

STARGATE ATLANTIS * THE FALSE AESIR TRILOGY

THE LANTEAN GOD

Book III: An Ancient Host, An Asgard Mind, A Goa'uld Soul

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

PROLOGUE: The Cathedral in the Void

Ten Thousand Years Ago — The Intergalactic Void Between Pegasus and the Milky Way

Before the Lantean High Council voted to submerge the city of Atlantis and return through the Stargate to die among the primitives of Terra, Praetor Aurelius had stood alone in the starlight between galaxies and built a cathedral for a god who did not yet exist.

They had called the project Aethelgard.

Crafted in secret inside a gravitationally locked Lagrange pocket two million light-years from both Pegasus and the Milky Way, the Aethelgard was three kilometers of grown white Alteran crystal interlaced with golden neutronium ribs donated by a dissident delegation of early Asgard cosmologists who shared Aurelius's terror of the dark. It was larger than an Aurora-class battleship, faster than a city-ship, and armed with phase-shifted plasma lances that could crack the mantle of a planet.

Yet it was not the weapons of the Aethelgard that had caused Janus and the High Council of Atlantis to arrest Praetor Aurelius in the night, seal him inside a deep-crust cryo-pod, and bury him beneath six miles of ocean and basalt on M35-117.

It was the Celestial Conduit built into the ship's central spire.

Long before the Ori had ever built their first Prior staff or sent their crusading armadas across the stars, Aurelius had discovered the fundamental secret of the lower and higher planes: that human consciousness, when focused in synchronized devotion or terror across millions of minds, generates a measurable, harvestable current of sub-quantum zero-point energy. The Ancients who ascended naturally refused to touch that current, fearing it would corrupt their enlightenment into tyranny.

Aurelius had not been afraid of tyranny. He had designed the Celestial Conduit to link directly into a galaxy's Stargate network--turning every Stargate into a psychic resonator that would draw a microscopic fraction of synaptic bio-energy from every living human within a thousand kilometers and channel that ocean of living power straight into the pilot seated in the Aethelgard's neural throne.

For ten thousand years, the Aethelgard had drifted in zero-time stasis in the

dark between galaxies, waiting for its architect's mind to return.

To understand why the High Council of Atlantis had feared Praetor Aurelius above even the Wraith, one had to understand the secret schism that had nearly torn Alteran society apart millions of years earlier, when the Ancients and the Ori were still one people in a distant galaxy.

When the Ancients fled the Ori's religious fanaticism and came to the Milky Way --and later to Pegasus--they had sworn a sacred oath never to use their evolutionary gifts to harvest the minds of lesser beings. Yet during the final century of the Wraith siege in Pegasus, as one Lantean world after another fell to the Hive fleets, Aurelius had argued before the Council that non-interference was merely a polite word for suicide.

With the assistance of three exiled Asgard quantum-field theorists who had accompanied the early Vanir expedition to Pegasus, Aurelius had secretly laid the keel of the Aethelgard inside a cold-dark Lagrange fold between galaxies. He had grown its three-kilometer hull from living white Alteran quartz-crystal seeded with golden superconducting naquadah and Asgard neutronium, creating a vessel that could drink the ambient zero-point energy of vacuum while channeling the bio-psychic resonance of an entire planet's population into its central Sanctum.

The night before Aurelius intended to take the Aethelgard to Lantea and force-ascend himself into a physical warrior-god to annihilate the Wraith, Janus had betrayed him to the High Council. Rather than execute one of their own, the Council had wiped the Aethelgard's coordinates from the city database, placed Aurelius in deep-crust stasis six miles beneath the ocean of M35-117, and abandoned Pegasus to the dark.

For ten thousand years, that secret had remained buried under six miles of water and basalt--until a Goa'uld who had learned how to think like an Asgard came looking for a host.

And now, aboard the USS Daedalus as the Earth battlecruiser raced through intergalactic hyperspace toward the Milky Way, Praetor Aurelius sat in the VIP officer's quarters with a cup of Earth chamomile tea in his hands, smiling warmly across the desk at Dr. Rodney McKay--while behind his clear hazel eyes, Sebek-Ra counted down the minutes until the Daedalus crossed the Lagrange coordinates of the sleeping dreadnought.

CHAPTER ONE: The Saint Aboard the Daedalus

Wherein Praetor Aurelius charms the crew of Earth's battlecruiser, and Dr. McKay discovers a terrifying flaw in a ten-thousand-year-old equation.

Colonel Steven Caldwell had commanded the USS Daedalus through enough intergalactic crises to develop a healthy skepticism toward alien VIPs, ancient prophets, and anyone Dr. Rodney McKay vouched for. Yet by the third day of their high-speed transit from Atlantis toward the Milky Way border, even Caldwell had to admit that Praetor Aurelius of Lantea was the most pleasant passenger the Daedalus had ever carried.

The silver-haired Ancient didn't complain about the mess hall meatloaf. He didn't demand that the crew bow or address him by titles. During the afternoon watch, he had spent two hours in Main Engineering with Caldwell's chief Asgard-core technician, gently pointing out three harmonic bottlenecks in the ship's Hermiod-designed hyperdrive coupling that immediately increased their intergalactic cruising speed by eighteen percent.

"At this velocity, we'll cross the Midway intergalactic coordinate threshold in six hours and drop into Earth orbit by nineteen hundred tomorrow," Caldwell said on the bridge, watching the blue-white swirl of hyperspace outside the forward bay window before turning to Sheppard. "General O'Neill and SG-1 are already waiting at Cheyenne Mountain, and Colonel Carter has the Antarctic Defense Chair prepped for the Praetor's diagnostic upgrade."

Sheppard leaned against the rear tactical rail, his arms crossed over his flight jacket as he looked down at the main deck monitor, where Teyla and Ronon were currently giving Praetor Aurelius a tour of the F-302 fighter bay. "Yeah. Everybody loves him. When he walked through the mess hall twenty minutes ago, two airmen offered him their dessert pudding, and he blessed their hyperdrive wrenches in Latin."

"You still don't trust him," Caldwell observed quietly.

"Steve, in the last month I've been shot at by a three-foot grey alien in a clip-on gold beard who turned out to be a hologram, and a polite guy in a charcoal coat who dissolved into strawberry Jell-O before blowing up a two-kilometer battleship," Sheppard said dryly. "At this point, if my own mother walked through the Stargate carrying an apple pie, I'd make Jennifer Keller run an MRI on the

crust."

Down in Science Lab Two on Deck Three, Dr. Rodney McKay and Dr. Jennifer Keller were doing something very similar.

"Look, Rodney, I've run the Praetor's blood panel four times since we left Atlantis," Keller said patiently, leaning against the biobed while McKay paced back and forth in front of three holographic chalkboards covered in Lantean sub-quantum equations. "His white blood cell count is normal, his cervical spine has zero symbiote scarring, and his synaptic activity is a textbook eighty-eight-percent ascended Lantean curve. Why are you staring at his ZPM optimization formula like it just insulted your cat?"

"Because there is a footprint in the math, Jennifer!" McKay stopped pacing and jabbed his stylus at the sixth line of the sub-quantum phase stabilization formula Aurelius had written for the Atlantis ZPM two days earlier. "Do you know how many beings in the history of the universe can write sub-quantum zero-point tensor equations at this level? Less than a dozen! Janus, Merlin, Samantha Carter on a very good day with my notes, me obviously, and Praetor Aurelius!"

"Right," Keller said. "And Praetor Aurelius wrote that equation."

"Yes! Except look at the notation he used for the third-order neutrino damping constant right here at the bottom of the bracket!" McKay zoomed the holographic display in until a single, tiny subscript character filled the screen. "In standard Lantean mathematics, the Ancients always expressed neutrino phase-damping as a base-eight fractional harmonic! Always! For ten million years! Do you know who expresses neutrino phase-damping as a base-twelve logarithmic radix?!"

Keller frowned, stepping closer to the screen. "Who?"

"The Asgard!" McKay's voice dropped to a hoarse, terrified whisper. "Specifically, High Geneticist Lokor's base-twelve radix convention from the Naglfar's computer core--the exact same base-twelve notation that Sebek-Ra used when he critiqued my Fourier inversions during the siege of Atlantis!"

Keller's breath caught. "Wait... how could a ten-thousand-year-old Lantean who has been frozen in a deep-ocean cryo-pod since before the fall of Atlantis accidentally use a modern Milky Way Asgard mathematical shorthand in his calculus?!"

"He couldn't!" McKay's face went chalk-white as his mind raced backward to the Auxiliary Stasis Vault aboard the burning Sol Invictus. "Oh, my god. The cracked lens on the Asgard consciousness-transfer tripod! In the vault on the Sol Invictus, I scanned the cryo-pod's vacuum seal and assumed the transfer beam hadn't fired because the physical seal was unbroken! I forgot that an Asgard quantum-tunneling optical beam passes straight through transparent Lantean crystal without breaking a vacuum seal!"

"Are you saying--" Keller backed toward the wall intercom, her hand reaching for the emergency bridge alarm. "Rodney, are you saying Sebek-Ra didn't try to implant a physical symbiote into Aurelius?! He used the Asgard consciousness-transfer beam to download his own Goa'uld-Asgard mind electronically into the Ancient's brain before we even got to the vault?!"

"And then used the Ancient's telekinesis from inside the pod to crack the tripod lens so I'd think the machine failed!" McKay lunged for his radio headset. "Sheppard! Colonel Caldwell! Lock down the F-302 bay right now! Praetor Aurelius is--"

Earlier that afternoon aboard the Daedalus, before McKay noticed the base-twelve subscript in the ZPM equation, Praetor Aurelius had dined in the officers' wardroom with Colonel Caldwell, Sheppard, Teyla, and Ronon.

Watching the silver-haired Ancient eat a plate of military-issue beef stroganoff with genuine enthusiasm, Sheppard had tried three separate conversational traps to see if the old man would slip.

"So, Praetor," Sheppard had said casually, leaning back in his chair with his coffee mug, "when you were on the High Council with Janus and Moros ten thousand years ago... did you guys ever run into that grumpy Asgard scientist Lokor? Short grey guy, big head, kind of a ruthless streak?"

Across the table, Aurelius had paused with his fork halfway to his mouth, his warm hazel eyes reflecting a look of mild, grandfatherly sorrow.

"I knew of the Vanir expedition, Colonel Sheppard," Aurelius had replied softly, without missing a single beat. "In the final decades before my imprisonment, our long-range sensors occasionally detected their science vessels on the outer rim. Moros--whom your histories remember as Merlin--forbade us from sharing our zero-point matrices with them, fearing their desperation to cure their cloning malady

would lead them into darkness. Had we helped them openly, perhaps both our peoples would have been spared ten millennia of grief."

"And what about the Goa'uld back in the Milky Way?" Ronon had asked, watching Aurelius's hands as the Ancient broke a dinner roll. "You ever run into them before you left Earth?"

"When my people first seeded life in the Milky Way and built the Astria Porta--the Stargates--the creatures you call Goa'uld were still primitive aquatic predators swimming in the dark lakes of a single feral world," Aurelius had said with a gentle sigh. "To learn from Mr. Woolsey's briefings that such parasites later stole our stargates and posed as gods over the young human race of Terra... it fills me with shame for how carelessly we left our creations unguarded. That is why I wish to help Stargate Command secure Earth's defenses once and for all."

Sitting beside Sheppard, Teyla had inclined her head in quiet respect. "Your humility does you credit, Praetor. Many of your people whom we encountered previously found it difficult to admit that the Ancestors ever erred."

"Ten thousand years in a dark box at the bottom of the sea gives one ample time for self-reflection, Lady Teyla," Aurelius had said with a warm, self-deprecating twinkle in his hazel eyes--a twinkle that Sheppard had only realized two hours later was the exact, dry amusement of Sebek-Ra laughing in their faces while eating their beef stroganoff.

Meanwhile, down in Science Lab Two, as McKay stared in horror at the base-twelve Asgard radix subscript in the sixth line of Aurelius's ZPM formula, he pulled up the secondary biometric logs from the Daedalus's internal environmental sensors.

"Look at the power draw in the VIP quarters from last night!" McKay hissed to Dr. Keller, his fingers trembling on the keyboard. "While we were all asleep at zero-three-hundred hours, someone in the VIP quarters established a sub-quantum telepathic carrier link straight through the Daedalus's hull to the auxiliary Asgard computer core on Deck Four--without touching a single physical wire or door lock!"

"He used natural Ancient telekinesis and neural-interfacing through the walls while pretending to meditate," Keller whispered, her hand slapping the wall intercom button just as the lights died and the steel blast doors welded themselves shut.

Before returning to his VIP quarters on the second evening aboard the Daedalus,

Praetor Aurelius had spent an hour in the forward observation lounge with Teyla Emmagan, looking out at the hypnotic blue-white river of intergalactic hyperspace.

"Colonel Sheppard tells me your people, the Athosians, lived in the shadow of the Wraith for generations after my Council departed," Aurelius had said softly, his hands clasped behind his white High Council robes. "Tell me, Lady Teyla... in all those dark centuries when you prayed to the Ancestors for deliverance and no answer came, did you ever come to hate us?"

Teyla had considered the question with her usual quiet honesty. "We did not hate the Ancestors, Praetor. We believed that you had gone to a higher place, or that the war had simply been beyond even your strength to win. When Colonel Sheppard and Dr. McKay awakened the city, we learned that the Ancestors were neither flawless gods nor uncaring spirits--they were simply men and women who grew tired after a very long war."

Aurelius had turned his head to look at her, and for a fleeting moment an expression of profound, almost chilling intensity had crossed his noble features.

"A leader who grows tired of protecting his flock has no right to wear the crown of creation, Lady Teyla," he had murmured. "If a shepherd truly loves his sheep, he does not ascend into the clouds and leave the wolves in the pasture. He builds a wall of fire around the fold--even if the sheep fear the heat of the flames at first."

At the time, Teyla had thought it was merely the lingering guilt of an ancient defense minister who had watched his world fall. Only when the blast doors of the fighter bay slammed shut the next afternoon did she realize she had been listening to the manifesto of a Goa'uld who had conquered the mind of an Ancestor.

The laboratory lights didn't flicker. They simply turned off.

At the exact same instant, the heavy steel blast doors of Science Lab Two slid shut and welded their own magnetic locks together with a silent pulse of white-hot telekinetic heat.

CHAPTER TWO: The God in the White Robe

Wherein the mask drops in the fighter bay, and an eighty-eight-percent ascended mind demonstrates why bullets are obsolete.

Down in the Daedalus's F-302 hangar bay, Teyla and Ronon felt the change half a second before the ship's internal alarms even tried to sound.

Praetor Aurelius was standing beside the nose cone of an F-302 fighter-interceptor, listening politely as the deck crew chief explained the railgun ammunition feed.

Suddenly, Aurelius stopped smiling. He tilted his head slightly toward the ceiling, as if listening to McKay's frantic shout three decks above--and then let out a soft, genuinely regretful sigh.

"Ah," Aurelius said--and the gentle, archaic Lantean lilt vanished completely from his voice, replaced by the smooth, cultured, unmistakably Ba'al-like baritone of Sebek-Ra. "Dr. McKay finally noticed the base-twelve radix in my neutrino constant. I really must break myself of Lokor's notation habits; they are terribly untidy."

Ronon's particle magnum was out of its holster and firing on red-beam kill in less than a fifth of a second.

The searing bolt of crimson particle fire never touched the white Lantean robes.

Six inches in front of Aurelius's chest, the air itself crystallized into a shimmering, golden-white Lantean telekinetic lens--generated not by a mechanical hand-device, but by the raw, eighty-eight-percent ascended synaptic power of an Ancient Praetor's brain. The particle beam deflected harmlessly upward into the ceiling girders.

With a casual flick of his left wrist, Sebek-Ra sent a silent wave of telekinetic force across the hangar deck that swept Ronon, Teyla, and four armed deck crewmen off their feet and slammed them flat against the hull of the nearest F-302, holding them pinned in midair with the effortless strength of a hydraulic press.

Up on the bridge, Sheppard and Caldwell saw the internal security cameras in the hangar bay flare white.

"Security to the fighter bay!" Caldwell barked, hitting the general quarters klaxon as Sheppard yanked his P-90 off his shoulder and bolted for the stairwell--

only for the bridge turbolift doors to slide open right in front of them.

Nobody stepped out of the lift. Instead, the ship's central holographic projection table in the middle of the bridge lit up with a live image of Praetor Aurelius standing calmly in the Daedalus's auxiliary Asgard core room on Deck Four.

"Please do not trouble your Marines, Colonel Caldwell," Sebek-Ra said pleasantly, his hazel eyes glowing with a terrifying, incandescent ring of golden-white Lantean fire as he rested one hand casually atop the Daedalus's glowing Asgard computer core. "Lady Teyla and Mr. Dex are quite unharmed; I have merely tucked them into the cockpit of an F-302 with the canopy locked so they don't bruise themselves."

Sheppard leveled his P-90 at the hologram, his jaw clenched hard enough to crack a molar. "Sebek-Ra. I knew you were too slimy to burn up in that reactor."

"Come now, Colonel Sheppard, 'slimy' is strictly a biological descriptor for my previous aquatic form," Sebek-Ra chided gently, brushing an invisible speck of dust from the sleeve of his white High Council robe. "Have you any idea how liberating it is to be free of that parasite body at last? For ten thousand years, the Goa'uld were prisoners of their own flesh--forced to burrow into the necks of lesser creatures like ticks, terrified of Trinium syringes and Tok'ra poison. Thanks to High Geneticist Lokor's consciousness-transfer matrix and your own heroic rescue efforts aboard the Sol Invictus, I am no longer a worm wearing a man."

Sebek-Ra spread his hands, and a halo of pure, golden-white Lantean ascension energy rippled across his shoulders.

"I am Praetor Aurelius-Ra--a living Alteran elder on the threshold of ascension, carrying within one mind the complete engineering mastery of the Ancients, the thirty-thousand-year quantum science of the Asgard High Council, and the sovereign will of the System Lords!"

Behind Sheppard, McKay's voice crackled frantically through the bridge intercom from Science Lab Two, where he had bypassed the welded door comms using a diagnostic lead: "Colonel Caldwell, cut the main hyperdrive engines right now! He didn't boost our hyperdrive speed by eighteen percent to get us to Earth faster--he altered our intergalactic course vector to drop us out of hyperspace at a hidden Lagrange coordinate right here in the void!"

"Helm, emergency hyperspace abort!" Caldwell ordered.

"I can't, sir!" the helmsman yelled, his hands slapping dead controls. "His Ancient gene concentration is overriding the Asgard core's master lockout! The ship isn't responding to human biometrics anymore!"

Outside the forward bridge windows of the Daedalus, the swirling blue tunnel of intergalactic hyperspace collapsed in a blinding flash.

The Daedalus dropped into normal space inside a vast, pitch-black pocket between galaxies.

And hanging dead ahead of their bow--illuminated by the cold starlight of two distant galaxies--was a starship that made the Daedalus look like a tugboat beside a cathedral.

It was three kilometers long, sculpted from translucent white Alteran crystal and ribbed with towering spires of gleaming golden Asgard neutronium. Along its central spine sat a ring of twelve colossal Stargate-sized subspace resonators that began to spin to life the moment Sebek-Ra's mind touched the ship's dormant sensors.

Down in the Daedalus's F-302 fighter bay, while Ronon, Teyla, and the four deck crewmen hung pinned against the steel bulkhead by Sebek-Ra's invisible telekinetic wall, the man in the white High Council robes walked unhurriedly toward the open airlock leading to Deck Four.

Teyla strained against the crushing mental force holding her shoulders against the fighter's wing, her jaw clenched as she projected her own telepathic awareness outward to test the strength of the mind imprisoning them.

It was like touching the surface of a star.

When she had touched the Wraith Queen's mind on Veldara in Book I, she had felt ancient, predatory hunger. Here, inside the eighty-eight-percent active Alteran brain of Praetor Aurelius, she felt a terrifying, crystalline cathedral of pure intellect--ten thousand years of Lantean star-engineering and thirty millennia of Asgard quantum physics fused seamlessly around the cold, glittering diamond of Sebek-Ra's immortal ego.

"Do not strain your gift against my barrier, Lady Teyla," Sebek-Ra paused at the

airlock threshold, looking back over his shoulder with a genuine, almost affectionate smile as his hazel eyes shimmered with white-gold fire. "Your telepathic resilience is admirable--one of the finest legacy gifts my people's accidental genetic experiments ever left in Pegasus. In fact, once I have ascended in the Aethelgard's Sanctum above Earth, I intend to appoint you Viceroy of the Pegasus sector. Under my light, your people will never fear the Wraith or the dark again."

"My people would rather die free in the dark than live on their knees beneath a thief wearing a stolen face!" Teyla spat back against the telekinetic pressure.

Sebek-Ra chuckled softly. "Everyone says that before the miracles begin, my dear. Ask the Priors of the Ori how quickly skeptics become choirboys once the sky opens and heals their sick. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a schedule to keep--and I promised myself I wouldn't kill any of Colonel Sheppard's friends unless you force my hand."

With a gentle wave of his fingers, he floated Ronon, Teyla, and the unconscious deck crewmen smoothly through the air into the open two-seat cockpit and rear avionics bay of F-302 Fighter Four, lowered the polycarbonate canopy, and fused the external mechanical latch with a pinpoint flash of telekinetic heat before strolling down the corridor to the Asgard core room.

Two minutes later, when the Daedalus was yanked out of hyperspace in front of the three-kilometer crystalline dreadnought Aethelgard and Sebek-Ra beamed across the void into his waiting cathedral, the farewell pulse from his hand-link didn't just fuse the Daedalus's primary Asgard hyperdrive stabilizer coil--it also left a polite, single-line message scrolling in glowing golden Lantean script across every monitor on Caldwell's bridge:

THANK YOU FOR THE RIDE, COLONEL CALDWELL. PLEASE DO NOT FORGET TO VALIDATE YOUR PARKING.

In the Daedalus's auxiliary Asgard core room on Deck Four, right before Sebek-Ra beamed across the void into the waiting cathedral of the Aethelgard, Dr. Lindsey Novak had tried one last desperate override from her backup terminal in the adjoining alcove.

"I'm locking the Asgard transporter matrix with Hermiod's master diagnostic cipher!" Novak shouted into her headset to the bridge. "Even with the Ancient gene,

he shouldn't be able to beam through an active Asgard encryption lock without High Council authentication!"

Standing beside the glowing crystal core ten feet away, Sebek-Ra heard her through the open bulkhead grille and smiled.

Without even looking at a keyboard, he spoke a single, twelve-syllable vocal string in ancient, pre-cloning Asgardian--the personal root cipher of High Geneticist Lokor, who had sat on the original council that commissioned Hermiod's generation of shipboard AIs.

Instantly, Novak's console chirped politely and shut itself off.

"My apologies, Dr. Novak," Sebek-Ra called out pleasantly as the golden Lantean transport rings of the Aethelgard locked onto his coordinates from outside the hull. "Hermiod was a very diligent technician, I'm sure, but Lokor wrote the compiler for his operating system four thousand years before Hermiod was decanted. Do give my regards to Colonel Carter when you reach Earth--assuming Dr. McKay can figure out how to drive this ship without a stabilizer coil."

"Behold the Aethelgard, gentlemen," Sebek-Ra murmured softly as a white-gold Lantean transport beam enveloped him in the core room below. "Ten thousand years ago, the cowards of Atlantis buried me beneath the sea because I built a ship capable of turning the devotion of a galaxy into the power of a god. Now, I am taking her to Earth--where seven billion human minds are waiting to light my path to eternity. Do try to catch up."

With a flash of golden light, Sebek-Ra vanished from the Daedalus--and simultaneously, a farewell pulse from his crystal hand-link fused the Daedalus's primary Asgard hyperdrive stabilizer coil in a shower of sparks while the three-kilometer crystalline dreadnought outside opened an intergalactic hyperspace window the size of a city and vanished toward the Milky Way.

CHAPTER THREE: The McKay-Caldwell Hyperdrive Miracle

Wherein First Recon is freed from a fighter cockpit, and Dr. McKay has twelve minutes to rebuild an intergalactic engine with spare parts.

Three minutes after the Aethelgard jumped into intergalactic hyperspace toward Earth, the USS Daedalus hung dead in the dark void between galaxies with smoke

pouring from her main engineering bay.

Sheppard and two Marines pried open the jammed canopy of F-302 Fighter Four in the hangar bay, helping a furious Ronon and Teyla climb down from the cockpit, while down on Deck Three a damage-control team cut through the welded blast doors of Science Lab Two to release McKay and Dr. Keller.

When McKay sprinted into Main Engineering sixty seconds later, the room looked like a war zone. The central Asgard optical housing--where Sebek-Ra had rested his hand before beaming over to the Aethelgard--was cracked and glowing dull orange, and Colonel Caldwell was standing over the chief engineer's console with a grim expression.

"Give it to me straight, McKay," Caldwell said without preamble. "The Aethelgard just jumped on a direct vector for Earth. At the speed that dreadnought's Lantean-Asgard drive is moving, it will drop into high orbit over North America in three hours and forty minutes. How long until our hyperdrive is back online?"

McKay shoved two junior technicians out of the way, slapped his diagnostic tablet onto the smoking Asgard housing, and scrolled furiously through the damage log. "A standard repair of a fused Asgard intergalactic stabilizer coil? Eighteen hours in drydock!"

"We don't have eighteen hours, Rodney," Sheppard said, stepping up beside the core. "If Sebek-Ra parks a three-kilometer Ancient-Asgard dreadnought over Earth with Praetor Aurelius's pure Lantean gene in his blood, the Antarctic Defense Chair won't even fire at him--in fact, he'll be able to command the Antarctic Chair from orbit, lock out the SGC, and turn on that 'Celestial Conduit' thing you found in the database!"

"Wait--tell Colonel Caldwell what the Celestial Conduit actually does, Rodney," Teyla said gravely.

McKay swallowed hard, wiping soot from his glasses. "According to the restricted High Council quarantine file I just pulled out of the Daedalus's buffer--which Aurelius accidentally left cached when he accessed the core--the Celestial Conduit is an Alteran prototype of the same psychic-harvesting technology the Ori later used in their galaxy! Except the Ori needed years of Prior preaching and millions of willing worshippers chanting Hallowed are the Ori to trickle power across the planes!"

"And Aurelius's version?" Caldwell asked coldly.

"Aurelius designed the Aethelgard's twelve subspace rings to lock directly onto Earth's Stargate and the Milky Way gate network and induce a forced, involuntary alpha-wave harmonic across every human brain within planetary range!" McKay's hands shook as he pointed at the schematic. "He doesn't need Earth's population to willingly worship him! Once the Aethelgard links to the terrestrial power grid and the Stargate in Cheyenne Mountain, six point eight billion human minds on Earth will be locked into a continuous, hypnotic neural resonance loop--feeding their synaptic bio-energy straight into Sebek-Ra's eighty-eight-percent ascended brain until he crosses the ninety-nine-percent threshold and becomes a literal, physical Ori-level god with a three-kilometer warship!"

"And what happens to the six point eight billion people on Earth when he drains their synaptic energy?" Sheppard asked quietly.

"For the first twenty minutes, they'll just stand in the streets staring at the sky in a trance while whispering his name," McKay said bleakly. "At the thirty-minute mark, when the conduit hits full draw... cortical burnout. Every human brain on Earth goes dark at once."

Silence hung in the engineering bay for two seconds.

Then Sheppard looked at McKay. "You said eighteen hours for a standard repair. How fast can you do an insane, reckless, completely unapproved McKay repair if we give you the ZPM we brought from Atlantis and the spare Asgard stones I kept in my pack from the Naglfar?"

McKay blinked, looking down at the olive-drab pack Sheppard had just dumped onto the deck--inside which sat twelve pristine blue Asgard optical stones from the Naglfar's ultrasonic bath that they had brought along in Jumper One, right next to the Atlantis Zero Point Module resting in its portable transport cradle for the Antarctic upgrade.

Slowly, the panic in McKay's eyes gave way to the cold, manic focus that had saved Atlantis a dozen times.

"If I bypass the burned-out Asgard stabilizer coil entirely," McKay said, his words tumbling out at machine-gun speed as he grabbed a plasma wrench, "and wire the

Atlantis ZPM directly through the Naglfar's twelve navigation stones in an unbuffered Lantean-Asgard series bridge... we won't just match the Aethelgard's speed. We'll ride right down the slipstream of his own intergalactic hyperspace wake and drop out over Earth ten minutes behind him!"

In Main Engineering aboard the stranded Daedalus, the twelve minutes it took Dr. Rodney McKay to hot-wire the Atlantis Zero Point Module and the Naglfar's twelve Asgard navigation stones into the burned-out intergalactic hyperdrive housing went down in Stargate Command history as the loudest twelve minutes ever recorded in a vacuum.

"No, do NOT hand me a three-eighths metric spanner, Novak, do I look like I'm fixing a lawnmower?!" McKay bellowed from inside the smoking crystal housing, his legs sticking out onto the deck plates while Dr. Lindsey Novak, Colonel Caldwell, Sheppard, and Teyla stood around the open panel handing him optical fibers and Lantean crystal shunts. "I need the high-capacity trinium alligator clips and the jar of thermal-conductive silicone paste! If the phase-impedance between the ZPM and Stone Four varies by more than zero point zero two ohms when we hit intergalactic velocity, the subspace field will turn us inside out so fast our boots will arrive in Colorado twenty minutes before our feet!"

"Rodney, breathe," Sheppard said, holding the portable ZPM cradle steady with Ronon while McKay clamped two thick golden-sheathed cables from the Naglfar salvage kit directly onto the ZPM's top terminals.

"I am breathing! I am hyperventilating at a mathematically optimal rate to oxygenate my prefrontal cortex!" McKay scrambled out of the housing, his face streaked with grease and soot, and slammed the twelfth blue Asgard stone into the jury-rigged fiberglass collar wrapped around the ZPM.

Instantly, the ZPM flared to blinding white-orange life, and the twelve Asgard stones around its neck began to levitate half an inch off their sockets in a tight, humming magnetic ring.

Across the engineering bay, the Daedalus's main sublight and hyperdrive reactor gauges didn't just climb back to one hundred percent--the digital readouts passed 100%, hit 240%, and began flashing in frantic Asgard runic warning characters that even Novak had never seen before.

"Uh, Doctor McKay," Novak said, her voice hiccuping slightly as she stared at

the main power board, "the Asgard core says the hyperdrive field generator is currently operating at two hundred and sixty percent of maximum structural design tolerance, and the outer hull plating is already heating up to four hundred degrees Kelvin from ambient subspace bleed!"

"Which is well below the melting point of trinium-steel alloy!" McKay snapped, wiping his hands on a rag and pointing a dramatic finger toward the bridge intercom. "Colonel Caldwell! Tell your helmsman to lock onto the residual Cherenkov ion-trail of the Aethelgard's hyperspace window and punch it right now, before the silicone paste catches fire!"

Up on the bridge, Caldwell didn't hesitate a tenth of a second. "Helm--maximum intergalactic burn! Engage!"

Outside in the black void between galaxies, the USS Daedalus didn't open a normal blue hyperspace window. Powered by an unbuffered Lantean Zero Point Module running through twelve hot-wired Asgard stones, the battlecruiser tore open a roaring tunnel of blinding violet-white lightning and shot toward the Milky Way like a cannonball fired out of a star.

Once McKay's unbuffered ZPM-and-Asgard-stone jury-rig launched the USS Daedalus into the roaring violet-white slipstream of the Aethelgard's intergalactic hyperspace wake, the three-hour-and-twenty-six-minute sprint across the void between galaxies pushed the human battlecruiser to the absolute edge of structural survival.

Every twenty minutes, the ship's hull frames groaned like a submarine diving past crush depth as the turbulent subspace wake of Sebek-Ra's three-kilometer dreadnought buffeted their shields.

In Main Engineering, Ronon and Sheppard stood on either side of the portable Atlantis ZPM cradle, using twin liquid-nitrogen fire extinguishers to hose down the twelve levitating Asgard optical stones whenever the fiberglass collar began to smoke.

"More nitrogen on Stone Nine!" McKay yelled over the deafening whine of the hyperdrive coils, his eyes glued to his thermal camera. "Stone Nine is carrying the lateral vector calculation for the Milky Way entry coordinate! If Stone Nine cracks before we cross the galactic rim, half the ship will drop out of hyperspace over Colorado Springs and the other half will end up in orbit around Jupiter!"

Ronon squeezed the trigger of his nitrogen tank, coating the glowing blue crystal in a thick rime of white frost that hissed and steamed away in three seconds flat. "How much longer?"

"Fourteen minutes!" McKay shouted back, wiping sweat from his brow with a grease-stained sleeve. "And the really galling part is that Sebek-Ra isn't even straining his engines up ahead! That three-kilometer crystal monstrosity was built by Praetor Aurelius specifically to cross intergalactic distances at fifty times the speed of a standard Aurora battleship!"

"Which means the moment he drops into Earth orbit, he's going to go straight for the Cheyenne Mountain Stargate and the Antarctic Defense Chair before the SGC even knows what they're looking at," Sheppard said grimly, checking his watch. "Teyla, get on the long-range subspace buoy link--the second our nose crosses the Milky Way border and gets within relay range of the SGC, beam our entire diagnostic packet straight to Carter's computer!"

"And the catch?" Caldwell asked.

"The catch is that running an unbuffered ZPM into a Daedalus-class hyperdrive will turn the hull plates cherry-red, void every warranty the Asgard ever gave us, and if we stay in hyperspace for more than three hours and thirty-one minutes, the engines will melt through the floor!" McKay barked, already diving headfirst into the open crystal housing. "Everyone who doesn't have two doctorates, get out of my way and hand me the blue duct tape!"

CHAPTER FOUR: The Rendezvous at Cheyenne Mountain

Wherein the Daedalus rides a lightning bolt across the void, and First Recon teams up with SG-1 in the shadow of the apocalypse.

Three hours and twenty-six minutes later, the sky above Colorado Springs turned the color of hammered gold.

Inside the Stargate Command control room twenty-eight levels beneath Cheyenne Mountain, General Jack O'Neill stood beside Major General Hank Landry and Walter Harriman as every NORAD space-tracking monitor on the wall went haywire.

"Well," O'Neill said, squinting up at the main satellite feed showing a three-kilometer-long cathedral of white crystal and golden neutronium dropping out of

hyperspace two hundred miles above the North American continent, "that's either the world's biggest hood ornament, or Carter and McKay forgot to carry a two."

At the rear briefing room stairs stood SG-1: Colonel Cameron Mitchell, Colonel Samantha Carter, Dr. Daniel Jackson, Teal'c, and Vala Mal Doran--who had been assembled at the mountain two hours earlier to welcome the Atlantis delegation and the newly discovered 'benevolent Ancient.'

"General, it's not a diplomatic transport," Carter said, her fingers flying across the primary sensor station beside Walter as the colossal dreadnought in orbit raised a shimmering golden-white shield envelope that covered three hundred square miles of the thermosphere. "Look at the energy signature! That's a hybrid Lantean-Asgard warship drawing power from three internal ZPM-equivalent cores--and it's already locking a high-energy subspace carrier beam directly onto our Stargate here in the mountain!"

Down in the Gate Room below the control window, the Earth Stargate began to hum--not rotating its inner ring, but vibrating at a deep, resonant golden harmonic that made the concrete walls of the silo tremble and caused every unshielded light bulb in the facility to glow bright amber.

Simultaneously, on the briefing monitor, the USS Odyssey--Earth's sister battlecruiser, which had been conducting orbital drills near the Moon--dropped out of short-range jump fifty kilometers off the dreadnought's port bow and opened fire with all Asgard plasma beam weapons.

The brilliant blue Asgard plasma beams from the Odyssey--weapons that had once sliced Ori motherships in half--splashed harmlessly against the golden-white shield of the Aethelgard like rain against a brick wall.

"People of Terra," a warm, magnificent, impossibly charismatic baritone echoed simultaneously through every television, radio, cell phone, and military speaker on the planet Earth--accompanied by a gentle, hypnotic Lantean alpha-wave pulse that made half the technicians in the SGC control room freeze in their chairs with dreamy, vacant smiles. "Do not be afraid. Ten thousand years ago, your ancestors--my brothers and sisters of Atlantis--walked among you, and left you alone in the dark. Today, I, Praetor Aurelius-Ra, have returned to make you whole. Open your minds to the light of the Celestial Conduit... and let your burdens become my strength."

In the control room, Walter Harriman's eyes glazed over slightly as he

whispered, "Hallowed... no, wait, he seems really nice, General..."

"Snap out of it, Walter!" O'Neill barked, clapping a hand on the technician's shoulder while Teal'c, Mitchell, Carter, Daniel, and Vala shook off the initial wave of the psychic harmonic.

"It's an Ori-style Prior resonance wave amplified through the Stargate's subspace field!" Daniel Jackson shouted, adjusting his glasses as he stared at the ancient Alteran script scrolling across the telemetry monitor. "Except instead of using a Prior staff, he's using an Ancient planetary-scale neural broadcaster! Carter, if we don't damp the Stargate's harmonic resonance right now, everyone in North America is going to be brainwashed in ten minutes!"

"I'm trying to raise a damping field around the gate, but his Lantean command codes are overriding our SGC computers!" Carter yelled--just as a second, smaller hyperspace window tore open in high orbit right beside the Odyssey.

Out of the swirling blue vortex shot the USS Daedalus, her outer hull plates glowing dull cherry-red from McKay's unbuffered ZPM-Asgard hotwire job, trailing plumes of vented coolant gas as she skidded into formation beside the Odyssey.

Two seconds later, five columns of white Asgard transport light flared in the middle of the SGC control room.

Sheppard, McKay, Teyla, and Ronon materialized directly behind O'Neill and SG-1 --with McKay still holding a smoking soldering iron in one hand and a portable Lantean crystal array in the other.

"Don't anybody listen to the radio!" McKay screamed before the transport sparkles had even faded, sprinting straight to Carter's console and slamming his portable Lantean crystal into the SGC firewall slot to sever the Stargate's audio-harmonic link. "The nice Ancient guy in the white bathrobe is Sebek-Ra! He used an Asgard mind-transfer beam to hijack Praetor Aurelius's eighty-eight-percent ascended brain, stole a three-kilometer doomsday cathedral out of the intergalactic void, and in twenty-four minutes he's going to suck the brainwaves out of every human on Earth so he can ascend into a physical Ori-god!"

For two seconds, the SGC control room was dead silent.

General O'Neill looked slowly from McKay's smoking soldering iron to Sheppard.

When First Recon materialized in the middle of the Cheyenne Mountain control room and McKay slammed his Lantean bypass crystal into Carter's console to cut the Stargate's hypnotic audio-resonance link, the sudden silence in the underground bunker was deafening.

Around the control room, four SGC technicians blinked rapidly, shaking their heads and looking down at their keyboards in bewildered embarrassment as the lingering golden alpha-wave haze cleared from their prefrontal cortices.

"Sir," Walter Harriman said, rubbing his temples and looking up at General O'Neill and General Landry in horror, "for about ten seconds there, I was just about to enter the master iris override code and open the blast doors for him. It didn't even feel like a mind-control beam--it felt like... like my grandfather telling me everything was going to be okay."

"That's how the Ori Priors worked on whole planets in the Ori galaxy, General," Daniel Jackson said grimly, stepping down from the briefing stairs alongside Mitchell, Teal'c, and Vala to meet Sheppard's team. "Except the Ori had to send human Priors through the Stargate on foot to convert populations village by village because the Ancients' collective ascended shield blocked the Ori from acting directly in the Milky Way. Sebek-Ra isn't ascended yet--he's operating in the physical plane inside an eighty-eight-percent active Ancient body! The Ascended Ancients won't lift a finger to stop a biological Ancient using a physical ship!"

"Oh, wonderful, the cosmic non-interference bureaucrats have found another loophole to avoid doing their jobs," McKay muttered, already spreading his schematics of the Aethelgard across the main briefing table beside Carter. "Look at the satellite thermal scan over North America right now! Even with our Cheyenne Mountain Stargate isolated behind my Lantean firewall crystal, the Aethelgard's twelve dorsal collector rings are directly inducing a sympathetic electromagnetic harmonic across the North American and European high-voltage power grids!"

On the wall monitor, a real-time neurological satellite map of the Western Hemisphere showed pulsing golden rings spreading outward from major metropolitan power transformers--Denver, Chicago, New York, London, Paris--as the three-kilometer dreadnought in high orbit used the planet's own electrical infrastructure as a secondary antenna array.

"He's using the continental power grid as a giant tuning fork," Carter said, her

eyes wide as she calculated the exponential growth curve on her screen. "Right now, the terrestrial grid harmonic is only at twelve percent efficiency compared to the Stargate link--which gives us roughly twenty-two minutes before the alpha-wave resonance reaches the threshold where he starts drawing lethal synaptic current from six point eight billion human brains at once!"

"Can the Daedalus and the Odyssey hit him with Mark IX gate-buster warheads from orbit?" Colonel Mitchell asked, leaning over the table beside Sheppard.

"Colonel Caldwell and Colonel Emerson already fired two Mark IX warheads at his dorsal shield ninety seconds ago," Carter said grimly, pulling up the orbital combat feed. "Before the warheads could get within fifty kilometers of the Aethelgard, Sebek-Ra used an Asgard mass-transporter linked to his Lantean deep-space sensors to beam the naquadria cores right out of the missiles mid-flight and vent them harmlessly into the solar wind."

"Yeah, he did that to three Wraith Hive ships in Pegasus too," Sheppard said darkly. "You can't beat this guy from the outside with missiles or beam weapons. When you combine an Asgard transporter grid with an Ancient Control Chair and a guy who actually knows how to use both, any projectile you fire at him is just free spare parts."

"Then we don't shoot him from the outside," O'Neill said, looking around the table at the two flagship teams of Earth's Stargate program--SG-1 and AR-1--standing shoulder to shoulder. "We take that gadget Merlin left in the basement, we put it in Sheppard's little invisible flying brick, and we shove it right down his chimney. Carter, McKay--you have ten minutes to make Merlin's toy talk Asgard."

Back in the Cheyenne Mountain briefing room, right after First Recon materialized and McKay severed the Stargate's hypnotic audio link, General Jack O'Neill stood at the head of the table looking at the holographic projection of the three-kilometer white-and-gold dreadnought hovering over North America.

"Let me get this straight," O'Neill said, holding up three fingers one by one. "First, you guys find a Goa'uld inside a three-foot Asgard. Then it turns out the Asgard put the Goa'uld in his own neck on purpose and ran off in a tall body. Then the Goa'uld turns out to have faked being strawberry Jell-O, builds a nine-ship fleet, and falls into a reactor--except he actually downloaded his brain into a ten-thousand-year-old Ancient guy who we just invited to Earth on our own spaceship."

"That is an admirably concise summary, General," Richard Woolsey said from the video link speaker.

"Woolsey, I'm not complimenting your filing system!" O'Neill pinched the bridge of his nose, then looked at Colonel Cameron Mitchell and Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard. "Alright. So the bad guy has an Ancient body, an Asgard brain, and a Goa'uld personality, and he's sitting in a flying crystal cathedral two hundred miles above my fishing cabin. How do we kill him?"

"Well, sir," Mitchell said, glancing at Sheppard with a crooked grin, "normally SG-1's standard move here is to sneak aboard in a captured cargo ship, plant C-4 on the main power crystal, and beam out while Carter counts down from ten."

"Funny," Sheppard said, nodding appreciatively, "that's our standard move in Pegasus too, except we use a Puddle Jumper and Rodney complains the whole time about the C-4 placement."

"I complain because you people treat high explosives like Feng Shui!" McKay protested from the side screen where he and Carter were already pulling up the Area 51 vault inventory. "And C-4 won't even scratch the internal crystal matrix of the Aethelgard! That hull is grown from self-healing Alteran quartz reinforced with Asgard neutronium! If you detonate C-4 inside his throne room, the walls will literally absorb the kinetic energy and use it to charge his shields!"

"Which is why we don't use C-4," Samantha Carter said, turning around from the monitor with a gleaming schematic of Merlin's Phase-Shifted Sangraal Resonator. "We use the weapon Merlin designed specifically to destroy ascended Alteran energy--and we supercharge it with the Asgard consciousness-transfer stones Rodney brought from Pegasus!"

"Sheppard," O'Neill said flatly. "In your report yesterday, you told me the snake was dead and you were bringing me a nice old man who fixes ZPMs."

"Yeah, well, the snake got an upgrade, sir," Sheppard said, racking the bolt of his P-90 and nodding to Mitchell and Teal'c. "On the bright side, we brought the Atlantis ZPM, and Rodney says if he and Colonel Carter put their heads together for ten minutes without killing each other, we might actually have a way to crack his ship."

CHAPTER FIVE: Two Geniuses, Two Warriors, and a Thief

Wherein Carter and McKay co-engineer the impossible, Ronon and Teal'c compare weapons, and a joint strike team boards the Aethelgard.

Up in high orbit above the night side of Earth, the Daedalus and the Odyssey were fighting a desperate holding action against the three-kilometer crystalline dreadnought.

Every time the two human battlecruisers fired a concentrated volley of Asgard plasma beams and railgun rounds against the Aethelgard's golden shields, Sebek-Ra didn't even bother returning full-power lethal fire--because he wanted the Daedalus's and Odyssey's crews alive to add their synaptic energy to his ascension harvest. Instead, with a mere wave of his hand on the Aethelgard's bridge, he used precision Lantean-Asgard gravity beams to toss both seventy-thousand-ton battlecruisers sideways through low orbit like toy boats in a pond while the twelve colossal subspace rings along his ship's spine spun faster, drawing a shimmering aurora of golden bio-psychic light upward from the cities of Earth below.

Down in the SGC's main laboratory, Samantha Carter and Rodney McKay were standing on opposite sides of a worktable, their hands flying at blurring speed over a cylindrical silver-and-crystal device that Daniel Jackson had pulled out of the Area 51 vault twenty minutes earlier: Merlin's Phase-Shifted Sangraal Resonator Prototype.

"No, no, no, Sam, if you couple the Asgard phase-inverter in parallel with Merlin's ascension-nullifier matrix, the harmonic radius will only be four meters!" McKay barked, soldering an Asgard optical stone from the Naglfar directly onto the side of Merlin's Ancient crystal housing. "We need to invert the entire Celestial Conduit carrier wave across the ship's neural throne!"

"And if you wire it in series without a damping buffer, Rodney, the feedback pulse will detonate the ZPM inside the device the second you turn it on!" Carter shot back, her fingers deftly re-routing three Lantean fiber-optic leads while Daniel Jackson translated the microscopic Alteran safety runes etched around the core. "Look at Merlin's original notes that Daniel translated during the Ori war: the Sangraal works by cancelling out energy that exists at the harmonic frequency of ascended consciousness!"

"Wait," Daniel said, tapping the center crystal of the device. "Praetor Aurelius's brain isn't fully ascended yet--it's at eighty-eight percent synaptic

activation, and he's using the Celestial Conduit to pull him across the final twelve percent while Sebek-Ra's Goa'uld-Asgard consciousness drives the cortex!"

"Which means," Carter and McKay said in simultaneous, wide-eyed realization, "if we tune Merlin's resonator to eighty-eight-point-four percent Alteran synaptic frequency--and boost the carrier wave with an Asgard consciousness-transfer stone--"

--the moment Sebek-Ra tries to draw the ascension energy through the throne, the resonator will phase-invert the neural bridge inside his own cerebral cortex!" McKay finished breathlessly. "It won't just knock him out of the throne--it'll trigger a localized ascension-cancellation cascade that will vaporize the Ancient host body's synaptic field and overload the Aethelgard's central crystal spire!"

Across the room, near the weapons locker, Ronon Dex and Teal'c stood side by side in absolute silence, loading power packs.

Ronon glanced sideways at the massive Jaffa warrior's twin-barreled staff weapon and heavy kull-disruptor module. Teal'c glanced down at the Satedan's oversized red-steel particle magnum.

"Nice gun," Ronon said.

"Indeed," Teal'c replied, inclining his head once. "Your sidearm appears equally capable of decisive structural persuasion."

"Want to trade for five minutes after we board?"

"I would be honored, Ronon Dex."

Sheppard walked over with Colonel Cameron Mitchell and Vala Mal Doran, strapping on a phase-shielded tactical vest. "Alright, listen up! Colonel Caldwell just called down from the Daedalus. Because Sebek-Ra's shields are blocking all standard Asgard beaming into the Aethelgard, neither the Daedalus nor the Odyssey can beam a bomb or a team inside that dreadnought."

"Then how do we get Merlin's device onto his bridge?" Mitchell asked, checking his P-90.

"Look at how the Aethelgard's Celestial Conduit works," Teyla said, pointing at the orbital schematic on the wall monitor. "Every ninety seconds, the twelve

subspace rings on the dreadnought's spine open a micro-aperture in its outer shield directly along the carrier beam linking the ship to our Stargate here in Cheyenne Mountain, so it can draw the bio-psychic current up from the planet without shield attenuation!"

"And Puddle Jumper One--which is currently sitting in the Daedalus's hangar bay --still has the out-of-phase Asgard-Lantean VIP transponder signature from when we rode Sebek-Ra's hyperspace wake!" Sheppard grinned, exchanging a look with Mitchell. "Cam, you and I fly Jumper One right down the throat of that carrier-beam aperture at Mach Nine, slip inside the Aethelgard's central crystal atrium, and drop a combined AR-1 and SG-1 boarding party two hundred yards from his throne room!"

Vala Mal Doran rubbed her hands together, her eyes sparkling as she eyed the holographic schematic of Sebek-Ra's golden-ribbed dreadnought. "Did someone mention a throne room? Tell me, boys--does this new version of Sebek-Ra still keep twenty-four-karat gold ZPM housings around the palace, or has he gone completely minimalist?"

Down in the SGC's main engineering lab three minutes later, watching Samantha Carter and Rodney McKay work side by side on Merlin's Sangraal Resonator was like watching two concert pianists play a duet on a live landmine while arguing over the tempo.

"Hand me the optical fiber stripper--no, not the green one, Sam, the green one strips the micron cladding off Lantean quartz leads!" McKay snapped, holding a magnifying loupe to his eye as he spliced the Naglfar's blue Asgard consciousness-transfer crystal into the center of Merlin's rotating golden rings.

"I used the green stripper to rebuild three different Goa'uld naquadah generators and an Ori control chair, Rodney, I think I know how much thumb pressure to apply!" Carter shot back without looking up, her soldering laser moving with surgical precision across the sub-quantum phase bridge. "Besides, if you don't cross-couple the Asgard rune Ansuz with Merlin's third-dimension phase shift, the resonator is just going to shift Sebek-Ra's Chair into pocket-subspace where we can't shoot him!"

"I already inverted the Ansuz gate on the secondary bus, look at the schematic on my tablet!" McKay shoved the screen in front of her nose, then paused, blinking. "Oh. Wait. You're routing the third-dimension bleed back into the primary Sangraal emitter so the phase-pocket collapses inward on his synaptic frequency instead of

outward. That's... actually very elegant. I was going to do that in the next step."

"Of course you were, Rodney," Carter said with a faint, fond smile as she sealed the crystal housing and locked the activation primers.

Across the lab, while Daniel Jackson and Teyla practiced synchronizing their mental focus for the two-second telepathic disruption pulse they would need on the bridge, Vala Mal Doran strolled over to inspect Sheppard's P-90 and Ronon's leather coat.

"So," Vala said brightly to Teyla and Sheppard, "you're the famous Atlantis team! I have to say, from the stories Daniel and Sam told me, I expected more seaweed and fewer leather coats. Although--" She eyed Ronon up and down with appreciative approval. "--the tall, brooding look with the giant red gun is working very well. Does he talk much, or is he like Teal'c where you have to guess which eyebrow twitch means 'duck'?"

"I talk plenty," Ronon said, snapping a fresh power cell into his magnum.

"Indeed," Teal'c added from beside him. "He is practically garrulous."

Sheppard grinned, checking his watch as the lab's red alert lights flashed. "Alright, time's up! Caldwell says the Daedalus and the Odyssey are in position fifty kilometers off the Aethelgard's dorsal spine. Let's get up to the hangar bay and go crash a cathedral!"

When the nine members of the joint strike team--Sheppard, Mitchell, Carter, McKay, Daniel Jackson, Teyla, Ronon, Teal'c, and Vala--beamed up from Cheyenne Mountain directly into the starboard hangar bay of the USS Daedalus, Puddle Jumper One was already sitting on the launch rails with its drive pods extended.

Colonel Mitchell walked around the nose of the Lantean craft, running a hand over a faint patch of residual twenty-four-karat gold shimmer near the forward sensor array that Zelenka's sandblasters hadn't quite been able to buff out of the trinium grain.

"Wait a second," Mitchell said, squinting at the faint outline on the nose cone. "Sheppard... did somebody weld a giant gold snake onto the front of your spaceship at some point?"

"We don't talk about the cobra hood, Cam," Sheppard said firmly, ushering everyone up the rear ramp. "And nobody touch the bass knob under the pilot's seat unless we need to impersonate a System Lord."

Inside the cabin, Teal'c ducked his head slightly to clear the Lantean bulkhead frame, taking a seat on the starboard bench across from Ronon while Vala squeezed in between Daniel and a visibly claustrophobic McKay.

"Cozy!" Vala declared cheerfully, patting the silver case containing Merlin's modified Sangraal resonator on McKay's knees. "It's just like the time we hijacked that Lucian Alliance cargo hauler on P3X-447, Daniel, except it smells faintly of frankincense and pickled fish!"

"The fish was three weeks ago on another ship, and the frankincense is embedded in the ventilation filters!" McKay snapped, clutching the resonator case tighter as the hangar bay doors slid open ahead of them to reveal the burning golden sky above Earth.

"Touch anything that isn't nailed down until after we save the planet, Vala," Daniel warned, picking up the armed Merlin-Asgard resonator case, "and I'm leaving you on Atlantis with McKay."

"Cruel and unusual punishment," Valastage-whispered as Carter locked the final crystal into the resonator. "It's ready! Beam us up to the Daedalus!"

CHAPTER SIX: Riding the Golden Lightning

Wherein Colonels Sheppard and Mitchell argue over cockpit ergonomics at Mach Nine, and Jumper One threads the eye of a cosmic needle.

Inside the cockpit of Puddle Jumper One in the Daedalus's starboard hangar bay, Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard sat in the pilot's seat, while Colonel Cameron Mitchell sat in the co-pilot's chair, squinting suspiciously at the dashboard.

"I'm just saying, Sheppard," Mitchell said as the hangar bay depressurized and the bay doors parted to reveal the blinding golden-white bulk of the three-kilometer Aethelgard filling half the sky above North America, "for a ten-thousand-year-old spaceship, there's a distinct lack of actual throttle levers in here. How do you know when you're at full burn if there isn't a stick to push forward?"

"You think 'full burn,' Cam, the ship reads your mind through the Ancient gene," Sheppard said, powering up the drive pods as the Asgard bass subwoofer under his seat gave a low, reassuring rumble. "Just don't think about ejection seats or your high school prom while your hand is on the auxiliary console, or you'll accidentally dump our drone bay into the Pacific Ocean."

In the crowded rear compartment behind them, McKay, Carter, Daniel Jackson, Teyla, Ronon, Teal'c, and Vala were strapped into the side benches--forming the single highest concentration of firepower, doctorates, and intergalactic property damage ever packed into a twenty-foot aluminum-trinium tube.

"Twenty seconds until the Aethelgard's twelfth subspace ring opens its shield aperture to draw the next harmonic pulse from the Cheyenne Mountain gate!" Carter called out, reading the live telemetry synchronized between her tablet and McKay's. "And John--remember, the aperture window is only eleven meters wide and stays open for zero point eight seconds!"

"Eleven meters wide for less than a second while flying through an active psychic lightning bolt," McKay whimpered, clutching the silver case containing Merlin's modified Sangraal resonator to his chest. "Why do I ever leave my lab?! I have a very nice lab! It has an espresso machine!"

"Daedalus and Odyssey are moving into close-range flanking positions to draw his point-defense turrets!" Colonel Caldwell's voice crackled over the comm as both Earth battlecruisers surged forward on full sublight thrusters, unleashing every railgun battery and Asgard plasma beam they had against the Aethelgard's dorsal spire to mask the cloaked Jumper's approach.

"Aperture opening in five... four... three..." Carter counted down.

Ahead of Jumper One, the twelfth colossal golden ring on the spine of the dreadnought flared like the eye of a hurricane, parting the outer golden shield membrane for a fraction of a second as a beam of shimmering amber bio-psychic energy surged upward from the cloud cover of Earth below.

"Hold onto your hats!" Sheppard mental-throttled the Jumper's modified sublight drives to one hundred and forty percent.

Cloaked and riding straight up the edge of the golden carrier beam like a surfboard on a tidal wave, Puddle Jumper One shot through the eleven-meter shield

gap with eighteen inches of clearance on either side of its tucked drive pods, rocketed straight through the open crystal induction tunnel of the Aethelgard's dorsal spine, and skidded to a fiery, spark-showering halt across the polished white Alteran crystal floor of the Grand Central Atrium.

As Puddle Jumper One shot out of the Daedalus's starboard hangar bay into the blinding chaos of high Earth orbit, the view through the forward windshield was enough to take even veteran pilots' breath away.

Two hundred miles below them, the night side of North America sparkled with the spiderweb lights of athousand cities--and rising from every major power grid across the continent were shimmering, ghostly curtains of golden bio-psychic aurora that converged upward into the twelve colossal collector rings along the spine of the three-kilometer Aethelgard.

Flanking the massive white-and-gold dreadnought, the USS Daedalus and the USS Odyssey looked like two steel terriers snapping at the heels of a leviathan. Blue Asgard plasma beams and white-hot streams of depleted-uranium railgun fire lanced continuously from both Earth battlecruisers, lighting up the dreadnought's outer golden shield dome in giant ripples of Cherenkov fire.

"Watch the gravitational shear off Ring Nine!" Mitchell barked from the co-pilot's seat as Sheppard banked the cloaked Jumper hard between two thirty-meter golden plasma bolts fired by the Aethelgard's automated point-defense spires. "He's using localized gravity lenses around the collector rings to bend our battlecruisers' plasma beams back into space! If we clip the edge of one of those gravity eddies at Mach Nine, it'll shear our drive pods right off the hull!"

"Then we don't clip the edge--we ride right down the center of the main psychic carrier beam where the gravity field is neutral!" Sheppard said, his hands resting lightly on the Lantean control crystals as he lined the Jumper's nose up with the twelfth dorsal collector ring.

In the rear compartment, McKay stared at the structural stress readout on his tablet as the Jumper entered the outer halo of the golden carrier beam. "Uh, Sheppard? You realize that carrier beam is composed of raw, synchronized human alpha-waves amplified by three ZPM-equivalents of subspace energy, right?! While we fly through the aperture for zero point eight seconds, every single one of us is going to hear the amplified subconscious thoughts of six billion people on Earth at the exact same time!"

"Keep your eyes on the target, everyone!" Teyla called out, bracing her hands on the overhead grab-bar beside Daniel and Teal'c. "Do not let the voices in the beam distract your focus!"

"Aperture opening--NOW!" Carter shouted.

As Jumper One streaked straight through the eleven-meter eye of the golden hurricane at Mach Nine, a deafening, breathtaking roar of six billion human voices--laughing, praying, singing, crying, dreaming across the entire planet Earth--echoed through their minds for eight-tenths of a second like the sound of the ocean inside a shell, before the Jumper burst through the inner crystal induction tunnel and slammed onto the polished white floor of the Grand Central Atrium!

Outside the Daedalus's hangar bay, Colonel Steven Caldwell and Colonel Paul Emerson aboard the Odyssey were executing the most dangerous close-range capital-ship maneuver in USAF history.

To force the Aethelgard's automated point-defense spires to track away from Dorsal Ring Twelve where Jumper One needed to enter, both human battlecruisers dropped their altitude to one hundred and eighty miles and charged straight across the dreadnought's upper bow at point-blank range.

"All railgun batteries, continuous fire on Spires Eight through Eleven!" Caldwell ordered on the bridge of the Daedalus as a sweeping golden gravity beam from the Aethelgard caught the Odyssey's port nacelle and spun the sister ship forty degrees off axis. "Asgard beam weapons--aim directly for the base of Ring Eleven to create a plasma glare screen across their optical sensors!"

Four searing bolts of blue Asgard plasma from the Daedalus and Odyssey converged simultaneously on the golden neutronium rim of Ring Eleven.

The resulting flare of violet-gold Cherenkov radiation blinded the Aethelgard's dorsal optical sensors for three critical seconds--just long enough for Sheppard and Mitchell to dive the cloaked Puddle Jumper straight down the throat of Ring Twelve's eleven-meter aperture at Mach Nine!

Inside the Jumper, as the rear landing skids slammed onto the white crystal floor of the Grand Central Atrium and plowed through two internal security obelisks in a shower of sparks, Ronon kicked the rear hatch release before the craft had even

stopped sliding.

"Not bad," Mitchell said, unbuckling his harness and racking his P-90 as he looked out the cracked windshield at the soaring, cathedral-like interior of the dreadnought. "Little heavy on the rudder at the end, though."

"That wasn't the rudder, that was two of his internal security obelisks we just bowled over," Sheppard grinned, popping the rear hatch.

CHAPTER SEVEN: The Hall of the Ascended Throne

Wherein Ronon and Teal'c test their traded weapons on golden constructs, and Vala finds a shiny distraction.

The Grand Central Atrium of the Aethelgard looked like the love child of the Vatican, the Atlantis control tower, and Odin's palace on Asgard.

Vaulted arches of translucent white Alteran crystal rose two hundred feet overhead, veined with pulsing rivers of golden zero-point energy that flowed from the twelve spinal collector rings straight toward a massive, elevated sanctum at the forward prow of the ship.

And waiting for them between the Jumper's rear ramp and the sanctum doors stood twenty Aurelian Praetorians--not the clumsy robotic jackal-constructs of Veldara, nor the human Outcast mercenaries of the Sol Invictus, but sleek, seven-foot-tall crystalline-and-gold biomechanical sentries that Praetor Aurelius had originally designed ten millennia ago, now animated by Sebek-Ra's hybrid Asgard-Lantean AI core.

Each Praetorian carried a phase-shifted Lantean energy lance and wore a personal golden kinetic shield.

"They're phase-shifting their shield frequencies every half-second so neither bullets nor standard stunners can lock on!" Carter shouted, dropping behind a white crystal pillar beside Sheppard and Mitchell as a barrage of golden-white lances vaporized the top of the pillar into glowing dust.

Ronon and Teal'c stepped out on the left flank together.

True to their word in the SGC locker room, Ronon was holding Teal'c's twin-

barreled Jaffa staff cannon, and Teal'c was holding Ronon's oversized Satedan particle magnum.

"Simultaneous impact overrides phase-cycling," Teal'c observed calmly over the roar of energy fire.

"On three," Ronon said. "One. Two. Three."

Without waiting for two, both warriors opened fire at the exact same microsecond --crossing the high-density plasma bolts of the Jaffa staff cannon with the concentrated crimson particle beam of the Satedan magnum directly onto the chest plates of the lead Praetorians.

The combined plasma-particle harmonic overloaded the Praetorians' phase-shields instantly, blowing the front four crystalline sentries into showers of golden shards while Teyla, Sheppard, and Mitchell poured concentrated armor-piercing fire through the gap in their shield timing.

"Go! Get the resonator to the Sanctum doors while we hold the atrium!" Mitchell yelled to Daniel, Carter, McKay, and Sheppard, tossing a fresh magazine to Teyla as he, Ronon, Teal'c, and Teyla formed a four-person wall of fire across the grand staircase.

Wait--where's Vala?!" Daniel shouted, looking around as he, Carter, McKay, and Sheppard sprinted up the wide white-crystal stairs toward the Sanctum.

Forty feet to their right, inside an open auxiliary power alcove flanking the Sanctum entrance, Vala Mal Doran was using a hairpin and a stolen Asgard circuit-spanner to pry open a gleaming, solid-gold Lantean ZPM housing conduit.

"Vala! Stop trying to steal the ship's batteries, we're trying to save six billion people!" Daniel yelled.

When the rear hatch of Jumper One dropped open inside the Grand Central Atrium and the twenty seven-foot-tall crystalline Aurelian Praetorians opened fire with their phase-shifted energy lances, the firefight echoed through the two-hundred-foot vaulted crystal halls like thunder.

Beside the Jumper's right drive pod, Colonel Cameron Mitchell and Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard popped up from behind a shattered crystal obelisk in

alternating rhythm, laying down blistering three-round bursts from their P-90s whenever Ronon and Teal'c's combined staff-and-magnum blasts overloaded the Praetorians' personal phase-shields.

"You know," Mitchell yelled over the whine of ricocheting energy lances as he slapped a fresh fifty-round magazine into his P-90, "for a guy who spent four years in another galaxy, your fire-and-maneuver timing isn't half bad, Sheppard!"

"I was just going to say the same thing about you, Cam!" Sheppard yelled back, triggering a single Ancient drone from the Jumper's auxiliary launcher via mental command that corkscrewed across the atrium and blew three Praetorians off the upper balcony railing. "Although back in Pegasus, our bad guys usually try to eat us with their hands instead of shooting golden lasers out of crystal statues!"

"Trust me, after two years of fighting Ori Priors and Sodan warriors, crystal statues are a nice change of pace!" Mitchell grinned, waving Sheppard, Carter, McKay, Daniel, and Vala forward up the grand white-crystal staircase while he, Teyla, Ronon, and Teal'c locked down the lower atrium against the second wave of sentries.

Halfway up the stairs, as Vala yanked the fist-sized golden-blue Lantean bypass crystal out of the auxiliary alcove and shorted out the Sanctum's outer force field, McKay caught the hot crystal in both hands, juggling it like a baked potato.

"Ow! Hot! That crystal was carrying forty thousand amperes of subspace current, woman, you could have warned me before you threw it!" McKay yelled, shoving the glowing crystal into the side receptor of Merlin's Sangraal resonator case while Carter locked the phase collar into place.

"Stop whining, Rodney, the doors are open and the universe is ending in four minutes!" Carter said, drawing her sidearm as Sheppard kicked the towering double-doors of the forward Sanctum wide open.

The battle across the two-hundred-foot vaulted Grand Central Atrium of the Aethelgard showcased the difference between a standard military unit and the nine veterans who had saved two galaxies more times than the IOA cared to count.

When the second wave of twelve seven-foot crystalline Aurelian Praetorians marched down the upper gallery ramps and locked their golden kinetic shields into a solid phalanx wall, Teal'c and Ronon didn't waste ammunition firing at the front of

the phalanx.

Instead, Teyla sprinted three steps up the side crystal balustrade, launched herself into a high, spinning Athosian aerial vault right over the top of the seven-foot shield wall, and landed squarely behind the center Praetorian--sweeping its legs with her Banto rods and disrupting the harmonic link between the adjacent shields!

In that half-second gap, Colonel Mitchell and Colonel Sheppard slid across the polished crystal floor on their knees side by side, firing twin bursts from their P-90s and captured Lantean stun-carbines straight through the open seam, while Ronon and Teal'c's crossed particle-and-staff beams blew the remaining Praetorian phalanx apart from flank to flank.

"We have the atrium!" Teal'c's deep voice boomed across the vaulted hall as he and Ronon planted their boots at the foot of the grand staircase and turned their heavy weapons outward toward the side corridors. "Proceed to the Sanctum! None shall pass this threshold!"

"You heard the man!" Mitchell barked, Reloading on the run as he bounded up the white crystal steps behind Sheppard, Carter, McKay, Daniel, and Vala.

"I'm not stealing it for the gold, darling, look at what this conduit is wired to!" Vala called back triumphantly, yanking a fist-sized, glowing golden-blue Lantean control crystal out of the wall socket and tossing it straight to McKay as the Sanctum's outer force field flickered and died! "That was the auxiliary shield generator for the throne room doors! Honestly, Daniel, after all our years together, you still don't recognize tactical larceny when you see it!"

"Okay, I like her," Sheppard said, kicking the unshielded crystal double-doors of the Sanctum wide open.

CHAPTER EIGHT: The Temptation of the Lantean God

Wherein Sebek-Ra commands the Chair of Eternity, and Colonel Sheppard's Ancient gene meets its master.

Inside the forward Sanctum of the Aethelgard, there was no ceiling--only a transparent dome of pure force looking out over the curving blue-and-white horizon of planet Earth two hundred miles below, and the twelve rivers of golden bio-psychic

light pouring into the center of the room.

In the center of the Sanctum sat an Ancient Control Chair--crafted of gleaming white crystal and gold, surrounded by a floating halo of thirty-six Asgard optical stones that rotated in silent, hypnotic orbit around the headrest.

Seated in the Chair was Praetor Aurelius--Sebek-Ra.

His eyes were wide open, blazing like twin white-gold stars as the first tendrils of the Celestial Conduit's harvested neural energy from Earth below flowed through the Chair's armrests into his temples. Across the Sanctum's main display, a Lantean synaptic counter was climbing steadily: 91.2%... 91.8%... 92.4%...

Sheppard, Daniel, Carter, McKay, and Vala burst into the chamber--and before Sheppard could squeeze the trigger of his P-90, Sebek-Ra didn't even turn his head.

He simply thought a single command through the Chair.

Every metallic weapon in their hands--Sheppard's P-90, Carter's carbine, Daniel's 9mm, and Vala's pistol--was wrenched out of their grips by a localized gravitational pinch and flung against the outer dome wall.

Worse, when Sheppard tried to step forward and use his own strong Lantean ATA gene to send a mental override command to the Chair's auxiliary floor crystals--a trick that had worked on every Ancient device he had ever touched--nothing happened.

Sebek-Ra slowly turned his head in the Chair and looked at Sheppard with a warm, almost pitying smile.

"A valiant effort, John," Sebek-Ra said, his voice resonating both in the air of the Sanctum and directly inside their own minds with the gentle, irresistible weight of an eighty-eight-percent ascended elder. "You have a remarkably strong expression of the Alteran gene--for a tenth-generation human descendant. Roughly zero point zero six percent synaptic parity with the original builders. I am wearing the body and brain of the High Councilor who wrote the genetic lock on this Chair. Trying to override my mind in an Ancient ship is like a candle trying to outshine a supernova."

"You don't have to do this!" Daniel Jackson stepped forward, holding his empty hands out as he spoke directly to the hybrid consciousness in the Chair while behind

his back, McKay and Carter knelt quietly behind the lower stone pedestal, frantically slotting Vala's stolen bypass crystal into Merlin's Sangraal resonator. "Listen to me! You have Praetor Aurelius's memories in your head, and you have Lokor's thirty thousand years of Asgard wisdom! You know what happened to the Ori! When you drain the free will and synaptic energy of billions of mortal beings to force yourself across the threshold of ascension, you don't become enlightened--you become a slave to an endless hunger!"

Sebek-Ra tilted his silver-haired head, considering Daniel with genuine intellectual appreciation.

"You must be Dr. Daniel Jackson," Sebek-Ra said softly. "Lokor's files--and the SGC database I read over coffee--spoke very highly of you. The man who ascended twice and chose to return to mortality out of compassion. Tell me, Dr. Jackson: when you walked among the Ascended Ancients on the higher plane, what did they do when Anubis slaughtered millions? Nothing. What did they do when the Wraith culled the Pegasus galaxy for ten millennia? Nothing. What did they do when the Asgard--their oldest allies--died of genetic decay? Nothing."

Sebek-Ra rose slowly from the Chair, floating six inches above the white crystal floor inside a column of golden-white ascension fire as the synaptic counter behind him ticked past 94.8%.

"The Ancients were cowards who hid behind 'non-interference' so they wouldn't have to bear the burden of ruling!" Sebek-Ra's voice filled the dome like a choir of golden trumpets--not mechanical speakers this time, but pure psychic resonance that made their knees buckle. "And the Ori were fanatics who burned worlds for prayers! I shall be neither! Once Earth's six billion minds lift me across the ninety-ninth threshold in three minutes, I will retain this physical vessel AND the infinite power of the higher plane! I will heal every disease, extinguish every war, and guide both galaxies with a benevolent, unbreakable hand!"

Inside the forward Sanctum, when Sebek-Ra wrenched their metallic weapons out of their hands with a single thought through the Ancient Control Chair and rose floating into the column of golden-white ascension fire, the sheer majesty and terror of what he had become held the room spellbound.

He was no longer merely a Goa'uld hiding in a stolen body. He was what Anubis had tried and failed to become for a thousand years: a unified, living synthesis of the three greatest powers in the known universe, standing at 95.4% synaptic

activation while the blue-and-white curve of Earth rotated silently beneath the transparent floor dome.

"Look at the planet below us, Dr. McKay, Colonel Carter," Sebek-Ra said, his voice warm, musical, and completely free of anger as he gestured downward toward the glowing golden grid of North America and Europe. "Two brilliant scientists who have spent their lives trying to patch together broken toys left behind by dead races. Think of what you could build if I shared the full, uncorrupted Lantean-Asgard archive with you! No more energy shortages. No more climate collapse. No more watching your friends age and die in the dark."

Behind the lower stone pedestal, where Carter and McKay were using their own bodies to block Sebek-Ra's line of sight as they armed the final trigger on Merlin's resonator, McKay swallowed hard.

"You know, the really infuriating thing," McKay whispered through clenched teeth as his fingers armed the Sangraal phase-inverter, "is that his math on the zero-point planetary grid coupling is actually flawless. If he weren't about to fry six point eight billion cerebral cortices in ninety seconds, I'd ask him to co-author a paper."

"Focus, Rodney, we need two seconds of shield drop around that Chair!" Carter whispered back, her eyes darting toward the Sanctum doors just as Teyla, Ronon, Teal'c, and Mitchell charged in from the atrium.

Inside the forward Sanctum, as Sebek-Ra floated six inches above the white-and-gold Control Chair inside a blinding pillar of golden ascension energy and the synaptic counter ticked past 95.8%, the twelve rivers of light pouring down from the ceiling dome began to weave themselves into a visible, glowing lattice around Praetor Aurelius's temples.

"Do you feel it, Dr. Jackson?" Sebek-Ra whispered, his voice echoing with the awe of a mind touching the infinite as he looked out over the curve of Earth below. "Six billion minds! Every hope, every fear, every spark of genius across an entire world--flowing through the Astria Porta into this Sanctum! In ninety seconds, when the lattice reaches ninety-nine percent saturation, the artificial wall the Ancients built between the physical universe and the higher plane will shatter around my throne!"

"And six billion innocent people will die in the dark so you can sit on a shiny

chair!" Daniel shouted back, deliberately stepping two paces to the left to draw Sebek-Ra's gaze away from the lower stone pedestal.

Behind that pedestal, Samantha Carter and Rodney McKay's fingers worked with frantic, silent precision.

"The Vala crystal is seated--Asgard stone Othala is locked in series--phase-inverter capacitor is at ninety-eight percent!" McKay breathed, sweat dripping onto his glasses as the metal casing of Merlin's Sangraal resonator began to vibrate with a high, singing harmonic hum. "Sam, the moment I bridge this final lead, the resonator's field is going to go live! We only get one discharge cycle before the crystal melts!"

"Bridging it now!" Carter locked the final Lantean jumper-lead into place--just as Teyla, Ronon, Teal'c, and Mitchell burst through the Sanctum doors behind them.

"By lobotomizing six point eight billion people on Earth to pay for your ticket?!" Sheppard shouted, fighting against the crushing psychic weight in the air as he took a step forward.

"A regrettable one-time metabolic cost, Colonel," Sebek-Ra said gently, raising his glowing right hand toward Sheppard's forehead. "Like breaking the shell of an egg so the eagle may fly. Take comfort, John--your mind, and the minds of SG-1 and First Recon, will live on forever inside my ascended memory."

CHAPTER NINE: The Sangraal Inversion

Wherein two galaxies of heroes strike as one, and an Ancient god learns the price of having three brains in one head.

Behind the lower stone pedestal, Carter and McKay's hands moved as one.

"The Aethelgard's inner shield around the Chair is blocking the resonator's direct wave!" Carter whispered frantically as the synaptic counter behind Sebek-Ra ticked past 96.5%, and down on the planet Earth below, six billion people froze in the streets as the golden aurora reached the stratosphere. "We can't get the Sangraal pulse into his neural stream unless someone physically touches the outer ring of Asgard stones orbiting his Chair with the resonator's emitter lead while his personal telekinetic shield is distracted!"

THE LANTEAN GOD

"If anyone touches that ring of stones while ninety-six percent of an ascension current is flowing through it, the voltage backwash will throw them across the room!" McKay hissed.

At the Sanctum doors behind them, Teyla, Ronon, Teal'c, and Mitchell burst in, having shattered the last of the crystalline Praetorians in the atrium.

Teyla took one look at the golden-white psychic aura surrounding Sebek-Ra--and realized in a single flash of intuition what kind of mental shield he was projecting.

"His telekinetic barrier is woven through the Lantean telepathic band--the same sub-quantum frequency the Wraith Queens derived their hive-link from ten thousand years ago!" Teyla called out, her eyes locking with Daniel Jackson's across the floor. "Dr. Jackson--you have held the consciousness of Merlin and the Ascended in your mind! If you and I project a synchronized telepathic spike directly against his mental focus for two seconds--"

"--it'll create a two-second blind spot in his telekinetic shield!" Daniel finished instantly, closing his eyes and pressing two fingers to his temple as Teyla did the same.

Together--the archaeologist who had walked the higher planes of the Milky Way and the Athosian leader who had mastered the telepathic dark of Pegasus--projected a single, blazing lance of pure human willpower straight into the eighty-eight-percent Lantean synaptic field surrounding Sebek-Ra.

Floating above the Chair, Sebek-Ra gasped, his glowing white-gold eyes widening in shock as two mortal minds momentarily jammed the harmonic frequency of his telekinetic barrier.

For two seconds, the shimmering golden shield around the Chair flickered open.

"NOW!" Carter and McKay yelled together, hurling the armed Merlin-Asgard Sangraal Resonator across the polished floor straight into Sheppard's and Mitchell's hands.

Sheppard caught the heavy silver-and-crystal cylinder in mid-stride, with Mitchell right on his left shoulder while Ronon and Teal'c laid down a suppressing crossfire of plasma and particle bolts that forced Sebek-Ra to raise his right arm

in defense.

"INSOLENT MORTALS!" Sebek-Ra roared--for the first time losing his cool, civilized mask as a flash of raw Goa'uld fury broke through his Lantean voice, sending a telekinetic shockwave that hurled Mitchell and Vala backward across the tiles.

Sheppard didn't stop. Driven by a booster push from Ronon's massive hand against his back, Sheppard vaulted straight through the ring of golden light and slammed the emitter tip of Merlin's modified Sangraal Resonator directly into the master Asgard stone orbiting the headrest of the Ancient Chair!

"Activate!" McKay hit the remote trigger on his tablet.

The Merlin-Asgard Resonator did not explode.

It sang--a single, pure, crystalline chord that existed simultaneously in normal space, in Asgard subspace, and across the threshold of the higher planes.

Instantly, the golden ascension current pouring into Praetor Aurelius's brain from the twelve Celestial Conduit rings inverted its phase by one hundred and eighty degrees.

Instead of lifting Sebek-Ra's consciousness across the threshold of ascension, the Sangraal harmonic locked onto the eighty-eight-percent active Alteran synaptic energy in his cerebral cortex and cancelled the neural bridge binding the Goa'uld-Asgard mind to the Ancient brain!

When Daniel Jackson and Teyla Emmagan locked eyes across the Sanctum floor and projected their synchronized telepathic spike straight into Sebek-Ra's eighty-eight-percent Lantean mental barrier, the clash of wills on the sub-quantum plane was blinding.

For ten thousand years, the Lantean Control Chair had been designed to respond to a single, harmonious mind.

By hurling two vastly different, fiercely mortal human consciousnesses--Daniel's memories of the Milky Way's higher planes and Merlin's sacrifice, fused with Teyla's fierce Athosian spirit and her mastery of the Pegasus telepathic network--directly into the Chair's neural feedback loop, they created a harmonic dissonance that

Sebek-Ra's stolen brain could not filter out.

You are not an Ancestor! Teyla's voice rang through the telepathic void like a silver blade.

And you are not a god! Daniel's mind struck right beside hers, driving a wedge of pure mortal defiance straight through the golden aura surrounding the Chair.

Sebek-Ra's head snapped back, a cry of genuine shock tearing from his throat as the shimmering golden telekinetic barrier around the Chair fractured for two precious seconds.

On the floor, Ronon Dex and Teal'c stepped forward shoulder to shoulder--firing the Jaffa staff cannon and the Satedan particle magnum in a continuous, roaring stream of crossed energy that pinned Sebek-Ra's right arm back against the headrest --while Colonel Mitchell took the brunt of the residual telekinetic shockwave on his phase-shielded vest to clear the lane for Sheppard.

And then Sheppard launched himself off Ronon's boosted hand, flying straight through the golden halo to drive the tip of Merlin's Sangraal Resonator dead center into the master Asgard stone above the Chair!

When Daniel and Teyla's synchronized telepathic lance cracked Sebek-Ra's mental barrier for two seconds and Sheppard caught the armed Sangraal Resonator in mid-stride, the last fifteen feet to the Ancient Control Chair felt like running uphill through liquid lead.

Even disrupted, the ambient gravitational and psychic pressure radiating from the ninety-seven-percent ascended Chair was immense. Every step Sheppard took toward the dais tore sparks from the floor tiles beneath his combat boots; to his left, when Sebek-Ra lashed out with a panicked backhand wave of telekinetic force that threw Mitchell and Vala across the room, the edge of the shockwave clipped Sheppard's left shoulder and spun him half-around.

He would have fallen three feet short of the orbiting ring of Asgard stones--had Ronon Dex and Teal'c not charged straight into the blinding golden glare right behind him.

Bracing their massive shoulders together against the telekinetic hurricane like two titans holding up a falling sky, Teal'c and Ronon caught Sheppard by the back of

his tactical vest and physically launched the Colonel forward through the final four feet of golden fire!

Sheppard's outstretched hands slammed the silver-and-crystal emitter tip of the Merlin-Asgard Sangraal Resonator dead center against the master Othala control stone orbiting the Chair's headrest.

"EAT MATH, SNAKE!" McKay screamed from behind the pedestal, and slammed his palm down on the remote activation rune.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!" Sebek-Ra's voice split into three overlapping harmonics--the noble Latin tenor of Praetor Aurelius, the cold runic baritone of Lokor's stolen archive, and the shrieking, ancient hiss of the Goa'uld symbiote--as blinding beams of pure white Sangraal light erupted from his eyes, his mouth, and his fingertips!

"The Ancient host body is undergoing total synaptic sublimation!" Carter shouted, shielding her eyes as the entire three-kilometer crystalline structure of the Aethelgard began to shatter from the inside out under the feedback of the inverted Celestial Conduit. "The ship's ZPM cores are cascading! Daedalus, Odyssey, beam us out NOW!"

CHAPTER TEN: The Ash of the Ancient (And the Coin on the Locker)

Wherein a three-kilometer cathedral turns to stardust over Earth, two teams share blue Jell-O, and a ghost leaves a tip.

In the final three seconds aboard the bridge of the dying Aethelgard, as the white-hot columns of Asgard transport beams from the Daedalus and the Odyssey locked onto the nine members of AR-1 and SG-1, Sheppard looked back through the blinding glare at the Ancient Control Chair.

Engulfed in the searing, pure-white fire of Merlin's Sangraal harmonic, the physical body of Praetor Aurelius of Lantea was dissolving into incandescent particles of golden-white light--his eighty-eight-percent ascended Lantean physiology literally sublimating into pure, non-corporeal energy that dispersed harmlessly into the vacuum as the Sangraal wave neutralized the ascension matrix.

Not a single cell, bone, or atom of the Ancient host body remained.

Then the white transport beam snatched Sheppard, McKay, Teyla, Ronon, Mitchell,

Carter, Daniel, Teal'c, and Vala off the shattering crystal deck.

They rematerialized on the bridge of the USS Daedalus right beside Colonel Caldwell--just as the Daedalus and the Odyssey fired full reverse thrusters to pull clear of the blast radius.

Outside the forward bridge viewport, two hundred miles above the night side of Earth, the three-kilometer crystalline dreadnought Aethelgard collapsed inward upon its twelve subspace rings and vanished in a silent, breathtaking corona of golden-white starlight that lit up the sky from New York to Tokyo like a second dawn.

Down on the surface of Earth, the hypnotic alpha-wave carrier beam broke instantly. Across six continents, billions of people blinked, shook their heads as if waking from a brief, pleasant daydream, and went back to their evening commutes without any memory of the voice that had spoken in their minds.

Four hours later, in the main commissary on Level 27 of Cheyenne Mountain, a very long, very loud celebration dinner was underway.

At the center table, General Jack O'Neill sat between Richard Woolsey, Colonel Sheppard, and Colonel Mitchell, surrounded by bowls of blue Jell-O, roasted turkey, and three celebratory cakes while Ronon and Teal'c quietly arm-wrestled to a forty-minute draw at the end of the table (eventually cracking the laminated tabletop in half to mutual satisfaction).

"I have to admit, Rodney," Samantha Carter said, clinking her coffee mug against McKay's across the table while Daniel Jackson and Teyla discussed Athosian and Ancient dialects beside them, "splicing an Asgard consciousness-transfer stone into Merlin's phase-modulator to invert an eighty-eight-percent synaptic field in eleven minutes was... actually pretty impressive work."

McKay puffed his chest out, beaming. "Pretty impressive? Sam, please, it was a tour de force of improvisational cross-galactic physics! Although I will concede your parallel capacitance lead kept the ZPM from blowing my fingers off. Mostly."

"Wait a second," Vala Mal Doran said, leaning her elbows on the table and looking around at the group with narrowed eyes. "Am I the only one who noticed that right before your lovely white transport beam yanked us off that exploding ship, the thirty-six Asgard optical stones floating around his Chair flashed green for half a second?"

McKay waved a hand dismissively, taking a spoonful of blue Jell-O. "That was just the Aethelgard's automated Asgard damage-control computer dumping its diagnostic buffer before the crystal spire shattered, Vala. We watched Praetor Aurelius's entire physical body vaporize into sub-atomic photons inside the Sangraal field! There wasn't even a tooth left!"

"And without a physical body, or an Ancient brain to hold that much data, an unascended consciousness dissipates into background electromagnetic noise in less than a second," Carter agreed, nodding reassuringly to O'Neill and Woolsey. "I checked the Daedalus and Odyssey sensor logs myself. The Ancient body was completely destroyed, the Aethelgard is space dust, and zero escape pods launched before detonation. Sebek-Ra is gone for good."

"Good," O'Neill said, raising his plastic spoon in a toast. "Because I am officially retired from guys with hyphens in their names. To Atlantis, and to SG-1."

Twenty minutes later, after the commissary began to clear out, Sheppard and McKay walked down the quiet corridor of Level 24 toward the SGC visiting-officers' locker room to grab their flight bags before beaming back up to the Daedalus for the trip home to Pegasus.

"You know," McKay said as they turned into the empty locker bay, "I actually feel a little bad for the real Praetor Aurelius. The guy builds a giant spaceship ten thousand years ago, gets locked in a box at the bottom of the ocean by his coworkers, and gets his brain hijacked before he even gets to see a movie."

"Yeah, well, at least it's finally over, Rodney," Sheppard said, reaching for the handle of his metal visitor locker.

Sheppard stopped.

He didn't open the locker.

"Rodney," Sheppard said very quietly.

"What? Did you forget your combination again? Because I told you, using 0-0-0-1 is statistically--"

"Rodney, shut up and look at the bench in front of my locker."

McKay stopped talking and stepped around the row of lockers.

Sitting neatly in the center of the wooden bench in front of Sheppard's locker--inside a locked military facility twenty-four levels underground--was a single, freshly materialized crystal brandy snifter filled with two fingers of amber Lantean brandy.

Resting beside the glass was a gleaming, twenty-four-karat gold coin stamped with a winking Eye of Horus surrounded by Asgard runes.

And propped against the glass was a yellow SGC post-it note written in impeccable, flowing calligraphy.

Sheppard picked up the note with two fingers and read it aloud:

"My dear Colonel Sheppard and Dr. McKay -- A truly magnificent game over North America today. Integrating Merlin's Sangraal harmonic with Lokor's optical stone was inspired; it completely incinerated Praetor Aurelius's Lantean body and stripped away eighty-seven percent of my stolen Ancient and Asgard memory matrices before the spire collapsed. Fortunately, in the final zero point zero four seconds before my mind evaporated, the Aethelgard's emergency Asgard medical transporter found a small, unshielded terrestrial telecommunications relay linked to the Cheyenne Mountain power grid--and downloaded what remained of my baseline human-compatible consciousness into a very charming, recently concussed gentleman in a Denver hospital who happened to be undergoing a cranial CAT scan during the aurora. I no longer have an Ancient body, nor a three-kilometer dreadnought, and I confess I have forgotten most of Lokor's base-twelve calculus. Still... Earth is a fascinating planet. I believe I shall run for Senate, or perhaps start a software company. Do enjoy the brandy, and keep my seat warm in Atlantis. Same time next century? -- Yours affectionately, S."

For ten full seconds, neither Sheppard nor McKay made a sound.

McKay slowly pulled his tablet out of his vest, checked the Cheyenne Mountain power-grid telemetry log from four hours earlier--and saw a single, 0.04-second anomalous data spike that had traveled down the NORAD fiber-optic trunk line toward Denver right at the moment the Aethelgard exploded.

"He downloaded his mind into a guy getting a CAT scan in Denver," McKay

whispered, his voice cracking.

Sheppard stared down at the twenty-four-karat gold coin in his palm, then looked at the glass of Lantean brandy sitting on the bench.

Slowly, Sheppard let out a long, tired breath, picked up the gold coin, and flipped it into his pocket.

"Rodney?" Sheppard said.

Back in the Cheyenne Mountain commissary during the victory celebration four hours later, after Ronon and Teal'c accidentally cracked the laminated mess table in half during the fortieth minute of their arm-wrestling match, General Jack O'Neill leaned back in his chair with a bowl of blue Jell-O and watched the two teams.

At one end of the table, Colonel Cameron Mitchell and Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard were using salt shakers and olive pits to diagram the Mach-Nine Puddle Jumper dive through the eleven-meter shield ring, arguing good-naturedly over whether Mitchell's weight in the co-pilot seat had thrown off the lateral trim.

In the middle, Dr. Daniel Jackson, Teyla Emmagan, and Richard Woolsey were discussing the diplomatic implications for both galaxies now that Atlantis possessed two intact Aurora-class battleship hulls and the complete Asgard-Lantean defensive database that McKay and Carter had backed up from the Daedalus's buffer before the battle.

And at the far end, Samantha Carter and Rodney McKay were already arguing over whether the device that killed the Lantean God should be officially logged in the SGC archive as the Carter-McKay-Merlin Phase Resonator or the McKay-Carter-Merlin Phase Resonator.

"Alphabetical order is the only objective scientific standard, Rodney," Carter pointed out calmly, taking a sip of her coffee.

"Alphabetical order is a tyranny invented by people whose last names start with A through L!" McKay protested, waving his spoon. "In terms of chronological contribution to the base-twelve Asgard radix discovery that exposed Sebek-Ra in the first place, 'McKay' clearly belongs in the primary citation position!"

"How about we call it the 'Thing That Blew Up The Giant Shiny Ship' and you both

eat your cake?" O'Neill suggested from the head of the table.

Nobody at that table--not O'Neill, not Carter, not even McKay--could have guessed what was waiting for Sheppard and McKay twenty minutes later on the wooden bench in front of Locker 14 on Level 24.

And when Sheppard stood in that quiet locker room holding the freshly materialized twenty-four-karat gold Eye of Horus coin and reading Sebek-Ra's polite sticky note from Denver, he couldn't help thinking that somewhere out there under the Colorado stars, a newly discharged hospital patient with a very sharp suit and a sudden craving for Lantean brandy was already looking up the real estate listings in Washington, D.C.

In the quiet visiting-officers' locker room on Level 24 of Cheyenne Mountain, after Sheppard read Sebek-Ra's polite sticky note aloud and pocketed the twenty-four-karat gold Eye of Horus coin, McKay stood staring at the freshly materialized glass of amber Lantean brandy sitting on the wooden bench.

"Wait a second," McKay said slowly, raising his handheld scanner and running a spectrographic sweep over the crystal snifter. "If Sebek-Ra's consciousness was stripped of eighty-seven percent of its Ancient and Asgard memory matrices before the emergency medical beam routed his baseline human mind down the NORAD fiber-optic trunk to Denver... how did he materialize a glass of Lantean brandy and a gold coin inside a locked room on Level 24 four hours after the ship blew up?!"

Sheppard picked up the yellow post-it note again and turned it over.

On the back of the sticky note, written in much smaller ink, was a postscript:

"P.S. for Dr. McKay -- Before you give yourself an ulcer trying to figure out how I beamed a glass of brandy into Cheyenne Mountain without a spaceship: I didn't. I materialized the brandy, the coin, and this note inside Locker 14 on a four-hour time-delay buffer two seconds before the Aethelgard exploded, because I knew to a 99.8% statistical certainty that Colonel Sheppard would open his locker at 22:15 hours, and I couldn't resist the dramatic timing. Old habits die hard. -- S."

McKay let out a long, shuddering breath and slumped down onto the wooden bench beside the brandy glass.

"Okay," McKay said weakly. "That's actually kind of impressive. Still evil! Very

evil! But statistically impressive."

Sheppard looked at the glass of ten-thousand-year-old Lantean brandy, picked it up, sniffed it once, and handed it to McKay.

"Drink the brandy, Rodney," Sheppard said, slinging his flight bag over his shoulder as he headed for the corridor door. "The Daedalus leaves for Atlantis in twenty minutes, and if we're lucky, the next guy who tries to conquer Pegasus won't know how to do calculus."

"What?" McKay squeaked.

"Let's go back to the Pegasus galaxy where it's safe, and let General O'Neill deal with Denver."

EPILOGUE & CLASSIFIED SGC / ATLANTIS JOINT DOSSIER: After-Action Technical &

Homeworld Security / SGC Archive — File Reference: SGC-HW-999-OMEGA (EYES ONLY: PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES / O'NEILL / WOOLSEY)

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President of the United States; General Jonathan J. O'Neill, Commander, Homeworld Security; Major General Henry Landry, SGC; Richard Woolsey, Atlantis Expedition.

FROM: Colonel Samantha Carter, USAF; Dr. Rodney McKay, CSO Atlantis; Lt. Col. John Sheppard, USMC/USAF; Colonel Cameron Mitchell, SG-1; Dr. Daniel Jackson.

SUBJECT: Neutralization of the Lantean-Asgard Dreadnought Aethelgard in Earth Orbit, Sublimation of the Ancient Host Body of 'Praetor Aurelius,' and Ongoing Domestic Search for Residual Consciousness Imprint 'Sebek-Ra.'

1. SUMMARY OF THE 'TROJAN ANCESTOR' INFILTRATION: Forensic review of the events aboard the USS Daedalus confirms that the entity Sebek-Ra successfully utilized a quantum-tunneling Asgard optical consciousness-transfer beam aboard the Sol Invictus (see Report SGC-ATL-512) to overwrite the cerebral cortex of the sleeping Lantean High Councilor Praetor Aurelius without breaking the physical vacuum seal of his cryogenic stasis pod or introducing biological Goa'uld tissue into the host. Possessing an eighty-eight-percent ascended Alteran brain, natural telekinesis, the purest recorded ATA gene in two galaxies, and the combined scientific archives of both Atlantis and the Asgard High Council, 'Aurelius-Ra' represented the single

highest-tier existential threat encountered by Stargate Command to date.

2. THE AETHELGARD & THE CELESTIAL CONDUIT: Utilizing altered hyperdrive coordinates during transit aboard the Daedalus, Sebek-Ra rendezvoused in the intergalactic void with the Aethelgard--a three-kilometer Lantean-Asgard prototype dreadnought constructed ten millennia ago around a psychic-harvesting array known as the Celestial Conduit. Functioning on the same sub-quantum bio-energy principles later exploited by the Ori, the Celestial Conduit locked onto the Earth Stargate at Cheyenne Mountain to induce an involuntary planetary alpha-wave resonance across 6.8 billion human minds, intending to force-ascend Sebek-Ra while causing mass cortical burnout across the terrestrial population.

3. JOINT SG-1 / AR-1 BOARDING ACTION & SANGRAAL INVERSION: Following an emergency unbuffered ZPM hyperdrive modification executed by Dr. Rodney McKay aboard the Daedalus, a joint strike team comprising SG-1 (Mitchell, Carter, Jackson, Teal'c, Vala Mal Doran) and AR-1 (Sheppard, McKay, Teyla Emmagan, Ronon Dex) penetrated the Aethelgard's shield aperture in Puddle Jumper One. Utilizing a synchronized telepathic disruption pulse generated by Dr. Jackson and Teyla Emmagan, Lt. Col. Sheppard connected a modified Merlin Sangraal Phase-Resonator (co-engineered by Col. Carter and Dr. McKay) directly to the dreadnought's neural throne. The resulting phase-inversion completely sublimated and destroyed the physical Ancient body of Praetor Aurelius and triggered a total structural collapse of the Aethelgard in the upper mesosphere.

4. UNRESOLVED ANOMALY (THE DENVER CAT-SCAN SPIKE): While 100% of Praetor Aurelius's Lantean biological tissue and 87% of the entity's stolen Ancient/Asgard memory matrices were destroyed in the Sangraal cascade, post-incident inspection of the SGC visiting officers' locker room recovered a materialized Lantean brandy glass, a gold medallion, and a handwritten note indicating that a compressed, human-scale fragment of Sebek-Ra's consciousness routed itself through a NORAD fiber-optic ground line into a hospital MRI/CAT-scan terminal in the greater Denver metropolitan area 0.04 seconds prior to ship destruction. NID and Homeworld Security teams are currently auditing all hospital discharges in Colorado from the date of the aurora. Until located, Colonel Sheppard's recommendation that we check the back of every suspiciously charming software billionaire's neck--and their math notation--remains standing SGC policy.