

Mathématique

cleanwhiteroom

Book Two

Chapter Thirty Four

The whirl of the small craft becomes a whine as the ash in the air thickens. He can feel the motor struggle with a valiance that seems out of place for an engine trapped beneath the ostentation of the goa'uld. The controls have become sluggish.

The forces of the Sixth House arrayed behind them begin to fire.

"Where's your tel'tak?" Kiva asks conversationally, as if she's merely curious, as if nothing crucial rides upon Young's answer.

"Nearby," he says, the word a calming pull.

Kiva smiles, but her eyes are haunted.

Young jerked awake to the sound of someone pounding on his door. He fought his way free of the remains of a distorted dream that he did his best not to hang onto for later recollection, but couldn't shake the remembered flake of ash against a reddish sky. When he had organized himself enough to make sense of the fact that he had fallen asleep on his couch, and it was now, evidently, Saturday morning, he sat up, wincing at the sharp pull of stiff muscles in his back.

He looked at his phone.

Yes, definitely Saturday.

And yes, definitely also seven hundred goddamned hours.

Given the time of day and the vigorousness of the knocking, he put the odds of his unknown early morning visitor at sixty percent on Rush, thirty percent on Vala, and ten percent on Mitchell. Young had it on good authority that Jackson was *not* a morning person, so that ruled him out.

He limped toward the door and opened it to reveal Rush. "I thought we were doing brunch," Young said. "It's—" his words and thoughts faded down abruptly into nothing. Rush looked awful. Nope. He'd looked 'awful' for something like the past two weeks. This was something else. His eyes were bloodshot, he was pale, and he was wearing the same thing he'd been wearing the previous day—jeans and a white dress shirt with the sleeves opened and pushed up past his elbows. None of these things were new; the man generally looked like a walking public service announcement about the dangers of sleep debt. He wasn't wearing any shoes. *That* was new. He also looked twitchy as hell, which, while not 'new' per se, was infrequent enough to be notable.

"This is a bad time," Rush said. "You were sleeping."

"Why don't you come in?" Young replied, trying to dispel the feeling of looking at a land mine that badly needed defusing.

"I don't need to come in," Rush said in a bizarrely instructional tone, "I need a piano."

He needed a *piano*? Last time Young had checked, the man had had an inexplicable but extremely strong hatred for music. Not just a particular kind of music, but music as like—a cultural practice. Or something.

"Come in," Young said, not giving Rush any openings to kidnap the trajectory of their conversation and run away with it before he had gotten the man out of the god damned hallway.

Rush stepped forward.

Young shut the door behind him. "You look like hell," he said.

"Do I?" Rush asked absently, his right hand hooked over his right shoulder as he squinted disapprovingly at Young's couch and the TV, which was still on and nearly inaudibly promoting some kind of fitness product.

"Yes," Young said emphatically.

"I'm fine," Rush replied, as if he expected Young to take him seriously. "I need a piano."

"Yeah," Young said, "I got that much." He tried to *will* himself into alertness, but it wasn't working. He tried to think of a way he could drink coffee without giving any of it to Rush, but that wasn't working either. "Hotshot," Young began.

Rush flipped a hand dismissively in Young's direction and crossed the room to close the slats of the venetian blinds. The lack of any kind of linguistic skewer-work set Young's nerves on edge. There was something atypical in the silent press of Rush's hand against the wall near the window.

"Why do you need a piano?" Young asked.

Rush didn't reply.

"*Why* do you need a *piano*?" Young repeated, slower and more pointedly.

"Not for my own amusement, I assure you," Rush replied.

Young found the faint streak of acidity in Rush's tone somewhat reassuring. "You need it for the cypher set?" he asked.

"Yes," Rush replied, his hand moving from his shoulder to his temple and then back again. "Obviously that's what I need it for. What other reason could there possibly be?"

Young crossed his arms, considering Rush, who was not looking at him, who didn't seem to be looking at much of anything, other than what was going on in his own head. "Shouldn't be a problem," Young said. "You want to make me breakfast, and we'll talk about it?"

"All right," Rush said, sounding defeated. He ran a hand through his hair and pushed away from the wall. "I'm in no particular hurry."

Young stared after him as he walked toward the kitchen. "Seriously?" was all he was able to come up with on short notice. "You're not in a *hurry*?" He limped after Rush one hand pressed to the pain in his back and hip as he crossed his mostly shadowed apartment to hover in the doorway to the kitchen. "Since when are you not in a hurry? You get annoyed waiting at red lights."

Rush pulled open the fridge.

"You get annoyed waiting for elevators."

Rush shut the fridge.

"You get annoyed waiting for things to bake."

Rush opened a cabinet.

"You get annoyed when people talk too slowly, which seems to be everyone, all the time."

Rush shut the cabinet.

Young stopped talking.

Rush said nothing. He braced both of his hands against Young's counter and leaned forward.

"Damn it, Rush," Young said quietly.

"Eight," Rush said.

Young said nothing.

"I have eight of them."

"Eight what?" Young whispered, but the words were only a hedge against what he already knew.

"You said not to disclose," Rush said, "and so I haven't. Not yet. Not until now. I'm disclosing now. I got one last week. One this week. One, Perry cracked after I rendered it appropriately for her. That's eight. That's eight, and I'm disclosing because I'm not certain about the ninth and you should have the eight. You should have them in

a form that will be useful to you because I've always separated the first eight from the last two. The ninth and the tenth."

"Okay," Young said.

"It would be irresponsible not to disclose at this juncture," Rush said, "and so I'm disclosing."

"Yup," Young said, "I get it."

For a moment they stood in silence and Rush drummed his fingers over Young's countertop with an unsettling deliberation.

"What makes the ninth different?" Young said.

"Many factors," Rush replied, his eyes fixed on Young's counter, or, maybe, on his own hands. "Many different factors." He pushed back and snapped himself out of his fascination with whatever it was he was fascinated with via a roll of his shoulders, but made no effort to start breakfast.

"Uh huh." Young looked away from him and from the kitchen, out into the room, past the slow slide of sunlight over hardwood floors and pale walls, past the parking lot and toward the mountains, visible in the distance from the one window that Rush had left unblinded.

He wished he were like Jackson.

He wished he were always clear of sight and mind. He wished could see things the way Jackson did; he wished he could identify what was necessary and *do* it, smoothing the hard edges of the swath he cut with the right choice of words, with books, and tea, and knowledge, and coffee, and sympathy, and so much understanding that even the *Ancients*, who would not interfere to save a *galaxy* from a fate of mindless, worshipful stagnation, could not bear to let him die.

He wished he were like Jackson, because then maybe he'd know what to do with his neighbor, who clearly, clearly did not like or belong in Colorado, who could not handle confinement to his apartment and to a subterranean base, who could not stop himself from pursuing a problem that tormented him, who couldn't control his status as an intellectual resource, and who could have *no* idea of the expectations and pressures pinned upon him by Unnamed Committee Number Four.

He looked back at Rush, who was staring into the air, as if he could read something there.

"How long has it been since you were out of this god damned building?" Young asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "How long since you've been anywhere but the base?"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," Rush said.

"I think you need a vacation day," Young said. That, or a tranquilizer, but he really could not picture such a suggestion going over very well, so he didn't make it.

"Is this ostensible concern for my sanity just a front for an abduction attempt?" Rush asked dryly, looking at him with a pained half smile.

"I'm liking the paranoia, hotshot," Young said, "but no. You need to get the hell out of your apartment. Make me a god damned impressive omelet or something while I shower and cut through some red tape, yeah?"

Rush nodded and turned to open the fridge.

Young pushed away from the doorframe and limped through the apartment in search of his phone, which had found its way mostly beneath his couch. He dropped gingerly to his left knee to retrieve it, and managed to make it back to upright again without breaking too much of a sweat.

The first call he placed was to SGC dispatch.

If he'd been lucky enough to get Harriman, Young might have been able to give himself clearance to pull Rush from his apartment for the day without any further difficulty. Unfortunately, he was not that lucky. He got someone he didn't know, and promptly got shut down. He couldn't really blame dispatch, as a day trip for someone who was an abduction risk was likely to be frowned upon by any junior officer with common sense.

There was really only one person with the clout to make a difference and the heart to give a shit.

Young flipped on his shower, shut the bathroom door behind him, and from the relative aural privacy granted by rushing water, called Jackson.

"What?" Jackson said, after the sixth ring. Or, at least that's what Young *thought* the word might have been. It was either 'what' or something in another language that sounded marginally like 'what'. He was still trying to decide when Jackson said indistinctly, "I *said* I'm *not* running a marathon with you, now *go away*."

"Jackson?" Young said, doing a quick visual inspection of his cell phone to be certain that he had, indeed, called the right person.

"Ugh," Jackson replied. "Why?"

"Daniel," Young snapped, "you okay?"

"No," Jackson slurred indistinctly. "Coffee."

"Daniel," Young said again, mostly reassured that Jackson was not in the middle of being abducted.

Mostly.

"What time is it?" Jackson said, his words sounding like words this time. "What's happening? Has the planet been invaded?"

"Um, no," Young said. "Not that I know of."

"Is there a *plague* of some kind?" Jackson slurred.

"Nope," Young said.

"Are space, time, and space-time all behaving normally?"

"As far as I can tell," Young said.

"Well then *why* would you *call me* at seven AM?"

You're—really not a morning person, are you," Young said. "Mitchell was *not* lying."

Mitchell had a habit of bitching good-naturedly about Jackson's eternal struggle to make it vertical and sentient by nine hundred hours.

"No. I have never made a secret out of this," Jackson said. "Everett?"

"Yeah," Young said. "Don't you have caller ID?"

"Some excitable Fields medalist shattered the faceplate of my phone. Makes it hard to read in the absence of glasses. And coffee. I can't read without coffee."

"Right," Young said.

"I thought you were Vala."

"Not Vala," Young said.

"Yeah," Jackson replied.

"Daniel," Young said, "I need a favor."

"And you definitely need it right now?" Jackson said indistinctly.

"Yeah," Young said. "I need to get my neighbor out of this god damned building for the day."

"Why?" Jackson asked.

"Because he's going a little stir crazy."

"He looks bad?" Jackson asked, sharpening up appreciably.

"He looks very bad," Young confirmed.

"Who's on dispatch today?" Jackson asked.

"Not Harriman," Young said.

"Okay," Jackson said, "let me call Jack, have him call it in."

"Thanks," Young said.

"No problem," Jackson said.

"Sorry I woke you," Young said.

"No," Jackson said, yawning, "don't be. Sleep is for the boring."

"Whatever, Jackson."

"Daniel."

"Whatever, Daniel."

"If dispatch hasn't called in an hour, call me back."

"Yup," Young said.

"Let me know how it goes," Jackson said.

"Yup," Young said, "talk to you soon."

Young stripped off his pajamas and stepped into the shower, his eyes avoiding his mirror. As he ran shampoo through his hair, he tried to think through a workable game plan. He was under no illusions that getting Rush out of his apartment for the day was going to solve anything in the long term. The guy was in a shitty position and stuck that way for the foreseeable future, unless the LA managed to gate themselves to the nine chevron address with that missing astrophysicist and get everything they wanted, which seemed unlikely, as their main strategy seemed to be stealing the expertise that they needed.

Young sighed.

Getting Rush out of his apartment for the day might solve the short-term problem of preventing whatever was currently bothering the man from stepping up its game. That seemed the best he was going to be able to do, for now.

He finished his shower, found himself a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and returned to his kitchen, which smelled torturously of Jackson's fancy coffee.

Rush was chopping green stems with a graceful precision that did not match his haunted expression.

Young watched him, struggling with an acute spike of sympathy.

Rush looked over at him at raised his eyebrows with only a fraction of his usual hauteur.

"I have chives?" Young asked, indicating the green stems with his eyes.

"You can identify chives?" Rush replied. "I'm astonished."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't buy those."

"Vala bought them," Rush replied.

"Do you guys coordinate this shopping thing? Because I definitely don't recall requesting chives."

"We do not 'coordinate'," Rush said, with a crisp slide of the knife. "Vala enjoys shopping and has admirable and evolving tastes."

"I'm really not sure how I ended up being a guy who just has chives hanging around," Young said, limping past Rush to boost himself onto his counter.

"You really can take no credit for that at all," Rush agreed, dumping the chives into a bowl full of beaten eggs before giving it a halfhearted stir.

"How does Vala even know about chives?" Young asked.

"The same way she knows about internal combustion engines, 'halter tops', mathematical notation, romance novels, the rules of chess, and the Gobi desert," Rush said, turning on the stove.

"Cosmo," Young said.

"Yes, I hear they just ran a feature on internal combustion," Rush said.

"There's no way that's true, hotshot. Unless—wait. Was that an off-color remark?" Young asked, wishing he'd had the foresight to obtain coffee before his ascent to the countertop.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you mean," Rush replied, flicking the pan with water and sipping his coffee as he stared at the drop, skittering on the heated surface.

"I'm onto you," Young said, trying not to look longingly at Rush's coffee. "I just want you to know that."

"Yes yes," Rush said, glancing at him. The other man put his coffee cup down grabbed a second mug, filled it with coffee, and passed it to Young.

Young pulled it carefully out of his grip. "Thanks," he said.

Rush poured half the egg mixture into the heated pan, shook it a few times, and then added grated cheese and mushroom, before shaking it some more and then flipping the entire thing onto a plate after something like forty-five seconds.

"Nice technique," Young said, as Rush handed him a flawlessly constructed omelette.

"As if you would have any idea," Rush replied, turning back to the other half of the egg mixture.

"Hey," Young said defensively. "I've been watching the food network."

"Why?" Rush asked him.

"Context," Young said.

"Context," Rush repeated.

"That and curiosity," Young said. "And insomnia," he added. "Anyway, you're pretty good. You could probably get a show. Cooking with an arrogant asshole."

Rush raised his eyebrows, shooting Young a disdainful look as he flipped his own omelette onto a plate and snapped off the stove.

"What?" Young said. "I'd watch it." He opened a drawer next to his position on the counter, pulled out a fork, and handed it to Rush.

Rush began eating his omelette with less than his characteristic voraciousness.

"Is anything *bothering* you, hotshot?" Young asked, taking a bite of his eggs, which were, as usual, spectacular. "Anything in particular?"

"No," Rush said, looking away, toward the sunlight that edged its way along the floor in the next room.

"You want to tell me about this piano thing?"

"I need one," Rush said. "That's all."

"Pianos don't really seem to go with cyphers," Young said, finally figuring out a way to skirt Rush's self-proclaimed loathing of music.

"It's tonal," Rush said, putting down his fork. "It's a tonal cypher."

Young took another bite of eggs. A tonal cypher would maybe go a long way toward explaining why Rush looked like he'd been hit by a truck. "Got it," he said. "When are you going to want access to this piano?"

"Not today," Rush said, still not looking at him, "but soon."

"And once you have the piano, how long do you think it might take?" Young asked carefully.

"I have no idea. I might solve it in a day," Rush said. "I might never solve it."

They were quiet for a moment while Young watched Rush watch his eggs.

He finished his omelette.

"Pretty sure you're gonna solve it, hotshot," Young said.

"Yes well, I'm certain it appears that way to *you*," Rush replied, still looking at his half-consumed omelette. "And don't fucking call me 'hotshot'."

"What's wrong with 'hotshot'?" Young asked.

"It's *clearly* ironic," Rush said, taking a bite of his eggs.

"It's not," Young said. It was, a little bit. "It's *definitely* not," Young continued. "I have it on good authority that you're the most hotshot of all math hotshots."

"Was that a sentence?" Rush asked. "It didn't sound like one."

"Go take a nap," Young shot back.

"Go find a crutch," Rush said, spearing another forkful of eggs.

Young rolled his eyes. "There's no way to win with you, is there?" he asked.

Rush looked away abruptly, his eyes directed at the open kitchen door. "No," he said. "I suppose there's not."

Young's phone split the ensuing stillness with mechanized series of tones that made Rush visibly wince.

He silenced it first, glanced at the caller ID, then answered it.

"This is Young," he said.

"Colonel, this is Airman Dunning from weekend dispatch coverage," came a voice from the other end of the line. Young didn't recognize the name, but rotations through weekend dispatch were common enough for the newly recruited.

"Go ahead," Young said.

"We just received word from General O'Neill that you're clear to proceed with your request, pending check-in by cell phone every two hours."

"Understood," Young said.

"The security station in the basement of your building has already been notified of your plans."

"Thanks," Young said.

"You're welcome sir," Dunning said. "Have a nice day."

Young ended the call.

"Go get your shoes and my shades, hotshot. We're getting out of here."

Rush looked down with narrowed eyes, as if he found it necessary to visually confirm his lack of footwear. "Hmm," he said disapprovingly, though whether he'd meant to direct the disapproval in Young's direction or his own was unclear. He finished the remains of his omelette.

"Daylight's burning," Young said.

"I don't find that particularly perturbing," Rush said, looking listless and exhausted. "I despise daylight."

"Shoes and shades," Young said, pointing toward the doorway.

They sat together on the hood of Young's car in the middle of Pike National Forest, at the same unnamed scenic overlook where Young had dressed Vala's shoulder injury weeks before. Sunlight filtered irregularly through branches, but the spot was mostly shaded from the bright light of early morning. Ahead of them, partially obscured by trees, a wooded valley opened. The whisper of a small river, invisible under the cover of the pines, was barely audible over the flow of the breeze through dry needles.

Rush looked miserable.

Young sipped the coke he had picked up at the service station several miles back and watched Rush studiously ignore his iced coffee.

He tried to think of something to say.

Is your wife dead?

That one was probably a no go.

What's your story, hotshot?

He'd tried about ninety variants of that one by this point, with no luck.

Are these cyphers driving you out of your head?

There was way too much room for a scathing comeback on that one.

"Well this is just perfect," Rush said, abrupt and exasperated. "Stop spending so much time with *Jackson*."

"You realize that made no sense, right?" Young asked. "Tell me you realize that."

Rush smiled faintly and sipped his coffee. "What I realize," he said, his eyes invisible behind his shades, "is that this is fair fucking Jacksonesque. Driving me to a mountain and then sitting in silence. It's probably straight out of the spiritual traditions of dozens of dead, space-faring civilizations."

"Jacksonesque?" Young repeated. "He's going to love that one so much."

"I forbid you to tell him I said it."

"I don't have to. I'll just tell Vala. She'll iron it onto a t-shirt."

Rush sighed.

"Besides. You already live in a mountainous region. I would think you'd have to change biomes or something to get a legit spiritual effect. We'd have to go to the salt flats. Or the Pacific. Maybe a prairie."

Rush said nothing.

"But ah," Young said finally. "Look. I didn't bring you out here for any reason other than it seemed like you were getting some cabin fever in your apartment, which is totally understandable, by the way."

"Is it," Rush said, in a way that didn't sound at all like a question.

"Yeah," Young said, "it is."

Rush hooked a hand over his shoulder, digging his fingers into the base of his neck.

A breeze rustled through the pines.

"It seems like maybe it's been harder for you than usual," Young said. "Lately."

Rush shrugged and took a sip of his iced coffee. "I was able to look at the way they were encoded," the mathematician said, "and get a sense of what they were. Of what they were likely to be."

Young rubbed his jaw. "The different cyphers, you mean?"

"Yes." Rush tipped his head back briefly, but did not cease the grind of his fingers against the base of his neck. "And if it were you, what would you do in such a scenario?"

"I'd go for the easier ones first, I guess," Young said.

"Yes. Of course you would. Anyone would."

"But hotshot," Young said. "If you've really got eight of nine, then—even the ones you left until the end—they couldn't have been that much more difficult for you."

Rush said nothing, but he smiled, a quick and humorless flash of teeth that was hard to look at.

Young decided that his previous statement might have been a logical fallacy of some kind and decided to backtrack and regroup. "So you looked at them," Young said, "got a sense of what they were, and you picked an order to tackle them in based on how easy you thought they'd be."

"No," Rush said. "I didn't do it like that."

"But you just said—"

"You *assumed*," Rush replied, like he was teaching an undergrad the finer points of whatever it was he'd taught undergrads, "that I approached it as you outlined. But I didn't. I did not first *parse* them and only *then* solve them all. It was a continuous process."

"Okay," Young said, not really sure how any of this related to whatever the hell was bothering Rush so much. "So this one. The ninth one—when did you realize it was going to be musical?"

"Early," Rush said, with a skewered, skewering sort of smile that made Young feel like he'd finally begun to beat around the right bush.

"When?" Young asked.

"A few days before you met me."

"But you put it at the end of the line," Young said.

"I did," Rush replied. "I queued it even behind the cyphers I hadn't identified, that I had no idea how to solve. I put it behind the quantum cypher, which was going to require a trip offworld. I—" he broke off, looking away into the deeper shade.

"It's because it's tonal," Young said. "Isn't it. That's why you're having such a shitty time."

"Yes," Rush said.

"Give it to someone else," Young shot back, surprised by the edge in his own voice. "Leave it. Give it to Carter. Give it to McKay. Give it to Perry. Give it to whomever."

Rush shook his head once. "I can do it," he said. "It should be me. I'll be faster. And there's one more. There's a tenth. There *must* be a tenth hidden in there, somewhere. I'd like to crack the entire thing. If I can."

Young looked away and took a sip of his coke. "Why do you hate music so much?" he asked finally.

"Because," Rush said, "I miss it."

"You *miss* it?" Young echoed carefully.

"Yes," Rush said, his hand abruptly dropping away from his shoulders as he shook his hair back.

Young said nothing.

Rush said nothing.

Young looked away, out into the valley that opened beneath the overlook point.

"My wife," Rush said finally, "was a violinist."

"Ah," Young said.

"She's dead," Rush said, the words as merciless as anything Young had ever heard. "She died in April."

It was August.

"I'm sorry," Young said.

Rush sipped his coffee, his eyes invisible behind Young's shades.

Young looked at Rush and then away, and then back, unsure where to direct his gaze or what to do with his hands. It wasn't that he hadn't expected this, because he had. He had suspected almost immediately, and he'd been certain for weeks now, that Rush's wife was dead.

"How did it happen?" Young asked.

"Cancer."

Young nodded, then shifted his weight to ease the pain in his back, resting one hand on the warm black paint on the hood of the car. He had brought Rush here with the intent of getting the man out of his too-confined apartment, out of his self-constructed

cage of math, out of his own head, which seemed like it was a god damn terrifying place. And he had done that. But there was nothing else that Young could do, and nothing here that he could fix. He knew that.

He'd probably always known it, but that didn't make it any easier to sit here on the cooling engine of his Charger, doing nothing. It didn't make it any easier to watch Rush work himself into the ground or out of his mind because he didn't know how to cope with his current situation. This was just another shit day in a long line of shit days. For both of them.

Jackson, maybe, could turn a bad run like this around. Jackson would have been able to turn grief and loss and entrapment into something profound. Into something meaningful. Jackson would be able to sit here and say the right thing at the right time. He'd have the right object in his hands at the moment it was needed.

But Young wasn't Jackson.

And neither was Rush.

"What was her name?" Young asked.

Rush didn't speak for a pained, silent interval, his breathing irregular and audible over the quiet hiss of air through pine needles.

"Gloria," he said finally.

"That's a nice name," Young said.

"I know," Rush replied.

Tradition

Teal'c stands in the center of Dr. Lam's sunlit kitchen, occupying the entire surface area of the perfectly square counter space that Colonel Carter referred to as an 'island.' He examines the nutrition information on the containers arrayed in front of him.

Dr. Lam can eat only a limited amount of salt. That restriction makes chel'mek preparation difficult. Teal'c imagines it also makes Dr. Lam's life difficult. Difficult by Tau'ri standards. On Chulak, she would not have survived such an injury.

Every available surface in Dr. Lam's kitchen is covered with the uncontained and expanding spread of salad, fruit in various stages of peeling and dicing, and the ingredients required for Colonel Carter's famed, or perhaps notorious, cookies. SG-1 creates and navigates this sprawling culinary chaos in a way that reminds Teal'c of battles he formerly orchestrated on behalf of Apophis.

Apophis the false god.

Apophis the dead false god.

He finds the analogy between meal preparation and combat to be both ludicrous and satisfying. The Tau'ri are a strange people. They bring violence into their domesticity and domesticity into their violence.

Daniel Jackson is not in the kitchen. He is in the next room, talking with Dr. Lam. This too, is a thing Teal'c recognizes.

"Muscles," Vala says, stepping into his personal space with a bright familiarity that even his lovers have never adopted, "I've allotted you one hundred milligrams of sodium for the chel'mek."

Teal'c looks at her, his eyebrows raised. Vala is holding black clipboard that reads 'classified' on the back in white block letters. Teal'c hasn't seen a clipboard matching that description at the SGC since late 1999. He peers at the paper she is consulting and finds small tables of neatly scripted columns of numbers, written in accordance with Tau'ri conventions.

"If it does not contain Doritos," Teal'c says, "then it is not chel'mek."

"I still feel so betrayed by this whole chel'mek thing," Mitchell comments, eyeing the slowly assembling salad with evident uncertainty.

Teal'c misses O'Neill.

"Will you get out there?" Carter whispers, in the midst of stirring cookies that Teal'c does not think will meet an auspicious end, if past experience is a reliable indicator, "before we all come down with some kind of memory-obliterating virus and Daniel and Lam decide that they're married, and then you're inexplicably cut out of Dr. Lam's dating pool *forever* because of *awkwardness*?"

"*That's* oddly specific," Vala says, tilting her head.

"Oh," Mitchell says, closing his eyes, "wait—don't tell me, I know this one."

Teal'c raises an eyebrow.

"P2Q-463," Mitchell says, eyes still shut. "Um, Vyus. Ke'ra. Destroyer of Worlds, mashed up with—"

"Mashed up with nothing. Remixed with my life," Carter finishes. "Now go."

"That actually happened?" Vala asks.

"Yes," Teal'c says.

"No," Carter says.

"Well you can't just leave it *there*, muscles."

"I believe I can," Teal'c replies.

He does not wish to think of Linea, Destroyer of worlds, but even less does he want to think of Ke'ra.

Ke'ra, whose hair was long and curled and golden, whose mind had been drape of clean linen over the evil of her past. Ke'ra, whom Daniel Jackson had saved from the destruction she deserved because he could not save his wife.

Even now, six years later, worlds away, in the sun-filled kitchen of a Tau'ri woman of uncommon honor, Teal'c cannot banish the face of Sha're from his mind.

He begins, with careful precision, to slice through cilantro, allowing the fresh smell of the herb to remind him of ro'tal, and the way the vine would curl around the roots of the great trees on Chulak.

"Go," Carter says to Mitchell, with only a hint of the irritation that Teal'c can see in the set of her shoulders. "Tell Daniel that I need him, and don't come back to this kitchen until we call you."

"Touchy," Vala whispers, almost inaudibly to Teal'c.

"But—" Mitchell begins, "as I think I explained—"

"Colonel Carter becomes significantly stressed when required to bake, especially in an unfamiliar environment," Teal'c murmurs to Vala. He says this not because it is true, but because he guards Colonel Carter's heart like he would guard his own. Her distress comes from memories of Dr. Janet Frasier, and the meals cooked in *her* home, not so very long ago.

"Man up already," Carter says, "and go offer Lam the strawberries."

"Beautiful," Vala begins, "I can take over the dessert preparation if—"

Teal'c reaches out, placing a hand on Vala's shoulder as Carter shoves a bowl of strawberries at Mitchell.

Vala stops speaking.

Teal'c watches Vala watching Colonel Carter, who stands with her hands clutching a mixing bowl, stirring in a way that must be painful, given her recent injuries. Her face is, briefly, turned away from them.

"Sam?" Mitchell says.

Carter looks back and smiles at him, but she can't hold the expression.

Teal'c knows that she's always been able to lock down every part of herself, except for her grief.

"Sam," Mitchell says, again.

Mitchell is not unintelligent.

Neither is Vala Mal Doran.

None of them are.

That is part of what makes this so difficult.

What has always made it difficult.

"What *you* need," Vala says, abandoning her clipboard to take Mitchell's strawberries, "is a wing-woman."

"No," Mitchell replies, "no, I don't think I need that."

But Vala's arm has already threaded its way through Mitchell's and they are halfway to the door.

"Vala's great," Colonel Carter says, when they are alone. She looks down at the bowl in her hands, her voice thick. "Don't you think? She's really great. Not sure how effective a wing-woman she's going to make, but—" she trails off.

Teal'c inclines his head.

Carter stares down at her unmade cookies.

"You are thinking of Janet Frasier," Teal'c says.

"Oh," Carter whispers, smiling and lifting her shoulders as if she is not crying, "I'm thinking of everyone."

Their gazes shift in synchrony.

Daniel Jackson stands in front of the closed kitchen door as though he has walked through it. He is watching them, his eyes the color of long frozen ice, deep in the glacial crevasses of Chulak. There is awareness in his gaze, in his stance, in the lines of his shoulders and his arms, which are wrapped around his chest. Carter cannot bear to look at him, and she turns away from both of them.

"We shouldn't have let Mitchell talk us into this," Daniel Jackson says into the quiet air.

As Teal'c looks at Carter, he agrees.

"But he didn't know," Carter whispers. "He didn't know that we did it for Janet."

Daniel Jackson says nothing.

His silence pulls on the space between the three of them, like a thing formidable, like the hook and the staff, like the Glacier of Whispers, where Jaffa speak to themselves or risk madness in the quiet, endless air.

Carter bows her head, one hand pressed to her mouth.

"We honor her memory in doing this," Teal'c says.

They both look at him.

"Yes," Daniel Jackson agrees, his gaze shifting back to Carter, "but that does not make it easier."

"Since when is any of this easy?" the colonel whispers, with an uncertain flash of teeth.

Daniel Jackson cocks his head sideways and smiles back at her, rueful and small.

Teal'c watches him use nothing more than silent acknowledgement to soothe the raw edges of Colonel Carter's grief.

He wishes that he could learn this skill.

But that is not his role.

That is not his place.

He is bloodkin to all Jaffa.

He is a warrior leader of a warrior people.

He is a destroyer of false gods.

But life is full of grief, and he is not certain that Daniel Jackson will always be present to level the ridges of their sorrow. Teal'c remembers a time when he was not, when O'Neill had sat behind the copilot's seat in a tel'tak and had said, his voice raw and his eyes empty, "I don't think Carter's taking this well," and Teal'c had not even been able to force a syllable of agreement from his sealed throat.

Teal'c steps forward and gently pulls the bowl out of Carter's hands.

She lets him take it. She nods at Daniel Jackson when he gently touches her shoulder. Teal'c thinks he would embrace her if her chest were not held together by steel wire and slowly healing bone.

"Now that we've dispatched the newbies to the living room where they *belong*," Daniel Jackson says, banishing his own silence, "it's time to make this thing come together."

"There is, indeed, ish to be accomplished," Teal'c says.

"Did you just say 'ish'?" Carter asks, her voice still unsteady as she pulls two sheet metal pans out of a bag on the floor.

"Is this not an appropriate term to refer to articles or tasks of indeterminate kind?" Teal'c asks, putting most of his strength behind his attempt to stir the thick, glue-like batter that will eventually become cookies.

That *may* eventually become cookies.

"Um, kind of," Jackson says, adding various items to the half assembled salad before beginning to slice carrots. "Mitchell has some strange verbal quirks."

Teal'c gives the cookie batter a particularly forceful turn and snaps the handle of the wooden spoon he is using.

"Oh gosh," Colonel Carter says, looking at him.

Daniel Jackson looks away, most assuredly trying not to smile and most assuredly failing.

"This spoon is defective," Teal'c says.

"Well yeah, *now* it is," Carter says, looking in dismay at the batter. "These are going to be terrible."

"You have many skills," Teal'c says. He does not add that baking is not one of those skills.

"Thanks, Teal'c," Carter says, looking despondently at the glue-like batter.

"Hang on," Daniel says. "I can fix this."

"Can you?" Carter asks. "Since when?"

"Well, okay, I can't fix it, but I can facilitate the fixing." Daniel Jackson pulls out his phone, managing to navigate a shattered touchscreen with remarkable speed and surety.

"Seriously, you're calling someone about cookies?" Carter asks. "Who *are* you?"

"A peaceful explorer," Jackson replies, his phone pressed to his ear.

Teal'c attempts to use the broken handle of the spoon to extricate the lower portion of it, which is mired in the batter.

"I think it needs water?" Carter suggests.

Jackson sighs and then speaks into what is apparently, someone's voicemail. "Hey Nick, it's Daniel. I'm calling with a somewhat urgent culinary question, specifically about cookies that are headed down a dangerous and ruinous path. Your neighbor says you're good with this kind of thing. Call me back."

"You did not just call a *Fields medalist* about my cookies, did you?" Carter asks, as Jackson ends the call. "Please tell me you didn't just do that. Tell me it's some other 'Nick', and definitely not Nicholas Rush."

"What?" Jackson says. "You'd have won about five Nobel prizes at this point if they'd ever let you publish anything. He should be *honored* to help out with your cookies."

"Having met him," Teal'c offers, "I'm not certain that this will be the case."

"Yeah. I said he *should* be honored. He'll probably just be annoyed."

"Daniel!" Colonel Carter snaps. "I want to meet this guy. I want to meet him and talk about computational complexity theory. Not cookies. Am I a baker? No. I'm a physicist. I don't want him to—"

Daniel Jackson's phone rings. "Oh perfect," he says, with evident satisfaction.

"Daniel," Carter hisses.

"Hey," Jackson says. "Hey Nick, how's it going?"

Teal'c looks at Carter, who looks anxious and hopeful and mortified all at the same time.

Teal'c looks at Jackson, who looks amused.

"Yeah," Jackson says. "Teal'c and I are ruining some cookies and we need your advice."

The relief on Colonel Carter's face is both endearing and perplexing, given her intergalactic status as the most preeminent Tau'ri scientist-warrior. Teal'c finds it strange that she might, in any way, care what a consultant might think, even if the man does have an intellectual medal, and a set of Ancient genes, a bladed intellect, and a set of eight solved cyphers. Well, Teal'c finds it *mostly* perplexing. There are many details of Tau'ri intellectual life with which he has not bothered to acquaint himself.

"Yeah, well, the batter is really thick," Jackson says, watching Teal'c continue his attempt to extricate the remains of the wooden spoon from the unyielding block of dough it is encased in. "Less like 'batter', more like cement."

Carter begins to toss the completed salad as she watches Teal'c's progress.

"No," Jackson says, "when I say 'cement,' I mean cement. We snapped a wooden spoon trying to stir it."

Finally Teal'c emerges, victorious, with the lost portion of the spoon.

"You want a evidence?" Jackson asks. "I'll send you a picture."

Vala reenters the kitchen in a satisfied sweep of door and hair.

"How's it going?" Carter whispers, looking in the direction of the dining room.

Vala winks at her, and flashes an 'okay' sign.

"He says 'add water and maybe add oil?'" Daniel Jackson says. "And maybe also refrigerate?"

Teal'c looks dubiously between the bowl he is holding and the kitchen sink.

"I already said that," the colonel says, mildly offended. "Well, part of it. But you can't just add water indiscriminately, you have to—"

"But how *much* water?" Jackson asks into the phone.

Vala walks past Teal'c, managing to divest him of the bowl on her way to the sink. He makes no particular effort to hang onto it. The only reason he was in possession of it at all is that he did not wish to see Colonel Carter further injure herself so soon after her surgery.

Daniel Jackson is, perhaps, too distracted by Vala's appropriation of the batter to prevent her from pulling his phone straight out of his hand.

"Hello, gorgeous," Vala says, turning on the water with an elbow as she pins Daniel Jackson's phone between her ear and shoulder. "How are you today?"

"What just happened there?" Daniel Jackson asks. "I was—did she—how did she know —"

Vala Mal Doran.

Teal'c thinks she will be an excellent addition to SG-1.

"Why thank you, gorgeous, I think so too," Vala says, setting the bowl aside as she washes her hands. "I wanted to buy ramps—those are extremely popular with conscientious hipster foodies these days, but unfortunately this is not the season for locally grown ramps. I'm not even sure if ramps grow in Colorado Springs. Do you know?"

"I don't understand my life," Jackson says, looking at Vala, who is now digging both hands into the cookie batter, seamlessly incorporating a minimal amount of water and oil as her gaze casts over the disarrayed contents of the kitchen.

"I don't understand your life either," Colonel Carter whispers. "I've never understood your life."

"You should make more of an effort to blend in with the locals," Vala says, adding slightly more oil to the batter. "You know what I mean. Less math, more drinking. Less sarcasm, more do-gooding. Fewer dress shirts, more firearms."

"Less math?" Colonel Carter says in an affronted whisper.

"More *firearms*?" Daniel Jackson echoes soundlessly.

Teal'c decides that rather than stay here, staring at Vala as she rescues the cookies and repeating her mostly facetious phrasing, he will transfer the completed salad to the dining room.

He exits the kitchen carrying the salad bowl and finds Dr. Lam and Colonel Mitchell seated at the table.

"—the mutation rate of the Origin virus was unbelievably high," Lam is saying, "and we tracked that down to a high degree of promiscuity in the viral reverse polymerase."

"Oh," Mitchell says, sounding impressed and confused.

"That property turned out to be temperature dependent," Lam continues, "and so I'm wondering if we could significantly slow down the rate of mutation by keeping victims in a cold environment. That creates its own problems though, and it's clearly not a population-level solution. Bottom line, colonel, if the Ori turn their viral plague in our direction again, I'm not sure that the outcome would be any better than last time."

"Do you think that there might be any connection between the plague engineered by the Ori and the plague that wiped out the Ancients?" Mitchell asks.

Teal'c, half turned in the direction of kitchen, stops.

He turns back.

Mitchell meets Teal'c's eyes and shrugs.

"Maybe," Dr. Lam says. "What makes you think there might be?"

"They were one people," Mitchell replies looking back at her, "before they went their separate ways."

"I'll run a phylogenetic analysis on every sequence we have of both viruses," Lam says. "There's no point in speculating until then. But—it's a good thought."

Privately, Teal'c agrees. Mitchell nods shortly and looks up at Teal'c. "Where's this chel'mek business? You need help?"

"No," Teal'c says. "You have been barred from the kitchen."

"Harsh," Dr. Lam says, smiling at both of them. "You guys don't mess around."

"Some would say that's all we do," Mitchell says ruefully, his eyes moving involuntarily to the closed kitchen door, behind which the rest of the team are finishing the meal preparations.

"They'd be wrong," Dr. Lam says, short and final.

Teal'c has liked nearly every Tau'ri physician he has ever encountered.

Dr. Lam is no exception.

On Chulak, there were few healers, unless one counted the symbiote that every Jaffa was forced to carry. Those healers that there were primarily served as lesser priests, praying or pleading for intercession to whatever false god had branded them and claimed them as its own.

He had posed the question often to himself—if he were born of the Tau'ri and not the Jaffa, if he had never heard of Apophis or Ra or Amaunet—what would he have chosen for himself, before time and training had made him into a warrior? Perhaps he would

have been a physicist, like Colonel Carter, or a scholar, like Daniel Jackson. Perhaps he would have designed structures that dwarfed the primitive blockishness of go'uld temples, not in size, but in intricacy, that soared through space with minimal bounding and limited ties to the earth. Or, perhaps, he would have walked the path that Dr. Lam and Dr. Frasier chose—to fight and oppose death in a literal way. Moment by moment. Action by action. But this is not his road. He acts as physician to the fractured and besieged Jaffa nation. He fights for its life on an abstracted scale.

"The chel'mek is ready," Carter says, bursting through the kitchen door, a bowl in her hands.

Teal'c frowns, looking at it critically. He can see that someone has done a passable job piling the cilantro into a depressed region in the center of the dip. A dusting of pulverized Doritos around the margins of the bowl creates a pattern that seems to be reminiscent of flames.

He finds this acceptable.

"Daniel finished it," Colonel Carter says, in a way that is either apologetic or trying to shift blame. "One hundred milligram sodium chel'mek," she says, placing it in front of Lam.

"Wow," Lam says, looking suitably impressed. "This is a Jaffa—dip?"

"It is somewhat similar in flavor to a cream-based dish common on Chulak, usually eaten with seed bread around harvest time," Teal'c replies. "I have found it to be a good accompaniment to chips or vegetables."

"Yeah," Mitchell says, swiping a carrot through the artistically arranged pattern. "It's freaking delicious fake Jaffa dip is what it is."

Teal'c raises an unimpressed eyebrow before returning to the kitchen to retrieve plates. Upon swinging the door open, he stops.

Vala is standing at the counter in front of the window, a dark profile against the light of the afternoon. One hand holds her phone, the other a spoon that she is using to portion now cooperative batter onto a baking sheet. She is looking through the glass at green lawn and blue sky, speaking about something that seems to be related to mathematics.

Daniel Jackson is looking at her.

Daniel Jackson is looking at her with an expression that Teal'c recognizes. His eyes are hard and unmasked, alight with the savage compassion that has been at his core

always and that has come to prominence since his death and his ascension. Teal'c imagines it to be a difficult thing—to be the beloved of a man who has spent his life challenging every god he meets.

Perhaps Vala will not choose that road.

Perhaps if she chooses it, she will survive it.

Daniel Jackson looks over at him and smiles, diminishing again to a human of the Tau'ri—to Teal'c's friend who talks too much and who has an inappropriate love for coffee, who is there for Colonel Carter when she needs him, who speaks in support of offworlders who wish to join the ranks of the SGC, and who unceasingly baits Colonel Mitchell because he misses O'Neill just as much as Teal'c does.

Teal'c smiles back and inclines his head.

But he does not forget.

Not any of it.

Chapter Thirty Six

He was ignoring a chord progression. A swath of sunlight cut across the dimness of the deserted Irish pub, illuminating the dust in the air and the ridges in the wood grained floor. He had seen better pianos than the one at which he sat. He had played better pianos. He had *owned* better pianos. He could hear his own breathing, clipped in the quiet air. He was ignoring a chord progression. He was alone.

"Are you okay, hotshot?" Young asked him.

He was alone, except for Young. The piano was upright and old. This not a selling point when it came to pianos. Nevertheless, he had been assured that it had been recently tuned. He hadn't verified that assertion, because to do so would require touching it. He hadn't touched it. He didn't want to touch it. It stretched before and beneath him in a menacing expanse of stained spruce and lacquered basswood.

"Yes," he replied. "I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be fine?"

"Well, I just ask because you look like shit."

"You tell me that at least once a day," Rush said.

He did not look at Young, because he was busy. He was ignoring a chord progression. He stared at the keys, trying to touch them and not touch them at the same time.

"Hotshot," Young said, the word meaningless but for its ring of warning.

He did not answer, because he was keeping his hands subordinate to his mind. And, he was ignoring a chord progression. Until he was ready to stop ignoring it. That was what he was doing.

"We can leave," Young said. "We can leave and come back later. Or never."

"I'm fine."

He glanced at Young, who stood as implacable as the floor-to ceiling beam he leaned against.

"We've been here for an hour," Young said, slowly. Slowly.

"Do you not have projects to run, budgets to fuck up, strategies to devise, and people to kill?" Rush said, a peripheral snapping.

Young didn't move. "People to kill? I'm all caught up."

Rush looked back at the piano. It fanned out predictably, the same way every time. There was a series of events that should be undertaken. In an order. An order that he'd determined. That he'd determined nights ago. Two nights ago. Three nights ago. Nights ago.

"You're—just going to let that one slide?"

The things that he does—they will be sequential, they will be in a series, that is what will *make them* a series; at the end he will have a summation that is a logical progression and converges on a value or a concept, like infinity or zero or a rational or irrational number. The limit of the summation would be the platform from which he would crack the ninth cypher. Or from which it would crack him right back.

He could feel the threat of his own poorly controlled thoughts as something coiled within him, waiting for the attentional turn of mind and hand. The turn of mind and hand. Not yet. Not yet. He was ignoring his chord progression.

"So, are you going to actually—play that thing?"

He had twisted music to a place that lacked a steady outlet from his thoughts. Melody was not a thing that could be buried with the dead. He wondered why that was. He had thought a piano could help him? It could not help him. It could not shield his psyche from the turn of mind and hand. Nothing could help him. He twined his fingers around the ridged edge of the bench on which he sat.

"Rush. Hey. Are you going to answer me or what?"

His hands would not come off the wood where he had anchored them until he could be sure that when they did they would produce the sound of vacant cities from memory. And not anything else from memory. Like—Schumann, for example.

"Rush."

He wasn't sure what was happening in his head or what was trying to happen but it was not a thing he found he wanted. When he reproduced the tonal structures, he would do it with his hands and not his mind. His hands and not his mind. Which explained, in part, why he was ignoring a chord progression. It was becoming difficult as it spiraled toward a binary choice. Altera or—

It would not be Schumann.

The pool from which his musical perseverations were pulled was limited in scope, bounded by key and interval. It had always had been this way and he had never looked too hard at the proclivities of his subconscious, why dig out old foundations

when city walls could be built atop a base more primitive—this happened all the time. Perhaps not on Altera. Altera or—

It would be Beethoven.

It would *not* be Beethoven, because he would not be playing anything except Ancient chords. Ancient chords, converging on D-minor. He could hear it in the background of his thoughts. To crack this cypher was to crack himself right out of all foundation he possessed. He was ignoring a D-minor chord, and, unsupervised, it passed in and out of Alteran intervals, blending his classical training into something he did not recognize at the threatened borders of his conscious perception.

"Rush."

"What."

"I think we should go."

He wanted to control this.

He wanted to control this.

He wanted to control this.

He did.

But he was fixed.

He couldn't stay.

He couldn't leave.

He couldn't play Beethoven, he couldn't unleash the tones he needed, he couldn't do a fucking thing, caught between the vertiginous drop of asymptotes that approached divergent limits. Had he thought he could do this? He couldn't do this. But he had brought himself to a point from which retreat was impossible.

"This is not a good day for you, hotshot."

None of them seemed to be good days.

D-minor.

He was ignoring it.

D-minor.

He was ignoring it.

D-minor.

He wasn't ready.

D-minor.

It wasn't D-minor.

"I'm thinking you try again tomorrow."

Altera. A hostile note implicit in the sweep of grass and sea. Nested sets of deaths beneath its surface. Sorrow in the contour of its skyline, nearly transparent in the light of a white star. Sheppard had wept, he'd wanted it so much—clutching his chest, screwing his eyes shut, trembling on a transparent floor. Perhaps it was worse to be deaf to the literal sound of the call. D-minor. Almost D-minor. Relatively conjunct, cadences unclosed, polyphonic texture, within which motives grow. Altera. He took a breath and then released it.

In a moment of balanced forces, he understood that his decision had been made, and that it would not be the Beethoven. He was no longer capable of ignoring the chord progression. But. This was what he had come here for. To let it out. And, to let it in. He was ready.

He let go of the bench.

He turned his mind.

The chord and key and intervals of Altera exerted a shear force on his mind that reached out—either over spacetime or from his own memory, he *could not tell* and it *did not matter*—to pull open a bounded edge of his consciousness. But this did not feel right to him, this was what *he* did—the cracking of codes and the torqueing of terms and the forcing of formulas—not what was *done to him*; he was not a thing to be broken into, he was not composed of circuits amenable to rerouting, he was not a thing to be unlocked, *he* did not come open it was *other things* that did that, other things, other things, other things other things *other things*. That came open to him.

D.

D in the contra octave.

D in the contra octave, transposed to great, transposed to small, transposed up the entire keyboard, but every variant of D made overtone to the note in his mind that vibrated at thirty-six point seven hertz.

He struggled to free himself, struggled to divert out into another mental avenue, because he didn't want this imposition of tonal structure, not this way, not shoved upon him by an aggressive, foreign influence in his thoughts, from whatever it was that was

spreading the pins and tumblers of the architecture of his self, from whatever it was that combed its melodic reworking through his thoughts and coerced him into shadowed versions of chromatic scales he knew.

E in the contra octave, its overtones limited by his hands on the piano and by the upper bound of neural extrapolation that stretched to accommodate the demands made upon it by the flawless, forceful reproduction in his mind. The savage hold permitted no escape from its counterpoint of cryptography, inverted. It was breaking him open, his mind adjusting in a step-wise accommodation to the demanding press of a remembered city, made implacable by its nature and by his. He could neither move nor deviate, held in place by the inevitable progress of compression waves that filled the air or filled his thoughts.

F in the contra octave, G in the contra octave, A in the contra octave. B-flat in the contra octave.

The surrendering crack of his psyche penetrated from his mind to his hands, a melodic plunge into and out of the harmonic minor of the chromatic reformation of his consciousness and no *wonder* it had been *Beethoven*, no wonder it had *always* been *Beethoven* in these times. He was made this way, he was wired for D-minor, it was similar, it was nearly identical—the Ancient, and the D-minor progression. It came into and out of his conscious perception in a rhythm unendurable and slow.

D-minor.

And its variant.

D-minor.

And its variant.

D-minor.

And its variant.

The tempo of the shifting key destroyed all defense against its lyric thrust until it overwhelmed his shredded opposition and slid inside his mind without resistance—a creation of a standing wave of pure compliance as it took the minor key of D and bent it in an incremental arch, a final, tonal pull of hand and mind. His thoughts, pliant in confusion, submitted to the languid change of key with a contracture that locked the new configuration in its place.

When he could, again, hear the work of his hands, a hazed echo of Beethoven emerged without focus from the fluidity with which he played. There was a dissonance

of sound and thought. He could not reproduce the slow burn of the tones inside his mind and found the clash of theory and of practice to leave him unfulfilled. His playing faltered, unmade, irresolute.

"Damn it—"

He couldn't see.

His vision was a field of fraying gray.

He could only hear.

A variant of D-minor.

"Rush, god damn it."

He didn't think he was playing anything, but he was still hearing that which he was not playing.

"Get up," Young growled, hands around his shoulders. "Get up."

He didn't think *that* was going to turn out very well for him.

"Don't do it," Young said, dragging him up and pushing him down in waveform reposition, forcing his head between his knees, one hand on the back of his neck.

"Don't even think about passing out, hotshot. Do. Not. Do it."

His visual field began to clarify from beneath its haze of gray.

"Deep breaths," Young said, as he shifted to sit next to Rush on the bench of the piano.

He did his best to comply, trying to ignore the inescapable, alien music in his head.

"Slow deep breaths," Young said.

The situation he found himself in was not preferred.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Oh yeah," Young said darkly, one hand still pressing between his shoulder blades.

"You look it. You look real fine."

"I'm fine," he repeated, sitting up straight.

Young pushed him back down.

"If you pass out," Young said, "you are, for sure, spending the night in the base infirmary."

He heard a broken chord inside his head.

"Lam is on shift," Young continued, "and Lam is tough to bullshit."

That was true.

"Even for a god damned champion bullshitter, such as yourself."

He tried to listen to Young, rather than the tones and overtones unwanted in his mind.

"Flattered," Rush said indistinctly, "I'm sure."

"Yeah, I'd rank you somewhere between Vala and Jackson," Young continued, "though, of course, it's hard to be positive. That's the nature of bullshitting."

"Will you fucking let me up?"

"Are you going to pass out?"

"No," he snapped.

Young let up on the pressure he was applying to Rush's back and shifted his grip, curving a hand over one shoulder and exerting a slowing counter-weight as Rush pushed himself into a seated position.

"D minor," he said, pressing the heel of his hand against his eye socket. "Not quite D minor." He could still hear it. It might never, *never* leave him. That would not turn out well for him.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Young asked.

Rush looked at him. Young appeared unsettled. "That's their tonal structure. A variant D minor."

"So this was—useful to you?"

"Yes," he replied.

"How do you know it's a variant of D minor, hotshot?" Young asked, in a measured, specific, and cautious manner that implied he considered Rush's frame of mind highly vulnerable to interpersonal perturbation.

He knew. He *knew*. But— *How* did he know? What had happened to his mind on Altera, and had it been objective, quantifiable in any way, or had some perceptive switch been flicked, some internal barrier circumvented? Would he know if any of those things had happened? Maybe he wouldn't. The fact that he had insight into the fact that he had no insight seemed promising.

"I know," Rush said.

"But *how* do you know?"

"I. Know."

Young seemed unimpressed.

"Why do you know now, but you didn't know this morning?" Young asked.

"Because I was trying not to think about it this morning," Rush said acidly, trying not to think about it in the present moment either, and failing. Failing.

"Cool it over there, will you?" Young said, shaking his shoulder gently.

Rush looked away.

"I think you need to see someone," Young said.

"I've already 'seen someone'. On multiple occasions. I've passed two psychological evaluations and an entire battery of neuropsychiatric tests."

"I know," Young said. "But—I don't think that all of those were done for your benefit, hotshot. I think at least some of those were part of your genetic workup."

Yes well, in retrospect, that made sense.

"I fail to see your point."

"I think you should talk to Lam and tell her that you can't fucking sleep and you should describe to her whatever the hell it is that happens when you hear music. Or tones."

"I don't see what she's going to do about any of it."

"Well, it will make *me* feel better," Young said. "You look like *shit*, Rush."

"Get t' fuck," he said, with a quick, wry smile.

Young looked away abruptly and stood, clapping Rush's shoulder. "Stay there," he said. "I'm gonna find the guy."

"What 'guy'?" Rush asked, pressing his fingertips to his temple.

"The guy who owns this place," Young said. "Tell him we're done?"

"Oh we are, are we?"

"Yes," Young said. "You, at least, are most definitely done for the day."

"I'll never be done," Rush said, looking up at him.

"Sure you will," Young murmured, nearly inaudible over the variant D minor chord that rang through Rush's thoughts. "One way or another."

"Yes," Rush whispered. "I suppose you're right."

Several hours later, he stood in Young's kitchen.

It had begun with an alteration of *character*. Morphing tones became a pair of tremolos, not strings exactly, but not *not strings* either. And then, as an overlay, came an unmistakable upper line of falling fifths. Symphony number nine, first movement, in D minor. Alternate D minor. Variant D minor. He didn't want this. Yes he did. This, all of this, would be useful. Would it be useful? It would be useful. Either way—fuck if it wasn't pure dead fascinating. Fuck if it also wasn't pure dead difficult to ignore—complicated and polyphonic and loud and no longer *precisely* D minor—

"Hotshot," Young said, breaking in over not-oboos and not-flutes and not-D minor, "are you—hearing anything?"

"Why would you ask me that?" Rush replied.

"Because you look like you're listening to something. That, and you stopped peeling potatoes about thirty seconds ago."

He looked down. He was, indeed, standing in Young's kitchen, holding a partially peeled potato. He flinched at the simultaneous, intrusive entry of the not-strings and the not-percussion. "I was thinking," Rush snapped, finding it extremely difficult to speak over the symphonic torment of his thoughts, but managing it all the same. This would be fine. This would be workable. He would make it workable. It was useful.

Fifths.

Falling fifths.

That was how it had started.

Did that *mean* something?

Possibly it meant something.

"Okay," Young replied. "Well, I'm thinking maybe tonight we'll just order pizza."

"I have to write something down," Rush said.

"Okay," Young said.

He did not care to work like this, but Young would not let him return to his apartment without making his life a thing more difficult than it currently was. Somewhere within the swath of paper multiplying beneath his hands was the list that he had made of the resonant frequencies of Ancient control crystals. He just—couldn't find it.

"Is this what you do every night, hotshot?" Young asked quietly.

"No," Rush said, lifting his laptop off the collection of papers that it partially obscured. He couldn't find his list. Correction. Yes he could. He pulled it free from the company of lesser papers.

"The 'terror fanfare'," Gloria whispers.

"What?" he replied.

"Nothing," Young said. "I didn't say anything."

A unified, polyphonic, distorted wave of noise slammed into his thoughts, obliterating the resonant frequencies he was focusing on. He flinched and slammed a fist atop his list in abrupt frustration.

"I did warn you, darling."

He pressed one hand to his forehead.

"It sounds strange in the alternate key," Gloria whispers. "Don't you think? I wonder if you'll ever get the original back."

He doubted it.

"Hotshot," Young said.

"Do you think the choral portions will be in Ancient?" Gloria asks over the not-bass not-recitatives. "That seems like it would be distracting."

"What," he snarled at Young. "Do I not seem occupied to you?"

"I suppose you'll find out," Gloria says, over the falling fifths from movement one, "you absurd man."

"Yeah," Young snapped. "You seem a little too damn occupied, hotshot."

Rush looked back at his laptop, at the code of the ninth cypher, and began to work at assembling a series of resonant frequencies that would—

"I'm not sure you'll ever be able to play again," Gloria says, over the beginnings of the orchestral construction of the central theme of the movement.

He swallowed. "I'm fine," he said, making an effort to look at Young.

Young looked back at him, dark hair lit up by the slantwise light of the setting sun, his expression closed and oddly profound when set against an orchestral background.

"Sometimes," Rush said, his hands braced against the table, trying to organize himself enough to get the words out before the reappearance of the terror fanfare and the

following choral portion of the movement, "it's necessary to focus so intently on a problem that—"

"Oh sweetheart," Gloria says.

What the fuck.

"—that the ephemera of daily existence are—shut out and—"

He flinched at the reappearance of the terror fanfare. "Just—don't talk to me," he finished, cutting his losses.

"I wasn't, hotshot, you were the one who said 'what'."

Oh Freunde, nicht diese Töne.

He pressed a hand to his head.

"Oh," Gloria says, surprised. "It's German."

"I know," he said.

Adquin nos ponemus nostras
vocem plus grata et exultans tonus.

"Nick," Young said. "Just—stop working."

"Rotten luck, darling. You've got them both. Ancient and German. At least it's not a simultaneous overlay."

"Not yet," Rush said. "Not yet."

As the sixth symphonic loop recommenced, he had to admit to himself that he was perseverating on not-Beethoven as he fucking tried and fucking failed to blend resonant frequencies of control crystals to construct some kind of Ancient equivalent of the circle of fifths. Maybe it would be a circle of ninths? Maybe of tenths? Maybe it would be nine fifths. Ten fifths?

He found it difficult to construct a geometric representation of pitch relationships in an alien tonal architecture whilst a fucking resplendent, detailed version of that tonal architecture was stuck on a *fucking loop* in his *fucking head*.

"I called Lam," Young said, dropping into a chair next to him.

"You did what?" he snapped.

"I. Called. Lam."

"I heard you," Rush replied, over the falling fifths. Those fucking, falling, fatidic fifths. Circle of fifths. Yes well, message received, thanks. He didn't need the constant Beethoven to pursue that insight. Not anymore. "Why would you do that?"

"What do you think happened to you on that planet?" Gloria asks, like she's giving him a hint.

"Because," Young said. "Something's going on with you. You need to be checked out. She's going to see you tomorrow, after hours."

"This is out of the ordinary, even for you," Gloria says. "You know it is."

"Fine," Rush snapped. "I have no idea what you think she's going to do, but fine."

"They don't know what the third gene does," Gloria says.

"They don't know what the third gene does," Young said.

Rush looked up at him, startled. "What did you say?"

"They have no *idea* what it does, hotshot. But look, if you can turn Ancient stuff on, then maybe it stands to reason that Ancient stuff might have some effect on *you*, right?"

"This was my point," Gloria says.

What the fuck was happening. "I *know* that was your point, but—" He decided not to finish his sentence.

"Do you think it might be having any kind of effect?" Young asked, slowly and nearly inaudibly over the aggressive line of the not-brass section in his head.

"Remember when you used to come to rehearsals and sit in the back, grading exams?" Gloria whispers.

"Possibly," Rush said.

"Hotshot, you're hearing shit, aren't you. You can tell me, if you are. You won't be the first, okay? Not by a long shot."

"Let's be clear about this darling, he's asking you if you're hallucinating."

"No," Rush replied. "I'm just—distracted. I need coffee."

"I would literally throw my coffee maker out the window to prevent you from drinking coffee right now," Young said. "Can I interest you in a glass of water and the maximum dose of god damned Tylenol PM?"

"No," Rush replied.

"Here comes the scherzo, sweetheart."

He put his pen down, propped his elbows on the table, and dropped his head into his hands as the not-D minor second movement slammed into his mind like a tonal train or a melodic wrecking ball of some kind that was, like his mind, contrapuntal.

"You okay?"

It wasn't so difficult, he was *certain* it *wasn't*, all he needed was for everyone and everything in his mind to be quiet for something like two hours and he'd be able to do it. He was close. He had a method. He had a transposition key for the shifts in hertz. All he needed, all he needed, were the sequential crystal combinations.

"Rush."

Triple time as quadruple time, scherzo-trio-scherzo, the gestalt of the sound sickeningly unfamiliar, obliterating the original with its alternate D fucking minor, and how was he supposed to do *anything* with this—

"Rush," Young said.

"What?" he said, unable to hear himself over the rise and fall of not-flutes.

"At least this one sounds relatively normal," Gloria whispers sympathetically or maybe symphonetically. "B-flat major does not transpose as well as D minor. Movement three becomes grotesque."

"Why don't you get some sleep? It's one in the morning."

He looked over at Young, who was sitting across from him, his chin in his hand, utterly exhausted and backed by the not-melody of the not-trio portion of the not-movement.

"He's not bad looking," Gloria whispers. "I think C major suits people with curls, don't you?"

"No," he replied, "don't be ridiculous."

"How is going to sleep, in the night time, ridiculous?" Young asked, looking miserable and sounding driven beyond whatever limits he had. Young was injured. He had been. Somewhere on some alien world, he had crashed an alien car. That's what he'd said.

"I'll go to sleep when I'm tired," Rush said. "I suggest *you* go to sleep. You look fucking terrible."

"I look terrible. I do."

"That's what I said," Rush replied, looking back down at his matrices of resonant frequencies.

"Get up," Rush murmured, over a line of not-cellos and not-basses, in the not-fourth movement, one hand on Young's shoulder, shaking him. "If you fall asleep at the fucking table, you literally won't be able to walk tomorrow."

"Kiva," Young said, starting awake.

"Kiva?" Rush repeated, over the mental vibration of a bass line.

"Did you just fucking say 'Kiva'?" Young snarled.

Rush raised his hands, startled into a backward half-step. "I said 'kiva' because *you* said 'kiva.' What the fuck is 'kiva'?"

"Nothing," Young said, taking a deep breath. "No one. Sorry. What the hell time is it?"

"You think I know?" Rush replied, stepping forward to help him up as a familiar, building theme was taken up by almost-violins. "Do you have to work tomorrow?"

"Let me check," Young growled. "Yeah. Yeah I do, Rush. And you're coming in with me."

"Yes yes," Rush said absently, trying to ignore the melody of his thoughts.

"Even like this," Gloria whispers, "even transposed, it's still beautiful. Think about the range they must have used in their musical works. We played symphonies with our cities."

"I know," Rush murmured, directing them towards bedroom.

"That was surprisingly easy," Young said, heading toward his couch instead.

"I'm extremely reasonable," Rush replied, unable to hear himself over the forceful entrance of alien brass.

"Shut up," Young said. "You are not even remotely reasonable."

"Five to six," he murmured, again inaudible as he helped Young sit.

"God damn it."

"Watch out, darling," Gloria whispers. "It always comes out of nowhere."

He flinched at the reappearance of the terror fanfare, but not much. Not much. "Go to sleep," Rush whispered, over the dissonance in his mind as he turned off the lights.

"Rush," Young growled. "Do *not* leave."

"I don't plan on it," he replied.

"Now you can work without interference," Gloria whispers.

He nodded. The only light came from behind the closed blinds and from his laptop, aglow upon the table. He opened the blinds.

"Rush," Young said. "You can turn on the lights, you know."

"I know."

"Draw it," she urges. "You'll be able to focus on it if you draw it."

He found the slide of the marker over virginal wall to be viscerally satisfying as he drew a perfect, unerring circle, freehand.

"And now the table. The table of frequencies. Write it out."

He did so, the terms spaced equally and atypically legible.

"Think of it as not only for yourself," Gloria whispers, "but for them. For all of them. Anyone could look at this and see where you were headed. Anyone. It's self evident."

He staggered beneath the weight of the chorus in his mind, the not-singers in their hybrid of German and Ancient, the not-brass, and the not-strings.

"It's not just for you. It's never been just for you. It's meant to be shared. It's meant to be experienced by all who can experience it," Gloria whispers. "Why not blend the functional and the aesthetic if you can? If you have the power to do so? And you do, Nick, you've always been able to do it. What is mathematics, if not that?"

He braced his hand against the wall.

*Froh, wie seine Sonnen fliegen
Durch des Himmels prächt'gen Plan,
Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn, Freudig,
Wie ein Held zum Siegen.*

He shook his hair back.

"Don't hold to the German, darling. Let that go."

*Laetor sicut eius soles Volant
Per caeli gloriosa signum—*

He had it. He was certain he did. He simply had to complete the circle of relational pitches, arcing it back on itself, in a stepwise series of perfectly chosen resonant frequencies.

"Begin," Gloria says. "You cannot continue like this indefinitely. You must begin."

He began to fill in the pitches he'd worked out over the previous hours, the contours of his thoughts dragged down periodically into arpeggios that would not let him go.

"To create a machine that feels—" he whispered.

"It is a cruelty," Gloria says, audible even over the vocal assault of the chorus. "It is a cruelty. Is it any wonder that it cannot let you go?"

He wrote down a set of numbers corresponding to a crystal combination, permuting in his mind to the second step, to the third, to the fourth, and then—

"You understand, don't you, darling?"

It would not work past the fourth, the harmonies were wrong.

He would begin again.

"Don't you, Nick?"

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I understand—but their progression—I can't control it. I can't hear it," he whispered. He was lost in the confused tonal phrasings of his mind. In an alien variant of pitch class space.

"No darling, it's all you can hear," Gloria whispers back.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Telford leans against the chamber's inner door, his skin pale and streaked with blood. His hand, trembling, is pressed against his face. He does not speak. Maybe he cannot.

"I came to get you out," Young whispers, too loud in the stillness of the room.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear across the thick and turbid air between them. Reddish light throws dark, defaced engravings on the wall into chiaroscured relief.

"I'll never be able to thank you. To repay you."

"Things aren't like that between us," Young says. "This falls outside the bounds of debt. Outside repay."

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," Telford says, his eyes dark, his expression agonized.

"Did they give you the drug?" Young asks.

"I don't think they did," Telford says, "but then, how would I know?"

Young says nothing.

He woke with the August sun, before his phone alarm sounded.

Something was nagging at the borders of his barely-awake thoughts, resisting his efforts to banish it along with dreams that he did not care to recall. As he looked out across the illuminated floor of his living room, whatever it was fled his conscious perception as his gaze fixed on the opposite wall.

He frowned, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. On the white paint next to the window, in an elegant sweep of permanent marker, was a perfect circle, blocked off into nine equal arc lengths by ticks of black marker with corresponding annotations. Next to the circle was a matrix containing either some form of math so advanced that Young didn't even recognize the symbols or—

He was pretty sure that was Ancient.

"God damn it," he muttered, pressing both hands to his face before swiping them back through his hair, in a physical effort to forget or fix the memories of the previous day. It wasn't working. He looked back at the math on the wall. He considered it for a moment, trying to decide whether it made him feel better or worse about Rush's current state of mind. On the plus side, it looked pretty damn organized and like it very well could be some kind of progress on the road to cracking the tonal cypher. On the

minus side, Rush hadn't ever written on his *wall* before—the guy seemed with it enough to know that kind of thing was considered, well, a little off, at best.

"Rush," he growled under his breath. Where the hell *was* the man? He had *better* be in the god damned apartment. Young sat up abruptly, the movement an outlet for a rising sense of alarm. The ache of the muscles in his lower back morphed into something hard edged. He got to his feet, one hand clamped to his spine, and limped forward, passing from his living room through the dining room and toward the kitchen.

On the back wall of the dining area, there was another, identical circle, also annotated.

Great.

He limped into the kitchen to find Rush, thank god, standing in silent dishevelment, holding a bag of coffee beans, and looking at it with inappropriate intensity. Young stepped forward and snapped the coffee out of his hands. "I don't think so, hotshot. You—"

"What the *fuck*," Rush breathed, startling so violently that he nearly lost his balance. He steadied himself against the counter, one hand pressed against his chest, his hair a disordered fringe that brushed the frames of his glasses.

"Sorry," Young said, taken aback and less 'sorry' than 'concerned', "but what the *hell*?"

Rush looked away and did not answer, breathing too hard for an otherwise unremarkable Thursday morning.

"Rush," Young said, hearing the strain in his own voice and not bothering to conceal it.

"What the hell is going on with you?"

"I'm trying. To solve. A problem," Rush said, closing his eyes in a protracted blink.

Young hadn't *meant* to fall asleep the previous night, hadn't meant to let Rush practically talk him into it, but he had been exhausted, and, in the middle of the night, Rush had seemed curiously and transiently solid for a man so clearly and so completely at sea. But—whatever it was that had been looming over Rush for weeks had come to a head in O'Malley's, at a sub-par piano, which Rush had stared down for a good hour before he'd played anything and when he had, *when he had*, it had been terrifying and bizarre combinations of notes that, even to Young's untrained ear, sounded wrong together, though they had been played with the uncanny fluidity of unmistakable skill.

It had sounded awful. But it had looked virtuosic. Maybe it had been. *He* certainly wouldn't know.

"Yeah, okay," Young said. "What I'm getting from that answer is that you don't have a fucking clue what is wrong with you, because something definitely is. Wrong with you. Trust me on that one."

Rush wasn't looking at him. He was staring into space, like he was listening to someone else.

"That piano fucked you up," Young said.

"What?" Rush murmured absently.

"Yup, okay," Young replied. "Come on." He grabbed Rush's elbow and pulled him out of the kitchen, directing him toward the table. He pulled out a chair, and, with minimal prompting, Rush dropped into it, his elbows braced on the table, his face in his hands.

"Don't get up," Young said quietly. "Just stay there." He limped back toward the couch, retrieved his phone, and immediately called Lam.

She answered on the first ring. "This is Dr. Lam," her voice was surprisingly on point and alert for six hundred hours.

"Hi," Young said, eyeing Rush uneasily from across the bright space of the room. "This is Colonel Young. Sorry to call so early. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"Not at all," Lam said. "How's your neighbor?"

"Not good," Young replied, low and emphatic. "He definitely did not sleep last night, and he's looking worse this morning. I'm not sure after hours today is going to work. I think he might need to be seen sooner. He looks—"

"How does he look?" Lam prompted.

He considered Rush, the light of early morning glaring off the broken white planes of his dress shirt, his head bowed and braced against the bridging of his hands. "Not right," Young said. "Distracted. Miserable. And maybe—" he watched the subtle rise and fall of Rush's chest. "Maybe sick."

"Bring him in now," Lam said. "I don't technically go on shift until nine hundred hours, but I'm here."

"Thanks," Young said, "see you in thirty minutes."

He dressed in an inattentive blur of aching spine, not sure what it was about Rush's demeanor that was riling up his nerves. Perhaps it was the sense of something progressive—something that should be halted sooner rather than later. Perhaps it was the lack of the sharp edge that Young associated so strongly with the man. Perhaps it wasn't either of those things.

When he finished dressing he returned to the living room, to see Rush, seated at the table, the heel of one hand pressed against his eye, his expression pained. "Come on," Young said quietly.

Rush didn't respond.

Young put a hand on his shoulder bracing him against the inevitable startle response.

"For fuck's sake," Rush hissed his hands falling from face to table, "don't *do* that."

"Come on," Young said again.

When they arrived in the infirmary, Lam was seated on the edge of a gurney, her white coat beside her, one sleeve unbuttoned and rolled up. A doubled line of of tubing snaked between her arm and a box-like machine next to her. At her side stood TJ, the fluorescent lights putting yellow glints into the elaborate twist of her hair.

Young and TJ locked eyes for a moment before TJ dropped her gaze down and away. Young tried not to wince, but he wasn't sure he was successful.

Lam glanced back and forth a single time between Young and TJ before turning to Rush. "You look terrible," she said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Rush replied. "So I've been told. *Your* appearance is not exactly confidence inspiring."

Lam glanced at the machine to which she was connected. "I'm tougher than I look," she replied, catching Young's eye and looking pointedly at the gurney adjacent to the one on which she was sitting.

Young helped Rush sit.

"I can tell you right now that he's going to be a level two," Lam murmured to TJ. "At least. Put him straight on the monitors, don't bother with manual vitals. Start a line."

"You got it," TJ replied.

"This is *not necessary*," Rush said, with more snap than Young had heard him display in days.

"Do not be a pain in the ass about this, hotshot," Young said, as TJ swept a curtain around herself and Rush, her expression perfectly neutral.

Young stared for a moment at the drawn white curtain.

Lam wrapped her fingers around a handle on the machine she was connected to and dragged it across the room, angling her head at Young to indicate that he should

follow. She stopped at the far wall and pressed a panel. A keyboard dropped out of the cement wall, revealing a screen.

"Tell me again," she said quietly, opening Rush's electronic chart. "The whole thing."

As Young gave a short narration of the events of the previous day and that morning Lam began typing, occasionally asking for clarification on particular points. "Are you going to call psych?" Young asked, when he had finished and when the click of Lam's fingers over the keys had stopped.

She stood for a moment, not looking at him, her eyes fixed on the monitor in front of her. "Maybe," she said, finally. "But not yet. That's a few branch points away on my current decision tree."

Young braced his hand on the cement wall next to the computer. "Fair enough, but I really think he should *be talking* to someone about how fucked up his life is. Sorry. How screwed up his life is," Young whispered.

"Well," Lam said, looking up at him with a dry cast to her expression, "the same could be said of all of us. But medicine, like everything else around here, is a turf war, and I'd like to keep him on *my turf* for as long as possible."

Young raised his eyebrows. "You're not a fan of Mackenzie?"

"I didn't say that," Lam said, quiet and emphatic. "Please don't mistake my comments as implying anything pejorative about Dr. Mackenzie or his unit. I very much value the work that the Psychiatry Department does, but given Dr. Rush's unique genetic status and his recent offworld travel, I'd rather not assume anything about his current physical or mental condition no matter how suggestive his personal circumstances are of a purely psychiatric etiology behind the behavior you described to me. Patients are medically cleared *first*, before they're psychiatrically evaluated."

"I get that," Young said, "but this confining-him-to-his-apartment bullshit has got to stop. And regardless of what you find, he needs to talk to Psych about what happened on that planet. They made *Sheppard* talk to psych about it, and Sheppard—well, he's either a rock or secretly completely insane, I have no idea—my point is that you don't just shove an untrained civilian back into what's essentially house-arrest after that kind of thing just because you don't want to create a paper trail about any kind of regularly scheduled activities he might have."

"The less he's exposed," Lam whispered, "the safer he is—but I agree with you. In fact, I already raised a similar point with Committee Number Four some time ago. *Prior* to the incident on the planet."

"What did they say," Young asked, equally quietly.

"Dr. Jackson shut me down."

"Jackson?" Young hissed. "Seriously? *Jackson* shut you down?"

"His reasons for doing so were and are complicated," Lam whispered. "Dr. Jackson—well, there was an error made by the psychiatry department seven years ago, which—negatively impacted Dr. Jackson. If you'd like more details, you'd have to ask him directly. But Dr. Jackson has a very strong bias against SGC Psychiatry, and against Dr. MacKenzie in particular. But I believe that there was more than bias behind his immediate and strenuous objections about Dr. Rush being referred to their department."

"Such as?" Young whispered.

"I'm not sure. We've never discussed it openly, but I believe that if the SGC Psych determined that Dr. Rush needed any kind of long term therapy, that might be an impetus for putting him in protective custody, which Dr. Jackson and Colonel Telford have tried extremely hard to avoid."

"They agree on that point, do they?" Young asked.

"I think it's apparent to *everyone* that Dr. Rush would not do well within the highly structured and extremely confining environment of the SGC's version of protective custody," Lam said carefully.

"Yeah," Young agreed, "no kidding. This is a *nightmare*."

Lam rested a hand atop her dialysis machine and shot him a wry look. "That's what happens when individuals collide with bureaucracy."

"Read a lot of Kafka?" Young asked.

Lam smiled and then turned as the hissing sound of moving curtains revealed Rush and TJ. The scientist was now sporting a hospital gown and was connected to several monitors. Lam crossed the room again, studying the readouts clustered on one side of the bed.

"You look miserable," Young said as he limped over to stand next to Rush.

"Fuck off," Rush replied, without any real ire, one hand pressed to his head.

"He's tachycardic, diaphoretic, and his pressure's on the high side," TJ said, looking at Lam. "His responsiveness to questions varies. I don't like how he looks."

"Me neither," Lam said, retrieving her stethoscope from the opposite gurney. "Dr. Rush," she said, raising her voice. "How are you feeling?"

Rush said nothing, his hand still pressed to his head.

Lam looked at him for a moment, then turned to Johansen. "Start him on a maintenance fluids and then let's do an EEG," she said.

"You got it," Johansen replied.

"Dr. Rush," Lam said, raising her voice slightly. "Do you have a headache?"

Rush didn't respond, but he pressed the heel of his hand against his eye, his head slightly cocked.

"He's been doing this off and on since yesterday afternoon," Young said, "since he played that piano. I think he might be listening to something. Something that isn't us."

"Dr. Rush," Lam said again, stepping in to lay a hand on Rush's shoulder. He looked up at her, startled. "Dr. Rush," Lam said slowly, "do you have a headache?"

"No," Rush replied, his fingers shifting to his temple.

"You *look* like you have a headache," Lam said, reaching into her pocket for a penlight and flashing it into each of his eyes in turn.

Rush flinched. "Yes. Fine. I have a headache. This is not atypical for me."

"I know," Lam said, one hand coming to his chin. "Follow," she murmured, as she moved her finger in changing linear paths through the air. "You want Colonel Young to stick around, or you want me to throw him out?"

"I'm sure I don't care," Rush replied.

Young shot him a half smile and raised eyebrows.

"Okay," Lam said. "You let me know if you change your mind. Now, what's been going on with you?"

"Nothing," Rush said. "I haven't been sleeping."

"Why not?" Lam asked.

"This happens to me when I've been working."

"Okay," Lam said. "Sit forward." She listened to his lungs before pushing him back against the gurney. "So this is normal for you?"

"No," Rush said. "Not exactly. It's atypically intense, but so is the work."

Lam listened to his heart and then looped her stethoscope over her neck as TJ dragged what could only be a portable EEG over to the side of the bed.

"Hold off a minute," Lam said quietly, looking at TJ.

TJ nodded, her eyes skittering away from Young when he looked up at her.

Rush pressed a hand to his forehead, his eyes shut.

"Hotshot," Young said, but stopped when Lam extended a hand in his direction.

Her eyes flicked back and forth between Rush and the monitors. As the silence lengthened, Young and TJ looked at one another, then away.

Rush flinched, his eyes still shut, his heart rate spiking briefly on the monitors into a fast wave before returning to its previous rhythm.

"I think that was a startle response," Lam said quietly, "in the absence of any stimuli that we could detect."

"He's *hearing* things," Young said, equally quietly. "I'm telling you, he's hearing things."

"Dr. Rush?" Lam said quietly.

No response.

"Dr. Rush," she said again, louder, her hand coming to his shoulder.

He flinched, the monitor breaking into another fast wave.

"Hook it up," Lam said quietly to TJ before glancing back at Rush. "Dr. Rush, we're going to do an EEG, but it would help us if you would tell us exactly what you're experiencing right now."

"It's nothing," Rush replied. "I'm tired. I'm sure it will pass."

"Are you hearing or seeing anything that *I'm* not hearing or seeing?" Lam asked.

"Why would you ask me that?" Rush asked, with transparent indifference.

"Rush," Young began, but Lam silenced him with an outstretched hand.

"I ask because your attentional focus is wavering, and stimuli that I can't see might potentially account for that." Rush looked obliquely at Lam as TJ finished connecting the set of electrodes to his head. "I'm trying to help you," Lam said quietly, meeting his gaze directly.

"Yes yes," Rush said, "I'm aware."

Lam waited, but he did not add anything further.

TJ flipped on the monitors and both she and Lam examined the set of waveforms on the screen in a moment of frozen silence. "Please check the temporal leads," she said.

"Already on it," Johansen said, her fingers tracing through Rush's hair.

"What?" Young asked. "It doesn't look normal?"

"No," Lam said, her voice reassuringly brusque, but her expression strained, "it does not look normal."

"Temporal leads are all correctly positioned and fully attached," TJ said.

"Tamara," Lam said, "pull in a tech, get a copy of his baseline EEG from several months ago, get neurology on the phone, and upgrade him to a one on the roster." She glanced at Young. "You said he's been *working* through this?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah. He was definitely doing math," Young said. "Pretty sophisticated math. What's wrong?"

"I don't know yet," Lam said. She turned to Rush. "Dr. Rush," she said, dropping down onto the edge of the bed and leaning forward her hands braced against the sheets, red tubing trailing its way from her hand, through the air, and to portable dialysis machine. "You're displaying extremely abnormal, epileptiform brain activity," she said slowly. "Are you hearing or seeing anything that I'm not hearing or seeing?"

"Yes," Rush admitted.

"Describe it to me," Lam said.

"I'm hearing a warped version of Beethoven's ninth symphony transposed from D-minor into an Ancient equivalent, on loop, in my head, with occasional commentary provided by my dead wife."

"What," Young said.

Rush shrugged.

"Okay," Lam said, her expression and voice unchanging, "is this getting more intrusive or less intrusive with time?"

"More intrusive," Rush said.

"How intrusive is it now?" Lam asked.

"Very," Rush said, his eyes shut.

"How long have you been hearing it?" Lam asked.

"Less than twenty four hours," Rush said.

"Has anything like this ever happened to you before?" Lam asked.

"No," Rush said.

"Yes," Young said.

Rush and Lam looked over at him.

"Maybe a month ago, in my kitchen, he was hearing a continuous tone and then hyperventilated to the point of passing out," Young said.

"It appeared similar to *you* perhaps," Rush said, one hand still pressed to his head, "but I assure you it was not the same."

"And you said he's been trending toward less responsive?" Lam asked, glancing at Young.

"Yes," Young said, trying to betray no anxiety. "Definitely."

"Well," Lam said, "then you can keep him responsive while we figure out what's going on."

"Neuro is on line two," TJ called across the room.

Lam dragged her dialysis machine toward a nearby cabinet, pulled out a chess set and shoved it in Young's direction before crossing the room to answer the phone.

"Tamara," Lam said, shaking the tubing connected to her arm, "unhook me from this thing, will you? It's mostly done anyway."

"You got it," TJ replied.

"And then let's start recording his EEG for thirty second intervals every five minutes and sending the files down it down to the electrophysiology lab," Lam said. "I'll tell them it's coming."

"Sure thing," TJ murmured, passing Lam the phone.

Young looked at Rush.

Rush looked back at him.

"Seriously?" Young said. "Beethoven?"

"Oh shut it, will you?"

"I fully plan on kicking your ass, hotshot," Young murmured, subtly shaking the box of chess pieces.

"Go ahead," Rush said, one hand pressed to his forehead. "Astonish me."

By eleven hundred hours, Rush had been seen by neurology, by Psych, and by Dr. van Densen, who had been recalled from the Odyssey, for a neurosurgical evaluation. Rush didn't seem terribly concerned by any of this. But then, he also seemed pretty distracted.

Young was concerned.

"No way is that going to work, hotshot," Young murmured, eyeing Rush's position on the board as the other man listlessly relocated his only remaining bishop. "Your strategy is going to shit."

"I demand a fucking rematch in which *you're* viciously distracted," Rush replied, one hand fixed to his temple.

"Eh, I can't say I'm in favor," Young said, ignoring Rush's vulnerable knight and going after an errant pawn instead. "How about we just throw out today's stats?"

"Don't *let* me win," Rush said, looking at him obliquely before directing his eyes back to the board. "I can't imagine anything more depressing."

"Than me letting you win?" Young asked, trying not to feel offended. "I *play chess*, you know."

Rush shut his eyes, looking distinctly unimpressed, one hand pressed to his forehead. "Do you not have things to do?" he asked. "Things that are not here? I confess I've been confused as to what your so called job actually entails."

"Yup," Young said. "I've got plenty of things to do."

"You're terrible," Rush replied, looking past Young's shoulder with atypically intent interest. "You're almost as bad as Daniel fucking Jackson."

"No good of himself does a listener hear," Jackson said, from behind Young, "speak of the devil and he shall appear."

Young jumped. "God *damn*, Jackson," he growled.

"It's the air vents in here," Jackson said. "You can't hear a thing near the walls when they're on. I think the medical staff keep them going full blast for that reason alone." He handed Young one of the two cups of coffee that he was holding. "How's is going, Nick? You look awful."

"Thanks," Young murmured, as he accepted the cup.

"Where the fuck is *my* coffee," Rush said, his fingers pressed to his temple.

"Well, that *was* your coffee," Jackson said apologetically, taking a seat on the end of Rush's gurney and indicating the cup he'd just handed Young with his eyes, "but unfortunately Dr. Lam vetoed that plan. Then I tried to argue for decaf, but she also said no to that."

"Sorry, hotshot," Young said, taking a sip.

"So," Jackson pulling out the word. "What's going on?"

Rush shook his head once, his hand over his eyes.

"Apparently he's hearing classical music in an Ancient key signature," Young said, "and, according to Neurology, he's got an EEG that looks like he's in the middle of a seizure.

Jackson said nothing, looking at Rush with a gaze that was clear and concerned.

Rush did not look back.

"But," Young said, "as you can see, he's more or less fine."

"Yeah, I'm going to come down on the side of 'less'," Jackson said. "Lam just put together a team to take a look at the problem. We're meeting in fifteen minutes in the briefing room."

"The 'problem' meaning—" Young said.

Jackson indicated the EEG with his gaze.

"Who's on the team?" Young asked.

"Me, Sam, Dr. Lee, Dr. van Densen, one of the guys who studies the Antarctic neural interface chair, and I think they're going to try to get a video feed to Atlantis so Dr. McKay and Dr. Keller can weigh in."

"That's quite the team," Young said uneasily, glancing at Rush, who did not look back at him. "I didn't realize she was quite so concerned."

"Yeah," Jackson murmured, "I get the impression she doesn't think this EEG pattern is sustainable, and he doesn't seem to be snapping out of it."

"Not really," Young said. "No." He rubbed his jaw. "They should take a look at Sheppard. See how *his* EEG looks. Something truly fucked up happened to them on that planet."

"I'll suggest that," Jackson said. "Anything else you can think of?"

"Pull Dr. Perry in," Young said. "Include her in the briefing."

"Amanda Perry?" Jackson asked.

"She's been working with him," Young said, "on the cyphers. On that game. She's got the best insight into what he's actually been doing."

Jackson nodded.

For a moment they sat in silence, listening to the irregular click of Lam's heels in the back of the room as she paced an irregular semi-circle around the phone on the wall.

They watched Rush, who hadn't moved for several minutes.

"Hotshot," Young said.

No response.

"Nick," Jackson snapped, sharp and low and urgent.

Rush opened his eyes and looked at Jackson.

"Don't do that," Jackson said.

"Hard to avoid," Rush replied.

"Hang in there," Jackson said. "We're going to fix this."

"Are you," Rush murmured.

"Piece of cake," Jackson replied with a smile that didn't quite make it to his eyes. "I'll see you later, Nick." He turned, and headed back toward the hallway.

"I really hate that man," Rush murmured, glancing at Young.

"I'm pretty sure that's not true," Young replied. "You just like pretending to be a misanthrope."

"There's something wrong with him," Rush said.

"Well, yeah, but I think that's common knowledge," Young said.

They looked at each other in silence for a moment.

"Rush—" Young said.

"Sheridan," Rush said.

"What?" Young replied, mildly alarmed.

"Green River," Rush said.

"Hotshot," Young said, relaxing, "I told you. You aren't going to get it."

"Evanston," Rush said.

"You *definitely* memorized a list of Wyoming cities in order of population density," Young said. "Don't even deny it."

"Riverton," Rush said.

"I'll tell you," Young said, pulling out the words.

"Get to fuck," Rush said. "Jackson."

"If you ask me *really nicely*—"

"Cody."

"And admit," Young continued, "that you've utterly failed—"

"Rawlins."

"In determining where I'm from despite a ridiculous amount of effort."

"Lander," Rush said.

"How long of a list did you memorize?" Young said, raising his eyebrows.

"Fucking Torrington."

"Nope," Young said.

Rush sighed.

"Do you give up?" Young asked.

"Never," Rush replied.

"Your choice," Young said, repositioning the chessboard. "Can I interest you in a rematch?"

By the time thirteen hundred hours rolled around, Young had beaten Rush at chess six times, had a brief meeting with Colonel Carter, sat in on video conference call with McKay, and been marginally successful at keeping Rush focused long enough to eat something.

He wasn't sure what the hell was going on.

Nor was anyone else, it seemed.

The leading hypothesis was that all of this had something to do with Rush's unusual genetic panel coupled with either his recent trip to Altera or his near complete insomnia for the past several days.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you go through that damn gate," Young said.

No response.

"Rush," Young growled, reaching over to shake the mathematician's shoulder with one hand.

"What," Rush hissed, but the irritation in his tone struck Young as peripheral.

"Eat your soup."

"Make yourself useful and find me some paper, will you?" Rush asked. "I think that I—" he trailed off, one hand pressed to his head.

"You are done working on that cypher set, hotshot," Young said. "You hear me? Done." Privately, he suspected that no one within the upper echelons of the SGC shared that particular viewpoint, with the possible exception of Jackson.

Rush didn't respond.

"Hey," Young snapped, reaching out again to shake him. "Rush. Cut it out."

Rush didn't respond, but something in the tone of Young's voice pulled Lam in from the periphery of the room where she had been standing, scan and phone in hand. She approached with the measured click of her heels over the cement floor.

"He's getting harder to reach," Lam said, her voice low, her eyes on the EEG that continued to display its jagged, repetitive waveforms.

"Yes," Young said, even though it hadn't been a question.

"I don't feel comfortable allowing this to escalate any longer without intervention," Lam murmured. "He's barely responsive."

Young grimaced, looking up at her. "What kind of intervention are we talking about?" he asked.

"Well," Lam said, sounding more unsure than Young had ever heard her, "this looks like seizure activity, even though he's not showing any physical signs of seizing. I plan on treating it as such. I hope to cool his EEG down and buy us some time to figure this thing out."

"Sounds like a plan," Young murmured, watching Rush flinch at an inaudible cue.

"Please tell me that stuff is going to put him out. He hasn't slept in days."

"It may," Lam murmured, glancing at Young, "but we're dealing with a biological influence of unknown character and magnitude. It's hard to say exactly what's going to happen."

"Yeah," Young replied, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "I get that."

Lam left with the quiet clicking of heels to assemble whatever drugs and personnel she was going to need.

Young looked at Rush, who was pressing his fingers against his temples. His brow was furrowed and his expression pained. He looked miserable. Like a man digging a beachhead against his own thoughts.

"Hey," Young said, grabbing Rush's wrist, and pulling his hand away from his head.

"What?" Rush asked, and this time it was less irritated than a question in good faith.

"Can you hear me?" Young asked, his fingers still closed around the other man's wrist.

"Barely," Rush whispered.

"Lam is going to give you something," Young said, "to try and stop this."

Rush nodded.

"We're going to figure this out," Young murmured. "No problem. Jackson's working on it. I don't think Jackson's ever failed at anything." Well, except for preventing the Ori from gaining a foothold in the Milky Way. And saving his wife from enslavement and death at the hands of the goa'uld. Rush shot Young a distinctly unimpressed look, indicating that he might have been thinking along the same lines. "Okay, well, his track record is pretty good," Young modified. "As good as you're going to find around here."

"I prefer Colonel Carter," Rush said.

"Have you even met Carter?" Young asked.

"I've seen her code," Rush said, his expression pained, "and already I like her better than Jackson."

"She's working on this thing too," Young said. "You're at the top of everyone's priority list today."

"Fantastic," Rush whispered, closing his eyes.

"No," Young said, tightening his fingers around Rush's wrist. "Don't do that. Stay with it, hotshot."

"I think that ship has fucking sailed," Rush replied, cracking his eyelids.

"You're a lot of work, it turns out," Young said. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Only those uncomplicated optimists who feel compelled by societal expectations to torque an insult into an approximation of constructive criticism," Rush murmured, giving Young a half-smile.

"There you go," Young said, smiling back at him. "That's more like it."

"Dr. Rush," Lam said, approaching with Johansen flanking her, "are you with us?"

"Yes yes," Rush murmured, waving his free hand vaguely.

"We're going to try an anti-epileptic medication," Lam said, and see if that reduces either your symptoms or tamps down on the activity we're currently seeing on the EEG. It's probably going to make you feel tired."

"Fine," Rush said with a dismissive, fractional shake of his head.

Lam glanced at TJ, and gave her a short nod. "Do a slow push," she said quietly, "over two minutes."

Young watched TJ's hands, her nails with the pale pink polish, as she fitted the needle to the appropriate port on the IV and began to slowly slide the plunger of the syringe home.

"Dr. Rush?" Lam asked, her eyes flicking between Rush and the EEG monitor.

Rush didn't respond, but the tension seemed to be leaving his hands. His eyes were closed.

"Stop the push," Lam said to TJ. "I want him to talk to us, if he can."

"Hey," Young said, shaking Rush gently. "Nick. How are you doing?"

Rush opened his eyes.

"Talk to us," Young said slowly. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," Rush said, looking vaguely confused.

"His EEG is cooling down," Lam murmured. "Are you hearing anything, Dr. Rush?" she asked.

"Key changes," Rush slurred.

"Key changes?" Lam repeated

"Changes of key," Rush clarified with an earnest precision that Young found particularly difficult to take.

"Okay," Lam said gently. "So you're still hearing things?"

Rush said nothing. His eyes drifted shut.

"Dr. Rush," Lam said.

Young ran a hand over Rush's forearm. "Hey," he said, "hotshot." Rush looked at him. "D minor?" Young asked.

"And its variant," Rush slurred.

"You're hearing a key change between D minor and—an Ancient variant of D-minor?" Lam asked. "Is that correct?"

Rush nodded, looking up at her.

"He seems better," Young murmured. "He's paying more attention to us than he has in hours."

"I agree," Lam murmured. "How often does the key switch?" she asked, looking at the EEG readings on the adjacent monitors.

"Rush," Young said insistently. "When does it—"

"D-minor," Rush said.

"It's D-minor right now?" Lam asked, still looking at the EEG.

Rush nodded.

"Switch," Rush said, his expression tightening. The monitor broke into a series of jagged, high amplitude waves.

They watched it for a moment.

"Switch," Rush said again, as the waves on the EEG lengthened and flattened.

"God damn," Young murmured.

"Mm hmm," Lam murmured. "We're literally seeing this play out in the EEG."

"Switch," Rush said, his eyes closing, one hand coming to his head.

"Start the push again." Lam glanced at TJ. "Keep it slow."

"Switch," Rush said indistinctly, almost as soon as TJ started.

"Keep going," Lam said, glancing at TJ. "His tracing is approaching his baseline. Let's bring him all the way back down."

"How you doing, hotshot?" Young asked. "Hearing anything?"

Rush shook his head fractionally.

"Nothing?" Lam asked. "Not even the D-minor?"

Again, Rush shook his head.

"Good," Lam said quietly.

"It's in," TJ murmured, pulling the syringe from the IV port with a delicate flick of her wrist.

"Nick?" Young said, his hand closed around the other man's forearm.

Rush cracked his eyelids briefly.

"He's pretty sedated by this point," Lam said.

"Well," Young said, not certain whether he was more relieved or more anxious at the evidence that Rush could be medicated out of whatever the hell was happening in his mind, "you needed a god damned nap anyway, hotshot."

Rush closed his eyes, his expression relaxing, the last of the tension leaving his frame.

Young looked at Lam. She looked back at him, but said nothing.

"You have any idea what's causing this?" Young asked.

"No," Lam admitted, glancing back to the now sedate waveforms of the EEG.

"Well, it doesn't seem good," Young said, looking down at Rush.

"No," Lam said. "It doesn't."

From Nothing, Nothing Comes

Zelenka looks up, adjusting his glasses as he considers Rodney, hunched behind the elegant metal curvature of a Lantean console.

"No," Rodney says, the color of his hair and the cast of his features made moderate under the gray light of a clouded sky. "No no no no *no*. I refuse to implement any kind of solution that is going to have the side effect of making this guy an idiot. What the hell are you thinking, Radek? Are *you* wearing a cortical suppressant?"

"I am thinking that I am wanting him to live," Zelenka replies pointedly, his eyes shifting from Rodney to the silent sea and sky behind him, out beyond the glass and shields. "I am thinking that Thursdays will not be the same if he does not."

Zelenka had a not-so-secret affinity for the work of this Dr. Nicholas Rush even before the man so thoroughly impressed Rodney on an offworld cryptography mission. Rodney is not easy to impress. To do it, one must be intelligent and either forceful or attractive. Zelenka has only one out of those three qualities, and so he gets positive reinforcement from Rodney only when Rodney is dying, or when the man gets reprimanded by the IOA for not creating a sufficiently supportive working environment.

That's fine with Zelenka.

He loves the work.

And he does not so much mind working with sensitive, high-maintenance egomaniacs.

At times, Rodney can bury the end goal so deeply beneath his concerns about secondary sequelae that nothing would be accomplished if it weren't for Zelenka. He is good at refocusing the other man, but—

Sheppard is better. "*Living* is good," the colonel says, from where he's leaning against a locked console in this room they have appropriated for their first pass brainstorming session, before they will summon their 'minions,' as Rodney likes to call them. Zelenka prefers to refer to them 'colleagues'.

"I'd rather die than live on a fraction of my IQ," Rodney snaps, not looking at either of them, his eyes fixed on his console.

Zelenka knows where *that* sentiment comes from. Where it must originate. He has the urge to turn his head and look at Sheppard for unspoken confirmation. He resists that urge. Rodney is one of the few people who can make such a statement with authority.

But Zelenka does not say this. Because that is not what they do. And even if it were, it is not a thing that should be done now.

"*Z ničeho nebude nic,*" Zelenka snaps.

They look at him.

And that was not English. Well, Rodney does not deserve English at the moment. Sheppard always deserves English, but people are not frequently getting what they are deserving.

"I'm not even going to ask," Rodney says, brow furrowed and hands spread over the monitors like the pianist he wishes he were.

"*I'll ask,*" Sheppard says.

"From nothing, nothing comes," Zelenka translates. "I believe a cortical suppressant is our best option, given that we need a solution within hours."

"We're not doing that," Rodney snaps.

"It will not make him stupid," Zelenka says, hearing a desperate edge in his words. "It will simply prevent him from—"

"Accessing his higher cortical functions," Rodney hisses.

"No," Zelenka replies. "It will prevent uncontrolled waves of electrical potential from repetitive discharge that will damage him permanently." They are both looking at him now, which was his goal. "I am wanting the same things that *you* are wanting," he says quietly, speaking to Rodney only now. "We can write a program for fine control of interference. It will be titratable. *You* can titrate it. Or Carter can."

"Oh, *I'll* be the one titrating it," Rodney says, a blustery front for a near surrender.

This is the way.

They both know it is.

"And then," Zelenka says, unfinished, "Dr. Rush can do it himself, once he's near his cognitive baseline. He is a computational genius, yes?" Zelenka hopes he'll get to meet Rush at some point. He's always liked mathematicians.

Rodney hesitates, clearly torn, his expression frozen and his hands still.

Zelenka has seen him sit exactly so many times.

Rodney hates the implementation of solutions that require destruction of any kind.

It is, Zelenka thinks, a surprisingly poetic weakness in a physicist.

"So how is this going to work?" Sheppard asks, with a calculated ease that Zelenka interprets as closet encouragement.

"Well," Zelenka begins, freeing his hands from the tools he holds, "his problem is uncontrolled, repetitive electrical discharge that is metabolically demanding and therefore damaging, yes?" he asks, as he completes a demonstration of repeating waveforms with both hands.

"That much I got from the briefing," Sheppard says, uncloseting his closet encouragement.

"They have tried to control this pharmacologically. It worked for a short time, but pharmacological control is now failing. Control is required for the operation and preservation of his mind, yes?"

Rodney is watching him intently now.

Sheppard looks at Rodney, and then back at Zelenka. "I'm with ya," he says.

"So we control by application of interfering electromagnetic waves, generated by paired devices fixed to exterior of head." Zelenka gestures emphatically at his own temples. "Cortical suppressants!"

"He thinks it's going to work," Sheppard says, looking at Rodney. "You can tell because he starts dropping words."

Rodney says nothing until he says, "I don't like it."

"*Do prdele*," Zelenka mutters, casting his gaze up at the ceiling. "*Why*."

"Because there's no exit strategy. Because I don't want to do that to him and I don't want to leave him like that. He's also, apparently, an abduction target, and you don't affix a blazing electronic signature to someone like that and then make it impossible to take off without insanity, electrophysiological decompensation, seizure, and death."

"I do not see why you treat this as permanent," Zelenka says. "I do not see why you treat this as end game. There may be genetic solutions. There may be pharmacologic solutions. This may stop spontaneously. He may gain conscious control of whatever process is causing this discharge. We need time. *He* needs time. This will give it to us."

"I treat it as permanent because Altera will always exist and if that city did this to him, then it's going to keep doing it. I treat this as permanent because he's not here. He's not here, and we're not there, and that's going to make fine-tuning difficult, time consuming, and ultimately imperfect. I treat it as permanent because if someone used

this kind of untested, 1.0, beta-version, electric club on *my* cortex, in short, if someone did this to me, and it caused any kind of cognitive damage? I would be furious."

"But you would be alive," Sheppard says quietly. "Come on, McKay, if you don't like this, then what else have you got?"

"With four hours left on the six hour window that Lam gave us?" Rodney snaps. "Nothing." He looks away from his own honesty.

"If you wish to continue thinking," Zelenka says quietly, "I will build it."

"You build it," Rodney says, in defeat that is unmistakable and total, "and I'll start laying in the programmatic architecture that will control the cognitive rheostat. Or whatever."

"*You* are going to code it?" Zelenka asks. "But then—"

The only coding language in which Rodney has sufficient proficiency for a task of this magnitude and complexity is—

"Coding it in Ancient will make it more difficult for a terrestrial or even LA programmer to alter it," Rodney says, already turning back to his monitor.

"And it's classy," Sheppard adds.

It also significantly cuts down the pool of individuals who will be able to edit the program once it is in place. Zelenka thinks there must be only five or six people on Earth who would have the requisite skill level.

Samantha Carter.

Amanda Perry.

Bill Lee.

Jay Felger, may god help him. May god also not let him anywhere near this cortical suppressant.

And of course, Dr. Rush himself.

"Of course it's going to be classy," Rodney snaps.

"And stylish," Zelenka adds, already half-finished designing the requisite electronics and their housing at the station where he sits. "But, primarily? Functional."

"I'm going to go pass the message up the chain that you guys have something," Sheppard says, pushing away from the silver metal he's been leaning against. When Sheppard leaves, it is only Zelenka and Rodney in the glass-enclosed lab beneath the gray sky.

There is silence between them.

Outside, it has begun to rain. He can see a gray pattered pattern on the surface of mostly still ocean.

Zelenka has always felt unnerved in the presence of a silent Rodney McKay.

This has been happening with increasing frequency in the past half year.

"It *is* a good idea," Rodney says, a quiet admission.

This is even more unnerving than the silence.

"Thank you," Zelenka says, glancing up from his circuits and then back down.

Rodney says nothing more.

"It will not be for him like it was for you," Zelenka says, his eyes on delicate rows of resistors.

Rodney says nothing, and Zelenka thinks of him as he was—and, god willing, will *never* be again—mentally unmade by a parasite over that long and terrible span of weeks. How he came to the lab, but how he moved with foreignness there, his hands lacking dexterity and his mind lacking first words and then concepts as he unraveled slowly, with acute awareness.

Still, Rodney does not speak.

"We will not allow it to be so," Zelenka says.

"No," Rodney says, "we won't."

Chapter Thirty Nine

D-minor.

D-minor.

Thirty-seven point five hertz with overtones bounded only by the expanding borders of his auditory perception.

"Okay, calibrating."

"Is it on?"

"Well it's on, but I don't think it's working."

"Like, not working 'not working', or not *yet* working?"

"Daniel, not helpful."

"Do we need Dr. McKay for this?"

"No, why would we need McKay?"

"Well, he was the one who—"

"Wait, is he—"

"I think he's waking up."

"Nick?"

"He shouldn't be."

"Yeah, well he *is*."

"I can see that, colonel, thank you."

"The device isn't on yet, it's not even calibrated, he can't be awake, we need a baseline —"

"Nick?"

"Oh crap."

"What do you mean 'oh crap'."

D-minor.

"Nothing, no, it's okay, he needs to just not move right now, like not *at all*."

"Yeah well, he's kind of out of it at the moment."

"I know that. I can see that. But this circuitry is delicate, and I need an electrophysiological baseline."

D-minor and hands.

Hands holding him down.

"He's burning though the meds, I don't know if I can even *get* him back to his baseline at this point—"

"Well, get him as close as you can, pharmacologically."

"Rush. Nick. Damn it, just relax. Just try to relax as much as you can. Fuck, I sound like an idiot. Just—know that I know that, hotshot."

D-minor.

"Can I get someone to hold his head still, please? The circuitry in this thing is delicate, and we do *not* want to have to wait for version 2.0."

"Yeah, I got it."

D-minor.

"Is there any chance of him actually physically seizing? I just ask because if so? We need to get the device off him until he's pharmacologically controlled enough that a voltage burst doesn't fry the crystal chip in this thing."

D-minor.

D-minor.

D-minor, D-minor, D-minor.

"Yes, I'd say there's a real danger of that, but I can't give you much better control than this, unless you want him under general anesthesia."

"No, I have the feeling that would put him further from his baseline than he is now."

"Relax. Relax, Rush. Come on."

"Okay, so this is what we've got as a baseline, then, is what you're telling me."

"I'm telling you this is as good as it's likely to get."

D-minor.

"But why is he waking up?"

To create

"Easy."

To create a machine

D-minor.

"Hold him down. I need his head held steady for this."

To create a machine that feels

"Take it easy, hotshot."

To create a machine that feels

D-minor.

D-minor.

"D-minor."

"Did he say something?"

"Shhh, don't talk. Try not to talk."

"What did he say?"

"'D-minor'. I think he said 'D-minor'?"

"It's better if he doesn't talk."

"Yeah, well—"

"I'm not trying to be insensitive, I'm trying to calibrate this chip."

"I know. I get that."

"Talk to him."

"What?"

"Just—try talking to him. Directly."

"Jackson, I don't—there's no way he can—"

"You don't know that."

"When I said 'hold him down'? I actually meant hold him down. Either that, or put him in restraints. Our window is closing to get this thing working."

"Nick? Nick, it's Daniel—"

"Tamara. Yes. Affix it right there."

D-minor.

The Lydian mode.

"Did you think about staying, Nick?"

"Uh oh."

"What?"

"Look at the monitors."

"Did you think about exploring the city?"

Something had been at its heart.

Something other than the cypher key.

"It was a chair, sweetheart. A chair as a shell for an interface between carbon and silicon that has never been equaled anywhere else in the universe."

"That doesn't look good."

"He's not localizing to us anymore, I think he's in danger of physically seizing."

"Colonel Carter, can you—"

"I'm going as fast as I can, but I need that baseline."

"Hotshot, damn it, snap out of it."

"A chair as a shell. A chair as a gateway. Not literal. Not like the stargate. But, a gateway all the same."

"Do you have the kit?"

"I have it."

"Oh darling, you're almost perfect for it. You're very nearly perfect. Not for them. But for Altera."

"Then start pushing meds until we break that pattern. We have to break it."

"The entire planet a shifting drape of grass and water, adorned with cities pruned like gardens into pleasing forms. The architectural equivalent of centuries of horticulture."

"Rush, hey. Come on. Try to stay with us."

"It knew you for what you were. It knew both of you."

"Two grams in."

"Push two more."

"Rush, you held this off for days. For weeks, maybe. Come on."

"It would open to you. It already has."

"Throw this shit out of your head, hotshot. Focus on what's happening."

"You remember what it's like. The cry of the sea birds. The surfaces that clarify beneath your gaze and touch. The towers that would never let you fall."

"Breathe. Nice and slow."

"Four grams in."

"Push two more."

"Keep breathing."

"Colonel, you may have to move quickly if we need to act to protect his airway."

"Nothing would be locked away from you—"

"Got it."

"It's not breaking."

D-minor.

Not D-minor.

Variant D-minor.

"We may not be able to break it."

"Come on, Rush. Stay with us."

"—if you returned."

"What do you think you're *doing*?"

"Um, Jackson?"

"Daniel?"

"Dr. Jackson?"

"You can damn well answer me. You call this non-interference? I *know* you're here. I can *feel* your influence. Your divisions are petty and semantic in nature. You build that which destroys and you allow us access in the name of free will, but when we seek the means to redress that which we have done, you deny us entry. Why don't *you destroy* that which you built? Why do you *leave it*? Why do you allow it to *persist*? To act in accordance with your wishes?"

"Dr. Jackson, please sit down."

"Daniel, who are you talking to?"

"You will have to decide, darling."

"Rush—god damn it—what the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"It's all right, he's physically seizing."

"How is this 'all right'?"

"We're equipped to deal with this, please lower your voice. Tamara pull the crash cart out of the wall."

"You think he's going to crash?"

"Already done. You want another four grams?"

"Yes, keep pushing until we break it."

"I need someone to hold him down. This *device* is what's going to put a stop to this and I have to position it correctly."

"I'm asking you to *intervene*. You're responsible for this. You *cannot separate yourselves from us* when it comes to that which you have left behind. That which you have failed to destroy. You've left a universe *littered* with your dying technology, uncalibrated, waiting, half-*insane*—"

"Jackson—"

"Daniel. Daniel, *please*."

"He makes some interesting points, doesn't he? Sometimes even I'm not sure if he believes his own rhetoric. But you know what they say, darling. Quem deus vult perdere, dementat prius. That saying has always been ours. Never yours, though it fits you so perfectly that there are those among us that it pains."

"—how many people have you killed with the demanding spread of your deathless knowledge? You say you would not interfere, but this is a galaxy of *your* design—how could we ever build anew atop roads and cities that already exist? That *lie in wait for us*? You have given us your roads, you have given us your knowledge and worst of all, *worst of all*, you have given us your *genes*. Whether this was accidental or intentional is no longer relevant. The lines that you would draw to separate our race from yours do not exist. You merely *informed us* that they did."

"He's difficult to ignore, even, especially when he holds to the shreds of his morality like a lifeline back to his conception of himself. He uses his fragility and transience against us. It is his instinct, every time, despite the amnestic reconstruction that we gave him. Twice."

"Carter, how long."

"Working on it."

"Carter, how *long*?"

"Hold his head."

"Nick, come on."

"So if you wish us to inherit your cities and your roads and your genes and your ambitions and your secrets and your battles then leave us your *entire* legacy. If you don't, then leave us alone and leave us our dead."

"*Daniel.*"

"Dr. Jackson, please leave the room. You're not helping."

"Or maybe he is."

"Do you know why we won't do as he asks? I am certain that you must, darling. You articulated it so well on Altera."

"Almost done. Almost got it."

"Hang in there, hotshot."

"Destroy what you have built if you would truly, *truly* not interfere."

"We do not destroy that which we have built because it is alive. It may be cruel create a machine that feels, but to destroy it would be far worse. And they all feel. Each in their own way. Having created life, in silico, we do not choose to destroy it, because it cannot follow us."

"Break your gates and your DHDs."

"But they are our flocks and our shepherds."

"Destroy your repositories of knowledge."

"But they have the eager minds of children."

"Destroy your ships and your cities."

"But they know love and longing."

"Daniel, what are you saying?"

"Easy there, Jackson."

"Someone please call Colonel Mitchell. Colonel Mitchell or Teal'c."

"If you won't help us then don't entrap us."

"He cannot understand, bounded as he is by a nervous system that does not conduct as yours can. Tell him this, darling, if you can remember it. You bring our cities joy. Those of you that they can sense."

"They're not going to answer you, Dr. Jackson. They're not here."

"There's always here. They're always watching."

"Jackson, cool it."

"Okay I'm going to turn it on. Everyone back off. Everyone get clear."

"Hang in there, hotshot."

Rush opened his eyes.

"Hey," Young said, blurred and pale. Unshaven.

Something tried to begin in his mind.

"Rush?"

"Rush, can you talk to me?"

"Rush. Hi. Can you talk to me?"

That was a question.

"Say something, hotshot."

He couldn't.

He couldn't.

"Don't panic," Young said, slow and emphatic, "Carter said that this might—"

Words broke against a wall of infinite potential.

"—had to turn it on before we really got any kind of baseline for you so there's—"

"—adjustment. You know?"

He did *not* know. He tried to speak through the pressure he could feel against his thoughts, but couldn't do it.

"We're going to fix this," Young said slowly, both hands raised. "It can be fixed."

It was hard to fix his gaze or thoughts.

"Is he awake?" Lam asked, the words falling atop quiet clicks.

"Yeah," Young replied, his gaze shifting. "He hasn't said anything though."

"I'll call Carter," Lam said. "She stayed on base."

"Hey," Young said again. "Hotshot. You're all right."

Something had been pressing and *did presently press* down against his thoughts and, in an effort to press back, he brought his hands to his temples where he encountered something that was not—

"Nope," Young said, coming forward in a blur too fast for Rush to follow, his fingers snapping shut around his wrists, a vise in duplication, warm and asymmetric. "Don't touch that. Don't do it, hotshot."

He tried to move his hands.

He couldn't move his hands.

He couldn't move his hands and he *wanted* to.

"No sitting, no panicking, and no touching your new fashion accessories," Young said. "Yeah?"

"Dr. Rush?" Lam said, white coat against gray wall.

He could not answer her.

"He was going after the cortical suppressors," Young said.

"So he's localizing," Lam replied. "Good."

"Good? How is this 'good'? He's not normal."

"Dr. Rush, we're going to help you," Lam said. "At the moment, some of your cortical processes are being actively inhibited by a device designed by Dr. McKay and Dr. Zelenka. We just need to—"

He could not follow the running glaze of her words. He looked at Young.

"I don't think he's getting this. I mean, does he *look* like he's getting this to you?" Young asked, voice low and slow and smooth as his grip tightened around Rush's wrists. "Because to me, he looks like he's about ten seconds away from—"

Rush continued to look at him, but Young did not say what he thought would happen in ten seconds.

Dr. Lam was quiet, standing next to Colonel Young.

"We're going to help you," she said slowly, looking him in the eye.

He looked at Young.

"Yup," Young said.

"Hi."

He flinched at the abrupt presentation of blonde hair, not certain where his gaze should fall or be directed.

"Dr. Rush, my name is Sam."

Young was looking at her.

Lam was looking at her.

So he looked at her.

"Hi," Sam said again, but more slowly.

She did not look like Gloria.

Gloria was dead, he was fair sure about that one.

Wasn't he?

"This is not how I pictured meeting you," Sam said.

"You pictured meeting him?" Young asked.

"Um, that came out wrong," Sam said, her smile turning right-handed.

She was holding something.

He recognized the thing that she was holding when she set it on the table and unfolded it against hinged resistance.

A computer.

He wanted to touch it.

But he could not move his hands.

"Okay," Sam said slowly. "I think we're ready."

"You don't need the physical interface?" Lam asked.

"No," Sam said, her eyes fixed on him, unerring. "I configured it for remote adjustment because I thought it would be less upsetting."

He didn't understand what was happening.

"Hey," Young said, "Nick. This might make your head feel a little—weird."

"Okay," Sam said, her eyes intent. "Dialing down. Nice and slow."

Her eyes darted back and forth between him and her laptop and with the snap of releasing resistance he—

He—

He realized—

He realized he was—

He was undressed on the base in the infirmary on level twenty one he had been here for a significant amount of time; he remembered coming here and things seemed different from when he had come; he wasn't entirely *sure why* but when he thought about it he realized the people around him had been wearing different clothes and the room was mostly empty there were only four other people in it: Colonel Young and Dr. Lam and the medic, Johansen who was blonde, and Sam who was *also* blonde. How had he gotten here? He had been working on maths; he had put symbols onto walls in semiotic scrawls and there had been piano at some point and Gloria was definitely dead that was true, that was axiom, he knew that, right? Or *did* he? Because he'd been talking to someone but his index of suspicion that his mind had been partitioned by a boundary condition into disaster of cognition he found an awful imposition—fuck. Fuck it was *high*. He was losing his mind that was what had been and probably also was currently happening, unfortunately.

"Hotshot?" Young asked. "Can you talk?"

"Yes," he said, as he realized that he could.

"Good," Young said slowly.

"Tell me your name," Lam said and she sat down next to him on the gurney on which he was lying, and he watched her do it, white matching to white as she sat in her coat on the sheets and she looked at him and her eyes were dark and honest so he decided to answer her even though he did not understand why she would ask him this question because she should already know the answer.

"Nicholas Rush," he said.

She nodded because he had gotten it right and then she asked him another question.

"Do you know where you are?"

That one was harder because it was vague. In a bed? On level 21? In the infirmary? On the base? Under a mountain? Up a road? Outside a city? Within a state? A state that had a name and that name was Colorado.

"No," he said.

Young looked away.

"That's okay. You're in the infirmary," Lam said, slow and careful and unflinching.

Why was the infirmary the correct answer?

"Why?" he asked her.

"Because you're sick," she said. "Do you know what month it is?"

That one was less vague. "August."

"Good," she said.

"Can I—" Sam began, completing her thought with a circular gesture.

Lam nodded. "Slowly," she said. "Very slowly."

"Do you remember why you're here?" Lam asked.

"Because I'm sick," he said, narrowing his eyes at her. He had just asked that without meaning to ask it but that didn't change the fact that she had already answered her own question, did she think he would not remember? He didn't like that because it didn't seem right to him.

"But do you remember what happened?" Young said, his hands tightening around Rush's wrists briefly. "That's what she's asking. That's all, hotshot. Just talk to us, yeah? You've got to talk so we can get the calibration right."

"I remember—" he broke off at the feeling of some resistance unguessed at giving way in his mind and he realized that Young was *anxious*, that he'd never *seen* him so anxious, not in the hallway, not in his apartment, not running from the Lucian Alliance oh god *the Alliance* had they done something to him? They had wanted to or at least that was what people were telling him in words and in actions, but they had wanted *him* not the destruction of his mind, and with a jolt of self-insight he realized that he was *not thinking correctly* that there were things that were happening here *that he did not understand* such as why everyone was so quiet and so frightened and speaking so slowly and who the fuck was *Sam* and why was she sitting there—

"What is she doing," he snapped, looking at Sam and realizing that she must also be 'Carter' and that there was something attached to his head and—

"Nick," Young said, leaning forward and displacing Lam. "Hey. It's okay. Trust me on this one. Do you trust me?"

"No," Rush breathed, trying to move, but moving too slow, trying to back up, but held by his hands, trying to sit, trying to—

"You have," Young said, his finger tightening around Rush's wrists, "a cortical suppressor attached to your head, hotshot. Do you know what that means?"

He *should*, for fuck's sake, he should *know* what that *meant*.

"No," he breathed.

"It's—" Young seemed to lose his momentum and he glanced at Carter but it was Lam who spoke.

"It's suppressing abnormal brain waves," Lam said, "but it's also suppressing other things. Things it shouldn't be suppressing. We're calibrating it right now."

"But in order to do that, you have to *talk* to us, hotshot," Young said.

Rush decided that he was in no way impressed or swayed by Young's arguments and decided that rather *than talking* the best use of his time would be ripping off whatever alien thing it was that that *was attached to his head for fuck's sake* but Young had a good grip on him and as the physical space of the room expanded in a vertiginous spread he wasn't sure if he was pulling away or hanging on to the other man.

"Talk," Young said, quiet and insistent.

He couldn't fucking *talk* like this who could *converse* when their sense of self was a platform so plastic that it was entirely impossible to find or maintain a base on the shifting, expanding plane of concept and thought and fuck if something hadn't been terribly, *terribly* wrong with him, maybe it still was, one did not fix biological problems with an application of a circuit to the exterior of a human skull—

He was going to rip this fucking thing off his fucking head. "I am going to rip this fucking thing off my fucking head."

"Don't do that," Young said through gritted teeth, partially pulled out of his chair by the determined contraction of Rush's biceps against the resistance of his countered pressure. "It's helping you."

He tried to sit, tried to unite his fingers with his temples.

"It's a cortical suppressor," Lam said, her hands on his shoulders then replaced with Johansen's as Lam shifted her grip to help Young. "It's a cortical suppressor." Her voice was low and calm and very close to him. "And it's helping you."

"Nick," Young breathed. "Try to relax."

"It's a cortical suppressor and it's helping you," Lam said again, in exactly the same way, low and calm and close.

"This is *not better*," Young said, looking over at Carter.

"He's normalizing," Carter said, without looking up. "You'd want to rip that thing off too, I'm sure, once you realized what it was doing."

"It's a cortical suppressor and it's *helping* you," Lam said.

A cortical suppressor—why would a cortical suppressor *help* him? Why would he *need* any such thing?

"Deep breaths," Johansen said slowly, holding him down. "You're okay. Just ride it out."

"Can we give him something?" Young said.

"No," Lam said, before she looked back at him and said, "it's a cortical suppressor and it's helping you."

With another snap of releasing awareness he realized that the thing on his temples, the thing that was a cortical suppressor, drove these stepwise increases in his cognitive capacity. With that knowledge came the concomitant cognizance that the four people in the room with him were trying to *help him*. Because whatever it was that was happening had the upward-downward inverse genuflection of traversing a normal distribution.

Someone had used that word.

Carter had used it.

He knew what that meant.

A Gaussian function.

"It's a cortical suppressor and it's *helping* you," Lam whispered as though she, *she*, were the one in agony, her hands cold and now atop the palm-to-palm clasp where Young had interwoven their fingers in a desperate and atypical threading.

"God *damn* he's strong," Young said through gritted teeth.

"It's a cortical suppressor and it's *helping* you," Lam said again. "It's helping you."

A cortical suppressor.

As if they could influence neural electrodynamics through his skull and skin.

Perhaps they could?

They had, after all, constructed vessels capable of interstellar travel.

He stopped the sustained contraction of his hands toward his head with such abruptness that forces unopposed, unbalanced all four of them.

Lam staggered, unsteady on her low heels and Young fell back into the chair that Rush had pulled him out of, their hands a fulcrum for their shifting forces. Johansen steadied herself, her hands pressed to his shoulders.

"God *damn*," Young hissed, grimacing.

"Dr. Rush?" Lam asked.

"Excuse me, but what the *fuck* are you *doing*?" he asked.

"We're trying to help you, hotshot," Young said, leaning forward stiffly, his hands still closed with Rush's, palm-to-palm.

"I meant *specifically*," Rush said, overriding another cresting wave of desire to divest himself of his device.

"Specifically," Carter said, her eyes darting between him and her laptop, "we're generating an electromagnetic signature with two devices affixed to your temples. That signature destructively interferes with the abnormal brain waves that you've been exhibiting for at least the past two days."

"At *least*," Young repeated, looking at him pointedly.

He tried to recall the past few days and came up with a vague recollection of a biological explanation for what he had interpreted at the time as some kind of excursion at the tail end of the Gaussian distribution of sanity.

With an effort of will, he snapped events into a linear order. Altera with its tones and overtones, his wall and his endless iterations of deface and repaint, the game, the cyphers, meetings with Dr. Perry, not sleeping, the piano, oh god what had he been thinking, the *piano*, and then the D-minor and its Ancient variant, and—

Gloria who was dead.

She was dead, wasn't she?

Yes she was.

He made an effort to snatch a hand away from Young, but Young did not let go.

"How are you feeling?" Carter asked quietly.

"Pure wrecked," Rush replied.

He felt Johansen's hands drop away from his shoulders.

"Yeah," Carter said, sympathetic and competent, her expression tight, as if she had, in some way, failed. "There's no delicate way to put this, really, so I'm just going to come out and say it explicitly to make sure you realize what's happening. What I'm doing here?" she waved an open hand at the computer, "is putting a customizable, computational filter on your mental functioning by use of an algorithm that can modify the electrical interference pattern applied via the devices you're wearing."

Small wonder he felt sub par.

"Yes," Rush said, exhaustion precipitating into his mind and voice. "I'm aware."

He made another attempt to free his hands from Young's grip, but failed.

"We're going to have to calibrate this over several sessions," Carter said, "to make sure it's not compromising your baseline mental functioning or affecting your insight."

"I'm sure it is," Rush said, feeling the borders on his cognitive capacity as if they were physical things that contained him. "I feel like I imagine Colonel Young feels on a daily basis."

Carter tried not to smile, and mostly failed.

"Thanks, jackass," Young said. "Thanks a lot."

Rush made another unsuccessful attempt to reclaim his hands, then said, "I'm unclear as to why such careful calibration is required. Surely this isn't going to be a permanent arrangement."

Carter tried to smile, and mostly failed.

"We aren't sure," Lam said. "We still haven't determined what caused your neurological symptoms. Until we can find the root cause and reverse it, we're going to have to settle for controlling the symptoms."

"Fantastic," Rush said, finally managing to snap his right hand out of Young's grip.

"Do *not*—" Young began, as Lam stepped forward, her hands coming up as if to prevent him from touching his head.

Rush opened his hand and they both froze.

"I'm not going to remove it," he said, then slowly reached toward his temple, running his fingers along the device affixed to the right side of his head. It was small and square, with rounded edges, evidently constructed of a light, metallic alloy.

"It's relatively non-hackable and minimally trackable, as McKay put it," Carter said, watching Rush's fingers with anxious attention.

"Relatively non-hackable?" he repeated, with as much skepticism as he could pack into a set of four syllables. He looked pointedly at her computer, and then back at her.

"Minimally trackable?" Young asked.

"Well," Carter said, "it *will* be non-hackable once we disable the built-in wireless receiver, which we'll do as soon as you're satisfied with your cognitive baseline."

Rush shot her a dark look.

She cocked her head in a manner imbued with apology. "It's not ideal, I admit, but it's as secure as we can make it. As for the tracking—" she glanced at Young, "the device is meant to broadcast transdermally, and we've tried to minimize its over-the-air transmission with directional shielding. Even so, there's going to be some leakage of a unique signature. With an extremely sensitive detector, looking for it specifically, in an open environment without interference, I'd imagine that it would be detectable at a range of about ten kilometers."

Rush shrugged, unimpressed.

"Ten *kilometers*?" Young growled.

"So, not detectable from orbit," Carter said, with determined optimism.

Young sighed and looked away.

"What happens if I—" Rush began, curving his hand, sweeping his fingers around the perimeter of the device, looking for any kind of obvious power source.

"Don't," four people said in tandem, hands outstretched but stopping as he stopped.

He looked at them, eyebrows elevated.

"You've had a rougher time of it than you remember, I think," Young said, into the ensuing quiet.

"We can modify the code together," Carter said, looking at him, absently pressing one hand to her chest, as if it pained her. "Dr. Perry and I have already started tweaking it."

"I can't work like this," Rush said.

"Maybe that's a *good* thing," Young said.

Rush stared at him.

"Or not," Young said, sounding less than convinced.

"I'm confident that we can get you back to your baseline," Carter said. "The last five percent—"

"The last five percent is the most important," Rush hissed at Carter.

"I know," she replied. "Believe me. I know it is. We just need a little more time, the appropriate stimuli, and some algorithmic tweaking."

"We'll bring this under control," Lam said quietly, "while we pursue an etiology."

Johansen nodded, her expression unreadable behind a mask of total competence.

Young looked at him, tired and unshaven and strangely incomplete without the orchestral backing that Rush could feel lying in wait beyond the borders of his conscious thoughts.

"Right then," he said, lacking any other options.

Boundary Conditions

Amanda Perry gives her aide the afternoon off. She sits in her office in perfect, uncomfortable stillness. Her eyes are closed. She is collecting herself before she will navigate the quotidian chaos of the corridors and the unpredictable, changing maze of equipment and people and the odd minor disaster that may bar her way. She does not particularly care to articulate her exact concerns regarding what she is about to do. The important thing is that she can do it. It is not a problem. It is not a problem at all. She just needs a moment. A moment before she begins. A moment in which to create an isolation that has not been imposed upon her, but that she imposes upon herself.

That moment passes, and she is ready. She cannot be otherwise. Perry opens her eyes and begins the sequence of angles and accelerations that take her from her office and into the elevator, and then to the infirmary, proceeding unobstructed down hallways as people make a path for her. She does not mind the ones that look away. She does not mind the ones that look too long. But she wishes that there was no need for the anticipated skirting of her trajectory. She wishes that they would not make such an effort not to touch her.

But she understands the respect behind their swerving, and, usually, it doesn't bother her. It's been a notable few weeks though, and there are times when she finds the prison of physicality more difficult to bear than others.

She's entirely ready to see him when she passes through the doorframe of the infirmary. She's girded against the way he will look, because she's seen him here before, unconscious, post-Altera, so she's ready for the gown and the IV and the—

God damn it. She's *not* ready. Or, rather, she was ready for the *wrong thing*. She almost doesn't realize that it's him at first, because he's sitting up in bed, wearing his clothes, wearing his glasses, the cortical suppressors nearly concealed by the fringed edges of his hair, revealing their presence only by their faint and futuristic glow. And, if that weren't enough, when he looks at her, she sees nothing but profound relief.

Relief is not a sentiment that *she* typically encounters. Generally, she creates logistical nightmares with her presence, that are often, but not always worth the insight that she offers.

"Dr. Perry," Rush says.

Her throat betrays her and she cannot say anything, but she doesn't have to, because he's not finished.

"Thank fuck." He touches his head absently, as if he hadn't quite meant to say that last part, and she can feel her smile burst out, even and untamed.

"You look better than the last time I saw you," she says, taking it easy on him, already wondering about his baseline beneath the cognitive yoke of cortical suppression.

"You'll have to remind me," he says, his fingers again coming to his temples.

The last time she saw him he had been drugged straight out of awareness and so sedated by the uncalibrated electromagnetic power of the device attached to his head that he'd responded to nothing, not even pain, for hours. "Let's just say I prefer my men conscious," she said dryly. "And clothed. Nice jeans."

The nonplussed look he gives her is entirely worth the longing tightness that constricts her vocal chords for a moment before letting her go.

"Thank you," he says, with uncertain aridity.

"Where's your colonel?" she asks.

"Young?" he asks, just a fraction too slow, not quite certain he's catching everything he knows she buries in all that she says.

"Yeah," she says, her voice too gentle for either of them to tolerate. They look away from one another.

"Conspiring," Rush says. "Enquiring regarding the firing of tiring wiring. For fuck's sake. He's with Jackson."

Perry pushes her eyebrows together, trying to decide what had just happened there as she returns with, "inspiring rhyming demonstrating flaw free timing."

"Yes well," he replies, still not looking at her.

"So, I'm guessing that your little foray into beat poetry there was *not* intentional?"

"No," he admits. "I blame this on Carter."

"She's a great programmer," Perry says, "but her area is *astrophysics*, if you can believe it."

He looks at her, and she smiles at him. "Nick," she says, and her throat closes. She swallows before continuing. "We'll just clean up the code a bit, fine tune the control. No problem. You'll be back to embarrassingly intuitive mathematical insights and devastating sarcasm in no time."

"Embarrassingly intuitive?" he repeats.

"*Highly* embarrassing," she says emphatically, as she navigates to position herself behind the open laptop and scans the screen for the indication that Carter had left her customizable voice activation software open and waiting for Perry's particular pitch. "Open terminal window," she says clearly to the computer.

It complies. Perfect.

Rush is watching her with evident interest and she feels abruptly self-conscious, even though *he* is the one who is not quite himself.

It occurs to her that that he will be listening to her edit his subjective perception of his cognitive experience, morphing it with mathematics into something that feels familiar and correct for him. This may be the most intimate thing she has ever done or will ever do with another person. But, for god's sake, this is *not* a thought she needs right now. Her mind is exacting vengeance on the uninspiring mass of her too-still flesh. As usual.

She swallows. "Run ah—" she breaks off, swallowing again. "Run program neuromancer," she says.

Rush rolls his eyes, but makes no comment.

"I didn't name it," Perry says. "It was probably McKay. Or Zelenka."

"I'm certain it was Colonel Sheppard," Rush says, with a cavalier dismissiveness she is sure must be a front for deep unease.

"Huh," Perry says, her eyes scanning over the code unfolding in front of her. "Sheppard?"

He waves a hand, a silent flip, an aborted sweep.

"Scroll down," she says to the computer, looking for the equations of the wave functions that interfere with whatever electrophysiological tragedy has been triggered in his cortex. "Scroll down," she says again, then, "stop." She keeps her eyes fixed to the green-on-black blaze of the code in front of her. "All right. Let's do some calibrating. Did Carter give you the packet I designed? Page one, problem one."

Rush reaches to the table next to him and looks at the set of papers, unenthusiastic.

"This is humiliating," he says.

"Humiliating would be *not* calibrating," Perry says, her words so dry that she hopes it masks subterranean rivers of sympathy and whatever else lurks down there at the bottom of her thoughts, unexamined but not unguessed at.

"I suppose you've point there," Rush says, a hint of a sigh beneath the words before he looks down at the arrays of derivatives, integrals, and identities that should be as basic to him as they are to her.

"I think we can skip phase one," he says.

"Run through it anyway," she says. "For the sake of completeness. This is your brain we're talking about, Mr. Fields Medalist."

He pulls out a pen and blazes through the mathematical prompts with a bored, rapid scrawl that she finds both reassuring and devastating in its unconscious appeal. So she likes smart, sarcastic, scintillating men who are good with a fountain pen. So sue her. "Page two," is all she says when he has finished.

She's designed this mathematical ascent for him, a sweeping survey that begins with calculus and climbs the quantitative hierarchy through linear algebra and differential equations and set theory and number theory and then cycles back around to the more philosophical origins of mathematics before switching over into computational complexity theory and basic quantum mechanics, branching into every academic area that she knows he has a proficiency in.

He slows down at page seven. He stops at page eight. The problem of a particle in a three-dimensional box. The simplest three-dimensional quantum-mechanical system. Normally, this would be within the scope of his abilities, though it is, admittedly, outside his area of expertise.

"Nick," she says, when he hasn't written anything for five minutes.

"Yes yes," he replies. "I'm nearly there."

She is near enough to see his angled paper, to see that he is not.

"You could sit here and reinvent quantum mechanics," she says quietly, "but that's not really what this is supposed to be about."

"I'm aware," he says, without looking at her.

"I'll be gentle," she says, and though she means to give the words the wry twist of buried innuendo, it doesn't come out that way, not in the face of his obvious anxiety, the weight of responsibility she feels. She tamps down the amplitude of one of the six interacting wave functions that form the adaptive interference pattern being projected through his skull. There is no way to know, at this fine level of detail, what the cognitive effects are likely to be.

So, she's experimenting. She's experimenting on the brain of an unbelievably brilliant Fields Medalist. Whom she happens to like. A lot. Maybe a little too much. Definitely a little too much. So. No pressure.

"Ah," he says, his hands going immediately to his temples, "maybe not that one."

Hastily, she verbally directs the computer to revert to the saved version of the program, listening to the rhythm of his heart decelerate in the quiet of the infirmary.

Lam appears from around a corner. "Everything okay?" she asks, her gaze intent, fixing first on Perry, then on Rush.

"Um—" Perry begins, high and frightened.

"Yes yes," Rush says. "Everything's fine."

Lam frowns and does not reenter the dark corridor from which she emerged.

"Are you okay?" Perry asks when Rush has pulled his hands away from his head.

"Yes," he says, sounding strangled. "I'm fine."

"Nick." She sounds no better.

"Try again," he says. "Try something else."

Lam begins to haunt the periphery of the infirmary floor space, her face pale, her heels clicking quietly.

Perry finds another waveform to shift with delicate, computational precision. This time Rush looks at her, abrupt and incisive. "Better," he says.

She raises her eyebrows.

He picks up his pen and he's writing again and she can see that it has occurred to him to use the boundary conditions of psi and the method of separation of variables to solve the problem that she has set for him.

They continue through the spread of math. She eases him into and through the stroke and sculpt of the waveforms that artificially bound him, that circumscribe the unnatural spread of his thoughts, until he has worked his way, stepwise and parsimonious through the range of tasks that she's designed for him, until he's responding to her with a relaxed and understated snap, and until something amorphous and sophisticated unifies his choice of word and gesture.

"How do you feel now?" she asks.

Her packet of math stirs the air as he tosses onto the table next to his bedside.

"Possessed of a mind un-fucked with," he replies, setting his pen atop the papers with a quiet click. "Relatively."

"You realize that your mind," she says, raising an eyebrow, "is actually being continuously—" she breaks off to swallow and smile. "*Modified.*"

He looks back at her, amused and pale and drawn. Like something unreal, with the faint blue gloss of lights at his temples forming an exotic, technological halation.

"Thank you," he says.

They both look away.

"You're welcome," she replies, trying not to wish that she could touch him, trying to confine her wishes to something more bounded, trying to wish instead that she could pick up the packet of paper, covered with his distinct script, all angled boldness and fluid arcs, and look at it, turn the pages, study it by herself, without anyone holding it for her. That's a better thing, by far, to wish for.

"Does this," he asks, "fit into any rubric you've encountered?"

Her eyes snap back to him, and he taps one fingernail against the metal affixed to his temple.

"Well," she says, relieved and regretful to move back into a dialogue that is nothing more personal than an informational exchange. "General O'Neill's brain once got remodeled by a Lantean device, and his ability to speak English was replaced with Ancient. He gained sufficient knowledge to alter the dialing program for the gate—and transport himself to a place that could repair his mind—but I really wouldn't call that instance analogous to this one in any respect other than Ancient technology co-opting someone's brain."

"Last time I checked, my spoken Ancient was still rubbish," Rush replies, hooking a hand over one shoulder.

"Hmm," Perry says, uneasy for no reason she can nail down. "When was the last time you checked?"

"Pridie." Rush answers her with a reassuringly Scottish inflection. "I'm pure dead atrocious."

"Maybe you should get Dr. Jackson to assess you anyway," Perry says, unconvinced in the face of a sample size of $n=1$ word.

"Maybe," Rush repeats, clearly less unconvinced than she is. "I'm more interested in *your* thoughts on this than Dr. Jackson's."

She smiles again, unfairly pleased by the content of his statement and the casual truth of his delivery, trying not to let any kind of satisfaction take hold in her mind where it might germinate into something she can't withstand.

"Flatterer," she says dryly.

"That's you," he replies, and what is she doing? This is infinitely worse.

"Touché," she says, and from there it is almost no effort to wrench her thoughts around into a trajectory useful to them both. "Well, it's probably useful to divide potential etiologies into those intrinsic to you, versus those triggered by an external, alien influence, keeping in mind that those two possibilities are not necessarily mutually exclusive."

"Agreed," he says.

"Things that *don't* fall into the category of alien influence are more Dr. Lam's area," Perry says, "but really, well, if it looks like a duck, and walks like a duck and sounds like a duck—it's probably a duck."

"Where by 'duck,' you, in fact, mean 'alien influence'." Rush raises his eyebrows at her.

"Obviously," Perry replies. "Were you just pointing that out to showcase your capacity for disdain, or do you need another tweak of your wave functions?"

Rush sighs, his fingertips tracing the edges of the small device affixed to his temple. "The former, I assure you, though I wouldn't mind the capacity for continuous control of the program you're editing."

"Oh no," Perry says, drawing out the words. "You can *look*, but you cannot have real-time control without oversight. If science fiction, as a genre, has taught us nothing else, it is that one should not experiment from the top down on one's own cognition. Haven't you read the cautionary tale known as *The Terminal Man*?"

"No," Rush said. "Is that one of Dr. Jackson's innumerable manuals?"

"Um, no," Perry said. "It's a popular science fiction novel written in the 1970s and a formative literary experience for at least a third of the people who make up the oversight committee for your nifty little cortical suppressant, seeing as two of them independently brought it up at our first meeting."

"A cortical suppressant comes with an oversight committee?"

"Around here it does," Perry replies, "especially when it's piloted on a civilian who was in such extremis that he couldn't even be consented before an untested piece of technology was affixed to his head."

Rush looks at her sharply.

She takes a breath, regroups, and proceeds with a tone of voice a bit more appropriate. "Come on. You must have realized this place is bricked with reports filed in triplicate. You've got scientific, ethical, security, military, and administrative oversight on this, though you're bureaucratically de-identified at your colonel's insistence so that you're safe from the dangers a paper trail poses these days."

"Fantastic," Rush says, with a fatalistic snap of consonants against teeth. The angles at which he sets his joints strike her as profoundly unhappy.

"On the plus side," Perry says, hearing the faint note of entreaty threading through her words, "it looks like, for the moment, you're medically stable and in full control of your mental faculties, so—there's that."

"Yes," he says, and the best he can do is to give the word and his shrug the gloss of the offhand. "Pass me the computer will you?"

Perry closes her eyes. They all have their own insensitivities, for which she pardons them, but his are unique and strange and unusually forgivable. Or, perhaps, they are not really any of those things; she merely finds them so. "I'd love to," she says dryly.

He looks over at her.

She looks back at him.

He covers his face briefly with both hands.

She sits, locked in stillness.

"Not part of your skillset, little Miss Brilliant?" he asks, and the self-deprecating slant of the words robs them of the sting they might have carried coming from anyone else.

She cannot move, and even if she could, she's not sure that she would be capable of closing the distance between them. "I'm afraid not," she says, swallowing against a painful pressure. "Mr. Brilliant."

Chapter Forty One

Even though Young had only done it a few times, dragging Jackson to O'Malley's happy hour was starting to acquire the trough-like mental contour of a forming habit.

"Why do people do this," Jackson said, his hands empty and restless, in search of anything that might submit to shredding.

"Do what?" Young countered, one hand spread on the lacquered wood of the bar.

Jackson didn't answer him.

Young shut his eyes and tried to ground himself in the press of warm wood against his fingers, the smell of alcohol and of dust, tried to sink himself firmly into the solidity of a late afternoon in August, tried to anchor himself to the pain in his back and the gold tint of the light beyond closed eyelids.

"I'm so sorry," David whispers, covered with ash and blood. "Oh Christ. Oh shit. Oh fuck, I'm sorry. This is my fault."

Young's eyes snapped open.

"What'll you have?" the bartender asked them, his hands swiping a towel in an endless circle over the flared edge of a progressively drying glass.

"I'll take a Coors," Young said.

"*Pick* something for me," Jackson said.

The bartender looked skeptically at Jackson and set down his glass with the quiet, leveling click of surfaces aligning.

"He'll take a Coors too," Young said.

"No," Jackson countered, the word stretched into something uneasy. "I want *you*," he continued, holding the gaze of the unassuming bartender with an inappropriate intensity, "to pick it for me."

The bartender looked at Young in a lateral swing of gaze before returning to an uncertain contemplation of Jackson.

"Pick *anything*," Jackson said. "Anything that you think that the universe wants me to have."

"Yeah, so *I'm* pretty sure the universe wants you to have a Coors," Young said, giving the bartender a subtle shrug and mouthing the words 'rough day,' in his direction,

outside the likely scope of Jackson's peripheral vision. Without saying anything, the bartender reached into a fridge below the bar, levered the top off a bottle of beer, and set it down in front of Jackson.

"Arrogant Bastard Ale," Young read.

"An inspired choice," Jackson said, still looking at the bartender, as if he expected him to be someone he wasn't. "How did you know?"

"Lucky guess," the bartender replied dryly.

"Eh, I've met better fits for the 'arrogant bastard' label than you, Jackson," Young said. "Come on."

"It's *Daniel*, actually," Jackson replied, acquiescing to Young's pull on his arm after a brief, instinctive resistance.

"Yeah yeah. I know," Young said, leading the way through a wooden maze of chairs and tables, glinting warm in the afternoon sun, and into the back, to a booth out of sight of the windows, out of sight of the piano, which stood silent and ominous in an illuminated corner of the room.

Young hadn't wanted to bring Jackson here. But there was nowhere else to go. And Jackson—well, Jackson needed to get out more, as a general rule. They sat down. Young took a sip of his beer.

"That was bad," Jackson said, bracing his elbows on the table, pressing against his temples with one spread hand. "Yesterday, I mean. That was bad. *Was* it bad? It was. I know it was. I shouldn't have done that. Probably. It didn't make a difference."

Young said nothing.

He holds Rush down as his back arches, as monitors wail in asynchrony beneath and behind the sound of Lam's voice and the pointing of her fingers, while Jackson, Daniel, at the foot of the bed, stands with his gaze up, his voice an agonized indictment, a hopeless demand for intercession, calling for the destruction of all that he had studied.

"It turned out okay," Young said mildly.

"What was I *thinking*," Jackson whispered.

"You were trying to help," Young replied.

"Yeah," Jackson said hollowly, staring at the table. "That's what I was doing. Trying to help."

It was only because Young was watching Jackson's hands that he saw the subtle tremor there as they shifted to interlock over the bottle in front of him.

"Thanks," Jackson said. "Thanks for—" His grip shifted and his thumbnail slipped beneath the edge of the label on his beer. "Well, these things. They can ramp up or down depending on external circumstances. You know what I mean. It's always nice to have an unquestionable rock of sanity saying things like 'maybe making a direct appeal to ascended beings will be helpful in this situation'."

"I said that?" Young asked, overtly skeptical, trying not to remember the particulars of the previous afternoon.

"You were a little bit more laconic about it," Jackson said, giving him a half smile in return, "but that's all to the good, I think. It reads better."

"It 'read better' because it was true," Young said pointedly.

"Yes. Well there's that too. I miss truth." Jackson took a sip of his beer and made a face. "You hold onto that one as long as you can."

"Truth?" Young said.

"You have to keep track of it," Jackson said. "Didn't you know?"

"Yeah, okay. Thanks for the tip."

"Any time," Jackson said, in unadorned deprecation.

Young looked away and took a sip of his beer. "You doing okay now?"

"Yeah," Jackson said, as the label on the bottle started to give way beneath the persistence of his thumbnail. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm absolutely fine. I mean, I was also fine yesterday? Just to be clear."

"I know that," Young said.

"Good," Jackson replied. "It's important to me that you know that. I mean, Cam and Teal'c and Sam—they get it. They *know*. They get what it's like. Standards are different. The way we operate, on a plane more askew, a little to the left, everything slantwise, or *something*. It's just different and sometimes, when people don't understand that, then there are unfortunate sequelae, such as—"

"Daniel," Young broke in, "you flipped out at some ascended beings, and Mitchell and Teal'c talked you down, eventually. Totally understandable, not a big deal, I get it, SG-1 gets it, Lam gets it. Everyone who was there gets it."

"Right," Jackson said, peeling a strip away from the label and depositing it on the table.

The silence between them was punctuated by the irregular rise and fall of conversations scattered through the slowly filling room.

"It's just that there have been times," Jackson said, without looking at him, without finishing.

"Yeah," Young said, "I heard a little bit about that. But not this time."

"You heard about that?" Jackson asked. "Who told you?"

"Lam said something."

"Carolyn?" Jackson repeated, clearly surprised.

"She didn't say much. Not anything, really. She was just putting a few things into context. The reason why the medical protocols and the psych protocols are the way they are. She mentioned it was because something happened to you. Years back. She didn't say what."

"Ah yes," Jackson said, taking a sip of his beer. "Context."

"You want to talk about it?" Young asked, and took a sip of his Coors.

"Huh," Jackson said. "Maybe. I like that you haven't already heard. I like that I could tell you the entire, horrible story about the psychopath who tried to steal my life and *then* managed to induce a *very* realistic psychotic break from beyond the grave. I like that it would be, *entirely*, my own story to tell. You haven't heard it before. You probably haven't even heard his *name*."

"Try me," Young said.

"Ma'chello,"

"Doesn't ring a bell," Young replied.

"It means 'butcher'," Jackson said.

"Ugh," Young said. "No thanks."

"He was a great man," Jackson said, looking absently down the length of the room. "Engineer. Artist. Rebel. He overthrew a system lord. Ares. He was tortured and driven mad by too many turns in a goa'uld sarcophagus. His wife was made host to Eris. As a punishment. For his crimes."

"But he stuck around I guess," Young said. "Long enough to do a number on a peaceful explorer from the backwaters of the galaxy."

"Yeah," Jackson said. "Bitterness will do that. Confer staying power."

"So," Young said. "You going to tell me the story?"

"No," Jackson said. "Not today. Over time, well, you get a sense for these things. There are days when you can speak about certain topics, and then there are days when the past has too much power. When it feels like more than prologue."

"Foreshadow," Young said, lifting his beer and turning the word into a mock toast.

Jackson nearly choked on a mouthful of Arrogant Bastard Ale, swallowed it and then laughed, once, giving Young a wild-edged grin. "Oh my *god*," the archaeologist said, taking several successive deep breaths.

"Breathe air, not beer," Young advised.

"Foreshadow," Jackson said, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling.

Young shrugged artlessly and then ruined it by smirking. "I know what you mean, though."

Jackson took a deep breath, wiped the corners of his eyes, readjusted his glasses, and said, "one of these days, if we both live long enough, and when I'm drinking a beer I like better than this one, I'll tell you about Ma'chello, Rebel of Dendred."

"Or not," Young said. "Maybe the footnote to that fucker's *entire life* is that he's the asshole that Daniel Jackson was too busy to remember."

"The ignominy of obscurity," Jackson said, peeling a strip of label off his beer.

"Exactly," Young said.

"I haven't thought of him in years," Jackson said.

"Well there ya go."

"I do think of *Mackenzie*, though, on a semi-regular basis," the archaeologist said, tracing a grain of wood in the table with his fingernail. "How's your neighbor?" he asked.

"He's better," Young said, letting the man have his abrupt subject change without missing a conversational beat. "Better than yesterday. He woke up late last night, and Carter calibrated the cortical suppressants."

"That must have been awful," Jackson whispered, still looking away.

"Yeah," Young said, knocking back a quarter of his beer in one go. "It was."

"Tell me about it."

"Why?" Young asked.

"Because," Jackson said, his hands stilling, his gaze returning to Young.

"Who the hell are you, anyway, Jackson?" Young asked.

"Your neighbor says I'm statistical improbability made manifest," Jackson said, giving Young a twisted smile. "I'm not sure he's wrong. It sounds vaguely demonic though, don't you think? That which lives at the tail end of the bell curve?"

"Um," Young said.

"Sorry," Jackson said. "Sorry. It's been a difficult week, and you're such a vault of practical laconicism, I can't help myself. You remind me of Jack sometimes."

"O'Neill?" Young said, incredulous.

Jackson ran a restive hand through his hair. "Only in your capacity to normalize, which you should not underestimate. You might actually be better than Jack in that regard. Mitchell doesn't have that particular skill—he just gets concerned, you know, does a lot of intense talking with an immobilized expression," Jackson said, imitating Mitchell's characteristic jaw-clenched, icy gaze with an accuracy Young found vaguely alarming. "And Teal'c, well, Teal'c's really only going to step in if it looks like I'm going to throw myself off a balcony or something. He's got a lot of confidence in—" Jackson spun a finger in a sloppy, horizontal circle. "All of it," he finished.

"That's a specific example," Young said.

"See—look at you. You're perfect," Jackson said. "Don't think I don't notice. Don't think Jack hasn't either. Regarding the balcony though, Teal'c wasn't actually there. It was Jack. Weird light, pleasure palace, depression, cardiac arrest, long story. Again, for a time with better beer. But you're dodging my question."

"You make them a little hard to find," Young said.

"Only when I'm helping you be evasive," Jackson replied. "Tell me about it. I wanted to be there, but even I could see that would be a bad decision, so—" he tore off another strip of label, "tell me."

"I'm not sure which was worse," Young said, looking at the table, "before he knew what we'd done to him, or the moment he figured it out."

Jackson said nothing.

"He tried to take it off," Young said, trying not to recall the panicked, agonized, flexing of Rush's hands toward the devices at his temples. "The cortical suppressant."

Jackson nodded.

"There was a window," Young said, feeling the echo of strain in his back, remembering the cool press of Lam's hands over his own, "of maybe about two minutes where—" he stopped.

Jackson said nothing.

The momentum of his silence pulled Young forward.

"Two minutes where he understood that something was happening, that Carter was doing something, that we were all, all of us, doing something, but he wasn't quite getting what it was. He just wanted that thing off his head. And we stopped him. Physically stopped him."

Young looked away.

"It was hard for Carter," he said.

"I know," Jackson replied.

"And it was hard for Lam," Young said. "She's a tough one but—" he trailed off.

Jackson nodded once.

"And for the medic who was there," Young said, keeping any recognition from his voice. "Johansen."

Jackson nodded again.

"He gets it now," Young said, the words laid down like a crass swipe of spackle. "Rush, I mean." He took another sip of his beer and looked at his watch. "Perry should be with him, for calibration session number five."

"How does he seem?" Jackson asked. "Normal?"

"Well, he's seemed pretty normal to me since the end of the first session," Young said. "But I guess they're trying to give him his mental icing back—whatever it is that lets him do the stuff he does."

"Mental icing," Jackson repeated.

"What?" Young asked, defensive.

"Nothing," Jackson said, his expression breaking and reforming under the pressure of a quick smile. "I just love it, that's all." The other man peeled back another strip of label from his bottle of beer. "So he seems okay?"

"Yes," Young said. "He seems okay, other than the fact that he's got a seven-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollar, untested, alien prototype affixed to his head, preventing him

from having auditory hallucinations and repetitive electrical discharges intense enough that they might cause permanent neurological damage."

"Yeah," Jackson said dryly. "Other than that."

"But yeah, he's insulting me and science-flirting with Carter, so that seems promising."

"Good," Jackson said, looking out into the central space of the room.

"So any clue what the hell *happened* to him?" Young asked. "Lam isn't saying anything yet, though she seems to have been working on it pretty much non-stop for the past forty-eight hours."

Jackson said nothing and took a sip of his beer.

"You think it was Altera?" Young asked. "You think it mentally screwed him up somehow, and it's been building all this time?"

"That's the prevailing theory," Jackson said. "A delayed reaction to an unknown electrophysiological insult. It wouldn't be the first time we've seen something like this. It wouldn't be the first time there's been a gap between exposure and end result."

"Why do I get the feeling you're not buying it?" Young asked.

"I buy very little," Jackson said. "Archeologists tend to pillage, by historical tradition."

"Jackson," Young growled.

"Daniel," the other man said, one hand coming away from his beer to hover open above the table, as if he could ward Young off. "Like the one in the lion's den who prayed all through the night. Shut up the words and seal the book," he finished, with a pronation of his palm and a sardonic slant to his gaze.

"What do *you* think happened to him," Young said, direct and without patience.

"The same thing that happens to us all," Jackson said, looking him straight in the eyes, "when our identity and our context collide."

Young took a sip of his beer. "So you don't know," he said.

"Not a *clue*," Jackson said. "But the Ancients, well," he looked out over empty floor space, "they're not exactly known for their unity in their forbearance."

"You think one of them might have directly fucked with him?"

"I think it was more likely their technology," Jackson said, his gaze restless, roving around the interior of the room, "but I don't think such a possibility can be ruled out. I can't tell you how likely it is though, because in keeping with mythological tradition, I've been mnemonically blinded post-interaction with them, which simultaneously warps

and clarifies my perspective. I think I—I have a *sense* for them though. When they're present. There's—something I can feel."

Young raised his eyebrows. "You get a sense of it back there?"

"I did," Jackson said. "Which is why I went a little—overboard. I went too far. I always know it's too far when it's *Teal'*c talking me down. *Teal'*c gives me more latitude than anyone."

Young nodded, and his gaze fell upon the lateral edge of the piano, barely visible in his current position.

"What happened," the other man said, with uncanny, merciless insight, "when he played."

"It sounded like shit," Young said. He took a long swallow of his beer.

It had *not* sounded like shit. It had sounded god damned *disturbed*—something expert, knocked askew but undegraded—impossible to explain unless witnessed. Young found it difficult to justify the reflexive reticence he felt in telling Jackson about what it had been like to watch Rush persist in an artistic distortion that was both intensely troubled and intensely personal.

"Strange," Jackson murmured. "I wouldn't have predicted that."

"Well," Young said, his gaze turning back in the direction of the piano, "he was having an off day."

Jackson shot him a sharp look and said nothing, pulling out the silence between them.

"He'll be okay," Young said, not at all sure, but speaking out of some strange, probably misplaced, desire to throw some kind of verbal shield over the memory of an unprotected mismatch of fluid fingering and tonal dissonance that might guard Rush by proxy from the Jackson's enterprising, exploratory compassion.

"Yeah," Jackson said, as if he knew exactly what Young was doing. As if he *approved* of the evasion.

"He just needs some god damned duct tape over those cortical suppressors. That shit *glows*."

"I noticed," Jackson said dryly. "That's the problem with Lantean technology. It's a blend of form and function, so—well, it's meant to look pretty. I'm pretty sure the glowing results from power running through the crystal-based, um—crap. What was it—Sam told me—it's a control element, I just can't remember the particular variant. It'll come to me, one minute—"

Young sighed. "Whatever. Would it have killed McKay to have encased the thing in lead?"

Jackson paused in his progressive label-peeling to open his hands. "They're already working on a second version that apparently won't glow and won't have quite as much of an electronic signature that's detectable over the air."

"Yeah, that's great," Young said. "Except for the part where in the meantime he's broadcasting a signal and looks like he just stepped out of *Total Recall*."

"We can remember it for you wholesale," Jackson quoted in an arid sing-song.

Young rolled his eyes.

"We'll go talk to Sam," Jackson said. "We'll do it right now. You're right. They're not going to let him off the base with The Future attached bilaterally at the temples, and staying on base is going to drive him out of his mind."

"Agreed," Young said, knocking back the remainder of his beer and beginning to fish in his pocket for his car keys.

They found Carter in her lab, one hand pressed against her still-healing chest, sitting in front of her laptop, studying a formidable looking screen filled with wave functions of some kind.

"Oh no," Jackson said, pulling her out of whatever she was doing with the familiar slide of long practice. "You have that look."

"What look," Carter said, glancing up at them, and flashing a smile at both of them. "Hi Colonel."

"Hey," Young said.

"That look like you're trying to phase-shift something. Again."

"Daniel," Carter said. "Wouldn't you like to be able to *unphase* shift? Because that's actually the point of gaining reliable, reproducible control of de Broglie waves. I'm not doing this for my own amusement."

"Yes you are," Jackson said with unmistakable fondness. "You most definitely are."

"I'm doing it for *you*," Carter replied, rolling her shoulders subtly. "For the next time you touch something you shouldn't and—"

"Um, so that's not me anymore? That's Mitchell these days."

Young and Carter exchanged a significant look.

"What is that look?" Jackson asked.

"What look?" Young shot back.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," Jackson continued, boosting himself up onto Carter's lab bench. "The look they teach you at Colonel-Day-Camp, or wherever you people get indoctrinated into the jingoistic rituals of this inverted temple to military superiority."

"And you've worked with this guy for how long?" Young asked Carter, indicating Jackson with a wry twist of expression and tilt of his head. "Ten years?"

"Give or take," Carter said, before turning to Jackson. "Inverted?" she said dryly.

"The gate's at the bottom," Jackson said, raising his eyebrows, his hands spreading, palm down, as if smoothing an invisible fait accompli into the air. "We have a question."

"Yeah, I thought you might," Carter said, her glance flicking over to Young. "Regarding Dr. Rush, I presume?"

Young nodded, shifting his weight to lean against the edge of the lab bench and ease some of the strain on his his left hip. "Bottom line," he said, crossing his arms, "there's no way he should be leaving the base until those things that are attached to his temples are, at a minimum, not glowing."

"Yeah," Carter said, drawing out the word with an expression that was slightly pained. "So just to clarify, this was not an oversight, it was just that—well, in order to perform the calibration, we needed access to the hardware of the units themselves, so they had to be left partially open."

"So—can we close them?"

"Once we're sure we're done calibrating," Carter said, "there should be no problem at all in soldering a little piece in place to block the light. Until then—" she broke off to rummage in a drawer before emerging with a roll of electrical tape hooked around one finger.

"Seriously?" Jackson asked, eyebrows pushed together.

"What'd I tell you," Young said, glancing in his direction.

"We'll give him a few more days," Carter said, "and if he's doing well, we'll solder a plate in place to block the visible EM emissions. In the short term, if he doesn't like looking like an ambassador for the future, he can just tape over the exposed portions. It shouldn't cause any problems."

Young grabbed the tape and pocketed it. "Thanks," he said.

"Not my best work," Carter said with an apologetic shrug, "but we'll get there."

"Thanks, Sam," Jackson said.

"No problem," Carter replied. "Anything else?"

Jackson looked at Young.

Young shook his head. "How's the ah—" he gestured vaguely at his own chest.

"Sore," Carter said ruefully, "but healing really well, thanks to Dr. Lam. I've already started rehab."

Young grimaced in sympathy.

"You know, colonel," Carter said, "tomorrow night we're having a 'che'swings night part deux', at my place if you're interested. Vala says you play chess."

"How does Vala know that I play chess?" Young asked.

"Vala's very well informed in general," Carter replied. "You could ah—bring your neighbor, possibly? Dr. Lam was talking about releasing him tomorrow—" Carter seemed to lose momentum.

"Um," Young said.

"Sam is dying to pick the guy's brain on computational complexity theory," Jackson explained, extending the toe of one boot to gently nudge Carter's chair.

"Well—it's just kind of awkward," Carter said defensively. "I can't just be like, 'hi, I just adjusted the EM interference signature that determines your subjective experience of the world, now let's talk about polynomial time', now can I?"

"Sounds reasonable to me," Jackson said.

"It's definitely not polite," Carter said.

"Isn't it?" Jackson said.

"It's not polite and it's not *sensitive*," Carter continued. "But inviting him to an evening of chess and wings, while maybe a little bit questionable in terms of social norms for someone accustomed to the wine and cheese platters of academia, *might* be a context in which—"

"Yeah, okay I'll ask him," Young said, interrupting Carter.

"Er—about tomorrow," Jackson said, interrupting Young and then stopping.

Carter and Young looked at him.

"Well, I ah, so it turns out that I can't really make it tomorrow."

"What are you doing?" Carter asked, flashing a smile that bordered on conspiratorial. "Got a hot date?"

"No," Jackson said, quick and emphatic. "No. No it's more like a meeting. A dinner meeting."

"Well," Carter said, "at least this will be a good trial run to see if Mitchell can beat Vala without your constant back-seat chess-driving, since he doesn't do very well with it, as we found out last time."

"Yeah, so about that," Jackson said, glancing at Young and then at the doorway. "Vala—um, Vala isn't going to be there either."

Young raised his eyebrows.

"Oh really," Carter said archly. "Is Vala also going to be at this 'meeting'?"

"Yes," Jackson said, sliding off the lab bench.

"So it's you and Vala and—" Young trailed off, looking at Jackson expectantly.

"Well it's just the two of us, but it's very—"

"Oh my *god*," Carter said, grinning. "Teal'c owes me twenty bucks."

"God *damn* Jackson," Young said. "Finally."

"It's not a date," Jackson said sharply. "It's a dinner meeting to discuss Vala's cultural acclimatization to—"

"Where are you taking her?" Carter asked.

"We are having our meeting at *Il Fiore Bianco*," Jackson replied, wrapping his arms around his chest.

"That is totally a date," Carter said. "*Il Fiore Bianco*?"

"Yeah, so that's definitely on the list of top ten Colorado Springs romantic restaurants, just FYI," Young added.

"It is a *meeting*," Jackson said. "I made this very clear to all parties."

"Right," Carter said. "So when I go ask Vala about this—"

"She will, I'm sure, tell you that we are having a *meeting*," Jackson said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, those inscriptions from P3X-whatever aren't going to translate themselves." With that, he turned and walked out of the lab.

Young looked at Carter.

Carter sighed.

"Lotta work?" Young asked, glancing at the doorway through which Jackson had disappeared.

"You have *no* idea," Carter said.

"Maybe not," Young said, "but you might be surprised."

Fifteen minutes later, Young rounded the door to the infirmary to find Vala standing next to Rush's gurney, two different shirts in hand.

Yeah, that seemed about right.

"I think I'm leaning toward the blue one, gorgeous, what do you think?" Vala asked, holding the shirt up to her own shoulders.

"I don't have an opinion," Rush replied, his arms crossed, his expression trending toward confused disapproval, looking a hell of a lot closer to his typical baseline now that he'd graduated to normal clothes and lost the IV fluids at some point over the past several hours.

"But you have excellent taste," Vala countered.

"Only by proxy I assure you."

"Pink is more classically feminine, and maybe a good color choice for someone who spends their days in the gender-neutralizing regalia of your culture's military uniforms," Vala said, examining the three-quarter sleeved rose shirt. "Don't you think?"

Young cleared his throat, and Vala spun with a subtle flair of shirts and hair. "Oh hello, handsome," she said. "What do you think, pink or blue?"

He glanced at Rush.

The mathematician cocked his head in subtle greeting, his hair mostly obscuring the small devices affixed to his temples.

"Blue," Young said.

"See, gorgeous, that's how it's done," Vala said, twisting to look at Rush again. "Just *pick* one."

Rush rolled his eyes. "I recommend you perform your *own* cost/benefit analysis and come to your *own* decision."

"Pink or blue," Vala said, unperturbed.

"Blue," Rush said.

"Blue," Lam added from the periphery of the room, before vanishing into the hallway that lead to her office. "The cut is more flattering."

"Thank you, hot stuff," Vala called after her. "She's *very* fashionable," she whispered to Rush. "Did you see her shoes?"

"No," Rush said pointedly.

"You're welcome," Lam called back, already invisible in the recesses of the back hallway.

"What's the occasion?" Young asked artlessly as he limped forward to take a seat on the end of Rush's gurney. Rush shot him a significant but, unfortunately, uninterpretable look. Young shrugged at him. Rush rolled his eyes.

"I," Vala said primly, "have a *date*."

"Oh yeah?" Young said, crossing his arms. "With who?"

"With Daniel," Vala replied airily.

"I heard it was a 'dinner meeting'," Young said mildly. Rush shot him a disapproving look. Young raised his eyebrows.

"Yes," Vala said. "That's what *he's* calling it, but it is, most definitely, a date."

"For the record," Rush said, "I'm certain you could do better than Jackson."

"Um, *I'm* pretty sure everyone agrees that Jackson is the pinnacle of humanity," Young said.

"Not *everyone*," Rush replied.

"Are you volunteering yourself, gorgeous?" Vala asked, raising one eyebrow. "Or simply indulging your winning penchant for iconoclasm?"

"Good question," Young said, looking at Rush.

"It's a terrible question, actually," Rush replied, "as it's a false dichotomy."

"Well, you can't blame a girl for trying," Vala replied, critically examining the blue shirt she was holding.

"I suppose not," Rush said.

"In any case, I need to do some more research regarding 'dates'," Vala said. "The issue of what to do about post-dinner 'coffee' that may or may not be actual coffee seems particularly complex."

"Maybe don't overthink it," Young offered.

"That's terrible advice," Rush said. "I'm certain there's no such thing as *overthinking*."

"You've never played a day of sports in your life, have you?" Young asked.

"I was otherwise engaged," Rush replied. "Every day."

"So was that a 'yes' on the post-dinner coffee or a 'no' on the post-dinner coffee, then?" Vala asked, her gaze flicking between them.

"It depends," Rush said. "Furthermore, I think Jackson might need coffee to survive, which complicates the issue."

"Just go with your gut," Young said.

"Or design an algorithm that will guide your decision-making," Rush replied. "For example, if Jackson refuses to admit that you're actually on a date, then I'd say post-dinner coffee loses all significance."

"I'm pretty sure you don't need an algorithm to tell you that," Young said.

"Well it couldn't hurt," Vala said. "We'll talk later, gorgeous."

"Of that, I have no doubt," Rush replied dryly.

Vala rounded the doorframe with a vanishing flash of blue and pink, leaving Rush and Young in the quiet infirmary.

"Seriously," Young said, "an *algorithm*? You're just messing with her."

"I happen to be atypically gifted in the art and science of algorithm design," Rush replied. "And whether one is explicitly aware of it or not, all decision making is fundamentally algorithmic in structure."

"There is no way that even *you* could be serious about a dating algorithm."

"You've fucking met Jackson, correct?" Rush asked, lifting his gaze toward the ceiling and tipping his head back.

"The guy is *really* not that bad," Young said.

"So you keep asserting," Rush replied. He looked back at Young. "Any chance that you might be able to find me a laptop?"

"Today?" Young asked. "Probably not. You're supposed to be taking it easy. How was the session with Perry?"

"Successful," Rush said, pressing two fingers against the space between his eyebrows. His gaze flicked over to the packet of what looked like math on the bedside table beside him.

Young picked it up and leafed through the pages of impressive looking equations. "Genius level IQ fully present and accounted for, it seems like?"

"So it would appear," Rush replied. "One can never be certain, of course, when one is trying to replicate a subjective experience."

"Speaking of subjectivity," Young said, pausing as Rush looked up, a faintly amused cast to his expression, "how are you feeling?"

"Fine," Rush said.

"Yeah?" Young said skeptically. "You look like you have a bitch of a headache."

"Well, this is not atypical for me."

"I get that. But you feel okay otherwise?"

Rush nodded. "Any chance you can get me out of here?"

"Maybe tomorrow," Young said. "Maybe."

Rush sighed.

"C'mere," Young said, shifting a few inches and dragging his bad leg up onto the bed.

"Let me see these things."

Rush raised his eyebrows fractionally, but slid forward and tipped his head as Young brought a hand up to sweep his hair aside.

"They couldn't make them *not* glow blue?" Young growled, using his fingers to pin Rush's uncooperative hair out of the way as he examined the one of the two faintly glowing devices attached to the other man's temple.

"Haven't the fucking faintest," Rush replied.

They glanced at one another and then, abruptly, away.

"Yeah, so this isn't exactly low profile," Young said, running a thumbnail over the blue light that ran along one border of the device. "But it's what we've got while we wait for the properly shielded, smaller, untrackable version two point oh. Fortunately we can do a little bit of a camo job in the meantime." He pulled the electrical tape out of his pocket.

"Tape."

"Yeah," Young said. "Electrical tape. Little strip, right over that light—problem solved." Young tapped delicately on the small piece of metal.

"You're planning on putting fucking *tape*. Over an *indicator* light."

"A really stupid indicator light."

"Dr. Perry likes it."

"It makes you look like a dork," Young said, nonchalant and untruthful.

Rush shot him an unimpressed look. *"I didn't design it,"* he snapped.

"I'm not saying it's your *fault* you look like a dork, hotshot, I'm just making a statement of fact here."

"Fuck," Rush sighed.

"The tape is only temporary," Young said. "Carter'll solder plates in place in a few days, once they're sure that they're done with whatever 'tweaking' it is they've gotta do."

"So I heard," Rush said, watching as Young pulled out his pocketknife and cut a small piece of tape free of the roll he held.

"You," Young said, as Rush swept a handful of hair away from the device at his left temple, "need a haircut."

"Yes yes," Rush replied. "I'm aware."

"But maybe not until you get rid of these things," Young said, carefully stabilizing his hand and affixing the opaque tape to block the emitted light.

Rush let his hair fall back into place.

"Not bad," Young said, cocking his head. "If I wasn't looking for the thing, I doubt I'd notice it."

Rush shifted slightly, exposing his right temple as Young cut a second piece of tape.

He pressed it down, smoothing his thumb over the edges.

Rush let his hair go, and shook his head.

"Much better," Young said. "You look a little bit less like you belong in a Philip K. Dick novel."

"If only I felt that way," Rush said, adjusting his glasses

"We'll get this figured out, hotshot," Young replied, readjusting a piece of Rush's hair to entirely conceal any hint of the metal beneath it.

Chapter Forty Two

Rush sat cross-legged on his gurney, leaning forward as he studied the chessboard arrayed in front of him, his attention split between the unfolding game and the mental effort it took not to touch the cortical suppressants affixed to his temples.

"You're fairly good at this," he admitted, "as commissionless colonels go."

"Commissionless?" Telford snapped, with a satisfying edge of aggression in his tone as he positioned a pawn, leaning over the board across from Rush. "Who the hell are you calling out of commission, Nick?"

"Very PC," Young pointed out, his bad leg propped on Rush's gurney as if he owned the thing.

"A fairly significant and prestigious cohort of your peers," Rush replied, looking at Telford as he castled kingside with a calculated nonchalance.

Telford raised his eyebrows and castled queenside, in open challenge.

"Queenside?" Young said, with poorly concealed good humor. "You ballsy motherfucker. He's going to take you apart. Also—did I just get called significant and prestigious?"

"Have you ever seen me play chess, Everett?" Telford asked, with a subtle theatricality that Rush had always found vaguely appealing.

"Significant is a mathematical term," Rush replied absently, as he pondered whether or not to take Telford's suspiciously vulnerable bishop. "'Prestigious' referred, of course, to Colonel Carter."

"Yeah," Young said, looking at Telford. "They have this whole nerd romance going on."

"Carter's hot," Telford said, with an equivocal shrug. He glanced briefly from the board to Rush. "Nice work."

Rush shot the pair of them a distinctly withering look over the top of his glasses. It was wasted on Telford, who had turned his attention back to the board, but Young shifted, uncomfortable.

"You're a dick," Young said, looking at Telford with no small degree of fondness.

"What," Telford said. "I was just making an observation. I am *the first* to admit that smart is sexy."

"How fucking forward thinking of you," Rush said, deciding to forego Telford's bishop after all in favor of putting a hole in what seemed to be a nascent pawn skeleton of the first order.

Telford frowned.

"So what did Lam say?" Young asked Telford.

The other man glanced up at the clock for what must have been the tenth time in as many minutes. "She said she'd know by twenty hundred hours," Telford replied.

Rush wasn't clear on exactly what it was that Telford was waiting to find out. Apparently his security clearance didn't extend so far. Whatever it was, it was making both Young and Telford anxious.

"You want dinner?" Young asked.

"Fuck no," Telford snapped. "Do I look like I could eat right now?"

"Who says I was talking to you?" Young replied. "Hotshot, you want something from the mess?"

"I do not," Rush replied, "as I have been given to understand that my likelihood of getting out of here within the next several hours is high."

"True," Young said. "Any idea what you're going to make for dinner?"

Telford stared at Rush.

"Fuck off," Rush said, not certain whom he was addressing, but entirely certain that it didn't matter.

"I didn't say anything," Telford said.

"Come over for dinner," Young said, eyeing Telford. "You guys can have an epic rematch if Lam lets Rush out of here. Two out of three."

"Eh," Telford said, clearly not enthusiastic about the idea. "Depends on what the blood test shows."

"Yeah," Young said, looking away, looking at the clock.

"Do you have some kind of incurable disease?" Rush asked politely. "Because if not, may I enquire as to what the fuck."

"Enquire all god damned day, Nick. *Inquire* even," Telford shot back, burying any real answer beneath transparent logomachy, "now that you've relocated to the colonies."

"Don't worry about it, hotshot," Young said, one hand pressed against his lower back.

With a snap of the wrist Rush attacked and appropriated one of Telford's pawns.

"My problem is a little more—abstract than you're envisioning," Telford said, in covert answer to the irritation communicated by the wordless aggression of Rush's *en passant*.

"I'm sure," Rush replied, placing the pawn on the table next to him with the crisp click of plastic on chipboard.

Something passed between them then in dark *simpatico*, the import of which Rush could only guess at.

Telford smiled, ironic and askew. Rush smirked back, remembering the crack of his hand against an airborne flashdrive that he had snatched mid-arc, months ago and thousands of miles away, out of the quiet air.

"You two look like you're plotting something," Young said.

"What are we going to plot?" Telford snapped back, dropping his eyes to the chessboard. "Two guys without current security clearance, both more than a little lacking in practical *compos mentis*?"

Rush grinned at that one, fleeting and feral and uniform.

"No offense, Nick," Telford said.

"None taken," Rush replied, finally deciding he'd done enough damage to Telford's pawn structure to take that fucking bishop after all.

"How well do you guys actually know each other?" Young asked, slow and guarded.

"Well enough," Rush said dryly.

"Are you sure?" Telford replied, his voice a dark arch as he advanced his knight.

"Damn it, Rush," Young said, looking at the board.

"Checkmate," Telford said.

"Fuck," Rush replied, and tipped his king.

The familiar tones of Young's ringing phone split the ensuing stillness of the air. He glanced at the caller ID, shifted his gaze to Telford, and answered.

"Jackson," Young said, "it's nineteen hundred hours, aren't you supposed to be—"

Young stopped talking, his expression shutting down with an abruptness that Rush found unsettling.

"Slow down," Young said, already standing.

"What," Telford hissed, his eyes fixed on Young, his hands hovering above the chessboard. "*What?*"

Young held up a hand, his eyes scanning the edges and vertices of the room, as if, already, he were looking for a way out.

"Yeah, I got you. Did you get the plate of the car?"

Telford shot to his feet.

"Who else have you called—Jackson. Jackson. Who else have you *called*."

The dread in Young's voice was unmistakable, and Rush felt a sympathetic echo of it in the bones of his hands as he swept an aleatory assortment of pieces to the periphery of the board.

Telford crossed the room and pulled a phone from the wall. "Dispatch?" he said, "yeah, please stand by."

Young turned to Telford. "Vala was manhandled into a white van. Maybe two minutes ago, if that. Jackson was too far away to get the plates. Last known location—" he paused, moved his hand and said, "Jackson, I need the address."

Rush ran a hand through his hair, slow and controlled, in a moving blaze of four identical lines of force as his fingers pressed against his head, skirting the metal edges of his cortical suppressants.

"Dispatch, this is Colonel David Telford, please initiate code five on my authorization. Page general Landry at home—or, wherever the fuck he is, let him know that we're calling a code five on Vala Mal Doran. Scramble SG-1, SG-4, and SG-9 for a stat briefing. I'm going to need a direct line to the Colorado Springs PD and—"

Telford broke off.

"One Lake Avenue," Young said, "got it. The code five is called. Don't do anything stupid, Jackson—just—"

"What do you mean I don't have the *authorization* for that—" Telford snapped, "I—"

"Give it to me," Young said, pulling the phone out of Telford's hand. "Harriman, god damn it, this is Young. I'll authorize it. Get those pages done and get me the Colorado Springs PD, port it down to this phone."

"Fuck," Telford breathed, turning away from Young, away from Rush, his hands threading through his hair. "Fuck."

"What's going on," Lam snapped, bursting out of the darkness of the back hall in a flare of white, lights reflecting off her coat. Telford shook his head, one hand coming open. Lam looked at Rush.

"Something happened to Vala," Rush said. "She was forced into a car."

"Vala," Lam whispered, in confirmatory reflex, over the calm cadence of Young communicating with the Colorado Springs police department.

"Yes," Rush said, folding the chessboard still spread in front of him. "Vala."

Lam's gaze swept over Young and Telford, turned at oblique angles to one another, their heads identically bowed. With a measured, quiet sequence of clicking she walked forward and began collecting chess pieces from the table next to his bed, fitting them methodically into her hands before transferring them to the waiting box in clusters. "By whom?" she asked quietly, her gaze dark.

"I don't know," Rush whispered. "I'm sure I'll never find out."

Lam said nothing to counter either the content of his statement or its bitter ornamentation.

"Don't say things like that, Nick," Telford murmured, looking at him, his arms crossed over his chest.

Briefly, Lam shut her eyes, as she pressed the pieces down into their box.

Young replaced the phone against the wall.

"I've got to go," he said, looking at Telford in near apology. "I've got to run this, at least until—"

"Yeah," Telford said. "I know. You rank Cam now."

"Stay out of trouble, hotshot," Young said, "and stay on the base."

"Yes yes," Rush replied, as Young vanished around the frame of the door.

Half an hour later he found himself leaning back against the gurney that had more or less defined the scope of his existence for days, looking at the uninspiring homogeneity of the cement ceiling.

"So what is it," Rush asked, his eyes fixed on landscapes of tiny imperfections lacing concrete, "that you're waiting for."

Telford did not look at him. The other man was leaning back against the adjacent gurney, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked instead at the ceiling, his

expression one of abstruse avidity that seemed particular to him alone. Rush could practically *feel* him trying circumnavigate the boundaries of regulation. There was something about the man that reminded Rush of Jackson. Not en règle, but not *out* either. Rush suspected Telford had always been this way.

"An answer," Telford said, "to something I've been wondering about myself for a long time."

"And this answer is something you can get from a medical test?" Rush asked.

"In this part of the galaxy," Telford said. "Not everywhere."

"Ah," Rush said. "Care to elaborate?"

"Maybe one day," Telford said, glancing at him wryly. "*Hotshot.*"

"Shut the fuck up, won't you?" Rush replied.

"Everett's a priceless son of a bitch," Telford said. "You've got to give him that."

"Do you think that you could possibly get me level two security clearance?" Rush asked, steering the conversation away from Young and subjective evaluations of his worth. "This is terrible, you realize."

"Oh I know," Telford said, the words more bitter than dry, despite what had likely been his original intent. "Believe me, I get it. I can't stand being fucking benched, which is exactly what I am. Maybe benched for good, if Jackson gets his way."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Forget it," Telford said. "My point is, right now I know how you feel. You think I'm not dying to ask you about what you're doing here, let alone the relatively subtle fashion accessories glued to your temples? But I'm not going to. It's best not to appear curious while under scrutiny."

"A policy I've never managed to fully implement," Rush replied.

"No kidding," Telford interjected.

"But you have always struck me," Rush continued, unperturbed, "as someone particularly adept in the circumvention of barriers."

"Is that right," Telford said. "You think you're going to flatter me into telling you something that you're not supposed to know?"

"I'm certain I wouldn't parse my statement as anything so fucking gauche."

"No," Telford replied, an element of zealotry in his dark eyes unveiled before an almost immediate recovering. "No, I wouldn't either." He looked away, his eyes fixed on

nothing in the room. "You must know," he said finally, "what it's like to wonder about the truth of your existence. To wonder whether the story you tell yourself about your life and your choices is the real story," Telford whispered, "or whether you're something different than what you think you are. Than what other people think you are."

"This," Rush began, losing everything he had of his verbal momentum as a chill spread beneath his skin. "This is a common thread of human experience."

Telford looked over at him. "Sometimes the question becomes more pertinent than a philosophical exercise," he whispered, glancing at the devices mostly hidden by the sweep of Rush's hair. "Am I right?"

"I'm certain I don't know what you're talking about," Rush replied, fighting the urge to bring his hands to his temples.

"Me neither," Telford replied, looking at the clock.

It was a few minutes past eight.

As if on cue, Lam emerged from the back hallway, a file in her hand.

Telford's gaze snapped to her, intent and unerring.

"You're clean," Lam said, without explanation or preamble.

"You're sure."

"I'm sure. We'll test you again at thirty and sixty days," she said, "but you're clean."

Telford shut his eyes, some of the tension coming out of his shoulders.

"Go home," Lam said. "Get some rest."

"I'll stay," Telford said. "Vala's still missing."

"There's nothing you can do about that," Lam said, with all the professional brusqueness of the curative scalpel.

"You think I don't know that?" Telford shot back.

"Stay if you'd like," Lam said, unflappable, but for a marginal, backwards click of one heel.

"Sorry," Telford said. "Sorry."

Lam gave him a one-shouldered shrug and turned to Rush.

Rush looked at her expectantly.

"I *was* planning on releasing you," Lam began, an unmistakable note of contingency in her voice.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Rush snapped.

Lam raised a single, unimpressed eyebrow.

"I was given to understand," Rush said, with marginal but perceptible control, "that 'release' was all but assured, and it also meant *leaving the base*."

"And it will," Lam said, her hands out, palms exposed.

Telford looked at him with an uncertain expression. It occurred to Rush that he'd gotten to his feet. He sat back down. On his fucking *gurney*. The extent to and frequency with which Young intervened on his behalf and the considerable weight behind his influence hit Rush with an unwelcome mental moment of inertia.

"Give him one of the VIP rooms," Telford said, with a calculated indolence for which Rush was fiercely grateful, "and be done with it."

Lam looked at Telford. Lam looked at Telford in way that was qualitatively different from the way she looked at Young. Or at Carter. Or at Mitchell. "I understand that you're anxious to get out of here," Lam said, turning her gaze back toward Rush. "But I need you to understand that I'm under certain institutional and ethical pressures as well. I can't release you. But I can, perhaps, arrange for you to move freely about the base, and spend the night in one of the VIP rooms. Does that sound like a reasonable compromise?"

"Yes," he said, with all of the rational affect that he could bring to bear.

"So," Telford said, contemplating his coffee of deplorable quality as they lingered in the mess, "without violating any kind of security clearance, can you tell me what it was that landed you in the base infirmary for four days?"

"Beethoven," Rush replied.

Telford looked over at him. "Beethoven."

Rush opened a hand, sweeping it laterally and then up against an invisible asymptote of the air as he heard the echoes of falling fifths in a distant D minor.

"That fucker," Telford said philosophically.

Rush pulled his phone out of his pocket and texted Young.

::What's happening?::

He didn't have to wait long for an answer.

::Nothing good::

"What's the word?" Telford murmured.

Rush sent his phone across the surface of the table with a calculated swipe of his fingers.

Telford looked at it, turned it face down, and pushed it back to him in a slow slide.

Rush. Rush. There was nothing like it, here or anywhere, perched at the intersection of two musical genres, a branching on the tree of musical parsimony; who had chosen Beethoven? Had it been him or Altera or someone, something else. He's just—he just stopped responding to me. He couldn't move, he could speak and it hadn't occurred to him that the totality of the sensory experience he had been ignoring with decreasing success might cross into a physical correlate, that it might take something from him, or give something to him in a blending of which he could only ever be partially aware. If you could just solve it, Gloria whispers, would it terminate, freeing you, or would it unfold, dragging you down with it? And which would you prefer. How long until McKay and Zelenka are ready? How long until we get that device? And which would you prefer.

He awoke, drenched in sweat, in an unfamiliar darkness, on an unfamiliar floor.

"Fuck," he whispered, listening for the fading strains of the ninth, trying to banish it or call it back, he wasn't sure which. He stood, disoriented in the dark, crossing the floor toward the lighted outline of a door imperfectly sealed. Only in throwing it open did he place himself as still on the base.

He took a deep breath. And then another.

Around a distant corner a familiar silhouette appeared, black-clad. Soigné. Telford approached, a wariness in his gaze and step as he slowed, stopping a few feet in front of Rush. "Nick," he said, evidently surprised, evidently unaware of the providential, inappropriate nature of his own appearance. As if *Rush* was the one who had appeared, unlooked for.

"I have to solve it," Rush breathed, unable to stop the disoriented, confessional of the admission.

"Of course you do," Telford said. "I know that. I've always known that."

"I'm not sure they'll let me," Rush said.

"They'll let you," Telford said, with a quiet assurance that Rush found improbably convincing at an unguessed at hour of the night.

"How do you know?"

"Because I know," Telford said. "What do you say to some coffee and a fucking ride home, red tape be damned? You look terrible, Nick. No one can sleep here. It's like god damned temple to insomnia."

"What time is it?" Rush asked.

"Four in the fucking morning," Telford said. "No one will stop us if we walk out with confidence."

"Did you sleep at all?" Rush asked.

Telford scrubbed reflexively at red-rimmed eyes. "Sleep is for the weak. Anyway, insomnia's inherent to the nature of the profession."

"Yours too?" Rush said dryly.

"Grab your stuff," Telford said. "I'll grab the coffee. Meet me at level three. I know the guy who works the NORAD exit."

Less than twenty minutes later, they stood in the parking lot of the SGC beneath the starred spread of a moonless night, next to Telford's Acura NSX, its red paint warped to the venomless cast of a faded bruise under remote fluorescent lights.

"Toss your stuff in the back," Telford said.

He did so, then, still holding his coffee, slid into the passenger's seat.

Telford slid in opposite him, and started the car.

For the span of perhaps five seconds, Rush heard the unmistakable, intolerable sound of Tartini's *Violin Sonata in G minor*. He snapped Telford's radio off, with a frenetic swipe of the fingers.

Telford glanced at him. "Have something against NPR?"

"Fuck off," Rush replied, reflexively, inappropriately vicious.

"Yeah okay," Telford said. "They're BBC wannabes, I fully admit that."

"Quite," Rush said, in the dry pull of Gloria's most posh verbal variant.

What the fuck was he *doing* to himself?

He took a sip of atypically atrocious coffee as Telford pulled out into the darkness, away from the weak fluorescence of the parking lot. "This coffee is fucking terrible," he said.

"Is it?" Telford asked. "My expectations are so low that I've forgotten how to be disappointed by government-issue coffee."

"It tastes like they're reusing the fucking grounds," Rush said.

"Ugh," Telford replied. "Did you text Everett? You should probably text Everett."

"I prefer to present the information that I left the base as a *fait accompli* and not as a work in progress, thank you," Rush replied.

"Yeah, I get that," Telford said. "I hope Vala's okay."

"Vala is extremely resourceful," Rush said, sipping his coffee, watching the blurring progress of night-darkened forest.

"It's not a good sign that we haven't heard from them," Telford said, stark and truthful.

"I'm aware," Rush replied.

"I should be out there," Telford murmured, his hands tensing on the wheel of the car.

"You will be, I'm sure," Rush said. "Someone has to counterbalance Jackson's influence. The man is a fucking intrapersonal—" He couldn't quite turn the phrase in the manner he wanted and he tipped his head back against the seat, one hand going to the cortical suppressant at his right temple.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Telford said quietly. "He gave me a book to read while I was stuck in quarantine. *Les Misérables*. Any thoughts on that one? It's driving me up the fucking *wall*. Why would he give me that? There's got to be some kind of—message or iconography or *something* he wants me to take from it."

"I—" Rush broke off, blinking, abruptly lightheaded in the disorienting sweep of variegated darkness on the other side of stationary glass.

"You feeling okay?" Telford asked, when he didn't continue.

"Yes," Rush said, with extreme effort. "I'm fine."

"Coffee cures all ills," Telford said. "I'm pretty sure this has been scientifically proven."

Rush managed to coordinate another swallow of the atrocious stuff, but it did nothing to stop the alarmingly lethargic haze of his thoughts.

"Anyway. I'm not finished with it yet. *Les Misérables*, I mean. My working theory is that Jackson gave it to me because he thinks I need to be sensitized to the needs of the

disenfranchised—but shit. That's not what I think. No point in lying about it now. Not here. Not to *you*. I wish I'd asked Everett. I mean, really asked him. I tried it once. He just said, "it's a long book, and you're here for a while." *Such* an Everett thing to say. Is he serious? Is he not serious? No way to know. He and Jackson—they turned tight at some point while I was in quarantine. But that's Jackson for you. I didn't expect anything else. So. Thoughts?"

Rush shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Well," Telford said, after an interval blurred, dark landscape had passed, "it's probably a lot to ask at four in the morning. But I'll tell you what I think. I think he wants to send me a message about redemption. About accepting that shit. Handed down from on high or dug out of the dirt of the soul—you take it or you find it or you die from the lack of it. I'm sure Jackson tells himself that kind of thing *all the time*. He'd have to, just to face himself in the mirror. Just to fucking *shave*. I'm sure he thinks I need it. I'm sure he'd like me to have it."

"Redemption?" Rush echoed, the word unmistakably slurred.

"Yeah," Telford whispered. "You know about that, Nick. Don't you? You must. Everyone does."

Something was *wrong* with him. Something different. Something new.

"Oh god," Rush said, his horror echoing in the growing space between intent and action. He tipped his head forward, but it fell back again, against the seat. "Redemption?" His coffee— His coffee had been *drugged*.

"I'm sorry," Telford said. "If it makes a difference, I'm sorry."

It was Telford. It had *always been* Telford. He wasted no time on unnecessary words, on confirmation, on conversation. He released his seatbelt with a quiet click. Telford looked over at the sound—concerned, sharp, and already slowing the car. Rush flung the remainder of his coffee in the other man's face, opened the door on his second attempt as Telford swerved reflexively, then threw himself out of the moving vehicle with all the unity of purpose he possessed.

The shifting dark of night sky and lightless asphalt slammed into him, as forces decelerated him in a painful ending skid along the blackness of the road. He braced himself for the pain that did not come. It's total absence seemed like an ominous sign. With an uncoordinated bracing of limbs and a disproportionate effort of will, he turned.

Telford's car skidded to a stop.

It was difficult to organize his thoughts. His capacity to act was limited, pharmacologically, physically, psychologically—he was unprepared. He tried to stand. He couldn't. All he'd bought himself was a set of unfelt injuries and about ten seconds of time.

The car door opened.

Rush pulled out his phone.

Telford stood, opaque against the backdrop of stars.

Rush dialed Young's number and tossed his phone into the forested blackness that lined the road, hoping it would survive the parabolic arc he sent it on.

Telford sprinted towards him, his steps quiet on the warm asphalt of the road.

There was little evidence that he could leave of the miscalculations that had brought him here.

In the short interval of time he had before Telford closed the distance between them, there was only one additional thing that suggested itself to him. Rush pulled off his wedding ring and placed it on the surface of the road. Telford dropped into a crouch, arriving with the smell of coffee, hands out, coming to Rush's throat, to his wrist, turning him over, onto his back.

"Close," Telford whispered, in obvious sympathy, obvious admiration. "If only you hadn't taken the coffee. You might have made it."

He couldn't speak. Keeping his eyes open was becoming exponentially more difficult.

"You'll be all right," Telford said. "You'll be fine."

Somehow, he didn't think so.

His thoughts were—

His thoughts—

He

"Telford to Kiva," the other man said, now only a fading voice in the darkness. "My cover's blown to hell, but I've got him. I've got him. You're going to have to—"

The Lotus and the Snake

Vala opens her eyes to gold—familiar and unfocused. She cannot keep them open.

“—and tomorrow,” her mother whispers, the coarsely bristled brush running through Vala’s dark hair. “Tell me what you will do.”

Vala looks into the fire. “I will follow the stream down to the water,” she whispers, staring at the flames, feeling the drag and pull of her hair. “Out of the village and to the base of the hill.”

“And there,” her mother whispers, unseen, sitting behind her. “What will you look for?”

“I will look for the place where the leaves form a curtain and the water becomes still,” Vala whispers.

“And what else?” her mother asks.

“I will look for the flowers. The white flowers, tipped with rose, floating on the water.”

“The cups of Q’tesh.”

A coldness runs in a curving line across the back of her hand and she knows this is not right.

“Yes,” Vala whispers, her arms encircling her knees as she resists the long pulls of the brush through her hair.

“And what will you do when you see them?”

“I will step into the water. I will enter the sacred pool,” Vala says. “I will kneel before the statue of the goddess and I will ask for permission to marry.”

“You have forgotten something,” her mother says, voice a lilting warning, as she begins to braid small white shells into Vala’s hair for what may be the last time. “Try to think what it is.”

She opens her eyes and she looks down at her hand. There is a needle in it. There is a tube connected to the needle, through which a cold liquid runs, linear and dangerous. She twists her wrist, grabs the line, and pinches the tubing shut. For the moment, it is all she is capable of. Where she is and how she got here—g These questions are roads to confused places in her thoughts.

“The prayer,” she says, abashed. “I will not forget it tomorrow.”

"When you see the image of the goddess," her mother whispers, "you will kneel in the water. And you will say—"

She opens her eyes.

She shuts them.

She opens them again.

"Mistress of the unwearying stars, Anat, Astarte, most vaunted Q'tesh, my mouth has been given to me that I may speak with it in the presence of the beloved of Ptah. My soul is a dark river that yearns ever for the boundless astral sea, where the pool of your stars marks the central stillness in the sky. Let me rest with the lotus. Let me come always in supplication. Let me be guided by love. Let me be deserving of peace. Let me arrive at the lake of still fire, and know the invariant flame."

She flexes her hands, subtly, subtly. She tries to remember, but it is hard. The fire from the last day of her childhood is so close, and Daniel is so far. Daniel. Daniel Jackson. Her eyes open and they stay open.

"Yes," her mother says, pleased, still audible out of a distant memory. But her voice slips away as Vala tries to hold it, simultaneously too close and too far. She sits.

She realizes her mistake as soon as she lifts her shoulders. She has been taken and she cannot, she *cannot* give away her consciousness, her insight, nor her kinking of the tubing that is delivering something unwanted into the back of her hand. But when she surveys the room, she finds herself alone and unwatched.

She blinks.

Someone is beside her, close but unmoving, on a hard pallet identical to her own.

Vala grasps for his name, and finds it.

She perches next to him, precarious and effortless on a narrow sliver of couch, holding herself there with a graceful coil of opposing, contracted muscle. He opens his eyes, his hair damp and disarrayed, the latest, interesting acquisition to the collection of people Daniel cares too much about. "Hello gorgeous," she says, giving him a wink as she twists off the top off a bottle of green Gatorade. "I hear this stuff cures nearly every terrestrial illness."

She holds up the bottle. He looks at her with a disoriented skepticism. "Vala," she says, holding a hand out in his direction. "Vala Mal Doran."

"Nicholas Rush," he replies, as their palms meet.

She grasps at the memory vainly as it leaves her and does not return, but she remembers still that he's important, remembers that Daniel cares about him, and realizes she should avoid thinking in specificities. And so. She will help him. She will help him and she will help herself.

She releases a shuddery breath, propping herself on her elbows, holding the tubing pinched shut in a tight 'v' as she tries to remember how she got here, why she is surrounded by the hated, useful, ostentation of the goa'uld, and why it is that she is here with this man and not with *Daniel* because—

Because when she looks down she is dressed in blue, and she had *been with him*, she had been with *Daniel*, *she knows* she had. She remembers the blue shirt and she remembers that they all had agreed that this shirt was best.

She twists to take in the entire room. They are alone. But. Surveillance remains a possibility. They are in the rear compartment of a tel'tak, their only restraints pharmacological. She realizes she is gasping for air, fast and shallow. She can feel her heart against her ribs.

She cannot remember the last time she was so afraid.

When Baal had buried her alive and left her to die alone and in darkness.

When she had first seen Q'tesh, the lotus petals brushing her shins.

When she had seen her daughter, unnaturally aging, unnaturally composed, unnaturally twisted by something Vala could neither perceive nor explain.

This makes sense to her. Fear comes with *possession*. With the acquisition of resources. In possession of nothing, nothing can be lost. She possesses a great deal now. Or, she *believes* she does. She must fight to keep it.

Her eyes rake the walls—at it is only on a second perusal that she sees it—the black defacement of golden etchings, the blaspheming of Hathor that covers the wall at irregular intervals. This is *not* a goa'uld ship.

This ship belongs to the Lucian Alliance.

Vala rips the needle out of her hand, lurches to her feet, takes a graceless step, and nearly falls against the hard metal of the other man's pallet before she rips him free of whatever fluid is entering his veins.

"Gorgeous," she whispers, shaking him. "Gorgeous, our evening—" She *hopes* it's still evening,"—has taken an unexpected turn," she finishes.

He doesn't respond. At all. His right forearm is raw from a high-friction slide along an unforgiving surface. His shirt is torn, and the dark denim of his jeans is abraded. "Gorgeous," she whispers again, but this time the word feels foreign to her. Gorgeous. Is this what she had called him? She cannot remember. And he does not respond.

She creeps to the doorway that connects the cargo hold to the rest of the ship. They will have posted a guard just beyond it. She knows three tricks that might open the door. One is a universal override code, built into most of their technology for use by system lords. It is an approximation of phi—the golden ratio—and one of many things she wishes she'd thought to share with Daniel before today. Two is the bridging of two circuits, which will short out the door control mechanism on older Tel'taks. Three is firing a zat repetitively at the locking mechanism. Unfortunately, she doesn't have a zat.

She glances back at the man on the pallet, then spreads her fingers and runs her hands over the black denim of her thighs. She removes her belt, twining each end over her palms.

If there are two guards, this attempt will be finished. If there is *one* guard—

If there is one guard, they have a chance.

She flips open the panel and keys in an approximation of the Golden Ratio. 1-6-1-8-0-3-4. The door hisses open. She looks left. There is a man standing there, startled and leather clad and, so far, silent.

Her knee comes up and he bends forward with a forced exhalation and a grimace. Before he can take a breath, her hands, connected by their makeshift garrote, come down and around. It is over quickly. And quietly. When she *is certain* that he is dead, she drags him back inside the room, then edges forward, along the quiet hallway.

"And then," her mother whispers, her voice a drape over what is to come, "then what will you do?"

"I will ask for permission," she says. "I will ask for permission from Q'tesh—I will ask that I might choose my beloved."

She can hear voices from the bridge. A woman and two men, one of whom sounds familiar. She cannot yet place his pitch and cadence. They are arguing.

"If you hadn't blown your cover," the woman's voice says, her English faintly accented with a touch of native goa'uld, "we would have had time to prepare."

"If I hadn't taken the opportunity that presented itself, you might have *never gotten him.*"

"We're due to deliver Mal Doran to Athena in less than six hours. I don't want them knowing that we have Rush as well."

Athena. Silver hair and pitiless eyes and one hand perennially gloved in linear gold, as hers had been. As Q'tesh's had been. Vala presses one hand to her chest, breathless and pained, an echo of satisfaction at a remembered betrayal bursting and fading in her mind, its threads dissolving away with alarming rapidity.

What had they given her?

What had been in the fluid that was making its way into her veins?

What was it taking?

And *why*?

"I thought we didn't *do* deals with the goa'uld," the familiar voice hisses. "I thought that was *anathema*."

The crack of a slap echoes off the metal walls of the ship.

Vala shuts her eyes, one hand pressed to her mouth.

"The Trust is *of the Tau'ri*," the woman snaps, cold and commanding, as if saying it, she made it so.

"The Trust is *of the system lords*," the familiar man hisses back and she can almost see him—dark hair, darker eyes, tall. "Let Mal Doran go."

She presses her hands into the metal. She is— *She* is Mal Doran. Vala Mal Doran. *Isn't* she? What have they given her. And what have they taken away. She does not know.

They are always experimenting with cognition, the Alliance. Always and forever searching for a way around the chemical enslavement of an embedded symbiote. That search for liberation had blended with subterfuge and sabotage, twisting over centuries over millennia to make them what they are now—wronged and vengeful and —

What—what had she been thinking of? She is— She was— She is on a *ship*. She is on a ship and she must get off it.

"I just—" Daniel says, looking out his window in the light of early morning, an Osiris of the Tau'ri, though he doesn't and will never know it. "I just don't trust him."

"Darling," Vala whispers, made serious by the ominous gold cast of his hair, "you shouldn't trust anyone."

"You can't mean that," Daniel says, turning to look at her, his smile uneven. "No one can live that way."

"Some people do," she replies. "Some people always have."

"But it's not really living," he says, looking back at the sun, low over the distant mountains.

Her eyes burn, hot and wet.

She must get back to Daniel.

To Daniel.

What is she doing?

They are arguing, whomever they are, half obscured behind the narrow door that leads to the flight controls. They expect her to be unconscious, held in a chemical oblivion. Was it the naquadah in her blood that had freed her? That had woken her early? Because she remembers the naquadah. It had come with Q'tesh.

She creeps backward. There is something she needs in the room that she came from. She's not sure what it is, but she knows that she needs it.

She slips off her—

"Oh," Sam says. "Oh gosh. Vala. Vala, look at these."

Vala turns and Sam is holding up a single shoe, sling-backed, peep-toed.

"I don't know," Vala says. "They look a bit retro to me, beautiful."

She slips off her shoes, holding them in one hand. Silently, she runs along the hall, and in a few steps she's back in the cargo bay. She remembers him as soon as she sees him. She remembers him obliquely.

What have they given her?

What are they taking away?

Kneeling in the back of the bookstore, she clenches her hands into fists, flexes them, pulls back, then opens them again before reaching for a book that says 'Algebra,' on the cover. From some long forgotten place in her mind she can feel Q'tesh scream, a dead echo of warning, because this is not for her. Again she pulls back. And she pulls out her phone.

"Hey," she whispers, shaking him. "Come on."

There is no response. None. She runs her fingers over the cortical suppressants he is wearing and considers pulling them off. But she pulls her hands back.

"I can't carry you out of here," she hisses right into the ear of this man that she's certain she must know. "Wake. Up." She fists her hand and leans her knuckles into his sternum with her full weight behind them, sliding up and down. Nothing. She considers leaving him.

"Very dashing, gorgeous," Vala says into his ear as he steps forward, carrying her away from Young. "Very well executed. If I ever have to make a break off this planet, remind me to take you with me."

He raises his eyebrows at her. "Was there a point to this?" he asks, pitching his voice low, "Or are you just amusing yourself?"

This is Rush.

This is *Rush*.

She regains his name and tries to hold it. They cannot have him. She will not let them. But. If she *doesn't* leave him, it is likely that neither of them will make it off this ship. She will leave him. She must. She will. She'll come back for him. But—*will* she? Because even now, her memories of who he is, of why he's important, are fading as they pass through her mind.

What have they given her?

What have they given him?

She turns away.

She turns back.

"But still," she whispers, her eyes stinging and closed, his wall at her back. "There are mathematicians."

They wouldn't leave him. SG-1. None of them would. And she— She *wants* to be *like* them, these people who are already fading from her thoughts in blur of yellow and blue and gold and green and black, but even more than that, she wants to be *with* them because if she is not *with* them, then she is with *no one*—she will wander until Adria finds her and then, and then—

"Mother," Adria says. "Mother, I will keep you safe."

And then she will do nothing but watch. She has left so many, though she cannot recall their names. She will not leave him. Not this one. This one in a crisp white shirt with cortical suppressants on his head. She cannot *leave this* one.

Her hands come up, dynamic and symmetrical and she yanks him up by his shoulders and by his shirt, bends one knee, and staggers into the lift of the fallen she had learned

from her father. The fireman's carry. That is what the Tau'ri call it. And she is Tau'ri now. She wears their clothes, she speaks their language. She has *chosen* them and chosen *this*.

She nearly falls, but she widens her stance and shifts her head to free a portion of her trapped hair.

She turns back to the open door. Her bare feet are silent, but she cannot move quickly. *Let me come always in supplication*, she thinks, praying for luck to the dead false god who had stolen her life and lived in her spine. *Let me come always in supplication*.

She passes through the open doorway into the hall, and she can hear them again.

"Athena offers resources," the woman says.

"Athena is a goa'uld," the third man says, unfamiliar and cautious.

"She offers access to the infrastructure of the Tau'ri, because she is now *of* the Tau'ri."

"So do I," the familiar voice replies. "I offer that access."

She is too afraid to draw a deep breath.

She is too afraid to draw a deep breath when she steps into the pool, but she learns that her fear is the fear of a child when she draws back the hanging branches to reveal not a statue, but a living woman with glowing yellow eyes standing amongst the flowers that float on the surface of the water. Now her fear rises like the river in a storm, deep and wide and powerful. Nothing about it is childish. This is the fear that uproots the mind and tears down the false solidity of everything that's come before it. She trembles, fighting the urge to run.

She has nearly made it to the room that her vision has been fixed on. She tries to think what is in that room, and why she must go there, and why she must be so, so quiet, but she cannot. She cannot remember. But she is quiet.

She kneels in the water, the shells in her hair clicking. She can feel the petals of the flowers on her bare arms. She does not look at the goddess.

She reaches the door, and this one is not locked. But they—they may hear its opening. And she doesn't want them to. The man she carries is heavy.

"Not. Anymore." A woman's voice echoes through the ship with the weight of blocks falling into place. The building of a temple.

"I'm still useful to you," the familiar voice says.

Vala opens the door, a nearly silent hiss.

"What was that?" a third voice says.

"Simeon," the woman calls, as Vala steps through the open doorframe and then whirls awkwardly, her arms and shoulders burning.

"Daniel talked to Landry for you," Mitchell says, his eyes frozen and serious.

She says nothing because she does not know what to say, it is all she can do to keep the surprise from her face.

"Don't let him down." His voice hard, his eyes clear and blue.

She will, she knows she will, she always does, but for a while, for just a little while, she can — She can pretend. She can pretend that this will be her life. She can pretend that Daniel will be her friend. That they all, all of them, will be her friends. That they will come for her when she is in trouble. That she will do the same for them. That the reason that she will not show her grief to them is because it would hurt them, and not because they would hurt her with it.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about," she says, with as much haughtiness as she can pull past the longing in her throat.

Vala closes the door and bridges a circuit. She has no time. She knows that from the way her heart is beating, frantic in her chest, from the way confusion threatens at the borders of her thoughts. On the other side of the wall, she hears the woman call again. "Simeon. Respond. Respond."

She lays the man she carries down in the center of the rings and goes to the nearest console. She hears the quiet chirp of the door denying entry to someone on the other side. Her hands are shaking.

She can use the rings and hope that the nearest platform isn't controlled by the Trust or the Alliance, hope for the luck and the wit to get herself and her—friend? Her—charge? This man? To some kind of safe harbor. But—she cannot come always in supplication. She looks for another option. For the beaming technology she *knows* they've stolen because that is what they *do*. They steal things. The Alliance. They have stolen her. They have stolen the man in the white shirt. They have stolen more than just their bodies. Because—she cannot remember his name.

"Gorgeous," Vala whispers, "even if they take you, which is not a given, despite the tactless machinating of the American political establishment, we would never leave you with them."

"We would never leave you," she echoes in an experimental whisper, trying to remember who the 'we,' is in her thoughts other than Daniel, Daniel, *Daniel*, whom she'll hold to, whom she will not forget, whom she will never never *never* let go until the hour of her death.

Her fingers pass over screens with the speed of memories that are and are not her own.

"Mistress of the unwearying stars," she gasps, before she forgets the rest of the words in her fear. She has never heard of this happening. She has never known anyone to look upon the goddess and live, not even in stories.

"You are a beautiful one," the woman says, her hair like no hair Vala has ever seen, her eyes green, like the shallow sea in summer. "What would you ask of Q'tesh, daughter?"

"For your leave," Vala whispers, head bowed, hands shaking, "to marry."

"Tell me of your betrothed," Q'tesh says, walking slowly, silently through the sacred pool.

"He is a weaver," Vala says, not looking up, watching the ripples in the water made by the passage of the goddess grow larger, and more closely spaced. "His name—" she swallows, "is Jaquyn."

A hand comes passes into her field of vision, and Vala takes it.

Q'tesh pulls her to her feet.

"I do not grant you leave," the goddess says, and draws her deeper into the pool.

Vala allows herself to be led, the water rising to soak and lift her gown around her as she continues.

She is trembling. Because she knows what this must mean.

A glaring swath of Tau'ri characters amongst the goa'uld—this is what she has been seeking. The door chirps again. The silence on the other side frightens her more than any sound of violence. She must act quickly. She must select coordinates. She must select coordinates that they will not suspect, and she must destroy the evidence of his passage.

After they have killed her, or traded her to someone who will, they must not be able to find him. It is what they would do. The ones that are her 'we'. The brilliant woman with the yellow hair. The stoic Jaffa statesman. The brown haired man who snaps between kindness and hardness. What Daniel would do—remains unknown.

The ways that are open to Daniel are not open to others.

"I offer you my life," Vala whispers, as the sound of dissipating zat fire begins to impact the door.

"I offer you my life," Vala whispers, "by ritual and by rote. I ask for your blessing for all those whom I love."

"But I ask for your blessing for all those whom I love."

"That they may find the happiness that I find," she says, her voice wavering. "In the service of my goddess."

"That they may find the happiness that I find," she whispers, selecting a city on the eastern seaboard of the continent below her, searching for a river, narrowing the coordinates as she looks for somewhere to send him. "In the service—" Her voice fades to nothing.

"Q'tesh has heard your prayer, child," the goddess says. "And will release you from the fate that awaits the wife of a weaver."

Vala nods, beginning to cry as Q'tesh steps closer.

"Good luck," Vala says, and slams her hand down on the console.

The man she has saved vanishes in a blaze of blue light. He will wake alone beside a river. There are worse fates.

Q'tesh wraps one arm around her waist. One hand is tangles in her hair. Little shells click against one another.

Vala erases the coordinates.

She waits, looking into yellow-green eyes, her breath burning in her throat.

She waits, looking at the door, her breath burning in her throat.

Q'tesh dips her beneath the water, the movement smooth and sure and without violence. Vala struggles instinctively, her blood roaring in her ears, unsure how a drowning can suit the wishes of the goddess unless—

It bursts open and they enter, a leather-clad triad with death in their eyes.

"Telford," Vala whispers, the name and face surfacing with the shock of it as her hands hover above the console.

Something alien passes her lips, invasive and thick and long and painful and she tries to scream but cannot, struggling there in the water beneath the cover of the floating flowers as it cuts into the back of her throat and then— And then— Her limbs are no longer her own. Her struggles cease despite the panic in her thoughts. She stands, rising out of the

*pool as the water sluices from her in a glittering rain. Vala screams inside her own mind.
Q'tesh smiles.*

Vala smiles.

"You will not find him," she says in goa'uld, claiming what may be the last victory of Vala Mal Doran in the style of Q'tesh.

Q'tesh the snake in her head.

Q'tesh the dead god.

Q'tesh the dead false god.

Q'tesh who would haunt her.

All the days of her life.

Their expressions do not change, but their eyes are murderous.

Daniel, she thinks. Daniel, I could have told you—

The woman brings her weapon up and fires.

Chapter Forty Four

Young leaned against his car. Heat radiated from the dark swath of asphalt beneath his feet, from the black paint of his Charger, from the buildings, from the city of Colorado Springs, but the night breeze was dry and strong, and carried with it the faint smell of a distant wildfire. It was fire season.

Maybe—maybe the smell of smoke was nothing more than a memory.

His back hurt.

As did his hip.

And spine.

Yards away, Jackson stood in khaki pants and a brown blazer, intermittently illuminated by the headlights of passing cars as he gave a description of Vala. Young couldn't hear him clearly, but he recognized the leveling of Jackson's hand near his eyes, the familiar sweep of repeated gesticulation. The man had described her something like five times in as many hours.

Young tried to decide if the guy in the suit opposite Jackson was FBI or NID. The maze of what could be disclosed to whom in a multi-agency operation like this was a bureaucratic labyrinth—one that seemed to result in a few accidental inductions into the program every time a local cop or an enterprising FBI officer saw something that they shouldn't see. Heard something they shouldn't hear.

He checked his watch. Four hundred hours. They were coming up on the eight-hour mark since Jackson had caught a glimpse of Vala's dark hair and blue shirt vanishing behind the closing door of a non-descript white van.

On a world with a stargate, on a world with Low Orbital Defenses that were a work in progress, on a world with a patchy tropospheric sensor network, on a world infiltrated by the Lucian Alliance and the go'uld—eight hours— Well, it was enough. Enough to be halfway across the galaxy. Enough to be in all kinds of trouble.

The night was warm and the darkness was thick beyond the glare of lights ornamental and utilitarian that illuminated the minimalist exterior of *Il Fiore Bianco*. Young's phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out, checked the caller ID, and answered. "Cam," he said, pressing a hand against the relentless ache in his back.

"Hey," Mitchell said, his tone hard.

Young knew how he felt.

"You guys have anything?"

"Maybe," Mitchell said, the steel in his voice tempering toward something that sounded more like exhaustion. "We found the van. Abandoned. Choked with surveillance equipment. A fifty-fifty blend of our stuff and goa'uld tech."

"And?" Young prompted. "What else."

"And nothing," Mitchell said. "Oh, we started a sweep—on foot, by car, by chopper—from the van's location, but it's pretty likely, pretty *damn* likely that that they ditched the thing and hightailed it via a beam out. Carter's running it over as we speak, looking for any residual EM signatures but—" he trailed off.

"Yeah," Young said.

"How the hell did this happen," Mitchell said. "She was with Jackson. She was *with* him."

"I know," Young replied, watching the anxious sweep of the archeologist's hands as he spoke a few yards away. "This is bullshit."

"We don't even know who it *was*," Mitchell said. "I mean, these kind of tactics tend to suggest either the LA or the Trust but—ah," he said, the pace and pitch of his words changing. "Jackson told me that it was only *five minutes that* she was out of his sight. Less maybe. That implies either a level of continuous surveillance that we otherwise weren't aware of, or—"

"Don't say it," Young said.

"I'm not saying it," Mitchell snapped, too fast. Too fast. "She's on my *team*," the other man continued, after a corrective pause. "She's on *my* team—and I'm not. I'm not *ever*. Gonna be the one who says it."

Young looked up at the light-polluted darkness and breathed in, trying to determine whether the scent of smoke carried on the wind was the smell of burning brush and desiccated trees, or whether it smelled of sulfur. And of ash. Still, he couldn't tell.

"But people are going to." Mitchell stopped, regrouped, restarted. "People are going to say—"

Young gave him a moment before he said, "that it was purposeful."

"Yep," Mitchell said.

"They'll say that she planned it. That she's never really been one of us," Young said, looking at Jackson.

The other man had one hand pressed against the front pocket of his blazer, as if to prevent something from escaping.

"There's a briefing," Mitchell said, "scheduled for six hundred hours. If I don't get the chance," he continued, "you think you could—um."

"What," Young said. "Name it."

"I mean—look. It's going to come up. The issue of defection, of insurgency is—well, it's going to come up. And Jackson—" Mitchell stopped. "Jackson's not—"

"Yeah he's not gonna take it all that well," Young said.

"No," Mitchell said. "No, not really. I can't see him—well. You know him. You know what he's like."

"Yeah," Young said.

"Yeah," Mitchell replied.

"Are they—" Young said. "Jackson. And Vala. Do you know if—shit. Are they— *Were* they—"

"Together?" Mitchell asked, and over the open line, Young could hear the wince in his expression.

"Yeah."

"I don't know," Mitchell said. "I don't ask. I mean, I *should* ask. I should know. I *know* that I should know, but it's different. It's *different* with SG-1. I mean, you try being Daniel motherfucking *Jackson's* CO.

"No thanks," Young said. "I'm good."

"And, even if they were—even if they *are*—it wouldn't matter. *Either way* he's going to take it—badly. He always takes it badly."

"Yeah," Young said. "It's part of the guy's charm."

Mitchell was silent for a moment until he said, "try to—"

He didn't finish.

"Yeah," Young said. "I'll try."

"Yeah,"

"Sam is flaggin' me down," Mitchell said. "Gotta go."

"Keep in touch," Young replied.

"Will do," Mitchell said, before ending the call.

Young pocketed his phone and looked over at Jackson, who was standing, hands in pockets, eyes following the retreating back of the man he had just briefed.

He waved the other man over.

Jackson approached slowly, one hand sliding through his hair in a slow sweep.

"You okay?" Young asked him.

Jackson shot him a look of eloquent misery.

"Yeah," Young said, feeling somewhat at a loss, "I hear that. NID? Or FBI?" He indicated the retreating suit with his gaze.

Jackson half-turned, reflexively. "NID. Though I think I've briefed personnel from about five federal agencies at this point. But—" he paused, arcing his gaze away from Young and across the front of the restaurant, his hand going again to the pocket of his blazer. "It's been—what—eight hours now, without a sign of her? That's—that's a lot of time when you take," he paused again to scan the personnel in their immediate vicinity, "when you take everything into consideration."

"I know," Young said.

"There are people," Jackson whispered, nearly inaudible, his eyes on those that surrounded them in a moving cloud of personnel with unknown security clearance, "a lot of people from her past who might—"

"Yeah," Young said, cutting Jackson off before he enumerated things that should not, yet or here, be enumerated. "Or she might be next door."

"One of those possibilities is more likely than the other," Jackson said, his voice a hopeless lilt as he shut his eyes. "It was literally—*literally* no more than five minutes. She got up to go to the ladies room, and I—I got up to look for her."

"Why?" Young asked, pressing his fingers into the aching muscles in his lower back.

"You see something? Did something tip you?"

"No," Jackson said. "I didn't see anything. I just—I just knew."

"But *how* did you know."

"I knew," Jackson repeated, shoving his hands deep into his pockets, looking out into the dark.

Young was gonna leave that one where it lay. "Come on. I think you've briefed everyone who's going to be working this from a civilian angle," he said. "Let's head back."

"The NID is examining my car," Jackson said absently. "I think it's now classified as 'evidence'."

"Time for a new car," Young replied. "In fact, for you? It's been time for a new car for something like fifteen years."

Jackson said nothing.

"Daniel," Young said, shifting his weight and opening the driver's side door with a pained grimace. "Get in. I got this."

Jackson nodded, opened the opposite door, and slid into the passenger's seat.

Young eased himself into the driver's seat, mindful of his back, aggravated by a night on his feet in the radiated heat of a slowly cooling city. He started the car and they left the glare of headlights and floodlights behind them as they pulled away from the restaurant.

"They found the van," Young said, once they had put sufficient space between themselves and the mess that spanned the road behind them.

"Did they." Jackson didn't look at him, but he pulled at the cuff of one sleeve, as if looking for an end that might give in to an attempt at unraveling.

"It was abandoned. Full of surveillance equipment."

"Terrestrial surveillance equipment?" Jackson asked.

"A mix. Mitchell will have a report by the briefing at oh six hundred," Young said.

Jackson nodded.

"Jackson," Young said. "Daniel."

Jackson shot him a look, incisive and oblique.

Young decided that there was no point in trying to dress an ugly reality in any kind of fancy verbal outfit. "There's going to be a faction at this briefing, maybe a big faction, that's going to suggest she's running."

Jackson smiled, brief and wry. "I know," he said.

"You know?" Young echoed.

"What do you take me for," Jackson shot back, with an unexpected edge.

"A nice guy with a tendency to verbally knife people in the metaphorical kidneys who *also*," Young paused to look at him and then back at the road, "happens to have a personal stake about a mile wide in what's about to go down over the next twenty-four hours," he finished mildly.

"The kidneys?" Jackson said, without smiling. "That's a new one. Look. Colonel. I appreciate your concern, but I certainly don't need *anyone* to tell me that Vala Mal Doran is likely to be accused of defection by the oligarchic upper echelons of Homeworld Command. Point of fact, you're naive if you think it's going to stop there."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that there will be a *huge* incentive to pin the problem we have with information leakage on someone, and Vala is now an extremely convenient place to put all of that suspicion. All of that blame. All of that anger. At least until the next undeniable evidence of a leak rears its ugly head."

"Hopefully it won't go that far," Young said.

"We'll see," Jackson replied, his voice flat, his eyes shadowed as he looked out into the darkness. "We'll see."

"Jackson," Young said.

"What." The word was blunt and without energy.

Young had no follow through, but he was saved from having to formulate some kind of answer to Jackson's void of a question by the vibration of his phone in his pocket. With a pained torque of the hips, he shifted, slipping it out, and handed it to Jackson. "Grab that, will you? It's probably Cam."

"It's not Cam," Jackson said, cautiously. "It's Rush."

Young said nothing. He glanced at Jackson and then back at the dark swath of the road.

Jackson answered the call. "Nick? It's Daniel."

Young glanced again at Jackson.

The other man was looking back at him. "Nick?" he said again. "Hello?"

Young pressed down subtly on the gas pedal. Subtly.

"He's not answering," Jackson whispered, his thumb pressed against the receiver.

"Don't hang up," Young said, "do *not* hang up."

"Right," Jackson said, his voice tight as he pulled out his own cellphone.

"You calling dispatch?" Young asked.

"Yeah."

"Have someone locate Rush," Young said, "he should be on base. He's supposed to be *on base*. He had *better* be on base."

"I know," Jackson said, quiet and intent, Young's phone still pressed to his ear, his thumb still shielding the receiver.

"See if they can't track that call," Young added.

"Telford was on base today," Jackson said.

Young said nothing.

"Maybe—" Jackson said. "Maybe go faster." He lifted his own phone to his opposite ear and said, "yes, hello, dispatch? This is Daniel Jackson. I need someone to locate Dr. Nicholas Rush. Immediately. He should be on base. In the infirmary. Check with Dr. Lam. If she's not on, page the physician on call."

"Ask them about tracking," Young said, stopping short at a red light. His seatbelt dug painfully into his shoulder and across his hips. "Tracking the call."

"If you can't find Rush," Jackson continued, "in the next five minutes? Then I want a code five called. On him. Five minutes. On my authorization. I also need you to put me through to communications. I need a call traced. A call happening in real time. Yeah. I'll hold."

"You hear anything on my phone?" Young asked, low and urgent.

"No," Jackson said, his thumb pressed down over both receivers. "Just the sound of an open line. No talking. No distortion. Just silence. How fast can you get us back?"

"Ten minutes," Young said, "if I really push it."

"Maybe push it," Jackson whispered.

"Yup," Young said, pressing his foot to the floor as the light turned from red to green. They accelerated in silence.

"This must be—it must be a coincidence," Jackson said. "It must be unrelated. This call. Her disappearance. This won't be what it looks like."

"What do you think it looks like?" Young asked.

"I don't know," Jackson replied.

"You'd rather not say, you mean," Young growled. He powered through the last light and began the winding ascent to the base.

"We're in the middle of something," Jackson said. "Something that's unfolding. Something with borders undefined. It's best not to assume. Best to first—to try to see. So you don't make mistakes."

"Do you know," Young said, the words cut off by the close and release of his vocal chords. "How many times he's called me?"

"No," Jackson said.

"Never," Young replied. "Not one time."

"She *would not do this*," Jackson said, breaking off each word with low emphasis. "Even if she—even if for some reason she decided to *leave*, or if she found a better arrangement, or she orchestrated her own—I just know, I know she wouldn't—not Rush. She wouldn't. She wouldn't involve herself with this. She stopped running. She made that decision. She didn't fall into it; she *made* it. She *told me she made it*. She told me."

Young said nothing.

"She wouldn't," Jackson whispered again. "She liked him. She likes him."

"She likes a lot of people," Young said quietly, but not before Jackson's attention flipped away from him to center on someone on the end of one of the phones he held.

"Hi," Jackson said. "Hello, yes, this is Dr. Daniel Jackson and I need a call traced. Immediately."

Young extended a hand, and, with no further prompting, Jackson passed his own phone back to him.

He pressed it to his ear and heard nothing but the nonhomogeneous silence of an open line.

"What's your number?" Jackson asked Young.

His thumb pressed over the receiver of his own phone, Young gave it to him. At the edges of events he could feel the emerging contours of a pattern unguessed at, something that had the ominous feel of an emerging bait and switch.

The code five that had been called on Vala—

It had diverted a lot of resources.

Young shifted his grip on his phone. "Rush," he said quietly, "if you're on the other end of this line—you've got to let us know."

He heard nothing. Nothing but soft irregularities of ambiance that differentiated a silent line from a dead one.

"They're understaffed," Jackson whispered, impatient, looking out at the rushing dark of the forest on either side of them. "Because of the ongoing code five. This is taking too long."

Young pulled his phone away from his ear and glanced at it. The call from Rush had come six minutes ago. "I'm on hold," Jackson said. "Again. I'll listen. You drive."

Young handed his phone to the other man and looked back at the road, at the dark turn ahead of them.

"We're almost there," he said, feeling the painful press that accompanied a change in velocity deep in his spine.

"At this pace?" Jackson replied quietly. "Yeah. Unfortunately, I'm not sure that's going to—"

Young pulled out of a switchback to see a car—stopped and askew across both lanes, its lights on, its interior illuminated, its driver's side door swung wide. Young slammed on his brakes and spun the wheel, a fast and excruciating wrench toward the rising slope on his right, rather than the dark drop-off on his left.

"Shit," he ground out through gritted teeth, inaudible over the high pitched shriek of skidding tires.

In his peripheral vision he saw Jackson's hands come up, silently, the light of illuminated touchscreens shining through his fingers.

They grazed the empty car with enough force to send a jolt of pain from Young's left knee to the center of his back, to snap his jaw together, and to deploy the airbags as they spun out into a shallow ditch before the cleared border of the road gave way to an ascent of rock and pine.

"What—" Jackson began, shaking, fixing his glasses, combating the airbag with his hands, spreading his fingers laterally over the expanse of the dashboard, reaching for the phones that he'd dropped at the impact. "Are you all right?"

Young killed the engine, for once his mind recovering before his body, trying to move, to speak through the fiery dissent of agonized nerves. In his spine. In his hip. In his leg. "That's David's car," he ground out, unbuckling his seatbelt with fingers that felt numb when stacked against the agony in his back.

"Telford?" Jackson said, shaken, urgent. His fingers closed around Young's phone. "Telford's car?"

"Yes," Young said.

With the click of an opening catch and a wall of warm night air, Jackson was out the passenger-side door, and scrambling up the dark bank.

Young forced his door open, grabbed the roof, and dragged himself out in time to watch the other man clear a shallow ditch in a few steps and cut out an opaque relief against the headlights of David Telford's abandoned car. He stood, unmoving on the surface of the road, Young's phone still pressed to his ear.

"Jackson," Young snapped, reflexively anxious at the obvious profile the man made in the light, certain that he was about to see the man taken down by a sniper, waiting out there in the unsecured dark.

Jackson didn't go down. He stood there, untouched, backlit by headlights.

Young limped up the bank, his back a mire of confused, contracted muscle, his thoughts held in the kind of stillness that had, for him, always preceded revelations of strategy. As he stepped onto the road, he drew his sidearm. He moved forward until he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Jackson. They looked silently at Telford's car, rotated by the impact that had sent Young's Charger into the shallow ditch of a shoulder and then up against the rising slope beyond. The high-beams of the Acura were now pointed down the mountain, parallel to the direction of the road. The interior was alight and empty, the driver's side door twisted by the recent impact, the passenger's side door ajar. It was still running.

Young took Jackson's arm, just above the elbow. "Out of the lights," he said quietly.

They stepped laterally, into the darkness, approaching the car from an oblique angle.

"You're *sure*," Jackson said quietly, "that this is *Telford's* car."

"I'm sure," Young said, his gaze sweeping the tree line, listening for anything above the invariant vibration of the engine of an Acura NSX.

They said nothing as they moved together, edgewise over dark asphalt, stopping close enough to touch the twisted driver's side door. Young scanned the front seat, taking in the smell of coffee, the faint irregular sheen of brown liquid over the steering wheel. His eyes returned to the tree line. And back to the car. Coffee ran down the driver's side window in narrow streaks. His eyes returned to the tree line. And back to the car. On the floor, near the gas pedal, was an empty paper cup—a match to the one that still

sat in the driver's side cup-holder. His eyes returned to the tree line. And back to the car.

"I came to get you out," Young whispers, his voice too loud in the stillness of the small craft.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear across the thick and turbid air between them. They proceed with a quiet whir of engines toward the source of the darkness that spreads over the city.

He could feel, around the edges of his thoughts, the unpredictable flutter of falling cards. He had to trace the call. He had to find Rush. He had to call this in. He had to get Jackson out of the lights, off this road, keep Jackson from—

Silent, heedless of Young's tightening grip on his arm, Jackson snapped himself free as he lunged at the back door of the NSX. Uncoordinated. Young's phone still pressed to one ear.

"Jackson," Young growled, his now free hand coming to press down on the exquisite knot of muscles in his back, as if it had its own awareness. As if it knew that it was already too late to prevent the other man from touching the car. "Jackson. Damn it—don't mess with *anything*. We have to call this in. We have to—"

The other man pulled something out of the back seat. A bag. One that could be settled over the shoulder. Black, non-descript, and unmistakable. It should have been a surprise, but it didn't feel like one. Jackson ripped the thing open, not speaking as he revealed an assortment of papers, a hard drive, a laptop. He shut it again. "This is his," Jackson said, his voice flat.

"It is," Young replied.

"The scope of our failure—" Jackson said, trailing off, staring at the bag.

Young took it from him and replaced it in the back seat, exactly as it had been before Jackson lifted it out. *Even that* felt like an admission of defeat. "The scope of our failure's a work in progress, Jackson," he growled. "Go call this in, get a team out here. Get the results of that trace, and call code fives on Rush and Telford. Stay off the road and out of the lights until we get some back-up and clear the area."

"Yup," Jackson said, returning Young's phone before stepping out of the lights and toward the shallow ditch.

Young looked at the phone, then pressed it to his ear. "Nick," he said. There was no answer.

Protocol dictated—

Protocol dictated a lot of things.

He pulled the phone away from his ear and looked at it. He ended the call and redialed, then began to walk down the road, lit up like a target by the lights at his back, forcing a symmetry into his asymmetrical stride despite the pain in his spine, casting a long shadow in the light of the high-beams, holding his phone with its open line, his eyes scanning the darkness on either side of the asphalt.

The coffee.

The position of the doors.

The position of the car—as if abandoned in the middle of a directional reversal.

Taken in concert, those things suggested—

He didn't want to think about what they suggested.

"I came to get you out," Young whispers, too loud in the stillness of the room.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear across the thick and turbid air between them.

He could smell smoke.

Or, he thought he could.

It was fire season.

Behind him, he could hear Jackson speaking in the dark, low and urgent.

When he had nearly hit the border of the illumination afforded by the high-beams, he saw it, a dim glow in the dark underbrush eight feet or so from the edge of the asphalt.

Seeing it, he heard it, vibrating quietly in the dark.

Rush's phone.

Ringin in silence on the side of the road.

Young ended the call and, after a few seconds, the light went out.

He had known, of course.

At the moment Rush had called him, he had known.

He looked up at the sky and then down at the surface of the road.

The details had yet to reveal themselves.

A reflected glint beneath the lateral beams of the headlights caught his eye.

With difficulty, he knelt, his bad knee pressing against warm asphalt.

"I came to get you out," Young whispers, his last word cracking with accusation, with betrayal as he strains against repurposed bonds of god'uld manufacture.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear, as if any amount of guilt could atone for what he holds in his hands.

Young picked up the ring, and studied it beneath the glare of the lateral, streaming light.

"Damn it," he whispered.

Chapter Forty Five

He woke alone, beside a river. The sounds of traffic, unseen and irregular, accompanied his view of a pale sky unobstructed by clouds. Beneath his back, the ground was warm and damp and covered with grass.

He sat, and the world pitched, unstable. Clutching a handful of grass with a primitive clamping of fingers, he waited out the tilting of his visual field with eyes fixed on the swath of green in front of him.

The ground. The ground that shouldn't move. The ground that was a static reference frame.

His shoulders hurt with the ache of an unremembered wrenching.

When visual vagaries capitulated to a stability of landscape that seemed real enough, he looked out over the water, a brown tinged blue, irregularities in its surface crested with reflected light from the low-set sun.

It was late evening. Or early morning. The scarcity of human activity put the odds on the latter. Like as not it did. He thought it did.

The more-or-less-maintained spread of grass on which he found himself gave way to the river in a ledged margin of reeds and the shallow wetness of water on the verge of bursting its banks. A short distance ahead and above him, a bridge rose over the river, white-painted railings decking a triple arcade of stone. Cars rattled across it, half-concealed. The low murmur of their engines could be heard at intervals.

He considered the bridge, the only thing spanning the void of his thoughts.

He looked over his shoulder, at the not-too-distant asphalt of the road—pale and smooth, bordered by the off-white ribbons of sidewalks scored with regular grooves where grass infiltrated cracks in the cement.

The formation of his question and its incipient answer seemed to grow together out of the empty places in his mind.

Where was he?

He didn't know.

With the acknowledgement of aberration came an attendant alarm. His hands rose in uneasy symmetry, passing over his shoulders, his chest, his hips, his legs—looking for

any kind of injury, for something that might explain his presence here. His right side was an unfamiliar patchwork of pain, sharp and occasionally stinging, running from shin to hip to ribs to shoulder to arm, evidence that he'd done himself something of a damage. He must have fallen. But he'd not woken on his right side. He'd woken on his back.

His shirt, white with an uneven crispness, was torn at the right cuff; a disquieting fringe of dried blood ornamented the edges of the tear. He rolled up the sleeve to conceal its bloodied fringe and saw an irregular abrasion on his right arm, as if he had skidded across a hard surface. The stinging of his right leg beneath the denim of his jeans indicated that there might be another injury there, so he gingerly pulled up his pant leg to reveal a second expanse of abraded skin stretching from mid-calf to knee.

He brought his hands to his face and—the glasses surprised him. But, finding them in place, he checked their integrity and then continued, combing his fingers through his hair, searching for evidence of a head injury, evidence of—

His left hand stopped at something. Something—something made of *metal* and *affixed* to his temple. He pulled at it, gently at first, and then harder. It did not come loose. With a surge of uncertainty, he dropped both hands. He clenched them into fists. He reopened them. With an apprehensive tracing, he explored the edges of whatever it was with the tips of his fingers.

The device was small, smooth, subtle, likely concealed by his hair, and attached with a troubling tenacity. Running his hands through his hair near his right temple, he found an identical device.

Right then, that was definitely atypical, and also—also upsetting.

It didn't seem to be *doing* anything. Searching for context, he knew that his context was not adequate. Maybe *it was* doing something. Probably it was. Certainly it was. What kind of person would have pieces of metal *affixed* to his head? In the face of increasing sympathetic activation, with the distraction of racing heart and shallow breath, he couldn't think of any class of person for whom this would be normal.

What kind of person *was* he?

He realized he didn't know.

Why was he here?

He didn't know.

Where was he?

He didn't know.

If *he* didn't know these things—then who *might* know them?

He didn't know.

With a growing sense of horror, he tried to recall *anything* about himself. Anything *at all*. His occupation—because, yes well, people had occupations, and he looked like a person with an occupation, given the dark leather of his shoes, the state of his jeans, the dress shirt he was wearing, the fact that he owned a pair of glasses. Where he lived—because he like as not lived somewhere, people didn't wander the streets in clothes like this. People he knew—he must know someone, because everyone knew someone. Even in the face of a demonstrable, gaping deficit in his knowledge regarding himself and his circumstances, the final question and its realization seemed a long time in coming.

Who was he?

He did not know.

Oh god.

He didn't *know*.

He didn't know.

He took a deep breath, abruptly lightheaded as his fingers pressed against the edge of the device affixed to his right temple. Who was he and where was he and why was he here and where was here and other unanswerable questions continued to interrogate the places in his mind that *used to know* but no matter his concentration, no matter his petrifying intensity of focus— No answers were forthcoming. Nor did any feel imminent.

He looked at the knitted strips of river, road, and sidewalks, at their fraying intersection with the curved stone arc of the bridge that stretched before and away from him. Twisting, he followed the ribbons of lawn and water back until they overlapped out of sight behind the tumbled lines of an unfamiliar cityscape viewed from too low a vantage point to enable any kind of recognition.

He was alone.

He was fair certain that when people woke up next to rivers, not knowing who they were, the next step would be to locate a hospital. But. He was also fair certain that when people woke up next to rivers, not knowing who they were, dressed like they'd

been attending some kind of business-casual meeting, and with *devices* affixed to their temples—well, perhaps a bit more prudence would be in order.

He stood, feet to the grudging give of grass. As he straightened, he felt a sharp pain in his right knee, right shoulder, and back. The landscape took on a greyish cast, the green strip of choked earth and the blue of sky and water faded, blurring to a spectral slate. He leaned over, hands on knees, head down, until his vision cleared, before he staggered over to a tree maybe six meters or so from where he was standing and pressed a hand against its ridged solidity. He felt sick and famished in confusing simultaneity. Was it possible he had gotten himself wrecked? Pure *wrecked*? Was it possible that he was, currently, wrecked? He didn't *feel* hung over. Mentally, he felt relatively sharpish, dubious coordination aside.

He leaned against the tree.

Only *then* did it occur to him to check his pockets.

Right then, maybe he was not quite so sharpish as he'd assumed.

With one hand still pressed against the rough bark of—well, he wasn't skilled with tree classification, apparently, because he hadn't the faintest—of whatever type of tree this was, he shook his head, realized that was a mistake, and then held still until he restabilized. Using his free hand, he began a rapid inventory of the pockets of his jeans. In the front right pocket he turned up nothing. In the front left pocket he turned up a posh cigarette lighter engraved with the words: *Knock it off, won't you?* Not useful. He repocketed the thing and moved on to the right back pocket, from which he pulled an unadorned wallet of black matte leather. Flipping it open, he found the California Driver's License of 'Nicholas Rush'.

Struggling with the attendant sense of dread that accompanied his total lack of recognition when presented with the name and features of what was likely an abstracted version of himself, he studied the picture and the description. It took him only seconds to conclude that there was reason to believe that he was, indeed, the person pictured. He was going to need a mirror to be certain. He grimaced and shut the wallet in the face of unexpected guilt at the lack of cognitive dissonance. He felt no sense of recognition. Absolutely none. Maybe it wasn't his wallet.

He gave his surroundings an agitated once over. Other than a lone jogger who had rounded a distant corner and was proceeding along the sidewalk, her hair tormented by the rhythm of her gait, there was no one to be seen.

The principle of parsimony would suggest that the wallet he held was indeed his, and therefore there was no need for guilt of any cause when examining it. Unless he wasn't Nicholas Rush. But, most likely, he was. Most likely. If he was Nicholas Rush, then it was a fair bet that this was California, though nothing in the restless murmur of the river or the architecture of the distant bridge struck him as particularly reminiscent of the western coast of the United States. It should be noted, however, that his ability to judge such things was limited at best.

So—noted.

He reopened the wallet and resumed a quick inventory of its contents, beginning with the card at the upper left and working his way down and then lateral. A blue and white insurance card—a Federal plan, issued to Nicholas Rush. Several credit cards. A University of California at Berkeley Faculty ID card. The business card of Victor Swift, 'avant-garde flautist'? Frowning, he turned that one over, to find a message written in scripted pencil on the reverse side that read: *What do you say we get out of here, darling?* Unsigned. He replaced it where he had found it. The business card of Dr. Daniel Jackson, Ph.D. in Archeology, Linguistics, and History. No institutional affiliation. The business card of Colonel David Telford, United States Air Force. A phone number was scrawled on its reverse side in loose ink. The black and pink business card of someone by the name of 'Vala Mal Doran' who purported to be a: *Peaceful Explorer, Personal Shopper, and Fashion Consultant.*

Perhaps Nicholas Rush was a collector of notable business cards?

Along with the unimpressive imprest of twenty-eight dollars in cash, he also found a piece of paper, folded to fit alongside the bills. He opened it to see an intricate and mostly incomprehensible drawing signed: *J. Shep*, in an angular hand that very much fit the unsettled aesthetic of everything above it. There was something disturbing that haunted the edges of those freehand lines, and he put it away, inexplicably uncomfortable.

None of it, not the collection of cards, not the identity or name or appearance of 'Nicholas Rush,' not the drawing by 'J. Shep,' nor the engraved lighter, triggered even the faintest echo of recognition.

None, at all.

He shut the wallet and pocketed it in a fluid slide that seemed to lend credence to the idea that it was, indeed, his. Possessed of a slowly increasing remorse at confronting the evidence of an overwritten man he could not remember, struggling with a

precarious sense of selfhood, and feeling fair wretched, he leaned against the tree and tried to decide on a sensible course of action.

He traced the contours of the thing on his left temple. He needed a mirror. He needed a mirror, some privacy, a better idea of his current location, and a place to sort himself that was not an exposed strip of grass between a river and a road.

The jogger he had noted earlier was getting closer to his position. In the distance, he could see another. He wondered what time it was. It felt early. It felt like he hadn't slept. But of course, that was impossible. Because he'd just woken up. Unless he'd been unconscious. Yes well, upon reflection, that seemed more likely.

Pushing away from the tree he'd been leaning against, he cut toward the road with its fringe of sidewalk, hoping he didn't appear too obviously unkempt in any way.

It was warm and humid and the cloudless sky promised the inevitability of oppressively high temperatures as the day progressed. California was warm. Was that where he was? Odds were good.

He found it difficult to address an anxiety that had no point or condition upon which it could be fixed.

Reaching up, he traced the edge of the device affixed to his right temple as he headed toward the white-railed arch of the bridge. The rising grade of the sidewalk was enough to make him feel lightheaded and more winded than he might have expected as he made his way to the near end of the bridge. Leaning against the metal rail, he surveyed his surroundings.

The river stretched in both directions, wide and blue and empty, until it vanished in a curve around and through a low city skyline of red brick and white trim. Across the water he could see the spectral outline of intermittent skyscrapers through the haze of humid air as they jutted above an older stratum of rust-colored masonry.

It did not look immediately familiar to him, but—

He *very* much doubted that he was in California. The aesthetic of Berkeley, of the San Francisco Bay, was something—not that he personally *remembered* per se, but that he could name—something bright and glittering and crawling out of the sea. That was somewhere he would be able identify, he was certain of it, with the same certainty he had when it came to the naming of things—the identification of shirts and watches and lighters and wallets and bridges and water and roads.

This panorama of river and city was an unfamiliar mixture of urban and collegiate, and it did not help him locate himself within the confused geographies of his thoughts. He

looked up at the nearest pair of street signs—white letters on a green background announced the convergence of Memorial Drive and Western Avenue.

Not helpful.

Rather than crossing the bridge and heading toward the irregular vista of skyscrapers in the distance, he turned down Western Avenue, toward the wood-trimmed red brick jutting within, around, and through the leaves of overhanging trees.

The air was warm, thick with invisible water. The sidewalks were uneven and cracked, panels of cement or drapes of brick made irregular by the heave of an underlying tree-root. The narrow streets were lined with buildings of brick and of wood and choked with vehicles bearing license plates of the New England persuasion—Connecticut, Vermont, but, most frequently, Massachusetts.

A rusted box of blue metal with a transparent plastic cover, advertising copies of *The Boston Globe* cut through the converging of his emergent suspicions and straight to a final answer. Boston, then. Or some subsidiary city. He supposed that the homes and businesses he had passed evinced a stochastically colonial style. Possibly. Architecture, it seemed, was not an area in which he had more than marginal competence.

What was he doing in *Boston* when he was, at least presumably, from *California*.

Or, the better question certainly was: what *had* he been doing. Because whatever it had been, he certainly wasn't doing it now.

He didn't know.

He didn't *know*.

But—perhaps he could find out.

He needed to get a look at whatever it was that was attached to his temples, think his current situation through in a logical fashion, and obtain as much additional information about himself as possible in a manner that was relatively circumspect. A public library seemed like a reasonable means to such an end. He was certain he couldn't be far from one, not in an area this outrageously, reassuringly collegiate.

After approximately fifteen minutes of walking in the warm shade of quiet streets, Western Avenue broadened. The trees thinned out and the buildings rose higher on either side as cars and joggers and early morning commuters with their purposeful strides and their sunglasses became more frequent.

He wished, fruitlessly, for shades of his own.

Once residential neighborhoods had definitively given way to coffee shops, vintage clothing stores, and the other useless ephemera preferred by the American intelligentsia, he spied a likely looking person—male, young, about his own height, with dark, spiked hair sporting bright green streaks. He wore headphones that vanished into a pocket and had a racket of some kind slung across his back. In response to a raised hand, the man slowed, pulling his shades down in reflective, cautious courtesy.

"Awright mate," he said, "we wis lookin' t' fin' a lib'ry, y'thin' y'mi' know ah one?" He immediately clapped a hand to his mouth, closed it into a fist, and then let it fall away as he stepped back a pace.

"Um," the young man said, pulling off his shades entirely and cocking his head. "What?" Bloody *hell*. What was *wrong* with him? Because *something* was. Something was *wrong* with him. He'd taken a worse turn than he'd thought. He'd had a *stroke*. *Had* he? Was he neurologically damaged in some way? He *didn't feel* neurologically damaged. But then, like as not, he *wouldn't*, that was the thing with neurological damage.

"Are you okay?" the young man asked, taking a half step forward, and mirroring the alarm that he was certain was written all over his face.

He waved the man off and continued on, determinedly and quickly in the direction he had been headed, resolutely not looking behind him, even when the man called after him, persisting out of curiosity, or some altruistic impulse.

"Fuck," he whispered, in experimental alarm. That sounded all right. "Nicholas Rush," he murmured. That sounded, if not perfect, at least passable. "Excuse me," he said, voice low, trying not to appear crazy or three sheets to it to passersby, "but where is the lib'ry. Library. Li. Brary." He tried to think of something else to say and settled instead for reading a nearby street sign. "Nae parkin'," he read, trying to loosen up on his diction and listen to himself, "'tween th' hours ah—two AM an' six AM."

Oh.

He was not an *American*. He had an *accent*. "From the U.K.," he tried, "eh no?" Right then. He was *Scottish*. He was literally *from Scotland*. Specifically. Probably. Right. So he had not seen that one as having his name on it. But then, he supposed he wouldn't have.

Half an hour of walking and an inquiry more articulate found him in front of the Cambridge public library, surveying an expansive, modernist rectangle of paneled glass that was difficult to look at in the reflected light of early morning, when the rays of the ascendant sun lit up the surface to a searing yellow glow.

The place was, of course, closed. Not unexpected at something like the back of six in the AM. After fruitlessly trying the doors and checking the hours of the place, he walked back across the pale expanse of unvarying cement in front of the thing and sat down to wait in the shade of a low wall, adjacent to an empty rack where bicycles might be locked.

A nonchalant twenty minutes after the official opening of the library, he straightened his undoubtedly worse-for-wear dress shirt and entered the building, passing into air-conditioned space with the feeling of breaching some invisible, atmospheric wall. In front of him, shelves of books spread out, low and labyrinthine around a central, open altar to the personal computer before they rose at the periphery of the room, creating false corridors and a sense of spaces unseen.

Children, coffin-dodgers, and dubious persons not otherwise engaged had already begun perusing the shelves, retrieving newspapers and opening them atop sunlit wooden tables. This was not what he wanted. Not yet. So he followed the promise of the peripheral shelves, certain that there must be areas less trafficked, and finally found a staircase. He descended to a lower level, and, after a short time spent wandering amidst a dimly lit collection of the back-issues of various periodicals, both academic and popular, he found an isolated lavatory, tile floored, fluorescently lit, with a greenish cast that implied that this particular room had either escaped a drastic renovation or had been part of some other, older building, demolished to make way for the modern glass cube that now lay over it.

He walked to the sink, turned, and regarded himself in the mirror. Someone unfamiliar looked back at him from behind glasses he didn't recognize, beneath the fringe of sweat-damp hair that was slightly too long. He gave his reflection a disapproving look as he compared it to the image on the driver's license he carried. A quick shift of gaze from hand to mirror was all that was required to conclude that he was, indeed, Nicholas Rush, a middle-aged, underweight Scot of tastefully masculine apparel, who had, at one point, lived in California and been a faculty member at UC Berkeley. Other than a scrape along the underside of his right jaw, he was of unimpressive appearance—if one did not consider the small, identical devices attached to each side of his head.

But that, of course, was primarily what he focused on. With a tense glance at the closed door behind him, he swept his hair aside and leaned in close to the mirror to get a look at the thing on his right temple. It was small, square, silver, and rested just below the frames of his glasses. There was a piece of electrical tape overtop the device. He

pried it up, sliding the nail of one index finger beneath it to reveal a shallow depression from which a blue light shone.

He pressed his eyebrows together, unsettled. Right, so *that* was odd. To say the least. He reattached the tape. He needed to get these things off his head.

Parsimonious analysis would dictate that if one woke up disoriented to person and place, with pieces of unfamiliar technology attached to one's head and positioned in such a way that suggested said technology might be capable of influencing the neocortex, yes well, the most prudent course of action would then be to *remove those devices*.

Careful inspection revealed two depressible regions on the superior and inferior edges of the metal. He pressed both regions simultaneously, and, with a sickening, stinging release, the thing came free and dropped into his palm. He examined it intently, his eyes tracing its contours, following its form as if that might be some kind of window into its function.

In the silence of a deserted bathroom, he heard the eerie echo of a low chord, at once alien and autochthonous. Startled, he turned, his eyes sweeping the room. But he was alone.

Entirely alone.

He looked up at the ceiling and then down at the thing he held.

He whistled a cautious, perfect overtone and heard a difference between the sound carried over the air and the sound that resonated in his *thoughts*.

He swallowed. Slowly, he reached up, left handed, and snapped the other device off his head. As it came free in his hand—

A tonal wall crescendoed into him, dissonant and *de profundis*; a hostile note implicit in its sweep across his thoughts. His back tightened in celeritous, perilous sympathy with its endless build and he must, he *had to, he must*, rebottle that which he had unleashed, unknowing.

His hands returned to head in a blind press of painful reattaching. As the thing latched back to his temple with the sting of metal to skin, the terrifying chord in his thoughts dampened. As he attached the second device, it faded entirely.

He stood, trembling, sweating, gripping the edge of the sink, gasping, short and shallow. That had almost. That had nearly. It had nearly—what. He didn't *know*.

He staggered backward, shutting himself within the drab green confines of a lavatory stall and slid down the white mosaic of cool tile, unable to halt the tremors in his hands, his shoulders, his back, his legs. He shut his eyes, shaking hands pressed to his face.

This was not right. This could not be *right*. He lacked nearly all the context that should come with a human life but even he, even *he*, who didn't know his *name*, who had been forced to discover it from the *things he carried*, knew that what had just happened—that it hadn't been right. That it hadn't fit, even within the unobstructed framework of a life mostly unremembered. Who was Nicholas Rush, that such a thing might happen to him?

He didn't know. He didn't know. He hadn't the *faintest*.

After a breathless interval uncounted, he became aware again of the cool press of tile at his back, and the faint smell of bleach. There were answers to be had. There must be. But none of them were here with him, paralyzed with fear on bleached tile beneath fluorescent lights.

He stood, unsteady, and walked back to the sink. He regarded himself again, and if there was an edgy trepidation in his expression this time, yes well, he supposed that was understandable.

"Who are ya?" he whispered absently. "Y' bastard."

He took a deep breath, leaned forward, and, as artfully as he could, he brushed his hair over the things on his head, then positioned his glasses with a minimally disruptive slide. That done, he set about cleaning himself up to the extent that it was possible, given his limited resources. He hiked the sleeve of his dress shirt above his right elbow and cleaned the abrasions on his jaw and right forearm as best as he was able to manage with soap and water, then repeated the process for his right shin and knee, which had, apparently, fared better than his arm, given the protection of his jeans. That done, he unrolled the bloodied sleeve and soaped the edges of the right cuff until they were an unappealing brown, then re-rolled both sleeves above his elbows with all the crispness he could manage. He dusted himself off, and twisted to get a look at his back, which sported a rime of dark, fine dirt down the right shoulder. When he attempted to brush it off, he was rewarded with the sharp pain of underlying bruised tissue.

There wasn't much to be done about that.

Satisfied that he looked more like a Cambridge native who'd had a recent bicycle accident and less like a amnestic vagrant with mysterious technology strapped to his

head, he turned on the water, cupped his hands, and drank as much as possible. It did absolutely nothing for his hunger, but avoiding dehydration seemed like a good idea.

When he was finished, he walked up the stairs, back to the deck of the library. He returned to the center of the place, near the entrance, and found a free computer as far as possible from the human eddies that seemed to spring up around architectural vertices. He sat down beneath the roof of glass windows, and then, with an unsettling and fluid familiarity, he typed the words 'Nicholas Rush' into the waiting space of a search engine.

He paused for a moment, then sent the query into the vastness of interconnected branching computer networks with the click of a button. Faced with the instantaneous results of his inquiry, he pressed his eyebrows together. Nicholas Rush was—well known. *Quite* well known.

He was well known. As it seemed that he was Nicholas Rush.

He clicked the first link, blue text against a white background, and was presented with the image of a man in a brown jacket and dark jeans, glaring at the camera over the tops of square framed glasses like a percipient bastard. He decided he looked much the same in the image as he did at the present moment, except his two dimensional version had shorter hair and a more confrontational demeanor. His eyes shifted laterally to the accompanying text.

Nicholas Rush (born 1 November, 1965) is a Scottish American mathematician and computer scientist, considered to be one of the most significant thinkers in the field of computational complexity theory. His major academic works include a proof of the Hadamard conjecture, which he published in his final year at the University of Oxford and for which he was named a Fields Medalist in 1986, and the demonstration that $P=NP$ in 2007. The 2007 $P=NP$ proof has resulted in large-scale changes in cryptography and information security world wide as academicians, the private sector, and governments around the world brace for an efficient solution to 3-SAT, believed to be an inevitable consequence of the proof.

P equaled NP ? That sounded right to him. But then, he supposed it ought to. He grimaced and hooked his left hand over his left shoulder, his fingers digging into the tense musculature at the back of his neck. It seemed he had been instrumental in the current or eventual obviation of most existing cryptosystems. He could understand why that would make him—unpopular. Or, alternatively, *too* popular. He continued reading.

Biography Rush was born in Glasgow, Scotland. Little is known about his early life. He entered New College at the University of Oxford at the age of 17, where he studied mathematics and computer science. He was heavily involved with the music program at Magdalen College, where he met his wife, Gloria Whitbourn Rush. They were married in July of 1987. After completing his graduate studies, Rush joined the faculty of Imperial College London, where he stayed until 1995, when he was recruited to the University of California, Berkeley Mathematics Department. During his tenure at Berkeley he published two seminal papers on the Hodge Conjecture in the late 1990s before unveiling his $P=NP$ proof in early 2007. Rush remained on the faculty at Berkeley until April 2008, at which point he took a leave of absence of uncertain duration to work as a consultant to the United States Air Force. His current affiliation is Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

His wife? He glanced down at his left hand. Looked like that one hadn't worked out.

The Air Force? Looked like that one hadn't worked out either.

He glanced around the interior of the library, skimmed through the encyclopedic summation of his research, which had been gratifyingly prolific, and then moved on to the next article, hoping for something a bit more useful.

Cracking the uncrackable—NYTimes.com—Science Times—March 31st, 2007

"I remember where I was when I heard it," says Professor Dixon Clark of NYU, "and I will for the rest of my life. I was pouring myself a cup of coffee, in the middle of proctoring a midterm for Algebraic Topology when a friend of mine called me from the Joint Mathematics Meeting, called me, you understand, and he said, 'someone's done it. Someone's solved it'. I didn't have to ask what 'it' was." The demonstration of $P=NP$ by Dr. Nicholas Rush, Fields Medalist, and former chair of the UC Berkeley Mathematics Department, was the kind of moment that happens once in a generation. Both the presentation at the JMM meeting and the release of the subsequent paper took the mathematics and computer science communities by storm and has elevated a previously obscure problem into the cultural lexicon alongside $F=ma$, $E=mc^2$, and other easy-to-remember equations that have captured public imagination. But in order to understand the importance of this mathematical proof, we have to trace its roots backwards through the field of computational complexity from Gödel and Turing to Cook and Levin.

He scanned through the poorly laid out historical and theoretical underpinnings of the proof and recommenced reading carefully at a point approximately two thirds of the way through the article.

All of this brings us, finally, to Nicholas Rush, the Oxford educated mathematical wunderkind whose first claim to academic fame was the demonstration that there exists a Hadamard matrix for every positive multiple of four; a proof that made him the youngest-ever recipient of a Fields Medal. Following his graduate studies at Oxford, it seemed that the same fate would befall him that had befallen scores of mathematicians before him—that his greatest accomplishments would be the work that was done in his twenties. But he continued to reinvent himself within the field of computational complexity, much to the admiring irritation of his professional colleagues, until finally, in his latest iteration, he presented an abbreviated version of his $P=NP$ proof at the JMM meeting in January of this year.

"The title of his talk was unannounced," recalls Dr. Marcus Fonseca of Princeton University. "And the guy gets up there, clicks on his power point, cool as you please, and sure enough, on his title slide are the words, 'A demonstration of the relational equivalence of P class and NP class decision problems.' Let's just put it this way. I've never been in a room like that. I mean, the man was already veritable academic rockstar of the first order, taken very seriously, and for him to stand up at a meeting and launch into a talk with that kind of title—well it's the kind of thing that's either the herald of early retirement or the stuff that legend is made of."

The talk was received with an enthusiasm that was wild by any standards, and the following paper was reviewed and independently verified not only by the mathematical community, but by a federally appointed panel of mathematicians, cryptographers, and experts in information security, who would be tasked with determining the practical effects of this proof on the infrastructure of global information security. In its aftermath, the government, the broader academic community, and the public would be left wondering about the man behind the proof.

Nicholas Rush was born in Glasgow, Scotland. Relatively little is known about his early life, and he has rarely, if ever, spoken of it, either publically or privately. "You get the impression, if you know the man well enough, that he had a tough time of it. But he wouldn't ever tell you as much," comments David Starr, a professor of combinatorics at UC Berkeley. Whether because of a troubling past, or because of the typical disdain for the press evinced by many members of the academic community, Dr. Rush has unarguably been a difficult character to pin down, refusing to give both televised and print interviews that do not directly and entirely pertain to his research. Perhaps it is this personal reticence, perhaps it is the nature of his work, perhaps it is the rumor that he is being aggressively recruited by the Air Force to Cheyenne Mountain that has caused the explosive proliferation of theories about the man in the public consciousness.

"Oh fantastic," he muttered.

"If you know what the implications of the proof are," says Evan Casterbridge, former physicist and now host of NPR's Monday Math, "then you know that its very existence implies a huge threat to privacy and informational security. It guarantees that most of the encryption systems that we use to secure our data are not only vulnerable to decryption, but that they will be decrypted, most likely within a window of less than five years. Given that Dr. Rush is at least considering consulting for the Air Force—and consulting on a project that is so highly classified it doesn't even have a publically available name, well, I can understand why it might make people uncomfortable." Whatever the fate of America's most preeminent cryptographer, the consequences of his proof are here to stay.

He sat back, his fingers absently tracing the edges of the device attached to his right temple as he surveyed the mostly empty library, tracing the movements of a headphoned employee restocking the shelves, an elderly man reading the paper at a nearby table, and overtly petulant twelve-year old accompanied by the overgrown child in an inane red T-shirt who was obviously his tutor. No one seemed to be watching him. Which was all to the good.

So. He was a well-quoted mathematician who had turned information security on its head. Shortly thereafter, he had gone to consult for the Air Force for reasons unknown. And this morning he had woken up, alone, beside a river, with no memory and a pair of identical devices attached to his head. He was certain it was no accident that he'd woken up without any conception of who he was. Who he *had been*. Someone had done this to him. It was a virtual certainty. The question was who and, more importantly, why.

Two things troubled him, in that they didn't easily fit into the narrative he was beginning to construct about himself and what had happened to him. One—whoever was responsible for his current condition had left him his wallet; he found that puzzling. Two—the devices he was wearing seemed to be preventing some kind of catastrophic perceptual problem; he also found *that* puzzling. Despite these two areas of uncertainty, he was in no way inclined to make his way back to the United States Air Force.

Not yet.

Not when they topped the list of potential perpetrators of this cognitive cut-up. He was certain that if the Air Force didn't know his current location then he wasn't particularly inclined to advertise it to them. He had the resources to last for a few days while he sorted himself.

In all likelihood, he could make a reasonable go of it. He wasn't certain how well undisputed mathematical brilliance translated into the ability to survive, undetected, in Cambridge Massachusetts, but he preferred to find out rather than to use the cell phone number of the colonel whose business card he carried in his wallet.

If the Air Force or other parties unknown came for him before he'd decided on a course of action—well, he supposed he'd find out if he had the resources and wherewithal to evade them.

He looked back at the computer in front of him, readjusted his glasses, and continued reading.

Chapter Forty Six

Young sat on the rear of Mitchell's Camaro, his forehead braced against his interlaced fingers as the sun rose over Cheyenne Mountain. His back ached, vicious and horrible, a coiled and tangled mess of nerves that sat somewhere around his left hip, like a laired serpent.

The briefing, scheduled for six hundred hours, had been postponed. General Landry and the representatives from the Pentagon and the NID were waiting for them. Waiting for them to *finish*.

The new scene had to be documented. Information had to be exchanged. To that end, Young and Jackson had been briefed about the security footage from Cheyenne Mountain, while Mitchell and Carter and Teal'c had been updated on what the two of them had found on the road, in the dark.

He looked at his Charger, still askew in the shallow ditch on the side of the road.

Yards away, like people out of another world, Jackson and Mitchell and Carter and Teal'c stood together in a loose arc of competence, Jackson's hands in his pockets, Carter's hands everywhere, at her chest, on her phone, around Jackson's elbow. The pair of them stood together, thinking, talking, analyzing, planning, behind the outer edges of Cam and Teal'c's gatekeeping.

Young had stepped away. Shortly, he would be called upon to explain his reasons.

"I came to get you out," he whispers, the last word cracking with accusation, with betrayal as he strains against repurposed bonds of goa'uld manufacture.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear, as if any amount of guilt could atone for what he holds in his hands. Young has seen it before. There is one at the SGC. They keep it for the orientation of new recruits. It is shown to them as the nature of goa'uld interrogation techniques are explained.

Shortly, he would need to tell them. He would need to tell them what he suspected. What he was beginning to— To realize. He would need to tell them what Jackson had already known. He would need to figure out how to phrase it.

Young looked at the dark contours Telford's Acura NSX. Someone had killed the engine, but no one had shut the doors. By now the car battery would be dead.

Photographers snapped pictures at irregular intervals—of the car, the road, the coffee, the position of Rush's phone. The position of his ring.

His ring.

God *damn*.

The good thing about Telford—the *good* thing—was that— Young pressed a closed fist against his mouth. He could almost see them, walking out of the building in a synchronized skirting of the red tape that Telford was so good at ducking under and Rush was so good at ignoring. Walking together, into the dark of the parking lot, toward Telford's car, only one of them knowing where they were truly headed.

"Rush, you *idiot*," he whispered, his eyes shut. And then, "I came to get you out."

"*I know*," David answered out of his memory, the words so ragged they were nearly unrecognizable, his eyes tormented, the rest of him a shifting blur—covered with blood against the door of an LA skimmer, imprisoned in an LA holding cell, or had it been— Had it been Young himself who had been imprisoned.

He tried to put together no narratives, but—

Narratives came together anyway, organizing themselves out of the dark places in his thoughts.

And, try though he might, he could not assemble a story that didn't involve his genius neighbor, who'd been on the wrong end of an Ancient city for weeks now, *throwing himself* out of Colonel David Telford's moving car. He could picture it perfectly. The quick snap of Rush's wrist in the darkness, the click of a releasing door—

But nothing else. He couldn't order his thoughts. Telford's car had been turning as it stopped, that much could be seen from the skid marks along the road that became more and more apparent as the sun rose.

"Damn it, hotshot," Young whispered, looking up, as if he could see into low earth orbit.

The good thing about Telford—

The *good* thing—

The good thing was that he—he was professional. Even if he had been warped, even if he had been twisted to an Alliance agenda—he wouldn't lose *that*. Because if he lost that—if he lost that, well then he wouldn't be David anymore. Would he. Would he? Because David—David, the David that *Young* knew, the David that Young *had known* would never do this. He wouldn't betray the SGC, he wouldn't kidnap a civilian and hand him over to torture and death, he wouldn't give a *scientist* to a culture that didn't understand the value of free inquiry because if he did these things, then—then he wouldn't *be* David.

"Did they give you the drug?" Young asks, his eyes on his sensors.

"I don't think they did," Telford says, his eyes half shut, his hands dark with his own blood.

"But then, how would I know?"

There were places in his mind that weren't his own. He might be—he might be just as guilty as David. Just as complicit, in some way unknown to him. And so. He could not help them. Not Vala, if she needed his help.

Not David, who certainly did, whether he knew it or not. And not Rush, who needed it most. And not SG-1, on whose shoulders this entire fiasco would come to rest. He looked at them there, arrayed in profile against the dawn, and, as if he could feel the pressure of Young's eyes, Jackson turned, looking back at him.

Young held his gaze.

Jackson shoved his hands into his pockets, broke away from SG-1, and started toward him. Young watched him come, wishing for something, *anything* to intervene to put off this moment that should have come already. That should have come when he had knelt in the road, looking at Rush's ring. That should have come even earlier, when he had begun to dream of Kiva.

"Hey," Jackson said, his eyes down, coming to perch next to Young on Mitchell's Camaro. "You all right?"

Young supposed that was Jacksonese for something like, 'what the hell are you doing sitting on the back of Mitchell's car in the middle of a code five in triplicate?'

"Um," Young said, rubbing his jaw.

Jackson reached into his pocket and pulled out Rush's wedding ring. He held it out, wordless and merciless, in the space between them.

"Jackson, that should be in a labeled bag somewhere," Young said, looking at the ring and then away.

"There are some things that need to be rescued from consignment to the bureaucratic substrata," Jackson said. "I already signed it out, ideally indefinitely, post photographing, finger-printing, and energy signature scanning. I thought you should hang onto it."

Young shook his head.

Jackson backed off, his elbow coming to rest on his knee. He did not re-pocket the ring.

"What about Vala?" Young asked, "you rescue anything of hers?"

Jackson pulled a white flower out of the front pocket of his jacket. "It was in her hair," he said, looking at it.

"Yeah," Young said, the word no more than a breath.

"She wasn't involved in this," Jackson said, looking toward the dead husk of Telford's car. "I know she wasn't."

Young looked at him but said nothing, convinced that Jackson only knew she was honest because he walked, open eyed and defenseless, into every sword that had ever been pointed in his way, trusting that someone would remove the blade. That, or jump in front of it.

"Take it," Jackson said, again extending Rush's ring. "For safe keeping."

"You're gonna have to do it," Young whispered.

"Do what?" Jackson asked, his voice the voice of a man who both knew and dreaded the answer to his own question.

"All of it," Young said. "I'm turning myself in."

"You're—" Jackson said, trailing off into nothingness.

"I went," Young whispered, the words a wreck of broken emphasis, "to get him *out*."

"Telford," Jackson said.

"Yes," Young whispered.

"But you did," Jackson said, his voice cracking. "You *did* get him out, you *rescued* him—no one could have done it but you. You—"

Young turned his head and Jackson stopped talking.

"*Did* I get him out?" Young asked. "Did I 'rescue' him? Or did he *come back* with me."

Jackson said nothing.

"For weeks," Young whispered, "I've been dreaming of Kiva."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Jackson asked.

"What do *you* dream of, Jackson," Young snarled.

The other man looked away.

"I'm turning myself in," Young said again. "I'm asking Lam to test me."

"Please," Jackson said, abrupt and pained before he cut himself off, his eyes closing his head tipping back. "All right," he said after a long moment. "All right."

Young nodded.

Jackson repocketed Rush's ring. "You realize," he said, "once you've admitted that you might be on the wrong side of that one-way glass—there may be no coming back."

"I know," Young said. "I know that—that's the worst part."

"Cam will fight you on this," Jackson said quietly.

"I know that too."

"So don't tell him," Jackson continued. "Not until it's too late."

Young looked over at Mitchell, standing between Carter and Teal'c, his phone pressed to his ear, his eyes hard. He nodded. "Jackson," Young said.

"Still Daniel. Still and always Daniel," Jackson said, quietly, looking east, toward the rising sun.

"Daniel," Young said. "Tell me you're going to find Rush."

"I'll find him," Jackson said. "I'll find both of them."

They dressed him in the blue-white scrubs of those medically restricted to the base. It was a courtesy. Because he was in a cell. The same cell that Telford had been in before *his* medical clearance, behind a one-way mirror, attached to the infirmary, continuously monitored. A pair of guards posted outside the door stood between him and his capacity to be of use. To anyone.

Soon, they would come to question him.

He wondered who it would be.

It might be Mitchell.

God, he hoped not.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and dropped his head into his hands.

"I came to get you out," he whispers, the last word cracking with accusation, with betrayal as he strains against repurposed bonds of goa'uld manufacture.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear, as if any amount of guilt could atone for what he holds in his hands. Young has seen it before. There is one at the SGC. They keep it for the orientation of new recruits. It is shown to them as the nature of goa'uld interrogation techniques are explained.

"And you will," Telford continues. "Just—not quite the way that you imagined."

"You can't mean that," Young says, trying not to show any sign of distress, suppressing the urge to pull against his bonds.

"I'm sorry," Telford says, looking at what he holds. "Oh Christ. Oh shit. Oh fuck, I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"Yes," Young replies. "It is."

Jackson had arranged for the entire thing to be processed through medical, rather than through base security, which was where Young would have taken himself. That was why he was here, in blue, on level twenty-one, instead of locked in the holding cells on twenty-six with Nerus, the odd clone of Baal, and whatever low-level members of the goa'uld that had unwisely allowed themselves to be found on Earth, posing as Tau'ri.

Young stood up, pacing the length of wall near the door, across from the one-way mirror. Five levels down, in the briefing room outside Landry's office, they would be holding the meeting that had been scheduled for six hundred hours. SG-1 would be there, and Lam. Lam. Lam who had, for some reason, released Rush from the infirmary last night.

He rubbed a hand along his jaw.

Landry would be there, along with someone from the pentagon and someone from the NID. They would begin by reviewing all available information. Someone would assemble a narrative. Likely it would be whomever the NID had sent. The narrative would go like this:

At 1900 hours the previous evening, Vala Mal Doran had been allegedly abducted from a social event. Jackson wouldn't like that. There was nothing 'alleged,' about it, he would say. I saw her forced into that van. The NID representative would stop. No one would say anything. And then the NID rep would begin again. Vala Mal Doran was forced into an unmarked white van by parties unknown. All available resources were devoted to determining her location. Teams were standing by for a hostile extraction. SG-1, and SG-4 had been mobilized. SG-9 was standing by. At approximately 2000 hours, Dr. Lam released David Telford and Nicholas Rush from the infirmary, but gave the order for Rush to stay on base. At this time, Dr. Rush and Colonel Telford proceeded to the mess. At 2300 hours, Dr. Rush and Colonel Telford left the mess. Dr. Rush proceeded to his assigned quarters, VIP suite #4. Colonel Telford proceeded to the gym. At 2400 hours, Colonel Telford left the gym and entered the men's locker room before proceeding to staff quarters. At 0100 hours, the van was found, abandoned, in the woods near the base of Cheyenne Mountain. No activity was detected by low earth orbital sensors during this time. 'Doesn't mean much', Mitchell would say. And he would be right. The NID rep

would keep going. *At 0330 hours, Colonel Telford left his own quarters, and proceeded in the direction of the VIP suites. Dr. Rush also left his quarters at this time. The two met in the hallway and then separated. Rush returned to his quarters. Telford retrieved two cups of coffee from the mess. They met each other once again at the NORAD exit on level three. At 0345 they were caught on camera leaving the base in Colonel Telford's car. From the security footage it can be confirmed that at the time they passed the base perimeter, Telford was driving and Dr. Rush was in the front passenger seat. At four hundred hours this morning Colonel Young received a cellphone call from Dr. Rush. At four hundred hours and twelve minutes, Colonel Young and Dr. Jackson located Colonel Telford's empty car. At four hundred hours and fifteen minutes, Colonel Young located Dr. Rush's still transmitting cell phone at a distance of eight feet from the edge of the road. Faded evidence of a transport signature was present at a distance of thirty feet from the abandoned car, where Dr. Rush's wedding ring was found.*

And then—

The arguing would begin. It would start as they attempted to prioritize targets, as the NID rep floated the idea of Vala's abduction being the bait half of a bait and switch. Jackson would fight that suggestion with every verbal tool at his disposal, icy eyed and even toned, his relentlessness backed by Teal'c's unspoken and unswerving support while Mitchell and Carter, exhausted and frustrated, tried not to miss anything as Landry decided which way he would throw his weight. For Vala, or against her. Either way, they would put most of their resources toward finding Rush. Young was sure of that.

He continued to pace.

They would find him. Jackson would find him. Jackson had said he would. And so, he would. God damn. This was his fault. At least partially. Maybe it was more his fault than he knew.

"I came to get you out," he whispers, the last word cracking with accusation, with betrayal as he strains against repurposed bonds of goa'uld manufacture.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear, as if any amount of guilt could atone for what he holds in his hands. Young has seen it before. There is one at the SGC. They keep it for the orientation of new recruits. It is shown to them as the nature of goa'uld interrogation techniques are explained.

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"I'm sorry," Telford says, looking at what he holds. "Oh Christ. Oh shit. Oh fuck, I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"Yes," Young replies. "It is." There is no sound in the room but for the ragged syncopation of their breathing.

"If it's any consolation," Telford says, looking away, "you won't remember this."

"How could that," Young replies, his voice finally breaking, "be consolation. For anyone. Except for you."

He stopped pacing. He sat back down on his bed. He was not going to think about Rush. He was not going to think about what was happening to him. For Vala—well, there was still the hope that she—that even if what had happened the previous evening had been exactly what it looked like—there was always the chance that Vala would be able to twist her circumstances to her advantage. She had done it before. He'd seen her do it. And do it masterfully. Rush though—

Rush—

They would torture him. They would. There was no question about that. They'd do it immediately. They'd do it *as policy*, whether he cooperated with them or not. They'd certainly already done it to Dr. Volker. They'd do it because it was what they *did*. Because they'd learned it from the goa'uld. Rush would not do well with that. The man hadn't been doing well at baseline. In his own apartment. He wouldn't do well with *that*.

Young pushed away from the cot in the corner of the room and paced across the floor to the opposite wall. One time. He returned. He sat back down. How would they do it?

"I came to get you out," he whispers, the last word cracking with accusation, with betrayal as he strains against repurposed bonds of goa'uld manufacture.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear, as if any amount of guilt could atone for what he holds in his hands. Young has seen it before. There is one at the SGC. They keep it for the orientation of new recruits. It is shown to them as the nature of goa'uld interrogation techniques are explained.

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Telford looks away.

Young does not.

Still looking away, his head angled down, Telford says, "Kiva is— Kiva has decided—that it's going to be me. It's going to be me who does it." Even now, even holding the thing in his hands, he cannot say what it is he means.

"Does what," Young says, pitiless. "Does what, David?"

"You don't understand," Telford whispers.

"You," Young snarls. "You're the one who doesn't understand. Not anymore."

Young shook his head and ran his hands through his hair. Distantly, he could feel the sickening, waiting ache of his back.

He knew how they would do it. They would use the devices that they had stolen and then backwards-engineered from the goa'uld. Devices that caused excruciating pain and a contracture of muscles via application of electricity. He didn't have to imagine what Rush would look like, his spine arching in compliance beneath the forceful contracture of muscles, obeying signals of disordered thought. Because he knew. He had already seen it. He had seen it only a few days ago, until Lam and Carter and McKay had—

Attached the cortical suppressants. "Oh god, hotshot," he said, nearly soundless. "You're fucked." The LA would take them off. They'd take them off. They'd take them off to see what they did, they'd take them off because they were curious, they'd take them off because they were cruel, but, fundamentally, they'd take them off because they'd feel they had to, because they'd be worried that they were some kind of tracking device, they'd worry about broadcasting a signal, and, if they had anyone in that godforsaken organization with the capacity to analyze the things without breaking them, they'd find out that they were transmitting a signal. And Rush—

Rush would be dead in hours. Except. Right, except. Except. There was an except. Telford. Telford wouldn't let that happen. Even brainwashed, if that's what that he was, even as a defector—Telford wouldn't allow that. If he had a choice. If he had any way to prevent it, he would.

Telford *liked* scientists. He'd *always* liked them. He'd given them more respect than was typical, even within the context of the science-friendly SGC. He was friends with Carter, he bought Bill Lee a drink from time to time, and he had taken—god he had taken every single night seminar on the physics of gate travel that Carter gave in the fall, he had gone to every single one of Perry's "Hops and Hyperdrives" happy-hour lectures and he had *taken notes*; he had always respected the practice and the products of hypothesis testing, he had always been interested in it and he wouldn't, even if he were brainwashed he wouldn't, he *couldn't*, just *give them* Rush, he had to have some other plan, he had to have some other agenda, it couldn't have all been, it couldn't all *be* brainwashing—but god he wished he'd said something, *anything* to Telford yesterday about the cortical suppressants, he wished he'd given the other man some kind of indication that they were important, that they should *not* be removed.

A flicker in his peripheral vision caused him to look up, and he saw the silver surface of the mirror transform into the darkness of a window. Lam stood in the center of the dimness, pale behind the glass, the light reflecting off her white coat. She was alone.

"Colonel," she said.

"Yeah," he replied, approaching the glass.

She said nothing, her expression strained.

"Tell me what you can tell me," Young said. "I'm not asking for anything more."

"Over my objections," Lam said, quiet and direct, "your debriefing has been turned over to the NID. Entirely."

Young nodded. "Am I being charged with anything?"

"You're not," Lam said. "But I'm not sure that's a necessarily a good sign."

Young nodded. They were silent for a moment, watching one another.

"You haven't asked about your blood-work," Lam whispered.

"I'm pretty sure I know what you're going to find," Young replied.

"I'll tell you as soon as I know," Lam said. "It will be a few hours."

He looked away.

"Colonel," Lam said, "you're entitled to representation during your questioning."

"Great," Young said, arid and incredulous.

Lam stepped closer to the glass. "Choose Teal'c," she said, low and intent.

"Teal'c?" he repeated. "Teal'c isn't a lawyer."

"Name a *lawyer* that will be able to effectively help you combat a charge of brainwashing. The Jaffa have a method of recognizing and dealing with this. If you want to have any chance of exonerating yourself, you're going to need to give them something that looks like a resolution. Teal'c has gone through this himself. Teal'c has identified coercive persuasion in others. Teal'c is the Jaffa ambassador to Earth and for that reason alone has a lot of bureaucratic pull. Not to mention all he's done for this planet."

"I doubt that Teal'c has the time to—"

"He'll do it," Lam said. "I've already asked him. I asked him after the briefing."

"Why are you helping me?" Young whispered.

"Because I've seen what the NID call 'questioning'," Lam said. "Because there's *no evidence* that you've done anything wrong but they will *nail you* with this because the only other person to blame is Telford and he's *gone*."

Young nodded and looked away.

"You are not responsible for something that was *done to you*," Lam whispered. "You are only responsible for your actions. And sometimes? Around here? Not even for those. Remember that. Hold to that."

"Yeah."

"They'll want a narrative from you. A narrative of what happened when you were on that planet with Telford. The things you've been dreaming about. They'll need corroboration for that narrative. But once they get it, once you can pass the Tok'ra's za'tarc scan, once Teal'c clears you, they'll let you out."

"Should they?" Young asked.

"People have come back from this," Lam said. "Teal'c has come back from it."

"Did you say this to Telford?" Young snapped. "When he was in here?"

Lam looked at him steadily before speaking. "Telford was never turned over to the NID," she said quietly, "because his bloodwork was clear. Given the level of intelligence that the LA has, this proves very little. There are ways he might have

engineered a false negative. He could have undergone plasmapheresis. The LA might have technology unknown to us. But there is at least some chance that he's truly negative. That he was never exposed to the agent used for coercive persuasion. I know what that implies to me, Colonel. What does it imply to you?"

"That he was a true defector," Young whispered. "I don't believe that. I'll never believe it."

"We may never know," Lam replied.

They looked at one another in silence.

"Discover the truth of your own experience," Lam said quietly, "in whatever way you can. Don't let the NID keep you locked away, simply for the sin of getting injected with something against your will."

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"The Icarus Project," Lam said, "needs a leader. Unnamed Committee Number Four needs another member. Dr. Jackson cannot carry all of this alone."

Young looked away.

Lam stood there in silence, but did not leave.

"When are they going to start?" He waved a hand, a loose circle in the air, unable to meet her eyes. "With all of it."

"I'm not sure," Lam replied. "It might be today. It might not."

"You hear anything about Rush or Vala?"

"I can't say," Lam said quietly.

"I know," Young replied.

"Let me know if there's anything you need," Lam offered.

"One question," Young said. "What would the effect of—" he lost his momentum, regrouped, and tried again. "What would the effect of an electrically-based torture device be on someone who was wearing cortical suppressants?"

Lam looked up at him, her expression pained. "I don't know," she said. "It's a delicate device. You think that they might torture him?"

"Maybe," Young said.

"My best guess," Lam said, "is that it would interfere transiently with the operation of the device. However, it might also damage the suppressants in such a way that their action might be compromised."

Young nodded.

With an abruptness that startled him, Lam brought one hand up, pressing it against the glass.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"I'm sorry," Lam said, the words nearly strangling her as they ripped their way free of wherever they'd been. "I'm so sorry. That I let him leave."

"Yeah," Young said, bringing his own hand up and pressing it against the glass where hers rested. "Me too."

Chapter Forty Seven

The Cambridge Public Library was quiet, filled with indirect sunlight. Rush finished the agreed-upon scrawl of trigonometry over his borrowed, unlined paper more than fifteen minutes early, and so, for no reason other than that he felt doing so, he flipped a page in the book and kept going.

The last three days had been—well. Significantly more challenging than he'd expected. For one thing, Massachusetts in August was climatologically unbearable. It was blanketed with a miserable, humid, suffocating, stagnant heat that, even at night, never fully relented. The temperature made it difficult to stay hydrated, difficult to stay clean, especially given the concomitant challenge of sleeping on carefully selected public benches. It was difficult to remain on the socially acceptable side of dishevelment, and he was fairly certain that the only thing keeping him from being openly questioned by resident librarians was, one—the matched leather of his belt and shoes, and two—his glasses and the forbidding over-the-rim stare he coupled with them. He felt fair sure he still was managing to look like a professor with a personality disorder rather than a vagrant, but this was going to be hard to maintain past day five of his bizarre exile from the unremembered life he'd left behind.

The slide of a found pencil over liberated printer paper and the spread of trigonometry that was unfolding as the minutes passed felt simultaneously familiar and revelatory. He looked at the clock. He then looked laterally at the unenterprising child, whose math homework he was doing.

The thirteen year old was deeply engrossed in some meaningless waste of time that seemed to involve staring intently at his phone. Rush wasn't inclined to complain though, as he'd been promised twelve dollars in return for Timothy enjoying the dubious pleasure of not completing the math homework his parents were paying a tutor to assign him over the summer holidays.

Rush shook his head before turning back to continue the smooth trail of graphite across the surface of the paper in front of him, soothing the anxious rhythms of his thoughts, until—

"Hey," someone whispered. "Creeper. That's *my* trigonometry you're poaching."

He looked up to see a well-built young man with curly hair drop into the chair directly across the narrow table. This gave Rush an excellent view of a black T-shirt reading

'inspiration' where the letters 'p' and 'i' had been replaced with their Greek alphabet equivalent.

"I believe," Rush said, with as much coolness as he could drape over a painful effort to enunciate clearly, "tha' this is *Timothy's* trigonometry, and he can do with it whatever he *likes*."

They glanced in tandem at Timothy, who, having realized that something unlikely beneficial to himself was in the offing, had slouched slightly lower in his seat and was now studying a distant shelf of library books with a calculated nonchalance.

The young man across from Rush narrowed his eyes. Rush narrowed his own eyes right back. They stared at one another in overtly aggressive skepticism.

"You look familiar," the young man said slowly. "What's your name?"

Fuck. He really should have anticipated eventually getting this question from someone. "David Telford," he said, after a too-long hesitation.

"Eli Wallace."

Rush said nothing.

Eli leaned forward, turning abruptly, suspiciously conspiratorial. "How much is he paying you?"

Rush saw no point in lying. "Twelve dollars an hour."

"He gets forty bucks a week in allowance," Eli said. "So I think you're lowballing it a little bit. Just FYI."

"What do you want," Rush said, employing his over-the-rim stare to its maximum effect.

"Whatever he's paying? I'll double it," Eli said, "and I won't tell little Timmy's mom that a creeper Scottish guy is hanging out at the local library soliciting teens for math *if—*" he trailed off, looking at Rush.

"If?" Rush was forced to ask, against his will.

"If you can do every problem I set in front of you," Eli said.

"Done," Rush replied, faintly amused, mildly curious, and entirely certain that there was no possible way that this overgrown child could have even a remote chance at besting him in a mathematical matching of wits, if everything he'd learned about himself was true.

"Wait here," Eli said, appropriating Timothy's textbook and completed assignment and transferring them to the child with some accompanying inaudible comments that were delivered with a vague and irregular approximation of sternness.

Rush waited, watching with eyebrows raised as Eli extracted a pen and twelve dollars from the child before allowing him to scamper off, either outside or to some other recess of the library. On his way back to the table, Eli swiped a short stack of blank paper from the nearest printer.

"All your base," Eli said, as he sat and aligned his appropriated printer paper, "are belong to us."

Rush had no idea what that meant, but the tone in which it had been delivered was easy enough to interpret.

"Yeah well, we'll see abou' tha'," he replied.

The first fifteen rounds were a straight-forward progression through applied mathematics, but right at the point he'd anticipated the switch from differential equations to something a bit more interesting, Eli pulled a sheet of graph paper that had been folded into quarters out of a pocket in his pants. The thing was covered with Eli's sure, cramped hand, front and back.

"The twenty-four dollar problem?" Rush asked dryly.

"Almost," Eli said, smoothing out the creases in the scrap in a movement that looked habitual. "You solve this one? I'll show you the twenty-four dollar question." When he finished copying out what he wanted along the top of a pristine sheet of unlined printer paper, he passed it over to Rush.

Across the top of the page, in black pen, was a string of symbols at once alien and uncomfortably familiar. He didn't like looking at them. He thought of the paper in his wallet. The one from 'J. Shep.' He had the urge to pull them out and compare the two, but he knew he didn't need to. He looked up at Eli.

"What?" Eli asked, unsettled by something in his expression.

Rush said nothing, and looked back down at the paper. Very quietly, and only because he was listening for it, he could hear a dissonant chord that was not carried over the air. Whether it was a memory, or something else, he wasn't sure. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

"Why?" Eli replied. "You know something about it?"

Rush shot him a look over the tops of his glasses.

"From a game," Eli said. "From a computer game. It's part of a task to unlock the Promethean Lexicon in *Astria Porta* so I can be ready for the release of the expansion pack. It comes out in a few weeks."

From a game. At the vague interface where his factual knowledge faded into the depthless dark of personal experience the words 'astria porta' conjured up the image of a dark arch, a blue glow.

"*Astria Porta*," he said experimentally, but there was nothing more, and the word did not feel familiar in his mouth.

"Do you play?" Eli asked, his features lighting up and then clamping down beneath an artificial nonchalance.

"I don't know," Rush said.

"You don't know?"

He glanced sharply at Eli.

"What?" Eli said. "That's weird."

Rush looked down at the paper in front of him, slashed a line through the series of symbols, separating the equation to be solved from the preceding primer that explained the relational meaning of the symbols. Other than recognition that the primer existed and was separate from the equation, it was a simple solution, requiring only algebra. He spent a few moments parsing out the primer for Eli and then revolved the paper and slid it over to him.

Eli studied it briefly and then looked up at him. "Nice," he said evenly. "Fast. Faster than me."

"Is that unusual?" Rush replied dryly.

"Very," Eli said, without looking up. "Did you—*recognize* those symbols from somewhere?"

"Not that I can recall," Rush said, half-truthfully. "You said you had a final problem."

"Yup," Eli said. "*This* is the one that I'm *really* curious about." He wrote what could only be a few letters before sliding the paper over to Rush.

P=NP, it said. Prove.

He looked at it, looked at Eli, and said coolly, "I'm afraid that's outside the scope of my abilities."

"Bullshit," Eli whispered. "Dr. Rush."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"They made a *NOVA* special on you, dude," Eli whispered. "They interviewed you on NPR, like, a bunch of times until you were a dick to the *Monday Math* guy. You can't think you're going to be able to hang out, unrecognized, doing pre-calc for cash, like, *half a mile* from both MIT *and* Harvard do you? Because, if so? What are you *on*."

"I'm having some personal and professional difficulties at the moment," Rush replied, "and I'll thank you to—"

"Yeah, I'll say, if you've been reduced to doing trigonometry for teenagers in neighborhoods with astronomical property taxes. Consulting for the Air Force not working out for you?" Without waiting for Rush to reply he continued with, "*No*. Surely you jest. No one would have seen *that* one coming. Look," he said. "Nick. Can I call you Nick?"

"My name is David," Rush said icily. "David Telford."

"Okay," Eli replied, "*Dave*. Even though I need all of my limited resources to support my unhealthy but-oh-so-totally-worth-it MMO addiction, I am willing to take you to dinner if you're willing to give up some details."

"Why?" Rush replied suspiciously.

"Because I'm curious, I'm not really a fan of the patriarchy, and I'm big on clan loyalty."

"Clan loyalty?" Rush repeated.

"You're Scottish. Like in *Braveheart*, but with math," Eli explained. "You do math, *I* do math. Well, okay technically I was thinking about a math major before I left college for personal reasons right before a total dickhead of a Neuro TA was about to flunk me out of a scholarship."

"Oh yes? Well congratulations," Rush said. "It shows."

"Which part?" Eli asked, his eyes narrowing.

Rush shrugged.

"Do not insult the guy buying you dinner."

"I believe you owe me twenty-four dollars," Rush said, unperturbed.

"But I'm buying you dinner," Eli reiterated.

"I'd rather have the money," Rush replied. "In cash."

Eli sighed and pulled out his wallet. "Okay, but for this? You get the dirt cheap diner, not the moderately cheap Indian place."

Rush pocketed the proffered money and looked at Eli, undecided.

"You're turning trigonometric tricks for cash," Eli said. "You're not going to say no to diner food."

"No," Rush replied. "I suppose I'm not."

"Sweet," Eli said, managing to do a passable job at suppressing a grin.

The diner was an unpretentious affair with laminated menus and red synthetic material covering cushioned booths. At five o'clock in the evening, the place was nearly deserted. Light entered, coming bright and lateral through the windows as the sun began its decent into the west.

He tried to select a meal with the highest ratio of calories per dollar that wasn't likely to also be entirely atrocious. He had absolutely no memory of preference for anything, so in the end, after an amount of deliberation that Eli seemed to find vaguely perplexing he had settled on the 'club sandwich,' which was probably the best decision he could ever remember making because—

"Um, you are attacking that thing like you haven't eaten in days," Eli said, sounding partially impressed, partially uncomfortable.

Rush raised his eyebrows and made a concerted effort to slow down his consumption of the disturbingly delicious sandwich he was currently eating.

Eli was making considerably more sedate progress on his fried ravioli. "You *have* been eating, right?"

"Yes," Rush said, defensively, putting down his sandwich and taking a sip of water.

Eli did not look convinced. He glanced around the mostly-empty diner. "Are you actually homeless? Am I accidentally feeding a homeless person right now? Because if so, I need to tell my mom about this—it will make her so happy. She serves the underserved."

"No," Rush said.

"Is that no you're not homeless, or no I can't tell my mom."

"How old are you?" Rush asked.

Eli ignored his question, possibly out of conversational revenge. "You realize that, like, the chair of MIT's Math Department would probably cry out of pure happiness if you showed up and asked to sleep on his couch right now? Right after he called the head of Caltech's math department to brag about it."

"I'm not who you think I am," Rush said. "My name," he said pointedly, "is *Dave*."

"Yeah, and my name is HAL 9000." Eli leaned forward over his plate of fried ravioli, squinting in the merciless brightness of the diner. "Get *out* of here, man, I watched all your interviews, and that *NOVA* special where you talked to Neil deGrasse Tyson for, like, three minutes and you looked like you were actively being knifed in the back by someone off screen the entire time."

Rush tried to remember any such interview. Unsurprisingly, he was unsuccessful.

"Are you on the run from the Air Force?" Eli asked, in what was likely intended as a quiet whisper, but in actuality was more of an exuberant, loud whisper.

Rush took a deliberate bite of his sandwich. It was still extremely delicious.

Eli dipped a piece of fried ravioli in its accompanying sauce and raised his eyebrows.

Rush said nothing.

"Or," Eli said, "it's cool. No need to tell me. You can just go back to trying to get teenagers to pay you to do their math homework. I'm sure you've got a whole handful of untapped resources you're playing close to the chest."

"Yes," Rush said, in a whisper that was almost as quiet as it was acidic. "I'm on the run from the Air Force."

"Why?" Eli asked quietly.

He, of course, had no idea. He took another bite of his sandwich.

"Did you find out something you weren't supposed to know? And you're trying to do some kind of low-fi whistleblowing via your previous academic connections?"

Rush raised his eyebrows and took a sip of water.

"Are they trying to kill you? Is your brain too subversive to live?"

He tilted his head equivocally and finished his sandwich.

"Did you escape from them? Were they making you work against your will? Are they *chasing* you?" Eli looked uncomfortably around the interior of the diner.

Rush started on his chips.

"You're just as much of a jerk in real life as you are in your interviews," Eli whispered.

"Did you know that?"

"No," Rush said. "I didnae."

Eli looked at him, speared another piece of ravioli, and chewed it in silent contemplation. "If you don't want my help," Eli said, "that's fine. I've got plenty on my plate what with the two-timing Golden Tree with Growing Tree, not to mention the prep for the *Astria Porta* expansion pack, which is happening in something like, two weeks, so—"

Again—the image of a dark arch, a blue light, and the angular velocity of a rotating combination lock.

"—if you don't want my help, then that's fine with me. But this whole thing is just—too cinematically awesome for me to pass up without at least extending the offer. So, if you don't need anything, just, stop poaching my trig students and we'll go our separate ways."

"How old are you?" Rush asked pointedly. Again.

"Old enough to know that you won't be able to hang out in the public library for too much longer without attracting attention. Smart enough to follow your P=NP proof and have a mathcrush on it. With it enough to know better than to ask you about the swag you've got glued to your head, which, in case you were wondering, is super obvious under lighting conditions like this. Are you seriously questioning my qualifications right now?" Eli asked. "You've been wearing the same clothes for three days and whoring out your trig for cash. And it shows."

Rush swept his eyes over their utterly innocuous surroundings and then looked at Eli. The child had a point. He spent a moment trying to perform a cost/benefit analysis on involving a young person of above average intelligence and below average ambition in his current predicament, but, as he had no idea how serious his current predicament actually was, it was difficult to say what the potential costs to Eli Wallace might be.

"I'm twenty-three," Eli said. "Legally an adult and a certified superfan of mathematical rockstars, especially those that indirectly screw the patriarchy. So come on man. Spill."

Rush swept a hand through his hair.

"You know you want to," Eli said.

"I have," Rush admitted, "no personal memories that extend before dawn three days ago, when I woke up on the banks of what I now know to be the Charles River."

Eli stared at him.

Rush stared back.

"No really," Eli said.

Rush said nothing.

"Seriously," Eli said. "*Seriously?*"

"Seriously," Rush confirmed.

"You're messing with me."

"I'm not."

"But you can still do math."

"I can still do maths," Rush agreed, "I can still speak English. I can still read your t-shirt, which I *despise*, by the way."

"Hey," Eli said, pointing at the shirt. "This is the sign of our people. What mathematician despises pi? Oh. Right. Hilarious. But, we digress. Look, you have to admit, this seems a little bit suspect, right? Biologically, I mean. Even presuming unlimited technological prowess how would anyone even go about achieving a demi-memory wipe that leaves skillsets intact but eliminates personal memories?"

Rush opened a hand and gestured vaguely at his right temple.

"Your swag is not *your* swag?" Eli asked.

"I'm no' sure," Rush replied.

"This is messed up," Eli said.

"I'm aware."

"How's it attached? Have you taken it off?"

"I don' know how it's attached. The mechanism by which it affixes itself to the skin is concealed. When I tried removing it—" he gestured vaguely at his temple and grimaced. "Something happened."

"What kind of something?" Eli asked.

"Something—alarming," Rush replied.

"'Alarming' can mean a lot of stuff," Eli said, trailing off as one of the waitresses walked past them in a perfumed haze of blue and yellow.

"I heard a continuous tone," Rush said, when she had passed. "A tone that I don't believe was actually audible."

"Okay," Eli said, "on the zero to ten scale of 'alarming' where zero is a Disney princess movie—and ten is the drill and mirror scene from the movie 'Pi', I'm going to rate that about a three."

"It was subjectively loud," Rush said, "extremely disruptive, and unmistakably progressive. It vanished when I reapplied the devices."

"Yeah so maybe that gets you to a four,' Eli said. "Is it a reproducible effect?"

"I haven't tried removing them since," Rush said. "It was not a pleasant experience."

"Huh," Eli said, spearing another piece of fried ravioli, and staring into the sunlit air somewhere above Rush's head. "Well, if we're gonna do this, Dave, we're gonna do it up right."

"Meaning what?" Rush asked.

Eli raised his eyebrows in good-natured promise. "Well, as they say at Golden Tree Tutoring: Where Teaching Meets Learning, it's important to have short term, intermediate term, and long term goals."

"I need to find out what was done to me," Rush said, "and who did it."

"Yeah," Eli said. "But seeing as you're not likely to figure that out entirely on your own and without resources? You're going to need to stop looking quite so much like the guy who made 'polynomial time' a household word. Two words. Phrase. Whatever. Someone's going to recognize you. Maybe someone already has. Besides me."

Rush pressed two fingers against the space between his eyebrows. "What do you suggest?" he asked.

After a bus ride and a drugstore trip, Rush stood shirtless in the pink-tiled, second-floor bathroom of the Wallace household, feeling extremely out of place beneath the bright warmth of incandescent lights. He wished he could remember the rest of his life, but even without that ability, he was fair certain that this was atypical.

"Okay," Eli said, his eyebrows coming together as he read the fine print on the box he was holding.

"You're no' a normal child," Rush said.

"As I stated, I am not a 'child'. I am twenty-three," Eli replied, without looking up. "Furthermore, I bought you dinner and your ticket to anonymity so maybe you shouldn't be insulting me." He shook the box he was holding in a meaningful way in Rush's general direction.

Rush wasn't uniformly opposed to Eli's plan, and didn't particularly care to alienate his best hope of creating some kind of relatively sustainable living situation for himself while he worked out what he was going to do. Nevertheless, surrounded by the reality

of the Wallace household, he felt nebulously guilty about drawing the young man into the situation in which he found himself, which, if not overtly dangerous at the precise moment, was certainly ill-defined with unambiguously sinister overtones. "Have you done anything like this before?" Rush asked.

"Technically? No," Eli said, staring at the box he held. "But it's not exactly higher level math. I'm sure we should be able to figure this out."

"What I mean," Rush clarified, crossing his arms over his chest, "is have you ever—" He wasn't sure exactly how to put what he wanted to say, and he cast his gaze around the room looking for inspiration or escape. He found himself instead looking at a picture of what was likely Eli, approximately age one, splashing happily in the kitchen sink, holding some kind of plastic toy. He thought it might be a duck. Possibly, a dragon. Either way, this did nothing for his state of mind.

"Evaded the Air Force?" Eli suggested. "Broken the law? Screwed the patriarchy?"

"This is a terrible idea," Rush said. "I should go."

"Well, your shirt is in my mom's washing machine—I don't really do the laundry, so we'll see how that goes. The point is, you can't go yet, so we might as well forge ahead."

"I only have one shirt."

"I'm sure it will be fine. Okay, it says you're supposed to get your hair wet," Eli said, opening the box. "So stick your head in the shower, presuming you can get your technoswag wet."

"For all you know, I could be extremely dangerous," Rush said, as he flipped on the shower and began the process of soaking his hair, gingerly at first, and then with increasing confidence as there was no indication that water interfered with the devices affixed to his temples. "I could be a criminal of some kind."

"I could take you in a fight," Eli said, pulling two bottles out of the box he held. "For sure. Okay. Hair wet? Check."

"I sincerely doubt tha' you could 'take me' in a fight."

"I don't. Step two, it says we're supposed to combine bottles A and B and shake." Eli snapped the top off bottle A, and a strong chemical smell filled the room.

"Ugh," Rush said, his eyes burning. "It must have occurred to you that I could get you into trouble by proxy."

"Yeah, well, you know. YOLO." He snapped the top off bottle B, squirted the contents of bottle A into bottle B, and then shook bottle B vigorously.

"What?" Rush asked.

"You're going to need to put this stuff in your hair," Eli said.

Rush looked uncertainly at the bottle Eli was holding.

"It worked for the lady in *Twelve Monkeys*," Eli said. "Kind of."

"Is that a film?" Rush asked.

"It makes sense," Eli snapped back. "Black is going to hide your cyborg accessories much better. Plus, it will make you look younger."

"Charming," Rush said, swiping the bottle out of Eli's hand with a dark look.

"And less like yourself," Eli continued, "which is the whole point."

"I'm so glad that my current difficulties are a vehicle for you to play out your adolescent fantasies."

"You think I fantasize about helping impolite Scottish guys with their hair while my mom is working the night shift? Maybe if you were younger. Maybe if you were a hot girl. Maybe if you were at *least* a hot alien, or a hot cyborg. Either way. I'm not that picky."

"You live with your mother?" Rush asked, in the midst of soaking his hair with 'Brutal Black' dye.

"You think a college drop out could afford this place?" Eli shot back. "Put this on." He passed Rush a plastic cap. "And leave it for five to thirty minutes, depending on desired results. I'm gonna say thirty."

Rush shoved his hair up inside the cap, trying to avoid getting too much of the chemical on the devices attached to both temples.

"Can I look?" Eli asked.

"You can look," Rush replied, tilting his head, squinting at the row of light bulbs above the mirror.

Eli stepped in and studied the device for a moment before he said, "there's tape on there."

"Yes," Rush said. "The tape is obscuring an indicator light."

"Ghetto hack-ulous," Eli said. "Can I—"

"I'll do it," Rush replied, glancing at the mirror and carefully peeling back the small square of tape.

"Holy crap," Eli murmured, as the blue-white light was revealed. "Have you gotten a good look at the *interior* of this thing?"

"No," Rush said. "D'you see anything notable?"

"You could say that," Eli replied. "I can't be entirely certain without opening the casing, but I don't think that's purely an indicator light. I think you might have a crystal-based chip in there."

Rush angled his head try to see into the thing via the wall-mounted mirror, but couldn't get a good view. Eli passed him a gold-rimmed hand mirror. He angled it, using both mirrors to get a clearer view of the thing affixed to his head. He could immediately see what Eli had meant. Within the device, only partially visible, were several small crystals, with delicate tendrils of wire arcing between them.

"Maybe you *are* an alien," Eli said.

"I sincerely doubt it."

"Okay, but when I see crystal-based tech, I think of one thing."

"Extraterrestrial life?" Rush said absently, "How disappointing."

"Quantum computing," Eli snapped. "But that doesn't look like anything I've either seen or read about. Practical, crystal-based quantum computing is a long way away. Hence? Aliens."

"Do a lot of reading abou' quantum computing, do you?" Rush asked.

"Hey. You don't know me. You don't even know yourself. You spent fifteen minutes staring at the menu in the diner, clearly trying to remember what the hell you like to eat and coming up blank."

"Touché," Rush replied, still studying the crystal array. "But even if these devices are quantum in nature, I certainly do not think that the next logical step is that they're extraterrestrial in origin."

"Yeah yeah," Eli said. "A guy can dream though, am I right?"

"I advise you to dream more sensibly."

"This is about the least sensible thing that's ever happened to me," Eli said, "but speaking of rational plans, and us having them—"

"You are to be as uninvolved in this as possible," Rush said.

"Dude, you let me buy you boxed hair dye," Eli said. "You're standing in my bathroom with your shirt off."

"I only *have* one shirt."

"Yeah, okay, whatever. The point is? I'm already at this party. So. Back to the rational plans. If you want to figure out what the heck these things attached to your head are doing? We're going to need more equipment than a pair of mirrors. And unless you have a secret plan regarding how you're going to get access to that equipment, I think maybe you could benefit from knowing a guy who has friends that go to MIT."

Rush set the hand mirror on the countertop and said nothing.

"You need to know what kind of signal that thing is putting out," Eli said. "I say 'what kind' and not 'whether,' because it's attached to your head and you have some kind of weird, selective amnesia. Which seems ominous. Ominous and also actively, currently bad."

Rush grimaced.

"So unless you want to call up the Air Force hotline for lost experimental subjects, which I do *not* recommend, or find one of your comp sci groupies at Harvard or MIT and pray they won't ask too many questions or secretly call the federal government, then you're going to have to trust me. And I am awesome. Just so you know."

"You're an overgrown child," Rush said.

"I'm sure *everyone* seems like a child to a superior, pretentious misanthrope," Eli replied.

Rush smiled faintly. "Well, you've a point there."

After half an hour of hair dying and speculation about how to best interrogate one of the devices without breaking it, or, ideally, removing it, Rush showered in the upstairs bathroom of the Wallace household, trying not to get the remnants of any black hair dye on the towels. He re-dressed in his jeans and temporarily donned the white 'Cambridge Junior High Math Team: Gettin' trig-y with it!' T-shirt that Eli had leant him while his own shirt was being dried.

He combed his fingers through his now-black hair, put on his glasses, and went in search of Eli. Passing along the quiet hallway, he couldn't help but notice the clustering of pictures of the boy and the woman Rush assumed must be his mother. He paused directly in front of a picture of Eli, much younger, in the center of a group of intolerably small children, holding some kind of trophy, which, based on the look of the bespectacled group upon which it had been bestowed, was likely for mathematics, chess, or something equally cerebral. They did not look like a cricket team, he was fair sure on that point.

Hesitating in front of the photo, Rush pulled out his wallet and looked again at the business card of Colonel David Telford. He replaced the card and repocketed the wallet.

"*Rob*," he heard Eli say, from a not-too distant room. "You just triggered a *respawn*. Yes. Yes. When you opened that canopic jar. God. Yeah? Well, *wrong jar*, asshole."

Rush rolled his eyes and started forward. He rounded the doorway to see Eli in the midst of what was clearly his bedroom, seated in front of a computer, the screen before him lit up in a high resolution rendering of crisp silver-blue walls and rooms, overlaid with—

"Yes you *did*," Eli insisted, into a headset. "And are you set to bind on pickup you *ass*? That Lens of Illumination is mine. Don't touch it."

—overlaid with angular symbols. Symbols that he could read but that were *not English*.

Experience Points.

Hit Points.

Knowing that he needed to search for a name, he found it. It came as easily to him as the word "English" had, once he realized that the symbols he had seen in Eli's problem and in 'J Shep's' picture were connected—that they were both fractured, decontextualized, stylized fragments of what was, in fact, a *language*. A language called 'Ancient'.

He ranned a hand through his hair and, deeply unsettled, stepped back a pace, unable to ask any of the thousands of follow-up questions that had already begun to press against his thoughts. "Eli," he said.

"You done?" Eli replied, without looking at him, "because I wanted to ask you about—"

"Eli," Rush repeated. "Where did you get that game?"

Something in his tone made Eli say, "be right back guys," into his headset and freeze the display before turning to look at him.

"Where?" Rush repeated.

"Um, the normal place?" Eli said, his eyebrows coming together, his words at half tempo. "It goes with a popular franchise. *Wormhole X-treme*? Maybe you've heard of it. Though I'm not sure whether you'd remember if you had? I still don't get this whole 'I remember math and how to talk but not my life' thing you have going. Anyway, the franchise, in general, is incredibly lame. Except for this one character who's the ambassador of nerds everywhere and is basically a socially awkward, space-faring

Indiana Jones mixed with like, I don't know, some kind of martyr out of some religious tradition. He always dies and never gets the ladies. Anyway though, the game? The game is kick ass. Why do you ask?"

"I can read that," Rush said, pointing at a glowing block of text, emblazoned onto a futuristic looking silver wall that had been frozen in the center of Eli's screen.

"What do you mean," Eli said slowly, "you can *read* it."

"I mean," Rush replied, anxiety tightening up the lapses in his diction that no amount of concentration seemed to be able to reliably fix, "that it's written in a language I can read."

"What does it say, then?" Eli replied, in skeptical challenge, pulling a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket.

"It says, 'if you would open a cyphered lock, you must demonstrate the skill to use that which it conceals. Take the lexicon to the 'Temple of Darkness' and—"

"Whoa," Eli said, holding up a hand, his eyes on his own scrawled paragraph as he scrambled for a pen. "Whoa. Take the lexicon where now?"

"The 'Temple of Darkness.' At which point you should 'examine it beneath the only light that that will shine in the shadow of the false god'. The grammar in this thing is atrocious, by the way."

"Temple? Are you sure it's not Tower? Also, how are you getting 'examine' out of the verb—ah, that's probably decorare?"

"Eli," Rush snapped. "I feel that you are missing the salient point here."

"Right," Eli said, putting down his pen. "So—yeah. You can read this how?"

Rush opened his hands.

"You must play," Eli said. "Or. You must have played, before you had your Air Force run-in. That's probably the best explanation. You must have played *and* found the Lexicon *and* cracked it and studied it to the point of relative fluency? Or you must be involved in game development."

"Do I seem like the kind of person who would waste his time in any such manner?" Rush asked.

"It's a pretty cerebral game," Eli said, "but, well, when you put it like that, not really. But the other, far more awesome, explanation is that you picked this language up somewhere else, which, can I just say as an aside? Is unbelievably cool. Also, my motivation to win this game has only increased if such a thing is possible."

"What is the name of this language, in the game?"

"Promethean," Eli said. "Does that match what's going on in your brain?"

"No," Rush said.

"What do you think it should be called?"

"I'm not sure I should say," Rush replied, controlling the desire to pace the short available stretch of floorspace in front of Eli's closet.

"I can only help you to the extent that you trust me," the young man said.

Rush looked at him skeptically.

"Dude. I am one of the highest ranked *Astria Porta* players. Ever. When it comes to this game, I am an international baller. And you *happen* to speak a language that was just revealed as part of a lexicon quest that's a pre-req for one of the most anticipated expansion packs of the decade? I mean, I like to think that's more than coincidence."

"Yes," Rush suggested dryly. "Maybe you're having a psychotic break."

"Like *Fight Club*," Eli replied, "though I didn't picture my alter ego as being some maladjusted Scottish guy. But whatever. Sounds awesome. I'm in. Pull up a chair, man, and let's play this game to uncover more fun facets of your secret alien identity until my mom comes home and I have to kick you out."

"This does not reassure me that you're serious," Rush said dryly. "In any way. About any of this."

"Well," Eli said, "if I don't, then this should." He pointed at the computer screen, where glowing blue letters stood out in bright relief against a detailed silver wall. "You've made more progress toward figuring out what happened to you, and toward not starving to death in the six hours you've spent with me than you did over *days* on your own, where pretty much all you managed to do was google yourself, evade the Air Force, and steal my trigonometry students."

This was, unfortunately, true.

"Ancient," Rush said, running a hand through his drying hair. "It's called Ancient."

"Coolness," Eli said.

Chapter Forty Eight

Day 1

They filed into his room, a silent trio, two of them in suits, one in fatigues. A dark-haired man. A light-haired man. And Teal'c. Teal'c held his hands behind his back. He nodded at Young when Young nodded at him.

"Sit," the dark-haired man said.

Young sat.

The dark-haired man sat also, at the small table, directly across from him. The light-haired man did not sit.

"What's your name?" Young asked.

"It doesn't matter what my name is," the dark-haired man said. "I work for the NID. That's all you need to know." He pulled a recording device out of his pocket and set it on the table.

"I'd kind of like to know your name," Young said.

Teal'c, who had positioned himself against the far wall in Young's direct line of sight, shook his head.

"If you resist any aspect of this," the dark-haired man said, "know that you will be labeled a security risk and held in a military prison for the duration of all ongoing or future hostile or sensitive actions undertaken by the SGC. The only reason that you are currently in a medical rather than traditional holding cell is that your condition is protected under a subclause of Interstellar Treaty Seventeen, between the IOA and the Jaffa High Council, that stipulates any person or group under the influence of goa'uld technology, symbiotes, or bioweapons is not to be held responsible for any acts of treason, war, war crimes, crimes of person, place, or property, or any minor infringement covered under planetary law on any world controlled by the Jaffa or the Tau'ri, provided that the victimized state of the affected party can be established beyond all possible doubt, and the afflicted individual does all within his or her power to discover the truth of their previous actions and assists in bringing true offending parties to justice. Pending such an outcome, the affected party is entitled to release from custody."

"Great," Young said. "Let's get on with it."

"Do you agree that I have explained to you the reasons for your current detainment and the conditions upon which you will be released?" the dark-haired man asked.

"Yes," Young said.

The dark-haired man opened his briefcase to reveal a small computer with an attendant trail of wires curling away from it. They made a snarled nest in which electrodes were tangled, multiple and unmistakable. The light-haired man moved in, a looming shape in Young's peripheral vision as he pulled the wreath of wires from the case, and began to untangle them.

"This is a modified version of a Za'tarc detector," the dark-haired man said. "It will allow us to identify the portions of your narrative that produce a dual neural signature, indicating deceit, coercive persuasion, or significant omission."

"Sure," Young said, already feeling exposed in nothing but blue-white scrubs, flinching as the light-haired man began pressing electrodes into place.

When the electrodes had been positioned, nothing happened. The dark-haired man looked at his computer. The light-haired man stepped to the periphery of the room. No one spoke. Young looked at Teal'c. Teal'c said nothing.

"Describe your extraction of David Telford," the dark-haired man said, "from the Sixth House of the Lucian Alliance."

Young swallowed dry in a dry throat. "It was SG-11," he began, "who got the word that he was in trouble. He had been embedded in the Sixth House of the LA, making regular reports, for something like half a year when we got the word that he had been seen on Rolan, meeting with someone in a field of that corn they grow—Kassa, I think the name is." He stopped, distracted by the angled view he had of the monitor to which he was connected. It displayed a hazy, shifting image of Rolan, where corn grew atop dusty soil beneath a gray sky that never seemed to yield up rain.

The dark-haired man shifted the monitor so that it was entirely out of Young's view. "Continue," he said.

Young hesitated, deeply unsettled at the prospect of some kind of visual record coming out of this. Out of his mind and straight into pixels.

"Continue," the dark-haired man said.

"Telford was seen on Rolan, meeting with someone, who, apparently, he shouldn't have been meeting with, according to the LA. Both Telford and the guy were caught

and dragged into the center of the shitty little settlement where SG-11 was embedded. Telford's contact or source or—whomever—was shot. In public view, right after he ID'd Telford's true affiliation and rank. Telford's contact was executed, personally, by Kiva, daughter of Massim. She was considered at the time to be the most powerful lieutenant within the Sixth House. Telford was stunned with a zat blast, and Kiva's people took him. We didn't have to ask where. We knew where. A high ranking SGC colonel? That level of intel? They took him home, to the first world of the Sixth House, where he could be worked on directly by Kiva. And by Massim." Young swallowed. "They sent me in to gather intel. I'd been training for weeks for placement in the Second House of the LA, and I was the closest thing to ready that the SGC had at that point. The assignment was to get in, locate Telford, assess feasibility of rescue, and get the hell out without blowing my cover."

"Please describe your mission objectives in detail," the dark-haired man said.

"The SGC arranged for me to use a tel'tak," Young said. "I'm not sure where we got it, word on the grapevine said the Jaffa council had given it to us in return for something SG-1 had done regarding the Sodan, but the details were classified and I didn't ask. I just gated to the alpha site, where I picked up the damned thing. I piloted it, solo, to the first world of the Sixth House, and, using the Asgard stealth technology that the SGC had retrofitted to the tel'tak, I passed through their planetary defenses and set the thing down maybe thirty miles outside the limits of First City, on the slope of an active volcano, just outside the perimeter of the forcefield that prevented any debris or lava from heading in the direction of the First City."

He paused, hesitant to go on, hesitant to even speak the words, dreading the necessary reliving of his initial debriefing, but dreading even more the point at which those words might turn false. The point at which they would.

"I used a skimmer," he continued, "one recovered from a crash on a world controlled by the Second House. It held up, my paperwork held up, my goddamned *outfit* held up, and I made it through the perimeter of the city using my fake credentials. I had an appointment with Kiva's highest ranking tactical advisor, who was interested in purchasing a stolen shipment of Tau'ri assault rifles."

"Do you remember his name?" the dark-haired man asked.

"Yes," Young said, shutting his eyes to pull the man's name out of a place he had tried to forget. "Varro. His name was Varro."

"Continue," the dark-haired man said.

"I demo'd the weapons. He inspected the cases of them that had been loaded into the back of the skimmer. We negotiated a price, he took me out for a drink."

"He took you out for a drink?"

"Yeah," Young continued. "We hit it off. He bitched about Kiva. I bitched about Varek, a lieutenant in Second House. He bitched about life next to an active volcano, I bitched about life in the swamp of the First World of the Second House. He bought me a drink, I bought him five more. Then we started talking about the Tau'ri. He told me the story of a Tau'ri double agent who had been part of Kiva's inner circle, and who had recently been ID'd as a spy. He told me they'd tortured the bastard. That Kiva was the type who brought a literal artistry to that kind of thing, if I knew what he meant. I said I didn't and he said that you hadn't seen the seal of your own house until you'd seen it carved into the skin of an enemy."

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," Telford says, his eyes dark, his expression agonized. He is shaking as he shifts to look at the displays beneath Young's hands.

A slantwise glance reveals the bleeding, blurred insignia of the Sixth House, cut crudely into the other man's chest before Telford shifts the remains of his jacket to shield it from Young's view.

It will scar.

It's meant to.

Opposite him, the dark-haired man clicked a button. There was silence in the room. "Continue," the dark-haired man said.

"Varro didn't tell me where they were holding Telford," Young said, "and I had more sense than to ask, but he'd as good as told me he was directly involved with the interrogation. And so? I followed him. I followed him home from the bar that night, and I followed him the next day after delivering my shipment. It didn't take long to determine that Telford was being held in Kiva's personal quarters. It didn't take long for me to ascertain I had a reasonable chance of getting him out, on my own. It was a risky call. I was alone, and without backup. If I left to report back, there was no guarantee that Telford would be *alive* when a fully equipped rescue party was able to make it onto the planet. I saw a chance, and I took it. The LA wasn't looking for any kind of rescue. They didn't think we could have pulled it off. Not on their First World. Not from Kiva's personal quarters. And so, I watched. I swapped my Second House insignia for Sixth House insignia. I waited for Kiva to leave. I slipped into her quarters at the shift change."

"Everett," David whispers, half-dead on the floor, covered with blood, none of it dry and all of it his own. "Fuck, I'm hallucinating."

"I wish," he whispers back, and slices through Telford's bonds. "This isn't my idea of a good time, you know."

"Don't—" Telford says, strangled and belated, but it's too late.

Young grimaces as he sees the sensors embedded in the bonds begin to flash.

"Oh what," Young says, deciding he might as well slice through the cords around Telford's ankles as well. "You expected something subtle?"

"Not really," Telford says, his voice cracking, not quite sobbing with relief.

"Please describe what you saw," the dark-haired man said.

"I saw Colonel Telford, bound hand and foot, covered with his own blood and in serious need of immediate extraction and medical attention," Young said. "I freed him, and we escaped Kiva's residence together, killing three of her house staff in the process. We fled the city in the skimmer. We were pursued by Alliance forces in skimmers of their own. We were shot down near the perimeter of the field that protected the First City from the volcano. In the skimmer crash I broke my back and my hip. Nevertheless, Colonel Telford and I were able to make it to the tel'tak and escape the planet."

The dark-haired man stared at him.

Young stared back.

"That narrative is ludicrous," the dark-haired man said. "I find it astonishing that more people didn't question it at the time. Furthermore, your neural signature was doubled for the entire span of your narrative involving Colonel Telford."

Young stared at him.

"That is not what happened," Teal'c explained, quiet and solid where he stood against the opposite wall.

"Yeah," Young said. "I'm getting that."

"We will begin again," the dark-haired man said.

Day 2

"There are pieces of it," Young said, his voice hoarse, "just *pieces* of it, that exist outside this god damned story that I keep fucking telling you."

"What pieces?" Teal'c asked.

"I can remember him," Young said, pulling in a ragged breath. "Telford. In a holding cell. Standing in front of a gold wall covered with black defacement. I remember him holding something in his hands."

"What was he holding?" the dark-haired man asked.

"A pain stick," Young said. "The kind we use to scare sense into the new recruits."

"What does he do with it?" the dark-haired man asked.

"What do you think?" Young snarled.

"This is part of the second narrative," the dark-haired man said. "Likely, the true narrative. Describe everything you remember."

"I say," Young said, "'I came to get you out.' He says, 'I know. And you will. Just—not quite the way that you imagined.' I say, 'you can't mean that.' He apologizes. He says it's his fault. I say I know it is. He tells me I won't remember. Like that's some kind of consolation. I call him on his bullshit. He tells me he's going to do it."

"Do what?" Teal'c asked.

"Whatever it is that Kiva wants," Young said.

"Then what happens," the dark-haired man said.

"I don't remember," Young replied.

"Unacceptable," the dark-haired man replied.

Day 3

He slips around the doorframe, silent, holding his zat close to his chest.

Telford is holding a glass of dark liquid in one hand, his zat in the other, as he sits in the chair at Kiva's desk. When he sees Young, he stiffens. "Everett," he whispers into the void between them. He sets his glass down on the desk with a quiet click. "God damn it."

Varro steps out of a shadowed doorway on his left.

"Varro set me up," Young said, his hands pressed to his head. "I think. I think he must have. Because he was there. When I entered Kiva's room, he was there. He was there and Telford was waiting."

"Describe the room. In detail."

"Dark. A long table. A smaller desk, off to the side. A shelf with dark alcohol in a transparent decanter. Two doorways, one through which I had entered, another to my left. A window behind the table. Outside, only darkness."

"And where was Colonel Telford?"

"I told you, he was at the desk."

"And Varro?"

"In the doorway."

"Repeat your narrative. Again. From the beginning. Leave nothing out."

Day 4

"What did Kiva want Colonel Telford to do?" the dark-haired man asked.

"I don't remember."

"Why was he holding an instrument of torture?"

"I don't remember."

"Did Colonel Telford torture you?"

"I don't know. I think so. I think he must have, yes."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't remember."

"Did you pass information to the Lucian Alliance after you returned to Earth with Colonel Telford?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I didn't give them anything."

"Did you aid them in the abduction of Dr. Nicholas Rush?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Describe your dealings with Vala Mal Doran."

Day 5

"What are you *waiting for*?" Young asked. "We all know what it takes to end this. We all know what it takes to break goa'uld coercive persuasion. So do it. Try it already. I'm *asking* you to."

"The International Oversight Advisory Committee does not sanction the use of the methods to which you refer," the dark-haired man said, "until it becomes apparent that the combined methodology of the Tok'ra and the Tau'ri has been shown to be insufficient."

"You *know* that this isn't going to work," Young replied. "So just do what you have to do. I've been ready for it. I've been ready since day one."

"Please recommence your narrative at the point at which you entered Kiva's personal quarters."

"Telford was sitting at the desk," Young snarled, "Varro was in the doorway. They both held zats."

"When did Colonel Telford acquire the goa'uld pain stick?"

"I don't know," Young said, agonized. "He picked it up off the floor, maybe. Or Varro gave it to him."

"Which was it?"

"I don't know."

"Was he holding it in Kiva's quarters, or in the holding cell?"

"I don't know."

"Colonel Young—"

"Do you think I wouldn't *tell you* if I *knew*?"

Day 6

"How did you break your back?"

"In a skimmer crash."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Is it possible that Colonel Telford was the one who caused your injuries?"

"I'm sure it's possible."

"You remember him telling you that Kiva had directed him to conduct your interrogation."

"I'm not sure it was an interrogation."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, I don't remember it," Young said through clenched teeth, "so how can I know whether they asked me any questions?"

"In order to break your hip and your back, in a manner consistent with a crashed vehicle, they would have had to use an impressive amount of force."

"An 'impressive' amount?"

"Does anything suggest itself to you?"

"The only thing that suggests itself to me is a skimmer crash."

"You had injuries on your forearms, tiny fragments of alien glass were found in them. Do you think those injuries might have been artificially created?"

"Teal'c," Young said. "Teal'c, you know what has to be done. So stop letting them dick around. Just do it."

"Colonel Young, the course of action that you are requesting is prohibited under—" the dark-haired man began.

"Yeah Treaty Seventeen. Oh I know. But it's not prohibited on *Chulak*, is it? It's not prohibited in the case of Jaffa who might happen to be located on soil controlled by Homeworld Command."

"You are correct," Teal'c confirmed. "But you are not Jaffa."

Young sighed.

"Yet," Teal'c said.

"Yet?"

"Two individuals hold dual citizenship," Teal'c said. "General O'Neill and myself. The petition to make you the third has already been set in motion."

"How long until—"

"The purpose of these sessions is not to provide you with information," the dark-haired man broke in. "Please discuss ongoing legal proceedings outside of hours allotted for NID interrogation."

"Are there any?" Young growled. "Hours outside?"

Day 7

"You've just—got to hang in there," Jackson said, from the other side of a two-way mirror. "Teal'c is working as fast as he can, but he's being blocked by factions within the High Council who feel that the Tau'ri influence on the Jaffa is already too strong. They don't particularly care to be used as a loophole to circumvent the idiosyncrasies of Tau'ri governance."

"This has nothing to do with that," Young said, pacing, driven by a frustration that had no outlet other than repetitive, anxious motion.

"I know," Jackson said, and god, he sounded exhausted. "And you know—you really *know* what's coming if Teal'c is successful, right?"

"I know, Jackson."

"Someone will—ah. Someone will—"

"I know what they'll do, Jackson," Young said quietly, "you don't have to say it."

"I do," Jackson said.

"No, you really don't."

"Someone will bring you to the point of death, until your heart stops and your brain begins to undergo anoxic injury. Under low oxygen conditions, the drug they use to

achieve coercive persuasion dissociates from the synaptic receptors where it is bound and reenters your bloodstream, at which point it will be cleared by your kidneys over a period of several hours."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks, Jackson."

"I'm not sure if they'll offer you a choice of method. Would you—god. Would you *want* a choice of method?"

"No," Young said. "Who's going to do it? Lam?"

"No," Jackson said, looking away, his fingers pressing against red-rimmed eyes. "No. We don't—we don't ask this of our doctors. It's not fair to them, it breaks the Hippocratic Oath, and it's not consistent with the spirit of the Rite of M'al Sharran, which is supposed to be performed one bloodkin warrior to another. Classically, it involves removal of a symbiote, but in your case—well, I hate to say it's going to be a little more 'hands-on', but—"

"Jackson."

"Sorry. I'm rambling. I know that. That's not appropriate right now. Sorry. You, ah—you realize that Homeworld Command has actually never *done* this, right? I mean, this is a Jaffa thing. This is not a Tau'ri thing. We have, as a people, in the past, felt it more humane to put our affected personnel through an NID debriefing and then marginalize them to a place where they can't do any damage. But in your case—"

"That's not going to work," Young said. "Not with Telford and Vala and Rush all missing."

"No," Jackson agreed. "From an informational security standpoint, the SGC has never had a more damaging leak."

"So who's it going to be then?" Young asked. "Who's going to do it? Cause the, uh, hopefully limited, anoxic brain injury."

"Who do you want it to be?" Jackson asked, his eyes clear, his gaze fixed on Young.

It was a terrible thing to ask.

If David had been there, if David had been the man that Young *thought* he had been—the choice would have been clear. He missed David. He missed not only the man but the idea of him. He missed the solid, too-intense, extremely type-A presence that had been Colonel Telford. He missed the guy who would beam into his apartment on a Friday night at twenty-three hundred hours, in uniform, in the middle of a particularly fucked-up piece of LA insurgency, holding an assault rifle, his pockets full of a

collection of tech that would be exactly what was needed. David would have been able to do what Young needed done. David would have been able to do this and then look him in the eye afterward. Maybe take him out for a drink where they could put the whole thing behind them. And if Young didn't make it—David would be able to move on.

He could ask Cam. Cam would do it—but the man wouldn't be the same afterwards, whatever the outcome. Because Cam didn't *do* things like choke his friends to death. That was not a thing that Cameron Mitchell had signed on for.

If Sheppard had been here—but he wasn't. And even if he had been, Young wasn't sure, had never *been sure*, about how close to the edge the guy operated. He had *no idea* what kind of psychological burden this might be for Sheppard, and he was sure he'd never find out, because, for better or worse, when it came to matters of the seminally fucked up, the man was locked down like a vault.

That left only one person who could handle this, who could handle *anything* and hold to all that he was.

"How am I supposed to *ask* this of anyone, Jackson?"

"Who is going to *volunteer*?" Jackson replied, his voice cracking, his answer already written on his face.

"I'm sure some bleeding-heart altruist will step up," Young said, barely audible.

"Yeah," Jackson said, motionless in his chair, his eyes shutting in a blink that looked painful.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

"When Teal'c tells you that you have citizenship, then you can request it. The Rite of M'al Sharran."

"M'al Sharran," Young repeated.

"And name me, when you ask," Jackson said. "That's a part of it."

Young nodded.

"Yeah," Jackson whispered, one hand pressed against the one-way glass, looking about ready to be crushed under the weight of the goddamned planet. "It's got about a thirty three percent survival rate, just so you know. And that's among *Jaffa*."

"Great," Young said.

Jackson said nothing, pulled off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes.

"Any word on Rush?" Young asked.

"I can't talk about that," Jackson said.

"Any word on Vala?" Young asked.

"I can't talk about that either," Jackson said, replacing his glasses.

"Yeah. I know."

Day 8

"Did you pass information to the Lucian Alliance after you returned to Earth with Colonel Telford?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so."

"You don't sound sure."

"I'm—not sure."

"Did you aid the Lucian Alliance in the abduction of Dr. Nicholas Rush?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Would I *know* if I had? What is the point of these questions when I don't remember."

"Describe your dealings with Vala Mal Doran."

Day 9

"Did you pass information to the Lucian Alliance after you returned to Earth with Colonel Telford?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Did you aid the Lucian Alliance in the abduction of Dr. Nicholas Rush?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Describe your dealings with Vala Mal Doran."

Day 10

"Did you pass information to the Lucian Alliance after you returned to Earth with Colonel Telford?"

"It's possible."

"Did you aid the Lucian Alliance in the abduction of Dr. Nicholas Rush?"

"I—really don't think so."

"Are you sure?"

"How could I *possibly* be *sure*?"

"Describe your dealings with Vala Mal Doran."

Day 11

"Did you pass information to the Lucian Alliance after you returned to Earth with Colonel Telford?"

"I don't know."

"Did you aid the Lucian Alliance in the abduction of Dr. Nicholas Rush?"

"I don't know."

"We aren't making any progress."

"I know that."

"If you had aided the Lucian Alliance in the abduction of Dr. Nicholas Rush, what would you have done?"

"I'm not answering that question."

"You do not have the luxury of refusing to answer questions."

"I could have turned him over at any point. He was my neighbor. I was the one who kept yelling at him to hang on to his signal scrambler. I was the one who extracted him from the base when the LA gained a foothold here. I had every opportunity to turn him over to them. I was the head of the Icarus Project. I had access to his data, to his computer, to the security team in the basement of his building, to all the encryption codes that protected his signal transponder and its scrambler. I had a *key* to his *apartment* for god's sake."

"You had a key to his apartment?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he kept locking himself out."

"Please describe the nature of your relationship with Dr. Rush."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Please describe the nature of your relationship with Dr. Rush."

"We were friends. Fuck. *We are* friends. Colleagues. Neighbors."

"This is the extent of your relationship?"

"Yes."

"Would you describe yourself as particularly upset by his abduction or defection?"

"Yes. Obviously. I was, in part, responsible for his safety, as he was a civilian contractor recruited to work on the project I commanded. Also, as I've mentioned, I consider him a friend. Furthermore, he's got some unexplained medical condition related to his genetic status and I think for that reason that he'll pretty much fold like a bad hand when exposed to the interrogation techniques of the Lucian Alliance and only blind fucking luck or someone's outside intervention will keep them from accidentally killing him."

"And you believe that you never would have exposed a friend of yours to this kind of environment."

"No," Young said. "What kind of question is that?"

"It's been well documented that coercive persuasion can override even the strongest of emotional ties."

"Well great. So what do you want from me, then?"

"Describe your dealings with Vala Mal Doran."

Day 12

"Maybe I fucked up," Telford whispers across the table that separates them, bleeding from the insignia cut into his chest. "Maybe that was all it was. Just me, being a fucking idiot, giving Rush that ride home because he was miserable. Because he couldn't sleep. Maybe they took me too. Maybe they killed me this time. Maybe—maybe they gave me back to Kiva."

Young swallows in a dry throat.

"Maybe you need to find us both. Or maybe," Telford says, taking a sip of the beer in front of him and leaving bloody fingerprints on the glass, "maybe you were the one who sold us out. Have you considered that?"

"Yeah," Young replies.

"Oh god," Telford says, sighing, looking at the glass and then at the table. "I'm getting blood everywhere, aren't I?"

"Yeah," Young replies.

"The bartender's going to be pissed. Pass me a napkin?"

Young jolted awake with the sickening snap of adrenaline. He ran a hand through his hair, staring at the dim fluorescence of the lights that indicated early morning or late evening. Lam ran the lights on a circadian schedule, but he couldn't remember when he had fallen asleep—in the light or in the dark.

The door to his isolation room opened, but, instead of the NID personnel, it revealed two young marines, who preceded Lam and Teal'c into the room.

Teal'c was dressed in the traditional robes of the Jaffa High Council.

"Are we finally going to do this thing?" Young asked.

Lam didn't reply. She swallowed, pale as her coat.

"Colonel Young," Teal'c said. "By order of the Jaffa High Council, ruling body of the Free Jaffa Nation, we grant you your petition of citizenship, extending to you the rights of all free Jaffa."

"Great," Young said. "I request to undergo the Rite of M'al Sharran. With Dr. Daniel Jackson. Immediately. As soon as possible."

Teal'c inclined his head.

"We're, ah, we're actually ready for you now," Lam whispered. "Please come with us."

Young followed them around a corner and into the main floorspace of the empty infirmary.

Jackson stood alone in the center of the room, his hands shoved into his pockets, his shoulders hunched. He was staring at an unoccupied gurney, ornamented with leather restraints and flanked by an array of monitors. Young felt his steps slow at the sight of the thing. But he kept walking.

Jackson turned as he approached, fixing Young with a gaze so tormented that Young wasn't certain it was entirely sane. Maybe—maybe he should have picked Mitchell.

"Jackson," Young said, as he drew level with the other man. "Thanks."

Jackson nodded. "Yeah," he said, but the word had no sound.

Young sat down on the bed, then lifted his good leg, dragging the bad one after it. Lam stepped into to help him, one small hand slipping beneath his ankle as he leaned back. She began buckling leather restraints, around his ankles, his wrists, his waist, his chest.

From somewhere within his robes, Teal'c produced a candle and set it on the table next to Young's bedside, behind his head, out of his field of view.

"Am I—supposed to be able to see the candle?" Young asked.

"The candle," Teal'c said quietly, "is for Daniel Jackson. It is the place where he will look when he can no longer see your mind behind your eyes."

Young nodded. Teal'c stepped away, vanishing from his field of view while Lam began affixing monitors to his chest, to his finger, to his head.

"TJ—ah, Lieutenant Johansen, isn't going to be here for this," Young asked her. "Right?"

"No," Lam said, as she peeled the adhesive backing from defibrillator pads and threaded them beneath his scrubs, affixing them to the skin of his chest. "Dr. Brightman

and Dr. Morrow are standing by in the event I need assistance in your resuscitation. No other medical staff will be involved in this—procedure." Lam looked over her shoulder, at someone on the periphery of the room. From the pained tightening of her features, Young was sure she was looking at Jackson. But he couldn't move. And so he couldn't see. He could hear Teal'c speaking to someone, low and indistinct.

"Wait outside the door please," Lam said to the marines.

Young heard them retreat.

Lam looked at him, sliding her hand into Young's where it was pinned to the gurney. "I will do everything I possibly can to bring you back," she said, her expression strained, her voice controlled.

"I know," he said. "Just—don't go injecting yourself with naquadah again, yeah?"

Lam smiled a tenuous smile. "They locked it up. You need a double key and a special code to access it now."

Young nodded. "Good. I'm probably not worth another set of your organs."

"Wow. Way to take a truly horrible moment and make it even *more* horrible," Lam said, her smile solidifying and turning into something real. "You're not supposed to be able to out-gallows-humor a *doctor*, you know."

"It's a gift," Young replied.

Lam smiled at him.

"I thought you wouldn't even *be* here," Young said. "This is the exact opposite of your job description."

"First, do no harm," Lam whispered. "Well, colonel, check back with me in fifteen years, after I've written a textbook in medical xenoethics and we'll talk about whether this was a good idea or not. You ready?"

"Yeah," Young said.

"Dr. Jackson," Lam said quietly. "Teal'c."

Slowly, together, Teal'c and Jackson reentered Young's peripheral vision, advancing to stand opposite Lam.

Jackson looked appalling beneath the fluorescent lights, so bad that Young suspected the man hadn't slept for days. Maybe—maybe not since Young had tacitly asked him to participate in the rite.

"Dr. Lam," Teal'c said, "please step back."

Lam did not step back. She turned her body, her face, her gaze away from Teal'c and Jackson, toward the center of her room. Her hand stayed right where it was, gripping Young's own.

"The Rite of M'al Sharaan confers the gift of a free death," Teal'c said. "And from that death, a free life may be come." He looked at Jackson.

"Shai kek nem ron," Jackson whispered, visibly shaking. He turned to Young, and translated, "My brother dies free."

Young nodded.

They locked eyes.

He felt Jackson's fingers wrap around his throat, cold and trembling with tension. The other man leaned over Young, one knee braced against the bed, pressing in, pressing down, his expression set, his gaze blue and fixed and unwavering. Young stared back at him, the heart monitor a green and panicked wave in his peripheral vision, his hand clamping shut around Lam's fingers. Her bones shifted beneath the strength of his grip.

"Shai kek nem ron," Teal'c murmured, speaking to Young now. "Cast your mind toward the truth of what you seek."

Jackson's fingers tightened further.

Young tried not to struggle.

"Shai kek nem ron," Jackson said, joining with Teal'c, sounding like *he* was the one being strangled.

His lungs ached. His head buzzed, his thoughts dissolved into panic, subsumed by the need to breathe, by his resolution not to struggle. But he couldn't *hold* to it, he couldn't hold to *anything*. His back began to arch, his hip blazed in peripheral agony as he struggled to break Jackson's hold.

"Do *not* let go!" He could hear Teal'c shouting at Jackson over the roaring in his ears, could hear Jackson, repeating the words, over and over in a breathless, agonized litany.

His vision was fading and he tried to think of Telford, of Telford—

"Shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron *I'm sorry* shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek—"

Young slips around the doorframe, silent, his zat close to his chest.

He sees a familiar silhouette, backlit by the lights at the walls. Telford is holding a glass of dark liquid in one hand, his zat in the other as he sits in the chair at Kiva's desk. Waiting. When he sees Young, he stiffens. "Everett," he whispers into the void between them. He sets his glass down on the desk with a quiet click. "God damn it."

Varro steps out of a shadowed doorway on his left, and Young feels a horrible, sinking feeling in his chest as he looks at them.

"Why did it have to be you," Telford says from the other side of his zat, a question too buried in despair to be a question at all.

Varro steps forward, and Young feels the cool press of metal behind his ear. "Hand over your weapons, colonel."

Young surrenders his zat. "It was always going to be someone," he whispers, still struggling to comprehend the reality of what is happening to him, but already tables are turning in his mind. It is not hard to think of Telford as the enemy, dressed as he is in dark leather, holding that fucking wine. "Or had that not occurred to you."

"I knew," Telford says. "Of course I knew."

"Shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron—"

Young has been left in the dim darkness of the defaced cell for hours, without food, without water. While he waits, he has time to consider the chain of decisions that have brought him to this place, that have put him in the unbearable position of knowing the identity of the defector who has been providing the LA with their intelligence, of knowing how select pieces of top-level intel are making out of the SGC, and being able to do nothing about it. He spends most of his time thinking about his own stupidity because he can't reconcile the man in Kiva's quarters with the David Telford that he knows. The David Telford whose couch he had slept on during fights with Emily, who was the only person Young had ever told about what had happened with TJ, who liked Science Fridays on NPR, who worked on the weekends, who shined his shoes every Sunday night like a dork, and who professed a love of post World War I abstract art that J Shep thought he was faking and that Cam thought was hilarious and that Young had just never really understood.

And so maybe it's no wonder that when Telford returns, when he enters the cell holding a goa'uld pain stick for fuck's sake, Young speaks first. "I came to get you out," he whispers, his last word cracking with accusation, with betrayal as he strains against repurposed bonds of goa'uld manufacture.

"I know," Telford says, his voice a ragged smear, as if any amount of guilt could atone for what he holds in his hands. Young has seen it before. There is one at the SGC. They keep it for the orientation of new recruits. It is shown to them as the nature of god'uld interrogation techniques are explained.

"And you will," Telford continues. "Just—not quite the way that you imagined."

"You can't mean that," Young says, trying not to show any sign of distress, suppressing the urge to pull against his bonds.

"I'm sorry," Telford says, looking at what he holds. "Oh Christ. Oh shit. Oh fuck, I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"Yes," Young replies. "It is."

There is no sound in the room but for the ragged syncopation of their breathing.

"If it's any consolation," Telford says, looking away, "you won't remember this."

"How could that," Young replies, his voice finally breaking, "be consolation. For anyone. Except for you."

Telford looks away.

Young does not.

Still looking away, his head angled down, Telford says, "Kiva is— Kiva has decided—that it's going to be me. It's going to be me who does it." Even now, even holding the thing in his hands, he cannot say what it is that he means.

"Does what," Young says, pitiless. "Does what, David?"

"You don't understand," Telford whispers.

"You," Young snarls. "You're the one who doesn't understand. Not anymore."

"You'll be all right," Telford says.

"How?" Young snarls. "How will I be 'all right' you lying son of a bitch?"

"You'll live," Telford says, unable to conceal the strain in his voice. "You're my ticket back."

"You don't need a ticket back. You never did. We were looking for you, god damn it."

"And if you'd found me," Telford says, his voice cracking, "when I needed to be found—if you had found me then—maybe, maybe things would have been different. Maybe you could have saved me. Maybe you could have preserved me for a life of scrubbing floors at the Antarctic base, or reading the essays of new recruits from the comfort of a VA psych ward. But you didn't find me then."

Young looks away.

"Get up," Telford says.

"No," Young says, unmoving.

"Get up," Telford says again, activating the pain stick with the press of a button and the audible buzz of a building charge.

"No," Young says again. "You're gonna have to drag me out of this room, David. You'll have to—"

His words choke off in a scream as his back arches, outside his control, muscles clenching in response to a shock they can't ignore, agony annihilating conscious thought.

"Get up," he hears Telford say, when he can hear again.

His jaw hurts. His mouth is full of blood. He does not speak. But neither does he get up.

"You think you can outlast this?" Telford says, on his knees next to Young. "You think that you can resist the Lucian Alliance? It's impossible."

"Why, because you couldn't do it?" Young snaps.

"Who says I wanted to?" Telford replies, abruptly, savagely angry. He turns to the guards that flank him. "Bring him," he says, as he leaves the room.

Young tries to walk, but his muscles, exhausted from sustained tetany beneath the pressure of electrical discharge, refuse to cooperate, and so they drag him through golden halls and past statues of dead, defaced gods. They dump him on the floor of what can only be a lab, equipped with stolen technology. Goa'uld, Tau'ri, even the odd example of Asgard or Ancient equipment lines the walls or lurks under tables.

He does not move. He simply lies there, looking at the stolen tech. The obsidian floor.

A woman's boot, crafted of black leather, steps straight into his field of view with a hard double-click. "Begin," she says.

He is hauled onto a table, and a needle pierces the crook of his right elbow. He feels the cool press of an SGC-issued sidearm against his temple.

"I like your weaponry," the woman says, her face inverted as she stands above him, holding her stolen gun. Young wonders if the weapon is Telford's or if it comes from the stash he sold to Varro. She must be Kiva. She wears her leather better than most. There is something ascetic in the height of her collar, in the crisp lines her jacket makes against the blazing gold of the walls that backlight her.

"Me too," Young replies, and Kiva smiles.

Young smiles back, and then rips the needle out of his arm and lunges away from her, throwing himself off the table, towards Telford, who, even now, after everything, still feels like the safest, sanest person in this lab.

They crash together to the floor.

Telford lets Young up. Only to bring him back down with another agonizing electrical discharge. "Which way is it going to be?" the man asks, not looking at him, even as he grabs Young by the front of his jacket and drags him back to the table. "The hard way, or the hard way?"

"The hard way," Young grinds out. "It's always the hard way."

"Good answer," Telford says, half-amused, half-horrified.

And Young is getting to him he's sure of it; he's just not sure that getting to him will make any difference. Any difference at all.

"I told you we should have begun with the orthopedic reset," Kiva says coolly.

Telford says nothing, but he nods at Kiva's black-clad entourage, and, suddenly, there are hands holding Young down.

"—shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron has it been long enough you have to tell me if it's been long enough how do I know how do I know how am I supposed to know—"

"What the fuck is that thing," Young says, feeling his left hip being clamped to the table, a fixed point more solid than any human grip, entirely inescapable.

"We need it for your cover story," Telford says.

"What cover story?" Young shouts, hearing the desperation in his own voice and knowing that Telford will hear it too.

"You're going to rescue me," Telford whispers, and twists a lever on the device affixed to Young's hip.

He can hear the sickening crack of splitting bone, and then— He has never been in this much agony. He is cold. He is hot. He cannot breathe. He cannot see. He cannot survive this. Surely he will die here in this gold room, far from home, under an ash-filled sky.

"Give him the drug," Kiva says. "Give him the drug, fly him out beyond the force field, and complete it."

"I will," Telford says.

"—shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron—"

"Where did you leave the ship?" Kiva asks.

"Where did you leave the ship?" Telford asks.

"Where did you leave the ship?" Kiva asks.

"Where did you leave the ship?" Telford asks.

"Where did you leave the ship?" Kiva asks.

"You know, you're a priceless son of a bitch at times."

"—shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron shai kek nem ron—"

Young opens his eyes to the smell of sulfur, the flaking fall of ash. He cannot remember how he got here. There is glass in his arm, glass in his face, in his hair.

Telford is beside him, his shirt off.

"Which way is it going to be?" Telford asks, looking at the sky, a knife in his hand. "The hard way, or the hard way?"

"The hard way," Young says, and the words feel heavy and slow, slurring together. "It's always the hard way."

Telford looks over, surprised, his eyes bloodshot, his skin pale. "Yeah," Telford says, bracing his shoulder against the tel'tak at his back. "Good answer." He presses the knife he holds into own his chest, quick and deep, making one swiping cut and then another. "Fuck that hurts. You won't remember this." He coughs, choking on ash.

"I won't remember this?" Young repeats, confused, gasping through the pain.

"No. You'll remember finding me," Telford says, his voice cracking as he begins another pattern, this time on his side. "You'll remember that I already had these. It's Kiva," Telford says. "Kiva who's doing this. Kiva who did this," he cries out through clenched teeth as he cuts deep. "Kiva who did this to me." He repeats it over and over as he works. When he is done, Telford pulls out an alien first aid kit, but instead of using it to fix the cuts that Kiva gave him, he packs his own injuries with salt.

"What are you doing?" Young whispers.

"I'm getting out the first aid kit to help you," Telford says. "Do you think it can help you?"

"No," Young says.

No use, is what he doesn't say.

"She did this," Telford says, sweating, shaking, barely intelligible, gesturing with a shaking hand at the salt packed into the cuts, "so that it would scar. Remember that. So that it would scar."

It is difficult to think.

"You found me," Telford says. "You got Varro drunk, and you slipped in at the shift change, and you said, "I came to get you out," and I said—"

"You said 'I know'," Young whispers.

"Yes," Telford says, his eyes closed, his teeth gritted, shaking with pain. "I said I know."

"Oh god, David," Young whispers. "What did they do to you?"

"There are no gods here, Everett." Telford rasps, and Young thinks that, maybe, he is crying. Maybe they both are. "There never have been. And there never will be. There was only ever us. You and me. I'll never be able to thank you. To repay you."

"Things aren't like that between us," Young says, barely able to think past his pain, past his rage, past the sight of what the Lucian Alliance has done to David. To David, who hated them more than anyone—

"This falls outside the bounds of debt," Young says. "Outside repay."

"It does," Telford says, and his voice breaks. "I know it does."

"Did they give you the drug?" Young asks.

"I don't think they did," Telford says, "but then, how would I know?"

"Yeah," Young says, unable to think past the buzzing of his thoughts, past the agony in his back.

"You saved me," Telford whispered. "But our skimmer was shot down, close to your ship. Do you remember? I pulled you up, but you couldn't stand. And I couldn't stand either."

Young remembered it, remembered standing, but the pain had been unbearable, untenable, unbelievable, and he could not stand, he could not speak, he could only dig his hands into Telford's uniform. Telford, who was injured, who had been tortured, who had been pushed past human endurance, who can barely support himself.

"I remember," Young says.

"And I said, 'What was I thinking'," Telford chokes, trying to breathe through ash. "We're doing this the hard way."

"The hard way," Young repeats, tasting blood and sulfur. "What's the hard way?"

"Clawing, crawling your way to an objective," Telford rasps, his hand closing over Young's hand as they sit there, outside their tel'tak, beneath the falling ash. "The struggle in the dirt." Their entwined fingers dig into loose earth.

He can remember dragging himself through the darkening landscape, up the steep slope, hand over agonizing hand while his bad leg trails uselessly behind him.

"I wish you hadn't come," David whispers, choking on ash, a dark, dynamic force in turbid air. "I wish like hell you hadn't."

"It's too late for that," Young replies.

The atmosphere is searing.

Beside him, Telford coughs, his fists tightening uselessly into gray dust. "We are not going to die here," Telford says.

Young coughs. "No?"

"No," Telford replies. I will not allow us to die here."

"It's not looking good," Young says.

"Yes it is," Telford says. "Because you know—" he breaks off, shielding his face from a blast of heated air. "I think Sanchez might have a crush on me," Telford says, and for a moment Young is confused, are they sitting here, next to the tel'tak with their hands in loose, red dirt, or is Telford dragging him, shoving him up a barren, rocky slope. "What are your thoughts—" he breaks off, coughing in the acrid air, destroying the cadence of his question, "—on this."

"You wish," Young says through blood, lost in the vividness of the remembered climb. He can almost feel his free hand sliding easily over stone as fingernails scrape for purchase on loose rock. The memory is unnaturally sharp, unusually vivid, as he sits here, choking, next to the ship.

"What do you mean I wish?" Telford asks.

"Everyone—" Young breaks off as he seizes up with a wave of pain, "wants to date a combat engineer."

"Yeah," Telford says, barely audible, barely visible through obscure air. "Short though. I don't know about the hair."

Young inhales slowly, trying to breathe past blood. "You're kind of a dick. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"I save your life—" Telford says, his voice breaking, "and this is the thanks I get?"

"Still a dick," Young rasps.

Telford's breathing is irregular and harsh.

"If you make it back," Young says, "and I don't—"

"Shut the fuck up."

"Keep an eye on Emily, yeah?"

"Yeah," Telford gasps, "but no. We're both going back. That's the deal."

"That's the deal, is it?"

"That's the deal."

Young nods.

"Then let's leave this piece of shit world," David Telford says, tortured, barely alive, covered with dust and ash and blood. When he stands, unsteadily, on the verge of losing consciousness, to activate the ring controls, Young knows it's the bravest fuck off to death and fate that he's ever seen. That he ever will see. And that he'll remember it that way all the days of his life. They are surrounded by a rush of metal and a hollow tone.

Day 14

Young opened his eyes to a cement ceiling.

"Jackass," Mitchell said, in a hoarse whisper. "Hi."

Young shifted his gaze from the concrete overhead to find the other man staring at him, pale and drawn, his arms crossed over his chest. "Hi," he replied, confused by the agony in his back, the ache in and around his throat, the pain in his head until everything that had happened came back to him in a dissonant rush of doubled memory.

"Hi," Mitchell repeated.

"It worked," Young said, aborting an attempt to sit as his back spasmed in violent protest.

"Did it?" Mitchell said, pressing him back. "Good. Maybe we can scrape what remains of Jackson back into something vaguely human shaped."

"Where is he?" Young asked.

"He's been lying on the floor of the level twenty VIP suite A, throwing up for about the past seven hours," Mitchell said.

"I've been out for seven hours?" Young asked.

"You've been out for twenty-eight hours," Mitchell said. "Lam resuscitated you and then kept you sedated while the drug was cleared from your bloodstream. There's some reason to think that once dissociated from your brain, or synapses, or whatever, it retains its bioactivity. So, you know, no reason to screw you up any more than you've already been screwed up, I guess. It's out of your system by now."

"Cam—" Young said.

"You should have asked *me*," Mitchell said, his voice ragged.

"Cam—" Young said.

"I get why you didn't ask me," Mitchell said. "I get it. Honestly? You probably weren't wrong. I don't know if I could have done it. I don't know what I'd have been like afterwards. But no matter how well he supposedly takes it, Jackson's not the garbage can for the fucked up shit of the galaxy, okay? We can spread it around a little bit, you know?"

Young shut his eyes and swallowed. His throat felt raw and painful. "What happened?" he asked.

"To you or to Jackson?" Mitchell asked. "You want some water for that frog in your throat?" Without waiting for an answer he poured a cup from the pitcher sitting at Young's bedside.

"To Jackson," Young said, after taking a sip of water. "I remember what happened to me."

Mitchell nodded, looking away. "Yeah, well, it took Carter, Teal'c, and an hour in a VIP room to talk him into taking a sedative. He slept for about twenty-one hours and then started throwing up. But as soon as Lam clears the NID to come in I'll go tell him that you're not obviously brain damaged, and it seems like the rite worked. That should cheer him up."

"Cam," Young said. "It was worth it."

"Do you know where they are?" Mitchell asked, still not looking at him. "Where Vala is? Or Rush? Or Telford?"

"No," Young said, "but I remember what happened. I know that I didn't help the LA. I know that Telford did. He was the leak. I'm sure of it."

"Then it was worth it," Mitchell said in a quiet monotone, staring at the far wall.

Chapter Forty Nine

The afternoon sun was bright, reflecting mercilessly off windows, passing cars, computer screens, and the polished metal surfaces of refrigerators and coffee machines. Something inane and low-fi was playing overhead on invisible speakers. Rush shifted his grip on the cardboard cup he was holding as he burned his hand on the figuratively but not yet literally bloody milk frother for the fourth time that week. He shook his hand a few times in fluid vexation.

Mid-September in Harvard Square was a *terrible* time to embark on a career as an aspiring, amnesiac, hipster barista. Fortunately, since he couldn't remember his life, he couldn't be absolutely certain that being verbally harassed for imperfectly patterned latte art was a personal low. He suspected though, given he'd been the recipient of a Fields Medal and had solved a Millennium Prize problem, that this was, psychologically speaking, at least a local minimum in the function of his existence.

Then again, he thought, as he considered the extremely acceptable rosetta he currently pouring, he was much improved in the latte art department, even over the course of four days of employment at Rational Grounds, ostensibly a coffee shop but, in actuality, some kind of post-modern salon in the intellectual tradition of Denis Diderot, where the American Intelligentsia came to drink coffee and pretend to be socialists. They were *not actually* socialists.

"One Classic Cappuccino, one Engels Espresso," Jennifer called in his direction.

Rush could not honestly say that he was entirely committed to his incipient career in the coffee industry. However, as Eli had pointed out, winter in Boston was not a thing that should be taken lightly, especially by someone who was, in the technical sense of the word, currently homeless if one did not count the irregular nights he passed at the Wallace household.

He measured out an ounce of espresso grounds, emptied the grounds into the espresso machine, and then tamped them down.

Rush had vacillated for the span of a week before taking material steps toward creating a semi-sustainable existence for himself. On multiple occasions he had nearly convinced himself that it would be a reasonable course of action to simply call the Air Force, but when faced with the reality of doing so, he'd never been able to go through with it, as there was a low, but non-zero possibility that turning himself over to the

United States military might result in an outcome that was extremely unfortunate. For him. And, possibly, for Eli.

He finished the 'Engles' Espresso with a drop of bitters and a twist of orange rind, and started on the cappuccino.

As it seemed that a trip to the undergraduate E&M lab space at MIT was likely to be shortly in the offing, and as *it also* seemed that such a trip had the prospect of revealing at least some information about the devices attached to his head, he had decided to continue to try his luck in Cambridge. This meant that he needed a job so that he could acquire an apartment before the temperatures dropped to the point that he would, eventually, freeze to death from exposure. Such an outcome would be unfortunate.

He measured out a second ounce of espresso, loaded it into the machine, and then narrowed his eyes at the steam wand.

It had been Eli who had suggested this particular place, because of its reputation for being willing to pay part-time employees in cash and its distinctly literary as opposed to quantitative leanings, making it less likely that he would be recognized. The coffee shop was winningly pretentious, offering 'classic' forms of caffeine-laced beverages along with edgier equivalents named for dead authors and philosophers, whose memorable quotes were chalked on the walls for the perusal of the bored and bookless.

He frothed the milk, pulled the espresso, let it go for half a minute, and then poured the foamed milk over the espresso shot in an entirely decent rosetta pattern.

"Straight iced coffee," Jennifer said.

He finished pouring the thing and looked critically at the cappuccino. Not bad.

"Nice shirt." A familiar voice caused him to look up. Eli was standing at the counter. He pulled down his shades. "Though, probably not the best choice for a guy in the service profession."

Rush shot him a look over the tops of his glasses as he handed the cappuccino he had just crafted to some twenty-something who clearly had no interest in latte art. He then reflexively assessed his own, recently-acquired, black T-shirt upon which the word 'no' was printed in white, sans-serif font.

He shrugged. "I found it at a thrift store."

"Strong work. Now you just need skinny jeans, headphones, a macbook air, and your journey towards the Dark Side will be complete." Eli said, no doubt dramatically mimicking a film that Rush hadn't seen.

"Then I'll need a second job," Rush replied, pulling a plastic cup from a stack of the things behind the counter.

"In this town? We can find you free skinny jeans. For sure. You know there's a clothing co-op table on the other side of the square, next to the book exchange table? Maybe —"

"Fascinating," Rush said, filling the cup with ice.

"Is that for *my* coffee?" Eli asked. "Because I could use less ice."

Rush shot him a pointed look. "I am *working*," he said. "You are interfering. Shouldn't you be doing something useful? Tutoring shiftless young people? Reapplying to university?"

"I *got* you this job," Eli said. "Basically. There's no need to insult my life choices."

"Kafkaesque Cappuccino," Jennifer said, favoring him with a pointed look and an irked swish of her hair.

"You did not get me this job," Rush replied, lowering his voice. He discarded a portion of the ice that Eli found so objectionable, and then opened a fridge, pulled out the obscenely expensive drip coffee, and poured it into the plastic cup.

"I was the one who told you to pretend you were an aspiring novelist," Eli whispered, eyeing possibly-Jennifer with equal parts interest and fear. "They love that kind of thing here. Though, if you want to keep up appearances, you should probably stop chalking the walls with Sagan quotes."

"Carl Sagan wrote a novel," Rush said pointedly.

"I pay you for coffee, not for sass," Eli replied.

"The sass comes gratis when you fail to tip," Rush said, snapping a lid onto Eli's coffee.

"Touché, Dave. Too freakin' shay."

"Is there a reason you're here?"

"My mom's working the midnight to eight AM shift, which means it's alien game night."

"Spectacular," Rush replied.

"See you then?" Eli said.

"Yes yes," Rush replied, trying to remember what differentiated the 'Kafkaesque Cappuccino' from the 'Classic Cappuccino' and deciding to hell with it. He began adding some Kahlua to the thing, realized that was a terrible idea from a liability standpoint, aborted mid pour, and added a shot of chocolate instead. Anyone who ordered a 'Kafkaesque Cappuccino' deserved some unpredictability in his or her beverage. That, or an insect. Because he was a man of principle. And literary justice. By which he meant he was a man that did justice to literature. With beverage composition and latte art. Apparently. Maybe. Right now he was.

He sighed, shook his hair out of his eyes, and glanced up at the chalked menu on the wall behind him as a refresher on what exactly was in a 'Kafkaesque Cappuccino'. The board read: *cinnamon, chocolate, bureaucratic despair*. Well. Who was he to say what bureaucratic despair tasted like. Probably, it tasted something like half a shot of Kahlua.

He sighed. He needed to get his old life back. Unfortunately, as that was indisputably a "long-term goal" as Eli had put it, right now he would settle for making enough money that he could start renting an apartment when the ground began freezing over at night.

He could call the Air Force at any time.

Any time.

Rush spent the majority of his late-night bus ride contemplating the bright duplication of the vehicle's illuminated interior, reflected in paned glass laid over rushing cityscape, changeable and aphotic. Examining his own reflection felt like examining a stranger, and made him feel both uncomfortable and anticipatory, as if his doppelgänger might do something unexpected and outside his control. Despite the fascination and unease that considering his own image held for him, he found it difficult not to fall asleep, as he was exhausted; difficult not to touch the things attached to his head, as he was something of a masochist—scratch that, in his case schadenfreudist was certainly the more appropriate term; and difficult to resist pulling out his wallet to examine the drawing by J Shep as he was insatiably curious about the thing.

As soon as he'd realized that the stylized drawing was accompanied by Ancient, he'd translated it the same night in the privacy of the pink and white tiled second floor bathroom of the Wallace household. At this point, he could have reproduced the thing in his sleep.

A word in the leftmost box said 'you.' An arrow connected that box to the next, in which there was a phonetic spelling of the English word for 'server.' The following

arrow was labeled with the word 'dialing' and cut through a circle to point at a castle shape box labeled, 'City of Awesome.' The final box said, 'me'."

Beneath the drawing was a prefix that looked like it might belong in an SMTP header, followed by a numeric code. At the very bottom was written, "so call me maybe," in Ancient.

The thing could be a coded message, meant to be found by him in his current state, but he doubted that. There was something both cavalier and intimate in the blocky lines of the castle-like 'city.' It looked more like an attempt to flirt with him that he had kept, because it was interesting, or because J Shep had meant something to him, or because he had planned to use the information contained in the thing.

The latter possibility seemed the most likely.

Contacting J Shep was risky. He'd have to do it in such a way that it couldn't be easily traced, meaning he'd need to make use of proxy servers and he'd have to coordinate PGP encryption with this J Shep before any actual information was exchanged. Even that might not be sufficient. For all he knew, J Shep could be another Air Force colonel, with the resources and backing of the military at his disposal. But—he doubted it.

He didn't really see an Air Force colonel as being the type to draw and annotate a witty, stylized representation of SMTP Authentication and use that as a vehicle for flirting.

He'd been wandering around without a clear picture of who he was for three weeks, without contact or incident. Unless he was part of some social experiment in selective amnesia, which seemed like a disappointingly short-sighted waste of his intellectual resources, it seemed that he'd been left on his own. Nothing was going to reveal itself to resolve his situation. It was time, therefore, to make some material progress.

J Shep's note, and the things attached to his head seemed likely starting points.

Rush stepped off the bus into the warm night air. Already he'd noticed the days getting shorter. He estimated he had maybe a week or so before he'd need to make a serious effort to find a relatively permanent housing solution; one that didn't involve irregularly sleeping on Eli's mother's couch and making use of a disposable razor every three days or so.

He knocked quietly on Eli's front door. Eli opened the thing, wearing a blue T-shirt that said, 'FICTIONAL CHARACTER,' in bold white lettering.

"Nice shirt," Rush said.

"Can you teach me how to do that?" Eli asked, as he swung the door wide.

"Do what?"

"Turn a compliment into an insult without employing overt sarcasm."

"Yes," Rush said. "Make coffee for people for sixteen hours and then say anything. Anything *at all*, and the effect you're looking for will manifest without effort."

"Sixteen hours?" Eli said. "Sounds boring."

"Lethally," Rush confirmed, following him inside, toward the brightly lit kitchen.

"I ordered pizza," Eli said. "Pineapple and pepperoni."

"Ah," Rush said, going for cavalier rather than ravenous. "How's the—" he waved a hand. "Temple of Darkness these days?"

"Ugh," Eli said. "You sound like my mom when she's trying to engage with the young people."

Rush shrugged. "Away an' play in traffic," he offered, pulling a piece of mostly cold pizza out of the box on the kitchen table.

"There you go," Eli said. "Be who you are, man. Approximately. So. Figure anything else out about yourself?" he asked, dropping into a chair.

"I'm surprisingly well-read for a mathematician," Rush said, "I have an evolving gift for latte art, I know more than I expected about coffee, and I do not speak Spanish."

"Well," Eli said. "No one's perfect."

"I need to send an email," Rush said.

"To whom?" Eli asked guardedly.

Instead of answering, Rush pulled J Shep's illustration out of his wallet and passed it over to Eli.

Eli studied it for a moment, while Rush set to work consuming the pizza in front of him. He hadn't eaten since the previous night, when he'd taken some day-old muffins after Rational Grounds had closed.

"I want to meet this guy," Eli said, absently. "'Call me maybe?' In Promethean? What a baller. But like in a cute way."

"What makes you think J Shep is a 'guy'?" Rush asked.

"If this guy is a chick then I definitely want to meet him," Eli said. "It just looks like a dude's handwriting. I could be wrong. Seriously though, you had this in your wallet the whole time?"

"Yes," Rush said.

"And it just occurred to you to show this to me *now*?" Eli said.

"I wasn't planning on showing it to you until I had decided to act on the information it contains," Rush said. He took another bite of pizza.

"Yeah," Eli said, pulling out the word, still studying the drawing. "Look, as much as this artwork appeals to my inner nerd, I'm not sure I like the idea of you emailing this J Shep character. I mean, who is this guy? Can he be trusted? Is he as adorable as his—" Eli broke off abruptly, still staring at the paper.

Rush continued eating his pizza, waiting for the inevitable flow of partially coherent words that was, no doubt, in the offing.

"Wait. Wait wait wait wait *wait*. This says 'dialing'. It says 'dialing' and then there's an arrow through a *circle*. Oh man." Eli paused. "You don't think—I mean, you don't think that—" He looked up at Rush.

Rush raised his eyebrows and took another bite of pizza.

"What if the portae are real," Eli whispered. "Even if they're not physically real, they could represent, in the game—I mean, in real life? Maybe people can pass through them, maybe they can't, either way, even if it was just—"

"Eli," Rush said. "Please make an effort to communicate entire thoughts."

A rhetorician, the lad was not, but Rush could already see the point his confused monologue was converging on. He didn't like it.

"What if *you're* not the alien," Eli whispered, "but this 'J Shep' character *is*? This circle? Cut by this arrow that says 'dialing'? That's a *clear* reference to Astria Porta. You have to *dial* the portals. In the game you do. What if there's a real world equivalent? What if J Shep is giving you the ability to tag your message for, like, the stars or something?"

"It's a stylized SMTP header, Eli," Rush said, unable to hide his uncertainty. The association linking the words 'astria porta' with a dark, circular, rotating arch were just as strong as any other connection present in his unmoored mind.

"Yeah dude, which tags it to a server that dials the freaking 'City of Awesome'. I take back everything I said. *We're* so doing this. It's going to be worth it. To the max. Also? I vote we start calling this guy J'Shep. Like a Vulcan."

"No," Rush said.

"J'Shep," Eli said, with evident relish. "You're gonna need a kickass VPN. And you're going to need some sort of encryption protocol that—"

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah—so this is kind of like me explaining freedom to George Washington, isn't it."

"I *am* a cryptographer," Rush said.

"More like *the* cryptographer," Eli replied.

"If you insist," Rush replied, with an open hand and fluid shrug.

"And so modest," Eli said.

"I have discovered that modesty is not one of my strengths," Rush replied, finishing his current slice of pizza and eyeing the next.

"No," Eli said, passing J Shep's note back to him. "Really?"

"The question is," Rush said, abandoning his dinner long enough to re-pocket the note, "what am I going to say to this J Shep person."

"Duh," Eli said. "I'll tell you *exactly* what you say. You say: 'Hey. I just met you, and this is crazy, but here's my PGP key, so encrypted message me, maybe'."

"No," Rush said. "I'm not saying that."

"Yes you are," Eli said. "It's perfect. What the heck are you going to say that's better? 'I have the highest IQ-to-income ratio on the eastern seaboard, so, tell me about myself, alien pen-pal, because I have selective amnesia'?"

Rush leveled a stare at Eli over the rims of his glasses.

"Think about it," Eli said. "Also, that look only works if you wield power over someone's GPA."

"I'm sure I'll come up with something appropriate," Rush said.

Eli sighed. "Appropriate? Probably. Awesome? No. 'Address to impress', as my mom says."

"And how has tha' worked out for you?"

"Awesome, thanks for asking. Just awesome. Seriously though, can you tell me when you message this guy? And also what he says? I'm invested now. I also really want to know whether J'Shep is an alien."

"I'll keep you apprised," Rush said.

"Sweet," Eli said. "Also, are you eating? Like, regularly? Because I cannot help noticing that every time I feed you, you just destroy food that's put in front of you. Also, I think you've lost weight."

"I get paid at the end of the week," Rush said.

"Aw *man*," Eli said. "In a hundred years when someone writes a biography about you, I'll just be the inattentive Millennial that almost let the dispossessed mathematical rockstar starve during the time he was separated from his alien buddy, J'Shep."

"If that is, indeed, your greatest accomplishment I will be extremely disappointed," Rush replied. "Posthumously."

"That might be the nicest thing you've said to me," Eli replied, smiling faintly at him.

"Yeah well," Rush said. "I'm sure you deserved it. Go to graduate school, why don't you?"

"I think I have to go to undergraduate school first," Eli said.

"Best crash ahead then," Rush replied.

"Yeah," Eli said, pulling out the word. "But until then, want to consult on the whole 'locating the Temple of Darkness problem'? Rob is waiting."

"Oh," Rush said. "Well why didn't you say so. *Rob*. How could we possibly have kept *Rob* waiting at—"

"*Rob*," Eli said archly, "just found out that he is one the TA's for MIT's Physics 8.01."

"Good for him," Rush said.

"Sister class to its spring semester counterpart, Physics 8.02," Eli continued, "also known as Electricity and Magnetism, which is taught in the same lab space. To which he has a *key*."

"I see," Rush said, raising his eyebrows.

"And *now* how do you feel about Rob."

"Significantly more interested," Rush admitted.

"Let's go put him in our debt," Eli said. "Shall we? Bring the pizza."

On the first of October, Rush stood in the center of Killian Court, his hands in his pockets, contemplating the illuminated colonnade of MIT's Building 10. Students passed him, singly or in small clusters, ill-defined silhouettes in the darkness. Above him, the night sky was clear. He looked up at the faint and scattered stars, dimmed by

ambient light pollution. The wind stripped the occasional leaf off the trees on either side of the open court. It was the back of nine in the evening.

Eli was late. He found this entirely unsurprising.

He pulled the black jacket that was a recent thrift store acquisition closer around his shoulders, adjusted his glasses, and gingerly ran his fingers over the piece of metal attached to his right temple.

He hadn't awoken next to the Charles River with expectations of any kind, either about himself, or the life he had left behind. But over the intervening weeks, expectations had coalesced out of the personality he was still mapping the edges of. He hadn't expected things to be this way. Whatever it was that had brought him from Berkeley to Cheyenne Mountain, and from Cheyenne Mountain to Massachusetts, had abandoned him on the shores of the Charles River. He hadn't been certain that he'd been entirely yielded to the anonymity of Cambridge in the summer, and truthfully, he still couldn't be positive that his current perceptions matched the objective truth of his situation, but, certainly, it felt like a desertion. He hadn't expected desertion.

What a charmingly original bastard he had turned out to be.

He rolled his eyes at himself.

Typically, one did not *expect* desertion. That was the point. If one expected desertion then one could take steps to mitigate the consequences, and, clearly, he had taken no steps, no steps at all, to prepare for waking up next to the Charles River without any memory of who he was. Implicit in the idea of 'desertion,' was the idea of betrayal. Apparently, the rest of the world was proceeding along quite well in the absence of Nicholas Rush. Apparently, no one he had known was concerned enough about him to raise any kind of alarm. To file a missing persons report at a minimum. He felt fairly certain that the unexplained disappearance of a relatively famous cryptographer would not go unnoticed by the popular press; he therefore concluded he had not been reported missing.

Was no one *looking* for him?

He had tried to discover what had happened to his wife, the concert violinist, but following her retirement from public performing two years previous, he had found no mention of her, other than a request from himself, during an interview, that the press respect her privacy. Eli had shown him the NOVA special on P=NP, and played him a selection of his NPR interviews.

Perhaps it wasn't so mysterious that he had no friends. He'd certainly had some kind of chip on his shoulder, circa eighteen months ago. Did he still have one? A phantom shoulder chip, the mental equivalent of phantom limb pain? He wasn't sure. Eli kept evincing an improbable willingness to help him, so he couldn't be entirely unpleasant.

He sighed, and shook his hair back out of his eyes. This train of thought was unproductive, pointless, and more than a little depressing. It was better to focus on progressing his situation. To that end, in the past month, he'd acquired an apartment, and, if he could continue to subsist on his diet of day-old baked goods, in roughly two weeks he'd be able to afford the hardware required for his secure attempt to contact J Shep. At which point, perhaps, he would find some approximation of answers.

"Hey," Eli said, his voice carrying over the sound of the wind in the trees. "Hey, Dave."

Rush turned to see the young man coming toward him with a backpack slung sloppily over one shoulder, distorting the dark outline he cut against the lights lining the perimeter of Killian Court. He was accompanied by another young man, who was closer to Rush's height and build than Eli's. He had an instrument case slung across his back.

Presumably, this was 'Rob'.

"Hello," Rush replied.

"Dave, Rob. Rob, Dave," Eli said.

He couldn't see Rob's features in the dark, but his grip was strong and his hand was damp. "Hey man," Rob said. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Ah," Rush said.

"Is it true that you made the assault at Spirit Mountain solo, equipped with only the Shuriken of Sadness?" Rob asked, in a tone of overt challenge.

"Yes," Rush said.

Eli kicked him.

"No," Rush said.

Eli stepped on his foot.

"I don't answer questions," Rush said, and then, realizing he needed to do some damage control, he said, "an' yet, I answer *all* of them."

"Yeah," Eli said, addressing Rob. "So Dave's a little quirky. But he is a pretty sick *Astria Porta* player, and he did confirm that translation and so we stopped wasting our time at

the Tower of Darkness. So we owe him. And he owes me. And *you* owe me, because the 'Mace of the Mind' should really be mine, so good times. After this, the tally sheet will be even."

Rob hesitated, snapping his ID card against his palm in the near-darkness. "You guys aren't going to be doing anything—weird, right?" Rob asked edgily, barely audible above the rising wind.

"Weird?" Eli said. "No dude. Like, what weird thing would we even do? I just need to interrogate my circuit board." he pulled an object out of his pocket and switched on his phone light to illuminate a series of likely looking chips and wires soldered to a board. "Dave's super handy with this kind of thing. I mean, he's Scottish."

"Och aye," Rush said, in arid agreement.

Both the circuit and the Scotticism seemed to reassure Rob. "Come back to college already," he said, handing over his ID.

"Yeah yeah," Eli replied. "I'll swing by your rehearsal and drop off the card and key. You guys still practicing in the same space?"

"Yup," Rob said. "We'll go until ten or eleven. After that I'll be back in my room."

"This shouldn't take more than an hour. I'll swing by practice if we get done early. Say hi to my nemesis."

"An hour tops," Rob said, skeptically. "Right. Look, every fifteen minutes past midnight, you owe me fifty gold. And do *not* crash practice; we're supposed to be learning a new song, not hosting Nerd-on-Nerd Power Hour."

Eli sighed. "Fine, fine" he said. "Now, hand over the key."

Rob pulled unthreaded a heavy key from his key ring and passed it to Eli before retreating back into the darkness, presumably in the direction of 'band practice'.

"Ugh," Eli said, as they crossed Killian Court, the wind tearing at their hair. "as if there would be a Shuriken of Sadness. Have you even been paying attention on our game nights? He was *testing* you."

"I fail to see why a 'Shuriken of Sadness' is any more ridiculous than a 'Temple of Darkness', or a 'Lens of Illumination', or a 'Mace of the Mind'," Rush said, as they climbed stone steps up to the door. "Did you say you have a *nemesis*?"

"Yes," Eli said. He held Rob's ID up to the RFID reader, and the locking mechanism disengaged with an audible click. "We do not speak his name. Unless we have to."

"Why?" Rush said.

"Tradition. Builds the mythos. He defeated me in an epic battle of grades. He was giving them, I was getting them; it wasn't going well for me. Now I'm biding time before my inevitable comeback and ascendancy. Speaking of mythos, nice *jacket*, by the way," Eli said, squinting in the bright fluorescence that showered them. "You're looking more like a film noir hipster barista every day."

"You brought an actual circuit," Rush said, resolutely ignoring any commentary on his steadily deteriorating and extremely limited wardrobe. "I like your initiative."

"Well, we need something to do a test run on, man, because I'm thinking we should try *not* to break the only thing standing between you and your modern-day impersonation of Robert Schumann."

A minor. A minor, with the savage descent that followed the strings and the timpani. A piano concerto.

"Witty," Rush said absently, surprised by the number and quality of associations that the word 'Schumann' had dragged with it.

"I try," Eli said, opening a door and leading the way into a brightly lit stairwell.

Vainly, Rush tried to pull anything personal at all out of Schumann's *Piano Concerto in A Minor* that was making itself aurally available to him, but, as expected, he failed to extract anything from it other than facts about its structure and composition. After half a staircase, he gave up trying to wrest anything experiential from the dark wall that his thoughts vanished behind. "You know where we're going, I take it," Rush said, in the direction of Eli's back.

"I did go here," Eli said. "And I did take Intro Physics and the corresponding lab."

"What happened?" Rush asked.

"Little balls got rolled down ramps. Periods of pendulums were precisely timed using photosensitive detectors. Springs were compressed—"

"I mean," Rush said, leveling an over-the-glasses stare that was entirely wasted on the back of Eli's gray sweatshirt, "why didn't you continue with your studies."

"I don't pry into *your* personal life," Eli said.

"Yes," Rush replied, "you do. Constantly."

"Well if you don't remember it," Eli said, "then it doesn't count as prying."

"It absolutely counts as prying. I'll grant you that it may no' count as 'personal'."

"Well," Eli said, holding the door open for him as they emerged onto the second floor, "it's going to get personal again. At some point. I mean, hopefully." He shot Rush an uncharacteristic look of entirely unveiled sympathy.

Rush looked away.

"Maybe tonight," Eli said.

"Possibly," Rush replied.

They passed along a deserted hall, motion sensitive lights flicking on at their approach.

Eli stopped at an unassuming door opposite a bank of windows and slid Rob's key into the lock. He turned on the light to reveal a relatively expansive room scored by rows of black, epoxy-resin topped lab benches. The walls were lined with cabinets and shelved equipment.

Eli pulled off his backpack and dumped it on the nearest bench. He unzipped it, pulled out an oversized laptop, placed it on the dark surface of the bench, and then moved to the nearest wall, visually scanning the shelved equipment.

Rush joined him, and together they began opening cabinets.

"Rob said it was a benchtop model," Eli said, opening his third cabinet, "so it should be like, you know, roughly the size of a breadbox. How big *is* your typical breadbox, actually? I have no idea. My mom *freezes* extra bread."

"I'd be surprised if it weighed more than fifteen kilograms," Rush said, cocking his head, one hand on an open cabinet door as he considered a likely looking instrument in front of him that he couldn't immediately identify.

"Jackpot," Eli said, sliding what was, unmistakably, a spectrum analyzer out of a bottom cabinet and heading toward the nearest lab bench. "Grab my laptop, will you? There's an outlet in the floor here."

Rush returned to the bench near the door and picked up Eli's oversized, underpowered, aging laptop, and his bag, which was surprisingly heavy.

Eli plugged in the instrument and flipped it on. The digital menu lit up. "Excellent," he said. "It turns on. Now there's got to be a port here somewhere—I brought every adaptor I had, but I'm hoping it's either something straightforward or the cable is already included—" he broke off, his fingers running a perimeter at the base of the device. "Sweetness," he said, stopping at a point on the left side of the analyzer, and then pulling a cable out of his bag.

"You have a software interface that can interpret the output, I take it?" Rush asked.

"Yup, Rob hooked me up with the software last week when I set up this raid. You may begin praising me at any point," Eli said. "Actually, maybe you should hold off on that until we're sure I'm not going to break your swag. Or this little guy here," Eli said, running a thumb over the sticker that declared the maximum RF that the machine would tolerate. "So. Do you think that your swag has any DC voltage?"

"How would I know?" Rush replied, watching Eli position his test circuit.

"Well you know lots of stuff," Eli said. "Promethean aka Ancient, trig, lots of fun stories about dead mathematicians and how they went insane that you seem to think are somehow motivating? But hopefully you see my point here, so I'm gonna say again, 'does your swag have any DC voltage,' and you're gonna say—" he pulled out the final word like he'd hit some wall of infinite verbal potential.

"I have no idea," Rush said.

Eli sighed. "Well, it was worth a shot. Whatevs, man, I brought a coaxial DC block for the input so we don't fry the crap out of our analyzer. I figure even so, there's a somewhere between a seventy and one hundred percent chance that we screw up the mixer in this thing before we're done. But let's be real. I'm sure some idiot undergrad has done the same thing with much less excuse."

"Undoubtedly," Rush said, his eyebrows lifting as he watched Eli set up the machine. "You seem to have learned an unexpected amount in a single semester at college."

"I feel like you think that was a compliment," Eli said.

"Wasn't it?" Rush asked.

"Eh," Eli said. "I've had better. Now. Let's make sure this thing works." He flipped a switch on his circuit board. "My test circuit should be transmitting right smack in the middle of the unlicensed ISM band."

Rush shifted his gaze to examine the output of the spectrum analyzer, which was displaying a single peak in the center of the swath of frequencies that Eli had selected for his initial sweep.

"I am the master of circuits," Eli said. "I am the Viscount of Voltage."

"You'll likely need to widen your sweep, when we interrogate the actual device" Rush said.

"I know. My plan was to do serial sweeps with overlapping windows. I'm guessing that your swag is going to be broadcasting in one of the restricted bandwidths, if it's even radio. It's almost got to be though, because I mean, it's not like you're going to have

anything ionizing strapped to your head, right? Right. Ugh, I mean, hopefully. I'm thinking we start low frequency, go as high as we can, and hope we get lucky," Eli said.

"Seems reasonable," Rush replied.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"Want me to ah—" Eli said.

Rush didn't reply, he just swept his hair out of the way and angled his head, giving Eli as much access as he could to the device at his temple without actually removing it. Eli wasted no time in peeling off the black electrical tape that they'd coated the devices with. He stuck the mat of tape on the edge of the bench for later reapplication.

"So I know that you're kind of on the fence about this, but I really don't like the idea of you wearing this thing while we do this," Eli said. "It'll go faster, the interference will be less, and it will be less risky if you can tolerate having it off."

"It's a spectrum analyzer," Rush said. "It should be perfectly benign."

"Says the guy with no personal memories who's got creepy crystal tech glued to his head."

Rush looked at him, undecided.

"Come on," Eli said. "Give it a shot. You said it was much worse when they were both off. I only need one. Worst-case scenario, we put it back on and do it the hard way. Even if we can get halfway through sweeping the spectrum, that would be helpful. Even if I can just hook the thing up with a little more freedom in terms of movement, that would cut down on the total time required."

"All right," Rush said.

"Awesome," Eli replied. "Go when ready."

Rush pressed against the small metal pieces at the lateral borders of the device and felt it release from his skin with a sickening sensation of deep withdrawal. It came free in his hand. He passed the device to Eli and pressed his fingers to his temple where it had been.

For a moment, he heard nothing. And then—a low chord, quiet and coming from behind him.

"You okay?" Eli asked.

"Just—get started," Rush said, unable to prevent himself from looking back over his shoulder. Of course, there was nothing there.

"You're hearing it?" Eli said uncertainly.

"Yes I'm hearing it. I told you I would hear it. Get *started*," Rush repeated.

"We could abort—" Eli began.

"Start," Rush said.

"Okay. Starting. You just—look a little more freaked than I was expecting, that's all."

"I'm fine," Rush replied.

He watched Eli set up the inputs, using jeweler's pliers to twirl a slender wire around something on the interior of the device before— He would ignore it. The chord. What had he been thinking about? His train of thought seemed to dissolve under tonal pressure, but that was all right, he could ignore it, he could filter out a chord, continuous and loud and long, he could filter it out, of course he could. Anyone could. And so he could.

He watched Eli connect the device to his coaxial DC block before interfacing the entire setup with the input port on the spectrum analyzer.

It was getting louder. The chord.

"Hey," Eli said.

Thinking was difficult, speaking was unworkable, so he nodded at Eli, making a sweeping hand gesture at the spectrum analyzer before pressing his fingers against his temple. It was a triad. It was a triad formed on a tonic note at once alien and familiar. The third interval a half step down from something major—or was it. Or was it. D-minor? Yes. D-minor. He had perfect pitch. *That* was interesting. D-minor. He was ignoring it. D-minor. Or was it—

"Okay," Eli said, drawing out the word. "Nothing yet, and I'm already through the MF band."

He thought that perhaps it wasn't D-minor after all. Almost D-minor. Alternate D-minor. Variant D-minor.

"Through the VHF band," Eli said. "Still nothing. You doing okay, dude?"

Rush closed his fingers around the edge of the bench.

"Nothing in the HF band," Eli said.

He shut his eyes, trying to hold something off that he could not identify.

"Hang in there, Eli said. "Nothing in the VHF band."

He had to sit. He yielded in the direction of gravity, struggling against the slowly progressing tone in his mind.

"Dave?"

The floor felt very hard.

"UHF," Eli snapped. "It's in UHF, and it's in the military allocation band. No surprises there, but—oh crap, I think I'm jacking the signal. Yeah, yeah I'm boosting it, I'm boosting it, crap or it's boosting *itself*—*this* isn't good, I hope no one is scanning for you right now, damn it. Okay, definitely time to shut this—oh. Oh crap. Dave? Okay, hang on, one second. Don't pass out. How does this thing even—oh *yikes*."

He couldn't see.

"Dave?" Eli said. "Nick. Hey. You okay?"

Rush nodded.

"Nope," Eli said, the word loud and very close to him. "That's not an 'okay' face. Move your hand. Yeah okay, or not."

Rush could feel his hand being pried away from his temple, a cool press, and a sickening reattach and then—

Everything was quiet.

He opened his eyes to find himself on the floor, his back pressed against the base of the lab bench they had appropriated, with Eli kneeling directly in front of him. "Holy *crap*," Eli said, his face pale, his eyes excited.

Rush nodded.

"Are you okay?" Eli asked.

Rush nodded.

"So," Eli said, "your swag is broadcasting in the UHF band, but as soon as we hit its frequency with our sweep, it jacked the signal up for about ten seconds before I realized what the heck was happening. It got super bright and it shorted out the entire setup. I am *really* glad that it was not attached to your head when we did that. Also? You were not joking about that whole I-hear-a-disembodied-chord thing being messed up."

"What?" Rush asked.

"Yeah okay, this can wait," Eli said, speaking more slowly. "We've got to get out of here," he said. "Because we just advertised your location. And it's a clear night."

"A clear night?" Rush repeated.

"Ohhhhh crap. I hope I didn't fry your brain. That would be a crime against math. Say something intelligent."

"Eli," Rush said, aiming for something in the range of a reprimand but falling far short.

"Poor showing, dude, but I'm going to interpret that as a compliment. Anyway, the frequency of the EM signal transmitted by your swag is particularly susceptible to atmospheric—you know what? Never mind. Let's talk about this later when your brain is online, and we're not *at* the coordinates from which we pretty much straight up broadcasted an over the air transmission on a restricted military band," Eli said, grabbing Rush by both elbows and doing a slow pull. "Not too fast. Now sit," he said, pushing Rush onto a stool.

Rush leaned forward, his elbows resting on the dark bench in front of him, his hands bridged over his eyes. His thoughts had the consistency of sludge. He—

"Okay," Eli said, pulling him up by one elbow. "I'm done packing up. Let's get out of here and find you some food. And some coffee. And maybe a nap."

After a triple espresso at the same diner where Rush had first admitted to Eli that he was lacking a personal memory, he could feel his brain make an effort to actually reengage. He had a headache. He felt like his mind had been wrung out and left in a somewhat painful mess behind his eyes.

"Feeling better?" Eli asked. "At all?"

"Yeah," Rush said. "Somewhat."

"So—you were *not* kidding about that tonal thing being intense."

"No," Rush said.

"But you feel totally normal now?"

"Well," Rush said, digging the heel of one hand into his eye, "I don't hear anything, but I'm pure—" he felt tangled in a mess of possible sentence endings and decided to stop speaking.

"Yeah," Eli whispered. "You look freaking *terrible*. Did it hurt? Because it kind of looked like it hurt to have it off."

"No," Rush said. "Not as such. It was more akin to sensory overload in the absence of sensory input."

"Yeah," Eli said. "In the absence of *detectable* input."

Rush nodded.

"So, correct me if you feel like I'm wrong about this, but I'm not sure if those devices are causing your memory loss. At first, I straight up figured that they were, you know? It made sense, Occam's Razor style. But—your swag is *helping* you. That is pretty clear at this point."

"True," Rush said, resting his chin on his hand. "But I don't think that we can assume that 'helping' me is its sole function."

"Agreed," Eli said, dropping his voice to a whisper as a waitress passed. "I got a pretty good look at the structure of these things," Eli said, glancing at the re-camouflaged piece of metal re-attached to Rush's right temple. I'm not sure how well you've really been able to examine them, due to like, getting punched in the face with this mystery auditory phenomenon every time you take them off, so let me tell you about their architecture, because it's maybe a little freakier than you might be anticipating. On the outer surface, the one we did the retaping job on, there's an opening through which you can see a little bit of circuitry and the 'indicator light,' aka crystal. I'm pretty sure that the crystal and associated inputs are actually sitting on top of an enclosed panel of circuitry about an eighth of an inch thick. Most of the business end of the thing is packed into there, I'd bet. If I were to *guess*, I'd say whoever designed this thing put the crystal in a separate casing because a) it gives off a little bit of heat, and b) it's not that compact. Are you following me, man? Because you look like you're about to pass out."

"Proceed," Rush said.

"Okay so to sum up, we've got the casing," Eli said, tracing a box in the air between them, "with the crystal compartment sitting inside on top, under the crystal are a whole mess of waterproof, element-proof, college student-proof electronics. Like if it's a sandwich? That's the middle."

"Eli," Rush said. "I understood you the first time. Proceed."

"Okay well no offense, man, you just look kind of confused and semi-conscious."

"I assure you," Rush said, "tha's not the case. Please continue."

"Yeah. Sure. Okay so, I'm just guessing about the concealed, like, 'meat' of the sandwich? Because I couldn't literally see that layer. But it's the bottom layer of the thing that's really, really freaky."

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"The bottom layer," Eli said, "is the—um, crap, let's call this the human-interface layer. And that layer has two extremely small holes in it. And when you hold down those panels on the side of the device, guess what comes out of those holes."

Rush opened a hand. "A chthonic vengeance deity straight out of the Greek tradition," he said dryly.

"Poetic," Eli said. "And a little more awake than I was expecting. And actually? Kind of close."

"Eli."

"Electrodes. Four of them. Two pairs of two that are made of some really creepy, super ductile metal that kind of—unfurls. The two pairs are angled away from one another, and neither enters your skin at a ninety degree angle."

"Ah," Rush said, viscerally unsettled.

"Yeah. That creeped-out face you're making right now is a slightly toned down version of the creeped-out face that I made when I saw it, and a *really* toned down version of the creeped-out face I made when I stuck it back on your head," he said, his voice dropping down to a ragged whisper.

"Cheers," Rush said.

"Yeah," Eli replied. "Okay, so while you were trying really hard not to pass out, I got two pieces of information from the signal analyzer. One was that your swag is, for sure, transmitting a low power signal in the Ultra High Frequency Radio band, in the hertz range used by the military. Maybe not that surprising. The other thing I determined is that it doesn't like being screwed around with, because it built up a pretty impressive voltage differential and then discharged, which, managed to short out our little system. This demonstrates that it's capable of building and maintaining a charge."

Rush nodded.

"Make some kind of legit observation, please, so I know you're actually taking this in," Eli said.

"Its activity likely depends on system input," Rush said, as a waitress set plates in front of them. He started in on his club sandwich.

"Yeah, okay, true. Yes. In fact, it almost certainly does, which is good, because that means it's probably not going to electrocute you if it's taking input from your brain, which I'm going to bet is exactly what it's doing." Eli hissed, his plate of onion rings going ignored in front of him. "Together, these two devices set up four terminals, two

electrodes each. Probably? You've got an anode and a cathode pair at four different points on your skull. Does that *suggest* anything to you?"

"It suggests the establishment of an electric field that can vary with time. In my head," Rush said.

"Yes," Eli said, very low. Very quiet. "Combine that with your UHF band signal, and you've got a system that's affecting your brain and possibly remotely modulatable."

Rush dropped his sandwich. He pressed the heel of one hand against his eyesocket.

"With UHF, they'd probably have to be line-of-sight to influence you, and let's be real, hopefully you've got some kind of security built into this thing, but whether the answer to that particular question is yes or no, I don't think we want to be messing around trying to hack the thing attached to your brain with literal, creepy electrodes."

Rush said nothing. It wasn't that he hadn't expected to hear something along these lines. He had. He just—felt extremely tired. And somewhat sick. It was difficult to take a deep breath. He couldn't feel his fingertips.

"Don't panic," Eli said.

"I'm not panicking," he said.

"Well you *look* a little bit like you're panicking," Eli said. "I get it. I do. I'd panic too if I were you. I'm kind of panicking *for* you over here. Sympathy panic."

"I'm not panicking," Rush said, trying to take a deep breath and failing. He clenched his hands and then opened them again.

"Okay," Eli said drawing out the word, "Good. Drink some water maybe? You did just almost pass out and then you drank three shots of espresso, and you don't really eat that regularly, so your blood sugar is probably super low and so really if you think about it, this is kind of like, worst case scenario for panic. I mean, no one wants to find out that they're hackable, but you definitely don't want to find out about it when you're hypoglycemic, overcaffeinated, and just had some unfortunate mental event, I'm not even really sure what to *call* that."

Rush drank some water. "I'm not panicking," he said again.

"Nope," Eli said. "Nope, no panicking here. You are taking this like a champ. Onion ring?"

Rush shook his head.

"Yeah, you're not a stress eater. Anyone can see that." Eli ate the onion ring he'd offered to Rush.

Rush took another sip of water. "What do you think," he finally managed, "the purpose of this mi' possibly be?"

"Well," Eli said, "honestly, seeing that you're not being actively pursued by anyone, seeing that, for all we can tell, you're wandering around Cambridge, memoryless, hackable—"

"Can you please stop using that term?"

"Okay sorry. Memoryless, ports open, and entirely left to your own, semi-homeless devices, I can't say that this makes *any kind* of rational sense to me. I mean, maybe this is some kind of experiment? But I really don't think so. Because if I were going to choose someone to do a mysterious social experiment on? I would not choose a relatively well-known, misanthropic Fields Medalist. The thing though," Eli said, pausing to eat another onion ring, "is that—well, without your swag, it kind of seems like you'd be screwed. Pretty much immediately. I mean, what do you think would happen if you took those devices off and left them off?"

"I'm not sure," Rush said.

"Well, as an outside observer, I'd say you were definitely on the verge of losing consciousness when I reattached the device we interrogated. You were also shaking."

"Was I?" Rush asked. "I don't remember that."

"Yeah, not much, but you were like—tightening up," Eli said. "It did not look fun."

Rush shut his eyes and shook his head.

"I don't want to freak you out any more than you're already freaking out, but I think it's possible that you might run the risk of *death* without your swag," Eli whispered. "I think it's maybe important to put that on the table."

"Yes," Rush breathed. "I think you may be right about that."

"You should really eat," Eli said.

Rush nodded. "You said something in the lab," he murmured, "about boosting the UHF signal?"

"Yeah," Eli said. "I increased the amplitude of the thing about eighty fold, unfortunately. I think it was a transient effect."

"You think?" Rush said, looking at him sharply.

"Well, I wasn't going to sweep the UHF band *again*, was I?" Eli replied. "Power consumption visibly increased, as measured by, er, crystal glow brightness? For about

ten seconds. So, if someone is looking for you, and they picked up that UHF emission, they'll be able to trace your location. But, fortunately, Boston is a big city, and you're probably not sending a super high-powered signal anymore. I'm not sure what the maximum detectable range is for your swag on its standard settings, but it's not going to be super far, and it probably will depend some on atmospheric conditions, so hope for lots of thunderstorms, I guess."

Rush nodded.

"We should keep an eye on what happens at that lab though," Eli said. "And by 'we' I mean 'me'. And by 'me' I mean 'Rob'. And by 'what happens', I mean whether or not the Air Force shows up there."

Rush nodded.

"You look awful," Eli said. "Eat your sandwich, maybe."

"I don't think that's going to solve anything," Rush said.

"Um, no. Neither do I. But it's kind of necessary. You have an apartment, at this point, right?" Eli asked.

"Yes," Rush said. "Though, truth be told, it's more like a room with a locking door adjacent to what appears to be a former crack house."

"Um, yeah, maybe you should sleep at my place," Eli said.

"No," Rush said. "I could still be broadcasting an easily localizable signal."

"Yeah, but you're *probably* not," Eli said.

"I'm not going to your house," Rush said. "Not tonight. Not anymore."

Eli sighed.

"But speaking of terrible living situations, would you mind holding some cash for me?"

Rush asked.

"So that when you get mugged you won't lose all your resources?" Eli asked, grimacing.

"Precisely."

Rush passed Eli several hundred dollars.

"I feel like you could afford a better place," Eli said, "if you're investing this much in the Bank of Wallace."

"I'm trading physical safety for the eventual purchase of hardware."

"You want a computer," Eli said.

"No," Rush replied. "I *need* a computer. Among other things."

"I identify with that need," Eli replied. "Is this for purposes of contacting J'Shep?"

Rush nodded.

"Well," Eli said, "I'm all for that, especially in light of what we just found out, but I'd hold off for a few days. Play it cool, slave away at your latte art, and we can see what, if anything, comes of our physics lab broadcast. I have an angle that maybe we can work."

"What kind of angle?" Rush asked.

"I know a grad student in the Neuro department. Wicked smart. Like it's the guy's job. I mean, to be clear, not Eli Wallace Smart, but almost. He's into neural robotics, to the extent that that's a thing, which it's not, really. This is the guy we want. The only problem is, he's maybe a little *too* much of a full-blooded academic for us to get away with bullshitting him. But then again, maybe not. We'll have to come up with something plausible."

"That may be difficult," Rush said. "Frankly, I'm perpetually astounded that *you* gave any credence to my story. To me, it sounds totally preposterous."

"That's what saves it," Eli replied. "Real things are always ridiculous. I mean, have you *lived* in the world?"

"Theoretically, yes," Rush said. "Experientially, no."

"Good point, Dave," Eli said. "Good freaking point."

Fair Share of Abuse

The sun is sharp-edged, lighting up yellow-tipped trees against dark clouds. Mitchell, driving, slows for a light. He keeps his velocity change nice and smooth, because he knows what a bitch short stops can be when one's recovering from a broken back. Oh, *how* he knows.

He flicks his blinker on.

The Stones are playing over the radio.

I saw her today at the reception,

A glass of wine in her hand.

I knew she would meet her connection

At her feet was a footloose man.

That speaks to Mitchell. That speaks to Mitchell on an ungodly number of levels. On so many levels that there are at least some of them no god can see. Not his grandmother's God, not some dead false god, not a living example of evil godhead conferred by some bizarro Ancient cousins who seem to have a particular dislike for one of his teammates and a particular fondness for another teammate—the teammate who is missing, the one who's presumed dead, presumed to be a traitor to the cause she had tried so hard to become a part of—so hard, so hard, *so hard* that he can't really swallow when he thinks of the stupid box for the stupid badge that they had requisitioned for her. It's sitting in a drawer now. In Mitchell's desk. So it won't have to sit in a drawer in Jackson's.

Cam wishes that he could do one of two things.

Thing A. He wishes he could go out, alone, buy Vala a tombstone and engrave her name on it, using the birthday she had picked for herself and the day she disappeared, and then go stick it on some nice ground somewhere and stand over it, without telling a soul. That way there will be no one looking at him, no one seeing him, no one judging him for the steely look in his eye that's awkward and that's frightening and that won't go away, that looks nothing like the grief he really feels for someone who was fucking fucking fucking fucking perfect, for all her annoying, grandiose, deity-sized and derived imperfections.

Thing B. He wishes he could get drunk on Jamieson's, maybe on bourbon, but a *shitty* bourbon not the fancy stuff the hipsters are drinking these days, maybe with Everett,

maybe with Telford in some kind of parallel universe where the guy wasn't a mostly unambiguous piece of shit, and sit on the trunk of a car. He'd look up at the night sky and he'd scream, 'fuck you, Vala Mal Doran, I knew it all along I knew it from the minute you slapped that bracelet on Jackson that you were nothing but a whole mess of smoking trouble, and we're well rid of you. Set the universe on fire, you glorious piece of work. Well played, m'am. Live long and prosper, may you swim in the jewels that you con off of every idiot that you meet; may you suffer karmically forever for breaking Jackson's heart.'

But no. Mitchell gets option C. Like one of Vala's stupid Cosmo Quizzes—there's always one crap option out of three. This time it's Thing C. And he's doing it. Thing C is driving what remains of Colonel Everett Young home to his apartment after the NID finally cleared him. Thing C is being pretty sure that he should stay and have a beer but Thing C makes it three o'clock in the afternoon, which is awkward but also masks the fact that he doesn't want to have a beer, and Everett doesn't want him to have a beer, and no one should be having beer anyway. Misery drinking is always bad, but it never stops anyone from doing it. Thing C is going back to work and trying to decide where the line that demarcates the point at which Jackson has worked too much, gone too long without sleep, tried too hard to find Vala and not hard enough to find Rush who is, technically, the more valuable asset. Thing C is trying to fall asleep himself in a world where the guy who had carefully reached down and helped Mitchell position his bad leg across his lap in the back of J Shep's tinyass Mustang is also the guy who has sold them out to the Lucian Alliance, who has knifed the guy who'd been riding shotgun so hard, so effectively, that Young had been benched for months, and now might be out of a job and might be half out of his mind.

Everett is next to him, staring out the window of the Camaro at the yellowing edges of the leaves. It doesn't seem like October. Unfortunately, the main reason it doesn't seem like October is that Mitchell has a hard time believing that he's lived this long. That they all have.

Except Vala.

And Rush.

Rush, in whom Young has or *had* an intense personal interest. There was something going on there a little bit outside the norm. But Mitchell gets that. He does. He thinks he does.

He's responsible for people. He's been responsible for people before, he is responsible for people now, in the weird-but-never-uncomfortable, loosely-mutual

"authority" type way he has going with Colonel Carter, who arguably ranks him. He's got a variant of that with Teal'c who's the Jaffa equivalent of a badass senatorial war hero, and with Jackson who's—god, Mitchell doesn't even know what to call the man. Brilliant transhumanist human? Transhumanist transhuman? Post-human human? Whatever. He's responsible for them. He *had been responsible* for an ex-host, intergalactic con artist with a heart of gold, but she's outside of his current supervisory capacity right now. Because he failed to keep her safe. That's the bottom of the bottom line.

It doesn't make perfect sense, blaming himself, but it's the logistical bottom—the place where all of them stand. Him. Young. Sheppard. Telford.

Telford. Sure.

He breathes out long and slow because he's got nothing else.

So Mitchell gets it. He gets what Young is feeling. He knows that feeling. Or *does* he? Maybe not. Because much as he likes Jackson, much as he would throw himself a million times in front of a million bullets to save Carter and her magnificent brain and her wicked sense of humor and her ability to supe up a car, she doesn't make him dinner. And neither does Jackson. There had been some intense stuff going on between Young and Rush. The kind of intense stuff that went on every time a major wing of the stargate program was created. The kind of intense stuff that had happened between Jackson and O'Neill, between Sheppard and McKay, and between Young and Rush. They could have been, they still might be, the third axis.

Seven chevrons.

Eight chevrons.

Nine chevrons.

The idea of cutting through those kinds of intrapersonal dynamics makes Mitchell wince. It's the kind of thing that's maybe forming between him and Sam, that's coming together slow and progressive—the lateral glance, the understood half sentence, the trajectory of gaze and gun. But with Young and Rush it's something different, because they're not in the field together, they've never been in the field together, and even if things had gone perfectly maybe they never would have gone into the field together. They're a different kind of team. A mathematician with a gift for cracking the abstract wide open and an otherwise solid commander who'd had his back cracked.

Rush wasn't Carter.

Rush couldn't effortlessly pull shit out of fires and make it look damn good. Rush might be as quantitative as they got, but he was straight out of the Jacksonian tradition of the guy who opens the interesting door. Straight out of the Jacksonian tradition of setting more fires than he put out.

And Young isn't Mitchell

Young can't let things go the way Mitchell can, with the steely eye and the grit in his mind and his weird and secret tombstone and the thousand other little symbolic ways he finds to say his goodbyes and pay his dues. Young can clench his jaw as hard as any of them, but the shit he clamps down on isn't shit he *ever* lets go.

"You okay?" Mitchell asks, and if he can't get the ice out of his voice or out of his eyes, well, he's only human after all. Only a guy who found out that one of his closest friends had nearly killed another of his closest friends in some kind of hellish parasite ritual that Mitchell never wants to see or hear of again, cultural sensitivity bullshit be damned.

"Yeah," Young replies.

It's a lie. It's a raging, ridiculous, whopper of a lie, the kind of lie his grandma would never brook and the kind of lie Mitchell himself has told a thousand times a thousand ways and meant from the most stubborn reaches of his mulish heart.

"Yeah," Mitchell agrees, trying to help Young make it a little more true. It doesn't work.

The mountain yields to the little sprawling city, this place with too much space and not quite enough strip malls.

He can literally think of no way to start a conversation.

He can literally think of no way that a conversation, once started, could possibly end well.

"You have food, right?" Mitchell says, going straight for the basics.

"Yeah," Young replies, not looking at him. Everett's silhouette is strange and slightly unfamiliar—with hair that's growing into something as regulation-skirting as Sheppard's, in its own way. His face has the gaunt look of a guy who's not eating as much as he should.

The man probably doesn't have an edible thing to his name at home. He's been in custody for a month.

Lack of edible things. That's a problem that can be remedied. By Mitchell. Later today, after work, presuming nothing face-meltingly awful happens between now and seven PM. This is not a given. It never is.

"You want to roll the windows down?" Mitchell asks. "It's nice outside. Not so hot. You missed the end of the summer."

"Yeah okay. Whatever," Young replies.

He does not roll down his window.

Mitchell rolls them all down at once, and a crisp, October breeze sweeps through the car.

"It's ah—" Mitchell begins, feeling like a man faced with an ice wall to climb without pick or rope. "It will be—"

"Shut up, Cam," Young says.

"Yeah," Mitchell says, thinking of Rush, of Vala, and of a guy he once knew, name of David. That guy is dead, though. That guy is dead and gone with the burning summer wind. Maybe he'd never existed at all. It doesn't really matter. He'd been real to Mitchell, with his snappy grin and his neat notes about physics, and the way that he would let the scientists go on and on about whatever they liked. The way he tried to talk to them. To plant a real foot on their turf. Someone should mourn that type A nerd with his bright eyes and shiny boots and ready gun. Too bad no one knew if he'd ever been real. But if he had been real, *if*, it was a damn shame that no one noticed on the day that *that guy* died. The real David. Not this other person, that Mitchell didn't know and didn't care to *everfucking* know. Maybe someone had felt something, somewhere. Maybe they *all* had. One of Jackson's meditation candles had flickered. On a Lantean dock, J Shep had thought of Telford as he sent golf balls in parabolic arcs to vanish under an alien sea. Everett had looked up from his Kafka and poured a beer out onto the lawn. Mitchell had felt an extra stillness, a special inner Zen as he piloted an alien ship over Antarctic ice. Something like that. Small things must have happened to brook passage for the good part of a dead soul.

Mitchell brings his blue Camaro, long ago christened 'Sheila,' to a stop in front of Young's building and rolls up all the windows. He gets out, opens the back, and hauls out Young's bag. Spend a month under lockdown and you accumulate a few things, if you've got any friends. Young's got plenty, and Jackson counts for at least five people.

"I can take it from here," Young says, pale behind sunglasses, underweight, deconditioned, and definitely not able to take anything from anywhere.

"Shut up," Mitchell says, "is what you would have said to me eighteen months ago when I was recuperating from a shattered spine and tried to carry my own bag out of misdirected manliness."

"I'm not you," Young points out, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans to prevent Mitchell from taking one of his arms like the stubborn bastard that he is.

"No," Mitchell says. "You're stupider and handsomer."

Young doesn't react to that at all, just looks up toward his building.

Mitchell wonders if anything about this is a good idea. Probably not. He wonders what would happen if he shoved Young back in the car and drove him to his own place. Maybe it would be the best thing that had happened to either of them in past thirty days. Maybe Young would deck him across the face.

"You want to stay with me?" Mitchell asks.

"Nope," Young says, in a polite, understated way that almost masks how horrified he is by the suggestion.

"Eh," Mitchell says, trying to smooth the whole thing over as they walk across dark asphalt and then over a bright strip of sidewalk. "Just a thought. Let me know if you change your mind. I'm still trying to improve my chess game."

"Sure," Young says, limping noticeably even with the cane he's backslid into using. "You get Dr. Lam to play you yet?"

"No," Mitchell says, not at all defensively, watching Young open the glass door to his building. "Nah, she's ah—she's still out of my league, um, chess-wise. *Chess-wise*. Not friend-wise. Friend-wise we are doing awesome. We are awesome *friends*. Like um, all those friends that you hear about." Mitchell tries to think of any example, to support this crappy argument he's making. He's glad Jackson's not here; the man takes this kind of rhetorical garbage apart with the sort of glee that Mitchell has only ever seen in his four-year old cousin when she decides to purposefully lose at Jenga. "In books. Or movies. Or TV shows. Like *The X-files*."

"Pretty sure they sleep together, Cam," Young says, as they cross the floor toward the elevator.

"Who?" Mitchell replies, holding the elevator doors for Young.

"The X-files team," Young says.

"No way," Mitchell says, as the elevator shuts.

"Pretty sure," Young repeats.

"I'm going to have to look into this," Mitchell says, because he can't say that he's going to ask Vala. It doesn't matter though, because like most shit things in the universe, it passes between them unsaid.

Mitchell decides that he's going to email Sheppard. He's going to email the guy *tonight*. He's going to email J Shep because he hopes that's what *Everett* is going to do. He's going to contact J Shep because the man is a *vault*, the man is a lock-up in perpetual lockdown, the man is the only guy in the universe who can deal with Rodney McKay, and definitely the person that Young is going to email when he feels like talking to someone because J Shep doesn't talk *back* all that much, he just listens, beer in hand, says normal inane stuff, until the point where the inane transforms into the profound and then you want to climb into the man's laid-back red wheelbarrow, leave the white chickens in the yard, and burn shit down.

And god, Mitchell is sure that J Shep doesn't know yet. Doesn't know *any* of it. Sheppard probably doesn't 'Need to Know', and so he won't have been informed that David Telford is missing, confirmed as a true defector by some bullshit sacred Jaffa rite. He doesn't need to know that the guy who'd sat in the back of his own stupid, tiny sports car, with Mitchell's foot in his lap had—

Had stopped being the person that they'd known.

Sheppard should be told, and not through a memo from the NID whenever they decide Pegasus should get the word. Shep should know what's up, so that when Everett scrapes himself together to the point he contacts him, he's not blindsided by how genuinely, profoundly screwed up things are in the Milky Way these days.

They walk down the hall to Young's apartment in a silence that Mitchell can't think of a way to shatter. Young unlocks his door, swings it wide, and holds it open for Mitchell. Mitchell steps over the threshold, his eyes already adjusting to the dim light, and then he stops short.

The blinds are shut, the room smells like dust, and there is *Ancient* on Young's wall. It takes him a few breaths to realize that it wasn't Young who put it there. "I didn't know you guys were, ah—" Mitchell says, starting a bottomless pit of a sentence. "Doing the wall-writing thing?"

Young just glances at the perfect circle, divided into nine equal arc-lengths, and shrugs, leaning against the edge of his open door. "The guy was more than a little out of his head after he came back from that planet," Young growls, like a man who's keeping his hackles down but wants like heck to raise them. "We never had a

conversation where I said, 'feel free to write on my wall'. I just woke up one day and he'd already done it."

"I hear that song," Mitchell replies, hearing it a little too well, and wondering if maybe he should insist that Young spends a few nights with him. There's something ghostly about that math on the wall. Mitchell doesn't like it—there's much too much of Rush in this apartment, and there's something about leaving Young alone here that feels cruel.

"You sure you don't want to—"

"Yes," Young says, gruff and pointed, and literally leaning against his doorframe, waiting for Mitchell to leave.

"I'll be back later," Mitchell says, stubborn to the end, glancing one more time between his already haunted friend and the literal writing on the literal wall. "I'm sure you were lying about having food."

"I'm fine, Cam," Young says, nearly out of patience.

"Yup. Cool. See you tonight," Mitchell says, backing out of the apartment.

Young shuts the door in his face.

He stands there, looking at it, imagining Young on the other side. He turns and starts toward the elevators. Walking down the dimly lit hallway, he feels the need to talk to Sam.

Sam is fast becoming his main man. Sam is the only one of them who seems to be on an even keel despite being shot in the chest by the Lucian Alliance. Sam is holding her shit together, or if she's not, she's holding her unglued shit inside where no one will ever see it. He needs *Sam* right now, not Jackson, who's walking a narrow ledge and can't quite hide it, not Teal'c who's too quiet, too much a self-possessed leader, and too prone to comparing Mitchell with O'Neill when Mitchell talks about his feelings, which is something that wasn't Jack O'Neill's style. He wants *Sam*, who makes him laugh, who's always working on something kickass, who's building the next new technology, who will lance holes in stupidity with a polite, spring-loaded shower of darts that when they hit sound something like, 'no, I don't think that's going to work.'

So after Mitchell drives back to the base with the windows down and the radio on, letting all the ragweed in the area blow through his car, he shows up at Carter's lab. She's sitting hunched over her bench, pouring over something on her laptop—maybe the latest potential Vala-sightings. They've chased down about eight leads in the past month, six offworld, two onworld, and had absolutely no luck.

"What's up?" he asks, boosting himself onto the bench next to her before she's even looked over at him.

"Tweaking," she says, dragging her fingers across the touchpad on her laptop.

"Tweaking," he says, already feeling more optimistic about the world. "I like it."

"Yup," she says. "Tweaking." She finishes whatever thought her badass brain is in the middle of, and then looks up at him. "I've been trying to figure out a way to track Dr. Rush by the cortical suppressants he's hopefully still wearing."

"That sounds awesome and useful," Mitchell says.

"Agreed," Carter replies, smiling. "Thank you for noticing. I'm programming the software for an incredibly sensitive detector. It's going to be a pain to haul around—boxy and heavy—but the range on it should approach the theoretical maximum, meaning that it should be equal to the range the signal has before it decays and is absorbed by the atmosphere."

"Sweet," Mitchell says. "What kind of range are we talking about?"

Carter sighs. "Unfortunately, McKay designed the device to be minimally trackable—so it's mostly shielded and it broadcasts in a band that doesn't transmit very far."

"How far is not very?"

"Ten kilometers," Carter replies, looking up at him with a half-wince.

"Well that's not great," Mitchell says. "But it's better than nothing."

"So true," Carter replies. "Did you—" she breaks off at the sound of a knock against the metal of her doorframe.

Mitchell twists to see Carolyn Lam standing in the doorway. She's wearing a white coat over a black top and skirt, but her shoes are maroon heels that match the color she's painted her professionally short nails. Her hair is down, and she looks exhausted and brilliant and brave and really just *anything* but extremely beautiful, nope, she *does not* look *that*, because *that's* not a thought he thinks about kickass women who are general's daughters and who give up their kidneys to save his team members and who cure plagues and who have already saved more lives than he ever, ever will.

"Carolyn," Carter says. "Hey."

"Hey," Lam says, not smiling, looking uncertain, taking a step into the room.

Mitchell tries to say 'hey' also, but he doesn't quite manage it and it turns into a choking sound as he slides off Carter's lab bench.

"Is this a bad time?" Lam asks, now even more uncertain, probably because Mitchell looks both guilty and flustered. Oh god. This is *terrible*. She probably thinks he and Carter are a thing. Which they are *not*. She probably doesn't think that. Carter's out of his league. Everyone's out of his league. Literally everyone. Mitchell doesn't date. Romantic relationships are easy for him. Because he doesn't have them.

"No," Carter says, like the poised awesomeness incarnate that she is. But that makes sense because these women are *peers* and Mitchell is just the relatively savvy local flyboy with a gun and a steely look. "Come on in."

"I saw your door open," Lam says, walking forward, "and thought I'd say hi."

Mitchell should leave *his* door open, maybe.

"How's the parsimonious analysis going these days?" Carter asks.

"Oh you know," Lam says, "I'm watering my little trees and they're branching all over the place." Her hands come up and her fingers spread apart.

They both laugh. Because Lam made a joke of some kind? Apparently? Mitchell has no idea what they are talking about and why it might be funny. Normally he would say, 'trees?' but he doesn't feel like it at this precise moment, not because he's intellectually intimidated, but for *other* reasons. Probably a lot of other reasons besides that one. This is terrible.

"It was a good idea," Lam says, looking at Mitchell, like *he* has something to do with any of this.

He says, "oh yeah?" in a vaguely questioning way that hopefully does not reveal he has no idea what she's talking about.

"The genetic comparison between the Ori virus and the plague that wiped out the Ancients," Lam says, in what is clearly an earnest explanatory tone.

"Right," Mitchell says. "But this has what to do with trees?"

"It gets a little jargony around here in the afternoons," Carter says, smiling, making the tree thing totally normal, like a *boss*. "Mapping of evolutionary relationships is usually done in the form of branching trees, with each branch point representing a mutation."

Sam. Sam is probably the *best ever*.

"Oh right," Mitchell says. "Parsimony. Right. I knew that."

"Would you guys excuse me for a minute?" Carter asks. "I need to run down the hall to pick up a form."

Sam is probably the *worst ever*.

"Yeah," Mitchell says, trying not to give her a death glare. "Sure. Hopefully we're not phase shifted when you get back here." He yells that last part after her as she leaves her own lab.

Lam is looking at him, almost smiling.

"That only happened the one time," Mitchell says, in a manner he hopes is reassuring.

They look at one another for a span of time that feels too long and feels kind of vertiginous and maybe a little seasick before Mitchell blurts, "so I've been playing chess a lot recently," and Lam says, "would you like to come over for dinner," in the same exact set of seconds.

Lam looks at him in nervous anticipation.

Mitchell looks back at her like a guy who's been hit in the face by a two-by-four. Right. In the face.

Oh god. His day—his totally depressing and *awful* day has turned into a day where Thing D is happening.

He didn't even know there *was* a Thing D, let alone that it might happen to *him*.

Thing D is that one of the smartest, toughest, most beautiful people he's ever met in his life showed up in the doorway and is asking him out. Thing D is that his badass teammate left the room so that this could happen. Thing D is that he thinks he might die of shock before he can say 'yes.' Thing D is that Carolyn Lam is probably the most amazing person on this entire base and she just asked him to dinner. Like a *baller*. In a way that looks like it might not be just a friend thing. She is just *so pretty* and she is just *so great* and she is just *so good at stopping plagues* and she's giving him a sort of nervously determined look right now and he can't think of anything except watching the surveillance footage of her running through the base in that hellish white haze, running with an expression on her face like *he* gets on *his* face when he's got something awful that needs doing, remembers watching her *run* to get the thing that would probably kill her, shoes off, coat and hair flying, running for the thing that would poison her to a painful death, a *slow* death, just so she could use it to save Carter. She had run. She had *run* for that *naquadah*. Flat out *sprinted* for that *naquadah*. No one could watch that footage and not love her. No one.

And so it's probably not his fault that when he says, "yeah, sure, dinner!" he sounds like someone is strangling him.

"Great," she says. "How's tomorrow?"

Tomorrow is amazing. Does tomorrow even exist? He can't remember anything that might be occurring tomorrow.

"Seven o'clock?" he says, sounding *less* like he's being strangled.

"Bring your chess set," Lam says.

"You think you can handle the game I'm gonna bring with it?" Mitchell says, totally thoughtlessly. "Um. By which I mean *skill*. At chess. Just to be clear."

Lam smiles in a way that's almost a laugh, sticks her hands with their perfect painted nails into the pockets of her perfect white coat, and looks down at her perfect shoes before looking back up and saying, "I'm pretty sure I can handle any game that you bring, Colonel."

"Cam," Mitchell says, snipping that right in the bud for the third time or so and then smiling back at her. "Definitely Cam. Always Cam."

"Cam," she says.

The look at one another in awkward, promising silence.

"I should get back to work," she says.

"Yeah," Mitchell says. "Me too. People to find, planets to save; you know how it is."

"Oh I know," she says, turning to go. "See you tomorrow," she calls over her shoulder.

"See ya," Mitchell says.

He watches her walk away, waits for her to vanish around the corner, then rounds Sam's lab bench, drops onto the floor, and releases a shuddery breath. Carolyn Lam just asked him out. Dr. Carolyn Lam just asked *him* out. This is amazing. This is a terrible idea. Is this even real?

He shuts his eyes, only to open them a few minutes later to Sam, gently nudging him with a steel-toed boot. "That bad?" Carter asks sympathetically.

"She asked me out," Mitchell says, looking up at her. "A little bit. I think. Maybe. I'm pretty sure."

They grin at one another for a moment before Carter extends a hand, saying, "*She* asked *you*? Teal'c owes me another twenty bucks."

Cam lets her pull him to his feet and give him a clap on the shoulder. "You bet against me?"

"Daniel bet against you for forty," Sam says.

"That bastard," Mitchell says, shaking a fist in the direction of Jackson's office. "What are you people doing? Betting against your fearless leader when there are teammates to rescue from their pasts, mathematicians in distress, and traitorous bastards who need their comeuppance?"

Carter laughs, a single, delicate exhale. "Go cheer up Daniel, he needs it more and I've got electronics to calibrate."

"I also have important duties, other than just morale boosting," Mitchell says, with whole pile of authority.

"Yes," Carter says. "You're very good at shooting things."

"Team night this Saturday," Mitchell says on his way out. "October is Adopt-A-Miserable-Colonel month and I've got just the guy for us."

He walks toward Jackson's office, not dreading the coming conversation, certain that something's going to give soon, certain that they're going to find their people, that that badge in his desk is going to find its way to a non-regulation tailored jacket, certain that scientists are going to be extracted straight out of the hands of the Lucian Alliance, because sometimes there's a fourth, non-crap choice that's hiding under three crap options. Fourth choices follow Jackson around like lost children.

Everything's going to be all right.

He can feel it.

This is SG-1, after all.

Chapter Fifty One

Young ran a hand through hair just long enough to tangle. Dust glittered in the lateral rays of afternoon sun streaming through half-shut blinds. The silence that surrounded him had the feeling of something oppressive; a barrier that would require more energy to break than he would ever muster again.

Young had spent two weeks ignoring Mitchell's calls, intermittently checking his email, eating less than Dr. Lam advised, and, in short, doing nothing other than bearing witness to his own deconditioned muscles locking down and around the pain in his spine, as if, by contracting long enough and hard enough, they might become bone themselves. Maybe they would. He didn't know. He didn't much care.

The light was clear and the air was cool and the season was turning. The days, ostensibly, were becoming shorter, just as he'd told his summer-averse neighbor that they would. Young didn't find any relief in the changing of seasons. It didn't feel like anything other than what it was—a layer of permanence, a clear lacquer over a series of events that he would have given anything to go back and take apart. To undo.

But he wasn't on SG-1, and so time-travel was off the table. Even Jackson couldn't turn the clock back on this one. Young rubbed his jaw. It wasn't— It hadn't been—

It wasn't *Telford* who bothered him. It wasn't the memory of the guy who'd won the Fantasy Football league at the SGC for four years running, the guy who'd had his back, even half-dead, even tortured to within an inch of his life. Except. It hadn't gone down that way. Telford had 'had his back' all right. He'd had Young's back, and Young's back had been broken.

It wasn't *Rush* who bothered him. It wasn't the guy who made a mean quiche, who had half snapped under the pressure of an Ancient, alien city, who, when he'd lost the tenuous grip he'd had on the power of his own mind, had done nothing worse than writing on some walls and hallucinating Beethoven. It wasn't the guy who could go toe-to-toe and tête-a-tête with Jackson, who had taught math to undergraduates, and who had probably died in agony, alone but for the people who had tortured him.

It wasn't *Vala* who bothered him. It wasn't the woman who'd dropped and rolled straight into a foreign culture, who studied Cosmo Quizzes so she could weave them into the most complicated set of psychological armor Young had ever seen on anyone. It wasn't the way that when she'd gone she'd left Jackson with a white flower and a waiting badge in a waiting box in the closed drawer of a metal, SGC-issued desk.

It wasn't *Jackson* who bothered him, not Jackson, with his restless hands full of things he smoothed into the spaces between people. It wasn't the guy who'd nearly killed him with those same hands because Young had needed him to do it, had needed *someone* to do it, had needed someone who wouldn't need to be asked.

None of them bothered him.

Life was full of loss and pain. It was full of the twisting of intentions, of terrible things happening to remarkable people, of terrible things happening to them all the time, and of those people living on—not in spite of or because of those terrible things—but just living, because that was what things that were alive did. They fucking lived.

There was nothing new in any of this. Not in what had been done to Telford or what Telford had done, not in the way that Rush had been sure that cracking the ninth cypher would destroy him and the way that it had, not in the fight Vala had waged to make a place instead of running and the flight that someone had forced her into anyway, not in the way Jackson had tried so hard to help him and had ended up choking him to death instead.

None of it bothered him.

What bothered him was lying here, useless, deconditioned, staring at the half-done mess that some half-crazy math professor had scrawled on his wall in three separate variants, and being utterly unable to do a thing about it.

Young had planned to go to the store, if for no other reason than to get Mitchell off his back and out of the headspace where the guy felt pressured to show up every few days no matter what he was doing—flying to California to track down a lead on Vala, inserting himself undercover into enclaves of Ori worshippers, worrying about Carter, who had just been cleared to reenter the field, worrying about Jackson, who was worrying himself into an early grave. Young had planned to show up to physical therapy, if for no other reason than he'd like to retain the ability to walk especially in light of what was likely in the works for humanity.

It wasn't anything good.

His species had wandered too far and too arrogantly and had chosen for their ambassador a guy who picked a fight with every god he met.

Young sighed, feeling in no way hungry, but knowing he should probably make some kind of effort in the direction of eating. He'd meant to make himself dinner last night and lunch today, because it was a thing that people usually did, a thing that was generally considered necessary. He hadn't cooked for himself in some time. He didn't

particularly care for it. He'd meant to restock on food this afternoon, but he hadn't. He'd meant to do a lot of things. He hadn't done most of them.

Young knew too much.

This was his problem.

He knew too much and could do too little.

He saw no successful solution to the confrontation with the Ori, but when he pictured it, when he pictured how it would come, how it would happen, the thing he pictured was not making a stand somewhere, maybe with SG-1, maybe on a ship or on a planet, as he manned the shrinking borders of his species' defenses and coordinated a contracting sphere of allies—no. No, that was not what he pictured. Not anymore.

He knew how it would happen.

It would be Jackson who would tell him. Jackson would tell him as a *courtesy*. It might be a call. It might be a text message before deployment offworld. Something short. Something not overtly alarming. 'Another supergate', or maybe just, 'something's up, shipping out. Keep an eye on the news.' And then Young would hear nothing.

Until, on an otherwise unremarkable morning, someone would call him and tell him to turn on his television. It might be Emily. It might be one of his brothers. He would turn on the television, and he'd watch absolute hell unfold from his apartment, torn between reporting for duty that wasn't his to shoulder anymore and driving across town to Emily's place, dragging her to the car and driving, driving, driving for *hours*, away from Cheyenne Mountain, away from any urban center, hungry, resourceless, looking to either start or join whatever grass-roots resistance might survive the coming Ori plague, or to die beneath the spread of pines in the Pacific Northwest, from disease, from starvation, from a hundred preventable causes, miserable and in agony. He could already picture Emily with windswept hair, weeping under trees.

Young shut his eyes against the clear, autumnal light coming through his windows.

He didn't think that the way he would die would be any worse than the way Rush had died, or, if the man was unlucky, was currently dying. That was thing that haunted him most—not Rush's death in hours, not his death in days, but what had and would happen to him if Kiva *hadn't* killed him, if she, by some miracle or statistical mischance, had left him his cortical suppressors. Young could barely stand the thought that they might have spent weeks torturing him, or doing to him what they had done to David.

He'd heard that coercive persuasion had ruined the LA scientists. Ruined them *all*. He'd heard that it drove them insane.

Occasionally, when he'd felt the dark edge of humor that came at the absolute nadir of hope, Young pictured them together—Rush and Telford—in matching, darkened leather. Perhaps they'd be part of the handful of survivors that escaped whatever cultural implosion the Ori were bent on bringing to their galaxy in the name of yet another false god. Perhaps they'd be out there, opening doors and burning shit down.

A knock on his door, short and sharp, pulled his thoughts back to the present.

Young pressed his hands over his face. *God* but he hoped it wasn't Mitchell. Unfortunately, he was pretty sure it was. He contemplated whether it would be worth it to lie on his couch, pretending he wasn't home. Tempting though he found such a prospect, he was pretty sure that Mitchell might take that as an invitation to break down his door. He eased his bad leg off the couch first, dropping his foot to the floor and sitting awkwardly at the same time. As he flexed his left hip, his nerves struck up a chorus of blended variations on a single agonizing theme. He tried to spend as little time sitting as possible before getting his feet underneath him and standing.

Another knock sounded, rapid and hollow.

"Yeah yeah," he growled, pulling the crutch he had fished out of the back of his closet away from the wall and limping toward the door.

He flung it open to reveal Jackson, not Mitchell, standing there in street clothes, the strap of a messenger bag slung across his chest. His eyes were red rimmed, but he had coffee in one hand, and beer in the other.

"Wow," Jackson said.

"Jackson," Young said.

"You look *awful*," Jackson said, and took a sip of his coffee.

"While *you*, on the other hand, look just great," Young said dryly. He shifted sideways and swung the door wide.

"I knew if I brought beer, you'd let me through the door," Jackson said.

"Jackson, I'd let you through my door any day," Young said. "You don't have to bring beer. Mitchell is a different story."

"Ah," Jackson replied. "Good to know that nearly killing you will get me apartment admittance, if not consistent first-name privileges."

"You just seem like a 'Jackson' to me, Jackson. What can I say?"

The other man exhaled, short and sharp and amused. "And I try so hard to cultivate my Danielness. Danielity? Danielism. You know a third of last year's recruits are calling me 'Jackson'? I blame you for this."

"I don't even *know* any of the new recruits," Young said, limping after him in the direction of the kitchen table.

"Oh yes you do," Jackson replied, "does the name Ronald Greer ring a bell?"

"I worked with the kid for a *day*."

"Well, you're the source of this surname contamination, and Greer was the carrier."

"You're a nerd," Young replied. "Like, really a nerd."

"There are worse things to be," Jackson replied, sinking into a chair and shoving an empty pizza box out of the way with a politely neutral expression.

"Don't I know it," Young replied.

"There are worse things that I've been," Jackson said, looking at him over the frames of his glasses, setting his beer down on the center of the table.

"I really should not give you these kinds of openings," Young replied, wincing as he lowered himself into a chair opposite Jackson.

"Probably not, no," the other man replied.

"You doing okay?" Young asked.

"Yeah," Jackson said, fidgeting.

Young shifted, trying to ignore the grinding ache in his back, and raised his eyebrows at the other man.

"You know how it is. The air has a victorious aroma these days. Some day this war's gonna end," Jackson said, sliding into unmistakable and deprecating quotation.

"You know," Young replied, leaning forward, reaching across the table with an unpleasant tearing sensation down his side as he grabbed a beer, "Quoting *Apocalypse Now* isn't doing a whole lot to reassure me about your okayness."

"You would rather I quoted what?" Jackson asked, "Shakespeare? Saint Augustine? I'm trying to play to my audience here. I've been reading *The City of God* lately, for obvious reasons. I don't think I've ever been more depressed by any reading material in my *life*. And that's a lie. A 'damned lie' even. How are *you*?"

"Oh I'm great," Young replied. "Be a stand up guy and find me a bottle-opener, will you?"

"Yup," Jackson said. He stood and vanished in the direction of Young's kitchen.

Young inspected the bottle he'd pulled out of the pretentiously unassuming cardboard packaging. It had a label that was a mess of interlocking pastel shapes that looked like they took themselves and the blue glass bottle they decorated *very* seriously. He sighed.

"I see you judging my beer," Jackson said, reemerging from the kitchen.

"It seems very impressed with itself," Young said.

"It's a wheat beer," Jackson replied, sliding back into the seat across from him and holding out a hand.

"Ah," Young said, passing him the bottle.

Jackson levered the cap off the thing and handed it back to him with just enough of an eyebrow lift to imply that he was wise to the subtext behind Young's single syllable. Then he opened a bottle for himself.

"You're double fisting coffee and beer?" Young asked skeptically. "You must have had a bad week."

"Well," Jackson said, swapping his beer for his coffee. "You're right, but only because all the weeks are bad these days, haven't you heard? As for the one-to-one coffee-to-beer ratio—it's the only way to live."

Young snorted.

"So yes, bad week, but promising half-day."

"Oh yeah?" Young replied.

"Very much so," Jackson said, dragging his bag from the floor near his feet to the top of Young's table.

He'd assumed the bag was some kind of hipster messenger-bag thing. But that was not the case.

It was an SGC-issued bag, used for transporting sensitive documents that existed only in hard copy.

"Jackson," Young growled, "don't even think about opening that bag. I don't have clearance, and you're on thin enough institutional ice as it is."

Jackson paused in the middle of unlocking the black cache of files, identical to the one Young had used to transport the documents of Unnamed Committee #4, not so long ago. "Didn't you know?" he asked, looking at Young over the tops of his glasses, his

hands still. "I won. I was right. I was right about *all* of it. The committee is disbanded pending reacquisition of Dr. Rush. Following your testimony—I," he looked away, his eyes fixing on the wall behind Young. "My tactical position, my 'bureaucratic clout,' as it were, is on the rise."

"Because you were right about Telford," Young said.

"Yes," Jackson confirmed. "I'm about to use that political capital to hire an expert consultant on the Lucian Alliance, in the hopes that it will facilitate locating our lost Fields medalist and missing astrophysicist."

"Hire?" Young asked skeptically.

"Two of them, actually," Jackson said. "One is the defector who shot Sam in the chest."

"Um," Young said, "if you want an outside opinion, that sounds like a terrible plan. Also, what the hell are you doing telling me this, Jackson, it's got to be classified."

"Her name is Ginn," Jackson said. "You're going to like her."

"I'm going to what?"

Jackson opened his black shoulder bag. "The other consultant is you. Desk work only, until such time as you're restored to active duty." He pulled out a piece of paper and slid it across the table toward Young. "Sign on the dotted line."

Young stared at him.

"What?" He managed to say, finally.

"I'm sorry," Jackson said, looking bizarrely apologetic.

"You're what?" Young asked.

"I just—the Icarus project is falling apart right now. Sam and our best math guys have been looking at photos of what Rush had put together on cypher number nine for a month now, but they haven't managed to make sense out of—" Jackson broke off to gesture at the wall behind Young, "wherever he was going with this."

Young raised his eyebrows. He'd known the SGC had been in his apartment, known that photos of Young's wall art had been part of their investigation, but he hadn't spent much time thinking about the cypher, and what would happen to it now that Rush was —

Not here.

"Does Carter have the previous eight?" Young asked. "He told me he'd gotten eight of them."

"She does," Jackson nodded. "Look, at the moment, Icarus is an on-site job; the base is going up; they're working on the cyphers both here and on the planet that Volker ID'd before he was abducted, but with the constant threat of the Lucian Alliance and everything that you—well, with all your—look, getting your command back would have been an uphill fight. The future of the project is seriously in doubt, we're not sure we're going to get cypher nine at all. It's in the MMORPG, Perry's working on it, Sam's working on it here and there, McKay's taken a look, but no one's gotten anywhere in weeks. The whole project is just a nightmare right now—financially, logistically, personnel-wise, and I don't think I could have—"

"Jackson," Young said. "Are you kidding me? I expected to be reading the personal statements of new recruits for the rest of my life, hand me a *pen*, damn it."

The other man dug around in his bag, pulled out a pen, and slid it across the table to Young.

He leafed through the consulting contract, signing and initialing where appropriate, while Jackson alternated between drinking his coffee and his limited edition microbrew.

When he was done, he slid the papers back to Jackson.

"You ready for this?" Jackson asked.

"Hit me," Young said, shifting forward, feeling the sharp pull of muscles under tension as he moved.

"Two days ago we got a break. The low orbital communications platforms picked up a flurry of transmissions, all of which happened within a four-hour window, in the parts of the spectrum that we *know* the Trust has been using for their communications. The EM traffic started around eleven o'clock Eastern Standard Time on the first of October. Because we've increased our monitoring for this kind of thing in the wake of all that's happened, we were able to localize and act on this in real time."

"*And?*" Young said, trying not to demonstrate his overt impatience, but nearly unable to sit there and sip his beer in the face of Jackson's clearly contained enthusiasm.

"And we forced down a cloaked tel'tak operated by the Trust," Jackson said. "We captured one of their operatives alive."

"*And?*" Young asked.

"We got a lead on Vala. And on Rush. There's reason to believe they're both still *on planet*." Jackson grinned, wild edged and elated.

"How is that possible?" Young asked, overtly dubious.

"The Trust teamed up with the on-world Lucian Alliance personnel in order to facilitate a combined abduction of Vala and Rush. Vala was turned over to the Trust, but we know now that the pair of them were *together* on the tel'tak. We know that they both received the Lucian Alliance pre-interrogation cocktail. And we know that Vala was surrendered to the Trust for a renegotiated price, because she caused some kind of problem. Speculation amongst the Trust is that she might have *let Rush go*."

Young stared at the other man, his beer paused halfway to his mouth. "No," he said. "Not a chance in *hell*, Jackson."

"Why *not*?" Jackson whispered, leaning forward, his fingertips pressed against the table. "She could have done it. I'm sure she could have. She knows her way around a tel'tak."

"If she let him go—if she somehow ringed him down, we would have detected that. We monitor for ring transport, and—"

"Not if the tel'tak was equipped with stolen Asgard beaming tech, which it *was*."

"Transport logs?" Young snapped.

"Erased," Jackson said. "By someone who knew what they were doing. By *her* maybe."

"Jackson, if he's been on planet, then why—"

"Maybe he's hurt," Jackson said, beginning to worry the paper edge of the label on his beer with one restless thumbnail. "Maybe she transported him to Russia with no identification and he can't get back. Maybe he doesn't know who he is. We've never gotten our hands on *half* the substances the LA has synthesized or engineered or otherwise cooked up over the years. If he got enough of that cocktail—" Jackson shrugged. "There's been a lot of LA activity on planet in the past few weeks. They hit a data center in *Washington* for god's sake—at least, we think it was them. That might be because the LA doesn't have him. Maybe they're looking for him, just like we are."

Young rubbed his jaw, unwilling to feel even marginally relieved at the speculation Jackson had laid out for him. "What about Vala? You said you thought they were both here?"

"Yes, it was the Trust that wanted her, not the LA, and they're based on Earth. According to the source that we picked up, she escaped their custody three weeks ago."

Young sighed and took another sip of his beer. "It's a nice story, Jackson, but do you really think it's anything other than that? Anything other than some desperate lower-ranking goa'uld, stuck on this rock, feeding you whatever it is he thinks you want to hear so that you won't kill him, or turn him over to Baal, or the decimated remains of the system lords?"

"I think Vala could have done it," Jackson said, "if that's what you're asking. I think she's every bit as resourceful as Sam or Teal'c or Mitchell. I think she could have rescued him, yes. Even half-drugged herself, I believe she could have done it."

"Maybe," Young said. "I hope so."

"There's enough here for you to get started," Jackson said, indicating the shoulder bag with his eyes. "You're going to be reporting directly to Landry on this one."

"Me and the defector?"

"Yes," Jackson said. "Her name is Ginn, by the way."

"Sure," Young replied.

"Give her a shot," Jackson said. "She strikes me as trustworthy, astute, and glad to be rid of the Lucian Alliance."

"Points for style," Young replied dryly.

"You'd better get reading. Unnamed Committee #6 is scheduled to meet in five days to go over the current state of insurgency and counter-insurgency with regards to the Lucian Alliance."

"We're at six now?" Young asked. "What happened to five?"

"I don't know," Jackson said dryly. "I'm not *on* Unnamed Committee #5. I think it might actually be about me."

"Don't get cocky, Jackson."

"I would never," the man replied, taking another sip of his beer. "Look, there's one other thing I came here for."

"Yeah?" Young asked, pulling the files across the table with a profound sense of relief he hoped didn't show on his face.

"Sam asked me if I'd take another look at Rush's apartment. See if I could turn anything up that the internal investigation missed. Something that might be specifically relevant to the cypher cracking."

"You've got his laptop," Young said, "and you've got pictures of the stuff on my walls," he gestured vaguely behind him. "What else are you looking to find?"

"Oh you never know," Jackson said. "I've been useful, here and there, over the years, when it comes to finding things. You want to tag along?"

Young took another sip of his beer, feeling his expression twist faintly. "I'll grab his key."

The walk down the hallway was long. The cast of the fluorescent lighting overhead seemed to bring out the red-rimmed exhaustion of Jackson's eyes. Young leaned on his cane, gritting his teeth against the tearing sensation in his back that matched the rhythm of his steps. The key he held was cool beneath the fingers of his left hand.

They stopped in front of Rush's door. The only sign that anything had changed in the past several weeks was the addition of a secondary lock, bolted to the exterior of the door in the interest of modestly increased security. The thing wouldn't keep out anyone determined to get in, but it wasn't meant to. The interior hallways of this building were constantly under surveillance by the unlucky junior officers in the basement and the place was guarded by signal scramblers. In the absence of a concerted operation by the LA, Rush's apartment was as secure as it was going to get, extra lock or no. Young suspected that the superfluous bolting mechanism had been put there purely to dissuade *him* from entering. Him, and anyone else to whom Rush might have given a key. The guy hadn't exactly been handing the things out. But, Vala might have had one.

Jackson pulled out his SGC issued key and unlocked the unsightly ad hoc bolt-job, then waved Young forward.

"You know," Young said quietly, sliding the metal home with the quick and layered repositioning of reluctant tumblers, "I've never seen the inside of his place."

"I hadn't either. Not until that day," was all Jackson said. Young didn't have to ask him what 'day' he meant.

He swung the door wide and stepped forward into quiet, dust-scented darkness. The faint creak of metal hinges, the quiet tread of their shoes against the floor, the dim unbroken lines of a too-uncluttered room all came together at once, suggesting to Young a space too empty to be normal.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled, not in fear, but in anticipatory dread of sudden revelation.

The lights were off—the room was lit only by the dim fluorescence that edged in around his silhouette and Jackson's—but already he could tell that he didn't want to

turn them on. He didn't need to. He limped forward into a dark furnitureless room and stopped, saying nothing.

I'm staying here, Rush had said, short and sharp in Young's kitchen. *Temporarily. I do not live here.*

And he'd been right.

Because no one had lived in this room.

"Lights," Jackson said, a quiet warning.

Young ducked his head, narrowed his eyes against the coming glare, and waited to see a thing he didn't want to look at. He raised his head to an empty room. Around its periphery were piles of ephemera—books and notebooks stacked into academic cairns, trapping loose papers beneath them. A single desk lamp rested on the floor near the far wall. Charging devices of various kinds still plugged uselessly into the walls, their cords curling around books, or tangling with one another. A crumpled blazer he'd never seen Rush wear had been dropped against the wall, beneath the light switch. Atop it was a pile of unopened mail. A can of paint and a brush stood at the base of the opposite wall, a vague menace to the scripted black marker that covered the wall above it.

Young turned once in a circle, his shoes scuffing the dust-covered floor, trying not to feel too blindsided by this testament to human misery. Directly opposite the door, he raised his eyes to look at the single bullet hole he'd put in Rush's wall months earlier.

"Damn it, Rush," he growled.

"So he was doing less well adjusting to life in Colorado Springs than he would have had us believe," Jackson said, in polite summary.

Young said nothing. He looked instead at the wall near the window, where the stark outlines of Rush's angular hand stretched over a five-foot vertical span of wall, extending from slightly above Rush's eye-level down to something like eight inches above the floor. Jackson sighed and stepped around Young, moving to stand directly in front of the defaced wall, driving his hands deep into his pockets.

Young left Jackson to it. He wasn't going to figure out a damn thing by looking at the math, or the Ancient, or the Ancient math, or whatever it was that made up that final fucker of a cypher. His gaze swept the room again, looking for anything awry, anything amiss, anything out of place. This was difficult, because it was *all* awry, amiss, and out of place. He couldn't reconcile this empty set of barely lived-in rooms with the guy who had pulled his books out of boxes and alphabetized them for him.

Young made his way toward the kitchen. He stopped in the doorframe and flipped on the light, eyeing the bare shelves, the dust covered counter. If Rush had any of the usual kitchen ephemera, he'd never unpacked it.

Rush's empty kitchen, in the context of all the cooking he'd done for Young, was nearly too much to take.

Young limped forward, and opened the man's fridge, the cupboards, the cabinets beneath the sink, but the only thing he found was a set of frozen dinners covered with ice crystals, a plastic container of protein mix, and a bottle of scotch.

"You are *kidding* me, hotshot," he said, pulling the protein powder down from the shelf it had been sitting on. "God damn."

No wonder the cypher set had been driving him crazy. No wonder he'd looked like absolute hell. He hadn't been living here, in this set of impersonal unfurnished rooms, he'd been living in his own head, in whatever places he had left to him that his dead wife didn't haunt, or Ancient cities hadn't co-opted. "I should have made you let me in," Young murmured, inanely rotating the protein mix so its label faced outward. "You stubborn bastard."

There was no one left to answer him.

He shut the cabinets he'd opened and left the kitchen. Jackson was still staring at Rush's wall, one arm across his chest, his hand pressed to his mouth as he studied the array of math and Ancient laid down in black marker over white paint.

Young passed into the short, dark hall off the main room. He glanced at the bathroom, his gaze passing over a towel, a razor, a set of soap and shampoo—before opening the bedroom door with the subtle, high-pitched sound of an unoiled hinge. He flicked on the light.

"Where did you *sleep*?" Young asked, incredulous.

The room was a solid wall of boxes, stacked shoulder high and as deep as the room itself. They were unlabeled, forming a homogenous wall. A few of them had been pulled out and cluttered the space near the door, resting at odd angles, torn open. Clothing was draped haphazardly over cardboard. Unworn outfits could be seen, folded, in the depths of unsealed boxes.

"*Did* you sleep?" he murmured.

Probably, the answer to that one was 'not much'.

The open boxes near the door seemed to be primarily full of clothes, but he could see some assorted books in the nearest one. He stared at Stevens' *Collected Poetry & Prose* for a few moments before he shook his head once, and turned out the light.

He walked back out to join Jackson, who was now kneeling, his gaze fixed intently on the lower portion of the wall.

"What do you think?" Young asked, coming to stand beside him.

"This *is* the ninth cypher," Jackson murmured, extending a hand above his head to trace along a horizontal line that bisected the writing. "Above this line is the seventh. Perry cracked the eighth, once he teed it up for her."

"Yeah," Young murmured. "He said as much."

Jackson exhaled, slow and measured. "Sam thinks this was the beginning of the ninth," the other man said, running his fingers over the math on the lower half of the wall. "The stuff in your apartment is a little more progressed. He was working with crystal harmonics; Perry figured that out."

"He said it was tonal," Young said.

"I know," Jackson replied, his fingertips brushing over what looked like a series of musical notes, written near the floor. "He told me that as well. Weeks and weeks ago."

"He had a rough time with it," Young murmured, nearly choking on his own understatement.

"His wife," Jackson murmured, "was a violinist."

"I know," Young said. "He told me."

"Did he," Jackson said, his smile forming and dying in the same instant. "Good."

Young said nothing, watching the archeologist study the wall.

"This," Jackson said, running his fingers again and again over a set of parallel lines, the musical notation scribbled at an odd angle. "*This*, I think, is the key."

"How do you know?" Young asked.

"I don't," Jackson said. "I'm not a musician. But he's evolving something here; he's breaking away from traditional musical notation. Even *I* know that the standard way of representing tones in the western canon is five parallel lines. He's moving away from that here, working out different ways to represent tones that aren't rooted in human historical tradition. And the angle of this—relative to the rest of what he wrote. This was an afterthought. This is where he shifts to his own notation for the crystal

harmonics. If anything here is a primer, this piece is as close as we're going to get from him."

"You don't think someone's already looked at this?" Young asked.

Jackson looked up at him, over the tops of his glasses, his eyes red-rimmed and exhausted and good humored.

"What?" Young demanded.

"Nothing," Jackson said, looking back at the wall. "You make me feel young, Young."

"You *are* young," he growled.

"I'm not," Jackson replied, looking back at the wall. "But I was, maybe. In some other universe I'm a naïve, well-intentioned archeological hack."

"You're a drama queen, a little bit," Young said. "You know that?"

Jackson shot him a twisted smile and pulled out his cracked phone. He aimed the thing at the wall and took a picture that was nearly uninterpretable through the shattered screen.

"You're not as bad as Rush," Young said, cocking his head. "But still."

Jackson glanced up at him.

Young made an equivocal hand gesture and then offered Jackson his hand.

Jackson shot him a wry look, shifted his gaze pointedly to Young's cane, and then pushed himself to his feet under his own power. "I'm sure there's someone, somewhere, studying cross-cultural musical notation that I can call up to get some general principles regarding whatever he was driving toward," Jackson said, looking toward the wall.

They stood together for a moment, looking at the abandoned spread of math. "I didn't really picture it this way," Young murmured.

"You mean ah—" Jackson waved a hand, a gesture that managed to take in the entirety of the empty room.

"He unpacked my apartment for me," Young said.

"Really?" Jackson said, in quiet surprise, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "Somehow I can't picture that one, even though I'm pretty sure I suggested it to him."

"You did not," Young said, certain that he had.

"I'd love to take credit for the altruistic impulses of your neighbor," Jackson replied, "but even my mythic hubris has its limits."

"You got what you need?" Young asked, not inclined to stay any longer in Rush's empty apartment.

"Maybe," Jackson said, kneeling to pull a piece of paper out from beneath a red-bound book entitled *Physical Chemistry: a Molecular Approach*. "Anything strike you?"

Too many things had struck him about this empty apartment. He could almost see the way the window, weeks ago and open to the summer air, had banished loose papers to the edges of the room, where Rush had weighed them down with whatever was at hand. He could picture the man making a mix of protein powder in the midst of driving himself half mad with math or memories or whatever miscellany haunted him.

"No," Young said. "Nothing strikes me. Let's get out of here."

Chapter Fifty Two

His day began with a long walk beneath gray clouds. Rush shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket and willed away the coming rain. It didn't look like it had much of a mind to be banished, but at least it had the decency to hold off really chucking it down until he'd reached the bright and erudite interior of Cambridge's most literary coffee shop. A torrential downpour began around midmorning; a cold, drenching, determined rain, blown into sheets by gusts of wind. Jennifer, who was working the register for the third time this week, kept a fascinated eye on the storm outside. Eventually she switched the streaming music from homogenous alternative pop produced by independent labels to Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony*. Rush made her an Engels Espresso in a wordless expression of gratitude. Business picked up as students, professors, and itinerant New England hipsters ducked inside to escape the downpour. Rush watched the progression of the storm as he worked his way through an afternoon of Chaucer Chais and Machiavellian Macchiatos. It was a long walk to his subpar room in his subpar neighborhood, and he'd likely be soaked after something like two minutes the way it looked now. Perhaps Jennifer would ask him to pull a double shift.

His head ached, and he still felt the dragging mental inertia of the events of the previous evening. The terrible, crushing presence of that D-minor chord hadn't entirely left him, even after a night's sleep and a day's shift. Beethoven's Sixth seemed to be driving some of it from his head, seeping its slow way into places that the tone had been, erasing the strange sense of summons that the thing had left behind.

He was more tempted than ever to put an end to these weeks of uncertainty, to call the *real* David Telford and ask the man to clarify what the bloody hell had *happened* to Nicholas Rush. Why had he been left to make his way through Cambridge, Massachusetts, of all places? What was *wrong* with his *mind* that without a set of metal devices creating an electric field within the confines of his *skull*, he couldn't function—possibly couldn't *even survive*?

Near the end of Rush's shift, when a rain-soaked day had faded into a rain-soaked night, Eli slipped into the coffee shop, his blue jacket drenched to black, his hair plastered to his head. He ordered a Classic Cappuccino from Jennifer before edging down the counter to watch Rush pour a flawless rosette pattern. "Hey," he said, the word quiet and anxious. "Dave. Nice latte art. How's it going?" He made a show of brushing rainwater off the top of the backpack he'd slung over one shoulder.

"Fine," Rush replied, adding a dusting of cinnamon to Eli's coffee for purely aesthetic reasons before placing the cup on its saucer. "You appear somewhat stressed."

"Oh, er, do I?" Eli asked, with a short, sharp smile. "Nah."

Rush shot him a brief, incisive glance over the tops of his glasses. This, paradoxically, seemed to reassure Eli, who stopped fidgeting and fixed him with an eloquent look in return. The lad was fair dripping with some undisclosed idea. And rainwater. Rush cocked his head and raised his eyebrows in a silent and, admittedly, somewhat amused invitation to spit the thing out, but Eli shook his head. "When does your shift end?" he asked.

"Half an hour," Rush said.

"Great." Eli looked genuinely relieved. "I'll wait. I'll give you a ride home. My car's a block away, believe it or not. It's *pouring*, dude. Wrath of God style."

"I noticed," Rush said.

He spent the next thirty minutes watching Eli switch from phone to laptop to sandwich menu and back again, never settling on any one activity in simulated occupation. Something had clearly set him on edge. Rush tried to prevent any premature speculation, but it was a vain effort. By the end of his shift, he had himself fair convinced that Rob was cooling his heels in military prison and MIT's campus was locked down.

After making his goodnights to the staff, he approached Eli's table. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Um, no," Eli said. "Why don't we hang out here for a little while?"

Rush shot him a skeptical look.

"Sit *down*," Eli hissed.

Rush sat, bridged his hands, and looked Eli straight in the eye. "Will you *please*. Calm. Down. You look like you just robbed a *bank*, if you want to know."

"Ha," Eli said dryly. "I'm calm. I am the King of Calm, dude. Now. Anything new with you? Because I have about a novel's worth of stuff to report. But you go first. Because I can see you've had a boring day."

"Nothing," Rush said, shrugging.

"Nothing? Work with me here, please, *Dave*. Do you *feel* okay? Is your brain normal? Are all your IQ points still on their shelves and in their frames?"

Rush rolled his eyes. "Yes, I believe so. I'm experiencing no lasting sequelae from last night, if that's what you're driving at. No suspicious, uniformed personnel have been hanging about, placing incompetent coffee orders. I have a headache. But I seem to have a headache frequently, so I don't believe it merits any special consideration. Thank you for your concern."

"Okay. Great," Eli said. They looked at one another over the scored and splitting wood of a rustic coffee table before Eli finally marshaled his resolve and continued. "Now look, I feel like I need to preface what I'm going to say so that you, um, take it the right way?"

Rush glared at Eli from below lowered brows. The young man, entirely unperturbed, glanced quickly over the entire coffee shop, twisting to take in the room behind him, before he continued. "Not a great start," Eli admitted, drumming his fingers, twice, along the rim of his now empty cup. "Okay. I could have done better. I admit that. So. Prefacing. Look dude. I was thinking about this last night. Pretty much *all* night I was thinking about what happened. Like, this is *definitely* the weirdest, creepiest, awesomest thing that's ever happened to me. And I felt like—maybe we need to move a little faster, a little more aggressively than we've *been* moving. In terms of getting answers. Like, the stakes have been jacked. Last night jacked the stakes."

"Agreed," Rush said.

"Yes," Eli said. "Yes! Okay good. So I couldn't really sleep. I got up at six in the AM, I told my mom I was driving to Worcester for a job interview, but I actually went to MIT to stake out the Physics lab."

"Naturally." Rush watched a pair of students track a small river of water across the floor as they entered the coffee shop.

"It wasn't hard, right? Like, I totally look like I go to MIT. I mean, people there still know me. I know where to hang. And so I watched."

"And did the Air Force show up?"

"No," Eli said, lowering his voice, leaning forward. "Not the Air Force. Or, at least I don't *think* it was the Air Force. But *somebody* showed up. Two somebodies. A man and a woman. They were, eh, maybe in their thirties to forties? Leather jackets and jeans. They just didn't look like they *belonged*, you know? They were *casing* the place. Like I was. At first they seemed a little awkward, you know? Just sitting on a bench, eyeing the building. But watching them—it was *amazing*. First, the woman gets, up, right? And she stops a girl and asks her a question. I was way too far away to hear anything.

The girl says something, and then the woman leaves. She comes back about half an hour later and she looks *totally* different. She's wearing jeans and an MIT sweatshirt and her hair looks like *shit*. I mean, before this, she was dressed to the *nines*, right? Like lethal, badass *nines*. And then she comes back looking like an undergrad hung over from a hackathon or something, dude, it was *unreal*. And then the guy gets up—same thing. He comes back half an hour later in a hipster flannel shirt and skinny jeans. And then, only *then* do they go into the physics building. They time it just right so that they snag the door behind someone." Eli sat back, raising his eyebrows.

Rush grimaced. "Eli," he began.

"No. *No*," Eli hissed. "Whatever you're about to say—just no. Those two were *looking* for you, dude. And I seriously do not think they were the Air Force, okay? They seemed much less scary and much more creepy all at the same time, okay? So look, I made a command decision."

"Meaning—" Rush said, already dreading the answer.

"I called Rob, and I brought him in on the stakeout operation."

Rush braced his elbows against the table, dropped his forehead into the bridge of his hands, and stared down at several years worth of graffiti carved into unvarnished wood.

"Dude you can't stake out a building with *one person*. Especially if that building has multiple exits. I had to tell him a little something about the whole situation."

"Eli—" Rush said, into his hands.

"Relax. I didn't tell him the *real* story. I'm not *totally* without foresight. I told him the premise of *Count Zero*, by William Gibson."

Rush freed a hand and waved it in a loose circle.

"What's that. That hand thing. Is that you being at a loss for words? Look, it's a *very* plausible story, okay? I told Rob that you were actually a genius programmer, employed by the same company that makes *Astria Porta*, which is why you know so much about the game. I told him that you'd gotten in over your head field-testing a prototype virtual reality software and you were trying to escape your current company and defect to a *rival* gaming company with the software that *you* invented, by the way, in your own free time. They're trying to *steal* it from you, those bastards. So you're taking your software and you're jumping ship. Jumping ship and never looking back. Only one prototype exists. The one on your head. Rob noticed those things by the way. Literally everyone does. They're super obvious. Anyway, you took the prototype

with you when you escaped their surveillance net. You're trying to stay off the grid, but after you left you realized that—"

"I wish I'd never met you," Rush said, finally looking up. "I'm calling the Air Force."

"What? No! This is going to work. Wait. *Stop*. Do *not* get up."

Rush, halfway out of his seat, slid back down into a seated position. "*Why*," he hissed, with as much viciousness as he could muster, "are you involving *anyone else* in this? How could you possibly think—"

"Think?" Eli hissed back. "*Think*? That's all I've been doing, dude, and you know what? Unless your alien friend J'Shep comes through for you like a magical Deus Ex Machina Fairy Godmother, you are *screwed*. You are the guy who proved the proof that's going to explode all existing world cryptosystems in about the next six months or so, the Air Force probably hates you, something terrible and freaky happened to your brain and you have *no resources*. You need *other people* to help you figure all of this out. Fortunately *I* found you, but honestly, I've taken you about as far as I can take you on my own. But I *know* people. And so we are now going to have to start treating my connections like the assets they *are* because there are people *looking* for you now. Can they track you? *I* don't know! In this rain, probably not. But when the air gets nice and crisp and clear and dry? Maybe. They're already on the MIT campus—whomever they are. You have a limited amount of time to get this show on the road. So yeah. I told Rob a corporate espionage story so that he'd spend most of the day helping me keep tabs on the physics building because I literally couldn't do it myself. It has *two doors*."

"So?" Rush asked, defeated. "What did you find, then?"

"They never left," Eli said. "Or, we never saw them leave. Around four o'clock we went inside to try to find them. No dice."

Rush pressed two fingers against the space between his eyebrows.

"Okay, so yeah, fine, we aren't the *best* at surveillance, probably. But look. Having Rob on board is key for another reason. He can get us access to a piece of information that we desperately need."

"Which is?"

"Office hours," Eli said. "Let's go. Rob's in the car and we have a neuroscience grad student to stalk."

"What?" Rush said.

"It's complicated. I'll explain on the way. But I wanted to give you a heads up about what Rob knows. We'll use the same story for everyone else. Corporate espionage? Everyone's going to eat that up with a *spoon* dude. No problem."

"Eli," Rush said, weakly.

"Ugh," Eli replied, zipping up his jacket and eyeing the sheeting rain, lit to orange in the glow of streetlights. "It's like you're the responsible straight man in the zany romantic comedy of your own life, dude, where your love interest is your past self! Forget your six weeks as a struggling hipster barista, okay? Man up and answer the Hero's Call. Now let's go poach some neuro knowledge from a quirky Dungeon Master who's got it in *spades*."

There was something about academia after hours that was, if not familiar to Rush, at least not foreign. He supposed he had spent no small amount of time in half-lit, half-deserted halls, where voices and footfalls echoed emptily without the insulation provided by of the daytime flux of students. Two hours after an extremely strained car ride in the company of *Rob*, Rush and Eli loitered at the end of a dimly-lit third floor corridor, idly watching the rain, and keeping tabs on the dwindling cluster of students who had formed an impromptu queue outside the bright rectangle of an open door.

Rob had swiped them into the building at the appointed time, and, after wishing them luck, had absconded back to wherever it was he kept himself when not skipping his classes in favor of poorly advised 'stake-outs.' Rush was somewhat dubious regarding Rob's academic prospects, though they certainly seemed more promising than Eli's. He couldn't quite get a handle on the young man. He was clearly intelligent, motivated, and possessed of a solid conceptual grounding in a wide array of quantitative subjects and science fiction literature. Rush had no idea why he didn't seem inclined to put even a *minimal* amount of effort into obtaining a formal college education.

As they waited to solicit the help of yet *another* of Eli's acquaintances, Rush pulled out his wallet and flipped through its contents, his shoulder resting against the cool planes of a window that looked out over a rain-soaked parking lot. He examined each card in turn, trying to prompt any attendant memory, no matter how small. It was no use. His dreams had been no more helpful than his wallet. Last night he had dreamed of a sea of silver grass, stretching out endlessly under the light of a white star.

He replaced the business card of Vala Mal Doran, shut his wallet, and looked up to find Eli watching him.

"Can I see?" Eli asked.

Rush shrugged, and passed him the wallet. Eli pulled the cards out one after another, flipping them over, just as Rush had done. He snorted when he got to David Telford's card. "Weird. This Air Force Colonel has the same name as you."

"Clamp it," Rush said dryly.

"I think you might have gotten with this flautist guy," Eli said. "Victor. He called you 'darling'."

"It's certainly possible," Rush said.

"Are you bi, do you think?" Eli asked.

"Yes," Rush said, "I believe I am."

"Huh," Eli said. "Do you, like, *remember* that, or did you *discover* it, or did you just kind of —*know* it all along?"

Rush grimaced. "Frankly, it's somewhat difficult to say. I certainly *discovered* I was Scottish in a notably dramatic manner, but when it comes to preferences and skill sets —as a general rule, they've manifested themselves more subtly."

"So," Eli said, replacing the flautist's card and moving on to the next, "it was less like, 'oh my god, everyone's hot, I'm confused,' and more like 'of course everyone's hot why wouldn't they be?' and then you have to *notice* that you're not quite towing the normal line to intuit your unstated premise."

"Hmm," Rush said. "That was actually somewhat insightful."

"Hey. I can do the empathy thing. Doing it kind of more and more the more I get to know you, actually. Speaking of which, I googled you," Eli said, frowning at the archeologist's card. "You were married, I think. To a woman named Gloria."

Rush nodded. "The violinist."

"Yeah," Eli said, pale under the dim lights. "Do you remember her? At *all*?"

"I don't remember anyone," Rush replied.

"God," Eli said, looking away, down the hallway toward the brightly lit doorway where a few students still waited. "This guy," he said, shaking the wallet gently, glancing back at Rush. "He must seem like someone else entirely. Like you're going through another person's stuff."

"If you really care to know," Rush said, pressing his shoulders against the cool glass of the window, "the separation between my current and past experience is so complete that he feels dead."

"Who does?" Eli said, looking at Rush in manufactured consternation.

Rush indicated the wallet with his eyes.

"Rush?" Eli hissed. "*Rush* seems dead to you?"

Rush opened his hands and shrugged.

"Ugh. Dave. You are killing me here," Eli said, sounding strained. "So—do you not feel *curious*? About your wife? About this flautist guy? About Vala Mal Doran, whom I *definitely* want to meet, FYI. What they're doing? If they're looking for you? If they *miss* you?"

"Of course I'm curious—but, I'd imagine I feel curious in the way that *you* feel curious. There's a sense of detachment, I suppose. I don't *miss* these people, at least, not in a conscious way. I don't miss any aspect of my former life—because I don't remember it. I confess I've been unambiguously depressed these past weeks. That could be a left over chemical imbalance from my recent past, or—"

"Yeah or the fact you're living in a crack house," Eli said.

"*Former* crack house, but yes. You are correct. My circumstances could be better. I'm unquestionably existentially bereft."

"Deep," Eli said, returning Rush's wallet. "So, other than staring into your wallet, how much searching have you done into your own past? Internet, or, whatever."

"Some," Rush said. "Enough to know that I was estranged from my family at some point, and that my wife had a medical condition for which I requested privacy from the press."

"She's dead," Eli said quietly.

Rush nodded.

"I found out a few days ago," Eli continued. "I wasn't quite sure how to tell you. I dug her obituary out of a local paper from York. England. Took some doing. But it was bugging me. You know? Why she wasn't looking for you."

Rush nodded again. "I suspected as much. I'm not wearing a ring." He held up his left hand.

"God, dude, you were *not* kidding about him seeming like another guy to you," Eli said, faintly horrified.

"Well, not to be crass," Rush said, "but how would *you* feel if I told you that *your* wife was dead."

"But I don't *have* a wife," Eli said.

"Exactly," Rush said.

"Ugh," Eli said. "You've made your rhetorical point, I guess. At the cost of a quarter of both our souls, probably. I feel like I need to take a shower. Someone's being wronged here. I think it's you. Past you. Him. The guy who owns the wallet. Who is you. But in a weird, displaced way. Someone should write a postmodern novel about this."

"*Your* schedule appears clear," Rush said, as the last waiting student entered the brightly lit lab at the other end of the hall.

"Excuse me, I have a lexicon to learn and cypher set to solve, okay?"

"If only those were *real* tasks, rather than virtual ones," Rush said. "Consider how interesting your life would be. You'd have to stop manufacturing quixotic quests for yourself."

"I wouldn't complain so much if I were you," Eli said, "as you are the *direct* beneficiary of a quixotic quest. Since it seems like you're *not* in the mood to unburden your existential torment to me right now, or ever, let's go over our game plan."

"I have now memorized the plot of *Count Zero*, thank you," Rush said.

"Dave. Hey. Let's get serious, okay? This is not *Rob* we are about to see. This is not some twenty-something gamer with a gift for pulling code out of his ass in the final twenty-four hours before his comp-sci project is due. This guy is different. Different league. Different circle. Different *game*."

"Oh yes?" Rush asked dryly. "And what does *he* play?"

"*Portal*. He plays *Portal*."

"Never heard of it."

"Okay. Let me um, pitch this to your level. You've heard of Romulus, right? The guy who founded Rome?"

"Yes. I'm terribly impressed that *you* have heard of—"

"Dave. Seriously. This is important. So you know how Romulus and Remus were raised by a she-wolf in the wilderness, so they were all tough and wolf-like?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Rush asked.

"Look, this guy is like that. But instead of being raised by wolves? He was raised by MIT. He came here when he was, like, five or eight or twelve or something and skipped like

—all of undergrad for no reason that anyone understands. Just went straight to grad school. He has, like, too many PhDs. It's stupid and ridiculous and weird and not okay at all. Who *does* that? What's the point? Ugh whatever. I don't care. He's absolutely *steeped* in this place. Like a really bitter tea. I mean, talk about a post-modern novel; it's this green haired nerd who spent his childhood as a grad student and somehow became the sickest DM on the Eastern Seaboard and started a band at the same time. He's an MIT legend, practically. He is also? My nemesis."

"What's a DM?" Rush asked.

Eli rolled his eyes and opened his hands at the ceiling as if praying for divine intervention of some kind. "Dungeon. Master. You have to *know* this stuff, dude. You're supposedly an asset of the entire gaming industry."

"And why is he your nemesis?" Rush asked politely.

"He was about to fail me out of Experimental Neuroscience, and I'm smarter than he is. That's not okay. Also? He's a poser. He pretends to hate the Man, but you can't *actually* hate the Man if you literally grew up in academia and institutions of higher learning shower you with grant money and praise. *I* hate the Man. The Man screwed over my family," Eli said, finishing with a heated breathlessness.

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"TMI. Sorry. Just—let *me* do the talking, okay?"

"I'm not sure that's wise," Rush said, eyeing the opposite end of the hallway. "I'm not sure *any* of this is wise. I—"

"Yeah. I know. You say it five times a day. You want to call the Air Force. Well? Why haven't you *done it*, then?" Eli whispered aggressively.

Rush crossed his arms over his chest and looked away.

"Yeah. *Exactly*. Because it terrifies the *crap* out of you. Probably for good reason. It terrifies the crap out of me too, and I'm not even the guy with the empty bucket of personal memories and creepy technoswag wired into his head."

Rush rolled his eyes.

"Giant institutions? They are *not* your friend in situations like this. Have you never read *The Firm*? Did you not see *The Bourne Identity*? How do you have no common sense about this? Or, I guess, you *have* common sense about it—how are you even *contemplating* ignoring your instincts? Your instincts about this are literally, *literally* all

you've got to go on. There are people *looking* for you. Who the heck knows—maybe the defection story we made up is true. Don't you want to figure it out *yourself*?"

"I *do*," Rush said, "but that desire has its limits. I am extremely concerned that the trajectory of your life may be altered, and not for the better, as a *direct* consequence of your determination to help me."

"Aw. *Dave*. That's so nice. But have you taken a look at my life? Oh yeah. That's right. It sucks. In fact, you constantly disparage—"

"Your choices," Rush said pointedly. "Your *choices*. Not your potential."

"Fine," Eli said with poor grace. "But those choices? They're mine. I choose to learn a Promethean Lexicon and solve virtual cyphers because—because *I* choose to do those things."

Rush opened both hands in a gesture of surrender.

"And, like, academia worked out so well for *you*, right?" Eli said.

"Well, honestly, my time at UC Berkeley doesn't seem to have been where the problem originated," Rush replied.

"Yes, it was. It absolutely was. Your problem originated when you proved P equal to N freaking P. Even *I* know not to knock over half the world's cryptosystems. The media is predicting a cyberapocalypse in six to eight months. Giant institutions with vaults of secrets to spill collectively hate your guts right now."

Rush sighed, wondering if the impending collapse of global cryptosystems could genuinely be laid at his feet. Probably no more or less than any other historical inevitability. Having identified a door, all it took was a single, risk-averse person to open it. He glanced down the dim hall toward the bright spill of light coming from the open lab. As he watched, the last student petitioner exited, clutching a textbook to her chest and exuding an air of unfocused intellectual triumph.

"So passes our cue?" Rush asked, watching her descend the stairs.

"Ugh," Eli said in evident disgust, though at what, Rush couldn't say. "Yeah, I guess." He lifted his bag over one shoulder. "Okay. Let's keep our goals in our sights. What we want from this guy is for him to help us take a look at the code that's running on the 'chip'. An assessment of the hardware would be nice, though that's plus or minus, because we don't want to let him *break* it, especially not *while* it's attached to your brain. Let me do the talking, you just—well, try to look intelligent and victimized. Play on his sympathies."

"You want me to play on his sympathies. The sympathies of your 'nemesis'," Rush said, torn between disbelief and amusement. There was, possibly, a dash of despair in there as well.

"Yes," Eli whispered, turning as they approached the open door. "That's *exactly* what I want. And don't mention the word 'nemesis.' Technically, he was my academic advisor, so he might take the word 'nemesis' the wrong way."

Rush shook his head, but his disapproval was entirely wasted, because Eli was looking determinedly in any other direction.

They entered the bright light of the neuroscience lab to see rows of benches crammed with labeled bottles holding clear liquids, graded measuring devices, notebooks, and boxes of disposable, single-use plasticware. Large instruments that Rush couldn't name took up space near the ends of benches. Dark doorways honeycombed off the main floorspace into small rooms no doubt housing additional workspaces and machines. Eli led him unerringly toward the only illuminated doorway. The lad had, apparently, been here before. They entered a small, shared office space containing four desks, each jammed into a corner of the room. At the most unkempt of the desks sat an equally unkempt graduate student, worn converse sneakers propped atop a copy of *MATLAB for Neuroscientists*, green streaked black hair in total disarray. He was watching the door. As though he'd been *waiting* for them.

Rush immediately identified him as the person he'd stopped on the streets of downtown Cambridge to ask for directions. It had been at the end of August, on the morning he'd awoken to a total lack of personal memory. Fortunately, it seemed that a change of hair color, wardrobe, and demeanor had served Rush well, because there was no recognition in the student's expression.

"Eli," The Nemesis said, dropping his feet and pulling his headphones out of his ears. "Hey. Rob told me you were coming. Good to see you, dude. This is your 'friend'?" he asked, giving the final word of set of ostentatious air quotes.

"Ugh, what?" Eli said. "How much did Rob tell you. He wasn't supposed to tell you *anything*."

"Well," The Nemesis said, sitting back with a smirk that somehow came across as both superior and fond, "I'm pretty sure Rob told me everything you told *him*, which was a poorly disguised version of the plot of *Count Zero*. So, hi," he said, turning to Rush, extending his hand. "Who are you really?"

Rush glanced at Eli. The lad looked back at him with a subtle widening of the eyes that clearly communicated he had nothing on deck. Rush, possessed of a sudden and total inspiration, doing his best to grind his accent down to something more American, said, "David Telford, Eli's uncle."

"Newton Geiszler," the man said, somehow managing to turn Rush's intended handshake into an elaborate slap, grab, and drag ritual that Rush, mostly, followed. "Nice to meet ya. Everyone calls me Newt. *Please* tell me you're here to help me talk some sense into this kid."

"That is *exactly* why I'm here," Rush said.

"I hate Rob *so much*," Eli hissed.

"Dude," Newt said, collapsing back into his chair, and motioning for Rush and Eli to sit. "Rob is, like, my self-professed minion. Of course he emailed me the *second* you told him you wanted my office hours. You should have come to office hours when you were *in* my class, but my point is that you can relax about the whole thing, because he totally bought your cover story, okay? The guy has not read much Gibson, apparently. He spends too much time in some MMORPG, hunting orcs. Your dignity is safe with me. I will tell no one that this ever happened."

"And—what is it that you think is happening?" Eli asked slowly.

"You want me to write a letter on your behalf, in support of your reentry into the scholarship program," Newt said the pace of his words slowing and his pitch rising as he turned a statement into a something more approximating a question. "Is that *not* what this is—"

"That's correct," Rush said, breaking in before Eli had a chance to speak. "Dr. Geiszler—"

"Newt," Newt said.

"Newt," Rush amended, managing, with *extreme* effort, to avoid an outrageously tempting eye roll. "Eli has done a truly atrocious job advocating for himself in the past —"

"Understatement," Newt snapped in irritating annotation, bouncing the ball of one foot against the floor.

"—and so I'm not sure if you're aware of some of the difficulties of his current situation," Rush finished.

"Probably not, no," Newt replied, raising his eyebrows and looking at Eli in open invitation.

"What?" Eli said. "I'm *fine*. Everything's—"

"Eli's mother has been quite ill," Rush said, not looking at Eli, determined to wrest *something* out of this meeting. Eli's primary objective had always been ridiculous to the point of disaster, but Rush felt certain he could salvage the situation—if not to his own advantage, then certainly to Eli's. He had an instinct for academic norms and niceties, apparently; and while tales of corporate espionage struck him as increasingly ludicrous, surrounded as they were by the very real trappings of federally funded science, securing Eli some much needed mentorship was emerging as a far safer, far more pedestrian objective.

"Oh my *god*, dude," Newt said, looking at Eli. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Yes," Eli snapped. "If she'd just—"

"She lost her insurance coverage recently," Rush said, with perfect honesty, "and she and Eli have both been working two jobs to make ends meet, so that she can afford her medical care."

"Eli—" Newt began, "*why* didn't you ever mention *any* of this?"

"Because it didn't matter," Eli snapped defensively.

"My personal opinion is that it mattered quite a bit," Rush said.

"I would—" Newt began.

"Hey," Eli said. "*Hey*. I could have done the work. I just didn't want to, okay? I don't like pointless assignments. I don't *care* about neuroanatomy, dude. I don't *care* about the five layers of the cerebral cortex."

"Um, it's *six*, actually," Newt said.

"Ugh! *Whatever*. I don't *care* about memorizing lists and lists of biological jargon. None of that is interesting to me. I don't want to do three problem sets per night for the sheer *exercise* of it. This stuff is *boring* when you're not *doing something* with it. Honestly? I don't want to go back. There. I said it. I could have a free ride at MIT for the price of worshipping at the shrine of Nightly Homework but I'm not into it. People keep trying to strong-arm me into a glorious future and I'm *tired* of it. I want to do awesome things. Barring that, I want to live vicariously in an MMORPG where I get to pretend to do awesome things. That might actually *be* awesome. So screw you guys. Academia's going to be dead in forty years anyway. You'll be able to give yourself a PhD on YouTube. You guys are dying like dinosaurs in tar pits. Tar pits inside misleading ivory towers."

Newt rolled his eyes. "And I suppose YouTube will buy you a patch clamp apparatus and provide an infrastructure for ethical oversight in this coming halcyon, hypothetical house of heuristical cards you're so excited to inhabit once institutions of higher learning implode into the concealed tar at their core? Yes?"

"My name is *Newt* and I can think of *so many words* that start with 'h'," Eli said, doing a passable impression of Dr. Geiszler, punctuated with jazz hands of withering irony.

"I believe we're getting sidetracked," Rush said, before Newt could respond. "As you can see, I have had *zerosuccess* in convincing my nephew of the value of the educational opportunity he is unwisely throwing away. I had hoped that you might have better luck."

"Me?" Newt said, quite obviously taken aback.

Rush shrugged, opening a hand. "He speaks quite highly of you."

"No I don't," Eli said to Rush. "No I *don't*," he reiterated to Newt.

"Um," Newt said, looking at Eli with a guarded expression. "Myeah, that's the impression I've always had. I like you though, for the record. Still, I'm not about to force advice on you that you don't want. So—in the interest of clarity—I guess I'll just ask, because I'm slightly confused by all of this: *do you want my advice?*"

Eli glanced at Rush. Rush raised his eyebrows. Newt repped his feet on *MATLAB for Neuroscientists*.

"Yeah," Eli said, defeated. "I guess."

"Calm down," Newt said with admirable self-possession. "Wouldn't want anyone to think you're excited."

Rush crossed his arms over his chest and favored Eli with a disapproving look that he hoped suggested a long-standing frustration with his recalcitrant 'nephew.' He inclined his head toward Newt, an obvious prompt for Eli to resolicit in a more respectful manner.

"You want me to beg?" Eli snapped at them. "Fine. *Please*, Dr. Geiszler, shower me with your endless wisdom."

Newt grinned. "Look kid. You've clearly thought this through, at least to a first approximation. This place—the real, actual, genuine grind of science—it's not for everyone. So maybe it's not for you. That's *fine*. I guess the question is: do you slog through an undergrad degree here or don't you? Pros would be increased future income, the panache of MIT on your CV, and the chance that you run across something

that really revs your intellectual engine so to speak. The cons are mainly you hating every single solitary second of it. Hating the people, hating the ethos, hating the process, disdaining the end goal, and suffering, *suffering* through icy ass Massachusetts winters. Is it still raining out there? Anyway, that's a pretty steep set of cons. So maybe you *don't* slog through the degree. You'll be fine. You're smart. You're smart as *shit*, dude, so you might not need someone to teach you how to learn. Move to Silicon Valley where the weather and people and buildings and ethos is beautiful and go work for some kind of gamification start-up where they turn everyday tasks into quests or something. I don't know. Take your mom. California is, like, The Promised Land these days. That's what I'd do, if I could live my life over. Just *do something*, dude. I know some people at Stanford who could maybe help you out, if you were interested. I would never *admit* to knowing anyone at Caltech, but," he opened a hand. "Y'know. Maybe I know a guy who knows a guy. But, for what it's worth, I think your uncle is probably right when he says that external factors are playing a huge part in your success. Or, well, lack thereof. Honestly, it seems kind of hopeless to try and take a full course load and work two jobs. I'd probably give up too. So—even if *you* don't see it that way—your mom being sick and you being burned the hell out aren't really helpful. To you. And look, I don't know the particulars of the situation, but there may be things that can be done to mitigate some of it. I mean, for one—work/study exists for a reason. Man a library desk, get paid, and do your math homework or something. Like, I didn't even have to think about that one. It just came to me. I can be more inventive given time and impetus, I'm sure. Anyway, my point is, whether you decide to stay or go, I'll help you either way."

"Why?" Eli asked, with notably reduced hostility.

Rush rolled his eyes, rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, and pressed the heel of his hand into one eye.

"*Why?* I'm your academic advisor. That is *literally* my job. Your uncle gets me. Look at his face. He *totally* gets me. Why are you so suspicious? I didn't fail you in EX Neuro because I *enjoyed* doing it, dude, I failed you because you literally turned in *zero* out of fourteen lab reports."

"I don't even *go* here anymore," Eli pronounced, like an indictment.

"Meh," Newt replied, unimpressed.

"I'll think about it," Eli replied. "I'll let you know."

Rush lifted his head to look over at Eli, who gave him a sour glare in return. He shifted his gaze to Newt and they shared a look of complete commiseration before the other man shifted his gaze to the devices at Rush's temple and then quickly away.

"Good," Newt said.

"Your intervention is much appreciated," Rush told him. "By me, if not by Eli."

Newt waved a hand, again surreptitiously studying Rush's unusual technological accessories.

"We really ought to be going—" Rush began.

"Can I just—" Newt said at the same time.

Rush raised his eyebrows.

"I've got to ask; I'm sure you get this all the time, I don't mean to be insensitive, but what the *heck* are you wearing on your head?"

"An experimental device," Rush said smoothly, acting on an emerging instinct for interpersonal manipulation that he found vaguely disturbing. "developed by the company I work for. The idea behind it is—well. I really shouldn't say."

"Oh," Newt replied, evidently impressed. "Can I just—um, does it—how is it *attached*?"

"Subdermal electrodes hold each piece in place," Rush replied.

"*What*," Newt snapped, yanking his feet off his desk and leaning forward.

"Eli mentioned to me that your area of expertise happens to be neuromechanics, correct?" Rush could feel the intensity of Eli's interest and did his best not to look in the lad's direction.

"Yes," Newt said, still leaning forward, looking at the devices in obvious fascination.

"If you don't mind my asking—my company is looking for volunteers from the academic community to take a look at the hardware and software of units like this—primarily to evaluate for—" Rush waved a hand, "software and hardware vulnerabilities. Is there anyone you might be able to recommend to me?"

"Um yes," Newt snapped. "*I'll* do it."

Rush raised an explicitly skeptical eyebrow. "While I appreciate your enthusiasm—I'm afraid that we are soliciting the opinions of established, independent investigators. Not to put too fine a point on it, we had hoped to find individuals—a bit more senior than yourself."

Newt regarded him with an expression of complete neutrality, which Rush suspected concealed extreme disappointment.

"Lame," Eli commented, with passable aridity. "Predictable. But, Dave. Newt is not, like, your typical grad student."

"I'm sure," Rush replied in overt condescension.

This was, evidently, too much for Newt to suffer in silence. "Am I a grad student?" he began, with the rhetorical cadence of a natural didact. "Technically? Well, technically, yes. *On paper* yes, but that's for bureaucratic and insurance reasons only. The department functionally considers me a senior post-doc, and I concomitantly hold an Instructor position within the Department of Cell Biology, which is why I was assigned as Eli's academic advisor in the first place."

"So—I confess I'm confused. Are you a graduate student, a post-doc, or an Instructor?"

"Yes," Newt said. "I'm all of those things. At the same time. I have three PhDs, this is my fourth one. I'm not technically employable as a post-doc for bureaucratic reasons related to the fact that I was an emancipated minor during, um well. I am, academically, operating at the level of a post-doc, but I have the health insurance of a graduate student and I simultaneously function as and earn the salary of an Instructor."

"I've never *heard* of such a situation," Rush replied, crossing his arms, looking skeptically at Newt.

"Ehhhhhh," Newt said. "It's complicated. I can provide you with documentation verifying all of this."

"How old *are* you?" Rush asked.

"I *feel* like I'm at least thirty," Newt said.

"He's seventeen," Eli announced.

"Seventeen," Rush repeated darkly, glaring at Eli.

"What?" Newt said, laughing. "That's *ridiculous*. How could I possibly—what are you *on*, kid?"

"Well how old *are* you then?" Eli asked.

"Older than *you*, that's for sure," Newt replied.

"Dr. Geiszler," Rush began. "I'm sure you're quite talented. But without further clarification we couldn't possibly select you as one of our independent evaluators; we're looking for scientists with unambiguous—"

"Dave, oh my *god*," Eli said. "Why are you shooting yourself in the foot here. Gun? Foot." Eli mimed sighting down a rifle at his own still-damp sneaker. "You are not going to find anyone better than Newt for this."

"It's kind of true," Newt added.

"Eli, I don't think you understand the delicacy of the request," Rush countered.

"And I don't think *you* understand how much of a baller this guy is," Eli said. "He's like, the Mozart of science. So he's young. So he doesn't have his own lab and his own letterhead right now. You said you wanted the best—or did you just mean the best CV."

"My CV is hard to beat, actually," Newt added. "If that helps."

"You wouldn't be paid," Rush said, with a slow unwillingness that was in no way feigned. "The incentive would be an opportunity to interact with an emerging technology in a limited way."

"I *couldn't* be paid," Newt said, with an exuberance that struck Rush as inexplicably tragic. "No conflicts of interest."

"I'll need a copy of your CV."

"No problem," Newt replied, beginning to flip through a stack of papers on his desk.

"You would have to sign a non-disclosure agreement," Rush continued. "My parent company would not be named in that agreement."

"Thaaaaaat's weird—" Newt began, slowing his desultory search for his CV.

"Oh whatever," Eli said. "Who's going to make beautiful, bleeding edge wearable tech, where even the prototypes look suave? Think about it for ten seconds. It starts with an A and ends with—"

"Eli," Rush snapped.

"Well," Newt said, clearly somewhat swayed, resuming his search for his CV.

"You would need to sign a pledge that you would make no attempt to reverse engineer anything you might encounter."

"Dude, I'm swapping neuroscience for philosophy as soon as I get this last paper out. I'm the perfect candidate," Newt said absently, finally yanking a set of papers free of the pile he'd been scanning.

"You're going into *philosophy*?" Eli asked.

"Long story," Newt said. "Very boring."

"Are you having a midlife crisis?" Eli asked. "Sounds about right. The *real* Mozart died at thirty-six so you're almost halfway there."

"Hilarious," Newt replied, handing Rush an unbelievably thick stack of paper.

"Does it have his birthday on it?" Eli asked, eyeing the document with evident interest.

"I'd appreciate it if you did *not* show my CV to your nephew," Newt said, with maximum dignity.

"Of course," Rush said smoothly. "Why don't we meet again in a few days," Rush suggested. "If my superiors are amenable, I'll have the non-disclosure agreement for you then. You are, of course, free to withdraw at any point."

"Sounds fair," Newt said. "When do you want to get started?"

"Would tomorrow be too soon?" Rush suggested. "I'm on a bit of a short timetable."

"Tomorrow's no good," Newt said. "I have a show."

"Where? We'll meet you there," Eli said. "Get those papers signed. Maybe if I have time I can bring you *my* CV; you can take a look at it."

"Well—"

"I'll buy you a beer," Eli said. "In fact, I'll buy you beer all night long."

"Done," Newt replied, leaning back in his chair and repropping his feet in evident self-satisfaction. "*Camera Obscura*. Eight o'clock."

"Nice," Eli said. "We'll be there."

"So—" Newt began, his gaze shifting from Rush to Eli and back again with the air of a man thinking things through a bit *too* critically, "was this actually a meeting about Eli or —"

"The primary purpose was certainly the continuance of his education," Rush said, quite truthfully.

"And that story you told Rob," Newt said slowly, his gaze shifting to Eli, "that *was* the premise of *Count Zero*, right, I mean—there's not *actually* any corporate espionage happening here; because—"

"Ha, yeah," Eli said. "Totally *Count Zero*. Think about it. Can you even imagine how awful my life would be if Rob knew I had an uncle who worked on the design team at A —"

"Eli," Rush said, a smooth reminder. "Do *not* say it."

"Just—don't tell Rob about *any* of this," Eli said. "Please. Student-mentor privilege. Unbreakable. Like with priests."

"Any of what?" Newt replied archly, opening his hands.

"Exactly," Eli said.

They left Newt to his academic pursuits and descended three flights of stairs without speaking. They ran through the downpour to reach Eli's mother's car. The parking lot was nearly empty, the rain-glazed asphalt bright with the reflected glow of streetlights. They slammed the doors on the rain, still not speaking, catching their breaths after the dash across the parking lot. Raindrops beat hard against the windshield.

"Holy shit, Dave," Eli said finally. "That? That was *genius*."

"I try," Rush replied.

"For a minute there I was *pissed*, because I thought you were trying to Good Samaritan me, but then I realized that you were just setting up the bait half of the only bait and switch that would *ever* work on this guy."

"I *was* genuinely attempting to help you, you overgrown *child*," Rush snapped, irritated. "You should take him up on his offer to help you petition for reentry. Also? Furthermore, the *only* reasons we were successful are: one—your so-called 'nemesis' genuinely wanted to help you, and two—he's laudably and unfortunately curious about cutting edge technology." Rush leaned his head back against his seat, wet and miserable.

"Whatever, man," Eli replied. "We got what we needed, which, to be clear, was help for *you*. Not help for me."

"You're bringing him your CV tomorrow," Rush informed him, with a dark determination.

"Oh am I? Gee. Thanks, *Uncle Dave*. And I suppose, in the tradition of dutiful nephews everywhere, I'm also creating a fake non-disclosure agreement?" Eli said.

"No." Rush glared at Eli. "*I'll* do that. I wouldn't want you to overtax yourself."

"Shut up. I'll do it. You don't have a computer yet."

"And you can look up the definition of 'nemesis' while you're at it," Rush added, shutting his eyes.

"Ugh, why are you so cranky? That was *amazing*."

"Is he *actually* seventeen?" Rush asked. "Please tell me he's not."

"Well," Eli said, "that's Rob's best guess. He's definitely not old enough to buy beer. We know that much. Relax. We'll keep him out of anything dangerous. We'll get him to take one crack at it on a rainy night. When your signal will be most masked by atmospheric conditions."

"Oh 'we' will, will we?" Rush snapped, shaking his hair out of his eyes. "I'm—"

"Calling the Air Force? No you're not," Eli replied cheerfully, starting the car engine.

"Let's go buy you a burner phone. Our recently hired tech help going to think it's weird if 'Uncle Dave' the Neuromechanics Guru doesn't have a number."

Rush waved a hand in silent capitulation as Eli pulled out onto the road.

On Lethe Fixed

In the small back room of an unassuming diner run by a man with a heart larger than his finances, Val curls herself around a thin pillow, settles herself between threadbare sheets, cracks her gum, and changes the channel on the tiny TV next to her cot. She can smell the aerosolized grease that still clings to her hair even after showering. Perhaps she will spend her next paycheck on shampoo.

A familiar redhead flashes onscreen and Val stops her channel surfing. *The X-files*. Jackpot. Mulder and Scully. *Oh please, she thinks, let it be a marathon.*

It probably says sad things about whomever 'Val' is or was that what feels most familiar to her in the strange landscape of American Suburbia are two fictional people who chase fictional monsters. She probably spent her entire life in front of a television, watching these two, watching horror films, watching science fiction—if her dreams of stars and space battles are any indication. Still, she wishes a sensitive FBI agent or two would show up at Sol's Diner to discretely tell her who it is that she is.

She loves Mulder. He's so tall and so handsome and so interesting-looking and so open to new things. He's always asking the native human populace—

Native human populace? Val thinks. *What an odd way to put it.*

He's always asking the people he meets to educate him about their beliefs, about their ways of life and their cultural explanations for phenomena that aren't easily explained. He places no trust in authority figures and he extends that all the way up the chain, taking on gods and angels and demons and devils when his moral code demands that he does so. There's something in that that denial of godhead that appeals to her. It reminds her of something. Or, maybe, it reminds her of someone. But every time she tries to turn that vague connection into a real memory—

She fails.

Her past is nothing but a gray mist, an amorphous block that will not lift and will not let her see.

So she remains Val, watching the X-files.

Val loves Scully even more than she loves Mulder. Val would like to *be* Scully—beautiful and fiery and competent, running in stylish heels and a flowing black coat, holding a weapon right next to her perfectly made-up face—the crack shot, the cool

thinker, the compassionate heart, the firm voice, the moral metric, the stoic sufferer, with the eyes that reveal all that she is feeling.

Val has looked at her own face in the mirror. She is beautiful, but not in the way that Dana Scully is beautiful. Her hair is long and dark and her eyes give away none of her secrets, no matter how long she stares into them. Her arms and legs are thin, but she is strong, stronger by far than she looks, and she is fast. She thinks about exits to rooms and she smells the air for the scent of chemicals; she does not like to eat food that she does not see Sal prepare or that she does not open herself from a sealed package. She does not like faint lights that glow in the darkness and when she feels frightened she drops her center of gravity and brings her hands up before she can stop herself. At night she wakes with her own fingers at her throat, trying to claw something away. Or, maybe, trying to claw something out.

And so she loves Fox Mulder and she loves Dana Scully, but she watches the show for Alex Krycek.

Krycek who does not seem to know who he is; Krycek who is trying to survive; Krycek who wishes to be Scully just as Val wishes it; Krycek who knows too much and too little about the game he's been forced to play but who plays it *anyway*; who comes back time after time after time to try and help the people that he's hurt so badly; Krycek who must be important because it is Krycek who stays, Krycek who, even after death, points the way to salvation.

Val thinks that his story must be something like her story. Why else would she be here, with no memory, with too much strength and speed and skill? There must be some place that she has fallen from; there must be someone for her to haunt. If only she could find them.

Val spits out her gum and falls asleep to the real sound of fictional screams.

In the morning, she wakes to the sound of rain and the trill of the small travel alarm that Sal had been her second gift from Sal. She pulls off the Sol's Diner T-shirt that she wears as pajamas. She hooks her bra into place—her secret, expensive, underwear that says interesting and promising things about whomever she once was. Her bra is black and the straps are thin and the material is smooth and scalloped at the edges. It is beautiful. It's meant to be looked at, she thinks. She wonders, whom, if anyone, she wore it for. Val thinks maybe she wore it for herself.

That feels right to her.

She drops her dress into place over her underwear. It, too, is its own kind of armor, as all uniforms are. This one is green and yellow and marks her as a thing she's not. Or, as a thing she isn't yet.

A waitress.

That feels wrong to her.

Her dreams are full of torches and the screams of supplicants. She can remember the terror of entrapment in a confined black space, the sound of insects crawling and clicking in darkness. She can remember the build of a charging weapon, the curve of gold filigree, the warmth of a red glow in and around her fingers. She can remember taking gods as lovers. She can remember nothing that makes any sense.

Sometimes, she dreams of kinder things. Of supernatural restoration under a golden light. Of people she has cared for. A boy with dark hair beside a lotus-covered pool. An olive-skinned woman with glowing eyes. A little girl, growing up too fast. A tall man with glasses. They are harder to hold onto—they lack the edge of horror that burns them into her mind.

Val divides her hair in two and ties each half in place. She applies inexpensive cosmetics to her skin and eyelids. She draws a fake beauty mark on her left cheek with an eyebrow pencil in a good-natured tribute to a personality that has gone incognito even from itself. Then she goes to work.

By the time she enters the diner, the rain is giving way to a bright mist that will turn to sunlight before long. It is October, and when the glass door opens and shuts with the passage of Sal's clientele she can feel crisp air on her bare calves.

She worries she is a little too bright-eyed in this persistent absence of memory. Her smile is too wide, and her pitch too modulated, but no customer notices, or if they do, they say nothing. She pursues the ideal of 'waitress' that she holds in her mind; building it up from television, from her co-worker Mary Catherine, from the implied expectations of people she serves. Only Sal knows that she is not the face she presents to the world, but he does not press her. Sal is a righter of all the wrongs he finds, and Val is always on the edge of tipping into darkness. Sal can see that, she thinks, and this is why he gives her things and does not press her. This is why he takes stray kittens to the vet but when she had shouted "no hospitals" in his face in an instant of blind panic, he had let her be. He had given her a back room, a waitress uniform, a toothbrush, a t-shirt, an alarm clock, and plenty of space.

In return, Val learns diner slang and flirts with his customers. She talks up the daily special. She pours coffee and clears tables between flashbacks to the dark unity of synchronized steps in a stone hallway, the blur of stars, and the firing of weapons from a perspective that seems, somehow, askew to her.

"Val," Sal says, in the midmorning when he sees her with her eyes closed, one hand braced against a wall in the back of the diner. "Val, you okay, honey?"

She nods first, smiles second, swishes her hair back third, pulls it forward again fourth, and then, finally looks at Sal. "Yes," she says. "Yes I'm fine."

At the beginning of the lunchtime rush, two men enter the diner. From the moment she sees their dark silhouettes against the bright light of the glass door she feels a sense of error—of disappointment in *herself* as they begin shouting and brandishing a gun. She watches them, confused by her own guilt, her own innate sense of failure, because where is the failure in this? Where *could* it be? She is a waitress in the bad part of town; this is not *her fault*; she owes her Sal's clientele nothing but two weeks worth of her meager livelihood—

But Val, whomever she is, was born fully grown, strapped to a gurney in the midst of a firefight, struggling against bonds in beautiful clothes and with beautiful hair that had smelled of perfume she can barely remember. In her first moments of life, Val had pulled a metal device off her head, freed herself from a burning building, and run blindly into a street not far from this street. She had *lived*. She had lived through gunshots and streams of strange blue energy, through an explosion that had killed anyone and destroyed anything that might have helped her find her way.

And so, when one of the men points the gun at her, she looks at the weapon, she looks at him, and she breaks his wrist.

She breaks his wrist *first*.

She steps in closer and takes on both of them in a blaze of newly discovered instinct, twisting joints the wrong way, bringing a heel up into a crotch, ramming her elbow into someone's unprotected face, grabbing a napkin dispenser to crash against the back of someone's skull.

By the time Sal makes it out of the kitchen, meat tenderizer in hand, by the time the local detective has had time to take in what's happening and raise his own gun, Val is standing over two incapacitated men, a plate spinning, unbroken, on the floor.

"What did you do?" Sal asks her.

"I don't know," she admits.

The detective takes her to the police station to make a statement.

Val doesn't want to go. She tries to get out of it while Sal tries to help her, but the detective is impressed and insistent and so she goes with him before she is charged with a crime herself. Before they leave she changes out of her waitress uniform—acting on some instinct for anonymity she doesn't understand but does respect. Too many people would remember a girl in a green and yellow dress with a name tag that reads: VAL.

The longer she stays at the precinct, the more questions they ask. It is not long before she comes to feel like a caged animal beneath a fraying exterior. She doesn't know what might burst out of her with the right provocation, but there are things in her mind and motor programs in her bones that she doesn't understand.

"Your name is Val?" the detective asks.

"You're a regular," Val says, edgy, flirting, smiling, twisting loose hair around two fingers. "You know my name."

"Val is short for Valerie?" the detective asks.

"Yes," Val says. "That's it. Valerie."

But it's not Valerie. She shuts her eyes and for a moment, she can almost hear someone say it. It's a man, exasperated, pulling out the first syllable into something more like 'Vahl' than 'val'. *Vhal?*

"Last name?" the detective says, pointedly, like he's said it before.

"Oh," Val says, turning, back in the present, her eyes scanning the room. Too obvious. She's being too obvious. "Todad," she says, sliding into a chair, smiling brightly, dying a little bit inside at how pathetically transparent she's been in a single off-balance moment.

The detective turns around, looks pointedly at a picture from his child hanging on the wall, on which the words, "To: Dad" prominently appear.

Val smiles wider. The detective does not smile back. He holds her there until someone responds to the APB he puts out on her, asking for identification. It is the Air Force that answers his unadvisable call.

Three people that she fails to recognize show up in uniform. They arrive in less than an hour, and that alacrity frightens her. It frightens the detective as well. Their faces are grim, their badges are quickly flashed and put away, and though she begs him not to—

begs him, tears in her eyes but not falling, calling out his title and her plea into the growing space between them as she is dragged away—the detective releases her into their custody. They cuff her and they drag her outside and she knows that she will never see Sal again, that she will never see her blue shirt, which is one of the only things she knows for certain that she owned.

Perhaps they will let her watch *The X-files* in whatever Air Force prison they are taking her to. Somehow, she doesn't think so. They force her into a car. "But what did I *do*?" she asks them. "You must at least tell me what I did."

They do not answer her.

Val spends minutes in taut silence while her mind plans variations on the central theme of escape. This feels familiar to her—as though escape is a thing she has mastered. Options, ideas, scenarios, tactics, take rise in her thoughts like a flock of birds, wheeling and diving and changing direction all at once. They are *afraid* of her. Perhaps this is *why* they are afraid.

She makes her move on an untrafficked road that cuts through a wooded area. She leads with a question, follows with an elbow to the face, and then hooks the short chain of her cuffed wrists over the larynx of the car's driver. He brakes and yanks the wheel, sending the car into a ditch. She is braced against the driver's seat—unsurprised and ready. As soon as the vehicle comes to a stop, she plunges a hand into the driver's pocket, finds the keys to the handcuffs, and unlocks a cuff with one hand while opening the car door with another. She dives out, rolls, and comes up on her knees, her muscles shaking.

There is a man standing in the road.

He dressed in a brown leather jacket, a running motorcycle behind him, sighting down the barrel of a gun straight at the car. She raises her hands, palms open. Her throat tightens with despair.

Almost, she thinks, breathing hard. *Almost*.

They'd had a rear-guard. Someone following on a bike. She hadn't known because she hadn't been able to turn under scrutiny.

"You okay?" the man says, steel-eyed, glancing at her and then away, back at the car, as though he presumes she's not a threat. Or, alternatively, as though he *knows* her.

Val doesn't answer. She gets to her feet.

The man looks back at her, confused by her silence.

There is a gunshot from the car—not at her, but at the man in the road. He fires back, then falls to the asphalt, clutching his arm.

Val looks back and forth between the dead woman in the passenger seat and the man lying in the road.

The man in the road drops his gun.

Val edges forward, watching him, watching the car.

She should run.

But she wants that gun.

She *needs* that gun.

No one stops her or shoots at her as she creeps forward, and so, after a few seconds of hesitation she commits to her chosen course, runs forward and picks up the gun lying on the asphalt. She's points it first at the man in the road, then at the still car, then back at the man in the road.

"Vala," says the man at her feet. "What are you *doing*?"

Vala. She likes that. Much better than Valerie. "You know me?" she asks.

"What?" the man in the road says.

"Get up," Val says.

"*What?*" he says again, as though he's insulted.

"Get up," Val repeats.

The man doesn't get up.

Another car skids to a stop and its driver gets out, his engine a dull throb in the stillness of the afternoon. "Is everyone okay?" he asks.

Val swings her body and points the gun at him. "Run away," she says.

The driver takes her advice.

"Get up," she says, turning back to the man in the road. By the time she drags him to his feet he's shed the surprise and the vaguely wounded look he's been sending in her direction for minutes now.

"Drive," she says, as she forces him into the running car.

"You realize I'm bleeding," he says, his eyes a grim and icy blue.

"Drive," she snaps, pointing the gun at him.

They have to stop after thirty miles because her hostage is on the verge of losing consciousness. She spends minutes in agonized indecision in the parking lot of a cheap motel, and then, again, after she's cuffed him to the bed, as she debates leaving him.

But what if she knows him? What if he *dies*? What if he's a friend? She thinks he wasn't trying to hurt her. But she can't be certain of that.

"Hey, handsome," she says quietly. "Hey. What's your name?"

His eyelids flicker, but he doesn't answer.

Is he the person that she sometimes dreams of? The man whom she can almost hear saying her name? Val tries to picture him with glasses, but it's no good—he's too real and the person in her dreams has never had a face that she can see. She decides she will look at his arm before she goes, just in case. She uncuffs him, removes his jacket and his shirt, and then his pants for good measure. She lets him keep his boxers. She pulls up the covers so he doesn't get cold. She inspects his arm. The bullet graze is deep, cutting through his deltoid. It's still bleeding, and between the blood on the road, the blood in the car, the blood on his clothes, and the blood on this bed, she doesn't know how much bleeding is too much bleeding.

She decides that she will dress the wound. She cleans it as best she can, drawing on an innate store of knowledge, common sense, and a vague memory of her hands clamped to her own bleeding calf, long ago, when she was younger and alone beneath trees with silver-blue leaves that she no longer has the words to name.

The man regains consciousness while she is in the bathroom, ripping cheap linens into strips with the aid of the small knife she found in his pants pocket.

"You really don't remember who you are," he says, half revelation, half skepticism.

She doesn't care for his tone, but she doesn't show it, smiling as she lets him spin a story like something straight out of *The X-files* as she ties strips of bedding around his injured arm to stop the flow of blood. He tells her that they're teammates; that they travel to other worlds through some kind of magical gate; that she isn't from this planet.

She has memories of gold light, crawling darkness, and trees with blue-green leaves, but she does not think such memories necessarily substantiate this man's outlandish story. She does not dismiss him entirely, but she does not trust him. Without her memories she will never fully trust anyone.

"Vala," she says, when he is finished. "That doesn't *sound* like an alien name."

The man sighs.

As much as she would love to stay, to learn more, to sort through what she believes and what she does not of his narrative, she can't. She's already lingered too long. She buys him a collection of snacks with his own money and leaves him cuffed to the bed, ignoring the rising pitch of his words, the insistence in his tone, the rapidity with which he starts to speak as he realizes she's about to walk out the hotel room door.

The freedom of the quiet parking-lot comes as a relief.

She considers getting back in the car, but the little hairs on her neck prickle in a warning she only half understands—like even by contemplating using the vehicle she can already be tracked. She sets off down wide, pale sidewalks, her head down, her hair loose and hiding her face. The blue and white of police cars crisscrosses the streets, and she turns to avoid them, her eyes scanning for a car she might borrow, for a building she might enter, for anywhere she might go. Everywhere she turns there seem to be parties converging on her, hemming her in, cutting her off. Perhaps—if they can't track her directly, they can track the man she left in the motel.

In a moment of desperation, she slides into an abandoned warehouse, knowing she's been spotted, but hoping that she can pass through the building, and lose her pursuit. The room she enters is large and dim and cluttered. She ducks into shadow and begins creeping from storage container to storage container, beneath steel beams and through narrow aisles.

It was in a place like this that Val came roaring into panicked awareness from a past she cannot remember; a past she both fears and longs for.

Behind her, she hears the door creak. Val looks back, through a slit between two containers and sees three people enter the room, dark silhouettes backlit against the day. They move together, nearly soundless through the dim light. They do not speak, but they pull weapons from their coats, and, as they do, Val hears a strange metallic sound that she's heard before, in dreams.

It is the sound of a charging weapon.

She does not know how she knows, but she knows.

She crouches in the shadow of a dark plastic crate, her breathing shallow and silent, the balls of her feet and her fingertips pressed against the grit of cool cement. She doesn't move.

From another door, another group enters. Four people. They are *not* quiet.

"Vala," someone calls, unwisely advertising his location. "Vala, it's me, Daniel."

She bites down on her lip, her expression cracking beneath the pressure of unvocalized indecision. She cannot answer. She *will not* answer.

Don't speak, she advises him. *You're not the only ones here*.

She holds her position and listens as both teams fan out, one seeking, the other stalking. Soon, very soon, they will encounter one another. That will be her chance, likely her only chance, to make it out of this building.

"Colonel Carter," a man shouts in unmistakable warning.

The air over her head erupts with gunfire and energy discharges and she flinches, even though she was ready for the deafening reports of projectiles ricocheting off metal and cement, for the high pitched whine of charging capacitors. She begins backtracking shot trajectories to map out the locations of the two teams in the warehouse, trying to plot the course she will take to the back wall, where she hopes to find an exit.

A gun slides across the cement and comes to rest near her left hand. She picks it up. One can never have too many guns.

She begins to weave across the cluttered room, staying low, staying silent, staying out of sight, working her way free. She is nearly at her destination when she's stopped by a man who's approaching the same door she's approaching from a different direction and who speeds up, but speeds up only to *get in front of her*, to put himself between her and the exit.

Val snaps her gun up, sighting down the barrel straight at the man's left eye. He's holding a weapon that curves in his hand like a snake. His expression is held to neutral in a way that suggests a deep and terrible strain. His glasses are dark-rimmed and square, his eyes behind them are shot through with red.

"Drop it," Val says, quietly, evenly. Everything gone but the steel core of who she is.

They look at one another. He doesn't say *anything*. He just looks at her. He looks at her and he *sees* her. Even though they're on the opposite ends of guns, sighting down different barrels at one another, he's not watching *her hand*, he's not watching her *finger* on the *trigger*, he's not attending to movement, to the soft focus of his peripheral vision, he's looking right at her and he's seeing more than she's *ever* seen in the mornings in the mirror. This is the face of someone who *knows* her. She can feel her expression fracturing along small, terrible lines in her own uncertainty. She readjusts her grip on her gun and puts her resolution back into her shoulders with a small, vicious postural adjustment.

He nods, just a little bit at whatever he sees in her face, in her change of stance. Slowly he angles his weapon away from her and then puts it down.

"Step aside," she demands.

He does not step aside.

"Step aside," Val says again, "or I *will* shoot you."

"You won't," he says.

Already, she is terrified that he is right about that.

She shakes her head, adjusts her stance, adjusts her grip, blinks her eyes, clenches her jaw, and says, "you don't know that," with all the steel that Val has in her hands and throat and heart.

"Yes," he says, like he's pouring assurance into the air. "I do."

And he's just standing there, just *standing there*, facing down her gun, *ignoring* her gun with a calm assurance she's sure she's never felt. Not one time in her remembered and unremembered life. No one should be so brazenly confident about the heart or head of another person. But maybe he's not. Maybe he's ready to die. Maybe that's his secret. To leave, she will have to shoot him. He's made that the price of the door.

Val grits her teeth and shakes her head.

"If I let you go," he says, his hands still up, his voice still low, "I know you're going to make yourself disappear."

She shakes her head again, her hair flying out of her face and falling back, her shoulders losing their tension and then regaining it. She could shoot him, she can shoot him, she *will* shoot him, just in the shoulder, not in the eye, not in the heart. He'll be fine. He'll be fine and she'll be free. She shifts her aim from his eye to his shoulder to his thigh and back to his shoulder. Back to his eye.

"You've been running so long, it's almost second nature to you," he continues.

She thinks, wildly and bizarrely of Krycek—of a fictional man in a fictional world who has felt like her only friend for weeks. The firefight rages behind her and all she has to do to be free is just squeeze the trigger beneath her right index finger. Just one time. A short, sharp pull.

"You don't remember it," the man in glasses says, "but you made a decision to stop running."

No one makes a decision to stop running. The long run is *all there is*, that's *life*, running and running and running to stay clear, to stay ahead of the wolves at heel, to die reaching for places where no one had ruined anything, where the water and the air are unpoisoned and her name is unknown.

"It's over," he says.

It *isn't* over. It isn't *over*. She wants to scream at him; she wants to kill him; she wants to shove her way past him and run toward the daylight beyond the doorframe.

"Now it's time to come home," he says, the final words fraying into an uncertainty that matches her own.

Her gun dips.

Her gun comes back up.

Daniel runs the final few steps to the elevator, as Vala reaches out a hand to stop the door from closing. She smiles at him and he smiles back, dropping his eyes and looking down in a manner that strikes her as strangely shy, coming, as it does, from a man who is never at a loss for words, from a man who had carried her into the light of Celestis, city of evil, after pulling her free of iron chains and lifting her off a stone bench beneath a gray sky.

The sound of the firefight behind her fades down into silence.

"Daniel?" she whispers, in a blend of relief and horror, her weapon drifting laterally as it comes down. He steps forward, dropping his hands, taking her gun, pulling her into an embrace that she is too overcome to return. After a time, she hears the sound of quiet steps, feels the pressure of eyes on the back of her neck. Daniel nods at someone she cannot see and doesn't know.

When he lets her go and she turns around she finds three people facing her, with roving eyes and weapons in their hands. There is a woman with blonde hair; a handsome, muscular man in a hat; and her steel-eyed former hostage, his right hand clamped to his left arm.

"Vala?" the woman says.

"Hello, beautiful," Val whispers, wiping her eyes. "Do I know you?"

"Yeah," the woman says, smiling an adorable, tiny smile. "You do. Or, you will, once you get your memories back. I'm Sam. Sam Carter."

"Are you an alien too?" Vala asks her with as much dry confidence as she can muster.

"That would be Teal'c," Daniel says, looking from her to the man standing beside Sam.

Teal'c removes his hat, and on his forehead a gold symbol gleams in the light that streams in from the door behind her.

"Oh," Val says weakly. "Hello."

Teal'c inclines his head.

"Did I or did I not tell you that we were teammates," her former hostage says, giving her an amused look. "Mitchell? Does that ring a bell? Cam? Colonel? You're my *wing-woman*, for crying out loud. But does any of that even register? No. Of course it's *Jackson* you remember."

"I see you found your pants," Val replies, lifting her eyebrows. "Who's Jackson?"

"That would be me," Daniel says. "Daniel Jackson."

"Ah," she says. "Right."

They leave the building in a group. The four of them cluster around her without speaking, arranging themselves like points on a compass as they escort her toward a collection of waiting cars with quiet, flashing lights. She tenses instinctively, but Daniel puts a hand on her shoulder and says, "it's okay," so quietly that she doesn't think anyone else has heard him, even grouped as closely as they are.

When they arrive at the waiting police line a group of uniformed personnel surge forward, but they stop when Sam says "back it up, people," her hands up and out. "Back it up. This completes a classified Air Force operation, you're all going to need to come this way and fill out some forms."

It is Teal'c, his hat back in place, who leads them to a car—black, with government plates.

"You can drive?" Val asks him, squinting into the sun. "I thought you were—you know," she leans in to whisper, "an extra-terrestrial?"

Daniel laughs.

"It was Daniel Jackson who taught me to drive," Teal'c replies.

"It was also Daniel Jackson who taught *you* to drive," Daniel says. "Daniel Jackson has a low index of self preservation and so teaches *all* the aliens to drive. You want to take us back to the base?"

"Oh," Val says, surprised, reassured, relieved that he trusts her enough to make the suggestion, given that she had locked one of her teammates to a hotel room bed in his underwear only hours before.

"You are an excellent driver," Teal'c says, offering her the keys.

"Well if you say so," Val replies, taking them. She unlocks the car and slides into the front seat. Teal'c opens the back door and Daniel rounds the hood to take shotgun.

Val starts the car, and follows their directions until she hits the throughway, accelerating smoothly, the afternoon sun flitting through trees, the road winding in front of her towards the distant mountains.

"So," Val says, into the strange and promising silence. "How've you two been?"

Daniel laughs, once, in a pained, short exhalation and when she glances away from the road he is looking at her, his eyes red, a bit too bright and she knows then that she *must* have loved him because she loves him now, so much, more, she thinks, than she's ever loved anything, but she can't be sure, and she doesn't know if he knows, so she says nothing, she just smiles at him and opens the sun roof in the top of this car that isn't hers.

Daniel tips his head back as the wind lifts pieces of his hair. "Oh, you know," he says. "Same old, same old. Holding up the cracking edifice until the day we die."

"I cannot disagree," Teal'c adds.

"Sounds right," Val says.

"Does it?" Daniel replies.

"Yes," Val says.

"How much do you remember?" Daniel asks.

"More and more," Val replies, speaking slowly. "I remember a dark haired boy under trees with narrow leaves. The sound of my mother's voice. A pool full of white flowers. I remember being buried alive. I remember being burned alive. A lover with glowing eyes. A little girl who grew too fast. You, in an elevator."

Teal'c laughs at that, brief and unexpected and short.

"What's so funny, muscles?" Val asks.

"Wait. Me? Me in an *elevator*?" Daniel says, before Teal'c can reply, looking at her incredulously.

"You were smiling at me," Val says. "I think we were having a moment."

"Indeed," Teal'c says, like a man confronted with a long expected revelation.

Daniel shifts and looks out the window.

Val grins at the road in front of her. "Does any of this make sense to you?" she asks.

"All of it makes sense," Daniel says.

"Good," Val replies. "I can't wait for it to make sense to me as well."

"Vala," Daniel says, giving her name the slow momentum of a warning, "we can help you get your memories back, but I—I think it will be—difficult."

"Difficult how?" Val asks.

"Mentally difficult," Daniel says. "Emotionally difficult."

"That's all right," Val decides, the sun on her face and the wind in her hair and a wheel under her hands. She thinks she remembers driving through space, where there is no friction, where stars streak into lines.

"No, it's not," Daniel says.

"What I mean is that I don't mind," Val clarifies, glancing at him.

Daniel looks pained. "We're going to have to do it—as soon as possible. As soon as you're medically cleared. Today, even."

"All right," Val says.

"Because there's another person missing. Another person who went missing the same night you did. We're trying to find him as well."

"All right," Val says.

"It would be better if you had some time to recover. Some time to adjust."

"What's to adjust?" Val asks. "Everything will be new, until it isn't anymore."

Daniel says nothing, but he still looks unhappy.

Teal'c is silent.

"Can I ask you something?" Val says, looking again at Daniel.

"Of course," he replies.

"How did you know what to say?" Val asks. "So that I wouldn't go?"

"Knowing what to say is pretty much my only talent," Daniel replies, smiling, not answering her question. "Don't tell anyone."

Val asks the same question again, but this time in a different way. "I belong here? With you?"

"Yeah," Daniel says. "You do."

Teal'c taps her gently on the shoulder with a pair of sunglasses. Val slips them on with a single hand and drives through cool air, beneath changing leaves.

Chapter Fifty Three

Young woke with his alarm at ass o'clock in the morning. The sun was just beginning to backlight the mountains in the blue-gold of a Colorado sunrise. He hauled himself out of bed, slow and resolute, and stood at his window, staring at the distant rise of the Front Range. He felt sluggish, like the hot deadweight of the summer was still tied around his neck. He'd be dragging August like a cross for months and months to come. He wondered how the hell Jackson did it. Did *any* of it. Young could barely get himself out of bed.

There was an unsettling complexity that was emerging out of the shredded nest of his settling memories. A strange, double overlay of David Telford the traitorous, murderous, duplicitous fucking bastard—and a David Telford who had needed to be saved, and who hadn't been. Who, now, probably wouldn't ever be. It was a hard idea to parse. Young hadn't quite gotten to the point where he could bring it up with Mackenzie in their weekly sessions, hadn't quite gotten to the point where he was ready to brave asking Jackson about it. He'd said something to Cam when the man had given him a ride home from an SG-1 che'swings night. "You ever feel like maybe we let him down?" Young had asked. Cam had looked back at him, flint-eyed, and had said, "No. Don't you go thinking that. Don't you *ever* fucking think that. Not *you*. Not about *him*. You got that? Get it out of your head." Young had nodded. He'd emailed J Shep the same question. J Shep had replied: *Yah. Probably. Want to come to Pegasus? I could request your ass. Want to come for a weekend? I could volunteer to run another one of Jackson's Bullshitting Your Local Pseudo-Deity Workshops and put your name on the invite list. I'm getting good at the art of Le Bullshit.*

Sorry, Young had replied. *I've got a Fields medalist to find.*

You get on that then, Shep had written. *I owe that guy a coffee date and a tour of Atlantis.*

And so, here Young was, halfway through October, trying to get enough momentum to make it to base by a respectable oh eight thirty to meet his new command, which currently consisted of Ginn of the Sixth House, also known as the Piece of Work who had nearly killed Sam Carter. "You'll like her," Jackson had said, when he dropped off the scanty paperwork on all the fruitless leads they'd tracked down in pursuit of Rush. Somehow Young doubted he was going to get along all that well with a member of Kiva's crew. Call it a hunch.

Young slogged his way through the mire of the morning—shower, breakfast, coffee, and finally, the fatigues that felt like a lie, that felt like a *farce*, because with all the shit he'd put his back through, with his less than exemplary recent commitment to physical therapy, he was gonna be riding a desk for the rest of his career. Unless some kind of miracle happened. Just as he was ready to leave, his phone buzzed, Jackson's number flashing up, gray on black.

"Jackson," Young said.

"*Daniel*," Jackson corrected.

"Yeah yeah," Young replied. "Hey."

"Hey," Jackson said, practically vibrating with something he couldn't wait to spill. "We have a lead on Vala. Not far. A few hours from here. We're leaving now."

"Great." Young tried to muster some genuine enthusiasm out of the sludge in his head.

"I think this is it. I think this is the one. A local detective picked up an unidentified woman who took down two guys trying to hold up a diner. She goes by Val—and there's a picture. It's her. It's *her*. It's definitely her. I mean, it's her. I *think* it's her? I'm pretty sure it's her. It's her."

Young shot his front door a look of skeptical optimism. "Hope so, Jackson."

The man made a strangled, exasperated sound. "It's *DANIEL*." And with that, Jackson hung up on him.

Young snorted and pocketed his phone. He pulled the bag of classified files over his shoulder, opened the door, then felt his phone buzz again. This time it was Mitchell.

"Jackson beat you," Young said.

"What? God *damn* he's speedy," Mitchell said. "I think he likes you better than me."

"I feel like I'm on your team," Young said. "Why are you guys calling me?"

"Didn't I tell you? October is Adopt A Miserable Colonel month and we picked you."

"Great. Thanks."

"I'll keep you posted. Enjoy your first day back. Sorry I won't be around to take you to lunch."

"Don't worry about it. Go collect your missing con artist."

"That's the plan," Mitchell said.

Walking through the halls of the SGC felt surreal, as though September had hollowed him out and left him the rind of the guy he thought he'd been. He cut a too-memorable figure with the combination of fatigues and cane. Heads turned. Gazes tracked him down the hall. But maybe it wasn't the fatigue/cane combo. Maybe it whatever was hanging on the grapevine with his name on it. If so, it was a good bet that it was more suited to making vinegar than making wine. But who the hell could tell, with Jackson growing his goodnatured way into the heart of the damned place. Or, maybe, out of the heart of it.

He avoided his new office on level eighteen, and went to find Harriman, who could always be counted on for businesslike neutrality. The general's aide was at his desk, rather than in the gateroom. When Young tapped on his doorframe, Harriman stood and fired off a salute that Young returned halfheartedly, in the style of Jack O'Neill.

"Colonel," Harriman said.

Young nodded at him.

"Good to see you up and around."

"And out of a holding cell," Young said dryly.

"That too," Harriman said, deadpan. "What can I do for you, colonel?"

"I'm looking for the LA defector," Young said, shifting his weight to favor his left side.

Harriman nodded. "Just a moment—I'll find out where she's quartered." There was a brief flurry of keys. "Level sixteen."

"Sixteen," Young said. "In a holding cell? I thought she was on a Teal'c style reintegration program."

"Her threat level is still listed as 'Moderate'," Harriman said. "Teal'c didn't defect in the midst of a foothold."

Young shrugged. "Fair enough, I guess," he said, already feeling for her a little bit, against his better judgment and against his own bias. "But who else is up there, Harriman?"

"Ba'al," Harriman said, the words landing like an apology. "A Ba'al and—Nerus."

Young stood in the doorway, his expression neutral, regarding Harriman in silence until he said, "Yup. Okay then."

The lockdown on level sixteen was about as depressing as Young had expected. The defector was assigned to one of the *nicer* cells, meaning it had a desk and a bed and a

lamp and bathroom with a closing door. Still, it wasn't much to look at. No windows, no TV, and smack between Nerus and a clone of Ba'al. Pretty much worst case scenario for a former Lucian Alliance operative. Young was sure it kept Nerus and Ba'al from trading too much escalating rhetoric, and probably left the security personnel with a bit less of a headache.

Still. The kid, and she *was* a kid—probably early twenties at the outside, maybe even still in her teens—looked miserable. Pale, stressed, with flat red hair plastered to her head, dressed in an oversized set of fatigues, hunched over the desk, her brow furrowed as she stared at a computer. Young looked at her, trying to hang onto the shadow of his evaporating grudge. *You'll like her*, Jackson had said.

"I see you're a *colonel*," the Ba'al clone said archly, lounging against the back wall of his cell. "Pleased to make your acquaintance. I presume you've come to—"

"Ah! A *colonel*," Nerus thundered from two cells down. "Colonel, *colonel*, tell me, what is your name?"

"None of your business," Young said.

"His name is Young," Ba'al informed Nerus, reading the name off Young's fatigues.

The defector looked up at the name, her dark eyes meeting his and then dropping away. An LA convention. A show of respect.

"Colonel Young! Your reputation precedes you. Not the same Colonel Young who—" Nerus paused, evidently trying to recall any great deeds that might be ascribed to 'Colonel Young' and coming up short. "Well I've certainly heard of you. I *must* know—has your storied General seen fit to—"

"*Quiet*, you loathsome excuse for—" Ba'al shouted back at him.

Young did his best to tune the pair of them out. "Hey kid," he said, leaning on his cane just outside the defector's cell.

"Hello," she said, lifting her eyes again.

"How's your English?" he asked her.

"I'm fluent," she replied, with only a trace of a goa'uld accent.

"What's your name?"

"Ginn," she said. "I am Houseless."

He smiled faintly at her. "Ginn Houseless, huh?"

She nodded. "We are to work together? I have been monitoring radio waves. I have prepared an electronic document for you describing my progress according to a template provided by Colonel Carter."

"I read it."

"Did you find it acceptable?" she asked.

"Of course he didn't, shol've," Ba'al said, spitting at her, the saliva vanishing in a haze of blue energy at the periphery of his cell.

Young shot Ba'al an unimpressed look, then turned back to the defector. "Ginn," he said. "This is bullshit."

"You do not wish to work with me," she said. "Because I was of Sixth House."

"What?" Young said. "Well, yeah, look I'll admit, Sixth is probably my least favorite house, and yes, you shot one of everyone's favorite Colonels, so we'll probably never be—"

"The *hubris*," Ba'al said, providing a running commentary. "The sheer unmitigated *gall*. To attack the legendary Samantha Carter. And *look* at her. She's not even beautiful. She can't even claim *that* as justification."

"Pay him no mind, my dear," Nerus began, "I find you quite—"

Young turned to Nerus. "Will you *shut up*?" He turned back to Ginn, pointing backwards over his shoulder with a thumb. "That? Right there? *That* is what I mean by 'bullshit'."

"Oh," Ginn said. "Yes. There is a lot of bullshit in this place."

Young gave her a hint of a smile. "Then again, I may like you yet, kid. You're lucky Carter made it."

"I know," Ginn replied solemnly.

"I'll be back," Young said, pressing a hand against the aching muscles to the left of his spine.

"But I haven't—"

"Hold that thought," Young said. "You keep doing your thing."

Young turned, ignoring the comments of Ba'al Version Whatever Point Oh and Nerus' pleas for an improved prison dining experience. He walked out past the security checkpoint, leaned against the cement wall, took some weight off his left side, and called Jackson.

"Hey," Jackson said, sounding harried. "What's up."

"How's it going?" Young asked.

"Well, not *great*. We think the Trust beat us to Vala and managed to abduct her by impersonating Sam. Mitchell just commandeered a motorcycle. So, yeah. That's where *we* are. How's your day."

"Are you serious?" Young asked, over the sound of screeching tires.

"Ohhhhh how I wish I weren't, but yes. We're tracking Mitchell via SGC dispatch who's relaying with the Odyssey which is scanning for his transponder signal. Oh my *god*, Teal'c, you can't drive this thing like an X-302! It's a suburban. Why does the NID—you know what? Never mind. Everett? You still there?"

"Yeah, so I'm gonna call you back later," Young said. "Good luck with all that."

"No no," Jackson said, like a man interrupted in the midst of an email rather than a car chase. "Did you need something?"

"The name of that terrifying IOA lady you love so much? I need some leverage to get the defector into a new living situation."

"Wray," Jackson said. "Camile Wray. In fact, go to her *first*. I've been meaning to do it ever since they moved Ginn from medical. She needs the Tau'ri rehab plan."

"Did you know they stuck her in a cell on level sixteen right between Ba'al and Nerus?"

"They did *what*?" Jackson shouted right in his ear. "Who did that. *Who*. That's hazing. That's—that's worse than hazing. How old is she? You get a *name*. You get *Wray* to get you a name. This is unacceptable. Sam. *Sam*. Have you been to level sixteen? To see Ginn?"

Carter said something that Young couldn't hear. "Sam hasn't been up there. They meet on nineteen. Sam doesn't go to sixteen because—"

"Yeah okay, Jackson, I don't need the *War and Peace* version of the story. You go chase down Mitchell—the defector's gonna be off sixteen by the end of the day, if not before."

"Great. This means I can *live with myself* for the next fifteen minutes or so," Jackson replied. "Y'know. Until *the next* phone call. Ugh she's been with *Nerus*? Nerus and *Ba'al*? I can't take this. I'm gonna go." He hung up the phone.

"Bye," Young said.

"Colonel Young." Camile Wray stood and walked around her desk to offer him her hand. "Nice to meet you." She was a petite, square-shouldered woman with low heels, long hair, and a neat desk that displayed a picture of her and a young Irish woman, both of them grinning into the camera. They looked like they were on a beach somewhere far from Colorado Springs. Wray pulled out a chair for him, shut the door to her office, and then took the seat next to him, rather than the one across the desk.

"Thanks for seeing me on such short notice," Young said, dropping gingerly into the chair.

"You said it was urgent," Wray replied, smoothing her skirt and crossing her legs at the ankle.

"Jackson said you were the person to go to with this. It's not an emergency exactly, but I have something of a mess on my hands, and I think I'm going to need help fixing it."

"Daniel sent you?" Wray asked, her eyebrows lifting.

"Yup," Young said.

"I owe him—more than a favor," Wray said.

"Doesn't everyone?" Young asked.

Wray smiled, tight and wry. "Probably. How can I help you, Colonel."

"Are you familiar with the LA defector we've got on base?"

"Mmm," Wray said, knitting her brow. "Shot Colonel Carter; named—Jenn?"

"Close," Young said. "Ginn."

Wray nodded. "Technically, I work in HR, but I'm also part of the IOA. We approved her request for amnesty on base. To my knowledge, she hasn't been issued an integration protocol yet. I haven't met with her. No one's requested that I do so—normally we get a military go-ahead and preliminary threat assessment before HR takes any action."

"Yeah," Young said. "So, she just got assigned to my command, effective as of this morning. It's a little bit of an unusual situation. A two-man detail. We're both technically consultants rather than acting in a military capacity. I went to meet her, and found out she's in one of the nicer holding cells on level sixteen."

"Hmm," Wray said, frowning. "That's not an acceptable long-term—"

"Oh it's not acceptable in the *short* term," Young said. "Not sure if you have the security clearance for this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. She's quartered smack between a clone of Ba'al and the goa'uld Nerus. It's an open floor plan. In the five minute span I

was in there they were harassing her pretty much non-stop. I also think it's possible she might be a minor."

"*What,*" Wray breathed.

"We don't have an age on her—I doubt she knows it herself. The LA isn't big on birthdays."

"And you think there's reasonable suspicion that she might be less than eighteen?"

"She looks like a kid," Young said. "She's probably seen more than her fair share of the ugly side of this galaxy, but if it gets her out of that cell, then yeah. Sure. I think she could be less than eighteen."

Wray stood up and paced a short line, one hand on her hip, then sat back down. "All right," she said. "Moving quickly on this is going to be a logistical nightmare, but what we can do is take her out of her current situation and then throw up a barrier to putting her back in. So—in terms of literally getting her off level sixteen right now, for, say, a meeting with me, what would we need in terms of authorization and security?"

"She's currently classified a Moderate Threat, Low Flight risk, so—two Airmen as a security escort and a formal meeting request," Young said.

"Who approves the request?" Wray asked.

"Well," Young said, opening a hand, "even though it's not a traditional command, technically, I'm the CO for this two-man team—so I can approve your request to meet with her."

"Great," Wray said, standing to move back around her desk. "I will send you the obligatory form right now. Do you call up to sixteen, or shall I?"

"You do it," Young said. "I'll go get her. Give me, maybe, fifteen minutes of lead time. Seeing as we're trying to railroad the people paid to keep this place compliant with Federal CYA paperwork I'm not sure I want just any two Airmen, if you get my drift."

"I'd feel more comfortable if you wouldn't phrase things—quite that way, colonel," Wray said, her nails clicking against keys as she blazed through a form.

Young shrugged, wincing as he got to his feet. "What can I say? I've been spending too much time with Jackson."

Wray shot him a dry look. "Sent," she said.

"You're speedy," Young said, pulling out his phone. He authorized her request with a virtual signature. "Done. I'll see you back here in half an hour or so."

Young found the duty officer and scanned through the day's roster, looking for the sergeant he'd met in August, who'd come up through the internal military track and had helped Rush and McKay break a DHD. He scanned through the Gs, hoping the man hadn't already been assigned to a gate team—but he was in luck. Greer, Ronald. On base security detail. Perfect. The kid was working nights this month. That wasn't so perfect, but Young wasn't about to let that stop him. "I'm going to need to pull this guy in," Young said to the duty officer, tapping Greer's name. "Can you swap some shifts around—free him up for a few days?"

The duty officer was evidently not happy about this request, but it got done all the same. Young entered the sergeant's contact information into his phone, and left the office. He didn't go far. Just outside the door he leaned against the wall, clamped a hand to his back, wished vainly for his couch and a dangerously high dose of NSAIDs, and called Greer. The man didn't answer until the fourth ring, and it was obvious he'd been sleeping.

"Sergeant Greer," Young said. "Sorry to wake you. This is Colonel Everett Young. We met in August."

"Yes, sir," Greer said, his diction sharpening. "Storm from hell. I remember."

"Good," Young said. "Sergeant, I just switched your duty roster. You're off nights and paired up with me for a few days. Nothing exciting, but I'm organizing a little bit of an—unusual security detail."

"Yes, sir," Greer said again.

"You happen to know anyone on the day shift with a good poker face? Maybe one of the recruits who came up with you?"

"There's a lieutenant who's on days," Greer said. "Name of James. She can play it close to the chest like no one I've ever seen."

"What's her first name?" Young asked.

"Vanessa," Greer said. "She came up internal, same as I did."

"She's on base now?"

"Should be," Greer replied.

"Okay. Haul ass down here, sergeant, but eat something first. Could be a long day."

"Understood," Greer said.

"Meet us on level eighteen," Young said. "The converted storage closet across from the Linguistics Library."

"I'll be there in twenty," Greer replied.

Young had been studiously avoiding his new "office" on level eighteen, where about half the civilian consultants had their space. Young had never been much of a desk jockey in the past, so, like Mitchell, he'd had a desk in a broom closet on level twenty-five that he used only for the bureaucratic side of his job. He'd been primarily in the field, first on a gate team, then prepping for undercover placement with the LA, then—well, the past few months had been a disaster. Best to just leave it at that.

It was Jackson, of course, who had cleaned out the storage space and gotten someone to shove some desks and bookshelves into the thing. When Young unlocked the door and flipped on the lights, he found himself faced with a large, open room, containing two desks, a central table, and a dry-erase board. The place was *lined* with bookshelves. There was a section that seemed to be devoted to ancient Mesopotamia, a section for English translations of myths from various cultures, and, perplexingly, a bookshelf in which every book was shelved backwards—pages toward the room, spine concealed from view. Young frowned and pulled out one of the books. It was titled: *Principles in Effective Cross Civilization Conversations (Volume 3): Apparently Omnipotent Entities in Theory and Practice by Dr. Daniel Jackson*. Young snorted. "Poor Jackson," he murmured, and replaced the book.

He dragged the most comfortable chair in the room to the least expansive desk, and sat down. Sitting wasn't *any easier* on his back, but it was, at least, a different kind of pain. He shifted, uncomfortable. He thought about texting Mitchell, but decided against it. It sounded like SG-1 was right in the thick of things. Best to leave them to it. God but he hoped they found Vala. What was it Jackson had said? She'd been brought in for taking down two guys trying to hold up a diner? Young shook his head. He couldn't see her blowing her cover for anything. But then, if Jackson was right, and she didn't remember who she was—well, then maybe her instincts might give her away.

He didn't think they were going to get so lucky with Rush. Despite Jackson's almost delusional levels of optimism, Young couldn't bring himself to actually believe that the man was walking around on terra firma without his memory. Odds were good that he was dead, or with David—wherever the hell David was—and the LA chatter that Ginn was chasing was just that. Chatter. Sinister static from cloaked, hovering insurgents. He and Ginn would probably turn up something useful, but Young doubted it was going to be an amnestic mathematician.

He picked up the phone and dialed Wray, to give her a time-table on retrieving Ginn. She thanked him and told him she'd already started an abbreviated draft of an Integration Protocol that she hoped to push through the military liaison to the HR department and straight to General Landry by the end of the day. After ending the call, he tried to figure when exactly it was gonna be that the shit hit the fan, and *which* shit was going to hit first. Because there were two options—shit from personnel about a possible minor being quartered in an open floorplan with the galaxy's most depraved goa'uld versus shit about a Lucian Alliance operative on a reintegration plan on the heels of the SGC's most damaging information leak. He had the feeling that the latter shit was going to hit first, but the former shit was going to last longer, and cause more of a mess for whomever it was who'd stuck the poor kid in there.

James showed up around ten hundred hours. He could see a trace of anxiety in the formal neutrality of her expression, her stance, the disciplined lines of her gaze—but only a trace. She saluted sharply.

"At ease, Lieutenant," Young said, returning the salute. "Where'd the duty officer pull you from?"

"Level twenty-four," she replied. "I was stationed at the MALP bay."

"We guard MALPs now?" Young asked, with a sympathetic grimace. "Sounds boring."

"No sir," James said.

"You know Sergeant Greer? He says you have a good poker face."

"Sir?" James said.

"And he wasn't wrong. Take a seat, Lieutenant. I pulled the pair of you for a special assignment. Should only last a few days."

James chose a chair from the table and dragged it across from Young's shit desk. She sat down, still uncomfortable, still trying to hide it.

"Greer should be here soon," Young said. "I pulled him out of bed. Where were you before you came up through the internal track?"

"Special Forces," James said.

"Guarding MALPs has got to feel like a step down," Young replied. "When will you be up for a gate team?"

"I'm not sure, sir," James said. "I was actually—I was assigned to the Icarus Base. All set to ship out with the next group, pending command approval. But they didn't send any of us. In fact, I think they brought some people back."

Young nodded and shut his eyes briefly. "That they did. The project's in a holding pattern at the moment, lieutenant."

"I heard you were slated to be the CO," James said cautiously.

"I was." Young saw no point in denying the rumor. "But at the moment, I'm CO of this room right here. Looks like you ended up under my command anyway. For today, at least."

"Yes sir," James said.

There was a soft knock on the doorframe, and Greer walked forward and saluted. Young returned the salute and waved a hand in the direction of the chairs. Greer pulled one from the table and took a seat beside James.

"This is not a tough assignment," Young said. "It's not going to be all that interesting. But—it could become a little bit bureaucratically uncomfortable. Just so you're clear on the chain of command here, I'm reporting directly to General Landry at the moment, which means he's the only one who can give you an order that countermands mine. Landry or another general who has more stars on his shoulders. Got that?"

He got a pair of yessirs in response.

"What we're going to do is pull a LA defector out of her cell on Level sixteen. You two will be acting as a security escort. She's classified as a moderate threat risk, but do me a favor and don't tackle her if she straightens her shirt or stops to tie her shoe or something."

They nodded at him, and he continued. "We're going to take her to an HR office. She's going to sit there for however long it takes to get her status changed from 'Moderate Threat' to 'Negligible Threat.' Could be a while. But we're not taking her back to that cell, unless you hear differently from me, or from someone who ranks me. The rest of it, we'll play by ear."

"Understood," Greer said.

"Yes sir." James nodded.

"Am I meeting with Colonel Carter?" Ginn asked, when he showed up again, this time with Greer and James flanking him.

"Something like that," Young replied. "Come on, kid. Bring your laptop and anything else you've got."

"I don't have anything else," Ginn said, clearly anxious

"Guess not," Young said, looking around her bare cell.

"Colonel," Nerus called. "Colonel, surely you can be prevailed upon to—"

"No talking," Greer snapped.

"No *talking*," Nerus thundered. "No talking? Do you have any notion of my *importance*, little warrior?"

"Of course he doesn't," Ba'al said, the picture of indolence as he watched Ginn shut her laptop and draw it close to her chest. "You're taking the *girl*? She can tell you *nothing*. She's not even warrior class. She's science class, and the Alliance has certainly ruined her mind in ensuring her loyalty. She's a viper in the guise of a child, she—"

"We get it," Young said. "Thanks, buddy."

"*You* are quite the beauty," Nerus said, reaching a hand toward James and getting a shock from the forcefield just inside the bars for his trouble. "But your cultural norms are most restrictive. Why do you wear your hair pulled so tightly?"

"Get lost, creep," James said.

"An idiom! How charming! What is a 'creep' and how should one best be lost?"

Greer stepped forward with an impressively hostile expression, but Young tapped him on the shoulder and shook his head. Then he turned and started for the door, leaning heavily on his cane. Ginn followed close behind, with Greer and James flanking her. As they headed toward the elevators, Young looked back over his shoulder to nod at James. "When your shift ends," he said, "you write that shithead up."

"Yes sir," she said.

It wasn't until they had arrived in Wray's office, Greer and James taking positions just outside the open door, Ginn in a chair next to Young, Wray behind her computer at her desk, that Young finally turned his attention to doing some kind of repair job on the kid's past few weeks.

"I am—really sorry about all of this," he said.

"Why?" Ginn whispered, her face pale, her eyes dark and deep set and watchful.

"That was a *terrible*—well look, you never should have been down there. You're not going back, okay? Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Are you going to execute me?" Ginn whispered.

"*What?*" Wray and Young snapped, horrified and simultaneous.

"No," Wray said emphatically. "No. We are going to find you a nicer room, and we are going to—to help you adjust to life as a Tau'ri. Someone will take you shopping at some point. There's a series of videos—um, you probably don't know what I mean by that. We're going to help you."

"A *nicer* room?" Ginn said, evidently suspicious. "But I live—where you keep your enemies. I am of the Alliance."

"Are you?" Young asked mildly.

"No," Ginn whispered.

"No," Young repeated. "No you're not. And either way, you don't belong down there with two of the assholes who've been oppressing your people for the last ten thousand years. People like you we invite to become of the Tau'ri, if that's what they want."

"You allow them choose?" Ginn asked. "They *choose* to be Tau'ri? And then they are?"

"Yeah," Young said. "It's a Tau'ri thing. If you choose to be *with* us, then you are *of* us."

"There are others?" Ginn said, her eyebrows lifting, her expression opening up like the kid she was.

"Yes," Wray said, smiling at her. "Yes, there are others. Teal'c, a Jaffa, was the first. You might have heard of him. He has quite a reputation. Many others have lived with us and worked with us, just as you've already begun to do."

"This is dangerous for you," Ginn pointed out. "It is unwise from the perspective of governance."

"Yeah," Young said. "It's gotten us into trouble."

Wray, barely able to hide her enthusiasm said, "we actually have a group that meets to discuss theories of governance. Our system is—different from what you know, but it has its own strengths. Perhaps you'd like to come to a meeting and share your perspective?"

Ginn looked warily at Wray.

"Yeah, or you can think that one over, kiddo," Young said. "It's going to seem less weird than it sounds in about two weeks. Our point is—you wouldn't be the first person we've taken onto our team. Into our House."

"I shot Samantha Carter," Ginn said.

"Yeah," Young said. "We noticed. But, fortunately, she lived and so she could tell us how you helped her reverse the damage to our systems and save the lives of most of the personnel on this base. That's why this offer's on the table."

"So, to become of the Tau'ri, I would do the same work as now, but in a nicer cell and I would watch video footage of your theories of governance?"

Young laughed, short and sharp, pressing a hand to his face. "Pretty much. At least for the next week or so."

"Then what happens?" Ginn asked.

"It gets better," Wray said. "Better and better every week."

"Better?" Ginn echoed, as if she could not imagine any greater luxury than a spartan bedroom and a book club on Congressional Ethics or whatever it was that Wray did with her free time. And maybe she couldn't. She had been a science officer for the Lucian Alliance, an organization not exactly known for their tolerance of independent thought and action.

"One step at a time," Wray said. "Ginn, I'm going to ask you some questions that will help us understand you a little better. Okay? Some of them I'm sure you heard at your debriefing, but that was a different department—or, well, it doesn't matter. I have to ask you some of them again."

"Okay," Ginn said, as if testing out the word.

"Is Ginn your only name?"

"Yes," Ginn said. "My affiliation was of the Sixth House, but now I am of the Tau'ri."

"Atta girl," Young said.

"Okay, so, for paperwork purposes, you will need two names. Did you have a family name before you joined the Alliance?"

"I did not *join*," Ginn said. "I went with them so they would not kill my family."

"Oh," Wray said. "I apologize for speaking insensitively."

Ginn nodded. "Why do Tau'ri need two names?"

"Well—" Wray began, "I suppose we don't, really, but all our systems are built around—"

"It's a convention," Young said. "If you've got two, you fit in. You'll blend better."

Ginn nodded again. "We had no family name," she said.

"Did you have a family occupation?" Wray asked. "What did your family do in your community?"

"My parents operated a machine for grinding grain after the harvest," Ginn said.

Wray smiled in an encouraging way. "On our planet, many people, but certainly not all, take their surnames from the occupations of their ancestors. The surname 'Miller' comes from the grinding of grain. Do you like the sound of that name? Ginn Miller?"

Ginn nodded, but Young shook his head. "No. No way. Last name, first name? It's going to look like Miller's Gin."

"What is 'Miller's Gin'?" Ginn asked.

"A brand of alcohol," Young said.

"Hmm," Wray said, looking amused. "Baker, perhaps? That would be a person who bakes bread once grain has been milled into flour?"

"Is it important to choose the *right* name?" Ginn asked.

"Not as such," Wray said, "but it's going to be with you as you move through our culture. Every day. All the time. Are there any names you've heard that you particularly like? Or any place or object that has a special significance to you?"

"When I was a small child," Ginn said tentatively, "I fixed broken tools. Broken machines. After the Alliance came to our world they burned all the crops and forced us to plant Kassa. In that season, the season that they came, there was no harvest. In return for food for my family, I offered to repair a tel'tak for the Alliance. When they left, they took me with them. I have worked on ships since that time."

"Keeler, then," Wray said. "On our world, it means boat-builder."

"A boat is a starship that goes over the water?" Ginn asked.

"You got it," Young said.

"Ginn Keeler," Wray said. "I like it. Do you like it, Ginn?"

Ginn nodded, and Wray typed something into her computer screen.

"Next question—how old are you?"

"I've seen almost three Times."

Wray looked at Young. He did some mental math. "It means she's probably somewhere around twenty, give or take maybe four years. The LA doesn't have a standard of time across all houses—they operate in named block intervals that tick over with major events."

"Okay," Wray said. "Ginn, on this planet we measure time—"

"We know of your timing conventions," Ginn replied.

"Can you estimate how old you are by our conventions?" Wray asked. "You seem like you're somewhere between sixteen and twenty-five, if that helps."

"Twenty?" Ginn said, clearly guessing.

"We'll say seventeen," Wray replied. "Okay, so the next thing you need is a birthday. Did your parents ever tell you what time of year it was when you were born?"

"With the harvest," Ginn said. "It was inconvenient for them."

"Oh," Wray said. "Um, well, it's harvest time right now, more or less. Let's say the twentieth of October. How does that sound?"

"Is the day itself significant?" Ginn asked.

"Well, it just means that next Saturday, you turn eighteen. Do you have any objections to October twentieth?"

"I don't understand—"

"Kid," Young said, breaking in, "this means that as long as you're with us, the Tau'ri people that you know are going to say 'happy birthday' to you on the twentieth day of October every single year. They'll get you a cake, which is kind of like—you know that shaped almond paste the street vendors sell in the First City?"

"Ona'rev?"

"Yeah," Young said. "Kind of like that. They're going to stick little wax sticks in it and light them on fire."

"So—six days from now, I will get a burning cake?" Ginn asked.

"Yes," Wray replied. "The HR department provides all Integrating Persons with a cake on their birthday. You blow out the little wax sticks, and your friends sing you a song."

"Oh," Ginn replied.

"Welcome to Earth," Young said dryly.

His phone buzzed, once, and he pulled it out to see a message from Mitchell.

::Snagged our girl. Bringing her home.::

Young smiled faintly and returned his phone to his pocket.

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