

STARGÅTE

SG·1™



VALHALLA

Tim Waggoner

Based on the hit television series developed by
Brad Wright and Jonathan Glassner

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SG · 1™

Valhalla

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STARGÅTE

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MGM TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT INC. Presents
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in

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To Christine:

Thanks for stepping through the gate with me.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

We loop in the purple twilight,
~~We spin in the silvery dawn,~~
With a trail of smoke behind us,
To show where our comrades have gone.
So stand to your glasses steady,
This world is a world full of lies.
Here's a toast to those dead already,
And hurrah for the next man who dies.
— “Stand to Your Glasses Steady,”
Air Force drinking song

Historian's note: This novel takes place toward the end of Season 7.

CHAPTER ONE

Now

The giant warrior strode down a barren, rocky hillside and into the valley, the impact of his massive boots causing the ground to tremble, as if the world itself was terrified of the monstrous creature that walked upon its face. The inhuman warrior was impossibly muscled and stood at least twenty feet tall. His skin tinted a deep crimson, flames where hair and beard should be, and eyes that glowed like red-hot coals. The giant was garbed in a mail vest over a simple tunic, with leggings and leather boots. He carried a sword wreathed in blazing fire, and flames trailed behind the blade as the warrior slashed the air before him. Space rippled and distorted around the giant swordsman, but Major Samantha Carter knew this effect wasn't due to the heat.

"Just once, I'd like to fight something that has the common decency to use a simple gun," O'Neill murmured. "Even a ray gun; I'm not picky."

"We fight guys who shoot ray guns all the time," Sam pointed out. "In fact, I can't think of a time in recent memory when we haven't —"

"Carter," O'Neill interrupted. "Let's focus on the Not-So-Jolly Red Giant heading our way, alright? I promise to let you talk at me some more later. Who knows? I might even listen."

Sam gave O'Neill a look that said, *You're not as funny as you think you are*, but O'Neill ignored it, just like he always did.

O'Neill and Sam crouched behind a rocky outcrop, alongside Teal'c. The outcropping lay at the north end of the valley, situated at the base of another hill, this one far larger than that which the giant had just descended, though it couldn't properly be called a mountain. *More like a mountainette*, Sam thought. The outcropping provided little in the way of cover and even less in terms of defense, but right now it was all the three warriors had.

Many more such stones covered the valley floor, gray boulders of varying shapes and sizes, and the giant stepped around — or in some cases over — all of them with ease. The boulders shimmered as the giant passed but reassumed their solid appearance once he moved on.

"It is difficult to make an accurate estimate given the distortion," Teal'c said. "But I believe Surtr to be less than a kilometer away."

"And with that stride, Daddy Long-legs will be here before we know it," O'Neill said.

"Indeed."

Just as she'd done on hundreds of missions before, Sam quickly checked her primary weapon. The P90 submachine gun was fully loaded and ready to rock and roll, but though the weapon had served Sam well in the past, she privately wondered what good it could do against a creature like the one fast approaching.

Guess I'm going to find out soon enough.

O'Neill carried a P90 as well, along with a Beretta 92R pistol with 9mm rounds for back-up. Teal'c carried a zat'ni'katel — or a "zat gun" for short — and given the size and unknown nature of their giant foe, Sam found herself wishing that the Jaffa warrior had brought his larger, more powerful

staff weapon with him on this mission. Sam carried a zat gun as her back-up weapon, and wondered she shouldn't switch over to it now. Then again, she had a bad feeling that a being who seemed to be made of living flame would probably shrug off the electrical discharge of a zat as easily as he would 9mm rounds.

They were outgunned and overmatched, but what else was new?

And as if the thought was a cue, from overtop the hillside the giant had just descended came a mass of warriors, perhaps two hundred strong, all of them red-headed, tall, broad-shouldered, and well-muscled. But unlike Surtr they stood no taller than seven feet, their flesh was pale Caucasian, and their hair and beards did not blaze with flame. They were garbed like the giant — mail vests, tunic, leggings, boots — but many of them also wore metal helms and carried brightly painted wooden shields. They were armed with swords, war axes, or spears, but none of their weapons emitted fire like their leader's blade.

Thank Odin for small favors, Sam thought. But then again, a horde of Viking warriors was big enough in and of itself.

The warriors came marching down the hillside, following in the giant's wake, displaying no sign of military organization. Ultimately, they were just a mob of men, but they were a very tall, very muscular mob armed with far too many sharp objects for Sam's liking.

"The Jotuns seem determined to keep their distance from Surtr," Sam said. "Why?"

O'Neill unsafetied his weapon. "Maybe he didn't put on his Viking deodorant this morning."

"Perhaps the spatial distortion in Surtr's vicinity will affect his warriors if they come too close," Teal'c suggested.

"Possibly." But Sam wasn't convinced.

O'Neill glanced at his watch, and Sam guessed what he was thinking. The Colonel wanted to give Daniel and the others a few more moments, just to be sure, but she knew they were running out of time.

"All right, that's long enough," O'Neill said. "Let's say hello."

Sam and Teal'c nodded and the three SG-1 members stood in unison.

"Hey, Hotstuff!" O'Neill shouted, to get Surtr's attention. He began firing his P90 at the giant while at the same time Sam fired hers and Teal'c discharged his zat gun.

Just as Sam had feared, the bullets had no effect on the crimson-skinned giant — if they even reached him. She saw no sign that bullets were ricocheting off Surtr, and she feared that the giant's flames were simply melting the rounds before they even got close. The electrical energy from Teal'c's zat gun at least reached the giant, but the energy blasts flared blue-white as they struck and coruscated briefly across the Surtr's body before dissipating. If the flame-bearded giant felt any ill effect from the zat blasts, he showed no sign, and they certainly didn't slow his progress. Surtr kept coming, on implacable stride after another, his burning-coal eyes fixed on SG-1 and inhuman hatred literally blazing forth from his sockets.

Sam had to give the giant this much: he had some cool special effects going.

"Keep firing!" O'Neill ordered.

Sam understood that their goal wasn't to stop Surtr — well, technically it *was*; their ultimate goal was to prevent the giant and his army from crossing through the valley and reaching what lay on the other side. But the three of them weren't supposed to do it... at least, not all by their lonesome.

Just give it a few more seconds, Daniel...

As Surtr continued his march toward the north end of the valley he half-turned his head and called back over his shoulder.

"*Kill them!*"

The giant's words echoed through the valley like the voice of God which, Sam supposed, was the

point. She smiled grimly as she continued firing her P90 at Surtr. The giant had taken the bait.

—With a roar, the Norse warriors that followed in Surtr's wake surged forward en masse, though they made sure to give their flame-haired leader a wide berth as they streamed past him like a river flowing around a large rock.

"Teal'c, Carter, choose any target and fire at will!" O'Neill ordered.

The Jaffa warrior began loosing blasts of electrical energy at the oncoming wave of warriors and Sam was gratified to see that Surtr's men didn't share their leader's resistance to zat gun fire. Every man Teal'c hit stiffened as the energy struck him, and fell face-first onto the ground unconscious. Without waiting for O'Neill's order, Sam dropped her P90, switched to her zat, and began helping Teal'c pick off Norsemen. Unfortunately, there were far too many of them and while Sam and Teal'c made a dent in the Norsemen's numbers, the warriors kept coming, brandishing their weapons and howling for their enemy's blood.

O'Neill reloaded with swift efficiency and resumed firing, joining Sam and Teal'c in targeting the onrushing warriors. Their additional firepower helped slow the Norsemen's advance, but Sam knew it wasn't enough and that their position would be overrun within seconds.

"Now would be an excellent time, Daniel," O'Neill muttered.

Across the valley, hundreds of boulders shimmered, grew blurry and indistinct as they reworked themselves into new forms. An instant later the boulders were gone, replaced by a second group of warriors, but these were garbed in battle dress uniforms similar to those worn by SG-1, and they all carried P90s. These men had blond hair instead of the Jotuns' red, but the most noticeable difference between them and the other warriors was that they stood six foot on average, and many were closer to five feet in height. The smaller-statured warriors were scattered throughout the valley, and the attacking Jotuns were now directly in their midst.

Sam, O'Neill, and Teal'c ceased firing as the Jotuns stopped their charge, looking around at the blond-haired warriors in surprise and mounting panic. Sam spotted Daniel Jackson standing among the Vanir, and he gave his comrades a quick grin before shouting for the warriors to attack their red-headed foes.

The Vanir bellowed inarticulate battle cries as they surged forward to engage the Jotuns. Sam watched as the smaller warriors laid into their adversaries with vicious enthusiasm, and within seconds the valley became a deadly battleground as Jotun and Vanir fought with no quarter asked or given. A host of P90s thundered, sending a hail of 9mm rounds slamming into Jotun flesh. But the red-headed warriors refused to be cowed. They dashed toward the Vanir, ignoring their foe's superior weaponry. Many Jotun were cut down in mid run, but enough reached the Vanir gunmen. Swords and axes bit deep into Vanir bodies, and spears pierced chests and bellies. Men roared with fury as they struck and other men cried out in pain as metal violated their flesh.

Sam watched the fighting, but took no pleasure in it. As a warrior she understood the necessity of taking life in order to preserve it, as perverse as that equation often seemed, but that didn't mean she reveled in slaughter. As far as she was concerned, the best battle was the one that could be avoided, but failing that, the second-best battle was one that was over swiftly with minimal loss of life on both sides. And one that ended with the good guys victorious, of course. Sam was beginning to think that the trap they'd sprung on Surtr and his men into was going to work — but then O'Neill shouted.

"Carter, Teal'c!" He pointed toward Surtr.

The giant now swept his flaming sword back and forth in blazing arcs, striking through Vanir and Jotun alike. But when the fire-flecked blade struck the warriors, instead of slicing through the flesh it caused them to burst into flame which was then immediately absorbed by Surtr's weapon. And with each warrior Surtr struck and absorbed, the giant increased in size and mass, his armor, clothing

and sword growing proportionately with him. He'd stood twenty feet tall when he'd entered the valley but now he was closing in on thirty feet and showed no sign of stopping. The giant continued striding forward, sword sweeping around him, destroying friend and foe alike and using their bodies to fuel his growth.

"Now we know why Surtr's warriors maintained a discrete distance from him," Sam said. "They wanted to avoid being absorbed until their master was ready."

O'Neill's analysis was more succinct. "Oh, crap."

CHAPTER TWO

Two days ago

Sam had just finished a strenuous workout culminating in a long, relaxing run, and was on her way to take a longer, even more relaxing shower in her quarters, when a klaxon sounded, echoing throughout the hallway. Sam recognized the gate activation alarm, and she was already running toward the gate room when she saw Daniel jogging down the corridor toward her. The klaxon fell silent, and Sam stopped running. Every time the Stargate was activated, an alarm sounded throughout sublevel twenty-eight of the Cheyenne Mountain complex as a security precaution. Over the years Stargate Command had learned through painful and costly experience not to permit off-world contact of any sort, even simple audio communication, without taking the highest security precautions. If the gate operation proceeded smoothly and there was no threat, the alarm silenced when either the gate was deactivated or the gate-room personnel verified an all-clear.

When Daniel reached Sam, he paused for a second to catch his breath. Daniel was in good shape, but when he was excited, he ran with more passion than discipline and often forgot to breathe properly. Sam couldn't keep from smiling a little. In many ways, that summed up Daniel's personality perfectly. He was the most passionate person she knew.

"We've just received an off-world communication request," Daniel said. "Well, to be accurate, *we* didn't; *you* did. It's Jonas. He wants to talk with you."

Daniel wore his blue battle dress uniform, as he often did when on base, but Sam had been exercising, and so she was wearing a tight black T-shirt and a pair of light gray shorts. She was still sweating a bit, and so she took hold of the towel draped around her shoulders and used one end of it to wipe her brow. Some women in the military — especially those of higher rank, like her — might have felt self-conscious to be seen like this: in shorts and sweating after a workout. Despite all the progress the military had made toward gender equality in the last few decades, the fact remained that its culture remained heavily male, regardless of the branch, and women often felt the need to de-sexualize themselves in order to be taken seriously. The same was true for the field of theoretical astro-physics. But Sam wasn't overly concerned with such matters. It wasn't that she was unaware of sexist attitudes, but she'd never been a person who allowed others to define who and what she was.

Besides, she could never feel self-conscious in front of Daniel. After everything she'd been through with the other members of SG-1, she considered them family. No, they were closer than that. Their bonds had been forged in battles on dozens of different worlds, fighting against enemies that were beyond most people's imaginations. But the SG-1 team was bound by more than just the experience of shared combat. The things they'd seen: worlds, races, and technologies both wondrous and terrible, and all the things they'd done...and had done *to* them... It changed you, in ways so deeply profound that only someone else who'd lived through the same experiences could ever hope to understand. Sam didn't think there was a word for the bond the team shared, but it was real and it was deeper than anything she'd ever known. For a time Jonas Quinn had been a part of SG-1, and that meant he shared that bond. Whatever Jonas needed, Sam would do everything in her power to help.

him — and she knew the rest of the team would too.

—“Is there trouble on Langara?” She tensed, ready to race toward the gate-room.

“Jonas is fine, and so is Langara.” Daniel grimaced. “Well, you know what the political situation is like there. *Fine* may be overstating the case a bit. From what I gather, Jonas is working on some sort of project, and he’d like your input.” Daniel’s expression suddenly became concerned. “Wait — you didn’t think...? I hope I didn’t worry you because I was running. It’s just that Jonas is waiting, and... He gave an apologetic shrug. “Sorry.”

Sam smiled affectionately. Daniel was in the prime of his life — which was saying something for a man who’d been dead not all that long ago — but he often came across as the stereotype of the preoccupied elderly professor.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go see what Jonas wants.”

Sam headed toward the gate-room, but Daniel hesitated.

“I’d like to,” he said, “but one of our archeological teams brought back some off-world artifacts a few days ago — pottery shards, weapons, armor — recovered from a burial mound. I haven’t really had a chance to do much more than glance at the artifacts, but the runes on them are extremely similar to those used by the ancient Norse peoples, and... Well, I was hoping to take a closer look at them this afternoon.” He paused. “Meaning now.”

Sam couldn’t help breaking into a broad grin. Daniel was by training, not to mention temperament, a linguist and an archeologist, and while those skills were vital to SG-1, he rarely got the opportunity to engage in pure research anymore. Usually he was working on the fly, desperately trying to find the answers the team needed in order to stave off one disaster or another. Working at a more relaxed pace, without the fate of one or more worlds hanging in the balance, would doubtless seem like nirvana to him.

“Have fun,” she said.

Daniel returned her grin and headed off toward his quarters, while Sam continued down the corridor in the opposite direction, curious to learn what Jonas wanted to speak to her about.

“Langara has a planetary defense network?” Sam said. “I was just there a few months ago, and you didn’t mention anything about it. In fact, I was under the impression your people’s space technology wasn’t all that advanced.” She paused. “Sorry. No offense.”

Sam sat at one of the computer consoles in the gate-room, Jonas Quinn’s face displayed on the screen in front of her. He wore a loose-fitting light gray shirt with a zipper down the front, similar to what he’d worn during her last visit. She gathered it was his people’s equivalent of a lab coat, though his outfit looked a lot more stylish, not to mention more comfortable.

Jonas smiled. “We’ve been rather busy since your last visit.”

Several months ago an unstable vein of naquadria had threatened to destroy the entire world of Langara, and SG-1 had traveled to the planet to help. With the team’s aid, Jonas used an underground excavation vehicle to burrow down to the naquadria vein and neutralize it. Complicating the mission was the discovery that Jonas’s new research assistant, Kianna Cyr, had in fact been taken as a host by a Goa’uld in service to the System Lord Ba’al. The Goa’uld, for reasons of its own, helped Jonas and the others complete the mission, but in doing so the symbiote had sustained a great deal of damage from exposure to naquadria radiation. In the end, the Goa’uld succumbed to its injuries, but not before managing to use the last of its strength to heal its host body and ensure the survival of Kianna Cyr.

“Once we discovered that the Goa’uld who’d taken Kianna as a host was an advance scout for Ba’al... Well, let’s just say that the Joint Ruling Council decided to make our space program its number-one priority — with more than a bit of urging on my part, I should add.” Jonas smiled grimly. “There’s nothing like the impending threat of having your planet’s population enslaved by a Goa’uld.”

System Lord to get bickering politicians to stop acting like children and start working together.”

—Langara’s quarreling nations had a long history of mistrust — not unlike Earth, Sam had admit — and it was only the Langarans’ discovery of the Stargate system that had begun to change that. But the Langarans were a stubborn people who were slow to accept change, and even the threats posed by the System Lords could only get them to cooperate so far. During the naquadria incident, there had been a very real possibility that their world would be obliterated, and even then — with the clock rapidly counting down to Langara’s destruction — the members of the Joint Ruling Council had argued so much about the specifics of how to save their populace that, in the end, General Hammond and Colonel O’Neill had withdrawn Stargate Command’s offer to relocate their people to another world. Even impending planetary annihilation hadn’t been able to compel the council members to set aside their differences. But from what Jonas was saying, it sounded as if the council members might finally have learned their lesson — especially since Ba’al would undoubtedly love to get his hands on their planet’s rich naquadria deposits.

Jonas continued. “Our space program advanced quickly, in no small part because of the knowledge I gained about advanced technologies during my time with SG-1. But when it became clear that creating a space fleet of our own was beyond our current capabilities, we decided to shift our focus to create a planetary defense network. As you might guess, a complex system like the Array requires massive amounts of energy to power. We’ve developed an experimental naquadria power cell for use in the Array, but the key word here is *experimental*. The council would like to begin full-scale tests of the Array as soon as possible, but I’d feel more comfortable about that if I could get someone I trust to look over what we’ve done and double-check our work. Someone like you, Sam.”

She was flattered by Jonas’s request. The man possessed a genetically advanced makeup that granted him extremely high intelligence and an ability to learn scary-fast. Sam wasn’t given to false modesty. Though she did have a tendency to doubt her capabilities from time to time, such doubts rarely lingered, and they never kept her from doing what needed to be done. She knew her stuff, but sometimes she thought Jonas played on a whole different level than mere mortals like herself.

“I’d be happy to take a look at any data you send me,” she said.

Jonas looked uncomfortable. “The ruling council would prefer it if you made a more...personal inspection.”

“Meaning they’re touchy about sending any data on the Array off-world,” Sam translated.

“Exactly.”

The Langarans were still learning to trust one another, so it was no surprise to Sam that they didn’t fully trust Stargate Command yet, despite all the help SGC had given their world in the past.

“I’ll have to run it by General Hammond and get his permission, but I don’t think it’ll be a problem,” Sam said.

Jonas grinned. “Great! I’ll feel so much better flipping the Array’s *on* switch once you’ve had a chance to look things over. Not that I don’t have good people working with me on the project. My new assistant Rahil has been absolutely invaluable. Not only was he a great help in designing the naquadria cells, he also assisted in revising the final designs for the Array. And Kianna...” Jonas trailed off, his expression growing more serious.

“How is Kianna?” Sam asked. Hosting a Goa’uld symbiote had devastating psychological effects on a human, and recovery could take years. And even then, some mental and emotional scars remained.

“Her work has been exemplary,” Jonas said. “No complaints there. In fact, she retains a certain amount of her symbiote’s technical knowledge — I believe the symbiote imprinted it on her mind as a sort of... Well, as a going-away present, I suppose you could say. Whatever the reason, that knowledge has proved most useful to the project.”

“That’s good to hear,” Sam said, “but I didn’t ask for a job-performance review. I asked you how Kianna was.” She said this gently, hoping to soften any sting her words might carry.

Before Jonas had learned that Kianna was host to a Goa’uld there had been a mutual attraction between them. But he’d met Kianna after the Goa’uld had taken her as a host, and thus he hadn’t known the real woman. The Goa’uld had been attracted to Jonas, though Sam would’ve been hard-pressed to believe the symbiote loved Jonas or indeed, that the creature was even capable of experiencing the emotion. But the fact remained that the Goa’uld *had* sacrificed its life to save Langara, and Sam believed that had been due in no small part for its feelings toward Jonas. After the naquadria incident, Kianna had considered resigning as Jonas’s assistant — after all, it had technically been the Goa’uld’s position and not hers — but ultimately she’d chosen to stay on.

So Jonas now worked with the body of a woman he’d been attracted to, and that woman retained the memory of the Goa’uld’s feelings for Jonas: feelings Kianna had experienced, if not exactly shared.

Talk about an awkward office romance.

Jonas seemed to struggle for words as he answered Sam’s question.

“Our conversations tend to focus solely on work-related matters, but from what I gather Kianna’s been seeing a therapist to help her deal with the psychological aftermath of being taken as a Goa’uld host. It seems to be helping, but she still has periods when her concentration lapses. She’s been taking medication...” He trailed off.

Sam tried to think of the most delicate way to phrase what she wanted to say next. “Have you considered that this project might be too high-stress for Kianna right now? Maybe it would be best if she took some time off to recover.”

“We discussed that,” Jonas said, “and Kianna prefers to keep busy. She believes that having an outside focus is what she needs to help prevent her from dwelling on what happened, and her therapist agrees. I’m not so sure *I’m* convinced it’s best, but I’m willing to give Kianna the benefit of the doubt for now. Her work remains excellent, and since I have Rahil to assist me as well...” He broke off and sighed. “I know it’s stupid of me, but I can’t help feeling that I should’ve picked up on what was happening. I worked alongside Kianna for weeks without realizing she’d been taken as a Goa’uld host.”

“You can’t blame yourself, Jonas,” Sam said. “The Goa’uld, for all their megalomaniacal posturing, are highly skilled at blending in with ordinary humans when they wish. It only makes sense since their species is a parasitic one. It’s a defense mechanism, a kind of protective coloration. They may not use it very often, but when they do, it works great.”

Jonas shook his head. “Out of the millions of people on my planet, I’m the only one who’s had direct experience of the Goa’uld. I should’ve *known*.”

Sam understood then that the major reason Jonas had kept Kianna on the Array project was because he felt a deep guilt over what had happened to her.

“Because of the work we do — traveling across interstellar distances simply by stepping through a gate, fighting to protect worlds and sometimes the entire *galaxy* — we sometimes forget that we’re only human,” Sam said. “Don’t be too hard on yourself, Jonas. The only one responsible for what happened to Kianna was the Goa’uld that took her for a host.”

“You’re right,” Jonas said. But from his tone it was clear that he wasn’t convinced.

It’ll take him some time, Sam thought. Just like it will for Kianna. Aloud, she said, “I know the ruling council is reluctant for you to send data off-world, but is there any chance you can sneak in some specs on both the power cell and the Array so I can look over them before requesting General Hammond to authorize my trip to Langara? You know how he is; the more intel he has, the more comfortable he is when making decisions.”

Jonas slowly smiled. “Like I said, Sam, I’m not permitted to send you anything. By the way, ~~while we’ve been talking, my equipment has picked up a faint secondary signal. It’s probably just data-echo, but I can’t tell whether it’s originating on my end or yours. We should probably run equipment diagnostics on both ends.~~”

“Thanks for the heads-up.” Sam suppressed a grin as her fingers flew across the communication console. With seconds, she’d detected the hidden transmission signal Jonas was sending, isolated it, and downloaded the data that he wasn’t allowed to send her. “There. I think that should do it, but it’ll take me a couple hours to run a complete diagnostic.” *Meaning a couple hours to read over the data you sent.* “I’ll speak with General Hammond then, and I’ll get back with you and let you know what he says. Sound good?”

Jonas smiled. “Thanks, Sam. Hopefully, we’ll see you on this side of the gate soon.”

Jonas terminated the transmission, and his image disappeared from Sam’s screen to be replaced by SGC’s insignia. Sam took a few more seconds to transmit Jonas’s data to the workstation in her quarters, and when she was finished, she stood.

Looks like I have some homework to do. She used her exercise towel to wipe partially dried sweat off the back of her neck. *After a quick shower.*

CHAPTER THREE

Sam and the rest of SG-1 were already seated around the meeting table when General Hammond walked into the room.

“Good afternoon, people,” he said as he took his seat at the head of the table. Hammond carried a manila file folder, and he placed it on the tabletop in front of him, opened it, and spread out the papers within so that he could refer to them as he spoke. As always, his manner was brisk, confident, and professional.

Sam couldn't count the number of times she'd sat here and watched the General begin his briefing, but every time she was impressed by how his presence seemed to fill the room. General George Hammond wasn't the most physically imposing of men. At first glance, there was nothing to distinguish him from an average man on the street, but Hammond was a highly decorated officer whose career spanned nearly forty years. He'd served in Vietnam and Kuwait, and when he'd accepted command of SGC, the Stargate had been inactive and his posting was supposed to be a quiet transition to retirement. Little had the General known that his retirement would be postponed when SGC became the first line of defense for Earth. Sam couldn't think of anyone better suited to the job. Hammond exuded a quiet strength and wisdom, and she often felt that she — as well as the other members of SG-1 — relied on that strength, drew on it to prepare themselves for whatever mission lay ahead of them.

At least the mission they were here to discuss today would be a routine one... Or at least as close as SG-1 ever came to routine. Sam noticed Daniel had brought a sword scabbard which he'd laid on the table in front of him. No doubt one of the Norse artifacts he'd been studying. It wasn't uncommon for Daniel to bring work with him to a meeting in case it got started late, and she thought no more about the scabbard.

Before Hammond could get the meeting started in earnest, O'Neill asked, “General, have you ever played Pong? The video game, I mean.”

The General, unflappable as always, turned to O'Neill. “No, Colonel, I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure.”

“I was trying to teach Teal'c the finer points of the game earlier and he was, shall we say, less than impressed.”

Daniel frowned. “Finer points? As I recall, there's not much to the game.”

Teal'c glanced at O'Neill. “Precisely.”

“Pong is as an important piece of Earth's cultural history,” O'Neill said. “It was one of the earliest video games, not to mention a way to bring the experience of the table game to those poor unfortunates who didn't have space in their house for the real thing.”

“I find the tactile reality of the real thing far more stimulating than the simulation you showed me, O'Neill.” A small smile crossed Teal'c's lips. “Besides, I believe your true intention was to beat me at the video game because you cannot defeat me at true ping-pong.”

“And did he beat you?” Sam asked.

“He did not,” Teal'c said. “I was the victor in each of our matches.” He paused and his smile

widened slightly. "All twenty-one of them."

~~O'Neill gave the Jaffa a withering look before turning his attention to the General.~~

"When we get back from wherever you're sending us, sir, you and I will have to sit down a play a game or two. Maybe *you'll* be able to appreciate the subtleties of the game that others can't."

"I'll look forward to it," Hammond said smoothly. "Now, if we could get to the matter at hand. Or matters, I should say, since I've received mission requests from both Major Carter *and* Dr. Jackson."

Sam looked at Daniel and he at her, both equally surprised.

"I take it Jonas wanted to do more than just chat with you about his new project," Daniel said.

"And I take it that you discovered something of more than casual interest when you inspected those Norse artifacts," Sam said. Now she knew why Daniel had brought the scabbard to the meeting.

O'Neill turned to the General. "Don't you just love it when these meetings run themselves?" He turned to Sam and Daniel. "Maybe you two should flip a coin to see who goes first."

Sam and Daniel turned to General Hammond.

"It's true. You've both requested permission for SG-1 to go off-world, but to two different places and for different reasons. Colonel Carter, since it seems your fellow team members aren't aware of Mr. Quinn's recent communication, why don't you fill them in?"

"Yes, sir." Sam gave her fellow team members a quick rundown on her conversation with Jonas that morning. "Since then I've gone over the specs Jonas sent," she said. "Both the Array and the naquadria power cell are highly sophisticated technologies — a real quantum leap for Langara, and potentially of major interest to us, not to mention all the other planets in the galaxy threatened by the System Lords. If the power cell works according to Jonas's specs, it's capable of producing immense amounts of energy. It works by first stimulating a complex series of subatomic reactions in the naquadria, and then..." She broke off when she saw the blank looks on the faces of the four men in the room with her. She knew she had a tendency to geek out when it came to discussing new technologies, especially something as potentially revolutionary as Jonas's naquadria cell. "Well, let me just say it's pretty cool."

"On a coolness scale of one to ten?" O'Neill asked.

"If the power cell works the way Jonas hopes, all the way up to eleven, sir."

O'Neill nodded. "Eleven's good."

"Not only would the power cell solve so many of the energy problems we face," Sam continued. "But if we could build our own defense Array to protect Earth..."

"We get it," O'Neill said. "Another eleven, right?"

"You bet."

"Thank you, Major," Hammond said. "Your turn, Dr. Jackson."

Daniel pushed his glasses up on his nose, leaned forward, and clasped his hands on the table in front of him. "As I told Sam, several days ago one of our archeological teams brought back a cache of artifacts they found in an off-world burial mound. Until today, I hadn't had the opportunity to give them more than a cursory examination, but now that I have, I can verify the team's initial surmise: the artifacts do indeed contain runes similar to those used by the Norse peoples of Earth."

"So we're talking what?" O'Neill said. "A boatload of Vikings who got *really* lost on their way to pillage Britain?"

"Not exactly," Daniel said. "As I said, the artifacts contain Norse runes — on the outside. But on the *inside* of one of the artifacts — specifically, this scabbard — I discovered writing from another language: Asgard."

Teal'c frowned. "On the inside, Daniel Jackson?"

Daniel leaned back, looking suddenly sheepish. "Yeah, well, when I was examining the scabbard

I, uh, sort of dropped it.”

—“And let me guess,” O’Neill said. “It sort of broke. Didn’t they teach you *not* to drop priceless ancient artifacts back in Archaeology 101?”

Daniel pursed his lips in irritation, but he took hold of the scabbard and lifted one side of it away from the other. He held up the split piece and turned the inside toward the others so they could see the runes etched within. “On the inside, written in Asgard, is a gate address — one previously unknown to us. The address is accompanied by a single word: *Valhalla*.”

“Is that not the Asgard planet where the Replicators were trapped?” Teal’c asked.

“That’s Hala,” Daniel said as he replaced the scabbard piece back onto its other half. “In the Asgard’s language, it means *beginning*. The word on the inside of the scabbard is *Val*-halla. The name derives from the old Norse word *valholl*, which means hall of the slain. Interestingly, there’s a similar word in Asgard, but it means *new beginning*. Valhalla is a sort of a Viking paradise, where the spirits of slain warriors spend eternity in glorious battle. Every day they fight from sunrise to sunset, then the night those who were killed in the day’s battle are resurrected and everyone adjourns to a mead hall to feast, drink, and brag about that day’s victories or commiserate over the day’s defeats. The next day, they do it all over again.”

“Forever?” O’Neill said. “Sounds like it would get dull real fast.”

“I can see how the concept would possess a certain appeal to a warrior culture,” Sam said.

Daniel went on. “Technically, Valhalla is the name of the hall where the Vikings feast after the day’s battle. Odin, the Allfather of the Norse gods, was supposed to join in the revelry each night. The spirits of the slain weren’t just fighting to while away eternity, though. They were training for the day when Ragnarok, the Norse version of doomsday, took place. The slain warriors were supposed to fight with Odin and the other Norse gods against the forces of darkness during Ragnarok.”

“And were they supposed to win?” O’Neill asked.

“No,” Daniel said. “The Vikings weren’t big on happy end-ings. Ultimately Odin and the rest of the gods would be destroyed, and then the cycle of Creation would begin anew.”

General Hammond broke in then. “Do you believe this myth has any connection to the planet Hala?”

“The gate address inside the scabbard definitely belongs to a different planet,” Daniel said. “As far as I know, there’s no connection... We’ve all been doing this long enough to know the way truths, half-truths, and outright myths can become intertwined when it comes to alien civilizations. It’s likely there’s some sort of connection, even if it’s only a tenuous one. But it’s impossible to even guess what the connection may be without further investigation.”

“You mean *direct* investigation, do you not?” Teal’c said.

Daniel shrugged. “The easiest way to find out about any connection is to dial the address, walk through the gate, and see what we find.”

“Not to piddle on your parade, Daniel,” O’Neill said, “but this sounds like a job for one of the other SG teams.”

General Hammond answered before Daniel could reply. “Ordinarily, I would agree with you, Colonel. But if this new address leads to a world with a connection to the Asgard, not only does it merit investigation, but I want SGC’s top team on it. The Asgard are one of our most important allies against the Goa’uld, and the technologies they’ve shared with us have been absolutely essential to Earth’s defense.”

“And if we just happen to find some new technology that the Asgard left lying around there...”

“Precisely, Colonel,” Hammond said. “Good to see we’re on the same page.”

Sam had been listening patiently the whole time Daniel and the others discussed his finding, but now she felt a need to jump in.

“With all respect, sir, what about Jonas’s naquadria cell? That’s an important new technological advance, and not only do we know it’s real, we know exactly where to find it. Besides, Jonas is a member of the team. At least, he was. We owe it to him to respond to his request for assistance.”

“Agreed on all points, Major,” Hammond said. “I’ve read your report, and if I understand the situation correctly, you didn’t detect any problems in the design of the power cell based on the data Mr. Quinn sent.”

“That’s true, but the technology involved in the naquadria cell is incredibly complicated, and I only had a few hours to go over the specs —”

“What I’m getting at, Major, is that we have no reason to believe there’s a pressing need to pay an immediate visit to Langara,” Hammond said. “Is this your assessment as well?”

Sam thought about it for a moment. “Yes, sir. Both the naquadria cell and the Array are being tested in simulation only right now. Full-scale tests are weeks away, at least.”

“So Mr. Quinn can wait a few days while the four of you check out the new gate address Dr. Jackson’s discovered,” Hammond said. There was a slight suggestion of a smile on his lips, and a hint of a twinkle in his eye. General Hammond was a disciplined military man, but he was also a father and a grandfather, and he often had a parent’s gentle way of allowing his “children” to reach their own conclusions about matters.

Sam smiled. “I suppose he can.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Sam. I’ll see you in a few days.”

Jonas broke the connection and rose from his computer console. He was glad he’d been able to talk the ruling council into allowing him to have a secure comm link to Langara’s Stargate in his lab. It wasn’t that he was too lazy to go to his people’s version of SGC’s gate-room to talk to Sam, but he hated to waste time when there was important work to be done. Not that he didn’t enjoy a break now and again, but considering the potential threat his people faced from Ba’al and the other System Lords, he couldn’t allow himself the luxury of wasting time when Langara so badly needed the defense Array to be up and running as soon as possible.

“I don’t know why you feel the need to have your former comrades come inspect our work. Honestly, I find it a bit insulting.”

Rahil stood on the other side of the lab, gazing at the computer screen before him. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, a bit on the beefy side, but not fat. He was a handsome man, but his bald head, crow’s feet, and graying brown beard showed that middle-age was catching up with him. He wore a light blue lab tunic and matching slacks, but despite the fact the clothing was designed to be loose-fitting and comfortable, Rahil always seemed to Jonas to look stiff and ill at ease in the outfit. Then again, he thought, Rahil never seemed fully at ease no matter what he was doing.

Rahil hadn’t looked away from the computer monitor when speaking — he never took his attention off his work if he could avoid it — so Jonas crossed the lab to join him.

Jonas’s facility was one of the most advanced laboratories on Langara, but you couldn’t tell that by its appearance. A thick iron door covered the lab’s entrance, making the space seem more like a prison than a place of scientific inquiry. The far wall was lined with windows from ceiling to floor, relieving some of the door’s gloomy effect and providing an abundance of natural light to work by. Given the sensitive nature of the work that went on in the lab, though, the windows were designed to be opaque from the outside, and they were impervious to weapons fire — both projectile and energy-based. Simple metal shelves and cabinets lined the other walls, all of them filled with a seeming haphazard assortment of papers, bottles, and electronic equipment. The worktables were less cluttered with the equipment they contained — computers, microscopes, chemical-filled vials and flasks — organized more or less neatly. An old-fashioned chalkboard sat propped up in one corner of the lab.

and it was currently covered with a series of arcane equations that only a handful of people on Langara even had a chance of deciphering. Jonas did most of his work on computer, but there was something about the tactile nature of writing on a chalkboard that he found inspiring; plus, it made working with a team easier.

All in all, the lab's overall feel was one of a lived-in, slightly cluttered workspace, and it suited Jonas perfectly. It had a homey feel, which was good since he spent more time here than he did in his personal quarters. Rahil, however, was a bit of a stickler when it came to neatness, and no doubt working in the midst of Jonas's benign clutter was something of a constant irritant for him, though the man had never said anything. Still, Jonas sometimes caught Rahil tidying up when he thought Jonas wasn't looking. Jonas didn't care, though. Just so long as he could find what he needed when he needed it.

"I didn't ask Sam to consult on our project because I lack faith in your work — or Kianna's," Jonas said. "Samantha Carter is a brilliant scientist in her own right, and when you add to that all the experience she's had as a member of SG-1... Well, there aren't too many people in the galaxy who can match her qualifications. We don't have the luxury of taking years to perfect the Array and the naquadria cell. We need to do it as swiftly as possible, and we need to get it right the first time. Because of that, we're rushing so fast that it's more than likely we've made some mistakes along the line — mistakes that we can't see because we're too close to the project. We need a pair of fresh eyes to look over our work."

Lines of code were scrawling across Rahil's monitor, but he tapped a key and the screen display froze. He turned to Jonas and smiled.

"You're right, of course. We are under a great deal of pressure, aren't we? I suppose it gets to me sometimes. I apologize."

A great deal of pressure was a monumental understatement. The Joint Ruling Council wanted Langara safe from off-world predation, and they wanted it *now*. After the incident with the unstable naquadria vein *and* the discovery that a Goa'uld loyal to Ba'al had infiltrated Jonas' lab, the council had been almost frantic to ensure the safety of their people. Before dying, the Goa'uld in possession of Kianna had sent a message to Ba'al claiming the naquadria deposits on Langara were too unstable to be suitable for the System Lord's use. The Goa'uld had likely done this more out of spite toward Ba'al than from concern for the Langarans. It had never had any intention of helping Ba'al gain Langara's naquadria; instead, the Goa'uld had wanted to claim the energy-rich prize for herself. Still, the message had done its job. Ba'al had stayed away from Langara in the months since, but that didn't mean the planet was safe. Ba'al might eventually get wind that he'd been lied to and come to check out the naquadria's suitability for himself. And even if Ba'al didn't come, there were other System Lords in the galaxy and other threats as well. Just as on Earth, most Langarans were unaware of just how precarious their position in the galaxy was. If the Langaran people were to have any hope of ensuring their ongoing survival, that hope lay with the Array and the naquadria cell that would power it.

And that meant all the planet's hopes depended on the work Jonas and his two assistants were doing in this very lab. Pressure? Just a little.

Jonas clasped Rahil's shoulder and gave it a friendly squeeze. "No apology necessary. The way we've been going at it these last few weeks, I'm surprised that the three of us aren't at each other's throats by now."

"Speaking of the *three* of us, where's Kianna? I haven't seen her all morning."

Jonas removed his hand from Rahil's shoulder and sighed. "She sent me a message earlier asking if she could come in later today. She...had another bad night."

Once Kianna had been freed from Goa'uld possession, the Council had demanded that she resign

her position as Jonas's assistant. The three Council members had little more than a basic understanding of the symbiotic relationship between Goa'uld and host, and they feared that even though Kianna was "free," she might still somehow be tainted by the Goa'uld's persona. It had taken hours for Jonas to explain to the council that Kianna was completely free of Goa'uld influence, and that in a sense she had actually benefited since she retained some portion of the Goa'uld's technical knowledge and expertise. So the council reversed itself and decided Kianna could continue to work as Jonas's assistant. *If* he took on a second assistant to help keep an eye on Kianna and to replace her completely if it became necessary for her to leave in the future. And *if* Kianna would agree to undergo periodic medical scans and regular psychotherapy appointments — as well as taking a number of psychopharmaceuticals to "stabilize" her mental condition.

Sometimes Jonas thought the damned drugs were doing more harm to her than the Goa'uld possession itself had. They made her sleepy, drained her energy and made it more difficult for her to concentrate. And though the therapy seemed to be helping somewhat it, along with the pills, didn't seem to be making a dent in the terrible nightmares Kianna experienced each night. She refused to tell Jonas what they were about, and he didn't wish to pry, but he gathered that whatever the dream centered around, they were bad.

He remembered something Sam had said during their first communication that day.

Have you considered that this project might be too high-stress for Kianna right now? Maybe it would be best if she took some time off to recover.

Not for the first time, Jonas wondered if he'd done the right thing by arguing so strongly to keep Kianna on the project. But despite the effects of her medications, despite her continuing struggle with the nightmares, Kianna was still producing high-quality work, and if it hadn't been for the technical knowledge imprinted on her mind by her Goa'uld host they never would've gotten as far as they had as swiftly as they had. So far, everything had worked out to the project's benefit. He just hoped he wasn't doing a disservice to Kianna, wasn't cold-bloodedly using her to achieve a greater good. He remembered a quote he'd learned from an Earth philosopher named Niccolo Machiavelli: *The ends justify the means*. Jonas didn't believe that. At least, he didn't *want* to believe that. But the stakes were so high...

Before he or Rahil could say anything more, the iron door to the lab grated as it slid open to embrace Kianna Cyr.

She was an elegantly lean woman with short straight blond hair, and aquiline features that gave her a distinctive beauty. She wore a light blue tunic similar to Jonas's and Rahil's, though hers was a touch rumpled, as if she hadn't had a clean one available and had been forced to raid her laundry hamper to find something to wear. The door closed behind her and sealed shut as she entered, and she jumped a little at the sound it made. She looked embarrassed but didn't say anything. Kianna wasn't the sort to make excuses for her behavior, even given the extenuating circumstances she was currently suffering through. Jonas respected and admired her for that.

"Good afternoon, Jonas — Rahil." She nodded to the two men as she walked over to join the one next to Rahil's computer console. She moved with exaggerated deliberation, as if she had to concentrate on every step she took in order to keep her balance, a result of her medication, Jonas guessed. Seeing her move like this always made him feel a pang of sadness. He remembered the lithic graceful way she'd moved when the Goa'uld had been in possession of her body, and he couldn't help noting the difference. And he couldn't help but feel somewhat ashamed that he'd been attracted to her — or rather, to her *body* — when the Goa'uld had been operating it.

He remembered a kiss they'd shared aboard the deep excavation vehicle when they were prepping it for the mission to neutralize the unstable naquadia vein. Remembered Kianna's soft lips and warm breath — her body, but controlled by the Goa'uld symbiote inside, a puppet master working

the strings.

—“Hello, Kianna,” Rahil said. “You’re looking... well today.”

Rahil’s pause clearly indicated the man was lying, and doing a poor job of it, too.

Kianna acknowledged Rahil’s comment with a weak smile before turning to face Jonas.

“On the way here, I was thinking that I’d like to go over the figures on the naquadria cell projected power output based on the latest round of simulations. I had an... idea about how we might be able to increase the cell’s efficiency by an additional two percent.”

Jonas noted the way Kianna had hesitated before saying *idea*, and he understood what that meant. Her notion on increasing power efficiency hadn’t come from Kianna, but rather from the ghost of the Goa’uld’s persona that still haunted her mind.

Jonas gave her a smile that he hoped wasn’t pitying or patronizing. “That sounds good.”

“Allow me to bring up the data in question,” Rahil said. He minimized his work screen, and a few keystrokes later the information they needed was up on the monitor. Rahil stepped aside and gestured toward the console. “It’s all yours, Kianna.”

The smile she gave Rahil was more confident this time. She had to walk past Jonas to reach the console, and as she passed, her hand accidentally brushed his. The contact was momentary and slight, but Kianna recoiled as if she’d been hit with an electric shock. She took a frantic step away from Jonas before catching herself.

“I’m sorry, Jonas! I didn’t — I don’t...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jonas said. “Let’s just get to work, all right?”

Kianna looked at him, holding his gaze longer than was comfortable. He had the impression that she was searching for something within his eyes, but he had no idea what it might be. Then, without another word, Kianna looked away and stepped up to the computer console and began typing.

Rahil looked at Jonas with a raised eyebrow, and Jonas gave a slight shake of his head to tell Rahil not to worry about it. The three of them gathered around the monitor and continued with their work of trying to keep their world safe.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Well, this looks...dull.”

The four members of SG-1 stood several meters away from the Stargate, taking in their new surroundings. A MALP had already been sent through the gate to do an initial recon of the area, as was standard procedure, so the team had already seen video images of this world. But Sam knew from long experience that there was a big difference in viewing a world on a flat screen and actually stepping onto it physically for the first time.

Still, Sam couldn't disagree with O'Neill's assessment. The slate gray of the sky was relieved only by a few wispy clouds, and the temperature was in the low fifties. The team wore green BDU, SG vests, and heavy jackets, as well as caps, all of which should've provided enough warmth. Nevertheless, Sam felt a slight chill that she knew was probably more psychological than physical. This place just *looked* cold.

“Don't get me wrong,” O'Neill said. “I *like* dull. Dull is safe. Dull doesn't shoot energy blasts at you or try to suck out your brain when you aren't looking.”

The Stargate and its DHD were set atop a stone dais on a small grassy hill. The surrounding terrain was similar — grass-covered hills dotted with trees stretching for miles, though the growth was too sparse for this to be considered forest land. Off in the distance were snow-covered mountain peaks, which only reinforced the feeling that this was a cold, unwelcoming planet. Then again, they'd been here for a few moments and no one had tried to kill them yet. That was a better than some worlds that welcomes them'd received upon stepping through a gate.

“The trees are interesting,” Daniel said.

“If by *interesting* you mean *not interesting*, then I agree,” said O'Neill.

“They're Earth species,” Daniel continued. “Spruce, ash, elm, birch, pine. All types found in Scandinavia.” When O'Neill just looked at him, Daniel added, “You know — Viking land?”

O'Neill nodded. “Gotcha.”

“We have encountered Earth trees on other worlds before,” Teal'c said. “Throughout history, humans who traveled through the *Chaapa'ai* — whether willingly or not — often brought animals and plants with them.”

“True,” Daniel said. “I guess my point is that the trees would seem to prove this world does have some connection to the Norse peoples of Earth.”

“But not necessarily the Asgard,” O'Neill pointed out. “Unless you can spot a tree equipped with a hyperdrive engine, or maybe a transporter device...?”

Daniel smiled. “I'm afraid a closer inspection is needed before I can make that particular determination.”

O'Neill leaned his head forward and peered at Daniel's glasses. “Really? When's the last time you had your prescription checked?” He pulled back. “Let's move out, people. There's a *Simpsons* marathon going on this weekend I don't want to miss, so the sooner we finish our recon and get back to Earth, the better.”

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