

The team battles the Hounds of Hell

STARGATE ATLANTIS™



HALCYON

James Swallow

Based on the hit television series created by
Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper

STARGATE
ATLANTIS™

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James Swallow

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STARGATE ATLANTIS™

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For Jo and Dave,
for Adam, Sarah, Sam and Emma
– my favorite Goa'ulds.

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Author's Note:

~~The events depicted in **Halcyon** take place in the second season of **Stargate Atlantis**, between the episodes “Runner” and “The Lost Boys”.~~

CHAPTER ONE

The phenomenon was wholly alien to her. She tried to quantify it, to find an antecedent from her life that could compare. Nothing suggested itself; the sensations churned inside her body, fighting for some form of expression, for a way to get out. They manifested themselves in the motion of her limbs, the powerful pumping of her legs. On some instinctual level, she understood that if she allowed it, the heady rush of these new feelings would overwhelm her, take her beyond rational thought and into a realm of pure, animal reflex. In its own way, it was enticing.

The terrain was difficult and it did not lend itself well to stealthy movement. The rolling gray-white landscape shifted underneath her boots with each footfall, at times putting her off balance and threatening to tip her from her feet. There was little cover from the howling winds that scoured the shallow valley ranged around her. The hard, knobbed growths of stocky trees protruded from the hillside, hunched low against the weather. They were capped with spindly branches in spiked crowns, the thin twigs clattering against each other as the gusts caught them. In the dull light of the planet's sunset, the trees cast strange shadows that jumped and moved. They played tricks on her eyes, suggesting the forms of pursuers when in fact there was nothing there.

She took a moment to rest, her breath panting out of her mouth in chugs of vapor. She pressed herself into the lee of a larger tree and took stock of her situation, desperately ignoring the constant tingle of the new sensations. The chill was nothing to her; she was no stranger to the cold, but the drifts of frozen precipitation were an unpleasant hindrance, dragging at her, slowing her down. Worse still, she left a trail that only the sightless would not have been able to follow. The flakes of snow were falling constantly around her, and she hoped that they would smooth out her footprints before the hunters caught up.

Crouching, she drew her clothing around her, sinking into the shadows. She sniffed the air and attempted to fathom the scents of the planet, sorting them into signals she could understand; but the place was too different, too alien. She would have to rely on other senses to find her way.

She listened for the presence of her fellows and heard nothing. The constant snow coated everything with a layer of heavy silence. She wondered if the stillness was a sign that they had fled, the alternative was something she did not wish to contemplate. In an unconscious gesture of solidarity, she brushed a thin finger over the tribal tattoos visible on the bare skin of her neck; she shared the same pattern there as all of her kindred, and now she touched it as if it were a talisman, a fetish that would keep her safe. The valley snaked away beneath her vantage point, past the blinded windows of the crude township to the north. She knew that salvation lay just beyond that collection of domiciles and sties. If she could just get close enough, then escape was within her grasp. The silver ring was out there, silent and waiting. She knew the symbols for home as well as she knew the faces of her clan. She could keep one step ahead of the strident, foul hunters, if she could make it to the podium at the foot of the ring – then she could call on the device to transport her away from the frozen wasteland. Perhaps that was what the others had done. Yes, she wanted to believe that, she hoped it would be so. It was hard to hold on to that possibility, however; after they had been separated in the first attack, the keening wind had brought her the sounds of sporadic weapons fire and cries of agony.

Her teeth bared, a little in bravado, a little in anger. There was fury mixed in with the strange new feeling, and she clung on to that. Rage was something she could fully understand, something she could take hold of and make her own. There was already a part of her thoughts spinning ideas of vengeance. Once she was safe, she would come back with a dozen, a hundred-

Movement.

She did not dare to breathe. Yes, she was not mistaken. There, coming out from the tree line were three of them in a wary formation, long rifle-like weapons held at their hips, the blunt maws of their guns sweeping the path before them. They were, as far as she could tell, males; but then the creatures all looked alike to her. Two were identical to her eyes, faces concealed behind the black shutters of masks, garbed in clothing that might perhaps have had some military rationale in the hunter hierarchy. The one that led them was clear by the way it moved, a stark arrogance in every step. Even from this far away, she could tell the one in the long dark coat was the leader just from the way the other two showed it deference.

They spoke to one another in guttural, atonal sounds that were hard on her senses. It seemed more like the squealing of animals or the chatter of insects. She felt revulsion at the sight of them, a deep-seated loathing that bubbled up into a snarl in her throat; and there it was once more, the new emotion, coiling at the pit of her stomach. It made her veins sing and her nerves tingle. Her muscles bunched with the need for fight or flight. In that instant she had the measure of it.

Was this... Could this be real *fear*? The roiling flutter in her torso, the pressure against the inside of her ribcage? The novelty of the experience faded like smoke. *No*. She refused to give the creatures such a hold over her, she denied it to them. How dare they have the temerity to strike at her people, what right did they think they had to attack her kindred?

New strength borne of wrath flowed into her, and she rose slowly, keeping the bole of the tree between her body and the three figures. If she kept her silence and let them pass, they would never know she was there, and then she could move on to the ring; but what sort of an epitaph was that for the others, killed – or worse, *captured* – by these freakish beasts?

The weapon tucked into her pocket was only a short-range pistol, its effectiveness reduced to anything but close quarters, and there were three of them, all well armed; but she bared her teeth in a feral smile as she contemplated them. She would leave this frigid world, but before she departed she would pass on a message for these creatures. They were lucky here today, that was all, they had caught her kindred by surprise. She would end the lives of these three in a most bloody manner and do it alone. Then it would be *their* turn to feel fear and jump at the flicker of every shifting shadow.

She drew the gun and coiled her fingers around the knurled grip, taking the weight of it, feeling the warmth as it became active, sensing the threat of imminent violence. She waited until they had drawn past her, listening to them bleat and squawk. Her smile widened as she watched them make their mistake. They were completing the arc of a patrol sweep through the woodlands, and in sight of the village they had relaxed their guard, keeping their eyes off their backs.

You are overconfident, she told them silently, and you will pay for that conceit with your lifeblood.

The anticipation of the attack was sweet, but now she threw off her concealment and leapt into the air, spinning into a jump that brought her down right behind them.

The two masked ones reacted, one shoving their leader aside in a gesture of protection, the second spinning the rifle-weapon around to attack. She was too quick for them. Her pistol shrieked and white fire engulfed the second hunter, throwing it back into the snow with a shattering crash and displaced air. The other discharged its weapon with a bark of sound, but she was moving, still moving. With a handful of claws she raked at the leader and tore through layers of clothing, her sharp nails coming away with dark fluid on them. The first hunter tried to club her with the butt of its rifle and

she ducked, the blow slipping over her head. She jammed her claws into right side of its ribcage and tore. ~~The hunter howled and liquids frothed from the grille of its mask. The scent of fresh blood bloomed in the cold air as it collapsed into the white drifts and died.~~

The leader moved, the wound she had inflicted bringing a snarl to its face. This creature had a peculiar weapon of its own, a hybrid of handgun and short sword that came up so quickly she felt the blade point strike home in her stomach. The pain made her furious and she backhanded the weapon from the leader and kicked it to the ground. The flood of aggression fuelled her hunger, and she leapt on the winded creature, her tongue flicking out of her mouth. The pistol forgotten, with one viselike grip she wrapped her pale fingers around the leader's neck and held tight; and then, with her heart racing in excitement, she opened her palm wide and let the serrated feeding cavity in her hand unfold, shiny with enzymatic fluids. In a single brutal thrust, she plunged her hand through the shredded material of the leader's jacket and felt the warm human flesh underneath. She gave a little shudder as the feeding began, the nourishing torrent of organic energies drawing up into her. The adrenaline from the man's veins made it *delicious*.

But too late she understood that she had been careless, that she had made the same error as her fellow Wraith; she had underestimated the resilience of the prey. The second hunter, the one she had cast aside, shook off the effect of the blaster and leveled its rifle. She had assumed that the weaker-willed human would not attack while she was so close to its leader for fear of striking it. The pitiful look it returned her showed otherwise. It no doubt believed that it was performing a mercy on the other man-prey by ending its life before her feeding could be completed. The second hunter's gun spat puffs of gas and vapor, releasing a volley of razor-edged needles. The scatter-shot blast tore her off her victim and threw her into the snows.

She felt the burning spines deep in her tissue and understood abruptly that this was death. As much as she tried to fight it off, to decry it, the ripple of fear returned tenfold and dragged her down.

The Wraith perished, her fangs bared to the icy sky above.

She made a point, whenever she could, to watch the sun rise. From the high balcony atop the central tower of Atlantis, there was no better view of the pale golden disc as it emerged from below the horizon, the first rays of light turning the dark ocean into a sheet of glittering, beaten copper. The thin cirrus clouds overhead glowed pink underneath, drifting frames around the star as it climbed into the teal blue sky. There was ozone in the air and the strange salt tang of alien seas.

If ever a day comes when I forget why we are out here, I can just walk up and look at this. Elizabeth Weir smiled to herself and turned her head, looking around at the angular minarets and steeples of the floating city. Atlantis was a work of art in many ways, as much an expression of the character of the Ancients who built it as the scientific legacy they had left behind. Seen from the air, it drifted atop the ocean like a silver brooch on a vast indigo cloak. Up close, the city-complex was a forest of glass and steel spires reaching up into the heavens. The shapes of the towers reminded Elizabeth of origami, turned straight edges and seamless folds of brushed metal. It was a metropolis built by curious and studied minds, and while it wasn't a clinical place, she sometimes felt that Atlantis lacked the warmth and the small chaos of cities on Earth. She thought of the senses she had of New York, of London and Paris, Delhi, Moscow or Hong Kong; Atlantis felt lonely in comparison, even after more than a year of human occupation, and she wondered if that would ever change. *The Ancients lived here once upon a time, so why couldn't we?* The smile broadened as she imagined the sights of children going to school on Atlantis's metallic boulevards, dog-walkers, baseball games and couples in the parkland, markets in the great atrium. *Maybe one day.*

It was in moments like this, when she was alone with the city's melancholy quiet, that Weir felt closest to the people who had made this place. Back home, it was something she hadn't really been

able to understand, not completely; she'd seen the look in the eyes of astronauts who'd been to the Moon, she'd seen it in people like Samantha Carter and Daniel Jackson when they spoke about other worlds. Now she saw the same look in the mirror, in a wiser face framed with dark hair, a kind of insight about Earth and mankind, about how small and precious they were.

After months of being here, they were still only paddling in the shallows of the great oceans of knowledge left behind by the Ancients, and sometimes Elizabeth wondered if there was still something left of them in these walls, watching silently. In any other place, such a thought might have been eerie and disturbing, but she found it the opposite. If the Ancients were the progenitors of humankind, then the Pegasus expedition team were the children returning to the birthplace of their parents and making it their own. Perhaps it wouldn't be within her lifetime, but one day Earth's people would know all the secrets of this place; and the bright future that knowledge would bring would make everything they had endured here worthwhile.

That is, if the Wraith don't destroy us first. She frowned at the dissenting voice in the back of her mind. *Or the Genii, or any one of a dozen other threats...* "We never thought it would be easy," she said aloud, and reached for the steel mug at her side to take a sip of tea. Weir looked down; on the lower tiers she could see people moving around, going about their duties. Out by the western atrium Dr Kusanagi and her group were setting up an air-monitoring experiment that would give them a better handle on the planet's weather systems. Directly below, she could hear the echoes of barked orders where some of the military contingent were sparring on a lower level; the recent additions of troops from the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom – part of a treaty agreement surrounding the Stargate program – were meshing well with the existing Atlantis Marine Corps garrison. And on one of the spade-shaped 'petals' that formed the outer districts of the city, a maintenance team were preparing the landing platform for the arrival of the *Daedalus*, the starship that in recent months had become the lifeline for the outpost.

The regular returns of the vessel were now an important part of life on Atlantis, with a palpable rise in the morale of the people here in the days running up to its landing. *Daedalus* brought news and mail from home, supplies and new faces, and most importantly the ship made the Atlantean contingent feel *connected*. A year of isolation and a Stargate they could never use to dial home had taken its toll, but with *Daedalus* Earth was only a hyperspace journey away. Each cargo she brought made the distance seem a little less; out here in the Pegasus Galaxy, even seemingly tiny things like replacement toothbrushes or toilet paper took on a great level of importance – it was the small, mundane details like those that helped keep the human presence in Atlantis on an even keel, helped the people working and living here to forget that they were Earth's most distant outpost of mankind. Despite the friction that seemed a regular part of her interaction with *Daedalus's* commander, Colonel Caldwell, Weir had to admit that the sight of the ship always raised her spirits. *Daedalus*, with her blunt, aircraft carrier lines, might lack the crystalline beauty of Atlantis, but her mere presence conveyed an important message. *You're not alone out here.*

The data pad at Elizabeth's side chimed and she gathered up the device. The flat screen portable computer terminal seemed never to be more than arm's length away from her, constantly feeding information from the city's heart – and sometimes distracting her with games of Solitaire or Minesweeper. An alarm window was open; Weir had set the prompt to remind her of the morning's departures through the Stargate. Three teams were outbound today on missions to target worlds from the city's vast database of addresses, basic reconnaissance jaunts to search for new allies, Ancient artifacts or to just plain explore. She scanned down the list and saw the name of the commander of the team assigned to the next transit through the Gate; *Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard*.

Weir tapped the pad with a finger and left the balcony behind.

“So,” said Sheppard, rubbing his thumb over his chin, “either of you two got an inkling about this place we’re going to?”

Ronon Dex shook his head without looking up from unfolding his greatcoat. “Never been there.

The tawny-skinned woman standing across from Dex cocked her head. “I too have never visited the colony, but there were some of my people who did.” Teyla Emmagan paused as she zipped up her uniform tunic. “As I recall, the planet has only a handful of settlements quite close to the Stargate. They trade furs and cured meats harvested from the local wildlife.”

“So, kinda low-tech, then?”

“No more than Athos,” she said, with a hint of a smile, “but if you are asking if they might have relics of the Ancients, then your question may be in vain.”

Off to one side, the fourth member of Sheppard’s core team made a comment under his breath about ‘wild goose chases’ and returned to lacing up his boots. The colonel gave Dr McKay a sideways look. “Thanks for the input, Rodney.” Sheppard turned his attention back to Teyla. “What about any uh, hostiles?”

“The Wraith are active in that part of the galaxy, but I do not believe the settlement has experienced a culling in many years, certainly not since I was a child.”

“Some good news, then. Maybe this place is too far off the beaten track for them to bother with.”

Dex pulled on his coat. “Or maybe they’re just overdue for a feeding frenzy.”

Sheppard gave a tight, humorless smile. “That’s what I like about you, Ronon, you’re such a ray of sunshine.” He crossed the prep room to where the other half of his unit was gathering themselves together. “Sergeant Mason, right?” he asked, picking out the most senior-looking man in the group.

“Staff Sergeant Mason, sir,” said the soldier, his pug-face creasing,

“Oh yeah,” nodded Sheppard, “different ranks for you guys, right?” The four men were relatively new to Atlantis, one of two squads of British Special Air Service troopers brought in to serve in areas of Stargate Command. As part of a rotation that would put the men on front-line duty in the Pegasus Galaxy, it fell to the colonel to take them with him on a few missions, to show them the lay of the land. This was the first time he’d had to deal with the Brits face-to-face; until now he’d only seen them around and about in the city, laughing in rough humor or playing in animated poker games with the Marine Corps contingent. “You’ve been off world before, right?”

Mason nodded. “Did a tour at Cheyenne Mountain, sir. Dealt with some of them growlers when we were there.”

“Growlers?”

“Goa’uld, sir,” said one of the other men, a stocky guy with dirty blond hair, “that’s what we call them, on account of the way they talk. Y’know, all that *puny humans, you will die* stuff-”

“Clarke, shut it,” said Mason, with curt finality.

Sheppard gave a small smile. “Lance Corporal Clarke, right? And these two other gentlemen would be Privates Bishop and Hill?”

“Sir,” chorused the men. Both the privates had the watchful look of career soldiers.

“Well, listen, I’m not expecting any trouble but you never can tell. The Wraith aren’t like the Goa’uld, they don’t waste time bragging, they just go straight for the jugular.”

“Actually, it’s the heart,” McKay chipped in. “That’s where they prefer to feed from.”

“Whatever,” Sheppard met Mason’s gaze. “The point is, don’t be stingy with your ammo. You got one in range, take it down.”

Mason nodded. “That we can do.”

The colonel patted him on the arm. “Welcome to the team. We don’t have a secret handshake or anything...”

“We’ll manage,” said the soldier.

—Sheppard left Mason’s men to their preparations, catching a whispered comment from Clarke as he walked away. “He seems all right for a Rupert.”

Rupert? John had a feeling serving with these Brits was going to be a whole new learning experience for him.

The doors to the prep room hummed open before Weir to reveal Sheppard’s team in varying states of readiness. McKay appeared to be the least organized person there, in the middle of attempting to don a webbing vest festooned with equipment packs, and trying to secure a pistol in his thigh holster at the same time. He was contorting himself in the process, much to the amusement of the military contingent. Ronon, Teyla and the rest of the squad were at their gear racks, making last minute checks and loading their weapons.

Sheppard looked up from the open breach of his P90 submachinegun. “Elizabeth. Come to see me sign off? Don’t worry, I remembered to pack my mittens.”

Weir raised an eyebrow and gestured with the data pad in her hand. “I’m glad I caught you before you left, John. There was something I meant to query you on.” She extended the pad to him and he took it.

An involuntary wince crossed his face as he read the file displayed there. “Oh yeah. Riley’s file. Behind him, she saw McKay make a similarly pinched expression.

As part of the paperwork that was required each time *Daedalus* arrived at Atlantis with supplies and new staff, as the director of the outpost Weir was required to provide full reports for the ship to carry back to Earth, on everything from Ancient archaeological finds and Wraith force intelligence to personnel dispositions and equipment requisition forms. Dealing with the paperwork also meant that it was her ultimate responsibility to handle one of the worst parts of the job – the casualty reports. Every time they lost someone, Elizabeth was required to sign off on their death certificate, and if there were remains, it was her responsibility to ensure they were ready to go home on the next hyperspace flight.

But it wasn’t always possible to return the dead, however. Sometimes – as was the case with the late Master Sergeant Riley, USAF – there was nothing but a cloud of free atoms left behind. The unlucky soldier had been caught in the nimbus of an Ancient plasma generator, which had shorted out explosively during a venture into the city’s lower levels; there one moment, vapor the next.

Sheppard held out the data screen to her. “I signed off on him. What’s the problem?”

Weir didn’t take the screen back straight away. “I reviewed the Sergeant’s records, Colonel. There’s nothing made for some interesting reading.”

“Really?” replied Sheppard warily. “Well, he was an, uh, interesting guy.”

“Did you know that during his entire tour on Atlantis, Sergeant Riley never once took part in any hazardous off world excursions? As far as I can determine, he hardly ever left the quartermaster’s stores where he worked.”

Sheppard’s expression turned a little sheepish. “Well. He probably had a lot of... Boxes to move. And stuff.”

She tapped the screen with a finger. “It’s remarkable. It seems every time Riley’s name came up on off world rotation, someone swapped duties with him, or he was otherwise excused. I wonder what that was.”

The Colonel said nothing. He gave McKay a sidelong look and the scientist blinked back at him.

Weir leaned closer. “I did a little digging. Do you know what Riley brought with him as his personal gear allocation when we first came through the Stargate from Colorado?”

“No?”

In her diplomatic career, Elizabeth had spent time in the presence of liars of all kinds

including a few non-human ones – and she knew the untruth on Sheppard’s lips automatically. “Eleven high-density data storage devices. Capable of storing thousands of hours of video. It says here that they contained ‘instructional films’. Is that an accurate description, Colonel?”

Sheppard returned to loading his P90. “I guess so.”

“Some of them...” McKay added, a slightly wistful tone in his voice; then he blinked. “I mean that is, so I was lead to believe.”

“They were entertainments,” said Ronon, without preamble.

McKay rounded on the bigger man. “You saw them too?”

Weir’s eyes narrowed. She hadn’t once taken her gaze off Sheppard. “Am I correct in thinking that Master Sergeant Riley was in fact running a video library for the crew aboard Atlantis?”

“I found the romantic comedies to be very informative,” offered Teyla.

“And there’s also the matter of the floating crap game. And the glassware and medical boiler that went missing from Dr Beckett’s infirmary.”

“You couldn’t hide a still on Atlantis,” blurted McKay, “the internal sensors would register an heat build-up-”

“Rodney,” growled Sheppard, silencing the other man.

“If Colonel Caldwell sees this, he won’t be happy.” Weir took the data screen and weighed it in her hand. “He runs a tight ship, John.”

Sheppard met her gaze. “You know, when the Wraith invaded the city last year, Riley put down two of their bruisers and kept them out of the lower levels. Okay, so he bent the rules a little, but we’re the farthest men from home out here. Riley was a good guy. I turned a blind eye because I thought people could stand to blow off a little steam. You know I’d never let anything go so far that would compromise Atlantis.”

After a moment, Elizabeth found herself nodding. “That’s all I wanted to hear.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “I know people think of me like I’m some kind of school principal, watching everyone from up there in the gallery, but I’m not. I live here too, John. I know what homesickness can feel like.”

“Oh, good,” he smirked. “No detention then?”

McKay gestured at the air. “What, uh, happened to the data devices?”

Weir eyed him. “Oddly, Dr McKay, they don’t appear to be among the Sergeant’s personal effects. I can only assume some enterprising soul has appropriated them.”

Rodney gave a solemn nod. “Ah. It’s what he would have wanted.”

“The rest of his belongings will be loaded on the *Daedalus* when she arrives. Colonel Caldwell is bringing a new rotation of staff and troops.”

“Any washouts?” said Sheppard. Generally, the turnover of people on Atlantis was small, with only a few voluntary transfers every now and then. For the most part, psychological evaluations made sure that anyone coming to serve a tour in the Pegasus Galaxy was mentally able to deal with the isolation, but there were still the occasional one or two who found the impossible distance and alien environment just too much.

“A couple of transfers from the civilian contingent. Doctors Walton and Ming. They’re both taking reassignments to the *Daedalus* science team.”

McKay rolled his eyes. “Ming. That figures. Do you know, he had the nerve to call this assignment boring? Good riddance to him. He’s been bleating about getting a posting on the *Battlestar Galactica* ever since we got here...”

“You know Caldwell hates it when you call the *Daedalus* that?” said Sheppard.

Rodney gave an arch sniff. “Yes, I am fully aware of how much it annoys him.”

“Well,” broke in Weir, “while you’re enjoying the crisp sub-zero wonderland of M3Y-465, I’ll

be sure to give the Colonel your best regards when he arrives.” She gave the group a nod and left them to their preparations. “Be safe, people.”

“Sure thing, Teach,” said Sheppard.

Having finally negotiated the pistol holster, McKay approached Sheppard with a grimace on his face. “One moment. Sub-zero? She said ‘sub-zero’?”

Sheppard nodded. “She did.”

Rodney shook his head. “No. M3Y-465 is a temperate planet. I saw the MALP reports, cool, a bit cloudy, lots of trees...”

“Nope,” Sheppard replied. “You’re thinking of M3Y-565. Captain Paterson and his team lit out for there this morning. He got the trees, we get the ice and snow.”

“Snow,” McKay repeated in a leaden voice. “I don’t perform well in the cold, Colonel. I get the ah—” He pointed at his nose. “The sniffles.”

“Then take a scarf.”

McKay squinted. “Why don’t you take Zelenka? He’s from above the Arctic Circle, or something. He’d be in his element.”

Sheppard secured his weapon and threw a nod to Staff Sergeant Mason. “Let’s move.” The other man nodded and barked out orders to his troopers.

“John?” prodded McKay, as they entered the Gate Room, the shimmering disc of blue energy already open before them.

Sheppard halted as the others filed across the atrium. “Rodney, I don’t want to appear like I’m uncaring or disinterested in your complaints, but I am, so that’s how it comes out.”

McKay made a face. “Fine.”

The Colonel pointed at the SAS soldiers and as one Mason and his men moved in ahead of them, crossing the event horizon of the wormhole.

Four more figures came through the Circler after the first group. They seemed different from the men in the uniforms of strange gray-white camouflage who had moved on ahead, all but one wearing heavy-weather gear in mid-blue. They were most definitely not Wraith, and their kit matched no known pattern, not even the most basic element of the sanctioned army standards. They had weapons, it was an assumption, albeit a logical one – but the firearms seemed small and spindly, doubtless of inferior power and range. The eight figures moved away from the Circler as the shimmering gateway folded in on itself and vanished. These people paid it no mind; clearly, they were seasoned travelers. In a loose spread they walked on, picking their way through the snows.

It was peculiar; some of them moved with the vigilant air of military training, while others, one most notably – stomped across the drifts with little concern for protocol. The two figures that watched them exchanged glances and fingered their rifles, weighing their options.

Then one of the new arrivals looked up, directly at them, the wind flickering long auburn hair out from under her hood.

“Teyla?” Sheppard drew close. “What is it?”

The Athosian woman was silent for a moment. “I... Am not sure, Colonel. I thought I saw a...”

John’s gloved fingers tightened around the grip of his P90. “Wraith?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I was mistaken. The play of the light from the Stargate on the snow perhaps.”

“You don’t sound convinced.” He eyed her. “If that spider-sense of yours is tingling, I want to know about it.”

Teyla looked away. "I'm sorry, John. My... Gift is not predictable. It is not like a lamp I can simply switch on or off."

Sheppard nodded. The genetic kinks in Teyla's DNA, the dubious donation of years of Wraith experimentation on her bloodline, had left her with a preternatural instinct that the colonel had quickly learned to trust. "Okay. Let's keep our eyes open, huh?"

Corporal Clarke approached them. "Sir? Staff Mason spotted what looks like a village farther down the valley." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "No lights, though. Seems dead."

"Feeding frenzy," said Ronon.

Sheppard made a face. "There you go with that upbeat attitude again." He nodded to Clarke. "Let's move in."

Trudging up behind them, McKay's face peered from the woolly oval of an arctic parka. He waved a handheld scanner at them. "I'm not picking up any energy traces." He sniffed wetly. "You know, this would have been a lot easier if we'd taken a Puddle Jumper."

Sheppard ignored him. "Teyla, Ronon, watch our backs. Let's go pay a house call."

"Oh, good," McKay sneered, "and while we're there, we can ask Santa to let us borrow Rudolph and his sled."

The settlement was as silent as the snowy landscape. The highest structure in the hamlet was a watchtower growing from the center, tall enough so an observer atop it could sight out to the Gate and alert the inhabitants to any new arrivals. The buildings clustered around it, fanning off short alleyways in radial spokes. The construction was a mix of stone and heavy, dense wood, the lodge-like domiciles low to the ground like they were drawn tight against the chill. There were no footprints, no signs that there had been any life in this grim little ghost town. No lights burned anywhere, just as Clarke had reported, and the fans of illumination from the torches on the team's guns cast peculiar shadows. The only sounds were the crunch of snow beneath their boots and the thin howls of the bitter breeze.

Ronon chose a house at random and pulled open the door, peering inside. He saw a bed and a stove, desk and chairs. The bed was rumbled, slept in. A book was open on the table. A thin rime of frost covered everything, making it twinkle in the torchlight.

Sheppard glanced at McKay. "Anything on the scanner?"

Rodney shook his head. "Eight thermal blooms inside the settlement boundary and nothing else. I'm not reading anything further out, just static. Might be something in the local rock strata interfering with the scanner."

They drew slowly into the middle of the township, and at the foot of the watchtower lay the largest building they had yet encountered. "Is it a town hall, maybe?" suggested Private Hill.

"Could be," agreed the colonel. "Let's take a look-see."

Mason spoke up. "Sir, we should form a perimeter around the hall, just in case." Off Sheppard's nod of agreement, he snapped out orders to the rest of his unit and they fanned out. "Hill, go with them."

Teyla entered first, holding her weapon close to her chest, the fire select set to three-round bursts. The inside of the hall was open, studded with thick wooden pillars to hold up the roof. There were dead oil lanterns dangling from beams, but faint illumination came from a long, low counter set along one of the walls. "What is that?"

McKay pointed at a series of dull yellow-green bowls made of glass fitted to the walls. Liquid was visible inside, glowing faintly. "It looks like bioluminescence. Probably extracted from plants or insects. Cheap lighting, if a little gloomy-looking."

They spread out through the room, their eyes adjusting to the dimness, and abruptly Teyla

realized the function of the building. "This is a tavern." On a round table before her there were a couple of flagons and a discarded clay pipe. The faint whiff of stale beer was still detectable in the air.

Sheppard swept his P90 around the hall. "No bodies anywhere."

Ronon fingered a fan of oval playing cards on a long bench. There were other hands here and there, and a pile of stamped metal rings in a clay bowl before them. "Someone left their winnings behind."

Hill crouched by a larger table. "Look here, sir. These chairs are knocked over, like maybe the person sitting there got up quickly."

"Whatever happened, they had little or no warning," ventured Teyla, "there are no signs they had time to prepare an adequate defense."

The soldier frowned. "But there's no indications of any weapons fire, ma'am, no burns or bullet holes. Did the blokes who lived here just put down their pints and give up without a fight?"

"Okay," said Rodney, folding down his hood. "I'm going to put this out there, just say what we're all thinking. *Culled*. The people here were culled by the Wraith."

Sheppard glanced at the ceiling. "They must have swept in with Darts and just beamed the place straight up," he said, turning to Hill.

Teyla suppressed a shudder, thinking back to of the awful screeches of Wraith Dart-ships buzzing through the air of her own village, trawling for human lives.

"No doors are locked," noted Dex. "Must have been panic in the streets."

"Blimey," whispered the Private.

"Question is, how long ago?" Sheppard studied the floor. "There's a little snow in here. It couldn't have been more than a few days."

Ronon sniffed at a discarded tankard. "Maybe less."

"And so we come to the big questions," said McKay, crossing the room. "Are they still here? And why don't we discuss this in greater depth back on Atlantis?"

"This is not the only settlement on the planet, Doctor," said Teyla, "there are several others within a few day's riding."

"The Wraith would have taken this one first," noted Ronon. "It's closest to the Gate. They moved out in a spiral, looking for any more."

Sheppard frowned. "All right. I'm just about ready to call this one. As much as I hate to admit that Rodney might be right about something, we're gonna head back to Atlantis and come back here after sun-up in a Jumper. We can scope out the other villages and look for survivors."

"There won't be any," said Ronon, with grim finality. "I've seen this before, on dozens of worlds. They don't leave people behind. The Wraith don't waste anything."

McKay was leaning close to a support pillar, shining a penlight at a bony disc halfway up the pillar's length. "This doesn't look right..."

"What is it?"

"The design looks different from the other manufactured items here-" Without warning, the disc let out a whirring sound and unfolded like a skeletal flower.

Teyla saw a shock of recognition on Ronon's face; in the next second Dex had his particle-beam magnum in his hand. "Get away!" he snapped.

McKay barely had time to duck before Ronon's pistol barked and a flare of bright energy blew the pillar and the disc into burning fragments.

"You could've killed me!" wailed the scientist.

Dex turned on Sheppard. "That was a Wraith sensor pod. They leave them in places they've never harvested in case they miss anyone the first time around."

Hill nodded, getting it. "So any poor sods who came home thinking they'd gone would set it off."

and back they come.”

—“Okay, that’s it,” said Sheppard. “We’re not waiting around here to see if the Wraith want us for a dessert course.” He toggled his radio. “Mason,”

“Sir,” came the reply. “Heard gunfire, do we have enemy contact, over?”

“Could be. Get back to the Gate on the double, I’m scrubbing this mission.”

“Roger that,”

Sheppard looked up. “Let’s move.”

Teyla heard his order, but it seemed as if the words were coming from a very great distance. She felt dislocated, suddenly unconnected to the cold and ill-lit tavern. She could feel something, out there in the ice and the snow, out there in the howling winds. A predatory sensation in the back of her mind, the pale shadow of something cunning and hungry. It wasn’t the same glimmer of threat she had felt at the Stargate, there and gone, the very barest touch on her senses. This was different, strong and horribly familiar.

“Teyla!”

She found herself again and turned on Sheppard. “Wraith. They’re already here.”

The clatter of assault rifles met them as they raced from the tavern. The wind carried the sound from the direction of the Stargate, gunshots joined by the shrieking cracks of Wraith stunner blasts.

“Mason, report!” demanded Sheppard.

“Heavy contact,” grated the Staff Sergeant, “they must have flanked us, come back around past the Gate. We got no cover up here!”

“Fall back to the village and regroup,” ordered the colonel. He turned to the others. “Hill, you’re with me. Ronon, Teyla, McKay, find something defensible, something with thick walls, and hole up there. If they got Darts and they catch us in the open...” John let the sentence trail off. He didn’t need to spell it out.

“If we could just make a run for the Stargate-” began Rodney.

“And let them know Atlantis *isn’t* a pile of radioactive rubble?” Sheppard shook his head. “Nope. We gotta deal with this here. Go!”

He sprinted off with Hill at his flank, moving quickly from cover to cover in the lee of deep shadows. McKay’s escape plan, while crude and direct – and not without a certain appeal, John had to admit – was out of the question. The Wraith siege of Atlantis, months ago now although it still seemed fresh in his mind, had ended with a magic trick that David Copperfield would have been proud of. The city’s defensive shield had been turned into a cloaking device to fool the aliens into thinking Atlantis had been obliterated, but now each time an off world team ran afoul of a Wraith raiding party they were effectively on their own. They had to operate as if they were isolated survivors who had escaped the city’s destruction, lest they tip off the aliens that Atlantis was still intact.

And right now, that meant they had no easy way out of this.

Gingerly, the adjutant ventured a question. “Highness, what would you have us do in the engagement? The troops await your orders.”

His commander remained silent for a long moment, observing the unfolding fray in the village through a bulky brass monocular. When the answer came, it was another question. “Who are these people? Their livery and wargear is of no manufacture I can place, not from the homeworld or a vassal planet.”

“I suspect they are Genii,” offered the adjutant.

The commander made a negative noise. “I know those skulks, and these people do not wage war like them.” The exchange of fire became furious, reaching them in the cover of the tree line. “Genii”

warriors would run. These ones stand and fight. They have zeal.”

—“Highness,” said the man, “if you would forgive my temerity to say so, but their zeal will give them little support against such numbers of Wraith. The second group of the predators we observed even now approach from the far side of the village. These people, whomever they give allegiance to, will perish if we do not intervene. Is that your wish?”

The commander snapped the monocular shut and met his gaze. “That would be poor form, don’t you think? It would be impolite of us, to say the least.”

“Your will, Highness.” The adjutant nodded and turned to his troops. “Charge your guns, gentlemen, and ready the horns.”

Sheppard and Hill met Mason and the other men at the edge of the township. White fire from Wraith guns sizzled down after them, flaring off the snow. Private Bishop had Corporal Clarke on his shoulder, helping his comrade scramble away. Mason was low behind them, spraying bullets from his L85 rifle. Sheppard and Hill fell against cover either side of the alleyway and set up corridors of gunfire, covering the retreating men. Bishop and Clarke scrambled past them, and the colonel saw the corporal’s face slack and numb along the left-hand side, like a stroke victim.

“He got clipped by a stunner,” said Bishop, by way of explanation.

“Bathtahds,” lisped Clarke, ‘worz thun been drung,”

“Fall back,” snapped Sheppard, “we got you covered.”

Mason came after them, ducking low. “Reloading!” he shouted, ejecting the clip on the bullpup assault rifle.

Sheppard and Hill kept up the pressure, taking down Wraith warriors with careful aimed shots to the torso. Mason joined in as the colonel’s own weapon ran dry. He dropped behind a wooden barricade and levered off the empty magazine.

“Sheppard!” Ronon’s voice crackled from his radio. “Teyla found a place we can use as a strongpoint, west of you, a conical building.”

“Copy that, we’re on our way.” Sheppard called out to Mason. “You get that, Staff Sergeant?”

“Clear as a bell, sir,”

“Then let’s go!”

Moving and firing, the five of them made their way back into the village in an overwatch formation, two men covering the others as they dropped away from the Wraith advance. They turned the corner and sprinted the last few meters to the building Dex had described, half-dragging the injured corporal with them.

Teyla was at the heavy wooden door, her P90 primed and ready. “Did you bring any guests?” she asked dryly.

Sheppard nodded. “Afraid so. And they all want dinner.” He cast a look around inside. The building was circular, with only one door but a number of slatted hatches in the walls. The air smelt of mould. “What is this place?”

“A granary,” said Teyla. “We are lucky it is summer. In winter this would have been full.”

“Summer?” echoed McKay. “That’s summer out there?”

Ronon crouched and gave Clarke a look over. “Don’t worry, the pain will pass. Can you hold your weapon?”

“Yeh,” managed the soldier, his head lolling. “Jus’ point me att’a door.”

Mason directed the other men to firing positions at the slats and Dex approached the colonel. “So, how we going play this, Sheppard? You let them bottle us up, and-”

“I’m working on it,” he replied, cutting Ronon off. “We miss our call-in and Atlantis will send out Lorne and a rescue team.”

“That’s not much of a plan.”

“Hey, I’m making this up as I go.”

Rodney snorted. “No change from normal there, then.”

“I see one,” said Bishop. “End of the street, he’s scoping us.”

“They won’t try to wait us out,” said Dex, “that’s not how they do it. They’ll rush us.” F sneered. “Wraith like the direct approach.”

“Couldn’t be more than a dozen of them clowns out there,” noted Hill, “even counting those v put down.”

Sheppard looked around. “Ammo check. Anyone low?” He got a chorus of negatives from everyone except Teyla. The Athosian woman was stock still, sighting down the length of her gun. “Teyla, you with us?”

She shuddered, and he saw the distant, fearful look in her eyes that he knew meant trouble. “John. There are more Wraith out there. A lot more. They know-”

Teyla’s words were drowned out in a howling chorus of blaster bolts as the aliens opened up on the stone building from all sides.

“Return fire!” barked Sheppard. “Targets of opportunity!”

Hot flares of muzzle flash stabbed out into the night, reaching toward the Wraith advance; but they were coming like a snarling tide, shrugging off glancing hits, furious in their attacks.

Rodney unloaded his pistol into the enemy advance, firing off the whole magazine in what seemed like seconds. He felt a momentary surge of elation as one of the Wraith warriors went down but then realized that the gun was empty. He fumbled desperately at a fresh clip, ducking behind Ronon as the Satedan ex-soldier sent shot after shot into the enemy attack. *I should get a laser gun too*, he told himself, *none of this stupid reloading stuff with those space blasters.*

The Wraith shots rang the granary like a bell, sending rains of powdery snow and wood fragments falling from the support beams. The breech of the Beretta pistol finally snapped shut and he brought it up to firing position, fighting off the trembling in his hands. “I am not going to die cold and scared,” he whispered. “I am going to die of old age surrounded by nubile graduate students and many Nobel Prizes.” It had become a kind of mantra for McKay, a quiet little prayer he relied upon whenever things took a turn for the worst... And that seemed to be a regular occurrence these days. The first part changed depending on the circumstances; “cold and scared” had previously been “Wraith snack food”, “of suffocation”, “in a nuclear fireball” and so on. So far, it seemed to have worked. *So far.*

He started squeezing the trigger; and then he heard the reveille of a brass section. *That’s it*, he realized, *I’ve gone mad with the fear.*

“What the bloody hell is that racket?” shouted Bishop.

Something that sounded like a cross between a set of bagpipes and a trumpet was blaring out a clarion call across the snowbound valley, echoing back and forth over the village; then moments later it was joined by a crashing, thunderous fusillade of gunshots.

“We got fire support,” said Hill.

“But from where?” asked Ronon.

McKay craned over Dex’s shoulder. “That’s not Major Lorne...”

Sheppard’s face creased in unease. “Sounds almost like... Muskets, or a blunderbuss.”

“There!” Rodney pointed. Figures in heavy black greatcoats were rushing down from the top line. Brocade and filigree on their clothing glittered in the moonlight, and thin wisps of steam trailed from packs on their backs. They wore high hats with dark facemasks. Some carried long rifles, others bright spotlights with stark yellow beams, and a couple – well, a couple of them were playing long

brass trombone-like contraptions.

The new arrivals had the Wraith caught unawares, and the aliens broke off their assault on the granary, scrambling to regroup to meet the larger force. Mason and the others took the advantage and pressed forward out of the doorway, striking at the enemy as they disengaged.

“Rodney, stay with Clarke!” Sheppard snapped and vaulted out with Ronon and Teyla behind him.

McKay pressed himself up against the hatch slats and saw the Wraith break under the hammer of the hooded soldiers. There were ten of them that he could count, and they moved in drilled lines like Roman legions, shifting about and taking the Wraith down with quick, efficient moves. Each time one of them fired a shot, the blocky bulk of their rifles spat out a plume of vapor and snarled like a dog. He couldn't smell the acrid tang of cordite; instead he tasted wood smoke and steam.

The hooded troopers made short work of the Wraith, some ripping into them with flights of flashing steel darts, other guns releasing slow-moving shells that stuck to Wraith battle armor and lit off crackles of electric discharge. The men with the horns produced pistols with wide, bell-shaped maws and from these they fired expanding nets that enshrouded any Wraith who fled, pinning them to the ground.

Then the aliens were all dead or subdued, and only the Atlantis team remained standing before the soldiers. The sounds of battle died away into the night and silence fell heavily.

Clarke dragged himself to his feet and stumbled painfully outside, and McKay followed warily behind. “I am not going to die on this stupid Lapland planet,” he began quietly.

Sheppard could see from the corner of his eye that the P90 still had half a clip remaining, but he had no idea about any of the others in his team. If things were going to turn bad, it would happen in the next few seconds, and with a sinking feeling he realized that the choice would be all down to him.

Two of the hooded figures detached themselves from the main group and took a couple of steps forward. The colonel's first impression was a flash of memory from a history book he'd read during officer training school. The uniforms looked like something from the Napoleonic era, hats like the Prussians wore, big shoulder pads and buttons, panels of etched armor plate and ornamental tabards. With slow and careful motions, Sheppard pulled down the hood of his parka and allowed the P90 to point at the ground, taking care not to let his finger stray too far from the trigger.

One of the figures had more gold leaf and jewels encrusted on their uniform than the others, so it was a safe bet this was the person in charge. John could see lines of pressed metal medals down the right arm of the soldier, twice as many as any of the others.

He gave his best winning smile. “I'm Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard, United States Air Force. We appreciate the assist.”

The lower ranked soldier tensed. “You will not speak until given—”

A raised hand from the commander silenced him, and he gave a contrite nod. With equal care the highly decorated figure released a series of clasps around the hood-helmet headgear and removed it. The cold wind caught a flurry of striking red hair and pulled it up like a pennant. Sheppard found himself looking at a young woman with a regal, composed air about her. “I am the Lady Erony of the Fourth Dynast. You may consider my intervention a gift.”

“I do,” said the colonel. “I mean, thanks.” John frowned a little. The tension didn't seem to be easing any. “If we trespassed on your village, we're sorry—”

“This?” sniffed Erony, with a faint air of disgust. “This is not our world. Surely you recognize our insignia? We are a hunting party from Halcyon, here seeking a lost splinter of our brethren.”

“We're kinda new to this part of the galaxy,” Sheppard replied. “We, ah, we're from out of town.”

“Indeed?” said the woman. “And yet you have already made an enemy of the Wraith.”

“Well, you know them. They make an enemy of just about everybody.”

“True.” Erony hesitated as her subordinate leant close.

The other man nodded at Ronon. “Highness, the dark-skinned male. He bares the mark of Runner.”

“So I see. I am intrigued.” Erony studied Sheppard’s team. “Your soldier is injured?” she asked indicating Clarke. “I would offer assistance to him, if you wish.”

“Very kind of you,” said Sheppard.

She cocked her head. “The Wraith are the bane of life. Anyone who hunts them can be an ally of Halcyon.”

“My Lady,” insisted the soldier, “we know nothing of these people, where they hail from or what they intend. If the Magnate—”

She gave the man a hard look. “You will be silent, Linnian. This is my splinter, and I alone decide the play of the game.” Erony looked at Sheppard again. “I grow so jaded with the hunt at times Lieutenant Colonel, and there are so few new distractions these days. Your party will accompany us back through the Great Circlet to Halcyon.”

Sheppard blinked. “Well, that’s a very nice offer-”

A loud sneeze from McKay broke through his words. “Sorry,” ventured Rodney. “I think I’ve caught a chill.”

Erony gave a small smile. “I’m sure your cohort will enjoy it there. Halcyon is far more temperate than this frigid sphere.”

“We have people waiting for us on the other side of the, uh, Circlet. They’ll be expecting us to contact them.”

“Do so,” said the woman. “Inform them that you are now guests of the Fourth Dynast. Make it clear to them that the Lady Erony does not give her invitations lightly, nor does she expect them to be refused.” Her eyes flashed. “I trust we understand one another?”

“We certainly do,” said Sheppard, eyeing the ranks of hooded troopers outnumbering them.

Weir leaned forward and folded her arms on the gallery rail, staring into the placid vertical portal of the open Stargate. “Halcyon? The name doesn’t raise any flags in the database. What’s your take on this, John?”

Sheppard’s voice was tinny in her radio earpiece. “Ronon says he’s heard of these people, but only a few whispers. They’re fighters, apparently, but they keep to their own turf. They sure made a mess of the Wraith out here.”

“Well, any enemy of the Wraith could be a friend of ours.”

“That’s pretty much what Lady Erony said. They want us to go back with them. I’m thinking we should play along for the moment, just to be gracious.”

“They did just save your lives.”

“Yeah, and we don’t want to get a reputation for rudeness in the Pegasus Galaxy, right?”

“I concur, John. I have my hands full with the preparations for *Daedalus*, so I’m authorizing you to make official diplomatic contact with Halcyon’s government on behalf of Earth. I think we’ve overdue to build some bridges out here.”

There was a hiss of static as he paused. “Elizabeth, I don’t know if I’m exactly the right guy for the job...”

“I’m certainly not going to ask Rodney to do it. You’ll be fine, John. I know you can pour on the charm if you need to.”

She heard the smile in his voice. “Flattery will get you everywhere. Okay. I’ll report back aft

we make some progress.”

—Weir nodded. “Watch yourself, John. Come back safe.”

“Count on it. Sheppard out.”

The wormhole vanished into nothingness, the blue chevrons turning dark. It was a long moment before Elizabeth could turn away and return to her duties.

Sheppard looked up as Ronon and Teyla approached him. “We have a go, so I guess we better put on our best shoes.”

Ronon threw a look at his footwear. “These *are* my best shoes.”

“How’s Clarke doing?”

“The stun blast is wearing off. He will be fine. Colonel, there’s something we wanted to bring your attention,” said Teyla, a serious expression on her face. “While you were in communication with Atlantis, Lady Erony’s men have been at work on the Wraith.”

“Define ‘at work’...”

“They left a few of them alive,” noted Dex, “they stunned them and trussed them up like cattle.”

“I heard some of them talking. They are taking the survivors as prisoners. After we go back to Halcyon with Erony, they will follow us with the captured Wraith.”

Sheppard’s brow furrowed. “What would they want with live Wraith?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Ronon, “but I don’t like it.”

The colonel’s answer died in his throat as Lady Erony walked over to the DHD where they stood. “You have conversed with your friends?” she asked.

Sheppard nodded. “I’ve been given full diplomatic status, apparently. It’s kind of a new string on my bow, but I’m hoping to do well with it.”

She began to enter a sequence of symbols on the oval podium. “Excellent. I will furnish you with a formal introduction to Halcyon’s ruler after we arrive.”

The Gate flared with exotic energies and opened. “You can do that?”

“Of course,” said Erony, with a hint of amusement. “He’s my father.”

CHAPTER TWO

They emerged from the Stargate into the yellow sodium glare of harsh spotlights, and for a moment Sheppard had to fight back the reflexive twitch of his trigger finger. Then the beams turned aside and a set of bells and trumpets struck up a brief fanfare, the flourish echoing around them as Lady Eron walked forward.

“She must be important,” McKay said from the side of his mouth, “she’s got her own theme music.”

Blinking away the afterimage on his retinas, the colonel glanced around and took in the place where they found themselves. The chamber was long and wide, open inside with illumination in tight clusters from the spotlights and thin window slits at the tops of the walls. There were aircraft hangars out at Nellis and Groom Lake that were large enough to hold a B-52 bomber with room to spare, and this place could have swallowed one of those easily. He imagined that a good pilot could have backed the *Daedalus* in here for a touchdown. The Stargate had pride of place, raised up on a wide dais and ringed with skeletal derricks. As he stepped forward, Sheppard heard faint whirring noises coming from the tops of the towers and looked up. He could see ornate horns like something from an old gramophone and huge glass-eyed, wooden-bodied cameras that were the size of a doghouse. Thin cables snaked away from them into the shadows. A broad pavement led down from the dais, marked every few meters by poles topped with elaborate ceremonial banners. Beyond those were indistinct shapes in the dimness past the pools of yellow light, broad cylinders of dull gray metal. More men with the same large rifles as Erony’s party stood at attention in a semi-circle before them, heads bowed. The colonel noted that their uniforms, while similar in cut to those of Erony and her men, were of a different color and the tabards were reversed. *Same army, different unit?* he wondered.

There were giant cogwheels on pinions overhead, thick chains big enough to haul battleship anchors, and massive, silent pistons. Sheppard couldn’t be sure, but he thought he could see the very slightest knife of daylight coming from a long horizontal join in the roof above. The Gate Hangar – he was already thinking of it as that, as it was way too big to be considered a Gate ‘room’ – was hissing with steam and there was the unmistakable smell of oil and grease. This was a wrought iron edifice, heavy, boiler-plated and industrial; the absolute antithesis of the clean silver lines of Atlantis.

From the corner of his eye he saw Mason and the SAS troopers, Ronon and Teyla, all of them eyeing the shadows with the same air of wariness.

McKay looked at the ground under his feet and nodded. “Huh. We’re standing on a natural stone platform. Looks like this place was built around it, or maybe it was brought here from somewhere else.”

“The latter is the correct assumption,” said Erony. “You are quite observant.”

“I’m a scientist,” McKay noted. “Observation is part of what I do.”

“Indeed?” The woman gave him an appraising look, as if she were re-evaluating him. “Forgive me, but I do not have your name...”

“Oh yeah, sorry,” said the colonel. “I’m terrible with introductions. This is Dr Rodney McKay.”

“Greetings,” said Erony, inclining her head.

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