

## Stargate: New Flight

By Shura0107

The flight deck was always a bustle of activity, as it was one of the places aboard the USAFV *Nyx* that operated around the clock. There was a lull in the frenzy when the BC-304 traveled through hyperspace, as all F-302 fighters were docked, but activities centering on the fighters did not stop as they were refueled and serviced, preparing them for the next time they would be needed. When the battle cruiser was traveling at sub-light speeds, the pace of activity increased as fighters were sent out on patrols in every direction away from the ship so as to ensure that nothing could sneak up on the ship. The activity was constant as patrolling fighters returned for refueling and new ones were sent out to take their place.

Lieutenant "Rocket" Jones began his pre-flight walkabout of his fighter, something that all pilots did before strapping themselves into the cockpit. He was pleased to see there were no leaks from any of the hydraulic systems, as his fighter was brand new, having only been shuttled from the Area 51 production facility to the *Nyx* in orbit around Earth a week and a half ago. Continuing around the slope winged fighter, Rocket tugged on the four enhanced AIM-120 missiles that formed the F-302s main armament, ensuring that they were seated properly on their launch rails and would not become dislocated during the course of a flight. He then peered into the barrel of the Gatling gun and stuck a finger down to barrel to check for any fouling. Though the gun was new and had only been test fired, it was good practice to check it every pre-flight. Finally satisfied that his plane was in top shape, Rocket climbed the ladder and began strapping himself into his seat. He was joined shortly by his RIO, Lieutenant "Goldfinger" Dixon, who had also been performing his own pre-flight checks.

"Ready?" Rocket asked, as the canopy came down.

"Let's turn and burn," came the reply. As the thrum of the engines made its way through the cockpit, Rocket checked his status board, and satisfied that all systems were green, he continued down the checklist, occasionally conferring with 'Finger. Once the start-up checklist was complete, Rocket followed a plane handler's directions to where the fighter would launch. A new feature that the *Nyx* had over the original *Daedalus* was its electromagnetic launch tubes, which allowed the onboard fighters to launch at higher velocities. The system was not unlike the electromagnetic catapults on the *Nimitz*-class aircraft carriers, which was replacing the steam catapults, making the BC-304 not unlike its ocean going cousins. The launch was always the best part, in Rocket's opinion, giving him a surge of adrenaline at the beginning of a mission. It seemed all pilots enjoyed the sudden acceleration that occurred as the fighter was hurled into space, most likely because fighter pilots seemed to be adrenaline junkies.

The Pegasus Galaxy was a dangerous place, as the war with the Wraith was still underway, and Wraith hive ships and cruisers prowled the space lanes, hoping to catch an Earth vessel unawares or searching for the next plentiful feeding ground. In the intervening years, the SGC and IOA had managed to increase production of ships and now had several BC-304 class vessels stationed in the Pegasus Galaxy. Along with the *Nyx*, its sister ships *Daedalus* and *Apollo* worked to safeguard the denizens of the Pegasus Galaxy and the Atlantis outpost from the Wraith.

"So I said, 'You stink'." Laughter burst across the radio as Major Megan "Jester" Woody finished telling her wingman about her latest adventure during her last leave.

"Hold on," Jester's RIO said. "I've got a sensor contact. Heading 057, mark 344. Looks like it's headed in our direction." The mood immediately became serious, and all thoughts of jokes or amusing stories left the pilots' minds.

"Is there a stargate in this system?" Jester asked.

"Beats me," her wingman replied over the radio.

"Nightshade, this is Eagle 2-1, I have a bogey, heading 057, mark 344, 1000 knots closure."

"Eagle 2-1, follow standard ROEs," the reply from the *Nyx* said. "Drummers 2-3 and 2-4 are inbound to your location."

"Roger." Standard Rules of Engagement meant that Jester and her wingman had to get visual confirmation of the bogey before they could engage if it turned out to be hostile.

The new *Mjolnir*-class carriers were a sight to behold. Two and a half times larger than its BC-304 predecessors, it was crammed full of reverse engineered Asgard technology. Though the

304s incorporated Asgard technologies in their design, the ships were a hodgepodge of Earth, Goa'uld, Asgard, and Ancient technologies, whereas the *Mjolnirs* were designed from the ground up to incorporate the latest advancements in reverse engineered Asgard and Ancient technologies. The power plant on the new ship was much more efficient than the ones on the 304s, powering the ship's energy weapons and shields, both of which were much more powerful than its predecessor. Despite the advancements, the new ship was nowhere as fast, nor had shields as strong as a ZPM enhanced ship. Every ship captain and SG team member wished they could get their hands on one of those miraculous Ancient power sources, but they were proving to be quite rare. But despite the rarity of ZPMs, the new ships were proving to help turn the tide of war against the Ori and the Wraith.

Colonel Data proudly looked up at the painted crest on the wall of his ship's wardroom. It consisted of a javelin with lightning bolts all pointing towards a bull's eye, a fitting crest for the USAFV *Gungnir*, named after a magical javelin that never missed and was used by Odin of Norse mythology. The ship would serve as the spearhead of the Earth offensive against the Wrath in the Pegasus Galaxy. That is once the ship was fully operational. Currently, it was going through its shakedown trials, and the crew compliment was only half of what it was supposed to be. In addition to that, the *Gungnir's* fighter wing was only able to field three of its four allotted squadrons of F-306 Fenrir fighters. All in all, the *Gungnir* was not ready for combat; but despite the ship's status, it was one of the finest ships in the Earth fleet. A knock at the wardroom door brought the colonel out of his thoughts on the readiness of his vessel.

"Enter," he called. The door swung open and a US Navy Commander wearing a standard issue flight suit entered. He was the ship's CAG, the most senior officer of vessel's pilot corps. It was a carry over term from the Navy, as many of the terms aboard were an amalgam of Air Force and Navy slang.

"What's new on the flight deck, Viper?" Data asked.

"We've taken delivery of the last Fenrirs, just need pilots for them now," Viper replied.

"Any idea on where you're going to get them?"

"I've got some coming from the SGC's training program at Area 51, some, I'm going to have to vet from other units."

"You do what you have to do, Commander. I want this air wing operational, ASAP. I don't care what branch they come from. If they can fly, I want them."

"Aye, sir." As Viper left the wardroom, Data shook his head, wondering at the whole different vocabulary that the Navy used. This command would prove to be both challenging and interesting. The *Gungnir* would have one of the first truly joint service crews, from Air Force and Navy crewmembers, to Marine and Army ground forces, as well as pilots from all branches of the military. Each of them would bring their own distinctive styles and flavors of their respective branches, not to mention their own opinions on the other branches, jargon, and traditions. And managing the whole circus would be his job, not only under normal circumstances, but most likely combat situations as well.

"You see a trailer?" Jester's wingman asked.

"Negative," Jester's RIO replied. "Looks like he's a single."

A good fighter pilot knew to trust their instincts if they wanted to survive, and Jester had a bad feeling about it. A lone unidentified contact in a supposedly uninhabited system; it felt like trouble.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Jester said. "I'm going to get visual ID; you hook 'im."

"And I'll clean him and fry 'im," the wingman's RIO replied.

Jester accelerated her 302 to full power and sped towards the unknown contacts in order to get a visual confirmation on the bogeys. The sensor board beeped as it resolved one contact into two separate contacts just as they came into visual range.

"Shit, there's two of them!" she swore as she put her fighter into hard dive and pulled to the left to get out of the incoming fire from the two Wraith Darts.

"Nightshade, this is Eagle 2-1, I am engaged with two Darts, returning fire," she said as she leveled out and looked around for the two bandits.

"*Eagle 2-1, this is Nightshade, just sit tight, Drummers 2-3 and 2-4 are inbound, ETA one minute.*"

She knew that the reinforcements would probably come too late, as a minute in a dogfight could be an eternity, and she had to act on her own. Having shot past her, the pair of Darts had gone for her wingman, who was now defensive and trying to dodge the fire from the Wraith

fighters. It was a stroke of pure luck that both fighters were focused on her wingman and were ignoring her. That would give her a free shot at one, perhaps both bandits. Employing the most advanced air-to-air radar made by the United States, the F-302 could track and target multiple targets, and two fighters was a piece of cake. That is if she could get a lock. Fortunately for her, she could get a lock quickly. The missile lock tone sounded clearly through out the fighter's cockpit.

"I got good tone," she said. "Fox Three." She pulled the trigger and the missile streaked from underneath the downward slanting wings of the F-302 and straight towards the Dart. It hit the Dart just aft of the cockpit and soon it became a ball of rapidly expanding gas and metal. Meanwhile, her wingman had managed to dodge fire from the remaining Dart. In a split second, the pilot cut his thrust and flipped his fighter end for end, the momentum of the fighter's movement keeping it heading in the direction with which it was traveling before, and then opened up at close range with the fighter's guns, blasting the remaining Dart into oblivion.

"Nightshade, this is Eagle 2-1, Darts have been neutralized."

"*Eagle Flight, return to base. Drummer Flight, resume Eagle Flight's patrol route.*"

"Roger that."

The newly commissioned 441<sup>st</sup> Fighter Squadron, "The Hydras", was running integration exercises, as did all units that were new or had new members. Though it was still a few pilots short of full operational strength, the currently assigned pilots felt that training exercises beat boredom any day. It also provided them with a chance to familiarize themselves with the newer F-306 fighters. Though the controls were generally the same as the older F-302s, the Fenrirs were faster, more maneuverable, and carried a larger payload than the F-302s. Also, the Fenrirs had one feature that the F-302s lacked: a short range hyperdrive. Though the original design of the F-302 had called for one, the inherent instability of a naquadria powered generator made the use of a hyperdrive on the earlier fighter risky business. The concept of a short range hyperspace capable fighter had been proven with then Colonel Jack O'Neill's F-302 hyperspace jump to dispose of the stargate that Anubis had set to explode, and had been made a reality with the F-306. The newer Asgard power generators allowed the fighter to make short jumps in hyperspace, though with no where near the range of the larger hyperdrives mounted on the 304s and *Mjolnir*-class ships. The small hyperdrive basically allowed the fighter to jump clear of a system and then land on it's mother ship, without the larger ship having to wait to recover all the fighters; a useful feature when the ship was under attack and a quick retreat was required. Another difference the 306s had was the number of crew required. F-302s required a crew of two: a pilot and a RIO/Weapons Officer, which both had to be trained to operate the fighter; whereas the F-306 only required a crew of one, though there several multi-seat variants to fill a variety of roles.

Captain "Monopoly", currently the squadron's Executive Officer, led the other three pilots in the planned exercise. As there was only one full flight of fighters, they were to engage in a two-on-two dogfight with simulated weapons. The exercise served two purposes. The first was to allow the pilots to familiarize themselves with the new aircraft beyond their initial training. The second was to further train the pilots. Statistically, after ten combat missions, the chances of a pilot's survival increased dramatically, and realistic training missions gave pilots needed experience without the loss of life. Though all of the pilots had already seen aerial combat during their time of service before joining the F-306 program, none of them had ever flown in space. Monopoly had the benefit of experience as a former F-302 pilot, who had flown with Dagger Squadron off the *Daedelus* before transferring to the F-306 program.

The missile lock warning tone sounded through Monopoly's cockpit and he and his wingman began to weave, trying to throw off the pair of pursuing fighters. A two-on-two fight was fairly even, but in a dogfight, the tables could turn at any moment, with the hunted suddenly becoming the hunter, and vice versa. With perfect precision, Monopoly reduced his thrust and pulled back on the stick, causing his fighter to accelerate in a new direction and with a quick roll, end up behind his pursuers. A quick simulated burst from the fighter's guns and one of the pursuers was "dead" and the pilot veered away, leaving Monopoly's wingman being pursued by the remaining aggressor, and Monopoly behind him. Having been sandwiched between two hostiles, the remaining aggressor pulled away, reluctant to push an unfavorable position. With the exercise over, Monopoly checked his fuel status. After conferring with the other pilots, he decided that they had enough fuel for one more round, as they had already been through several rounds of combat already.

"Hydra Flight, return to base," a voice said over the radio. With a sigh, Monopoly turned his fighter towards the *Gungnir*, with the three other fighters dropping into formation behind him.

"Sir," Monopoly said, as he stepped onto the *Gungnir's* bridge. "What's going on?"

"We're heading out to Pegasus," Viper replied, turning away from a map of the Pegasus galaxy only to acknowledge his XO's presence.

"May I ask why, sir?"

"We've gotten reports of increased Wraith activity. Atlantis' deep space sensors show hive ships on the move." He pointed to a cluster of stars on the map near the location of Atlantis. "Both the *Apollo* and the *Nyx* report Wraith scouts here and here." He pointed to two more stars.

"The Wraith are on the move?"

"Looks like it. Maybe even a full scale offensive against Atlantis and our assets there. We'll be joining the *Slepnir* at Midway Station."

"Sir, if I may say, the *Gungnir's* just finished shakedown trials, and we only have three out of four full squadrons aboard."

Viper threw Monopoly a look that said it wasn't news to him.

"We'll be getting a few more pilots at Midway," Viper said. He clapped his XO on the shoulder as he walked past him, heading back to his quarters, as the ship left Earth orbit and entered hyperspace, on its way to the mid-point between the Milky Way and Pegasus galaxies.

The aptly named Midway Space Station was the midway point of a three million light year wide void between the Milky Way and Pegasus galaxies. Having been completed several years after its inception, it allowed travelers from Earth to travel to Atlantis with the use of a macro, and shortened a travel time of three weeks to a mere half hour. Midway served as a transit and resupply depot between the two galaxies, where ships could replenish supplies and take on additional personnel and effect any repairs needed. The station had grown from simply being a transit station to a full fledged base with shipyard facilities just being added to it.

It took the *Gungnir* a week to make it to Midway, as the new ship's engines were faster than the older 304s, which took a week and a half to make the trip. The week in hyperspace almost drove the pilots of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing crazy as they were denied the opportunity to fly, and instead had to restrain their amusements to those found in their briefing rooms. The ship's simulators were in constant use as pilots continued to train or hold competitions with each other. Viper found Midway a welcome sight, as the ship dropped out of hyperspace. Already his pilots were anxious to get off the ship to stretch their legs, even though they were just going to another enclosed environment. At Midway he was supposed to receive a trio of pilots to fill the vacancies in his squadron, though it still left him short. He had cast his net of recruitment far and wide, but still had only netted three pilots.

"Ten hut!" one of the new pilots bellowed as she stood up and snapped to attention, causing the other two, both male, to follow suit.

"At ease," Viper said, as he set his Tablet PC on the lectern. He was followed by Monopoly, who took a seat off to the side. Viper surveyed his three new pilots, each of them having arrived via the Intergalactic Gate Bridge the day before the *Gungnir's* arrival at Midway. A quick glance at the data displayed on the screen of his Tablet told him all he needed to know about the three pilots in front of him.

The first on his left was what was probably the pilot with the most unusual background, and probably the most unique amongst the Earth forces. First, he came not from any branch of the United States military, but from the Royal Air Force. Secondly, his medical record indicated he was "blended" with a Tok'ra. Apparently the symbiote had plenty of piloting experience, bringing even more skill and experience to the already capable pilot.

"Lieutenant Jalnor, welcome to the Hydras," Viper said, using the British pronunciation of the rank, as he shook the pilot's hand.

"Thank you, sir," Jalnor replied.

Likewise, the second pilot was also from the RAF, but had a less unique history, though still experienced and skilled as a pilot. He had served a tour of duty in Operation Enduring Freedom, flying Tornados in a variety of missions ranging from air intercept to ground support.

"Lieutenant Zodiac." Again Viper shook the hand of his new pilot.

The third pilot would be the first female pilot in his squadron. Though Viper had nothing against female pilots, as he was friends with several, so far his search for pilots had only turned

up male pilots. Her service record indicated she was an excellent pilot, as all pilots were associated with the Stargate program and its affiliates. Like Zodiac, she had served in Enduring Freedom, as well as a short stint during the initial parts of Operation Iraqi Freedom, before she was vetted from her unit and sent into the classified 302/306 training programs.

"Lieutenant Angel, welcome." Viper then addressed all three new pilots. "Again, welcome to the 441<sup>st</sup>. Right now, we're a few pilots short of a full squadron, though we are expected to be fully operational. This is Captain Monopoly of the USAF, squadron XO. He'll get you squared away after this briefing." The door to the briefing room opened and a pilot poked his head in, and on seeing that it was occupied began to leave, but Viper waved him in. The pilot nodded to the pilots accompanying him, and entered the room. With the three new pilots, the 441<sup>st</sup> was now at two-thirds of full strength, lacking only four pilots. As it was an operational briefing, Viper introduced the new members to the older ones and vice versa. Assembled were Captain Kirby, and 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenants Kroze and Spike. Of the American pilots assembled, only Viper and Kirby were not of the US Air Force; Kirby being from the Marine Corps.

"We are currently here," Viper said, commencing the briefing. He tapped a command on his tablet and the room's projector whirred to life, projecting a map showing the two galaxies and the space between them. "Midway Station. Conveniently located in the middle of nowhere. We're headed here, Atlantis Outpost in the Pegasus galaxy. Prime vacation spot, if you don't mind gothic space vampires."

When Jester heard the news, she swore like the Marine that she was. Having first being an enlisted soldier before attending OCS, she was familiar with a very wide range of profanity. Wraith cruisers and hive ships were on their way to Atlantis and from the looks of it, it was a second offensive against the Lost City of the Ancients. The Darts she had run into during her patrol was a recon pair from a scouting cruiser lurking nearby. After the *Nyx* had discovered the cruiser, it had immediately scrambled all its squadrons against the lone ship. Despite a long record of 304s being severely damaged in skirmishes with Wraith ships, it was usually because it was one ship against several hive ships, or a multitude of cruisers. One on one, a 304 could take on a cruiser, and hold its own against two. During the sortie against the cruiser, Jester had made one kill against a Dart and severely damaged another before she expended the rest of her missiles against the cruiser's communication's array. She cursed the F-302s four missile load out, as it lacked battlefield endurance. The newer F-306s could carry four missiles on wing pylons, with another eight in internal stores, like the F-22 Raptor, but like the Raptor, it usually did not mount its external pylons as it compromised the fighter's stealth characteristics. Still, with an eight missile internal store, the 306 had twice the combat endurance that a 302 had. Currently, the *Nyx* was slated to replace its 302s with 306s in a year's time, much too far away for Jester's liking.

The mission called for three 304s to hit a Wraith hyperspace stop where they were culling a planet. It would be like walking straight into the lion's den, and the lion was very hungry. It was a dangerous combination. The combined presence of the *Daedelus*, *Apollo*, and *Nyx* represented a significant portion of the Earth forces in the Pegasus galaxy, as there were only a few *Mjolnirs* available, and most were defending Earth against the Ori. Defending Atlantis was the *Nidhoggr* and the *Jormungandr*, and scheduled to arrive soon was the *Slepnir*, and the *Gungnir* after that. Also in the Pegasus galaxy were the 304s *Heracles*, *Athena*, and *Agamemnon*, though they were on missions elsewhere in the galaxy.

While the *Daedelus* and *Apollo* hit the Wraith ships, the *Nyx* was to move in and provide support for SG teams helping to defend the planet, which meant providing interdiction against Wraith Dart sweeps on the local populace. As soon as her flight was clear of the *Nyx*, Jester could see a major furball already in the works. Above the planet's surface, a giant dogfight between F-302s from the other 304s and Darts was easily evident, as missile trails and flashes from energy weapons filled the void between the fighters. Taking her flight down into the atmosphere, Jester saw a quartet of Darts escape from the furball and make a run down to the city near the stargate. Nearing the gate, she saw that it was active, and several Puddle Jumpers had come through, most likely reinforcements from Atlantis. The Jumpers would even the fight against the Darts, but with the sheer number of Darts entering the fray it would still be a long and hard battle.

"Eagle 2-3 and 2-4," Jester said. "Fly a CAP over the city, and make sure there isn't a Dart lurking around making sweeps."

"Yes, sir," came the reply, and the two trailing fighters of Jester's wing peeled off towards the city while Jester, her wingman, and a pair of Puddle Jumpers engaged the quartet of Darts. She and her wingman got locks on a pair of Darts and fired just the same time as the two Jumpers fired their Ancient drone weapons. The missiles hit the Darts first, causing them to splinter into a pair of magnificent fireballs, and the drones, having originally locked on that pair of Darts, veered off sharply and acquired the remaining pair of Darts as new targets. The explosion was just as spectacular.

Despite the roar of the F-302s flying over head, Lieutenant Karegg still heard the wailing buzz of the Wraith Darts as they battled the Earth fighters. Occasionally a small group of Darts would try to break off and make a run on the city, but they were quickly dispatched. But despite the bad tactical choices, there were simply more Darts than there were 302s, and they could only keep them at bay for so long. Karegg and his team had already begun to mobilize as much of the indigenous population as they could, some of them traveling to the Atlantis Alpha Site, while others stayed to help fight. The long line of evacuees at the stargate was becoming a target for Darts that had escaped the furball, as a long sweep with their beams could effectively take the entire stream of evacuees. To prevent against this, Karegg had set up several defensive positions manned by soldiers with FIM-92 Stinger MANPADS. The Stingers provided anti-air capabilities to the ground units and could hold off or discourage runs by Darts long enough for reinforcements in the form of F-302 or Puddle Jumper air cover to arrive.

"Incoming!" a soldier yelled. "Ten o'clock!" He raised his rifle and fired off a burst. Around him, other soldiers followed suit, firing round after round at the Dart that was going to fly right over their position. If it managed to do that, then it would be able to sweep the entire defense team and leave a gap in the defensive network. While rifle fire would eventually bring down a Dart, given their current circumstances, it would not be fast enough. Karegg looked around for a Stinger, but he saw only empty tubes. They had already expended all the missiles they had brought with them. It was do or die time. Suddenly, there was a loud bang and the Dart veered off to the left, its rear on fire and trailing smoke. Another smoke trail that arced back towards the ground was a tell tale sign of what had caused the Dart to crash. Seeing the Dart make a run on Karegg's defensive position, another soldier had fired a Stinger from his position. Karegg gave him the thumbs up sign in response to the soldier's hand signal query as to their status.

"Karegg, what's your status?" a voice asked over the radio.

"The evacuees are through, but the Wraith are still here. We're running low on Stingers."

"OK, sit tight. Resupply is on the way."

"We got a bandit coming at five o'clock!" Goldfinger warned Rocket. With sensor contacts in every direction, cluttering up the sensor board, Goldfinger's job as RIO became one where he kept his eyes open and warned the pilot of anything that would be cause for concern, and a Dart moving in on their rear was one such event.

"Come on, let's see some of that pilot shit," Goldfinger said. In response, Rocket pulled back on his stick and pointed the fighter upwards, towards space, rolling the fighter at the same time to keep its profile constantly changing. Energy blasts from the Dart came closer and closer to the fighter as Rocket continued the climb. Suddenly, he cut his thrust and leveled out slightly before resuming the climb. Caught unaware over the sudden change in speed, the Dart overshot the F-302 and when the Earth fighter resumed the climb, it was on the Dart's tail.

"Good tone, Fox Three!" Rocket said as the fighter's targeting system locked onto the Dart. The missile blasted the rear portion of the Dart into oblivion, leaving only the prominent front spike of the fighter to fall to the ground.

"Rocket, another bandit coming in from your eight o'clock," he heard his wingman say. He pulled back on the stick and the fighter pulled out of its climb leaving it inverted before he completed the loop and pulled banked off to his left to engage the Dart head to head. As the two fighters closed with each other at supersonic speeds, both fighters began to fire off their guns at each other while constantly maneuvering in order to deny their opponent a clean shot. They blasted past each other, neither having sustained any damage in the encounter and then began to circle around, trying to get on the other's tail.

"Rocket, I'm engaging your bandit," his wingman said.

"Roger, Rush, I'm your wing," Rocket replied. In his loop with the Dart, Rocket could see Rush's 302 slide into the circle and dispatch the Dart with a burst from his fighter's guns.

With all her missiles expended, Jester managed to damage several and even kill one Dart with the F-302s onboard gun before she expended her ammunition for that too. As she made her way back to the *Nyx*, she could see how the space battle was going. The two 304s, the *Daedelus* and *Apollo*, had managed to destroy or disable two cruisers by either beaming explosives aboard the ships, or with directed missile fire. Early encounters with the Wraith had shown that the original missiles deployed on 304s traveled much too slowly and that Darts could actually intercept the missiles before they impacted on the Wraith capital ships. The subsequent refitting of the 304s had given them faster missiles that Darts had a much more difficult time intercepting, though a Dart in the right place at the right time could intercept an incoming missile.

As Jester came in for a landing on the starboard hangar, she saw the *Nyx* fire off a salvo of missiles at the hive ship. It was quickly followed by a second salvo from the *Daedelus* and another from the *Apollo*. The first salvo tore into the hive ship's shields, but did not do any damage to the ship's hull, while the second and third salvos ripped into the weakened shields and blasted the hull. Armored plates cracked and burned on the hive ship, and already several decks were venting atmosphere. With Keepers of the Wraith fleets becoming rare, any significant damage to a hive ship would cause the hive to retreat, granting a temporary respite for its intended victims, but as the citizens of the Pegasus galaxy had lived with the Wraith threat for so many centuries, a respite, though temporary, was a welcome one.

"Fresh air, not canned air," Viper said to Monopoly. "That's the difference." They were standing on one of the balconies of the magnificent Ancient city of Atlantis, the crown jewel of Ancient construction. Surrounding the vast city was an open ocean, stretching as far as the eye could see. Out there somewhere was the main continent, where the Athosians, an indigenous population of the Pegasus galaxy, had settled after their world had been overrun by the Wraith. The city itself was an engineering marvel. According to the reports and specifications that Viper had read, the city was actually a starship, originating from Earth. It had made the journey across galaxies powered by three ZPMs, giving it an unheard of power output. Even though the city only had one ZPM, its defensive shields were still quite formidable, and the drone weapons were far powerful than anything Earth had so far managed to be able to build.

"I doubt even Ancient technology could make the air aboard a starship not seem so stale," Viper said.

"I know there's one invention the Ancients never thought of making," Monopoly said.

"What's that?"

"A device that tells you if a girl shares mutual feelings with you."

"Like it matters to you, Monopoly, you're married."

"I was referring to that nurse down in the Infirmary. You know, the one that you..."

"Shut up, Captain."

"Shutting up, sir."

"A device like that would totally take the fun out of love," Viper said after a few moments of quite contemplation. "Love... is a game. Like StarCraft. You need to know when to rush, and when to turtle, and when to build up the big units."

"If I may say so, sir, I think you're bunkering down when you should be attacking."

"Everyone plays the game their own way, and I'm not bunkering down. I'm building the big units."

"True, but I'm the one that's married."

"Touché, Monopoly."

After few days at Atlantis, the *Gungnir* was underway again, its crew having been given the chance to stretch their legs and breathe some fresh air. With help from Atlantis' long range sensors, the ship was able to locate another Wraith task force and reach their projected hyperspace stop point before the Wraith did. With the new technologies incorporated into the new generation of fighters and ships, the tactics for fighting changed. Using a pair of captured cargo ships that had been converted to fill an AWACS role and an ECM role, the *Gungnir* could deploy its 306s in a quick strike against the Wraith ships before engaging.

"Who's out on AWACS?" Data asked.

"AWACS commander is SoS," the communications officer replied. "She is reporting on station and no sensor contacts."

"Right. Status of F-306 squadrons?"

"Air Boss Nasa reports all fighters are ready to go."

“Launch all squadrons and have them hold position.”

The AWACS ship was a refitted cargo ship that had been crammed full of sensor and communications equipment. It served as a mobile command center for its mother ship and her fighters, allowing the group early warning as to any possible enemy attacks as well as providing coordination to the group as it engaged the enemy. In certain instances, it allowed the *Gungnir* to run silent and on minimal power expenditure, making it literally undetectable by the enemy while the AWACS provided coordination to the fighters. In a pinch, the AWACS ship also worked well as a decoy to lure away any attackers.

Major SoS was the commander of the AWACS ship, overseeing a group of sensor operators and coordinating the movements of fighters. Over the years, she had developed good relationships with all the pilots she had encountered, and the pilots knew and trusted her to give them the necessary information at the time it was most needed. Effectively, she had command of the *Gungnir* and its fighter wing as well as being their eyes and ears beyond the normal sensor range of the ship.

“Contact!” one of the sensor operators reported. “One Wraith hive ship, supported by six cruisers.”

“Heading?” SoS asked.

“Along the projected route, ma’am.”

“OK, tight beam transmission to the *Gungnir*. Let them know the Wraith have arrived, and give them the fighter dispersion plot.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Within seconds, the sensor readings of the Wraith group was being transmitted to Data aboard the *Gungnir* along with one of the pre-approved fighter dispersion plans for attacking the Wraith ships.

Moments later, the proper jump coordinates had been loaded into the waiting F-306s. The plan called for the four 306 squadrons to jump in at staggered times and in positions around the Wraith fleet, causing surprise and confusing amongst the Wraith, allowing the fighters to disable several key systems on the Wraith ships before the *Gungnir* jumped in and finished off the fleet. Off to his left, Viper saw a squadron disappear into hyperspace for the short jump, and watched the seconds tick down before it was time for his own squadron to jump. When the timer hit zero, the fighter’s navigational computer engaged the hyperdrive and as one, the eight fighters of the 441<sup>st</sup> Fighter Squadron entered hyperspace.

It was a short jump, lasting only a little short of a minute, and then Viper found himself on the far side of the Wraith fleet. Already the other squadrons of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing had engaged the Wraith, who were scrambling Darts in an effort to try to fend off the sudden attack by the Earth fighters. He could see that the Wraith were confused, with F-306s appearing all around their fleet, and the stealth characteristics of the fighters were unlike anything the Wraith had faced before. It was the first combat deployment of the F-306, as the other *Mjolnir*-class ships in the Pegasus galaxy still had F-302s. It was also the reason why Viper had such a difficult time finding pilots to fill his squadrons. There were simply not enough pilots that were qualified to fly the F-306.

“Squadron, come port, heading 234, mark 010,” Viper said over the squadron’s tactical frequency. “Break by pairs. You know your assignments.”

The 441<sup>st</sup> had been the last squadron to jump into the fight against the Wraith, and as such, when the squadron had arrived, the Wraith formation had been disrupted, with the cruisers and Darts forming a defensive line against the attacking fighters and protecting the hive ship. In front of them was the large hive ship, its rear unprotected by either cruisers or Darts, making it the perfect target. Viper accelerated towards the hive ship, and his targeting computer locked onto the targets for his initial strike. For this mission, the F-306s had traded two of their missiles for a pair of SDBs, or Small Diameter Bombs, smart-bombs that could acquire and seek out their own targets, much like the Ancient drone weapons, but without the thought controlled guidance. Viper, along with the rest of his flight, consisting of Kirby, his wingman, and the wing pair of Angel and Kroze, was to target the hive ship’s engines, preventing it from running before the *Gungnir* could come in and finish it.

“Hydra 1-1, pickle,” Viper said, reporting that he had “dropped” both his SDBs.

“Hydra 1-2, pickle,” he heard Kirby report, which was then followed by reports of Angel and Kroze dropping their bombs. The SDBs had been modified for space flight, and whereas the original model was the size of a backpack, the space version was larger so that it could be fitted

with an engine. In addition to an engine, the explosives were naquadah enhanced, and the avionics were upgraded to be able to track a target in a micro-gravity environment. Viper got a visual track on the bombs as they accelerated towards the hive ship's engines before he pulled away towards his second target, the hive ship's communication's array.

"Status on the strike?" Data asked his sensor officer.

"The squadrons are engaged," Lieutenant Vampire reported. "Attack is proceeding as planned."

"OK, let's finish this. Major Nixorbo, weapons to full. Captain Drums, get ready to jump on my mark."

On Data's mark, the ship entered hyperspace and reemerged right on top of the Wraith ships. Immediately, Data ordered a full salvo of energy weapons and missiles to be directed at the nearest Wraith cruiser. The barrage blasted through the already weakened shields of the cruiser, and caused hull breaches on several levels, venting atmosphere. A second barrage left the cruiser ravaged and effectively non-functional as a combat unit. It took the Wraith a few more seconds to reorganize and divert away from the fighter threat, but the cruisers and most of the Darts began to ignore the 306s and turn their attention on the Earth battle cruiser.

"Status report?" Data asked after the hive ship and 5 remaining cruisers blasted the *Gungnir* with a salvo from their weapons.

"Shields are holding at 96%," Nixorbo replied.

"All guns, fire at will. Drums, take us towards the hive ship."

"Looks like they just impacted on the surface," Angel reported over the radio to Viper. She and Kroze were near the aft of the hive ship, engaging a few Darts that had ended up in that area before Viper ordered a BDA, bomb damage assessment. "*Could be that their engines are better protected than we thought.*"

"Roger, Angel," Viper replied. He switched channels away from his squadron frequency. "SoS, you got the BDA?"

"Got it, Viper, forwarding it to the Gungnir."

"Boss, I see a Dart making a run on the Gung," Kirby said.

"Take it down, I've got your wing," Viper replied.

Kirby pushed his throttle forward and hit the afterburners, making his 306 surge forward, gaining on the attacking Dart. Around him, the *Gungnir's* point defense batteries opened up, and Kirby hoped that none of them would accidentally hit him. The Dart was too busy trying to evade the fire from the *Gungnir's* point defense weapons that it did not notice Kirby slide in on its tail and fire off a missile.

With one ship, the Earth forces had managed to ambush a fleet of seven Wraith ships, disabling or destroying three of the ships, and driving off the remaining ones, including the hive ship. They had managed to disrupt another possible culling and with various assets deployed throughout the Pegasus galaxy, they could track the movement of Wraith fleets and work to prevent cullings from happening, though with the sheer amount of Wraith ships present and the limited amount of Earth vessels available, they could not prevent every single culling from taking place. With the arrival of the *Slepnir* and *Gungnir* in Pegasus, the Earth forces could now challenge larger fleets roaming the galaxy, and make a difference against the threat of the Wraith.

The first combat deployment of the F-306 Fenrir fighter was a stunning success. The new stealth features of the fighter made it difficult for Darts, which relied completely on sensor input to guide the pilot, to lock onto the fighters and thus kept pilots alive and gave them better opportunities to shoot down the enemy. With the increased battlefield survivability, came extended battlefield endurance with the greater payload that the fighters could carry. Each fighter had the capability to down several Darts before needing to resupply, and the fighter's guns gave it an effective back up weapon.

"OK," Viper said to the assembled wing. "Let's get down everything we learned and everything we observed about the 306s. This evaluation goes back to the eggheads at Area 51."

"The fighter is more maneuverable," Jalnor said, his voice deep and resonant, indicating that it was the symbiote that was speaking. "Than its predecessor as well as faster. In my experience, it is superior to that of the Gliders, and anything that the Goa'uld could have constructed."

"The larger combat load is nice," Monopoly said. "I remember with the F-302, that it had a very limited payload. Also, with the larger variety of munitions that the F-306 can carry, we now have more tactical options in terms of missions, even if we aren't carrying a full load."

"The stealth features are good," another pilot said. "It seemed to throw them for a loop when we jumped in. Dart pilots can't see outside their cockpits, and all the information they receive is through the Dart's sensors. They seemed to be firing blindly in the beginning of the fight while they tried to get sensor fixes on us."

"Which goes to show the only truly reliable sensor is your Mark 0s," Viper said. Mark 0s were pilot slang for a person's eyes. "Anything else? Anyone here engage with the gun?"

When the *Nyx* returned to Atlantis, Jester found that she had a surprise in store for her. The *Slepnir* and *Gungnir* had arrived ahead of schedule and had managed to make a delivery of several F-306s to the outpost. To determine who would get to fly the new fighters, the commanders of the ships had agreed to a random drawing of names consisting of the gathered pilots. After their names had been picked, the pilots would undergo a familiarization process with the new fighter, bringing them up to speed on the new capabilities that they had. Jester had been quite surprised when her name had been pulled out of the hat, and was very ecstatic that she now had the chance to fly the most advanced human fighter ever built. Over the next week, she had studied the manuals for the new fighter extensively, and spent many hours in the simulator, familiarizing herself with the controls, along with the eleven other lucky pilots.

After an extensive week of classroom and simulator training, the lucky twelve were given the chance to strap themselves into the F-306. While a majority of the controls were similar or the same as the F-302, the F-306 did incorporate a few new features in terms of control, namely the inclusion of a helmet mounted heads-up-display, which projected the HUD onto the pilot's faceplate instead of a mounted display. This gave the pilot the ability to simply turn his head and lock onto a target, instead of having to turn the fighter. Coupled with the high off-boresight tracking capability of the AIM-120D AMRAAM missile, the new HUD allowed the pilot to hit whatever he was looking at with a missile, regardless of where it was in relation to the fighter itself. As she flew, Jester wondered if they had managed to add in the Ancient thought-responsive technology of the Puddle Jumpers, as the F-306 seemed to respond to her every thought, flawlessly performing every maneuver she wanted it to perform. In essence, it was a sweet ride, but she was itching to see what it could really do in combat.

"*Good morning gentlemen, the temperature is a hundred and ten degrees,*" she heard a voice say over the radio. Immediately she recognized the voice, and checked her sensor board and spotted the corresponding IFF blip moving up to join her formation.

"*Holy shit! It's Viper!*" Goldfinger said. He had been one of the pilots selected for the F-306, much to Rocket's chagrin.

"*Great... Viper,*" another pilot said.

"OK, knock it off," Jester said. "What brings you out here, Viper?"

"*Well, given that all y'all got a new toy, I thought I'd bring my squadron along and see if y'all want to play,*" Viper replied. A new set of blips appeared on Jester's sensor board as the 441<sup>st</sup> lit up their IFF transponders.

"So, what are you thinking? A little RED FLAG?"

"*I was thinking TOP GUN, but it doesn't matter. I've got an AWACS tasked to give us some command and control. SoS will get us setup.*"

After a few minutes, directions from SoS' AWACS ship had the squadron of new 306 pilots in position to fly against the eight planes of the 441<sup>st</sup> and another flight from another squadron. The rules were simple: when a plane was hit with a simulated weapon, either missiles or guns, it was to break off and orbit a certain area. The moment Jester closed in onto the enemy flight that she was to engage, she could see that it was Viper's flight that she was flying against. Her wing pair broke off to engage the other pair in Viper's flight, leaving her and Goldfinger, who was her wingman for this exercise, going head to head against Viper and his wingman. All four fighters juked and danced around as the pairs flew towards each other to make it difficult for their opponents to get an easy shot with either a missile or the guns. As they blew past each other at near supersonic speeds, they began to circle around each other, trying to get onto the other person's tail. It was in a situation like this that a helmet mounted HUD became useful, as while the planes were flying in a circle, the pilot could simply turn his head towards his target and acquire a missile lock. At the sound of the missile lock warning, Jester began to fire off countermeasures, and she saw that Viper had likewise begun to do so, effectively neutralizing

missiles as an option in this mock engagement, which meant they had to engage with guns. The F-306 was equipped with a 25mm gauss gun, much like the ones that were point defense guns on the 304s, and could fire bursts of projectiles at high velocities with enough kinetic energy to bring down a Dart or Death Glider in a single controlled burst.

Then Jester saw Viper do something with the F-306 that made her swear. Much like its earthbound counterpart, the F-22 Raptor, the F-306 had thrust vectoring capabilities, which was what gave it such maneuverability in combat. Viper had stood his fighter on its port wing, and while maintaining movement in the circle, had pitched his fighter so that it pointed towards her, giving him a clean shot at her. In response, Jester broke the circle and dove straight for the deck, twisting and spiraling as she went. With a quick check of her surroundings, she saw that Goldfinger had engaged Kirby, and that the whole engagement was now a series of one on one dogfights.

As he chased Jester fifty meters above the surface of the ocean and at two times the speed of sound, Viper was enjoying himself. Like all pilots, he was an adrenaline junkie, and to him, a dogfight was the greatest adrenaline rush that anyone could ever have. In front of him, Jester's fighter kicked two large walls of water from the wing tip vortices, and the spray of water occasionally obscured his vision, making him pull upwards to gain some altitude. Once he reached sufficient altitude, Viper dove and came in at an angle to Jester's tail for an attack from her starboard side. In response, she turned starboard and raced for a series of canyons on the nearby continent. With a growl, he turned his fighter around and went after Jester.

Viper sensed that Jester had picked the canyons as their battleground for a reason. They were wide enough to permit a fighter to fly through, but had enough twists and turns that made flying through them difficult. It was obvious to him that she had flown through them many times before, and she clearly had the upper hand in this situation. With a quick rolling reversal, Jester now became the hunter, and Viper was the hunted. Such things were common occurrences in dogfights. Not willing to play the hunted in Jester's chosen playground, Viper pulled back on his stick and sent his fighter upwards to open sky where he would have room to play. Since he had flown the F-306 longer than Jester had, he knew a few tricks, all thanks to thrust vectoring. With a quick tail flip, his fighter seemed to flip over onto its back before completing the loop, and during the flip, it gave him a quick window where he could fire off a burst from his guns at Jester. Unfortunately he missed, but it kept Jester from getting a clean shot at him. Again, he pulled the F-306 into a climb and when he was certain that Jester was once again on his tail, he put it in to a controlled, but highly erratic spiral downwards, his fighter going through what appeared to be a flat spin as it fell. As Jester dove towards him, Viper climbed again and went for a head to head pass. In the brief moment that the two fighters were head to head, both pilots instinctively fired, and according to the AWACS control ship, the duel was a draw, as both pilots had hit each other in the high speed pass.

"*I feel the need...*" Viper heard Jester say over the radio as they flew towards the "dead pilot" area.

"The need..." Viper replied.

"For speed!" they said in unison. Both of them put their fighters into a dive and leveled out just above the surface of the ocean, accelerating as they went. They blew past the city of Atlantis at Mach 2.7, the massive sonic booms created by both fighters reverberating through out the city.

Dr. Meredith Rodney McKay was in the cafeteria eating his usual lunch of several sandwiches and coffee, enjoying a bit of quiet time in between all the projects he had to do. He had just taken a large bite out of a turkey sandwich and was washing it down with a large gulp of hot coffee when two loud sonic booms rattled the cafeteria, startling everyone present. The suddenness of the sonic booms caused McKay to jerk involuntarily as he held the coffee cup up to his face, causing hot coffee to spill down his front and onto his pants.

"Son of a..." McKay said as he saw that his pants were covered with hot coffee.

"You!" Viper heard someone say as he entered the cafeteria of Atlantis. Since his high speed flyby a few hours ago, he was anxious to see the damage he had done. Hopefully, it was nothing too permanent, as having the reputation of damaging a ten-thousand year-old city was not a good one. Viper turned towards the voice.

"You're still dangerous!" Jester said, as she walked up to him. "But you can be my wingman anytime."

"Bullshit," Viper replied. "You can be mine." Angel, who had been walking with Jester, brushed passed them and rolled her eyes. Despite the seniority of Jester and Viper, the two of them could act like children when they got together. It was said that if the two of them ever ended up in the same squadron, it would be utter havoc and pandemonium.

"So, what do you think?" Viper asked as he, Jester, and Angel made their way through the food line.

"Shiny," Jester replied, as she picked up an orange off the fruit bowl.

"That it is. It gets even better once you figure out all the tricks it can do. It's going to win us this war." The three of them joined table where a bunch of pilots were already eating. Kroze and Goldfinger were up to their usual antics whenever they got together, and the two RAF pilots were quietly talking, ignoring the more boisterous American pilots. The members of the group gave a quick nod to the high ranking officers that joined them, but as the cafeteria was an area marked as "no décor", meaning that ranks were ignored, they did not have to pay the usual respects to the officers.

"Are any of you here the pilots who buzzed the city?" a voice asked halfway through the meal. They looked up to see an irate Dr. McKay, who had since then changed into new clothes.

"What's it to you?" Viper asked, leaning back in his chair.

"I would have you know that what they did was totally unprofessional and out of line."

"Really? Did they disrupt any important experiments? Or were you just sitting around jer... doing nothing."

"No, not really, but I was doing some very high-level thinking. Most certainly higher than any of you fighter jocks could ever do. And I spilled hot coffee all over myself!"

"I'm sorry, Dr. McKay," Jester said. "Perhaps next time you could use a sippie cup? In the mean time, I'm sure maybe some dessert will put things into perspective. Lemon meringue pie, perhaps?"

"No, not really," McKay said, starting to lose some of the color in his face and backing away from the table.

"Perhaps an orange?" she held out her orange to McKay, who simply dropped the matter at hand and left.

"He's allergic to citrus," Jester said to Viper, who had a puzzled look on his face.

"So that's why Colonel Sheppard had a lemon in his pocket," Viper replied as he returned to his meal.

"Hey, look, three o'clock, with the tray," Jester said, a few minutes later. She elbowed Viper and he turned to look in the direction she was discreetly pointing to. Exiting the food line with a laden tray was the nurse that Viper had a crush on, searching for an empty table to eat at. As she looked across the room, she spotted Viper, who waved in her direction, and she began to make her way over. Just as she was about to reach the table, there was a loud scraping of chairs as the other pilots at the table scattered like shrapnel from a grenade.

Emboldened by his commander's attempt to pick up the pretty nurse, Kroze decided that he would make a move of his own. He mustered his courage and sat down at a nearby table that happened to be where Dr. Esposito, one of the research members of the Atlantis expedition, was eating her meal.

Rocket was passing through the cafeteria when he spotted Goldfinger. He was curious as to his RIO's experience with the new fighter, and was eager for a description on his time with it. However, he found his backseater's attention more focused on events several tables away than the morning's flight. Curious as to what could be more interesting than discussing the new fighter, Rocket turned to see for himself.

"Isn't that Kroze and... you know that one with the really cute..." Rocket asked.

"Yeah. She's the one," Goldfinger replied. "I bet you he's going to get slapped."

"I don't know, he seems to be doing good right now."

"Twenty bucks?"

"You're on." The two pilots trailed Kroze as he and the doctor left the cafeteria.

A loud resounding slap brought a grin to Goldfinger's face, and he held out his hand to Rocket, who let out a sigh and deposited a twenty dollar bill into his RIO's waiting hand. The two of them peeked around the corner to see Esposito storm off with an angry look on her face.

"Fuck you, Kroze!" she yelled before turning the corner and disappearing from sight. As Kroze walked back from the balcony, Rocket and Goldfinger could see a red mark developing on Kroze's face from the slap he had just received.

"Well," Goldfinger said to Kroze as he stepped out from his hiding place. "I say you got farther along on that one than you have before. You said the line, didn't you?"

"Screw you, Dix," Kroze replied. He massaged his cheek and worked his jaw around. The mark was becoming brighter and the outline of a hand was clearly visible.

"Using the line 'If I told you that you had a nice body, would you hold it against me?' makes you deserve getting slapped. Besides, she's way out of your league." The conversation fell silent as Viper passed by within earshot, whistling as he did. It seemed that he was in a good mood, most likely because of the time spent with a certain nurse. His jovial mood lasted until he got a call on his headset radio, and then his face became all business and made his way over to the trio of pilots.

"Kroze, get your shit together, we're heading out," he said. "You two as well."

"Yes, sir," the three pilots said in unison.

It was a battle group consisting of the *Daedelus*, *Apollo*, *Nyx*, *Sleipnir*, and the *Gungnir*, gathered to launch an offensive against one of the larger Wraith fleets roaming the Pegasus galaxy. The five battle cruisers could field up to fourteen squadrons of fighters; eight squadrons of F-306 Fenrirs from the two *Mjolnir*-class ships, and six squadrons of F-302s from the *Daedelus*-class vessels. Scattered amongst the F-302 squadrons was a handful of F-306s. The primary strike force would be the *Sleipnir* and *Gungnir*, as they were more heavily armed than the older vessels, and would be supported by the 304s. It was a straightforward plan, the battle group would jump in, attempt to disable or destroy the Wraith ships, most preferably the hive ship, and then jump out. To prevent Wraith reinforcements, an ECM ship would be deployed along with an AWACS ship, which would jam Wraith communications.

As Viper strapped himself into his fighter, he had a bad feeling about the whole thing. He couldn't quite put a finger on what made him feel bad, but as a commander and a pilot, he knew to trust his feelings. Still, he couldn't go to Data and call off the mission simply because he felt bad about it; he needed some concrete proof. He fastened his breath mask and lowered his visor, which would serve as his HUD. Once the system was up, he turned his head and scanned around the fighter bay to make sure the system was tracking his head movements. With everything working as it should, he signaled to his plane handlers that he was ready and to remove the chocks holding the plane in place. He would launch right after the ship came out of hyperspace along with the rest of the squadrons.

The *Gungnir* was already engaging the nearest Wraith ship when Viper joined the battle. Once he cleared the launch tube, he pushed forward on his stick and to starboard, taking his fighter down and away from the keel of the *Gungnir* as the *Mjolnir*-class ships had their fighter bays centerline and underneath the ship, unlike the two side bays of the BC-304s. A quick check of his sensor board and a visual confirmation told him that his wingman, Kirby, was right behind him. For this mission, the profile would be the same as the last one; the F-306s would be deliver guided munitions to specific points on the Wraith ships. Except there was a difference from what they had expected to find. There were two hive ships, which meant twice the advertised number of ships. There were a hundred sixty-four Earth fighters, fourteen squadrons of twelve, minus the four short from the 441<sup>st</sup>, but there were hundreds of Darts. It was more like a swarm than anything else, and already they were making runs against the 304s, which the Wraith knew the capabilities of well. The *Mjolnirs* were still too new for the Wraith to have knowledge of their capabilities.

"All squadrons," he said, addressing the 243<sup>rd</sup> Wing. "Proceed with plan. Hit the hive ships so they call back some of their fighters."

Flight Lieutenant Douglas "Jalnor" Carr relaxed as he made his approach to the hive ship. He was an experienced pilot, and getting nervous would not help. Relaxing kept him focused, and he would allow his symbiote to do most of the flying. It was nice, having an experienced pilot as his symbiote, someone who could teach him all the tips and tricks of surviving fighter combat, and how to recognize those tips and tricks when being used against him. He and his wingman,

Zodiac, were tasked to hit the hive ship's launch bays, where a direct hit would cause secondary explosions on the hive ship. But getting into position to make the bombing run was difficult, as soon, the area was swarming with Darts; more had come from the second hive ship. It was readily apparent that they were seriously outnumbered, but it also gave the Earth fighters a slight advantage. Scrubbing the original target profile for his SDBs, Jalnor launched one at a cluster of Darts before pulling sharply away and hitting his afterburners. The smart bomb shot out from underneath his fighter and raced towards the cluster of Darts and exploded in their midst, the naquadah enhanced warhead turned the cluster of Wraith ships into a fast moving cloud of debris, a large portion which became shrapnel and embedded itself into nearby Darts.

Knowing that the trick would only work once, and that the Darts would scatter when a SDB was inbound, Zodiac unloaded his two bombs on his original target, and fired off a burst from his guns for good measure. Unfortunately, the Darts began picking up on the SDBs, and either made chased after the bombs and fired upon them or simply crashed into them before they hit their targets.

"There's too many Darts," Zodiac said. "They're intercepting the bombs."

"Sir," the communications officer said. "Our fighters are reporting that the Darts are intercepting the bombs. No hits have been made against the hive ships."

"Right," Data replied. "Pull them back to cover us."

"Sir!" Vampire said. "The *Nyx* is coming under heavy fire. Their shields are down, and Colonel Caldwell has ordered them to retreat."

"Are they recovering their fighters?"

"They're trying too, but they've taken heavy losses to their squadrons."

"Drums, move us in between the *Nyx* and the Wraith ships, let's see if we can't help recover their fighters and give them some cover. Nixorbo, target their weapons."

The *Gungnir* surged forward and interposed itself between the damaged *Nyx* and the attacking Wraith vessels. Its point defense weapons came to life as Darts began to swarm over the larger ship. By placing itself between the *Nyx* and the Wraith, the *Gungnir* took the brunt of the incoming fire, its stronger shields absorbing the fusillade of fire that would have destroyed the now vulnerable *Nyx*.

Jester watched from her new F-306 as the *Nyx* began its retreat from the battle. She was on approach to the *Gungnir*, which was closer to her, when suddenly, the Darts stopped swarming the *Gungnir* and all of them made a straight run for the *Nyx*, the Wraith intent on destroying one Earth vessel in response to losing so many ships since the arrival of the newer and more powerful cruisers. She knew the Darts were on a suicide run towards the *Nyx*, and she'd be damned if she was going to lose what had been her home for the past few months. Though the *Gungnir's* point defense batteries were trying their best to swat the swarm of Darts, there just too many to get them all before they impacted with the *Nyx*. Aborting her landing, Jester pushed her fighter to its maximum speed and went after the Darts, trying to save her home. The Darts seemed to ignore any of the other fighters that were trying to pick them off and were thus easy targets for a combination of point defense guns and missiles from fighters, but in the end, their greater numbers prevailed, and in the blink of an eye, the *Nyx* had been impacted by several Darts and exploded.

The command center of the *Gungnir* sat in stunned silence as the *Nyx* exploded before their very eyes. As the explosion faded in the darkness of space, they had more pressing concerns than the destruction of an Earth vessel and the untimely death of over two hundred crewmembers. The Wraith were now focused on them.

"*All ships retreat!*" Colonel Steven Caldwell of the *Daedelus*, the battle group commander, ordered. The order seemed to snap the crew of the *Gungnir* out of their silence and immediately they had pushed aside the grief for their fallen comrades and were back to their tasks with their usual professionalism.

"All 306s jump out to the rally point," Data ordered. "We'll take on as many 302s as we can." As soon as Data gave the order, the F-306s of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing began disengaging and making jumps into hyperspace. The surviving F-302 squadrons from the *Nyx* began landing on the *Gungnir* as their mother ship had been destroyed and without a larger hyperspace capable ship, they would be stranded. The recovery operation was thankfully short, as the Wraith began pounding on the *Gungnir* very heavily, threatening the further survival of the ship.

"All fighters, jump to Rally Point Alpha." Viper swore and broke off his attack run. He had seen what had happened to the *Nyx* and was itching for payback against the Wraith.

"Jump at your discretion," he ordered as he turned his fighter onto the appropriate exit path. Already his pilots were making their exit jumps, and one by one, their IFF transponders were winked off his sensor board in accordance with their jump report.

"Hydra 1-1, jumping," he said, though there was almost no one left to hear his report. He and the *Sleipnir* jumped out simultaneously, and the larger craft was the last Earth vessel left in the combat zone. Viper spent the five minute hyperspace jump thinking about what had happened during the battle. The Wraith presence was twice as big as advertised and there seemed to be more Darts than he thought could ever come out of a hive ship or two. Though outnumbered almost five to one, his pilots had acquitted themselves quite well, with no losses, but perhaps a few dings and dents here and there. His pilots were the best, and he was proud of them and their performance in this overwhelmingly difficult battle.

Once he had reached the rally point, Viper took a quick inventory of the gathered fighters, both visually and from his sensor board. He was relieved to see that all the pilots of the 243<sup>rd</sup> had made it to the rally point, generally in one piece. He noticed more than one F-306 had suffered battle damage, though it was a testament to the durability of the fighter that it had managed to make a hyperspace jump with such damage. Taking charge of the situation, he organized the wing and tasked a few relatively undamaged fighters to do visual damage inspections of the more heavily damaged fighters as well as putting a few on patrol duty, in case the Wraith came knocking. As he was sorting out the clutter of the gaggle of waiting fighters, he noticed an odd sensor contact labeled *Eagle 2-1*. Eagle Squadron was one of the two squadrons based off the now destroyed *Nyx*. He remembered that only one F-306 had gone to Eagle Squadron, and that it was assigned to Jester. It was welcome news to know that his friend had made it through.

"Eagle 2-1, come in," he said. "This is Hydra 1-1. Jester, you amongst the living?"

"Holy shit, it's Viper!" he heard Jester reply. Viper laughed. It was a good sign that Jester was still able to make light of the situation.

"What's your status?"

"I'm good to go." That was the standard reply, whether the pilot was actually good to go or not, even more so when the pilot was a Marine, who were well known for their toughness and reluctance to show signs of weakness.

"Kirby, do a visual check," Viper ordered. The flyby showed little significant damage to Jester's F-306, and Viper knew that most of the damage would probably be emotional. Jester had been connected with the crew of the *Nyx*; it had been her home away from home, and she had made friends with many of the crew and her fellow pilots who served aboard the ship. The toughest part was probably the loss of many Eagle Squadron pilots, fellow Marine aviators, who had died millions of light-years away from home, fighting an enemy that had such scant regard for human life, and their families would never know the exact circumstances of their deaths.

"When are we getting picked up?" he heard Jester ask. Now that he thought about it, the *Gungnir* should have arrived at the rally point before him, as he had jumped after it, but then he remembered another thing: the *Gungnir* had jumped in a different direction, and had done so as to avoid having the Wraith follow them to the rally point. Depending if the Wraith followed the *Gungnir*, their wait time could be anywhere between a few minutes to several hours.

"Just relax," he said. "Everyone rotate patrols every hour or so. Those low on gas, stay put."

After one more check of his surroundings to make sure everything was in order, Viper relaxed into his pilot's chair and closed his eyes for a quick nap. His fighter only carried a limited amount of air, and the carbon dioxide scrubbers would only extend that amount of air for so long, and death by running out of breathable air was something that he did not want to happen to him, and resting allowed him to conserve his air.

The hyperspace arrival warning from his sensor board brought Viper out his nap. It felt like he had only slept for a few minutes, but a check of his fighter's chronometer told him it had been thirty minutes. The shadow of the *Gungnir* filled his cockpit as the *Mjolnir*-class vessel exited hyperspace almost right on top of him. Getting run over by a ship exiting hyperspace was also on his list of ways not to die. Up first for landing were the pilots that were low on fuel and the most damaged planes. He arranged for Jester's fighter to also be taken aboard, as now she had no home ship.

As it had turned out, Eagle Squadron had come through with six pilots and their RIOs intact and they were waiting aboard the *Gungnir*, much to Jester's relief. The band of Marines was given some time and space to come together and grieve for their fallen comrades. The other squadron from the *Nyx*, Drummer Squadron, had fared much worse, with Goldfinger and his F-306, Rocket, Rush and his RIO as the only surviving pilots. Everyone else had either perished when the *Nyx* had been destroyed or had been shot down in combat prior to that.

The *Gungnir's* delay at arriving at the rally point had been caused by Wraith complications, where they had followed the ship to its first jump point, and after a battle there, in which the *Gungnir* made it out whole, though just barely, it had then proceeded to the rally point. It would take the dry dock facilities at Atlantis to bring the vessel back to full operational status, and once all the fighters were back aboard, the ship's destination was the city of the Ancients.

Everyone had turned out at the memorial service for the fallen aboard the *Nyx*. The entire Atlantis expedition as well as crew of the remaining ships stationed in Pegasus, all of them in their best suits or dress uniforms. In the days since the battle, everyone involved had reviewed what had happened, and though everyone present had done their best to save the *Nyx*, there was no way that it could have been saved from such a Wraith onslaught. The fault lay squarely with the Wraith.

"May our fallen comrades, our brothers and sisters in arms, rest in peace," the chaplain finished. Shortly after, the honor guard raised their rifles to their shoulders and each of the seven members fired off three shots in unison into the air. Before the report of the final shot had faded, a roar was heard overhead as a flight of four fighters, drawn from the survivors of the *Nyx's* squadrons, flew over head in a finger-four formation, and one of the planes pulled up and away while the rest of the flight continued in level flight. It was a missing-man formation; the traditional farewell to fallen pilots.

"Present arms!" As one, the gathered members of the armed forces, American, English, Australian, Scottish, regardless of their nationality, snapped to attention and raised their arms in a salute to their fallen comrades; the Americans with their palm downward salutes, and the members of the Commonwealth nations with their palm outward salutes, and though the different saluting styles were usually cause for some lighthearted teasing, there was none, as all of them were united in remembering the dead.

"Order arms!" Only then did the arms come back down to their sides.

As the gathered people were dismissed and began to disperse, Data could see through the crowd, the members of the original expedition, whose exploits against the Wraith with limited resources were well known. There was Samantha Carter, who had come from SG-1; Dr. Daniel Jackson, who also came from SG-1 and was a renowned expert on languages and ancient cultures, especially the Ancients; John Sheppard, commander of the expedition's military force; the Pegasus galaxy natives Ronon Dex and Teyla Emmagen, and the brilliant scientists Drs. McKay and Radek Zelenka. In the usual hustle and bustle of the great city, it was easy to miss the presence of such well known figures, whose actions had preserved the city and those living in it during the tumultuous first few years of their arrival in the Pegasus galaxy.

The survivors of the *Nyx's* fighter squadrons would be absorbed into the remaining squadrons aboard other ships to replace lost pilots. For the 441<sup>st</sup>, it meant that it could reach full operational strength, despite already having flown two combat missions. It was a sad fact that the 441<sup>st</sup> would benefit from the loss of a ship, but it was how things were done. For Jester, Rocket, Goldfinger, and Rush, they would now call the 441<sup>st</sup> their squadron and the *Gungnir* their home. For the four of them, they drew some comfort in being assigned together, and for Jester, she found herself somewhat excited at being assigned to the 441<sup>st</sup>. She knew that they were capable pilots, from the exercise she had participated in several days ago, but more than that, she had friends amongst the Hydras, Angel and Viper. Friends she knew she could count on in times of need, just as she knew she could count on her fellow Marines, regardless of their jobs and duty, in times of great need. And she knew that the rest of the squadron consisted of good people, as Viper had a hand in bringing them together. He would have picked only the best and the most reliable pilots for his squadrons.

"Who's going to be my wing?" Jester asked, after she and her fellow survivors from the *Nyx* had reported to their new squadron commander.

"Just hold on," Viper replied, holding up his hands. "There's some other business to attend to before we get to wing assignments. First, Rush and Rocket, the two of you don't have experience

with the F-306. We'll get you set straight soon enough. Secondly, Jester, since you outrank my current XO, you'll eventually have to take over those duties. In the mean time, work with him to ease the transition. That's all for now, we've got a squadron briefing, so I'll finish everything there."

It turned out that Angel was to be Jester's wing, and Goldfinger would be partnered with Kroze, while Rocket and Rush would stay wingmen. Though new to the F-306, Rocket and Rush were not new to working together, having been wingmen during their time in Drummer Squadron. Having lost a ship, the Atlantis expedition was taking a few days, perhaps even weeks, to assess the situation and it provided a good opportunity to train the new pilots on the F-306. If the offensives against the Wraith were to continue, Rocket and Rush would have minimal time to familiarize themselves with the fighter, and while the control schemes were similar, the capabilities between the two fighters were vastly different.

Making up Hydra Flight 1 was Viper with Kirby as his wing, and Goldfinger and Kroze. Hydra Flight 2 consisted of Jester and Angel, and the RAF pilots Jalnor and Zodiac. Hydra Flight 3 was led by Monopoly, with Spike as his wing, followed by Rocket and Rush. The twelve F-306s cruised high above the Lantean ocean and then dipped down below ten thousand feet. Their path brought them west over the main continent and then south, where the expedition had set up a training ground for their ground forces. The squadron made one large loop high above what had been called "The Sandbox" and then continued on their westward course.

"Sure sucks down there," Angel said, looking down at the ground units slogging through sand and mud. The weather forecast for that area was that it would be cold and rainy as well.

"Welcome to the suck," Jester replied. "Oo-rah."

"Cut the chatter," Viper said. "We're coming up on the target. Break by flights." The squadron split off according to their flights, with Viper's flight going low, skimming the waves, while Jester and Monopoly's flights went in opposite directions and remained high. Their "target" was a Puddle Jumper towing a series of target drones that would simulate a flight of Darts.

Swooping in from the left, right, and bottom, the squadron left no clear avenue of escape for the "target" Puddle Jumper, and like a swarm of sharks, the Hydras completely tore apart the simulated group of Darts.

The mission scramble created a sea of chaos on the flight deck; fighters were being armed and fueled as well as being moved about to facilitate launch and pilots were scrambling around trying to hastily pull on some article of clothing while running to their planes. Zodiac had been in the middle of a shower when the alert had been sounded, and as a result some parts of him were still dirty, while others were still soapy, and his hair was damp from being hastily dried off. He spotted the gathering of pilots and trotted over to where they were, and found Viper starting a quick impromptu briefing. Looking around him, he saw that a majority of the 243<sup>rd</sup> had been gathered, and more were still coming, and he was thankful that he wasn't the last one to arrive.

"... Hydra Flight 2 will take sector six," Viper said. Zodiac had arrived right as Viper was briefing his flight. "Orbit at Angels Ten. Flight leaders, brief your pilots as we head in. Let's move!"

"Jester," Zodiac said once Hydra Flight 2 was under way. "What the hell's going on?" His question was echoed by Jalnor and Angel.

"*Don't know the full details myself,*" Jester replied. "*All I know is we got a Jumper down. SG teams are moving in to get to them, and we're providing air cover.*"

"Fuck."

Sector six was a large mountainous area that reminded Zodiac of Afghanistan. The Afghan mountains were rugged and survival in that area was not easy, especially for a shot down pilot. Fortunately for the crew of the crashed Jumper, they did not crash in the mountains, but there was a Wraith presence on the planet, and they had slipped away somewhere after shooting down the Jumper. The 243<sup>rd</sup> had been deployed to provide air cover over the search and rescue area in case the Wraith came back.

Currently, Hydra Flight 2 was orbiting their assigned area at their assigned altitude. If nothing went wrong, the remainder of their mission would consist of nothing more than flying in circles. An SG team would land another Puddle Jumper nearby, extract the wounded, and prepare the damaged Jumper for salvage, if it was possible. Though beaming the team out would be quicker, there was something about the planet's ionosphere that prevented beaming. Suddenly, there was

a strange blip on Zodiac's sensors. It hadn't been there a few minutes ago when he had flown over that area on his last circuit.

"Hold on," he reported. "I got a contact, bearing 213. Looks like it's following the valley. I'm going in for a closer look, Jalnor, cover me." Zodiac took his fighter down for a closer look and then rolled his fighter so he was inverted. Looking up, he saw a large group of Darts following the path of a river in a valley towards the rescue area. The initial report had said only two or three Darts had been sighted, but this was more than just two or three. It was close to a full squadron. "Shit," he said to himself, before he keyed his radio. "Javelin, Hydra 2-4, tally ten Darts, bearing 213, permission to engage?"

*"Hydra 2-4, Javelin, have you been detected?"*

"Negative, Javelin."

*"Do not fire until fired upon, Hydra 2-4. Tail the group until help arrives."*

"Roger that." Zodiac rolled his fighter upright and dipped slightly lower so that he could follow the Darts.

Suddenly, a pair of blue energy bolts flew past the cockpit. Zodiac turned and looked behind him and saw that a half squadron of Darts were coming up behind him and firing on him.

"Javelin, Hydra 2-4, tally additional six Darts. Returning fire."

"Angel, let's go to buster," Jester said. She and Angel were already en route to Zodiac and Jalnor's position when Zodiac reported an additional six Darts and that he was under fire. Jester pushed her throttle forward to maximum and the fighter accelerated to its maximum atmospheric flight speed. It would take them two minutes to reach their position, as they had been on the other side of the sector when the report had been made.

Zodiac and Jalnor were completely defensive when Jester and Angel joined the furball. With six to two odds, the Darts outnumbered them and the F-306 pilots were unable to get a clean shot. With the arrival of Jester and Angel, things would change.

"Good tone," Jester said. "Fox Three." She heard Angel make the same report as she fired off a missile at the Darts. The two splashes that Jester and Angel evened the odds, but that changed suddenly when the squadron that Zodiac had been tracking joined the fight.

"Aww, *shit*," Jester heard Angel say over the radio. The odds were now fourteen to four.

Suddenly, Zodiac felt a jolt and a shudder come from the back of his fighter, and alarms just went off across his damage board. Looking back, he saw that he had lost his left engine and the stabilizers on that side of the fighter. He had taken a lucky hit from a Dart, narrowly avoiding having his engine exploding and blowing him to tiny pieces. Unluckily, the Dart that had hit him was still on his tail, and he had to contend with someone shooting at him while his plane came apart. Another blast shook his fighter, and Zodiac saw that someone had shot down the Dart that had shot him. Good, that removed one problem. With his port engine on fire, Zodiac cut fuel to that engine, in hopes that it would contain the fire; if not completely put it out.

"Zodiac, how are you holding up?" Angel asked, as she pulled up next to him.

"How do I look?"

*"You're trailing smoke, but it looks like the fire's going out. Think you can make it back to base?"*

"Maybe." He thought about jettisoning his ordinance and some of his fuel. If he crashed on approach to the *Gungnir*, there would be a smaller risk of a fire or explosion. On the other hand, retreating because he was damaged was not his style. He had a chance of fighting it out, just as Lieutenant Colonel Cameron Mitchell had done during the battle with Anubis over Antarctica. He just hoped he didn't end up paralyzed for months if he got shot down and had to crash land.

"I can still fight," Zodiac said.

*"Don't be crazy, Zodiac, get back to base while you still can."*

Everything went into slow motion for Jalnor. Even though his symbiote gave him strength and speed, there was only so much an edge that it gave him. His targeting reticule went red and the lock tone sounded, and he pulled the trigger, sending a burst of hypersonic projectiles spewing from his F-306's gauss gun at a Dart. At the same time, the Dart fired. The shots from Jalnor's gun shattered the Dart's cockpit canopy and Jalnor swore he could see a splatter of Wraith blood and guts spray out of the holes the bullets had made, and the Dart began to plummet out of control towards the ground. The shots that the Dart had fired before its demise seemed to move slowly as they traveled the distance and impacted the rear of Zodiac's stricken fighter, snapping it in half.

"I'm in deep dren," Zodiac said to himself, as he saw he had no back half of a fighter. "Angel, I'm punching out." He pulled the ejection handle and the one-piece canopy of his F-306 blew up and away from his fighter, exposing him to the rushing wind as his fighter hurtled towards the ground. A split second later, the ejection seat's rocket motor fired, propelling him up and away from the stricken aircraft.

"I see a `chute," Angel said, as she circled the area. "Marking location."

"Come back in, Angel," the voice of Viper said. "SAR Jumper should be on its way."

"But Boss, we can't leave him."

"You don't have the gas to stay, Angel."

"I'm not leaving anyone behind." Angel could hear Viper sigh over the radio. Viper knew the sentiment well. Any pilot worth his salt would not abandon a fellow pilot if he had any choice at all.

"I'm sending a tanker your way," Viper said a few moments later.

After dealing with his parachute, Zodiac took a quick inventory of what he had. On his person, he had his sidearm, and a folding knife, and in his survival pack that was attached to his parachute were a few extra magazines for his pistol, another knife, some flares, smoke grenades, a survival radio and some MREs and water. He wasn't expecting to be on the ground for too long, as undoubtedly they would send someone after him. They knew his location, and where he had gone down, and looking up, he could still see Angel's, or he thought it was Angel, F-306 circle overhead. Off in the distance, he could see another aircraft, though he wasn't sure exactly what it was, but he knew it was friendly. He had to find a spot that would facilitate pick up, and also a hiding place until then, so he could rest and get shelter from the elements.

"What the hell is taking so damn long?" Viper yelled. "That SAR Jumper needed to be there over an hour ago!"

"Sir, Atlantis isn't risking another Jumper until the area is absolutely secure," a lieutenant replied. He seemed to have nervous of steel as he faced the senior officer who was ready to rip into any one he came across. "And the available Jumpers are still recovering the downed Jumper."

"Absolutely secure? Damn it, Lieutenant, just what the hell has my air wing been doing for the past hour?"

"Sir, it's not my call. I'm just the messenger."

"Angel, come back in, Jalnor's taking over watch," Viper's voice said over the radio.

"Roger that. Status on the SAR Jumper?"

"No word on that yet. Just come on in." Angel swore to herself as she turned her fighter back towards the *Gungnir* in orbit, passing Jalnor's fighter along the way.

Once he was on station Jalnor opened a channel to his wingman, to let him know he was overhead. As he circled, Jalnor kept an eye out for a possible area that a Jumper could set down and land, as the terrain was much too rough for easy pick up. He spotted what looked like a possible landing area several miles away from where he was circling, and made a quick pass over it. The area was devoid of trees and the ground was relatively flat and smooth, making it a good choice of a landing zone. However, as Jalnor circled back for another look, a Wraith stunner blast whizzed by his cockpit. Looking down, he saw a small party of Wraith, several larger Wraith guards, and one smaller leader, firing upon him with their hand weapons. Though they were meant to stun human sized objects, Jalnor didn't want to find out what would happen if they hit his fighter. He came around for another pass over the area and open fired with his guns, strafing the area.

"Javelin, this is Hydra 2-3," he said. "I've come under fire from Wraith ground forces.

Recommend a ground team secure LZ and extract Hydra 2-4."

"Copy that, Hydra 2-3. Jumper resources are still limited."

"Get that SAR Jumper moving, now!" Viper ordered, as soon as heard Jalnor's transmission.

Authorization from Atlantis be damned. One of his pilots was in great danger now. While Zodiac would be able to hold out for a few days, he was about to come into contact with Wraith forces, and that changed everything. He then ordered Rocket and Rush, who were out patrolling, to cover the SAR Jumper, while he scrambled the rest of the squadron.

"Hydra 2-4, this is CAG, do not respond. You have Wraith ground units coming in from the northeast. Get to ground."

Zodiac heard Viper's warning and immediately began taking immediate action. Jalnor had told him of a good pickup point several miles to the northeast, and based on the warning, it was where the Wraith were coming from. From what he had seen of the terrain before he had been shot down, there were not many places where a Jumper could land, and perhaps the Wraith knew it. He hadn't seen a single Dart since being shot down, and he guessed that they had all been shot down shortly afterwards, but he had a hunch why. The Wraith were hiding, knowing that the humans would not leave on of their own behind, and were laying a trap. Once the Earth forces had moved in to pick him up, the Wraith would spring their trap, hopefully capturing or destroying the rescue party.

As the first F-306s flew over the proposed and contested landing zone, they drew some Wraith small arms fire. Jalnor's strafing run had only taken out a few of the Wraith that had exposed themselves, but there were more in hiding. To deal with that situation, Viper had ordered the LZ bombed with regular dumb bombs. The fighter-turned-bomber would come low over the trees and drop a few bombs before pulling up, and in order to flush out the Wraith in hiding, the surrounding area was to be bombed before the SAR Jumper was to land. In the mean time, Data had managed to pull one of the Jumpers that were working on recovering the downed Jumper to fly cover for the SAR Jumper. Its contingent of soldiers would also help secure the area and find Zodiac.

Lieutenant Karegg didn't know why Atlantis was so protective of its Jumpers. They had a cloak that could be converted to a shield, decent armor, and smart drone weapons. It could function just like a helicopter, but it was better. He cursed the IOA and its sometimes civilian bullshit. Generally, it did a good job, but this was a military matter, and it needed to be done the military way: with firepower. On Earth, the bombing runs that the F-306s were performing would have been done with just one bomb, dropped from the back of a C-130, usually a GBU-43 MOAB, the bigger version of the Vietnam War era BLU-82 Daisy Cutter. Not only would the bomb clear out all the hostiles in the area, it would level the vegetation creating a clear point for the rescue craft to land. Unfortunately, they didn't have any C-130s or MOABs, and a Mark IX naquadah enhanced nuclear device was overkill for clearing out a landing zone.

As the Jumper pilot brought the ship down for a landing, Karegg hefted his HK-416 rifle and flipped off the safety. His team would be out as soon as the Jumper's rear hatch was down, securing their area of responsibility.

As the last bombs faded and the Jumpers came in for a landing, the area suddenly began to swarm with Darts. The trap had been sprung.

"Where are all these Darts coming from?" Rocket asked as he dodged incoming fire from a head to head pass with a Dart. "Boss, we gotta figure out where all these Darts are coming from."

High above the planet, SoS' AWACS ship was hard at work. The refitted cargo ship's sensors were sweeping the planet, trying to find the source of the Darts. A planet didn't suddenly start spewing Darts, and the stargate had been secured by the teams recovering the downed Jumper, thus the only logical conclusion was that there was a Wraith ship on the planet, and it was up to SoS to find where it was.

"Its gotta be camouflaged somehow," SoS said to her sensor operator. "Give me a magnetic and IR scan of the whole area."

"Yes, ma'am."

SoS didn't like the results of the scans. The IR scan had revealed a significant temperature difference of the ground in one area. When plotted on a map, it created a significant sized blob covering most of the current combat zone. While temperature differences were common on the ground where different kinds of rocks absorbed heat at different rates, the current blob was unmistakably the size and shape of a Wraith hive ship.

Zodiac heard the Darts and the F-306s scream overhead, and he had heard the bombs drop to clear the landing zone. He had a choice: to stay where he was and hope that the SG team searching for him would find him before the Wraith did, or to begin making his way towards the

cleared landing zone and try to link up with the SG teams. With luck, the Wraith ground forces had been neutralized by the bombing run, but it wasn't a guarantee. Zodiac didn't like the idea of sitting around doing nothing, waiting to be picked up. If he kept moving, he could avoid any Wraith contact if he did encounter them, and perhaps make it easier for the SG teams to find him.

Suddenly, he heard the snapping of a twig, and he quickly and quietly moved to the cover of a nearby tree. He drew his pistol and quietly disengaged the safety. Cautiously peering around the trunk of a tree, Zodiac watched as a pair of Wraith guards walked by, unaware of his presence. They seemed more concerned with their path than searching for the downed pilot, as if they were trying to get somewhere rather than to find him. Intrigued, Zodiac began to follow them.

One of the members of Karegg's squad had spotted a footprint in the ground of the forest. From the tread of the shoe, it was obvious that it wasn't from Zodiac, and its size and depth of the impression was more consistent with a Wraith guard. An inspection of the nearby ground revealed the footprints of one of the skinnier Wraiths. They were close behind the Wraith, and if they were searching for the downed pilot, there was a chance they would be able to find him before the SG team did. If the team tailed the Wraith and could eliminate them, it would make the search much easier and remove some of the time constraints.

Further along the trail, the team's lead scout signaled for the team to halt, and then for them to crouch down. In front of them seemed to be a long narrow clearing, and from the markings on the ground and the amount of debris present, it appeared to have been a crash site. On the near side of the clearing were trees that had their tops cut off and the angle of which the trees had been cut created a gradient of tree trunks to the far end, where they could see the remains of half a fighter. At the far end, there were several Wraith scientists and a small contingent of guards going over the fighter, trying to learn its secrets. The F-306 had given the Earth forces a tactical advantage of the Wraith due to its stealth features alone, not to mention some of its more advanced technologies, and so the Wraith could not allow an opportunity to examine the F-306, even its wreckage. With hand signals, Karegg split his squad into two teams to go around the perimeter of the clearing and flank the Wraith forces. Once his fire teams were in position, they signaled each other with a discreet click on their radios. It was unlikely that the Wraith could listen in on their radio transmissions, but they took every precaution in dealing with the enemy. It was the team's light machine gunners that opened fire on the Wraith first, with the M-240 carried by one of the members of Karegg's team spewing a hail of 7.62 mm rounds towards the Wraith, and a lighter M-249 SAW following suit with its torrent of 5.56 mm rounds. A split second later, Karegg put two shots from his HK-416 through the center of mass of one Wraith guard and then traversed slightly to his left and fired off another two round set at one of the skinny Wraiths. Though smaller than their guard counterparts, the skinny variety of Wraith, creatively nicknamed "skinnies" by the Atlantis SG teams, was harder than the larger species, and usually took more to kill. After putting two through the center of mass, the skinny that Karegg had shot at picked himself back up, only for Karegg to put another controlled pair through the Wraith's head for good measure. The firefight was over quickly, with the SG team swiftly and decisively eliminating all the Wraith guards before they had a chance to organize and return fire.

As soon as the sound of weapons fire had faded and none of the Wraith appeared to be alive, Karegg signaled to one of his team members and two pairs of them moved forward cautiously while the others covered them. They quickly secured all the Wraith weapons and checked to make sure all of the Wraith were dead, and the remainder of the team advanced forward. A quick check of a life signs detector showed that there were no Wraith signals nearby, but there was a human life sign. Since there was no indigenous human population on the planet, the only logical conclusion was that it was their downed pilot, and Karegg sent off a small contingent to retrieve the pilot.

Zodiac was carefully picking his way through the forest when he heard weapons fire. It was the characteristic sound of Earth automatic weapons, and picked up his pace. He could see a small clearing up ahead, but before he could get to it, he heard a noise behind him.

"Hold it," the voice said from behind. "What's your name?" It was a challenge code, used to ascertain the identity of a pilot. In the Pegasus galaxy, the Wraith and any indigenous human would not know the slang terms for the citizens of the various countries that made up the Atlantis expedition and the military members assigned to it.

"Fairfax Carstairs," he said. The false name consisted of the surnames of two RAF pilots from a British comedy.

"Turn around." Zodiac heard the weapons that had been aimed at him lower as he turned around to see a pair of soldiers standing behind him.

"Are you injured, sir?" one of the soldiers asked as they escorted him back to Karegg's team. "Do you need water?"

"How is Flight Lieutenant Yates?" Jalnor asked Dr. Jennifer Keller, as she approached him when he entered the Atlantis Infirmary.

"In a word, good," the doctor replied. "He suffered some bruises from ejecting, but otherwise, he's in top form. He's being released now."

"So what about the downed F-306?" Colonel Samantha Carter asked Colonel Data as they walked down the corridor towards one of the conference rooms of Atlantis.

"After the Jumper was recovered," Data said. "My squadrons continued to engage the Darts and the hidden hive ship. I sent down a cargo ship to recover the remains of the fighter while the Wraith were distracted."

"What about the hive ship?"

"We managed to drive it off."

"And your downed pilot?"

"He's being returned to active duty."

Gathered in one of the Atlantis conference rooms were all the ship commanders, and their respective CAGs. Also present was Lieutenant Colonel John Sheppard and Dr. Daniel Jackson. Giving the presentation to the gathered pilots and officers was the *Gungnir's* intelligence officer, a US Air Force major who was known to everyone only by his nickname of Arizona; his real name was rarely used.

"From the sensor readings taken at the engagement at M6G-332," Arizona said. "As well as by Major SoS' AWACS ship when recovering the downed Jumper at M3C-221, we've determined that the hive ship encountered at M3C-221 was also at M6G-322. Given the range of Wraith ships and the time between sightings, we believe the hive ship is headed in this direction." He hit a button on his tablet and a circle appeared on the star map that was being projected behind him. "The fact that it was without cruiser support at M3C-221 means something is up. Hive ships are too valuable to the Wraith for them to let them fly around alone. If we can catch the hive ship without its support, we could take it down. So far, we have been unable to destroy a hive ship, but with the *Mjolnirs*, we can."

"What if you're wrong about the projected course of the hive ship?" Viper asked. He knew the answer to the question he asked, as he had helped Arizona put together the presentation, but he figured that Arizona deserved one ringer in the audience.

"Currently, the long range sensors of Atlantis are focused on the hive ship's proposed route, we'll know soon enough. Any other questions?" There were none. "We'll continue to refine our plans to take out this hive ship as we get more intel. There's one more thing. This maybe of more interest to the pilots than the ship commanders. The hive ship we're tracking coincidentally happens to be a hive ship we've encountered before. We're slowly building up a sensor profile of the individual hive ships, and this hive has been engaged several times by our forces. In one engagement, several pilots reported seeing a Dart with a unique color scheme that proved difficult to kill and shot down several fighters. This fighter has appeared in subsequent engagements with our forces, save the recent skirmish at M3C-211. We surmise that this maybe the Wraith equivalent to an ace pilot."

The picture that was displayed on the screen was that of a Dart, but had what appeared to be a red stripe running from its needle-nose down the length to the engines, and instead of the standard grey color scheme of Darts, it was painted a bright white, with black Ancient lettering painted on the nose of the Dart.

"From what we've seen of the Wraith," Daniel Jackson began, appearing to be out of place at what seemed to be a military briefing. "Is that the Wraith, like the Goa'uld, are imitative, rather than innovative, having derived much of their language and technologies from the Ancients. The appearance of a Wraith ace pilot may be indicative that they have been watching us and taking note of our exceptional pilots in that they may have chosen to create an ace from which they could rally behind, but also to push their own pilots to excel so that they may also attain this rank. Now historically, it's been shown that having aces, or high profile and very successful pilots

can greatly improve morale of a fighting force, which may show that from a morale standpoint, the Wraith actually may be suffering from low morale due to their recent losses, especially with the arrival of the *Mjolnir*-class ships. Also, with the destruction of the *Nyx*, that may also have served to boost their morale, giving them a small victory in what seemed to have been a long series of losses. Furthermore, this Wraith ace, may also serve to be demoralize us, as seen from what is written in front of his cockpit: *relinquo totus spes*. Or a loose translation in English, it would be 'Abandon all hope' which would obviously be a message to us."

"So what about Spooky von Richthofen?" one of the other CAGs asked. Most of the gathered officers seemed to be bored out of their minds after Jackson had started his talk about the Wraith ace, all of them sporting equally blank and bored looks. The only one that seemed to have paid attention was Viper, who looked as if he actually cared about the imitative nature of Wraith culture.

"Spooky von Richthofen?"

"Seems like a nice name for him."

"Ten-hut!" Rush said as Viper and Jester walked into the 441<sup>st</sup>'s briefing room. Immediately, the gathered pilots stood at attention, but Viper quickly waved them back to their seats as he plugged in his tablet into the room's projector.

"Listen up," Viper said. "Currently, the *Gung* and the *Sleipnir* are en route to a location near Wraith controlled space. We're going hive ship hunting. Intel has shown that we've been facing the same hive ship during our last few engagements, so we're going to find that hive and take it out. Get some payback for the *Nyx*." The pilots nodded in approval. "Atlantis has its long range sensors looking for where the hive's going to be, and we have a pretty good idea of where it is." "Sir," Goldfinger asked, standing up. "Two ships against the hive? What about their cruiser escort?"

"The hive didn't have its escort at M3C-211. We think something's up, and it's traveling without its escort. But as a contingency, we have the *Jormungandr* and the *Nidhoggr* as back up." The two other *Mjolnir*-class ships had just returned from Earth, having refitted their F-302 squadrons with F-306s. This mission would bring up to sixteen squadrons of F-306s to the battle, and the presence of four *Mjolnir*-class ships could bring a large amount of firepower into the mix, firepower that had currently not been fielded against the Wraith.

"One more thing," Viper continued. The picture of Spooky von Richthofen's Dart appeared on the screen "This is Spooky von Richthofen, a Wraith ace. He's got at least two dozen confirmed kills, and it appears he flies an upgraded Dart. This version of the Dart is faster, more maneuverable, and if Intel is right, better armed. This paint job stands out like a spotlight in a furball. He *wants* us to come after him."

"So what should we do?" Monopoly asked.

"Watch your six. Watch each other's sixes. With all the Darts flying around, we're might not get the chance to go one on one with this son of a bitch. In a giant furball, he could sneak up on you and paste you without you even knowing."

Being the CAG, Viper's cabin aboard the *Gungnir* was pretty spacious, though not as good as Colonel Data's was, as he was the ship's commander, but as Viper was pretty high on the totem pole of officers aboard, he did have a comfortable living space. He had his own private head, a regular desk, instead of a folding one, along with enough space for a comfortable executive-style chair, and enough space between his rack and his desk to move around a little bit. While in general, the quarters aboard a *Mjolnir*-class vessel were more spacious than its BC-304 predecessor, any regular crewman would have given their left nut for the amount of space either Viper or Data had, and most of his pilots would have dearly wanted the privacy that the two high ranking officers had. Rank hath its privileges. As was his custom during his downtime, Viper spent his time reading. He had just picked up the novel he had been reading, and was dying to know what happened next, when a knock came at his door.

"Who's at my hatch?" he demanded, while he marked his place in his book.

"Airman Roberts, sir," came the reply. "Colonel Data says he wants to see you on the command deck."

"Very well." Viper got off his rack and began putting on his flight suit, as all pilots were required to be in their flight suits and ready to go when on duty while the vessel was under way.

"Sir, you wanted to see me?" Viper asked Data when he arrived on the command deck. Data was studying the holo-table located in the aft portion of the command center of the vessel. Usually it marked the location of the vessel, but could also be used for other purposes.

"Yeah," Data replied. "We just got this from Atlantis." He tapped several controls set into the table and the hologram zoomed out to show a section of space. "The target hive is here, and it's pretty close to our location. Looks like we'll be engaging them sooner than we thought."

"Any intel on escorts?"

"No, and that's what's worrying me."

"We could deploy a recon pair of F-306s and gather intel before we jump 'em."

"Sounds good, so put it together."

"Aye, sir."

Goldfinger was just getting settled into his rack and about to drift off into the peaceful oblivion of sleep when someone knocked loudly and clearly on the door to his cabin, jarring him out of his restful state. He wrenched open the door, annoyed at being roused when he was about to fall asleep, but when he saw who it was, he immediately snapped to attention.

"Where's Kroze?" Viper asked. Since joining the 441<sup>st</sup>, Goldfinger and Kroze, who were wingmen, were also cabinmates aboard the *Gungnir*. Being officers, they had fairly nice quarters, but as they were relatively junior officers, they still had to share.

"Asleep, sir."

"Lucky bastard. Anyways, get him up. You two meet me in the briefing room in fifteen minutes."

"Man, why did you have to wake me up?" Kroze complained as he and Goldfinger made their way to the briefing room. "I was having this really good dream about..."

"Kroze, I swear, if you squeeze one off in your sleep, I'll punch you. Hard."

"It wasn't about that. Anyways, what's this all about?"

"Hell if I know." The two pilots entered the briefing room, which was empty save for Viper, who was sitting up front and doing something with his tablet.

"Get in here and dog the hatch," Viper ordered, looking up from his computer. It took a moment for Goldfinger to realize that his wing commander meant for him to close the door, as once again, Viper's naval slang was evident.

"Sir, where's the rest of the squadron?" Kroze asked. Viper checked his watch.

"With luck, asleep. But not for you two. You've got a mission."

"Why did he have to pick us?" Kroze asked. There was always a certain amount of griping and complaining with every mission, but the pilots knew their jobs and they would get it done, regardless of the amount of griping they did.

"Because he doesn't like you," Goldfinger replied.

"I mean, there are *four* squadrons aboard this ship. Forty-eight pilots, that means twenty-four possible pairs he could have picked, including himself. And of all those twenty-four pairs he could have waved his hand to pick, he had to pick us."

"It's because you fucking bitch so much."

Once their F-306s had dropped out of hyperspace, Goldfinger and Kroze were to maintain an inertial course towards the hive ship while keeping a low profile. They were to observe the hive and discreetly report back to the battle group if anything came up. To prevent the Wraith from picking up their transmissions, communications back to the fleet would be via short burst transmissions directed away from the mothership where SoS' AWACS would pick them up and relay it back to the fleet.

Goldfinger tweaked his sensor board, trying to squeeze as much resolution out of it as he could. He knew the big blip was the hive, but he wanted to make sure that there were no cruisers lurking in the sensor shadow. Due to the restriction of communications silence between him and Kroze, he had to rely on other means of communicating with him during the mission. For that purpose, he had taken the flashlight from his survival kit and shone it towards Kroze's cockpit, and using Morse code, he asked if Kroze could get more sensor resolution on the hive.

The recon run was nearing its completion and the reports back to the group had shown no cruiser support for the hive, which was tactically good for the Earth forces, but the reason for the lack of support was still on the mind of the planners for the missions that would be coming. The coming

missions would be slightly different from previous fighter sorties, as the return of the *Jormungandr* and the *Nidhoggr* had brought back new equipment for the F-306s. The advanced fighter usually carried its entire ordinance in its internal bays, but sacrificed its maximum load out for stealth, as each wing carried an additional pair of hard points for attaching weapons; two of them were even plumbed, so it could carry external fuel tanks. The new piece of equipment was a RAM coated enclosure of externally mounted weapons which would allow the fighter to maintain its stealth characteristics while at the same time allow it to carry its maximum ordinance. For the up coming mission, the F-306s would carry four SDBs on its wing pylons, allowing the fighter to carry a maximum internal missile load out.

After doing her usual preflight check, Jester climbed the ladder to her F-306 and settled herself into her pilot's chair while her crew chiefs helped her strap in. Jester felt as excited for the start of the mission. She had served aboard the *Nyx* before it had been blown up, it had been her home, and she wanted payback against the Wraith for destroying it. She felt eager to deal as much pain and damage to the Wraith as she could do. She was a Marine, a life-taker and heart-breaker, and she was a woman, and if Shakespeare was correct "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." And she wasn't just scorned, she was pissed. The Wraith were about to learn what it was like to fight against a pissed off Marine. Scattered through out the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing, were other Marines, and while they did not serve aboard the *Nyx*, they too wanted some payback against the Wraith. Marines prided themselves on their solidarity, and a blow to one, was a blow to the Corps.

"What's that?" Goldfinger asked, more to himself than anyone else. With the communications silence, he could not ask Kroze over the radio. He picked up a pair of binoculars he kept in the cockpit and trained them on the hive ship, as his F-306 was nearing the part of its run that took it closest to the hive, allowing him to resolve details with his own eyes. Something had caught his eye on the hull of the hive ship just above the engines. It was something that he hadn't noticed about hive ships before, and he wondered if it could make a difference in a fight. Working quickly, he brought up the targeting protocols of the SDBs he was carrying and for one of them, scrubbed its original target and replaced it with the new target. When the attack was to arrive, he and Kroze were to drop their SDBs as a covert strike before engaging the enemy. The countdown timer on his HUD reached zero. The attack was to commence. Around him, F-306s started appearing, dropping out of hyperspace from their hold position and following the fighters came the large bulk of the *Gungnir* and the *Sleipnir*. In response, Goldfinger and Kroze turned their fighters towards the hive ship and accelerated to full speed. As they closed with the hive, Darts began to launch from the hive, and the two F-306s, well ahead of the rest of the fighters, fired off a pair of SDBs before peeling off and turning back to join their advancing comrades.

As he entered the field of engagement, Rush saw the trails of several SDBs before the swarm of Darts was upon his formation. He fired a missile into the oncoming mass of Darts, scoring a hit and then pulled up and to the right in order to swing around and engage the Darts he just passed in the head to head, with Rocket on his wing. Firing a burst from the fighter's gauss gun, Rush turned a Dart into scrap, just as a white blur flew past him. It was Spooky von Richthofen. The Wraith Baron.

"Tally ho, Wraith Baron," Rush said. "Rocket, cover me."

"Roger. I've got your six."

He was good, leading Rush and Rocket in a series of maneuvers, twisting and turning in every direction across the field of engagement, and neither of the F-306 pilots were able to get a missile lock as they chased the Wraith pilot. As a defensive measure, the Wraith pilot took his Dart close to the hive ship, where the hive's point defense weapons could offer additional protection against the two Earth pilots.

Finally, a burst of fire from Rush caught the Dart on one of its engines. Rather than risk carrying on the fight with battle damage, the Dart disengaged and returned to the hive.

"Kroze," Goldfinger said. "We've got to disable the hive's engines! Cover me!" Goldfinger dove towards the hive ship, braving its point defense batteries as it tried to destroy the Earth fighter. Tucked in behind Goldfinger was Kroze, protecting his wingman's rear. The two fighters pulled up just above the surface of the ship and Goldfinger led the attack on the target. As they flew down

a narrow trench on the hive ship, Goldfinger sent Kroze his targeting data, so that his wingman could hit the same target. They had only one chance to do it, and every hit counted.

"The guns," Kroze said. "They've stopped." It was true. The hive's point defense batteries had stopped firing; some of them had been vainly trying to hit the fighters in the trench, even though they could not depress low enough to fire effectively.

"Check our six!" Goldfinger said. He was getting close to the target, and they could not afford interference from any Darts that may be defending their hive ship. The guns ceasing fire was probably so they would not hit their own ships as they came in to deal with the F-306s. As Kroze turned back, he could clearly see between the twin tails of his F-306, a trio of Darts coming around and sliding onto his tail.

"We got 3 Darts coming up on our six!" Kroze said.

"Almost there," Goldfinger said. "Almost there." The distance to the target hit zero and the tone sounded through out the cockpit. Goldfinger hit the trigger twice, dropping his last two SDBs before pulling up and away from the hive ship. A second behind him, Kroze did the same thing, just as the Darts open fired, missing the climbing F-306 by a hair's breadth. Seconds later, several explosions rocked the hive ship as the bombs hit their target and detonated.

"Colonel," Lieutenant Vampire said. "The hive ship's losing engine power."

"Helm, move us closer. Maybe we can deploy the retrovirus," Data said.

"Sir, cruisers dropping out of hyperspace! Count twenty!"

"Damn. I knew it was too good to be true. Dashiva, signal the *Jormungandr* and the *Nidhoggr*. Nix, all weapons on the hive. Let's see if we can't put it down before the cruisers get in range." The newly arrived cruisers formed a protective screen between the stricken hive ship and the advancing Earth vessels. With the arrival of the two reserve ships, the Earth forces surged forward like a pack of wolves, ready to devour their prey as a team. Just as the *Gungnir* closed the distance and began firing directly upon the hive, the colossal Wraith ship managed to make a jump to hyperspace, and was followed shortly by the cruisers.

"Sensors, give me a track," Data ordered. The hive ship was losing engine power, and it probably had enough reserves to make a short jump. It would be appearing somewhere very soon, probably hoping to make repairs before the Earth forces found them. But since they didn't have enough power for a longer jump, there would be a window of time in which the hive could be found and destroyed.

"What was the target you hit?" Viper asked. Goldfinger and Kroze were in a special debriefing session as it was their attack that had led to the crippling of the Wraith ship. The battle was over, but there were still things that needed to be done before they could rest for the inevitable battle when they found to hive ship. Until then, it was best for them to tie up loose ends and try to catch some sleep.

"I spotted it on the recon run," Goldfinger said. "From the sensor analysis, it put out a strong IR signal, so maybe some kind of thermal exhaust port. It's kinda hard to see too. I'm guessing it's only about two meters across."

"Alright. Good work. Now get some rest." The two pilots got up to leave Viper's office, but Viper waved Goldfinger back and handed him an envelope.

As he walked back to his quarters, Goldfinger quickly opened the letter and skimmed its contents. Not believing what it said, he read it a second time, but more closely. Despite having been deprived of a good night's sleep, and having just returned from a dogfight, Goldfinger felt his fatigue leave him as the news that the letter had brought him finally sunk into his head.

"What's in the letter?" Kroze asked, and with a large smile on his face, Goldfinger handed Kroze the letter as he entered the combination to enter their quarters.

"No way!" Kroze exclaimed as he read the letter. "I don't believe it."

"Well believe it. And Kroze, you're going to be my bitch."

"Well, sir," Viper said, presenting a report on the status of his pilots to Data. "Most of the pilots are fatigued. Most of the 362<sup>nd</sup> and 442<sup>nd</sup> are combat ready, but the 441<sup>st</sup> and 360<sup>th</sup> are exhausted. The entire wing can go if needed, but if we do find the hive ship, I suggest we hold off on operations for several hours." Data's reply to Viper's report was forestalled by an airman knocking on the wardroom door before entering and handing Data a small printout.

"Well," Data said, as he skimmed the report. "You're in luck. We've tracked the hive to a planet, and it looks like it has landed."

"What about the cruiser escort?"

"No sign of them. Probably waiting to jump us. We need intel. Cloaked Jumper insertion with a ground team... OK, get some rest, Commander."

"Aye, sir."

The mission called for stealth, both getting in and getting out of the hive ship. The team had to sneak in and try to get information about the Wraith ship, what its plans were, and the size of its escort fleet. They also had secondary orders to assess the damage that the hive ship may have suffered and to locate any targets of interest.

Karegg didn't like Wraith ships. It wasn't the fact that it was full of life-sucking aliens, or they were usually dark and spooky, but because their technology and control panels were squishy. Life-sucking aliens he could deal with, usually with a burst from his weapon and dark and spooky places were not a problem for night-vision goggles. But squishy and organic control panels were something different. Fortunately, he was only the team commander, and his technical specialist was the one who dealt with the interfacing of Wraith technology. The team had made it into the hive ship without incident, and was slowly making their way along carefully chosen corridors to their target locations. Or what they thought were certain locations. From what the Atlantis expedition had gleaned about the layout of Wraith ships, the team had made up their plan, but there was no way to check if all hive ships were laid out in the same way, or if the information was still accurate.

First stop, the computer core. Or what passed as the Wraith computer core. The life-signs detector showed no life signs, but the team wasn't taking any chances. Once the door was open, the team burst into the room in a standard room-clearing pattern, each member clearing his area of responsibility before turning to help his teammates cover theirs. Once the room was secured, the team's technician began interfacing his tablet with the Wraith computers. By hacking into the Wraith systems, he could gain all the information he needed to complete the mission.

"Sir," the sergeant whispered to Karegg. "It's strange."

"What?"

"I'm not encountering too much in terms of security. You'd think there would be more, given all the important data that's here."

"Well, theoretically, there wouldn't be any unauthorized access from this location. Still, be careful."

"Yes sir." Within in a few minutes, they had downloaded all the information they needed: the size and location of the escort fleet, and the hive's own damage assessment of its systems. The plans of the Wraith had not been found, and Karegg figured that they would be on a separate system, or in a more highly secured area. He ordered the sergeant to poke around the system some more, but the search turned up little, and the sergeant didn't want to risk too much exposure in the Wraith computer system. Once the data was secured, the team moved out, ready to go to stop number two.

Using careful navigation with the life-signs detector, the team managed to stay out of the heavily populated areas of the hive and managed to sneak their way towards one of the hive ship's power distribution centers. Once there, the team would plant timed demo charges that would explode once the team was well away from the area. If timed correctly, the demo charges would cripple the hive ship long enough that when the Earth battle group arrived for the main attack, a definite tactical superiority would have been established in favor of the Earth forces.

Karegg had just entered the power distribution center along with his team and was in the process of clearing out the room when he felt someone grab him from behind and try to put an arm around his neck. Acting instinctively, Karegg turned his head to the side and put his chin on his shoulder to prevent anyone from being able to apply pressure to his throat. He back peddled and slammed his assailant into the wall, which slackened the arm around his head, and Karegg followed up by ramming his elbow into the chest of the Wraith that had a hold on him. Twisting free, Karegg pulled his knife from his belt and stabbed with it, but the Wraith recovered and blocked the stab, grabbing his arm and following up with a punch. Shrugging off the hit, Karegg replied with his own punch and a kick aimed at the Wraith's side. The hit caused the Wraith to let go of Karegg's wrist enough for him wrench his hand free and plunge the blade in between the ribs of the Wraith. He pulled out the blade and stuck the blade in just below the Wraith's sternum

and pushed upward through the diaphragm. As the Wraith sagged lifelessly to the ground, Karegg pulled his knife out and wiped it clean before putting it back into his belt.

"Colonel Data," Lt. Vampire said. "Incoming transmission from the ground team." Data called up transmission to his tablet and began to study the data.

"Looks like the hive ship is being shadowed by a sizable support fleet," a voice said from right next to Data.

"For crying out loud, Commander," Data said, almost jumping from surprise. "Don't do that."

"Which one, sir? Sneak up behind you or reading over your shoulder?"

"Preferably both."

"Ian Dixon," Data read. "In recognition of your exemplary actions and dedication, the United States Air Force is proud to confer upon you the rank and privileges of captain in the United States Air Force from this day forth." As Data spoke, Kroze and Rocket, who were standing on either side of the pilot, turned towards the newly promoted pilot and removed the silver bar that was on each of his uniform's shoulders and replaced them with the double silver bars of his new rank. Once finished with reading the official document of Goldfinger's promotion, Data gave a short speech of encouragement to the new captain and to the rest of the pilots that were gathered.

"I can't believe you're getting promoted for pulling a Luke Skywalker," Kroze said, shaking his wingman's hand. The ceremony was over and the gathered pilots began lining up to shake hands and congratulate Goldfinger.

"Listen up!" Viper said. "I hate to break this party up before it gets out of hand, but mission briefing in half an hour. There's a war going on, people." A collective groan went up from everyone, as they were all looking forward to a short time of celebration.

"You can celebrate when we get back."

"OK, listen up," Viper said to the gathered 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing. "Here's the mission plan. We will be responsible for hitting several sections of the hive ship prior to the *Gungnir* arriving above the planet and hitting it from orbit. Stealth will be key prior to hitting the hive ship, so we'll be exiting hyperspace on the far side of the planet. To extend our range, the new stealth-coated external fuel tanks will be mounted. Once we reach the hive ship, each squadron will have a specific task." Viper continued the briefing with the assignment of each of the four squadrons under his command. The task of the 441<sup>st</sup> would be to provide air superiority while the other squadrons hit their targets.

"We're going ballistic," Viper said to himself as his squadron went head to head with a swarm of Darts. As the squadron tasked with air superiority, his squadron would be the first ones in while the rest of them would sneak in begin their bombing runs. The missile lock tone sounded in his ears and he pulled the trigger, launching a missile. The Dart saw the incoming missile and tried to pull up and away, but the missile continued to track and impacted the underside of the Dart, breaking it in half before it began tumbling to the ground. Then his squadron was past the line of Darts. Pulling back on the stick, Viper executed a quick flip, made possible only with the F-306's thrust vectored engines, and was on the tail of the Darts he just passed. Around him, the squadron had done the same, and a second salvo of missiles went forth from the 441<sup>st</sup> and into the Darts, this time, the Darts could not return fire.

"*Viper, Baron, nine o'clock low!*" Kirby said over the radio.

"Tally ho, I'm your wing."

"Roger." Viper followed Kirby as he banked to the left and pulled down towards the lone white Dart that was coming low and fast. However, it seemed that the Dart had no interest in joining the fight; it merely skirted the edge of the engagement and did not seem to notice the two F-306s trailing it.

"He's not engaging," Kirby said. "Something's up."

"*Light him up,*" Viper said. "*Let's blow this son of a bitch out of the sky.*"

"Roger... Problem. I'm not getting a radar lock." Even though he had the Dart in his sights, his targeting computer could not get a lock on the target. "Switching to guns." This did not bode well for the Earth forces, as the Wraith had begun to develop technologies which could give them stealth capability. While Wraith technology had stagnated for the past ten-thousand years, now that they were confronted with a new threat, they needed to swift kick in the pants to jump start

their technological development. It was possible that they had recovered some part of Zodiac's downed F-306, but it was too little time between when that event had occurred and the current battle to account for the Wraith reverse engineering the technology, not to mention that the Wraith Baron's Dart had not been sensor cloaked the last time they had faced him in battle. "Break right, Kirby!" he heard Viper yell just as he was about to open fire. With lightning reflexes, Kirby pulled his stick to the right just as a pair of energy blasts flew by the underside of his fighter, passing through the space where he would have been if he had not moved. Kirby spared a quick glance behind him and saw another Dart, painted exactly like the Baron's Dart behind him, trying to stitch him with fire, and when he looked forward at the original Dart, it was gone. "Shit, he's on my tail."

"Kirbs, come around to heading 332." As Kirby came onto the proper heading, he saw what Viper had in mind. The two wingmen were going head to head, with both of them being pursued by a Dart. The maneuver would require precise timing to pull off, and any error could lead to both of them colliding or getting shot down. With the head to head pass, the two pilots not only had to dodge fire from their pursuers, but also fire from the oncoming enemy.

In a performance worthy of the Blue Angels, as one, the two pilots rolled their fighters onto their starboard wings and blew past each other at over a thousand knots with only meters between the undersides of their fighters. As they passed each other, they opened fire on the other's pursuer. Kirby's burst hit Viper's pursuer squarely along its centerline, leaving a fast expanding fireball, while Viper's burst seemed to have little effect on the Baron's Dart, even though he too had hit it squarely along its centerline. As he passed the Baron's Dart, Viper felt a shudder in his fighter, and several alarms began going off in his cockpit. His damage readout showed that there was significant damage to his starboard wing, and looking back at it, he saw that he was missing about a meter of wing; the Baron's return fire must have clipped him.

"Boss," he heard Kirby say. "You clipped the Dart." Kirby was right. The Baron's fire had not hit him; the Dart itself had hit him. He saw the Baron's Dart somewhere below him, and parallel to the red stripe, was a long black gash running the length of the Wraith fighter.

"I'm heading back to base," Viper said.

"I've got your six."

With his F-306 missing a meter of wing, there was no way Viper would be able to survive, let alone be effective in a dog fight. In order to prevent a fire if he crashed, he jettisoned his ordinance and began dumping his fuel, leaving him with enough to get back. As he broke through the atmosphere, he saw the *Gungnir* perform a precision hyperspace exit right above the hive ship's position and after giving the fighters down below an opportunity to get clear, begin to open fire with everything it had.

"Nix, give 'em everything we got," Data said, before turning to Dashiva. "What's the status of the other group?"

"Sir, the *Sleipnir* reports engaging the Wraith escorts. So far they have disabled several cruisers and have tied up the rest."

"What have you done to my plane?" Viper's chief mechanic asked as Viper climbed down the ladder and onto the deck.

"Your plane?" Viper asked in response.

"You only have to drive it. I have to make it work, sir."

"Whatever. Get it fixed." As Viper walked back to the locker room to change out of his flight gear and take a shower, the mechanic could tell the CAG was frustrated or angry, or both. Until the wing could be fixed, he was grounded, and pilots, regardless of their service branch and what they flew, hated being grounded for any reason. The wing would have to be replaced, for a best case scenario, but the complexity of the F-306 made that a difficult task, and the mechanics didn't exactly have spare wings lying around to replace. Most likely, Viper would need a new plane, while his old one would be sent back to Earth for repair at Area 51. The downside to that was that there would not be another ship traveling back to Earth for another few weeks, and that meant that Viper was grounded for at least that amount of time, longer if they couldn't get a hold of a replacement jet.

From several miles away, the rain of firepower from space was a magnificent sight. Once the *Gungnir* arrived in orbit, it commenced an orbital bombardment of the hive ship's position. The hive, with its engines damaged and effecting repairs, was unable to lift off and escape, and since

the other three ships of the task force were engaging the hive's escorts, they could not screen the hive to buy it more time to repairs its damaged systems or to drive off the attackers. Orbital bombardments were a favorite of the Wraith as they had done it to countless worlds in retaliation for resisting them; it seemed fitting that they would destroy a hive ship in a similar fashion.

"Squadron leaders, get me fuel stats," Jester said. With Viper's departure from the battlefield, she had tactical control of the air wing. As the rest of the wing reported in, there were very few losses, mainly other fighters that had to return to base due to large amounts of damage. Most of the remaining fighters had a decent amount of fuel left, well above the "bingo range," due to the fact they had been fitted with external fuel tanks that had been jettisoned prior to entering combat. Once she got all of the reports in, Jester began dispatching the fighters with the most amount of damage back to the *Gungnir*, followed by the ones with the least amount of fuel.

"Jester," Angel said. "I've got a bandit, two o'clock low." Jester turned her head slightly to the right and saw the Wraith Baron's Dart, again skirting around the F-306s and away from the area. Most of the Darts had been caught in the orbital bombardment and the rest had been finished off by the four squadrons of F-306s. From the looks of it, the Baron, without any support, and his hive ship about to be destroyed, was making a run for it. Jester considered bringing the remainder of the 243<sup>rd</sup> down on the Baron as he made a run for it, but decided against it.

"Let's see if we can't have some fun with this bastard," she said, as she took her fighter down. She crept up on the Baron's six o'clock position and when the nose of her fighter was over the cockpit of the Dart, she rolled her fighter until she was inverted and then gently brought her canopy to within a meter and a half of the Dart. Looking "up," she noticed that the Dart's canopy was no opaque, like normal Dart canopies, but highly reflective, and that she could see into the Dart's cockpit. She set her radio to an open frequency broadcast, knowing the Wraith would be able to hear it, though the Wraith did not use much radio transmissions.

"Greetings," Jester said. Spooky von Richthofen looked up at her, and she raised her fist in greeting, with her middle finger extended. With her other hand, she held up her digital camera and took a picture of the Dart with Spooky's confused face staring back at her. "Watch the birdie!"

"I crack myself up," she said as she rolled her fighter right side up after Spooky von Richthofen pulled away. She wanted to fire on the retreating Dart, but she was low on ammo and had expended all of her missiles. Just as she was about to call Angel in to finish off the Dart, she noticed a kawoosh below her, and that there was an active stargate, and before she could do anything, the Baron's Dart had gone through the event horizon and was on his way to another planet. She could not follow since her fighter was larger than the inner diameter of the stargate, and that once she got to the other side, she had no way of contacting friendly forces, let alone she had no idea what was on the other side.

Despite the escape of the Wraith Baron, Spooky von Richthofen, they had destroyed a hive ship along with its escorts and along with it thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Wraith, all of whom were responsible for millions of human deaths, and now would be prevented from causing millions more. It was a time for celebration, with a victory in a war that had gone on for so many years. It was a turning point. With new technologies and ships, the Earth forces could engage the Wraith and take the fight to them. Since the Ancients left, the Wraith had only dealt with minor insurrections and for the first time in ten thousand years, they had an enemy that had used tactics they had never deal with before, and technologies that they could not easily cope with.

"Javelin, this is Hydra 2-1, requesting flyby," Jester said as she came on approach to the *Gungnir*. She was in an exuberant mood, though slightly tempered by the fact she had let Spooky von Richthofen get away.

"Negative, Hydra 2-1, the pattern is full," came the reply from the *Gungnir's* Air Boss. With a smirk, Jester pushed her throttle forward and accelerated towards the *Gungnir*, intent on having a little fun of her own in celebration of what had been done.

The *Gungnir's* Air Boss was Commander Nasa of the US Navy, the third highest ranking crew member of the vessel, second only to the ship's XO, and on par with the CAG, his fellow Navy commander Viper. In his entire career, never had he seen a pilot buzz the control tower. Though there was nothing against the regs about buzzing the tower, though the behavior was frowned upon, pilots usually showed more self-restraint than that, despite some of their more excessive displays of exuberance when they were on the ground. It would all change in the next few minutes.

Leaving the coordination of the remaining pilots that needed to land to his subordinates, Nasa looked out the viewport that gave him a good view of the surrounding space underneath the *Gungnir*. From this observation post, he could monitor the movement of planes on the vessel's flight deck as well as planes landing and taking off. As Air Boss, no plane, Jumper, or cargo vessel moved unless he knew about it and gave permission. He was responsible for the airspace around the vessel and preventing planes from crashing into each other as they moved about. Nasa picked up his mug of coffee and was in mid sip when Jester blew past the observation window, barely meters away. If Nasa had been on Earth or on a planet, the resulting shockwave and sonic boom, even if Jester had blown by him at several hundred meters, would have caused him to, at best, spill his coffee over himself. However, there was nothing in the vacuum of space to transmit a shockwave, and he only saw the fighter as a blur as it flew past. As he put his cup of coffee down, Nasa shook his head. He knew Jester and the belief that if she and Viper ever ended up in the same squadron, they would cause utter havoc. He also knew about their buzzing of Atlantis' central tower. So far the dynamic duo had only shattered windows and sent civilian scientists running for cover, which was nothing compared to what the rumors were saying before the two of them were posted to Pegasus. Nasa surmised that since Viper was the CAG and Jester his XO, the two of them had to exercise a little more responsibility and set a good example, as neither of them were junior officers fresh from pilot training and full of piss and vinegar. "Son of a bitch!" Viper said. He had been standing quietly next to Nasa in the observation room and had seen Jester's flyby. "I was going to do that!" "Bad day, eh, Viper?" Nasa asked. "First my plane's out of commission for weeks, and now Jester steals my flyby." "I'd rather you not do flybys in my space, thank you very much." "Party pooper," Viper said as he left the observation room.

"I went this way, he went that way," Kirby said, telling his fellow pilots of the head to head pass that he and Viper performed. "I asked him 'Where'd he go?' and he goes 'Where'd WHO gone?' Turns out his starboard wing clipped him. Left a long gash on Spooky's side." "How is the commander doing, anyway?" Jalnor asked. "In a word: cranky." "I heard Jester buzzed the tower," Goldfinger said, joining the conversation. "He's not going to be happy about that," Angel said. "He's always wanted to buzz the tower, and now Jester's gone and done it before him."

"Sir, the major acted without thought to proper procedure," Jester said. "And the major regrets having done taken such actions..." She had been called to Viper's office once she had landed and had gotten a chance to shower and change. She had guessed that it probably had something to do with her flyby, and she did not look forward to having to deal with a cranky CAG, who was probably going to put her on report for doing such a stunt. Deep down she felt that getting chewed out for a flyby that really didn't do anything was a little unfair, as the two of them had participated in a flyby that had actually done some damage to a ten-thousand year old city. "Oh, can the speech, Megan," Viper interrupted. "You don't regret doing the flyby." "Sir, the major..." "Just get a drink and sit down." "Yes, sir." As Viper didn't drink much alcohol, and Jester was allergic, Viper kept a small, but well stocked fridge of drinks in his office, though it mainly contained water and some fruit. "Heard you had an encounter with Spooky," Viper said after Jester had a chance to take several gulps of water. He leaned back and propped his feet up on his desk. "Yeah, I did. Heard you had a run in with him too." "Run in... I guess you could put it that way." Viper held out his own water bottle in a toast to Jester for her choice of words. "Clipped him, and lost a chunk of wing. You?" "Well, I started on his six, came through the clouds and then moved in above him." "If you were above him, how did you see him?" "Because I was inverted." "Bullshit." "No, really, it was great. I was about two meters maybe one and a half... I've got a great picture." "What were you doing at that range?" "Communicating... Keeping up foreign relations... Giving him the bird."

"Show me the picture." Jester took her camera out of her breast pocket and handed it over to Viper.

"Nice. Get it framed. Or better yet, put it on a mug."

The news of the hive ship's destruction sent the residents of Atlantis into a joyous mood. Many of the residents, both military and civilian had been working hard for the past several months and the expedition's leaders decided that a day of celebration and rest was needed, to help everyone unwind and to give them a chance to become refreshed in preparation to what could possibly lead to Wraith repercussions against the city. The crews of the four ships that had spearheaded the attack were welcomed back to the city amidst a great celebration and fanfare, and the commanders of the ships gave their crews 24 hours liberty. This news was taken with some apprehension by various members of the expedition. While the liberty was well deserved, it meant that various energetic and exuberant elements would be set loose in the city. Fortunately for Viper, who was still responsible for his pilots while they were on liberty, he had little need to worry.

The expedition members, on a day of boredom, had set up a volleyball court in one of the open spaces of the city, and had actually taken the time and resources to transport a large amount of sand from one of the continent's beaches to create a sand version of the court. It was somewhat fitting, as the city was in the middle of the ocean, but had little in the way of beach front property, and so the sand court added a little touch of the beach to the ocean. It was a good day for the sport, as it was in the middle of the planet's summer, and temperatures were high outside the city's climate controlled indoors. With the sun beating down, the uniform of the day was shorts and a t-shirt, though there were instances in which less was worn.

The pilots of the 441<sup>st</sup> Fighter Squadron were gathered around the court, as some of them had challenged the pilots of the 360<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron to a game. As the participants of the game practiced, the spectators milled about the court and absorbed the sun. Since most of their time was spent in space without any sunlight, they all welcomed the chance to sit in its warmth and relax.

"Not playing with the boys?" Jester asked when she saw Viper walk out to the court. He was wearing a polo shirt and dark slacks and dress shoes; something that was not fitting for a game of volleyball and more fitting for a meeting with a specific person. "Perhaps some prior engagement? A little game of StarCraft?" Viper didn't say anything in response and simply gave Jester a smirk.

"So," he said. "How's the game?"

"About to get started. Waiting on Dix."

Suddenly, a loud cry was heard as Goldfinger ran onto the court, letting loose his battle cry. The moment he had appeared, all eyes had been on him, and just as quickly, a portion of the eyes turned away. Since they were free of regulations and dress codes during their liberty, Goldfinger had chosen what could have been termed "minimal compliance with established standards" as he was dressed only in a pair of shorts. Fortunately for everyone gathered, they were not short shorts. Like all pilots, Goldfinger was in good shape, and as a younger pilot, he was in the prime of his life, well toned, if not well muscled, though he had nothing when compared to Ronon Dex, who was occasionally the talk of female circles.

"Dear God," Jester said, turning away and covering her eyes as Goldfinger bent a knee and flexed. Several other female bystanders mirrored Jester's reaction, but there were some that seemed to take a great deal of interest in the shirtless pilot, admiring his physique.

"Woooooo!" cried Goldfinger, thrusting his arms into the air as he ran around the court. His cry echoed off the tall buildings of the city.

"Dix, put your shirt back on!" someone yelled.

"I'm too sexy for my shirt!" Goldfinger replied, flexing again. "Boo-yah!" and the pilot did a pelvic thrust.

"Well, that didn't take long to start," Viper said as he turned away to leave.

Rush wasn't surprised to see his CAG in the Atlantis Infirmary on his day off. After all, he knew the commander wouldn't waste a chance to see the nurse he had a thing for. However, Rush wasn't there for nurses; he had set his sights on someone a little further up the medical hierarchy. In fact, it was the top step: Atlantis' Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Jennifer Keller. She reminded him of an actress from a short-lived science-fiction TV series that had been cancelled after thirteen episodes.

"Hey, Steve," Keller said, greeting the pilot with a smile. Rush felt his heart skip a beat. He hoped it wasn't due to a medical condition, but if it was, it guaranteed him at least some personal medical attention from the good doctor.

"Hi, Dr. Keller," he replied.

"Call me Jennifer. I don't call you by your rank, don't I?"

"No. Anyways, I was wondering if you wanted to go get some lunch." Keller checked her watch.

"It's lunch time already? Give me five minutes to finish this, and we'll go."

The fact that the city of Atlantis was in the middle of the ocean meant it offered extensive views that were breathtaking and perfect for quiet contemplation or an intimate location. For Rush, the views were only improved by the presence of Jennifer Keller, but the problem was finding a spot that was free of other people. In one of the locations he checked, Rush saw Viper and the nurse, who were sharing a dessert together and talking quietly. He wasn't quite sure, but he thought he saw his commander notice him discreetly signal to him that the next alcove and balcony was empty. Seeing that he had nothing to lose, he went over and indeed it was empty.

"It's beautiful," Keller said when she saw the vista that the balcony offered. "You know, you spend all your time here, but you never realize just how beautiful the surroundings are."

Karegg's plan for his time off was simple. Get together with a few of his fellow ground pounders, toss back a few beers, and maybe have a party. He considered going down the to volleyball court to see the flyboys play each other, and he also considered forming his own team to take them on, but he decided against it. Volleyball just wasn't his sport.

"Isn't that Dr. Keller?" one of his friends asked, pointing at towards one of the balconies that were so common in Atlantis. Karegg turned to see someone, he couldn't tell who because he only saw the back of his head, lean forward and kiss the doctor.

"Looks like someone's got to first base," Karegg said. "Lucky bastard."

"Who's on first?"

"I don't know."

"Third base!"

"Oh, shut up."

"Why are all the good women always taken?"

"Happens every time."

A diving save from one of the 360<sup>th</sup>'s pilots sent the volleyball just high enough where it reached the top of the net and started to fall down on the other side, but a set by Rocket followed by a spike by Monopoly continued the onslaught from the 441<sup>st</sup>. Another pilot dived to try to make a bump and save it, but ended up face down in the sand, trying to spit out the sand that flew into his mouth. The missed save cemented the game for the 441<sup>st</sup>, and they now led the tournament between the four squadrons of the 243<sup>rd</sup>. They would play next the 442<sup>nd</sup>, who were the other contenders for the winners of the tournament. In between the points and plays, Goldfinger had taken to randomly flexing, knowing that it would distract the opposition in several ways, and since he had been playing for several hours, he was covered in sweat and oil, giving his exposed body a sheen.

"Dix, unless you like tube steak, stop it!" Kroze said, getting annoyed with his wingman's antics.

"You're just jealous you didn't think of this earlier. Besides, this is for the ladies."

"Like any of them will take interest in you."

Soft strains of music gently floated through the room, creating a peaceful and tranquil mood, one that also took the breath away of the pair that was caught up in the height of passion. It was a paradoxical arrangement; the gentle waves of serenity feeding the burning fires of fervor. Each soft touch made by one stoked the excitement and desires of the other. Rush slowly lowered Keller down to her bed, their clothes having already been cast off and thrown across the doctor's quarters. There was beauty in both of their naked bodies, the doctor's curves and the pilot's roguish face, were just two of the parts of the creation of the beast with two backs, as it fed upon the passion and desire, and for their time together, they were one, moving together, feeling the same sensations throughout their bodies, their thoughts joined together for one purpose.

"So why do they call you Rush?" Keller asked softly. She was tucked in under one of Rush' arms and her head was on his chest, her hand, gently stroking his chest.

"I gave you a rush, didn't I?" He let out a little chuckle at his own joke.

"Do you think you're up to doing it again?"

"What's your professional doctor opinion?"

"Well, I'd say you should probably rest and rehydrate."

"Maybe you should take two and call me in the morning."

With the victory of their volleyball game against the other squadrons of the 243<sup>rd</sup> fresh in their minds, the members of the 441<sup>st</sup> that did not have prior plans for the day made their way to the recreation room that had been designated in the city. Over the years, various forms of recreational equipment had been moved from Earth to the city, and it offered a vast array of things to entertain the members of the expedition while they were not on duty. In one corner, a large flat screen TV had been setup and while there were no broadcasts to watch in the Pegasus galaxy, it was connected to a multitude of game consoles. Several of the pilots were gamers and had brought their own game discs with them to Atlantis, and one of the games included several different accessories mimicking instruments in a rock band.

"Hold on guys," Goldfinger said. "Give me some room to explore the space a bit." Kroze, who had often played the game with his wingman, rolled his eyes. Goldfinger's antics occurred whenever they played a specific song.

"You do *not* need more cowbell," Kroze said.

"I have a fever! And the prescription is more cowbell!"

In the morning before liberty of the squadrons of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing and the crew of the *Gungnir* was up, Jester, after a morning run and shower, decided to go to the range to work on her shooting skills. Even though she was a pilot, every Marine was considered to be a rifleman first, and as a part of training, all Marines were taught to shoot at the Marksman level or higher. Though she was proficient with a rifle like the M-16, she was more likely to use her sidearm when the need arose, such as getting shot down and having to defend herself from an enemy. For her personal sidearm, she had picked the Berretta M9, which was the standard issue US military sidearm that fired a 9 millimeter round. There were pilots that had purchased their own sidearms, or like Jalnor and Zodiac, used pistols that were standard issue in their country of origin. Despite using different pistols, the ammunition was the same, following the NATO standard, which made sharing ammunition easy.

Drawing two boxes of 9mm full-metal jacket rounds, Jester walked to her assigned lane and began loading her pistol. In the lane to her right, someone was already blazing away, shooting controlled pairs at their target down range. After sliding in the last round into her magazine, she inserted it into her pistol and hit the slide release. Then everything went on autopilot. The weapon came up, the safety went off, and she moved her finger onto the trigger, firing off a smooth pair of shots at her target. One hit the man-shape high on the chest, with the other slightly above it, both fatal shots.

"Not bad," someone said, when she had finished her first magazine. It was Viper. Apparently he had decided for a little early morning shooting of his own.

"So, how was your time with StarCraft Girl?"

"Good."

"Since you're up early, I take it last night was fairly tame?"

"You're as bad as the rest of them."

"If I was, I'd say things more along the lines of 'polishing the torpedo' or 'showing her the viper's bite' and other things like that."

"How about a contest?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"One round in the mag. We take turns shooting at our targets, and we see who gets the closest group."

"Winner gets what?"

"I'll trade you my box of candy for your box of brownies."

"Deal. What are you shooting?" Viper showed Jester his pistol; he had purchased it himself as his personal sidearm. It was a Springfield Armory eXtreme Duty .40 caliber pistol, based off the Croatian HS2000 design. He had picked this specific pistol because it felt much more comfortable than the Beretta, and he had a choice between getting a 9 mm, .40 caliber, or a .45 caliber version. There had been many complaints, some very vocal, others more quiet, that the 9 mm bullet did not have the stopping power of the larger .40 and .45 caliber rounds.

They changed to fresh targets and sent them down range before they loaded one bullet into their pistols. Taking careful aim, they fired. The double report of the pistols echoed through out the range. Jester's shot was a center of mass shot that hit her man-shaped target in what would have been the sternum, while Viper's shot hit between the neck and heart along the center line. They ejected their magazines and loaded another bullet in and hit the slide release. The point of having just one bullet in the magazine was to disrupt the shooter's sight-picture, as having a consistent and good sight-picture was what led to consistent and good shooting, amongst other factors. With a semi-automatic firearm, shooters were taught to look where their first shots landed, and then adjust subsequent shots if necessary. By forcing the shooters to reload after every shot, they had no chance to adjust for a follow shot. Winning the contest depended on consistently shooting after losing and reacquiring the sight-picture.

Even though the crews had a full twenty-four hours of liberty, most of them were back aboard their ships an hour or so before it was supposed to end, tying up some of the loose ends of their free time and preparing themselves to deploy and rejoin the war. The pilots of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing gathered in the ready rooms of their respective squadrons, talking to one another about what adventures they had over liberty and perhaps reliving together some of the finer moments. "Hey Rush," Spike said. "What did you do? Didn't see you at the game."

"Saw him with Dr. Keller, walking back to her quarters," Monopoly said.

"Good choice," Kroze interjected. "Our new captain here was doing the Slider."

"So what did you do with the good doctor?" Goldfinger asked. "Ask for one of those physical exams?"

"Or did you give her one yourself?" Rocket added. "What was the prescription? More meat? Tube steak?"

"Come on, Rush, spill."

"I don't kiss and tell," Rush said with a slight smirk.

"He's got a twinkle in his eye," Rocket said. "Like jewels. Bet she really got a hold of the family jewels." Rocket gave Rush a nudge with his elbow. "She must have drained you dry, like a Wraith."

"She liked the drumstick? Played the one stick solo?" Spike asked.

"What about tone? Did you get good tone? Good tone for the bone."

"Hey, Viper, Boss-man," Goldfinger called out to his commanding officer as he entered the briefing room. They were still on liberty for another hour, and Viper never stood on ceremony. In fact he preferred a more informal way of running his squadron. "What did you do yesterday? You missed an excellent game against the 442<sup>nd</sup>."

"I had some quiet time, away from you loud jerks," Viper said, his mouth twitched in a small smirk. "And stop giving Rush the third degree. Bastard's been shacking up to Keller since he got here, and he's been here longer than most of us."

"Got that from your lady friend?" Monopoly asked. "Speaking of which, how was StarCraft yesterday? The time is right for an attack, you know."

"Things were just fine yesterday, Monopoly. Thanks for asking in a civil way."

"Hey Boss," Spike said. "You asked her if she likes snakes? `Cause sooner or later, you're going to have to show her your snake." While the other pilots laughed, Viper threw a wad of paper at the Spike.

"Hope you all had a fun day yesterday," Viper said once the *Gungnir* had left the orbit of Lantea and was underway, heading back to the fight with the Wraith. "Glad to see that none of you did anything stupid... OK, too stupid. It's back to work for us. Major Arizona, if you please."

"Our intelligence network has spotted Spooky von Richthofen," Arizona said. "Looks like he's with another hive now. Analysis of the last battle with him shows that his Dart has been upgraded in more ways than we first thought. Data taken from the commander and Captain Parton's flight recorders show the Dart has some form of holographic projector, to be used as decoy. However it seems it's only a visual decoy. The Wraith know we use our eyes to spot targets, but it doesn't show up on sensors. The distraction only works for a few seconds, but it might be enough for Spooky to get the jump on you. Second thing is that his Dart seems to be impervious to gauss cannon fire. You'll have to go for a missile shot, which is easier said than done. The Commander's collision with the Dart left us with some scrapings of the armor. Hopefully the eggheads at Area 51 will figure something out."

"Our mission today," Viper said, taking the floor back. "Actually, *your* mission today, is simple: standard patrol where you'll be making transits through several systems, all of which are on the border of Wraith controlled space. Intel says there shouldn't be any enemy contact, but doesn't mean you should relax. Course has been entered into your nav comps."

As the briefing dispersed, the various pilots gathered their notes and made their way to the locker rooms to put on their flight gear, except for Zodiac, who, like Viper, was waiting for a replacement plane. Instead of suiting up, Zodiac went from pilot to pilot and offered words of encouragement and advice. Likewise, Viper was talking with Jester, as she would have tactical command of the mission, going over some of the finer details of the patrol route.

The command center of the *Gungnir*, or as Viper and any Marine often called it "the bridge," was located at the top of the superstructure. The viewports of the command center offered a good view of the upper hull of the vessel and its array of weapons turrets and launchers. However, as the launch facilities for the fighters were located underneath the vessel, it was a poor choice to view the launching of the F-306s. The prime location for observing fighter launches was the Air Boss' observation post. As it was the vessel's command center, every piece of information relevant to the *Gungnir* was displayed somewhere, from location, to the amount of ordinance remaining. With so much information available, the command center crew often joked that the mess hall menu was shown somewhere. For the duration of the mission, Viper had ensconced himself in the fighter control area of the command center, though currently direct control of the squadrons was handed off to SoS' AWACS ship. All the data from SoS' ship was sent to several parts of the command center, one of which was fighter control. The terminals that the crewmembers responsible for directing the vessel's fighter compliment were clustered around a large wall-mounted monitor that displayed the location of the *Gungnir* and its fighters in relation to it. Viper was studying the sensor board when an airman handed him a folded piece of paper. "Colonel," Viper said after reading the message and heading forward to find the ship's commander. He handed Data the message he had been given. "Permission to take a Jumper to the nearest planet with a stargate?" Data skimmed the message.

"How will you be getting back?"

"The *Athena* will be moving in to support us in a few days. It shouldn't be a problem to hitch a ride with them."

"OK, granted."

"Find me Zodiac," Viper said to the airman that had been assigned to him as an orderly.

"Who, sir?" the orderly asked. He was still learning the callsigns of the squadron, and occasionally had trouble with who was who. Since Viper called all his pilots by their callsign, there were times the orderly had trouble putting a pilot's proper name and rank with their callsign and face. Viper sighed.

"Flight Lieutenant Yates. One of the Brits. The one without the snake in his head." As he spoke, Viper pointed to the back of his neck, the place where the Tok'ra symbiote resided.

"Yes, sir." As the airman left, Viper thought to himself about getting a new orderly. As good as the current one was with administrative duties, and getting coffee, having trouble with names and callsigns was not a good thing.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Zodiac asked when he entered Viper's office.

"Pack your flight gear and whatever you need for a few days and meet me on the hangar deck in fifteen minutes, we're going on a trip."

After a quick jump from a hyperspace capable Jumper and a trip through the stargate, Viper and Zodiac found themselves back on Atlantis, where a group of technicians, led by a major, were waiting for them.

"Well, that was quick," Viper said when they reached the hangar section of Atlantis. Waiting for them was a pair of brand new F-306 Fenrirs, though on initial inspection, both pilots noticed a few differences. The thrust nozzles for the engines were a little different and the hull of the fighter seemed a little odd.

"These are two of the first F-306Bs," the major said. "Fresh off the production line."

"F-306B?" Zodiac asked as he and Viper began going over the new fighter. They opened every access panel they could get their hands on and carefully studied every square inch of the jet.

"There are some upgrades over the original version of the F-306A. Some are obvious, others not so."

"What's the skinny?" Viper asked.

"Though it looks about the same on the surface, the F-306B is totally a different plane underneath. Area 51 managed to get the manufacturing process worked out for a small scale Asgard power unit. It was what set the 306 program back a year or so. As a result, the new Fenrir doesn't need gas. But that doesn't mean the range is unlimited. We've also retooled the thrust vectoring system on the ion engines and made some adjustment to the hyperdrive." The original version of the F-306 required fuel to power the aircraft's substantial power generators, which provided power to all the systems and engines. Under normal operations, the power source provided a certain amount of excess power which the pilot could adjust. "Afterburning," though the fighter didn't have afterburners as it used a modified ion drive system, was one use of the discretionary power as well increasing gauss gun round velocity, and the fighter's hyperdrive consumed a certain amount of the energy. By increasing power to a specific system or creating a hyperspace window, the store of extra energy was drained from the fighter's power cells and was recharged over time at a rate dependent upon the consumption of power from the power generator.

"What's with the funky light pattern?"

"That's actually part of the energy diffusion armor. It diffuses part of the energy from an energy based weapon, like the ones on Darts, but not completely. It only mitigates it. Basically it turns what could be a fatal shot into one that causes severe damage."

"What else?"

"Some of the avionics have been upgraded. Another big change was the removal of the gauss gun."

"What?" Zodiac and Viper said in unison.

"It's been replaced by an Asgard energy weapon, scaled down of course, but still can give quite a punch."

"Interesting. Any chance we can take these out for a spin?"

"The *Athena* is scheduled to leave in two hours. I'm sure you could take the time to familiarize yourself with them."

An hour later, Viper and Zodiac were back in the air. Both of them had taken the time to get a few things done on Atlantis before they took flight once again, with Viper stopping by the Atlantis Infirmary for a quick visit, and Zodiac taking care of a few things he didn't have time to do before leaving.

"Rolling in," Zodiac said. They were practicing close air support attack runs on the range before meeting up with the *Athena* for transport back to the *Gungnir*. Zodiac's target was a patch of ground that had somehow escaped the repeated usages of the area for target practice. He squeezed the trigger and fired. The new energy weapon spat out a rapid stream of energy bolts, stitching a row of craters into the ground. Instead of an ammo counter, there was a bar showing energy reserves for the gun on the HUD, and firing the weapon caused it to lower slightly, but the fighter's new power core replenished it quickly. Coming in seconds behind Zodiac was Viper, who mirrored the British pilot's attack run and stitched a second row of craters next to the first.

"*What do you think, Zodiac?*" Viper asked over the radio.

"It's good to be flying, sir. This thing's even better than the first."

"*That's good to hear. Let's go up into space for some ACM. Viper has the lead.*" Zodiac pulled back on his stick and followed Viper up through the clouds and through the upper atmosphere and eventually into the black expanse of space. Far below him were the planet and the vast ocean that Atlantis rested on.

With their familiarization flight over, the two pilots headed over to the *Athena* in orbit around the planet. Landing on the flight deck of a BC-304 had changed over the years. With the slower and smaller F-302s, there was no need for arresting gear, as the smaller fighters could decelerate and come to a stop in a fairly short amount of space, but the larger and faster F-306s required an arrester system like that found on modern aircraft carriers. As a Navy pilot, Viper felt at home with the whole system of having to catch a series of cables, and was generally good at carrier landings. He had logged many carrier landings before he became a part of the F-302 and F-306 programs, and a portion of those landings occurred in pitch black night, with only the landing signal lights to guide him down. Those landings required nerves of steel and brass balls, as in some cases, the deck wasn't visible until the last moment his wheels touched it and his tail hook snagged the cable. By comparison, landings onto the *Gungnir's* flight deck was a piece of cake,

and he had the greenie board in the 441<sup>st</sup>'s pilot room to back it up, as he currently had a streak of fifteen "greens" on the board. Given the majority of his squadron were Air Force pilots, even RAF ones, he wasn't surprised that Kirby and Jester were also up there with him in the number of greens. To prevent the cable snapping from under the stress placed on it by the speed and mass of the F-306, the cables were made of carbon nanotube fibers, instead of steel strands, giving it a much greater tensile strength. In addition to that, the tension on the cables were calibrated to the weight of the incoming fighter, taking into account the amount of fuel and ordinance it had, to provide the appropriate amount of tension in the cable to stop the incoming fighter.

"Viper has the ball," he said, acknowledging he could see the "ball," a horizontal bar of lights that indicated his height relative to the landing deck. Following the guidance of the landing lights, he made a smooth touch down onto the *Athena's* port landing bay, snagging the third cable. As he taxied off, following the directions of a plane handler, the system was reset for Zodiac's landing. "Welcome aboard the *Athena*," an ensign greeted Viper, as he climbed down the ladder. The *Athena* was one of the US Navy crewed space vessels, a rarity amongst the multitude of Air Force vessels, and as such, the *Athena* was the one of the few that carried the USS designation. Just by looking at the flight deck, Viper was reminded just how much smaller the BC-304s were. He had grown spoiled by the vast open spaces of the *Mjolnir*-class vessels.

"Sir, the captain requests you join him on the bridge," the ensign said once the two pilots had been given quarters and had a chance to shower and change.

"Hey! Viper!" the captain of the *Athena* said when the two pilots entered the bridge, he extended his hand out, and Viper took it, his hand getting crushed by the captain's strength. He was a bear of a man, and known to be very jovial and friendly. His nickname amongst the crew, though it was never said to his face, was St. Nick, though the captain's mass was more muscle than anything else. He had been a linebacker on the Navy football team during his time at the Naval Academy, and had been present for a Navy trouncing of the Army team. "Welcome back!" Viper's previous posting before the *Gungnir* had been a squadron commander aboard the *Athena* though the ship had been assigned to the fight against the Ori.

"Thank you, sir."

"How's being CAG working out?"

"Just fine, sir."

Along with the two new F-306s, the *Athena* also ferried a crew that was qualified to service the new systems on the fighter and to teach it to the crews in the field, as an interim measure before they went through more formal training. After two days of being aboard a BC-304, Viper was screaming to be back in his quarters on the *Gungnir*. It wasn't because his quarters were bigger; it just had all his stuff in it. Since he was officially a passenger on the *Athena*, he had no duties to perform, and needed to find ways to occupy his time. As a result, he spent his time with the *Athena's* pilots, some of which had been his old squadronmates, while others were new faces.

"So he tries to bluff the sentry ship," one of Viper's old squadronmates said, regaling the "new" pilots with stories about their former squadron commander. "By telling them the cargo ship's full of rubber dog shit from Hong Kong." The gathered pilots, Zodiac included, burst out laughing. "And the Lucian Alliance guy's got no clue what the heck it is, nor has he ever heard of Hong Kong, but he lets it through anyway. Next thing he knows, he's got a squadron of 302s and an Al'kesh blowing the crap out of a *kassa* shipment."

"OK, I'm going to get a sandwich," Viper said, getting up from the table. "Any of you guys hungry?" Everyone else shook their heads. As he left the pilot's ready room, they could hear him say something about a cup of coffee.

"Hey," Zodiac said, now that his commander was gone. "I got a question. I heard something about Major Woody and the commander and something about chaos ensuing?" The gathered pilots all fell silent, looking at each other with somber looks.

"The first rule about Viper and Jester is that you do not ask about Viper and Jester."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." The rest of the pilots burst out laughing.

"Dude, I'm just having you on. Anyways, it's a long story."

"Welcome back to the *Gungnir*," Viper and Zodiac heard on their radios as they brought their F-306s in for a landing. It was good to be back on the *Gungnir*; it was larger, and offered more space to get things done. It was his home.

"Status on the 441<sup>st</sup>'s mission?" Viper asked the fighter control officer. On the sensor board in the fighter control area of the commander center, he could see a plot of the ship's squadrons and

their pre-planned patrol routes. The 441<sup>st</sup> were the farthest away from the *Gungnir*, while the 360<sup>th</sup> was close by, on CAP duty near the ship, and the remaining two squadrons somewhere in between.

"Patrol route is 60% complete, sir," the officer replied. "Reported a brief contact with a flight of Darts, but quickly neutralized the threat and AWACS reports no incoming Wraith ships."

"Right." Viper left the rear area of the command center and walked forward to where Colonel Data was seated, going over the various status reports that were submitted to him on a regular basis.

"Welcome back, Commander," Data said in greeting to his CAG.

"Good to be back, sir. What's our next move?"

"We're going to find Spooky von Richthofen, and lay the smack on him. He got away last time, and as a symbol for the Wraith, we can't let him live. And don't think I've forgotten that stunt Major Woody did."

"The flyby, sir?"

"No, I mean the one where she flipped him off. I've got nothing against Wraith insulting, but she let him get away."

"I beg to differ, sir. Yes, we did let him get away, and Spooky knows this. But he also knows we could have blown him to Hell if we wanted to. We let him live, but it's because we wanted someone to tell the rest of the Wraith how we took down a hive ship."

"Going for the psychological angle? If you want to do that, there's much more that we can do."

Even though it was a new fighter with new capabilities, strapping into an F-306B felt like putting on an old pair of comfortable gloves. Viper had spent some of his time on the *Athena* tweaking the settings on his new fighter, from adjusting his pilot's chair to the configuration of the various multi-function displays in the cockpit, slightly changing the information displayed and the function of the buttons.

With the mission brief done and over, the pilots suited up and walked out to their planes for preflight. The preflight inspection was a crucial part of flying, ensuring the plane was fit to fly and everything was properly mounted before it took off. Using the ammunition loader's switches, Viper opened up the weapons bays and peered in, checking that the eight AIM-120D missiles had been loaded properly so that there would be no unfortunate catastrophic jams. After closing the bays, he checked the housing for the energy weapon, making sure that there were no obstructions that prevented the small trap door from opening to reveal the weapon. Once done with the rest of the fuselage and engines, Viper checked the wing mounts. For this mission, his fighter had been outfitted with a full air-to-air combat load, giving him twelve missiles, eight in the weapons bays, and another four on the wings, mounted inside stealth pods to maintain the fighter's stealth characteristics. With his preflight done, Viper climbed the ladder and settled himself into his chair while one of his ground crew members held his helmet and handed him the various parts to his seat restraints. Before he started up his fighter, he checked that he had everything he needed for the mission. On a notepad strapped to his leg, he had a quick list and reminders on what needed to be done for the mission. In the various pockets of his flight suit, he had some emergency supplies if he needed to eject, and in his shoulder holster was his sidearm with a pair of extra magazines. He checked to see if his breathing apparatus was connected, and he locked in his breath mask and pulled down the transparent eye shield. In its default setting, the fighter's environmental systems controlled the flow of oxygen to his breath mask, though he could adjust it to a manual setting if necessary.

With everything on his person squared away, Viper flipped the switches that started his fighter up, and he heard the hum of the fighter's power generator and the *thrum* of its engines. After a quick check of the fighter's status readout, and that it would not blow up, Viper lowered the canopy, sealing himself into the fighter. He signaled to one of his ground crewmembers to release the chocks preventing his fighter from rolling, and when they were gone, he released the brakes and rolled forward, following the directions of one of the plane handlers in joining the queue of fighters being launched. The *Gungnir's* launch deck could launch up to four fighters simultaneously via electromagnetic catapults, much like the Navy system. Under the guidance of a handler, he lined his fighter up with one of the catapults and one of the crewmembers locked his launch probe that was attached to his front landing gear into the catapult's cradle. Once secured, a set of panels mounted into the ceiling and deck of the launch deck moved into place to deflect the wash from the fighter's ion engines, and when a crewmember signaled to him by

pointing his index and middle fingers at his open palm, Viper increased his power to maximum thrust. With a quick salute to the launch officer, he took his hand off the stick and held onto a handle bar, as the launch of the fighter was now in the hands of the launch officer. Even with inertial dampeners, the sudden acceleration of the catapult hurling his fighter into open space forced him back into his seat, though not as much as if it were not dampened, which was how it was done on naval aircraft carriers. Once clear of the *Gungnir*, Hydra 1 Flight formed up around their squadron commander.

"Squadron," Viper said. "Come left, heading 284, mark 300." The 441st fell into formation and turned to the appropriate heading. Their mission took them down to a planet that was a Wraith stronghold. Their intelligence reports had shown that there was a large Dart concentration, and possibly a Dart production facility. With Spooky von Richthofen and his improved Dart still at large, any Dart production facility could be retooled to produce the new version, of which the most troubling feature was its immunity to gunfire. As they had in previous missions, the 441st was providing air superiority for the other squadrons, who were on bombing duty.

As they approached the facility, Viper's sensors picked up a flight of Darts patrolling the air space around the factory.

"Hydra 2, take the north side," Viper said. "Hydra 3, southwest."

"Roger." Jester and Monopoly said and their flights split off to cover their respective areas. The squadron was coming from the southeast and the pincer movement would sow confusion into the defenders.

Since the incoming F-306s had the element of surprise, the initial sweep of then Earth fighters would be able to take out a large amount of the defenders, and the F-306s tracking abilities would only increase the damage they could do. Equipped with advanced sensors, the fighter could lock on and engage eight targets at once and could broadcast targeting data for additional targets to friendly units, making it like a mini-AWACS unit in a combat zone. Locking on to several defenders, Viper assigned targets to his flight.

"Fire on my mark, then break to engage... Mark. Fox Three!" As one, the four F-306s launched two missiles each, blasting eight Darts out of the sky. Around the facility, the scene was mirrored as the other flights shot down the remaining defending Darts. Before the flaming wreckage of the Darts hit the ground, the sky was swarming with more Darts being launched from the facility, streaming up into the sky with Spooky von Richthofen's uniquely painted Dart in the lead. As he turned to engage, Viper noticed the cockpit bubble of the Darts was closer to translucent and not opaque like it was on the normal Darts, possibly their first counter to the F-306's stealth technology.

"I've got Spooky, cover me," Viper said to Kirby as he began a series of aerial maneuvers with the unique Dart. First, Spooky tried to shake the pair chasing him by heading for the deck, trying to lose his pursuit in the twisting canyons, but the human pilot's practice in the canyons of New Lantea had polished their already prodigious flying skills even further and allowed them to stay on target, though clean shots at Spooky's tail were few and far between. As the canyon system ended, and there was no cover to prevent Viper and Kirby from getting a clean shot, Spooky climbed up, looping back to join the main furball, as several Darts broke off and came to help.

"Boss, we got three Darts incoming, four o'clock high!" Kirby reported. If they continued on their current course and prosecution of Spooky, the incoming Darts would end up on their tail and Viper and Kirby would be in serious trouble. However, the advanced tracking systems of the F-306 once again gave them the advantage to turn the battle. With the helmet mounted HUD, Kirby could lock on to the three incoming Darts by simply turning his head towards them, and fire off a spread of missiles. Launching the last two missiles on his wing pylons and one from the internal bays, Kirby watched as the missiles streaked out from under his plane before they turned to the right and pulled up towards the Darts, hitting all three head on, their pilots never knowing what had hit them.

"Come on, get tone," Viper said, as if talking to his plane would make it work more efficiently, but the targeting system could not achieve a lock on the jinking Dart, nor did it present a good target for the F-306's guns. He fired off a burst at Spooky just to keep the Wraith pilot mindful of his pursuit and perhaps score a lucky hit. Then, for a brief moment, the targeting reticule settled over the Dart and turned red, and the tone sounded.

"Fox Three!" Viper thumbed his weapons control over to missiles and hit the trigger twice, launching his last two wing mounted missiles at the Dart. Moments after he fired, the Dart twisted and turned, trying to evade the missiles that were now streaking towards it. Suddenly,

the Dart released something from its rear and there was a small pop before it released a cloud of shimmering metal fragments, and one of the missiles veered into the cloud and exploded.

"Shit!" Viper said. The Wraith had finally fielded countermeasures to their missiles. The first missile had been spoofed by disrupting the targeting signal between the missile and the target, and the missile had thought the cloud of metal was the target and had gone for that instead. It was the Wrath version of chaff countermeasures that the F-306s themselves carried. A second cloud of chaff spoofed the second missile, causing it to explode. With missiles now countered, it came down to a classic dogfight with guns.

"Motherfucker!" Viper cursed. "Damn that cockbiting son of a bitch to hell!" Spooky von Richthofen had once again eluded the kill as he had summoned a phantom squadron of Darts with his holographic projector and had slipped away in the clutter of the holograms and the real Darts that were still swarming around the rubble of the now destroyed production facility. Once Spooky's retreat had been covered, the rest of the Darts followed. The attacking F-306s had accomplished their mission: the destruction of the production facility. By letting the Darts escape, they could sow doubt about the Wraith superiority in the galaxy amongst the Wraith, and further humiliate them. In the recent months, the Earth forces had shown that they could meet the Wraith on an even footing and strike at places the Wraith had thought were secure. The sudden increase in Wraith defeats and the increased frequency at which they occurred was probably what led to the Wraith creation of Spooky von Richthofen, and now the Earth forces were going after him.

With their primary mission objective complete, the four squadrons of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing headed back towards the *Gungnir*. Atlantis would later send in ground teams to assess the damage and to secure the planet, and there would be more missions to clear the planet of Darts and other Wraith forces.

When Viper landed, he found that Data had called him to the command center. Sloughing off his flight gear and helmet and putting them in his locker, Viper made his way to the command deck still in his flight suit.

"Sensors just picked this up," Data said when Viper arrived. "Hive ship on the other side of the planet, recovering the Darts. The *Sleipnir*'s moving to engage, but we need to be ready to support them."

"Sir," Lieutenant Vampire said. "The hive ship is jumping to hyperspace. *Sleipnir*'s following."

"Drums, take us out of orbit and follow the *Sleipnir*. Viper, make sure the wing is ready to go. Get everyone rearmed and refueled, ASAP."

"Aye, sir."

Despite the initial rush to get the F-306s of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing rearmed and refueled, it turned out to be unnecessary, as the *Sleipnir* had lost its track of the hive ship, and the two ships turned back to Atlantis. With the first combat deployment of the F-306B, the pilots were jealous of Viper and Zodiac. Though the two versions flew pretty much the same, the upgrade of an energy weapon and the elimination of the need to refuel was the main source of envy. In going over the specifications and the official documentation on the F-306B, there were hundreds of minor differences between the original version and the new one, as there were minor differences between the first production run F-306s, called Flight I, and the later, Flight II F-306s, as the production and manufacturing processes became more refined and efficient and as battlefield reports were sent back and the necessary changes were made. But despite these differences, the Flight I and Flight II F-306s had the same performance, which was important to the pilots, but had slightly different maintenance profiles and times, which was a concern of the mechanics and ground crews.

When the ships returned to Atlantis, there were surprises waiting for everyone. For the pilots, there was a delivery of four brand new F-306Bs, along with trained mechanics to service them, while the service crews for the replaced Fenrirs were rotated back to Earth to be brought up to speed on the new systems. For Viper, his orderly had been reassigned. Though the orderly was competent, Viper didn't really feel too strongly about keeping him on, and when the airman had applied for a transfer to another post, Viper agreed, and a new orderly had been assigned to him.

"Who are you?" Viper asked a young blonde woman wearing the standard green jumpsuit of *Gungnir* crewmembers and was standing at attention outside his office door. He had stopped by to get a few things before going down to Atlantis for the new intelligence briefing.

"Petty Officer First Class Erin Marshall reporting for duty, sir. I'm your new orderly, sir."

"Well, that's good to hear. First time off world, Petty Officer?"

"Aye, sir."

"What do you think?"

"It's wonderful, sir."

"Glad you like it. Otherwise, this could make for a bad deployment. I'm going planetside for an intel brief. Get the main briefing room prepped for the whole wing, and make sure there's lots of coffee. And if any of the pilots give you trouble, just give them a good kick."

"Aye, sir."

The next big surprise was for the gathered ship commanders and their senior officers. Hours after the *Sleipnir* had lost track of the hive ship with Spooky von Richthofen, one of the allies of the Atlantis expedition had passed on information about the hive ship carrying Spooky. The exact identity of the ally was a carefully guarded secret to the main Atlantis contingent, and revealed only to those involved with operations that might bring them into contact with the ally. The quality of intelligence for the ally was good when it concerned the Wraith, as they were a common enemy, and generally operations against the Wraith generally occurred in concert, but independently of the ally, when it was deemed convenient.

"We're calling this area of space the Deimos March," Arizona said to the gathered 243rd, highlighting a fairly significant swath of space in the Pegasus galaxy. The briefing on Atlantis was finished, and now Arizona was briefing the pilots of the *Gungnir*, as their senior officers had been present for the main briefing, for the main operation that they would undertake. "Outside of the Wraith and Atlantis liberated territories, it is one of the largest areas of space controlled by one organization, and that's where our hive ship is heading towards. Based on tracking reports, it seems to be skimming the border of Wraith space and Deimos March."

"Sir," Monopoly said, standing up. "Who controls Deimos March? Will we be getting assistance from them?"

"I was just getting to that, Captain. What I say now, does not leave this room. Discuss this with no one else. Deimos March is controlled by Phobos, a System Lord."

The announcement sent murmurs through out the room, as the pilots digested the shocking news. The Goa'uld System Lords had been the scourge of the Milky Way galaxy for thousands of years, enslaving countless human populations across the galaxy to serve them and to worship them as gods. With a combined alliance of the SGC, Tok'ra, and the Jaffa Rebellion, the Goa'uld had been overthrown, and freedom was given to the whole galaxy. Unfortunately, the freedom lasted only until the arrival of the Ori, but again, that was changing. In the intervening time, the SGC had dealt with the remaining Goa'uld, namely a System Lord known as Ba'al, who had created multiple clones of himself, operating from a vast variety of covert bases, trying to reestablish himself. The idea of a System Lord reaching Pegasus was unheard of, namely, the threat of the Goa'uld had been neutralized, but also, they lacked the technology to cross galaxies, and much like the Wraith, they were confined to their own galaxy.

"Fuckin' snakes!" a pilot blurted out. Immediately, he drew harsh looks from Jalnor, a Tok'ra, and Viper, whose callsign was a snake species. "Sorry, sirs." The pilot sank down in his seat, looking embarrassed.

"For this mission," Arizona continued. "We'll only get support only in terms of locating the hive, and we'll lose that once we get a fix on it. Primary mission objective for the pilots is to eliminate Spooky. Secondary objective is disabling of the hive ship. Again, the 441<sup>st</sup> will provide primary fighter cover along with the 362<sup>nd</sup>, while the 442<sup>nd</sup> and 360<sup>th</sup> will disable the hive."

"Once we locate the hive," Viper said. "We'll attack along specific vectors relative to the hive. The first target for the hive will be this: the thermal exhaust port. You'll be required to maneuver down this trench to this point. The target is barely two meters across, but a direct hit will cause a chain reaction that will disable the hive's engines."

"Two meters! That's impossible, even for a computer," Spike said.

"Apparently, Captain Dixon had no problem with it."

"Maybe you should get 'Luke Skywalker' to do it again, sir."

"Maybe I should shove you up Spooky von Richthofen's Wraith ass. I'm sure it's big enough now, since he's been taking it from behind so often from all of us." The gathered pilots laughed.

"Now we'll see if Phobos can be trusted with his intel," Jester said to herself, as she waited in her F-306. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a candy bar she had won off Viper from

their little shooting contest. The squadron was waiting in space at a holding position for confirmation on the latest tracking report from Phobos, and there as little to do but wait, and for those who had thought ahead, eating snacks that had been discreetly stashed in their flight suits.

"Why are we trusting an evil snakehead?" Spike asked over the radio. "Especially for intel?"

"It's more than just intel," Viper said. "Were getting bullets and spare parts from him too."

"As the Tok'ra representative, why was I not notified of a Goa'uld presence in the galaxy?"

Jalnor asked. Ever since it had been revealed that a Goa'uld had managed to get to Pegasus, he had been noticeably irked.

"They did it just to piss you off, Jalnor," Zodiac said. "Seriously, boss, whiskey-tango-foxtrot?"

"OK, cut the chatter, we got the go-code: Irene," Viper said. "All squadrons jump on my mark."

The 441st swept into the swarm of Darts as they boiled out of the hive ship like a cloud of angry bees. Coming in just behind the screen of fighters was the *Gungnir*, firing off a salvo of missiles at the hive. Jester threw her fighter into a spiral as she dodged incoming fire and fired off a snap burst of fire, clipping a Dart on its left side. As she pulled out of the spiral, a series of energy bolts flew past her cockpit. Looking behind her, she saw a Dartvhad latched on behind her and was firing at her.

"Angel, a little help," she said, calling for her wingman to help her out.

"On the count of three, break high and right. One... Two... Three."

Jester pulled back and to the right on her joystick, taking her out of the line of fire of the Dart. From behind the Dart, Angel fired a missile. The Dart banked right and let off a series of chaff pods, trying to spoof the missile. Wavering slightly for a moment, the missile went for the chaff cloud and exploded. After dodging the missile, the Dart resumed its attack on Jester, despite Angel's cover of her wingman.

"He's gaining on you!" Angel warned.

"I'm bringing him closer."

"You're gonna do what!?"

"I'm going to hit the brakes, and he'll fly right by." Jester pulled up slightly and reversed her thrust, suddenly decelerating her fighter. Caught unaware, the pursuing Dart overshot Jester, falling to one of the most basic air combat maneuvers. Now on the tail of her pursuer, she switched to guns and fired off a burst. The 20mm rounds tore into the rear of the Dart, shredding its engines and compromising its power systems, causing them to explode. The explosion caused the Dart to pitch upwards, spinning end over end and away from the battle.

Zodiac found himself being chased by Spooky von Richthofen and with Viper chasing the Wraith pilot. It was a game of cat and mouse, mixed in with liberal amounts of chicken. Over the course of the battle, Zodiac found himself pulling maneuvers faster and better than he had ever done before, pushing the performance envelope of the F-306 to its extreme. Having survived numerous engagements with the best of the best pilots from Earth, Spooky had become better and better, as if the two forces were two knives sharpening each other, and it was only a matter of time until one of the constantly sharpened blades broke. Zodiac put his fighter into a dive, rolling as he went, with Spooky on his tail, firing as he went. The energy burst went wide, as Zodiac pulled out of the dive, but Spooky's subsequent shot were closer, but whizzed past the Earth fighter.

Suddenly, the hive ship was pulling away, taking its Darts along with it, as the *Gungnir* continued to pound at it with missiles and energy beams, scoring hits along the hive ship's hull. However, the strikes by the 442<sup>nd</sup> and 360<sup>th</sup> squadrons had hit the hive's hyperspace engines, preventing it from escaping. The hive's screen of cruisers had been tied up by the *Sleipnir* and the *Athena*, leaving the stricken hive alone to face the fury of a *Mjolnir*-class vessel.

With the hive ship gone, it came down to mopping up the Darts and killing Spooky von Richthofen, which was easier said than done. The sheer number of Darts that could be fielded by a hive ship dwarfed the number of fighters aboard the *Gungnir*, and even with the larger ship's point defense batteries picking off Darts that ventured too close, it was a long and difficult fight. Having expended much of their ammunition, the fighters of the 243<sup>rd</sup> began landing on the *Gungnir*, and after a short period of rearming and refueling, they launched again, ready to join the fight. For the six pilots that had F-306Bs, they were granted longer battlefield endurance, as the fighter's guns required no ammunition, but instead, their time on the battlefield was dictated

by the pilots who flew it. Fatigue had begun to set in; some of it could be overruled by the pilot's own willpower and conditioning, but some could not, and a momentary slip in a combat zone could cost a pilot their life.

The extended fight had taken them close to the hive ship, Zodiac in front, Viper in the rear, and Spooky in between. The *Gungnir's* pounding was taking its toll and the hive was going to explode at any moment, and it did spectacularly. The three fighters saw the shockwave of the explosion coming towards them, and forgetting the reason why they were fighting each other, turned to escape it. Zodiac, who had been furthest away, was tossed about, his fighter flipping end over end, as it was hurled away from the exploding hive, while Spooky and Viper, who had been closer, had been engulfed in the expanding wave of hot gases and metal that had come from the explosion, before being spat out.

The rolling and tumbling was annoying. He was in space, and therefore weightless, and the inertial dampeners of the fighter kept him from feeling the effects of sudden acceleration, but the rapidly spinning star field was making him dizzy, as Zodiac wrestled with his controls to get his fighter stabilized. Eventually the spinning stopped, and Zodiac got control. He checked his fighter for damage, and the display told him he had plenty. But from a closer examination, it seemed that it was more quantity than quality. One of his weapons bay doors had been ripped off, and another had been dented; the engine nozzles for the ion drives had been dinged, and he had numerous dings and dents and scrapes all over his fighter, but his fighter was functional. Except the gun. It was the only system that had been tagged "red," non-functional. With all of his missiles expended, the gun had been his last remaining weapon, and now he had nothing to defend himself in a combat zone, though a dogfight was the least of his concern, getting back home was.

"Artoo, can you reach the damage?" Viper asked. It was a joke. There were no astromech units aboard an F-306 Fenrir, though the sophisticated computers that controlled the fighter's systems were occasionally joked as being almost intelligent enough to be droids. He was dead in space, drifting off into deep space and oblivion. His only consolation was that he could see Spooky von Richthofen nearby, in a much similar situation. Someone to commiserate with him. His diagnostics display had turned up many red tags. Long-range communications, sensors, weapons, and most importantly, power. The power generator, the component that supplied the fighter with enough power for all its systems, and never had to be refueled, was now a chunk of slag, leaving the stricken F-306 with the power that had been stored in its batteries and capacitors. Given his dire situation, Viper considered that he still had life support, and that he wouldn't die of asphyxiation or explosive decompression in the meantime.

"At least it gives me more time to be found," he said to himself, as he shut down inoperable systems and rerouted power. He could only stave off the inevitable. Eventually, even with reduced power consumption, he would run out of power to operate life support, which kept his air breathable, and when that happened, the carbon dioxide levels in his cockpit would rise, and he would die a horrible and painful death. Again, he checked the list of systems to see what else he could shut down to conserve power and found a surprise. The hyperdrive still worked.

"Like that's going to do me any good." The explosion had blown him and Spooky so far away from the location of the battle, that he had no idea where they were, and without sensors, he could not figure out where he was, and given his current power situation, blindly jumping into hyperspace was not a good idea.

The squadron was getting worried. Though they had just pulled of another mission in which the Wraith lost another hive ship, two of their own had not come back, one of which was their wing commander. In the absence of Viper, command had fallen to Jester, who was now trying to organize the data that was coming in concerning the last known positions of the two mission pilots.

"What do you have for me?" she asked Petty Officer Marshall, who had taken on the task of organizing all the information in a way that was easily readable to Jester.

"Well, Major," Marshall said. "Here is the sensor track of the *Gungnir* and the corresponding data from Major SoS' AWACS ship." The two sensor reports put Viper and Zodiac close to the hive ship, engaged in combat with Spooky von Richthofen up to the point when the hive exploded. The explosion had blotted out the two tags marking the planes, overpowering their signal.

"Can we plot the last known heading?" Marshall began entering data into the computer, setting up the parameters for it to make its calculations. Despite having been assigned to Viper as a general administrative grunt, whose job description consisted of proof reading reports, creating drafts of reports, getting coffee for the commander, and other general office work, Jester noted the Petty Officer was quite competent in other aspects.

After a few minutes of crunching numbers, the computer was ready with its findings on the last known vectors of Viper and Zodiac. Given numerous factors, it projected an area of space which it deemed possible for the fighters be located in, expanding outward as it got further away from the site of the explosion. One matter of interest was the direction in which it pointed towards: Deimos March. Given hundreds of years, the projected path would take them into Deimos March, but by then, everyone involved with the battle would have been dead, but Jester noted the direction and brought it to the attention of Data.

"I don't think asking Phobos for help is a good idea," Data said, answering an implicit question from Jester. "Even though we trust him enough to get beans, bullets, and band-aids from him, I wouldn't trust him with this."

"Sir, I never said we should ask Phobos for help. They're one of us, and we'll find them ourselves."

"I understand, Major."

Colonel Data had brought the *Gungnir* into the projected path of the missing F-306s and had begun extensive sensor sweeps of the area, trying to pick up any sign of the pilots existence, but it was a vast volume of space, and searching it would take time. To speed up the search process, SoS' AWACS, with its powerful sensor suite, had been deployed to help narrow down the search area for each ship, while fighter patrols had been dispatched to comb other areas. Even with all the extra resources that had been poured on for the search for two pilots and their planes, it was estimated to take several hours to complete scans of the projected area, and there was no guarantee they were in the projected area.

He considered himself lucky that his communications array was more or less intact, and he could, theoretically, set off a broad spectrum rescue signal, but it could also attract the attention of any Wraith still lingering in the area. His sensor board was more or less functional, and he would be able to see any incoming ships. Off in the distance, he could make out a bright point of light that was the *Gungnir*, or so his sensors told him. He had a choice; he could set off his rescue beacon and wait for pickup; he could make a run for the *Gungnir* at either sublight or by a short hyperspace jump. Either choice beat sitting around doing nothing. Zodiac decided on doing both.

"You have got to be kidding me!" he said when his display reported that his emergency beacon was inoperable. He ran a diagnostic again and his communications system had suffered only a small amount of damage, and a detailed scan showed that none of the components were out of commission. He hit the button for the beacon again, and again, the system gave him an error.

"Son of a bitch!" He punched the console and the error went away, his display showing that the emergency beacon was now active. Slowly, Zodiac goosed his engines, bringing them up to fifty-percent power and headed off towards the *Gungnir*.

"Just out of curiosity," Viper said. "Are you a ladies man?" To pass the time, he was talking to Spooky von Richthofen, but the damaged Dart had yet to respond, which only served to annoy Viper, causing him to occasionally hurl insults across the radio. Already, Viper had gone over his diagnostic systems several times, trying to find ways to conserve power, and he had also considered his options. There was little he could do to fix the damage from his cockpit, that much was given. He had no tools, and his flight suit was not rated for long term exposure to vacuum. It was only to protect him if his cockpit pod had developed a leak.

"Or do you... you know... swing the other way? 'Cause, the only Wraith females I've heard about are Queens, and sometimes, I'm sure it gets lonely, with one Queen and thousands of males. And while we're on the subject, what's Wraith for 'Bend over, here it comes again?'"

Again, silence was his only response.

"You know what? Fuck you! Fuck you and your white haired, pasty faced race of space vampire fucktards. I've heard of horror movie villains that could be better than you. If it wasn't

for you, I could be back at Atlantis, or better yet, back home, spending time with this one chick. But no, I'm here, drifting in space, waiting to die, and I'm trying to make conversation here, but you don't even have the fucking decency to talk back!" Out of anger, Viper punched the button for the emergency beacon, and it lit up for a brief second before winking out. He hit it again, only for the same thing to happen again.

"I blame Kroze."

The moment Zodiac's emergency beacon lit up, it set off a series of events. Both the *Gungnir* and the AWACS ship had detected the signal and had immediately dispatched patrolling fighters to the location of the signal, but given the distance between the fighters and the location of Zodiac's signal, it would be over two hours before they could reach that location. If all went well, Zodiac's F-306 would soon be recovered, and the pilot would be back aboard the *Gungnir*, safe and sound.

Jester had been one of the pilots that had been called to respond to the emergency beacon, and was speeding her way towards the area with Angel on her wing. Coming in from another direction was the wing pair of Monopoly and Spike. As she waited to make contact with Zodiac, she tweaked her sensors, trying to get as much resolution out of them as possible, when she spotted an anomaly. Nearing the projected point in which she would reach the beacon, which was moving towards the *Gungnir*, there was a small sensor return showing an object that had minimal power. Intrigued, she called Angel over the radio.

"Angel, I've got a sensor contact," Jester said. "Low power and it's drifting. I'm going to check it out."

"Roger. Think it might be Viper?"

"Could be. I'll call it in to base."

"ETA to sensor contact, one hour," Jester reported to the *Gungnir*. A new ping appeared on the sensor board in the command center, representing the anomaly that Jester had reported. Her fighter was sending a continual stream of sensor data to its parent vessel, giving the *Gungnir* real time information from its scouts.

"OK, Major," Data said. "Keep us informed."

Monopoly and Spike closed in on Zodiac's beacon, and were relieved when they could see the outline of the fighter in the distance.

"Zodiac, this is Monopoly, come in Zodiac."

"...-od to see yo-..." Zodiac's reply was garbled with static.

"Come again, Zodiac?"

"I...-n't copy... radi-..." Monopoly guessed that Zodiac had just as much trouble hearing him as he did hearing Zodiac. It was possible that Zodiac's radio had been damaged enough that it garbled messages, or that there was some sort of system short in the radio or the fighter that introduced a great deal of noise into the signal. But Zodiac was alive and that was what mattered to Monopoly. Though there was some difficulty communicating with him, radios were not the only way the pilots could talk to each other.

"Status?" Monopoly signaled with a flashlight pointed at Zodiac's cockpit. All the pilots knew Morse code, and it was how Goldfinger and Kroze had signaled to each other on their recon run of the first hive ship they had taken down. By either using his free hand as a shutter or rapidly depressing the button on the flashlight, Monopoly could simulate the dots and dashes of Morse code.

"Diagnostics are green, request visual check," Zodiac signaled back with his torch. The onboard diagnostics were one thing and were usually accurate, but a visual check of his fighter was a much better assessment of the condition of his fighter and whether it would be able to take a landing. In response to his request, Spike dropped back slightly and moved in underneath the fighter and continued a roll around the fighter with his cockpit oriented towards Zodiac's plane. As he performed his check, he radioed his observations to Monopoly who relayed them to Zodiac via Morse code.

"I have something," Jester said as her sensor contact came into visual range. "Looks like two objects." She pulled out her binoculars and trained them on the target. After a few seconds of fiddling with the focus, she could clearly see the white hull of Spooky von Richthofen's Dart, and

an F-306 with the image of a hydra painted on the fighter's twin tails and a "00" in the upper corner of the tail, signifying the plane belonged to the CAG.

"I found him. Angel, radio home base... Viper, this is Jester, do you copy?"

There was no reply. It was possible that Viper had decided to go to sleep in order to conserve oxygen and energy, and had simply not heard her. If that was the case, he required a little waking up. As Jester neared Viper's plane, she decelerated until she was just coasting along slowly, and then allowed her fighter to gently "nudge" the other plane. The impact was soft enough to avoid damage to either plane, but strong enough to jar a sleeping pilot.

"Viper, this is Jester, do you copy?" Jester repeated. There was no response, and there was no visual indication that Viper had heard her. She had not even seen him stir when she hit his plane.

"Shit... Angel, signal home base, medical emergency."

Zodiac's Fenrir had just barely made it. The landing had required the use of the landing deck's tractor beam which was held for emergencies when an incoming fighter could not be controlled and needed to land. Zodiac had come in for a normal landing, with the tractor beam ready, and just as he passed the force field that kept the hangar bay pressurized, the tractor beam snapped on and gently brought the fighter to a stop. A plane tractor then moved the damaged fighter out of the landing area and off to the sides to make room for Monopoly and Spike to land.

"Well," Zodiac said after he had gotten out of the fighter and Monopoly and Spike had also landed, heading over to where he was to welcome him back. "Looks like she got me through this all right." He patted the nose of the fighter twice, and one of his weapons bay doors, which had been wrenched off its hinges and was barely holding on fell off and hit the deck with a resounding clang.

"Blood pressure?" the *Gungnir's* Chief Medical Officer asked.

"140 over 95 with accelerated heartbeat."

"He's suffering from hypercapnia." The unconscious body on the gurney convulsed and the medical team surrounding it struggled to get the situation under control as they wheeled the stretcher to the ship's sick bay.

"What's happening?" Data asked. He had made his way from the commander center to sick bay as soon as he had heard the news.

"He's suffering from carbon dioxide poisoning from breathing his own exhaled carbon dioxide," the CMO replied. He followed the medical team into sick bay and got to work, ignoring the presence of the ship's commander, as he had a patient to save.

"For the past several hours, he was running on battery power," Jester said to Data. "The explosion blew out his power generator. From his fighter's logs, we can tell he shut down all but the essential systems, but that only extended his time. Eventually, he ran out of power, and life support shut down."

"Why didn't he activate his rescue beacon?" Data asked.

"As you know, the F-306's rescue beacon is based off the sub-space communications array. The commander's F-306's long-range communications array was damaged, and so he couldn't activate the beacon. All he could do was wait."

It was a difficult time for the crew of the *USAFV Gungnir*, an uncertain time in which the life of one of their own hung in the balance, unsure as to whether he would live or die. The medical team tried their best to save Viper, even asking Jalnor to use a Goa'uld healing device on the stricken pilot in order to cleanse his body of the damage that had been caused by hypercapnia, but the outlook from the team was dim. To conserve oxygen, the brain had lowered its neural activity, and so far, had not restored the brain's activity levels to its proper state. EEG scans had shown that Viper currently had an EEG frequency of 0.5 Hz, which was consistent with a comatose and near death state.

Jalnor was once again trying to use the healing device in an effort to save his commanding officer, when Viper's vitals began to flat line.

"Please move, Squadron Leader," Keller said over the constant tone of the flat line signal. The *Gungnir* had made record speed back to Atlantis and had transferred Viper down to the city's Infirmary, where the medical facilities and Ancient technology could present a better chance at saving the pilot. "There's nothing left for you to do."

Jalnor watched as the medical team attempted to resuscitate the comatose pilot, from cardiac massages to defibrillation, alternating between Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation, mouth-to-mouth, and electric shocks to the heart in an attempt to jump start it.

"To the crew of the *Gungnir*... and the pilots of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing, it was an honor... to serve with... all of you." The gathered pilots were listening to a recording that had been made shortly before Jester had found the disabled fighter. From the recording, it was apparent that Viper had difficulty breathing, and that it had been made in his last conscious moments. There was a slight chuckle, though it was labored. "It isn't Kroze's fault... and with my last breath... I curse Zoidberg."

Clearing out the quarters was a task that no one enjoyed. The process of going through the possessions of another, regardless of how few or plenty, brought back memories of good times and bad times, and the pain that there would be no more memories, good or bad. The task had fallen to Jester, as she was Squadron XO, and soon to be the new CO of the 441<sup>st</sup> Hydras and the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing. She had already taken care of the quarters aboard the *Gungnir*, the task had been mercifully quick, as there was little to remove, just a stack of books, some CDs, personal effects, and a half-finished novel with the bookmark showing the last page that Viper had read. As she finished, she was confronted with the sobering fact that in a few days, she would be moving into the quarters she had just finished emptying, as she would become the new CAG. Perhaps it was because it had happened quite recently, but she still thought of them as Viper's quarters, the CAG's quarters, and not her own.

With a wave of her hand, Jester opened the door to Viper's quarters on Atlantis and found that someone else had arrived before her. Sitting on the bed was a woman wearing the Atlantis expedition uniform with the pale yellow trim of a member of the medical division. Though she could not see her face, Jester knew who it was; she had seen her with Viper enough times when he was in the city, though Jester had never learned her real name, as all of the pilots called her by her the moniker that Viper had secretly given her. She sat on the bed, a picture frame in her hands, and though it seemed as if she was looking at the digital pictures that cycled through the frame, it was obvious that her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Oh, hi," she said when Jester cleared her throat to announce her presence. It was apparent that StarCraft Girl had been crying, as there were two lines of tears running down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the back of her hand.

"Hi," Jester said, walking into the room. As she looked around, she noticed there were many more personal effects in Viper's quarters in the city than on the ship. It wasn't much of a surprise, as space was somewhat limited aboard the *Gungnir*. There were little knick knacks scattered around the room, decorating the various shelves that contained a copious amount of books. There were only one or two posters mounted on the wall, one of a snow covered Neuschwanstein Castle and another of a fog covered mountain landscape.

"He was a good friend," StarCraft Girl said after she and Jester had introduced themselves. She looked down at the picture frame in her hands and cycled through a few photos, pausing on each one for a second, recalling the memories that came with those photos, while puzzling at others that she had not been part of.

"Just a friend?" Jester asked. SCG gave her a weak smile, but one that conveyed a volume of information about the nature of her and Viper's friendship.

As a traditional farewell to a fallen pilot, the missing-man formation was once again performed above the city of Atlantis. The formation consisted of Jester, Kirby, Jalnor, and Monopoly, with Kirby to play the part of the missing-man. The flight of four F-306s cruised several hundred meters above sea level, lower than the towering spires of the Ancient city. They were on a schedule, and the flight was supposed to fly past a certain point at a certain time and perform the maneuver. At the appointed time, Kirby pulled up and away from the flight as they passed the appointed spot. The flight continued on out over the ocean that the city rested on as Kirby rejoined the flight, and then they circled around to land in the city.

Over the next few days, a feeling of unease spread through the 243<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing and the crew of the *Gungnir* and eventually to SoS. It was accompanied by a feeling of unrest and the desire to do more than sit around. The remains of Spooky von Richthofen's Dart had been

recovered shortly after Viper's disabled F-306, and the Dart was currently being studied by several teams of scientists. Spooky von Richthofen himself had not survived the turbulent ride of the explosion, suffering extreme contusions and blunt trauma to the head from impacts to the inside of the cockpit. Despite having eliminated one of the Wraith's top pilots and recovering his advanced Dart, the feeling continued. It turned out that SoS had an explanation that made sense to everyone, despite the fact that it seemed to come from left field.

"His death was not how he wanted to go," the AWACS commander said. It was obvious who she was talking about. "There was no honor, no glorious battle. His spirit is not at rest." Despite the myriad of religious beliefs of the pilots of the 441<sup>st</sup>, their common warrior spirit and ethos was what made this explanation satisfactory.

"We must fight a glorious battle in his name if he is to gain peace and entry into the hallowed halls of Sto-Vo-Kor. Duj tIvoq taH."

"bItu Hpa' bIHeghjaja," Jester said in response. The rest of the squadron nodded in agreement.

Within hours after the discussion between SoS and the 441<sup>st</sup>, the *Gungnir* was ready to depart Atlantis and rejoin the fight against the Wraith as it had done many times, but there was something different in this deployment. Everyone, from the lowest ranking airman, to Colonel Data, and all the pilots, were itching and ready for a fight, to fight the glorious battle that would give peace and rest to the soul of their fallen comrade.