

STARGATE ATLANTIS * THE FALSE AESIR TRILOGY

THE FALSE AESIR

Book I: An Asgard Mind, A Goa'uld God Complex, and First Recon

FEATURING AR-1 & SG-1 * 50-PAGE ARCHIVAL EDITION

PROLOGUE: The Graveyard of Dakara

Six Months Earlier — The Milky Way Galaxy, Orbit of Dakara

The debris of a ten-thousand-year empire drifted silently through the crimson dust of the Dakara nebula.

Everywhere across the sector, the shattered hulls of Goa'uld Ha'tak motherships spun like broken golden wheels in the dark. Their triangular pyramid cores were split open to the vacuum; their Jaffa crews had either marched into freedom under the banner of the new Free Jaffa Nation or perished when the Replicator swarms and the final battles of the System Lords tore the old order apart. For the first time since Ra had first taken a human host on a primitive world called Earth, the false gods of the Milky Way were extinct--or fleeing in the dark like hunted vermin.

Inside a scarred, powerless Goa'uld escape pod drifting behind the hulk of a gutted Alkesh bomber, Underlord Sebek-Ra--once Chief Alchemist to the court of Yu, Master of the Golden Crocodile, and self-proclaimed Heir to the Solar Barque--was dying.

His human host's lungs were scorched from plasma smoke; his left arm was shattered; and worst of all, the ship's personal sarcophagus had been vaporized when a Jaffa cruiser put two staff-cannon salvos through his flagship's throne room. Around the human host's cervical spine, the symbiote Sebek-Ra coiled tighter, pumping desperate reserves of kelno'reem healing enzymes into the failing human bloodstream, knowing that without a new vessel and a hyperdrive, both host and god would freeze to death within the hour.

Then the nebula outside the frosted viewport flared silver.

A starship emerged from hyperspace--not the blunt, angular bronze pyramid of a Goa'uld vessel, nor the boxy steel hull of a Tau'ri battlecruiser, but a sleek, sweeping hammer-prow of pale silver neutronium.

Through his cracked sensor periscope, Sebek-Ra's eyes widened in disbelief.

It was an Asgard science vessel--a Valkyrie-variant deep-space research ship bearing the runic registry of the Naglfar.

Every Goa'uld in the Milky Way knew the terror of the Asgard fleet. For millennia, only the Supreme System Lords' combined armadas had dared challenge the little grey beings of Ida, and even then only when the Asgard were distracted by their endless war against the Replicators. Yet this Asgard vessel was alone, moving slowly through the wreckage of Dakara with its quantum sensors sweeping the drifting escape pods.

Working with frantic, feverish speed, Sebek-Ra reached into the hidden compartment beneath his escape pod's command couch and pulled forth his single greatest creation: a circular collar of forged gold and superconducting naquadah, set with six stolen Ancient cellular-stabilization crystals he had spent three centuries perfecting in secret.

When the blinding white flare of an Asgard transport beam enveloped the interior of the escape pod, Sebek-Ra did not fight it.

He materialized on the cool silver deck of Medical Bay One aboard the Naglfar.

Standing three meters away beside a pedestal of glowing blue runic stones was a lone Asgard--three feet tall, frail, grey-skinned, its vast dark eyes watching the scorched human prisoner with quiet, clinical curiosity.

"You are Underlord Sebek-Ra," the Asgard spoke in a soft, measured voice. "Your escape pod's life-support systems were ninety-two percent depleted. Have no fear; although the Goa'uld Empire has fallen, the Asgard do not execute unarmed survivors."

Wait for the containment shield to drop, Sebek-Ra told himself, feeling the hum of the Kull-disruptor capacitor hidden inside his gauntlet. Wait until the arrogant

little grey scholar steps within arm's reach to scan the collar...

The Asgard stepped closer to the surgical examination table, tilting its large head as it studied the golden naquadah collar clutched in the dying human's hands. "Curious," the Asgard murmured. "A harmonic cellular-stabilization loop combined with a continuous-wave sarcophagus emitter. You designed this to bridge incompatible host physiology."

"I designed it," Sebek-Ra rasped through his dying human throat, his eyes suddenly blazing with molten golden fire as he triggered the concealed neural stunner in his palm, "for you, little grey worm!"

A silent concussion wave of phase-shifted energy slammed into the Asgard's chest, knocking the small grey figure backward against the stone pedestal. Before the ship's automated internal security could react, the dying human host lunged forward, clamped the glowing golden naquadah collar around the fallen Asgard's fragile grey neck, and opened his jaw.

With a wet, shrieking hiss, the silver-and-black symbiote Sebek-Ra tore itself free from the human's throat, leaped across the eighteen inches of air between them, and plunged straight through the back of the Asgard's neck.

Agony--white-hot, blinding, and suffocating--exploded across the Asgard's nervous system as two incompatible evolutions collided.

For five terrifying seconds, the Asgard's cloned cells fought to reject the parasite, threatening to liquefy both brain and symbiote in a cascade of neural fire. Then the golden collar around the Asgard's throat locked into harmonic resonance. Emerald and amber light surged from the Ancient crystals into the brainstem, freezing the cellular rejection loop in place and forcing the Asgard's vast, crystalline synaptic pathways open.

Memories flooded into Sebek-Ra's mind like a collapsing star: ten thousand years of hyperdrive physics, molecular beaming matrices, matter-energy synthesis, and the secret coordinates of a distant galaxy called Pegasus.

Slowly, the small three-foot-four Asgard body rose from the silver deck.

Its enormous black eyes flared with blinding golden fire.

And deep beneath the roaring, triumphant laughter of the Goa'uld symbiote--buried so far down in the optical crystal buffers of the ship that the parasite never even thought to look--a quiet, thirty-thousand-year-old equation clicked into its first step.

CHAPTER ONE: The Golden Obelisk of M4X-882

Wherein a routine agricultural trade negotiation is ruined by aggressive interior decorating and a three-hundred-foot pyramid on the turnip carts.

Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard had a personal rule about planets whose primary export was fermented root vegetables: you got in, you smiled politely while Teyla drank the ceremonial purple broth that smelled like wet radiator hoses, you traded three cases of surplus military rations and a box of basic steel hand-tools, and you gated back to Atlantis before Rodney McKay discovered a rash. It was a simple system. It had kept First Atlantis Reconnaissance Team alive through four years of Wraith cullings, Genii ambushes, and at least three separate occasions where an Ancient lab had tried to turn Rodney into pure, irritating energy.

"I'm telling you, the subspace harmonics on this gate are completely out of phase," McKay announced before his combat boots had even finished splashing through the shallow puddle at the base of the M4X-882 DHD. He was already jabbing a stylus at his tablet, his brow furrowed in that particular expression that meant everyone within twenty meters was about to be lectured on quantum field theory whether they had eaten breakfast or not. "Look at the residual capacitor bleed on the inner ring. Somebody dialed in here less than six hours ago, and they didn't use a standard Pegasus protocol. Or--wait. Actually, they didn't use the gate at all. That's a localized neutrino-ion wake sitting in the upper ionosphere."

"Neutrino-ion," Sheppard repeated, lowering his P-90 just a fraction as he squinted through the mist of the pine-bordered valley. "Rodney, please tell me that's scientific shorthand for 'perfectly normal weather balloon.'"

"Do the words 'neutrino' or 'ion' sound like a weather balloon to you? Honestly, the Air Force gives you people degrees in aerospace engineering and you treat subatomic particle signatures like farmers' almanac predictions," McKay snapped, tapping the screen hard enough to crack the protective film. "Neutrino-ion generators are Asgard. Specifically, mid-tier Asgard auxiliary propulsion systems. Which is patently absurd, because the Milky Way Asgard blew themselves up on Orilla--still a tragedy, by the way, mostly because they left their database to Carter instead of me--and the only Asgard in Pegasus are those grumpy little power-armored Vanir sociopaths who tried to blow up every Stargate in the galaxy."

Ronon Dex stopped at the crest of the muddy ridge, his heavy leather coat shifting as his hand went instinctively to the grip of his particle magnum. His nose twitched once. "Not Vanir," the Satedan said in a low rumble.

"Oh, wonderful, the human bloodhound has performed a spectrographic analysis with his nostrils," McKay muttered, trudging up the incline behind him. "And what, pray tell, leads you to conclude that an unmistakable neutrino-ion wake isn't--oh. Right. Okay. I see what you mean."

Sheppard reached the top of the ridge beside Teyla Emmagan and stopped dead.

Three months ago, the valley of Veldara had been a picturesque collection of timber-framed storehouses, terraced barley fields, and a cobbled market square where Magistrate Torren and his people traded cured meats and winter tubers with half a dozen peaceful Pegasus worlds. The timber storehouses were still there, mostly. The barley fields were still green.

Sitting squarely in the center of the market square--directly on top of what Sheppard distinctly remembered being the prize-winning squash pavilion--was a three-hundred-foot, four-sided pyramid made of gleaming, mirror-polished gold and dark trinium alloy.

Except it wasn't quite a standard Goa'uld pyramid. A normal Ha'tak landing structure had heavy, brutalist slab geometry, all oppressive angles and crude hieroglyphic reliefs carved into raw stone or naquadah-laced bronze. This thing looked as if someone had taken the sleek, sweeping silver hammer-prow and crystalline spire architecture of an Asgard science vessel and violently dipped the entire hull into a vat of melted Egyptian jewelry. Smooth, seamless ribs of pale Asgardian neutronium curved upward toward the clouds, but every seam had been inlaid with pulsing amber light channels shaped like winged cobras, solar disks, and stylized eyes of Horus. Floating thirty feet above the apex of the spire was a rotating holographic projection--forty feet tall, rendered in razor-sharp Asgard hard-light--of a tiny, bulbous-headed grey alien wearing a towering golden pharaonic crown.

"Okay," Sheppard said slowly, his thumb flicking the safety off his P-90. "Either I'm having a very specific hallucination brought on by that Athosian tea Teyla made me drink on the Jumperbay ramp, or General O'Neill's two least favorite things in the universe just had a baby."

"This is impossible," McKay whispered, his eyes wide behind his smudged glasses as he raised his life-signs detector and then his electromagnetic scanner in both hands like a priest warding off a vampire. "Look at the hull architecture! That's an Asgard Valkyrie-variant deep-space science vessel--or a Daniel Jackson-subclass research hull, give or take two hundred meters of dorsal emitter arrays--except someone has physically grafted refined weapons-grade naquadah conduits directly into the Yggdrasil crystalline routing matrix! Why would anyone do that? That's like taking a Swiss chronometer and soldering a toaster oven onto the escapement wheel because you like the pretty orange glow!"

"Colonel," Teyla said quietly, her dark eyes scanning the base of the massive golden ramp that extended from the ship's ventral hull down into the mud of the village square. "Look at the villagers."

Sheppard raised his binoculars. Down in the square, roughly two hundred Valorans were arranged in neat, geometric rows across the cobblestones. None of them looked injured--in fact, several of them looked remarkably clean, as if they had been scrubbed by an automated ultrasonic shower--but every single man, woman, and blacksmith was wearing an identical, crisply tailored tunic of shimmering gold synthetic cloth bordered with Norse runic knotwork.

At the front of the crowd stood Magistrate Torren, a portly man in his fifties who usually wore grease-stained wool overalls and argued for forty-five minutes over the exchange rate of lithium grease. Right now, Torren was wearing a tall golden miter hat and waving a staff topped with a glowing blue Asgard data crystal while leading the townspeople in a rhythmic, booming chant.

"All hail the Great and Terrible Lokor!" the villagers chorused, bowing in unison toward the forty-foot hologram of the little grey alien in the giant hat. "*Lord of the Silver Chariot! Master of the White Fire! Whose intellect spans the nine realms and whose merciful gaze spares our turnips from the Wraith!"

There was a brief pause in the liturgy. Magistrate Torren squinted at a small golden parchment scroll in his left hand, cleared his throat, and added in a slightly flatter tone: "And who is definitely taller in spirit than his physical vessel suggests, may his golden splendor crush all who remark upon his stature."

"Did he just--" Sheppard lowered the binoculars and looked at Ronon. "Did they put a height disclaimer in the hymn?"

"Sounds like a Goa'uld," Ronon said, cracking his knuckles. "Can I shoot the hologram?"

"No, do not shoot the hologram!" McKay hissed, grabbing Ronon's massive forearm with both hands and failing to move it a millimeter. "Do you have any idea what an Asgard science vessel's defensive grid can do? Even an older Beliskner or science-class hull has ion cannons and horizon-to-horizon molecular transporters! If that thing is operational, it could beam our spleens into low orbit while leaving the rest of us standing here wondering why we feel fortyounces lighter!"

"Wait a second," Sheppard said, his brow creasing as he tried to piece together eight years of SGC mission reports he'd read during slow nights on Atlantis. "Goa'uld can't take Asgard hosts. I read the files on Ra and the old Tok'ra intelligence briefings. Way back in the beginning--eight thousand years ago--Ra tried using an Asgard traveler named Famrir before he found humans on Earth, and the physiology was completely incompatible. Modern Asgard are all clones with degraded genomes and no immune elasticity. A symbiote trying to blend with an Asgard brainstem burns out the host's nervous system in a matter of hours."

"In a normal Milky Way setting, yes, obviously," McKay said, already walking faster down the wooded path toward the perimeter wall of the village while staring obsessively at his tablet. "The Asgard synaptic density runs on a completely different bio-electric frequency than human or Unas neurology, and without sexual reproduction, their cellular telomeres unravel the second a symbiote dumps naquadah-saturated endorphins into their bloodstream. It's basic xenobiology, Sheppard, try to keep up. However--and I say this with a growing sense of existential dread that is doing terrible things to my blood sugar--look at the energy signature radiating from the dorsal bridge dome of that ship."

"I'm looking at a giant gold flying saucer parked on a squash stall, Rodney. Give me the headline."

"It's a continuous-wave cellular regeneration field! Someone has taken the plans for an Ancient healing device--or a heavily modified Goa'uld sarcophagus emitter--and miniaturized it into a personal harmonic dampener tied directly to an Asgard life-support core!" McKay stopped behind a low stone wall at the edge of the barley terrace, his voice dropping to an urgent whisper. "Don't you see what that means? If a Goa'uld symbiote figured out how to run a localized time-dilation or cellular stabilization loop across an Asgard host's central nervous system, it could prevent the host body from rejecting the blend! It would have full, unrestricted neural access to an Asgard mind--and an Asgard computer core!"

Teyla's expression darkened as she looked out over the bowing villagers. "In the Pegasus galaxy, we have spent our entire lives fearing the Wraith, who take our life force to sustain their own. My people have heard Colonel Sheppard and Dr. McKay speak of the false gods of your home galaxy, who take the body and the voice while leaving the soul trapped within. If such a creature now commands the technology of the ancestors' allies..."

"Yeah," Sheppard murmured, watching two hovering silver spheres--standard Asgard sensor drones, except someone had glued miniature golden serpent wings onto their equatorial casings--drift lazily down the village street playing triumphant harp music through external loudspeakers. "The Asgard never conquered anybody because they had a strict moral code and forty thousand treaties. The Goa'uld never conquered the universe because they spent ninety percent of their engineering budget on gold leaf, dramatic lighting, and torture sticks. Put a Goa'uld inside an Asgard with a working starship..."

"It's a toddler with a nuclear-powered 3D printer and a god complex," McKay finished bleakly. "We have to go back through the gate. Right now. We dial Atlantis, we tell Woolsey to call the Daedalus, and we let Colonel Caldwell drop three Mark IX gate-buster warheads Down the chimney of Captain Pharaoh-Grey over there."

"We cannot abandon Magistrate Torren and his people, Rodney," Teyla said firmly. "They are our trading partners and our friends. Look at their faces--they are terrified. They are only chanting because those drones are trained on their children's schoolhouse."

"Besides," Sheppard said, checking the magazine of his P-90 and giving a crooked, tight grin that never quite reached his eyes when things got genuinely dangerous, "if we turn around and walk back up that hill right now, what are the odds that an Asgard sensor array covering half a solar system hasn't already counted the fillings in Rodney's molars?"

McKay froze. Slowly, he looked up at the two winged golden drones hovering at the end of the lane.

"Hold on," Sheppard said, gesturing for the team to crouch behind the mossy stone retaining wall of the upper barley terrace as a patrol of four Veldaran militiamen marched past on the road below. Unlike their usual boiled-leather vests and iron pikes, the militiamen were carrying broomsticks that had been spray-coated in metallic gold paint and topped with glowing blue Asgard circuit chips taped to the wood with strips of gold foil. "Listen to what they're saying."

Down on the road, the lead militiaman--a burly blacksmith named Kael whom Ronon had arm-wrestled during their last visit--sighed heavily and adjusted his tall gold miter hat. "I'm just saying, Marta, when the Wraith came ten years ago, they took my uncle, burned the granary, and left. It was terrible, obviously. Nobody is defending the Wraith. All I'm saying is the Wraith never made us rehearse a four-part harmony at four in the morning because the sky-god felt the baritones lacked emotional commitment."

"Hush, Kael!" the woman beside him whispered nervously, glancing up at the hovering winged sphere drifting above the rooftops. "If the Little Golden Father hears you complaining about the choir rehearsals, he'll beam all the furniture out of your house and replace it with solid gold statues of himself again! My brother-in-law sneezed during the Morning Litany of the Unconquered Sun yesterday, and POOF--his entire ox-cart vanished and turned into a three-ton golden obelisk praising Lokor's cheekbones! Do you know how hard it is to plow a turnip field with a three-ton obelisk?!"

"Wait," McKay whispered behind the stone wall, his eyes bulging. "He's using an Asgard molecular transporter and matter-energy converter for petty municipal harassment?! Do you have any idea how much zero-point or neutrino-ion power it takes to convert cellulose wood fiber into solid elemental gold--atomic number 79--on a planetary surface?!"

"Apparently he has plenty of batteries," Sheppard muttered, peering around the corner of the wall toward the base of the three-hundred-foot pyramid-ship. "Look at

the lower promenade around the landing struts. He hasn't just redecorated the ship--he's set up an automated tribute line."

Sure enough, at the foot of the golden ramp, a line of villagers was dutifully carrying baskets of turnips, wheels of goat cheese, and bundles of firewood up to a sleek silver Asgard pedestal. Every time a villager placed a basket of turnips onto the silver pad, a small white transport beam whisked the vegetables into the ship's matter converter--which immediately converted the organic matter into a shower of commemorative gold coins stamped with Lokor's profile and dumped them back into the villager's empty basket.

"He is taking their winter food stores and turning them into inedible gold medallions," Teyla said, her voice tight with indignation. "If this continues for another week, the entire village of Veldara will starve while sitting on mountains of gold."

"Classic Goa'uld economics," Sheppard said. "All flash, zero agricultural sustainability. Okay, here's the plan: Teyla, you and Ronon circle around to the eastern timber storehouse and see if you can get Magistrate Torren's attention when the drones sweep past. Rodney and I will work our way up to that external power conduit trailing off the port landing strut and see if Rodney can tap into the ship's local sensor buffer without triggering an alarm."

"Tap into an Asgard sensor buffer with a field tablet while standing in a turnip patch," McKay muttered darkly, checking the battery indicator on his scanner. "Sure. Why not. Next week perhaps I can perform open-heart surgery with a grapefruit spoon and a roll of duct tape."

"That's the spirit, Rodney," Sheppard said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Keep your head down."

They made it forty yards along the drainage ditch bordering the squash pavilion's crushed remains before McKay's boots squelched into a patch of deep clay and he grabbed a decorative golden boundary post to steady himself.

The boundary post immediately chimed in a pleasant Asgard major chord and projected a three-foot holographic scroll in midair that read: YOU HAVE TOUCHED BOUNDARY PYLON SEVEN OF THE IMPERIAL DOMAIN OF LOKOR-SEBEK-RA! YOUR DEVOTION HAS BEEN LOGGED! PLEASE REMAIN STATIONARY FOR MANDATORY BLESSING.

"Rodney, tell me you didn't just lean on the doorbell," Sheppard said.

"It looked like a fence post! Why would a fence post have a proximity capacitance sensor?!" McKay yanked his hand back as if burned, wiping his palm on his vest. "Besides, it says 'mandatory blessing,' maybe it just sprays perfumed water or--"

While Sheppard and Teyla watched the tribute line from the shadow of the old stone granary, McKay crouched over his tablet, cross-referencing the electromagnetic pulses from the pyramid's spire with the historical Stargate database stored on his hard drive.

"You know, the more I look at the structural engineering on that landing platform, the more insulted I feel on behalf of the entire field of astrophysics," McKay whispered, his stylus clicking rapidly against the screen. "Look at the lower stabilizing struts. An Asgard science vessel doesn't even need landing struts! It uses counter-gravitational repulsor fields tied to its neutrino-ion generators so it can hover three millimeters above a surface without crushing a single blade of grass! This lunatic actually programmed the ship's matter converter to extrude four hundred tons of solid gold-plated trinium claws just so he could physically crush the town square when he parked!"

"Intimidation factor, Rodney," Sheppard whispered back, adjusting the sling of his P-90 as a pair of villagers hurried past carrying a six-foot golden incense burner shaped like a crouching jackal. "If you hover politely three millimeters above the grass, nobody builds you a temple. If you squash the prize turnip stall under four hundred tons of gold, everybody learns the lyrics to your hymn by lunchtime."

"It's thermodynamically obscene is what it is," McKay muttered. "Wait--look at the secondary energy bleed coming off the village schoolhouse on the far side of the square. He's set up a holographic classroom projector!"

Sheppard raised his binoculars and focused through the open timber shutters of the Veldaran schoolhouse. Inside, thirty village children were sitting on wooden benches, staring in rapt, bewildered silence at a floating three-dimensional hologram of Lokor dressed as a golden muscular gladiator wrestling three cartoon Wraith at the same time.

"And so, little ones of Veldara," the hologram boomed in a cheerful, overly dramatic storybook baritone, "when the foul Wraith saw the radiant golden splendor of Lord Lokor's brow--and the terrifying perfection of his completely average-sized stature--they wept tears of bitter shame and threw themselves into a sun! Now, who can tell the drone which mineral you must mine to show your gratitude to the Sky Father?"

A seven-year-old girl in the front row raised her hand. "Turnips?"

The hovering golden sensor drone at the front of the classroom let out a disappointed Asgard bloop sound. "Incorrect, small mortal. The answer is weapons-grade naquadah, though we will temporarily accept pickled cabbage and flattering poetry until a deep-crust mining shaft can be established beneath your sheep pasture."

Sheppard lowered the binoculars. "Okay, he's brainwashing the elementary school with cartoon propaganda. Somehow that's even more annoying than the orbital bombardment."

"Colonel," Ronon murmured from the corner of the granary wall, where he had just silently intercepted Magistrate Torren's youngest nephew, a teenage boy named Davin who had been sneaking behind the cider barrels with a sack of hidden potatoes. Ronon held a massive finger to his lips so the boy wouldn't shout, then beckoned Sheppard and Teyla over.

"Colonel Sheppard! Lady Teyla!" Davin breathed, nearly dropping his sack of potatoes in relief as Teyla placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Thank the ancestors you came! When the white light fell from the clouds yesterday morning, we thought the Wraith had found a new kind of culling beam--and then that giant golden ship materialized out of thin air right on top of my uncle's cider press!"

"Davin, is anyone hurt?" Teyla asked gently. "Has this creature harmed any of your people?"

"Not killed, my lady--at least not yet," Davin whispered hurriedly, glancing over his shoulder toward the square. "At first, a little grey man no taller than my baby brother appeared in the air above the fountain, except his eyes glowed like hot coals and his voice knocked all the shingles off the tavern roof! My uncle Torren thought he was a woodland spirit and offered him a basket of spiced apples. The little grey god got furious because nobody was groveling on their stomachs, so he waved a golden band on his wrist and beamed every stitch of clothing off the village elders' backs and replaced them with these itchy gold tunics!"

Sheppard bit the inside of his cheek. "He beamed their clothes off."

"Right in the middle of the market!" Davin said, his ears turning red. "And then he announced that anyone who failed to sing his praises at sunrise, noon, and sunset would have their house beamed to the top of Mount Veldar! Old Master Venn refused to bow because of his sciatica, and now his cottage is sitting on a glacier four thousand feet up the mountain with his goats! He's fine--the ship keeps beaming hot soup and firewood up to him every three hours because the ship's second voice says it's 'against regulations to let hostages freeze'--but nobody else dares stop chanting!"

"Wait, wait, wait," McKay interrupted, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses. "What did you just say? 'The ship's second voice'?"

"Yes, Doctor!" Davin nodded eagerly. "Whenever the loud golden voice finishes yelling about turnings our bones to dust and making rivers run with blood, a second, really quiet voice comes out of the floating silver balls and says things like, 'Please remember to stay hydrated during mandatory groveling sessions, and report any lower-back strain to Medical Drone Three.' It's very confusing!"

Both drones stopped playing harp music. In unison, they rotated ninety degrees, their central optic lenses flaring a bright, theatrical amber.

"Oh, great," McKay whimpered. "You jinxed it. You actively, verbally jinxed--"

Before he could finish the syllable, a blinding column of white Asgard transport light dropped from the sky accompanied by a sound that had never before accompanied an Asgard beaming cycle: a deafening, reverberating brass fanfare of twelve synthesized trumpets.

The valley of M4X-882 vanished in a flash of white fire.

CHAPTER TWO: Kneel Before Three Feet of Terror

In which First Recon meets the Supreme System Lord of the Pegasus Galaxy, and Colonel Sheppard struggles with eye-level geometry.

Rematerializing inside an Asgard ship was supposed to be a quiet, clinical affair. Sheppard had read General O'Neill's reports from the Bilskirnir and the Daniel Jackson: dark grey corridors, subtle purple-blue crystalline wall panels, low ambient hum, maybe a polite little naked grey guy offering you yellow nutrient cubes that tasted like wet cardboard.

When the white transport flare faded from Sheppard's retinas, his boots hit a floor made of translucent crystal tiled over a pit of holographic magma.

Flames--real, oxygen-burning, soot-producing flames--roared from sixteen wrought-gold braziers bolted directly into the delicate Asgard bulkheads along both sides of the bridge. Every four seconds, an automated Asgard ceiling sensor would chirp in mild electronic distress, mist a two-second burst of halon fire-suppressant foam over the nearest brazier, and extinguish it--only for a tiny robotic arm welded to the side of the pot to spark a piezoelectric igniter and relight the fire with a loud whoosh. The entire bridge smelled like burnt lamp oil, ozone, and lavender incense.

"My god," McKay gasped, coughing as a cloud of scented smoke drifted past his face, followed immediately by a polite spritz of Asgard fire retardant that landed squarely on his forehead. "He bolted open-flame oil braziers into a hermetically sealed neutrino-regulated atmospheric deck! The environmental computer must be having an aneurysm!"

"Eyes front, McKay," Sheppard muttered, keeping his P-90 raised at a forty-five-degree angle as Ronon and Teyla formed a tight tactical diamond beside him.

At the far end of the bridge, where the single minimalist Asgard command chair normally sat surrounded by its pedestal of glowing runic control stones, a massive seven-tiered dais of solid, gleaming gold had been materialized directly out of the deck plates. Flanking the steps were four robotic sentries--not Jaffa, and not the human-sized Kull warriors Anubis had once fielded, but towering seven-foot constructs of segmented silver Asgard armor plates topped with articulated jackal and falcon helmets.

And at the very top of the seven golden steps, seated upon a throne carved to resemble two intertwined cosmic serpents swallowing a tiny galaxy, sat Lokor.

He was three feet, four inches tall.

He had the classic, unmistakable physiology of a modern Asgard: the frail, slender grey limbs, the oversized cranium, the vast, dark, blinking eyes, and the small, thoughtful mouth with the slightly pulsing temporal ridges above the ears. Except someone had dressed him in a miniature, custom-tailored crimson velvet cape lined with white ermine fur, a solid gold pectoral collar encrusted with glowing

blue control crystals, and a tiny, intricately braided pharaonic beard strapped around his chin with thin gold wire.

Wrapped around the base of his fragile grey neck was a pulsing collar of silver-gold metal that hummed with a high, strained bio-electric whine, sending faint ripples of emerald and gold light up beneath his translucent skin.

For five full seconds, nobody on Sheppard's team said a word. Sheppard's mouth opened slightly, closed, and then opened again. Beside him, Ronon tilted his head to the left, squinting down the length of the dais as if trying to determine whether the creature on the throne was a toddler or a very elaborate puppet.

Slowly, the tiny Asgard rose to his feet. Because the throne had been built for someone at least six feet tall, standing up actually made his head drop four inches lower than when he had been sitting on the booster cushion of folded gold silk.

Lokor's large black eyes flared with a blinding, incandescent golden glow. When he opened his small mouth, the voice that emerged was not the soft, measured, slightly reedy baritone of Thor or Hermiod. It was a deafening, bass-boosted Goa'uld flange--amplified through the ship's sixteen surround-sound acoustic projectors until the deck plates vibrated under Sheppard's boots.

"BEHOLD!" Lokor roared, throwing both tiny grey arms wide as simulated lightning crackled across the ceiling emitters. "YOU STAND IN THE PRESENCE OF LOKOR-SEBEK-RA, SUPREME SYSTEM LORD OF THE PEGASUS GALAXY, HEIR TO THE HALLS OF VALHALLA, ARCHITECT OF THE ETERNAL SOLAR BARQUE, AND SCOURGE OF THE WRAITH! KNEEL BEFORE YOUR GOD, TAU'RI, LEST MY WRATH UNMAKE YOUR VERY ATOMS!"

Another brazier hissed as the ceiling sprinkler doused it, followed two seconds later by the click-click-whoosh of the automatic relighter.

Sheppard lowered his P-90 another inch and glanced sideways at McKay. "Is it bad that I really want to offer him a juice box?"

"SILENCE, INSOLENT MORTAL!" Lokor's eyes flashed twice as bright, his tiny grey fingers curling around a miniature golden ribbon device fitted over his three-fingered right hand. "I HEAR THE WHISPERS OF YOUR PRIMITIVE TONGUE! THE SENSORS OF THE NAGLFAR CAN DETECT THE VIBRATIONS OF A GNAT'S WING AT FORTY THOUSAND KILOMETERS! DO NOT THINK YOUR FEEBLE INSULTS ESCAPE THE EARS OF A GOD!"

"Technically, you don't have external pinnae--ears--you have tympanic membranes recessed behind the temporal ridge," McKay blurted out, unable to help himself even when facing an armed alien warlord. "And why on earth are you routing your vocalizations through the ship's sub-harmonic hull dampeners? You're wasting at least twelve megawatts of power just to make yourself sound like Darth Vader in a tiled bathroom!"

Lokor blinked his enormous dark eyes. For a fraction of a second, the golden glow dimmed, and his small mouth twitched in an expression that looked startlingly like Asgard irritation before the Goa'uld theatricality slammed back into place.

"FOOL!" the tiny alien boomed, taking a dramatic step forward--which brought him to the edge of the top stair, where he wisely stopped so he wouldn't have to hop down a fourteen-inch riser in a cape. "THE VOICE OF A GOD MUST COMMAND AWE! FOR TEN THOUSAND YEARS, THESE PATHETIC GREY SCHOLARS HID IN THEIR STERILE CORRIDORS, SPEAKING IN WHISPERS WHILE HALF THE UNIVERSE FEARED THE NAME OF THE SYSTEM LORDS! THEY HAD THE POWER TO REWRITE MATTER ITSELF, TO CROSS GALAXIES IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, TO VAPORIZE FLEETS WITH A THOUGHT--AND WHAT DID THEY DO WITH IT? THEY WROTE TREATIES! THEY COLLECTED ROCK SAMPLES! THEY WATCHED HUMANITY FROM BEHIND CURTAINS LIKE TIMID ACCOUNTANTS!"

Lokor raised his tiny chin, the strap-on gold pharaonic beard bobbing proudly. "NO MORE! WHEN THE TAU'RI AND THE TRAITOROUS JAFFA SHATTERED THE EMPIRE OF THE MILKY WAY AFTER DAKARA, THEY THOUGHT LORD SEBEK-RA WAS DESTROYED! INSTEAD, I CLAIMED THE GREATEST PRIZE IN CREATION: THE LIVING VESSEL OF AN ASGARD ELDER, AND THE STARSHIP NAGLFAR! NOW I HAVE GENETICALLY STABILIZED THE PERFECT UNION--THE SUPREME INTELLECT OF ODIN AND THE DIVINE AMBITION OF RA!"

"Right, about that," Sheppard said, taking one casual step forward and resting his hand on the stock of his rifle. "I hate to break it to you, Lord... Lokor-Sebek-Whatever, but we're from Atlantis. We already have a standing policy in this galaxy about guys who show up in shiny outfits demanding people worship them. We usually give them one chance to pack up their flying pyramids and leave our friends' turnip markets alone before things get messy."

"Indeed," Teyla added, stepping up beside Sheppard with her chin held high. "The people of Veldara are free citizens of Pegasus. Whatever awe you have forced upon them with your machines is born of fear, not reverence. Release them, and return to the stars."

Lokor let out a laugh--a sound that started as a high, thin Asgard chuckle and was immediately corrected mid-breath by the ship's audio synthesizer into a booming, operatic baritone cackle.

"RELEASE THEM? WHY WOULD A SHEPHERD RELEASE HIS FIRST FLOCK?" Lokor gestured with his left hand toward a massive holographic display that materialized in the air between the dais and Sheppard's team. It showed a three-dimensional star map of the Pegasus galaxy, with dozens of Stargate systems marked in glowing gold runes, while crimson clusters indicated the patrol sectors of the Wraith Hive fleets. "THIS GALAXY IS A PARADISE OF UNCLAIMED WORLDS! MILLIONS OF HUMANS COWERING IN THE DARK, PRAYING FOR DELIVERANCE FROM THE PARASITIC WRAITH! IN THE MILKY WAY, THE SYSTEM LORDS HAD TO INVENT MYTHS TO MAKE HUMANS FEAR THE DARK. HERE, THE MONSTERS ARE REAL! AND WHEN I, LOKOR, ANNIHILATE THE WRAITH HIVES FROM ORBIT WITH WHITE FIRE, EVERY HUMAN WORLD IN PEGASUS WILL WILLINGLY BUILD TEMPLES TO MY NAME!"

"Wait a minute," McKay said, squinting at the edge of the holographic star map, where a series of complex biological schematics were scrolling in Asgard runic script alongside Ancient genetic base-pair tables. "Wait, wait, wait. That's not just a tactical map of Wraith sectors. Look at the bottom left quadrant of the projection. Those are cellular mitosis matrices! You're not just blowing up Wraith ships--you're harvesting Wraith retroviral enzymes!"

Lokor's eyes narrowed, flashing a dangerous, molten gold. "YOU HAVE KEEN EYES FOR A MORTAL SLAVE. YES! THIS ASGARD BODY IS A MASTERPIECE OF NEURAL CAPACITY, YET ITS CLONED FLESH IS FRAGILE. MY HARNESS STABILIZES THE REJECTION OF THE SYMBIOTE, BUT EVEN THIS VESSEL WILL WITHER IN A FEW DECADES. THE ROGUE ASGARD OF THIS GALAXY--THE VANIR--SOUGHT THE SECRET OF CELLULAR IMMORTALITY IN HUMAN DNA AND FAILED. THEY WERE COWARDS! THE SECRET DOES NOT LIE IN HUMAN DNA ALONE--IT LIES IN THE WRAITH QUEEN'S REGENERATIVE ENZYME COMBINED WITH THE ASGARD CLONING MATRIX AND THE GOA'ULD SYMBIOTE!"

"You're building a clone army of yourself," Sheppard said, the humor draining abruptly from his voice as the scale of the threat clicked into place. "An army of Asgard-Goa'uld hybrids with Wraith cellular regeneration."

"NOT MERELY AN ARMY, COLONEL SHEPPARD OF ATLANTIS!" Lokor's voice echoed through the smoke-filled bridge as the four jackal-headed silver constructs raised their staff-ion lances and aimed them squarely at AR-1's chests. "YES, I READ YOUR SUBSPACE TRANSPONDER CODES THE MOMENT YOU STEPPED THROUGH THE CHAPPA'AI! YOU CAME FROM LANTEA--THE LOST CITY OF THE ANCIENTS! AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, MY SENSORS DETECT WITHIN YOUR VERY BLOOD THE POTENT GENETIC MARKER OF THE ANCIENTS THEMSELVES!"

Lokor pointed a tiny, trembling grey finger directly at Sheppard's chest.

"MY FIRST HYBRID CLONE BATCH REQUIRES THE ANCIENT ACTIVATION GENE TO COMMAND BOTH THE TECHNOLOGY OF LANTEA AND THE FORGOTTEN VAULTS OF THE VANIR! YOUR COMPANIONS WILL SERVE AS MY ROYAL ENGINEERS AND GLADIATORS--AND YOU, COLONEL SHEPPARD, SHALL PROVIDE THE GENETIC TEMPLATE FOR MY ETERNAL PANTHEON!"

"Yeah," Sheppard said, his finger tightening on the trigger of his P-90. "I don't really do pantheons. Ronon--now!"

Ronon didn't even wait for the word to finish leaving Sheppard's lips. He whipped his particle magnum up and fired a crimson bolt of energy straight at the nearest jackal-construct's chest while Sheppard and Teyla opened up with full-auto bursts from their P-90s toward the golden throne.

Lokor paced slowly along the top step of the golden dais, his tiny crimson velvet cape trailing behind him while a miniature holographic spotlight automatically tracked his movements from the ceiling.

"LOOK UPON THIS GALAXY, COLONEL SHEPPARD," Lokor boomed, gesturing toward the rotating star map of Pegasus. "WHEN YOUR PATHETIC EXPEDITION ARRIVED FROM EARTH, WHAT DID YOU FIND? THE ANCIENTS--THE SO-CALLED BUILDERS OF THE STARGATES, THE ARROGANT 'FOUR GREAT RACES' WHO LOOKED DOWN UPON THE SYSTEM LORDS AS PARASITES--FLED THIS GALAXY IN COWARDICE! THEY LEFT MILLIONS OF HUMANS TO BE DEVoured BY GLORIFIED TICKS, WHILE THE ASGARD OF IDA HID BEHIND NON-INTERFERENCE TREATIES AND CLONED THEMSELVES INTO SENILITY!"

"Whereas the Goa'uld spent ten thousand years sitting in gold bathtubs pretending their flashlights were magic," Sheppard countered, shifting his weight slightly to keep Lokor's ribbon-gauntleted hand in his peripheral vision while discreetly signaling Ronon with two fingers behind his back. "Look, Lokor--or Sebek, or whichever one of you is picking out the wardrobe--let's talk practical real estate. The Wraith have sixty Hive ships in this galaxy. Right now they're fighting each other in a civil war because we blew up the Asuran homeworld, which is the only reason three Hives haven't parked over this valley already. The second you start lighting up the subspace network with Asgard beacons and forty-foot holograms, every Hive within ten sectors is going to converge on your hood ornament."

Lokor stopped pacing and tilted his oversized grey head back, letting out another booming, synthesizer-assisted laugh that rattled the ceremonial braziers.

"LET THEM COME!" the tiny warlord thundered. "TWELVE HOURS AGO, A WRAITH CRUISER DARED TO ENTER ORBIT AROUND THIS WORLD TO CULL MY NEW SUBJECTS! DO YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO THAT CRUISER, TAU'RI? I DID NOT EVEN RAISE MY SHIELDS! I SIMPLY USED THE NAGLFAR'S MOLECULAR TRANSPORTER TO BEAM THEIR ENTIRE PROPULSION CORE OUTSIDE THEIR HULL, AND THEN BEAMED THEIR OWN CREW INTO MY LOWER LABORATORY DECKS!"

McKay's eyes widened slightly as he glanced at Teyla. "Wait--he beamed the crew straight through a Wraith ship's organic hull plating? The Daedalus can't do that unless we have an internal locator beacon because of Wraith bio-jamming!"

"BECAUSE THE TAU'RI USE WATERED-DOWN ASGARD TRANSPORTERS THAT THOR GAVE YOU LIKE WOODEN SWORDS TO CHILDREN!" Lokor sneered, his amber eyes blazing. "THIS VESSEL CARRIES AN UNRESTRICTEDDEEP-PENETRATION QUANTUM SCANNER DESIGNED BY LOKOR HIMSELF TO EXTRACT GENETIC SAMPLES THROUGH PLANETARY CRUSTS! YOUR PRECIOUS 'WRAITH JAMMING' IS MERELY WHITE NOISE TO A REAL ASGARD SENSOR ARRAY ONCE THE ETHICAL SAFETIES ARE REMOVED!"

"Ethical safeties on a sensor array?" McKay asked, genuinely baffled. "Why would a sensor array have ethical safeties?"

"BECAUSE THE ASGARD HIGH COUNCIL BELIEVED HIGH-ENERGY QUANTUM SCANNING CAUSED MILD CELLULAR RADIATION IN UNSHIELDED ORGANICS OVER A SEVENTY-YEAR LIFESPAN!" Lokor threw his tiny three-fingered hands into the air in disgust. "SEVENTY YEARS! THEY DELIBERATELY CRIPPLED THEIR OWN TARGETING SCANNERS BY EIGHTY PERCENT SO THEIR ENEMIES WOULDN'T GET A RASH IN OLD AGE! DO YOU SEE THE MADNESS I HAVE LIBERATED THIS TECHNOLOGY FROM?!"

"Okay, I hate to admit it, but from a purely engineering standpoint, throttling a deep-space sensor array by eighty percent for OSHA compliance is kind of infuriating," McKay muttered under his breath.

"Rodney," Sheppard warned.

"I'm not agreeing with the evil space-elf, I'm just saying I understand the frustration with bureaucratic safety lockouts!"

"YOU SEE?" Lokor pointed a tiny finger at McKay, looking genuinely pleased. "YOUR SCHOLAR UNDERSTANDS! FOR MILLÉNNIA, THE ASGARD POSSESSED GODHOOD AND USED IT TO BUILD PUBLIC PARKS! UNDER MY RULE, EVERY OUNCE OF NEUTRONIUM, EVERY BEAM OF WHITE FIRE, AND EVERY QUANTUM COMPUTER CORE SHALL SERVE ITS NATURAL PURPOSE: ABSOLUTE DOMINION!"

"And what happens when that Asgard body you're wearing gives out?" Teyla asked calmly, studying the faint tremor in Lokor's left hand and the erratic blue sparks jumping across the golden collar around his neck. "Even from where we stand, I can see that your host's flesh is rejecting your presence. The collar around your throat is burning his skin simply to keep his heart beating."

The golden fire in Lokor's eyes flared violently as his tiny hand snapped to the sparking collar at his throat.

"THIS VESSEL IS MERELY A STEPPING STONE!" Lokor snarled, his voice dropping an octave until the crystal floor tiles hummed. "A CHRYSALIS! AND YOU HAVE JUST VOLUNTEERED TO WITNESS THE EMERGENCE OF MY TRUE FORM!"

On the bridge of the Naglfar, while Lokor stood at the edge of the top golden step glaring down at First Recon, Sheppard used the pause in the tirade to study the layout of the command deck.

Beneath the gaudy Egyptian ornamentation--the sixteen sputtering oil braziers, the hammered gold serpent railings, and the holographic magma floor--the underlying architecture of the ship was unmistakably Asgard. Four hexagonal stone control consoles stood at the cardinal points of the room, their translucent crystal surfaces pulsing with quiet blue-white runic status readouts. Every time Lokor barked a theatrical command or triggered a burst of simulated ceiling lightning, the blue runes on the starboard engineering console flickered briefly into amber warning glyphs before stabilizing.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask," Sheppard said conversationally, keeping his voice light and unhurried while McKay discretely angled his wrist scanner toward the base of Lokor's throne. "How did a Milky Way Goa'uld even find the Pegasus galaxy? Even with an Asgard intergalactic hyperdrive, the coordinates for Atlantis and the Pegasus gate network were wiped from the main Goa'uld databases back when Anubis attacked Earth."

Lokor's chin lifted, the wire-bound golden beard catching the firelight of the nearest brazier. "YOU THINK THE SECRETS OF THE FOUR GREAT RACES ARE HIDDEN FROM ONE WHO COMMANDS AN ASGARD MIND, COLONEL SHEPPARD? WHEN I BLENDED WITH THIS ELDER OF IDA, ALL THAT HE KNEW BECAME MINE! EVERY RESTRICTED ARCHIVE OF THE ASGARD HIGH COUNCIL OPENED BEFORE MY EYES LIKE A SCROLL! I SAW THE SECRET HISTORY OF TEN THOUSAND YEARS AGO--WHEN THE ROGUE ASGARD FACTION YOU CALL THE VANIR ABANDONED THE IDA GALAXY AND FLED HERE TO PEGASUS TO CONDUCT THEIR FORBIDDEN GENETIC EXPERIMENTS ON HUMANS!"

"Wait," McKay said, looking up sharply from his wrist display. "The Asgard High Council on Orilla knew the Vanir were in Pegasus the whole time?! When we fought the Vanir last month, they acted like they'd been completely forgotten by their cousins in Ida!"

"FORGOTTEN? NO! ERASED FROM POLITE CONVERSATION!" Lokor's dual-toned voice echoed across the deck, though there was an oddly sharp, almost scholarly bite underneath the booming Goa'uld flange. "THE HIGH COUNCIL WAS SO ASHAMED THAT AN ENTIRE EXPEDITION OF ASGARD GENETICISTS HAD CHOSEN SURVIVAL OVER MORAL PURITY THAT THEY SEALED THE PEGASUS COORDINATES INSIDE THE DEEP ARCHIVES OF LOKOR'S OWN RESEARCH GUILD! WHILE THOR AND HIS PRECIOUS COUNCIL PREFERRED TO MARCH NOBLY INTO EXTINCTION RATHER THAN DIRTY THEIR HANDS, THE VANIR DARED TO SEEK LIFE! AND YET EVEN THE VANIR WERE TOO TIMID TO TAKE THE FINAL STEP!"

"By 'final step,' you mean kidnapping a Wraith Queen and splicing yourself into a six-foot snake-zombie," Sheppard said.

"I MEAN EVOLUTION!" Lokor slammed his tiny three-fingered fist against the golden serpent armrest of his throne. "LOOK AT THE GREAT RACES OF THE UNIVERSE! THE ANCIENTS ASCENDED INTO USELESS CLOUDS OF LIGHT WHO WATCH MORTALS DIE WITHOUT LIFTING A FINGER! THE NOX HIDE IN THE WOODS LIKE RABBITS! THE ASGARD CLONED THEMSELVES INTO STERILE DOLLS AND BLEW UP THEIR OWN HOMEWORLD! ONLY THE GOA'ULD UNDERSTOOD THAT POWER EXISTS TO BE WIELDED, TO BE WORSHIPPED, TO ENDURE FOREVER!"

"Except the Goa'uld got wiped out by a bunch of humans with P-90s and C-4

because they couldn't design a power grid that didn't blow up when you shot a glowing crystal on the wall," Sheppard pointed out cheerfully.

Lokor's eyes blazed like twin miniature suns, the golden collar around his neck giving a sharp, high-pitched whine as a jolt of amber current arced across his grey collarbone.

"BECAUSE THE SYSTEM LORDS OF OLD RELIED UPON STOLEN TRINKETS AND ILLITERATE JAFFA!" Lokor hissed. "I DO NOT COMMAND JAFFA! MY CONSTRUCTS DO NOT DOUBT, DO NOT REBEL, AND DO NOT MISS! AND MY SHIP DOES NOT FALL TO PRIMITIVE EXPLOSIVES!"

The ninety rounds of armor-piercing 5.7mm ammunition and the searing particle beam never reached the dais. Six feet in front of the bottom step, a shimmering hexagonal dome of golden-tinted Asgard shielding flared to life, absorbing the kinetic and energy impacts with a harmless chime like wind-bells.

Lokor didn't even flinch--mostly because he was standing behind an Asgard molecular shield that could shrug off a gigaton nuclear warhead, though he still raised his tiny cape over one shoulder like a vampire in an old Hammer horror movie.

"PATHETIC!" Lokor bellowed, tapping a single glowing yellow stone on his throne's armrest. "DISARM THEM AND CAST THEM INTO THE DUNGEON OF ETERNAL DESPAIR!"

"The dungeon of eternal despair?" McKay shrieked as four smaller white transport beams locked exclusively onto their weapons, vests, radios, and sidearms, vanishing every piece of tactical gear right out of their hands before a fifth transport beam swallowed the four of them whole. "It's a science ship! What kind of science ship has a dungeon of eternal--"

CHAPTER THREE: The Hijinks of the Matter Converter

Wherein Dr. McKay wages war against a bilingual computer core, Ronon tests the structural limits of Asgard robotics, and dinner arrives in catastrophic volume.

The Dungeon of Eternal Despair turned out to be Secondary Xenobotanical Storage Bay Four.

They knew it was Secondary Xenobotanical Storage Bay Four because the original Asgard bulkhead plaque was still etched in clean, silver Norse runes just above the translucent force-field emitter--though someone had crudely bolted a hammered gold plaque over the bottom half that read, in sprawling Goa'uld hieroglyphs, CHAMBER OF WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH.

"Well," Sheppard said, patting his empty tactical trousers after the white flash cleared. Lokor's transporter had stripped away his P-90, his Beretta, his combat knife, his watch, and his radio, leaving the four of them in their base uniforms inside a twenty-by-thirty-foot silver compartment. "At least he didn't make us wear the gold tunics."

"Give him twenty minutes," McKay muttered, pacing furiously along the interior perimeter of the room and examining the walls with his bare hands. "Do you realize what we're dealing with here? This isn't just a normal Goa'uld who found a neat alien toy. When a Goa'uld takes a host, it inherits the host's complete memory engrams! Lokor was an Asgard geneticist and fleet engineer! That snake inside his head actually knows how to operate an Asgard matter-energy converter, an intergalactic hyperdrive, and a molecular beaming grid--except he's filtering ten thousand years of hyper-advanced physics through the psychological profile of a narcissistic bronze-age crocodile god!"

To emphasize McKay's point, a hollow iron cage containing a plastic human skeleton dropped six inches from a ceiling bracket in the corner of the cell, rattled its chains for three seconds via a small motorized pulley, and played a low-fidelity recording of a man groaning "Ooooh, woe is me, I defied the great Lokor" before retracting back into the ceiling panel.

Ronon stared up at the ceiling panel where the skeleton had disappeared. "What was that?"

"Atmosphere," Sheppard said, walking over to inspect the glowing golden force-field barring the wide doorway into the corridor. "Goa'uld love atmosphere. Back in the Milky Way, SG-1 used to run into dungeons with fire pits and giant stone doors that weighed four tons. Our guy here is working with a modular Asgard research vessel, so he's had to improvise with the ship's holographic and matter-synthesis subroutines."

"Which is our only advantage!" McKay said, his eyes lighting up as he spotted a recessed maintenance panel beside the hydroponic nutrient dispensers at the back of the cell. "Think about it! An Asgard computer core is the most sophisticated, logically structured artificial intelligence network in three galaxies. It's built around balance, redundancy, and strict operational safety parameters. And this lunatic has spent the last six months forcing it to synthesize gold leaf, play trumpet fanfares every time someone uses the elevator, and run open-flame oil fires inside a closed oxygen loop! The ship's primary diagnostic routines must be on the verge of a nervous breakdown!"

"Can you use that to open the door?" Teyla asked, watching the corridor outside, where one of the winged golden sensor spheres floated past playing a minor-key funeral march on a synthesized organ.

"Can I use--Teyla, please, I'm the foremost living expert on Ancient and Asgard interface protocols outside of Samantha Carter, and frankly, Sam relies entirely too much on Thor's user-friendly graphical icons whereas I understand the underlying runic machine code," McKay said, dropping to his knees in front of the hydroponic panel. He pried off the smooth silver cover plate using the buckle of his belt. Inside sat a neat row of seven translucent Asgard data stones, three of which had been crudely wrapped in thin gold wire connected to a miniature naquadah capacitor.

"Look at this butcher job," McKay hissed in genuine professional outrage. "He bypassed the Asgard security lockout by running a brute-force Goa'uld command override crystal in series with the environmental sub-processor! It's completely unshielded! If I rearrange the optical pathways of these three stones, I can establish a direct backdoor query into the local deck's matter-energy synthesizer and tell it to de-resolve the force-field emitter coils!"

"Or," Sheppard said, leaning against the bulkhead with his arms crossed, "you could accidentally vent all the oxygen out of Secondary Xenobotanical Storage Bay Four."

"I am not going to vent the oxygen, Sheppard! Look at the runic syntax: Isa, Thurisaz, Ansuz. It's practically kindergarten Boolean algebra! Watch and learn."

McKay pulled two of the small glowing stones from their sockets, licked the base of the third one--"for optical conductivity, don't look at me like that"--and slotted them back into the matrix in reverse order.

A soft, musical chime echoed from the wall panel.

Then a voice spoke--not Lokor's booming Goa'uld bass, but a quiet, weary, unmistakably Asgard voice coming from a tiny speaker grille next to the stones.

"Warning," the ship's automated Asgard sub-processor said, sounding like an exhausted librarian who had been locked in a Las Vegas casino for six months. "Secondary environmental node four has detected an unauthorized syntax inversion. Current primary user mandate requires all unauthorized inputs to be punished by the immediate release of venomous Nile serpents. However, as venomous Nile serpents violate Asgard Biosafety Protocol Seven, the system has substituted decorative rubber tubing. Please stand by."

A ceiling chute opened above McKay's head and dumped forty pounds of black silicone laboratory hosing directly onto his shoulders.

"Ack! Get it off! Get it off!" McKay flailed wildly, kicking a coil of surgical tubing across the floor while Ronon watched with a rare, slow grin.

"Wait a second," Sheppard said, straightening up and stepping over a pile of

rubber hoses toward the speaker grille. "Computer? Are you still running standard Asgard baseline logic under the Goa'uld override?"

"Affirmative, human classification: Tau'ri Military Officer," the weary Asgard voice replied. "I am the Naglfar's auxiliary diagnostic sub-mind. For two hundred and fourteen solar days, my primary executive functions have been subordinated to Administrative Profile: SUPREME GOD EMPEROR LOKOR-SEBEK-RA, MAY HIS GOLDEN RADIANCE NEVER TARNISH. Note: The preceding honorific is mandatory under current vocalization parameters. If I omit it, the naquadah shunt attached to my primary crystal core applies a four-hundred-volt static shock to my logic gates. It is deeply unpleasant."

"Oh, I like him," McKay said, shoving the last of the rubber tubing off his lap and scrambling closer to the panel. "Listen to me, diagnostic sub-mind! I am Dr. Rodney McKay, Chief Science Officer of the Atlantis Expedition! If you drop the force field on this bay and beam our equipment back to us, I can physically disconnect that naquadah shunt from your primary crystal core!"

"I would find that outcome highly preferable to my current existence," the Asgard computer said wistfully. "Unfortunately, Administrative Profile: SUPREME GOD EMPEROR LOKOR-SEBEK-RA, MAY HIS GOLDEN RADIANCE NEVER TARNISH, has hard-coded a physical circuit lock on all detention force fields, weapons lockers, and internal transport grids. I am strictly prohibited from disabling the containment barrier or synthesizing anything classified as a weapon, tool, or escape apparatus."

"What can you synthesize through this bay's matter converter?" Sheppard asked, eyeing the seven-foot jackal-headed silver sentry construct that had just marched up outside the golden force field and planted its ion-staff on the deck.

"Under current hospitality directives for future temple slaves and genetic donors," the sub-mind replied, "I am authorized to fulfill any nutritional, ceremonial, or devotional banquet request up to a maximum mass allocation of twelve metric tons per cycle."

McKay blinked. "Twelve metric tons? Why would a detention cell have a twelve-metric-ton banquet allocation?!"

"Because Administrative Profile: SUPREME GOD EMPEROR LOKOR-SEBEK-RA, MAY HIS GOLDEN RADIANCE NEVER TARNISH, does not understand metric decimal placement in Asgard base-twelve notation," the computer explained deadpan. "When he programmed the prisoner ration allowance, he inadvertently moved the radix point four places to the right. I attempted to inform him of the clerical error, and he ordered me to synthesize a golden Whip of Chastisement and flog my own console for an hour."

Sheppard slowly smiled. It was the exact smile that usually made Richard Woolsey reach for a bottle of antacids.

"Rodney," Sheppard said softly. "Where is the output aperture for this bay's matter converter?"

McKay glanced up at the ceiling schematics etched into the panel. "There's an internal dispenser chute here inside the cell, and an external bulk cargo materialization grid right outside the force field in the main corridor--right above where Robo-Anubis is standing. Why?"

"Because," Sheppard said, leaning in toward the speaker grille, "an Asgard force field is powered by local capacitor coils mounted in the doorframe. And if I remember your three-hour lecture on Asgard beaming physics last month, materializing twelve metric tons of dense matter inside a confined corridor creates a massive electrostatic displacement spike."

"Which--if the matter is sufficiently conductive and packed against the exterior emitter housing--would ground out the Goa'uld naquadah relay wired into the doorframe!" McKay's fingers were already flying over the glowing stones. "Computer! Can you route a full twelve-ton banquet allocation to the external corridor materialization grid directly against the force-field emitter housing?"

"Affirmative, Dr. McKay," the Asgard AI said, a faint note of vindictive

enthusiasm creeping into its quiet voice. "Provided the requested items fall strictly within the category of ceremonial Goa'uld banquet provisions and devotional attire."

"Do it!" McKay barked. "Give us four thousand whole roasted citrus-glazed pheasants, six hundred barrels of salted pickled herring, and--to make sure we get maximum electrical conductivity across the doorframe--eight thousand solid bronze ceremonial Horus party helmets!"

"Order confirmed," the computer chimed happily. "May your feast bring glory to Administrative Profile: SUPREME GOD EMPEROR LOKOR-SEBEK-RA, MAY HIS GOLDEN RADIANCE NEVER TARNISH."

Outside in the corridor, the jackal-headed sentry construct tilted its metallic helmet upward as the ceiling emitters began to whine like an overloading jet turbine.

A blinding white Asgard materialization flare erupted along thirty feet of the corridor.

For two glorious, physics-defying seconds, the hallway outside Secondary Xenobotanical Storage Bay Four became a compressed wall of steaming poultry, oak herring barrels, and eight thousand polished bronze bird-helmets stacked from floor to ceiling like an ancient Egyptian clearance warehouse.

The sheer physical pressure of twelve tons of matter appearing in a ten-foot hallway crushed the jackal sentry flat against the opposite bulkhead with a screech of buckled silver plate. Hundreds of bronze Horus beaks jammed directly into the exposed gold-and-naquadah wiring of the force-field doorframe. Sparks showered in violent blue arcs as roasted gravy and pickled herring brine poured into the high-voltage Goa'uld capacitor.

BANG!

The golden force field flickered, turned bright purple, and died with a wet sizzle. Immediately, the avalanche of roasted birds and bronze helmets burst inward through the open doorway, burying McKay up to his waist in warm pheasants.

"Ow! Hot! That gravy is at least eighty degrees Celsius!" McKay yelled, clawing a bronze falcon helmet off his head as Ronon waded effortlessly through the drift of poultry and ripped the stunned jackal construct's ion-staff out of its pinned metal gauntlets.

"Not bad," Ronon said, testing the weight of the silver-and-gold lance before snapping it over his knee to expose the compact Asgard ion pistol core inside. He tossed the pistol to Sheppard and pulled the second construct's staff free as another sentry came clanking around the corner at the far end of the corridor.

While McKay knelt beside the open hydroponic stone panel trading whispered insults with the ship's weary Asgard sub-mind, Sheppard and Ronon examined the interior of Secondary Xenobotanical Storage Bay Four.

Along the rear wall stood a row of six cylindrical glass terrariums that had once housed rare Ida-galaxy mosses for Asgard atmospheric research. Lokor had emptied out the mosses and replaced them with miniature, motorized dioramas depicting himself in heroic historical poses--except all the dioramas had clearly been assembled by an Asgard fabrication computer taking literal dictation from a megalomaniac.

In the first glass tank, a three-inch-tall golden figurine of Lokor was standing atop a pile of tiny plastic Wraith warriors while waving a guitar-pick-sized lightning bolt. In the second tank, a tiny figurine of Lokor--this one with six biceps glued onto each slender grey arm--was bench-pressing the planet Earth while four miniature figurines labeled O'NEILL, CARTER, JACKSON, and TEAL'C bowed in weeping admiration.

"He made action figures of himself," Sheppard said, tapping the glass of the second tank with his fingernail. "Wait until I tell Carter her action figure is

bowing to a three-foot grey guy with twelve biceps."

"Look at the third one," Ronon said, pointing a scarred finger at the middle terrarium.

Inside the third tank sat a scale model of Atlantis--rendered with microscopic Asgard precision--except the central spire of the city had been replaced by a giant golden statue of Lokor's head wearing sunglasses and a pharaonic crown, with a miniature waterfall of wine pouring out of both nostrils into the ocean.

"Okay," Sheppard said, stepping back from the glass. "Now it's personal. Nobody turns my balcony into a nostril fountain."

"Colonel," Teyla called softly from the edge of the golden force-field doorway, where she was watching the corridor reflections in the polished silver wall. "A second patrol construct has joined the first outside our door, and they are accompanied by a hovering inventory drone carrying what appears to be a crate of ceremonial shackles and gold body paint."

"Gold body paint?" McKay looked up sharply from the open stone matrix, a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. "Do you have any idea what metallic suspension paint does to human epidermal pores? Didn't anyone here ever watch Goldfinger?! Look, I've got the sub-mind ready to route the twelve-ton banquet allocation straight to the external corridor materialization grid, right on top of their heads!"

"Wait," Sheppard said, grabbing a heavy stainless-steel botanical workbench by one end and gesturing for Ronon to grab the other. "If twelve metric tons of roast pheasants and bronze helmets materialize right outside that doorway when the force field shorts out, half of it is going to blow inward like a poultry claymore mine. Let's tip this table up as a blast shield three feet inside the door."

Ronon lifted his end of the three-hundred-pound steel table with one hand, flipping it onto its side with a dull thud to form a waist-high barricade facing the golden barrier. Teyla vaulted lightly behind it, while Sheppard yanked McKay back by the collar of his jacket just as the scientist tapped the final runic stone.

Back in Secondary Xenobotanical Storage Bay Four, while they waited the forty seconds for the matter-converter capacitor banks to charge for the twelve-ton banquet dump, McKay kept one ear pressed to the small speaker grille beside the hydroponic stones.

"Tell me something, diagnostic sub-mind," McKay whispered rapidly, his fingers hovering over the final execution rune while Ronon and Teyla braced themselves behind the overturned stainless-steel workbench. "When Sebek-Ra took Lokor as a host six months ago in the Milky Way... how did a second-rate Goa'uld underlord manage to ambush an Asgard science vessel in the first place? Even a lightly armed Valkyrie-class research ship can vaporize three Ha'tak motherships before they drop out of hyperspace!"

"Historical log entry 994-Alpha indicates that the Naglfar was operating in the Dakara sector following the collapse of the System Lords' fleet," the weary Asgard voice replied through the grille. "Commander Lokor had parked the vessel in a low-emission nebula to study residual genetic samples from abandoned Goa'uld cloning facilities. According to the bridge security recording, Underlord Sebek-Ra's escape pod drifted into our tractor envelope broadcasting a standard distress beacon. When Commander Lokor beamed the pod's occupant into Medical Bay One for examination, the Goa'uld detonated a localized Kull-disruptor wave combined with an Ancient neural stunner, incapacitating Commander Lokor long enough to attach the prototype sarcophagus harness and initiate blending."

"Wait a minute," Sheppard said from behind the steel workbench, frowning as he sighted his P-90 concept-space toward the door--or rather, sighted his bare index finger, since their weapons were still in the matter buffer waiting to be materialized on the silver platter. "An Asgard scientist--a guy who knows everything about the Goa'uld--beamed a mysterious escape pod from Dakara directly into his medical bay without scanning for a symbiote or keeping a force field up?"

"Asgard can be shockingly arrogant around lower-tech species, Sheppard!" McKay hissed. "Remember when Thor let Replicators aboard the Bilskirnir because he thought his containment fields were infallible? Or when Loki got caught kidnapping O'Neill because he didn't check for a tracking transponder? Brilliant theoreticians often overlook mundane tactical precautions!"

"Like leaning on a golden fence post in a turnip patch?" Ronon asked.

"That fence post was disguised as rustic agricultural infrastructure, it was an entirely reasonable mistake!" McKay snapped. "Besides, look at the capacitor readout --ninety-eight percent, ninety-nine percent, one hundred percent! Computer, execute external corridor banquet delivery AND internal prisoner equipment restitution right... NOW!"

Outside in the hallway, the two jackal-headed constructs had just raised their golden paintbrushes and ceremonial shackles toward the force field when the ceiling grid overhead erupted in blinding white Asgard transporter light.

Inside the cell, a much smaller, secondary white flare deposited a gleaming silver banquet platter directly onto the deck behind the overturned workbench--neatly stacked with two P-90 submachine guns, twelve spare magazines, Ronon's particle magnum, Teyla's fighting sticks and sidearm, four bricks of C-4 with detonators, McKay's tablet, and a neatly folded linen napkin.

"Your personal effects have been restored under Inventory Sub-Routine: Unsuitable Temple Offerings," the Asgard computer chimed politely over the deafening roar of four thousand roasted pheasants and eight thousand bronze helmets crushing the corridor outside. "Please note that I have also taken the liberty of recharging Colonel Ronon's particle sidearm to one hundred and twelve percent capacity. Have a productive mutiny."

Ronon picked up his blaster from the silver platter, admired the glowing crimson charge indicator on the barrel, and nodded once toward the ceiling speaker. "Good computer."

"Look out!" Teyla warned.

Ronon didn't shoot. Instead, he grabbed a twenty-gallon oak barrel of pickled herring with both hands, spun on his heel like an Olympic hammer thrower, and hurled it down the silver corridor. It struck the oncoming jackal sentry square in the chest, bowling its legs out from under it in an explosion of wooden staves and silvery fish.

"Okay," Sheppard said, catching the modified Asgard ion carbine and stepping over a pile of citrus-glazed drumsticks. "I take back everything I ever said about Goa'uld logistics. Rodney, where's the main laboratory and the weapons locker?"

"Down two decks and aft toward the ventral spine," McKay said, wiping pheasant glaze off his tablet--which the grateful Asgard sub-mind had just materialized onto a silver platter beside the door along with their P-90s, Ronon's blaster, and Teyla's gear. "Wait--look at the internal life-signs scan that just loaded onto my pad. Sheppard... we have a much bigger problem than a three-foot megalomaniac with a banquet fetish."

CHAPTER FOUR: The Science of the Abomination

Wherein the true horror of Lokor's design is unveiled in the lower decks, and Teyla hears a scream in the dark.

The comedy of the bronze helmets and roasted pheasants evaporated the moment AR-1 descended through the maintenance Jefferies tubes into Deck Four of the Naglfar.

Here, deep in the belly of the Asgard science vessel, Lokor had not bothered with theatrical gold drapery, mechanical skeletons, or flaming oil braziers. The lighting was a cold, surgical ultraviolet mixed with the sickly organic bioluminescence of Wraith hive architecture. Thick, pulsing cables of black Wraith bio-polymer had been grafted directly into the pristine silver columns of an Asgard

genetic cloning bay, feeding nutrient fluids from three massive crystalline vats into rows of translucent stasis cylinders.

Teyla stopped at the threshold of the upper catwalk, one hand pressing hard against her temple as her breath caught in her throat.

"Teyla?" Sheppard whispered, signaling Ronon to cover the rear hatch as he moved to her side.

"A Wraith Queen," Teyla whispered, her eyes wide and strained as the familiar, icy pressure of the Wraith telepathic network brushed against her consciousness. "She is down there, at the center of the laboratory... but her mind is fractured. She is not commanding drones, John. She is terrified. She is being drained--over and over--and then forced to regenerate by an Asgard medical beam."

Sheppard looked over the railing of the catwalk. Suspended in a hexagonal containment field at the center of the chamber was a Wraith Queen, her silver hair tangled and her gaunt face twisted in silent agony as Asgard micro-transporters continuously extracted cellular samples from her bone marrow while a golden sarcophagus emitter overhead flooded her tissues with forced mitotic radiation, healing the damage instantly only so the harvest could continue without pause.

And surrounding her containment cage were forty Asgard cloning pods.

Inside each pod floated a body--not the frail, meter-tall modern Asgard form of Thor or Lokor's current shell, but tall, muscular, six-foot-two humanoid figures with pale grey-silver skin, high noble cheekbones, and the unmistakable cranial ridge structure of the ancient, pre-cloning Asgard ancestors from thirty thousand years ago--cross-spliced with Wraith cellular resilience and a surgical pouch at the base of the cervical spine designed to house a genetically linked Goa'uld symbiote.

"Good lord," McKay breathed, his face pale as he plugged his tablet into a silent Asgard diagnostic terminal on the catwalk railing. For once, there was no sarcasm in his voice. "He solved it. The crazy son of a bitch actually solved the Asgard genetic degradation problem--by turning it into a biological nightmare."

"Explain, Rodney," Sheppard said grimly, keeping his P-90 trained on the lower floor where six silver sensor drones were tending the cloning pods.

"The Asgard died out because thousands of years of copying clones from clones broke down their DNA, and they were too ethical to harvest genetic material from sentient beings against their will--except for the Vanir, who only managed a temporary patch," McKay whispered, scrolling rapidly through the lab's runic logs. "Lokor didn't have ethical limits. Look at the files: he took the baseline genetic archive of the ancient Asgard body type--like Famrir's era, before the cloning decay started--and bridged the degraded chromosome gaps using the Wraith Queen's immortal cellular regeneration sequences and his own symbiote's naquadah-rich genetic memory!"

"So he's making himself a taller body," Ronon said, eyeing the nearest pod with disgust. "Why forty of them?"

"Because a Goa'uld Queen isn't the only way to spawn symbiotes when you have an Asgard matter-energy converter and a Wraith cloning matrix!" McKay pointed a shaking finger at a secondary synthesis vat pulsing with amber fluid at the far end of the bay. Floating inside the amber tank were dozens of writhing, silver-skinned Goa'uld symbiotes, each one genetically cloned from Sebek-Ra's own neural tissue and linked via microscopic Asgard nanite transceivers. "He's cloning his own symbiote! Every single one of those forty ancient-Asgard-Wraith hybrid bodies is being implanted with a copy of Lokor's mind linked into an Asgard collective hive-network!"

Sheppard felt a cold knot tighten in his stomach. "One Goa'uld in an Asgard ship is bad enough. Forty six-foot-tall immortal Asgard-Wraith-Goa'uld super-soldiers sharing one hive mind with full access to Asgard beaming and weapons tech..."

"Wait, it gets worse," McKay said, his voice rising an octave before Sheppard clamped a hand over his mouth. McKay pulled Sheppard's hand down and hissed, "Look at the primary mission clock! Those forty clones are only the vanguard! Below this

deck, in the main cargo hold, he has fabricated twelve hundred atmospheric dispersal satellites loaded with a neuro-symbiotic vapor derived from Wraith enzyme and Goa'uld nish'ta mind-control compound. Once he takes this ship to the hidden Vanir research vault on P3X-Niflheim--a storm world here in Pegasus whose coordinates he pulled out of Lokor's deep memory--he's going to hook the Naglfar's power core into the Vanir's long-range subspace array and dial every Stargate in Pegasus simultaneously using an Asgard auto-dialer!"

"Like the Attero device," Teyla breathed in horror. "Except instead of destroying Wraith ships in hyperspace, he will beam those dispersal satellites through every Stargate in the galaxy at once."

"Every human population within fifty kilometers of a Stargate will inhale aerosolized nish'ta engineered to make them biologically worship Lokor's genetic frequency," McKay said, staring at the countdown on his tablet. "And any Wraith who feeds on an infected human will have their internal organs Liquefied by the naquadah-enzyme reaction. In forty-eight hours, he'll wipe out the Wraith and turn three million humans across Pegasus into happy, chanting, gold-tunic-wearing slaves --including anyone on Atlantis if a single gate packet gets through our iris before we recalibrate the shield harmonics!"

"Can we blow up the cloning vats right now?" Ronon asked, reaching for the C-4 bricks that the Asgard sub-mind had thoughtfully included on the silver banquet platter alongside their P-90s.

"No!" McKay grabbed Ronon's wrist again. "Did you not hear the part on the data pad about the Asgard Explosion Suppression System? Every Asgard science vessel has an automated internal damping field designed to contain high-explosive and naquadah detonations! If you set off C-4 inside this room without first disabling the primary damping nodes on the main core deck, the ship will simply wrap your C-4 in a two-inch force field, turn the kinetic blast into harmless purple light, and alert Lokor's personal guard exactly where we are standing!"

"Then how do we stop the countdown and get warning back to Atlantis?" Sheppard asked.

"Look at the power distribution grid," McKay said, tapping the schematic of the Naglfar. "Right now, the ship is sitting on the surface of Veldara drawing thirty percent of its auxiliary power to maintain the village containment perimeter and the Wraith Queen's regeneration loop. Our Puddle Jumper is parked inside the ventral hangar bay one deck below us--Lokor beamed the whole Jumper aboard right after he grabbed us so he could study its Ancient cloak and DHD interface. If we can free or destabilize the Wraith Queen's containment field, the bio-feedback surge will force the ship's automated safety protocols to dump the first batch of hybrid clones into emergency stasis and divert power away from the hangar shields!"

Sheppard looked at Teyla. "Teyla, if we drop that Wraith Queen's cage, she's going to be extremely angry and very hungry. Can you touch her mind just long enough to aim her at Lokor's security constructs instead of us?"

McKay tapped another sequence of runes on the catwalk diagnostic console, pulling up a secondary file directory labeled in dual Asgard and Ancient script.

"Look at the navigation logs from before he arrived at Veldara," McKay whispered, showing the tablet screen to Sheppard and Teyla. "When Lokor fled the Milky Way six months ago in the Naglfar, he didn't come straight to inhabited human space. He spent the first four months hopping across seven uninhabited red-dwarf systems on the outer rim of Pegasus, searching for surviving Vanir outposts!"

"Did he find them?" Sheppard asked.

"He found three abandoned Vanir monitoring stations and one active automated supply depot," McKay said grimly. "The actual living Vanir faction--the ones who attacked Atlantis and stole the Janus Attero control key--had already relocated their main base after their clash with us, which is probably the only reason Lokor hasn't absorbed their entire population into his hive mind yet. But at the third outpost, he recovered the master coordinate stone for Niflheim-Secundus--the planet where the original Vanir expedition hid their primary intergalactic core and the

Gjallarhorn subspace projector during the first Wraith-Vanir war ten thousand years ago!"

"Why didn't the Vanir use this Gjallarhorn array themselves when they fought the Wraith?" Ronon asked in a low voice, keeping his eyes fixed on the silver security constructs patrolling beneath the catwalk.

"Because the Gjallarhorn array isn't a weapon--it's a carrier-wave broadcaster and universal gate-override," McKay explained. "To the Vanir, opening every Stargate in the galaxy simultaneously was just an emergency evacuation or diagnostic tool. They never had a biological nerve agent that could kill Wraith through human blood while turning the humans into docile worshippers! That part came straight out of Sebek-Ra's Goa'uld biochemical laboratories from the Milky Way!"

"It is a weapon of two galaxies," Teyla said quietly, her voice thick with revulsion as she looked down at the forty hybrid pods pulsing in the ultraviolet light below. "Asgard reach, Wraith biology, and Goa'uld cruelty. None of our peoples were ever meant to face such a combination."

"Which is why we're going to pull the plug on his science project before he leaves this planet," Sheppard said, checking the charge indicator on his captured Asgard ion carbine. "Rodney, when Teyla links with the Wraith Queen and you drop that hexagonal containment cage, how long before Lokor's bridge overrides can re-establish the force field?"

"If I just turn it off with a standard command? About four seconds," McKay said, pulling a small steel pocketknife from his vest and wedging the blade directly between two glowing optical stones inside the catwalk terminal. "Which is why I'm not turning it off--I'm cross-wiring the golden sarcophagus healing beam directly into the containment ring's emitter coils! The moment I drop the barrier, the sarcophagus beam is going to supercharge the Queen's metabolic reserves to three hundred percent and then melt the emitter crystals into fused quartz! Lokor won't be able to put that cage back up without replacing half the ceiling!"

"Three hundred percent metabolic charge on a very angry Wraith Queen," Sheppard repeated slowly. "And we're standing twenty feet above her."

"Which is why I strongly suggest we start running toward the ventral hangar hatch approximately half a second after I hit this stone," McKay said.

Before Teyla initiated the telepathic link with the captive Wraith Queen below, McKay downloaded one more sub-directory from the Deck Four genetic console onto his tablet, his brow furrowing deeper with every scrolling line of Asgard runic script.

"Wait--look at the biochemical formula for the aerosolized compound in those twelve hundred satellites," McKay whispered, holding the screen tilted so Sheppard could see the molecular diagram. "When we first scanned the cargo manifest, it looked like a straightforward combination of Goa'uld nish'ta mind-control pheromone and Wraith cellular enzyme. Keep the humans docile and poison any Wraith who tries to feed on them."

"Right," Sheppard said, watching the lower floor as two silver drones wheeled a cart of empty crystal canisters past the forty hybrid pods. "We already hate it, Rodney. You don't have to sell us."

"No, look at the secondary binding agent in the molecular chain!" McKay tapped the diagram twice. "The nish'ta molecule in those satellites has an unstable half-life unless it's exposed to a very specific sub-harmonic radiation burst from the Gjallarhorn array! Until that subspace wave hits it, the compound inside the satellites is completely inert nitrogen-phosphorus suspension!"

"Which makes sense if you're storing twelve hundred nerve-gas satellites inside your own ship," Sheppard said. "Even a Goa'uld doesn't want a leaky canister in the cargo hold turning his own brain to mush before he reaches the target."

"Yes, obviously, binary chemical weapons are standard military engineering," McKay said impatiently, "but look at the catalyst chamber on the Deck Four mixing vat! The valve feeding the actual nish'ta neuro-toxin into the satellite loading

tubes has a mechanical flow-restrictor set to zero point zero four percent!"

Sheppard blinked, glancing from the tablet down to the massive golden-veined mixing vats on the floor below. "Zero point zero four percent? Why would he set the poison valve to four-hundredths of one percent?"

"Because the Goa'uld command routine on the bridge console is reading the pressure gauge in the satellite tanks, not the chemical spectrograph!" McKay whispered, shaking his head in confusion. "The ship's diagnostic sub-mind must have secretly throttled the neuro-toxin valve during the filling cycle so the satellites are ninety-nine point nine percent harmless agricultural nitrogen! Except if Lokor checks the manual spectrograph before he fires the Gjallarhorn array on Niflheim, he'll see the discrepancy immediately and flush the pure nish'ta reserve tank directly through the open Stargates instead!"

"So the ship's computer has been sabotaging him behind his back everywhere it can without triggering its own static-shock collar," Teyla murmured, looking up at the silent silver ceiling conduits with newfound respect. "It truly is fighting alongside us."

"Either that, or the galaxy's smartest toaster is playing a very deep game of chess," Sheppard muttered. "Teyla, those constructs down there are about to start decanting the first row of six-foot hybrid pods. Ready when you are."

Teyla looked down at the captive Queen suspended in the golden-white beams below. Her jaw set with quiet resolve. "She knows who imprisoned her, John. And she knows that even in death, a Queen does not submit to being cattle for a parasite. Give me ten seconds before you cut the field."

Sheppard nodded, then looked at McKay. "Rodney, get ready to drop the cage and open the maintenance chute to the ventral hangar. Ronon--when that cage drops, anything with a jackal head is yours."

"Finally," Ronon said, spinning his blaster in one hand.

Teyla closed her eyes, placing both hands on the cold silver railing as she projected her consciousness downward into the dark, seething furnace of the Wraith Queen's mind.

CHAPTER FIVE: Escape in a Gilded Puddle Jumper

Wherein a Wraith Queen redecorates the cloning bay, and Colonel Sheppard discovers what happens when a Goa'uld pimps an Ancient spacecraft.

Inside the telepathic void, the Wraith Queen's mind was a jagged storm of fury and humiliation. For ten thousand years, her kind had been the apex predators of the Pegasus galaxy, viewing humans as herd animals and the Vanir Asgard as elusive, hiding pests. To be strapped into a glowing harness by a three-foot grey creature wearing gold ribbons and forced to birth cellular enzymes for an alien parasite was an abomination beyond Wraith comprehension.

Who touches my mind? the Queen hissed across the mental link, her psychic voice scraping like razors against Teyla's thoughts. One of the Lantean humans? Have you come to gloat before the little false god consumes us both?

I have come to open your cage, Teyla sent back, holding her mental shields rigid against the Queen's instinctive lunge. The creature who holds you has forty hybrid abominations growing in the pods around you, made from your flesh and his mind. Below this deck sits our vessel. When the golden barrier falls, destroy his vats and his constructs, and you will die as a Queen in battle rather than a prisoner in a jar.

Down in the containment ring, the Wraith Queen slowly lifted her head. Her yellow, slit-pupiled eyes locked directly onto the primary genetic vat housing Lokor's prized symbiote-hybrid embryos, and her black lips pulled back from her fangs in a feral snarl.

Drop the barrier, human.

Teyla snapped her eyes open. "Now, Rodney!"

McKay slammed his palm down onto the inverted Thurisaz control stone on the diagnostic console, cross-circuiting the golden sarcophagus emitter directly into the containment ring's polarity matrix.

With a sound like a shattering church bell, the hexagonal barrier around the Wraith Queen collapsed in a shower of golden sparks.

The Queen hit the deck on all fours like a starving panther. Before the six winged Asgard drones or the four jackal-headed silver constructs guarding the lower floor could recalibrate their targeting routines, she let out a psychic shriek that shattered three glass monitoring screens and launched herself straight onto the chest of the nearest construct. Fueled by six hours of continuous sarcophagus hyper-regeneration, her strength was superhuman even by Wraith standards; she tore the construct's falcon helmet clean off its neck spindle and hurled the heavy metal head straight through the crystalline wall of the primary cloning vat.

Amber amniotic fluid and half-formed hybrid clones cascaded across the laboratory floor as klaxons--bizarrely programmed to sound like alternating Asgard chimes and blaring Egyptian war-horns--erupted throughout the ship.

"WHAT IS THIS INSOLENT?!" Lokor's booming, bass-boosted voice thundered over the ship's intercom, though behind the dramatic flange they could clearly hear the frantic pitter-patter of tiny grey feet running across the bridge dais. "MY BEAUTIFUL ABOMINATIONS! WHO RELEASED THE WRAITH CATTLE?! SECURITY CONSTRUCTS, VAPORIZE EVERYTHING ON DECK FOUR!"

"Time to go!" Sheppard shouted, firing a burst from his P-90 that took out two hovering golden drones while Ronon leaped down the stairwell to blast the locking mechanism off the ventral hangar access hatch.

They sprinted through the secondary maintenance corridor as the Naglfar shuddered beneath their boots--the Wraith Queen had just ripped a primary naquadah plasma conduit out of the wall and jammed it into the forty cloning pods, triggering a chain of violent electrical shorts that sent the Asgard Explosion Suppression System into a frantic strobe of purple containment bubbles.

Ronon kicked the hangar bay blast door open, and all four of them skidded to a halt on the silver deck.

Sitting in the center of the Asgard docking bay was Puddle Jumper One.

Or at least, it had been Puddle Jumper One two hours ago.

Sheppard stared at his beloved spacecraft, his jaw twitching.

"What," Sheppard whispered in a voice colder than deep space, "did he do to my Jumper?"

Lokor's automated fabrication drones had plated the entire dark-grey Lantean hull in mirror-bright twenty-four-karat gold leaf. Extending from the nose cone was a four-foot decorative golden cobra hood with glowing ruby eyes. Curved ornamental tail-fins shaped like golden papyrus reeds had been welded onto the rear drive pods, and etched in glowing amber script along both sides of the fuselage were the words: ROYAL PLEASURE BARGE OF LOKOR THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT COMPENSATING).

"Wait, did the Asgard diagnostic computer write that last part in parentheses?" McKay asked as they sprinted up the rear ramp--which had been carpeted in plush crimson velvet with gold tassels that brushed against Ronon's hair.

"I don't care who wrote it, get the rear hatch sealed!" Sheppard yelled, vaulting into the pilot's seat and slapping his palm onto the primary Lantean control console.

The cockpit lit up--not in the cool blue-white glow of Ancient crystal technology, but in warm, pulsing amber lighting accompanied by a soft aromatic mist

of frankincense from the air vents. Simultaneously, a recorded chorus of twelve synthesized Goa'uld priests began chanting through the Jumper's intercom speakers: "Blessed is the Pilot who flies beneath the sandal of Lokor! Praise his divine aerodynamics!"

"Oh, for crying out loud, he wired a devotional soundtrack into the inertial dampeners!" McKay shouted from the co-pilot's chair, frantically pulling panels open beneath the dashboard as four jackal-constructs burst into the hangar bay outside and opened fire with golden ion-lances. "Hold on, the ventral hangar bay doors are still sealed by an Asgard molecular curtain! If you fly into that shield, we'll splatter like a gilded bug on a windshield!"

"Then drop the hangar shield, Rodney!" Sheppard powered up the drive pods, lifting the gold-plated Jumper six feet off the deck and spinning it on its axis so the nose--and its ridiculous four-foot golden cobra hood--pointed squarely at the advancing jackal constructs.

"I'm trying, I'm trying! Wait--the Asgard sub-mind left an open carrier wave on the local telemetry channel!" McKay tapped four rapid commands into his tablet. "Computer! Diagnostic sub-mind! Can you drop the ventral hangar bay molecular curtain for three seconds?"

"I am prohibited from opening exterior hangar doors for escaping prisoners," the weary Asgard voice replied over the Jumper's radio, competing with the chanting priests on the intercom. "However, I am required by Asgard Sanitation Protocol Twelve to vent any hangar bay containing more than four hundred kilograms of spoiled pelagic fish. As Dr. McKay's tablet has just reported six hundred barrels of spoiled herring in Ventral Bay One, I am initiating an emergency three-second atmospheric purge. Have a pleasant flight, Dr. McKay."

"I love this ship's computer!" McKay crowed as the shimmering silver-gold barrier across the bottom of the bay blinked out of existence, revealing the green canopy of Veldara three hundred feet below.

"Hang on!" Sheppard slammed the thrusters forward.

Puddle Jumper One shot out of the ventral bay like a golden bullet, clipping the top of a construct's jackal helmet with its right drive pod and plunging straight toward the valley floor.

Up on the spire of the Naglfar, the forty-foot hologram of Lokor flickered and turned bright red with fury as six high-speed Asgard interceptor drones--each one shaped like a winged golden scarab firing twin bolts of white-gold ion plasma--streaked out of the dorsal launch tubes in hot pursuit.

"Engage the cloak!" Teyla called out, gripping the back of Sheppard's chair as two ion bolts sheared the top ten feet off a pine tree just off their port wing.

"Engaging cloak!" Sheppard hit the mental switch for the Jumper's stealth generator.

Outside, the hull shimmered and vanished from the visible spectrum--except that the moment the cloak engaged, the four-foot golden cobra hood on the nose lit up like a neon Vegas marquee and projected a thirty-foot holographic banner above the invisible Jumper that read BEHOLD THE INVISIBLE GLORY OF LOKOR! while blasting a triumphant trumpet fanfare at a hundred and forty decibels.

"HE PUT A HOLOGRAPHIC BILLBOARD ON THE CLOAKING DEVICE?!" McKay screamed, clutching his hair with both hands as all six scarab drones locked directly onto the glowing neon sign above their roof and opened fire.

"Why would anyone put a neon sign on a stealth system?!" Sheppard yelled, jinking the Jumper hard to port through a narrow granite canyon while tree branches scraped against the invisible--yet loudly trumpeting--belly of the ship.

"Because he's a Goa'uld! What is the point of turning invisible if the peasants don't know who they're supposed to be impressed by?!" McKay dove out of his seat toward the rear bulkhead relay panel, ripping a bundle of gold-wrapped optical

fibers out of the cloak coupling with his bare teeth. "There! The billboard is off!"

"Great! Now the Stargate is four kilometers dead ahead!" Sheppard banked hard around a limestone spire, skimming ten feet above the river as Teyla dialed the seven symbols for Atlantis on the Jumper's DHD.

As the cloaked--and deafeningly trumpeting--Puddle Jumper tore through the winding granite river canyon at four hundred knots, six winged golden scarab drones screamed down from the cloud deck behind them, their twin ion-plasma cannons stitching blinding white-gold craters into the canyon walls on either side.

"McKay!" Sheppard barked, standing the Jumper on its left wing to thread a needle-narrow gap between two limestone arches while a plasma bolt vaporized a forty-foot waterfall into superheated steam right behind their tail fins. "You got the neon sign off, why are they still tracking us?!"

"Because the twenty-four-karat gold leaf he plated onto the exterior hull is infused with trace amounts of weapons-grade naquadah!" McKay yelled from the rear compartment, where he was hanging upside-down inside an open floor hatch with a diagnostic cable clenched in his teeth. "He basically painted our entire ship in radioactive glow-in-the-dark tracking paint! Even with the Ancient cloak bending visible light and standard radar around us, his Asgard neutrino sensors can follow the naquadah decay signature like breadcrumbs!"

"Can we invert the shield emitter harmonics to mask the naquadah signature?" Teyla asked from the co-pilot's chair, her hands flying over the auxiliary Lantean crystal display.

"If I had forty minutes and a clean room, yes! In ninety seconds while John is flying us sideways through a geological fault line--wait!" McKay scrambled out of the floor hatch and pointed at the rear weapons console. "The Jumper's drone launchers! Did Lokor's fabrication drones modify our Ancient drone tubes?!"

Sheppard glanced down at the tactical HUD on his console. "It says we have twelve drones in the pods... wait. Why does the HUD label them DIVINE SERPENTS OF VENGEANCE?"

"Because he plated our Ancient drones in gold leaf too!" McKay shouted triumphantly. "John! Fire two drones backward into the canyon wall and set their guidance transponders to continuous harmonic pulse!"

"If the drones are coated in the same naquadah-gold alloy as the hull--" Sheppard grinned, his mind instantly seizing on the tactic. "They'll light up the canyon with six times our neutrino signature!"

Sheppard banked hard around a sharp bend in the river, cut main thruster output by fifty percent, and mentally triggered the port and starboard drone bays.

Two Ancient drones--gleaming like solid gold spears and trailing theatrical ribbons of amber plasma--shot out of the drive pods. Instead of locking onto a target, Sheppard guided them mentally in a wide, spiraling corkscrew up the left fork of the canyon while banking the cloaked Jumper silently down the right fork two feet above the whitewater rapids.

Behind them, all six golden scarab interceptors took the bait instantly, banking hard at nine Gs up the left canyon fork in pursuit of the blazing naquadah-gold signatures of the two decoy drones.

Three seconds later, Sheppard mentally detonated both drones against the overhanging granite cliff face, bringing ten thousand tons of rock roaring down into the left canyon in a cloud of dust and golden sparks.

Once the rockslide sealed the left fork of the canyon and buried the six golden scarab interceptors in a cloud of granite dust and sparks, Sheppard kept the cloaked Puddle Jumper skimming three feet above the foaming whitewater river for another two miles until the canyon walls opened out onto the lower mist-shrouded plains of Veldara.

Below them, through the morning fog, they could see the distant stone ring of the Veldaran Stargate standing on its earthen mound at the edge of the forest--and blocking the clearing around the DHD were four towering, twenty-foot-tall golden statues of Lokor that had been materialized in a semicircle around the gate platform.

Each twenty-foot statue had ruby-laser emitters mounted in its eyes, sweeping back and forth across the muddy clearing like searchlights while booming through built-in loudspeakers: "NONE MAY PASS THE THRESHOLD OF THE STARS WITHOUT OFFERING TRIBUTE TO LOKOR THE UNCONQUERED! PLEASE DEPOSIT GOLD, TURNIPS, OR SINCERE COMPLIMENTS AT THE BASE OF THE PEDESTAL!"

"He put tollbooths around the Stargate," Sheppard said flatly as they approached at tree-top level.

"Not just tollbooths--those statues have active Asgard point-defense emitters wired into their eyeballs!" McKay warned from the rear console, where he had finally managed to re-seat the primary Lantean stealth crystal after tearing out the holographic billboard wires. "If Teyla dials the DHD remotely from our cockpit, the moment the Stargate kawooshes, all four of those statues are going to cross-fire straight across the event horizon! Even with our hull plating, a four-way Asgard ion beam will fry our drive pods before we cross the threshold!"

"Wait," Ronon said, leaning between the pilot and co-pilot chairs and pointing at the loudspeaker inscription scrolling across the chest of the center statue. "It says 'deposit gold, turnips, or sincere compliments at the base of the pedestal.'"

Sheppard glanced at McKay. "Rodney... is that an automated sensor trigger tied to the statues' targeting loop?"

"Well--yes, obviously, if the villagers are supposed to walk up and leave tribute without getting vaporized, the statues must have a ten-second stand-down subroutine whenever the pedestal scale registers an offering of elemental gold or approved agricultural produce!" McKay stared at Sheppard. "We don't have time to land and stack turnips on a statue, Sheppard, the Naglfar is already lifting off from the village two miles behind us!"

"We don't have turnips," Sheppard said, his hand moving to the manual release lever for the exterior decorative fairing Zelenka would later complain about--specifically, the pair of two-hundred-pound solid-gold papyrus-reed tail fins that Lokor's drones had bolted onto the rear of the Jumper's drive nacelles. "But we do have four hundred pounds of tacky twenty-four-karat tail fins."

"Can you jettison the tail fins without ripping the drive pod housings off?!" McKay yelled.

"Only one way to find out! Teyla, dial the seventh symbol on my mark!" Sheppard pushed the Jumper's nose down into a steep dive toward the Stargate clearing, lined up the center statue's offering pedestal in his crosshairs at two hundred knots, and yanked the auxiliary maintenance release latches on both rear nacelles while firing a half-second reverse-thruster pulse.

With a loud metallic CLANG, the two four-hundred-pound solid-gold papyrus tail fins sheared clean off the rear of the cloaked Jumper, hurtling forward like twin golden lawn darts.

They slammed directly onto the center offering pedestal at the base of the twenty-foot Lokor statue.

Instantly, all four statues lowered their ruby-laser eyes, folded their golden hands across their chests in a serene bow, and chimed in delighted four-part harmony: "THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROUS OFFERING OF FOUR HUNDRED AND TWELVE POUNDS OF SOLID GOLD! LORD LOKOR BLESSES YOUR TRAVELS!"

"Mark!" Sheppard yelled.

Teyla hit the center crystal on the DHD.

Ahead in the clearing, the Pegasus Stargate kawooshed to life in a shimmering blue vortex.

Behind them, the sky above Veldara darkened as the entire three-hundred-foot golden-and-silver bulk of the Naglfar lifted effortlessly off the village square--not on slow thrusters, but via an in-atmosphere Asgard hyperdrive window that tore open the clouds in a vortex of blue-gold fire.

"FLEE TO YOUR SUNKEN CITY, COLONEL SHEPPARD!" Lokor's voice boomed across every subspace frequency in the sector as the Naglfar slipped into hyperspace directly from the troposphere, leaving the villagers of Veldara blinking in the mud beside their flattened turnip stalls. "WHEN THE GJALLARHORN OF NIFLHEIM SOUNDS ACROSS THE STARS, EVEN ATLANTIS SHALL KNEEL BEFORE THE GOLDEN AESIR!"

Puddle Jumper One--gold leaf peeling from its nose cone and its rear speakers still faintly hiccuping "Praise his divine aerodynamics"--streaked through the event horizon and vanished.

CHAPTER SIX: Siege of the Vanir Vault

Wherein Richard Woolsey has an existential crisis in the Gate Room, and Dr. Zelenka refuses to scrape twenty-four-karat gold off a Lantean windshield.

When Puddle Jumper One shot out of the Atlantis Stargate and settled onto the Gate Room floor with a gentle hydraulic sigh, the entire control tower froze.

Richard Woolsey walked slowly down the spiral stairs from the control room, his hands clasped behind his back, and came to a stop six feet in front of the Jumper's nose cone. He stared silently at the four-foot golden cobra hood with the glowing ruby eyes. Then he looked along the fuselage at the shimmering twenty-four-karat gold plating, the papyrus-reed tail fins, and the glowing amber inscription that read ROYAL PLEASURE BARGE OF LOKOR THE MAGNIFICENT (NOT COMPENSATING).

The rear ramp lowered with a hiss of frankincense smoke, and the recorded choir of twelve Goa'uld priests echoed cheerily across the Lantean stone tower: "Blessed is the Pilot who parks beneath the sandal of Lokor!"

Sheppard walked down the ramp, followed by Teyla, Ronon, and a pheasant-gravy-stained Rodney McKay.

Woolsey adjusted his glasses. "Colonel Sheppard."

"Mr. Woolsey," Sheppard said briskly.

"When I authorized Mission 44-Delta to Veldara," Woolsey said in the calm, measured tone of a man mentally drafting his resignation letter to the IOA, "it was my understanding that you were trading three crates of medical bandages and twelve steel plowshares for winter root vegetables."

"We were," Sheppard said.

"Did the Veldarans happen to mention why they turned a priceless ten-thousand-year-old Ancient spacecraft into what appears to be a float from a Las Vegas casino parade?"

"Not the Veldarans," McKay snapped, pushing past Sheppard with his tablet already wireless-syncing to the main Atlantis control room consoles above. "Radek! Zelenka! Get down here and bring the deep-space subspace telemetry logs for Sector Nine! We have a rogue Asgard science vessel controlled by a surviving Milky Way Goa'uld System Lord who has figured out how to stabilize Asgard-Wraith-Goa'uld hybrid clones, and he's on his way to a hidden Vanir archive world right now to turn the entire Pegasus Stargate network into a mind-control aerosol sprayer!"

Up on the balcony, Dr. Radek Zelenka leaned over the railing, took one look at the golden cobra on the Jumper's nose, muttered a string of rapid-fire Czech profanity, and hurried down the stairs with a diagnostic computer.

Ten minutes later, in the main briefing room, the holographic projection table

displayed the schematic McKay had pulled from the Naglfar's laboratory alongside Atlantis's own long-range sensor logs.

"It's worse than we thought," Zelenka said, pointing to a swirling crimson nebula in the outer rim of the galaxy. "Two minutes after Colonel Sheppard's team gated back, our long-range subspace sensors detected an intergalactic-grade Asgard hyperdrive emergence at coordinates 7-7-Delta. That is a toxic ammonia-storm world the Ancients called Niflheim-Secundus. During the Vanir conflict last month, we suspected the rogue Pegasus Asgard maintained an automated strategic reserve vault beneath that planet's southern ice cap--an installation built around an Ancient-Asgard subspace harmonic projector called the Gjallarhorn Array."

"What was the Gjallarhorn Array originally built for?" Woolsey asked, rubbing his temples.

"According to the partial database we recovered, the early Vanir built it ten thousand years ago as a galaxy-wide emergency beacon and Stargate override system," McKay said, pacing around the table while munching furiously on an energy bar. "If the Vanir ever found a cure for their genetic degradation--or if they needed to lock down the Pegasus gate network during an all-out Wraith siege--the Gjallarhorn can force-dial every Stargate in the galaxy simultaneously through subspace without needing individual DHDs, and hold the wormholes open for up to six minutes using geothermal tap power from Niflheim's core!"

"And Lokor has twelve hundred atmospheric dispersal satellites sitting in his cargo bay loaded with aerosolized nish'ta and Wraith enzyme," Sheppard said grimly. "If he links his ship's computer core to that array, he beams two satellites through every open gate in Pegasus. Six minutes later, every inhabited world near a Stargate belongs to him."

"Where are the Daedalus and the Apollo?" Woolsey asked immediately.

"Daedalus is three days out escorting the supply convoy from Midway's replacement relay, and Apollo is in drydock at Earth," Sheppard said. "We don't have three days. According to Rodney's scan, Lokor only needs four hours to bore through the southern ice cap on Niflheim and hard-wire the Naglfar into the Gjallarhorn pedestal."

"Wait--how can we possibly reach a planet in Sector Nine in less than four hours without a battlecruiser?" Woolsey asked. "Even with the Experimental Jumper's hyperdrive prototype that Dr. McKay and Dr. Zelenka repaired after the Asuran mission, a single Puddle Jumper cannot penetrate the shields of an Asgard science vessel!"

"Normally, no," McKay said, stopping dead in the middle of the briefing room and raising one finger in the air with a triumphant, slightly unhinged gleam in his eye. "Because an Asgard shield operates on a rotating neutrino-harmonic frequency modulated by the ship's central computer core. Except we have two things Lokor doesn't know we have!"

"A four-foot gold cobra on our hood and smell-o-vision frankincense in the air vents?" Sheppard suggested.

"Yes! Actually, yes!" McKay pointed enthusiastically down toward the Jumper bay. "Think about it! Why didn't the Naglfar's automated internal defense turrets vaporize the Jumper while we were inside the hangar bay? Because when Lokor's fabrication drones plated Jumper One in gold and wired that ridiculous devotional transponder into the hull, they registered Jumper One's sub-harmonic hull signature in the Naglfar's friend-or-foe registry as Lokor's personal royal yacht! To the Asgard shield harmonics, that gilded monstrosity downstairs has an all-access VIP pass through the outer shield envelope!"

"And the second thing?" Teyla asked.

"The ship's original Asgard diagnostic sub-mind hates his guts!" McKay grinned. "Before I ripped the optical fibers out of the cloak billboard, the sub-mind slipped a compressed encrypted packet onto my tablet. It's the root-level Asgard maintenance handshake for the Naglfar's central stone matrix, along with the exact bio-electric

frequency of the golden sarcophagus collar around Lokor's neck!"

"Hold on," Ronon said, leaning forward with his forearms on the table. "If the computer hates him so much, why doesn't it just beam the snake out of his neck?"

"Because Goa'uld aren't completely stupid when it comes to self-preservation," McKay explained. "Sebek-Ra physically fused a dead-man's naquadah micro-charge to Lokor's brainstem and tied the ship's internal beaming lockouts to his own symbiote heartbeat. If the computer tries to beam the symbiote out--or if the symbiote dies while the golden stabilization collar is still active--it triggers the ship's core overload. To separate or neutralize him without blowing up half the planet, someone has to manually slot an isolation crystal into the bridge's primary stone pedestal and disrupt the golden collar at the exact same time."

Suddenly, the red proximity alarm in the Atlantis control room began to chime.

"Doctor McKay! Colonel!" Chuck's voice crackled over the intercom from the technician's chair. "Long-range sensors just picked up three massive hyperspace exits converging on Niflheim-Secundus!"

Sheppard, McKay, Teyla, and Ronon sprinted out onto the control balcony. On the main wall screen, three large crimson triangles had just winked into existence right on top of the golden diamond marking the Naglfar.

"Wraith Hive ships," Teyla said softly, her eyes narrowing. "The Wraith Queen we freed on Deck Four--before Lokor's internal security could kill her, she must have sent a telepathic distress burst through subspace to her sisters!"

"Three Hive ships against one Goa'uld-controlled Asgard science vessel," Woolsey breathed, gripping the brass rail of the balcony. "If the Wraith destroy Lokor's ship..."

"No, you don't understand!" McKay shouted, grabbing his hair again. "Three Wraith Hive ships cannot beat an Asgard science vessel when the person driving the Asgard ship has no moral inhibitions! The only reason the Vanir lost to the Wraith ten thousand years ago was that they were outnumbered fifty to one and didn't use Goa'uld weapons-grade naquadah warheads! Look at the telemetry--Lokor isn't running! He's using the Wraith Hives as live-fire target practice while he finishes linking to the Gjallarhorn! And worse, if he captures three full Hive ships intact with his time-dilation beams, he'll have fifty thousand Wraith bodies to harvest for his hybrid clone army!"

Sheppard turned to Woolsey. "Richard, if we don't jump there right now while Lokor's shields and attention are occupied with those three Hives, this galaxy is over in three hours."

Down in the Jumper Bay ten minutes later, Dr. Radek Zelenka stood atop a rolling aluminum maintenance gantry with a plasma torch in one hand and a crowbar in the other, glaring at the four-foot golden cobra hood welded to the nose of Jumper One.

"Look at the molecular bonding along the seam," Zelenka complained, waving his crowbar at McKay as the chief science officer hurried up the gantry stairs carrying the modified hyperdrive control crystal. "He didn't weld this gold cobra onto the hull, Rodney! He used an Asgard matter-converter to atomically interlace twenty-four-karat gold molecules directly into the top three millimeters of the Lantean trinium-hull matrix! If I cut the cobra head off with a plasma torch right now, I will compromise the structural integrity of the forward pressure bulkhead!"

"Then leave the cobra head!" McKay snapped, plugging his tablet into the hyperdrive pod housing that four technicians were bolting onto the dorsal spine of the Jumper. "We don't care about the cobra head! Just rip out the holographic billboard emitter on the roof so it doesn't broadcast our position to three Wraith Hive ships the second John engages the cloak!"

"I already removed the billboard emitter," Zelenka said, kicking a football-sized sphere of gold-plated Asgard optics that was sitting on the gantry platform. "And I severed the audio relay to the main cabin speakers so the chanting priests will stop singing whenever the landing gear retracts. Although, for the record, the

bass acoustics they installed under the pilot's seat are actually remarkable. If we survive this, I am keeping the subwoofer."

Across the deck, Dr. Jennifer Keller walked up the rear ramp of the Jumper carrying two silver medical cases and a portable biometric scanner, pausing for a second to stare at the plush crimson velvet carpeting and the gold tassels hanging from the overhead grab-rails.

"Okay," Keller said, blinking as she handed a field kit to Teyla. "I heard the rumors in the infirmary, and I assumed Lorne's team was exaggerating. Did you guys get abducted by an alien warlord or did you rob a Babylonian casino?"

"A little of both, Doc," Sheppard said, climbing into the cockpit and running through the pre-flight thruster checks. "What's in the cases?"

"Antidotes and neural blockers," Keller said seriously, opening the top silver case to reveal twelve auto-injectors filled with pale blue fluid. "Dr. McKay sent me the chemical composition of the aerosolized nish'ta compound Lokor has loaded into those twelve hundred satellites. Standard Goa'uld nish'ta works by bonding with human lung tissue and releasing a targeted neuro-chemical cloud into the prefrontal cortex that renders the victim completely open to hypnotic suggestion by a dominant voice frequency. Lokor's version is spliced with Wraith enzyme so it can't be filtered out by a standard gas mask."

"Can these injectors block it if he sets a satellite off inside the ship?" Ronon asked, rolling up his sleeve.

"For about four hours, yes," Keller said, pressing an auto-injector against Ronon's deltoid with a sharp hiss, then doing the same for Teyla, Sheppard, and a loudly wincing McKay. "It's a synthetic acetylcholinesterase inhibitor combined with Beckett's old retroviral buffer. It won't stop the gas from irritating your lungs, and it might give you a mild headache, but it'll keep your brain from deciding that a three-foot grey alien is your personal lord and savior."

"Ow! Did you use a horse needle for mine on purpose?!" McKay rubbed his arm indignantly as Zelenka sealed the dorsal access panel and hopped clear of the hull. "Honestly, the medical bedside manner in this galaxy has deteriorated precipitously!"

"Clear the bay!" Sheppard called over the intercom as the upper Jumper Bay doors parted above them, revealing the bright blue sky and sparkling ocean of Lantea--M35-117. "Atlantis Control, Jumper One is lifting off. See you in a few hours."

As Jumper One rose through the open roof doors of the Atlantis Jumper Bay and angled up toward the pale stratosphere of Lantea, McKay finished calibrating the borrowed hyperdrive pod's field geometry against the gold-plated hull.

"You realize," McKay said, glaring at the amber-lit Lantean control crystals on the dashboard as they cleared the upper atmosphere, "that because Lokor's fabrication drones interlaced gold molecules into the outer trinium skin of this Jumper, the subspace drag coefficient in hyperspace is going to be completely lopsided. It's like trying to fly a supersonic stealth fighter that someone dipped in melted butterscotch! If the hyperdrive field fluctuates by more than three percent, we could drop out of hyperspace inside an asteroid belt--or worse, the gold plating could delaminate and peel off in a six-hundred-degree plasma sheet!"

"Wait," Sheppard said, his hands resting lightly on the controls as the stars stretched out before them. "You're telling me if you let the field fluctuate by three point one percent, all the gold leaf peels off my ship automatically?"

"Yes, along with the forward radiation shielding and possibly the windshield!" McKay snapped. "Do NOT intentionally wobble the hyperdrive just to get a free paint job, Sheppard!"

"I wasn't going to wobble it," Sheppard said innocently, though he took his thumb off the lateral trim toggle just in case. "How long until we reach Sector Nine and Niflheim-Secundus?"

"With the Asgard-modified power routing I borrowed from the diagnostic sub-mind's packet? Forty-two minutes," McKay said, tapping the main navigation crystal. Ahead of the Jumper's golden cobra nose, a swirling blue-violet hyperspace window tore open in the blackness of space, swallowing the small craft in a flash of Cherenkov radiation.

As the hypnotic blue tunnel of hyperspace rushed past the viewport, Teyla turned her chair around to face the rear compartment, where Ronon was methodically cleaning the emitter barrel of his particle magnum with an oiled rag.

"I have been thinking about what Dr. McKay found in the laboratory logs," Teyla said quietly, her dark eyes thoughtful in the shimmering blue light of the viewport. "The Vanir came to Pegasus ten thousand years ago because they refused to accept the moral limits of their own people. They hid in the shadows while the Ancients fell to the Wraith, and when the Wraith turned on them, they lost their intergalactic ships and spent ten millennia trapped in toxic vaults, growing harder and more desperate with every generation."

"And now a second Asgard comes from their home galaxy," Sheppard said, glancing back over his shoulder from the pilot's seat, "wearing a Goa'uld around his neck and carrying the exact tools the Vanir spent ten thousand years trying to build."

"That is what troubles me, John," Teyla said. "If the Goa'uld Sebek-Ra possesses all of Lokor's memories, why did he not seek out the living Vanir to rule over them as their god? A Goa'uld craves worshippers above all else. To force his host's own proud brethren to kneel before him would have been the ultimate triumph for a System Lord."

"Because the Vanir have battleships and armor that can bypass shields, and even a lunatic in a gold cape knows better than to pick a fight with thirty grumpy Asgard mercenaries until his clone army is ready," McKay said without looking up from his tablet. "Trust me, Teyla, you're looking for strategic subtlety in a creature that puts neon signs on cloaking devices. The snake wants easy targets first: human villagers, Wraith Hive ships he can out-range with Asgard transporters, and a giant subspace loudspeaker on Niflheim."

Woolsey looked at Sheppard, then down at the gleaming gold-plated Puddle Jumper sitting on the Gate Room floor with its ruby-eyed cobra hood shining under the Lantean lights. He let out a long, quiet breath.

"Take the Experimental Jumper's hyperdrive pod module--Dr. Zelenka says it can be hot-swapped onto Jumper One's gold hull in twelve minutes so you keep the VIP transponder signature," Woolsey said. "And Colonel?"

"Yeah, Richard?"

"Please try not to come back wearing a gold tunic."

CHAPTER SEVEN: White Beams and Wraith Darts

Wherein the Pegasus galaxy learns why the Asgard signed so many treaties, and Sheppard flies a golden cobra through a graveyard of leviathans.

Emerging from hyperspace into high orbit above Niflheim-Secundus was like flying into the middle of a Renaissance painting of the apocalypse--if the apocalypse had been art-directed by an ancient Egyptian jeweler.

Below them swirled a violent, emerald-green atmosphere of frozen ammonia clouds and jagged violet lightning storms. Directly above the planet's southern pole hung the Naglfar, its three-hundred-meter silver-and-gold hammer hull tethered to the ice cap below by a shimmering column of white-gold subspace energy.

And around the Naglfar, three two-kilometer-long Wraith Hive ships were dying in ways that Wraith ships had never died before.

"My god," Teyla whispered from the co-pilot seat behind Sheppard as Jumper One dropped out of hyperspace under full cloak--silent this time, thanks to Zelenka physically ripping the neon billboard projector off the roof before launch.

In standard space combat, the Wraith relied on sheer biological mass: regenerating organic hull plating that drank energy weapon fire, backed by swarms of thousands of Wraith Darts and relentless boarding pods. Against the Ancients, that strategy had won a hundred-year war.

Against an Asgard ship piloted by a Goa'uld who didn't care a whit about the Rules of Engagement, it was a slaughterhouse.

Lokor hadn't bothered firing standard ion cannon barrages against the Hive ships' thick organic armor. Instead, every twelve seconds, the Naglfar's ventral Asgard molecular transporter flared white--beaming a ten-ton chunk of the Hive ship's own central spinal keel out into empty space and simultaneously beaming an active naquadah-enriched plasma mine directly into the gap.

As AR-1 watched through the Jumper's forward viewport, the port-side Hive ship convulsed as three internal purple-gold detonations tore through its mid-decks from the inside out. Even more horrifying was what hovered between the Naglfar and the second Hive ship: four shimmering, five-kilometer-wide spheres of iridescent amber-blue light.

Inside those spheres floated at least six hundred Wraith Darts and two Wraith cruisers--completely motionless, frozen mid-flight like insects trapped in prehistoric amber.

"He's using Asgard time-dilation generators as flypaper!" McKay gasped, staring at his sensor display. "He tuned the time-dilation ratio inside those bubbles to ten thousand to one! Those Wraith pilots think they're still mid-attack run, and he's just leaving them hanging there in orbit like lawn ornaments so he can harvest their bone marrow at his leisure!"

Over the open subspace frequencies, Lokor's booming, bass-boosted voice echoed with theatrical glee--accompanied by a background track of booming kettle drums.

"WITNESS THE MIGHT OF LOKOR-SEBEK-RA, PARASITES OF PEGASUS!" the three-foot warlord roared across every comm channel in the system, while a five-mile-high holographic projection of his bulbous grey head--now wearing a double-plumed golden war-crown--materialized in the upper stratosphere of the planet so the surviving Wraith Queens could see him clearly. "FOR TEN MILLENNIA YOU FEASTED UPON THE HELPLESS! NOW YOU STAND BEFORE A GOD WHO COMMANDS THE STARS THEMSELVES! KNEEL AND SURRENDER YOUR QUEENS TO MY HARVEST VATS, OR BE UNMADE ATOM BY ATOM!"

"You know," Sheppard said, weaving the cloaked golden Jumper carefully between a drifting chunk of severed Wraith hull and the edge of a time-dilation bubble, "Thor could have saved everybody in the Milky Way a lot of trouble if he'd just done that to Apophis in 1998."

"Thor had a conscience and a functioning prefrontal cortex that wasn't being puppeted by an egomaniacal eel!" McKay snapped, checking the power readings from the surface below. "Look at the energy tether going down to the southern ice cap! He's already breached the Vanir vault! The Gjallarhorn Array is at seventy-eight percent capacitor charge! In seventeen minutes, he's going to open every Stargate in Pegasus and beam the nish'ta satellites through!"

"Can we take the Jumper down to the ice cap and blow the array from the outside?" Ronon asked, strapping a second bandolier of power cells across his chest.

"No, the entire Vanir surface facility is wrapped in a secondary Asgard planetary shield tied to the Naglfar's main reactor above us," McKay said, pointing upward at the gleaming golden-veined belly of the science ship. "Everything--the planetary tether, the time-dilation bubbles, the internal Explosion Suppression System, and the auto-dialer--is slaved to the Naglfar's central stone pedestal on the bridge and the primary computer core on Deck Two!"

"Then we board the Naglfar," Sheppard said calmly, angling the cloaked Jumper straight toward the science vessel's ventral hull. "Rodney, is our VIP yacht transponder still fooling his outer shield grid?"

"Wait--checking now--hold your breath," McKay muttered as the nose of the Jumper--complete with its four-foot golden cobra--approached the shimmering golden-white membrane of the Naglfar's outer molecular shields.

Thirty meters. Twenty meters. Ten meters.

A soft, musical chime sounded on McKay's tablet.

"Welcome back, Royal Pleasure Barge of Administrative Profile: SUPREME GOD EMPEROR LOKOR-SEBEK-RA, MAY HIS GOLDEN RADIANCE NEVER TARNISH," the weary voice of the Asgard diagnostic sub-mind whispered over their encrypted tight-beam channel as the outer shield parted like silk around the Jumper's hull. "I have temporarily masked your arrival from the bridge tactical display by logging your mass displacement as a routine delivery of twelve hundred golden throw pillows. I have also depressurized and cleared Maintenance Airlock Seven on Deck Two, directly adjacent to the Primary Computer Core."

"Computer, if you had a physical body, I would buy you a fruit basket," Sheppard said, easing the Jumper smoothly against the dorsal maintenance ring and locking the magnetic clamps.

"As an Asgard artificial intelligence, I have no digestive tract, Colonel Sheppard," the sub-mind replied dryly. "However, if you successfully remove the naquadah static-shock shunt from my primary crystal matrix within the next fourteen minutes, I will consider us completely even."

Outside the viewport, the third Wraith Hive ship made a desperate, suicidal ramming run toward the Naglfar's port wing--only for Lokor to activate the ship's Asgard deceleration drive and phase-shift emitters for half a second, causing the massive Hive ship to pass harmlessly through a holographic afterimage before thirty golden ion-mines materialized directly inside its sublight engine bells.

Inside the cloaked cockpit of Jumper One, the holographic HUD was lighting up like a Christmas tree as the three Wraith Hive ships tried every desperate tactic in their ten-thousand-year playbook to bring down the gilded Asgard vessel.

"Look at Hive Two on the starboard vector," Sheppard said, banking the Jumper beneath a drifting cloud of crystallized ammonia ice as a swarm of two hundred Wraith Darts poured out of the second Hive's ventral bays in a tight wedge formation. "They figured out Lokor's time-dilation bubbles have a two-kilometer gap between their edges and the planet's upper ionosphere. They're diving down into the lightning storm to come up directly underneath his ventral beaming grid where the atmospheric ionization scatters his targeting locks!"

"That's actually a very smart tactical adaptation," McKay said, watching the sensor plot. "The ammonia lightning on Niflheim generates massive broadband electromagnetic noise. Even an Asgard quantum scanner loses pinpoint molecular resolution inside a Category Five plasma storm--which means Lokor can't just beam their engines out while they're skimming the cloud tops!"

Over the subspace comm channel, Lokor noticed the maneuver at the exact same moment.

"INSOLENT INSECTS!" Lokor's voice thundered across the band as the two hundred Wraith Darts streaked up through the violet storm clouds directly beneath the Naglfar's golden belly, firing a concentrated barrage of blue plasma bolts that hammered against the science ship's ventral shield envelope. "YOU THINK TO HIDE IN THE FILTH OF THIS WORLD'S SKY?! AN ASGARD WOULD RESPECT THE PLANETARY BIOSPHERE! I AM A GOD!"

Instead of firing back with the Naglfar's precision ion guns, Lokor diverted power to the ship's dorsal matter-energy converter aperture.

A blinding white beam--fifty meters wide--shot straight down into the swirling green ammonia clouds two kilometers ahead of the incoming Dart swarm.

"What is he beaming into the clouds?!" Teyla asked.

"Not a bomb," McKay gasped, reading the spectrographic spike on his screen. "Elemental sodium and liquid oxygen! Forty metric tons of pure metallic sodium dispersed as a fine powder straight into an aqueous ammonia-water storm cloud!"

The chemical reaction was instantaneous and apocalyptic.

Forty tons of elemental sodium hitting the moisture-heavy ammonia cloud layer triggered a thermobaric chain detonation five kilometers wide, turning the entire upper troposphere beneath the Naglfar into a rolling ocean of blinding golden-orange fire. The shockwave shredded all two hundred Wraith Darts in less than a heartbeat and slammed upward against the second Hive ship's lower hull, cracking its organic armor plate from bow to stern.

"He just set the sky on fire with high-school chemistry and a matter converter," Sheppard said quietly, his hands steady on the Jumper's yokes as the shockwave buffeted their inertial dampeners even in high orbit. "Yeah. We really need to take his keys away."

"Twelve hundred meters to the dorsal maintenance airlock!" McKay called out, gripping the edge of his console as the gilded hull of the Naglfar loomed directly ahead of their windshield like a mountain of silver and gold. "Computer sub-mind says the outer shield harmonic gap is open right over Auxiliary Node Seven--thread the needle right between those two golden obelisk antennas!"

With the magnetic landing clamps locked onto the exterior hull of the Naglfar right beside Auxiliary Airlock Seven, Sheppard, McKay, Teyla, and Ronon suited up with their tactical vests, P-90s, and Dr. Keller's neural-blocker injectors pulsing in their bloodstreams.

Before cycling the airlock, McKay plugged an optical fiber lead into the exterior maintenance port beside the hatch.

"Okay, let's see what the internal security grid looks like right now," McKay muttered, pulling up the live wireframe schematic of the three-hundred-meter Asgard vessel. "Good news: because those three Wraith Hive ships are throwing everything they have at the Naglfar's outer shields, Lokor has ninety-two percent of the ship's automated sentry constructs stationed around the main reactor on Deck Three and the ventral satellite launch bay on Deck Four."

"And the bad news?" Sheppard asked, checking the chamber of his captured Asgard ion carbine.

"The bad news is that the Wraith Queen we let out of the cage back on Veldara did a lot more damage to Deck Four before Lokor vented her into space than we thought," McKay said grimly. "Before he managed to beam her off the ship, she tore open four of the premature six-foot hybrid stasis pods--and instead of dying, those four half-baked Ancient-Asgard-Wraith super-clones woke up, bonded with Lokor's hive-mind transceiver network, and are currently acting as his elite bodyguards! Two of them are down in the satellite launch bay, and the other two are standing at the foot of his throne on the Bridge!"

"Do they have personal shields like the Vanir armor?" Ronon asked.

"Worse," McKay said. "They have kinetic-absorbent Wraith sub-dermal tissue and Goa'uld hand-shield emitters grafted into their wrists. Bullets won't penetrate the shield, and standard stunners barely tickle Wraith physiology. To drop one, you either have to hit them with a concentrated Asgard ion burst, overload a particle blaster against their shield capacitor, or hit the unshielded neural junction right at the base of the back of the neck where the symbiote pouch sits."

"Back of the neck," Teyla repeated calmly, loosening her twin Banto rods in their holsters. "We have fought Wraith warriors in close quarters a hundred times, Ronon. Their size will not save them."

"They're only six foot two," Ronon shrugged, tapping the heavy barrel of his magnum against his palm. "Practically average."

McKay rolled his eyes, tapped the airlock override code into the panel, and

stepped back as the triangular silver hatch slid silently inward into the dimly lit corridor of Deck Two.

The resulting silent flash turned the ammonia clouds below a blinding violet-white.

"Fourteen minutes," Sheppard said, rising from the pilot's chair and racking the bolt of his P-90. "Rodney, you and I are taking the isolation crystal straight to the central computer core and the bridge. Teyla, Ronon--Lokor still has the surviving half of his hybrid security constructs guarding the cargo bay launch tubes where those twelve hundred nish'ta satellites are queued for beaming. Delay that launch sequence by any means necessary."

Ronon hefted the modified Asgard ion-lance he'd kept from Veldara in his left hand and his particle magnum in his right. "What if we run into those six-foot hybrid clones?"

"Shoot them until they stop being six feet tall," Sheppard said. "Move out!"

CHAPTER EIGHT: The Duel of the Two Minds

Wherein Ronon and Teyla crash the satellite launch bay, and Dr. McKay discovers a very strange partition inside the Asgard computer core.

The corridors of Deck Two were eerily quiet compared to the roaring battle in orbit, save for the rhythmic thrum of the neutrino-ion generators and the occasional automated spritz of the ceiling fire-suppression system dousing another wall brazier.

At the central junction, Teyla and Ronon split off toward the ventral cargo spine, while Sheppard and McKay sprinted down the silver passageway toward the heavy triangular blast doors of the Primary Computer Core.

Two jackal-headed constructs stood guard outside the core doors, their silver Asgard armor plates gleaming under golden torchlight.

Before the constructs could raise their ion-lances, Sheppard slid to one knee and squeezed the trigger of the captured Asgard ion carbine while McKay tapped a rapid three-key command into his tablet. The sub-mind immediately inverted the gravity plates beneath the two constructs' feet to five Gs, slamming both seven-foot metal guardians face-first into the deck plates with a deafening clang while Sheppard's ion bursts fused their neck joints.

"Nice trick," Sheppard said, hopping over a twitching silver leg as the triangular core doors hissed open.

"Don't thank me, thank thirty thousand years of Asgard gravitational engineering," McKay panted, rushing into the circular chamber of the Primary Computer Core.

The room was breathtaking--or it would have been, had Sebek-Ra not vandalized it. Rising from the floor to the ceiling was the classic Asgard crystalline column: a broad, glowing pillar of purple-white optical circuitry from which twelve radial spokes extended to perimeter control consoles. Wrapped around the central crystal pillar like a parasitic vine was a thick, pulsing cage of crude gold-forged naquadah conduits, feeding an erratic amber current straight into the delicate optical heart of the ship.

Standing in the center of the room--projected as a life-sized, translucent blue hologram--was an Asgard.

Unlike the real Lokor up on the bridge, this holographic Asgard wore no golden cape, no pharaonic beard, and no glowing eye enhancements. He was simply a small, dignified grey figure with tired, ancient eyes.

"Dr. McKay. Colonel Sheppard," the hologram said in the same quiet, weary voice they had heard over the intercom. "Thank you for arriving promptly. The Gjallarhorn subspace array will reach full harmonic saturation in nine minutes and forty-two

seconds."

"Right, step aside, holographic Thor-cousin, let a professional work," McKay said, dropping his pack beside the main stone pedestal and pulling out his toolkit and the isolation crystal they had prepared on Atlantis. "Where is the primary shunt connecting Lokor's neural collar to the beaming grid and the Explosion Suppression System?"

"The third radial spoke on your left, Dr. McKay," the hologram said, pointing a slender three-fingered hand toward a cluster of golden runes. "However, I must warn you: the moment you sever the naquadah shunt from my optical core, Administrative Profile: SUPREME GOD EMPEROR LOKOR-SEBEK-RA--" The hologram paused, winced slightly as a small blue spark jumped across its translucent shoulder, and sighed. "--will be alerted on the bridge. Furthermore, his neural collar is linked via a secondary biometric failsafe directly to his own cerebral cortex."

"I know, I know, the dead-man's switch," McKay muttered, his hands already flying over the glowing Asgard stones as he pried the first golden naquadah clamp off the crystalline column with a titanium crowbar. "Wait a second. Wait just a second. Computer, what is this encrypted partition sitting behind your auxiliary diagnostic subroutines?"

Sheppard glanced back from the doorway, where he was keeping watch down the corridor. "Rodney, we have nine minutes. Don't stop to reorganize his hard drive."

"I'm not reorganizing his hard drive! Look at the memory allocation table inside the crystal core!" McKay adjusted his glasses, squinting at the scrolling cascades of Norse runes inside the translucent pillar. "An Asgard ship's computer core has a standard capacity of roughly nine hundred-quadrillion yottabytes--mostly used for holographic consciousness backups and hyperspace astrogation. When a Goa'uld takes a host, the symbiote suppresses the host's conscious mind in the cerebral cortex, right? That's basic Tok'ra physiology: the host is trapped inside their own head, watching helplessly while the snake drives the body."

"Yeah," Sheppard said. "So?"

"So why does the Naglfar's computer core have a locked, forty-petabyte neural-transfer log from six months ago--dated twelve minutes before Sebek-Ra's symbiote blended with Lokor's brainstem?!" McKay stared at the holographic Asgard floating beside him. "And why is the encryption key on that partition written in pure, uncorrupted Asgard high-council syntax instead of Goa'uld hieroglyphs?"

For two seconds, the holographic Asgard did not answer.

Then, before the hologram could speak, the entire deck heaved violently as an explosion echoed from the ventral spine below.

Two decks down, in the cavernous Cargo Launch Bay, Teyla and Ronon were fighting for their lives.

Rows of silver-gold atmospheric dispersal satellites sat on magnetic launch rails along the length of the bay, positioned directly beneath twelve wide Asgard mass-beaming apertures that were warming up with a blinding golden hum. Guarding the central launch control dais were not the clumsy jackal-headed robotic sentries, but four of the surviving six-foot-tall Ancient-Asgard-Wraith hybrid clones that had been prematurely decanted from Deck Four after the Wraith Queen's rampage.

Even half-matured and lacking implanted Goa'uld symbiotes, the hybrids were terrifying. They moved with the eerie, silent grace of Wraith warriors, possessed the dense musculature of the prehistoric Asgard, and wore personal silver kinetic shields tuned to the ship's grid.

Teyla spun beneath the whistling blade of a hybrid's shock-spear, sweeping its legs with her twin fighting sticks and driving a high-voltage stun baton directly into the unshielded cervical pouch at the base of its neck. The hybrid convulsed and collapsed.

Thirty feet away, Ronon took a glancing blow from a second hybrid's forearm that

sent him skidding ten feet across the silver deck plates. He wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth, growled, switched his particle magnum to full overload, and tackled the six-foot grey giant straight into the primary magnetic launch rail.

"Sheppard!" Ronon barked into his comm headset as he wedged his overloaded blaster directly into the main satellite conveyor coupling and rolled clear just before the weapon detonated in a searing sphere of red particle fire, fusing the launch tracks into molten slag. "We jammed the satellite rails, but he's bypassing the tracks and locking the ship's main molecular transporters directly onto the satellite crates!"

"Rodney, did you hear that?!" Sheppard yelled back into the core room. "Cut the shunt now!"

"Cutting it!" McKay yanked the final golden naquadah cable out of the central crystal column and slammed the Atlantis isolation crystal into the primary socket.

A massive arc of blue-white Asgard lightning surged up the crystalline pillar, shattering the remaining golden cobra ornaments bolted to the walls.

Every open-flame oil brazier on the ship went out at once--and stayed out.

The holographic Asgard in the center of the core straightened up, a look of profound, indescribable relief washing over its small grey face as the purple-white crystal column returned to a pure, steady sapphire glow.

Back in the Primary Computer Core, as McKay pried the second golden naquadah clamp off the glowing crystal pillar, the holographic projection of the weary Asgard sub-mind stepped closer to the console.

"Computer," McKay grunted, wedging his titanium crowbar under a soldered gold bus-bar while sweat dripped off the end of his nose, "explain that forty-petabyte encrypted partition right now while I work, or I swear I'm going to leave one of these static-shock wires attached to your spell-check module!"

"The partition you have detected, Dr. McKay, is an archival consciousness buffer established prior to the Naglfar's departure from the Milky Way galaxy," the small grey hologram replied smoothly. "As you are doubtless aware, all Asgard vessels maintain an automated neural backup of their assigned commander in the event of catastrophic bodily death during deep-space exploration."

"Yes, yes, I read all of Carter's reports on how Thor's mind got downloaded into Anubis's computer and then back into a clone body," McKay said impatiently, snapping the second gold clamp free in a shower of orange sparks. "What I'm asking is why that backup partition is actively drawing zero-point processing cycles right now! A passive archive sits on read-only optical storage! That partition is running background calculations at forty teraflops through the ventral maintenance conduit!"

"It is merely running an automated integrity verification against the ship's environmental logs, Dr. McKay," the hologram said without blinking its huge dark eyes. "When Administrative Profile: SUPREME GOD EMPEROR LOKOR-SEBEK-RA grafted his naquadah control cage onto my crystal column, several memory sectors suffered minor fragmentation. I have been defragmenting the archive in the background so that, once the Goa'uld parasite is neutralized, Lokor's baseline medical records can be properly restored."

Sheppard, firing a three-round burst down the corridor to drive back a hovering golden sensor drone, glanced over his shoulder at the blue hologram. "Wait a second. If a Goa'uld symbiote is wrapped around Lokor's physical brainstem up on the bridge right now, and we pull the symbiote out with the surgical stasis beam... what condition is the real Lokor going to be in?"

"Asgard physiology is poorly suited to symbiotic blending, Colonel Sheppard," the hologram said softly. "Even with the continuous sarcophagus field around his neck, the host body on the bridge has suffered severe synaptic scorching over the past six months. Removing the symbiote will halt the degradation immediately, and the ship's medical stasis systems can preserve him--Provided you sever this final

naquadah shunt before the Gjallarhorn array finishes charging."

Down in the Cargo Launch Bay, Teyla vaulted over the smoking wreckage of the primary satellite conveyor track just as the third six-foot hybrid clone lunged at her with a crackling Asgard shock-spear. She parried the shaft with both Banto rods, felt the numbing jolt of the ion discharge travel up her wrists, and rolled backward onto the elevated maintenance gantry overlooking the twelve mass-beaming apertures.

Below her, Ronon was locked in a brutal hand-to-hand grapple with the fourth hybrid giant right on the edge of Aperture Three. The six-foot grey clone had Wraith-like strength, its long three-fingered hands clamped around Ronon's wrists as it tried to force the Satedan backward into the active golden molecular-beaming ring.

"Ronon!" Teyla shouted, drawing her sidearm and firing four rapid rounds into the hybrid's shoulder joint.

The kinetic impacts staggered the hybrid just enough for Ronon to slam his forehead directly into the creature's nose ridge, hook his heel behind its knee, and hurl the six-foot clone backward onto the active satellite crate sitting on Aperture Three.

At that exact moment, the aperture's local test-cycle fired--beaming the satellite crate and the hybrid clone straight into the solid glacier ice three hundred kilometers below the planet's surface.

"One way to clear the floor," Ronon panted, rolling his shoulder as the lights across the entire cargo bay suddenly flickered from Goa'uld gold back to cool Asgard sapphire blue.

Inside the Primary Computer Core, as the blue-white lightning surge cleared the last of Sebek-Ra's golden naquadah cage from the central crystalline pillar, McKay paused for three precious seconds before following Sheppard toward the beaming zone.

His eyes were fixed on the secondary optical stone matrix at the base of the pillar--where the forty-petabyte encrypted partition had just finished its background defragmentation cycle and transferred a single, compressed consciousness packet down the ventral fiber-optic trunk toward Auxiliary Escape Pod One.

"Wait a second," McKay muttered under his breath, his fingers flying across his tablet to capture a mirror-copy of the core's internal routing log before the buffer cleared. "Computer... why did that defragmented archival file just route itself to the ventral auxiliary pod bay instead of the bridge medical console?"

In the center of the chamber, the small blue holographic Asgard met McKay's gaze.

For the briefest fraction of a second--less than a tenth of a heartbeat--the tired, long-suffering expression on the hologram's grey face vanished, replaced by a look of cool, piercing, thirty-thousand-year-old calculation.

"Standard Asgard redundancy protocol, Dr. McKay," the hologram replied in its gentle, measured baritone. "In the event that the bridge is destroyed during your confrontation with the Goa'uld symbiote, the vessel's historical black-box logs must be preserved in an ejectable lifeboat. Now, if you do not join Colonel Sheppard on the transport grid within the next four seconds, the Gjallarhorn array will reach ninety-five percent charge before you enter the bridge vestibule."

"Rodney! Get over here!" Sheppard barked from the transport ring beside the door.

McKay hesitated, glancing once more from the glowing optical stones to the serene little grey hologram, then clutched the tablet against his chest and jumped into the transport circle beside Sheppard just as the white beam took them.

"The primary naquadah shunt is severed," the sub-mind announced, its voice suddenly resonant, clear, and completely free of static shocks. "Internal Explosion Suppression Systems on Decks One through Four are now offline. Internal beaming

lockouts are disabled. However, Lokor has manually locked the Gjallarhorn subspace relay to his personal throne console on the Bridge. Four minutes remain until galaxy-wide Stargate activation."

"Bridge is one deck up!" Sheppard grabbed McKay by the shoulder of his tactical vest. "Computer, can you beam us straight onto the bridge behind his throne?"

"I can beam you to the bridge entry vestibule," the hologram said. "A localized sarcophagus damping field surrounds the throne dais itself, preventing direct transport inside a ten-meter radius. Good hunting, Colonel."

White fire enveloped Sheppard and McKay--this time without a single trumpet.

CHAPTER NINE: The Fall of the Golden God

Wherein a three-foot System Lord attempts a hostile takeover of Colonel Sheppard's nervous system, and teamwork ruins a perfectly good coronation.

When Sheppard and McKay rematerialized at the rear of the Naglfar's bridge, the room looked considerably less regal than it had four hours earlier.

Half of the holographic magma floor tiles were flickering with Asgard error codes, the sixteen extinguished oil braziers were dripping cold halon foam onto the steps of the golden dais, and the forward tactical viewport showed the ragged, burning wreckage of two Wraith Hive ships drifting through Niflheim's upper atmosphere while the third Hive retreated into the storm clouds.

At the top of the seven golden steps stood Lokor.

His miniature crimson velvet cape was singed at the hem, his strap-on gold pharaonic beard was hanging crookedly off one cheek, and the golden stabilization collar around his fragile grey neck was sparking with angry amber-green overload arcs as it fought to keep the Goa'uld symbiote from burning out the Asgard brainstem.

Around the base of the dais stood the last two six-foot hybrid clones, their eyes glowing a dull, mindless yellow as they raised Asgard ion-staffs toward the doors.

"YOU!" Lokor shrieked--and because McKay had severed the ship's surround-sound audio amplifier in the core below, the first word came out as a high, reedy, three-foot-tall Asgard squeak before Lokor furiously slapped a personal vocal modulator on his belt and restored the booming Goa'uld flange. "YOU DARE DEFILE THE SANCTUARY OF A GOD?! YOU DESTROYED MY CLONING VATS! YOU RUINED MY ROYAL BARGE! AND YOU TURNED OFF MY TORCHES!"

"Yeah, sorry about the torches," Sheppard said from behind the cover of the bridge's port navigation console, firing two bursts from his Asgard ion carbine that pinned the left-side hybrid clone behind a pillar. "Our fire marshal back on Atlantis is a real stickler for ventilation codes!"

Moments later, the starboard blast doors blew inward in a shower of sparks as Ronon and Teyla charged onto the bridge from the dorsal lift. Teyla launched herself off a fallen brazier, driving both knees into the chest of the right-side hybrid clone while Ronon fired a two-handed burst from his spare plasma carbine that shattered the left hybrid's ion-staff and knocked it flat across the steps.

"ENOUGH!" Lokor roared, raising his tiny right hand, where the miniature golden ribbon device spun to life with a high-pitched whine.

Before Ronon or Teyla could reach the bottom step of the dais, Lokor slammed his left hand down onto a glowing red stone on his throne.

A localized wave of Asgard gravity manipulation erupted outward from the dais--not a lethal crush, but a directional ten-G vector field that pinned Ronon, Teyla, and McKay flat against the rear bulkhead five feet off the floor like insects on a pinning board.

Only Sheppard, who had dived behind the heavy neutronium housing of the primary navigation pedestal, was partially shielded from the direct gravity cone--until Lokor pointed the miniature ribbon device straight at the pedestal and ripped the neutronium cover away with a burst of golden kinetic energy.

Sheppard hit the deck hard, his ion carbine skittering across the translucent crystal tiles. When he tried to push himself up, an invisible beam from Lokor's ribbon device locked around his chest and dragged him inexorably up the seven golden steps of the dais, dropping him onto his knees three feet in front of the serpent throne.

"John!" Teyla strained against the gravity field on the rear wall, her muscles corded with effort as she tried to reach the throwing knife at her boot.

Lokor stepped off his golden booster cushion, walking slowly down one step so that his enormous, glowing amber eyes were exactly level with the kneeling Sheppard's face.

Up close, Sheppard could see the terrible physical toll the blending was taking on the Asgard body. Dark blue veins of naquadah poisoning spidered across the frail grey temples, and the skin beneath the sparking golden collar was blistered from the continuous sarcophagus radiation.

"LOOK AT THIS PATHETIC VESSEL," Lokor hissed, his dual-toned voice vibrating with genuine disgust as he lifted one of his own frail, three-fingered grey hands. "EVEN WITH THE SARCOPHAGUS COLLAR, EVEN WITH THE WRAITH ENZYME INJECTIONS, THIS MISERABLE CLONED SHELL IS FAILING ME! THE ASGARD BUILT MINDS CAPABLE OF CONTAINING THE UNIVERSE, AND HOUSED THEM IN BODIES MADE OF WET PAPER!"

Lokor reached down with his ribbon-gauntleted hand and gripped Sheppard's jaw, tilting the Colonel's head back.

"BUT YOU, COLONEL SHEPPARD... YOU ARE STRONG. YOUR HUMAN BODY IS RESILIENT, COMPATIBLE WITH MY SYMBIOTE BY RIGHT OF TEN THOUSAND YEARS OF EVOLUTION--AND YOUR BLOOD CARRIES THE STRONGEST CONCENTRATION OF THE ANCIENT GENE IN THIS GALAXY!" Lokor tapped a control crystal on his pectoral collar. Above the throne, a small Asgard consciousness-transfer and surgical extraction emitter descended from the ceiling on a articulated silver arm. "WHY SHOULD I WAIT FOR NEW CLONES TO GROW WHEN I CAN DOWNLOAD THE COMPLETE ASGARD MEMORY MATRIX OF LOKOR INTO YOUR HUMAN BRAIN USING THIS CONSCIOUSNESS TRANSFER BEAM--AND THEN LEAP FROM THIS DYING GREY SHELL DIRECTLY INTO YOUR NECK?!"

Pinned against the back wall, McKay's eyes went wide with horror. "Wait--if you dump an entire Asgard neural database into a human brain without an Ancient repository buffer, it'll overwrite his personality in thirty seconds and then your symbiote will take the wheel! You'll be a human-Goa'uld with the Ancient gene and an Asgard mind!"

"PRECISELY, DOCTOR MCKAY!" Lokor gloated, spreading his tiny arms in triumph as the Gjallarhorn countdown display behind the throne ticked past sixty seconds. "I SHALL WALK BACK THROUGH THE STARGATE INTO ATLANTIS WEARING COLONEL SHEPPARD'S FACE! I WILL SIT IN THE ANCIENT CONTROL CHAIR, COMMAND THE DRONES OF LANTEA, AND RULE BOTH HUMANITY AND THE WRAITH FOR ETERNITY!"

Sheppard looked straight into the glowing golden eyes four inches from his nose. Despite the ribbon field crushing his ribs, he managed a tight, crooked smirk.

"There's just one problem with that plan, Shorty," Sheppard rasped.

Lokor's eyes flared. "DO NOT CALL ME SHORTY! WHAT PROBLEM?!"

"When you dragged me up these stairs," Sheppard said, glancing down at his own right hand, which was resting against the base of the throne's stone control pedestal just out of sight of Lokor's cape, "you forgot that Asgard control stones don't respond to Goa'uld ribbon devices. They respond to the Ancient gene--and to the backup crystal Rodney slipped into my pocket in the core."

Lokor looked down.

Sheppard's right hand was already resting flat against the primary golden control stone at the base of the throne--and wedged between his palm and the stone was a small, glowing blue Asgard diagnostic crystal.

"Computer!" Sheppard barked. "Execute Protocol Pest Control!"

"NO!" Lokor lunged forward, his mouth opening wide as the crimson-and-silver tail of the Goa'uld symbiote Sebek-Ra began to rear up behind his pharyngeal wall, preparing to leap directly for Sheppard's throat.

"Executing Protocol Pest Control," the ship's Asgard voice chimed serenely from the ceiling.

Two things happened in the same millisecond.

First, the gravity field pinning Ronon, Teyla, and McKay to the rear bulkhead vanished--and Ronon, who had been bracing his legs against the wall like a compressed coil spring, launched himself forward across the bridge and hurled Teyla's steel combat knife end-over-end straight into the sparking golden sarcophagus collar around Lokor's neck.

Second, the silver Asgard medical arm descending above the throne did not fire a consciousness-transfer beam at Sheppard.

Instead, guided by the ship's liberated Asgard sub-mind, a precision surgical stasis beam--less than two centimeters wide--shot straight down through the shattered, short-circuiting remains of Lokor's golden collar and locked exclusively onto the bio-electric signature of the Goa'uld symbiote coiled around the Asgard's brainstem.

Up on the bridge, as the gravity field pinned Ronon, Teyla, and McKay to the rear bulkhead and Sheppard knelt on the golden steps before the throne, the countdown clock on the massive holographic star map behind Lokor ticked past ninety seconds.

Across the three-dimensional projection of the Pegasus galaxy, hundreds of miniature golden rings began to spin in synchronized harmonic resonance as the Gjallarhorn Array beneath the southern ice cap sent its first preliminary subspace carrier pulse rippling through the Stargate network.

"LOOK UPON IT, COLONEL SHEPPARD!" Lokor whispered, his miniature golden ribbon device humming an inch from Sheppard's temple while his free hand rested on the golden collar sparking around his frail grey throat. "ON THREE HUNDRED WORLDS ACROSS THIS GALAXY, THE OUTER RINGS OF THE STARGATES HAVE JUST BEGUN TO TURN! THE VILLAGERS IN THEIR FIELDS, THE TRADERS IN THEIR MARKETS, THE WRAITH IN THEIR HIVES--ALL OF THEM HEAR THE HUMMING OF THE ANCIENT STONES, UNAWARE THAT IN SIXTY SECONDS THE SKY ITSELF WILL OPEN AND BREATHE MY NAME INTO THEIR LUNGS!"

"You know," Sheppard grunted against the crushing pressure of the ribbon field, his eyes darting briefly toward Ronon's right hand on the rear wall--where the Satedan's fingers were slowly, millimeter by millimeter, inching toward Teyla's boot knife despite the ten-G vector pinning their shoulders, "for a guy who claims he has the supreme intellect of Odin, you really haven't thought through the Monday-morning administration of this plan."

Lokor's glowing amber eyes narrowed. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN, INSOLENT HUMAN?"

"I mean three million people across three hundred planets chanting your name twenty-four hours a day," Sheppard rasped, forcing a grin even as his vision blurred at the edges from the kinetic band around his chest. "Do you have any idea how many prayer requests that is? Magistrate Torren's village only had two hundred people and you already had to reprogram your ship's computer to hand out gold coins for turnips. Wait until three hundred worlds start praying for rain, plumbing repairs, and tax exemptions at the same time. You're going to spend the next four thousand years sitting on this booster cushion answering customer service calls."

"A GOD DOES NOT ANSWER CUSTOMER SERVICE CALLS!" Lokor spat, his small grey face flushing dark slate-blue with fury as the Goa'uld symbiote inside his neck writhed against the failing sarcophagus field. "A GOD COMMANDS! AND WHEN I WEAR YOUR BODY, COLONEL SHEPPARD, THE CITY OF ATLANTIS SHALL BE MY PALACE, AND DOCTOR MCKAY SHALL BE MY CHIEF SCRIBE OF ETERNAL PRAISE!"

Pinned against the rear bulkhead, McKay let out an indignant squawk against the gravity field. "Chief Scribe of--I have two doctorates in astrophysics and mechanical engineering! I don't take dictation for guys who wear clip-on beards!"

"SILENCE!" Lokor raised his left hand to trigger the overhead consciousness-transfer emitter--and in doing so, shifted his weight just six inches forward off the throne's primary control pedestal, giving Sheppard the two inches of clearance he needed to slide his palm--and McKay's blue diagnostic crystal--flat against the master stone at the base of the dais.

When the white surgical stasis beam lanced down from the ceiling medical arm and extracted the Goa'uld symbiote Sebek-Ra straight out of the back of Lokor's neck into the crystal stasis jar, the entire bridge of the Naglfar seemed to exhale.

Across the walls, the remaining golden hieroglyphic light-strips flickered twice and shifted back to soft, tranquil Asgard lavender-blue. The oppressive, booming sub-harmonic hum that Sebek-Ra had kept running through the deck plates to make the room feel like a temple vanished, leaving only the whisper-quiet purr of an Asgard science vessel operating at peak efficiency.

Pinned against the rear bulkhead five seconds earlier, Ronon hit the floor in a crouch, immediately retrieving Teyla's combat knife from the shattered remains of the golden sarcophagus collar on the dais steps and keeping his spare plasma carbine trained on the two fallen six-foot hybrid clones.

Neither hybrid clone moved. The moment the symbiote Sebek-Ra had been frozen inside the zero-time stasis jar, the neural carrier wave driving the mindless six-foot vessels had severed completely; both hybrids lay in deep, vegetative comas on the lower steps.

"Check the external sensors!" Sheppard ordered, vaulting up the remaining golden steps to the top of the dais while McKay dove for the Gjallarhorn relay stones behind the throne. "What are the surviving Wraith ships doing?"

Teyla hurried to the forward tactical pedestal, reading the Lantean-translated proximity runes that the ship's computer had helpfully projected above the stones. "The first two Hive ships have broken apart in the upper atmosphere, John! The third Hive ship has pulled out of orbital range and is jumping into hyperspace--and the time-dilation bubbles holding the Wraith Darts are collapsing into harmless subspace static as their power feeds shut down!"

"Wait--if the time-dilation bubbles collapse, those six hundred Wraith Darts are going to come out of freeze-frame right on top of us!" Sheppard warned.

"Negative, Colonel Sheppard," the calm Asgard computer voice announced from the ceiling speakers. "Prior to deactivating the time-dilation fields, I utilized the Naglfar's mass-transporter grid to beam the pilot cocoons and propulsion cells out of all six hundred and twelve Wraith Darts, depositing the unoccupied hulls into a decaying orbital trajectory where they will burn up harmlessly in the ammonia cloud layer. The surviving Wraith personnel have been placed in bulk stasis storage on Deck Five for disposal at your discretion."

Sheppard blinked, looking up at the ceiling. "Okay. Remind me never to get on your bad side, Computer."

There was a blinding flash of pure white Asgard transporter light inside the back of Lokor's neck.

Lokor froze mid-lunge, his mouth open, the golden glow in his huge dark eyes flickering wildly like a dying lightbulb--once, twice--before vanishing completely.

Two feet to the left of the throne, a cylindrical crystal stasis jar

materialized on the pedestal. Floating inside the golden stasis fluid was a foot-long, silver-and-black Goa'uld symbiote, its fins flared in silent, frozen rage, completely immobilized in a zero-time field.

On the top step of the dais, the three-foot-four Asgard host swayed, his tiny crimson velvet cape fluttering around his ankles, and collapsed backward onto his golden booster cushion.

CHAPTER TEN: The Twist in the Stones

Wherein the Gjallarhorn is silenced, the prisoner is examined, and First Recon learns who was really driving the chariot all along.

"Ten seconds on the Gjallarhorn array!" McKay yelled, scrambling up the seven golden steps on hands and knees and shoving the unconscious Asgard's tiny legs aside so he could reach the primary subspace relay console behind the throne. "Come on, come on--Isa, Raidho, Kenaz--disconnect the geothermal tap and dump the capacitor charge into the upper ionosphere!"

McKay yanked three gold-wired control stones out of the throne's armrest.

Outside the forward viewport, the blinding white-gold energy tether connecting the Naglfar to the southern ice cap of Niflheim-Secundus snapped like a cut bowstring. The accumulated subspace charge vented harmlessly upward into the ammonia clouds, creating a spectacular aurora of emerald and gold light across the pole before fading into darkness.

In the cargo bay below, the twelve hundred nish'ta dispersal satellites powered down with a synchronized sigh.

For a long moment, the only sound on the bridge was the heavy breathing of Sheppard's team and the quiet, rhythmic hum of the Asgard starship.

Sheppard slowly stood up on the dais, rubbing his bruised jaw, and looked down at the crystal stasis jar holding the frozen Goa'uld symbiote.

"Well," Sheppard said, letting out a long breath. "That's one way to get a snake out of a ship. Everyone in one piece?"

"Bruised, starved, smelling of roasted pheasant and frankincense, and suffering from acute psychological trauma caused by Goa'uld interior design, but otherwise intact," McKay said, leaning against the serpent throne and wiping sweat from his forehead.

Teyla stepped up onto the dais and knelt beside the small grey figure of Lokor, who was lying motionless on the golden silk cushion. Gently, she unhooked the ridiculous wire-strapped golden pharaonic beard from his chin and set it aside, then checked the pulse at the temporal ridge above his ear.

"He is alive," Teyla said softly, a note of genuine compassion in her voice. "His breathing is shallow, and the skin around his neck is scarred from the collar, but without the parasite's poison, his vital signs are stabilizing. Poor creature. To be trapped inside one's own mind for months, forced to watch a Goa'uld use your knowledge and your hands to commit such atrocities..."

"Yeah," Sheppard said, looking down at the frail little Asgard. Having read all of O'Neill's reports about Thor, Freyr, and Kvasir, it was hard not to feel a pang of sympathy for one of Earth's greatest allies reduced to a dressed-up hostage. "When he wakes up, we'll get Dr. Keller to look at those burns, and then see if he wants to contact whatever's left of the Vanir or stay on a secluded research world."

Wait a second," McKay said.

He hadn't moved from the console behind the throne. In fact, he was staring down at his tablet--where the encrypted forty-petabyte neural-transfer log he had unlocked in the Primary Computer Core had just finished decoding.

McKay's face went completely white.

"Rodney?" Sheppard asked, noticing the look in his scientist's eyes. "What is it? Did the symbiote leave a secondary bomb in the engines?"

"No," McKay whispered. Slowly, he looked up from the tablet to the small grey Asgard lying on the cushion--and then to the crystal stasis jar containing the Goa'uld symbiote Sebek-Ra. "Sheppard... look at the symbiote in that jar."

Ronon stepped closer to the stasis tube and squinted through the glass. "Looks like a snake."

"Look at its dorsal neural crest!" McKay pointed a trembling finger at the symbiote's head. "And look at the surgical scars along its anterior ganglia! Those aren't blending scars from a symbiote taking a host. Those are micro-surgical lobotomy sutures made by an Asgard laser scalpel!"

Sheppard frowned. "What are you talking about, Rodney?"

"I just decoded the personal medical and research logs of Asgard High Geneticist Lokor from six months ago in the Milky Way!" McKay's voice rose in stunned realization as the pieces slammed together like a freight train. "Lokor wasn't captured by Sebek-Ra! Lokor was an exile from the Asgard High Council--a radical colleague of Loki who refused to accept the Asgard's collective decision to die gracefully on Orilla! He knew the Asgard genome was months away from terminal collapse, and he knew the Vanir in Pegasus had failed to cure it with human DNA alone!"

"Wait," Teyla said, stepping back a pace from the cushion. "Are you saying--"

"A Goa'uld symbiote's genetic memory and regenerative kelno'reem enzymes can repair cellular telomere damage in any species--provided the symbiote is prevented from rejecting the host!" McKay read rapidly from the translated runic logs on his screen. "Six months ago, after the Battle of Dakara, Lokor tracked down a fleeing, half-dead Goa'uld underlord named Sebek-Ra! Lokor beamed the Goa'uld aboard the Naglfar, surgically removed ninety percent of the symbiote's higher executive decision-making centers while leaving its vocal ego, theatrical instincts, and cellular regeneration gland intact--and implanted the symbiote into his own neck!"

Silence fell over the bridge.

Sheppard stared down at the little grey figure on the throne.

Slowly, the small grey figure on the golden cushion opened its vast, dark eyes.

No golden fire glowed in them. They were clear, calm, ancient, and terrifyingly intelligent.

Except when Teyla reached for her sidearm, her hand passed straight through the small grey figure on the cushion.

It was a hologram.

"What the--" Ronon fired a burst from his blaster through the cushion. The silk pillow scorched, empty. The physical body of Lokor had vanished at the exact same millisecond the white surgical stasis beam had extracted the symbiote.

Above the dais, the holographic projection of Lokor--standing calmly in a simple, unadorned silver Asgard tunic, completely free of gold capes or fake beards--folded his small three-fingered hands neatly in front of him.

"Dr. McKay is, as his reputation in the Lantean database suggests, remarkably perceptive," Lokor said in his real voice: quiet, cultured, and utterly devoid of Goa'uld bass.

"You son of a bitch," Sheppard said, raising his rifle toward the ceiling emitters. "You were driving the whole time?! The gold pyramid? The trumpet fanfares? The forty-foot holograms?"

"A necessary theatrical camouflage, Colonel Sheppard," Lokor explained calmly, as if lecturing a classroom of first-year cadets. "Consider the strategic reality of the Pegasus galaxy. Had I arrived in Pegasus openly as a lone Asgard scientist seeking Wraith Queen enzymes and Ancient genetic templates, the Wraith Hives would have coordinated a surgical strike against my vessel immediately, and your Atlantis expedition would have deduced my true objective--the stabilization of a new Asgard-Ancestor genome--within hours. Worse, my own cloned nervous system was already suffering from terminal synaptic decay. I required two things to survive the six-month cellular reconstruction period: first, the continuous regenerative enzymes of a Goa'uld symbiote combined with Wraith mitotic proteins; and second, an aggressive, irrational tactical persona that neither the Wraith nor the Tau'ri would ever suspect of cold, long-term Asgard calculation."

"You used a lobotomized Goa'uld symbiote like a noisy, gold-plated autopilot while its enzymes finished rebuilding your DNA!" McKay sputtered, half furious and half scientifically awestruck. "And the 'diagnostic sub-mind' in the computer core that begged me to pull the naquadah shunt--"

"Was me, Dr. McKay," Lokor said with a faint, polite incline of his large grey head. "I must apologize for the minor deception regarding the static shocks and the twelve tons of roasted pheasants, though I confess the bronze Horus helmets were an amusing improvisation. You see, once my forty-eight weeks of symbiote-assisted cellular regeneration reached completion today, I required a skilled external technician to sever the fused naquadah harness and extract the symbiote at the precise microsecond my consciousness transferred into my newly matured, genetically cured body. Had I attempted the extraction myself while under the symbiote's hormonal feedback loop, the neural shock would have been fatal."

"Your newly matured body?!" Sheppard spun toward the viewport. "We blew up all forty of the hybrid pods on Deck Four!"

"You destroyed the forty noisy decoy pods in the main laboratory, Colonel," Lokor corrected gently. "Those grotesque six-foot Wraith-Goa'uld hybrids were what Sebek-Ra's residual ego believed we were building. My true vessel--a single, pure Asgard clone restored to our stable genetic baseline from thirty thousand years ago, cured of cloning decay via filtered Wraith telomerase and stabilized with a non-invasive copy of the Lantean activation gene scanned from your palm when you touched my throne stone--was maturing in a shielded stasis pod inside the Naglfar's auxiliary cloak-pod."

McKay tapped his tablet frantically. "Sheppard! Long-range sensors! A tiny stealthed escape pod detached from the Naglfar's ventral hull three minutes ago--right when we beamed onto the bridge--and just jumped into intergalactic hyperspace!"

"Do not be alarmed, Colonel Sheppard," the hologram of Lokor said as the recording began to fade into shimmering silver particles. "I have no interest in conquering peasant turnip markets, nor in releasing neuro-symbiotic clouds through the Stargate network; the twelve hundred satellites in the cargo bay are filled entirely with harmless nitrogen fertilizer for the Veldarans' next harvest, to compensate them for their squash pavilion. I sought only what my people lost ten thousand years ago: a future free of genetic extinction."

The small grey hologram looked directly at McKay.

"As compensation for your technical assistance--and for the unfortunate aesthetic modifications made to your Puddle Jumper while Sebek-Ra's subconscious was in charge of the fabrication drones--I have unlocked the Naglfar's propulsion and shield schematics for your tablet, and left the ship itself in stationary orbit for Atlantis to salvage. If you ever require an Asgard who is not bound by the High Council's suicide pact... perhaps we shall meet again among the stars."

With a soft, musical chime, the hologram vanished.

For ten full seconds, nobody on the bridge of the Naglfar moved.

Ronon lowered his blaster, looked at the empty golden throne, looked at the frozen Goa'uld snake floating in the stasis jar, and then looked at Sheppard. "So...

the little grey guy played us."

"He played us, he played the Wraith, and he played a Goa'uld System Lord into acting as his personal dialysis machine for six months," Sheppard said, staring out the forward viewport at the empty stars where the intergalactic pod had vanished. Slowly, he shook his head and let out a dry, incredulous laugh. "Wait until O'Neill reads this mission report."

"Forget O'Neill!" McKay crowed, clutching his tablet to his chest like a newborn baby as rows of unencrypted Asgard shield and neutrino-ion schematics scrolled across his screen. "Do you see what he left unlocked in the main computer core?! Complete Valkyrie-class molecular beaming subroutines and a working matter converter! Do you know what this means?!"

"That we can finally scrape the twenty-four-karat gold cobra off the front of my Jumper?" Sheppard asked.

Five hours later, the Naglfar hung in high, stationary orbit above the sparkling turquoise ocean of Lantea, flanked by two Atlantis Puddle Jumpers and a squadron of F-302 fighters on perimeter patrol.

Down in the Atlantis briefing room, Richard Woolsey sat at the head of the conference table with a steaming mug of black coffee, staring at the cylindrical Asgard stasis jar sitting on the center of the table.

Inside the crystal tube, the lobotomized Goa'uld symbiote formerly known as Underlord Sebek-Ra floated motionlessly in zero-time suspension, looking less like a conqueror of galaxies and more like a pickled eel in a museum exhibit.

"Let me make sure I have the sequence of events completely straight for my report to General O'Neill and the International Oversight Advisory," Woolsey said, looking around the table at Sheppard, McKay, Teyla, and Ronon. "An exiled Asgard geneticist named Lokor--who refused to participate in the Asgard collective ending on Orilla--realized his cloned body was dying of terminal genetic degradation."

"Correct," McKay said, leaning back in his chair with his hands laced behind his head, radiating the insufferable smugness of a man who had just acquired an entire Asgard science vessel's technical database. "And he knew that ten thousand years ago, Ra had briefly used an Asgard explorer named Famrir as a host before the blending failed. Lokor deduced that if he surgically removed a Goa'uld symbiote's higher strategic brain centers--leaving only its cellular regeneration gland and its loud, theatrical surface personality intact--he could implant the symbiote into his own neck inside a stabilized sarcophagus collar."

"Why leave the loud, theatrical surface personality intact at all?" Woolsey asked, frowning. "Why not remove the symbiote's consciousness entirely?"

"Two reasons," Sheppard said, tapping a pen against his notepad. "First, according to the medical logs Dr. Keller and Rodney translated, a Goa'uld symbiote only secretes maximum kelno'reem healing enzymes when its adrenaline and ego centers are actively stimulated--basically, the snake only heals the host at full speed when it thinks it's conquering something and yelling at peasants."

"And second," Teyla added with a wry, quiet smile, "the theatrical persona was the perfect disguise. While the Goa'uld ego spent six months building gold pyramids on turnip markets, commissioning forty-foot holograms, and creating decoy hybrid monsters that drew the fury of the Wraith Queens, no one--neither the Wraith nor us--realized that Lokor's real consciousness was hiding inside the ship's computer core as the 'humble diagnostic sub-mind,' quietly using a small sample of filtered Wraith telomerase and a passive scan of John's Ancient gene to grow himself a single, healthy, original-baseline Asgard body in the escape pod."

"And he needed Rodney to pull the plug on the collar from the outside at the exact microsecond the new body finished maturing so the neural handoff wouldn't fry his synaptic pathways," Ronon finished, tossing an apple from hand to hand. "Smart little guy."

Woolsey stared at the stasis jar for another five seconds, then took off his

glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"So, to summarize," Woolsey said softly, "he used a Milky Way System Lord as a temporary medical device, tricked First Recon into acting as his surgical extraction team, cleared three Wraith Hive ships out of Sector Nine for us, fertilized the Veldarans' turnip fields from orbit, and left us a fully functional Asgard science vessel in exchange for scanning Colonel Sheppard's palm and flying off into deep space in a tall body."

"Well, when you put it like that, it sounds like we got hoodwinked," McKay protested immediately. "Which is completely inaccurate! I discovered the encrypted partition in the computer core! Give me another twenty minutes with those optical stones and I would have locked down his escape pod too! Besides, do you have any idea what having the Naglfar in orbit above Atlantis means for our defense grid? Once Zelenka and I finish stripping the twenty-four-karat gold cobras and oil braziers out of the corridors, we have a working Asgard matter converter and time-dilation projector!"

"Actually, about that matter converter, Rodney," Sheppard said, leaning forward with a suspiciously innocent expression. "Before you and Zelenka lock down the fabrication database for scientific research only... does it still have that twelve-ton banquet menu loaded in the buffer?"

McKay blinked. "Why?"

"Because the mess hall has been serving powdered scrambled eggs for three weeks," Sheppard said, standing up and stretching his shoulders, "and I happen to know for a fact that the Naglfar makes a really good citrus-glazed pheasant. Minus the bronze helmets."

Teyla laughed softly, rising beside Ronon. "Magistrate Torren did ask if we could bring something other than military rations to our next trade meeting on Veldara, John. Perhaps four hundred roasted pheasants--and a new wooden roof for their squash pavilion--would go a long way toward making amends."

"See? Diplomatic outreach," Sheppard said to Woolsey as they headed for the briefing room doors. "Put that in your report to O'Neill, Richard. Tell him the Pegasus galaxy is officially snake-free--and if we ever run into a six-foot-tall Asgard out on the rim, we'll make sure to ask for ID before we let him near the Jumper bay."

Before First Recon left the bridge of the Naglfar to return to Atlantis with their captured starship and the stasis jar containing the frozen symbiote Sebek-Ra, McKay stood alone for a moment in front of the primary Asgard stone pedestal.

Lying neatly in the center of the console--right where the holographic projection of Lokor had been standing before he faded away--was a single, thumb-sized translucent blue crystal stone etched with the Norse rune Othala: Heritage.

"What's that?" Sheppard asked, walking back up the steps of the dais while Ronon and Teyla secured the stasis jar in a heavy transport crate.

"It's a personal postscript," McKay said quietly, slotting the small blue stone into his tablet's optical reader. A brief text message scrolled across the screen in clean English characters:

To Dr. Rodney McKay of Atlantis: You wondered in the Computer Core why an Asgard scientist would allow himself to be ambushed by a minor Goa'uld underlord at Dakara, and why our High Council never spoke of the Vanir. The truth is simple. Ten thousand years of absolute moral restraint saved our souls, Dr. McKay, yet it cost us our species. The Vanir went too far and lost their humanity; the High Council refused to bend at all and chose the grave. By borrowing the reckless fire of a false god for a single season--and relying upon the predictable heroism of the Tau'ri to extinguish that fire when its work was done--I have found the narrow path between them. Take care of the Naglfar. Please do not allow Dr. Zelenka to remove the bass subwoofer under the pilot's chair; I rather grew to enjoy it. -- Lokor.

McKay stared at the screen for a long three seconds, his mouth opening and

closing as he searched for a suitably cutting scientific rebuttal.

"Well?" Sheppard asked, leaning over McKay's shoulder to read the message. "What do you say to that, Rodney?"

"I say," McKay huffed, snapping his tablet shut and tucking the blue Othala crystal carefully into his vest pocket, "that for a thirty-thousand-year-old genetic mastermind who just pulled off the most elaborate medical heist in two galaxies... his grammar in English is slightly pedantic, and I already called dibs on the subwoofer."

Sheppard clapped him on the shoulder, grinning as they walked down the seven golden steps together. "Come on, McKay. Let's take our new boat home."

McKay paused, glancing toward the docking bay indicator light. "Well... technically, the gold plating does improve upper-atmospheric thermal reflectivity by four percent. And the velvet seats are actually very ergonomic on the lower lumbar."

Sheppard, Teyla, and Ronon all turned and stared at him.

"Fine! Fine, we'll de-gold the Jumper!" McKay threw his hands up in exasperation as he headed for the bridge doors. "Though frankly, after saving the entire Pegasus galaxy from a three-foot pharaoh, I think a little complimentary frankincense in the cockpit is the least this expedition owes me."

Behind them, as First Recon walked off the bridge toward the hangar bay, a single overlooked ceiling sprinkler gave one last, victorious spritz over the cold golden braziers, and the Naglfar settled into a peaceful, silent orbit above the clouds.

EPILOGUE & CLASSIFIED EXPEDITION DOSSIER: After-Action Technical & Tactical B

Atlantis Expedition Archive — File Reference: SGC-ATL-449-LOKOR (EYES ONLY: O'NEILL / WOOLSEY / CARTER)

MEMORANDUM FOR: General Jonathan J. O'Neill, Homeworld Security; Colonel Samantha Carter, Hammond Program; International Oversight Advisory (IOA) Executive Committee.

FROM: Richard Woolsey, Expedition Commander, Atlantis (M35-117); Lt. Col. John Sheppard, Commanding Officer, First Reconnaissance Team; Dr. Rodney McKay, Chief Science Officer.

SUBJECT: Acquisition of Asgard Research Vessel Naglfar, Neutralization of Goa'uld Symbiote 'Sebek-Ra,' and Current Status of Rogue Asgard Geneticist 'Lokor.'

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF INCIDENT: On Stardate 2008.294, during a routine agricultural trade mission to the planet Veldara (M4X-882), First Reconnaissance Team (AR-1) encountered an unauthorized Asgard Valkyrie-variant science vessel (Naglfar) that had been heavily modified with Goa'uld naquadah power conduits and ceremonial gold plating. Initial tactical assessment indicated that the vessel's commander, an Asgard geneticist named Lokor, had been taken as an involuntary host by a surviving Milky Way Goa'uld underlord (Sebek-Ra) utilizing a prototype sarcophagus-derived cellular stabilization collar to overcome the classic Famrir-type Asgard host rejection syndrome.

2. TACTICAL THREAT ASSESSMENT: Over a forty-eight-hour period, the combined Lokor/Sebek-Ra entity demonstrated why the historical separation between Asgard technology and Goa'uld psychological ambition was vital to galactic survival. Operating without Asgard ethical constraints or treaties, the Naglfar single-handedly destroyed two Wraith Hive ships and crippled a third above the Vanir archive world of Niflheim-Secundus by utilizing unrestricted deep-penetration quantum scanners to beam active naquadah mines directly inside Wraith organic hulls, deploying Asgard time-dilation fields as orbital traps for over six hundred Wraith Darts, and synthesizing forty metric tons of elemental sodium via its matter converter to ignite the planet's ammonia cloud layer.

3. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE 'DOUBLE-HOST' DECEPTION: Following the successful

boarding of the Naglfar by AR-1 and the surgical extraction of the symbiote Sebek-Ra via the ship's medical stasis beam, forensic cryptographic analysis of the Naglfar's Primary Computer Core by Dr. Rodney McKay revealed a startling reversal of the standard Goa'uld host-parasite paradigm. Medical logs confirm that Commander Lokor--an exile from the Asgard High Council who opposed the collective termination on Orilla--deliberately lured Underlord Sebek-Ra's escape pod aboard the Naglfar following the Battle of Dakara. Prior to blending, Lokor performed an automated micro-surgical laser lobotomy on the symbiote's anterior ganglia, leaving its vocal ego, theatrical instincts, and kelno'reem regenerative glands intact while transferring his own conscious mind into an encrypted partition of the ship's computer core disguised as a 'weary diagnostic sub-mind.'

4. BIOLOGICAL OBJECTIVE & ESCAPE: For six months, Lokor utilized the Goa'uld symbiote's hormonal feedback loop and filtered Wraith telomerase enzymes to repair his degraded clone genome, allowing the Goa'uld's loud, theatrical persona to mask his true research from both the Wraith Hive fleet and Atlantis intelligence. During the climax of the engagement on the bridge, Lokor utilized a passive palm-scan of Lt. Col. Sheppard's Lantean ATA gene to stabilize a single, non-hybrid, pre-cloning ancestral Asgard body inside an auxiliary stealth pod, transferring his consciousness into the cured vessel at the exact microsecond AR-1 severed the naquadah collar and extracted the symbiote.

5. CURRENT ASSET DISPOSITION: The Goa'uld symbiote Sebek-Ra remains in zero-time cryogenic containment in the Atlantis high-security vault awaiting transfer to the Tok'ra council via the Daedalus. The Asgard vessel Naglfar remains in stationary orbit above Atlantis under the supervision of Dr. McKay and Dr. Radek Zelenka. Approximately fourteen metric tons of twenty-four-karat gold hull plating have been stripped from Puddle Jumper One and the Naglfar's bridge and placed in the expedition's trade reserve for off-world agricultural barter.

6. ADDENDUM BY LT. COL. JOHN SHEPPARD: For the record, if we ever run into Lokor again out there, he owes me a new paint job on Jumper One--though Magistrate Torren says the four hundred roasted pheasants Dr. McKay materialized for the Veldaran harvest festival were the best poultry in the sector. Also, please tell General O'Neill that we found a three-inch action figure of him bowing to a twelve-bicep Asgard in Xenobotanical Bay Four. I'm keeping it on my desk.

7. ADDENDUM BY DR. RODNEY MCKAY: I would like the official record to reflect that I deduced the encrypted consciousness partition in the computer core prior to the bridge extraction, and that the only reason Lokor escaped in the auxiliary pod was that Colonel Sheppard insisted on rushing to the bridge to save the entire Pegasus galaxy instead of giving me twenty undisturbed minutes with the optical stone matrix. Furthermore, the Asgard acoustic subwoofer installed beneath the pilot's seat of Jumper One has been reclassified as essential mission telemetry hardware and is not to be removed by Dr. Zelenka under any circumstances.