the free bench and went to wake McPherson.

It felt strange and too exposed to stretch out on a bench instead of curling up in a ranger grave or under the humvee. When Simmons and McPherson came to shelter in the jumper that actually made it easier. He didn't really know them yet, but his subconscious had apparently pegged them as friendlies, and their quiet presence allowed him to relax enough to drift off.
Thanks for the lovely reviews!

Here's a fun theoretical question for you, dear reader: if Ray Person got to run a radio show on Atlantis, which songs would be on his playlist?

So far I have:
- Babylon Zoo - Spaceman
- Monty Python - Galaxy Song
- David Bowie - Space Oddity
- Beatles - Magical Mystery Tour
- Bif Naked - Spaceman

Answers on a postcard please!
"magnifique, tu as apporté le bon café."

"Qui, passez le filtre?"

Colbert woke up to a soft conversation in French and the scent of coffee. Proper coffee, too - not the instant crap he expected in the field. He just about managed to restrain himself from calling a Fruity Rudy joke and was glad of it when he opened his eyes and saw the inside of a spaceship. Not to mention Lieutenant Simmons sacked out on the opposite bench.

"All is well, sergeant Colbert." He didn't think he'd given away that he was awake, but Teal'c, standing outside in the unearthly halflight like some sort of protective statue, had apparently noticed.

"Thanks," he grunted, getting up. After his watch he'd baulked at taking off his boots, but he'd taken off the tac vest and tucked his rifle between himself and the bulkhead. He buckled the strap around his shoulder and came up next to Teal'c.

Fournier and Jackson were absorbed in making coffee, a whole row of mugs standing ready on one of the logs. Their low, rapid French sounded upbeat and unconcerned. Colbert shook his head in disbelief. This was a mission? Nate was never going to believe this shit.

"When I first came to live with the Tauri, many of their customs were alien to me," Teal'c said gravely.

Colbert looked at the alien standing next to him and blinked.

"I can imagine," he said faintly.

"Their style of communication, the fact that scholars were taken into battle," Teal'c summed up.

"And there were no female warriors on my homeworld."

Colbert nodded, trying not to trip over 'homeworld'. The concept that there were inhabited worlds other than Earth was still so strange.

"Then when they introduced me to the vital parts of their culture," Teal'c continued, "I understood that many of these things are deeply ingrained." He made a side left to right hand gesture in front of him. "Is not Obi Wan Kenobi a scholar as well as a warrior? Does not Princess Leia take up arms? These customs are modelled to the Tauri people in their most holy movies."

He made the gesture again. Colbert realised it was a Jedi handwave.

He bit his lip, hard. He hadn't had all the training yet, but he was pretty sure that 'don't offend aliens' was high on the list of 'how not to get killed when going through the stargate'. On the other hand, Teal'c had lived on Earth for ten years.

"Tell me you're fucking with me," he said finally.

Teal'c turned to him, one eyebrow raised in polite inquiry. Colbert caught the amused gleam in the other man's eyes and let out a breath in relief.

"Teal'c, are you doing your 'I'm a 160 year old alien warrior, I do not make jokes' thing again?"

Dr Jackson approached with three mugs of coffee.

"I do not know of what you speak, Daniel Jackson," Teal'c said, accepting a mug.

They were both silent for a few minutes. Colbert wasn't about to admit it, because that way lay bringing espresso pots on missions, but the coffee was good.

"It took time for me to understand," Teal'c eventually continued, "that some of the things that I had assumed were normal among the Tauri were in fact unique to the Stargate program. Warrior teams on Chulak did not get so..." he said a word Colbert didn't understand. "Daniel Jackson says this translates to 'siblings' and 'care' and 'love'."

"It's going to take some getting used to," Colbert admitted. He considered the men of Bravo platoon to be his brothers, but brothers were sometimes loud, ignorant and annoying. They were
close as could be, because the pressures of being on tour created such closeness, but it was an angled, sharp kind of close. Always pushing, measuring, competing, struggling for position. It wouldn't occur to anybody to look out for each other's comfort, or use the morning watch to get coffee ready for each other. Let alone to arrange watches so that one person didn't need to be woken up when that was apparently a problem.

"Hundred sixty?" He finally asked.

"Indeed."

* * *

Morning - no, not morning, because the twilight lifted and then it was noon sun again - was a leisurely affair, with Dr Fournier distributing coffee and milky tea, and Dr Jackson making dough out of the supplies the kitchen had given them. He baked bread on a flat stone, looking like this was part of his normal morning routine. When Colbert remarked on it, accepting a piece of the flavourful warm bread, the Doctor smiled ruefully.

"The first mission through the gate... I stayed behind, on a planet called Abydos. Got married, in fact. I lived with my wife Shau’ri and her people... she taught me this."

Jackson was silent for a while, and Colbert didn't have to ask to know that his wife was dead.

"It's all strange, the flour is different, Abydos was a desert planet..."

Was? Colbert wondered, but did not ask.

"...but it still brings me back." Jackson smiled sadly and sang a soft song under his breath as he shaped more dough balls.

Colbert didn't say anything. It didn't seem required.

* * *

"All right people, this is your chow for the day - we're moving out in sixteen hours, and you can have dinner in the mess hall tonight."

Captain Avery went around with a crate of MREs, pitching them at people's heads with deadly accuracy. It took a moment for Colbert to realise he wasn't distributing them at random.

"Meyers, meatloaf... McPherson, tuna... Simmons, chilli... Brittner, omelette.. Michèl?"

"They are all torture," Fournier sighed. "But keep a veggie burger for me?"

"You've got it. Colonel? Major? Teal'c? Dr Jackson? We've got meatloaf, tuna, veggie pasta and lots of chicken-pesto-pasta."

"Wait a minute, Captain - were these pre-selected at Supply?"

Major Lorne looked from Simmons, who shook his head, to Brittner.

"Doesn't everybody do that?" she said, taking a bite of the fresh, warm bread.

"Don't look at me, I just grab a crate," Simmons said.

"It's not like a rat-fuck 'em or anything," Brittner said. She took the packet of Poptarts out of her MRE and tossed it at Fournier, who put them on a flat stone in the fire. "I just take the ones I know we like - everybody likes different things, it sorta works out."

"Colbert?" Avery called.

He shrugged, and caught the pesto-pasta MRE as it came flying at him.

"Well, that explains the times our missions have been an all-fajita-all-the-time fest," Lorne said dryly.

Brittner threw her OOO-RAH bar at the captain without looking, and made an oops face at the
Major.
"Must've grabbed the crate meant for AR-9, sir. They ask for 'em."

"Freaks of nature," Meyers said sotto voce.

"They mostly use MREs as vehicle for that vile spice sauce they get from the Isholans, and they
like the fajita for it. I reckon they've got about 3 tastebuds left between 'em."

"Time to have a talk with Supply," Lorne said, shaking his head in exasperation.

The Captain walked back to the jumper with the crate, dropping the Tabasco and chewing gum
from his own MRE into Brittner's lap as he passed.

"Um... might I suggest a talk with Colonel Sheppard first, Major?" she grimaced, stowing the
various packets in her pockets. "He was.. uh.. kind of the one who suggested I pre-select, before
our last dual mission."

Colonel Carter was following the exchange with amusement in her eyes. Possibly because as the
civilian leader, this was not her issue to deal with.

Lorne just looked like he wanted to facepalm.

* * *

The day proceeded much like the day before, with various training sessions interspersed with
watch duty in the ruins. Dr Fournier took him on another tour, showing him different sections of
the ruins and explaining what they were doing there. Colbert wasn't sure if this was because the
doctor thought he'd be interested - which, to be fair, he kind of was - or if this was the start of the
'Let's give the sergeant a clue' program.

He tried to commit it to memory regardless. He was already figuring out that a member of a gate
team could not use the 'I'm just an NCO, I'm here for the grunt work' get-out clause he could in
First Recon.

It was perhaps somewhat daunting to realise that while he'd generally outperformed expectations
on Earth, there were going to expect a whole lot more of him here. Daunting, but appealing, too.

"...so you see that on the 3D rendering it is marked here and--" Fournier stopped mid sentence,
face going strangely blank.

"Doc?"

He suddenly snapped out of it, straightening up abruptly.

"Jumpers. Now."

They were climbing up the verge toward the camp when the radios came on.

*All hands, fall back to the jumpers,* Lorne said. There was an urgent sounding beep in the
background.

He had to hand it to them, as relaxed as everybody had seemed, everybody switched straight into
combat mode. The scientific group, including McPherson and Teal'c, arrived to find Meyers and
Simmons already in defensive positions around the jumper ramps, and joined them - even the
doctors seemed well practised at this.

Colonel Carter disappeared into jumper 5, where Lorne and Avery where looking at scanner
images. Brittner, arriving from the forest at a run, charged straight into the med jumper to grab
extra clips and handed them out.

*Listen up, people. We have a dart in atmo, and one lifesign has been set down at about two clicks
from our position,* Lorne said. His voice was somewhat audible outside the jumper, but apparently
Major Lorne did not like to raise his voice. *We suspect it might be a runner situation, the Colonel
is adapting the scanners, so we're waiting on confirmation for that.*

* * *
Three minutes later the three officers came out of the jumper and confirmed they were dealing with a runner - though Colbert still didn't know exactly what that was, but understood they wanted to capture a target. Major Lorne's team, dubbed 'Hunter', would go after the seven wraith that had now been set down three clicks away, while Avery's team, dubbed 'Gatherer', would head straight for the runner, hoping to intercept. Colonel Carter would stay at the jumpers.

Colbert was unsurprised, though no less displeased, when Avery told him he would be staying with the Colonel. The Captain, Lieutenant Brittner and Teal'c took off into the forest at a brisk jog, and he couldn't help feeling dismissed. A moment later Lorne and his team headed off along the tree line.

The Colonel called for her laptop and a set of cables, and Dr Fournier set up in a defensive position near Colbert while Dr Jackson brought them to her.

"Doctor - Michèl, what is a runner?" he finally asked, when the hoped for explanation hadn't happened.

"Ah, I apologise. It is easy to forget you do not know these things," Fournier said. "Sometimes the wraith implant somebody with a tracker and set them free somewhere, so they can hunt them. Some of them live like that for years - they can't go anywhere near people for fear of bringing the wraith down on them."

Colbert tried to swallow the sudden bitter taste in his mouth.

"Ronon, on Colonel Sheppard's team, used to be a runner. We encountered him on an uninhabited planet and Doctor Beckett did emergency surgery to get the tracker out. It is extremely impressive that not only he lived through it for seven years, but he did so with his sanity intact. The two runners we have tried to help since then could not say the same."

"What happened to them?"

"We removed the trackers, of course, and offered them a place in the city, but neither of them could acclimatise. One of them lived with our Athosian allies for a few months, and one just asked to dial to a planet he knew and might well still be living the same way. Many people in this galaxy regard them as cursed, you see, because they bring the wraith in their wake."

"That's..."

Fournier sighed heavily when he couldn't find words for it.

"People here have been under the bane of the Wraith for so long, there are many beliefs and superstitions surrounding them. For a pre-technological society it is much easier to believe that someone is cursed, than that there is a device implanted in them that calls Wraith to them."

*This is Base for all, it sounded through the radio. Affirmative that we are dealing with a runner. Break. Dart has returned to orbit. Over.*

He listened to the confirmations, running feet and fast breath audible in the transmissions, and sighed. Looked like they'd ditched him with the civvies.

"Feeling left out, sergeant?"

Colonel Carter had appeared behind him on the jumper ramp. She carried two laptops and a tablet, connected together with a thick bundle of cables that lead back to the console like some sort of demented umbilical cord.

"With all due respect, ma'am, but that-" he waved in the direction Avery had disappeared in, "-is a legit recon mission, which is what the United States of America spent about a million dollars training me for. This-" he nodded at the jumpers, "no offence, but it's babysitting."

"Ah, but it's babysitting the expedition leader," she said mildly, sitting down and arranging the laptops in front of her. "Think of it as a vote of confidence."

He tried not to snort. Felt more like a vote of no-confidence to him.

"It might help to know," she said in a preoccupied tone, "that Captain Avery faced some resistance when he proposed to ship you straight out there. There is good reason we give people Pegasus training on Earth these days - new personnel used to have disproportionately high losses, no matter how well trained they were beforehand..." she trailed off, typing a few lines.
"Having succeeded to get you here on such short notice, the Captain is understandably reluctant to prove the opposition right by putting you in a position to get killed on your very first mission," she continued after a minute. He was in awe of her multitasking skills. As far as he could tell, she was monitoring the scanners, which were showing on the tablet, working on some sort of code, and altering something on the third laptop that looked like one of the jumper interfaces. And having a coherent conversation with him.

Colbert tried to shake his restlessness. It didn't sit well with him to leave the action to other people. He was still on guard, though nothing threatened them here. Around him, Fournier and Jackson were preparing the jumpers for rapid takeoff, stowing things that people had been working on. The tents and sleeping gear had been cleared away on waking. Somebody had even managed to collect the bags of meat from the stream.

"Dart's breaking orbit," the Colonel suddenly said, perhaps ten minutes later. And then, eyes still on her screen: "Colbert, have you fired a Stinger lately?"

"Last training was three months ago, ma'am." He wondered if there was a training class somewhere at the SGC where they taught officers never to ask 'can you do it' but always to inform when somebody had last done a task.

"Well, get it out."

Music to his ears.

Base for all. Dart is re-entering atmo. Break. Suspected purpose is to deliver more wraith. Break. Base will attempt to neutralise by Stinger missile. Over.

Hunter copies.

Gatherer copies all. We are approaching the Runner's position. Break. Switching to low-traffic channel 4. Over.

Base copies, Gatherer. Out.

"Darts are tricky things to hit, so your effective range is reduced - approx two clicks," she said when he'd retrieved the Stinger launcher. "Punch out to the ruins and find a perch with some roof coverage close by. I'll spot you on scanner."

He wouldn't normally ask in a time critical moment, but he was beginning to recognise the signs of somebody assuming he knew more than he did.

"Why roof shelter, ma'am?"

"...you don't know about that. Right. Darts can transport people by dematerialising them and storing them onboard - they use a sort of beam to pick people up or set them down. If it comes within about 100 metres of you, get under a roof or we won't see you again."

"Roger that, ma'am." He set off for the ruins at a run, hefting the Stinger and trying to remember if he'd come across a suitable perch.

"Doctor Fournier, Daniel, I want you to get ready to get Jumper five into the air the moment the dart goes down," he heard her say behind him. "Dial Atlantis and get Dr Keller to stand by to come here for a trackerectomy the moment we've got the situation secured, and hold the gate blocked until then."

* * *

He ran through the ruins, looking for the spot he remembered. Colonel Carter's voice was in his ear.

Dart has set down six wraith at three clicks from base. Gatherer, they are headed to your position, 700 metres out.

Gatherer copies. Gatherer Two is talking to the runner. Will egress to a more defensible position ASAP. Over.

Base to Gatherer, the signal disrupter is close to completion. As soon as you're free, return to base with the runner.
Gatherer copies all. Out.

Hunter copies. There was weapons fire audible in the background. We are engaging seven wraith at this time. Over.

Base copies, over.

"Colbert to Base. I'm in position, ma'am," he radioed. "Negative visual on the target."

Copy that, Colbert. It's gone into a holding pattern. Stand by.

"Colbert standing by."

He had just finished checking that the Stinger launcher was good to go when he heard a strange, high pitched buzzing sound.

Base to Colbert, look to your three

"I see him, ma'am. I say again: affirmative on the visual."

As soon as he saw the thing appear he understood why they were referred to as darts. It was far out on the open field, coming in their direction with that horrible buzzing tone as a forewarning.

Range to target three.. two point six.. two point two.. target in range

He fired the missile, rocking back on his heels at the kickback, and watched as it found its way. The dart exploded in an impressive ball of fire and plowed into the field. He couldn't hold in a small, triumphant "Yeah!"

Then, thumbing his radio on,

"Target destroyed, ma'am."

Copy that. Return to base

She sounded preoccupied and not as pleased as he'd thought she would, but then again she was spinning about six plates in the air right now and he imagined she didn't have much thought to spare for him.

At the base camp, Dr Fournier was already in the pilot seat of Jumper 5, but Dr Jackson was standing next to the ramp.

"Daniel..." Colonel Carter looked very calm, and very pissed off.

"Sam, they're coming straight at you!" Dr Jackson sounded angry and indignant. "I can't just fly away and leave you in this!"

"You are going to block the gate so we don't get more darts on our heads." It wasn't even a command - it was a statement. "Go."

Jackson deflated a little and then turned on his heel and went into the jumper. The ramp began closing before he was completely inside, and a few seconds later the jumper slowly hovered away from the camp, shimmered into disappearance, and was gone.

The Colonel let out a harsh, irritated breath, squared her shoulders, and turned to him.

"Good work, sergeant," she said briskly. "Here's our next problem."

She pointed him at the laptop screen that was showing a scanner image of the area.

"Us," she pointed at the two pale dots at the centre. "Gatherer," the group of four dots some distance deeper into the forest. One of them was green, and he assumed that was the runner. The four were close together, with five red dots approaching in a half circle pattern. "Hunter," four dots a little further out, keeping themselves between six red dots and Gatherer.

"And our problem: she zoomed the view out a little and Colbert saw the cluster of six red dots out into the open field. They were about equidistant from Base as Gatherer was, but closing, and their direct line toward the runner would bring them right through the camp.

"The dart set them down in the seconds before you hit it," she said.
"Do you think they know we're here, ma'am?"

"Given that we just shot their dart, they know we're somewhere - and they'll already know the others are fighting our people. They have some sort of telepathic connection. But these wraith were only just re-materialised, I doubt they saw the smoke trail of the missile. They probably don't know our exact location."

She spent a few moments looking at different scanner views, and he realised that if she was coordinating the entire mission, it was hard to focus on just their own situation. You couldn't be the eye in the sky and the boots on the ground. And the expedition in general, and gate teams in particular, did give the impression that you were supposed to take initiatives and think for yourself, not just wait around for commands. Might as well start where it counted.

"Permission to lay out some claymores, ma'am?"

***

He managed to lay out about twenty claymores in under five minutes while the Colonel hurriedly finished the disrupter code she'd been working on. She had switched on the jumper's cloak, and when he returned, rolling out the detonator wires as he went, he had to search for the two sticks she'd laid next to the invisible ramp to mark it.

"A step to your right, sergeant," sounded her amused voice out of the void, and then he was on the ramp, suddenly surrounded by the jumper, pretending this was in any way normal.

"Ma'am, I laid the claymores in three lines," he said, laying the triggers on the bench. "I propose that I punch out ninety, hundred metres in that direction and lay on enough fire that they'll group up and take shelter behind that fallen tree," he pointed to a massive log some forty metres from the jumper. "The claymores are on this side of it - you'll be able to trigger them when they shelter there."

She pressed her lips together for a brief moment.

"Ma'am, with respect, I was left here expressly for your protection," he took a guess. "I should be the one out there. If it goes to hell, you can lock yourself in."

She nodded with a small, rueful smile, and he realised she wasn't used to being the one who was protected. It clearly wasn't her style to keep herself safe at the expense of other people. That was strangely reassuring. He'd heard something about the expedition losing its last leader though, and he didn't think anybody would ever forgive him if he let something happen to her.

"Very well, sergeant. Get out there."

They had mere minutes left before the wraith came into view, and he threw her a salute and ran toward the position he'd spotted earlier. There were some large exposed roots at the base of a giant tree, and though it was muddy after the heavy rain during the eclipse, it was a good perch to work from.

*Base to Colbert. Switch to exclusive channel two-two.*

He did so as he ran. It would avoid getting the chatter from the other groups while he needed to concentrate.

"Colbert copies. Switching to two-two now."

He reached the tree and looked for the best cover it had to offer.

*Word from Hunter is that the wraith have fed recently,* the Colonel said once he was on channel 22. *That means that they will not go down easily, and may get up if they do. Break. Do not dismiss downed targets. Over.*

"I copy, ma'am." he settled into position in a hole between the roots, knees sinking into the soggy, spongy forest floor. "I have visual on the target. One-two-zero metres, six targets, wide dispersion."

*Base copies. Fire at your discretion. Over.*

He waited longer than he felt completely comfortable with, not wanting to give the wraith the chance to veer away completely and end up passing too close to the jumper. When the only
logical place for them to go was behind the fallen tree, he opened fire.

The response was instant. The return fire came faster than he’d anticipated.

Fuck, the hell is that? An energy blast impacted the tree above him.

He picked away at the outer wraith, wanting them close together.

His rifle wasn't fitted with a laser scope, but he was fairly sure he hit one with four shots square in the chest without it going down.

Fuck, fuck - where's a 50 cal when you need one? Fuck. The claymores better work.

"Oh no no..." he murmured, watching the group split. He caught one with a bullet in the face, and it collapsed.

Speed, not precision, he reminded himself. Get them into the mine radius

The hit didn't drive them back together - two wraith split off further, taking shelter behind a tree. He wished for the M203 that had been on his old rifle, and a bunch of 4mm grenades.

He sharply turned his attention to the other three, keeping up steady fire to drive them toward the claymores.

Nearly there now

One of the split off wraith popped up from behind the tree, and he shot a few rounds to shove them back down.

Deal with them later. Get the Colonel clear first.

She still hadn't given herself away. That was good.

Few more metres, Colbert, he heard in his ear. He didn't take the time to answer, kept up his fire.

Why didn't these things take shelter like sensible creatures? Fucking space vampires.

Then yes, finally--

He was shielded from the two successive blasts by the fallen tree, but he couldn't imagine the damn things had survived that.

An energy blast impacted the tree just a few metres above his position.

Oh hell

That just left two wraith, but they were onto his position and as he opened fire on the one he saw, another blast hit, even closer. The second wraith had moved, but Colbert couldn't see him.

There was another explosion behind the fallen tree - the third line of claymores, probably.

He scored a hit on the first wraith, trying to down that one while pinpointing the second.

Fuck, fuck. Don't wanna prove them right by dying on the first mission like a green recruit, damn it. Recon can fucking well handle it

Then a sudden, burning cramp coursed through his entire body, making him curl up reflexively, rifle clattering out of his grip. It was like every nerve in his body had napalm running through it, and when it burned out it left.. nothing. He couldn't move. He couldn't feel anything.

Well, this is bad

The angle he had collapsed in gave him a front and centre stage view of the wraith approaching at a walk, unhurried and grinning in a way that made Colbert want to stab his eyes out with - well, anything would do at this stage. Captain America's bayonet maybe. Perhaps with Captain America still attached to it.

He tried to scrape his thoughts together. The wraith was still forty metres out. He had a moment. He could still-

Well, do fuck all, really, given that I can hardly blink
There was an inheld swoosh sound somewhere behind him, and the next moment the wraith flew backward several metres, and there was a sizable explosion. Bits of forest floor and scorched matter rained down.

*The fuck?*

Then a P90 started firing not far away - no, two, *three* P90s, and he cursed inwardly that he couldn't move to see what the hell was happening, but it sounded like a good sign.

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**Chapter End Notes**

I now know way more about shoulder-launched missile systems than I ever thought I would.

Thanks for the lovely reviews! I had a massive writing high this past week and hammered out about 7000 words, so this chapter comes out slightly ahead of my vague ‘a chapter each weekend’ timeline. Writing highs rock. Coming down from writing highs? Not so much fun.

I continue to invite input into what Ray Person would play on his radio show (In space!). I'm actually building a playlist on youtube I plan to link to in the relevant chapter. I'm having way too much fun with this idea :-)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Getting to some previously written content meant I was suddenly about three chapters ahead of posting, so here's an extra one :-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He heard running footsteps coming up behind him. Two of the P90s were still firing.

"Hey Colbert, how's it going?" Brittner skidded to her knees next to him. She flung down her medical pack and said "Kirr, can you check the suckers stay dead?" to somebody behind her while she pulled on gloves. Colbert could just see legs clad in tattered, rough-woven cloth, walking away on worn, primitive shoes.

"Fine," he wanted to say, but it came out as little more than a mumble.

"Awkward hole you've got yourself wedged yourself into," the Lieutenant said conversationally, laying a hand along his neck to feel his pulse. She had that analytical medic stare he remembered from Doc Bryan, ignoring the person for a moment while focusing on the body. The relief of seeing somebody of his team, of seeing anybody who wasn't a wraith, was indescribable. She ran her fingertips over his skull, and he felt a spike of pain when she touched the back of his head.

"Just a stunner blast?" she didn't seem to expect an answer, rapidly checked him for other signs of bleeding. When she didn't find any, she began packing gauze against the back of his head. The firing sounds had stopped now.

He tried to nod, but just ended up with his head slumped forward on the soggy ground. Damnit. This was seriously freaking him out.

"How is he?"

Brittner turned his head so she could shine in his eyes with a pen light. From the corner of his eyes, he saw the Colonel approach, looking flushed and with most of her hair out of its ponytail. She let an AT4 rocket launcher tube drop to the forest floor to tie her hair back and he realised she'd used it to kill the wraith that had been about to suck the life out of him. It was possibly the hottest thing he had ever seen.

"They got him good with the stunner - bash on the head, probably from the spasms, and a couple of splinters, but fine apart from that," Brittner reported.

"Okay, I need you to get the runner to the jumper and prep for surgery."

"Roger that, ma'am."

The Lieutenant turned her attention back to him as she pulled off her gloves. Her voice was direct and matter-of-fact. "This wears off, okay? Couple of hours. You'll be fine."

She got to her feet and disappeared from his field of view.

"Still think you got the boring job today, sergeant?" the Colonel asked with something of amusement.

* * *

A low, admiring whistle rang out from somewhere around where the wraith had blown up.

"Damn, ma'am. If it first you don't succeed, try again with a rocket launcher, huh?"

"Meyers. Everything secured?"
"Yes ma'am, they are definitely not getting up anymore," Meyers said with satisfaction. "Any that weren't in pieces, our new friend went 'round and treated to that pointy stick of hers."

"Good. Can you get sergeant Colbert to the jumper?"

Meyers looked at Colbert.

"Big fu--fella like him, gonna need the stretcher, ma'am."

She gave him a dry look, and he left at a jog.

Colonel Carter stayed within his field of vision. She didn't really have attention to spare him, but he appreciated it nonetheless.

"This is Carter for Jumper Five. What's your situation? ... Yeah... well, we need Keller over here. I've got the tracker jammed at the moment, but we don't know if the wraith set off any beacons of their own before they died. We need to get off this planet ASAP, and without the tracker." The Colonel argued reasonably. "And there's nobody else? Yeah, but assisting is hardly the same... well okay, if Mcbride is certain she can do it... right. Copy that, Carter out."

"Base for all. Hunter Three and Gatherer Two have arrived at my position. Base is secured. I say again, base is secure. Over."

Colbert realised his own radio was still set to channel 22, and he couldn't overhear the answer.

"Copy that. Return to base as soon as the last is neutralised. Base Out."

"Carter to Brittner. Switch to channel one-eight. .... I read you." The Colonel turned away from him, though he could still hear her to some degree. "Lee, I need you to perform the surgery. ... Dr Keller is offworld until tomorrow ... We have no time for that. There's a hive ship in the vicinity, we don't know if it was made aware, and I'm not hanging around until we can have a doctor here to find out. .... I'm not taking the tracker off this world. ... Doctor McBride assures me you can do this. Lee-- Lee-- Lieutenant. Get to it. I'll send Meyers to assist you once we have Colbert on the stretcher. Carter out."

She turned around with a hard expression.

"Here we are, ma'am." Meyers arrived with the scoop stretcher.

"Right, let's get this show on the road," she said, whatever had been troubling her dismissed.

They kneeled down next to him and with some effort managed to drag his useless body out of the hole between the roots. He closed his eyes, trying to pretend it wasn't happening. He'd never been good with being dependent on others.

"Right, I'll do the rest," the Colonel said as they got him flat on his back. "I need you to go assist Lieutenant Brittner. She will be performing the surgery."

"She will?"

The Colonel looked at him with weary irritation.

"At the risk of speaking out of turn, ma'am - did she go to medical school while I wasn't paying attention?"

"There could be a hive ship here any moment. Either the Lieutenant does it, with your help, or the runner will have to be left here. Those are the options," the Colonel said. She handily assembled the stretcher around him. "And the Doctor assures me it will be fine."

"Oh, well then," Meyers sounded dryly unconvinced.

"Go, sergeant."
"Yes ma'am."

She strapped him into the stretcher, got up, and leaned her weight into the pulling strap to get it moving. It was very disconcerting to be moved flat on his back like this, under somebody else's power - Colonel Carter's power, no less, of all the people to be forced to drag his paralysed ass around - and he tried hard to regulate his breathing. The others had it under control. They'd killed all the wraith, and the paralysis would wear off. And if Brad Colbert had to live out the rest of the mission helplessly strapped in a stretcher like so much dead weight, he would deal with that.

Sort of.

"Can't get you inside on my own, you'll have to wait until the rest get back," she said when she'd dragged him up beside the Jumper ramp. She looked a little flushed from the exertion, but she wasn't out of breath. "You can swallow, right? And move your fingers?"

He tried it. Yes. OK, no risk of choking on his own tongue, and he could wiggle his fingers.

She took his radio base set out of his vest pocket, adjusted the channel, and put it in his hand, fingers on the PTT button.

"I've put you back on open channel. Click if you need somebody. I'll check back on you."

* * *

Hunter One for Base.

This is Base. Go ahead.

Hunter has merged with Gatherer One and Three and is in pursuit of the last target. Break. We have one walking wounded at this time, over.

Base copies. Out.

"Look, I'm not a surgeon, and this is not like a bullet extraction - this thing is all wedged up against her spine. I'm in no way qualified to do this."

"Your objections are noted, Lieutenant."

"Surgery site is prepped, ma'am."

"All right then. .... Angle the scanner more like.. yes, that's good."

"Oh, hell. Look."

"When was your last meal?"

"Couple hours ago?"

"Right. let's time-out a few minutes, Lieutenant. Protein bar or energy drink?"

"The drink please, ma'am. Meyers too, if you don't mind."

"It's okay, I should have thought of it. You just spent an hour running around fighting wraith."

"Ready to go? I have the scanner output on monitor for you."

"I still strongly recommend against this, ma'am. .... I'm ready to start."

"Colbert's pretty spooked - wait ma'am, let me clear that up a little."
"Given that he got here less than two days ago, that seems reasonable, sergeant."

"Well, I guess that's why we have a Pegasus training course these days... another spreader"

"Lieutenant, you might keep in mind that it wasn't his idea to come straight out here, either."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What the hell is this thing? New model? These tendrils don't show on the scanner."

"Doctor Beckett described the one he extracted from Ronon as mechanical. ...this is partly organic so... yes, new model seems a fair... assumption."

"Sorry to have to ask this ma'am, but could you wipe my forehead?"

"No problem, Lieutenant."

"This is Gatherer One for Base. We have neutralised the last target. Break. Returning to base. Our position is four clicks out, over.

This is Base. I copy. What is the status of your wounded? Over.

Base, we have two minor injuries. Repeat: two minor injuries. I expect to be at your position in three-zero mikes. Over.

Base copies all. Carter out.

"Oh fucking hell.. is that tendril wrapped around the nerve? Colonel, can you zoom in? This thing has dug itself in like crazy."

"Fuckfuckfuck. Have I mentioned lately that I'm not qualified to do this?"

"It's okay ma'am, just a minor vein. I'll clamp it."

"This is Jumper Five for base."

This is base, go ahead

Our long-range scanners detect a dart in orbit. Looks like it's just come from the other continent, over.

"Damn it. No, don't concern yourself, Lieutenant"

Jumper Five, find the gate address for Mike Nine Sierra - Seven Three Six in your board computer. Over.

We copy Mike-Nine-Sierra-Seven-Three-Six, break. It is marked as a foot traffic only gate, over.

That's correct, it faces a cliff, but we have confirmed that a jumper will fit with careful manoeuvring. Break. You need to dial the planet and lure the dart through. Over.

Jumper Five copies all. Dialling the planet now. Over.

Mind your timing. You need to go slow, and veer right immediately on coming through. Break. Time it so that the dart will attempt to come through after you before the gate disengages. Over.

We copy. Will report ASAP. Out.
"Right, well that side is loose, at least. Retractor? Let's see if we can..."

* * *

"Gatherer One for Base. We are coming up on your position now, over."

"Copy that, Gatherer. We will depart immediately on your arrival. Out."

Avery crouched down next to the stretcher, looking like he'd ran through thorny underbrush.
"Hey Colbert, got you with a stunner, did they?"

* * *

"Yes, sir," he managed to say. It was a little slurred, but Avery nodded. "Heard you did good here, though," he said, sounding like he'd had quite a good day. "Ma'am, where shall we stow Colbert?"

"Starboard top!"

Teal'c had a bandage around his forearm, and Lieutenant Simmons was leaning on McPherson - looked like he'd hurt his knee. Everybody was looking scratched and muddy, and Major Lorne had apparently tried to wipe some brown-red liquid off his face and not quite succeeded, but they looked okay.

Avery and Teal'c lifted his stretcher up and into a top rack, and it was quite pleasant to be at face height, even though he couldn't turn his head yet. He just had to lie there, feeling useless. Not that he'd have been able to do much otherwise, at this stage.

"Who's driving?"

"You are, captain. I'll see to the walking wounded," Lorne said.

With ten people inside the jumper was pretty full - the captain and colonel still up forward, the two medics still working on the runner there, and four large, mud-splattered men gearing down in the cargo space.

"Please stand clear of the closing doors," Avery said in a bland tone, closing the ramp.

* * *

"Jumper Five to Base"

"This is Base, go ahead"

"We have dialled Mike-Nine-Sierra-Seven-Three-Seven and will proceed to go through, over"  

"Copy that. Base is in the air, over."

"We'll know in a minute if this works. If not, we'll proceed to beta site, over."

"Copy that. Stay in contact. Good luck. Base out."

"Lieutenant, does this look like it needs stitching?" Lorne called forward, gesturing for Teal'c to hold up his arm.

"Not really. Wraith though, right?"

"Yeah."

"Shot of broad spectrum antibiotics - Imipenem-cilastatin, 750 milligram."

"Oh yeah, he's taken the bait all right."
"I must have missed the beginning of this, but where are they luring the dart?" Major Lorne asked.


"The shortstop planet Sheppard discovered? Niiice."

Somebody must have looked like they needed more explanation, because he continued,
"Momentum is conserved by a wormhole."

"Speedy thing goes in, speedy thing comes out," Avery agreed.

"Always fun if you take a running jump into a wormhole. 'Eating ramp' we called that at the SGC."

"Indeed," Teal'c said. 'I have experienced this on several occasions.'

"So basically, if they lured the dart through the wormhole at high speed, and the people who use that planet to trade on have moved the gate there so it is facing a sheer cliff..."

Jumper Five, this is Base, come in please

Jumper Five, come in please

Jumper Five, come in please

"Wormhole disengaged," Avery said flatly.

Colonel Carter cursed under her breath. The jumper was completely silent apart from some soft sounds around the surgery table.

"What if they didn't get away from the gate in time?"

"Incoming wormhole... it's the planet."

Jumper Five, this is Base, come in please, Carter repeated.

Base, this is Jumper Five, we read you, over

Everybody in the jumper let out a collective breath of relief.

It's good to hear you. What's your status? Over.

We are manoeuvring into position for gate travel as we speak. Be with you in a minute, over.

What is the status of the dart? Over

The fireball was what disrupted radio communications. The dart is destroyed, over.

Excellent. We're in a geosynchronous orbit while Lieutenant Brittner removes the tracker, over.

Copy that. Proceeding through the gate now, over.

Base, we are back on Mike X-ray Two Six Two Zero. Shall we dial home at this time? Over.

Affirmative, Jumper Five. Might as well keep the gate blocked off. Out.

"They're back on our scanners," Avery confirmed. Then: "I can't believe you guys have been working on that tracker for... what, almost an hour now?" he said conversationally. "Doctor Beckett got Ronon's tracker out in two minutes flat."

"With all due respect, sir," Brittner said in a tight, raw voice that suggested that right now he wasn't due very much, "Please be silent."
"Here it comes," something landed in a tray.

"I've got the Zat ready - pass it back here," Major Lorne said.

"All right, get her in the portside top rack please."

Meyers and Brittner cleared away implements and discarded gloves and surgery aprons.

"How’d it go? Is she going to be okay?" he heard Major Lorne ask Meyers.

"Nothing some time in the tissue healer in the infirmary won't fix, sir." Meyers sounded tired and fed up.

Teal'c and McPherson lifted the runner's stretcher into the other top rack, and Colbert watched Brittner approach to do another check on the unconscious woman. The Lieutenant looked wrecked, breathing deliberately slow and controlled through her nose. She'd sweated through her BDU shirt, and she had the clench-jawed look of somebody trying to hang onto composure with both hands.

"How are you?" she turned to him, more acknowledgement than question. She didn't sound like she expected an answer. She checked his head wound, which had stopped bleeding, then took his hand and squeezed a little. He had a moment of what the actual fuck before he realised she was probably trying to assess his motor function or something like that, and squeezed back. He succeeded only a little, but the feeling was beginning to return to his fingers.

"Pins and needles are normal, sergeant," she said after she'd spent a moment taking his pulse. "Cramp isn't. Let somebody know if you get that, yeah? We can give you something."

Colonel! I heard your weekend off got crashed, Colonel Sheppard's lazy drawl came through the radio.

That it did, Carter answered ruefully. Our ETA is about ten minutes.

Doctor Fournier updated us. We've got a medical team stand by in the jumper bay.

Thank you. Carter out.

Not being able to see out the viewport made going through the gate extra strange. He thought he felt a diffuse moment of something that marked travelling through the wormhole, but he wasn't sure. Then they were landing in the jumper bay.

"Okay, let's get the runner down to the infirmary," a male Asian doctor strode in as soon as the ramp was down. "Any other wounded?"

"Doctor McBride," Brittner sounded very relieved to see him. "Sergeant's got a head wound that needs seeing to," she said while the runner was lifted onto a gurney, "and he's been shot with a stunner. Teal'c's got wraith scratches, already had 750 milligram Imipenem-cilastatin. Lieutenant Simmons.. I'm sorry, I never even got to you."

"Just twisted it I think," Simmons said. "I'm just gonna ice it down and rest, I'll be okay."

"I'll still want to see you for a scan, and you," the doctor addressed Teal'c, "to get that cleaned properly. And I'm calling somebody to get another gurney up here for the sergeant."

"I'll make sure everybody gets there," Meyers said.

"Good. Let's go." The doctor left with the runner and Brittner.

"So, how was your trip down memory lane?" Sheppard strolled in while everybody was getting gear together.

"Well, nobody got snaked," Colonel Carter said, considering. "Or sucked dry."
"You know it's not a proper trip down memory lane without me dying," Dr Jackson broke in from behind Sheppard. "Or without natives with strange rituals, and Jack there to insult them."

"That, too," Carter nodded seriously. "But hey, on the plus side, nobody got snaked, sucked dry, or otherwise dead."

"And the sergeant here shot down a dart," Sheppard said approvingly. "Nice work."

"Thank you, sir," Colbert said, wishing he wasn't lying flat on his back and strapped into a stretcher for this conversation.

"Then the Colonel shot a wraith with the AT-4," Meyers put in.

"I take it that worked."

"Oh yes. Sucker had quite the dispersion rate, after."

"Score for the bureaucracy of the jumper inventory commission," Major Lorne said. "Turns out AT-4s are not completely obsolete now we have the Stingers."

"Is it just that you didn't have a Mark 9 warhead with you, Colonel?" Sheppard smirked. "An AT-4 seems tame. Usually you take a more... nuclear approach to blowing things up."

"Invent one little bomb, and people talk like it's a hobby or something," Colonel Carter complained.

"Hey Marie, we'll load up Colbert's giant ass for you." Meyers greeted the medic who arrived with a gurney.

"Thanks, man" Colbert said dryly.

"Nooo problem." Meyers and Teal'c swung him down onto the gurney, and then there was more travelling on his back while others moved him.

"How long ago did you get hit?" the medic asked, looking at his head wound as they walked. Teal'c was helping Simmons along.

"I... have lost my sense of time," he admitted. That wasn't entirely true - he had been about ready for an afternoon snack when they'd first seen the runner on scanner, so his inner rhythm probably called that about four hours after lunch. Problem was that between still mostly being on Earth time, the longer Lantean days the expedition used and the confusing natural rhythm on the alien planet, he couldn't orient himself in time anymore.

"I make it about two hours ago," Meyers said thoughtfully.

"We usually see five to six hours until the effects have worn off completely," Marie said, looking down at him. "It is nearly 1900 hours, so you should get out to sleep in your own quarters tonight."

"Oh good. I've seen more than enough of the ceilings in this place," he said conversationally.

* * *

About an hour later he was in an infirmary bed, trying to decide if the way his arms were screaming in agony fell under 'pins and needles' or if he should call for somebody. The room he'd been put was empty apart from him. In the hallway around the corner it had been busy for a while, different doctors and medical personnel taking care of the runner, Teal'c and Simmons and then of the post-mission checkups. Then it had gone silent, though he was aware somebody had occasionally looked into the doorway of the room he was in.

"Ma chère, how is it?"

"She's paralysed..."

Ah, it was the Lieutenant, in the hallway. She sounded raw and a little lost. "I - I nicked a nerve.
My hands weren't steady."

"She is in the tissue healer now?"

"Yeah, over there. McBride says that with daily sessions and a lot of luck, she might be out of the wheelchair in a couple of two weeks."

"The doctor will take good care of her, Lily. You should go and rest," Fournier said.

"No, I. it's okay. I promised her I would take care of her.. that's why she let me sedate her. I want to be here when she wakes up."

Fournier sighed, resigned.

"I brought your pack."

"Thank you." There was a rustle of clothing, and Colbert thought they might be hugging.

"Have you talked to him yet?"

"I've tried." She sounded a little muffled. "I know this is just his messed up, stiff-upper lip way of trying to keep us together, but.. Well. Doesn't matter now anymore, does it? I just have to get through the next few weeks."

"You are going to pass, this time. I know this."

She let out a wry huff of laughter.

"Sure. Hey, the Colonel is giving me a couple of days at the SGC, to study without him breathing down my neck."

"And you are really going to stay at the mountain?"

"I know, risk of running into Paul. But I was thinking about cornering him and just yelling until I feel better."

"Chère, you never yell."

"Exactly - maybe that's where I go wrong. Maybe I should take a page outta Laura's book and just unload with both barrels, you know? Get it outta my head. Maybe then I'll have headspace for.. all this."

"Give it a try, can't hurt. Except him, and he deserves a little hurt," Fournier said, dry and weary. "We all need to move forward."

"I know."

Another hug.

"Now, are we still on for dinner tomorrow?"

"Yeah, of course. I worked on Bahir's shoulder, he owes me some good fresh ingredients."

"Bon. Now, go shower in the decontamination room, I shall watch over your patients."

"All right. Here, for Colbert. Stole them from McBride's desk."

"Come in, doc," Colbert said the next time he saw a shadow appear in the outline of the doorway.

"Ah." Fournier seemed to hesitate for a moment, and Colbert wondered if he had just realised that his rather intimate conversation with Brittner had been overheard. "I was not sure that you were awake."

"Has anybody ever slept through this?" Okay, that was the closest he was willing to come to admitting it fucking hurt like hell. Like he'd slept wrong on his entire body and his nerves were stuck in that horrible cold-numb-pain stage of the blood first coming back.

Fournier came up to the bed.

"I believe so, but it may have been that they were otherwise sedated," he said. "Here."
He put a soft ball in both Colbert's hands, the kind of squishy balls office workers used as stress relief.

"Squeeze and release. It'll help against the circulation pain."

He tried it and grimaced at the way it made the pain shoot down his arms, but the second time it already felt a little more normal.

"Thanks."

"You are welcome."

The doctor pulled up a chair. Colbert wondered what he wanted, if there was going to be a Serious Conversation. It seemed like that kind of moment, though Fournier didn't seem like the kind of person who needed a captive audience to be able to talk. But apparently the man was happy to just keep him company.

"What's on the program for the next few days?" he finally asked, trying to distract himself from his body.

"Ah, you should probably ask Darren, he plans our schedule," Fournier said. "But I believe you will have a few days of training, then Tuesday or Wednesday another mission."

"The effects of that damn stunner will have worn off by then, right?"

"Oh, certainly, or Lee would veto the mission. She takes health and safety very serious."

Yeah, he'd already realised that. Whatever else might be, he was okay with the team health care plan.

"I know a corpsman like that," he snorted quietly. "Never hesitant to go up against command if he thought they were being wasteful with our lives."

"Ah, then you already know the two rules of working with a medic on the team," the doctor said brightly.

"Maybe. What are they?"

"First, do not minimise problems - she must know about injuries. Small things like scratches can become huge problems in an alien environment. And Marines do have a reputation."

"In what way?"

"We once lost three-quarters of a team because nobody wanted to be the first to say they felt unwell - the beginnings of a fatal reaction to an unknown type of pollen. And there have been several cases of people losing, or almost losing, limbs to things like infected insect bites or small scratches, because they did not want to mention something so small."

"Jesus. I see your point."

He got that feeling again, the same as he'd had when looking at the med kit in the jumper. These people were out here exploring amidst dangers they couldn't even imagine yet. Fair enough that the medic responsible for a team had the paranoia dialled all the way up to 11.

"What's rule number two?"

"For the love of science, do not under any circumstance refer to any field health care as mothering."

Colbert snorted laughter.

"Trust me, I've been trained out of that quite thoroughly by Doc Bryan." Who as one of his more memorable impressions when he'd first been embedded with Bravo, had whacked Stafford over the head along with some Marine-worthy cursing and the words 'Hey fucknuts, do you see your mother rolling into battle with you anywhere?'

"Is he one of the men who are starting their training at the Mountain soon?"

"Yeah. On Friday. Earth Friday."

Fournier looked on his watch and his eyes unfocused for a few seconds.
"I think that is today, already. Do you regret not going through," he waved a hand, "all this, with them?"

"They're going to be a team and I was going to be on a AR-4, so we wouldn't have really done it together anyway," he shrugged. His shoulders even moved a little, painfully. "I wish I could see their faces when they find out about all this, though. Ray is going to go out of his head. He loves sci-fi."

"You must tell me about them," Fournier invited, and Colbert did.

* * *

_Nate,_

_So far, rumours of competence do not, I say again NOT, appear to be exaggerated._

_More tomorrow._

_Brad_

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the review love! I'm still, _always_, interested in hearing what you think. I especially love speculation. If you have ideas on where you think I'm heading with the characters and their interaction, I'd love to hear :-)

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

"So, is Pegasus anything like you imagined?" Cadman asked him.
"Fewer penguins," he said immediately.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Hey Colbert!" Meyers gestured at him when he walked into the mess hall on Friday morning. He was sitting at a table with McPherson and a few other guys who - Nate would have grinned - had the NCO look about them.

After he'd been through the food line to get a little of everything that looked interesting, he wandered over to the table.

"Morning."

Nods and grunts in acknowledgement.

"Sit down, man," Meyers kicked out a chair for him. "This is Nocks," short, squat guy with a bald head, "Waltemeyer," the grey haired guy who'd handed him his rifle the morning of the mission, "and Stilger." he nodded at a tall, red-haired guy whose goatee would most certainly not pass Sixta's grooming standards. "Guys, this is Colbert, he's Warszawski's replacement on AR4."

"Latest replacement," Waltemeyer corrected with a snort. "No offense, but Warszawski's a tough act to follow."

"In what way?" Colbert asked. He'd long ago learned that you couldn't get offended if you wanted people to tell you things. And this sounded like good intel ahead.

"Guy was on that team for what, two years?"

"Since we've had an AR-4," Stilger said. "He and LT Brittner were both second wave."

"That's right. Thick as thieves, the lot of 'em. Always hanging out together. Then the asshole goes and breaks his leg. Waltemeyer took a swig of coffee. "Gets hisself sent to Earth to recover, and is never heard from again."

"He disappeared? I thought he still worked there."

"Fournier and Brittner are Atlanteans," Meyers broke in. "No, he needs to get that, otherwise none of it makes sense," he aimed at Waltemeyer, who was about to interrupt. "Atlanteans are the people who are stationed here indefinitely, and who don't have much in the way of ties back Earthside. Fournier takes his leave on a friendly planet, I don't even know that he goes to Earth other than to confer with Doctor Jackson at the mountain. Your LT, as far as we know, doesn't have a life there either."

"Avery we don't know," Nocks interjected. "I think he's shaping up to be a lifer too."

"Sure as hell only seems to go to England to come back with crates full of tea and marmite and like, three gallon jugs of brown sauce," Stilger agreed.

"In any case, everybody thought Warszawski was an Atlantean too. He certainly did - he was bitching all the way to the gate, trying to talk Sheppard into letting him stay as his paperwork bitch. We all thought he was going to email his stupid head off and count the days until he was cleared to come back."

"Yeah. Then, nothing."

"Nothing what?"

They looked up to see a woman come up their table. She had black hair tied back in a ponytail, deep tan skin, and a USMC sergeant's chevrons on her BDU shirt.
"Hey Mehra, sit your ass down, it's story time," Meyers grinned. "We're just giving our man Colbert here some intel on his new team."

"Uh huh." She spared Colbert a glance and then kicked out a chair, sat down and began to eat, quickly and methodically.

"So anyway, Warszawski steps through the gate, and he might as well never re-materialise as far as we know," Waltemeyer continued. "I think Avery got some progress reports from the infirmary, but not a word from Paul."

"Which isn't very nice, but that happens," Meyers broke in. "When I'm at home with my wife, the first day I can't get my head out of the city, and after that it might as well be a weird dream, you know?"

"Million lightyears away," McPherson muttered.

"It doesn't become real again until I'm watching the gate dial Midway Station to go back."

"Thing is, there's still no word when his return date gets closer," Stilger picked up the narration. "And meanwhile his team has gone through three replacements, two of which were assholes. Then Avery gets impatient, and when the Major and LT Cadman are on Earth for a recruiting trip, they sit Paul down and press him - and it turns out he's met somebody, fallen in love, and isn't coming back at all."

"That's a hell of a bomb to drop on his team," Colbert nodded.

"Not to mention his NCO mates."

"They took it pretty hard, yeah. Your LT especially."

"So what, now she's all broken up? Were they fucking or something?"

Mehra put her knife down with a clatter.

"Fucking typical guy. Oh yeah, she's a woman, so she musta slept with every man she's close to! Jesus," she finished with feeling. "As if she would be that unprofessional."

"Chill out, Mehra. He was just asking."

"Yeah, he was 'just asking' like every damn guy in the whole damn military is 'just asking' every single woman in the service," she said with as much anger as weariness, like this was an old argument. Perhaps it was. "Because God forbid the concept of a woman working closely with men and NOT fucking any of them!" she stabbed her fork into her last piece of egg as if it has personally offended her, breathed out harshly, and then continued, calmer, "Brittner and Warszawski are the only remaining members of the original AR-4. They'd been through the mill together. Of course they were close. Don't mean there was more to it."

It was silent for a long moment, as nobody seemed to know how to respond to that.

"So yeah, tough act to follow," Waltemeyer finally gestured with his coffee cup. "It sucks to find out that the guy you think of as your brother doesn't consider you his brother."

"Or sister, as the case may be," Mehra said quietly. She gave Colbert a critical once-over. He looked back. She was about his age, with curves the uniform couldn't hide and sharp brown eyes. Hot, in a hard-edged way. A don't-even-fucking-think-about-hitting-on-me sort of way. Which was a shame, though he knew better than starting something when he'd barely found his feet.

"This the Recon boy Avery picked outta the Marine order catalogue for my spot on AR-4?"

Oh. Fuck. Seemed like there were just landmines everywhere in this place.

"The very one," Meyers confirmed in that special 'tapdancing in a minefield' voice. "Dusty Mehra, meet Brad Colbert."

He offered his hand, just to see if she would, and after a second of watching him she did reach out to shake it. Her grip was firm and warm and calloused, with no attempt to squeeze or otherwise intimidate him. Then she continued eating.
"At the risk of opening a can of worms," he said after a few minutes of silence. "Your spot on AR-4?"

"Yeah, after all the fuckery they had with replacements, Dusty here was the shoe-in," Meyers said, taking a swig of coffee.

"I've been up for a spot on a gate team for a while," Mehra finally said. "And what opened up was AR-4. Thing is, with the SRE missions I woulda needed some extra training. Take about a month."

"Word was that it was almost a done deal. But the Captain, not known for his vast wells of patience, apparently didn't want to wait," Meyers filled in.

Colbert wondered if it also had to do with the SRE team ending up as the Captain and Brittner, Cadman and Mehra. Much as he tried to see female team members as equal, he couldn't imagine a team like that.

"So he dug you out of the stack of potentials, rushed you out here, and I'm still stuck with a damn first shift security team," Mehra finished.

"You just got a bug up your ass about Recon, Dusty."

"You would too, if you were told sure, you're good enough, but you can't try out because you've got ovaries," she said vehemently. "Antiquated fuckers."

Colbert kept his mouth shut about the idea of women in Recon, because there were some places he was sensible enough not to go. He understood her frustration about being turned down for something she had no influence on, but he simply could not imagine what OIF would have been with a mixed gender platoon.

But something about the situation pinged on his observational radar. Something about the conversation he'd overheard the night before, something to do with the occasional look exchanged between the Captain and the Lieutenant, the tone of their voices now and then. Like there'd been a big argument, and they were professional enough and liked each other enough to have laid it aside, but the disagreement wasn't gone or forgotten.

Like maybe Brittner wanting Mehra on the team, and the Captain finding a surprise outside option? Like maybe Avery pushing his arrival ahead and calling it an advantage, when a month's downtime would probably have suited Brittner, with her upcoming exams?

"I gotta go," Nocks got to his feet. "Apparently Major Lorne wants to see me about the MRE supply situation." He rolled his eyes.

"Oh yeah, he caught onto the pre-select thing," Meyers said, taking a bite.

"Jesus. The man is second in command of the base, and he's gonna personally involve himself in how I arrange the MRE supply? Do I get involved in how he runs the base?"

Waltemeyer emptied his coffee cup and got up too.

Meyers leaned back with a grin.

"Here's a hint: the Major does not like fajitas."

"Aw fuck, LT By-The-Book got our crate a few times, didn't he?" Stilger put in. "And we didn't even like all that other shit."

"The shit I gotta deal with.." Nocks grumbled as he and Waltemeyer wandered off.

"So Dusty, anything interesting happen overnight?"

"Just AR-6 returning from market with all sorts of goodies and a few good deals lined up."

"Nice."

"Heard you guys brought back a runner who ain't running anymore, though."
"Yeah," Meyers said heavily. "That."

"Messed up situation," McPherson said.

"Not something either of us shoulda been asked to do," Meyers said. "I mean, I can remove a bullet if there's no other choice, and the LT's had basic surgical training, but this was neurosurgical work. The damn thing had feelers all up against her spinal cord. Wasn't like Ronon with a mile of shoulder muscle for a tracker to nestle in, that's a lot easier to remove."

"I thought CROs had less medical training than corpsmen," Colbert said carefully. The idea was generally that the CRO directed the enlisted medical personnel, not got bogged down doing the medical care themselves.

"LT Brittner was flight nurse on a MEDEVAC chopper before the SGC got to her," Meyers said, grimacing at his cold coffee.

"Flight nurse? How the hell did she end up Combat Rescue Officer?" How the fuck did a nurse end up where she was? And why the hell was she studying for paramedic exams if she presumably had a nursing degree?

"She should tell you that herself," Stilger said curtly, clearly feeling that the subject was closed with this. From the way the others seemed to take his word as authority, Colbert wondered if the man had been part of the first wave of the expedition.

"Yeah, you should ask her," Mehra said, heavy on the fake sincerity. "That's gonna go over great. "LT, how come you're CRO when women ain't allowed to serve as CRO?' - she'll love that. Make sure to sound properly sceptical and shit."

OK, so he hadn't hidden his scepticism about a female CRO as well as he should have. Last he checked, women were still definitely not allowed to serve in combat positions. How on earth she'd gotten the training and the rank, he wasn't sure.

"Thank you, I think I like my head where it is," he said.

"Shame, coulda been my chance at the team," she said, but she was grinning, so he figured it was okay.

* * *

"Morning Kay," Stilger said.

Colbert looked up to see another woman approach. Tall, threadbare blue coveralls, huge amount of blonde curls held back with a brightly coloured buff cloth - he recognised her as Plasma Torch Chick.

"Hey guys. Any of you want to do a radio slot? Paglia's not gonna make it back in time."

"Depends, do I have to do the discussions he does?" Meyers asked.

"Nope. Anything you like, including just setting up a playlist. But hey, your walking reporter thing was a hit."

"Mostly because I caught Zelenka while he was on the piano. Let me think about it a minute."

"Sure. Hey, I heard about you," she turned to him. She had to be in her forties, with more freckles than skin, and a completely baffling accent. Scandinavian maybe, or Dutch. "You're Brad Colbert, right? Marijke van IJsselmuiden."

"More commonly known as Kaylee, if you can't get that off your tongue," Mehra snorted.

"Or Kay," the blonde woman agreed.

"Hi." He shook her hand, which had grime deeply embedded in the calluses. "You heard about me?" He wasn't sure he liked the sound of that.

"In a fix-the-man-up-with-diving-gear sort of context, yeah. Drop by Maker Street sometime, I'll sort you out."
He clicked a few elements together.
"You're one of the tech crew divers?"
"Yeah, I do most of the underwater welding."
"Right. I'll come looking for Maker Street at some point." Presumably it was on the map on his tablet.
"Good-oh. So Brad, wanna be on the radio?"
"Not really. Didn't even know there was a radio station."
"Oh yeah, 28 hours a day, six days a week. Most of it ABBA songs," Stilger said.
"Oh shut up, I've heard you hum along," she said fondly. "And anyway, you want more variety, claim a spot and come play what you like."
"Fuck it, I'll do it," Meyers said, stacking his cup and cutlery onto his breakfast tray. "1800 to 1900 hours, right?"
"Yup. Thanks Will. And you guys are all coming to the sanity society tonight, right?"
"Sure."
"Wouldn't miss it."
"Cool! See you there then," she was off with a wave.
"All this shit is on the wiki, right?" he checked with Meyers.
"Yeah, yeah. Maker Street is marked as Ops/Tech on your map. It's where all the workshops and shit are."
"They're Navy types, but I'd recommend you keep them as friends," Stilger said. "They control about three quarters of the non-food trade market in the city. Anything you want, they can make it, procure it, or give you the tools and materials to make it yourself."
"Really? Navy?" he said with an eye to where Kay was chatting with a scientist. She had a loud, bright laugh.
"Not her. Used to work for a marine salvage company."
"Right. Don't piss off the people with the powertools. Noted."

***

Location: personal quarters, Atlantis
Time: Friday, 1417hrs New Lantean Time

Nate,

Just getting this one in on my training break before the databurst. You should be at the SGC now and I hope you've gotten in an email to let me know how things are over there. You probably already know more about the place than I ever found out.

* First mission turned eventful after all. Interesting to see people in action, even though they left me to babysit Col. Carter. Which turned out to be not so bad because the action came to us. She's good, and Jesus they have high standards here. She didn't know me from Adam, but she expected me to fall into step with her without a moment's thought. Think I did, so that's good.

* Met some Wraith. Fucking hell. Got shot with one of their stunner beams. Can't recommend it.

* Been here three days and I'm already being trained for normal command. Col. Carter is legit. Saved my ass by shooting a wraith with an AT4. That's a mental image that will help me through dark moments for the rest of my fucking life.
* Both scientists on the mission carried P90s. Knew how to use them, too.

* Aside from that, I've met sergeants who can do Ancient tech engineering, have xenobiology training or are working on chemistry degrees. I've met a staff sergeant studying Ancient language and heard about one who teaches the hostage negotiation course. There are Navy techs here who have designed and built systems to recycle pretty much any waste produced here and turn it into tradable items, and a gunny who is apparently considered one of the best diplomats in the city. Nobody here is 'just a grunt', especially not on a gate team. This place is like a world convention for overachievers.

* To quote Capt. Avery, being really fucking good at what you do is the standard here. You wouldn't be here if you weren't. Being really fucking good at a bunch of other things too, that's the goal. Apparently there's a 'Most Useful Teammate' award. (Dr. Fournier has won it in the past)

* Team is professionally okay as far as I can tell. (wasn't with them during the crunch part of the mission), I'm still figuring out the interpersonal side. I'm beginning to get the sense that not all of it is about me specifically. I swear, if you told me this entire team was screwing, I would believe it in a heartbeat.

* When you get the 'How to get along with alien cultures' talks, it probably helps to think of Atlantis itself as an alien culture. This is not a normal military base in any sense of the definition. There's 37 nationalities speaking 24 language (not counting the single-speaker languages). There's scientists, military personnel and civilians of all makes and flavours. It's one community, with intermingling (and probably fraternisation) all over the shop. Depending on the situation, civilians can have authority over military personnel. Expertise trumps all in an emergency.

* There is, I am not fucking with you, a 'Shit my CO says' section on the wiki. (We should have had something like that during OIF. Now THAT would have been good for morale.) Capt. Avery is one of the most quoted officers (probably because it sounds hilarious when he swears in that British accent, and he says 'bollocks!' a lot). Wonder if it's just NCOs posting there.

* There's a Radio Atlantis. Anybody who wants to can apply for a broadcast slot. I can't decide whether you should mention this information to Person or if we should keep it from him at all cost.

* Every single one of the city's 37 represented nationalities has its own weekly radio slot. (Fuck, Poke should have come, he could have had a slot for every minority he throws in with). Some of them are in native language (I've heard a Japanese broadcast) or have native music, but not nearly everything is. I think mostly the idea if to give everybody a voice, to use as they want.

* Bring a HD full of music. Hell, bring one each.

* There's a lot of live music too, including a rock/punk band. And there are soundproof spaces for them to practice, so it'd be okay to let Person ship in his guitar.

* We're up for another mission on Tuesday or Wednesday: Captain says probably delivering salt to a trading contact. I think the idea is to ease me into things by doing some low risk missions and meet some allies. Of course, first mission proves how quickly that idea can go to hell.

* Team dinner tonight. Still reconning the fuck out of that weird-ass team dynamic.

Right, break over. Up and at the 'First Contact' module. Stay frosty.

**

Avery took him on a combined city tour / run late in the afternoon. The databurst was at 1600 hours, and he was eager to check his email and see how Nate was doing at the SGC, but there wasn't time for more than a quick shower and shave before dinner, and he made himself wait until later. He'd been told to turn up between 1900 and 1930, so he showed up at Fournier's quarters exactly at 1900, punctual as only somebody who'd been drilled into it could be. Fournier, in a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up, looked a little surprised to see him.

"Ah, come in. I am no longer used to precisely-on-time," he smiled, opening the door wider.

Colbert thought his own quarters were pretty nice, with space for a desk and one of those large lounge pillows like the ones in the rec space. Plus his own bathroom, which was just luxury.
Fournier's quarters were at least three times as large, with its own balcony, a lounge with a circle of those same pillows and space for a large dinner table and eight chairs. An arch led off to what he figured was the kitchen, and two doors presumably lead to the separate bedroom and bathroom. He had both an acoustic and an electric cello in the lounge, several paintings of Atlantis on the walls, and the place was littered with art objects Colbert was fairly sure were not from Earth. He remembered what he'd been told about Atlanteans - these were clearly not somebody's quarters; this was a home.

"Nice place."

"Thank you. It was a trade-off," Fournier smiled ruefully. "We spent a year cut off from Earth, hanging on to survival by our fingernails and believing we would just slowly be picked off by one disaster or another. On the plus side, we could pick the best quarters, and even now, nobody dares suggesting we should move."

Colbert didn't know what to say to that, but the older man didn't seem to expect anything, just walked into the kitchen.

"A beer? I have Athosian Kherr stout and..." he studied a handwritten label, "ah yes, this is Darren's experimental space brew."

Colbert snorted.

"Living on the edge. I'll go with the Captain's experiment."

"Here you are."

It was... he frowned, took another sip, and blinked.

"I did say it was experimental!"

"It's not bad, it's just..." he took another sip. It reminded him of when the British troops he'd hung out with in Afghanistan had given him a bag of crunchy snacks and he'd still been unable to decide if he liked them even after he'd finished the entire bag, but had wanted more just to figure it out.

"You need more data to decide, no?" Fournier grinned.

** * **

"Gooood evening!" Captain Avery's presence filled the room the moment he crossed the threshold. "Oh Michèl, really now, don't serve that swill. I have a new batch." He took the bottle from Colbert's bemused hand and replaced it with another swing top from the crate he carried.

"Doctor Kiang gave me all this stuff, said you'd know what to do with it," he put the crate on the table. It was full of all sorts of vegetables. The only ones Colbert recognised were chillies. "And we're expecting Laura - she just gated back in half an hour ago. Said she'd turn up here once she's done with her post mission circuit."

"Magnificent. Do you enjoy cooking, Brad?" Fournier gestured for him to sit at the table.

"Not specifically," he said after a moment's thought. He liked how Fournier's questions never sounded like there were wrong answers. "Not like some of the guys." Like Poke spending half a day on marinating the meat for the barbeque just right, or Ray building a custom pizza with 30 ingredients and enjoying the making just as much as the eating.

"That is fine, we can always use washer-uppers," Fournier grinned.

** * **

"I feel all pruney," Brittner's voice announced as a door opened into the kitchen. A blast of scented steam accompanied her voice.

Colbert would have thought that a team mate emerging from the bathroom of another teammate for no apparent reason merited at least a raised eyebrow, but Avery didn't even look up from peeling vegetables.

"That's because you are not actually a water-dwelling creature," Fournier replied from the kitchen.
"Hey, did you see the soft cheese Captain Bahir got for me? It's almost mascarpone, I bet we could make a passable tiram--" she'd finally stepped out of the adjacent bathroom, face flushed and hair in wet spikes. He'd half expected her to be wearing a towel, but she looked relaxed in jeans and a threadbare hoodie with a faded Aeromed Evac Squad logo. At least, she looked relaxed for the space of a few seconds. Then she spotted him, and her posture stiffened, demeanour changing back to the reserved officer expression he'd seen from her all week.

"Captain, sergeant," she greeted neutrally.

"Lee..." Avery sounded.. weary, or just slightly exasperated. Like this was ground they'd gone over before. "Come on, Lee, Brad here won't think you're less capable of kicking ass and taking names if he sees you do something feminine like cooking."

He didn't think he could actually promise that in the heat of battle he'd never respond to her as a woman instead of as a warrior. He was pretty sure it would take a lot longer than a few days to get used to the idea of having women in combat, and find a way to relate to her that didn't rely on pretending she was a guy.

But he wouldn't *consciously* think less of her, and he knew a cue when he heard one, so he nodded. "Of course not, ma'am."

The captain might want them to be as informal as he was himself, but clearly neither of them were ready for that, if they ever would be. She acknowledged him with a nod, though he didn't doubt that she was as reluctant to believe this as he was himself.

"What's feminine about cooking?" Fournier came out of the kitchen, tying his apron strings. "And what is negative about feminine?"

Something like relief flickered across the Lieutenant's face. "Please Michèl, not the feminism lecture tonight," she said wearily, moving past him into the kitchen. "We're in the military, we're all fucked up in various unique ways - there's your answer."

"Ah yes, how could I forget?" the doctor answered wryly. "Do you want to start on the bread?"

"Sure," her voice drifted back out of the kitchen. "Do we have any rosemary left?"

He put chopping boards and a strange type of root in front of Colbert. "Peeled and diced, please."

It occurred to Colbert that the Captain had just completely missed the point that Brittner was unhappy with being seen to have used the shower in Fournier's quarters, though it was clearly not something remarkable for any of them. Then Fournier had stepped in to unfuck the stalled moment. It had all been so smooth that he wondered how often the Captain and the Lieutenant squared off and the doctor stepped in.

Then again, perhaps it had been a deliberate distraction on the side of the captain.

When there were like this, it was like watching a couple of musicians jam together, so in sync that the line between intent and improvisation was invisible. He wondered if they expected him to eventually become a part of this oddly intimate team dynamic or if it was okay - or even expected, as a sergeant - that he was outside of it. Hell, he didn't even know if he wanted to be that close with these people. Warszawski clearly had been, though. Colbert could almost feel the man's absence in the conversation, the moments the banter stalled for just a beat, as if they were expecting a voice that wasn't there.

He imagined it would be similar to the first few months after his ex had left him - that churning, confused feeling of both hating her and missing her.

Unsurprisingly, Brittner said very little, though from the way Avery attempted to draw her out he got the impression she normally wasn't quite as clammed up. The men talked freely, drawing him in to their planning for the Rube Goldberg machine they would make in the evening's activities. Avery kept getting up to collect things from around the quarters, and he and Colbert improvised until they had a 7-stage mini machine running around the table while Fournier and the Lieutenant cooked. Pleasant, if mostly unrecognisable scents started to drift out of the kitchen.

* * *

"Honey, I'm home!" Lieutenant Cadman called from the doorway about an hour later. She looked freshly showered and comfortable in jeans and a USMC hoodie.
"Excellent timing," Fournier smiled. "We are about ready to eat."

Colbert set the table while Avery asked Cadman about her mission, which had involved two days of clambering about mountains to set off rockslides with controlled detonations.

"Laura! How was the planet of the tiny people?" Brittner came out of the kitchen to put down fresh, still-steaming bread.

"Safe from rock slides! It was the best kind of mission," she grinned. "I got to blow stuff up and help people."

There was beat as they faced each other, as if they normally greeted each other differently but Brittner was hesitating. Cadman, apparently unfazed, stepped forward and gave the other woman a brief hug.

"How were the trees?"

The food was good, if strange and unfamiliar. The addition of Cadman seemed to fill in the gap in the dynamic he'd sensed earlier, at least partially. She kept up a steady stream of chatter with Avery and Fournier, and he watched Brittner relax, leaning back in her chair and observing them with fondness. It struck him that he did the exact same thing when around Ray - Person's endless stream of conversation relieved him of the pressure to be more talkative or social than he felt inclined to. Like a lightning rod.

"So, is Pegasus anything like you imagined?" Cadman asked him when they were eating a dessert of alien berries with cream cheese and coffee liquor.

"Fewer penguins," he said immediately.

Fournier almost inhaled his wine.

"How come?"

Colbert grinned. His imagination hadn't even come close to what the reality had turned out to be.

"Well," he nodded in Cadman's direction, "you couldn't really give me anything to go on. The most logical explanation for a super-remote location where they needed marines and researchers was that there was some super-secret war being fought over Antarctica."

"I'm gonna have a soak, if that's okay with you," Cadman said to Michèl when they were finished with the meal.

"Sure. Don't fall asleep."

"If you drown, we don't have our team complete for the sanity society," Avery nodded seriously.

"I'll keep it in mind," she said as she disappeared into the bathroom.

* * *

"Did you hear we're probably doing a salt run next week?"

Avery had already told Colbert about it. It involved a couple hours trek through dense forest to get to the indigenous peoples' settlement.

"I did. How much this time?"

"About 75 kilo I think."

"That's doable between four," Fournier said. Brittner gave him a raised-eyebrows Look over the rim of her wineglass.

"Okay, between three," he conceded.
"I thought so," she said, getting up to bring the pan into the kitchen.

Colbert tried not to let the sudden dose of what the flying fuck show on his face.

"Uh-huh. No way are we letting you carry salt," Avery agreed. "I didn't go through all the trouble to keep this team together only to lose somebody to the infirmary."

"Fine, fine, I will carry my towel and my sleeping bag and nothing else," Fournier sighed, resignedly amused.

Okay, that put a different spin on things. Colbert hesitated. It felt like they'd half forgotten he was there, and he still didn't really have a sense for how prepared they were to have him in their personal space. Avery was approachable though, and he didn't think it would have been said if he didn't want to talk about it.

"Excuse me sir, but.. keep the team together?"

"Darren," Avery corrected. "And AR4 was nearly disbanded."

"Temporarily!" Brittner called from the kitchen, slamming a drawer shut.

"Basically after all the wankery with temp replacements, and hearing that Paul Warszawski - that's our former sergeant - wasn't coming back, people were running out on me left, right and centre," Avery said, in the sort of tone calculated to provoke a response. "Michèl asked to be reassigned to the dig team on MX2-620--"

"--until the new sergeant was trained up," Michèl said, in a tone as if this was a performance staged for Colbert's benefit.

Avery ignored him.

"And Lee wanted to be sent to Earth--"

"Temporarily," the Lieutenant said sharply, popping into the door opening for a moment.

"--so she could spend a month frying her brain with facts she already knows, for an exam that she could do while being waterboarded. By wraith."

"Dishes need doing." She said sweetly, throwing a tea towel at his head as she walked past them to the door. "And your pep-talks suck."

"But you're still going to help us tonight, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

Chapter End Notes

I might be having too much fun with the whole 'daily life on Atlantis' theme. Because you know there has to be a sergeanty table, right?

Also, the snacks Colbert is thinking of when trying the beer are Twiglets. They're sort of marmite flavoured. I once ate an entire bag because I couldn't figure out if I liked them or not.

Also, holy fuck I am at 42 000 words and maybe a quarter into what I want to tell. Yikes.

Next chapter will (finally!) be Nate's email backlog :-(
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Location: Pendleton
Thursday, 23:40

Brad,

Hopefully I'll be able to transfer this text file to the SGC laptop once it's issued to me. Just want to put this down before I attempt sleep - we'll be put through the paperwork and then transported starting at 0800 tomorrow. You'll be pleased to hear I've got Ray, Doc (*), Mike, Garza, Christopher - and Tony! Last you heard he said no, but word of the next deployment to Iraq is starting to trickle down, and his wife said that she'd rather he go somewhere he might return from as a sane man, even though she's not allowed to know anything about it.

I contacted the email address Maj. Lorne had given me and a Major Teldy (in charge of recruitment and training) replied that bringing a team of seven was fine, because apparently Marine Sergeants are in high demand and I'm likely to have one poached off of me soon enough anyway. Still trying to decide if that's good or not. I'm already thinking that if this all turns out well, I know a few more to recommend. Officers, too. Should I feel guilty for considering to basically recommend that the SGC lift out every single competent officer and NCO 1st Recon has to offer?

Of course, I have no idea what you have landed in, and if it's actually as advertised. This twice-weekly communication thing is going to be a pain for the next month. I have a feeling there's going to be a lot going on.

The guys have been trying to get intel out of me all week. It's been hard to keep a straight face at their speculation. There's a wager (of course there is) with bets including Antarctica (not an unreasonable idea given that there are rumours about a secret USAF/Marine base there), a deep-desert base somewhere in Africa, a deep rainforest base, and 'the moon'. Ray, of course. He's going to be so smug when he's the closest.

Entertaining as that's been, I'll be glad when they'll all know. I've missed not being able to confide in Mike.

*) I say that he's coming, but actually there's a bit of an uproar - Bryan called last night to say that evidently the Navy doesn't know its ass from its elbow (only then worded with less restraint); his transfer to the SGC was approved earlier this week - faster than expected - but now he's getting shipped out to the USS Bataan with 24 hours notice. I called Teldy, who answered the emergency number herself (and I managed not to make an ass out of myself and didn't assume she was an assistant). I was all prepared to fight her for Bryan, because he's the guy I want for our health care, plus he was looking forward to sticking with us instead of getting redeployed with another unit. But Teldy didn't argue and just said she'd call me back this afternoon. Which she did, to say that Bryan should pack and prepare as for the original mission and go along with his transport, and that he would be 'intercepted and rerouted' to the SGC. Can they do that? I hope for Bryan (and for all of us) that they can do that. I guess the next 24 hours will tell.

Tim of course was none to happy about the idea that he has to let himself get shipped out and should just take it on faith that he'll somehow end up on the mission he was recruited for. He might be in the air by now - his phone is going straight to voicemail.

OK, really must try for sleep now. I'll update tomorrow. Not that you'll see this until Saturday anyway.

Nate

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* * *
Chronologically,

- Were met by Major Teldy and a GySgt Warszawski at the base. Guys were put through the paperwork but not actually given any details. I asked if she had news on Bryan’s situation and she just said it was ‘in hand’. Guys were bursting with curiosity at this point.

- Were loaded onto a truck and headed off to the airstrip. Except the Sgt. drove us into the hills toward Powder Magazine road. Stopped at a sheltered spot and Teldy told us to get out and make a stack of our gear. Very strange, right? Possibly feeling a little nervous about all of this at that point. Tony’s theory that we were all about to get schwacked and dumped in a ditch did not help.

- Teldy was on the radio with somebody called Dr Novak. She told us to stand close together. Stepped closer herself. Radioed ‘OK, ready for transport’. And.. bright lights.

- We’re suddenly in a room. Bryan is standing in front of us. “Hi guys,” he says. “Adjust your incredulity dials.”

- Teldy holds a little speech about how showing is easier than telling, and we were just transported onto a spaceship that’s in orbit, aliens are real (and there was no escaping that because there was one right there in the room. I don’t think he/she/it enjoyed being asked about Elvis and if he would take them to his leader) and we can travel to other planets via a device called the Stargate. This understandably brings up a few questions.

- She brought us to a rec room where we could talk for a bit and ask questions. Meanwhile our gear was beamed into the transportation room.

- Turns out that Bryan was pulled right off of the plane the night before, maybe 10 minutes from departure - all official top secret snatch mission with Teldy and a Major Davis (from the Pentagon, for fuck’s sake) in dress uniform. Would have loved to see that. He says he shat bricks there for a second until Teldy identified herself. He got the paperwork, and was beamed up. He spent the night on board, as the SGC didn’t really have anybody ready to meet him at that time.

- I quote Bryan: ‘If one corpsman merits sending two majors on a dress blues trip on what was probably their evening off, I am considering some cautious optimism about this place.’ - I agree: he hadn’t even signed yet. For all they knew he could have looked at the paperwork and changed his mind. Either they really want him, or they’re invested in getting me aboard. Or both.

- Bryan was a few steps ahead of the rest in terms of believing it’s all real, which makes sense after he spent a night aboard. It really helped the guys settle down a little.

- Got a brief tour of the bridge, Mike with his hand firmly on Ray’s shoulder. What a view out of those viewports. Put me in mind of Carl Sagan’s book. ‘That’s here. That’s home. That’s us’. Apparently I said it out loud, because Tony added ‘On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives’ at the same time as the Commander (Col. Caldwell) did. Might have known Tony’s read Sagan.

- Should have brought a camera. What’s the policy on photos?

- Beamed down to Cheyenne Mountain. So. Fucking. Weird. I was trying to keep my cool about it. Not sure if I succeeded.

- Paperwork, intake, get assigned quarters etc. Gunny Warszawski leads us though the whole thing. He was stationed on Atlantis until recently (he broke his leg and got sent to Earth) and he’ll be training us as a team. Nice guy - early forties, energetic and talkative... kind of what I imagine Ray will be like in 15-20 years. If nobody strangles him before then.

- Medical checks, got the implant like you describe, then into briefings.

- We’ll be trained on-base for the first two weeks - mostly briefings and VR training. After that, training missions begin.

- Got issued a tablet and logins, and found the email you wrote before you gated out. I think we met Col. Mitchell in the infirmary - he was just allowed upright for the first time.
- I'm really looking forward to this training period and all these new skills we'll be learning. The culture classification thing sounds especially fascinating. We both have some experience with other cultures, but we've always gone in with some prep. How you deal when you have absolutely no idea what you'll find, I'm curious to find out.

- Everybody I've met so far seems sane. Guess we won't know until there's a crisis though. There's always one.

- We have a small rec room just for us 7, which is where I'm sitting now. Garza and Ray are bouncing off the walls in excitement. Rest of the guys have gone off to find the gym rooms. These two wanted to go as well, but I figure they need to cool off a little first. I doubt the SGC appreciates a loud, constant litany of HOLY FUCK CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS SHIT WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU SERIOUS echoing through the hallways.

- They're already referring to gunny Warszawski as 'dad' and I'll have to make sure they don't get to calling Major Teldy 'mom' - I have the feeling that would not go over well. Though there are far, far more inappropriate things they could say. So far nobody has. That little talk we had beforehand must have made an impression.

- Your team sounds intriguing. I guess by now you'll have met them and hopefully there'll be an email from you tomorrow to report.

- I haven't seen the Stargate yet, but being beamed up to a spaceship does wonders in terms of convincing. I guess that was the point. Apparently Major Teldy didn't feel like having the sort of conversations you and I had with Major Lorne.

- I'm being harassed into convinced to go to the commissary for a late night snack now.

- The guys say hello back. Actually, they mostly said 'Holy shit, the Iceman's in ANOTHER GALAXY' and 'Greetings from Earth' and wanted to know a) if it's true that Atlantis is a non-smoking place and what about dip, and b) if you've met any aliens yet.

Hope you're well,
Nate

* * *

Location: SGC, Cheyenne Mountain Base
Saturday, 06:11

Getting in a quick email before the databurst at 0800hrs.

Alarms just went blaring. A passing Airman said it was 'just an unscheduled offworld activation' which from what Sgt. Warszawski has said could mean anything from a team wrapping up earlier than projected to a full scale invasion attempt. No alarms or announcements since, so presumably the first rather than the last. I get the impression there's not much space in between 'we're fine' and 'we're f*cked' at this base.

Apparently today or monday I'll be introduced at Command - it's a 24/7 operation but they do try to keep weekends free of routine missions, and the General may not be here today. I have to admit I'm nervous about it - getting handpicked like this and then told to pick my best guys makes me rather aware of all our manners! I have Mike and Tony making sure they're all on company behaviour, but still, some of the shit that comes out of their mouths. Maybe it's time for another little 'Don't embarrass me' reminder. I need them all buttoned up tight until we get a better feel for what flies here and what doesn't.

Bryan's even shaved, which marks the first time since I've known him that he's adhered to the Corps grooming standard rather than the Navy's. You know how it used to drive Sixta up the wall that he couldn't do a damn thing about Bryan's moustache. I feel fucking honoured.

Right, off to PT now. Let's see if we can burn off some of this excited energy.
Chapter End Notes

My continued, eternal thanks for your lovely, excited, in-depth reviews. Your insights and speculation keep getting me excited about this story all over again!
Saturday, 11:10hrs NLT
Personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,
Man, it's weird replying to a whole bunch of emails written over the course of a week. I'll just pick out some points.

- Awesome you've got Poke too. Don't think Gina will regret her decision.

- I've never met Major Teldy, but I like her style. Getting the lot of you beamed up gives new meaning to the idea of 'show, don't tell'. Shame you didn't get any video of Ray though

- Wish I could have seen Bryan's face when they pulled him off the plane. Going above and beyond, even for enlisted, doesn't seem out of character from what I've seen. And field-trained medical personnel is highly valued here. Apparently the SGC lost their Chief Medical Officer in the field a couple of years ago and since then they're always looking for combat trained medics who can handle all the alien weirdness.

- Probably a good sign. That combat pay is for a reason, and they do have casualties here, but I don't get the impression they throw NCOs under the bus, or at least not more than they throw anybody else under busses.

- It will take more time to figure out if things here are as advertised, but if you should feel guilty, then so should I - I've made one of those lists for myself. Imagine Patterson's face.

- Don't know if I mentioned his name, but Gunny Warszawski is the guy I'm replacing. Interesting, he's older than I expected. By all accounts he didn't leave the team in a great state (I'm still figuring out the details). Go on, mention AR4 and especially Lt. Brittner to him and let me know how he reacts. I have a theory.

- Say hi to the guys for me. Non-smoking is true (though I hear tell of a sheesha-like pipe the Athosians (allies) smoke herbs on, and there being a few in the city). No cigarettes, and given how clean everything is here I think people would probably kill you for dipping. I've met Teal'c, who is apparently 160 years old and used to have a snake in his stomach - that counts, right? Nice guy. He'll be back at the SGC by now, so you might run into him.

- Atlantis is like that too - no small emergencies here. Just like that first mission went from campfires and stories and Kumbaya straight to shooting wraith with an AT4.

- Holy crap, Doc really shaved? What is this devilry? You should feel honoured, that 'stache was his personal 'fuck you' at Command. Nobody here seems bothered about shaving - I've seen some goatees etc. Probably shouldn't push it with a ZZ Top look, but I doubt anybody is going to give a shit about shaving during a mission. I get the feeling a lot here is based on 'we're not going to be anal about it if you don't take the piss'. Which I guess they can afford to do because if you're the type to take the piss you wouldn't be here anyway, or not for long.

More later,
Brad

* * *

Friday night entertainment was an experience in itself - the Atlantis Sanity Preservation Society turned out to be a sort of freeform podium the natives called 'open space'. This time it was organised by a section of the Engineering department, lead by a small, energetic man called Radek. He spent all of three minutes explaining the idea in fast, accented English, then each team received a crate full of assorted items, and chaos ensued.

Apparently the original idea had been to make it a competition, but round about the time the gate teams started connecting their machines, Colonel Sheppard and Dr McKay began to build a launching catapult for paper airplanes, and one of the cooks integrated a toaster into the machine track, all the individual machines were connected until the resulting track ran twice around the mess hall, up to the gallery, and then down the hallway to the gateroom. There it finished by, for reasons unexplained to him, launching a giant inflatable crocodile into an open wormhole.
Colbert had only gone along because it was clear Avery would be disappointed if he didn't, but it ended up the most fun he'd ever had on any military base. Seemed that there were advantages to living with eggheads.

The 'meeting' ended with the tactical withdrawal of the senior officers that had been present, followed by the opening of a reasonable amount of alcohol both imported (from Earth and from other planets) and homebrewed. To his surprise it all stayed fairly low key - there was drinking and the radio on loud and a bit of dancing. People enjoyed themselves, but nobody got hideously drunk, and there was none of the cutting loose or burning off frustration he would have expected, not even among the Marine platoons.

He'd intended to head to his quarters at 0000hrs, but to his surprise 2759 turned into 2800 hours - apparently this was the weekly Leap Hour. It was marked by the unrolling of a giant Twister board, where a complicated, drunk game was played, accompanied by a Marine playing showtunes on the piano.

The Saturday was the communal day off, and he spent the morning using the weight room and then the pool, then revising the First Contact material Avery had given him. It had been some time since he'd studied anything theoretical in much detail, and the course material hadn't exactly been dumbed down. The amount of faith Avery had in his ability to hit the ground running was only just beginning to sink in, and he was determined not to disappoint.

Fournier had invited him to come listen to his music group in the afternoon, but he chose to just explore the city by himself - now he was beginning to recognise some faces he didn't feel quite so disconnected anymore. He encountered the juggling group, a congregation playing some board game he didn't recognise, several different gaming groups, and ended up watching people swingdancing in the mess hall while Radek Zelenka played piano and somebody in a USAF t-shirt played clarinet.

He learned that once every four weeks was a festival Saturday, when the Sanity Society organised a mishmash of festival celebrations all in one day - the next one being a combination of Intergalactic Women's Day, Pi Day, St Patrick's Day and Satedan New Year. He had no clue what to picture for something like that, but the gate tech had already moved on to enthusing about the gig he'd missed the Saturday before he arrived: the fifties rock band This Is How We Roll played in the mess hall once every four weeks. Apparently fifties music and dance was a Thing.

It was a strange feeling, watching all the activities; watching people stroll along piers chatting, hanging out in rec rooms watching TV. The weekend feeling that had come over the entire city felt as alien as the multiple moons. Being on base had always meant work, and play happened strictly off base. That every aspect of life was right here, with the same people, would take some getting used to.

He had dinner together with Meyers, McPherson and a few other of the NCOs. Avery had settled down at a small table together with a short, animated woman with black hair the others told him was Doctor Ingadottir. Fournier ate at the scientist table, which was a lot rowdier than Colbert ever could have expected, and Brittner and Cadman were having dinner together with Dusty Mehra and whatshername with the unpronounceable name, Radio/Plasma Torch Chick.

They looked they were all friends, and he couldn't suppress a pang of disappointment. He'd vaguely considered if he could ask Mehra out, somewhere down the line. If she was close friends with Brittner, that was out of the question.

The dating situation was beginning to sink in. No casual pickups here, no anonymity. People obviously paired off, and he didn't doubt some of it was casual, but in an environment like this word spread almost as fast as within a Marine platoon, and you'd better make sure you treated people with respect. Which, in the cold light of hindsight, hadn't exactly been his MO since his fiancé left him - at least, when professionals weren't an option. He resigned himself to the prospect of a long dry spell.

* * *

Stilger had invited him to check out the bouldering that evening, so after dinner he made his way over to the relevant tower. The lift/transporter thing was full of baffling symbols. At some point somebody had written numbers next to them with whiteboard marker, but they were almost completely gone now. He picked the one he thought said eighteen.

The only door on the floor where he got out opened for him. Inside it smelled of cookies. Maybe
somebody could tell him where the bouldering was.

It was a large room that had been divided into various seating areas. At the far side of the room were five women around a table, playing poker from the looks of it. An enigmatically smiling Japanese girl was raking in the entire pot, consisting mostly of chocolate bars and bottles of shower gel. Two people were standing on the balcony talking. In the near corner a couple of people were sacked out on large pillows, watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer on a projector screen attached to a laptop.

"...slip, slip another, then insert the needle here..." he caught the low voices from another area, and "How have I lived all this time without rainbow coloured socks?"

"...now recalculate the oxy-margins for an emergency dive?" He recognised Brittner's voice. She was looking at a table held up for her by Dusty Mehra, who was sitting next to her on a large beanbag. Then she turned to Dr Keller, who was sitting with her back between the Lieutenant's knees, and refocused her attention on massaging the doctor's neck. There was a stack of medical books at their feet. "All right Jen, hit me with the tricky ones some more."

"Uhh, right," the Doctor sounded like she was struggling to focus. "When you administer Procainamide, what would you monitor for?"

"Precipitous...hypotension?"

"Okay, put the orange portal over there?" Two women were sitting next to each other on a lounge pillow, playing a computer game on their laptops.

"...like henna?" he heard from the open bathroom door.

"I believe it is similar, yes," he recognised Teyla's voice.

"Well, let's hope for no city-wide disasters tonight, or I will have to run around with a towel on my..."

"...I will trade you wood for sheep." Six women were playing Settlers of Catan on a nearby table.

He took all of that in, in the short moment it took for somebody to look up and spot him in the doorway. There wasn't a man among them. He recognised several of the women, including Cadman at the poker table, and he was fairly sure that was Colonel Carter and one of the scientists on the balcony. All were dressed comfortably in civvies. Some of them had their hair wet and down, just recently out of a shower. Cadman was wearing an aggressively pink hoodie with the text 'My boom is bigger than your boom'. They all looked at ease in a way he hadn't seen before, even Brittner.

Somebody came out of the kitchen area, dusting flour off her hands.

"You fuckers just won't stop trying, will you?" He was vaguely impressed by how a woman who could be no taller than 5'5 could convey this much imposing hostility. She wore a flour-dusted navy polo, damp brown hair in a pony tail, and not a trace of interest in him in her face.

The room quietened a little at that, most of the women pausing what they were doing briefly, apparently concluding that one of them had the situation in hand, and continuing their various activities. Brittner had pulled her hands away from the doctor's shoulders, an increasingly familiar expression of suppressed discomfort on her face. He was beginning to think of it as her 'Oh Jesus, not in front of Colbert' face.

"For fuck's sake, not another partycrasher?" somebody in the knitting corner said. He thought he'd seen her in one of the science labs.

"And we're still not doing our nails, having pillow fights, or wild orgies," the woman in front of him snapped.

"He's new, Alicia," Brittner said mildly.

"Right." The hostility went down a couple of notches, though it didn't disappear. "Anybody send you?"

"No ma'am, I was looking for the bouldering space," he said honestly.

"Floor eighteen, not eight. Symbol in the lift looks like this," she drew a small notebook out of her cargo pocket, bit down on the cap of a sharpie, and drew a squiggle for him.
"Thank you, ma'am." Because if she wasn't an officer, Trombley was up for a Humanitarian Award.

"This was your new-guy free pass," she said coolly. "Don't crash the poker nights again."

"Understood, ma'am."

She nodded curtly, and he turned to leave.

"Thanks for planting suggestions, Alicia," he heard somebody comment before the door closed.

"They say worse," somebody else said. "Trust me, they say worse."

"Urgh. Thanks Dusty, now I need brain bleach--" and the door slid shut.

* * *

On Monday evening, after a long day of reading mission reports, talking to people in the Anthro department, and otherwise filling his head with first contact prep, he dropped by one of the twice-weekly Brazilian Jiu Jitsu sessions.

It was Dusty Mehra running the class, looking like she'd been wearing a gi all her life, brown belt around her waist.

Eight people on the mats - six women, two men. One blonde guy he vaguely pegged as a scientist, and the small, energetic black guy he remembered seeing in a blue coverall - Navy then. He was fighting Radio Chick - Kay, he remembered a moment later. The woman he'd mentally labelled 'Hostile baking chick' was fighting Teyla. They weren't all beginners either - the black guy had a blue belt and so did his opponent. Cadman and Hostile Baking Chick had a purple, and the others all had stripes on their belts.

He watched from beside the door for a while. After a few minutes Mehra came up to him.

"You came to roll?" she gave him a sideways look, slouching against the wall beside him.

"Thinking about it," he allowed. It wasn't the sort of grappling he was used to. A lot lower in intensity, and he wasn't used to people talking while they rolled, much less encourage each other. He heard Cadman say "Nice!" in an approving tone as the scientist guy took her back to set up a choke. The lack of testosterone-fuelled posturing was almost startling.

"We don't usually get marines in," she said after a moment. "They do the no-gi sessions."

He understood that to mean 'male marines' given that both herself and Cadman were there.

"I'm not supposed to be here?" he asked mildly. He was sick of all these unwritten rules. If she didn't want him there, she could damn well say so.

"Nope, you're welcome to join," she said. "It's just a different style. This is about technique, not strength. If you start to muscle your way out of submissions, you're out of here. Good Jits works when you're this tall, too," she indicated half a head smaller than herself.

"You raggin' on me, Mehra?" Cadman called, smoothly sweeping her opponent.

"You need a gi. I've come in board shorts and a t-shirt."

"Don't have one - I'll need to have one shipped in."

"Fair enough. I think we've got a loaner jacket that'll fit you...kinda."

'Kinda' meant the sleeves were a bit short, but he shrugged and belted it shut. He'd learned to grapple as part of his Marine training, which he was already realising was quite different from BJJ as a sport. There he'd done well even as a beginner simply because he was tall and strong. He doubted it was going to be the same here.

Mehra looked around the room.

"Hey Kay, what you weigh again?"
"'bout seventy-eight."

"What's that in normal measurements?"

"In stupid measurements, you mean? I thought we declared the entire city a metric-only zone," she trailed into a grumble.

"About one-seventy," her opponent supplied with the air of somebody who had heard this rant before.

Mehra eyed him up. "You're what, one-ninety?"

"Thereabouts."

"You up for it, Kay?"

"Yeah, in a bit."

He'd half hoped Mehra would roll with him, then squashed the thought. It definitely at least fifty percent about thinking she was hot, and THAT was a bad road for reasons of her being Brittner's friend, the teacher of a sport he wanted to keep doing here, and deserving of more respect. Really, a bad idea all around. Fucking up with any of the women here was a bad, bad idea, which was why he had already resigned himself to celibacy for the time he was here. Fucking up with the friend of his LT might actually mean the end of his place on the team.

After a five minute break and a drink of water Kay came up to him. He was surprised to realise he hardly had to look down at all - she had to be six feet tall. Noticing his look, she flashed him a dimpled grin.

"Apparently I'm not particularly tall in the Netherlands."

"Apparently?"

"I wouldn't know, I grew up at sea."

"Okay," Dusty said as they kneeled opposite each other. "Half speed, half strength. This roll should not be about working hard physically, but about rolling strategically and thoughtfully."

They both nodded, though he expected it was mainly aimed at him.

Kay met his eyes as she tied back her hair.

"You hulk-smash me, I can make it so you never have a warm shower in this city again," she said conversationally.

"Fair enough."

It turned out to be a lot harder not to use strength than he'd thought - every time he felt like control of the fight was slipping out his hands, he instinctively upped the pressure. Then either she or Mehra told him to dial down the intensity, and it started all over again. On some level he hadn't truly expected to feel threatened enough for that defensive instinct to kick in, certainly not at this pace. It didn't take long to realise that at half speed and strength, he'd lost two-thirds of his advantage, while Kay didn't depend on being stronger and bigger in the first place. She was able to bring him into trouble more easily than the other way around.

"Tap, Brad" Mehra said while he was trying to work himself out of an armbar. "This isn't about making sure you never have to tap. If you're only going with the things you know you can do, you're not learning a goddamn thing."

"Jesus, this is like rolling with a whachamathing spider!" Kay laughed a few minutes later, as he moved his ankle out of her reach. "Hooiwagen. Thingy. With the reaaaally long legs." She
transferred to open guard, and he tried to figure out a way to extract himself that didn't involve going full-force. "Harvestman! That's it."

"You're calling me a spider?" Her bantering was infectious. It also helped keep things light, kept in the forefront of his mind that this was a practice roll, not a fight.

"Uh-huh," she grinned, unrepentant.

"Spider's gonna armbar your ass," he muttered, passing her guard.

"Hey Dusty, doesn't anybody teach marines anatomy?" she was still grinning, and it took a moment to realise he was, too.

* * *

Monday, 27:08 NLT
personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,

Weekend (Friday evening and Saturday) here is weird. Instead of getting away from each other, everybody does activities together! OK, that's just what it seemed like to me. There were probably also people holed up in quarters or out in remote parts of the city.

Still exploring the social situation. The Sanity Society (Atlantis Sanity Preservation Society, their version of rec comm) is the main organiser of interesting stuff - a lot of what happens during the meetings later turns into little spinoff groups.

Lots of teams and departments here are tight-knit, especially the ones that are still almost as they were at the start of the expedition. One place like that is 'Maker Street,' which is a world unto itself - an entire corridor full of workshops. (It has one office, numbered 221b, because this entire city is Geek Central). It's some sort of social hub, lots of people dropping by for coffee and gossip. The crew there are the people you want to keep as friends, because they control most of the non-food trade - anything you want, they can make, acquire, repair or give you materials to make it yourself. These days with regular supplies it's somewhat less essential, but there's still stuff in function that they built - like the garbage compressor and the hand-cranked mixer in the galley - and they can make anything from furniture to musical instruments to sailboats. You really get the sense that people are prepared for getting cut off from Earth at any time.

It's also a prime place for intel. I learned more about the city over one cup of coffee down there than I did in the entire week before.

They told me about a card table - they don't play for money here, but for things like chocolate bars, coffee beans and socks. Money has no value here, but hard to get goods do. That would be why the Maker Street crew wields quite a bit of social power.

There's a thing where almost all the women here come together for an evening - they call it poker nights, but they were doing all sorts of stuff. I accidentally walked in and almost got my head bitten off. Not like they were doing anything interesting anyway, I have no idea why they feel the need to set themselves apart like that.

I found the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu class - it's taught by Sgt Mehra (female brown belt) and has more women than men. They separate BJJ from no-gi grappling here and apparently the no-gi class is mostly populated by marines, but it's on Friday night, and that's team night. This class was the weirdest grappling I've ever done - half speed, half strength, all technique. I found it frustrating as hell, got told off for 'hulk-smashing' about 600 times, but I came away without breaking anybody. Mehra kept saying 'there's always somebody bigger and stronger, that's why you need solid technique'. I think once I get over the fact that I got tapped out three times by a 40 year old woman, I'll go back.

Music is a big thing - maybe because there's no TV. There's a piano in the mess hall and the only time I've seen it silent is early in the morning. (Some people are really fucking good too.) People here seem to be into fifties rock/swing/dance in a major way at the moment. There's a group of people that dances twice a week and a full on concert every month. (Isn't Mike into that stuff?)

Team is still... weird. Dinner with them on Friday was interesting. I get the sense that something big knocked them off their stride (Warszawski leaving? The story is that he kind of disappeared on them, but I don't know. See what you can dredge up?) and they're trying to find back their rhythm but not quite succeeding. There's a lot of strange tension between the captain and the LT. Some of it might be joking, but not really a good kind. I wonder if it's not just the event of Warszawski.
leaving but also that he used to fill a role in their dynamic and they haven't learned to compensate yet. Or maybe it's just flirting, fuck I don't know. I just hope it doesn't blow up in my face when the shit hits the fan.

Things I've been told about the mission tomorrow:
- It'll be cold
- It involves a couple hours forest walking while carrying 25kg salt
- Not to drink the berry wine

Things I've inferred:
- The natives are an established trading contact, but Avery doesn't want me to know more because he thinks it'll be a good field test of my first contact skills.
- They probably won't try to kill us if I fuck up and offend them
- There are some rituals, but nothing so out there that Avery feels I can't roll with the punches.

Sound good to you? Yeah, I don't know. If it was a combat thing I'd have no doubts, but if it's a trade contact it'll be mostly social, and fuck knows I'm not the smooth-talking old-lady-charming bastard you are.

Let you know how it goes.

Brad

Chapter End Notes

I got all ahead of myself in writing the next mission and kind of left this inbetween bit, which is why it took a little longer than I wanted.

Feedback would make me very very happy. Speculation about what's going on and what you think will happen in the future still very welcome!
Colbert had gotten comfortable with the idea of loading up a jumper for a mission - going through the gate on foot was a strange experience. Especially because the four of them stood in the climate controlled gate room, geared up in their arctic gear. He felt faintly ridiculous.

Somebody brought a cart with the packs of salt, and to his surprise the others wordlessly divided them over the four of them. When he made to put on his pack, Avery hefted it up for him, so he could put both arms in at the same time. Brittner did the same for Fournier.

He made to pick up Avery's pack.

"Lift from your legs, sergeant," Brittner said while the captain handed up hers. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes, but corrected his stance.

When they were all good to go the gate was dialled, and Colonel Carter appeared briefly on the gallery to wish them a good mission. The other three pulled on gloves and hats, and after a moment of hesitation he followed their example.

As soon as they were through he understood why - the gate was on a plain between two cliff sided hills, and the icy wind howled through that gap, cutting straight through the wool of his watch cap. Definitely a dangerous level of wind chill. He looked around while the others dialled Atlantis to send the MALP back. He'd never been in Siberia, but it reminded him of TV images of that. Some long-abandoned remains of a village stood around the gate platform, and a little way out were the remains of a tall tower, crumbling and leaning with the wind. About a click away and slightly uphill began an enormous, dark forest.

When the wormhole had disengaged Avery lead them to crouch down in the meagre shelter of the gate platform. Colbert wasn't entirely surprised when that turned out to be to take most of the salt out of Fournier's pack and redistribute it amongst the others.

"I hope you don't mind," the doctor said apologetically.

"Mind what?"

* * *

Once they'd reached the shelter of the forest the hats could come off, and though the chilled gloom of an alien forest wasn't the first location he'd have had thought of for a walk, it was actually fairly pleasant. Brittner and Fournier took point, weapons up and alert, but their body language wasn't alarmed. The forest seemed too dense for darts to penetrate with their beams, and the further into the forest they went, the more relaxed everybody became.

He talked with Avery about their respective training - SAS and Recon being generally considered somewhat on the same level - and Iraq. He'd never actually talked about OIF with somebody who hadn't been there, hadn't seen the point really, but it turned out that despite talking a lot, the Captain did actually know when to shut up and listen, and it was good to talk about it with somebody who understood the frustrations of personnel with their sort of training having been deployed in such a clusterfuck manner.

Brittner and Fournier were walking in front of them, in step, and he caught the snatches of a soft tune.

They were about twenty metres ahead of where he was walking together with Captain Avery - at least, that's how they started out. After a minute he noticed that the gap kept changing, smaller and larger. He and the captain were keeping a standard 120 paces per minute without thinking about it, both having had it drilled into them by their respective military training. Fournier and Brittner were going from about 110 to 130 and back.

"Must you sing that bloody song?" Avery said when the two had slowed down enough that the gap between them had almost disappeared.

The only response was a slight increase in both volume and tempo, and then the gap was growing again.

"It's the world's most irritating marching song," Avery explained. "That they sing especially to
 annoy me."

Brittner turned around to walk backward a few paces. She was surprisingly easy on her feet for
somebody carrying a third of her own body weight.
"Aww, Capitaine, would we do that?"

"Of course you would."

She clutched at her chest as if wounded, and turned back around. Fournier launched into a song
about poisoning pigeons. Avery gave him an amused 'what can you do?' look.

* * *

After a 3 hour walk they crossed a deep riverbed where only a small stream bubbled at this
moment, rushing toward a waterfall in the distance. They could smell the wood fires from some
distance away, and then the heavy forest broke open to reveal a deep, craggy gorge from where
the wood smoke originated. There was a narrow stream that came out on the far side, but he
couldn't see the ground - looked like the cliffs overhung. It was quite a clever place to have a
settlement, if these people had managed to safeguard themselves against flooding from melting
water.

"They have houses under the cliff sides?" he remarked, trying to take his attention off his sore feet.
They newly issued boots were still stiff. "Doubt the wraith manage to bother them much, here."

Lieutenant Brittner said, "As far as they've told us, the wraith have never found it."

"Are they expecting us?" he asked, surprised that she was talking to him at all.

"Yes, though they don't know not exactly when. But it's their midsummer celebration. A good
time for visitors."

"He doesn't need to know that, Lieutenant," Avery said, climbing down a rocky incline on their
narrow path.

"Sir, don't you think telling him about the visitors riutual might be a good idea? Or about kimseh?"
she followed, balancing carefully

Was she saying he couldn't handle it?

"The sergeant can roll with the punches, Lieutenant." They had that thing going on again, that 'I
like you but sometimes you drive me nuts' undertone. "Not everybody is as cautious as you.
Colbert here is a Recon Marine, I'm sure he will be fine."

"I'm sure he will be fine," she agreed. "If everybody else, not to mention our trade relationship
with these people, will be too--"

Did she just imply he was trigger happy? He gave her an Iceman look, wondering if she was
intentionally insulting him. It wasn't like he was feeling particularly confident about the social side
of this mission, but to hear those doubts from her grated. Her face gave no clues, but she sighed.

"Do you at least know about the red berries?"

"I was told not to drink the wine. Ma'am."

"About forty percent of Earth born humans are violently allergic to the red berries they make it
from. You'll want to avoid the dried fruit cookies as well."

"Understood."

Okay, so maybe he DID need to know that. He'd assumed it was a 'don't drink alcohol on a
mission' warning. It might be just self interest that she didn't want him to get ill, but nonetheless.

"The cloudy white stuff is fine, it's a sort of ginger beer," Fournier weighed in.

"Thanks, that's good to know."

* * *

A group of two men and three women hailed the team as they clambered down the last stretch of
treacherously mossy path. Each of them was dressed in coarsely woven fabric adorned with fur,
sort of how he imagined the Inuit dressed in summer. That's where the recognition stopped through - they were wildly diverse in looks, from a pale blonde guy to a woman with deep brown skin and a sculpted, narrow face.

He hung back, observing as his teammates were greeted - they seemed especially pleased to see Brittner, which was explained when the older, brown-haired man pulled up a sleeve to show a large but well-healed scar.

"And this is our new kimsuhr, Brad," Avery introduced him.

He somehow made his way through the introduction - the four of them were apparently using first names here - and the apparently requisite forehead touches and cheek presses, trying to figure out the patterns behind the interaction and this little group.

"What happened to kimsuhr Paul?" The woman who'd introduced herself as Kare asked, concerned.

"He, ah, fell in love with somebody from another kimseh, and left us," Fournier said, regretful. "We miss him still. Then not long ago we met Brad, and asked him to bond with us."

"That is understandable," she nodded. "Three is not enough for warmth."

"But come," the older man, Est, said. "Lay down your loads in the storage hut, and come meet Ziou. We will prepare a hut for you for tonight."

They followed them deeper into the gorge, and they did indeed have huts built against the cliff sides, under the deep overhang. It offered a lot of protection from above, though given that it looked like this space had been carved out by a swollen melt water stream, it didn't seem all that safe to him.

When he mentioned as much, Fournier nodded.

"It did not used to be safe, but one of our first interactions with the Tjinerai was to have a couple of engineers out here to divert the stream as securely as possible."

He was still learning about exactly what Atlantis did, and hadn't realised that trading or offering expertise could play part in the complicated network of allies the city maintained. It explained why the civilian component of the expedition was as large as it was - they weren't just researchers. He made a mental note to look more closely into the stated mission goals of the expedition, because apparently it wasn't only exploration in search of technology, like he'd assumed.

They were brought to a hut that had a cellar-like space hacked out into the rock beneath it, and unloaded the vacuum-packed bricks of salt into it. Captain Avery made them take the magazines out of their P90s and stored the weapons on a high shelf in the same shack, though they kept their sidearms and stashed the magazines in pockets. Then almost immediately Brittner was whisked away to look at babies. Whether it was to admire them or check their health wasn't clear.

Around the large fire were twenty seven people, ranging from infant to a small, wizened woman he doubted was older than sixty years. If this was midsummer on this planet, it probably wasn't a climate conducive to long life. Everybody was in similar coarsely woven clothing, apart from the old lady and the smallest kids, who wore suits of thick fur. All the adults were armed with long knives, and there was a bow rack next to the largest hut.

Most of them were busy preparing food. A couple of teens turned a long spit with chunks of what he imagined might have been an elk-like animal, and there was a whole row of men and women who were peeling and cutting a sort of root vegetable, which they put into several large cauldrons.

Colbert observed as their little group was surrounded by good natured and curious natives. He tried not to twitch for his weapon when people passed behind him, tried to concentrate on the rapid conversations Avery and Fournier were engaged in. The old lady was leaning on a younger woman she introduced as Ahte, 'my new Kimne' and he was introduced again, with an explanation of where kimsuhr Paul had gone.

"It is good that you have adopted him," the old lady said to Avery, with an appraising look at Colbert. "He must have been very cold, alone."

That raised chuckles from the people around them, and Colbert wished desperately for a time out so he could observe them more, figure out a few things according to the system he'd been taught, and work out what the hell kimseh even was. He'd assumed it meant team, given that Avery had referred to their team with that phrase, and that kimsuhr was teammate or something like that. But
then the comments had made it sound like they considered him part of a family now. Or even that they were all sleeping together. Yeah, no.

He felt a touch to his leg and stamped down on the reflex that wanted his sidearm in his hand - it was just a small child of indeterminate gender, gazing up at him. Its arms went up in a clear, universal demand to be picked up, and when he failed to comply, its face scrunched up into what was clearly the harbinger of loud, teary doom.

He looked around. Everybody was watching him, including Avery and Fournier, the sadists. Clearly no help could be expected there.

He reminded himself this was a 'socialise with natives' mission, not a combat situation, and resigned himself to being profoundly out of his depth.

Nate could have done this, because Nate was the sort of social chameleon who could effortlessly change gear from messing around with the guys to having a polite and appropriate conversation with an old lady and have her come away charmed. The bastard. Ray could have done this, because kids probably recognised that special characteristic that made a grown-ass man act like a complete nutball without a hint of shame. Christopher and Garza could have done this, because between them they had approximately a million siblings. Poke and Gunny had kids themselves and wouldn’t have blinked. And Bryan could even be good with children when he couldn’t muster more than a scowl for anybody else.

The Iceman and kids? Not so much.

He tried a smile on the kid, hoping that it didn’t make him look like a serial killer, and would forestall the tantrum. Then he gingerly lifted it up into his arms. One of the men in the circle had a sleepy toddler on his hip, and he imitated the position, which seemed to satisfy the kid.

The conversation around him had moved on, and the old lady formally invited the team to stay for the midsummer celebrations. She began to name the new bonds that would be celebrated, but around that time the kid, apparently no longer satisfied with its new seat, began to pluck at his tac vest, opening pockets. He saved his detonators from the little fingers, tucked them back in, and firmly closed the pocket.

The kid began to cry. Great.

No concerned parents seemed to volunteer to take over, and he didn’t recognise anybody who seemed to have similar facial features as the kid. Putting it down turned out to be impossible as it was now clinging to him like a limpet, so he walked away from the group a little. The volume of the crying was disturbing the conversation.

Lieutenant Brittner was standing in the door opening of the largest hut, watching him with what he thought might be amusement playing around her lips. He went over to her, making a concerned face.

"Ma’am, it won’t stop crying. Could it be ill?” He turned the kid toward her and opened his arm so she could take it.

She didn’t.

"Sergeant, are you trying to hand off a kid to me?"

Fuck.

"You’re much better with them, ma’am.” He didn’t actually know that, but when in doubt, go for flattery.

"It’s a learned skill, Colbert, just like everything else. It doesn’t come standard with the ovaries."

He couldn’t really interpret her tone with the siren-like wailing of the kid in his ears.

"Right."

"And anyway, the Captain is far better with kids than I am, so if you’re looking for the kid whisperer, he’s over there,” she nodded to where Avery was still in conversation. “I suggest you make it a priority to learn, though. Making babies cry? Never a good start to a first contact."

"Right."

He winced as the kid drew a deep breath and let out a renewed shriek, little round face red and
angry through its deep tan, fingers clutched tightly at his tac vest. Fuck it. Apparently his pride went out the window in the face of a howling banshee kid.

"Any suggestions, ma'am?"

She gave him a very dry look.

"Are you sure I'm not offending the Corps by not letting you figure it out for yourself?"

Oh yeah, she'd definitely picked up that he'd felt offended by her reluctance to let him go in without briefing.

"Right now I'm more concerned about these people thinking I'm torturing this kid," he said, because there were definitely some stares now.

"He's probably just bored. He wanted attention, not just a seat," she said.

"I have a chocolate bar?"

"I wouldn't. You never know how digestive systems respond to having chocolate for the first time."

"Good point. Giving their kids the shits probably doesn't help diplomatic relations."

She snorted a laugh.

"Just talk to him, sing, whistle," she offered with an *etcetera* hand gesture, "spin around, pull a silly face..."

He wouldn't know what to say to a kid, but he tried whistling, and even though it made him feel like an idiot, it did work. He hoped the flash of light he thought he saw was his imagination, and not a camera flash going off.

* * *

There was a small fire burning inside the communal hut, and wide bowls with a sort of tallow candles spaced around the edges. Colbert ducked through the low entrance and stepped to the side so he could take in the space. Thirty-odd people just about fit inside, and they were clearly used to this - they'd organised into small groups and were walking to the far side to sit down in a wide circle.

"Ah, Brad," Avery gestured from where he'd settled down. Fournier was to his right, comfortably cross-legged on the mats, with about two spaces open between them. The positions on the outer side of them both were already filled. Colbert hesitated, then picked the space next to the Captain.

"You'll want to--"

"--budge," Brittner finished from behind them. He looked back and up, raising an eyebrow at her. Everybody else had stripped off their outer clothing - he and Avery were down to their long sleeved base layer. Brittner had only gone so far as to take off her arctic issue parka.

She raised an eyebrow back and made a gesture for him to move over toward Fournier. Did this have to do with rank in the team? He moved, and the Lieutenant sank to her knees on his left.

The circle filled out, Ziou underneath the ornate lantern on the wall, the members of her kimseh - whatever it was - taking the spaces beside her. There seemed to be a pre-determined order, though he couldn't figure out what it was based on

The crowd quietened gradually as the last people found their place, even the small children - this was clearly routine to them. Then the old lady began to speak. Her voice was stronger in the crowded space than he would have expected, but he didn't focus on the words. Instead he studied the circle how it was made up. People had quite naturally grouped off into what he thought were their respective kimseh, and they were groups of three to six adults of all ages, plus sometimes a number of kids. It wasn't immediately obvious whose kids they were - a red-haired woman who was almost pale enough to glow had a tiny dark-skinned baby in a sling against her chest. A man with Asiatic sort of features silenced two kids that didn't seem related to him.

He tried not to look uncomfortable with being pressed shoulder to shoulder with his teammates. Whatever kimseh was, it clearly indicated a closeness and comfort he didn't feel. Surprisingly, Brittner seemed quite at ease. He'd pegged her as somebody with a personal space bubble half a mile across.
Which was, now he thought of it, not unlike himself. It was only through Ray and Poke's persistent backslapping, arm grabbing and casual hugging that he'd become inured to the physicality of having his platoon around him. Even so, Ray was fond of calling him an emotionally constipated motherfucker.

He tuned back in when Ziou stopped her speech, and crap, he should have paid more attention to the words, because the ritual was starting and he still had no idea what to do. She turned to her right hand neighbour, a man in his forties with a mass of tightly curling grey hair, and slowly and with great ceremony laid her right hand high on his chest. Then he leaned in, and pressed a kiss to his lips. 

Oh. Fuck.

He held his breath for the space of a few seconds and then slowly let it out, trying to force his heart rate down. He was not freaking out about this. Absolutely not. First Recon could handle weird alien rituals. Even if they involved being kissed by his new, unwelcoming and undeniably female Lieutenant. It was an only marginally less uncomfortable prospect than if he'd been the one having to kiss her, probably why they'd insisted on this order. Not that kissing Fournier wouldn't be awkward as hell, but if it had to be anyone, the doctor, as a civilian and somebody who didn't seem fazed by anything, was possibly the best option. They could shrug it off with a joke and it would probably be fine.

The Lieutenant shot him a quick look, and fuck, if she was checking to see if he was okay he was definitely not hiding his reactions well enough. He put on his Iceman face.

The curly haired man turned to the young woman on his right and repeated the hand touch, but leaned in to press a kiss to her forehead. She in turn kissed the woman next to her on the lips. He tried to assign a pattern to the choice of lips or forehead, but couldn't really find one - it didn't seem to have to do with male/female combinations. The next man passed on the touch - he'd caught enough of Ziou's speech to understand that the idea of the ritual was to pass a bond of trust around the circle - and kissed his male neighbour on the mouth, who then very ceremoniously kissed Avery on the forehead.

Right. Okay. Hopefully forehead kisses were the way forward.

The Captain seemed completely relaxed with this, giving a slight, smiling incline of his head at the man in acknowledgement and thanks. Then he turned to Brittner. He laid a hand high on her chest - which should have been awkward, but somehow managed not to be - and she leaned into the touch slightly, eyes closing as she received the forehead kiss. It looked peaceful and fond and dignified, and Colbert wondered again at a command dynamic that let them be so at ease with each other underneath whatever strife they had going on at the moment. He was beginning to wonder if they both knew that whatever the fuck was going on was only a temporary upset. The bad moments were real, with the sort of rawness that hurt to hear, but there seemed to be enough genuine respect and affection that maybe it could be unfucked again.

Then the Lieutenant turned to him and after a slight raise of her eyebrows, either a challenge or her way to ask if he was ready, carefully placed a hand against his chest, thumb spread out so that it laid on his collarbone while her fingertips covered the opposite collarbone. Perhaps it was that he'd expected her to hesitate to touch him, but he was surprised by how it felt solid, connecting. He hesitated, and she put her other hand in his neck, fingertips curling a little against his spine to indicate he needed to lean in. The corner of her mouth quirked slightly, perhaps in amusement at his awkwardness, perhaps at how far he had to lean in to come down to her level. He felt her slow exhale brush his face as she gave a soft press of lips on his forehead, and then after the space of a few heartbeats she calmly took away her hands. He eased back upright, not wanting it to look hasty. She met his eyes with perhaps the most warmth he'd ever seen from her, and gave a very slight, approving nod.

Relieved that part was over, he took a slow, steady breath and turned to Fournier. The doctor gave him a slight, sympathetic smile, and Colbert reminded himself that the man was probably used to far stranger rituals. He leaned into Colbert's hand slightly, making it a solid, warm connection that strangely echoed how Brittner had just touched him, and inclined his head a little to present his forehead. Colbert made himself count one-Mississippi as he pressed his lips to the man's forehead, and then they both eased back. Fournier smiled slightly, and turned to his neighbour.

It was over. Except that it did not feel over, and he watched along with the others as the sharing custom made its way around the circle. He could still feel the touch high on his chest, like his thermal t-shirt was warmer there, and his right hand still echoed with the warm pressure of Fournier's chest. He tried to shake the thought that in that moment he really did feel connected to them. Strange alien rituals or not, it was just a figure of speech to pass wisdom and trust along.
Not like anything had actually happened apart from some touchy-feely stuff.

Dear Nate, he mentally composed.
Join the Stargate program! See the universe! Meet interesting aliens! Participate in their weird rituals! Today I was felt up by my new LT, and I kissed Dr Fournier. I'll have to shoot some wraith before my warrior spirit recovers from this.
Chapter 14

And, Brad, how are you so far?" Fournier sat down next to him in the dinner circle.

"As far as I know I haven't mortally offended anybody, so far," he said, considering. "And apart from the touchy-feely ritual, nothing's been too out there yet."

"Ah yes," Fournier smiled. "You will find that ritual and variations on many planets. Sharing trust and wisdom."

"The hand is about trust?"

"Did you not understand when she explained? A Wraith feeds with the right hand, here," he demonstrated with a hand high on his chest. "One shows great trust in ones neighbours by allowing such a touch."

"That makes sense," he nodded, taking another bite of the stew. It was good.

"And what have you learned about these people?"

"They're originally from several different planets, aren't they? Refugees from planets that got culled? And whatever kimseh means, I think they're some kind of blended family. Oh, and they're good cooks. Can't be easy finding much in the way of edibles here, but this is nice."

The doctor chuckled.

"You are correct - this planet is by many thought to be uninhabitable, which makes it a good refuge for those who can survive the climate."

Even at what was apparently midsummer, the temperature was creeping down to about ten below now the sun had disappeared. With the big fire in the shelter of the gorge it didn't actually feel anywhere near cold enough to put on his parka. The only one who had done so was Brittner, who either got cold easily or used it as a shield against inappropriate touching. He suspected it was the first, and was trying not to draw conclusions about field-suitability from it, though there was certainly plenty of the second.

The locals has a rather different concept of personal space - they stood closer, touched more. Maybe because they were all so used to that freaky 'sharing warmth' custom - if they were all snuggling up at night, then yeah, they wouldn't find it strange to not have any personal space. The thought that they assumed he did the same thing with his team made him cringe inwardly.

* * *

Fournier got caught up in a conversation, and Colbert was left to his own devices, though he noticed that Avery was staying within earshot. Unfortunately it was impossible to hang back and just observe - people seemed to be quite curious about him, and he struggled through a steady stream of small talk. It wasn't easy to satisfy their curiosity in concepts they could understand, and he was still fuzzy on what precisely kimseh entailed.

He had to forcibly remind himself that there were no suicide bombers here, that he might be uncomfortable with the way they crowed him, but that it wasn't actually a threat. Avery, who had to have had some of the same training ground into him, seemed completely at ease with it. Then again he hadn't yet seen anything that could faze the captain.

There seemed to be an informal little meeting by the pot that held the warm white-cloudy drink. Avery met his eyes, and Colbert excused himself from the awkward conversation he'd gotten stuck in, and went over.

"We're going to be inside for a while, catching up with these folks," the Captain said to him. "The Lieutenant here is going to make sure you stay out of trouble."

The flash of irritation in Brittner's eyes mirrored his own, though presumably not for the same reason. From the momentary quirk of Avery's lips, he was well aware of it.
"Yes, sir."

"Good, good. Have fun, kids."

As they walked away she closed her eyes for a brief moment, with an expression he couldn't quite place. Irritated amusement maybe, or if she wanted to roll her eyes.

"I'll be at the dancing. Click your radio if you need help."

* * *

Things were definitely looking up, as far as he was concerned, when awkward small talk with curious natives turned into tentative flirting with a rather cute girl. Not that that was going anywhere, because if there was one thing Avery had drilled into his head during his condensed first contact course it was Do Not Sleep With The Natives. Do Not Accept Any Special Beverages. Do Not Go Off Alone With Any Of The Natives. He'd illustrated this with stories of space-STDs until Colbert had definitely agreed it was a bad, bad idea to take this any further.

That didn't mean he didn't enjoy the attention. They sat on one of the mats by the fire and chatted; she had a pleasant voice and a wry, funny way of telling him about her life. He was aware of the occasional glance his way from the Lieutenant, but he ignored it. She was in a small group of dancers, learning some kind of energetic stomping rhythm. She'd even taken off her coat for the occasion.

Turve told him amusing stories about the recent construction of her Kimseh's new hut, and as it slowly got dark another woman joined them. Gioleta was a little older, perhaps mid twenties, and had a sort of older-sister way of looking at Turve, though they didn't resemble each other at all.

A few glances passed between them that he couldn't really decipher, but the three of them talked and drank the fizzy white kind-of-gingerbeer stuff and he was actually beginning to feel relaxed about this first contact thing. Maybe it wasn't so complicated.

"You should come and have a look at our new hut!" Turve said about an hour later, bouncing to her feet. Gioleta got up too, and Colbert followed, the pleasantly relaxed buzz grinding to a halt.

Fuck.

"I don't think that would be appropriate," he said after a moment, cautious.

"But you said you do not share warmth with Lily and Darren and Michel?"

He grimaced. He still hadn't figured out if they referred to snuggling for warmth or actual fucking, but he found it a distasteful idea either way.

"Did I not say?" Turve said to Gioleta. Then to him "Then they could not possibly object. Come," she gestured for him to follow.

Right. Time to swallow his pride. He reached up and tapped his radio headset.

On my way, Brittner answered immediately. The music sounded a lot louder where she was.

"I think we've misunderstood each other," he said to Turve, not moving from where he stood. Her face fell.

"Brother," Brittner said quietly. She came up beside him, standing close enough that their shoulders brushed.

"I believe I'm being recruited," he said under his breath.

"Lily," Turve smiled. There was something in her smile Colbert couldn't define. "Brad is getting along very well with us."

"That is good," Brittner said mildly. "And you hoped he would share warmth with you tonight?"

"It is only that he seemed to find the idea of sharing warmth with you repulsive that we thought he might consider our offer."

He wondered if that was a collective 'you' or one aimed at Brittner personally. Had this suddenly become one of those conversations full of subtle insults that his ex had sometimes had with women who paid him too much attention? The kind she used to have to explain to him afterward because 90% went over his head?
"You honour my brother with your offer," Brittner said, completely unruffled. "To be part of a Tjineraj kimseh would no doubt offer great warmth and security. However Brad has already gone through the Lantean ritual to become our brother, and it would sadden us greatly if we were to lose him."

"We understand, Lily," Giole said. "It is merely that he seemed interested."

"Our people express our bonds differently," Brittner continued, "and Brad is new to your way of speaking. Our world is warm, there is no need to share warmth in the way the Tjineraj do, and we have different ways to express kimseh bonds. Having each other's back. Watching somebody's six."

Right. Metaphorical sharing of warmth - the preservation and sharing of a precious resource. Not necessarily cuddling with his team mates.

"And you would..." Turve addressed him, frowning over the unfamiliar expression. "Watch Lily's six?"

"I would," he said without hesitation. That at least required no acting skills. It was his role on the team, one he didn't even need to think about.

"Even though you would not wish to share warmth with her?"

"Turve, it has only been a short time that Brad has been with us," Brittner said reasonably. "And I still miss Paul. Our bonds will grow stronger with time."

"The offer stands, if you wish to consider it in the future..."

Colbert wondered how strong he was going to have to refuse for the women to leave it alone, and how bad the ramifications for the city could be. Then the Lieutenant leaned her shoulder into his arm a little bit and smiled up at him. He smiled back, aware that she was acting but still surprised by his subconscious response. He hadn't thought it mattered that much to him if she liked him or not. After a moment he caught on to what she thought she wanted him to do, and put his hand on the nape of her neck. She leaned into his touch with a low, happy hum.

"We will go check on the babies now," Turve said, smile not quite hiding her pique. "Do excuse us."

"Good health to them."

"And to yours, if you should ever have any," was the retort.

"Ah, the dangers of intergalactic trade," Brittner said dryly, watching them disappear between the huts. "Mean to deliver salt, nearly deliver a sergeant too."

For a moment he missed Ray Person, who would have made the inevitable crack about a goats and camels exchange rate, just to get it out of the way. Then he was glad none of Bravo had witnessed it. Fuck, the guys would have had a field day with this.

If she were anybody else, he might have joked about how she should have taken the chance while she had it, but he just took his hand back, trying not to look relieved.

"Is there anything I could have done to prevent that?" He'd half expected a reprimand for nearly endangering diplomatic relations.

She turned in the direction of the dance circle and gestured for him to come along.

"Probably not. It happens."

He remembered what he'd been told about her and Avery's marriage mission. With her recent experience she probably wasn't about to make fun at him for this.

"It's almost never bad to ask people to teach you something," she said, nod of her head indicating the dancers. "People usually like to share their culture."

She rejoined the dance circle while he watched and tried to politely discourage other spectators from engaging him in conversation. He noticed the Lieutenant keeping a closer eye on him than before. She took a few short breaks to join him for a few minutes, helping conversations along, and once he was sure she tactfully intercepted a man who had been headed for him.
He watched her attempt another complicated steps sequence as two of the Tjineraj demonstrated it. Maybe she was on to something by trying to learn their dances - it gave an immediate, safe topic for conversation, and the natives seemed to like her interest. If you weren't afraid to sacrifice a little dignity, it was a pretty safe way to spend the evening. Unlike he would if he tried it though, she seemed to pick it up pretty fast. He'd never been a dancer, to Poke's endless amusement.

"You don't have to keep checking back on me, ma'am, I won't fuck up again," he said the next time she interrupted her dancing to appear at his shoulder.

"That's not--" for a moment she seemed taken aback. Then she bit off whatever she'd been about to say and let her expression go into a bland smile. "That's good to hear." She disappeared again.

He was really beginning to hate those things she didn't say. Maybe if she just spoke her mind for once, they could have it out, get the conflict out in the open, and work from there. He wondered why those words felt familiar, and then remembered it was pretty much word for word what his ex has said whenever they'd had an argument. Well, fuck. She was turning him into the one who wanted to Talk About The Relationship. Okay, working relationship, but still.

* * *

It was 27:43 on his watch - not that it seemed to mean anything here, it was already beginning to get lighter again - and he was sitting at the big fire. The Lieutenant had finally finished dancing, eaten two powerbars in rapid succession and put her parka back on. Now she was sitting next to him, huddled in her coat as she blinked owlishly into the fire. The people around them sang a slow, grave song that reverberated around the rock walls of the gorge.

He was struggling to stay alert, himself. If this were a combat situation he would snap-to sharply, but the calm singing and the people lounging around them made it hard to feel the urgency he needed for that state of wakefulness.

"Lily, go to bed," Avery came up behind them. "It's the same hut as last time. Est has already put our packs there."

"But I... you..." she began vaguely.

"It's long past your watch, and I owe you one from last mission anyway. Go and get warm."

She didn't protest further, and disappeared.

"So, how did your evening go?" Fournier dropped down in Brittner's spot. Avery sat down on Colbert's other side, chewing on some alien jerky with a thoughtful air about him.

"Well--" he hesitated, not liking to expose a blunder, but figured there was no way they wouldn't find out anyway. Plus, if there was going to be any fallout, they should be prepared. "--I think I nearly got myself married off, or something like that. Adopted? Fuck only knows."

"Oops," Avery said dryly.

"Our gate teams are difficult to understand for many societies," Fournier said. "When we first started trading with the Tjineraj, they kept asking about the reproductive status of the female gate team members. With societies constantly on the edge of extinction, it is unthinkable to many of the peoples we meet that our teams are not units for raising children. It took time for the Tjineraj to understand the concept of warrior kimseh."

Colbert nodded. From what he could tell kimseh revolved around providing enough stability and support to have children - with the constant danger of the Wraith, two parents were not enough. The expedition deliberately kept its connection with Earth quiet, so most of the people they met would not know or understand that the Atlantis expedition wasn't a society like their own, which needed to keep up its population numbers, but only a sample of people out of a much larger population, and that new people could be brought in.

Fournier wandered off to talk to somebody. Colbert and Avery listened to the singing in amicable silence.

"So is it worth it?" he finally asked.

"Is what worth it?"

"Letting women serve on gate teams."
"Letting them? Oh brother, I sense a visit of the feminism fairy in your future," Avery chuckled. "You sound like we're doing them a favour. The Stargate Program has a history of picking the best people for a job, regardless of gender. You better believe that there is no letting any of these women serve. If they're here, they deserve to be here."

"I - that's not-" he paused in frustration. "Jesus, even language is full of landmines here."

"Yes, I know. You'll get used to it." Avery swallowed his last piece of jerky and wiped his hands. "Just, you know, don't be an asshole and start telling people they're oversensitive feminazis when they correct you. Words matter. Or Michel will give you a male privilege lecture that'll have you wish for a waterboarding instead."

"Solid copy, sir"

"Good, good. To answer your question, as far as I'm concerned, abso-bloody-lutely. If you're thinking of Lee sitting here like a little frozen bird, just wait until we hit a desert planet sometime. That's more her element."

"I hadn't really thought about how extremely diverse the climates could be," Colbert conceded, happy to accept the change in subject. He didn't really think it was a good idea to let Avery know his doubts about the team.

"Frozen tundra and rainforest all in one week, sometimes," the captain nodded absently. Then, seemingly making up his mind: "Have you ever heard the saying 'work twice as hard to go half as far'"

"Not really."

"Cadam tells me that a woman among men has to be not just good, but twice as good as anybody else, to get any acknowledgement. On the other hand if she makes a mistake, it need only be a fraction of the mistake to get the same amount of flack."

"Right."

"Because she stands out, you see? She'd need to be undeniably the best. That's why almost all the women we have serving over here are specialists. Hard for them to stand out in general infantry positions."

"That makes sense," Colbert allowed. All the platoon-leading Lieutenants were male, and he knew of only three female enlisted Marines. He wondered if they got deployed with their squads as standard. Somebody like Mehra, strong and hardened, would be able to keep up with a recon team - he didn't doubt that. But if she could stand out far enough to be selected for the Stargate program that way was doubtful. She'd been picked because she was a MCMAP instructor. The Jiu Jitsu class was hobby - when she wasn't doing first shift, she spent her time teaching Marines hand-to-hand.

He'd wondered at that until he realised that if you were going to end up grappling with a Wraith, having been taught be somebody who knew all about being the physically weaker party and taught you accordingly made a lot of sense.

"Sir, does the SGC have an exception to the policy that women aren't to be sent into direct combat?"

"No, but let's say that there's some creative interpretation going on," Avery said after a moment. "Gate teams are classified as exploratory, and we've always had women on them."

"Like Colonel Carter," he nodded.

"Yes. They're exploratory teams that sometimes end up in combat, so it's kind of a..." he waved vaguely, "a letter-of-the-law-not-spirit-of-the-law thing, but we've been sneaking that by for eleven years now."

"Right."

"The regular Marine platoons are actually deployed into confirmed combat situations, so they're sent in as male only. And believe me, that's a source of much ongoing debate, but the Corps so far is hanging on to that policy."

"What sort of debate?"
"Well, the Wraith think we're food. It isn't as if they care what gender their food is. If the female Marines are willing and able to serve with their platoons, and they are, why should we hold them back? The Pegasus Galaxy doesn't care about our Earth ideas about who should be spared in war."

Colbert nodded slowly.

"We've got more flexibility with the Gate teams, because the Air Force is willing to be more flexible - and there's good precedent for deploying specialists, anyway, no matter their gender. Though that doesn't stop the wankers at the Promotion Board from fucking people about and ignoring accomplishments they think she shouldn't be making."

That last was low and vehement, as if it hadn't really been meant for his ears, and he wondered if this was the same issue as what he'd half overheard in a conversation between Colonel Carter and Lieutenant Brittner.

He still had difficulty picturing Brittner in a combat situation - though admittedly that was mostly based on hearing her insecurity in the only emergency he'd witnessed her in, during the medical situation with the runner. If Avery had confidence in her, he would try to follow that lead and wait for her to prove herself. He wanted to ask how it was possible for the Lieutenant to be in a combat position, but he'd missed his chance - just then a short, squat man came to invite the captain to talk.

"This could take a while," Avery grinned as he got up. "There's a lot of interplanetary gossip to catch up on. You go to sleep too. It's the hut with the red circles on the door."

"What about watches...?" he swallowed the 'sir' while the natives were waiting for the captain.

"The Tjineraj have sentries posted, and Michel is going to be awake all night. Just keep your radio close."

* * *

He shoved at the door of the hut, hoping it was just jammed and that the Lieutenant hadn't locked it. Now he really thought of it, that might actually be justified, with the door facing the rock wall, out of sight from the fires. Just anybody could come in, and he didn't want to think of her as a risk factor, but he also didn't want to think of how much more vulnerable she could be in the eyes of the natives, even if she could handle herself.

He was about to radio her awake to open the door when it suddenly opened under the weight of his shoulder, slamming against the earthen wall of the hut.

He heard a harsh breath and a rustle as he stepped in, glow of his torch faintly illuminating the space. The room was a lot smaller than he'd expected - he'd vaguely pictured bunk beds, something like that. There was just a small space with the floor covered in furs. It was 3 by 3 metres at most. Great. Kimseh - the forming of family groups for warmth and security. That meant sharing a bed. Literally keeping each other warm. He filed that away under 'things that were definitely not ever happening'.

Brittner was sitting upright against the far wall, eyes wide.

"Colbert?" her voice sounded thready and hoarse.

"Yes, ma'am." He realised he was a dark silhouette looming in the doorway, and crouched down to get his sleeping bag out of his pack. And because he wasn't entirely made of ice, "Situation is secure. The door was jammed."

"All right," she said, letting out a harsh breath. He heard the click of the safety going back onto her 9mm. "All right," she repeated softly to herself, settling back down onto the furs. She had a thick fur pulled over her sleeping bag, and once she was settled pretty much only her nose showed.

He picked a spot at an angle to her, feet in the same corner as hers, and lay very still for a while, trying to process all the different scents and sounds and textures, taking them in so they would feel normal and he'd notice if something changed. It was cold in the hut, but he was warm enough to be comfortable, and there was some kind of springy mat underneath the furs. For a primitive bed on a frozen alien world, it was pretty comfortable.

Dear Nate, today I nearly got myself married off to aliens on a tundra planet, he mentally composed, then fell asleep.
"Let's have a little break," Brittner said, barely half an hour into their return walk. Breakfast had been a subdued affair, and they had left not long after - it was clear that today was mostly a recovery day for the natives. They'd received some food for on the way, and the trade items - he wasn't actually sure what it was but it looked like plain rocks, and they had about 20 kilo of them divided between the three of them - and a low-key but friendly farewell.

He was surprised it was Brittner asking for a break. She'd had the most sleep of them all, and he wouldn't have thought she'd admit to needing rest in any case. As soon as they'd left the settlement she'd dropped any sign of warmth toward him and returned to ignoring him if she could, chilly formality if she couldn't. He'd spent a couple of minutes wondering if she was just that good of an actress to have seemed friendlier the night before or if he'd offended her somehow, then dismissed it. He'd find out - or not - and there was no point in worrying about it.

Fournier gratefully dropped down on a large branch of a fallen tree. Brittner jumped up onto the higher trunk, feet dangling, and made an pointed gesture, brows raised. Colbert watched in surprise as Avery gave a resigned sigh and then dropped his pack and his parka to stand in front of her. Colbert took up a sentry position.

"Let me guess, you tried to string that ridiculous bow Lakshu likes to get out for visitors," Brittner said, inspecting the captain's shoulder.

Avery's expression suggested that this might in fact be right on the money.

"I think I'll include it into the medical briefing about this planet," she said, manipulating the joint. "Even Ronon couldn't manage it. And people always come away with messed up shoulders."

"Wait, even Ronon? How do you-ah! The colonel? Really?"

"I'm pretty sure Lakshu keeps that thing purely for the entertainment factor of watching Terrans strain muscles," she said, not answering the question.

"Why don't you just use a stringing cord?" Colbert said after a moment of hesitation. He still wasn't sure if spontaneous contributions were welcomed.

They both looked at him, Avery trying not to wince at the ungentle treatment of his shoulder.

"That's what archers use to string bows. It's a cord with small leather pockets you put over the tips of the bow, then stand on the cord and pull the bow up, so it bends. Then you can just slide on the string and you're done," he explained, mimicking the movement.

Avery lit up.

"Can you make one?"

"If I know roughly the size of the bow, sure." He could probably talk the maker street guys into giving him the material.

"Bloody hell, Lee, now you're just poking me!" Avery complained. Colbert glanced over just as the Lieutenant - yeah, she was poking him, stiff thumb pressing repeatedly into the muscle. Not gently either.

"It's therapeutic poking," she said, with just a touch of petulance.

"Therapeutic for you, or for me?"

She made an expression of wide eyed innocence, and holy crap he wished she wouldn't, because it made her look like somebody who shouldn't even be handling an airsoft gun, let alone carry a P90.

"Sir!" she said, in a scandalised 'how could you suggest such a thing' tone.

Fournier and Avery snorted simultaneously.

A few minutes later the captain put his coat back on - he did seem to be moving more easily - then exchanged a look with Brittner, and said "Sir, Colbert."

"Sir?"
"Come on, sergeant, off with the shoes," Brittner said briskly, sitting down on a lower part of the branch and gesturing that he should sit beside her.

Ah. So they had noticed his sore feet. He'd been issued new boots on arrival at the SGC, and this was the first long march in them. Yesterday had been unpleasant, and the night rest and hastily applied patches this morning hadn't improved things as much as he'd hoped. He'd just gritted his teeth, not prepared to hold them up for a few piddly blisters. Marines did not complain about blisters.

She made an impatient gesture when he was slow to react, and he reached down to undo his laces.

Oh. Actually that did seem worse than he'd expected. His socks were embedded into his skin at places, and some of yesterday's blisters had opened, the back of his heels raw and oozing.

She'd snapped on gloves, and on her gesture he rested his calf on her knee.

"Heel is the worst," she said in a preoccupied tone of voice. "Tape is in the right-hand pocket of my pack."

It took him a moment to realise that was aimed at Fournier, who had grabbed his boots, tape and scissors, and was making some adjustments while Brittner quickly and efficiently tended to his feet.

"When we're running from a bunch of wraith, nobody wants to hear about your blisters," Captain Avery said conversationally from his lookout spot a few metres away. "But when we're having a leisurely stroll across a friendly planet?"

"--then for the love of all things pointy, just tell me," Brittner continued, putting a special sort of covering over the worst blisters. "Surely even Corps pride can see the sense in not doing a four-hour march on shredded feet when you don't have to?"

"Ma'am," he said in acknowledgement, not precisely denying or confirming that this might be so. He was still figuring out the rules here, because in First Recon you'd rather break a leg than halt a march for your blisters, and it would never have occurred to him to ask her. He figured she didn't want to hear his half-formed reasons for just getting on with it, though. They all came down to 'Marines do not complain about blisters' and she'd already shown her opinion about that sort of attitude.

"These boots all have the same problems when they are not broken in yet," Fournier explained, putting away the tape. "It should be better now."

He received his boots back, the heels on the inside smoothed and taped, and put them back on while Brittner closed her pack.

"Thank you ma'am, doctor," he said as he got to his feet. It did feel a lot better now. Brittner gave him a curt nod in acknowledgement and took point position as they moved out. The Captain gestured for Colbert to go, as he would take up their six, but Fournier walked with him, a good fifteen metres behind Brittner.

"You have to get used to us, but we also have to get used to you," Fournier said after a few minutes, smiling a little. "It turns out that Marine sergeants are not plug and play."

Behind them, Avery snorted a laugh.
Please review? Or I'll think you don't love me Rock Happy anymore and be all heartbroken and shit
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Location: Team room, Cheyenne Mountain Base
Saturday, 20:46hrs

Brad,

We're all okay. No clashes with the airmen so far and nobody seems to have irritated any of the officers yet, or at least not enough that I've had complaints. Jesus, this place has more brass than a marching band. Atlantis is not this top-heavy, is it?

We had a familiarisation walk around the general levels today, though still not the lowest levels where the gate room is. No program for tomorrow - they're giving us the weekend to settle in and read ourselves in. We have 'Best of' compilations of after-action reports to work ourselves through.

> * First mission turned eventful after all. Interesting to see people in action, even though they left me to babysit Col. Carter. Which turned out to be not so bad because the action came to us. She's good, and Jesus they have high standards here. She didn't know me from Adam, but she expected me to fall into step with her without a moment's thought. Think I did, so that's good.
> * Met some Wraith. Fucking hell. Got shot with one of their stunner beams. Can't recommend it.

Sounds like you've had an eventful introduction to the Pegasus galaxy. Not to mention that guarding the expedition leader when you've only been there a few days? That's a lot of trust. Glad to hear you survived the wraith. Being shot with a stunner is in our future, or so Warszawski says. I hope the effects have fully worn off for you.

> * Been here three days and I'm already being ruined for normal command. Col. Carter is legit. Saved my ass by shooting a wraith with an AT4. That's a mental image that will be able to help me through dark moments for the rest of my fucking life.

Ruined for normal command? I thought I had that honour. Though I can imagine that Colonel Carter doing a movie-worthy moment got your attention. I've seen her photo.

> * Nobody here is 'just a grunt', especially not on a gate team. This place is like a world convention for overachievers.

It sounds like you'll finally be able to stretch yourself - don't tell me you haven't occasionally been bored as hell with the stuff you've been doing, even with team leader responsibilities. No more hiding behind the excuse that thinking is for officers.

> * Team is professionally okay as far as I can tell. (wasn't with them during the crunch part of the mission), I'm still figuring out the interpersonal side. I'm beginning to get the sense that not all of it is about me specifically. I swear, if you told me this entire team was screwing, I would believe it in a heartbeat.

You haven't said much about your team yet. Do you mean they are closer than you're used to? The dynamic must be very different, and you're not used to being outnumbered by officers. It's a shame you haven't seen them in action yet.

> * There's a Radio Atlantis. Anybody who wants to can apply for a broadcast slot. I can't decide whether you should mention this information to Person or if we should keep it from him at all cost.

I just choked with laughter and Mike asked me if I was okay. Told him what you wrote - you should have seen his face. Ray is currently adding "IN SPACE!" to every other sentence. Maybe we could call his program 'Space Cadet Station'.

> * Every single one of the city's 37 represented nationalities has its own weekly radio slot. (Fuck,
You'll have seen by now that Tony is aboard this crazy train. Already talking about how he underestimated the White Man, since world domination isn't even the start of it and the White Man is already gunning for this galaxy AND a second. I'm waiting for him to reach the mission reports about the Ori...

> * We're up for another mission on Tuesday or Wednesday: Captain says probably delivering salt to a trading contact. I think the idea is to ease me into things by doing some low risk missions and meet some allies. Of course, first mission proves how quickly that idea can go to hell.

Good luck meeting the friendlies. Actually, since it'll be over by the time you read this, I hope it went okay. What sort of culture were they? Were there any interesting rituals?

> * Team dinner tonight. Still reconning the fuck out of that weird-ass team dynamic.

You're making me curious about these people. I hope the dinner went well.

Forgot to answer what you asked in your last batch of emails - as far as I know women are still not allowed to be CRO, and a quick search shows no record of any existing. Then again, I would never have thought they'd let a woman serve on the primary first contact team, but they did and that was eleven years ago. With all this top secret stuff they're pulling it wouldn't be impossible for them to have gotten her the training somehow.

Nate

### ***

Location: personal quarters, Cheyenne Mountain Base
Tuesday, 18:42

Brad,

First two training days were mostly still orientation on the Stargate program in general, and the Atlantis mission in specific. When I first heard that they have scientists serving on first contact teams that seemed insane to me (especially civilian scientists!) but it's making a little more sense now I've seen just how diverse the missions can be. It seemed crazy to give up 25% of a team to a non-combatant, but I'm reading my way through the 'Best of Ten Years of SGC Mission Reports' compilation and half the time it's scientists saving the mission. I guess I'm still largely thinking of this as combat missions, and it often won't be - sometimes diplomatic skills are just important. I'm curious how your salt delivery mission has gone off.

I had thought we were primarily going to be combat backup, but apparently that's what they have two rifle companies for, and we'll be a separate gate team - Teldy says we'll initially mostly be a second team on a mission, but once we find our feet do independent missions as well. Just not intentional first contact.

Apparently chances are good we'll get teamed up with you at some point (two medics, prime combination for humanitarian missions, according to Teldy). Ray is already looking forward to following you around while narrating your Adventures In Space in an Australian accent.

I met General O'Neill today. It was scheduled for yesterday but there was some sort of crisis. ("The regularly scheduled kind" according to Major Teldy. These people live on understatement) The General was... interesting. I could have sworn that when I saluted he had half a second of 'what did you do that for?' before he remembered he's a General. Not one to stand on ceremony, that's for sure. I like your description. Rock happy. I think he was playing at being a benign sort of cracked, but I've had enough experience with both real idiots and smart bastards pretending to be idiots to recognise the second type. You don't live through the sort of field-experience he has - not to mention running this place - if you don't have your wits about you.

It was short, we talked for a few minutes and he said he'd make sure we wouldn't get bored (that must be the SGCs main rule on how to handle Marines - for God's sake don't let them get bored - because Major Teldy had already said something similar) and that they're going to start 'shoving us through wormholes' ASAP. All right then.
I got a look at the Stargate while I was down there to see the General. Wow, I'm picturing you seeing that thing for the first time just before you're expected to walk through it. It wasn't in use, with only one team out on a longer mission, so everything was quiet. The control room tech laughed when I said it reminded me of a rotary phone, because apparently that's how they think of it too. The device that lets you establish a wormhole is called a DHD - Dial Home Device.

Despite the weekend they still had a whole platoon up: one squad in the Gate room and surrounding corridors as security, two in the ready room. Would have seemed over the top if I hadn't spent all weekend reading the SGC's Greatest Hits/Disasters. Nobody on other planets cares that it's weekend on Earth.

I met Teal'c! Felt kind of bad because O'Neill sort of saddled him with me in a 'Oh hey Teal', tell the Lieutenant all about your Atlantis trip, you old chatterbox' kind of way. He told me about your first mission, said you were 'still getting acquainted with your team,' and I got the impression you should be very honoured that he trusted you to watch Colonel Carter's back. Didn't get much more out of him sadly.

How is it going with your team? Have they warmed up to you yet? With what I'm reading and hearing about Gate teams, I can imagine it's a big shift for you: being the only Marine, the only enlisted, and coming into a team that's so well established can't be easy. Are they as close as some of the teams I'm hearing about here? I know you like to fall back on the Iceman when you're feeling unsettled, but don't forget to let your team meet Brad Colbert. I have a feeling he'll fit in better over there.

The guys are mostly okay, though I think we're all a bit spooked by some of the things we're reading in the reports. The scale of it all is overwhelming - hell, we've hardly gotten used to the fact that there are whole civilisations out there, now we're trying to swallow the fact that some of them would quite like to annihilate us. I appreciate the openness about the first few years of the program though, there's obviously been a steep learning curve and they're not afraid to show the mistakes and use them as examples.

Ray is (as might be expected) both excited and intrigued by the whole thing, and he's kind of dragging Garza along in his gleeful exploration. They report that there is some very attractive medical personnel in the infirmary (Training mishap. Don't ask. We're still trying to establish a PT regime that works indoors) though I have little doubt that said medical personnel is used to getting new Marines in. As Bryan puts it, with some of the shit they deal with here, I doubt that two hyperactive jarheads made much of an impression. (Bryan also mentioned that Ray has been eating three cups of jello every meal, and that the E-numbers might account for some of the... bounciness.)

Christopher is a lot more low key but also seems on the intrigued side of overwhelmed. I picked him for the team because he's shown himself to have a good balance between combat ready and open minded and I think he might turn out to be very good at first/ native contact type situations. He is going to get pilot training (simulator, of course) because he has the ATA gene. Not very strong, but strong enough to be our designated driver.

Tony is kind of veering back and forth between 'this is insane' and 'this is awesome' and I hope the awesome is winning - he's promised to at least stay out the month's training. (Major Teldy has already said that they certainly don't want to send anybody out there that doesn't want to go, and he'd be able to transfer back to Bravo) With his daughter so young I can understand how the whole 'other galaxy' thing is impacting him a little heavier. I think he would appreciate hearing a little bit about how you're doing, if you want to email him. t.espera@sgc.atl.mil

Mike is taking it in stride, as far as I can tell. He's getting on fairly well with sgt Warszawski, so maybe that's helping him form a picture of life on Atlantis and he feels it's steady ground. We've discussed the possibility that either he or Tony might be reassigned on Atlantis (a Sgt and a GySgt is a bit excessive for such a small unit) and if we have any say it'll be Mike going. Tony needs the experience as only sgt in a unit ("and being the one responsible for keeping the LT from getting himself killed," thanks Mike) and if Warszawski is to be believed there are interesting roles for somebody as experienced as Mike, potentially even on another gate team.

That reminds me, do you have a specifically defined role or responsibility within your team? With four people with such different backgrounds I'd expect everybody to have their own area of expertise. (Tony: "I hope they're not expecting him to keep an Lt AND a Captain from getting themselves killed. That's an unreasonable workload for just one Sergeant, even if he is the Iceman. Is there a union he could contact?")

Bryan seems mostly overwhelmed by the medical implications of the whole alien planet thing, but he's been introduced around the infirmary (he'll be doing a few days internship there later in the
month) and I think he's taking it as a challenge. It's amazing to see him so upbeat - I think they won him over from the moment Major Teldy turned up for him at Pendleton Air Base on her evening off. Sane, competent people in command AND not being treated 'like a sentient tube of toothpaste, squeezed empty and then discarded'? I can see how it's inspiring optimism in him, because it's doing the same in me.

All this alien weirdness would be impossible with the chain of command I've grown used to. (Garza, Ray and Tony re-enacted one of the Atlantis AAR we've read as if Captains McGraw and Schwetje had been present.. including a radio conversation where they discovered the space vampires. I had to leave the room before things could get undignified)

If I picture the things that seem to be waiting for us with a chain of command made up of the people I'm meeting here, and reading about, or their Atlantis equivalent... things don't seem so insurmountable. It would be quite something to feel properly backed up from above instead of struggling against the barrels of shit that normally come downhill. This delayed email thing is annoying because I'm sure by now you know more about your personal chain of command, but if I ask you for intel I won't have an answer for another week. Maybe Warszawski is willing to share. Still, please let me know if my tentative optimism is justified?

We've been under the mountain since Friday and everybody is getting a little antsy - indoor PT only does so much. Major Teldy is talking about doing our first offworld training on Friday, they just need to cram some more stuff into our heads first. I hear it's going to be a Land Nav exercise on a planet with no magnetic field. Should be interesting.

OK, enough with this wall of text, Tony wants a chess rematch.

Nate

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't seen it yet, there is also an update to Shit My CO Says :-)
Wednesday, 24:50 NLT
Location: personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,

Mission went okay. Four-hour hump through a Siberian forest, followed by a weird-ass touchy-feely ritual, followed by a party.

I have to let it sink in that it doesn’t help to try to classify alien cultures by Earth standards. I really need to not go ‘This looks like Japanese/Arabic/South American, so...’ I assumed I was having a pleasant conversation with somebody and she read something different into it. From the team’s reactions it was a relatively minor fuckup and I wouldn’t be surprised if they put me into the position to make it so I would learn that.

I think the way how they went about it is typical for this team. Capt. Avery wished me good luck and shoved me into the deep, and Lt. Brittner stood by in case I needed a life ring. I get the feeling that’s normal between them, but right now it feels off, the whole team feels off. I wrote about that in my last batch of emails.

In any case, Capt. Avery is the kind of solid, mid-thirties guy who knows what he’s doing and is enjoying it. High level of skills (not that you’d expect different from the SAS). Friendly, dry sense of humour, but the kind of person you don’t feel you really know much about. He’s pushy and demanding in terms of training, and I think very invested in making this placing work out for me. He’s doing a lot of my training in person (I think I’m sort of his project right now) and occasionally whoring me out to various departments (His words, not mine!) to get intel dumped into my head with a funnel.

Dr Fournier is a French national, PhDs in Archaeology and Anthropology. He was part of the original expedition, and he’s sort of the balance point in the team, really easy-going guy who buffers some of the sharp edges. He’s very approachable, and the sort of guy who wants to share all the cool finds with you even though you don’t understand half of them. Much prefer that to how some of the scientists seem to regard Marines as just barely a step above sentient weapons/pack mules. I think the Doc is already lining up internships for me with some of the soft science departments, for once my essential training is over. I’d mind, but some of it is actually interesting and all of it will be useful.

There’s a concerted effort to keep him on the team - he’s in his mid forties and his back is starting to play up, so I don’t know how much longer he’ll be able to keep down a spot on a gate team. I hope a good while yet, I like him, but I’m also not sure if the Capt and the Lt. wouldn’t smash apart without him.

Lt. Brittner is 30 or thereabouts. Allegedly started her career as an Aero Evac flight nurse (I really have NO idea how she ended up in this position - judging by some of the SRE mission reports she sometimes works on (advisory? supporting? coordinating? all of the above?) level with the Company commanders)

She’s kind of tightly wound and distant - I can’t figure out if she’s still making up her mind about me or if she already has and just thinks I’m an asshole. Or maybe she’s just acting far more official and buttoned up than anybody else here. Either way she’s at least willing to see me as her medical responsibility on a comfort level, not just life and death stuff, which is something. The Captain keeps cramming us together, and I can’t decide out if that’s the normal pairing in the team or if he’s doing it to make us work together, but she’s not happy with it.

I’m still working out what’s normal between them - some degree of antagonism probably is - and what is off because of Warszaski leaving/me coming in new/fuck only knows. I hope you can get something out of Warszawski! By all accounts he and Brittner went through a lot together (including losing both their initial team members) and were close. I’ve been slammed for assuming it was a relationship, but I’m not convinced it wasn’t.

It’d be really fucking weird to work with this team and you guys together, like two worlds colliding, but probably pretty cool too. Can’t believe this is only my 9th day here, I had to count back. Feels like much longer. Mostly in a good way.

I wonder what it says about the Stargate Program that two of its leading legends come across as
marching to the beat of their own drum band?

They have that rule about Marines here too, though it hasn't really applied to me so far because Avery's kept me busy. In fact I've had very little to do with the Corps side of Atlantis. The info on the tablet didn't set this out too clearly so maybe this'll help you:

Gate teams AR1-6 are 4-man first contact, recon and trade/diplomatic teams, and they're made up of a mix of international (Avery and a Swedish captain) and Zoomie officers, scientists, and Marine NCOs. Teams AR7-11 are 6-man Tactical/support teams (I think the idea is that if they back up a primary team, 10 people still fit in one jumper). They're mostly Marine teams, though Avery says they have an all Ranger team coming in too. You guys are going to be AR7, right?

Then entirely separate in organisation (though still ultimately under Carter/Sheppard/Lorne command) the two rifle companies, with Captains Holmbeck and Patel and their LTs. They are based in a building called (for reasons left unexplained) 'the Anthill' and seem to be doing the heavy lifting - both literally and in terms of security, city defence, and large scale manoeuvres. Squads and even platoons are often used as backup or security for offworld missions, but rarely on their own unless it's with well-known allies. Though Avery says there's an effort to build the first contact and diplomacy skills especially among the Lieutenants. In practice this mostly means the LTs sometimes tag along with the gate teams. I think it's largely an impression thing, the expedition wants to make friends and trade partners, and sending a squad of heavily armed Jarheads doesn't generally give that impression.

Basically I've had little to do with the Marines who aren't on a gate team except in passing, and it feels weird, like being outside my natural habitat. I'm not even wearing the same uniform, for fuck's sake. They have the digi cammies and I've been given the dark grey Atlantis utes worn by Gate teams. I get that they want teams to look uniform but it feels fucking weird. The other Gate team NCOs do spend time in the Anthill though, using the training facilities mostly, so once the initial learning phase is over I think things'll change a little. Apparently Captain Patel is a fiend for designing field exercises and Avery (as expedition-wide training officer) is involved, so I hope he'll be able to get me in on some of that.

Good to hear the guys are okay. Their reactions seem about right to me. I'll write Tony, though I'm not sure what I'd tell him - much as I'd like for him to come out here, he's got good reasons to hesitate. There's an entire section on the Atlantis wiki with all the names and photos of those who have died in the course of the expedition, and those who are MIA (presumed dead; the wraith don't usually give anybody back). It's not a small section. And the guys down in Maker Street have a large storage room full of stuff 'for if we have to go native again' (they mean an extended break with Earth so we'd go without resupply). Sewing machines, a weaving loom, stuff for making rope out of alien hemp, metal casting tools, God knows what else. I can't decide if it's scary or comforting that they feel the need to make or collect all of that shit. Maybe both.

You'll have done your exercise by the time you read this. How was your first time through the gate? Land nav go okay?

Brad

The remainder of the Wednesday he mostly spent reviewing his first contact course material with a widened understanding of the issues a team could run into. Then Thursday morning Avery announced he was going to do his paperwork, and that he recommended Colbert set about reading old After Action Reports of the team's missions.

He'd thought it was absurd to have a 4-man team for search, rescue and extraction - especially since he wasn't convinced that all of them could fully be considered combatant. But it turned out the mandate of AR4 as a SRE unit was not to resolve situations singlehandedly, but to go in, assess the situation, call in whatever reinforcements were needed, and coordinate their deployment. Even that didn't make a lot of sense until he found out that half the time SRE involved saving teams from the three Ws: Weather, Wildlife or Weirdness Related To Alien Planets (which included non-violent cultural misunderstandings, malfunctioning equipment, and general non-combat related injuries and illnesses. 'Fell down a hole, trapped in underground tunnels' seemed bafflingly common) and could often be handled by just the team or with one backup team.
His instinct was that it made more sense to send a platoon as a matter of course, but then he found
the report about a team that had been sedated with blowdarts because the natives felt threatened,
and the situation had needed some soft-voiced talking. Apparently sometimes pussyfooting was
the way to get the job done, and he could see how a platoon of Marines would escalate situations
that might have been resolved by a small, mixed gender team that was willing to tread lightly.

The expedition had some directives on use of firepower against technologically primitive cultures,
mostly centred around 'we are not here to make enemies' and a responsibility not to take advantage
of superior firepower unless expedition members were in direct and unavoidable danger. It wasn’t
uncommon for teams to egress under threat of spears, clubs or whatever the local population was
using, and that didn't make any sense at all until he realised that often the natives wouldn't have a
clue what firearms were.

Colbert was very used to being faced with caution. The fear on people's faces in Afghanistan and
Iraq had sometimes weighed on him, the expectation that he might shoot them at any time, but the
complete lack of fear that he might meet on alien planets was a concept he thought would take
some time to get used to.

In the case of an unknown situation or a capture, the approach was usually to send in the team
together with a backup team (and it sounded likely that was the kind of team Nate and the guys
would become) in a cloaked jumper. They would assess the situation from the air, attempt to
establish contact, and if necessary land strategically and do recon. Once there was a clearer idea of
the situation of the missing and of what could be expected at the gate, backup could be called in.
At that point Brittnerr's task became to coordinate with all the assets in play, including the Marine
platoons, and orchestrate the extraction of the missing expedition members.

He saw at least three reports where they had actually used a Marine platoon coming through the
gate as distraction, while AR4 infiltrated the hostile settlement to free the captives, with or without
the use of C4. The platoon held the gate and dialled one of the uninhabited backup sites, and as
soon as the jumper with AR4 and the freed captives was ready, exfil through the gate. It was
simple but effective.

It was actually a relief to read the reports; he'd half wondered if he was really expected to keep
three officers alive in the midst of combat, but it sounded like it was at least not the intention for
the team to end up in active combat. That didn't mean it didn't occasionally happen, but casualties
and serious injuries during rescue ops were well below what could be explained by luck.
Unfortunately it did include two members of the original AR4: the Athosian guide Harin had
been killed by Genii, and USMC Captain Tarson had died from internal injuries sustained in a
riot.

Reading between the lines, Colbert concluded that the Captain had probably known he was going
into shock, but had kept going through the night. By the time Brittnerr had discovered his condition
it had been too late to do anything. Given the circumstances at the time he thought it was doubtful
that they'd have been able to save the Captain even if she had known right away, but he did
appreciate that it would take her some time to trust a new team member, and especially a Marine,
to self-report injury.

Over the 27 months the team had held its SRE status AR4 had done 52 SRE missions. 11 of these
had been missed check-in/lost contact resulting in a simple retrieval. 24 had been assorted W/W/W
rescues. 17 had been actual extractions from captivity situations, 6 of which resolved peacefully,
11 of which had resulted in shots fired. Those last ranged from freeing a team from angry villagers
with stone spears to a full-scale rescue mission into a compound of the Genii.

Deliberate Wraith encounters were counted separately because they were generally lead by either
Sheppard or Lorne, though AR4 did play an advisory and supporting role in these too.

It was amusing to recognise his team member's personalities in the reports. Avery wrote short,
efficient reports in the style of a man who'd been doing it for fifteen years and knew exactly what
went in and what could be left out, and they had the same understated, laconic tone as the man
had in person. ('Lieutenants Brittner and Cadman suggested to the village leader that the team
would be willing to take the troublesome visitors off her hands')

Brittnerr apparently liked to write her reports in excel and print them sideways: brisk, detached
summaries of information flow and command decisions in a timeline shaped by multiple columns.
(‘2100 NLT: Delta reports Gate under control. 2110 NLT: Echo 3 reports 12 hostiles guarding
the compound. | Despatch Golf 1 to create diversion. | Despatch Echo 1 to assist Echo 3 | relocate
Base to locus for pickup. 2120 NLT: Golf 1 detonates building across settlement | Echo 1/3
breach compound wall.’)
Cadman supplied weaponry details ('Weaponry deployed: 7 units C4, 6 Claymore mines, 5 P90 mags, sarcasm') and Warszawski had occasionally made a contribution in a rambling narrative that suggested he was quite happy to leave the paperwork to his superiors and didn't want to be any good at it in case he'd be asked to do it more often.

Avery and Brittener's accounts tended to mesh well enough that he strongly suspected they sat down together to write reports. He wondered if they still did or if their recent rift had changed that.

* * *

Thursday afternoon had mostly been spent going through emergency protocols with Avery, so by the time he sat down for dinner he was thinking about going to a run, or maybe hit the weight room. Anything to get moving, get some air.

He hadn't seen anybody he knew when he sat down, but that was okay by him - it was nice to be able to observe the crowd. People seemed to form all sorts of table groups, sometimes along lines that weren't immediately apparent. There were plenty of tables all-marines or all-scientists (or just all-civilians), but there was also a group that looked completely mixed: three scientists, two marines, one Lieutenant, and two people of unclear designation. It took a moment to realise that their conversation, very halting on the part of some of them, was in Russian.

"So, I hear you had your first proper alien contact," Dusty Mehra plopped herself down at his table, tray stacked full of Quila mash.

"How do you KNOW these things? Is there a radio broadcast?"

She shot him a grin.

"Didn't you know a uterus is also a long-range communication device?"

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Colbert, you're on a team with LT Cadman," she said as if that should be blindingly obvious. "Even if she isn't along on a mission, she gets all the good details." Oh, fuck. Clearly news of his little adventure had already been shared. "And she and I run together."

He thought that maybe he should be scared now. Not that he was ever going to admit to that.

She flashed him a grin, and he realised he was in trouble.

Before he'd left for Colorado he'd called his cousin, who was a cop in Richmond, and between updates about her kids and his carefully circumspect announcement of his new posting, had asked her about working in a male dominated environment. The piece of advice that he'd taken on board had been 'You know that thing guys do when you meet a woman and the first thing you decide is if you'd fuck her or not? We can tell. Try not to do that.'

He'd really tried, and mostly succeeded - he was vaguely aware that Cadman was a knockout any time she wanted to be, that Kay had a sort of bright intensity that lit her up from the inside, and that he'd been thinking of valkyries right about the moment Colonel Carter dropped a still-hot AT4 tube to swipe back her hair, because Jesus, he was not, in fact, made of ice, and.. well.

But all that was awareness in the back of his head. With Mehra it was front and centre, jumping up and down and blinking red light. Mehra was hot. And he didn't have a clue what, if anything, to do about it.

"Hey Dusty," an Asian looking woman in infirmary scrubs came up to their table. It took a moment to recognise her as the medic who had taken him to the infirmary after he'd been shot with a Wraith stunner. "Hello sergeant."

Mehra introduced Marie, who gave him a smile, and then asked about somebody who'd gone to the infirmary.

Colbert zoned out a little over his coffee, trying to decide when to ask Avery if he could be
attached to one of the platoons for their exercises or if the captain wanted to immerse him in more individual training first. He didn't want the captain to think he was bored, because he was anything but, but he was beginning to miss the more regular combat training he was so used to.

The two rifle companies on Atlantis had an almost completely separate training regime from what he'd done so far - they did drills and exercises on uninhabited planets and on the mainland (and sometimes in the city) and their command centre was in a separate building where he hadn't been yet. It felt strange to be so disconnected from what felt like his natural environment. As a member of a Gate team - not to mention having been brought in separately - he wasn't part of a unit, and though Meyers had said he could join the PT sessions easily enough and was free to use the training facilities, he wanted to know where the Captain stood first. It wouldn't be easy to come into a unit as outsider who wasn't really going to be part of them, but he did need to keep up those specific skills the Marines would be drilling regularly, or he'd lose them.

He nodded to Waltemeyer and Nocks, who joined the table.

"You did a neat job of it, the ligament was stretched and it looks like he's got a Pelit fruit in there, but nothing torn," Marie was saying.

"Huhn." Mehra frowned. "So how long?"

"At least a few weeks light duty. He'll have to miss the big exercise the Captains are planning."

Colbert had figured out that among the set of people he talked to regularly, 'the Captain' usually meant Avery, but 'The Captains' referred to the Company commanders: USMC Captains Holmbeck and Patel. So far he'd mostly heard them referred to in the context of Dr Fournier talking about offworld research proposals - since those needed Marine protection, there was a degree of gatekeeping in what the Captains were willing to detail their men for. Judging from the way Fournier spoke of it, Colonel Carter spent a fair amount of time mediating between the science departments and the Captains.

"Who are we talking about?" Cadman sat down at the table with an acknowledging nod in his direction, "What happened?"

"Corporal Parnham, in Bravo One." Mehra made a face. "He hit the douchebag trifecta this morning. He copped a feel, he was making raunchy comments when I had him in a triangle, and then he wouldn't tap out when I had an armbar on him."

"Oh, delightful. So he went to the infirmary?"

"Yeah, popped his elbow. To be honest I was kinda hoping it'd be bad enough that they'd punt him through the wormhole back to Earth."

"Why didn't you just break his face?" Colbert asked before he could stop himself. "It'd be justified."

She gave him a level look.

"Because then next time I'm going to have guys gunning for me - and somebody will succeed if he really wants to break me into pieces, especially if I'm in teaching mode."

"She needed the rest of his platoon to see it was justified," Cadman explained. "Which presumably they did."

"Gunny Liehr was still bawling him out while he was in the scanner," Marie said with satisfaction. "We let him stay. We like Gunny Liehr."

Her tone said that if they hadn't before, they certainly did now.

"You tell Gunny about the groping?" Waltemeyer asked Mehra as he got up and stacked his things onto his tray.

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"You tell Gunny about the groping?" Waltemeyer asked Mehra as he got up and stacked his things onto his tray.

"Well, he caught the comments. And I was thinking I'd stick to demo'ing with the guys I know are okay."

"if you don't say anything, how do you expect things to change?" Waltemeyer asked rhetorically, then wandered off.

"Because it's just that easy," Mehra sighed.

"Yeah. Liehr is a good guy," Cadman said, resignedly, "but.. yeah."
"You're just going to let him get away with it?" Colbert asked. If the idiot had just tapped, he wouldn't even have a busted arm to remind him of the offence.

"What do you suggest?" Cadman said, then held up her hand. "Just think that all the way through and let us know how it turns out."

He did, and frowned when he realised what would happen. It would be easy to defend touching in the course of grappling - Kay had assured him that she knew the difference between contact and grope, but he still felt a little awkward about grappling with her. And raunchy comments were pretty much par for the course with Marines. If Mehra complained, the scorn was a whole hell of a lot more likely to end up on her than on the offender.

"I just think it sucks that everybody else gets judged by what one asshole did," he said finally. "Doesn't seem fair."

Maybe it was his imagination that there seemed to be an ominous silence.

"So, Colbert," Mehra said, flashing a bright, predatory grin as she and Cadman shifted in their chairs to face him more fully. "How often do people question your ability to do your job?"

He looked at each of them in turn, trying to find a suitable answer - because really, what the fuck?

"Or hey," Cadman took over, "How often do people in your unit wonder whose dick you sucked to get the rank you have?"

"Excuse me?" he finally found his voice.

"Well, you mentioned things not being fair," Mehra said reasonably. "Thought we might swap stories."

"You know, bond a little," Cadman said earnestly.

"I can't deal with this shit today," Nocks announced, draining his coffee cup and getting up.

"I wish we had the luxury of saying that, Nocks," Mehra said to his retreating back.

"But we don't, because for us it's around every corner, every new person who they send here, every damn time a team gets picked or a situation comes up," Cadman clarified to Colbert.

He wanted to say something, but her expression suggested this was one of those moments he should sit down, shut up, and let them swing the cluebat. It didn't seem to be aimed specifically at him, more at his general ignorance about what it was like to be a woman in the military, and he bit his tongue and let them rant. Maybe this was the feminist fairy Avery had talked about.

"And all because we have the Holy Uterus," Mehra said, making a two-handed V gesture with little circles at the tips. "Which apparently impairs our ability to do all kinds of shit."

"No no, it's because in its infinite wisdom, the US Military thinks the uterus is the most important part of a woman, too important to let her have control over it herself," Cadman said. "We can't be allowed to decide for ourselves if we want to risk our lives, because the Holy Uterus-- they both gestured the symbol in perfect unison, "-must be protected from the decisions us irrational feeble-minded women might otherwise make. The country needs its incubators more than it needs highly competent people in critical positions, after all."

"Lieutenant Brittner is in a combat position," he felt compelled to point out.

"And don't think for a moment that the acknowledgement versus scrutiny balance is anywhere close to where it would be for a man," Cadman said. "The weasels in DC like to second-guess every single decision and still won't even allow her to claim the job title officially."

"And hey, have you noticed that we have two female LTs here and that they're both 5 years older than the average male LT?" Mehra said.

He had noticed that, actually. He wondered if that was because they were non-infantry and therefore off the fast track, if they didn't get as many opportunities to show their skills, or if they really were being held back. Maybe it had to do with what Captain Avery had said, that they had to be more than merely good to be acknowledged.

"It's hard to show you're just as good-"
"-or better."

"-or better," Cadman acknowledged, "if they won't let you go into the situations where you could really prove yourself."

"And then you're lucky if people don't suddenly get a case of of the caveman instincts," Dusty added, swallowing a bite of mash. "Every fucking time I do a babysitting detail and it gets hairy, every damn civilian who ever followed a two-day weapon course refuses to let me do my job because they suddenly decide they need to protect me."

"And then if you get pissed off about it, you're a horrible bitch," Cadman nodded. "I think you're supposed to be grateful that somebody who doesn't know what the fuck they're doing considers himself more qualified that you."

"But wanting to protect somebody doesn't inherently mean you think they're unqualified to do it themselves," he protested.

"Yeah, but you know what? From my point of view, that doesn't make a blind bit of difference," Mehra said, almost gently. "It's still somebody shoving me out of the role I've been trained for. And if they get hurt risking themselves, it's still my fault."

"Not to mention that it really, really undermines your position."

"Oh, hell yeah. Like I don't already get enough comments."

"There really are only so many 'serving under' jokes you can stomach before you get the urge to shove a block of C4 down somebody's throat," Cadman said, seeming to lose steam to weariness.

"So why do all these separate clubs?" Colbert asked. "Aren't you just making exceptions of yourselves when you're saying you don't want to be?"

"That's because we ARE different."

He felt his eyebrows shoot up. Marie hid a smile behind her hand.

"Look, most of the time it's only okay to be a woman in the service if you act exactly like you're a guy," Mehra said.

"Women might be tolerated, but femininity isn't," Cadman explained. "And that's not okay, but we're all used to that." She gestured with her fork. "At a normal posting we'd just express that part of ourselves when off duty. But in a place like this, when there's no going home after work, it's exhausting. So we need spaces where it's okay to let the other parts of ourselves come out. The parts that like to play poker or Jiu Jitsu without macho bullshit, or watch Buffy, or..."

He realised she was actually hesitating to give examples, and that more than anything made him realise she was right. He was well aware how a squad of Marines could turn anything into a competition. He found it annoying himself, sometimes, but it was hard to opt out - there was always pressure to prove himself.

"...just, places where we can decompress and be female without worrying that it's going to affect the way we're treated by the men we work with."

"Because obviously, if we like to dye our hair or watch a girly movie-"

"-or have any conversation not about guns, sport or porn-"

"--that completely negates any skills we have in the field."

You couldn't be in Recon if you were selective about the information you took on board. Even if it hadn't been a well-ingrained Recon habit to take in any information offered, he wasn't about to walk away from intel about something that was clearly very important to a lot of the women in Atlantis, even if it wasn't comfortable to hear. He suspected that in their way they were actually helping him here - he was willing to bet not everybody got this talk, and they were offering him insight he wouldn't have had otherwise. And there was a pleasant buzz to the idea that they, and especially Dusty Mehra, wanted him to understand. They might not hold all that much hope that he would, but they wanted him to.

The least he could do was keep his reflexive opinions to himself, accept that this was their reality, and let all of it sink in for a while.

"Is this his 'I'm not going to make any sudden movements and wait until the crazy chicks go away'
"Is this his 'I'm not going to make any sudden movements and wait until the crazy chicks go away' face?" Mehra asked.

"You know, I think this might actually be his 'I suddenly have lots of things to think about' face," Cadman said thoughtfully.

Marie got up and Mehra followed, crumpling her napkin and tossed it onto her empty lunch tray. He was vaguely impressed that she'd managed to eat all of it - he really wasn't used to women eating more than dainty bites, the occasional stolen French fry, and salad.

"You teaching tonight?" Cadman asked.

"No, Lee is taking me and Alpha Three's new guys across the cakewalk."

"Ohh, fun."

"The cakewalk is a sort of air bridge," Mehra must have seen his questioning look, because she turned to him and gestured out the window. "Like that one, only less steep." He realised she was pointing at one of the diagonal struts that he thought were either support for the really high towers or somehow elevator shafts.

"It runs between the Cake - that's the building where most of the soft science labs are - and the Anthill, that's the Marine building. They've put climbing grips on the side and bottom of it, so you can go across on the outside."

"Cool."

"And then you climb past a few windows in the Cake and freak out the scientists," Cadman added with a bright grin. "That never gets old."

They all grinned.

"So, Lieutenant Vaughn's new guys, huh?" Cadman said innocently "Any chance you're coming along to do a rescue drill if one of them gets stuck?" .

Mehra didn't seem to know if to look conspirational or caught out.

"...maybe?"

"It's okay, Dusty - if the Captain hasn't stopped it by now, he's fine with it."

"...he isn't supposed to know."

"He doesn't miss much. Consider it his.. acknowledgement of passing you over. Not that he'd ever actually say so. But I'm pretty sure that right now he'd sign off on any training you can take here, and he'd at least consider Earth based training, within reason."

Colbert remembered she'd been working on diving calculations during the women's poker night and realised it was a concerted effort to get Mehra more likely to be considered the next time a spot in a gate team came up. It was oddly endearing.

* * *

Thursday, 23:35 NLT
Personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,
There is just no way to express how much I'm not in Kansas anymore

Brad

* * *
Friday, 07:02 NLT  
Location: personal quarters, Atlantis

Tony,  
How are you doing with all the weird shit? Nate said that you'd like hearing what it's like over here.

Things are at the same time completely alien (multiple moons, 28-hour days) and very ordinary, if more geeky than we're used to. There's a Morale/welfare/recreation commission ('Sanity Society') that organises all sorts of things, a lot of food is as you'd expect (though supplemented by alien ingredients the farther they get away from resupply time) and I've been studying in a room that might as well be on any base on Earth. There's a room that's set up specifically to look like a military base, and they're using it as video room. You can't have video calls (the Stargate is never open long enough) but you can record things to send home.

Don't know if any of that'll mean shit to you one way or another. Something I think will: everything I've seen here indicates that there is a solid bunch of people in charge. I don't know about the Marine commanders yet (Gate teams are run separately from the Rifle Companies and are directly under Sheppard/Lorne's command, so I haven't really had anything to do with the Corps officers) but everything I've seen of Carter, Sheppard and Lorne says that they are good people.

Gate teams are deployed as the Leatherman tools in the arsenal of the expedition (compact, diverse and sharp - the Marines platoons are more the power tools), and if you can live with the diplomacy/humanitarian side, this definitely seems like a job worthy of recon skills.

If Marine NCOs are unhesitatingly positive about field grade USAF officers (and the ones I've met are,) that seems to bode well. By all accounts if you come to harm in this place, and nobody denies that is possible, then it won't be because some asshole is too incompetent to breathe, is trying to score points, or after his next promotion.

Even though I'm still figuring out where I fit in my team and in the rest of the whole damn expedition... I'm not regretting signing up. This is an awesome place.

Stay frosty,  
Brad

Chapter End Notes

Feeeeeeeed(back) me? I've been bashing my head against this chapter. It's still not quite what I wanted out of it, but there's a point I just need to move on.
Location: Team room, Cheyenne Mountain Base  
Wednesday, 21:20

Brad,

Major Teldy is still considered 'So cool she's almost gaseous' (Garza) even after a week of studying. There's been a bit of protest (none of them are used to sit-down-and-read-this study anymore, even though there's a fair bit of group work, discussions, and the odd bit of simulator mixed in) but the Major's made it clear that this month isn't even the half of it. It's merely what we need to know so that we'll live long enough to learn the lessons Pegasus has to teach us in person. ("Aww, she cares" - Ray)

It did make me worried about how you are doing without that month's training, but Warszawski pointed out that we will be an all-newbie team while you have three very experienced team members to get you out of trouble. (I would feel vaguely offended on your behalf at the notion that you need people to get you out of trouble, if it weren't so clear at every turn that 'trouble' is the default state of gate travel and that the art is not in staying out of it, but dealing with it once it's all around you)

He speaks very highly of your team, so whatever happened wasn't professional (?) at least I didn't get that feeling,) I wish I could have done some more polite fishing at the time, but in class wasn't the moment.

I hadn't realised that Ray, Garza and Christopher are sort of considered prodigies to get a position on a gate team while still corporals - apparently they'll be the first, and it's only allowed because they have weighty recommendations and a deployment behind them. The rifle platoons do have about half E-4s, but nothing lower. Makes sense that they don't want to go through this whole process with guys that haven't proven themselves under fire yet. Must be strange though to have an entire company of experienced guys, with none of the usual hand-holding.

> - Holy crap, Doc really shaved? What is this devilry? You should feel honoured, that 'stache was his personal 'fuck you' at Command.

Believe me, I appreciate it, and not because I thought the facial hair had to go, because I don't care. It told the others something though, and his positive attitude about this mission is really having an influence on everybody else. Maybe it's just the novelty of Doc being positive about anything.

Good that the command over there isn't too uptight about grooming standards (no surprise, I guess, since they're Air Force). I wasn't planning on slacking off about it, and Mike would kill me if I did - Marines have standards, after all. But all in good priority, and in the middle of combat, shaving is low down on the list.

Speaking of Mike, he's grumpy as hell - he's the only one of us who really needs to quit dipping, everybody else was only smoking/dipping sporadically outside of deployments. Bryan has offered him nicotine gum, but Mike says it'll just replace dip instead of getting him off the shit, so we're all just riding it out.

It makes sense that Atlantis had all those social things going on - some of the people live there permanently after all. It's just weird to us because we're still sort of thinking about it as a military base and not as a city. Sounds like you found some interesting things though. Count me in for the technical BJJ. (do you need a gi? Size A4, right? Need me to arrange one for you?)

> There's a thing where almost all the women here come together for an evening - they call it poker nights, but they were doing all sorts of stuff.  
> I accidentally walked in and almost got my head bitten off. Not like they were doing anything interesting anyway, I have no idea why they feel the need to set themselves apart like that.

At a guess, to have a moment where they don't feel different from everybody around them. I think almost any minority does that.

I did a bit of recon about your team. Warszawski was happy to talk about what sort of missions you'll be doing (which is presumably stuff you already know by now) and speaks highly of their
skills and expertise, but nothing personal. He clammed up when I observed that he must have been pretty close with his teammates and if he missed them. And he’s a verbose guy, so there’s clearly something there. I tried to gently fish a bit more, but he said that it was like with any deployment in the sense that as soon as he was home, it felt like he’d been temporarily in another reality, and that it felt very distant. Which I don’t believe for a second - he was clearly very invested in Atlantis and in that team, it can’t have been like any deployment.

He, Major Teldy and myself were having lunch at the time, and it was interesting, I think the Major was also subtly looking for intel from Warszawski, and maybe even the same intel. I get the impression she talks to Captain Avery (which makes sense if they’re both training officers) so maybe whatever happened isn’t over? Or they are still trying to figure it out? Or sort it out, if it’s unresolved? I have no idea.

I hope your mission went well. Relax and let people see you as human and it'll be fine. Of course, we’ll see how I fare at my first contact with aliens.

Nate

***

Location: Barracks, Beta site
Friday 21:55 'Mountain Standard' - past midnight local time.

Well fuck. I had a near-death experience this morning. Or a near-near-death experience.

We had our first gate mission planned for 1200 today, but first thing 0800 I got called into the General's office. Remember I thought he was kind of absentmindedly pleasant?

Not so much so, now. He was ANGRY. Full on 'if you can't keep your men under control' pissed off. Ray was frog-marched in by Teal'c, looking... well, like Ray does when he thinks he should be looking contrite. I was told he would under no circumstance be allowed on the same base level as somebody called Vala, and that if he ever engaged in a Red Bull drinking contest with SGC personnel ever again, the General would personally pick a remote planet without stargate where he would be dropped off by spaceship.

Then he told me to have the whole team packed up and ready to go in 1 hour. I figured that was it, we were being kicked out. So did the guys - Ray got an epic chewing out by Tony and Bryan (*). Mike decided that no matter what, we weren't going to leave the barracks behind as a mess, so he procured cleaning supplies and there was a hasty scrub down of the quarters.

Warszawski escorted us - but further down, not up to the surface. We were marched into the gate room just as the gate dialled. The General was still looking pretty pissed off (Garza said something about walking the plank, and it did have something of that air).

So... we're suddenly at Beta site for the rest of our training. Not much to do here, but not much opportunity to get into trouble either, and that seemed to be the idea. I had hoped to get in a shopping trip, or maybe I'll have the chance in one of the times they'll have me back at the SGC for training sessions. I guess I can ask for stuff to be sent to us, anyway.

So, first trip through the gate was not so much fun. Made me feel a little nauseous and a lot unsettled. It looks fairly ordinary here, temperate forest sort of landscape, but the days are just under 20 hours long and the stars are very, very different. The complex here is your basic barracks type building, less luxury than we had at the SGC but! easy to go outside, and there is an open field we can use for PT. I look forward to running outside instead of on a machine. There's a platoon of Marines stationed here and I am hoping to get some useful intel out of Lt. Romick. Land nav exercise has been moved to tomorrow.

Somehow the concept of sending email to another galaxy is suddenly feeling much more real now I'm no longer on Earth. Beta site has daily gate contact with the SGC, so I'll still be able to email, though Warszawski warns me that we're all about to be kept very very busy, so I may not have time for long updates.

I swear, if Ray starts about 'hot space babes' one more time, I will stop keeping Tony from strangling him. Or maybe I'll do it myself. Being yelled at by a General is something I could have done without.
The door opened automatically, and he stepped into Fournier's quarters to find the whole team already there. For a moment he shoved down disappointment at the idea he'd been left out of whatever pow-wow they'd started earlier - he had really thought they'd wanted him to be part of the team.

Then he took them in a little more carefully. Fournier was sitting on a lounge pillow, cradling his acoustic cello as if it was a guitar and plucking the strings in a meditative sort of way. Cadman and Brittner, both with their hair still wet, sat near the open balcony doors. Brittner was attempting to juggle while Cadman asked her questions from a medical theory book.

Out on the balcony Avery was sitting at one of the lounge tables they'd dragged outside, together with a big man with South Asian looks and short, grey hair, though he was no older than Avery. It took Colbert a second to piece together the jokes of Atlantis's Bravo Company being especially trying on its Captain, and the name he'd heard. Captain Patel. They were working away on laptops and poring over city maps.

Okay, so maybe this wasn't so much as a pow-wow as everybody drifting in early.

"Hi Brad, come in," Fournier looked up. Both Lieutenants made vaguely acknowledging sounds and gestures, but just then Patel distracted them by leaning back in his chair and asked Brittner a question through the open balcony doors. After all the different nationalities and accents Colbert had gotten used to over the past week the Captain's Chicago accent seemed almost incongruous.

"Lee, if I req that rappelling cable with priority, can you bring it over with you?"

"Sure sir," she said, not stopping her attempts at juggling. "Just make sure it's given to sergeant Siler instead of set aside for the next supply run. He's um.. packing my bags." She finished brightly.

"Uh-huh. And your bags look a lot like a pallet full of crates?"

"I wouldn't know sir, Ops/Tech is arranging the luggage situation," she smiled to herself.

"I don't want to know, do I?"

"Probably not, sir," Cadman grinned. "Major Lorne is aware, though."

"Okay. Well, if anybody is going to run the under the radar acquisition track, it might as well be the Navy lot," Patel said, resignedly amused.

Avery snorted. "They can usually be relied on to have a modicum of common sense. At least about the things that really matter. Not about the advisability of using old mattresses to sled down flights of stairs."

Colbert had to assume the 'they' referred to the Maker Street team, who were all at least in their thirties and probably invested enough in Atlantis not to do anything too far over the line, rather than the Navy in general.

"That wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't involved the squad that was working the recycle room at the time," Patel was saying. "They should have known better than to give Marines ideas like that. I don't think there was a single mattress in the barracks that evening. My First Sergeant about blew a gasket."

"Ah, good times," Avery grinned.

"Brad, do you want a beer?" Fournier started to put his cello aside, and Colbert waved him away.
"Don't get up, I can get it myself."

It felt a bit forward to offer to bring beer for anybody else, so he just got one himself (a new homebrew batch by the captain, judging by the label) and dropped down on one of the pillows next to Fournier.

"They are wargaming the big upcoming training scenario here because Marines keep invading Captain Patel's office when they know he is working on it," Fournier nodded toward the two captains. The laptop that was standing next to him beeped, and he reached out to tap a few keys. It looked like a video file was rendering, and the screen displayed a photo of Ziou.

"I am editing the material I recorded with the Tjinerai," Fournier explained, seeing him look. "A lot of the societies we encounter do not have literacy - they pass things on through stories and songs, and because of the cullings, they struggle to maintain their identity. When we met the Athosians we discovered that recording their stories and making photos of their faces had enormous value for them - it meant that there was something of their people the wraith could not take away. Laminated photos become instant treasures, and from there on we branched out into audio and video recordings. Now we sometimes offer our allies a really basic modified tablet they can use to view and listen to the files."

He nodded.

"Ziou is the only survivor of her original home world, at least as far as anybody knows," Fournier continued. "She wanted me to record her memories of it, so that something of it would remain."

He didn't have to say that the old lady probably had been worried about not surviving much longer. She'd been fairly frail, and they lived in a harsh climate.

Colbert still couldn't wrap his mind around the idea that there had been an entire planet, now dead, and that there was only one living person to remember what it had been like. Hell, he was still struggling with there being more inhabited planets than just Earth. From what he'd read, Pegasus seemed to have its share of worlds that had once thrived - or near enough - and were now dead.

"Hey Michel, while you're working on those," Brittner drew their attention. "Do you have a spare player I can give to Kirr?"

"Our runner? Sure, I'll find you one. How is she doing?"

"Doctor Keller says her prognosis is fair. Feeling is starting to return. Function will take longer though, and spending so much time in the healer is driving her mad. If you have stories she could listen to... Don't we have an Earth fairy tale recording collection as well?"

"Of course. Do you want to give it to her?"

"She doesn't want to see me," she said. "Ronon goes to visit her, or you can give it to the doctors."

Colbert sat down and drank his beer, watching the conversation go from Cadman's research (currently in a sampling stage rather than in an interesting explosive stage) to the planned R&R trip to a planet with beaches (Colbert perked up at the possibility of surfing and then realised he didn't have a board) to tomorrow's UK vs. India cricket match (headed off Avery and Patel respectively) to what Brittner planned to do while on Earth for her exam.

"Visit my ex and the dogs, see how far I get down the shopping list," she shrugged. "Hit up a theatre supply shop to buy moulage supplies. Gallons and gallons of fake blood."

"Can I from that conclude that your return to the city will be celebrated with impromptu medical drills?" Captain Patel said from the balcony.

"Yes sir," she quirked a grin. "I've been down to ketchup these last few months, so I've been doing bloodless injury scenarios with the corpsmen. It's hard to train seriously when your victims are making Happy Meal jokes."

"Won't argue with that," he grimaced. "You want to do something big?"

"I'm working on a gate room scenario," she nodded. "Doc Kastenbaum in Alpha Three actually requested one for his platoon - says they're laughing off his pop quizzes about trauma. He wants something with gore."
"Sounds good," Patel said. "Alpha Three are adopting the 'blunt tool' thing a bit too much."

"Oh, oh, do we do that thing where we get all done up at Alpha site, then stumble through the gate?" Cadman asked, eager. "Hey Colbert, how's your acting?"

He blinked in surprise - he hadn't expected her to address him.

"Um, not good, ma'am."

"Then you can be the shock victim," Brittner declared, still juggling.

** * * *

Captain Patel was invited to stay for dinner, but duly declined with the claim that team nights were sacrosanct, and the five of them congregated around the table to peel and chop a large pile of... well, alien mini squashes.

Colbert discovered that two nights a week, Fournier hosted what he called 'Cooking lab' in his kitchen - an experimental cooking session with the newest alien ingredients. The results were passed on to the expedition cook, to the benefit of the whole expedition.

Cooking lab the night before had apparently determined that the mini squashes were best when roasted, and Fournier cheerfully used the team as a test panel for a variety of spice combinations. ("All three are.. strange." "Ah, but sergeant, which is the most pleasantly strange?")

They listened to the recording of one of Ziou's stories and then got into the subject of what sort of missions they each liked.

To nobody's surprise Fournier enjoyed missions with interesting Ancient finds as well as meeting new cultures.

"I like the real exploration stuff," Avery said. "When we just have the Ancient database to go on, and that's 10 000 years out of date. I like not knowing what we'll find."

"I wish I got to go on those," Cadman said mournfully. "I only ever get to blow stuff up."

There was a few seconds of audible ellipse and then a shared snort of laughter. Colbert hadn't been on a mission with her yet, but it seemed like everybody knew that Cadman loved blowing shit up.

Fournier, Avery and Cadman were clearly used to dragging stories out of reluctant speakers, and Colbert found himself telling a very small part of the frustrations of being trained as a Recon Marine and then being put into a string of Humvees. He wasn't sure any of them understood the particulars apart from Avery maybe, but being thrown into situations that didn't fit with your training was pretty much par for the course in Pegasus. Just usually in a different direction - here he was more likely to be out of his depth than under used.

Brittner hesitantly confessed that she liked SRE missions but hated that somebody had to get into trouble first, which made sense to Colbert: it was satisfying to do what you were trained for, but that didn't mean you wished for whatever brought the mission about. Her favourite mission had been one of the team's first rescue missions ever - when they'd ambushed AR1's capturers in a scene that sounded like cartoon style road bandits with wraith stunners. Apparently Colonel Sheppard's face had been a sight to see.

She had been mostly quiet so far, though it didn't seem to be the tense, uncomfortable quiet of the week before. It took Colbert a moment to realise that the others weren't just grinning because she was finally saying something, but because it was a new story to them - it had been before any of the others had joined the team, not just before he did.

"Did you know there's a rumour you said some interesting things to Captain Tarson once?" Avery said with a grin.

"Really? Because we didn't used to speak much."

Colbert figured that was probably literally true, even though it was a dodge now - judging by the reports AR4's first CO had been an old school Marine captain, and he couldn't imagine that being paired with a female Air force Lieutenant had really made anybody happy. It had read like a team
that had made sense on paper, not so much in person. They had learned to work together, but he doubted there’d been any warmth there, or much in the way of conversation.

"Lee, did you, or did you not, tell a Marine captain to 'Buck the fuck up'?"]

She glanced at Colbert, and he thought she might be trying to gauge how fanatic he was about the whole inter-service competitiveness thing, and how he would take something unflattering about a Corps officer.

"Fine. Yes, I did," she said finally. "It was that one visit to B6F-903, the one we did a ship-building skills thing with?" she said in Fournier's direction, who nodded in recognition. Colbert realised he’d been Atlantis at the time, though not on the team. "They were mostly fishers, and of course once their new ship was ready we had to come for a sail. They weren't the most comfortable sailing ships, and there was a horrible cross-swell. Even Kay was taking seasickness pills, and we managed to talk the fire-team that we had along into taking them too."

"Except the captain?"

"Yeah, Skipper was too hard to take seasickness pills, had been at sea when I was still in diapers, etcetera and so on. Then, of course, he got sick as a dog, and our hosts were really taking offence at his behaviour. So... I was the only one who could get away with it, and I said it."

"And how did he take that, ma'am?" Colbert asked. One the one hand, corpsmen and team medics often had a unique position and more freedom to speak their mind. On the other hand, given what had almost certainly been a tense working relationship in the first place, it probably hadn’t gone over well.

"Better than I thought he would," she said with a rueful grin. "I had the impression it was the first time I was speaking his language, so it could have been worse. And I did shoot him up with an anti-emetic first, that may have helped his disposition."

"Hey, B6F-903 - that's one of the ones that got culled last year, wasn't it?" Cadman asked.

"Only about eighty of them left now. I think we still send them aid now and then, mostly to supplement their all-fish-all-the-time diet."

From there on the conversation turned to reminiscing about people they’d met and planets they’d visited which had been fucked up by the Wraith or the robot people. Sometimes Colbert found it hard to understand how these people could maintain their wonder and enthusiasm about working in this galaxy when between them they could easily name twenty societies that had been wiped out.

* * *

While they were finishing up dessert - slightly squished looking coffee truffles that had clearly been saved for a while - Avery brought over his tablet.

"While I've got you all in one place, have a look at our mission schedule for the upcoming week," Avery said, going into the kitchen.

Fournier was sitting closest to the tablet. When the captain returned with coffee, he looked up. "Darren, did you just volunteer us for all the nothing missions still on the roster?"

"Eight planets in five days," Brittner said, reading over his shoulder. "And we'll be chasing daylight across the first three, with no stop in Atlantis in between." She didn't sound like that was a bad thing.


"Do you have time?"

She looked on the schedule.

"I can get somebody to check on my samples, and you have a night in the city in the middle, so looks like."

"I'm... well, as long as we don't get stuck anywhere," Brittner said. "I'm scheduled to go to Earth
"But your exam is on that Wednesday, right? We should be back the Friday before that. This coming Friday. Bloody hell, when is somebody going to come up with a sensible calendar so we can stop talking about 'two Fridays from now'?

"They're working on it," Fournier shrugged. "Not a clue what is taking so long."

"Anyway, is that enough buffer?"

"To make the exam, probably. To actually spend time studying? Not really." She sounded disappointed.

"Bring your PDA with the flashcard application, and we'll all pester you with questions."

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh, and Avery grinned. Colbert suspected that they both knew she was going to come along, but that didn't mean she had to like the position she was in.

Avery sat down and drank his tea. "Come on Lee, it'll be fun. As well as kill three birds with one stone. We put some gate miles on Colbert," he made a vaguely apologetic gesture, and Colbert nodded. "We show our faces to some allies we haven't seen in a while, and we become my entire chain of command's favourite team by taking all the scutwork off the mission list in one fell swoop."

"Four, sir, if you'll let me bring a few corpsmen on the MEDCAP mission. I've been meaning to get that signed off for all the field medics."

"If you can get it arranged with the Anthill, go ahead. It'll free us up from security to do a bit of helping out around there."

"Did you know LT Arroyo still calls his intro to Pegasus 'Captain Avery's Epic Magical Mystery Tour'?" Cadman grinned. She turned to Colbert. "He'd been through the wormhole all of two days when Colonel Sheppard shoved him at us with the words "Show him around a little"."

"I asked if he meant the city, and he said "No, the galaxy". Avery said fondly. "So I signed us up for half a dozen social calls and we dragged Alpha One's new LT across seven planets inside of a week."

"He's raised the time we were chased off a planet by birds into legend status, I think," Cadman said.

"We told him not to feed them," Brittner said distractedly, writing something on her PDA.

"I'm still sad you didn't end up using 'exfil under peck' in the report," Fournier said.

"I think I went with 'hostile avifauna' in the end," Avery said. "And the next time I was at the SGC, everybody smiled knowingly at me."

"Since Lieutenant Arroyo made them out to be Pterodactyls," Fournier smiled, "the silence on our part seems to have made that the consensus conclusion."

"Yeah, 'Nearly pecked to death by Hummingbirds' doesn't sound nearly as impressive."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the lovely reviews! It always gives me a boost to keep going :-}
Saturday, 2136 NLT
Personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,

Man, Ray really needs to learn that people won’t put up with his weird shit before he’s proven himself useful. That’s certainly the impression I get here - quirks are accepted and sometimes even encouraged, but you damn well better make sure you’re worth putting up with.

Apart from the lack of shopping options it sounds like a good thing to have outdoor access and be out underfoot of all the brass. And I’ll bet with a platoon stationed there, there’s plenty of training and entertainment options suitable for marines. (I wonder if you can order from Amazon and have it delivered to the SGC? Hell, I wonder if I can order from Amazon and have it delivered there? I’d have to order by email somehow and it’d take ages to get here, but still.)

Looks like things are picking up here too - at team dinner last night the Captain announced that he’s about to drag me all over the galaxy in a sort of introduction tour of Atlantis neighbours. The response at the NCO table was to start singing the Beatles (Magical Mystery Tour) and to urge me to bring back something cute and fluffy (?)

Apparently the gate teams have running themes to their adventures. AR1 (Colonel Sheppard’s team) has the kind of mishaps that require emergency medical care and/or a few platoons of Marines to rescue them. AR2 (Major Lorne’s team) has mishaps that require hostage negotiations or decontamination showers. AR-3 has mishaps involving either very uncomfortable alien rituals, pointy spears, or a combination of both. Reportedly Captain Klimczyk (AR9) tends to find interesting architecture by literally tripping over it or falling down into it. (“I swear, Skipper is like a dowsing rod.”)

AR4 apparently mostly has mishaps that involve being fed strange food, sitting through bizarre alien rituals, and being given weird hospitality gifts: food in varying degrees of edibility, very strange art (some of it obscene,) and animals. Which then end up with the Zoology department as they can’t be returned (not wanting to offend) and can’t be introduced to the ecosystem on another planet. The unofficial theory (which I am NOT sharing with my team) is that some cultures are concerned that the female members of this team show no inclination to reproduce, and that fertility statues and small, fluffy animals are supposed to encourage them. Yeah. SO not touching that subject with a barge pole.

Visiting neighbours doesn’t sound very exciting, but Avery seems perfectly happy to take the ‘nothing’ missions that nobody is really eager to take. Not sure if that’s for my benefit right now, but I think so: the trip seems to be taken as designated team time (It’ll be all five of us) and the idea is to get me some ‘gate miles’. They’re mostly missions that are too small or too sensitive to send a platoon on, but don’t have much potential in the way of Ancient technology or new contacts. I guess if you do SRE missions a lot you’re happy to take something low profile now and then? I’m itching for a good recon mission, but I’m not automatically the most qualified for that anymore - lots of good people here.

Thanks for the intel on Warszawski. Wonder if he knows Brittner is headed to Earth for Paramedic exams? She’ll be arriving next Monday. (I think they like to do personnel transfers on mondays because that’s when the Earth calendar and the Lantean calendar sync up). As I understand it she’ll spend a few days at the SGC. If you happen to be there, I expect you to use all your sneaky social manoeuvring powers to get her into the same space as Warszawski. Fuck only knows what’d happen, but it’d be worth seeing I reckon.

Gonna catch a few hours downtime now. We’re gating out at 0200. Stay frosty.

Brad

* * *
"I'm just saying, 'gate miles' really doesn't make any sense," Cadman's voice drifted out of the locker room. "If you measure the distance travelled through the wormhole, it should be 'gate lightyears'."

"And if you add up the actual steps you take through the gate, gate metres," Fournier added.

"You two are disgustingly awake," Avery yawned.

It was 01:50 Saturday night, so that seemed a fair comment to Colbert, who wasn't feeling completely awake himself yet. He entered the locker room, seeing most of his teammates there already. They were in various states of geared up: Avery just getting into his tac vest, Cadman had already shouldered her rucksack and was fussing with straps and shifting around to get comfortable. Dr Fournier was just lacing up his boots, rucksack already packed.

Lieutenant Brittner stumbled past him to her locker, boots unlaced and clutching a travel mug.

"...morning?" it came out a bit hesitant. It took him a moment to realise she wasn't hesitating about greeting him, but about what that greeting should be. "Evening?" She made a vague 'I don't even know' gesture, and he nodded at her in greeting.

"Hiya Colbert," Avery said. "Got some sleep?"

"Yes sir. Won't take me more than a minute to get ready," he said, shrugging into his tac vest. He'd prepared everything on the Saturday evening, before he'd caught a couple hours sleep. "Am I taking an M4?"

He wasn't going to beg, but he felt infinitely more at ease with a rifle in his hands than with the P90s.

"You wanna drag it around, I'm not going to stop you," the Captain said with a shrug. "Just keep in mind the people we visit are more likely to consider it threatening. Looks more like a Genii weapon."

"Understood."

"You got your med pack?" Brittner asked him, taking a swig of coffee from her travel mug. She was arranging the contents of her ruck to fit a box full of bottles sunscreen and the med kit that she had on the table next to her. The non-brand bottles had 'F100' written on them in Sharpie.

"Yes ma'am." He handed the red neoprene wallet over, and watched as she zipped it open, rapidly checked the contents, and then added a strip of pills and three packets marked 'ORS' from a box in her locker.

"Imodium?" he accepted the pack back.

"We're basically going to introduce you to our neighbours, Colbert," Avery explained. "They'll be feeding us."

"Right."

"Just follow our lead about what stuff you can really eat and what you only want to taste out of politeness," Cadman said from the open door to the armoury. Avery grinned. "Just don't take Lee's example, she never gets sick."

"Yes, I must remember to write my parents to thank them for the boost to my immune system," the Lieutenant said quietly, shouldering her pack and disappearing into the armoury room. She left a slightly awkward silence behind, and Avery and Fournier exchanged a look.

"In any case, these are not close allies we'll be visiting," Avery said after a long moment. "Those are the popular missions. This will be planets we occasionally treat with or just generally want to keep in touch with, so there's a bit more tiptoeing and making sure we don't offend anybody."

"Got it."

* * *
The gate room was quiet at 0200 on a Saturday, with the Marines who were on guard talking quietly and the Lieutenant who was Officer Of the Watch reading a book. Or at least, had been reading a book. When Colbert, Avery and Fournier walked, in a young man with the broad-shouldered build of an Infantry officer was just telling Lieutenant Cadman that if they managed to stick to schedule, he'd arrange to have AR4 On Tour T-shirts printed for them in the screenprint workshop. From Captain's 'Are you sure you don't want to come along?' Colbert concluded this was Lt. Arroyo. After getting used to his female officers, it was almost strange to see a typical USMC Lieutenant again.

Avery confirmed their planned itinerary with Arroyo - earlier it had sounded like a casual jaunt across the galaxy, but there was in fact an approximate time schedule with check-ins every time they went to another planet. Colbert realised that the purpose was to have at least an idea of where to begin looking if they disappeared. This was not as comforting as it would have been before he'd learned about all the ways Pegasus could fuck you up.

He wasn't sure if it was for his benefit or if the way they went about was the normal way of things, but even though it was supposed to be a friendly planet and the MALP had shown no life signs near the gate, they went through as if expecting an ambush. He and Brittner each took a side, leading with their weapons, and the moment they were through the gate and under the grey sky of the planet, they stepped to the side and swept their 180. The Captain, Fournier and Cadman had stepped through at the same time, the last one coming through the gate backward so that she was already aiming behind the gate as the wormhole blinked out.

"Clear," Fournier said dryly, looking up from the lifesign detector. His tone was that of a civilian who found it all just slightly over the top. Right. Exercise then.

Not that he didn't think it was a good idea. Best to get a feel for each other's skill levels and habits while they could.

They sent the MALP back to Atlantis and then Brittner took point to lead them into the forest. Colbert tried not to twitch - he was used to taking point, and not only did this situation leave him dependent on somebody with an unknown level of field skills, it left him right in the middle of three very awake, very talkative people who seemed to enjoy dragging him into their conversation. Maybe they were just pleased to have a new victim.

One time when Brittner glanced back he caught a pursed-lipped expression he thought might be amusement, and yeah, this probably wasn't coincidence.

There hadn't exactly been observing noise discipline, and when Brittner put up a fist to halt them nobody seemed surprised. All of them just waited, and Colbert wondered who exactly they expected to meet. He hadn't been given details about the people they'd meet, either because they'd assumed he'd looked the planets up in the database, or because the Captain wanted him to practise first contact situations.

He hadn't had time to properly research their destinations the Ancient database, which was still a half-translated mess that took practice to get anything useful out of. He'd gotten as far as the abbreviated mission list, which had told him that the expedition had first discovered this planet early on in the first year and had maintained a regular schedule of about a visit every three to four months.

Four short figures stepped out of the undergrowth about twenty metres ahead of Lieutenant Brittner. They held bows, arrows nocked but not drawn, and had paint daubed onto their faces in distinct patterns. The tallest of them said something to the Lieutenant, and the high voice tilted Colbert's perspective - not some kind of growth deficiency, but kids. They all lowered their weapons, and Avery led them to join the small group, which was already talking animatedly with the Lieutenant, all four of the kids telling her different news and stories of their tribes.

Up close he realised that they were ranging in age from about eight to maybe thirteen.

"They're sort of a cross between the Lost Boys and Lord of the Flies," Avery said under his breath. "Less of the latter, since we've convinced them to stop committing ritual suicide at 25."

"Fucking hell," he muttered back.

"They're quite welcoming, though they do generally insist on the face paint," Fournier said.
They had. Colbert fished a wetwipe out of the pack in his BDU pocket and cleaned the thick paint mark off his face. This mission had not been entirely unlike what he imagined was spending time with Ray Person's family, if Ray he had about a hundred hyperactive younger siblings who had been raised by wolves and then left to fend for themselves. It had been about ten hours - he figured, their watches did not work because of some weird technology nulling device - of non-stop chatter, storytelling, stalking games (Avery had looked on approvingly as he'd teamed up with a nine-year old with enviable woodmanscraft). Cadman had spent time being taught making a bow and learning to shoot with it. Brittner had run the impromptu mini-medpost he suspected would be part of every allied contact, handed over a big bag of vitamins, and talked to the two teens that were slated to come to Atlantis for a medical apprenticeship.

The Captain and Dr Fournier spent most of their time with the council of 'Elders' (all in their early to mid twenties) talking about the development of their community and its leadership structure, and Avery had insisted that he sit in on the meeting for a few hours to get an idea of what they faced. A society that had until a few years ago been as short-cycled as theirs was still developing into one that could deal with people staying around into their late twenties and older. From what Colbert could tell Atlantis offered guidance about everything from family planning to election organisation. He suspected that today had mostly about 'showing their faces', about the expedition maintaining a presence in the Pegasus galaxy.

"All clean?" Fournier asked, facing him. He nodded that he'd gotten the paint off. Cadman, the only one with long hair, was still trying to get it out of her hairline while the Captain dialled Atlantis. A Lieutenant Fletcher greeted them over the radio, told them the time so they could reset their watches (their hourglass-kept time was off by seven minutes) and wished them a pleasant next mission.

Colbert rocked back on his feet as the wormhole kawooshed ("That's the technical term, sergeant") and they got into formation. Avery and Cadman took the 9 and 3 positions this time, and he took 6 while Brittner was the 12 and Fournier auxiliary. Brittner stepped close enough that her shoulder brushed his arm, deliberately making the contact. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Stay level with me, sergeant. We go through together."

"Right." the contact would let him know how they were moving even as he had his back to the gate.

"We've had too much of 'he was right behind me'," Fournier explained, taking position on his other side with the lifesign detector in his hand.

"All set? Off we go," Avery said, and all five of them took the step into the wormhole.

***

The heat hit him like a wall, and the air felt thick and syrupy as he inhaled. Instantaneous travel was probably never going to stop being weird - from temperate forest to two suns above a prairie-like landscape in a single step.

They confirmed that the immediate surroundings of the gate were clear, and they stepped down from the platform to dig out sunscreen, sunglasses and hats. One of the suns had reached its zenith, the second one was approaching it.

"Two pair of life signs about half a click away," Fournier said, trying to shade the display so he could see better. "On our two and ten."

"Third platoon Bravo company, do you read me? This is Atlantis Recon team Four," Avery radioed. It was a little strange to hear radio transmission again after an entire day on a planet where none of it worked.

AR4, this is Bravo Three One, on gate detail, somebody answered. Come on down the road, we'll point you to where the LT is working.

"There's a platoon working here?" Colbert asked.

"Sometimes we trade labour in exchange for a share in the harvest," Fournier explained.
"Right." One of those. He'd heard about that.

The idea of a platoon of Marines helping with the harvest in a pre-industrial society was both hilarious and ridiculous - an affront to the warrior spirit, to put it mildly. The men they passed in the fields all seemed happy enough though, greeting the team with good-natured cheer. There was none of the 'shit rolled down and landed on us' tone or expressions that he would have expected from highly trained Marines who were being used as unskilled labour, pimped out for trade.

"They've sent us AR4? We're not even in trouble yet!" called a stocky young man as they walked toward a field where a squad was harvesting a sorghum-like grain together with the natives. Most of them had taken off their t-shirts, and they all wore shades and baseball caps or straw hats against the bright sunlight.

"We thought we'd give the preventative approach a whirl, Lieutenant Mejia," Captain Avery called back with a grin. The Lieutenant handed off his scythe and put on his shirt, either because he was facing a superior officer or because of the women on the team, and came over to them.

"Welcome to Ujuyu."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. How is it going here?"

"This is the last field, sir. Should have this clear by tomorrow noon, just when most of the fruit is ready to go. I've got a squad plucking now, and two teams helping the locals with the preserve process."

"They taking good care of your guys?"

"Bordering on too good, sir," Mejia grinned. "Gunny Ellis had to have a discrete word about the amount of beer they were setting aside for us."

"Ah yes, they do the cloudy sorghum stout here, don't they?" Avery looked like he wanted to try to get the recipe.

Colbert half listened to their conversation while he observed the Marines who were working the field. A few were bouncing a tune around that might or might not be 'Rescue Me' by Aretha Franklin and were having a half hearted go at the lyrics. Most were discussing a new computer game one of them was expecting, and there was the usual good-natured calling of insults. There seemed to be a bit more posturing going on that there had been on their arrival - both Lieutenants were watching them, and the men were clearly aware. Cadman and Brittner were talking quietly, and Colbert wondered if they were really discussing the bare torsos like the Marines seemed to think, until he caught the words 'UV index'.

"...something like eight or nine here, right?"

"Yeah, Doc Hedquist is gonna have to ride them harder about the sunscreen," Brittner nodded. "At least Sergeant McNaughton there has the good sense to cover up." She nodded at a red-haired Marine who was wearing a straw hat and a loose, longsleeved cotton shirt similar to what the locals wore. He was the only one not tanned or sunburnt, which was probably a good thing considering his pale, freckled skin.

"All right guys, time for siesta!" Lieutenant Mejia called out. Everybody gathered up canteens and discarded clothing, and a few minutes later they were strolling toward the settlement.

"Actually sir, could you see your way to discretely making sure that they're not feeding us more than they can miss?" Mejia asked Captain Avery. "We've been eating so well that it's worrying me a little, but Pesir just keeps saying that we are hungry men and they are our hosts."

"...and a platoon of Marines is basically a bottomless pit," Avery nodded. "They might be under the impression that as long as all the food is getting finished, you haven't had enough."

Colbert hung back a little, observing his team. Fournier and Avery were talking to Mejia. Cadman was surrounded by Marines, talking easily about an event she was organising and wanted their input on. He found it interesting to watch; there was distance created by both rank and gender, and they were obviously policing their manner and language, but there wasn't as much distance as he'd have expected, and it was a relaxed, animated conversation.

Lieutenant Brittner on the other hand was acknowledged with familiarity and the respect marines reserved for medics who were willing to risk their own lives to save theirs, but otherwise left
alone. He had wondered why he found it so much easier to talk to Lt. Cadman, but this was the first time he really considered that he’d been thinking of ‘women in the military’ as a single group, while there were huge differences. Cadman, personable and forthright, was also a Marine, and that made it easy for these men - and for him - to know how to relate to her. She understood their background and fit into a familiar structure, and it helped that she was approachable.

Brittner was the opposite in many ways - more reserved, Air Force - and that would never not matter - and hard to place in terms of experience and training. If it was true that she'd started her career as a nurse, he thought she probably also had less experience being around infantry, especially in larger groups, in the way Cadman clearly did have. Perhaps she was as much as a loss with them as they were with her.

He was interested to notice that Bravo Three's corpsman greeted her with warmth, and they immediately fell into a discussion about sun exposure effects in the natives. If he'd understood right, then she was responsible for the training of the field medics, so she probably knew him better than the Marines, and they clearly had a rapport.

* * *

"Dog, you wanna borrow some face paint?"

It was a strong Hawaiian accent that jarred him from his thoughts, and he blinked at the guy who sat down across from him.

"You look like you forgot to camo up for your recon mission," the man said, gesturing with his bread. He was in his thirties, deeply tanned and with his t-shirt revealing both arms covered in traditional stylised tattoo designs that had probably given his superiors fits when they’d had to grandfather him into the new Corps tattoo regulations.

"I'm good, thanks," Colbert answered, not sure what to make of this.

"I thought to myself, 'I wonder if Captain Avery brought his new Recon guy.' And here I spot somebody sitting off to the side, watching everybody like he's expecting a written exam later," the guy said. "And I figured 'that's gotta be him.'"

"Nothing to do with being the only face you didn't already know?"

The guy cracked a grin. "That too. The recon thing is pretty fucking recognisable though." He stuck out a hand. "Mel Keawe."

Colbert took it.

"Brad Colbert. You out of Pendleton?"

"Lejeune. We've got one more, he's out of Pendleton. Harrington in Alpha One."

"Thought there wasn't anybody Recon here."

Keawe shrugged with one shoulder.

"Most of us are pretty entrenched with our units, right? Hard to recruit, apparently, especially if they won't tell you anything before you've signed up. You and the guys who are gonna be AR7 are the first under the new recruiting policy."

"They let the LT pick his team, yeah."

"Makes a lot more sense. Nice that the Air Force finally listened to what we've been saying."

"So how did they get you guys?"

"Harrington's got the Ancient gene and wasn't given much of a choice. They caught me just after I'd made Staff Sergeant and was facing a fulltime job as some incompetent officer's shit barricade."

"Ever regret it?"

"Nah. LT's shaping up, Captain is a good sort, and despite them being Air Force I can't complain about Higher. Not that that stops me from doing it anyway, but you know how it goes."

Colbert grinned. He did.
"So how's a Recon E-6 taking this... traded labour shit?" he asked.

Keawe cast a meaningful look down the table, full of loud, cheerful men tearing into the fresh bread and bowls of spicy sauce.

"Dog, it's like a holiday," he said. "Nice to get out of the city, do something different from babysitting scientists - and they like us here."

"Huhn."

"Plus, I like that we're contributing to life in the city, not just defending it." Keawe shrugged. "Sometimes the Anthill can feel pretty insular. It's nice to bring back supplies that're going to make the whole city happy, remind people we do more than hang around being loud and heavily armed."

Colbert had been given one of the fig-like fruits with unpronounceable name, and it was delicious, so he could imagine that. Apparently the fruit ripened all within one week and would keep not longer than a few days after that. Atlantis, on discovering this, had struck a deal with the Ujuyun people to supply them with help and material to preserve the fruit; the major export product to this planet was the large glass jars the kitchen received a lot of its Earth supplies in. Atlantis now had a steady supply of a very popular fruit and a good destination for recycled glassware, the Ujuyuns could farm three times as much fruit without wasting any of it and had a significantly boost in prosperity for it, and glass jars, protected by woven grass baskets, could now be found at trade gatherings all across the galaxy.

"Why is it called the Anthill, anyway?"

Keawe grinned. "Apparently there was some kind of mishap with Ancient tech early on, and a whole squad got knocked out. Alpha Two pretty much invaded the infirmary to get them seen to. Doctor Beckett said they were like ants - they got in everywhere and there was no keeping them out. It sorta stuck."

"I don't care if you were born on the surface of the sun, Andrews," he heard Lieutenant Brittner say to a sergeant with skin the colour of coffee. "You're not immune to skin cancer. Use the damn sunscreen."

She was making her way down the long table, handing out bottles of Factor 100 to the team leaders. One team had apparently used the previous load of sunscreen to draw words on themselves, so they now had pale 'devil dog' tan marks. ("Negative space, Corporal. Give it a try.")

"Ma'am, you are the first person I've ever met who can pull off the boonie look," Keawe told her earnestly when she came to their end of the table. Colbert had to agree - Marines generally preferred their 8-point covers because the boonies made anybody look ridiculous, but the Lieutenant looked sort of cute with it.

Her eyebrows shot up over her shades, and her face did something complicated. Then she tossed Keawe a bottle of sunscreen.

"I had them make up a perfume free batch just so nobody could bitch about not wanting to smell like pina colada," she said. "Make sure your guys use it, and not just on the ink."

"Solid copy, ma'am."

"Colbert, when you're done eating Captain wants to see you."

"Yes, ma'am."

When she'd left Keawe gave him a WTF-look that didn't seem the usual shared rhetorical 'what's up with the officer?' look. More like he actually expected Colbert to know something. It hadn't seemed out of character to him, and he wondered if she normally reacted differently to the men - she did seem to be familiar with a fair few of them. How the hell he was supposed to know what was up he wasn't sure. He ate the last piece of his bread and got up.

"Hey, if you want to do some real Marine things, ask if Captain Avery will let you join us for the exercise that's coming up."

"Might do, thanks."

"Aloha, dog."
He thought of that again after the third hour Avery had him sit in on their meeting with the locals. He got that the Captain wanted him to get a feel for local cultures, but he thought he'd much rather be out there with the rest of the Marines, who were chilling in the shade while the two suns were both high in the sky and the sunlight was too intense to work in. He might have considered asking if he was required to stay with the diplomatic part of the mission if Fournier and Cadman hadn't both been there too - only Brittner was off, apparently to take stock of local skin issues together with the platoon corpsman.

The negotiating Avery was doing seemed to be treading a line between what these people could offer Atlantis - which wasn't much apart from that which they already were - and what Atlantis was willing and able to offer in medical assistance. It seemed to be a fine balance between a trade alliance and outright charity, and he wondered if it was deliberate that Brittner wasn't present for this part. With most medical personnel he knew, the prospect of medical help for those who needed it depending on a trade deal would probably not go over well.

In the end the locals threw in the gate addresses of several planets they had heard to have Ancient ruins, which was apparently always a good way to make the geeks happy, and an agreement for medical help was reached. Colbert didn't get all the details, couched as it was in vague terms. He'd forced himself to pay attention as much as he could, but he hoped there wouldn't be a quiz later.

It was 2100 New Lantean Time by the time they reached the gate, and the daylight that had started at 0200 was beginning to feel strange.

"So, Colbert - bass, baritone or tenor?"

They'd been walking for about half an hour through the sparse forest on the third planet of the mission. He and the Captain in the rear in amiable silence, Fournier and Brittner in front of them carrying on a quiet conversation about former Atlanteans she would try to visit, interspersed with medical questions. Cadman was walking point.

Colbert turned to look at the Captain and tried to tone down the "WTF, sir?" look shared by every NCO he'd ever met. Long association with Ray Person had inured him to the sometimes utterly random things that could come out of somebody's mouth, but he hadn't really pegged Avery as that type.

"you mean we don't know?" Fournier said over his shoulder, shocked. "I thought that was part of the selection process."

"I'll admit it wasn't my top priority at the time," Avery allowed. "So, what do you sing?"

"I don't really sing, sir," he said cautiously. Because going along with whatever shit Ray was wailing couldn't possibly count as singing. Especially not the kind of singing where it mattered if you were a base or a baritone.

"That's disappointing," Avery said seriously, and began to sing.

* * *

"We come in the Jumper Five,
Except we walked,
Around Ujuy-uuu we did roam
Talking for real
Brokered a deal
Well I feel so sunburnt
I want to go on"

It took a moment for the tune to click as 'Sloop John B'. The captain had a pleasant voice, but he sounded a bit hesitant, as if making the lyrics up as he went. Perhaps he was. Dr Fournier put forward the next part of the song.
So dial up P-six-J-four
See how the wormhole sets-

Call for the Gateroom control, Brittnner supplied. Fournier nodded and together they continued:
Let me go on, let me go on
I wanna go on, yeah yeah
Well I feel so sunburnt
I wanna go on

"Nice," the Captain grinned. They repeated the chorus, and toward the end, Colbert joined in, which seemed to give the Captain an inordinate amount of pleasure. He could almost feel the shape of the team, that moment. The way they fit together, and the space he was trying to fill and make his own.

It wasn't fixed, not by a long shot. Most of the time the Lieutenant still had that guarded look around him, as if she was waiting for something to happen, and just because it apparently hadn't so far, didn't mean it wouldn't. He might have thought that was normal for her if Avery hadn't reacted so impatiently whenever she seemed to want to say something but held her words. He didn't think that was actually helpful at all, but whatever was going on between them was their business, even if he wondered if the Captain's approach was causing the Lieutenant to dig in her heels.

Professionally he couldn't complain, and that was the main thing. Socially... well, that would come, or not.

* * *

It was mid-morning on this planet, but 2445 NLT by his watch, and after a few hours sitting in a smoky hut his eyes felt gritty and his head just a touch light. It didn't help that the locals were stiff and humourless, and expected all of them to sit still and listen attentively as they rehashed their society's entire oral history in stilted formal language. Since it mostly consisted of 'glorious progress, get culled, rebuild to our former (pre-industrial) glory, get culled again' even Dr Fournier seemed to be struggling to feign interest.

The food was bland, though not actively unpleasant. He was a Marine, he'd been trained to eat worse and like it, but mindful of the Imodium in his med pack he took small servings and followed Cadman and Avery's example in what to eat and what to taste just enough for politeness' sake. Dr Fournier was pretending to be too absorbed by the history retelling to notice his food, and Brittner was eating everything without any apparent concern for her digestive tract.

He felt an ominous rumble in his stomach and understood exactly why taking this mission off the list had made Avery a popular man with his superiors.

* * *

IDC verified. How was your run, Captain Avery?

"So good that we're extending it, Lieutenant Vaughn," Avery answered. "We're going to take a few hours for some team exercises. Expect us eight hours from now at the latest."

Noted, Captain. Good luck with the exercises.

"Thank you. Avery out."

The wormhole disengaged.

"Really, sir? After the day we've just had?" Cadman said.

Which had after all started at 0130 hours and it was now 2715 hrs. After the excruciatingly boring history lesson they had finally gotten down to business. It had taken another two hours of circle talk and ego massaging to come to an agreement. The locals were willing to let a science team explore the Ancient ruins that were far enough away from their settlement that Colbert was pretty
sure they'd never have noticed a team if Atlantis hadn't asked nicely. But apparently it was important to the expedition to ask nicely, no matter how pointless, which was why they'd all emerged from the hut coughing and with tearing eyes. The Imodium seemed to have headed off any impending stomach trouble, but he was pretty sure he wasn't the only one who didn't feel enthusiasm about the prospect of doing exercises now.

Except of course that was exactly why they should do it. Getting to know his teammates during missions was good. Getting to know them when everybody was sleep deprived and queasy and irritable was probably better. So far he'd noticed that sleep deprivation seemed to make Cadman bouncier, Fournier more talkative, and Brittner quieter. Avery hadn't really changed that he'd noticed; he suspected the Captain had had similar training and experiences as his own, and it would be a lot longer before he became noticeably affected.

"What better time?" Avery clapped his hands in a brisk sort of way. "This is now an eleven-planet hump. There are three planets that Captain Patel wants to use for the planned exercise next month, and he asked us to set out some trails. We've got a desert, snow, and a temperate autumn. Lee, what's our order?"

Lieutenant Brittner had set down her pack to make cold MRE coffee in a plastic bottle, and paused in shaking it.
"Desert, temperate, snow. Least shock that way."

"Works for me. Let's roll."

Chapter End Notes

I was trying to write breezier, so more time would pass in the same amount of words. Apparently I suck at breezier because there was no way I could get this entire week long mission into one chapter length.

Thank you for the lovely reviews! They really do help me to stay motivated and I still enjoy any speculation you might want to fire in my direction :-)
After they had taken a moment for hats, shades and sunscreen, the Captain decided they were now under enemy attack, and Colbert had to scramble to find his place in their retreat pattern.

And then... Sahara. It was a proper sandy desert too, with dunes and some dried up trees dotting the horizon and nothing much else.

They took turns digging a hole almost a metre deep, and Avery dropped in a small sealed box and an Ancient bauble that glowed faintly while he held it. Apparently the idea was that the shifting sand would hide where it was buried and only the Marines working with a somebody with the gene would find the clue.

"How does that work, sir?" he asked. "Detecting things like this?"

"Ah, that's a skill in itself," Avery said cheerfully, shovelling sand into the hole. "I mostly sense Ancient technology as a sort tickle in the back of my awareness. It takes practice to be able to seek it out and work with it."

"Always feels to me like running your finger around the rim of a wine glass sounds," Brittner said contemplatively, eyes on the horizon. Colbert concluded from that that it was probably something the English language didn't have concepts for. Operating machines with your brain was weird shit.

* * *

The temperate planet turned out to have gentle rolling hills and a tough sort of grass so tall that most of them disappeared, which was cause for some amusement. The Captain split them up: Cadman and Fournier, Colbert and Brittner, and himself on his own, and tasked them with making a trail away from the gate that looked like it was going somewhere for the first click or so, and then slowly went crazy. Sounded like fun to Colbert, apart from the company.

"Let's make for that hill," Brittner said, nodding in the direction of what would be a vantage point about a click away if you could see over the grass - which wasn't likely. She pulled ranger beads from a vest pocket and then, after a moment of hesitation, made a gesture that he should go in front. They jumped down from the side of the gate platform, and with the agreement of radio contact every ten minutes, disappeared into the tall grass.

They didn't speak much, and in between shoving his way through the grass and trying to keep orienting on the hill he could just glimpse if he stood on his toes, he wondered why she was suddenly okay with putting him at point. Was it just because she didn't feel like making the path? Tempting as that explanation was, he hadn't pegged her for a shirker, and she'd hesitated long enough that there had to be more to it. He had the feeling he should understand this, after Cadman and Mehra had clued him in on female-in-the-military issues, but he just didn't. It still felt like everything she did was an evaluation, like she had a list in her mind and was observing him for specific things to tick off. He just wished he knew what was on that list.

"I make this one kilometre," she noted when they were halfway up the hill. She seemed to wait a moment, as if expecting... he wasn't sure. "Let's find the most likely vantage point."

After they had made a small clearing they veered off to the right and back downhill. Radio contact and the lifesign detector had established that they had three trails heading straight out from the gate, and that they would each slowly turn right, meet the next trail, and use that to return to the gate.

"Want to switch?" she asked at a while later.

Colbert hesitated. Blazing trail was heavy work, but was she offering because she thought he was tired and needed the break? The Corps had definite Ideas about what sort of work officers did and what sort of work enlisted men did, and he didn't think she should be the one sweating while he walked behind, not if he wanted to keep his self-respect intact. But he'd also already realised that rules like that fell by the wayside in a gate team, and he didn't want to be one of those guys Dusty
Mehra had mentioned, who took work out of her hands because they considered themselves automatically more qualified. He just also didn't want to look lazy by letting her do the heavy work. Jesus, it was all so fucking complicated.

She was still waiting for an answer, and he thought about what he would say if this was Nate Fick asking. Nate would offer to take the lead, and it would be a genuine offer, but he'd also know that his men would rather drop dead than let their LT do the grunt work while they walked comfortably in his trail. He would have understood that this was about rank and Corps pride and not because they thought him incapable. If Lt. Brittner would understand the same was something else.

"I'm fine, ma'am," he said eventually. She seemed to find that amusing and he wanted to know why, but he couldn't exactly ask her.

It occurred to him some time later that both Cadman and Dr. Fournier were part-time members of this team - only Avery and Brittner went on all the team's missions. And he, from now on. He would be part of the core members, and perhaps the Captain's habit of shoving him together with the Lieutenant was as much because he wanted to shore up that side of the triangle as that he wanted them to sort out the personal side.

"Can you get a visual on the gate? Should be on our four," she said at some point.

He craned to see through the thinner top of the grass layer, looked down to check the direction she was indicating, and finally spotted the round crest of the top of the gate.

"Only just the top. There's a slight rise in between."

"Thank you, sergeant Periscope."

He cracked a grin at hearing her amusement, and went back to making a trail.

"If we veer right here we should bump into the Captain's trail within twenty metres," she said, moving a bead on her pacing cord. He'd seen the lifesign detector and its deeply uninformative screen, so he was maybe a little bit impressed when they did indeed hit another trail twelve metres later, and they followed it back.

They were the first back at the gate and set up post at the rear side, taking off outer layers to cool down from the walk. Colbert hesitated before taking off his base layer, unsure what was appropriate in the presence of a female officer, but she hadn't cared about the Marines on the earlier planet, so he went ahead and stripped off his sweat-soaked t-shirt. If the next planet was cold, wearing damp layers wasn't a good idea.

By the time he was dressed again she'd closed her PDA in frustration and tucked it away. He was all set to ignore her in favour of keeping watch - which wasn't really necessary between the life signs detector and the gate - when he caught a glimpse of her expression, the set of her shoulders, the bruising under her eyes.

It reminded him strongly of being in Iraq, of seeing his Lieutenant strain under the pressure of 36 hours without sleep and an avalanche of shit to hold back. Lt. Nate Fick could have that look in his eyes that said that all his illusions were being crushed under the weight of the world, and Colbert had never been able to resist the urge to try to offer something, anything, no matter how small - a crappy joke, a moment of shared silence - to ease that load.

Lt. Brittner gave the impression that she didn't hold any illusions at all. She didn't have that idealism that had made Nate so damn painful to watch during OIF, and he wondered if she'd never had it or if Pegasus had already taken care of it. He still felt himself responding to the expression. Maybe that shit was grafted into your brain when they gave you Sergeant's stripes.

He knelt down to make coffee.
"Studying not going well, ma'am?"

She blinked up at him.

"My brain feels like it's been boiled dry," she said after a moment.

He chuckled. That was a fairly accurate description of how he felt.
"That history lesson?"

"I'm wondering if it wasn't the smoke in that hut. I should have taken a sample of the wood they burn."
He finished shaking the bottle with cold coffee. "Here ma'am, this should help."

She gave him a slow, searching look as she accepted the bottle. Her lips quirked a little. "Something tells me that accepting field coffee from a Marine should be accompanied by the Jaws theme."

"Can't speak to that, ma'am," he said.

She probably interpreted that dodge exactly right, because she took a very cautious sip. Her eyes widened comically, and she coughed a little.

"JesusFUCK sergeant! What IS this?"

"My old RTO, Ray Person, likes to try shit out," he said, trying to contain his grin. "This is his favourite."

"Well, it lends weight to the theory that the Marine Corps cauterises the taste buds of its recruits on enlistment," she shook her head in disbelief. "This is what, coffee, creamer, sugar, chocolate mix and mints?"

"Two coffee packets. And this." He showed her the little packet of caffeinated mints.

"Oh, hell." She knocked back a long swig, made a face, took another one, and handed the bottle back to him. "Person is one of the guys on the new AR7, right? He and Michel should start an MRE cooking section on the wiki together."

"I thought the doctor was more a fresh ingredient kind of guy."

"We got stuck in a jumper for five days once," she said.

"Five days, ma'am? What happened?" He tried not to sound alarmed. Five days locked in a space that was maybe 12 metre square with three other people sounded like unadulterated hell to him. At least with the Humvees you could occasionally get out.

"Gate malfunctioning on the planet where we were at, we had to fly to the next nearest stargate," she shrugged. "Anyway, experimenting with what sort of meals we could create out of the different MREs was one of the chief sources of entertainment."

* * *

Two hours later he was rolling huge snowballs on a planet they were calling 'the snow planet' even though Dr Fournier insisted that it wasn't, that its gate was just set in the local equivalent of North Sweden. It wasn't uncomfortably cold - it helped there wasn't much in the way of wind - but they didn't have proper winter gear. It was probably a good thing they were only spending a short time there.

Avery and Dr Fournier were using E-tools and knives to carve the balls into blocks suitable for building with. If the purpose was to build a functional snow shelter, they would go about this differently. But since the purpose was to make a shelter that would invite exploration and look old by next month, this approach worked just fine. They had their radios set to open, and there was a discussion going on about the best gate room entry a team had ever made. Apparently toward the end of the year teams upped the weirdness factor in how they came through the gate - something to do with a video reel being shown at the Christmas party. Avery and Cadman were discussing AR3's 'STOP! Hammertime!' entry versus AR8's literally launching one of their members through the wormhole so that he slid into the gateroom on his stomach in superman pose.

By the time they returned to the last planet of their official itinerary to thaw out and make it look like they'd been there all along, the conversation had progressed to cajoling Brittner into using the new medical moulage supplies to making the five of them look like zombies.

* * *
Nate,

Just got out of the post-mission medical. Went through the gate at 0200 Saturday night, returned to Atlantis at 0716 hrs this morning. (remember, no Sundays here). Six planets in a little over 33 hours. Kind of insane, kind of awesome. And yeah, it was mostly a 'team time' thing. I won't say we've bonded, but we maybe have a better idea of how we work as individuals and where I fit into the team.

I made Ray's horrific chocolate-mint-coffee shit and fed it to Lt. Brittner. Yes, you read that right, AND I don't think she dislikes me more now than she did before. But anyway, I'm too wired to sleep, which is why I am writing this.

Planet 1: society where nobody is older than mid-twenties. They used to commit suicide at 25 because they believed it kept the Wraith away.
Planet 2: Two suns, platoon of Marines helping the indigs with the harvest. Atlantis exports fruit preservation technique and material. (All the technological advantages we have, and how we can best help these people is by teaching them canning.)
Planet 3: Apparently nicknamed 'Dullaria' by most of the expedition. Proof that offworld missions are sometimes as unglamorous as can be. Food was crap and they burn a wood that made my brain feel like it had been microwaved for an hour. (That might be an actual thing, LT took samples home to test.)
Planet 4: Uninhabited (as far as we know). Desert. Set out a trail
Planet 5: Uninhabited. Walked around in really tall, tough grass
Planet 6: Snow.

We’re gating back out 2200 for a humanitarian mission. I can’t even begin to tell you how surreal it is to go home to shower and sleep in between missions. This just breaks my brain.

Got to go see if I can get some sleep now, I need to be ready in time to prep the jumper for tonight.

I hope you’re all doing okay on your own gate adventures. Stay out of trouble

Brad

* * *

"You do this a lot, ma'am?"

Lieutenant Cadman swiped a tendril of hair out of her face.

"Which part, sergeant?"

"Turning up to provide medical care," he gestured down to where the MASH jumper had been parked, a large gazebo-like structure set up over the ramp. The two doctors, plus Lt. Brittner and the three corpsmen she'd brought along, were busy examining, triaging and treating pretty much every member of this tribe, which was 45, maybe 50 people all told. Apparently there had been nearly 300 of them. They had been culled ten days ago, and this was a follow-up visit. People were still fearful and jumpy, and Colbert tried not to let their haunted expressions settle under his skin.

Captain Avery had taken a watch down there while Dr Fournier was talking to the elders, possibly smoothing things along when the medical procedures were unfamiliar and frightening.

"As a team, yeah," she nodded. "That sort of goes with the territory when you have a field medic. I'm not usually on these missions though."

"Right."

The in-flight entertainment for the jumper ride to get there had mostly been filled with the corpsmen fantasising about outrageous medical drill scenarios, and sharing their kit wishlist with Lt. Brittner. Apart from the things she would already bring, they lobbied for a bloodpump, which was apparently required so they could simulate arterial bleeding, to properly train their units into taking First Aid lessons seriously. They'd been aided and abetted by Doctors Cole and Nieves,
who seemed to find the whole thing hilarious, and Captain Avery, who had put in that they could also do proper Monty Python performances if they had one.

He handed Cadman a detonator and kept his torch aimed at her hands as she set it up for the small amount of C4 she'd stuffed into a crack in the rock surface. The local people had chosen this cave system as their new home, and Cadman had offered to make it more habitable with a few careful, controlled detonations.

"Is the barrier on your side ready?"

He ran his fingers over where he'd stuffed a crack with clay, and nodded. The clay would hopefully contain the blastwave and direct the energy where it would split the rock, turning a low, uncomfortably narrow inner passage into one suitable for human use.

"Okay then," she said brightly, gesturing for him to head to the cave mouth, double checking her detonators and then following him. "Let's blow shit up!"

* * *

Sunday, 2204hrs
Personal quarters, Beta site

Brad,

Glad to see your mission went okay. Thanks for telling me more about your team. They sound like an interesting mix, and the more I learn about gate missions the more that sort of diversity makes sense. I look forward to meeting them.

It must feel very strange to have so little to do with the Marine contingent of the city! I found it disconcerting at the SGC, and being on Beta site has turned out quite well for all of us - with only Marines here I don't have to worry so much about best behaviour.

Sorry for the short email, we've been doing almost non-stop exercises, classes and manoeuvres. Gives a lot less time for worrying about the whole alien thing, that's for sure. We're all just falling into our racks at the end of the day. So far it's only been on this planet, but Gunny Warszawski says in a few days we'll start doing training missions through the gate.

Any specific reason why you wrote that you're not in Kansas anymore? Sounded like something happened. I really hate this email delay.

Take care,
Nate

* * *

2146hrs, Monday
Beta site, barracks

Iceman,

How's it going? Been sucked dry yet?

Thanks for your mail, man. I'm still not convinced, but I like how nobody is pussyfooting around the risks and dangers. That isn't really what makes me hesitate, though. It's the idea that if I don't make it back, my little girl will never even have an idea of what I was doing and why. There'll be no body, no explanations, just Airforce cover bullshit.

Not telling Gina what we're doing in Afghanistan or Iraq is.. well, we're both used to OpSec, but Earth based missions (look at me, writing about Earth based missions as if it's in any way normal that there are non-Earth based missions) have a spectrum. She doesn't know what I'm doing, but she has a reasonable idea of what it is she doesn't know about. This... this shit is different. Fuck, I don't even know. I just worry about being on leave and facing my girls and feeling like shit because they worry about IEDs while they should really worry about space vampires in another
galaxy. I don't know that I could manage to act like the person they know. I worry that the secret is too big.

Of course, the secret of the whole alien/stargate/other planets thing is already there, now I've been read in. And I'm fucked if I know why I'm asking an emotionally stunted fucker like you for advice.

Manere frigus,

Poke

* * *

Disoriented by the different rhythms of all the planets he'd visited in rapid succession, he slept poorly and in snatches, barely three hours all together. Then, after reporting to the jumper bay, he made a city tour together with Lt. Cadman to collect the items on the mission list.

Cadman looked like she hadn't quite managed enough sleep, but was nonetheless her energetic and talkative self. Colbert had wondered at the tight mission planning until he'd remembered that the Captain was running it like a stress test. Not full bore military exercise, but certainly an opportunity to figure out their team dynamic under pressure.

To his frustration he was far more tired than he should be. Six rest-hours in a safe, comfortable place used to be enough to set him back to rights. Hell, he'd recharged on an hour's sleep in a ranger grave. Now it seemed like he was more tired than when he'd gone to bed.

"How are you feeling?" Lt. Cadman asked as they got into the transporter.

"I'm fine, ma'am."

"Yeah?" she eyed him critically. "You sleep okay?"

Her expression said to cut the bullshit, and he wondered how she knew.

"Not really, ma'am."

"Hypomania?"

"Ma'am?"

"We're running on eighty hours of daylight, sergeant," she said. "That's gonna have an effect."

"Eighty?" He knew it had been a few days, but different day/night rhythms on every planet threw off his sense of time completely.

"We left Monday at 0200, it's now Wednesday afternoon?"

Right. Yes. He knew that. And it explained why the doctor who'd done his post-mission medical had been so interested in his mental state.

The mission turned out as ordinary as he suspected gate missions got. The expedition had been unable to reach the natives on one of the regular 'keeping up with the neighbourhoods' visits, though there'd been no signs of culling. AR4 took a jumper and did an aerial scan, located the new settlement half a continent away, and set down to catch up with them. Colbert was impressed by the distance the people had managed to cover - Avery did a quick conversation of the Jumper's Ancient measurements and said it was close to 500 kilometres.

The people were surprised but pleased to see them. They had voluntarily given up access to the Stargate, because better protection from the Wraith and better hunting grounds were worth it, but now they knew the Lanteans were willing to occasionally visit they were eager to make use of the opportunity to trade. There was food, which was tolerable, and drink, which was not, and it was altogether unremarkable apart from departure, when the natives tried to give Lt. Brittner a cub of the semi-domesticated Cougar-like predator they hunted with. To her visible disappointment the Captain managed to refuse the offer without causing offence.

* * *
Thursday, 1249 NLT
Personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,

Quick reply - I'm on an 8-hour break between planet 5 (really planet #8, but we're not counting the unofficial missions) and 6. I'll admit I thought this was going to be a breeze. Intense week long mission, sure, but not into hostile territory and a few actual sleep breaks on Atlantis. Compared to Iraq... I thought the biggest strain was going to be politely refusing weird alien food, because almost everybody wants to feed us. It sounded like luxury to me!

And it sort of is, but there are no words for how much gate travel fucks up your internal rhythms. We've been going from evening daylight straight to morning daylight and back again, on planets with anything between 13 hour days and 41 hour days. No night hours at all, because the breaks on Atlantis have been daytime, and I have actually had a lot of trouble getting to sleep. Don't think that's happened since boot camp. I feel fucking wiped out. Apparently it's a known problem, which is why Captain Avery is running the mission this way - everybody reacts to the rhythm thing differently.

Kind of a team stress test I guess. And it wouldn't surprise me all that much if it came to an explosion: hopefully not one to do with me, though. More likely the Captain and Lt. Brittner. Normally when they clash it has something of exasperation, you know? Like they've been over that ground and it hasn't been resolved and they both know it. With everybody kind of stretched thin it has a different feel to it. A lot sharper. I guess there are worse times for the team to implode (like when we're knee-deep in Wraith) - with Dr. Fournier and Lt. Cadman both along at least I don't have to deal with the immediate fallout. Plus, I've been here short enough that and I stand a reasonable chance of being reassigned quickly to either a Company or another gate team. Not like I'm particularly invested or anything.

I better try for some sleep. Next planet is apparently a social call. Hope their food is better than last planet.

Brad.

Chapter End Notes

*imploring eyes* Review plz?

I'm hitting the heavy writing stage now, where my initial steam doesn't quite push the story along anymore, and it would really help me to know that there are still people reading and anticipating. Anyway, what's going on with the team? Is Colbert catastrophising?
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Nate,
I will tell you about the mission with the freaky mutant Kudzu at some later point.
Going to drag my gate-lagged ass to bed now.
Brad

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After an eight-hour turnaround in which he mercyfully got some sleep, they flew back out for what was supposed to be a 'quick visit' to one of their more distant allies. Seven hours later Colbert was beginning to learn that even a quick visit involved clinic - he had to hold still a young boy while Lt. Brittner pulled his broken, deeply infected tooth - dinner, and interplanetary gossip time.

* * *

They returned to Atlantis only to exchange jumpers - two had been prepared for then by the Marines that were helping the Jumper engineering team.

"Here you go sir, all hatches battened down," one of them said with a grin. "As goat-proof as we can make it."

For a moment he thought the guy was talking about disaster-proof, as in goatfucks, but Avery just nodded and sent Colbert off to get a thermos of coffee and one with hot water for tea.

* * *

"We're really going to transport goats?"

"Captain didn't tell you? Yeah, it's a favour for people we know. They have a space gate, so they can't do any trading themselves," Lt. Brittner said, scrolling through the jumper's Heads-up Display

"And we bring them goats?"

"Yup. In return for being allowed to play in their giant Ancient temple."

"Right. Do they even care about the temple?"

The people on Dullaria sure hadn't.

"Oh yes, these people worship the Ancients. And they think we're them. It's all kind of embarrassing, really."

"They think you're Ancients?"

"We try not to promote that idea, but it's hard to disabuse them of it when half the temple lights up as soon as you walk in," she shrugged, and they lapsed into silence.

He'd been unsubtly encouraged to ride in the jumper flown by Lt. Brittner while the other three rode together. He'd raised an eyebrow at the way Avery had achieved it, but it turned out not to be such a bad arrangement. Cadman and Fournier were both in what he now realised were hypomanic states, high energy and high spirited moods induced by well over a hundred hours of sunlight. Cadman had been speedtalking about the Atlantis Pentathlon she was organising, and while he liked her, it was a bit tiresome in his current state of mind. It was like a Ray you couldn't tell to shut up.

The exhaustion run seemed to affect them all different. Cadman and Dr Fournier were more bouncy and seemingly inexhaustible, though at least the doctor was probably heading toward a crash sooner than later, and probably both of them.
Captain Avery was still energetic but more irritable, his usual good humour a little sharper, his never abundant patience markedly reduced. Lt. Brittner seemed exhausted, but she'd seemed exhausted three planets ago and hadn't noticeably slowed or changed since then, so it was hard to tell how she was doing.

He himself was feeling that stretched out, gritty feeling of impending exhaustion - he was still up and running, but the mental elasticity to handle setbacks and adapt to circumstances was rapidly disappearing. And while the silence between them was more comfortable than he'd expected, it also became too tempting to close his eyes. He stifled a yawn.

"If you're tired and you know it," the Lieutenant sang under her breath, "Crack a yawn..." and she did.

Colbert snorted.

"I have music on my tablet," she said with a jerk of her head to the mission box.

He wasn't sure if that was a request or a suggestion or an order, but it seemed like a good idea to him. Her music program actually had a playlist called STAY AWAKE, the tablet connected to the console with a bundle of cables, and a minute later he caught himself nodding his head along with something called Vibe Tribe.

* * *

On reflection, listening to Israeli psychedelic trance turned out to be the calmest moment of the mission. The planet they went to to deliver hand tools and collect goats ('Hriri') had a wealth of children, goats (obviously) and loud, chaotic people who were trying to make themselves heard over both. It took a meal of goat meat, a mildly strange ritual and four hours for hospitality to be satisfied, and another hour before they were finally shown the goats that had been selected for them. There were two herds of ten does, some of them clearly bred, and a buck each. They were fairly large, well-muscled and had broad, heavy horns.

"Semper gumpy," Colbert sighed, trying to cut off a goat jailbreak as they were herding the animals to the jumpers. He thought he should have found this mission demeaning and an insult to his skills, but in their tired states it turned out to be mostly hilarious. Especially the very British swearing as the Captain lead along an obstinate buck.

Lt. Cadman snorted laughter loud enough to make the goats in front of her bolt.

* * *

Friday, 1955hrs
Personal quarters, Beta site

Brad,

Your mystery tour sounds interesting! They may not be high profile, but I can see how that sort of thing could give you a good impression of Pegasus cultures and missions in a short time. You'll be most of the way through by the time you get this email, so I hope it's all going well.

(going home in between missions sounds weird. But the whole Stargate-instant-travel thing is weird. Hell, Gunny Warszawski says he's been doing it for seven years and it's STILL weird. Garza has a theory that we all got blown up in Iraq and we're sharing Ray's bizarro world coma dream.)

The running mission themes thing made me laugh. Now I'm wondering if myself and this roadside carnival I call a team will have a running theme. Hopefully it'll be something mildly embarrassing but harmless.

I can't believe you fed Ray's horrible concoction to your LT. Are you sure she just hasn't stopped vibrating long enough to have gotten around to busting your ass for it? When Ray fed it to me I felt like I'd had my ass kicked by seven-league boots.

We've done two offworld missions (okay, we're at Beta site, so already 'offworld'. Off WHICH world, anyway? Do they say that in Atlantis?) both to uninhabited planets, mostly to practice land nav. Seriously old school land nav. Sextants! I am enjoying that so much. We should get our first native meet-and-greet tomorrow, presumably to people who are already used to meeting SGC newbies and won't shoot us for inadvertently stomping all over their toes.

You'll be pleased to hear that I will indeed be at the SGC on Monday and Tuesday, together with Bryan and Tony. Bryan is doing a few days in the infirmary, and Tony and I are getting extra de-
escalation and negotiation training. (Major Teldy is clearly onto Tony's I'm-only-smart-when-it-suits-me thing, he's been assigned a lot of extracurricular training courses.) Not sure yet if Gunny Warszawski is coming along, but if he is, I'll do my best.

It may disappoint you, but my 'sneaky social manoeuvring powers' mostly consist of actually talking to people. You might give it a go.

Stay frosty,
Nate

* * *

They arrived back on Atlantis around 1100 on Friday, did a twelve-hour turnaround this time, enough to catch up with email from the latest databurst, shower off the smell of goats, and try to sleep.

As Colbert surveyed the faces in the locker room, he wasn't sure how much of that last had been successful. Lieutenant Cadman still reminded him of Ray Person on Ripped Fuel. Dr Fournier was cheerful and looked somewhat better than before the break, but still like he was headed for a crash. Captain Avery seemed more energetic but in no better mood, and Lieutenant Brittner seemed to have completely lost the interest in speaking with any of them. He wondered if she was annoyed at the mission overrunning - it would be early Saturday by the time they finished this last visit, but it was clear the captain didn't consider her presence optional.

Oh yeah. Looked like a fun mission ahead.

It was a simple social contact mission on foot, slated to be about eight hours long, and the last of their run. A trade contact who'd disappeared off the market gatherings where they usually had contact with Atlantis.

"When was this MALPed, Lieutenant Arroyo?"

"About an hour ago, sir," the Lieutenant answered from the control gallery. "It was midday there then. Nothing to report. Looks greener than it used to."

* * *

"Talk about a bloody understatement," the Captain commented after they'd come through on the other side. As far as Colbert could see was covered in some kind of creeping vine. Even the Gate itself - the wormhole had punched a hole through the green covering.

"I can see the settlement," Dr Fournier said, looking at the lifesign detector. "Looks to be where it was."

"I take it it didn't use be like this?" Colbert said.

"No." Avery said grimly. "Lieutenant, toss some machetes through the gate," he radioed. "And we'll want to decontaminate when we return. No point in using cleansuits now, but they appear to have a weed problem here."

A few minutes later they had machetes, and they set off in the direction of the settlement. Close to the Gate the growth was still only knee-high, but it got a lot higher quickly, until they had to take turns in front, hacking a tunnel. The smell of plant sap was oppressive.

"Mutant Kudzu," Cadman was explaining behind him as he hacked his way through the green wall. "Have you heard of Kudzu, sir? I don't suppose they have it in England. It's some kind of Japanese plant that is a plague in the South of the US. It's the only plant in the world with a growth progress measured in miles per hour. This looks a little different, but not all that much. The circumstances must be exactly right here."

"When you think of it, it is amazing this does not happen a lot more often," Dr Fournier said, bringing up the rear. He was filming everything. "With all the interplanetary travel, getting spores or seeds onto shoes and clothing must happen a lot."

"We're going to check in with the settlement, get as much info as we can, take samples, and send in the Biology department," Avery decided.
"Deploy... ze botanists!" Cadman cackled in a mock German accent.

When Colbert started to flag, Brittner tapped him on the shoulder and gestured she’d take point for a bit. He couldn't find it in himself to protest and left her to her slow but steady progress.

They found the locals wrapped up in a concerted effort to keep their last field of tuber root free of the invasive weed. It was a strange reception, because the people (he silently dubbed them Kudzudites) obviously feared for the team’s homeworld and were dismayed to see them. Colbert realised they’d isolated themselves and not used the Gate at all since their problem had began, worried that calling in help or evacuating would spread the weed to other planets. Once they learned that the team had both ways to keep their own world safe and the intention and ability to help, they were beyond glad to see them.

Colbert was familiar with this type of mission, in a way - visit a place in crisis, asses what the people needed. Recon had done this in Baghdad, though it had usually been Nate doing the assessing. Still, there was something comfortingly familiar about letting a couple of the locals take him around their village to show the damage. He filmed everything and tried to ask useful questions (Where had the first growth been? What had the weather been like at that time? How fast had it spread? Which planets had they visited in the time before that? What did they do for drink water? How much had the waterlevel of their well dropped since the weed had surrounded the village?).

It wasn't until about ten hours later, when twilight was just starting, that they discovered that the path they had cut from the Gate had grown completely closed. The Kudzudite leaders, a small man by the name of Terk and his smaller wife Pera, apologised.

"We thought you were aware of the speed of its growth, Captain. I apologise for not telling you of this sooner."

In truth, they had all been told about how fast the stuff grew, had in fact spent the past ten hours seeing the results of it, but Colbert hadn't truly taken it in until they were standing in front of the tunnel they had so laboriously made. Or rather, where you could still see it was filled with new growth. There was nothing like concrete visual evidence.

"So... looks like we're staying the night," the Captain sighed. Pera brought them to the communal hut, where there were mats and blankets. She apologised for the very meagre meal she could offer, and they ended up breaking into the MREs to make a few Minestrone Stew dinners into a sort of thick soup, padded out with some Beef Steak and Chicken Breast dinners and some tuber roots. The resulting pan full of surprisingly palatable food ended up feeding most of the village.

Colbert was vaguely aware of a radio conversation when Atlantis dialled in to see why they’d missed their check-in time. The Captain requested humanitarian supplies and a platoon of Marines, to arrive in the morning. The Marines would help defend the village while the scientists in Atlantis would work on the samples the team was bringing back.

A night on a planet where you could hear the weed grow (he wasn't sure if he'd ever hear a more sinister sound) wasn't really how he'd hoped to catch up on sleep, but actual darkness outside made it all irrelevant. After 150 hours of continuous daylight his body was ready to shut down at the first sign of night. He fell asleep to the image of Lt. Brittner on watch, sat leaning against the doorpost with her face lit by her PDA screen, and the quiet talking of his team.

"I think we should hook these people up with the Hririans," Cadman was saying. "Offer it as grazing ground for their goats..." she yawned.

"We'd have to make sure they wouldn't be spreading the plant via their fur or mest...." Dr Fournier pointed out.

"Yeah, but... think of it... like interplanetary matchmaking. It would be awesome... "

* * *

"Colbert?" He woke up to a low-pitched voice and the smell of coffee. Lt. Brittner was crouched well back as if she hadn't been sure if he'd wake up swinging. There was a mug next to him.

"Yeah. Up," he rasped, pushing to a sit. Two hours of deep sleep had been very welcome, but it was still only two hours.

A minute later he joined her at the doorway.
"Thanks," he gestured with the coffee. It was ridiculously strong, which he figured was either payback for the coffee concoction he'd given her, or a challenge. He drank it anyway - even at four times normal strength it was still better than pouring coffee crystals straight into your mouth, and he'd done that plenty of times too. "Anything going on?"

"Well, it hasn't shown sentience yet," she said dryly. "It'll be at the door by morning though, by the rate of growth. Couple of critters were hunting over by the hut there, nothing else."

"Got it. Sleep well."

"Good watch."

It wasn't until he felt his fatigue return near the end of his watch that he realised he didn't have the caffeine shakes he'd expected, and that she'd fed him decaf. What sick individual brought decaf on a mission?

... ***

"Time to wake, everybody. Alpha Three is going to be here soon."

"Oh God, and LT Vaughn and Gunny Walsh are always disgustingly awake in the mornings," Lt. Cadman groaned.

Colbert looked around and was somewhat relieved to see that nobody really seemed to be feeling significantly better than the night before. At least he wasn't the only one. He figured it would take at least another normal night until he felt like a human being again.

The Captain was rummaging in his pack with a frown. Lt Cadman and Dr Fournier both looked like they'd been unplugged from the mains. Lt. Brittner wasn't even awake yet, until Avery reached out and gave a firm poke at the sole of her exposed foot. He withdrew just in time to avoid getting kicked as she jolted upright in an explosion of movement.

"Get the fuck up," the Captain said curtly. "We need to bloody well hack our way out of this bloody hut."

The door opening was filled with vines and the springy, green branches that heralded complete invasion by the weed.

She curled around the mug Dr Fournier handed her and mumbled something that sounded like it was almost certainly uncomplimentary.

"...where are the machetes?"

Colbert looked around. He didn't see them either.

"I gave them to Terk to sharpen--oh, fuck," Lt. Brittner said, becoming more alert. "I was going to collect them after we'd eaten, but then everybody got distracted by the food and he hadn't done them yet, and..."

"You forgot about it," Avery stated sharply.

"I forgot about it," she agreed, deceptively mild.

"Why didn't we just do them ourselves?"

"He wanted to do something for us, as repayment for our help, and he has a flywheel. It seemed to make sense."

"Except now we have to wait for bloody Alpha Three to hack us out."

"Think about how happy they will be, getting to rescue us for once. It'll make their month."

Colbert had to admire her hardcore commitment to deflecting the argument the Captain seemed to want to be having. Was Avery's increasing irritation was a side effect of her approach or the objective? He sort of wished they would just shout at each other already. Since there didn't seem to be anything to do once their gear was packed, Dr Fournier gestured for him to join him and Lt. Cadman for a card game.

It was an uncomfortable, tense hour until the Marines reached their doorway, lead by a Sergeant with a rambo-style headband and a shiteating grin.
"Have no fear! Alpha Three is here!" he announced, chopping away the last branches.

"Sergeant Davis!" Lt. Brittner said, "my hero." Her bone dry tone did not quite hide her relief at getting out of the hut. The Sergeant beamed at her.

The platoon had arrived with three jumpers, one of which had already taken off for an aerial scan of the planet to map the spread of the weed. The team would take the remaining two with them so they could not be swallowed up by the weed. Captain Avery spent some time handing over to Lieutenant Vaughn while Dr Fournier and Lt. Cadman said goodbye to the Kudzudites. Colbert loaded up the cases with samples.

When the Captain was finished he strode toward the waiting jumpers and looked around.

"BRITTNER!"

The Lieutenant was talking to the platoon corpsman a short distance away, and she turned around to level the sort of look that wise Lieutenants did not level at their superior officers.

The Captain straightened up with a hard expression, and Colbert wondered if they had reached explosion point at last.

"Stop your bloody gossiping and get on with it," the Captain said.

"Come Sergeant, let's take this jumper," Cadman appeared at his elbow, sounding too cheerful in the suddenly tense atmosphere. He followed to where Dr Fournier was already heading up the ramp of one of the jumpers. "The Captain and the Lieutenant can ride together."

They were airborne in a few moments, and he caught a glimpse of both officers looking up.

"We'll be waiting for you in upper atmosphere," Dr Fournier radioed. Since the gate was less than half a click away, there was no need at all to go up, but it made it clear that he expected them to take their time sorting themselves out.

Colbert half expected the second jumper to go straight through the gate, but the HUD did indeed show that it was going up.

* * *

"Are they yelling, you think?" Lt. Cadman asked after about five minutes of silence. She was sitting on the deck between the two front chairs, back against the console, knees drawn up. Maybe it was just the crash after five days of inexhaustible upbeat energy, but she sounded a little bit lost.

"I hope so," Dr Fournier said absently, scrolling through the display views.

"The problem is that the Captain doesn't really know how to stop poking before he gets a reaction," he continued once he'd finished with the jumper. "And that Lee doesn't really know how to speak her mind until she's ready to shoot somebody." He sounded unhappy with the situation, though not as upset as Colbert would have expected. "It's not a great combination. Paul - Sergeant Warszawski - used to kind of balance them out. He could get Lee to talk and the Captain to back off a little."

Fucking hell. Talk about a tough act to follow.

"You're not expected to fill that role, Colbert" Cadman said, head tipped back to look up at him. "Believe me, nobody is expecting that. They just need to figure out how to deal with each other without a buffer. Gunny was already working with Lee when the Captain arrived, so they've never had to."

"But it is about me," he said, half questioning.

Fournier looked uncomfortable.

"I would say it is about the space you're occupying," he said after a long moment. "Not about you personally."

"Lee wanted a break," Lt. Cadman said. "Losing Gunny was hard on her, we'd already had two unsuccessful replacements, and with the exams upcoming I think she just really wanted some space."

Colbert raised his eyebrows a little at that. This was the military, you didn't get to decide who
would end up on your team and when it was convenient. Who was she, Goldilocks?

"With training up a replacement, things naturally would have worked out that way," Lt. Cadman continued. "We would have started back up after her exams. But then the Captain yoinked you to Atlantis on the double, rearranged all our plans to get you trained here...” she made a helpless gesture.

Maybe the Captain had had solid reasons for that, but he could see how from the Lieutenant's point of view it felt like active obstruction.

"I thought it had more to do with the previous NCO," he said after a long moment.

The other two shared a long look, and he understood the reluctance of talking about a team member like this.

"Have you ever lived in a shared house?" Lt. Cadman finally asked.

"I went to military school," he said cautiously, with no idea how this was relevant. "And enlisted straight out of it."

"But you shared a room long term, right?"

"Yeah, with five other guys."

"Did you ever get to a point where that really worked? Like, you know everybody's quirks, when to bug them, when to leave them alone, who takes longest in the shower, how they like their coffee, how to shut them up when they snore, who's gonna be your wingman when you're trying to talk to a girl—" she flashed him a grin.

"Yeah, okay," he admitted. "In senior year."

"Okay, I guess that works. Now imagine that your best friend, the one you thought you were still going to be friends with in thirty years, just doesn't come back after summer. You never hear from him again. He said he'd be in touch, so you worry, and then you hear he's fine, he just never bothered contacting you." She sounded a little bitter toward the end, and he remembered that while Lt. Brittner may have taken it hardest, the entire team felt betrayed by Warszawski.

"And meanwhile there's a new guy in your friend's place," Dr Fournier continued the explanation. "And he doesn't know how your little group works, so he grates a little. He's loud at the wrong times, he hogs the telephone, he eats the last of the snacks - and you miss your friend, but you try to make it work with this new guy, because you miss being that group of friends, and maybe even with one new guy you can still get that feeling back.”

Really? She'd tried to make it work? He said nothing.

"Only then this new guy starts making nasty jokes," Lt. Cadman said.

What? He'd never done that. He'd been very careful to watch his language. She saw his reaction and made a placating gesture to hear her out.

"Things that upset you and make you feel like you're no longer at home in your own space, like your room and your group is now a hostile environment. Only he only does it to you, and nobody else notices. They all like this new guy. When you tell them about it, they're 'well, he's just arrived, give him some time'."

Fournier shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Until he finally crosses the line where the others can see, and they kick him out."

Okay, he could see the shape that was taking. Meyers had told him a little about the previous replacement. If he'd felt comfortable enough to make sexist jokes in front of half of the team, it had probably been worse when it had been just him and the Lieutenant. Colbert might not really understand how jokes about periods and hormones had caused the team to feel like a hostile environment, but he thought this was one of those times where he didn't need to understand, that he just needed to accept that it had.

"If this guy was harassing 'me'," he said slowly, "why didn't 'I' just deal with this guy, or complain harder?"

Even as he said it the answer dawned on him.
There'd been a guy in his first unit who'd kept walking for two days with what later turned out to be a torn meniscus. Gunny had yelled at him about how being a tough marine didn't mean compromising your own combat effectiveness, and he'd been confused, because he had 'mentioned his knee hurt'.

When Colbert had made sergeant, he and Gunny Nunez had talked about how to take care of the men in his team. They both remembered that guy. 'Treasure your complainers,' Gunny had said. 'But watch the silent ones.' The complainers could be relied on to self-report if anything was wrong. Some would go overboard, but as a team leader that was just a matter of knowing your guys and asking the right questions to find out when intervention was needed and when it was just bitching. The silent ones might not say anything at all, or only once, or downplay what was going on. And if you didn't pick up on it and react with what was needed, they'd probably not say anything again.

"We thought she was upset about Paul, and not giving Sergeant O'Dannough a chance," Dr Fournier said reluctantly.

And then he'd arrived, and the Captain hadn't done either of them a favour by shoving them together so soon and with so much pressure. He could see how Avery had wanted his team back, had wanted to move on, but some things just could not be rushed, and most people were only willing to take so much shoving.

While he was glad to know a bit more of the background, knowing this didn't solve any of it. He could take hope from the suggestion that Lt. Brittner wanted the team feeling back even though Paul Warszawski was no longer part of it, and that given some time she would get used to him. Over the past few days he'd caught a glimpse here and there that made him think that process was already underway.

* * *

"Ah, they are going," Dr Fournier said, and put his hands on the controllers to follow to the Gate. 

*AR4, please proceed through the gate at walking pace,* Colonel Carter radioed once the gate was open. *There is a decon unit set up to spray the jumpers as they come through, and you will be escorted to the decon rooms off the jumper bay.*

"Jumper Two copies, Colonel," Dr Fournier confirmed. Colbert was vaguely surprised by how comfortable he seemed with flying. Somehow he'd thought of piloting duties mostly as officer duties, but of course if the Ancient gene was the deciding factor in who would get pilot duties, there was no reason why the doctor wouldn't have had the same training as Avery and Lt. Brittner.

A section of the jumper bay had some sort of translucent energy barrier, which sectioned off a corner large enough for two jumpers to land side by side. As they passed through it Colbert saw that the hatch of the other jumper was already open, and Marines in cleanroom suits were waiting for them. He noticed they were armed with stunners.

"We've had a bit too much experience with mind- or reason altering substances to trust people on the decon thing," Lt. Cadman explained, seeing it too.

"Right."

The hatch opened, and she greeted the Marines, who looked a little chagrined about being dressed like snowmen. It was not a good look over their uniforms. The sample case was taken away by two Marines, and they were herded down a short hallway and toward to changing rooms. He was relieved to see they were gender-separated.

"I'll go and remind Lee that normal people can argue and it doesn't mean they can never talk again," Lt. Cadman said, her good cheer sounding a little strained. Dr Fournier touched her upper arm for a moment, and Colbert gave her what he hoped was a sympathetic smile.

Captain Avery was already in the showers, wearing an 'I do not want to talk' expression that had Colbert retreating into stiff formality and concentrate on scrubbing clean and getting into the infirmary scrubs that had been brought for them. Let the Doctor do the prying about what was going on.

* * *

Saturday, 2120 NLT

B-tower, Atlantis
Nate,
Well, the good news is that somebody finally told me some background about why this team is all out of whack. Good old combination of clashing personalities, missing the guy who used to balance them out, being angry at that same guy, bad experience with the previous replacement and plenty of blaming all around.

The bad news is that I'm not actually sure there still IS a team. Things blew up on a mission this morning - we were all pretty strung out and exhausted, but mostly I think the Captain has been steering toward a confrontation with Lt. Brittner for weeks, and she was finally too tired to keep dodging it. I wasn't witness to the blowout, but the Captain looked pretty grim afterward.

We got back today around 1300 NLT, decontamination and medical took us into 1530hrs. I'm still feeling loopy with the daylight thing, so I'm trying to make it to night hours before I crash. I've worked out and then spent most of the afternoon in the park (yes, alien cities have green areas.. the Botany department has made this one pretty nice) watching geeks play unicycle polo. Now I'm holed up on a secluded balcony. There's a band playing tonight and apparently half the city is going, but I'm not in the mood to be around people.

I have no idea what is supposed to happen tomorrow. Captain usually lets me know about training before now, so I don't know if I'm expected to occupy myself or stay available in case he does want to continue training.

Oh yeah, you'll be at the mountain tomorrow. Lt. Brittner's been under a shitload of pressure and needs to pass her exam, so try and keep Warsawski away unless you think it'll improve things. I have no idea what happens if she fails the exam, but it probably won't help matters for the team here.

I will tell you about the mission with the freaky mutant Kudzu at some later point. Going to drag my gate-lagged ass to bed now.

Brad

Chapter End Notes

There, don't say I don't love you :-)  

Thank you for all the lovely reviews! It gave me such a boost I ended up writing a lot further than I thought I would this week (wrote instead of packing my bag... I should get on that, seeing as I leave for the airport in 2 hours) so here's a chapter for while I'm at sea. I know some of you were hoping for a loud, messy explosion, but I don't think either Avery or Brittner would do that in front of witnesses, not even their team. I hope this was satisfying anyway. Poor Brad though...
Monday morning brought a one-line email from the Captain with the news that he was farming Colbert out to the Science department for the day. It had been sent at 0237hrs.

He was in his third hour of trying to follow Dr Miko Kusinagi as she patiently explained about the intricacies of crystal technology in her soft voice, when his radio came on.

*AR-4, gear up for a rescue mission and report to the Gate Room in ten*

*Cadman copy*

*Avery copy, on my way*

"Colbert copies," he radioed. "I'm sorry Doctor, emergency mission."

Dr. Kusinagi gave a small, grim nod, and it vaguely occurred to him that this was probably not new to her. Like with any of the first wave scientists, there was steel under the geek surface.

"Get some, brother!" sergeant Ortego, who was acting as lab tech while recovering from a knee injury, called after him as he headed out the door of the lab.

He gave a vague handwave in acknowledgement. Lt. Brittner was slated to go to Earth at 1200hrs, so he didn't imagine this was a welcome development. He probably shouldn't look too eager.

*Brittner, copy that. Report?*

*I'm patching you in with the team*

There was a click he assumed was a channel switch - presumably he'd get the reader's digest version once in the Gate Room. It irked him to be kept out of the loop, but there was nothing to be done for that - not like he wasn't used to being kept in the dark and fed shit.

The run to his quarters provided enough time to realise that he didn't really feel solid on the team's SRE protocols. He'd read up on AARs and they'd discussed a lot of things over the past week, but presumably they had pre-determined approaches depending on what, if any, information they had about a situation, and they hadn't really gotten to that with his introduction. He'd have to hope they'd remember he was new to their way of working, even as he didn't want to be treated like a green recruit.

He was just putting on his tac vest when his radio came back on.

*AR-4, this is Brittner. We're looking at a weather-related rescue situation on WJ1-58H. No enemy contact at this time. This is a foot-traffic gate, and you're gonna want your rain gear.*

Okay, he could work with that. He put on gaiters and grabbed his poncho.

"Colbert copies."

*Cadman, copy.*

*Avery copies. Any gear you want me to pick up?*

*Ops/tech is bringing up the rescue gear, but we're going in light and fast. The rest can be sent after when as we hit locus. The Lieutenant sounded like she was running.*

* * *

They all made it to the gate room in a respectable eight minutes. Lt. Cadman had a towel around her hair that she tossed into a damp heap, and tied her wet hair in a ponytail. Avery was fastening his gaiters. Lt. Lt. Brittner gestured at the gallery that the gate could be dialled.

"I have the infirmary on standby, and the ready room has been activated - I'll have them stand by in case you need stretchers or other help out there," Colonel Carter called down to Lieutenant Lt. Brittner. "I can't keep the gate open for communications, but we'll do a radio check in every
twenty minutes."

"Works for me, thank you Ma'am."

The climbing gear arrived just as the wormhole established, and after they'd quickly divided things among themselves, they headed out without fanfare.

* * *

The planet -- it took him a moment to orient himself by the strange, shimmering light of the gate and realise they were in a cave. Ah, no wonder this was a foot traffic planet. Avery took point, a handheld device helping him navigate toward the well-hidden exit while Lt. Brittner contacted the team they were here to rescue. From what he overheard, it would take them about fifteen minutes to get there.

Once out of the caves they moved at a careful jog downhill along a mountain trail. The rain was pounding down, running in rivulets across the trail.

"We have ten people stuck on an island in what used to be a stream," the explanation finally came. "They've been researching the ruins there for a couple of days, but it started rained overnight, and it's more a river now. We need to get them off before the water rises much further."

Ah. Looking at the rocky, craggy landscape he wondered if a flashflood was among the concerns. Probably.

The tempo was obviously a careful compromise between speed and not ending up with broken ankles. Looking at Avery at the head of their group, it occurred to him that they were doing some sort of fluid command tradeoff - the Captain was at the wheel so that the Lieutenant could have her attention free for other things. She was on the radio, having the sergeant in charge of the science team's security escort describe what he could see of the rock walls and shelves accessible from their side, probably hoping to cut out time searching for a good base point.

He'd wondered how she and the Captain would be after their argument. Neither of them looked like they'd had a good night, and there was none of the usual subtle humour and affection in their interaction. But they'd slotted into their roles in the team without hesitation, and he figured that was good enough for now.

They reached the river in seventeen minutes, or rather they reached a high point looking out over the river and the now rather small island in the middle. There was a sort of temple in the middle of it. The terrain suggested that the stream splitting around it hadn't looked like much of a concern before it started raining higher up in the mountains. The people down there, four scientists and six marines, looked wet and miserable. Couldn't be much fun being trapped like that. Unable to reach the Gate, they had had to wait until their daily check-in from Atlantis before they could request help.

"The shelf down there, Captain," Lt. Brittner pointed, and they climbed down a few metres from the path. There was a shallow cave here, more of an overhang, and the rock shelf was wide enough to work on. They put down their gear under the overhang, and the Lieutenant started organising. Colbert had wondered how this worked when the team was technically still under Avery's command, but they seemed used to the command shifting to the Lieutenant in these sort of situations.

"Cadman, Captain, shoot a line down and then feed them the thickest green rope. They can attach it round that big centre boulder."

Cadman got out the rope gun while the Captain laid out the coil of rope and quick-tied the end of it to a small, craggy tree. It wouldn't hold a person, but perhaps that was just to make sure they didn't lose the end.

"Colbert, we're doing the hard points."

He snapped to, looking at the rock surface. Lt. Brittner was up on her toes, running her hand along a deep crack as high as she could reach, then examining her hand. She seemed satisfied with what she found.

"I want a friend in there, and another one..." she trailed off, motioning vaguely for a few seconds, and he realised she was calculating angles of force, "here," she indicated another crack about a metre left of the first. "they're in my pack."

It took about a second to click that 'friend' referred to spring-loaded camming devices. He got
them out and examined the crack to make sure he inserted the device at the best point.

The radio came on with Colonel Carter's voice, and he half-listened to the radio update. The backup was staying in Atlantis for now - this really wasn't the terrain where you wanted a lot of extra bodies, with its narrow rock paths, and Lt. Brittner was cautiously optimistic that she could everybody out safely. He didn't get the impression she was ever anything but cautious, and Carter seemed to take it as a good sign, which kind of confirmed that assessment.

While he did the two high hard points, and two at waist height points she'd indicated, Cadman and Avery got the green line down and provisionally attached, and then zipped down a canvas bag with equipment - mostly the emergency harnesses. They attached a grey line to the bag, which they would be using to help haul people up.

Colbert tried to anticipate what would be needed - he had some experience with this type of operation - but a lot of the gear was different, and they very clearly had a well-rehearsed system for running rescues like this. He hated having to wait for orders instead of being able to anticipate, but putting things wrong would only delay everything.

"Can you rig in the handy billy?" Lt. Brittner said, turning her attention back to him. He gave her a questioning look. Figured that the moment she gave him something to do, it was something he wasn't familiar with. "Nevermind, green line goes here-" she indicated the hardware she'd attached to the webbing band between the two high bolts. "Set up the ratchet so we can tension the green line, they're nearly done down there."

While he did that, she used the lower two hard points to set up a two-pulley system she rigged the end of the grey line into, and he realised they brought power-saving measures as a matter of course. They would be hauling up people up an almost 45% angle, and while at least the marines could hand-over-hand to assist, it would still be a heavy pull. He wasn't used to energy-saving solutions - the Corps tended more toward using hard work as challenge and entertainment. Bravo almost always had a bunch of bodies around for brute manpower. On the other hand, this team needed to be able to pull a hell of a lot of weight with just one or two people.

This is sergeant Paglia. I've secured the line with the detacher. We are ready down here, ma'am"

"Copy that. We're going to tension the line now."

A few minutes later the Lieutenant did a final check on all the points - he couldn't feel offended, he would have done the same - and then radioed for the first person to get ready. One of the corporals down there clipped his harness onto the green line and then the entire team jumped onto the grey line to haul him up. It took a few minutes to get him up across the thirty metres that spanned between the island and the ledge where they had set up.

"Hello Corporal Chee," Captain Avery said as the man set foot on the ledge. He clipped him off the lines and sent the grey one back down. "Get on the hauling team please."

Chee put his pack under the rock overhang with an apologetic look.

"I wouldn't have brung it, but the scientists made me take all their laptops."

"Nevermind that, let's get cracking," Lt. Brittner said, looking upstream over the river. "I don't like the look of those eddies."

The second marine was heavier, but with five people hauling it almost wasn't worth for him to help - just hauling him was faster. Once he was up on the ledge they had a beefier hauling team and things sped up. Paglia sent the scientists up one by one as the water started to lap around the edges of the ruins on the island. As soon as they were up, Lt. Brittner sent them to wait on the path, out of the way. They huddles under foil emergency blankets to shelter from the pounding rain and watched the proceedings with concern.

There was another radio check-in with Atlantis, over in thirty seconds: everything proceeding as anticipated, six people secured.

Two more marines followed, replacing Lt Cadman and one of the scientists on the hauling team. There was only space for six people to haul the line, and they needed to maximise efficiency. Avery quickly briefed them on the commands they were using and the accompanying hand signals.

* * *

The second to last marine was about halfway up when there was a dull, deep sort of rumble far
off. Colbert couldn't see the water level at the island, but Cadman was cursing and Lt. Brittner's hand command for hauling - hand pointed at the sky, moving in circles - had a sudden increase in urgency.

"Heave! Heave! Heave!" Colbert called, double-timing the rhythm. If the dam had just collapsed, Paglia wasn't going to survive down there for much longer. Mahajan shot up toward the ledge, where Lt. Cadman grabbed his arm to pull him to safety while Lt. Brittner clipped him off and sent the grey line back down. Colbert fed it through the blocks as fast as he could, ignoring the water pouring from the rock overhang down his neck. If Paglia could clip himself onto it before the flash flood reached him, they had a hope in hell of pulling him out.

He spared half a second to glance down, to see if he'd fed out enough line. It was hard to see through the heavy rain, but he thought Paglia had already started pulling himself up the standing line by hand. The rising water level was leaving him little choice, but it would be far too steep and heavy to get himself up to safety.

Further upriver... he cursed. It wasn't precisely a wall of water like fiction would have you believe, but the surge carried a lot of debris, and there was half a tree making its way to where Paglia was laboriously working himself up along the line. He thought the end of the grey line was down at the man's level, but he was struggling to clip it on - he needed one hand to make sure he didn't slide back down.

Colbert could hear his own heartbeat almost as loud as the roar of the water. Paglia was in up to his neck now, being battered by the smaller branches and logs that ran ahead of what must have been the main dam.

Avery had already taken the slack out of the line and through the pulleys, so when Lt. Brittner's hand shot up Colbert was calling "HEAVE!" before her hand was even circling. The six of them on the line hauled with as much urgency as was safe.

Pulling was much heavier now, the water dragging at Paglia doubling the resistance.

The Lieutenant's upraised hand made a fist, and the Captain called "Well!" to reinforce the silent command. They stopped pulling, keeping tension on the line. They couldn't see Paglia now, but they could still clearly feel the load on the end of the line. The sergeant definitely wasn't out of the water, and one of the marines behind Colbert cursed under his breath. What the fuck were they doing, pausing while the man was still dangling out there, fighting for his life? He was wondering that himself, but a glance at Avery said that the Captain was ready and waiting, eyes on the Lieutenant. If Avery was going along with this crazy waiting, Colbert wasn't going to step out of line, even if he thought it was insane. He just hated trusting somebody else's judgement of life and death situations.

After an eternity of seven heartbeats they got the command to haul, then after only two 'heaves' were stopped again. Lt. Brittner was standing at the edge of the ledge in the pounding rain, hand upraised, eyes on the river below. It made a sharp contrast with Lt. Cadman next to her, who was cursing and full of restless energy.

Finally the command to resume hauling came, and Cadman and one of the scientists got onto the part of the line before the block, adding their power as they hauled Paglia clear of the water and up toward the ledge.

"Slow!" Lt. Brittner called, and then a few careful hauls later she was guiding the battered, coughing Marine onto the ledge. He was bleeding from a head wound and many smaller cuts, but Colbert couldn't really see more. Captain Avery had jumped in with the med pack, obviously used to assisting Lt. Brittner.

"Good job, now get your asses up to the path," Lt. Cadman called out to the hovering marines, who were crowding up the ledge in their concern to find out how the sergeant was doing. They grumbled and clambered up to where the rest of the rescued team was waiting. They'd opened some MREs the team had brought with them and made hot drinks, but they still looked like drowned rats wrapped in tinfoil.

Lt. Cadman began coiling up the grey line, and Colbert took the hint and started packing up the pulleys and taking the lower two SLCDs out of the rock wall.

"Where's the remote for the detaching gizmo?"

Lt. Brittner fished something out of her pocket and blindly held it back.

"Not working," Lt. Cadman said after a moment. "Too deep under water?"
"Probably. Cut it, when a team comes back here they can pick it up," Lt. Brittner said absently, dressing the cut on the sergeant's forehead.

Colbert wondered at that, because surely a climbing rope that had been in the muddy, debris-laden water of a flash flood would be written off, until he noticed that debris was already getting caught behind the rope. If left long enough, it might end up causing another dam and subsequent flash flood.

Paglia pushed himself to a sit, still coughing, but moving under his own power. After a word from the Lieutenant, the Captain got up and went to check if the rest of the rescued team was good to walk back to the gate.

"All right then, on your feet," Lt. Brittner said to Paglia, watching critically as the sergeant heaved himself to his feet. Paglia had been arguing that he could walk to the gate, and that it was unnecessary to wait for the next check-in and ask for the Ready Room platoon to come with a stretcher. Apparently being rescued by AR4 was one thing. Being rescued - or just carried - by a platoon of fellow Marines was harder to take.

"All right, here's the deal," the Lieutenant said as the man took a few unsteady steps, hiding his grimace. "You can walk, and tell me the moment you need to rest or stop, and we'll take a break. Or -" she said sharply before he could answer, "you keep going until you pitch over, and then you will go through the gate on a stretcher... and Lieutenant Cadman and myself will be carrying it."

Colbert stifled a snicker. Oh yeah, she knew where to put the pressure. Paglia would hate to admit he needed a break, but most Marines would rather die than let themselves be carried into the Gateroom by two women. Not that there wasn't respect for both the Lieutenants, because there was and the past hour had given him a decent idea of why, but he'd never live that down.

Paglia looked pained.
"Understood, ma'am."

"Good!" she said brightly. "Now where - ah, Colbert. This is sergeant Paglia, from Alpha Company. I'm sure you have sergeanty things to talk about."

She gave him a meaningful look that was wasted on him until Lt. Cadman took point and the whole group started moving. Ah, right. Paglia wouldn't accept help, certainly not from any of the officers, but if he were talking to a fellow NCO and should happen to be offered a hand on the steeper and more slippery bits... well, then that would probably be okay.

Lt. Cadman lead the parade of cold, soggy people up the rocky trail. The scientists and the marines of the rescued team helped each other across the trickier bits of the path, and Colbert was surprised to see geeks and marines work together so well. He'd have expected the usual mutual disdain and even animosity, but they were all talking. Not exactly boisterous, but perhaps the last few days had forged a bond.

"So why did we stop and let you dangle like a fish on a line?" he asked Paglia as they slowly trudged up the path back to the Stargate. "I couldn't see."

"Have you ever played that game Frogger?" Paglia paused to cough painfully. Colbert caught Lt. Brittner observing it critically. "It was like that, man, but with trees."

They made it to the gate with two short breaks -- "We'll tell everybody it's because of your allergies, sergeant" -- and walked through to find the Gate room full of geared-up Marines with rescue stretchers. Apparently one squad of the Ready Room platoon had been kept ready to go in case help was required after all. Paglia looked very relieved that he'd made it under his own power.

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There was some muted cheering as the last of their group came through the gate and the assembled Marines realised they'd brought everybody back on their feet. The crowd cut a path for them, and Colbert greeted the few faces he recognised. He caught congratulatory ooo-rah's and "the fuck happened to you, Paglia?" also a sulky "all dressed up and nowhere to go", of course, as the squad was being stood down by their Gunny. One of the marines shouted "WHO YOU GONNA CALL??" and Lieutenant Brittner hid a smile behind her hand as she directed the group into the hallway that lead to the infirmary.

* * *
Medical checks, getting warm and dry and then the debrief took them into the early evening hours. Debriefing made clear that the tension in the team wasn't gone, though Colbert thought that most of the frustrated anger was gone and they were mostly uncertain how to move from here. Lt. Brittner was more formal than usual, with none of the fond irreverence that normally seemed to underrun her interactions with the Captain. Avery in turn was uncharacteristically hesitant and serious with her.

Colbert was fairly sure that both Colonel Carter and Major Lorne were aware of the discord, and he wondered if anybody was going to interfere at any point. Presumably if they did, he wouldn't be party to it.

It was strange to be so much less aware of what the rest of the team was doing, all of a sudden. Even before the past week where they'd all been in each other's pockets, he'd had frequent updates about what was going on and what was expected of him, plus a certain amount of social chatter, usually meal invitations. From the Captain via email, sometimes several times a day, and more indirectly from Lt. Brittner via the team wiki page. Now they weren't talking all of a sudden. Colbert felt like he had no idea where anybody was or what was going on, and it made him feel restless and a little uneasy. On a small scale it was like returning from deployment and feeling restless because he didn't know where Ray was and what Trombley was doing, after so much time of having them in his responsibility.

Dr. Fournier and Lt. Cadman seemed a little at loose ends too, perhaps unsure if intervention from them would improve matters or not. They were both busy with their other responsibilities in the city, and it was strange to think that in some ways they were no closer to the pulse of the team than he was. Right now the Captain and the Lieutenant were very much the core of the team, and with Colbert still too new and Lt. Cadman and Dr. Fournier both part-time members, their uncertain future was making itself very much felt.

* * *

He cleared his tray at the counter, amused by the corporal on KP duty, who was singing what sounded like the tenor voice from Allegri's Miserere Mei, Deus as he scrubbed a pot. Not half bad, either.

"You coming?"

Dusty Mehra was giving him a you're-being-slow sort of look when he just blinked at her. It was Tuesday morning and they'd just had breakfast together in the mess hall. He wondered if he'd been given decaf again or if he was supposed to know what she meant.

"To the Gate room? To see LT Brittner off?" she clarified.

He nodded, trying to hide the fact that he'd assumed she'd departed the night before.

* * *

The Lieutenant was standing at the top of the stairs in the gate room, looking stiff and uncomfortable in her dress uniform. She was talking to Colonel Carter while two Marines were loading a few crates onto a trolley in front of the gate. After a few minutes they concluded their conversation, and she saluted, which the Colonel returned.

"You ready to kick ass?" Mehra asked as she came down the stairs. Lt. Brittner's eyes lit up a little at seeing her friend. She seemed momentarily startled to see him there too, and he wondered if she'd avoided telling the team her departure time. Given they had all worked together reasonably well during the rescue mission the day before, he thought that was probably more to do with not wanting a fanfare than that she was still actively avoiding them all.

Mehra moved to embrace her, and the Lieutenant's face did something complicated, perhaps because they were in public. Or maybe because he was there.

"Ohhh sorry, did I wrinkle your ribbons? Do I need to get you a steam iron?" Mehra disengaged from the hug and inspected the dress uniform with exaggerated care, brushing off imaginary bits of lint. Colbert noticed it had an Aeromed patch, and a few more ribbons than he would have expected.

"Shut up," the Lieutenant said fondly.

They stepped to the side of the platform as the Gate began to dial, and just then Major Lorne walked past, hand pressed against his earset as he spoke.
"Doctor McKay, I don’t care what Colonel Sheppard agreed to when you ambushed him at the end of a three-hour meeting. It’s expedition policy that you need an escort to go into that section of the city. You can ask Captain Holmbeck to give you an escort, or if you want me to arrange it for you, I will do so this afternoon."

He spotted Lt. Brittner and veered off his trajectory to shake her hand. When the other side replied they could all hear the volume, and Lorne winced and turned it down on his radio base set. He mimed 'good luck!', made an apologetic gesture to his ear, and continued on his way. They heard his reply as he walked off.

"It's possible that I lack the genius to appreciate how important this is, Doctor, but you seem to lack the understanding of how vital a security escort is to your own safety."

They shared amused smiles. The gate kawooshed - he would never be able to think of it as anything else - and the Lieutenant stiffened as if suddenly remembering again where she was about to go and why. Mehra hugged her again, and just before she turned away, Colbert said.

"Good luck with the exams, ma'am. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Her expression didn't quite hide her surprise.

"Thank you, sergeant."

As the gate blinked out he could see Mehra give him a speculative sort of look.

* * *

"Is this the designated Corps NCO table or are Zoomie officers welcome?"

He looked up and into Major Lorne's face. He was holding a loaded lunch tray.

"Major," he said, annoyed with himself for being so deep in thought that he hadn't seen the man come up to his table. He'd spent the morning in the Chrystal Tech lab again, though his thoughts were still mostly on Dusty Mehra and the mystifying look she'd given him that morning. She wasn't coming on to him - she still very much had that spiky 'don't you dare hit on me' armour up - and he couldn't figure out what had been going on in that moment after Lt. Brittner had walked through the Gate. He hoped she didn't think he was interested in the Lieutenant.

"Please," he gestured for the man to sit down.

The man sat and began to eat, and Colbert did too, relieved no conversation seemed to be expected of him.

"How are you doing, sergeant?" Lorne asked after he'd finished about half his portion of alien lasagne.

"Fine, sir."

Lorne made a noncommittal sound.

"And how is it going with your team?"

Colbert wondered if the Major was fishing or if he actually knew about the slow, quiet implosion that currently seemed to be happening. From the look on his face, he knew.

"I guess we'll know that if Lieutenant Brittner returns, sir." Damn it, he'd meant to say 'when', but it was hard to suppress the doubt about if he actually still had a team.

"Oh, she'll be coming back, don't doubt it," Lorne said, taking a bite. Then, contemplating, "I guess that's part of the problem."

"Sir?"

"You're aware that it's not legal for the Lieutenant to function as Combat Rescue Officer on Earth, right?"

"Yes, sir," Colbert said slowly. He had known that, but hadn't really considered what that meant for her in practical terms. If she asked for reassignment to go back to Earth, she'd have to go back to being a Flight Nurse, staying on the plane to take in the wounded, watching others do what she'd been trained for. She wouldn't even be allowed to tell them.
Lorne looked like he'd been following his trail of thought.

"I don't even think we could reassign her within Atlantis," he said thoughtfully. "Apart from her, Captain Avery is by far our most experienced SAR officer, and his team would lose its SRE status if she left. But she wouldn't be allowed to run a team on her own even if she did finally get promoted. The SGC really wants a Major at the helm on an SRE team until our CROs are senior enough to lead their own teams."

Colbert hesitated. On the one hand, plain speaking seemed encouraged. On the other hand, you wanted to be careful with speaking plainly to a field grade officer.
"Sir, are you saying that she...or rather her job, is essentially being held hostage?"

For somebody who had fought as hard for her job as she must have, he didn't think there was any separating those two, but he didn't want to sound melodramatic. And it resonated with some of the resentment he'd picked up on; knowing that she had no other option than to put up with it probably hadn't made the Captain's decisions concerning his own introduction any easier to swallow. And if the team's status depended on her presence, that made the Captain and the Lieutenant both stuck with each other and dependent on each other in ways that didn't seem entirely healthy.

"Believe me, nobody is happy about that, least of all General O'Neill," Lorne said. "He's arranged for her to come along to DC during this visit, hoping to finally break through a few barriers of bullshit."

Colbert managed not to raise his brows at hearing that sort of language out of a Major, and nodded. It explained the dress uniform.

"Did that news come with databurst on Friday?" he asked cautiously. In hindsight, that's when ordinary exhaustion had turned into something else.

Lorne nodded.
"It was a possibility before, but the news came that the General has arranged a slot for her to speak."

Holy fuck. Right. Colbert pictured introverted Lt. Brittner, the person least likely to go insane under a vow of silence, speaking before a large assembly. He made a little hmmm sound. He wondered if the Captain had known. Talk about a pressure cooker.

"There's been a lot of pressure," the Major made a spectacular understatement, "and I believe Captain Avery and the Lieutenant have very different ideas of what constitutes supportive behaviour."

That was probably true, he considered. He was fairly sure that the Captain thought that keeping the Lieutenant from what he'd called 'frying her brain' by keeping her occupied was in her best interest. Colbert wasn't even sure that was wrong - she'd seemed a little obsessive with the studying. It was clearly not the backup Lt. Brittner had wanted though.

He wanted to ask if there would be any intervention from higher up, but it felt too much like criticism. In truth he was somewhat comforted to hear that Lorne was clearly aware of what was going on. It was almost strange to find he trusted the Major to handle the situation. He didn't think he'd ever had that much faith in higher command.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, an SRE mission at last. Like? Dislike? Banana?
Chapter 22

Tuesday, 21:55hrs
SGC, guest quarters.

Yo dog,
You too good to answer your bro’s emails now? You’re lucky that Nate says you’ve been on some
crazy marathon mission, or I’d take offence.

If Lt. Brittner even slightly resembled your mutant Viking ass, I would declare her your sister.
That was freaky.

Doc had already met her in the infirmary so we had an excuse to invade her table at lunch (not
that we really needed one - Nate was pretty much determined to talk to her). I’m fairly sure she
knew he was fishing about you and she wasn’t exactly forthcoming, but Nate’s had a lot of
experience getting reticent fuckers to talk to him, and I think she said more than she’d intended to.

Iceman’s old LT:  1
Iceman’s new LT: 0

That was pretty much it for the entertainment of the day, rest of the day was knuckling down on
the negotiation/how to win friends and influence aliens training. We were supposed to head back
to Beta site tonight, but Dr. Jackson suddenly became available to give us an additional talk
tomorrow morning, so we’re here until Wednesday lunchtime.

I like how thorough the training is. They acknowledge that there is basically no way to be
completely prepared for what we could be facing out there, and then they pile on training and
talks about anything they think could come in useful. I think it’s equipping us to the best way
humanly possible. We’ve had a few meetups with current and former gate team members
(especially the ones who have been in Atlantis) and it’s helping to form a picture. At least, I think
so. Guess I won’t know until we’ve been doing missions for a while.

Do any of your teammates have family? Other people you hang out with? How do they deal with
keeping the secrets? I can ask here, but if you work at the SGC you get to go home in between
missions, so it’s different.

Got to go now, there’s a card game starting in the Ready Room.

Manere frigus,
Tony

* * *

Tuesday, 21:30 Mountain Time
Guest quarters, Star Gate Command

Brad,

Sounds like it was almost inevitable for things to explode over there, but still - sorry to hear it.
Knowing what’s going on must be cold comfort.

I met your LT today: Tony and Bryan and myself are still at the Mountain, and because Bryan did
her medical intake (he’s doing a few days interning) I could arrange to talk to her at lunch without
too obviously manoeuvring it.
I’m sure Tony will email you his conclusion in more pithy terms, but do you have any idea how
similar you are to her? The reserve, the blank expression, the conversation that becomes like
pulling teeth the moment it becomes even vaguely personal - it was eerie.

I had the opportunity to arrange for her to bump into Warszawski, but decided against it. She
seemed worn pretty thin already, plus I’m fairly sure she’d figure out in three seconds flat that you
had orchestrated it and that probably wouldn’t go over well. In as much as I got her to talk, she
actually sounded fairly positive about you. Poke couldn't get her to tell any embarrassing stories about you either..

And thinking about it again, she didn't sound as if she thought the team was ending. Take that for what it's worth. I tried to scope out some info about how things were going, but she clammed up. I just didn't get the impression it's a closed chapter.

Thursday we are finally starting contact missions. Major Teldy is coming along for the first one (which is supposed to be just a meet and greet). I thought that was to make sure we didn't insult the indigs, but she says it's just to 'get her gate legs back'. Apparently she lost her team about half a year back (two people in a fire fight with Ori worshippers, the third because he had a kid on the way and he'd had enough of alien weirdness) and agreed to be training officer for a year. She'll probably go back to leading a gate team after that, either here or on Atlantis.

Bryan is in a disturbingly good mood tonight. Apparently they let him play with the cool alien healing toys in the infirmary. Or maybe it was spending time with Dr Lam. I just asked if he wanted me to say anything to you and he said "Yeah, Sharp glacial ridge, five across". Yeah, I don't know either.

I have to go and do a quick bit of revision before racking out. We're meeting Dr Daniel Jackson tomorrow morning and from what I hear he's very keen on having all gate teams knowing Goa'uld emblems on sight.

Take care,
Nate

---

On Wednesday morning he reported to the conference room for a briefing which turned out to be about a return visit to the Kudzu Planet. Besides himself, Captain Avery and Lt. Cadman there was a team of the more adventurous botanists and xenobiologists. The briefing made clear that he would be along as scientist babysitter and general assistant, but he was pleased to be included in the briefing at all. Apparently the leave-Colbert-in-the-dark-to-see-how-he-handles-it stage of training was over.

"Are we sure this thing isn't secretly a flesh eating plant?" Lt. Cadman's voice drifted back to him, a little muffled from how she'd belly-crawled into a gap under a thick green branch. "Because I'm about to stick my arm... yeah."

He stifled his chuckle. It had taken them the best part of the morning to locate a root cluster and hack a path toward it. He was coated in plant sap, the smell of growth impossibly strong in the air around them. He took off his protective glasses to clean them, but couldn't find a piece of his t-shirt that was clean enough to actually improve matters.

"Let's hope so, ma'am, or we're about to really piss it off."

"Fuckin' A."

He chuckled. It was a relief to be out of the oppressive mood the Captain carried with him today. He wouldn't have guessed that somebody as quiet as the LT would leave such a noticeable absence, but the whole team felt off-centre.

The Captain and Dr Fournier were in the settlement while Lt. Cadman had taken himself and a squad to make sure the path for their retreat to the jumper stayed clear. They'd flown a good distance away from the settlement to try this approach, not wanting to risk it close to the village until they knew how the weed would react.

One of the botanists - the one who had used the words 'awesome in every sense of the word' when he'd first seen the weed's rate of growth - was safely ensconced in the Jumper. Apparently Lt. Cadman was a believer in keeping scientists safe by not giving them the opportunity to wander off. Colbert had to agree - the guy did not seem to possess an abundance of self-preservation instinct.

"All right, hand me the second cluster?"

He crouched down to pass her the bag with the second set of explosives she'd wired up ahead of
"Jesus this shit grows fast!" somebody exclaimed further down the path. Colbert looked around to see sergeant Williamson observe a vine that was determinedly making its way across the path they'd hacked out. They had most of the squad stationed along the way, each walking up and down their sector to keep the way clear. Williamson swung his machete and the vine fell.

"Looks like it grows the faster the closer you get to the root structure," he observed, chopping away a few vines that were approaching their position.

"...which is why you're going to have to pull me out," Cadman said with an odd tone to her voice. "Right now, actually."

Oh hell. He crouched down to look over her back into the gap where she was wedged, and then caught her about the waist and tried to slide her out. There was a muffled grunt, but he couldn't move her.

"Three-One Alpha, this is Colbert" he radioed. "Reposition to free up some people, we need a hand."

He tried to see what exactly was keeping Lt. Cadman stuck. A thick green vine had grown across her shoulders.

"Fucking thing got my arm stuck," she ground out.

Williamson and another sergeant joined him, and after a moment of conferring, they carefully began to remove vines and foliage so they could see what was happening and reach into Lt. Cadman's position from above. Meanwhile Colbert reached in along her body, trying to hand her her ka-bar so that she could try to keep free her arms.

Five endless minutes later he managed to pull her out. Her face had some shallow scratches and she was bathing in sweat and plant sap, and she rocked on her feet for a long moment after he helped her up.

"I'm fine. Let's get the fuck out of here," she said curtly.

Williamson took rearguard as they walked back through the green tunnel to the Marine-made clearing where the jumper could land, and a few minutes later they were all crammed into the jumper. Somebody handed them a damp towel to get the sticky sap off their faces.

"I've got the scanners set up, ma'am," said the marine flying the Jumper. "Double checked for life signs, and Captain Avery has given the all clear."

"Okay then." She positioned herself behind the empty passenger seat, one hand on its back. "Fire in the hole."

There was an anticlimactic moment after she pressed the remote detonators, and then the Jumper display showed a slowly blooming explosion. She had attempted to direct the force of the explosion underground - the objective was not to destroy the vines, but to destroy the root enough to stop it from growing further.

"Looking good, I think you got the taproot completely," the botanist was saying.

"Whoa LT, you don't look so good."

Colbert saw her arm shake where she leant on the chair. Her face was red and swelling up, and she was ineffectually scrabbling for the pocket that held her med pack.


He took her by the upper arms, and she stared at him with a sort of mute horror.

"I've got you, ma'am," he moved them both a few steps so he could sit her down on the deck, crouching in front of her, and took out his own epi-pen. The angle made it awkward, but he got the needle through her BDUs and in the outside of her thigh. The chatter of a Jumper stuffed full of Marines had died away with the shock.

"Doc Kastenbaum, this is Three-One Alpha," the pilot said, activating his radio as he swung the Jumper around. "We are headed for base with one severe allergic reaction, epi-pen administered."
"Captain Avery, this is Colbert, come in please," he tuned to the team channel.

**Avery here, go ahead**

"Sir, we need to suspend all activity close to the root clusters. Lieutenant Cadman just had a severe allergic reaction."

**Oh bollocks.**

---

Lt. Cadman recovered mercifully quick, though she would be on med watch for the next 48 hours. It was determined that the fine hair on the above ground part of the root cluster had caused the allergic reaction, and with some adjusting of the protective gear that was used, the proceedings were again declared safe. Cadman spent her time explaining how to set up the C4 on the clusters, and then radio-assisting the three teams that had been selected for doing this task.

Because it worked. The plant that drew its water from the almost nine metre deep taproot - a plant covering easily the size of a football field - was no longer growing at all, and without water to sustain it would begin to wilt within the next 24 hours, or so the botanists speculated. They had sprinkled the remains of the root with a substance that would prevent it from regrowing. Reseeding was a problem, and the discussion about controlled burning was still ongoing, but they made good progress.

By the end of the day the seven clusters surrounding the village were all destroyed and beginning to wilt, and the scientists had determined that fire would indeed destroy the seeds - not a given, considering it seemed to help germinate Earth based Kudzu - so there was hope for this planet. Considering that hope consisted of burning down an area roughly the size of Maine, it was not a decision to be taken that night.

This time when they stayed the night in the village moods were better all around. The Atlantis delegation had brought food besides MREs, and the villagers were relieved and hopeful that there was at least a way forward.

The morning brought the news that both the village council had decided in favour of temporary relocation and burning, and Colonel Carter had given her permission. The weed had strangled off the entire native flora, and almost all the fauna had migrated away from it - coincidentally compounding the problem of spread - so there wouldn't be much lost. The botanists took a jumper and a few of the natives to an unaffected area with similar climate, and - wearing cleansuits - collected samples of plants they would want to re-introduce after the burn.

Colbert spent the day helping with the relocation and, because they were the people the Kudzudites were most familiar with, he and Lt. Cadman accompanied the villagers through the Stargate to the Atlantis Delta base, which had been set up for the decontamination of the people and all of their belongings.

Captain Avery opted to stay behind, hacking and hauling vines to make a wide clearing around the gate. He was wearing heavy work gloves and his t-shirt was soaked with sweat, and the Marines he was working with seemed both bemused and appreciative of his hard work. From the way Cadman looked at him, Colbert wondered if the Captain wasn't working like a man who couldn't afford to stop and think.

---

It was Friday afternoon, and he'd finally managed to scrub the scent of smoke out of his hair. Mostly. He was having a very late lunch with Lt. Cadman and Dr Fournier, who looked about as tired as he felt. The burning on Planet Kudzu was still ungoing, but their team had been relieved.

They were slouched in their seats, Cadman slowly eating a pudding cup. Colbert supposed he should get up, but with Avery having stayed behind on Kudzuia he didn't have anything specific to do the rest of the day, and the inertia was just too much.

"Do we know when she's gating back?" Cadman asked. The name Brittner hadn't fallen, but seemed to weigh heavily on everybody's mind. Especially because Colbert was fairly sure that the Captain's behaviour hinged on if she would be coming back, and if so, in what state of mind.
Dr Fournier shook his head. "The databurst is in an hour. She will either come today or send news," he said.

"In other words, no idea what tonight's dinner will be like," Cadman sighed. "Either really good or really bad."

"Good, I think," Colbert said softly.

"Do you know something we don't?"

"My old LT wrote that he'd spoken to her just after she arrived at the mountain," he said cautiously. "and that she did not sound like she was staying on Earth. And I can't imagine how she would fail her exams, as hard as she studied."

"Exam stress - don't underestimate it," Cadman said, but she looked cheered anyway.

"We should make cake," Dr Fournier decided. "I still have some good chocolate."

"Wouldn't that jinx her exam?"

"She has already taken it, so we can't influence it anymore. Besides, it can be a congratulations cake or a commiserations cake."

"There is no bad time for cake," Colbert nodded solemnly.

"Will the Captain be back for dinner though, you think?"

"Colonel Sheppard will probably order him back in a few hours if he doesn't return on his own," Fournier said. "Darren is just... I don't think he wants to stop to think about things."

"Must have been a hell of a fight," Colbert said.

"I think it was mostly that the argument he thought they were going to have wasn't the argument they ended up having?" Cadman said, scraping out her pudding cup. "He thought it was going to be a Mentos-and-Coke thing, and then it turned out to be more like Yellowstone."

That didn't really surprise Colbert. The Lieutenant had to be a typical overachiever, or she never would have made it into this position. As a trailblazer for women in combat roles she must have exceeded expectations in every step of the way of her career, and he doubted she'd ever felt like a superior officer was unhappy with her. By the time the confrontation had been unavoidable, he figured she'd been ready to blow up the team if it came to it. He might have, in her place - Nate wasn't wrong that they were more alike than he'd realised. But he doubted Avery had been prepared for the conflict to come to that level.

"Way to bottle up," Cadman continued, shaking her head.

"Not everybody learns healthy conflict management at home," Dr Fournier said mildly.

"True, true."

* * *

"So what is the deal with this big training exercise I keep hearing hints about?"

"You don't know? Of course you don't know," Cadman answered her own question. "Sorry, it's hard to remember you've only been here a month. Or less?"

"This is day... 22."

"Huh. Time flies. Anyway, it's an exercise for the Marine companies, but because we're the Captain's posse, we always get involved."

He confessed he'd hoped to be attached to a unit so he could participate.

"Ah, if that's what you really want I think the Captain will be able to arrange it - there might be a Gate-team NCO unit. But usually we're playing roles in the scenarios."

"Last time I was an Ancient posing as a hermit," Dr Fournier said, reminiscing. "I had so much fun giving them cryptic hints."
"I was rebellion leader, ruling my fraction of society with iron fist," Cadman grinned widely. "We were rebelling against the Captain's section of society, and the Marines had to figure out who of us had most to gain from giving them the correct information."

"And Lieutenant Brittner?"

"She was command centre."

In the command centre, surely - but from what he understood of her CRO role, she was good at multiple information streams, so it made sense that she'd be there.

"I was hoping for an actual combat scenario to participate in," he said. "I don't want my training to fade off."

"You should ask the Captain if he can arrange for you to be free for Wednesday Wars," Cadman nodded. "I think he was planning to do that anyway, but mention that you're worried about lack of training."

"Wednesday Wars?"

"Company against Company, but there's a unit made up of Gate team members. I think this week they did a beach assault."

"That sounds like fun," he admitted.

"Darren has been making sounds about putting the team in more of that sort of thing, so for the big upcoming exercise we might end up being predators rather than intended prey," Fournier said. "Just ask him. The whole thing is his and Captain Patel's baby, he'll be happy to talk about it."

Though possibly not tonight.

"As long as you don't spread the word."

"Of course."

* * *

Wonder if she'll pick up any interesting intel while she's in DC," Cadman mused. "I hear they're talking about Don't Ask, Don't Tell again."

"Until you have a president who is willing to stand up for LGBT rights, all they will ever do is talk," Fournier said, stirring his coffee even though it had long since gone cold.

"Yeah. The Cloggies in Maker Street keep making fun of me because my government is backward about these things."

She threw him a look, and he realised she wanted to know his stance. Subtle she was not.

"What do you say, Colbert? DADT, stay or go?"

"I lost one of my best Marines because some asshole listened in on his phone call and figured out it was with a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend," he said after a long moment. He was far from the most liberal guy around, but that still infuriated him five years later. "Far as I'm concerned, as long as you don't go around propositioning your platoonmates, you can dream about whatever body parts you want."

Apparently that was the answer they'd hoped for. The conversation moved on into what would need to happen before Bush would change the law. Cadman a full-bird Colonel.. one of Colonel Sheppard's missions to go off without a hitch.. or the Wraith to go vegan. Then to if Wraith experienced taste when feeding on humans, and who would taste best to them. Cadman them moved them to speculation on if Wraith could feed on animals if needed, and if it was about energy, if hooking them up to a battery would work. Which was about the point Colbert decided he needed to be in his quarters to check his email, because the databurst would have come in. And maybe take a strategic nap.

* * *
Body:

Are we on for dinner? I went shopping.

Lee

Chapter End Notes

I am struggling to put everything in here that I feel needs to be in here without making it into an ungainly behemoth of a story. (as mentioned in reviews, I know most people might not mind if it just keeps going, but I am trying to make it into a manageable scope, or I will lose interest before it's done) Basically I wanted to skip this week but then they wanted to go back to Kudzuiaia and.. well, here you go. I really am trying to advance the plot, I swear.

Reviews? Cookies? Cocktails?
Dr Fournier had instructed them both to turn up for Friday night dinner as normal, and after Colbert found Lt. Brittner's email in his inbox he figured the evening probably wouldn't be boring. He arrived at Fournier's quarters just in time to get sat down with a cake, a bowl of icing and a spatula.

"I don't actually know how to ice a cake," he protested, more for form's sake than anything.

"But can you plaster a wall, Brad? Same thing," Dr Fournier grinned.

He'd much rather be doing what Cadman was doing, which was wield a cleaver to chop a large alien squash type thing into manageable chunks, but she looked so enthusiastic about it that he didn't think asking to swap tasks was going to get him anywhere.

While he was smearing icing on the cake the room phone rang, and Fournier answered.

"Oh, hello Colonel Sheppard... you've collected our wayward sheep, have you? ...very well... yes, but we can wait until you are done with them... Thank you."

"They will be here in half an hour," he said after he'd disconnected.

"Ah, but in what sort of mood?" Cadman called, still chopping.

"Don't underestimate the Colonel."

* * *

"Hi guys."

Lieutenant Brittner stood in the doorway, dressed in utes and carrying a small packing crate. Her voice was soft, and she stayed in the doorway as if she wasn't quite confident of her welcome. Unnecessarily. Cadman threw down the cleaver to come over and hug her, and as soon as she let go, Dr Fournier did too.

"Are we celebrating or commiserating?" he asked carefully when he'd disengaged. She glanced over to where Colbert was trying to resist the urge to lick a smudge of icing off his hand.

"Celebrating."

Colbert decided that merited a smiley face drawn in the icing.

The Captain arrived ten minutes later, and when they sat down to roasted squash and very large, very good steak Colbert wondered if things were 'back to normal' now. He couldn't know, having arrived in the middle of upheaval in the team. Judging by the way Lt. Cadman and Dr Fournier were acting, he thought it might at least be closer to normal than things had been since his arrival. The Captain and the Lieutenant still had a bit of that careful edge about their interactions, but the pressure seemed gone. This, he figured, was restorative.

"So have you officially passed the exam or you just know you did well?"

"The second. I should hear next week, but I know it went well." She hesitated for a moment, and he wondered if she was uncomfortable being the centre of attention even if it was only within the team. He got the impression that she was perfectly comfortable being in command during a rescue mission, but outside of that, preferred to stay in the background.

"There's another reason we're celebrating." Having begun, she ploughed on, "General's O'Neill and Landry arranged for me to speak while I was in DC. And it's been conceded on Pentagon level that the Promotion Board should definitely take my current role into account."

Colbert watched Fournier and Cadman's heartfelt congratulations and added his own. This probably meant she would be getting her overdue Captain's bars at the next round of promotions.
"They also agreed to launching a committee to look into women in combat roles. General Landry said that was a victory in itself, though I doubt it'll go anywhere."

"As long as they keep talking, they may eventually get somewhere," Fournier said. "At least it's getting attention."

"Did you get to see Fliss and the dogs?" the Captain asked. "How are they doing?"

The Lieutenant winced almost imperceptibly.

"Rocking an ambo through the inner city, and getting to be old fogeys, respectively. It was hard to leave again. You really should have let me keep that Lynx. I miss having pets."

"Better be careful not to say things like that around the men," Cadman grinned. "Remember when Dr Esposito said she missed having a cat and half of Bravo was trying to find her acceptable alternatives?"

"Aided and abetted by the Lieutenants! 'How could we know it would grow that big?' Avery imitated Lieutenant Mejia's Texan accent. "I remember that, Patel's pokerface really got a workout."

* * *

"On to the part where I play Santa," Lt. Brittner declared after they'd finished dinner. She opened the crate she'd brought and tossed a large white bag at him. He caught it and was surprised it was a gi. Which he needed, but hadn't wanted to ask her for.

"Thank you, ma'am, but..."

"Two separate people asked me to get one for you," she shrugged. "So there you go. I was in the shop anyway for a new hakama."

He wondered who those two people were. Nate, probably. Mehra perhaps?

"I appreciate it."

"Good work on the anaphylactic shock," she said at the exact same moment. He met her eyes, and for a brief moment he thought they had an understanding. Of not liking to be in the centre of attention, and be praised for things that didn't merit praise.

She gave him a nod in acknowledgement, and drew a bottle from the crate.

"Your Grand Marnier, Michel."

She'd also brought a stack of academic journals for Cadman (plus a box of jellybeans) and a cd for Avery. He read the handwritten text on it and lit up.

"You got it? Excellent!"

Dr Fournier shifted over to look at it.

"Oh! Fantastic. Viewing party next Friday then."

Colbert gave them an enquiring look.

"Eurovision."

He shook his head slightly, indicating it meant nothing to him. Avery grew a grin that looked positively predatory.

"You've never heard of Eurovision before, have you? Oh, this will be good."

* * *

The Sanity Society for the evening was dance related, with people teaching dances from all over
the two Galaxies (Staff Sergeant Stilger had apparently promised to show a Jaffa dance he'd learned back when he was on an SGC Gate team). Colbert wasn't feeling enthused by the prospect of dancing, but he was assured that spectating was perfectly possible, and nobody would make him dance. He wasn't really convinced, but he was loath to break up the team evening when it felt like everybody was slowly finding their groove. Lt. Brittner seemed low energy, tired after her very eventful week, but she and the Captain were cautiously finding their way back to friendly banter.

Besides, sitting on the big lounge pillows on the gallery that looked out over the mess hall wasn't much of a hardship. There were snack tables up there and a lot of people relaxing and chatting. There was a good view over the area where about sixty people were dancing or watching people demonstrate.

Teyla and five other Athosians who were in the city either permanently or on temporary basis showed a dance that was obviously not new to many of the Atlanteans, because many - including Dr Fournier - immediately joined in. Apparently there had been regular celebrations when the Athosians lived on the mainland and the two communities had been more closely connected, and many from the city had attended.

There was a line dance, followed by the Macarena (which had embarrassing amounts of people joining in), then an impressive Tango by Lieutenant Arroyo together with an Argentinean biochemical engineer. That they were both in jeans did not detract from the elegance and passion of the dance in the slightest.

Then there was Salsa and Cha-Cha, which had quite a few Marines join in. That didn't surprise Colbert, given the male to female ratio in the city. For the enlisted men in the Anthill there might not be all that much opportunity to socialise with the opposite sex apart from dance classes.

It was followed by the Haka, performed by the rugby team that was fronted by a Maori Geologist. Apparently encouraged by the enthusiastic reactions, Ronon Dex then showed a traditional Satedan warrior dance together with Colonel Sheppard and Teyla, who both already knew it. Colbert watched with interest - from the very little he'd seen of Dex he had expected something more tribal, but it was far more complicated than the Haka and somehow elegant. A dance less to intimidate the opponent and more to demonstrate superior training and grace. It seemed like the Satedans had been a far more sophisticated society than he'd assumed.

When the Satedan dance was winding down, a couple of Marines formed up to open a Breakdance challenge, and not long later there was a pitched battle between AR1 (Satedan dance), Two Alpha (Breakdance) and One Bravo (Capoeira). Teyla had some serious moves, and what Colonel Sheppard couldn't bring in terms of flexibility was made up by respect for being at least ten years older than the opponent and holding his own. Colbert tried to picture Godfather spending time with his men like this and sprained his brain.

"Lee, why are you not on the floor? We're going to Lindy Hop after this."

The four of them - Fournier still at the dancing circle downstairs - looked up to see Hostile Baking Chick. She looked bright eyed and almost bouncing on the balls of her feet. Lieutenant Brittner got that slightly pained expression he'd come to recognise as her 'not in public' face.

"Don't you have enough dancers? I'm not really dressed for it."

She was still in BDUs and a hoodie, oversized and comfortable.

"Nobody else is, so who cares," Hostile Baking Chick said. She was in jeans herself. "Come on, Doc Zelenka says he'll play piano and Ouderijn and Ortega are getting their instruments...and Doc Michaels is on leave. If you don't join I'll have to ask Wenckworth and you know he can't lead me worth shit."

"That's because you boss him around, Vega," Avery grinned.

"Mostly because he's too damn tall." she said brightly. "And used to tossing Lee around."

"I'm still pretty gateagged, Alicia." The Lieutenant glanced at her teammates, perhaps looking for a way out.

"Isn't it only afternoon on Earth?" Avery threw her under the bus.

She gave him a tilted-head look that promised retribution and got up from her lounge pillow.
Captain Vega - Colbert had finally placed her against one of Meyers comments - bounced on her feet while the Lieutenant took off her hoodie.

Colbert watched them go down the stairs and approach the dancefloor. Lt. Brittner stopped to talk to a small, blackhaired women who was with the organising department of the evening - Anthropology. She looked up to the balcony, nodded at Lt. Brittner, and made her way up to where they were watching.

"Uh oh, I don't think you're getting out of this, Captain," Cadman grinned hugely.

"Daren!" the woman smiled. She was short and energetic and her black hair was greying at her temples. After a moment Colbert remembered that he had seen her before, eating with the Captain. Doctor Ingadottir. From the look on Avery's face now, they were dating. That is to say, he looked both pleased to see her and dreading what was about to come.

"Come dance with me," she smiled down on him.

"I can't actually Lindy Hop, Bryndis."

"Sure you can, the basic steps." She held out an imperious hand. Colbert hid a grin.

"Sir, surely you didn't just send your Lieutenant into a situation you aren't willing to face yourself?" Cadman said innocently.

Avery threw her a very dry look as he climbed to his feet, but said nothing. He offered his arm to Dr Ingadottir and they went to the dancefloor.

Colbert shared a grin with Cadman.

Down on the dancefloor the battle had wound down and the spectators had left open a wide circle, the piano on one side. Dr Zelenka sat down to murmured sounds of anticipation. He raked his hands through his already messy hair and then started into a fast, upbeat tune that was picked up by Ouderijn on a saxophone and Sgt Ortega on a very limited drumset.

Six pairs of dancers began to move in a frenetic dance full of fast swings and turns. He wasn't entirely surprised to see that Brittner and Vega were one of the better pairs; he didn't think they'd been able to convince her to dance in public if she wasn't fairly confident of her skill. They were well matched, enough different in size that they could do some of the more athletic moves and lifts, and they fell into synch so easily that they had to have danced regularly before.

He could sort of see why she hadn't wanted to do this in front of him. If Bravo were here, there would be Comments. As it was their pairing raised some catcalls, though it was possible that was more because they were burning up the dancefloor than because they were a female pairing. Then again, despite, or perhaps because, of what they were wearing - Vega in jeans and t-shirt, the Lieutenant in BDUs that hung off her hipbones and a strappy top, it was surprisingly sexy.

The music segued into a slightly calmer rhythm, and some more people joined in, including Avery and Dr Ingadottir. Captain Vega danced with Ouseti, and Brittner with a very tall Marine with a #1 haircut and a big grin, presumably Wenckworth. She switched from lead to follow without apparent effort, and there were some lifts and flips he would not have expected in a dance from the Forties. At one point she jumped into the air and the sergeant spun her around his shoulder, which made the breakdancers look.

Zelenka led the music through uptempo swing to boogie woogie and then slowly toward fifties rock and roll. This far less complicated dancing caused a great many more people to enter the floor. Including Cadman, who had been startled but pleased to be asked by Major Lorne. She'd apologised for leaving him alone, but Colbert didn't mind. He had a beer and a comfortable seat and a good view of his teammates enjoying themselves. The lack of wide dresses did take away some of the effect of all the twirling, but it was still a fun sight.

Avery and Dr Ingadottir were smiling at each other and yeah, they were definitely dating. Dr. Fournier was dancing with somebody Colbert thought was from Social Sciences. He hadn't realised that Cadman was that familiar with Lorne, but they seemed to know each other well enough to dance very nicely. And Wenckworth and Brittner were still showing off, tight spins and deep dips.

He wondered how the Staff Sergeant had gained the sort of trust necessary for her to to let him dip her until her shoulders nearly touched the floor. Was that level of trust something he might reach with her? They were going to need it if he was her designated security during offworld missions. And while that role hadn't been officially made his, Warszawski had filled it, so he was pretty sure
it would not be far off for him.

* * *

Saturday, 0954 NLT
Personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,
Sorry for the lack of email last databurst. We've been insanely busy with the mutant Kudzu. I'll assume that your lack of email is because you've been busy meeting aliens?

Thanks for the intel on my LT. She's back now and things seem to be improving. No idea what happened, and I doubt I will ever find out, but she and the Captain seem to be able to get on again.

OK then. I'll take it.

Do I have you to thank for the gi? I'm starting to enjoy the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu classes. Last class I finally managed to tap out my usual opponent without a hint of 'hulk smashing'. Just all smooth technique. It was kind of hilarious how pleased she and the instructor were for me.

Last night was team night and then a big Sanity Society get-together with all sorts of dancing. Poke would've loved that shit. No, I didn't dance - but it was fun anyway. Day off today - Meyers (Sgt on another gate team) is taking me to the Anthill to do their obstacle course.

Oh, get this - Lt. Cadman is working on organising the Atlantis Pentathlon, and it's going to be a Pegasus adapted version. Sprint being a '500 metre dash for the gate while carrying a teammate' and there will be climbing 'to escape from angry alien fauna' and more things like that.

Lt. Brittner says you've been claimed for 'The L Team'. Just so you know.

Stay frosty,
Brad

PS: tell Bryan hi. Dr Fournier says 'Arête'
PS: Do you have a date for gating out here yet?
PS: What's Eurovision? Apparently we're organising a Society evening about it. They won't tell me what it is but apparently it's the perk of having two Europeans on the team and I'll love it..? Please google.

* * *

Saturday 2048 NLT
Personal quarters, Atlantis

Yo Poke, My LT is not my sister. I mean, teams here are weird, but not like THAT. I'm not really getting the resemblance, but Nate says the same, so I'll take your word for it.

Hope your contact mission went well. Don't go off ranting at unsuspecting aliens, it confuses them. And don't get married on accident.

I asked around a little about people with families. There's a few guys here with kids, but not that many who are still married to the mother. Not a lot of talkativeness about how they deal with the secrets, but a bunch of them hang out regularly so that's something. And there was muttering about spouses being read into the program - but I think that's only for officers, or only for people who sign up long term? Not sure. Major Teldy presumably knows.

I'm gonna go to the bouldering cave now. I'm improving, even though I'm apparently too big for the real Spiderman work. They may be right - the unbeaten champion here is a wiry little guy who can stick to the ceiling like he has a special arrangement with gravity.

Tell the guys hi from me.

Brad

* * *

Monday consisted of the rescue diver training, done in what turned out to be a submerged jumper bay. Because the spaceships could also go under water. He wondered if he was ever going to run out of things to be amazed about. After the training Lt. Brittner gave him a folder with course
material for the official qualification, to work through at his leisure.

After that he spent the rest of the day in the Ancient Tech lab, dodging Dr McKay as he berated the scientists and watching Dr Zelenka skilfully redirect the man whenever he spent disproportionate amounts of time telling Colbert not to touch anything. Which he wasn't, apart from the device Dr Kusinagi had given him to study.

Colbert figured the man was probably indeed a genius like he claimed. It was the only explanation for why nobody had drop-kicked him from a balcony yet.

As the designated ATA-negative person on his team, most of the training consisted of learning to recognise the signs of an active device and what effect it could have on his teammates. It was disconcerting to think there could all three be under the influence of something and not notice it - or all three be suddenly distracted by something they experienced as 'loud' - and depending on him to keep his feet on the ground and get them back on a level.

Tuesday morning he reported to Lt. Mejia and spent the day attached to Three Bravo, which had returned from Ujuyu the week before, some of the men badly sunburnt in the spots they'd missed with the Factor 100 sunscreen. PT was a familiar, almost comforting rhythm, and because it was a warm day it was followed by a swim off the North pier.

Sergeant Ruiz thought that was the perfect time to tell him about the giant sea creatures that lived on this planet (until Gunny Ellis bellowed at him to double-time it) but Colbert figured that despite the occasional grumbling about loud and boisterous Marines, the expedition was actually pretty careful of its people, and probably wouldn't let them get eaten by giant whales or whatever. Which turned out to be true - Mel Keawe showed him the sonar system that would alert them all if anything longer than an arm approached them.

There was a couple of hours on the long distance shooting range - which was on another planet and he didn't think he would ever get used to that - and after a two hour break for lunch they spent the afternoon doing urban warfare training in an abandoned section of the city. He mostly worked with Keawe, which gave them the opportunity to establish that Recon training really was unequalled, and Colbert let himself sink into the familiar rhythms of working amidst Marines, doing Marine things. After so much time as the only NCO on his unusual team, it felt almost like a holiday.

Chapter End Notes

Here, I think you should see this to properly form the pictures.. **Awesome Lindy Hop**

Storywise, I'm still struggling with tempo (I keep trying to speed up the narrative and failing) but at least I feel things are on their way again. I'd love to hear your ideas about Brittner's meeting with Nate and Tony and Doc Bryan :-)

(there's a short story about '10 things Lt. Brittner did during her leave' which will turn up at some later point, but it's always fun to hear what you guys think happened!)
Tuesday, 22:32 hrs
Barracks, Beta site

Brad,
Sorry for the silence - been too busy to write. Three contact missions since Thursday!

Planet 1: Long established allies of the SGC (we didn't know that in advance, though it was an easy guess), A Bronze Age civilisation with Minoan elements, which was interesting. We practised first contact type introductions and making nice with the locals. They fed us some quite nice food, and I was asked by the High Councillor to give his regards to General O'Neill. That may have broken my brain a little. Here we are on an alien planet, and an alien tells us to say hi to the General. Really drives home that there have been Gate missions for over ten years now.

Planet 2: Technologically advanced civilisation (Earth level, somewhat ahead on some fronts, but all very different). We actually had a purpose, not just meet and greet, but despite bringing them intel about the Ori war the people didn't seem particularly interested in us, and I kind of felt like we were barging into an executive lounge in our battle rattle. I'd read enough mission reports to know this sort of treatment was a possibility we might come across, but some of the guys were kind of affronted. I think it was a good lesson to experience - just because we're hot shit on one planet doesn't mean other civilisations are going to be impressed, or even civil, and sometimes you have to make nice anyway. There's cause for a little humility.

Planet 3: I think this was our lesson in 'It's better to make friends than enemies'. Mission to a planet where the SGC is mining - together with a race of... well, lizard people. They're called Unas, and they are primitive enough that initially when they tried to drive an SGC mining operation away from the mine, there was talk of tranquilising and forcibly relocating them. Instead of all out war Dr Jackson managed to negotiate an alliance - the Unas are also enemies of the Go'auld, and they are willing to mine the mineral Earth needs to make weapons and spaceships in turn for food supplies. I won't say it was easy to communicate with the few of them we were introduced to (or without a few heart-stopping moments) but I'm glad I got the opportunity.

Had a few interesting conversations with Major Teldy, mostly about team formation. She has this theory that a really well balanced team is like a collection of mining canaries for different circumstances, and that if you know eachother well, you can detect impending 'bad stuff' from the way your teammates subconsciously react to it. Maybe that didn't make sense the way I've explained it, but have you noticed your team putting a lot of weight in intuition?

According to Teldy, developing and learning to value my own gut sense and that of my team will be one of the big steps toward being an effective and safe gate team.

In other news, they're planning to ship us out this coming Monday. We've got one more mission coming up and a few VR sessions, then a 36-hour pass for the weekend. Mike and Tony are briefly going home (SGC has been kind in arranging transport to make that work). The rest of us are probably just going out (with the strict reminder to not get compromised) and do some shopping. Ray's already got his cousin to send him a harddrive with God knows how much illegally downloaded music and movies (not to mention porn, I'm sure), and I think I'll buy an e-reader. Any other things I should bring?

I think we're about as ready as anybody could be. I'm looking forward to seeing you and how you're doing - you're starting to sound like you're settling in.

Nate
He was in the middle of the final address for Wednesday Wars when his radio switched on.

He'd been attached to First Platoon, Alpha Company earlier that morning, and after Lt. Arroyo had given the platoon its mission briefing, the entire Company came together for this address by Captain Holmbeck. Colbert thought the whole thing sounded like a hell of a lot of fun. And then this.

*AR-4, report to the jumper bay on the double*

Before he could even reach to his ear to activate his mic to respond Captain Holmbeck stopped in the middle of his sentence. The command channel must have been activated immediately after the team channel, because he looked to where One Alpha was standing, found Colbert's face, and said "Colbert, go."

Given that Colbert had only been introduced to Alpha Company this morning, Captain Holmbeck was eerily good with names and faces. There was some murmuring among the assembled men, because they knew on which team Colbert was, and AR4 being summoned usually only meant one thing. Somebody in trouble.

He nodded to the Captain, acknowledging the radio hail as the door whooshed shut behind him.

* * *

They flew through the gate within fifteen minutes, sweeping low over the grassland. AR9 wasn't far from the gate, perhaps three clicks out. The viewscreens showed their lifesigns - four men, and one more that looked different. Colbert watched as Avery changed the view, engaged some kind of scanning device, and grid lines form and they could see depth. The fifth man was nearly sixty metres down some kind of shaft.

"Oh hell," Lt. Cadman said, as the scanner revealed that the entire area was undermined. Including the ground where the rest of the team stood, restless in their worry. It was their Captain down there, Captain Klimczyk. Colbert hadn't met him yet, but Stilger was on this team, and he spoke very highly of his CO. Far more so than he'd have expected of a US Marine with a Russian CO.

"Can we do a hover pickup?" Lt. Brittner asked Avery, who was flying. The Captain nodded.

"AR-Nine, this is AR-Four. You may be on unsteady ground. Stay where you are, we will pick you up."

This is Stilger, copy that

A few moments later Colbert was kneeling on the open ramp of the jumper as it hoovered about a metre above the ground, helping a very pale looking Lieutenant and three sergeants into the jumper. Lt. Cadman helped him, and Lt. Brittner stood off to the side with an oddly blank look on her face.

"All aboard!" Cadman called forward as the last man was on the ramp, and the jumper rose a little higher. Avery was explaining what they saw on the viewscreen to the shaken members of AR9 while Brittner talked to Staff Sergeant Stilger, who in lieu of the Captain was apparently the go-to person for cool-headed info. The Lieutenant - Olson, apparently - looked very young and very relieved that he was not called upon. All of them were relieved to hear their CO's lifesign was still on the scanner - the Captain had been carrying the handheld lifesign detector, so it had disappeared into the ground with him, and they'd had no idea if he was close to the surface or already out of their reach - let alone alive.

"There's something down there," he heard Lt. Brittner say. "Huge but very far down - I can just about sense it. Captain Klimczyk is your only ATA positive team member, right? He may have woken something."

That sounded very alarming to Colbert, and it was something of a relief to realise they were talking about a machine, possibly a mining device, that caused vibration that was making the ground so unstable.

"Atlantis, this is Jumper Eight."
Sir, there is an Ancient device here that looks to be making the ground unstable, and I can't turn it off. Break. Request that either Major Lorne, Dr Kusinagi or yourself join us to keep it deactivated. Break. We are going to do an air-evac into what appears to be a collapsed mineshaft. Over."

Copy that. In the background of the transmission he could hear the Lieutenant on gate room duty passing out orders to ready a jumper. My ETA is.. about five minutes. Sheppard out.

In the confines of the jumper things kicked into gear. Lt. Brittner dug out two full body harnesses and handed him one of them. Right, okay. He was going with her. Somehow he'd have expected she'd take the Captain, but of course he was the only one who could fly the jumper.

Lt. Cadman and Sgt Stilger began to set up the winch. Lieutenant Olson had been given scanner monitoring duties, and the two other sergeants readied a rescue stretcher. There had been no radio contact with Captain Klimczyk, which could mean the radio wasn't working - there was some kind of crystal in the ground on this planet that could cause interference, which was probably why it had been mined in the first place - or, more likely, that the man wasn't able to answer. His life sign was still showing up on the viewscreen, but it had been a long fall.

"All right," Lt. Brittner said as she clipped her harness shut. Colbert was still working on his. "You're going--descending, first - and on a separate line. I'll be on the cable together with the stretcher, so I'll need you to help me do the manoeuvring to get into position." She absently reached out to adjust the shoulder straps of his harness. "No matter how we find the Captain, this is a scoop and run."

"Jumper Eight, this is Colonel Sheppard. I am on the planet and working on deactivating the device. Over"

"We copy, Colonel. Standing by for your mark. Over." Avery answered him.

"I hope he brought a driver," Cadman said under her breath, clipping a steel cable onto Colbert's chest ring. She and Stilger had put on the more basic emergency harnesses so they could be clipped on close to the ramp that was now opening. The rest of them crowded back into the forward area of the jumper.

"Arroyo is control room today, so Sergeant Harrington was within reach," Lt. Brittner answered. Colbert remembered that Harrington was the Recon guy who had been yanked into the program because of his genes.

Colonel Sheppard indicates he has the device inert, a new voice announced. The two women nodded at each other. Colbert assumed they'd been right about who that was.

"Copy that. Make sure he doesn't give himself an aneurysm," Lt. Brittner said, clipping herself to the second cable.

"Copy that, ma'am," it was returned in an amused tone. Jumper Two out.

"In position!" Avery called from the pilot seat.

"Copy. You ready, sergeant?" the Lieutenant asked him, head tilted as she assessed him. He nodded.

She did a rapid visual check of his harness, and then gave him the 'go' nod. He tried to hide his irritation as Cadman and Stilger helped him into position and then over the edge of the ramp. It wasn't like abseiling was new to him. And this wasn't even abseiling, he was just being lowered.

Into a bottomless pit, his mental Ray voice helpfully supplied. They hadn't been able to see a bottom on the scanners. By a spaceship.

"I have passed ground level," he radioed. "The edges are crumbling, but at this position you are clear to - descend." He hadn't missed how the Lieutenant had suddenly become a lot more careful to avoid anything that could be turned into innuendo. Presumably because the other Marines had joined them.

Copy. On my way.

He looked up to see her coming over the edge of the jumper ramp, the rescue stretcher attached awkwardly in front of her. Looking down, the diffuse light of the lamp that was attached to the cable above his head didn't reach very deep. He focused the beam of his second lamp and aimed
down, searching the walls. The shaft was almost ten metres wide. There seemed to be a gradual curve to the shaft below about where the scanner indicated Captain Klimczyk was, but it was hard to estimate depth in this light. The walls were very roughly hewn stone, and he was just passing the last shrub that had managed to find root. Further down it was too dark.

It was cold down here. He searched the walls further down, wondering how on earth Klimczyk could be somewhere here at all, when he spotted a sort of slope come into view. It looked strange until he got a little further down and saw that it was a shelf-like part of the wall above where whatever had dug this vast tunnel had changed direction. The ledge had caught a lot of earth over time, until there was a small, steep slope of rubble and earth above it. How he would never know, but somehow the Captain had landed there and not slid down.

"I see him. We're going to need to be against the Gateward side," he radioed. "Over."

Copy, Cadman confirmed. She was handling the communications for them, since apparently both Captain Avery had to fully concentrate on keeping the jumper steady. How much further down? Over.

"About eight more metres for me."

The strange, crumpled shape of the Captain was very still, and that was probably what had saved him from plummeting into the blackness below. It looked like the slightest movement would set the rubble of the slope to sliding down and off the ledge.

"Fuck," he heard softly from above. "That's unstable as hell."

"Yeah, I'll just.." he hit his radio button. "Correction, do not move us against the Gateward wall until my mark. The Captain is in a very unstable position."

Copy that. Standing by for positioning.

Klimczyk looked bruised and battered, one leg at a horrible angle. Colbert had no idea how they were going to get him into the rescue stretcher like that. After a few minutes of careful communication with Cadman, Lt. Brittner was slightly underneath where the Captain was. The scoop stretcher was positioned so that the man could be rolled in, Colbert at the side of his legs so he could try to arrange the broken leg. He'd maybe expected her to check pulse or breathing, but she didn't bother - there was nothing that could be done here, and the only priority was getting the man onto safe ground. The problem was that they had no leverage, nothing to keep themselves close to the slope - if they exerted too much force, they'd end up pushing themselves away.

"Okay. The moment he's in, whack the straps on any way you can. Preferably around the good leg, but I'll take whatever works."

He checked to make sure he could find the straps in one go, and at that moment there was a low rumble deep below them. The sound reached them about a second before the rock began to shake.

"Fuck." her voice was clipped. "Three, two, one, GO."

They simultaneously heaved on Klimczyk to roll him onto the stretcher, but the movement of their feet bracing against the slope pushed both of them outward at the same time as the slope collapsed. Colbert saw in horrifying slow motion how the sand and rubble began to shift. His feet slipped down with it, and he lost his position, swinging away, half turning away from Lt. Brittner.

He fought to turn back around, dreading what he'd see.

"Brad. Brad," The Lieutenant sounded tight with pain and fear. She was still holding on to the Captain, whose upper body had ended up in the stretcher - along with a large amount of sand. She had a white-knuckled grip on the shoulder of the man's BDU shirt.

The entire slope was gone, so she had nothing to brace her feet on, and his legs, still hanging outside, were trying to tip the whole thing over. She had pulled up her knees to keep the stretcher from tipping, which meant she was pretty much supporting the weight with her stomach muscles, and there was no way she could pull him onto the stretcher fully, the angle was horrible. "He's slipping."

"Cadman, bring us against the wall!" he radioed.

He could see her entire body shake with the strain of keeping a 200-pound man from falling, and looked around wildly, but dangling from a cable rather limited the options. He could get closer, but he wouldn't have any more leverage to move the man than she did. Just then the movement
from the jumper above brought them all swinging toward the wall, smacking the Lieutenant's knees and Klimczyk's limp body un-gently against the rough stone. Colbert pushed back off automatically, then managed to steer himself to end up behind Lt. Brittner. He brought up his feet and put them against her lower back, bending his knees to absorb the shock a little, then straightened them.

"Ow, fuck." She was taking tight, shallow breaths. The angle of the cables meant that he was now pushing her against the wall, hopefully with enough pressure that the friction of the rough rock wall could help support part of the Captain's weight. "Yes, good."

He grimaced to himself while she heaved the captain into the sled. He was down here to help her with the muscle work, and he hated that he couldn't actually help hauling the man's dead weight.

"OK, come strap him in," she gasped after what seemed like an hour. The Captain was on the stretcher fully, though his broken lower leg was awkwardly half sticking over the side. She was still holding the stretcher with a white-knucked grip to keep it balanced. He swung around, which made them both swing out from the wall, and grabbed on to the edge of the stretcher. The Lieutenant was pale and sweating. He fastened the straps as fast as he could.

"Ready," he said a moment later, fastening the last strap around the healthy leg. The Lieutenant let her legs relax, and the stretcher tilted a little without her knees to support it, but with the Captain strapped in, all that fell out was sand. They both let out a breath.

"Okay ma'am, we're ready to come up."

The jumper flew straight up, extracting them faster than the winch could have, and a few very cold and windy minutes later Captain Avery carefully set them down in front of the Gate platform. Three Marine orderlies were waiting there. One of them was already dialling Atlantis while the other two detached the stretcher with Captain Klimczyk from the cable and took it straight through the wormhole.

Colbert surreptitiously reached out and, when Lt. Brittner undid the clip attaching her own harness to the cable, caught hold of her back ring just in time to stop her from crashing to her knees. She shot him a half-hearted glare as he helped her sit down on the steps of the platform.

"Cable is clear," he radioed. The jumper, which had been hovering above them, flew off.

* * *

The instantaneous travel thing through the Stargate was a bit of a mixed blessing, he thought when they were surrounded by worried faces and peppered with questions the moment they set foot in the Gate room. When you were in trouble, you were immediately back into safe territory. But if you needed some time to decompress after a rough mission, you were shit out of luck. Lt. Brittner looked a little wild-eyed at the questions, like she hadn't made it out of emergency mode yet, and he could feel himself getting twitchy for his sidearm because there were too many people here to keep track of, and some of them moved around the edges of his field of vision.

"Shall we go deliver these to the jumper bay, ma'am?" he suggested, gesturing to their harnesses. I need to get the hell out of here, and so do you. She moved stiffly, clearly uncomfortable, but he didn't think she needed to go to the infirmary immediately, or she would have said so. Maybe walking off the adrenaline would be good, keep the strained muscles from cramping up.

At their calm pace it was a 15 minute walk to the jumper bay, and apart from answering a worried radio call from Avery about their whereabouts, neither of them spoke. The jumper bay was already quiet again by the time they got there, both jumpers Eight and Two standing in the loading area waiting for one of the maintenance crew to get to them.

They stashed the harnesses, and then, by unspoken agreement, started on the post-mission inventory checks
"This team is the only family I have that's worth knowing."

It was a soft remark, seemingly directed at the rescue hardware she was cleaning the sand out of with a soft brush. Colbert froze momentarily, because he understood that she'd just told him something that mattered, but he was fucked if he knew what to say.

"Okay."

_I hear you._

By the time they'd finished with the inventory of the second jumper, he wasn't clenching his jaw anymore and she was breathing down to her stomach again. Colonel Sheppard has radioed to let them know the debrief would be in the evening hours, when there'd be more clarity about Klimczyk's health situation, and to remind them to go for their post-mission checkup.

"How do you think he is, ma'am?" He asked as they walked to the infirmary level. He knew she'd done a very limited examination of the man in the few minutes they'd hung in the air as the Jumper flew them to the Gate.

"Lee," she said absently, rolling her shoulders and grimacing at an audible clunk sound. She seemed almost lost in thought, and he was just considering if he should ask again when she said: "Not good."

* * *

He sat down at the NCO table for late lunch. Stilger, still in his mission BDUs, was listlessly staring at his bowl of cold porridge as if the secrets of the universe were in there somewhere. Colbert briefly put his hand on the other man's shoulder as he sat down. Sergeant Dyatlov, also of AR9, seemed to be meditating on the swirl of the coffee he was stirring, and Deike, their third and youngest Marine, was just staring unseeingly into the mess hall.

Colbert ate in silence, feeling as if he should say something, break the morose silence, but having no idea what to say. Nate would have known. Ray wouldn't, but he'd have said something anyway, get them all distracted with an inane rant on the merits of putting caffeine mints in coffee or something like that.

The three men were obviously down about their injured Captain - Klimczyk was a surprisingly popular officer for being a Russian commanding US Marines. From what little Stilger had told about his CO during meal conversations, the Captain was a hardass, but with a stealthy sense of humour, and his men were obviously loyal.

It wasn't as if Colbert could justify optimism - the Captain would be off the team no matter how his recovery turned out. So he said nothing, and ate his alien lunch.

***

"Well, that joke of how Skipper Klimczyk finds Ancient technology by falling into holes is never going to be funny again," Dusty Mehra declared, putting down her tray and shaking all four of them out of their individual thoughts. She dug into her food.

"First time the guy falls into an Ancient underground lab, he calls up to us," Stilger said slowly, putting on a Russian accent, "'In Soviet Russia, technology falls on _you_!'"

They snorted.

"Any idea what's going to happen now?" Mehra asked. Colbert wondered how she could say things like that without sounding like an insensitive idiot. He was sure he couldn't.

"They will send us a new Kapitan," Dyatlov said. "We have only eight people in the program; three officers and five serzhant." It took Colbert a moment - and a glance at the sergeant's Russian flag patch - to realise 'we' meant the Russian military. He still wasn't used to people fighting under different flags. "Government is not going to let a space taken up by desk job."

"Gonna be fun for the LT," Deike said. "We've barely broken him in and then we get a new CO."

"They might rotate in somebody who's at the SGC now," Stilger said. "And anyway, your government," he nodded at Dyatlov, "Seems to have learned what sort of people and personalities do well out here. They tend to send really good people."

"Only three officer slots," Dyatlov shrugged. "It is very great honour."
"I reckon they'll send.. whatshisname, with the unpronounceable name. Second on SG-8 at the moment."

"Pshenichnikov," Dyatlov supplied.

"Yeah, him."

Colbert and Mehra shared a grin.

"At least, that's what I would do," Stilger said."He's probably about ready for a command by now, and they can give Colonel McGloin a new guy to train up."

"He is good man," Dyatlov said. "It will not be Skipper, but good man."

"Yeah, I guess we should all start working on learning his name," Mehra nodded. Deike snorted, and the gloom lifted a little, just for a moment.

* * *

The mission debrief ended up being at 1900, because apparently interacting with the mining device had given the Colonel a migraine and he needed some time. Colbert had assumed the aneurysm comment had been a joke, but perhaps not.

It felt strange to have an equal seat at the conference table. Dr Keller reported that Captain Klimczyk was being kept in a medical coma, that he would likely need brain surgery unless the Ancient healer device could do a miracle, and that she couldn't say anything about his prospects at this point. Best case scenario had the Captain able to do a desk job at the SGC, worst case scenario was severe brain damage and requiring round the clock care.

After that depressing update Lieutenant Olson gave an account of the team's mission until the drama had started, with the only input from the three Marines a politely indignant assurance that of course they had not let the Captain walk point. Colonel Carter accepted this correction with grace, and Colbert was reminded that she probably hadn't worked with Marines for very long yet. Colonel Sheppard looked faintly amused, as if he'd expected the reaction.

Apparently Klimczyk had walked in the middle of their widely dispersed team as they were looking for any signs of the ruins or Ancient technology the Captain was sensing.

"I guess he found it," Dr McKay said, then seemed to hear how callous he sounded and ducked his head.

"Then AR-4 arrived on the planet," Colonel Carter said, moving things along.

Lt. Brittner reported her assessment of the situation and how they'd gone about the rescue, and he was mentally nodding along when he heard "Sergeant Colbert will be better able to continue."

Suddenly everybody was giving him expectant looks, and he shot the Lieutenant a reproachful look for dropping him in the shit. She gave a slight quirk of a smile and a minute shrug, so he took a deep breath and explained the difficulty they'd faced getting the Captain safely into the stretcher and how it had ended up going.

When he finished Colonel Sheppard talked about his findings with the mining device, which the Colonel thought was defective and had likely never been intended to do the amount of tunnelling it had. He and Dr McKay got into it about if it was possible for Ancient machinery to self-activate, how hard he'd tried to shut it down (pretty hard, Colbert imagined, if it had given the Colonel a migraine) and if they should examine the device further. It turned both heated and complicated to a degree that he tuned out the words and just watched the two men like it was a tennis match. Colonel Carter finally interrupted with a few pointed questions that nobody but Dr McKay seemed to understand, and agreed to discuss the feasibility of an exploratory mission at a later point.

* * *

"Could you write up a report about this?" Lt. Brittner asked afterward. "There's a template on the wiki."
He gave her a betrayed look. Officers were supposed to protect their men from bureaucratic crap. It was only fair when the men protected the officer in the field. She huffed an amused breath.

"Nothing fancy, just what you explained in there, couple of paragraphs."

He opened his mouth for a token protest, and closed it again. The only time he'd seen Warszawski's additions in the old AARs was when somebody had been killed or seriously wounded. Not the moment for good-natured bitching about paperwork. He nodded.

"You guys coming along to dinner?" Cadman asked, gesturing in the direction of the mess hall.

* * *

Team dinner - whoever was on kitchen duty had gone for pizza, possibly on the basis that anything, no matter how alien, would be eaten when served on a bread base and covered with cheese - turned into a mission briefing.

The Captain announced that they would be taking on a mission that had come up from some shuffling on the mission list, AR9 being out of the running. It was an almost-first-contact mission, because Captain Bahir's trade team had encountered representatives of a people who had claimed to have knowledge of the location of a ZPM. Colbert had already learned those were the magic words to guarantee a mission.

"They called themselves the Loetan, Bahir thought they might be nomadic, and AR-3 has to go to Iridya instead of AR-9, so we get the Loetans. That's pretty much all we know. Any questions?"

"Jumper or foot, sir?"

"Foot. Reportedly they are close to the Gate at the moment, and they have cattle, I don't want to worry anybody."

Lt. Brittner nodded.

"Will you be up for it?" Avery asked her, "I know this morning was heavy."

Colbert hid his wince - she had to be aching, but asking her like that, in front of the whole team, surely guaranteed that she would never admit to not being okay.

"Be fine, sir."

The Captain clapped his hands together.

"All right then, tomorrow, 0600 hours, be there or be rectangular."

* * *

Wednesday, 2135 NLT
Personal quarters, Atlantis

Nate,
Good to hear your missions went well. Unas sound pretty strange.

Today I learned that this galaxy has endless ways to fuck you over, and most of them without even trying. AR-9's Captain sank through the ground. Just... a mining shaft that had overgrown, some kind of mining device that had gone nuts. Guy fell sixty metre and then - fuck knows how - got stuck on a ledge, so we managed to get him out. Prognosis is not good though.

Just like that. No sense, no reason. Just the Ancients leaving their shit littered all over the galaxy before they bugged out. Now I understand why everybody here objects so much to the notion that expedition members either are, or worship, the Ancients. As Dr Fournier says, at best we selectively admire their work.

Haven't really thought about intuition in that way. I've mostly been trying to figure out where the
gap in the team is and how I fit into it.

Monday? Cool. I'll try to be around, but if not you can hail me on channel 14 once you've got a radio set. Or ask the control room guys to page me (providing I'm actually onworld - no idea about our schedule yet, but I should know more by Friday, will let you know on the databurst then)

Stuff to bring - anything essential or basic for morale is already here, but any newly released major movie or video game (there's an X-Box, a Wii and a Playstation) will be very welcome. I asked Mehra and she says there is nothing on Atlantis (and via the trade teams, the main markets we trade with!) that can't be acquired with high quality dark chocolate, good coffee beans, nice shower gel, salty liquorice, or bartering your personal space allowance on a Daedalus run.

Don't buy too many books for your e-reader - there's over 9000 books in the library directory of the communal server here. Nobody's too worried about copyright law in the Pegasus galaxy.

Gotta go prep my gear now for tomorrow. We're doing an almost-first-contact mission at 0600.

Brad

Chapter End Notes

Whoa, just realised I passed the 100 000 words with this chapter. And not nearly finished yet!

Feedback please? I will love it and squeeze it and call it George :-)

Just in case you missed it: 10 Things Lt. Lee Brittner Did During Her Earth Leave
Chapter 25

Happy birthday Sess! *hug* :-)

The Loetans were indeed nomadic, though their camp was big enough that Colbert didn't think they moved more than once or twice a year. There were about 80 large, yurt like tents, but so far he'd seen thirty men at most. Apparently the women lived in a separate part of the camp. There were plenty of young children though: playing around the campfires, leading around young animals, or outside the camp, caring for the herds of Loe: large deer-like animals that provided the Loetans their relative wealth.

It was a martial society, in a spears and knives sort of way, but welcoming enough. The meal they'd been served had been completely made up out of various Loe products, and while it hadn't been bad, there were only so many variations you could make on the all-Loe-all-the-time diet.

Avery and Fournier were deep in conversation with Hurn, the leader, and had moved from the getting-to-know-eachother part of the introductions (carefully devoid of mentions of Atlantis) into the what-can-we-do-for-eachother. In return for providing information and guides for a ZPM search, the Loetans mostly wanted to trade fruit and vegetables. They'd started out interested in the weapons the team was carrying, but that possibility had quickly been dismissed by the Captain, and Colbert had the impression that these people were mostly interested in close ties with a technologically advanced society.

They had been heavily culled 'nineteen cycles' ago, which had no meaning to any of them, until Hurn pointed out one of the oldest children - a boy of 11 or 12 years old - and explained that he'd been the first to be born after the culling.

Both Colbert and Lt. Brittner had been left to their own devices and had been sitting in the back of the tent for a couple of hours now. Colbert felt a little like he was back in school, in a really boring lesson he hopefully wouldn't get quizzed about later. At least he just wasn't of much interest to Hurn. The Lieutenant had been outright ignored, with the explanation to Avery that it was out of respect for him.

He figured that had to grate, but she was wearing a blandly polite expression and was watching the slice of camp life that was visible through the tent flap.

It was getting toward local evening, though it was still only 1300 Atlantis time, and he was considering if it was acceptable to get up and walk around a little, because he was bored stiff and his legs wanted to go to sleep. Just then somebody entered the tent. Sand coloured hair and tanned skin, much like the other men he'd seen so far. He went to Hurn and they had a whispered conversation.

"This is Klir. One of his children is hurt. Will you send your healer to see to it?" Hurn said to Avery after a moment.

The Captain frowned and turned to Lt. Brittner, who shrugged, and he nodded.

So far everything was well within parameters he'd learned for meeting a new culture. The Loetans were welcoming and seemed pleased with the opportunity to form an alliance. The brief interest in weapons had been dropped gracefully when Avery had taken it off the table. They had no hesitation letting their kids be around the offworlders, which to Colbert was a universal sign - learned in Afghanistan - for people who neither planned nor anticipated problems.

He could not pinpoint why unease was strumming across his senses, but when the Lieutenant briefly met his eyes, he was already getting to his feet, rifle over his shoulder.

Klir led them out of the tent, out of earshot of his leader, and halted to look questioningly at
"I am her assistant," Colbert said.

"That will not be possible. The baby and its mother are in the women's camp, where men may not enter. It is our custom."

"Then bring them out where it can be examined," he said mildly.

"Surely your healer can examine a baby without your assistance."

"I will not go where he cannot follow," the Lieutenant said softly. Colbert hid his reaction. She'd never sounded so... meek. She was often quiet, but there was a core of steel to her that wasn't usually hidden.

The man looked to Colbert as if seeking support for his irritation.

"You heard her. We do not leave each other alone. That is our custom," Colbert said, trying to leave the 'because I do not trust you further than I could throw you with a sizeable trebuchet' tone out of his voice. If something was wrong here, then showing his suspicion would only endanger them.

"Wait here, then."

They were left alone as the guy strode into a nearby tent, though there were four men watching them from various points around the camp. Colbert raised his eyebrows at the Lieutenant. She made a face and a 'wait and see' handmotion.

"Anything about this seem.. off to you, ma'am?" he said under his breath.

"Yes, but it might be the glaring offness of not being treated like a person."

A baby began to cry in a distant tent.

A few minutes later the same man returned and led them through the camp to a small tent that bordered on a partitioned section of the camp. There were screens of a sort of tough grass that kept the entire section from view. Inside the tent, the baby still cried.

He followed the Lieutenant in, rifle loosely in his hands, trying to look at ease. He might not entirely know what form of danger to expect here, but he knew she was usually a good judge of her own safety with other cultures, and her unease was enough to put him at high alert.

The baby was on a table, swaddled in black, red faced and crying angrily. There were two men inside who did not introduce themselves, merely stood to one side, and a white-swathed person he assumed was a woman. Not even her eyes were visible, and she did not speak or move from her place in a corner.

Lt. Brittner opened her med pack and then unwrapped the baby from its swaddlings. She spent a few minutes examining, speaking in a low voice all the time, and he handed her some items in the guise of his assistant role. The baby calmed a little. She tried to speak with the woman, asking her questions about the baby, but one of the men made a displeased sound, and the woman did not reply. The Lieutenant opened a vest pocket to take out her stethoscope and, craftily enough that he did not see it, clicked her radio base station. Two times, then two again.

One of the first things Avery had explained to him when his training had started was how many different ways a retreat could go. It could vary from 'Let's nod and smile and say goodbye' all the way to 'Shooting your way out'. In many cases they would make an effort to not escalate the situation by obviously cutting their visit short or insult their hosts. There were times it would be safer to leave amiably, even if they never wanted contact with the locals again.

Two-two meant 'start exfil, level 2' which stood for 'Make excuses and leave ASAP'.

He tried not to visibly react to the message or to the acknowledging clicks from Avery and Fournier. The Lieutenant continued to treat the baby, who had quietened, and squirted some liquid into its mouth, which made it cry again. She left a sachet and instructions on how to administer, and then they were outside again, Klir and one of the other men following them out to escort them back to the visitors tent.

Captain Avery and Dr. Fournier were already outside.

"I am sorry, but we have to leave immediately," Avery told them for the benefit of their hosts.
"We got a call from home that we're needed right away."

He sounded credibly apologetic. The gate here was far enough away that their hosts wouldn't know if it had been activated or not - if they even understood that a wormhole connection was necessary for radio contact with Atlantis. Colbert and Lt. Brittner nodded in acceptance, and a few minutes later they walked out onto the plains, leaving their hosts behind.

***

"So." Avery said after five minutes of silent walking. "What did you discover?"

Colbert was a little surprised at how easily the Captain seemed to accept the abortion of the mission. He'd expected the man to question the decision to give the two-two signal.

"That baby wasn't sick," Lt. Brittner said after a long moment. "She'd just been woken from her nap."

Colbert thought that through. It had seemed like the tune had changed as soon as he'd announced he wasn't letting her go on her own.

"There wasn't a sick child at all?"

"I don't think so. And I don't think that woman was there of her own free will."

"Bloody hell. Kidnappers?" Avery sounded horrified. "I had a bad feeling about them, but I hadn't gone that far."

"You couldn't know, sir. I didn't know until I saw the baby."

"Thinking about it, I now wonder if that's how they rebuilt their numbers so quickly after their last great culling," Fournier spoke up. "Did you notice we hardly saw any teenagers, and none of the kids looked like the men we saw? I thought they might have merged with another culled society, but it seems more likely their either kidnapped or bought women to..." he gestured weakly.

"Use as brood animals," Lt. Brittner said sharply.

"That," Fournier nodded grimly. "It also explains why they wanted to trade for such basic things - they have plenty to trade with and access to the Gate, I had wondered why they were not already trading for vegetables. But perhaps not many are willing to deal with them."

"That seems likely," Avery said absently. "Excellent work, guys. Considering we were talking about sending science teams to this planet, I'm glad we found..."

The Captain trailed off looking into the distance, and Colbert saw a small group Loetan riding through their herds, in the direction of the gate. They were bristling with spears.

"Armed hostiles at our three. I think we may be getting a goodbye committee."

"Lovely. That makes the people on our six a lot less innocuous," Lt. Brittner said.

"Two clicks to the gate," Dr Fournier supplied.

"Great. All right, let's up the pace a little, but we're not at a two-four yet. The closer we can get to the Gate before it escalates, the better off we'll be."

They casually drifted into a more defensible formation, with Dr Fournier in the middle, and double-checked ammo. As far as they knew these people were not familiar with firearms, and that meant that there was a small chance that shooting over their heads and flashbangs would do the job enough to exfil safely. A grenade or two about twenty metres before them would be the next step. If the assault kept coming and they could not reach the gate, they would escalate to shooting to wound. Colbert privately thought that with these people's limited medical knowledge, shooting to kill might actually be kinder, but apparently it was a protocol which had been put in place by Dr Weir.

Colbert didn't know much about what the former expedition leader had been like, but he knew enough to understand that Colonel Carter might be taking the revision of expedition policy gradually. With ten years Gate experience she almost certainly knew better than shooting to wound being kinder, but she was also still quite new, and replacing a much beloved civilian leader.

They were at a firm marching pace now, eating up the path between themselves and the Gate. It
was little more than a trampled trail through the tough grass, with the massive herds of Loe occasionally blocking it, needing to be shooed away with handclaps. As the Gate came into view they could see the reception that awaited them. Twenty men on Loe. Lots of spears.

"So.. I'm guessing they figured out I bluffed about getting a call from home," Avery said dryly. Colbert thought he should sound more alarmed. He was certainly beginning to wonder how the hell they were going to get out of this - even if they shot all the men by the Gate, there were about twenty-five more on their six, and he held no illusions about being able to shoot everybody before somebody could get in a lucky spear.

"Do you want to try talking?" Dr Fournier asked.

The Captain glanced at the Lieutenant.

"No. We're not going to get within talking distance."

Then, with a look at the herd all around them, "Lee, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I think so, sir, but how many flashbangs did we bring?"

* * *

When they were about three hundred metres away from the Gate, Operation Stampede was put into action. They threw stun grenades in a specific pattern into the vast herd around them, and to Colbert's satisfaction this set all the Loe moving. As hoped, a sizable part of the animals surged forward toward the Gate. As soon as the animals started running, the team did too - hoping to make use of the confusion to clear the Gate area and exfil.

The riders has been swept away by the herd, and as they ran he kept an eye out for the group behind them. A couple of that group had somehow hung on to their mounts and were now approaching at a rapid trot. The Captain, focused on getting Fournier to the DHD, didn't halt when Colbert slowed to take aim.

"Shoot a Loe, let them see the effect," suggested Lt. Brittner, sweeping the landscape as she slowed to cover him. The riders were on the limit of precision range for her P90 - never a precise weapon in the first place - but it was an easy shot with his M4A. He took aim and downed the front Loe with a shot in the chest, and animal and rider crashed to the ground. The Lieutenant sprayed bullets over the heads of the attackers. It felt like a strange strategy, but Colbert knew that the instant exfil of a Gate changed everything about a retreat. They were really just keeping their attackers outside of spear throwing range until the wormhole was established and they could disappear, and if they could do it without killing anybody, all the better. He'd have to see if anybody had compiled anything about Gate warfare tactics.

"We're dialling!" the Captain radioed.

They upped their pace, still mostly walking backward. Colbert shot another Loe, and then the last riders dismounted and let their spooked animals run.

"Thirty metres," the Lieutenant called to him, covering the other sectors so he could stay focussed on the twelve men still on their tail.

"MERDE!"

Colbert glanced around just in time to see the Gate power down without establishing a wormhole. He gritted his teeth. If the Gate was broken - if they were stuck here, out in the open without the Gate as a point of retreat, they were royally, epically fucked. The first spear fell a little short of them, but their retreat clearly emboldened the Loetans, and they had a larger range than Colbert would have estimated.

He heard the telltale clink of a grenade being relieved of its pin, a whoosh as it was thrown from beside him and then it exploded perhaps fifteen metres in front of the forerunners. They didn't stop, just scatter, and Lt. Brittner cursed under her breath. Two of the Loetans ran straight into the explosion of a second grenade.

"Any time now, please Michel!" Captain Avery called from where he was covering the DHD.

"One moment.. yes! I have--" he was cut off by the kawoosh of a connecting wormhole.

"Lee, Colbert, fall back to the platform."
He cautiously stepped back, tracking an approaching spear as it flew toward him. Too high - it disappeared into the top of the wormhole.

"Go through at an angle," Lt. Brittner said, indicating a slanted step into the event horizon. He nodded; it would get them away from the danger zone of the other side, if these people would continue throwing spears through. Of course, the control room should have the shield up almost immediately after they’d come through. The Lieutenant threw another grenade, creating just enough breathing space to make it up the Gate platform.

"In position... three, two, one, go."

* * *

Colbert stumbled a little as he came backward through the wormhole. Instead of the smooth Gate room floor, he stepped into sand. He saved that worry for later as he immediately moved to the side of the Gate and watched about a dozen spears come hurling through the wormhole before it disconnected. Then Fournier ran for the DHD and dialled straight back out.

Colbert nodded at the Captain, who was looking all them over to make sure nobody was wounded, and looked around. They were on a plateau, looking out over a craggy landscape that seemed devoid of anything but rocks and sand and small, tenacious trees. Avery gestured for them to fall back into formation, and then the were stepping through the Gate again for the second time within minutes.

"Huh."

There was a towering rock wall about thirty metres ahead, and it overhung so much that it reached until directly above the Stargate. He wondered if somebody had placed the Gate like that on purpose, to catch fast-exiting aircraft.

The others seemed to relax somewhat, dropping their P90s into straps and shoulders easing, so he took his time to look around. Behind the Gate was a gentle, grassy slope and a wide view of a forested valley. It seemed to be spring, and he could see no signs of habitation.

"Where are we?" he said.

"Beta site. I couldn't raise Atlantis," Dr Fournier explained, eyes fixed on the lifesign detector. "Nobody here, Darren."

It took Colbert a moment to realise that they'd just performed what Chuck had called an 'evasive bounce'. Atlantis had a shield and ways to protect itself from whoever wanted to settle grief after a mission had gone bad. Beta site relied on nobody knowing where it was. You shook pursuers - or just people who might look at the DHD for the Gate address - by dialling a random uninhabited planet off a list he was supposed to memorise, then immediately turned around to dial Beta site.

"Is there something wrong with the Gate?" He was thinking of Major Lorne's words about how Gate travel was wonderful... when it worked. He was suddenly acutely aware that if something was wrong with the Gate they would be stranded. At best, it would take weeks for the spaceship to reach them. Though he supposed that at least it wouldn't need to search long - Beta site was the first place they'd look.

"Could just be a busy tone," Avery shrugged. "We'll give it fifteen and then try again."

Dr Fournier gave him a look, but didn't say anything.

Lt. Brittner cornered the Captain and gave him meaningful looks until he sat down on the steps of the platform and let her clean the cut on his hand.

"Sorry about..." he gestured vaguely, and she caught his hand to continue dabbing at the cut.

"If you hadn't, we might not have found out until they grabbed one of the scientists."

"Yes, but I like to at least..."

"There weren't any clear alarm bells until I saw the kid. Just..."

"Wrongness. Creepiness."

"Yeah. And anyway, Colbert had my back."

"So we're..."
"Yeah, we are."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later the Gate still wouldn't establish a wormhole to Atlantis.

"And no message anywhere?" Fournier asked tightly.

"Nothing Michel, I'm sorry," Lt. Brittner said, tone oddly gentle. She'd spent most of the fifteen minutes pacing the long grass in front of the Gate platform. They'd all geared down, packs in a stack to the side of the platform.

"If the city had to suspend its Gate activity for any reason, they would have dialled here to leave a capsule with a message," the Captain explained.

"And if there is no message?" Colbert asked.

"Then we've just caught a busy tone twice, or they have a malfunction they are working on, and they'll have it fixed in a few hours."

His tone was deliberate enough that Colbert realised it wasn't for his benefit but for Fournier's, who seemed tenser than he had ever seen the man.

Colbert got up to move around a little, still trying to work off the adrenaline of combat, and then realised there were now two people pacing.

"Why don't you guys go check in what state the caves are?" Avery suggested.

* * *

The caves were a maze of interconnected smaller and larger spaces, some of them obviously expanded by human hands, though it didn't look like it had been used recently.

There was a small amount of firewood in the central cave, and a heavy metal door set into an opening. The Lieutenant showed him the code for its combination lock, and it turned out to lead into a small anteroom where there were shovels, a broom, and locked metal crates. They put down their weapons to unlock them, and they turned out to contain large amounts of MREs, stoves and fuel, strings of solar powered lights to light the caves, water skins, blankets and other survival gear. Lt. Brittner pulled out the lights and put their cells into a patch of sunlight.

"How many people can stay here?"

"We've got other caches on this planet, including weapons, so if needed, the entire expedition could evacuate to here," she said, doing a quick check on the expiry dates of the medical supplies in the case. "That's why Michel is a bit..." she made a vague hand motion. "In the first year of the expedition, they didn't have a ZPM, so the city shields didn't work. There was a huge storm, and they evacuated everybody, first to people we thought we could trust, and then here."

"Not knowing what state the city would be in when they got back?"

"That was the least of it. You've read about the Genii, right? They got foothold in the city during the storm, and everybody who was here found out later that the expedition had lost two men, nearly lost Doctors Weir and McKay and Major Sheppard, AND the city, all while they were sitting here around the campfire."

"Right." He could understand that it was probably mostly about not knowing what was happening in Atlantis. If something had gone badly wrong, they might never find out. That thought was enough to speed up his heart rate a little, and he'd only been there a month.

"How are you on ammo?"

"Half a clip down, and out of flashbangs."

"Mm, okay. I'm out of grenades. We might as well check the weapon caches while we're on this planet, make sure you can find it."

He wasn't entirely sure why he was a little alarmed by how matter of fact she seemed, given that she'd killed at least two people with the grenades. Maybe he'd expected her to be upset about it, and he wasn't sure why she should be, except that he'd been expecting her to.
Maybe because she was a medic and was supposed to be all about preserving life. Maybe because she was a woman and he'd always assumed they would find the realities of combat harder to shake off. Maybe because it was the first time he'd ever been in a combat situation with a woman at his back. It hadn't felt strange in the moment; in fact he'd only just realised. But he was still rattled by what had almost happened in the camp, and perhaps there were some belated protective instincts speaking up now.

They spent about an hour shovelling and sweeping and weed-clearing, making the caves habitable again. Colbert guessed that it was part in case they needed to sleep here tonight, part general upkeep, and part busy work, which wasn't entirely unwelcome. It was good to work off some of the post combat restlessness.

He could see why the expedition had chosen this planet - the caves were spacious and dry, had a small underground well, and the two entrances were very defensible. There was even an escape tunnel. They radioed to the Captain that they would be out of radio range for a short time and followed it. Brad was quietly cursing his size and his decision to take an M4 instead of a P90, because he was almost bent double and struggling to find footing on the downhill slope of the tunnel floor.

The tunnel widened after about two hundred small paces, and faint light entered through a low gap that was covered with foliage. The Lieutenant pointed out the small weapons cache there, and he helped push the Ivy-like plant outward while she squashed herself into the gap and cut the underside loose with her combat knife, so it covered the entrance like a curtain.

"ack into range? Stargate is activating"

"Copy, sir. on our way."

It took longer than he wanted to belly-crawl out of the tunnel, but then they were heading up a rocky gorge at a careful run, boots splashing in the stream that ran there. The gorge lead up to about fifty metres below the back of the Gate, and he had to admire whoever had made that tunnel, because they were now in a strategically perfect place to shoot whoever came through the Gate in the back.

Captain Avery and Dr Fournier had retreated to about thirty paces to the side of the Gate platform, P90s raised. Colbert tried to see if anybody had come through the wormhole yet, but he was looking at the back of it, and the strange shimmer effect was only very slightly transparent.

There was a ripple, and then the Captain and Dr Fournier lowered their weapons, apparently seeing somebody familiar.

"Captain Bahir's team?" Lt. Brittner radioed.

"Good guess"

"Not a guess, sir, I remember the mission roster," she grinned. They left the shelter of the underbush and began walking toward the others.

Colbert hadn't met AR-6 before - they were the resident trading team, and having grown used to Gate teams being largely military, it was a little startling to see their makeup. Captain Bahir was an affable man of Arabic-American descent. He looked comfortable with his weapon, and Colbert didn't make the mistake of thinking he wasn't any good in a jam, but he'd been chosen for this position because he had a gift for negotiating.

His team consisted of Dr Hayashi, a female Social Scientist (Colbert had already learned that nobody on Atlantis stuck to just one field of study) who almost immediately went over to Dr Fournier to embrace him, and Dr Whitmoyer, a diplomat who looked very unhappy with having been rerouted to Beta site. Then there was Hillan, a young Athosian man, and Staff Sergeant Wenckworth.

It took about three minutes for him to realise that both Dr Hayashi and StSgt Wenckworth had been first wave Atlanteans. On hearing what their situation was they got pinched looks similar to Dr Fournier. Nobody was happy with the news that Atlantis was 'offline', but the three of them clearly had extra unpleasant memories to keep them company.

They set up camp inside the caves, though most of them stayed outside while the sun was still on
the tall grass in front of the cave entrance. Captain Avery sat down with Captain Bahir to discuss the Loetan mission - Bahir was horrified for not having seen this coming, though Colbert didn't think there was any way he could have known. Doctors Fournier and Hayashi settled down in the grass with their tablets to discuss something Colbert couldn't follow.

Dialling Atlantis had now been pushed back to every half hour. Apparently realising not everybody could settle, Captain Avery sent Lt. Brittner on a mission to find and check all the weapon caches, taking both Wenckworth and Colbert. This took the three of them on a three mile hike all around the Gate to find the four separate caches. It took nearly two hours, and they gathered firewood on the way back. It was beginning to look like they'd be spending the night.

After a dinner of MREs everybody settled into their preferred method of entertainment. Hillan was teaching Drs Whitmoyer, Hayashi and Fournier a game he had been reminded of on the market they had visited that day. It sounded complicated, but they seemed eager to be distracted from the circumstances, which was presumably the purpose. The Captains continued their dissecting of the Loetan mission. Lt. Brittner took off her boots and used the rock wall for some bouldering practice, staying close to ground level and mostly moving sideways. And Colbert and Wenckworth quickly turned to the universal entertainment fallback amongst Marines: sparring.

Given that the Staff Sergeant was as tall as he was and a good twenty pounds heavier, this posed Colbert with a serious challenge. He tapped out twice in rapid succession, and was getting frustrated when Lt. Brittner called "He's an Aikidoka, Colbert" from where she was clinging to the rock wall, and he realised he'd been giving away complimentary wristlocks.

"Ma'am!" Wenckworth called out, half reproachful, half amused. Colbert realised they trained Aikido together, which was probably why they danced together so well. Though Aikido had always looked more like Tango to him than the 40s and 50s dancing they'd been doing at the Sanity Society event.

He did much better after that, figuring out how to adapt his tactics to defend against the other man's approach. Apart from being clearly very experienced in Aikido, which gave him a fine grasp of wrist and arm locks, Wenckworth was like most big guys who trained MCMAP, the USMC mixed martial arts program - used to depending on superior strength and weight. It was pleasantly surprising to realise to Colbert that he wasn't working as hard as he would have been before he'd joined the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu class, and that the techniques he'd been practising in low resistance worked very well against a heavier opponent.

He liked Wenckworth, who clearly didn't feel he had anything to prove, and they weren't so competitive that they couldn't take a break. The other man let himself fall backward into the grass, watching Brittner's progress with amusement.

"Spiderma'am, spiderma'am," he sang softly. "Does whatever an LT can..."

Lt. Brittner snorted, almost lost her grip, and grumbled that it wasn't fair to make her laugh.

After they men had caught their breath and drank some water, the bout continued. They had the whole grassy field to roll, and their bout was moving further away from the Gate when Colbert rolled onto a rock. He hissed a breath, and Wenckworth backed off from his attempts to sweep him.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just rolled onto a--"

He held it up. It wasn't a rock, but a bright red capsule. Plastic. Earth made.

"Message capsule," Lt. Brittner said, dropping to the ground in a crouch. "Some fucker must've thrown that through the Gate way further than they're supposed to."

He handed it off to her, and she blanched when she read the written message inside. She made a head motion they chose to interpret as 'come along' and headed over to where the Captains were sitting.

**

"MQ-Six-GD - oh, bollocks," Avery muttered. By now everybody had caught that something was up, and both teams congregated around where the Captains were sitting on a log, deciphering the coded message. Captain Bahir had pulled out pen and pencil and was jotting along. "Medical quarantine," Avery said a little louder. "Entire population affected, Gate disabled." He looked at his watch. "As of.. seven hours ago."
There was a ripple of dismay through the assembled nine people. Dr Fournier cursed in French.

"Is there any detail at all?" Dr Hayashi asked, looking pale.

"These are medical codes," Avery handed the message to Lt. Brittner.

"Symptoms. Give me a minute, sir."

She got out a pencil and bent over the paper while the rest broke into a discussion of what kind of medical emergency it could be, and if it could be some kind of chemical warfare by the Wraith, Replicators or Genii. Apparently the city had a detection and defence system that should have caught airborne disease - and that something had bypassed it and spread so rapidly suggested deliberate intent of some description.

"Anybody feel dizzy?" the Lieutenant asked when there was a morose lull in the conversation.

"Headache?"

Colbert looked around to see the headshakes.

"What time did your team leave Atlantis, sir?" she asked Bahir.

"At 0800 this morning."

It was now 2030 Atlantean time.

"Okay. If any of us had it, we'd know it by now."

"Had what? Did they know?"

"No. Looks like they were still figuring it out when they decided to disable the Gate. Dizziness, severe headaches, progressing to... MS-84b--" she frowned, snapping her fingers and then balling the hand into a fist to slap it into the palm of her other hand. Repeated it a few times in a distracted sort of way before suddenly stopping. "Memory loss. Fuck. Mental Symptom 84b is sudden onset memory loss."

Chapter End Notes

I think I might have done a cliffhanger? Sorry about that. This mission kind of ran away from me.

Is there anybody among my regular reviewers who would like to help me? I don't use a beta reader, but I do sometimes like to work with somebody who plays soundboard - I'd probably be asking you a bunch of questions about chapters and your answers would help me figure out how much of the stuff in my head comes across in the story. If you're an analytical kind of reader and you already spend time thinking about this story, it can be a lot of fun. Anybody, please?
Days were short on the Beta site planet, it apparently being a very small planet, and it started getting dark at 2100 New Lantean Time. The scientists retired early, Dr Fournier temporarily dislodged from AR-4 and swallowed up by their still ongoing vivisection of the Loetan society. Maybe it was helping to distract him from the very unpleasant reality they found themselves in now.

It left the military members - plus Hillan - outside after dark, cradling mugs of tea from Captain Avery's travel stash, which he'd apparently deemed necessary for morale to break out. It was nominally Colbert and Lt. Brittner's watch, but since they were all still up, they'd just joined the little circle. The subject was, of course, what they could and should be doing about Atlantis.

The primary problem was how to get there, since they couldn't Gate in. Colbert had learned that disabling the Gate meant removing a crystal, and that that procedure in combination with memory loss might well mean nobody now knew where it was.

By the end of the first watch they seemed to be on a semi-solid plan for that. AR-3 had crashed a jumper a couple of weeks ago that the expedition had not gotten around to recovering. As far as Captain Bahir knew, it stood a good chance of being fixable once it'd been cleared out of the forest it had crashed into. It was accessible to them by Stargate, and they had an axe and wire saws in the caves - and probably whatever gear was still in the jumper. The plan was to leave a presence on Beta site and take the rest to see what they could do about the jumper.

"Main thing will be getting it going," Lt. Brittner said contemplatively.

The Captain's face cleared in understanding.

"One of the Weapons Platoons is out, isn't it? On a.. was it irrigation building mission?"

"Alpha's," she nodded. "They're doing irrigation building on... Grisg? I think they were scheduled to check in around now, so with any luck they'll call in here and we have lots of bodies to clear that jumper."

"What will we do once we have transportation?" Hillan asked the question everybody seemed to have been avoiding.

"Well, it will have hazmat suits aboard," Captain Bahir said. "And we can gate to the nearest planet and fly to New Lantea."

They all fell silent, because what happened after that none of them knew. The situation on Atlantis seemed urgent enough to all of them that they had to get over there, had to know what was happening. What they would do once there, nobody seemed to know.

"The Daedalus is what, two weeks out?" Avery said after a long silence. "They will have doctors aboard, and more resources. We would need to connect with them before they land on Atlantis. Perhaps wait in the atmosphere until they turn up."

"That is assuming Atlantis doesn't shoot us or the Daedalus out of the sky," Lt. Brittner pointed out soberly.

"Would they? Why?"

"Paranoia is one of the most common side effects of memory loss." She looked around their little circle. "If any of us found ourselves in a strange place without any memory at all, and people in hazmat suits tried to enter, would we just comply?" she asked, almost gentle. "There's over two hundred military personnel in the city. They won't be bemusedly wandering the halls, asking if anybody knows their name."

"I think them organising against intruders is the best case scenario," Wenckworth spoke up. "Hell of a lot better than turning on each other."

"God, I had not thought of that," Captain Bahir said, stricken. "Remember Major Leonard..."

"Do you think that would happen?" Hillan asked Lt. Brittner. She made a face.
"Hard to say, it depends on too many factors. A major one is if the memory loss is like a wipe, with all the history gone, or if it's actually stopping them from retaining any new information." She took a breath as if to say more, and then stopped herself. Colbert recognised the signs of somebody who was refraining from saying more because it would not be in the best interest of morale.

* * *

It was well into the Captain's watch, which he took together with Wenckworth, before their conversation slowly trailed to a halt, until they were just sitting together quietly. It wasn't a cold night, and they'd gotten some blankets out a few hours ago, so Colbert was thinking about just sleeping there and then. Captain Bahir and Hillan had gone to get some sleep about an hour ago.

"Lee, don't go to sleep like that." Avery said softly. She was sitting with her back against a log, knees pulled up to her chest like she was made of rubber.

"Too late, sir," Wenckworth chuckled. He was right, she was already asleep.

The Captain crouched down in front of her.

"Lee... come on, wake a little..." he sing-songed. "Lee-lee..."

She woke with a start, and the Captain leant back a little so as not to crowd her.

"Beta site, remember?"

"What? Yes..."

"All is well. You should lie down to sleep, or you'll be aching tomorrow."

"Oh. ...right..." She slowly let herself tip over, and the Captain held a hand so that she didn't knock her head against the log. He unwrapped an emergency blanket, which she sleepily wrapped around herself over her normal blanket, and then she went back to sleep almost instantly.

Even after having been with this team and its sometimes oddly intimate interactions for a month, Colbert was a little surprised at the care. He couldn't imagine doing this for anyone, except maybe for Nate. And then it would have been a prod and a grumbled 'lie down and sleep like a normal person, sir'.

* * *

"Colbert. Wake up."

He opened his eyes to see the Lieutenant's pale face in the gloom. She was holding out his rifle, and he accepted it instinctively as he came to a sit.

She nodded toward the Gate, and he realised some of its symbols were lighting up. She had her P90 at the ready but stayed seated, and he understood that they were almost invisible in their low nook against the rock wall, the tall grass hiding them. Captain Bahir and Hillan were underway to take positions to the side of the Gate.

He wondered if somebody had woken Brittner or if she was primed to the sound of a Gate activating.

The seventh symbol lit up and the rock wall briefly lit up with the light of the backsplash.

_This is Lieutenant Adams. Does anybody read me?_ he heard faintly, and realised his radio set had slipped from his ear. He resettled it to hear Bahir's answer.

_We read you, Lieutenant. How has the weather been for you? Over._

_Like Atlanta in August, only less pleasant, over,_ was the answer, a tone to it that made Colbert realise this was a coded exchange. Without IDC codes this was how they could establish identity.

_I've always preferred February in Bahrain. Over._

_Understood, Captain Bahir. Is there a situation? I can't dial into Alpha base. Over._

_It would be best if you could come through to Beta site discuss it, Lieutenant. Is your mission completed? Over._

_Affirmative. It will take a few hours to wrap up here, over._
It is oh-dark-thirty local here, so that's good. We'll expect you in two hours. Over.

Copy that. Alpha weapons platoon out.

* * *

Dawn brought a hazy sun trying to break through the morning mist, and forty Marines laden with shovels, buckets and other gear. They were dusty and tired from a week of building irrigation systems, and various degrees of disgruntled that the return to showers, beds and cooked food was delayed.

Lieutenant Adams, a wiry young man with unquenchable energy - Wenckworth muttered that his nickname was Energiser Bunny - sent them all to wash in the stream at the bottom of the field, which lead to a brief explosion of shouting, splashing, and half-naked men chasing each other across the grassy slope with buckets of water. Until the platoon’s Gunnery Sergeant, a gruff man by the name of Cooney, shouted to keep it down as the LT couldn't hear his briefing.

The Marines, correctly surmising that they would not be needed for a little while at least, quietened down and began to lug rocks around. Colbert wandered down a ways, amused and curious, and saw that they were industriously building a dam so that water was collected in a pool large enough to lounge in. The water was pretty cold, but that didn't seem to bother any of them - from the sounds of it they'd spent a week sweating on a desert planet.

When he returned to the little command pow-wow - and it still felt weird to have a space in that circle, instead of having to stay with the grunts - the updating part of the briefing was over. Lt. Adams wore a grim expression, but he was new enough to Atlantis not to carry the dread of some of the others.

"Right. I'm going to P3U-206, and I'd like you and Wenckworth along to help sort out the jumper," Captain Avery nodded at Captain Bahir. "Adams, you and your guys are going to help clear it, minus one squad to handle security here."

"Yes, sir."

"Brittner, you're holding the fort."

"Yes, sir."

Colbert was a little frustrated that he wasn't being taken along to work on the jumper, but there was something in the way Avery looked at Wenckworth that made him think that it might be mostly because the Captain wanted to keep the Staff Sergeant busy, and was less concerned about Colbert's mental state. Which was fair enough, though he was beginning to realise that you didn't need to be a long-time Atlantean to feel apprehension pool in your stomach at the idea of what could be happening in Atlantis right now.

Sure, they themselves would probably be picked up by the Daedalus sooner or later and be able to go back to Earth. But he couldn't quite get enough oxygen at the thought that he'd never go back to that surreal, beautiful city or see some of the people he'd grown fond of. That he'd never get to show Nate and Ray and Tony around. That in all likelihood he would end up going back to First Recon and be deployed to Iraq, being a sergeant under idiotic command and dealing with an avalanche of shit. And that he might never again experience the high of stepping through a wormhole to explore the universe.

* * *

He watched the wormhole swallow two-third of the Marines and both Captains and tried to convince himself that the plan with the jumper was more than a way to keep everybody occupied. That there was a hope in hell that they could get to Atlantis, and that once there, they would be able to do something to save its people. Unfortunately it was the sort of rescue that even if they could pull it off, would probably not require his particular skill set, and he felt frustrated and powerless.

"You wanna go hunting with Hillan?"

He turned to the Lieutenant as the wormhole blinked out, and thought he saw the same forced briskness in her eyes, the need to keep moving because otherwise they'd despair.

"Sure, ma'am. You gonna be okay here?"

She smiled slightly, and he belatedly realised she could have taken that as an insult, as him asking
if she needed help leading the Marines, but she didn't seem to. She nodded, and turning away
whistled sharply on her fingers. As he geared up for hunting he watched her detail a fire team to
dig a latrine, another to go collect firewood, and the last to drag out all the gear from the cave to
do inventory.

It was preparing the site for longer term habitation, he realised soberly.

At least they wouldn't have to rely on the MREs. There was plenty of edible wildlife on this
planet, and Hillan could name a dozen planets that would be willing to trade them food for labour.
They had two cooking pans in the cave, which wasn't enough to easily cook for fifty, but Drs
Hayashi and Whitmoyer were already drawing up a list of allies where they could ask for some
additional equipment without broadcasting the precarious situation Atlantis was in.

Because if the Wraith found out Atlantis was virtually defenceless..

They shot a handful of small turkey-like birds and two rabbit-like animals the size of dogs. No
longer needing to keep silent for the hunt, Hillan chatted away while they cut down some long
branches to lash their kills to. Colbert had known the Athosian man was young, but he hadn't
realised he was only barely 17 - he acted far more mature. Then again, to his own people he was a
full-grown man and, he revealed with a grin, in Athosian cycles he was 28.

It lead to a discussion on how different people measured time, which was interesting to Colbert.
Every time measurement he knew ceased to be applicable the moment he was no longer on Earth,
so how did people who travelled between planets regularly keep time? The Athosians had had a
system of counting seasons, but since they had left their old home planet four Earth-years ago, this
had been abandoned in favour of 'child cycles'. This concept puzzled Colbert until Hillan, with the
air of somebody who had painstakingly memorised the measurement units of the aliens he was
living with, clarified that it was the amount of time it took for a new life to grow. Eight to nine
months, then, since the Athosians weren't that precise - but he understood how it might be the only
stable long term measurement across planets.

Hillan himself had nearly finished his time in Atlantis. Apparently the Athosians, while not as
closely entwined with Atlantis these days, felt it was a good idea to send their apprentice traders to
the city for a cycle to be part of a trading team. It allowed them to represent Athosians while
introducing Atlantis to new trade partners, and gain experience in trading for larger amounts than
their own people did. A sort of apprenticeship, and according to Hillan quite a prestigious one at
that.

He wondered if there was an Athosian equivalent to 'I survived a cycle on a Gate Team and all I
got was this lousy T-shirt'.

* * *

It was past midday when they returned to the caves with their bounty, though his watch said it was
0330 New Lantean Time. It looked like most of the morning tasks had been completed, and many
of the Marines were hanging out in the sun.

Lt. Brittner had the sort of pinched look that suggested the men had been trying. He didn't think
anything had gone majorly wrong, or there would have been a different atmosphere among the
men, but he was sure it hadn't been easy for her to suddenly get them under her command. He
only had to imagine what Bravo Two would have done if they'd suddenly been given a female
Airforce Lieutenant. That gave him a vague sort of anger he didn't care to examine further.

People got busy with plucking and skinning the carcasses. The LT greeted him with an approving
nod toward the bounty.

"Nice work. Just had an update from Captain Avery - they think they can get the jumper free, but
it'll take a few days."

He nodded. "Anything I can do here?"

"You can think about how we're going to keep a platoon occupied and out of trouble," she said
with a wry smile. "Chances are good we'll be here a while."

"We could set them to heightening that tunnel?" he offered with a half-grin.

* * *

He spent the afternoon together with Dr Fournier and a couple of others, digging for tuber roots
and a kind of onion like plant. Fournier was outwardly making the effort, but Colbert thought he
seemed withdrawn in a way he had never seen the man before, and not even the comedy routine of hopeful Marines bringing him various sorts of plants to see if they might be edible could draw him out.

Hillan had taken Dr Hayashi and another fire team to visit New Athos and procure a large cooking pot, a sack of flour, and some other practical supplies. The Athosians didn't communicate with Atlantis often enough to have noticed that the city couldn't be reached right now, but they would probably have know soon enough.

Dr Hayashi, who was apparently well known with the Athosians and the present Atlantean's chosen representative, had told them that there was a technical problem that stopped the Gate from working, and that a group of them were on Beta site.

These different events came together to form a pleasant stew for... evening light on the planet made it feel like dinner, but it was 0900 New Lantean Time. He wondered how long they would stick with imposing Atlantean time onto the local, much shorter days. On Earth everybody operated on Zulu time, but there days were still always 24 hours. Interplanetary travel introduced a whole range or complications he'd never even considered until now.

The Marines, who had spent a week on a planet with 33-hour days, were even more off their rhythm than Colbert. After a day of chopping and hauling trees, digging latrines and whatever else they'd been tasked with, most of the platoon was tired enough to settle down not long after dinner.

Lt. Brittner and Dr Hayashi strategically went upstream to wash just as Lt. Adams assembled his men for a combination briefing / moto talk. Everybody else just washed in the rock pool the Marines had made that morning.

Dialling Atlantis had now been relegated to an attempt every four hours, though nobody now expected it to connect and it had become a rote action. The reality of the situation was beginning to sink in, and by unspoken agreement Colbert's team settled down in the evening sun a little way away from the caves, just with the four of them. They sat with their backs against the back of the Gate platform, looking down into the valley, and drank the mint-like tea Hillan had made with an eye to stretching supplies of Earth coffee and tea. Avery talked through the jumper and equipment situation for a few minutes, not as much an update as a mental list he seemed to need to work down. Then they lapsed into silence.

The Captain at least seemed moderately optimistic that they would be able to both get to Atlantis (it was a ten hour flight from the nearest planet) and be able to do something useful once there. It could be an act, but Colbert had always thought the man had something irrepressible about him, so maybe he really believed it. Colbert hoped so. Somebody had to.

Next to him was Lt. Brittner, who had worked all day with the sort of brisk efficiency that suggested she was well aware that Marines looked to their medics to gauge how deep in the shit they were. She'd handled any amount of questions about memory loss with an opaque kind of compassion that couldn't quite conceal that she didn't have much comfort to give. Colbert had yet to meet an experienced combat medic who was an optimist - it just didn't stick with you in that line of work - so he was fairly sure the way she was leaning her head back against the platform behind them said more about her state of mind than anything she might say.

Dr Fournier was sitting next to her. Away from people he felt he needed to keep a brave face for, he was staring into the distance, sunken into his own bleak thoughts. Colbert imagined that after four years in the Pegasus Galaxy, he had more than enough nightmare material to draw from.

He privately agreed with Wenckworth that it would be a miracle if nobody on Atlantis turned against their own people - he'd read a fraction of the sort of shit long term members of the Stargate program lived through, and being suspicious of everybody else was a natural response to the situation. But no matter what he believed, they needed to get to the city, to see what there was to see. With only four hazmat suits available, he could only hope he'd be permitted to join the mission.

They were sitting close together, shoulder to shoulder, and he was very conscious of the arm length between himself and Fournier. It seemed kind of far all of a sudden, but moving now felt like it would be some kind of statement. The others had a sort of dynamic that had seemed strangely intimate from the beginning - even when the Captain and the LT had been at each other's throats. He wasn't quite sure if he was expected to become part of that, or if as the NCO on the team it was natural that he would have a little more distance. Hell, he wasn't even sure if he wanted to become part of it. He was pleased that they were beginning to work together better and that the LT wasn't so guarded around him anymore, but he wasn't really ready to be assimilated into their weirdly intimate sibling dynamic, if he ever would be.
Of course, he couldn't quite talk himself into believing that there would be more missions, that the current situation wouldn't culminate in the end of the Atlantis expedition and a return to Bravo company for him, which would render the team a distant, irrelevant memory.

* * *

It wasn't really night - 1100 Atlantis time, in fact - but he was deep enough into mission mode to be able to sleep anytime, anywhere. One of the Marine squads was on watch overnight, and the rest of them had occupied the largest cave, night next to the entrance. The two Gate teams had by unspoken agreement taken the second largest space, except for Dr Whitmoyer, who had been banished to one of the anterooms for snoring. Given the cave acoustics it didn't help much with the noise, but, Dr Hayashi had smiled wryly, it was the principle of the thing.

He woke from a dead sleep to the sound of rustling, and opened his eyes just as somebody hurriedly left the cave. The Captain, who'd been sleeping opposite him near the entrance, stirred awake.

"Radio, sir?" Colbert asked, puzzled.

"What? She kicked --oh--" his eyes widened, and he threw off his blanket. "Bollocks. Gate activating."

A few seconds later they were both jogging out, weapons in hand.

"Everybody up!" Avery called into the space where the Marines had bedded down. "Gate activity."

Lt. Brittner was outside with the fire team currently on watch. They were just getting to their feet, and she sent them to positions at the back of the Gate.

The second symbol lit up.

"How did you know, ma'am?" he asked. She looked surprisingly alert for only just having woken, though her hair was a mess.

"The Ancient crystals in the DHD activate slightly before the Gate does," she said quietly, watching the Gate. "It's the kind of pattern change that I'm tuned into."

"I'm better at talking to Ancient tech, she's better at listening for it," the Captain explained, and they fell silent as the wormhole thundered toward them, briefly lighting the field. Marines were swarming out the cave opening, not all wearing their boots but all armed, and formed a line along the rock wall. If any wraith came through - or Genii, of whoever might have found Beta site - they would meet a firing squad style ending.

Beta site, this is Atlantis.

* * *

It took ten minutes of heavily coded conversation for Captain Avery to be satisfied that Colonel Carter was herself, decision capable and calling them of her own free will. Then ten more minutes for her to update the Captain about the illness that had had such a disastrous effect on the population, and how without Ronon and Teyla, every doom scenario the stranded teams had come up with would have come true.

Once the Captain had given the 'ID verified' signal Lt. Brittner had stood the men down, and by the time the wormhole blinked out, everybody was already packing up gear.

Colbert felt like he was lagging, mind still stuck in the reality where Atlantis might well be lost to them. Now suddenly Dr Fournier was lamenting that they'd planned to do a Eurovision party that night but hadn't had any time to prepare for it. Surreal.

Half an hour later Weapons Two went through the Gate while the rest of them waited. Two Marines went down to the stream to break up the dam, and Colbert watched them idly while Wenckworth explained quietly that the expedition had had various instances of alien influence and 'people not being themselves' in the past, and that the men were scouting for anything out of the ordinary. Colbert wasn't sure what passed for ordinary on Atlantis, or he was supposed to do if everybody had turned into pod people. He hoped others did.

Twenty minutes later the all clear came. Gunny Cooney sent another squad through, and then politely but implacably made clear that the officers and civilians were definitely going through
before the last of the Marines. There wasn't any danger on the Beta planet that they knew, but Colbert knew it was the principle of the thing, and hid a smile at Dr Whitmoyer's indignation.

* * *

All of senior command was up on the control room gallery, as well as Ronon Dex and Teyla Emmagan and the Company Commanders. There seemed to be a heated conversation between Drs McKay and Zelenka. Colonel Carter welcomed them with a weary smile, and asked the Captains to come up.

Colbert had grown used to the abruptness of returning to the city after a mission - the sudden feeling of normalcy and safety. This time he looked around with a sharper eye, no longer immediately assuming all was well. There was only so much you could do before crossing the line into rampant paranoia, but he was a lot more aware that Atlantis wasn't always the safe home base he'd grown used to.

Lt. Adams dismissed his men just as Colonel Sheppard came down the stairs, and the Colonel paused for a moment to ask him about the irrigation project mission. As the Marines trooped out of the Gate room, Captain Avery turned to his team. They drew a little closer.

"I suggest you lot un-ass the area before you get dragged into a debrief," he said sotto voce, handing his P90 off to Colbert. 

"Appreciated, sir." Lt. Brittner flashed a grin, and then the three of them turned on their heels and disappeared with the crowd. Major Lorne, up on the gallery, caught Colbert's eyes with a raised eyebrow of 'I see that' but said nothing.

* * *

"Is there anything documented about Gate warfare tactics?" he asked as the three of them were sorted gear into their lockers.

"I think there's some bits here and there in mission reports," Lt. Brittner said after a long moment. "And the SGC might have something more comprehensive, but I don't know."

"You should ask Colonel Carter," Dr Fournier said.

Colbert stopped unbuttoning his BDU shirt to stare, because only a civilian would suggest so casually to a sergeant that he should approach a Colonel.

"She will know, or she can easily ask General O'Neill," Fournier shrugged. "And she'll be happy to talk to you."

"Ask at some informal thing," Lt. Brittner suggested, emptying out the pockets of her BDU trousers.

"An informal thing like Eurovision night?" A head poked around the door.

"Hey Laura," Dr Fournier said.

Lt. Cadman flashed a smile in greeting. She was in civvies, hair loose around her shoulders. "Everybody here is still recovering from the freaky alien flu, so Kay and I are organising a chill-out session for Sanity Society tonight. Baking cookies, watching Bob Ross, playing games, and I think a few people are bringing instruments. Probably not going to be busy, but if you guys want to come hang out."

Colbert shrugged. He felt weird, like he'd just come out of battle. Not tired, because he'd only woken up an hour ago, but weary and on edge at the same time, not quite completely convinced this wasn't a dream. He couldn't decide if he wanted to be social and verify for himself that everybody was okay, or spend time alone in a quiet room. Maybe he'd know after he'd showered and changed.

"I will join you," Dr Fournier nodded. "Assuming that the kitchen saved us something to eat. Darren mentioned perhaps doing Eurovision tomorrow night."

"I was hoping for that. We can use the cinema room. The Browncoats finished their rewatch run last week."

"I will be in D2 in the afternoon," Brittner said. "It's my turn to hang with the Parkour guys. But after that I can help set up."
She must have seen his questioning look, because she explained, "Freerunning? Crazy jumps and shit? There's a park in D2 that they like to use for it. Dr Weir knew she couldn't stop them doing it, so she mandated that they always had to have a medic present. I think the idea is to talk them out of their more suicidal ideas." She didn't look all that enthused about it.

"Okay, so you guys are in for tomorrow night? Doc Zelenka says he'll get the projectors set up, Kay and Ouderijn have the decorations, and I'll arrange for the softdrinks and nibbles."

Cadman looked at each of them in turn, and Colbert shrugged and nodded. He had no idea what to expect, but it was clear he wasn't going to get out of this.

"Sure."

"I'll do the booze," Lt. Brittner said.

"I'll sort out the invitations tonight, then," Dr Fournier nodded, closing his locker. "Get the guest list drawn up."

"Guest list?" he hadn't realised it was that sort of party.

"Public gatherings aren't allowed to serve anything apart from beer and small glasses of wine," Cadman said. "So we make it invite only, with everybody from the Euro zone automatically invited, and they can bring a plus one."

"Or plus two, three or four," Dr Fournier added. "Or a plus-team."

"And all of Medical is automatically invited in honour of Doctor Beckett," Lt. Brittner said, balling up her dirty BDU shirt and tossing it into the laundry basket. "He started the Eurovision tradition."

* * *

Friday, 1235hrs
Mess Hall, Stargate Command

Brad,
Back on Earth for the last VR sessions (two more this afternoon) and then leave. Last mission was pretty good - still trying to let go of the cultural assumptions, but Gunny Warszawski seemed pretty happy with how we did.

I'm glad to hear things are improving with Lt. Brittner. I did get the impression that once she was past the exam and the meeting in DC, she was going to focus on making the team situation work. Pleased to hear I was right. And could you let her know I am looking forward to being part of The L Team? (Love the name.)

I did ask for the gi for you, but she already had it on her list, asked by somebody called Dusty. The BJJ class sounds great, I'll join you ASAP!

I googled Eurovision (I am really going to miss google!) and apparently it's a song contest, has been going on since the fifties. Mentioned it to Gunny Warszawski and he laughed - says it's a cheese fest, that the European expedition members seem to consider it a bonding thing but nobody takes it seriously, and that you should just roll with it. Oh, and he said something about glitter, but I'm not sure what that was about.

Mike and Tony will be off at 1700 today for a weekend at home. I told Tony about the dancing evening and he looked interested. I know he's struggling with the secrecy most of all, but he actually seems to be looking forward to finally seeing Atlantis. I think we all are, actually - at least, if anybody has cold feet, I haven't heard about it and neither has Mike.

Tonight, I expect, will involve alcohol, inappropriate behaviour and hopefully nothing too crazy... Major Teldy says that she spends a fair amount of time defending Marines toward her colleague who trains Airmen, and would like for us not to embarrass her.

Yeah, that argument has never worked for me, but I think some of the guys are a little smitten with her, so let's hope it works for her.

A few more days! And then this incredibly annoying time-delayed email swapping is over.

Take care,
Nate
I can see why some writers enjoy leaving cliffhangers, it was kind of fun seeing the reactions of those who hadn't connected this to Tabula Rasa, the SGA episode it ties into. Almost makes me sorry I didn't yank this story off into an AU where Teyla and Ronon didn't succeed...

With thanks to green_grrl's enthusiastic help :-)
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I've always liked the idea of Atlantis as an international and diverse city, and it was disappointing that SGA almost never used what they set up in different nationalities in the pilot. So here's my ode to an Atlantis where American culture isn't always the default.

Eurovision aficionados will notice that I picked tracks from various years - just as I haven't anchored this story in a particular year, it just works better for me if I don't get hung up on making everything fit perfectly. It's a Eurovision time warp!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After a shower and a change into civvies Colbert went to the big rec room where the Sanity Society was being held. Until now he'd thought that that name was a joke, and usually it probably was, but tonight apparently the sanity of the expedition members required quiet social time with the scent of cookies. It wasn't very busy, and people wandered in and out, but it seemed to be some sort of affirmation that everybody was there and okay. A lot of people were still recovering from the flu, so people were mostly lounging on pillows and drinking Athosian herbal tea.

He felt rather too energetic for the communal mood, but just when he was about to leave with his tray of food, Dusty Mehra spotted him. He spent the next hour talking about the memory loss situation on Atlantis and how his mission had gone, and when the rest of his old unit would come to Atlantis. She was still a little ill, huddled in her USMC hoodie and scoffing at the herbal tea she'd been advised to drink. It left him uncomfortably at sea, not sure how to handle the urge to wrap her in one of the colourful knitted blankets and hold her. It would be easier if he could see her strictly as a professional colleague, but they didn't actually work together, and sometimes the conversations seemed to turn... well, personal, he supposed.

He was never quite sure if they were flirting or not, but tonight, with her sleepy and relaxed and almost chatty, he was starting to think that maybe they were. He was just starting to consider testing that theory by offering to walk her to her quarters when Captain Avery stopped to greet him and tell him where Colbert would need to turn up for next day's party setup. Dusty took the space of those few sentences to flag down a friend who was just leaving, and touched his arm to tell him she would see him at BJJ class.

* * *

Feeling a little dejected and a lot confused, he joined the Captain on the balcony. The man had a half-litre mug of tea with milk and a small plate with freshly baked cookies he put down on one of the outdoor tables, inviting Colbert to sit with a gesture of his mug.

"So Brad, how is it going?"

Colbert was silent for a long moment, because he'd sort of expected this conversation for some time now, but still had no idea how to handle it. As far as he was concerned he had a comfortable working relationship with his CO. The man had shown occasional sharp edges, but that didn't actually bother Colbert, who was used to working under both the chronically shouty and the terminally incompetent. The Captain had shown himself decisive, quick on the uptake and tactically solid, and that was pretty much everything he could have wished for. He'd never had a more personal relationship with an officer apart from with Nate, which had grown very slowly. In First Recon they were NCO and Officer always, and it had taken time for the glimpses of personality that leaked through the Marine persona to add up to the picture of a person.

"Fine, sir."

"Darren." The Captain said absently, shaking his head slightly, lips curling up. "And bloody hell, my decision to let you and Lee iron things out between yourselves has backfired on me."

He seemed amused, so Colbert wasn't quite sure what to make of that.

"I mean that you two seem to have taken on the same communication style. Let me try that again. So Brad, how are you feeling about Atlantis, about the team, and about the missions we've done so far?"
He couldn't figure out if this was his CO asking a sergeant about his professional functioning in a new environment, or his team leader wanting to know how he was doing in a more personal sense.

"Is this a professional evaluation, sir?"

Avery actually rolled his eyes.

"If I had any doubt about your ability to function professionally it would have been erased after the past few days. I'm asking how you're feeling about your new life in outer space."

Right. Okay. Professional and personal weren't so far apart, here. That was actually one of the things he was still getting used to. He couldn't imagine sitting down with Nate for a plate of cookies after only having worked together for a month. It had taken the mutual frustration over the clusterfuck in Iraq to get anywhere close to this level of openness.

"It's growing on me," he said after a long moment. "I'm still getting used to the..." he gestured vaguely. "Work life mix thing."

"It takes some getting used to letting people see you with your hair down, doesn't it?" Avery tapped on the table, a little restless. "It took me weeks to stop dithering about going to the Sci-Fi club."

"I think it will be stranger once the other guys from Bravo arrive on Monday," he mused. "The person they knew is... a little different."

Avery chuckled.

"They will be thrown headlong into the same situation."

"I think I'm getting the hang of the team," Colbert said after a moment, taking another cookie. "And the team the hang of me."

"I didn't make it easy on you, did I? But I agree - I think we're all getting the hang of this team," Avery said thoughtfully.

From anybody else he would have taken that as pandering, but the man actually sounded as if he genuinely meant that it wasn't just one sergeant taking the place of another, but a completely new team that each member had to get used to. Which, thinking about it, perhaps it was.

"I had underestimated how symbiotic we had all become. I thought it was just Lee and Paul."

Colbert huffed an amused breath, because while it sounded dramatic, he could see how the triangle of Avery-Brittner-Warszawski had collapsed without the latter and how his own arrival was always going to result in a whole new dynamic for the three of them.

"I can't sit still, I'm going for a run," the Captain suddenly decided, putting down his tea mug. "Want to come?"

* * *

Ten minutes later they met up again in PT gear and hit the 10-mile trail. It took a few minutes to find a comfortable rhythm next to Avery's slightly shorter stride and resolute refusal to make it a competition, but yes, this was what he'd needed. The rhythmic pounding of his feet wore off the adrenaline buildup of first the fucked up Loetan mission and then the prospect of either losing or needing to rescue Atlantis.

"It's par for the course out here," the Captain nodded when he said as much. "Jarring, isn't it? There's even an acronym for it. WF-W-WF. Stands for 'We're Fucked - Wait - We're Fine'."

Colbert snorted a laugh.

"I think it's the Gate imposing a sort of absolute over everything. You do find ways to cope. Michel likes to do yoga, Lee is at the shooting range right now, Laura likes to blows shit up in the containment chamber, and I either swim or run."

"It's good to know other people get the same thing."

They ran in comfortable silence for a couple of miles, and Colbert found himself engrossed in watching the city as the sun set, watching the towers and gardens slowly take on golden hues of
light. He wondered if the Ancients had built things specifically for that effect, and given the placement of some tower elements and glass-like material, he thought they had. It floated, but maybe it had some sort of system to orient it to the sun in this way.

The city hummed contently under their pounding feet. He was looking forward to doing this run with Nate around sunset, and see the look on his face.

"What will I be doing on Monday?" It still felt strange not tacking on the 'sir'.

"I'll be an admin day. I'm going to want an AAR addition from you on the Loetan mission, and if you haven't gotten to it yet, the rescue mission for Captain Klimczyk."

"Wilco, sir. Is there any news about the Captain?"

"He's still being kept in a coma, but apparently his brain activity is improving."

"That is good to hear."

"His replacement is arriving on Monday. Captain Pshenikov? Pshenichkov?"

"That's fast," he said noncommittally. It seemed a bit much to Gate in a replacement just days after Klimczyk's accident. He would have thought they'd give his team a little more time.

"It is, but we've got the IOA pushing. They heard about the Memory Loss Flu and what nearly happened, and now they're sending two people on Monday for a debrief." His voice was almost-not-quite neutral, and Brad thought they probably thought the exact same thing about bureaucrats coming in after the fact to pick holes in all the decision-making. It hadn't taken long for him to pick up on the expedition's dislike of the IOA. "So the Colonels and Major Lorne will be busy with that. I was thinking that you and Lee should welcome-wagon AR7."

Colbert glanced aside, wondering if the Captain knew that he'd been angling for that the entire time. Well, he hadn't thought of Lt. Brittner joining him, but it made sense for Nate to be welcomed by a fellow officer. He wondered what she'd make of the guys.

"Thank you, sir."

"Darren."

* * *

"Colbert! Ireland or Latvia?" Lt. Cadman was sitting behind a table at the door, armed with a tablet computer. She was wearing a T-shirt that said '12 points!' and a Greek flag sticker.

"Sweden."

"We already have Kapten Kundgren and Doc Carlquist to support Sweden, sorry."

"Ireland then."

Somebody behind him sucked air through his teeth, and he turned to see Dr Zelenka. He was wearing a red and white T-shirt with a blue triangle, which Colbert assumed was the Czech Republic flag, and a grin.

"I would have gone for Latvia, sergeant."

"Any reason why?"

"You will see."

"Have you already watched then, Doc?" Cadman said, handing Colbert an Irish flag sticker and indicating he was supposed to wear it on his shirt.

"I have seen only photos of the candidates. Colonel Carter sends her regrets - she is still preparing for the visit from our IOA overlords."

"That's a shame. I'll make sure we send her something nice to drink, later."

Zelenka grinned.
"I am sure she will need it. Oh, Teyla and Ronon are on Czech Republic contingent tonight."

"Cool. Noted," Cadman grinned, entering their names on the guest list.
Colbert hung around near the entrance for a bit, trying to figure out what the hell this was all about. The big rec room was beginning to fill up with an interesting subset of Atlantis denizens. Mostly civilians, but he saw the odd pocket of military. It was strange to feel like a minority - Europeans were definitely in the majority here, in a way he'd never experienced before. Many of the people had their tablets with them, and there were two projectors aimed at a huge white wall: one showed a Eurovision logo, and the other what appeared to be an instant messenger channel. A few people had already logged in, though there was no conversation.

"What's that about, ma'am?" he asked, indicating the second screen.

"Heckling," she shot him a bright grin. "This way you can easily share your thoughts with the entire group. It's fun."

Just then a tinkling of glass approached from the hallway, and Lt. Brittner rolled in a cart full of bottles. Various kind of liquors and mix drinks, fruit juices of all kinds, and a few large bottles of homebrew.

"Lee! Are you supporting anybody yet?"

"Can I have Belgium?"

"Ops/Tech claimed it on the basis of the Netherlands never getting through the semis. I have Latvia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine left."

"I'll take Latvia. Are we about ready?"

"Michel is getting the cheese table, apart from that, as good as."

"Cool. So Colbert, are you ready for this?" Lt. Brittner turned to him. Her T-shirt read I'm only here for the cheese'.

"Not quite sure what it is that I'm ready for, ma'am," he quirked a smile.

"Just pretend it's a first contact mission," she advised, and he couldn't tell if she was joking or not. "You know, strange but benign ritual to appease the natives...?"

"When you put it like that.."

Colbert spotted Stilger, Hillan and Dyatlov, all three wearing Russian flags. He thought they looked a little bit lost, and wondered if this was something they had planned to do together with Captain Klimczyk. Probably - he'd noticed that a lot of the longtime Atlanteans were present, presumably because it had become a yearly tradition now.

* * *

"Oh no, Rodney and John were quite happy to leave us to this.. cultural experience," Teyla Emmagan smiled at Lt. Cadman as she accepted her Czech Republic flag sticker. Ronon Dex was with her, currently warily looking around the room. On seeing that everybody else was wearing a sticker, he reluctantly applied his own.

Colbert hadn't really interacted with Dex, only heard about him, and wondered what a guy like him would make of the whole thing. He seemed sort of bemused right now, but also as if he was willing to be entertained.

The infirmary contingent, seventeen people in total, trooped in decked out in various permutations of United Kingdom and Scotland flag paraphernalia. For reasons best known to himself, one of the nurses was wearing a kilt. A couple of others carried trays full of crackers, dips and other snacks.

Captain Avery came over to have a look at the guest list, bottle of homebrew in his hand. His t-shirt showed a circle of tents on a mountainside.

There was a commotion outside, and everybody turned to watch... Colbert felt his eyebrows shoot up. Six men in elaborate makeup barged into the room, waving cartoonishly large wooden swords and axes. Most of their skin was grey and they had forehead ridges and.. well, he supposed they were orcs. They had cuts and open wounds everywhere, blood dripping down onto their improvised grey, ragged costumes.
Ronon Dex and Teyla tensed instinctively, but the men looked nothing like Wraith, and they relaxed again.

Lt. Cadman clapped a hand over her mouth to contain her giggles.

One of the orcs leaps onto a table, played an exaggerated chord on his air guitar, and then screamed in a gravelly voice "ZOMBIE LORDI IS HERE!"

Next to him, Captain Avery inhaled his beer, and Colbert spent the next few minutes pounding him on the back.

"So... the Corpsmen are supporting Finland?"

"I think Doc Uusipaikka might have mentioned something to that effect," Lt. Brittner said blandly.

Cadman grabbed one of her hands and held it up to examine. There was grey makeup under her nails.

* * *

As the program intro played a trio of medical doctors took up station behind the makeshift bar and began to mix up large pitchers of something that looked sweet and sticky. He grimaced as somebody offered him a cup - it smelled fruity - and the guy grinned.

"One Athosian Iced Tea coming up!"

The cup he was offered next held something dark and slightly viscous - it smelled not entirely unlike Guinness. He took a cautious sip and found that it was some kind of very heavy tea mixed with vodka and something else.

"Good, yes?"

"I'll go with this," he conceded, given the alternative.

On the big screen the first performance started

"That was.. not what I was expecting," he said to Cadman, who had something purple in her cup that she was drinking with every sign of enjoyment. It hadn't been - the music wasn't really his taste, but he wouldn't have turned it off if the car radio played it.

On the instant messenger screen people complained that that had been far too normal for an opener.

"Just wait," she said cheerfully.
"Bats? Bats?"

"Batshit..."

"Why does this make me think of 300?" Avery said.

"Okay, this is a little weird," Colbert admitted, just as laughter burst out in the room.

"They made a boat! Does that count as costume change?" Dr Ingadottir called out, to answering calls of 'YES!'. People raised their cups and took a long drink.

"It's a drinking game," Lt. Brittner explained. "Costume change, wind machine, pyrotechnics, key changes.. there's some others, but then you have to drink."

"Obviously fake instrument playing, shadow singers, people doing athletics, seriously out of key singing.." Dr Fournier supplied. "Cross dressing, shiny clothing, extreme make-up - there are a few others."

The next few entries were mostly unremarkable - vaguely poppy, some strange dresses, and a few ballads. The first ballad went painfully off key, which was met by general cheering and drinking. The second, by Spain, was sung by what was obviously a professional opera singer - he'd been told most of the artists weren't - and a Spanish bio-engineer wondered on the chat screen how the woman had been talked into it. Apparently most professional artists would be embarrassed to be seen at Eurovision.

"What? I don't even..."

"STUNT KNITTING!" somebody exclaimed joyfully, and Colbert took a swig, trying to get into the spirit of the thing. Everybody seemed to be having a great time, but he was still mostly baffled. Wasn't this a contest? What the hell was he even looking at?

"I have always thought of this as equivalent to karaoke in my own country," Dr Hayashi was explaining to Teyla and Ronon Dex, who both seemed similarly puzzled. Colbert tuned in to the conversation. Maybe you needed social scientists to explain this shit to you for it to make sense.
"You have seen people do karaoke here, have you not?"

They nodded.

"In Japan it is very popular among businessmen, people with very high pressure, high responsibility jobs. It is, in a way, a sort of ritual public debasement. 'Now that we have both made ourselves vulnerable, we may do business'. The other person will not seem as intimidating, you see?"

"It seems very strange to me, but very well." Teyla nodded. "I have seen many different negotiation rituals. How does this relate to this.. song contest?"

"Europe is a continent full of small countries with a long history of war between them," Dr Hayashi continued. "I believe that it is good for international relations to all get together and act ridiculous."

"Like bonding over mutual embarrassment," Ronon Dex rumbled. "There was something similar on Sateda, men would get drunk and dance the K'tare."

"MOONWALKING BAGPIPES!" a loud cheer went up, to general drinking. The 'cocktail doctors' went around with pitchers to provide refills, and he was offered a choice of Cheddar, Gouda or Brie by a zombie Orc.

There was some more drinking over overly short dresses and pyrotechnics, and Colbert laughed when the scientist who'd been assigned to support Romania climbed on onto a table to take a bow for his country's brilliance with the bagpipe.

"Bloody hell, this is actually really good," Captain Avery remarked. "I could see this winning."

"Has she been hiking in that dress though?" Cadman wondered. "It looks muddy."

"She had cold legs, so she skinned a yak," Lt. Brittner suggested.

That surprisingly tolerable entry was followed by what barely classified as singing by a group of
people dressed in post-apocalyptic bondage gear, some generic pop that mercifully faded from the mind as soon as the song was over, and another overly dramatic ballad.

Colbert choked on his drink, and Lt. Cadman pounded him on the back, grinning hugely.

"Shit, Ukraine wants us to drink ourselves into a coma," Stilger laughed.

"I think we need background dancers like that," Dr Zelenka wrote on the messenger screen. "They could support important speeches via interpretive dance. It would liven up long meetings."

This led to a quick round of voting, passing the idea with 34 in favour versus 13 against - but stranded on the question of who would actually fill the role.

"Ohh, look Brad, Ireland's next," Dr Fournier announced.

"They're like the neutered children of a Ken doll and Tigger," Lt. Brittner said with an expression of horrified fascination.

Colbert downed his drink, watching in silent horror. When the performance had mercifully ended he turned to Captain Avery, who was wearing a shit-eating grin.

"Sir, request permission to go find a planet with rabid Grizzly bears. I will need to wrestle a few of them to recover my manhood."
"What IS she wearing?"

"Did they think they were too ordinary for Eurovision?"

"The costumes are a bit... nuts, but I like the song."

"If this came on the radio, I would probably not rush to change channel," Colbert conceded.

"Wanna bet that this is going to end up in the bottom ten?" Avery said to Dr Fournier. "It's just not batshit enough."

"So.... would this be batshit enough?" Lt. Brittner asked after a long silence.

"It normally might be, but I have the feeling the corpsmen are onto something this year," Dr Ingadottir said. "Have you heard the Finnish entry?"

"I've only seen a photo to base makeup on," the Lieutenant shook her head. "But it should be good."

"I don't understand what scores are based on," Colbert admitted.

"It's kind of a mix of standing out from the rest, sounding good, sounding memorable, not taking Eurovision too seriously.—"

"But not taking the piss too much, either," Captain Avery broke in.

"-indeed, and either being sexy or being fun," Dr Fournier gestured vaguely. "Ireland sent somebody in a turkey suit last year, that didn't get through the semi finals."

"Of course, Ireland doesn't actually want to win," the Captain explained when Colbert looked confused. Turkey suit? What?

"They won a couple of times in the nineties, and since winning means you are organising the next one..."
"It's really a giant game of 'pin the expensive event on the country,' Cadman clarified.

"It also has to do with connecting with a general mood, I think," Dr Ingadottir said, leaning against Captain Avery's side. "This is nice, and it will probably end up in the top 10, but it doesn't really grab people."

"Something for your next doctorate?"

"Sure, once I'm done with researching how communities heal from extreme trauma," she answered tartly.

"You were right, Doc," Colbert called to Dr Zelenka. "I should have gone for Latvia."

"This is dreadfully catchy," Lt. Cadman frowned. "And kind of fun."

"This is classic Eurovision. Camp, fun, bat shit insane," Avery declared. "Well done, Lee."

"Um, thanks?"
"I take that back, THIS is classic Eurovision."

"I didn't know I'd signed up to support man cleavage," Cadman said plaintively, fingering her Greek flag sticker.

"KEY CHANGE!"

Everybody took a drink, and Colbert flagged down somebody with a pitcher.

"Oh, oh! He tore open his shirt further - that counts for costume change!"

Colbert grinned and took a swig of his newly filled cup. He was working on a world-class buzz - the Athosian tea stuff was growing on him. He couldn't even work up any real disgust about the Enrique Iglesias clone on the screen.

"OH yeah!"

The corpsmen/Zombie Orcs climbed onto tables to rock along, one of them waving a giant foam battle axe along with the beat.

"This sounds less crazy than it looks," Lt Cadman mused.

"Actually, yeah, I agree. I thought it was going to be straight-up parody or something," Kay nodded. "But it doesn't sound bad."

"Are you kidding? This is fucking awesome!"
"Hurrah for Franglais!"

"Is that a cat around his neck?"

"He's wearing heels - DRINK!"

"What the fuck am I listening to?"

"Allez, how can you not love the drummer with angel wings?" Dr Fournier implored.

* * *

Captain Avery ruthlessly fast-forwarded through all the presenter bullshit and only paused the recording when the scoreboard was nearly filled up. Apparently the part where national presenters called in the points for their country took forever and was the most boring part of the whole show.

By the time it became clear that Finland was winning most people were 'pretty sauced' as Avery put it, and various pieces of the zombie orc costumes had been redistributed until half the crowd looked like it had been to a particularly intense gaming convention. Colbert had long since given up trying to be disgusted by the whole thing and was now struggling not to giggle at the sight of an orc teaching Ronon Dex to moonwalk.

Lt. Brittner, who was either the least tipsy or the best at acting sober, was dispatched to Colonel Carter's office with a travel mug full of a sweet sticky cocktail. She managed to refuse the offer of some of the half-dressed orcs to escort her, but somebody set off a glitter cannon in the door opening just as she walked through, and she trailed glitter all down the hallway. Colbert wished he could see the scene in the Gate room if that was how she was going to go to the Colonel's office.

Around midnight the fake-blood and glitter encrusted attendees started to trickle out, mindful of tomorrow being Monday.

From what Colbert understood, only senior command would be occupied by the surprise IOA investigation, but the stress of the visit trickled down to the entire expedition. Apparently this was primarily through Colonel Sheppard's friendship with Dr McKay, who hated seeing his friend beleaguered and, unable to do anything about it, was sure to spread the stress liberally around the science departments. Though the scientists seemed a bit more open about their general resentment of the IOA. Nobody was a fan of an organisation that judged from its position safely back on Earth.

"If they have another purpose than second guessing our decisions and pressuring our leaders, I have not yet discerned it," Teyla said.

"They make Sheppard all... weird," Ronon Dex added.

Colbert had heard the rumours of how the Colonel had become the military leader of the expedition in the first place when nobody had intended him to be, and yeah, it made sense that he wasn't anybody's favourite back on Earth. He seemed to be doing pretty well out here and Colbert hadn't spoken to anybody who wasn't deeply loyal to the man, but he hadn't been the one the upper-ups back on Earth had wanted for the post, and he doubted they let the Colonel forget that.

* * *
He was tired enough to go straight to bed, something he regretted in the morning. Apparently one of the hazards of partying with his team was stealthily being sprinkled with glitter, because his pillow was *covered* in it.

Chapter End Notes

I accidentally earwormed myself with Jedward for this chapter. Is there a Purple Heart for writers? I think I deserve one.

Feedback plz? What did you think?
Chapter 28

Brad had expected to get some shit from fellow Marines about attending the Eurovision party, but when he turned up at PT with wet hair from washing out the glitter, only Dyatlov and Stilger grinned. They seemed in a good mood, and when they lead a brutal run up the stairs of a 30-story building, Stilger explained why.

The three Marines of AR9 had taken to dropping by the infirmary when they could - which was often at odd hours, like early morning before PT. The medical staff did not mind as long as they didn't disturb anybody, and one of the doctors had taught them a little bit about how to interpret the data on the monitors at the Captain's bedside. This morning Sgt. Dyatlov had dropped by to tell the Captain about the Eurovision party and the monitors had shown signs of increased brain activity.

"Of course, it might not mean anything more than we already knew," Stilger conceded. "Which is that he can hear and at some level process sound. But Yuri says that there was a pattern to it that really seemed like Skipper was listening - like, increased activity when he told a joke. He was speaking Russian, maybe that helped."

"That's great news," Colbert said, trying not to sound out of breath. He hadn't exactly been drunk the night before and the weird Athosian stuff didn't give you a standard hangover, but he wasn't really at his best. Luckily most of the Marines had been at a different party, so nobody was really feeling 100%.

"Yuri says that we should get the LT to try his Russian this afternoon. If we see more activity when he mangles his pronunciation, we'll know for sure it's Skipper laughing."

Colbert knew that Stilger had passable conversational Russian, Dyatlov was a native speaker and Deike, their youngest Marine, was learning. It sounded like one of those frontier-spirit 'We're all stuck here and why not learn what you can' initiatives left over from the first year of the expedition. Lieutenant Olson, a recent addition, was still struggling to get his tongue around some of the sounds, to the amusement of the Marines.

"ARE WE THERE YET??" somebody yelled up the staircase from a flight or two below them. It only barely carried over the sound of a squad of Marines pounding up the stairs. "CAN I HAVE ICECREAM?"

"SARGE, HE'S TOUCHING ME!" somebody else piped up.

"AM NOT!"

"ARE TOO!"

"Don't make me turn this thing around!" Colbert yelled back.

* * *

Colbert leant against the control gallery railing, shoulder to shoulder with Michel and Lt. Brittner. Captain Avery was on the other side of the doctor, together with Lt. Cadman.

They watched with interest as Lt. Nate Fick led his six men through the gate and did a credible job of not looking overwhelmed by the Atlantis gate room. Lorne was already down there to greet Nate. Colonel Sheppard met the new Russian officer, while Colonel Carter welcomed the two IOA inspectors. They looked very much out of place in their suits and ties.

"He brought a Sergeant AND a Gunnery Sergeant?" Lt. Cadman pulled up her eyebrows. "All
for his team? That's just greedy."

"That Gunny's gonna get snatched up so soon the LT won't even have time to say 'where the fuck did my Gunny go,'" Lt. Brittner predicted with a rare grin.

Colbert felt strangely between places, for a long moment. As if there were two versions of him, overlapping only partially. The men down there were his brothers in ways that transcended words, but seeing them also brought home that he truly felt part of this team now. When Brittner said 'the LT' he had a second of disconnect because apparently in his mind she was 'the LT' now, and Nate was Nate. His friend, no longer his CO.

"Oh yes, Captain Bahir's gonna be happy," Avery said. He turned to Colbert to add, "He's about to lose staff sarge Wenckworth to OCS."

"Best way to lose an NCO," Brittner said under her breath. They exchanged a look, and he knew they were thinking about Warszawski.

"A trade team though?" Brad said after a moment. He couldn't quite hide the derogatory tone. Bahir seemed like a good guy, but it was hardly the place for a Recon Gunnery Sergeant.

"Yeah, but don't knock it. Friendly aliens, interesting markets, not a lot of getting shot at," Avery said. And, Colbert inferred, the NCO on that team was the spearheader if they did run into trouble.

"Plus, you practically corner the market for internal trade," Fournier added. "We sometimes get the chance to trade a little, but AR-6 goes to the big market gatherings, and they always get a little personal shopping in. How do you think we get most of the ingredients for our dinners?"

"Are you suggestion I should talk him into it so we'll have a personal connection?" Colbert said with a grin.

"I'm just saying, if Bahir taps him, he should go for it," Avery said. "It's a lot more fun than babysitting scientists."

"We could work out a deal," Brittner mused. "He brings us food, we invite him on Fridays."

Just for a moment, Colbert pictured all of the guys at the dinner table in Fournier's quarters. Talk about two worlds colliding.

"Poor LT Fick, he's been here all of five minutes and we're already preying on his gunny," Cadman smirked from beside Avery. "Maybe he's been saving for a full set."

"I'm just glad you didn't recruit Sixta," he said under his breath.

"Sergeant Major Sixta?" Cadman had keen ears. "Short man, bellowing at somebody about the gruemin' standars'?" she hit the terrible accent almost perfectly, and Colbert winced.

"That's the one."

"We thought we had arrived on comedy day," Cadman said, shaking her head.

"See, that's why I don't yell at Marines," Brittner said. "What's the point? You guys have been yelled at by professionals."

"Now I'm imagining a meeting between Colonel Sheppard and Sergeant Major Sixta," Colbert said after a long moment of contemplation.

Cadman had a coughing fit.

* * *

Nate was still talking to Lorne, and his six men were standing at ease beside the Gate, just waiting to find out what was going to happen next.

"BRAD! BRADLEY MY MAN!" Ray Person called out, apparently getting bored. "Have you missed your--"

Thankfully Colonel Carter had already lead the two IOA bigwigs up to her office, but Major
Lorne looked up in irritation, and from sergeant Meyers' respect for the man Colbert had already concluded that there were limits to the Major's easygoing demeanour. Pre-naturally laid-back Airforce officers didn't get that kind of Marine respect unless they were willing to set and enforce firm boundaries.

Espera apparently saw it too, because he halted Ray's progress toward the gallery by grabbing him by the collar of his BDU shirt, yanking him back into the line, and then thwapped him over the back of the head. It did not seem to repress Ray, though he did stay where he'd been put.

Suddenly all three of AR-4's officers had their 'I'm an officer and don't find this amusing in the slightest' faces on.

"Go, Colbert," Avery said in his crisp accent, eyes full of repressed mirth. "Before he decides to serenade you."

"Please, sir - don't give him ideas," he said very seriously, before turning to go down the steps.

It felt strange to be in his dark grey Atlantis BDUs when his former teammates were in the regular digi camo of the USMC. He wasn't sure if the grey uniforms were a Gate team thing or an Air Force thing. Probably Gate team and only the Rifle Company Marines wore cammies - the change would be sure to invite some bitching from the guys about looking like Air Force.

He joined the six men where they were waiting beside the cart that held their personal crates. Mike Wynn nodded at him in greeting, and Brad shook his hand and left him to observe what Major Lorne was telling Nate. Gunny was looking out for whatever shit might be poured out over their heads - even though there was likely to be less shit here - because some things would probably never change.

Next to him stood Christopher, looking wide eyed and a little zoned out.

"Hey Christopher. Heard you get to play with the cool toys."

"Hello Sergeant Colbert," the young man said after a long moment, blinking to attention. "Um, I believe so."

"Are you okay, Corporal?" Christopher might be one of their youngest, he wasn't a flake.

"It's very loud, sergeant," he said vaguely. "The city?"

"Right." He had no idea what that was like, so he made a mental note to mention it to Lt. Brittner, who would know if that sort of thing needed extra attention or if Christopher would get used to it. Then he turned to the next man in line, who was practically vibrating with excitement.

"Homes! Intergalactic travel is the shit!"

There was no way to escape the embrace, because Ray liked to say that his personal space bubble needed popping.

"That your new team?" Ray said after Brad had disengaged, a nod up to the gallery where the other four members of AR-4 were still leaning against the railing. Colbert had the distinct impression they found this situation absolutely hilarious, and that he wouldn't hear the end of it anytime soon.

Ray waggled his eyebrows. "Man, you get to serve under--"

"Corporal Person," Brad said sternly, grabbing Ray's shoulders and turning them a step so that he blocked Ray's face from the view of his team. He was pretty sure Fournier could lip-read. "If your fucked up, Whiskey Tango, sister-fucking hick ass is about to say anything even slightly inappropriate about my team, I will personally make sure that you spend the next month rinsing out pudding cups down in the recycling room."

Recycling room duties were carried out by Rifle Company Marines, not the ones who were on Gate teams, but he was pretty sure he could talk the ops/tech people into accepting extra help.

"Fuck homes, chill out. Kickass women. I was going to say kickass women, that's how Gunny Warszawski described them."

Colbert gave him a very dry look, because they both knew that there was no way in hell Ray accidentally threw in an innuendo like 'serving under'.

"Sure, that's what you were going to say," Garza nodded with fake earnesty.
"It was! Because Major Teldy would kick my ass across two galaxies if she heard about me saying anything else." Ray sounded oddly gleeful about that.

"Finally found a way to make a woman who is not from a trailer park pay attention to you?" Colbert said, feeling himself slipping back into all too familiar patterns.

"You watch, homes. I'm gonna take this hippy-ass city by storm. Women just can't resist me," Ray grinned.

"If you mean 'resist the urge to drop-kick you through an open wormhole', yeah, I agree."

"Awww, Bradley. I didn't know you--"

"Hey, Corporal Fucknuts," Tim Bryan, who was at the end of the line, cut him off in a low voice. "Keep it down. Are you trying to embarrass the LT?"

"I'm just saying." Ray finished sulkily. The reminder that their behaviour reflected back on Nate seemed to do the trick.

"Yo dawg, how ya been?" Poke clapped Brad on the shoulder.

"Good, man. Glad you decided to come after all."

"Nah, not my decision. My wife sent me. Said this sounded like I was going to stay sane more than another tour in Iraq would."

"Good on her. You do always say she's smarter than you," he grinned.

"Ain't that the truth."

"Well, doesn't look like you've been sucked dry by space vampires yet," Bryan's dry voice broke in, and Colbert took a few steps so he could embrace him. It felt like they hadn't seen each other since Iraq, which made seeing him here even stranger.

The Navy had yanked Bryan off to a ship in the Gulf almost immediately after OIF, and he'd only been home for a month before Brad had been transferred to the Mountain, so they had only seen each other once since Iraq. It was the fate of a Navy Hospitalman, who often ended up just as closely bonded as any other man in the units they served with, only to get pulled out and redeployed with another unit. Brad had always thought it sounded exhausting to integrate with new units over and over again.

Bryan was looking him over with that familiar, assessing look he used in theatre, then nodded to himself, apparently satisfied. "You look like you're in a good place."

"I am, Doc - you're gonna like it here."

"May be," Bryan allowed, looking around the gate room, examining the assorted personnel that had come to see their arrival. He looked up to the gallery and smiled at Lt. Brittner in recognition, giving her a nod. "May be."

***

The men watched in bemusement when Captain Avery helped the Russian officer to load his personal crates onto a smaller cart. Colbert wasn't entirely used to that himself - he was still half expecting somebody to turn to him and order him to do the grunt work. Officers doing their own grunt work was still surreal.

Then Nate concluded his conversation with Major Lorne and was handed over to Lt. Brittner, who looked wryly self-conscious of the clipboard she was holding. It was strange to see the two Lieutenants greet each other warmly. Brad knew they had met while Lt. Brittner was on Earth, but somehow it hadn't quite sunk in until now how his two realities, represented by two different Lieutenants, overlapped.


"Christ on a fucking bike, we've been here all of five minutes and the LT gets lucky?" Ray said,
low enough that the officers couldn't overhear. "How is that fair?"

Both Bryan and Brad shot him a glare. Brad didn't think there was anything there and doubted
there ever would be, but he couldn't exactly say that. He would probably need to have a little talk
to some of the guys about how to relate to female members of the expedition.

Nate disrupted the moment and introduced his men, and Brad tried to figure out where to stand,
given that he was no longer a part of Nate's unit. He was pretty sure the LT noticed, a glint of
humour in her eyes.

They collected the cart that held their team's crates and headed off down the corridor. The
officers walked up front, talking quietly about the day's programme. Colbert caught up with Tony
Espera and Gunny Wynn, enjoying their expressions when the group came to a window and the
guys caught their first glance of Atlantis.

Tony muttered something reverent-sounding in Spanish.

"We've been shown maps and photos, but..." Mike said, trailing to a halt with a helpless gesture.

"Come on gents, let's get you set up with quarters first, then there'll be time for sightseeing," Lt.
Brittner said. There was something tight in her voice, and Brad suddenly realised that Ray and
Garza were now pointing each other at suitable locations where Nate should bring his date. He
moved to quietly squash that nonsense when she stepped in herself.

"Corporals Person and Garza. If I hear any more speculation about my personal life, you will be
walking to your quarters."

"With your crates," Nate added.

"We're Recon Marines, ma'am, we don't mind a hike," Garza said, because sometimes neither of
those two knuckleheads knew when to stop pushing.

"Oh good," she answered serenely. "The Atrium building is over there." She pointed out the
window to the low building, thirty stories below them and toward the outside of the city. It was
sometimes easy to forget daily life on Atlantis took place in separate locations, isolated patches of
habitation in a sea of dark and uninhabited city. It just seemed close together because of the
strangely instantaneous transporter travel linking them. There were still significant no-go zones
that hadn't been cleared as structurally sound by the engineering team, and other areas where you
could only go with an escort and permission of the control room. You could walk from the central
tower to the Atrium, because it was on the five mile running trail, but it wasn't a trivial journey if
you were carrying all your belongings.

"We apologise, ma'am," Ray said, looking as if he'd belatedly engaged his brain. He sounded as
sincere as Brad had ever heard him.

She gave him a long, steady look, and Brad was amused to see Ray fighting not to squirm
uncomfortably, but then nodded, apparently dismissing the issue.

* * *

The team was quartered in city-facing adjoining rooms in the Atrium building, in a different wing
from where AR4 was housed. After a brief time of excited exclamations about their housing, an
admonishment about inside voices and acoustics, and Lt. Brittner instructing Christopher on how
to turn the shower off again with his mind, they trounced off to do the official Atlantis intro tour.
This lead them past the control room for radios and the very brief reiterating lecture about their
use. Then, mimicking post mission procedure brought them to the locker rooms, armoury and then
the infirmary to be shown the how and where of post-mission checkups.

"Don't go through that door before you've been cleared," Lt. Brittner pointed at a doorway that
had been helpfully lined with red. "On pain of Doctor Keller getting very, very irate."

She indicated the small female Chief Medical Officer, who looked like 'irate' would involve foot
stomping, and the only reason that Brad didn't grin was that he'd been told about Dr Keller's
stealth backbone when it came to her patients.

They went to the mess next, since it was about lunchtime, and all squashed in at one large table.
Brad let himself be swallowed up by familiar loud conversation, trading good-natured insults, and
fascinated examination of alien food. Tim Bryan was talking quietly with Lt. Brittner, presumably
about medical things, and Nate was just leaning back and observing everybody with a slight smile.

Brad had worried a little about how the LT would respond to the guys, if she would get that cautious air again he remembered from his own arrival. He'd already caught that the two teams would be likely to get paired up now and then and that had the potential of being truly awkward if they couldn't get along - he'd be stuck in the middle. But apparently without the stress of exams Lt. Brittner found it easier to handle new Marines - or maybe it was that she had already met Nate and Espera and Bryan. He was glad she'd stepped in herself to cut off Ray and Garza, because that was much better than Brad having to do it for her.

The guys weren't quite how he remembered them. With unrestrained idiots like Chaffin and Jacks cut out of the mix, and after a month working with the apparently very formidable Major Teldy, they were surprisingly appropriate. That was to say, a few civilians threw them glares, but Brad was pretty sure that was just because the group was loud and boisterous, not because anybody wasn't policing their language.

Last time he'd seen them they were still Bravo Two, Marines among Marines. In the month they'd been separated his old unit had somehow become Atlantis Recon 7, which operated amidst Airforce, civilians and aliens and required far more personal responsibility from each of them. As far as Brad could tell, they had taken to it.

* * *

When everybody had finished eating, they went to the big balcony outside the mess hall, and Brad enjoyed watching them all examine the city.

"Hey, is that a trebuchet?" Ray leaned dangerously far over the balcony railing, and Tony Espera reached out for the back of his shirt with an automatic gesture that Brad knew he'd made himself more than once. It was strange to see somebody else occupying that space in the team now, and he was surprised how okay he was with seeing himself so completely replaced. He'd missed having the guys around, but he didn't think he'd say yes if they offered to switch him with Mike or Tony now.

"A trebuchet?" everybody else followed Ray's gaze, and Colbert spotted a wooden structure that could conceivably be the base of a smallish trebuchet, if there was any reason that there should be a trebuchet on Atlantis. Then again, he'd learned just last night what people here were willing to do for entertainment. It was in an enclosed garden that was, while not officially off limits to military personnel, very much the domain of the Social Science department. Brad had never been there and he doubted any other Marine had, or he would have heard about a trebuchet by now.

"That building in front of it is the Cake," he said. "That's where the social scientists are based."

"That presumably includes Archaeologists and Archaeo-engineers," Nate said, not quite hiding his interest. "It might be their project.

Colbert felt his eyebrows rise at that - Lt. Fick in First Recon was never less than completely composed and completely professionally blank. It had taken Brad months to detect the subtle tells of Nate's amusement and irritation. Apparently the month at the SGC had changed his old unit in ways he hadn't quite expected. Nate clearly felt comfortable letting his inner geek show a little. He wondered if he seemed just as different to them.

"You can introduce us, right Brad? Right?" Ray wheedled. "It looks awesome."

"I'll ask Dr Fournier about it," he conceded. "Might be somebody's research." In which case a bunch of curious Marines who didn't get the concept of look-don't-touch probably wouldn't be welcome. Because what Ray meant - okay, let's be honest here, what they all meant, even him - was 'we want to launch shit with that thing'.

"We're hitting Maker Street on the city tour, they'll know who is working on it," Lt. Brittner said, eyeing the wooden frame with just as much interest as the rest of them. "The wood supply must run through them."

* * *

The afternoon tour was more of a treasure hunt, with Lt. Brittner announcing the destination and then letting the new team figure out how to get there. It got everybody familiar with how to orient themselves in the city and handle transporters. Brad did most of the tour guiding, the LT letting herself disappear into the background and making occasional notes on her clipboard.

He thought he'd hidden his curiosity well, but the next time he ended up next to her she tilted the
Brad fished a pen from his cargo pocket and added 'Says the city is 'loud', with an arrow to Christopher's name, and 'Best RTO I know' next to Ray's name.

It wasn't stuff that wasn't in their files, but observations and facts about the guys that would be good for Captain Avery to know when deciding on their program for the coming week.

They went to the jumper bay next for AR7's jumper equipment induction. The guys had been introduced to most of this in theory, so it didn't take that long for them to get the hang of where everything was supposed to go. Learning to convert the MASH jumper took longer, and Brad found it hard to believe that it had only been a month since he'd first learned these things. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Intro tour concluded, Lt. Brittner left them to socialise with the reminder to Brad that the Captain needed his report additions at noon the next day, in time to compile the AARs for the databurst. She added that there was a chance AR4 would get a mission in the morning, but he didn't get why that should make her sound amused.

The guys bade her goodbye with varying degrees of formality and then decamped to one of the smaller lounges on the ground floor of the Atrium building, where Brad spent the next few hours getting his brain picked about missions, sport and training facilities, alien food (a subject of much fascination), his new team, social life on Atlantis and... why there was a tiny piece of glitter stuck to his cheekbone.

* * *

He wondered how the hell the LT had known, because the next morning they did indeed get summoned for a mission. With Colonel Sheppard and Dr McKay. Surely if she had known this should would have told him?

"Ah, you're here." Sheppard still had that slouchy, messy haired Airforce pilot thing going on, and Colbert felt his own spine stiffed in involuntary response. "The Ancient thingy--"

"Invaluably advanced insect control device," Dr McKay broke in sharply.

"-Whatever. It's on Iemos and it's broken, so we're going out to fix it. Teyla and Ronon will be stuck in IOA interviews, and since your CO will be busy getting our newbies settled in today, he's agreed to lend you two to us."

"Plus, it makes you feel better to have a medic along in case you start turning into a bug," Dr McKay said, apparently oblivious to the Colonel's wince.

"What's our ETD, sir?" Lt. Brittner said.

"Half an hour in the jumper bay?"

"Yes, sir."

* * *

Brad caught up with the LT in the hallway once they'd both changed into mission gear (long sleeves, gloves, neck gaiters) and helped her collect a couple of cases from the infirmary: topical repellent, insect netting, and various specialised injectable treatments to help the native population on the planet recover from what were no doubt numerous and unpleasant insect bites.

He finally gave in and asked how she'd known about this mission.

"If they could, the IOA would have the Colonel sitting on standby all day while they question everybody else about his conduct," she said, with the barest hint of distaste. "This mission came up yesterday afternoon and they sent AR5 to check it out, and Kapten Lundgren decided this definitely required Dr McKay, who doesn't like to go offworld without his team, and a medic. It made us the obvious choice."
He got the impression that the subtext was that the situation gave Colonel Sheppard a perfect excuse to be offworld instead of cooling his heels while the IOA poked around, and maybe even that Lundgren had deliberately reported it as such, though of course she couldn't say as much. Further proof that Sheppard was not only liked and respected, but that his people were protective of him. Brad found that interesting - he hadn't really seen anything that might warrant people to put themselves on the line just to get the man free of a situation that was no doubt uncomfortable, but not actually harmful.

* * *

As the Colonel expertly flew the MASH jumper through the Gate and toward the Iemos settlement, Brad began to understand why the sergeants at the NCO table grumbled about getting assignments with Dr McKay. There was grudging respect for the man, because he seemed to have saved the whole expedition on more than one occasion, but none of the fondness they reserved for Teyla, Dr Fournier or some of the other civilians who regularly went offworld.

Dr McKay had called Lt. Brittner "Brittney" until the Colonel had said patiently "She's Lieutenant Brittner, Rodney. Remember, the one who pulls our asses out of the fire?". Colbert he just referred to as 'Marine' with the deliberate tone of somebody who had been forcefully trained out of calling everybody in a uniform 'soldier'. Colbert didn't mind, and was happy enough being ignored by everybody - being in a jumper with Colonel Sheppard was weird enough without being expected to interact with the rambling scientist.

McKay was in the front passenger seat, going on about Ancient technology and how the Iemos natives were lucky that he was at their beck and call for technology repair. The Colonel interjected the occasional comment in sort of half exasperated, half amused tone that suggested it was a routine between them. Brad and the LT were in the back seats of the cockpit, which gave the whole thing an air of 'bizarro family road trip'. From the look of her they were both aware of it. She was pretending to be engrossed in the medical file for the planet, and seeing him trying not to fidget, had quirked a conspiratorial eyebrow and handed him the section on the local culture. He was pretty sure it was more so he had something to concentrate on than that it was vital to know on top of the mini briefing the Colonel had given them.

* * *

For a mission with the two rock stars of Atlantis it turned out to be a pretty uneventful day. They covered up as much skin as they could - "We look like we're about to rob the place," Lt. Brittner observed.

"Let's not go through that again," the Colonel said. Brad remembered a mission report about one of AR-4s more diplomatic rescues. He thought Sheppard might be smiling, but he was wearing a cloth tube as a balaclava, so it was hard to tell. They applied wore a bug repellent that smelled so foul that Brad wished for his gas mask, and he carried both his rifle and a bottle of some spray that came with a lecture about eyes and mucus membranes.

Thus armed he guarded Dr McKay while the man worked on the Ancient device. It was a water treatment thing which apparently made the population, which drank from the well, both less attractive to the bugs and less susceptible to the painful effects of the bites. After having cleared the surroundings, the Colonel and the Lieutenant headed to the village to do clinic - Sheppard presumably to catch up with the people, whom he'd visited before.

Guarding Dr McKay turned out to be less bad than anticipated. Lt. Brittner's method of stopping the man from talking to her - which was to serenely agree with him no matter what he said until he got uncomfortable and stopped suspiciously quizzing her on medical and emergency preparation - did not work for Colbert. However, he had plenty of experience with people who rambled, and just let the word stream flow past him - it wasn't unlike listening to an older Ray who took himself a lot more seriously. He even got the hear the 'bug story', which left him torn between pleased that he finally understood the references and a little guilty that he'd just been told something about his commander that the man in question would almost certainly not have wanted told.

The insects had bodies about the size of the tip of his thumb, nasty, bullet-like things with large jaws and extremely painful bites. He wondered aloud why anybody would want to live somewhere where they were under siege from that kind of fauna, but Dr McKay pointed out that the native population was normally protected by the Ancient device, and that bugs were very aggressive toward Wraith. They had not been culled nearly as much as many of the other societies Atlantis had met. Brad supposed it was worth the tradeoff.
After a day of alternately cursing the Ancients, the bugs, the Wraith, the awkward waterline location of the device, the unfortunate soul who had touched his toolkit, the bugs, Colonel Sheppard for going to the village and leaving him alone (Brad apparently didn't count) and oh yeah, the bugs, McKay did manage to repair the device. It switched on with a low hum, and then faded to silence - a sort of crystal below the waterline emitting a slight glow. Apparently that was what kept everybody safe from insect related misery.

Brad radioed the Colonel, who had let him know about an hour before that they were finished with the clinic and that they would be socialising until McKay was finished - a fact Brad had chosen not to share with the doctor, who had at that time just built up a good head of steam for his rant about the Ancients. Lt. Brittner and Colonel Sheppard returned with the jumper, and without much further ado they loaded up and returned to Atlantis. Once landed, Brad and the LT stayed behind to sort out the jumper.

"I miss Teyla and Ronon," Dr McKay said to Sheppard when they were walking away, in what he probably thought was a confidential tone. "These two are boring."

Given that from the stories he'd heard, the excitement on AR1 missions tended to come from enemy contact, hostile fauna, catastrophically overloading technology or people turning into bugs, Brad was pretty sure he was okay with boring.

Chapter End Notes

so yeah, two more chapters. Thought I'd warn you :-) (I have material for a few shorter sequels though.)

Also, YAY THE GUYS HAVE ARRIVED. I had forgotten how tricky it is to write a big ensemble cast.

Feedback plz?
How was your mission?” Nate asked, stretching his left hamstring.

"Apart from the nasty bugs, pretty uneventful,” Brad shrugged, looking out the window. It was Thursday, and the sun was setting. They’d both been busy enough all week that this was the first time they could catch up. "Fucking weird to be on a mission with Colonel Sheppard, let me tell you."

"I can imagine,” Nate nodded. They set off down the 7-mile trail, feet falling into a familiar rhythm.

"They thought we were boring, can you believe that? I don't know if that says more about us or about Ronon Dex and Teyla Emmagan," Brad grinned. He didn't think his team was boring, but it was true that both he and Lt. Brittner had been more formal than usual, both very aware of Sheppard's rank. While Sheppard's normal team was civilian apart from himself, and Brad had gotten the impression the man wasn't used to people simply following his orders on a mission. "How was your babysitting expedition?"

"Quite enjoyable, actually," Nate said. Captain Avery had taken AR7 along on a mission to recover the downed jumper on P3U-206, along with Dr Zelenka and his engineering team. "Your captain had us on a good mix of hard work, security, and getting familiar with the jumpers. Plus, Doc Zelenka let Ray assist with the repairs, so he's finally stopped complaining about not having the Ancient gene."

Presumably the Czech engineer had shown Ray that for many technical jobs in the city it was an advantage to not have the gene - repairing something could be hard when it was trying to switch on or interact with you. It was the same reason that every team needed one ATA-negative member.

"And of course, after spending time with Avery, half my guys are now saying 'bloody' and 'bollocks'," Nate shook his head in amusement.

"How are they settling in?" Brad had been busy enough the past few days to not see much of the guys, and hadn't seen any of them privately enough to really find out how they were doing.

"Garza found the Salsa group last night and he hasn't shut up about it since,” Nate grinned. "And Bryan has been hijacked by the field medic group."

"They’re all batshit insane,” Brad said, trying and failing to picture Doc 'Perpetually Pissed Off' Bryan as a Zombie Orc. "I guess he'll either run away in disgust, or join them in the madness."

"Mm, he's been a lot more relaxed this past month. My money is on the second."

"Ray is having the time of his life, I noticed at PT."

"Yeah, he's hardly shut up since we arrived. But nobody's booted him off a balcony yet, any I've had no complaints, so apparently he's managing to keep it on an acceptable level. And Doc Zelenka seemed happy enough to have him inside the jumper with him for most of the day."

"I think Dr Zelenka works together with Dr McKay a lot," Brad mused. "Who shares a tendency toward verbal diarrhoea, only with less of Person's entertainment factor. So that might explain Zelenka's tolerance."

Nate chuckled.

"Ray apparently did his 'Wow, you're a space alien' thing when he met Teyla Emmagan. Or at least, Christopher was wondering if rolling your eyes was an intergalactic signal of exasperation or if Teyla had picked it up from the people here."

They both chuckled, and slowed down a little to make sure the door opened for them in time. They had just passed the greenhouses and now crossed one of the parks the Botany department had replanted.

On one grassy field a whole group of people - the only ones he recognised were Hillan and Dr Ingadottir - sat around a giant animal fleece, plucking out bits of plant matter while others were washing sections of the fleece in large tubs. Brad wondered what sort of animal it had been. It smelled similar to the colourful floor mats and rugs that could be found in many of the recreational
areas in the city.

He guessed that they would be seeing the fleece make an appearance on the hand-spinning tools and knitting needles that tended to come out during movie nights and musical performances.

Nate looked at the group in fascination.

"Is this a leftover of the cut-off-from-Earth period or are people just really crafty here?"

"Either, both," Brad gestured vaguely. "I think some of it may also have started as a cultural exchange thing with the Athosians. Plus, people use it as personal trade currency." In fact, just the other day Lt. Cadman had bragged about having won an IOU for a pair of handknit socks in a poker game.

They passed out of the park and came past a large garden area that was divided into many smaller plots. A couple of Marines, apparently having joined their plots together, were tending to a small field of corn.

"Community garden. If any of the guys want a plot, they need to drop by Botany to get put on the waiting list."

"This is... really cool," Nate shook his head in amazement. "I mean, they told us that people live their lives here and that it's a city, not just a military base. But..."

"Hard to grok until you see it, isn't it? I'm still discovering new stuff."

"Been re-reading Heinlein?"

"I don't know, Stranger In A Strange Land just seemed appropriate," Brad quirked a grin.

They slowed to pass a few people, lapsing into silence.

"Christopher didn't seem so zoned out anymore when I saw him this morning," Brad said as they passed under the Cakewalk. "Is he getting used to the freaky city-talking-to-him thing?"

"Seems like..." Nate said absently, looking up to see three climbers slowly making their way along the side of the airbridge. "He and Tony got a 'city interaction' session from a Dr Kusinagi and that seems to have helped a lot. Tony didn't have it as bad, apparently ATA-induced doesn't make the city as "chatty". Nate made the airquotes, sounding like he couldn't quite believe he was saying all these things.

"How's Tony doing?"

"I'm not sure," Nate admitted as they went through an ornate archway and turned out toward a pier, the evening breeze cool and salty on their faces. The towers and spires at their back were throwing long shadows onto the pier and the water.

"He's been quiet. I think it might be the realisation of how far from his family he is now that's hitting him. Same for Mike - I think the both of them will have a harder time immersing themselves into the social scene here. The rest of us didn't have as much life to leave behind."

"That makes sense. I'll introduce them around as much as I can - I know some of the senior NCOs have families." He was also pondering how he could introduce Tony to some people who would get his weird mix of passionate and belligerent about social issues. He had a feeling those people could be found in the Cake, but there wasn't a lot of overlap in those social circles. Maybe Michèl Fournier would have some ideas.

"And yourself?" he asked finally.

"Still exploring the place," Nate said. "The L Team runs together on Friday mornings, so I'll be meeting a whole bunch of new people tomorrow."

Brad figured that would go fine - if Nate didn't fit with the image of a typical USMC Lieutenant, the Anthill Lieutenants he'd met so far had all seemed like they had been 'the odd one' back home. Atlantis seemed to collect the odd ones out and gave them a place to thrive.

"Have you found the literature club yet?" They rounded the end of the giant pier.

"Yeah, it's--oh"

They were now facing Atlantis again, and Nate trailed to a halt, something reverent in his face.
The sun was behind the city from their point of view, lighting the towers and spires from behind, golden light glinting off hundreds of spires and backlighting the delicate, alien architecture. It was a little later than Brad'd hoped, the light not quite catching the frosted glass-like panels like he'd seen before, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

It wasn't as if he'd felt lonely after the first weeks here, and it had helped to be able to email with Nate, but it still felt good to have people here who understood where he came from, who were also new and not yet inured to the sheer alien-ness of it all.

"...I would say this is 'otherworldly,' but words like that lose their meaning here, don't they?" Nate finally said.

"They kind of do," Brad agreed, letting the warm light fall on his face.

* * *

Friday evening Sanity Society was a communal quest for the perfect paper airplane, which was presented by Colonel Sheppard and Major Lorne. They referred to themselves as 'your Air Force Overlords' for the occasion, which made Ray choke on his crisps. Christopher helpfully pounded him on the back until the obligatory small scuffle broke out.

Nate, on the other side of the crowd, had started to come over when Colonel Sheppard interrupted his explanation with a laconic request for somebody to put the bear cubs outside. That made the guys straighten up with a sheepish expression. Brad was forced to concede that maybe Sheppard did indeed know what he was doing with the command of Marines.

There was some amused muttering among the Marines about flyboys and paper planes, but it took about two minutes flat for the gathered crown to warm up to the idea. There was a crate full of paper from the recycle room, there were three irons set up to smooth paper out so it could be reused, and they even had a little camera and beamer setup so that they could easily demonstrate folding to the entire room. Once everybody had a plane, their name written on it, people went up to the gallery to see how far they could get.

Dr. Zelenka's plane won, and he demonstrated its complicated construction via the beamer. Huddles of scientists and Marines immediately formed to experiment with the design, and after that it was pretty much a free for all.

* * *

When the airplane onslaught began to wind down and people started to drift out, Brad became aware of activity in the back of the mess hall, in the lounge area. This space had a half-circle of windows, two stories high, which looked out over the ocean and were letting in the last golden light of the day.

The main lights had been dimmed there apart from an ornate lamp hanging down from the ceiling, throwing warm coloured light into the circle of lounge pillows. When he wandered over he found Michèl, Captain Avery, Dr Ingadottir, Teyla and several Athosians he'd never met. They had brought in large baskets of the now dried wool he'd seen the day before, as well as spinning tools - including a beautifully made spinning wheel. Several more civilians came in, people he recognised as residents of the Cake, and they laid out simple musical instruments.

"Hello Brad," Michèl smiled. He was setting up sound recording equipment. "Won't you join us?"

"What would I be joining you for?" he asked cautiously. The concentration of this many social scientists was usually a sign of something, well, woolly, about to happen.

"We're making a community rug, like the Athosians do," Michèl said, which told Brad precisely nothing.

"It's a storytelling slash memorial slash rugmaking thing," the Captain clarified, bringing in more lounge pillows. "More thrilling than it sounds, I promise."

Yeah, he wasn't so sure about that. Normally the Captain's presence would indicate it wouldn't be complete esoteric anthropofluffical bullshit, but Avery was dating Dr Ingadottir, who was a social scientist, so there was a chance the man was just putting a good face on something he was doing for the peace of his relationship.

He was about to turn away to see what the other guys were doing when he spotted Nate approaching, Mike in tow.
"The guys all disappeared on you?" he grinned.

"There's a rock band playing somewhere, apparently," Nate nodded with a wry grin. "We thought we'd give that a miss. What's this?"

"Storytelling session," somebody said brightly while passing by, and all three of them flinched because it was Colonel Carter, whose attire of jeans and hooded sweatshirt took away nothing of her command presence. She flashed them a smile and went to the tall Athosian guy with the long hair. He seemed to be one of their leaders. The Colonel faced him and he leaned down and they touched their foreheads together for a moment in what Brad had learned was the standard Athosian greeting. Then they sat down next to each other, and the man showed the Colonel some sort of tool and explained something to her in a low voice.

Brad looked at Nate and Mike. He knew the Colonel hadn't meant it as an order, but...

"Well, if nothing else it'll give us some idea of culture here," Nate said, watching as Captain Bahir and Hillan brought in a small cart with a few carboys of wine and a tray full of cups. He turned to Mike. "You in, Gunny?"

Mike Wynn shrugged, and they sat down in the circle, which was filling quickly as the last paper airplanes were put back into the paper recycling box. A young Athosian man introduced himself as Jinto, and gave them a basket full of wool with the request to pluck it apart to fluff it up.

Michèl Fournier sat down on Brad's left side, and Mike was on his right, with Nate next to him.

"Halling and a few others were visiting us to testify about the disease to the IOA representatives," Michèl explained. "They will return home tomorrow, and Kirr is going with them." He subtly indicated the runner they had encountered on Brad's first mission. She was standing a little ways away, clearly wary of so many people together. Brad was glad to see her on her feet.

He noticed that there were a lot of first wave Atlanteans. Stilger, the Maker Street team, and Colonel Sheppard all looked like they were familiar with the whole thing. He also recognised Alpha Two's platoon Sergeant, Stackhouse. All of them had taken up wool and spinning tools with every sign of confidence.

"The idea is that the stitches of the rug contain the stories that were told during its making," Fournier explained to the three of them. "We also say the names of those who have fallen or have brought us to where we are now, and other things that are important to the community."

"Like a symbolic communal document," Nate mused.

Mike grumbled under his breath about wanting a symbolic couch to sit on instead of pillows on the floor. Kay, a few places over from him, smiled.

"The Ancients didn't have anything like that. And can you picture a line of Marines carrying sofas down Cheyenne Mountain and through the Gate?"

"Or stuffing the hold of the Daedalus full of them," Captain Bahir grinned. "No thank you," he said to Teyla when she offered him a cup of wine, and showed her he had tea instead.

They snorted. The damn things would have to go into two separate elevators, down hallways - and that was just logistics. It would be pretty hard to explain to Norad up top what the downstairs neighbours needed all those couches for.

"Or the requisition forms," somebody said brightly.

"Well, no," Mike admitted. "But you could make them here."

"There are some pallets and stools," Kay nodded, mass of curls falling in front of her face. She put the spinning tool down to tie it back. "And you can claim some packing crates. But Ouseti is our only woodworker, and he's too busy to make furniture."

Nate looked thoughtful, and Brad remembered that Mike was a decent carpenter. For a moment he thought about volunteering the man, but Nate met his eyes and gave a tiny shake of his head. Too soon, maybe. Kay hadn't quite made an invitation, but if Mike offered, Brad was pretty sure he'd be welcomed. Down in Maker Street they were happy, first wave style, to put anybody's talent to good work. Maybe that was too strange for Mike right now.

The circle slowly quietened into a sort of calm anticipation. Brad was just beginning to wonder what they were waiting for when Halling suddenly beat a thundering salvo on the drum he was
holding, and as the sound reverberated around the hall, began his story.

Ten minutes later Brad remembered to take a sip of his wine. Halling was a master storyteller, weaving his tale of the Ancestors and the origins of the Athosians as powerfully as he was weaving the centre of the rug. He was using a sort of hooked tool to pull loops of the yarn that Colonel Carter was making for him, and it was slowly spiralling larger. There was an almost hypnotic rhythm to it - the story, supported with drums and singing by Teyla and Jinto, the motions of making the stitches in the rug, the soft sound of Dr Ingadottir working on the spinning wheel, the hand motions of the people in the circle, plucking fibre and spinning.

The telling, and the rug, was taken over by Colonel Carter. She told the tale of how Earth had first discovered its Stargate, how they had made it work, and the first time she herself had gone through the Gate. Her style was not as dramatic and well-refined as Halling's, but it was made all the more compelling by the realisation that she was one of the people who had first gotten the Earth Gate to work, that none of them would even know about Atlantis without those events.

She finished with a list of names, one per stitch she made. By the gravitas in her voice, they were of people who had died in the Stargate program. Several of them - Doctor Janet Fraiser, General George Hammond - caused sad nods with people like Major Lorne and other veterans of the program. Then she named Doctor Daniel Jackson three times, and people chuckled. Brad made a mental note to ask what that was about. He'd met Dr Jackson - the guy wasn't dead.

The tale passed to Teyla, who told of how the Atlantis Expedition and the Athosians had first met, and then to Colonel Sheppard, who talked about the rescue that had cemented the alliance. He said the names of those who had been killed by the Wraith that first day, which included Colonel Sumner, the original military leader of the expedition.

The tale passed around the circle along with the stitching tool, and as the rug grew and the Ruus wine was passed around, Brad realised that while many stories were about dark times, the Athosians seemed to have some kind of inherent optimism that kept this evening from becoming maudlin. Maybe it was having lived under the threat of the wraith for so long, because even stories about Doctor Weir, whose absence was still keenly felt, were for the most part funny and fond, not mournful.

Jinto talked about a snowball fight with Lieutenant Ford, whom he had clearly looked up to, and both Teyla and Sheppard took a long drink and concentrated on the fibre they were working on. Brad didn't know what had happened, because Ford's name wasn't on the memorial section of the Wiki, but it was clear that the Lieutenant's fate was still a sore spot.

"You may add to the rug if you want." Michèl explained softly as the hooked tool came in their direction. "If you have a name of somebody who was important in bringing you to this point, for instance. It's acknowledgement of anybody's part in bringing us to this present, not just memorial."

When it was his turn, Michèl named Captain Tarson and Harnin, the Athosian guide who had been his predecessor on AR-4. Both had died on missions. He also said "Gunnery Sergeant Paul Warszawski" and Brad breathed down a twitch of jealousy. He wasn't quite sure why - as Michèl had just said, the man had contributed to a present where Brad had a place on his team.

He took a deep breath and accepted the hook. He stabbed it through the outer ring of the rug, and as he pulled through the thick yarn he said "Gunnery Sergeant Nunez." The man who had inspired him to get more out of being a Marine by putting more into being a Marine.

Mike Wynn passed on the hook, but Nate accepted it and named his sister, who had apparently encouraged him to take the Atlantis assignment. She hadn't known anything about it except how Nate's voice had sounded when he talked about it.

By the end of the evening the rug was three metres across and everybody was pleasantly buzzed on the Ruus wine, which was a lot more potent than it had seemed. Brad's hands were a little sore from plucking wool all evening, and very soft with the grease, and he was more than a little surprised that he'd have a very good evening. Nate seemed to be in a similar state of mind. What Mike thought he couldn't really tell, apart from his quiet cursing about having been sat on the ground for hours and his knees not being twenty years old anymore.

Brad was pretty sure Mike was homesick. He was used to deployments, but not to deployments where you could make yourself at home, and he seemed to be resisting the notion a bit. It had to be difficult when the rest of the team was making connections and finding interests.

* * *
Saturday he spent most of his day showing the guys around. The eight of them went to the no-gi grappling class, which was indeed a whole lot more competitive and testosterone heavy, and they had fun testing their skills against those of the other Marines, though Dusty kept an eye out for things getting overly fanatic. They didn't embarrass themselves, but it wasn't the sound victory some of them seemed to have imagined. The vast majority of Atlantis Marines might not be Force Recon, but they were no slouches - most of them had been picked individually for assignment to the SGC. The faster the guys dropped the rockstar attitude, the better they would settle in socially.

Ray got tapped out three times in quick succession until Espera called out "For fuck's sake Person, stop depending on being a fast little runt! That only works if your opponent isn't one too!"

Then he realised Ray was rolling with Lieutenant 'Energizer bunny' Adams, and blanched.

"Um. I apologise, sir."

"Off duty!" Adams called back, sweeping Ray, who'd been distracted by the exchange.

"Pardon me, sir?"

"We're all off the clock," Adams explained, and oofed as Ray did a neat reverse and threw on an armlock. Adams tapped as if it was no big deal, and continued "I know this is new to you guys, but I'd like to switch off on my day off."

The AR7 guys exchanged a look. Between them, they'd partnered up with Nate to keep him away from some opponent who might feel the need to make a point by smashing the new officer. Yeah, this place would take some getting used to.

Dusty seemed like a whole different person when teaching this class. Brad kept expecting her to randomly pick somebody for a quick demonstration like she did in the gi class, or to jump in for a bout herself, but she was far more distant here, less laughter and more armour. The few times she explained something she had to show for herself, she picked Gunny Liehr, whom she was obviously familiar with. He'd wondered if she was familiar enough with him to feel comfortable with using him as demo victim, and the answer was obviously no.

He definitely needed to take Nate, and maybe Tony and Bryan too, to the gi class. He had a feeling he should start with just Nate, make it feel less like an invasion

* * *

Saturday lunch at the NCO table tended to require a couple of extra tables - the Anthill people didn't often make it during the week, but Saturday brought a crowd, seventeen senior NCOs all told. He introduced Tony and Mike around, and got lucky as both Gunny Liehr and Bravo's First Sergeant Rennaker were there, as well as Mel Keawe. Waltemeyer, Liehr and Rennaker had kids, and Mike's relief at finding some people who weren't at the twentysomething no-ties-on-earth stage was palpable. Tony was talking about Gate missions with Stilger and Wenckworth, and Brad got talking to Keawe.

Within about three minutes they were debating being stationed in Pendleton versus being based in Hawaii in terms of the best surfing. After seven minutes Keawe was telling him about a planet they had recently found and which was being considered for occasional recreational trips - 'Waves like Laniakea, man, I'm telling you'. Apparently Colonel Sheppard was a surfer, so if the planet got cleared as safe the chances of a regular outing were good.

Then they got into how to get surfboards and a spirited discussion about foam vs wood and which would be easier to make themselves. Tony shared a look with Mike and rolled his eyes. Brad grinned and gave him the finger.

* * *

He'd just confirmed with Bootsman Ouderijn that if he ordered a foam and resin kit, ops/tech would let him use workshop space to make a surfboard, when he heard Lt. Brittner's voice from one of the storage rooms.

"Are you with Miko now? Is she coming along?... well, I'm standing in the gear room right now, tell her to make up her mind... Hey," she spotted him, one hand to her ear. "You ever climb the Cakewalk?"

She'd given him his climbing briefing early on, but he hadn't had time to use the big outside wall. The Cakewalk you weren't supposed to climb until one of the instructors could go with you the first time across.
"No ma'am."

"Lee. Wanna come along? - No, it's Brad. Okay, make sure she's wearing good shoes," she said, the second presumably into her radio.

"Yeah, sounds fun."

"Cool. Grab a harness and meet us in the Anthill in twenty."

* * *

'Us' turned out to be Laura Cadman, Dusty Mehra, and Dr Kusinagi. Dusty looked startled to see him, and then pleased - or perhaps that was wishful thinking. They geared up on the balcony that was the start of the climbing route while Lt. Brittner explained how the safety line system worked once they switched from vertically down the outside of the Anthill to horizontally across the actual Cakewalk. It would be the third time crossing for Dr Kusinagi - "Please, say Miko" - and she didn't look all that confident.

The airbridge was round, and had climbing grips over the entire side of it, so that you could take the easy route on the top half or the hard route on the bottom - and if you were suicidal, actually cross it while hanging underneath. There were five lanes, from blue on top, to green, yellow, orange and with red underneath the airbridge. Apparently Lt. Brittner was still working on managing that all the way across, and the only person who could do it was the unbeaten climbing champion in the city - Petty Officer Ouseti.

"At that level it's a matter of body composition," the Lieutenant pointed out. "His muscle power to weight ratio is insane. He's half a head smaller and twenty pounds lighter than me, and he has the same amount of muscle mass. It's awesome to see him climb, but he can't teach anybody else."

"Lesser mortals can't do any of that shit," Dusty agreed with a grin. She clicked shut her harness and dropped through her knees, checking if it was adjusted right.

Just then the balcony doors slid open as a group of Marines passed by, presumably on their way to the nearby weight room.

"--poor Recon dude's gotta go climb with the women," one of them grinned at his mates. He had a bandage around his elbow. "Sucks to be you, dude!" he said in passing to Brad.

"Hello Parnham," Dusty blocked the door from closing, and her casual greeting couldn't quite hide the undertone of impending doom. "And going climbing with the women is bad because....?" she made a 'you finish' gesture, watching him with raised eyebrows.

"You're on your own, man," Parnham's companions muttered, and disappeared into the weight room. Thus deserted, the guy scowled.

"Well, Corporal?" Lt. Cadman said, "We're dying to hear your reasoning, here."

Brad was pretty sure there wasn't an answer the guy would be willing to say out loud, if he'd ever even thought this far.

"Could you check my harness, ma'am?" he turned to Lt. Brittner. He thought she understood that he was demonstrating that 'recon dude' had no problem being taught by women, because she didn't correct him about her name like she'd been doing, just checked over his harness and nodded sharply.

"Good to go."

She'd already checked over Miko's harness, and then frowned at the little standoff in the hallway in impatient irritation.

"Oh hey, Corporal Parnham," she said, as if just noticing him. "Have you made it all the way across yet?"

Her tone was sympathetic, and Brad couldn't quite tell if she hadn't been paying attention to what the guy had said, or if she had, and was just delivering the death knell from a different angle.

The Corporal, apparently finally realising he was hopelessly outgunned here, grumbled something and turned away to disappear into the weight room. Laura and Dusty exchanged amused looks.

"Laura, if you want to take point? Dusty can pace Brad, and I'll pace you," Lt. Brittner nodded at
While they waited for Laura to climb down, Brad looked around and realised he was in the company of the city's Explosives expert, its Unarmed Combat expert, its Search/Rescue/Extraction specialist and the Ancient Tech scientist who was one of only two people Dr McKay would willingly delegate to. They were pretty fucking vital to the expedition, and how anybody could think that he would feel spending time with them was an insult to *him*, he wasn't sure.

* * *

Looking at the Cakewalk from the safety of the tower he'd thought that he'd be taking the yellow route, maybe orange if he got comfortable. Actually climbing down to it over the outside of a fifteen-story tower, he dutifully started on the blue route like he'd been instructed and then decided to stick with it until his heart had stopped pounding quite as loudly. He was used to climbing where you started on the ground. This was.. something else.

Laura was a little way ahead of him on the yellow route, slow but steady, and Miko and Lt. Brittner were side by side on the green trail, Miko copying the grips and motions she was using precisely.

Dusty chatted with him, cheerful and flirtatious, and that distracted him enough from the yawning depth underneath the bridge that he could regulate his breathing and move a little more confidently along the green climbing trail. It was strange to be climbing sideways, but at least the round shape of the airbridge mostly hid the ground from his sight.

They were talking about her upcoming leave and the family visit she was planning, and it took him ten metres of climbing to realise that she'd gradually moved down on the grips, he'd followed without thinking about it, and he was now on the yellow route. Huh. She gave him a bright smile when he said so, and he thought the pounding of his heart might not entirely have to do with the height.
Monday morning saw his team on a mission to a planet where the local population was host to a group of culling refugees. The natives - who called themselves Yjovs - had made some kind of agreement with Atlantis for assistance. Brad learned that while the expedition would host refugees is there was no other option, the usual approach was to find another planet willing to host and support them locally. Not only was it difficult for the overwhelmingly rural Pegasus natives to feel at ease in the city, it was still a priority not to let word of Atlantis spread further than necessary.

Their visit was to assess how everybody was getting on and what further medical care and supplies Atlantis would be offering.

There were a lot of kids, because the Wrenovians had managed to send most of their kids deep into a cave network while the adults stayed near the entrance. They had ended up sacrificing themselves to the Wraith's hunger, which was explained to them with a kind of detachment that made Brad reach for his Iceman composure.

All that was left of an entire population, and entire society, was 27 children in ages between newborn and about twelve, and the five adults that had been sent into the caves with them, tasked with their care. Two boys and a girl in their late teens, a pregnant woman, and an 'elder', an old man who was treated with much respect by everybody. In the Pegasus galaxy simply living to his age was an accomplishment.

The temperate winter on the Yjov planet was much colder than the Wrenovian's former home, which had been semi-tropical, and a lot of the kids were snotty and lethargic, working their way through the adjustment period of missing their parents while being subjected to new types of food, being wrapped up in thick fur suits for the first time in their lives, new water sources, new plant and animal allergens, new day rhythm, new everything. Brad spent part of his day helping Lt. Brittner with running clinic. She kept giving him young kids to hold while she treated them, until he had held so many squirmy kids that he was no longer worried about dropping them on their heads. Possibly that had been her goal.

The Wrenovian carers were exhausted and overworked, struggling to cope with the loss of their entire world while caring for the children. The Yjov people helped as much as they could, but the kids couldn't be split up among the families, clinging together fearfully. The influx of people on the small Yjov settlement was straining resources, especially because it was the end of the winter and food stores were beginning to run low.

This was where Atlantis came in. The initial support goods package had been assembled within the city with scarcely an hour's notice - blankets and MREs mostly, and warm expedition-issue clothing for the carers. Since then AR6 had scoured the markets for warm weather gear for children, and Brad was pretty sure some of the knitted hats had been made in Atlantis.

They also brought sacks of sorghum-like grain to boost the Yjov supply stores, crates of toba root, and as a treat a few large jars of the preserved fruit from Ujuyu. The day had started with erecting a large, well insulated dome tent as a communal space for the refugees.

Most of the kids were if not doing well, at least not in immediate danger, Lt. Brittner told him in a low voice, carefully inserting an IV needle in the arm of a tiny baby. It had a croaky voice so hoarse from screaming that it triggered a hitherto undiscovered must-fix-this instinct in Brad. The three babies, suddenly away from familiar faces, from their mother's presence and, not unimportant, milk, were failing to thrive. That medical term seemed like an understatement to him.

The Lieutenant tucked the IV bag inside her coat, wrapped the baby into a warm blanket, and walked out of the jumper, which had been parked with its open hatch into the dome tent. Captain Avery was talking with the Yjov leader. Seeing her come with the baby, he partially unzipped his coat and unbuttoned the BDU shirt underneath, and with a few short words accepted the baby and tucked it against his chest. He jigged the kid around until its cheek rested against his T-shirt and closed the layers most of the way again, the IV bag warm kept in the crook of his neck. The Captain held one arm so that the kid was securely cradled against him, and continued his conversation. After a few minutes, the pathetic, croaky cries stopped.

"You're magic, sir," Lt. Brittner said with a rueful shake of her head.
"I'm a furnace," the Captain corrected. "Are we taking any of them back with us?"

"You're holding the main candidate. If he doesn't perk up with the IV, I want him in the infirmary. The other two are..." She made a frustrated gesture. "I'd prefer to have them on formula food, but sanitation is a problem... so we'll have to stick with goat milk. Dr Keller made up a supplement to mix into it, and that should help."

"All right. We'll see at the end of the day," the Captain nodded, absentmly humming a tune.

Lt. Brittner returned to the jumper, gesturing for Brad to come along, and in that moment she looked almost exactly like Doc Bryan, that frustrated expression that came with trying to give the best possible care to kids living in far from optimal conditions.

"Why don't we bring them back with us, ma'am?" he asked once they were back in the jumper. "Do they really think the kids are a security risk?"

"Taking people out of their environment is always difficult," she sighed, dropping down in one of the jump seats. "Kids doubly so. Does the good of having them in easy reach of care weigh up against isolating them from their own people and culture? Once they're in the city they get used to our way of life, they form bonds, people get attached to them, and it tends to become hard to stay objective about when they should be returned."

"Because by Earth definitions, most of Pegasus isn't safe?" he guessed.

"Exactly. And the expedition is supposed to help where it can, but we're not set up to take in long term refugees. This right here-" she gestured out the jumper, "is actually the best case scenario. The two planets were trade partners, there were bonds already and their culture is compatible. Long term these kids are going to be fine right here. It's just so hard right now because of the climate. By next month the thaw will be setting in and things get easier."

When they had re-sanitised the jumper she dismissed him so that she could examine the pregnant woman, and Brad found himself in the dome tent with the wholly unprecedented urge to do something, anything, to make these grim-faced kids smile. He ended up outside the new dome tent with a bunch of the older kids, wrapped up warm in their new fur jackets and boots, teaching them to make snowmen.

* * *

A few hours later Lt. Brittner examined the smallest baby again, and concluded that the IV and warm sleep had done a lot of good. Captain Avery reluctantly handed over the baby, and she cradled it close while she ghosted a large hand over its head in goodbye. It was such a comfortable, familiar moment that Brad wasn't surprised a lot of natives assumed they were a couple, or that the team was a family.

Michèl carefully flew the jumper away to a clearing just outside of the settlement, and Brad helped Captain Avery to quickly close up the gap in the dome tent. The wood burner they had set up inside would soon heat the space again.

Lt. Brittner reminded the Yjovs and the Wrenovian carers to call Atlantis if they needed help or if there was anything wrong with the kids - they had a radio set - but never to walk through the wormhole unless they had been expressly told so via the radio. Brad knew that the procedure was more likely to be that a team of Marines on Ready Room duty would be sent through to verify identity and escort them to Atlantis, but he understood the sense of reinforcing the warning for the shield.

They said their goodbyes, and Brad had already boarded the jumper when he realised Lt. Brittner was being handed something by the Yjov leader along with a quiet, solemn speech. He did a double take when he saw what it was.

"Unless you want surprise testicular surgery, I suggest you do not laugh," Captain Avery said sotto voce.

"Solid copy, sir."

The Lieutenant accepted the stone polished... statue, said her goodbyes, and walked into the jumper with an expression so serenely bland that he knew it was hiding either a grin or a snarl - it was impossible to tell. When he cleared his throat in an attempt to conceal a chuckle - not so much at her expense but because it was just so damn ridiculous - she shifted her grip on the stone object, holding it like a bludgeoning weapon. He stifled his amusement. Right, snarl it was.
"That again, huh?" Dr Fournier said sympathetically from the pilot seat. "Put it in my bag, I will take it to the Cake."

"So here's what our tasks will be for the training exercise," the Captain changed the subject as they took off. "We have designated planets Alpha through November, and the Marine teams need to collect eight tokens. Some of the planets are just goose chases, like we set out a couple of weeks ago, and we will start out at..."

* * *

Nate and the guys were babysitting a botany field trip - and didn't that just sound like a barrel of laughs - and he ended up having dinner at the NCO table.

"Hey Colbert, anything fun happen?" Waltemeyer greeted him.

Dusty Mehra was there too, greeting him with a smile, and Nocks, who just grunted.

"They gave the LT a fertility statue," he sat down, stifling his grin. "Shoulda seen her face when she was thanking them."

"LTs Brittner and Cadman must have a whole collection by now," Waltemeyer grinned. "Was it a little dude with a big schlong or an actual dildo?"

"The last. I can't believe she kept a straight face," he shook his head in disbelief.

They laughed.

"You do realise these people think of a team as a family unit, right?" Dusty said when they had quietened again. She had a gleam in her eyes.

"Do you mean-oh," Colbert said. "Shit."

"What?" Nocks asked.

"Just that LT Brittner getting a fertility idol is more a reflection of what those people think of her teammates than of her," Dusty said brightly.

She stacked her things on her tray, flashed Colbert a wicked grin that had his heart skip a beat, and walked off.

"I wonder if Warszawski knew that," Waltemeyer finally said thoughtfully.

* * *

Tuesday he spent most of the day helping Captains Patel and Avery and Lt. Brittner set up for the field exercise, which would start at 0400 the next day. This involved collecting all sorts of gear and items around the city while trying to evade the Marines who were on city patrol, who were unsubtly trying to see what was stacked on the handcarts and what conclusions they could draw from it.

The exercise would consist of a sort of treasure hunt across several planets - volunteers and allies had been recruited to play roles and dole out information if the Marines approached things right. AR4, save Lt. Brittner, also had acting parts to play in this. There would be a Wraith attack, by way of a Jumper with a narrow-beamed spotlight/stunner combination and AR3 and AR9 as Wraith on the ground. Major Lorne would direct that part of the exercise.

There was a part where AR4 (minus the Captain) would be residing over the 'snackbar', the camp where captures Marines would be held. And the part Brad was most looking forward to was 'ambush duty.' There was a planet with a forest the Marines would need to pass through on their way to a checkpoint, and where several teams would be trying to whittle them down. Michèl would stay in his role as village leader for that part, but the team would be complete in its SRE makeup.

There was a complicated schedule that allowed every platoon to go through every part of the exercise while Atlantis stayed sufficiently secured, and the Gate teams manning the exercises also rotated through most of the positions. There were three officer teams rotating through the Command Post, which was why AR4 couldn't operate as a complete team throughout the exercise: Colonel Sheppard and Lt. Brittner, Captain Avery and Lt. Arroyo, and Captain Patel and his First Sergeant, Rennaker.

"The first time the exercise ran at this scale, Colonel Sheppard was in charge of the command
centre alone. While the Colonel is a very fine field commander..." she trailed off, and he understood the implicated 'an organisational wonder he is not'. "Major Lorne called me in to assist, and I ended up running the comms side of it."

Colbert could see why. She was good at multiple information streams, and junior enough that it could be seen as delegation rather than 'please, God, go in and save us from the chaos'. Even though he suspected that that was exactly what it was.

"I like to think of you and Rennaker as organisational grenades," Patel grinned at Lt. Brittner. "We send you in and stand well back."

* * *

Standing around looking like an extra in Gladiator wasn't really Brad's idea of a good time, but he had to admit this was an interesting exercise. He'd asked if he could join a Marine team for this part, acting not really being his strong point, but Captain Avery had said that he would learn just as much watching other groups go through.

Most of the Anthill Marines never interacted with Pegasus natives one-on-one - or at least not with people who weren't very well established allies. If there were any sensitive encounters, their platoon commanders handled those parts of their missions. Now they were split up into four-man teams, and thrown into the sort of situations Brad had already encountered on his offworld missions. Avery had decided to make an exception for AR7 as the only Gate team to participate, because they could do with some Pegasus style encounters.

He looked coldly down at the sergeant who was currently trying to engage him in conversation, or at least persuade him to give up the information they needed. This team, one of Alpha Three's, was making the apparently classic mistake of assuming that the martial-looking members of a society were automatically the ones in charge. They would not get what they wanted until they figured out that the unassuming looking Dr Parrish was the leader, approached him politely, and suffered through the trust ritual that had taken Brad by surprise on his own first mission.

Then they would be invited to come inside the cave - but without weapons, so the men would need to navigate if, and how, to risk that. If they succeeded in all that, their next Gate address was chalk-sprayed inside the cave.

So far out of eight teams, Brad, Meyers and McPherson had chased away three who had gotten impatient and impolite at some stage of this production, and used their dialled-down stunners on one team which had decided to try to extract the information by force. Those had been picked up by the cloaked jumper that was both guarding them from actual Wraith attacks and serving as their comms relay with command.

The teams weren't wrong to be cautious, because while these 'natives' might be cold and difficult but ultimately willing to help, there was a settlement on Charlie planet where Michèl and Teyla Emmagan played the very welcoming leaders of a society that collected offworlders to offer as tribute to the Wraith.

* * *

This is Echo Air to Echo Ground. AR Seven has just arrived on the planet, Gunny Stackhouse radioed from the jumper. Each team reported their whereabouts to the jumpers that were on each of the planets in use for the exercise.

"Copy that," Dr Parrish responded. "Team Alpha Three One Bravo was successful and has departed about ten minutes ago."

Brad, Meyers and McPherson switched positions. Knowing that his old team would definitely try to use their familiarity with him to help them along, he took up position just inside the cave entrance while the others hung out around the fire. He would let them take the lead on this one. Both so he couldn't inadvertently give anything away and so he could observe how Nate and the guys would handle this.

Drs Parrish and Hayashi continued cutting up roots for the pot of surprisingly fragrant vegetable stew they had on the fire, and there were two people from Archaeology building a chair with tools they had constructed that morning.

Brad watched as Nate lead his men into the clearing. They had lowered the barrels of their paintball rifles and made good approach, not as cocky as many of the other teams had done. It made sense when he thought about it - Recon teams had more experience with going into situations where they were outnumbered, needed information, and needed to depend on not
making enemies. The Anthill Marines, not usually deployed in groups smaller than two squads, were more used to seeing themselves as in control of a situation. Precision tool versus blunt weapon.

There wasn't a set plan for the interaction, their group had space to roll with what the Marine teams were giving them as long as they stayed consistent and within the scope of the culture brief they had been given.

Which was how Doc Bryan ended up tending to the (very minor) scrape on Dr Hayashi's elbow while Nate and Tony tried to strike up a conversation with Meyers and McPherson. Christopher and Mike watched with interest how the Archaeologists were working with their new bow drill.

Ray, generally willing to eat anything not matter how alien, was immediately drawn to the cooking pot and had struck up a surprisingly appropriate conversation with Doctors Parrish and Hayashi. When he figured out that the Doctor was willing to talk about more than the food, he signalled for Nate to join them. Brad was maybe a little impressed.

The trust ritual tripped the guys up a little, but they managed to keep their jokes in enough not to offend - or at least not enough for Dr Parrish to kick them out.

Meyers threw in the suggestion that the guys kept each other warm at night just to see how that would go over, and Brad leaned back to let the shadow fall over his face, because he had to fight to maintain his composure at the shocked looks and the spluttering that followed. Tony threw around a quelling look and smoothly said that they were indeed close like brothers, and that settled things down again.

The notion that Nate would disarm and go into the cave on his own was met with 'Oh hell no' and Brad grimaced behind his mask. He hoped that they wouldn't go wrong here when they'd started so well. Of course it was important to maintain personal security, but they had to do it while not offending the natives, or they still wouldn't get the information they needed.

Dr Parrish, who was a surprisingly good actor, took offence at the show of distrust and Brad and Meyers and McPherson loomed closer, spears in hand. It took all of Nate's considerable diplomatic skills to smooth over the moment. He used an approach which Brad knew they'd taught him at the SGC (because Avery had told him about it) which was to explain that Nate, personally, trusted Parrish and saw no danger, but that his men had been tasked with his safety and would not allow such a situation. Tony finally brought the solution, which was for enough of the men to disarm and go into the cave that they could form an eyesight chain to those who remained on the outside and armed.

Their Gate address acquired, the men stuck around for a bowl of stew, and then went off to their next mission.

* * *

Planet Lima was the one he'd been looking forward to. His team - in its SRE makeup, Dr Fournier still being part of a village on another planet - were to be the shadow forces that picked off Marines in a dark forest. In dark grey coveralls and face masks, his team members certainly looked the part. He looked forward to finally getting a measure of their field skills.

Avery turned out to be more than proficient, which was both a surprise and not - he'd expected the SAS to be highly skilled, but it was still a surprise to see a Captain move like this. He was used to finding the true experts among the enlisted men. Recon usually left its officers behind. The Captain was walking point, leading them to where their targets would pass.

Lt. Cadman was about where he'd expected a Marine with her training would be, which meant that she could use some work but wasn't a significant concern.

Lt. Brittner was the weak point, which wasn't really a surprise. The Air Force wasn't exactly renowned for its ground skills, and her odd career path hadn't really equipped her for night time assault. She had the sort of innate stillness that could let her become completely invisible and she certainly moved quietly enough, but he didn't think she'd had much in the way of offensive training.

Thinking about her training that actually made sense - for all that CROs were trained for the eventuality that they'd be dropped behind enemy lines, Combat Rescue was about finding, securing and protecting friendlies. SERE and most of her other training would have focused on evasion and defensive skills, not on offense. She clearly knew her limitations though, which was something he appreciated in people he was tasked to protect.
He wondered if she would want to learn, and if there was a way to offer to teach her without offending.

Lt. Brittner would be their sniper, hidden up a tree at a terrain-enforced bottleneck to pick off marines that slipped through the net. They'd holstered stunners and carried paintball rifles now, because the forest was too dense and too large to pick up stunned people by jumper. Anybody who had two paint hits (or just one, centre mass) would be held back at the next checkpoint.

There was some kind of device near the Stargate which jammed the lifesign detectors the Marines carried. The predator teams had adjusted devices which did work, and they'd had the opportunity to study the terrain from the jumper before it dropped them off.

The Marine teams wouldn't have that advantage. The moment they stepped through the wormhole they'd be hunted by Stilger's team and driven right into the areas AR4 and AR8 were covering. Difficult terrain would then force them toward the bottleneck, after which there would be an unassailed but difficult to navigate further eight miles to the checkpoint.

The planet's two moons threw strange, harsh shadows in the forest. Brad looked to his right for a moment, gauging what the most likely approach was for the teams. When he looked back at the team, Lt. Brittner had vanished up the tree.

"You're good right there," Avery said, looking up. "Any way to secure yourself?"

"Yes sir, I'm clipped in," her voice drifted down, higher up than he'd thought she would be.

The Marine teams were supposed to have had their stunners disabled, forced to use their paintball rifles, but you never knew if somebody had managed to sneak in a working stunner. A six metre fall was still a long way. One of the shadows moved, his perspective shifted, and then he could see her again in a V of the trunk of the tree, body plastered against a branch, enough foliage to hide the shape of her head and rifle. Yeah, he thought she was going to be fine. The teams were competing against each other, so it made more sense for them to work past this point as fast as they could than to gang up and disable her.

Apparently in a previous exercise, teams had taken the view that eliminating competition was as good as making time across the 12 mile stretch and had turned the whole thing into a paintball match. In response, this year the predator teams had a distinct colour and other hits didn't count.

"Of course, somebody will find another loophole," Avery grinned as they ghosted into the depth of the forest. "Somebody always does."

***

"So how many points do they get for hitting us?"

Lt. Cadman laughed softly.

"None whatsoever," the Captain said, toothy grin flashing in the dark. "The only effect returning fire will have is that we have more time to get hits in."

"Aha. So this is only about making it through as fast and unmarked as possible? Do they know this?"

"Nope," Lt. Cadman said. "This is a lesson called 'Welcome to Pegasus, where you are usually not the hammer.'"

"And figuring out the rules as you go along is what Gate missions are all about," Brad realised. Fucking hell. He hoped Nate and the guys would not fall back onto Earth based tactical habits. The exercise was much more a learning experience than competition, and he'd already understood that there were higher expectations for AR7. They had after all had a month of Gate mission specific training the Anthill marines had not had.

***

When the predator teams converged on their pickup point at the end of the night all of them were paint-drenched, exhausted and grinning. Major Lorne, who was picking them up, took one look at them and dug out a bin bag to put the colourfully dripping coveralls in before they were allowed into the jumper.

It had taken a lot of the teams far too long to figure out that their enemy was invincible and that retreat was the only option. Whole teams had been wiped out, failing to draw the right conclusions
when Brad and his team had abandoned stalking in favour of standing out in the open. It was a lesson Brad had taken in too - if your opponent doesn't bother with cover, you needed to get the fuck out of there.

* * *

The exercise had been deliberately unwinnable, and there were plenty of teams that had ended up in the Snackbar in their entirety. No one team had made it through without casualties. AR7 had lost Mike Wynn and Garza to Lima planet before they'd figured out that retreat was the best course of action there, but they had the best score for Echo and Charlie, and had done respectably well on the other parts. Mel Keawe's fire team had made it through Lima with only two separate hits to limbs, possibly because Keawe had Atlantis experience enough to have a sense for how his commanders thought. They had then been halved by Michél's wraith-worshipping cult on Charlie planet. Dusty was the only survivor of her team, which she declared to be 'just fucking embarrassing'.

Brad could see why everybody had been so excited about this. Captains Avery and Patel clearly had well-deserved reputations for putting on fiendishly difficult, confronting and challenging training exercises. And the regularly repeated 'How To Talk Yourself Out Of Trouble - A Pegasus Diplomacy course' classes organised by the Cake suddenly had a lot more takers.

* * *

At breakfast the next day Dusty once again acted like he was a total stranger, which Brad found hard to take after he'd enjoyed climbing together with her. Growing frustrated, he followed her to the balcony where she'd gone to finish her coffee.

Dusty was leaning against the railing, looking out over the sea. She looked up, seeming a little startled to see him, and he was about to open his mouth and ask her what was up with the mixed signals when he realised she'd just scoped out her exit route.

Oh.

Apparently there weren't even close to where he'd thought they were.

He'd half decided he would use the opportunity to ask her out. He was - or at least, had been - fairly sure that she was interested in him too, and he was mystified by the hot-cold behaviour. Getting women had never been difficult, but the rules were all different here, and she wasn't sharing them.

Now he was reminded of how much he didn't know. About her, about how things worked for the military women in the city. About how the hell dating worked in a closed environment, when the person he was interested in was best friends with his LT. He and Lt. Brittner seemed to be heading toward a solid working relationship - he hoped she would agree - and he knew he was risking that if he messed things up with Dusty. Hell, messing up risked more than that. If renewed difficulties with his LT weren't enough, it could screw up the friendships he was forming with other NCOs, not to mention his involvement in the BJJ lessons.

He leaned against the railing next to her, leaving a professional distance between them.

She smiled a little, tipping her face into the breeze.

He nodded slowly as he settled on something. Hotness aside, she was interesting and fun and could kick his ass - all things he appreciated in friends. Maybe it would grow into something more at some point, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd concentrated on being friends with somebody he had bigger feelings for. Compared to being friends with his ex fiancee after she'd left him for his best friend, this should be a breeze.

"So tell me, how many guys can I bring to BJJ class before people start talking about a Recon invasion?"

* * *

"Oh hey, Sergeant Colbert."

He jerked his head around from his contemplation of the lunch options, and saw that Colonel Carter was standing next to him. He straightened to attention, then relaxed into at-ease, his compromise between the manners drilled into him by the USMC and the more relaxed attitudes of Atlantis. She smiled slightly.
"Ma'am."

"Nice work on the exercise yesterday."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And I also heard good things about your work on the Loetan mission."

"Thank you, ma'am." With everything that had come directly after it, that mission seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Missions like that are always the hardest - when you have to make the judgement call on how severe the danger is," she said. "I'll have the lasagne please, sergeant Paglia."

"Until they started following us and waving spears, it was hard to tell if we were over- or under-reacting," Brad agreed. He hesitated before asking a question, still not quite used to that being acceptable. "Ma'am, will the expedition do any follow up to that planet?"

"Possibly. We're going to talk about that now we've finished rehashing the whole memory loss situation. There'll be a meeting, you'll get the invitation in the next few days."

She walked to a nearby table, inviting him to join her with a tilt of her head. He hesitated, because chatting over lunch with the full-bird Colonel who was the expedition leader was just weird. But he'd been on a mission with Colonel Carter, and having seen her in the field somehow made her less imposing. While she in no way made the gulf in rank between them disappear, he found it unexpectedly easy to talk to her.

"It's not mandatory, but you were on the mission, so your insights would be welcome," she said, sitting down. They both dug into their food.

"What sort of action would you be willing to authorise?" he asked after a long moment. "Against the Loetans, I mean."

"If you're thinking about a covert military operation, that's not going to happen."

Okay, maybe he had been thinking about that. Night infiltration, free all the women and take them off-world.

"At this point we don't know anything about these people, only that they set off your team's alarm bells and reacted badly when you retreated. I can't justify military action on the basis of gut feelings-" she held up a hand when he straightened up in protest, "-even if I think you and your team's actions were justified and correct according to our mandate. You handled in the interest of self preservation, I would have done the same."

He nodded, mollified.

"But I can't authorise invasive military action based on that," she explained."Even if we do find out that your suspicions are correct and those women were forcibly taken from other planets, they should have a deciding voice in their own future. Most of them have children who have grown up Loetan. Some of them may not have a place to return to if they should leave. We can't barge in there and decide what's best for them, and in the process make it impossible for them to remain if that's what they chose. Plus, if we did just take all the women away from there, chances are good that the Loetans would just kidnap new women."

"Right. What do you think we might end up doing, ma'am?"

"Luckily I have some specialists to help me figure that out. Both Dr Van Wyk and Dr Ingadottir have a lot of experience with helping communities heal from trauma, both internal and external. Dr Van Wyk used to run a project that rehabilitated child soldiers and reintegrated them with communities."

Colbert nodded.

"It's possible that the best chance would be to matchmake - the Loetans are relatively rich in resources. We might be able to match them up with a people who have lost theirs, whose presence would ensure the continuation of both their societies. General Hammond once helped broker such an arrangement in our own galaxy and I believe those people are getting on well, though it took considerable mediation from the SGC for the first few years."

"You would match them with somebody like the.." Kudzudites "..people from the Kudzu planet?"
Or, God forbid, give them the Wrenovian children?

"I don't think that would make a good match culturally. It would be difficult to find people who would be able to negotiate from a position of strength - Loetan culture would obviously need to change. But if the Loetans agree to such an intervention, long term it might be the most viable."

"Does it not make you angry, ma'am?" He asked. "To hear they kidnapped women and..." he gestured, angry at his inability to help them. It sounded like whatever would be done, military action wouldn't be part of it.

"Of course it does." He belatedly realised that could be seen as an accusation. Thankfully she didn't sound angry or indignant, but there was a sort of banked intensity to her eyes that reminded him that in her ten years on a Gate team, she had probably seen all sorts of ugliness. "And we will help anybody who wants to leave, whether they have a place to return to or not. We have before. But punishment isn't always in the best interest of the situation. If punishment is only to satisfy our own need for retribution, I believe we are better off taking the long view."

He nodded slowly, not liking it, but understanding that there wasn't much more that could be said about that. Then, figuring he wouldn't get a better chance, "There's something I have become interesting in, ma'am."

She made a 'go ahead' gesture as took a sip of her alien fruit juice.

"Having the Gate as an access point seems to really alter combat strategy. Has anything ever been written about Gate warfare tactics?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment, and then focused on him with a look that made him feel like she was reading the story of his life off of his forehead. He'd heard tales of perceptive senior officers, but in his time in the Corps he'd only ever met field grade officers who were either oblivious or uninterested of their men as individuals. He wondered if the Stargate Program fostered perceptiveness in commanders or if it simply picked officers who already had that quality.

"No..." she said slowly, still considering, "I don't think so. It would be good if there was a document like that, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. I kind of feel like I'm inventing the wheel all over again."

"And now your training period is winding down you must have some spare time," she considered, and he resisted the urge to facepalm, because she'd walked him right into that. "Especially given that your teammates all have responsibilities outside of missions."

She flashed him a sudden, bright smile.

"Woulld you be interested in taking this on as a research project, sergeant? You're new enough that you're still asking questions, where more seasoned people would just accept something because, well, 'that's how it's done.'" She gestured with her spoon. "You can ask Lieutenant Brittner for help, she writes a lot of our training documentation. And I can get you access to mission reports... and you should interview team leaders," she continued, sounding endearingly enthusiastic about this idea. "I'm sure General O'Neill will lend his support to your initiative, so he'll make sure you have access to SGC reports and team leaders as well."

He looked at the table where his team was eating. Laura was telling a story about, judging from the hand motions, an explosion. Captain Avery had his head tipped back with laughter, and Lt. Brittner had a hand in front of her mouth, but her eyes were crinkled with mirth.

Yeah, he was pretty sure she'd help him if he asked.

Answering the Colonel's question felt oddly like stepping over a threshold. Like she was asking him to do more than just work on Atlantis. Like she was asking him to abandon the idea of being 'just a grunt', to step outside of his role as enlisted man and contribute something lasting to the benefit of the city and its inhabitants. Like she was asking him to become an Atlantean.

"Yes ma'am," he said finally, meaning it. "I'd really like that."
It's the end! Only it's not quite the end, because there's an epilogue coming :-) I am currently somewhat obsessed with rounding off this story, so it probably won't be long...
THREE MONTHS LATER

"Thank you for your time, sir."

"You're welcome, Colbert. I'm looking forward to the finished result," Captain Holmbeck said as Brad stood up. "And to making my Lieutenants study it. Have a good weekend."

"Sir." Brad drew himself up into attention and saluted. Alpha Company's commander was the most traditional officer in the city, and it still baffled Brad that he actively had to remember all the manners and obeisance that had been drilled into him. Apart from Captain Holmbeck, nobody stood on ceremony here, and he'd gotten out of the habits.

The Captain had given him a few useful additions for his Gate Warfare Tactics document, and he found himself looking forward to sitting down to incorporate them. The document was coming together, and the next step was to send it to Colonel Carter to look at. He was looking forward to that too, because the two times they had done that before she'd spent time going over the points with him, making suggestions and adding her expertise both in Gate tactics and in producing the kind of documents the SGC would take seriously, not just put on a shelf somewhere.

She'd even helped him get time with the people who were the hardest to pin down, scheduling him time with Holmbeck and Gunny Stackhouse.

General O'Neill had been another story. Brad's every email had gone unanswered until Colonel Carter had attached his written questions to her own email, and then the answers had been curt and uninformative. He'd figured that was that, but the Colonel had then, next time a few scientists went to Earth for a conference, written him a 36 hour pass and gotten him an hour of the General's time.

It had made him privately shake his head in disbelief - what officer, even a full-bird Colonel, could dictate her CO's time like that? What had she put into the equation to get him that time? And was he about to spend an hour trying to interview with an extremely disgruntled three star General? It took about five minutes with O'Neill to understand Colonel Carter's approach, because upon realising this was actually something he was interested in, the General had shoved his paperwork into a drawer and called in Teal'c and Colonel Mitchell. Then the four of them had spent the better part of an evening hashing out the tactics of some of SG1's more notable missions. There had been takeout food. it had been weird.

Then, though sheer luck of a control room tech overhearing him when he explained to Colonel Mitchell that the 24 hours leave that would be left in the morning weren't enough to visit his parents in California, he was informed that the Odyssey was beaming a scientist to San Diego for the day, and if that was workable for him they could send him along.

Which was how instead of shopping down the long, long list of snacks, movies and video games the guys wanted him to bring back, he experienced morning rush hour on a spaceship - and that was a whole other story - and managed to visit his parents. Who were obviously struggling not to ask how the hell he'd managed a day visit from his super secret overseas assignment, but were delighted to see him. He brought back his wetsuit, favourite board shorts and his surfboard - the expression of the Odyssey tech in charge of transport had been awesome. Then he'd gone to buy a few overpriced DVDs and games from a 24/7 shop near the Mountain and called it good.
Even Colonel Carter hadn't been able to pin down Colonel Sheppard, who was presumably under the impression that Brad wanted to sit in an office and review mission reports. The man had skillfully evaded every attempt to make an appointment, and Brad had more or less given up until Lt. Brittner had radioed Brad from the infirmary that he should come and bring a recorder.

It turned out that Sheppard and his team were stuck in the quarantine ward for a couple of hours pending the results of their blood analysis, and once Sheppard realised this did not in fact involve paperwork, he'd been glad of the distraction and both engaged and helpful. Brad had been relieved of the recording he'd made, because the rest of AR1 had joined in with the conversation, and information had come hard and fast with Teyla and Ronon contributing. Even after editing out Dr McKay's snarky comments he had plenty of interesting material.

He'd spoken with officers and NCOs and even Gate team civilians, who tended to have surprisingly observant insights into offworld problem situations, coming at things from a different direction. He'd discovered an entire field of verbal defensive strategies and de-escalation approaches that didn't fit into his report, but fascinated him nonetheless, and on the encouragement of Lt. Brittner he'd written down as much about it as he could anyway.

Asking her for help hadn't been easy. There was still a large part of him that hated showing that he needed help with anything, even something that he logically wasn't expected to be good at. Not to mention that he really, really hated owing people favours, but there was no getting away from that.

Last time he'd done any sort of writing that wasn't a report written precisely according to USMC defined standards had been in school. And even then, Military School wasn't exactly big on self-governed research work. He'd finally bit the bullet and broached the subject on one of those early morning missions where the Captain and Michel were hideously awake and chatty, and he and the LT were walking point just to get some distance from the godawful cheerfulness.

"Ma'am?" he'd said hesitantly, because sometimes comfortable silence was hard to break.

She'd given him a questioning sort of hum and a bleary glance, and he'd ploughed ahead.

"Colonel Carter has asked me to write something about gate warfare tactics."

She said nothing, but her gaze turned marginally more awake, and she nodded for him to continue.

"I... she said you write a lot of the training documentation we use. Would you... I've never done this sort of thing before."

"Sure, I'll help you," she yawned, and he marvelled at how unexpectedly merciful she could be. "Maybe it was the early hour making her mild. "I'll want something in return though."

Or not.

"Will you help me work on my offensive skills?"

* * *

His first impression of this project when Colonel Carter had volunteered him was that he'd compile something that would go onto the Atlantis wiki. But by the time that Lt. Brittner sat down with him to get the format more in line with official SGC reports, and Major Teldy closed her email with 'I'm looking forward to using this in my training program' he began to realise he was in for something a lot bigger. Thankfully he was already two-thirds in and it was too late to get intimidated.

* * *

...1900 hours, and here is your Ray-Ray with the community announcements! All right, listen up you lot, tomorrow there will be an expedition to gather wood for the furniture building project. If you would like to see more or those awesome seats Gunny Wynn is building and you're free tomorrow - oh, and if you can be trusted not to act like a retard when you're handed something sharp - then report your ass to the jumper bay at 1100 hours.

In other news, our Airforce Overlords would like to remind us all that this coming Wednesday is Intergalactic Scrubdown Day - it's not like this doesn't happen every month or anything like that, but apparently it tends to take some civilia--I mean people, by surprise. So now you know:
Wednesday, Scrubdown Day. Report to whoever is in charge of you to find out what you're supposed to be scrubbing down - it ain't hard homes, even Marines can do this shit.

And lastly, anybody who is signed up to spend their day off on PX4-362, also known as 'the planet with the really kickass beach,' should report to the Gateroom at 0900 hours tomorrow, so you better not party too late tonight, because if you miss the dial-out, tough luck!. Right, that's it for community announcement shit, homes, welcome back to hour two of the first ever Ray Person's Space Radio! You haven't gone anywhere, I haven't gone anywhere, so I don't even know why I say welcome back, but nevermind homes and homettes, let's go straight into some kickass music!

[Author's note for ereaders: Rock version of Also Sprach Zarathustra]

"So he hasn't been kicked off yet?" Brad asked rhetorically. He'd stopped inside the doorway to listen to the radio, which was turned up inside Michèl's quarters.

Ray had gotten wind of Radio Atlantis during his month at the SGC and gone to see Kay almost immediately after he'd arrived in the city. She had told him that she would let him on the radio after he'd lived and worked in the city for six weeks - he needed to get to know his audience, after all. Between searching for the missing Athosians, Replicator emergencies and fucking hive ships, it had become three months. Brad still thought it had been a sound decision, because the Ray he remembered from Iraq would have thrown in a hell of a lot more profanity.

"I think he's scuffed the line a little," Darren grinned.

"More than a little," Mike said gruffly. From what Brad had picked up they were talking about how Mike's try-out period on AR6 was going. Staff Sergeant Wenckworth would be around for another month, so they were doubling up for a few trade missions to get a feel for if Mike would fit with the team and the missions. From the sounds of it, he was still struggling with the idea of having civilians on his team.

"He likes Kay," Nate said from where he was talking to Laura about the trebuchet project he was helping on. "It's hard to rebel against somebody whose only rule for letting you on the radio is 'don't be an idiot.'"

The second song started, and Laura inhaled her beer. Nate patted her on the back, first carefully, then more effectively.

"Is he trolling the scientists? He is trolling the scientists," she laughed, still coughing. "Pluto is a planet? Doctor McKay must be frothing at the mouth."

Several voices sang along with the song from the kitchen, and Brad grinned, leaving people to their conversations to check it out.

Tony's voice drifted out of the kitchen along with the singing, holding court on something to do with intergalactic imperialism. Apparently he'd met more than his match in Michèl Fournier, though they didn't actually seem to be disagreeing much. Brad had heard Michèl mention the expedition's Ethics Committee and thought Tony was probably headed for a recruitment similar to his own, but he wasn't going to warn the guy. It'd be good for Tony to have some people who could keep up and argue back.

Brad stuck his head around the door to find they'd dragged a table and chairs in there. Tony was at the stove stirring a big pan of something fragrant, shoulder to shoulder with Michèl, who was
looking through his spice cupboard and holding up open spice jars for Tony to smell. Brad was pretty sure Michèl had borrowed a 10-litre pan from the mess kitchen for the occasion.

Tim Bryan was at the table, pounding dough and interjecting the occasional comment about if the expedition was justified in interfering in the culture of other societies. There were two of the huge mushrooms that grew on Barliti in front of Christopher, who was cleaning and cutting, and Garza was chopping up a stack of vegetables with deep concentration. Lee was in the corner, whisking something in a bowl with a meditative sort of expression while she listened to the discussion and the radio.

He'd intended to be there when AR7 invaded Friday evening dinner, but Captain Holmbeck had thought that Friday at 1800 hours had been the right moment for his interview about gate warfare, and Brad had been happy enough to pin the man down at all. That's how it had happened that they were all already there when he arrived. He knew that almost everybody had at least interacted at some stage over the three months that had passed since Nate and the guys had arrived, but still, the guys in full force could be a little... overwhelming. Darren, Michèl and Laura could handle it, but he'd half wondered if Lee would get as clammed up around the guys as she used to be around him. He was glad to see her looking fairly at ease.

Oh shit homes, do you know that feeling when you need to sneeze but you can't? Ray's voice broke in as a song ended. He sounded a little nasal. Why doesn't that have a name? Hey I know, we're gonna call it blue sinus balls from now on. Right, I should probably stop talking now, so here's Bambee, for all of you who are secretly still a 13 year old girl

Brad snorted as the music started. "Is he wearing his radio? Can we call him to bitch about his music choice?"

"Hey man, get your viking ass over here and chop some of those vegetables," Tony spotted him.

"Do I look like a rabbit?"

"No, but you're gonna look like an idiot when your ass gets scurvy." Tony shot back, tasting something from a spoon and making a surprised little hum of pleasure.

"I'm not gonna get scurvy. Doc, you tell him."

"It's a possibility," Bryan said dryly, shaping the dough into balls.

"You hear that? Sit down and help out, dawg."

"I want a second opinion. Lee, am I gonna get scurvy?"

"Brad," she informed him seriously, "it is my considered medical opinion that you'll absolutely die of scurvy unless you sit down and chop some vegetables within the next five minutes."

The guys snorted.

"Ya got told, dawg."

"Way with the fuckin' bedside manner," he huffed, sitting down and picking up a knife. It wasn't like he hadn't been about to offer help, but this felt good, the banter. His two teams mixing. Like something slotting into place.

"I'm just concerned about your health," she said, eyes huge and wounded. It was that expression that never failed to twang his subconscious protective instincts even when he knew she was messing around. "Anyway, what am I, a nurse?" she waved her whisk dismissively. A blob of whatever it was in the bowl landed on Garza's face. "Oops. Sorry"

"s nice," Garza scraped it off his face and licked his finger.

"In the field you get your ass patched together. In the infirmary you get bedside manners," Bryan put the dough balls on a tray and put them into the oven. He shared a look with Lee, and Brad remembered Bryan dealing with a hundred ailments in his trademark brisk manner - if he'd been too nice about it, he would never have managed any sleep. In theatre, everybody wanted some personal attention to feel human, and the medic was the obvious place to get it.

Now he thought about it, he and every other Marine he knew instinctively understood that the seriousness of the situation was inversely proportional to the amount of shit you got from the doc. If he bitched you out, that pretty much meant it wasn't too bad. You didn't get worried until he went all comforting. He'd seen Lee do the same - she'd snapped at a sergeant with a twisted ankle
that he should sit down and stop bitching until she got to him, but on a recovery mission after a Wraith attack she'd sat with the panicked, crying suddenly-geriatric Marine, and had held his hand until he'd fallen into a sedative induced sleep.

They've brought the guy home to the infirmary, where he'd lived for another two days. Mostly he'd slept, with occasional moments of clarity in which he'd dictated letters to his family and awkwardly said goodbye to his platoon mates and friends. Brad still wasn't sure if it wasn't better to just be dead instantly.

"And if you set your pubes on fire because you're bored, you get a tube of salve and a 'get the fuck out of my sight'," Lee said, deadpan. Christopher made a little choking sound.

"Have you two been sharing stories?" Brad asked the two medics.

"That one is surprisingly universal," she said brightly. "Apparently bored Marines share some common harebrained trails of thought, because of the twelve field medics we have, only Doc Usipaaki hasn't encountered that one."

"Apparently Finnish Marines do different idiotic shit when they get bored," Bryan supplied. He held up a chocolate bar for Lee to see, and she nodded, so he broke it into pieces to melt it.

"Like seeing who can hold their extremities into snow or ice water the longest," Lee said dryly.

Brad wondered at 'extremities' instead of 'limbs' and--oh. Right.

The conversation turned to other insane things Marines did while bored, though of course they'd only ever heard of other Marines doing these things, they themselves were far too sensible. Or at least, too sensible to admit to doing crazy shit with two medics in the room.

Bryan had come over with the molten chocolate, evading Brad and Garza's attempts to swipe a finger through the bowl, and leaned in over Lee's shoulder to very slowly add it to whatever it was she was making. Brad watched him, still a little amazed at how being here had changed all of them. He'd always known Tim Bryan as a man with the inheld fury of somebody who wanted to believe in the good of humanity and hadn't quite resigned himself to being perpetually disappointed.

Lately he seemed to be smiling more, move looser, speak easier. It had to be that he was no longer surfing the tsunami of shit that Iraq had been from a corpsman's point of view. After spending four months travelling the galaxy with a field medic of his own, Brad had more appreciation for just how hard Iraq must have been for Bryan. Atlantis, with its shockingly competent command and missions where he was actually allowed to help people, had clearly done wonders for his morale. Brad thought that having been adopted by the field medics crew had also helped - Tim had been the first of the guys to make social connections outside of the team. It was still strange to think that Brad's LT was one of them.

So this one time way back, my band opened for Limp Bizkit. Man, we sucked. But then again, so did they. Only difference is that they became famous and I joined the Marines, then went to another galaxy to kick space vampire ass and make radio. I don't know about you, homes, but I think I got out ahead of the deal there. Oh hey, there's somebody standing on the other side of the radio booth!

There was a muffled sort of thumping sound, and Ray's laughter.

Man, you look a little irate. Was it something I said? What's that? Sorry, can't hear you, this place is soundproofed. Ohhh, let's do charades! Five words, first word is... hey, mouthing the word is cheating, man. Pluto? Pluto. Second word, small word.. two fingers.. is? Is. Pluto is... kill? slice neck? flatline? negative? Not? Pluto is NOT a planet? Ya know homes, I think that's pretty damn insensitive, that just because it's kinda small and doesn't get all dominant about its environment and shit, you call it a dwarf. Harsh, man. Plus, kinda politically insensitive. Can't we go with 'little planet' or something?

From the living room, the sound of Laura's hysterical laughter could be heard. The conversation in the kitchen had come to a halt, everybody listening in horrified fascination.

Oh, really, you insult my intelligence? Seriously, you just declared yourself smarter than a Marine corporal? Homes, they make us hand in our brain cells along with our taste buds before they'll even let us off the bus on the first day of bootcamp. There's yeast cultures in the homebrew lab smarter than me. Declaring yourself smarter than me isn't exactly a ringing endorsement of your own intelligence.
Brad snorted. Anybody willing to spend more than an hour with Ray Person - granted, when he wasn't hopped up on Ripped Fuel and adrenaline and 40 hours without sleep - knew that Ray was far from stupid. What almost nobody knew, because it was the kind of secret that Ray guarded with great care and tons of distracting bullshit, was that he had a full ride to Northwestern's engineering program waiting for him when he got out of the Marines.

What not even Ray knew, because Brad only knew because he'd happen to overhear in a conversation between his Captain and Major Lorne, was that Dr Zelenka had suggested Ray for an apprenticeship. Which might actually mean that Atlantis could be interested in having him back when he got that degree.

"Are you okay? You look a little red in the face. Anyway, that song was released in 1998... Seriously, should I ask for a medic to come down? Oh, you don't need a medic? Let me play you a nice soothing song then, here's -- oh, hello Colonel sir.

Everybody burst into laughter when Ray's voice lost its taunting tone at those last words, though there was still an undercurrent of glee, because there was nothing Ray liked as much as a reaction, and this was about as big a reaction as you could get.

"You've come to collect your friend? Wonderful, I was beginning to get a little concerned about him.

And then, because Ray absolutely did not know how to stop when he was ahead...

"Is there anything you'd like to say to our listeners?"

They heard the click of a door opening and the sudden low-level background sounds of Maker Street. There was an outraged huff which Brad assumed was Dr McKay realising he'd just been baited into playing charades for no reason, and then Colonel Sheppard's laconic drawl.

"Yeah, I think 'sinus blue balls' is a crap name, Person. I think we should go with 'snjet'."

Then, more faintly and moving away from the microphone:
"Come on Rodney, Ronon will have finished your plate if you don't get back soon."

They heard footsteps moving away, then the door again and apparently Ray was back in the booth.

"Homes, I've just been out-cooled by our pointy-haired Airforce Overlord. Let's listen to some music while I recover my ego, okay? I'm reliably informed that this one should be a crowd-pleaser, so here is Komputer with Valentina - dedicated to all the ladies out here, from Ray-Ray."

Brad was amused to see Lee recognise to the song and smile. Apparently Ray was right about the crowd pleasing part.

"Man, I'm not sure if I want to claim him as team or pretend I don't know who he is", Garza said finally.

"Do you remember the time he got half the platoon to act like lemmings and run off a cliff into the lake?"

"If you think that's weird, you obviously weren't there in Afghanistan when he convinced a whole bunch of people that standing outside in a sandstorm was good for your skin."

"I feel so normal now," Christopher laughed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Dawg, you travelled through a wormhole to another galaxy, you're on a floating city which is also a spaceship, and it talks to you. You ain't never gonna be normal."

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"Right homes, I gotta run now, or my teammates are gonna eat all the food and I'll be all sad and hungry and forced to beg for scraps or MREs and shit."

Brad picked up the last of the chairs and watched Mike and Garza angle a large table through the door of Michél's quarters. Laura and Christopher carried the other four chairs they'd borrowed from Dr Zelenka across the hall. The two teams together made for a full house, twelve people strong, but it was a good sort of busy. The tables were set at top speed, and then everybody milled around, impatiently commenting on Ray's closing of his radio show. It was 1955hrs, so he hadn't run late quite yet, but they'd been sitting in the mouthwatering scents of fresh bread and alien curry for long enough that there wasn't much patience.
I should be back next--oh, hello LT, wanna be on the radio?

Brad frowned and whipped his head around to see Nate standing on the balcony, hand pressed to his ear.

--let you know that we've just barely managed to wait with eating until now, so you should probably hurry.

Nate sounded amused, and Ray laughed.

Solid copy sir! All right, Ray Person's Space Radio signing off, have a good evening, don't do anything I wouldn't do, lah lah, blah blah, have some more David Bowie

Ray's already fast speaking pace sped up toward the end and it sounded like he was grabbing his stuff together. They could hear the sound of a headset getting thrown down and everybody laughed as 'Life on Mars' came on with an audible click.

Michèl and Tony brought in the food, and people settled around the tables. Brad was amused to see how they naturally found places according to volume and liveliness. Loud and animated on one end of the long table - Darren was telling Tony, Laura and Garza about the flying pigs-like animals AR4 had encountered on one of their last missions. They'd kept a chair free for Ray.

Calmer on the other end, with Mike talking to Michèl about being a civilian on a Gate team, and Christopher listening with interest. Next to Christopher, Bryan and Lee were discussing breakfall technique and the plan for her to give a few guest sessions at the start of BJJ class. Aikido was the only civilian-dominated martial art in the city, and with its non-competitive and sometimes theatrical style got little respect from Marines, but there was no denying it taught you really excellent ukemi. He'd seen her roll out of throws and falls that should have broken bones, and everybody could stand to learn a little more of that.

On Brad's other side was Nate, looking around the table with the sort of quiet contentment that he'd never thought to see from the man. Nate was at home here too, and Brad hadn't known how much he'd hoped for that until he saw it was true.

"Hey Brad," Nate said, noticing his look. He smiled. "Seen any penguins yet?"

Just then the door slid open to admit Ray, who looked like he'd been running full-tilt across the city.

"Have no fear! Ray-Ray is here!" he crowed, spotting the open chair and dropping down in it as Tony and Michèl sent the pan of alien curry and the bread basket around the table.

"No penguins," Brad said when he'd filled his plate and sniffed appreciatively. He looked around the table, at smiling faces and clattering of cutlery and Garza juggling a bread roll while chanting 'hot-hot-hot'. At some of the best people in this galaxy and the next. "But plenty of other good stuff."

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Oh gods, it's actually done now. This is so weird.

I'd like to thank, in no particular order, gelbes_gilatier, steelphoenix, Karen and green_grrl, who all made big contributions at various points by keeping me from spinning into my own circles. I don't think I could have made it to the end without you guys to help keep me on track.

My gratitude to all the wonderful reviewers, who kept me enthusiastic by telling me their ideas about what was happening and dug their fingernails into this universe together with me. Sharing something so directly with an audience is the best, best, best part of writing fanfiction. Every time I write original fiction I miss it like hell!

(Hey Hanseatic_Keks, bet you didn't think you'd get a novel when you tossed the idea of a SGA/GK crossover around :)
It's been great. Come talk to me on my tumblr!

Also, I sell timeshares on Atlantis. Please make your cheque out to...

End Notes

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