

~ GAIA ~

REVISED VERSION

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Additional disclaimer: This is an alternative story, dealing with a sexual relationship between consenting adult women. If you are too young to read stuff like this, please go away. If it's illegal where you live; get the hell out of there. It also contains scenes of physical punishment of consenting adults - yes, I know it may sound incongruous but by reading the story you will understand.

Pairing: Xena / Gabrielle: established relationship; and Sam / Janet: sort of a first time story and more.

Timeline: Follows X:WP up until the end of season four. The timeline for SGC is more difficult to assess but it's definitively shortly before Season 5's episode: 'The Rite Of Passage' - however, I simply couldn't let the dramaturgical advances of the Anubis' threat and his super soldiers slip away, so, just imagine them possible before season 7.

Language disclaimer: English isn't my first language, so please be lenient. Special thanks go to Pam and Mary, my valiant beta readers who made this whole story a lot better. You rock, gals!

WARNING: This is a revised version of the story I posted around 2006. The revision became necessary to make it flow better with the sequel which will be posted soon.

Prologue: Gate Room

Colonel Jack O'Neill was standing in the Gate Room, bitching about the routine jump ahead. And for at least the third time this day, not counting the briefing, his second in command calmly explained why it was important, carefully keeping her annoyance with her commanding officer out of her voice and eyes.

"Preliminary tests on the samples of plant life the MALP II collected show that they have a great potential to be used as antibiotics, sir; the geological data hints at considerable reserves of naqada and the video material has the historians excited about finding a village straight out of ancient Greece, sir."

"Yadda, yadda, yadda... but why do 'we' have to do this, that's what I'd like to know, Carter? It sounds boring as hell. There are other teams better qualified. Hammond could just have sent one

of the geek squads."

Major Carter's face reflected nothing but bland obedience.

"No, don't say it. I know: Because after our last run-in with the Goa'uld the doc and the general want us to take it easy for a while. And an order is an order. I don't have to like it, right?"

At this moment the baritone of General George Hammond came through the speaker system.

"Permission to pass through the gate, colonel. Report back with your preliminary security report as soon as possible, and don't forget, it's a diplomatic mission."

The colonel rolled his eyes but nodded towards the control centre and walked up the ramp, closely followed by Teal'c, Daniel Jackson and Major Carter trailing behind.

Chapter One: The First Contact

Sam thought she felt some sort of resistance stepping through the event horizon but didn't have time to dwell on the feeling, but instead followed O'Neill's order to check the immediate vicinity of the gate.

Before they were more than twenty paces away, a group of a dozen women armed with bows and swords appeared as if out of nowhere. Teal'c readied his zat, O'Neill had his AK-90 aimed, Carter her 'Carter special'; and Daniel was his usual trusting self, stepping forward to introduce himself and his companions.

A young woman with light brown hair and a face full of freckles joined him and bowed to the newcomers. "Welcome to Gaia, humans from Earth. We have been expecting your visit for a few days now and are deeply honoured being able to greet SG-1 as the first representatives of Earth on the Amazon homeworld. You are our revered guests. We have order to show you around and give you the opportunity to see that your research team will be perfectly safe with us."

She'd already half turned around to lead them out of the clearing the Stargate was situated in when Jack said, "If honoured guests are met by an 'escort' armed to the teeth, I don't want to know what kind of welcome you reserve for your enemies. But lead on, I can't wait to speak to the guy in charge."

She whirled around, stepping in his face in the blink of an eye, snarling. "Better keep your tongue in check, male, else you might lose it."

Daniel tried to get between them, as always the diplomat and talker but to no avail. Jack simply side stepped him and answered with a snarl of his own. "I'm a man - and of the mind to teach you a lesson in manners, little girl."

His eyes were glaring with an aggressiveness that rivalled any Goa'uld System Lord. His right hand fell on the slender woman's arm and before he knew how he was sprawled on the ground at least five feet away. The Jaffa warrior reacted on instinct; trying to eliminate the threat to his best friend but also found himself on the ground, face first, next to the colonel.

Now, Daniel instinctively drew his sidearm, levelling the barrel of his gun at their young escort. The other women surrounding them already had their weapons at the ready, when a low female voice demanded. "Stand down."

The women immediately lowered their weapons and took two steps back. A tall woman stepped passed Carter, clad in a strange set of leathers and armour, long black hair with red highlights flowing freely down her back.

The young woman lowered herself on her right knee, her right fist went straight to her heart, and her eyes found the ground. "Aria, what did I tell you about the proper conduct towards our guests?"

"I'm sorry, your highness."

"Do I have to repeat my question?"

"No, your highness. You told me to be courteous and not to react on the men's aggressiveness, mistress. I'm sorry; my instincts got the better of me. It won't happen again."

"Never make promises you can't keep, Aria. Now, how many times did I tell you not to follow your instincts alone?"

"At least one time too many, your highness. Please have me punished for disobedience and stupidity."

The last word brought a smile to the taller woman's face.

"Report to me after sundown. It will be marked in your record but there's no need for a public punishment. I congratulate you on the moves you used; they were fast and efficient without exerting yourself. Report to the guest palace and then go to the weapons' master. Tell her that your training is to be advanced another level. I'll take over."

The young woman was on her feet faster than lightning. "Wait, young one. Didn't you forget something?"

"Yes, your highness, I'm sor... I know; don't be sorry, try to improve." Aria turned to Jack and Teal'c who now were back on their feet. "Colonel O'Neill, Master Teal'c, I apologise for my lack of discipline. I should not have taken your innocent remark as an insult. I'm sorry that I attacked you."

Jack was only glowering at her but the Jaffa raised an eyebrow and said. "Apology accepted,

young warrior."

Now the raven-haired woman turned towards the rest of the newcomers. "Welcome to Gaia. I apologise for the incident. For the young and wounded sometimes it's hard to see beyond the obvious. I hope it won't hamper our future relations."

"I know you must have a lot of questions. We pose no threat to you. Give us the benefit of the doubt and soon you will have your answers."

Meanwhile Daniel had his composure back and his revolver put away in its holster. "Your majesty, I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding, that will be easy for us to put behind us."

"That's good to hear, Doctor Jackson, but I'm not the queen, I'm merely her consort."

There were a few whispered remarks among the escort and some very unwarriorlike giggles the imposing woman silenced with a simple look.

Samantha Carter found herself strangely drawn towards her and instead of staying back as she usually did in situations like this, waiting for a technical problem to present itself, she now stepped forward and asked.

"How did you know in advance that Colonel O'Neill would act more aggressively than normal?"

"Yeah, how did you know? Or do you think all men are nothing but aggressive?" Jack piped in.

The tall woman gave him a genuine smile that eased his tension. "No colonel. Aggressiveness is not genuinely connected to a person's sex. However, one of the side effects of the energy shield protecting Ath... the Stargate is to increase the testosterone level in male humanoids considerably. It's only temporary but nevertheless not to be disregarded."

"So, the resistance I felt when leaving the wormhole was some sort of iris?" Sam asked, already intrigued by the possible mechanics of something like this.

"It serves the same purpose, yes, Samantha Carter. There soon will be time for you to consult with our scientists."

"Please forgive my impoliteness; my name is Xena. I'm the consort to Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, Chosen of Artemis, Queen of Gaia. I'll escort you to the guest palace where the queen is waiting to discuss the terms of your stay on our planet."

"We'll go the long way round to give you a view of our village from above though I suppose you already know what to expect. - Tarah, you and your unit can return to the training grounds. Your help no longer is needed; get some sword drills in."

The young blonde to whom she had spoken opened her mouth to say something in protest but then thought better of it, saluted by bringing her right fist to her heart and then answered. "Yes,

your highness."

"You speak of scientists and energy shields but our preliminary reports didn't show any kind of advanced technology." Daniel finally said.

"Dealing with the Nox, you should have learned that looks sometimes can be deceiving, Doctor Jackson." She answered with a smile, leading them along a broad path through the forest. "The fact that we don't openly display our technology and that most of us prefer to handle our daily life without using it, doesn't mean that we don't have it or that we wouldn't agree to share some of it. I know you have a lot of questions but I'm a warrior not a storyteller. My Queen soon will answer your questions, even the ones you don't know you have. Be patient."

"Are you really an Amazon? I thought they were a myth." Carter said, not ready to miss out on their guide's alluring voice just yet.

"Yes, I am but not by birth as most of us are. I was adopted into the tribe a long time ago, Samantha Carter. There's something I'd like to show you. Are you afraid of heights, Samantha Carter?" The young blond just shook her head. "If you gentlemen would please continue along the path, we'll be back in a few candelights."

Before O'Neill could call her back, Carter and the strange woman had disappeared. The men stopped dead in their tracks. "Daniel, I want some answers, now! What are these women?" He asked while they did as told.

"Amazons?" Daniel answered and shrugged his shoulder.

"There's a legend among the Jaffa that a nation of women warriors have defied the System Lords for more than three thousand years now. It is said that not even the most skilled among the Jaffa stood a chance against their skills in hand-to-hand combat or with every weapon imaginable. It's said that they are protected by one of the oldest Goa'uld, one whose name is never spoken of, one who is regarded as a traitor. It is also said that the Goa'uld Lord Bastet once trained an army of female Jaffa to finally best these women but that none of them ever returned."

"In Ancient Greece," Daniel continued the lecture, "Amazons were a tribe of fierce women warriors. It was said that they only interacted with men to kill them or to procreate. They killed the boys and only raised the girls - just like in some parts of China and Africa the girls are killed and only the boys are given a chance to grow up." Daniel saw Jack's frown and quickly came back to his subject. "They supposedly amputated one of their breasts to make it easier to handle the bow; they lived in the forest or on the plains of Russia and Turkey. Legend has it that Hercules and Perseus both defeated them in big battles. There is also a story about Bellerophon, a half-god born to Artemis, the Goddess of the Hunt and protector of the Amazons, killing the rest of them. He wanted revenge for his mother not raising him but giving him away."

"All right, already. Are they a threat?"

"I don't think so, Jack. They could have killed us a dozen times over by now. No, I think they

genuinely are interested in establishing a relationship with us."

"Teal'c?"

"I agree with Daniel Jackson, O'Neill."

O'Neill's face suddenly became pensive, then he said. "Wait... you don't suppose that's why they want us, do you? I mean, you know, the three of us?"

Daniel looked at his friend and suddenly blushed and stammered. "You... to mate with? No, no... I don't think so."

O'Neill's speculations were no surprise to everyone who knew him more than a couple of candlemarks. "Well, because you know me... I'm all for helping people."

Daniel's blush deepened and to save the situation Teal'c asked. "How long is a candlemark supposed to be?"

"It's the equivalent of one minute, Master Teal'c, as a candlemark is the same as an hour. The only difference to your time is that our days have 26 candlemarks." The low voice of their guide answered, standing behind them with a grinning Carter at her side.

"Where the hell have you been, Carter? I didn't authorise any escapades."

"I'm sorry, sir. Xena just took me to the treetops and showed me how to move there. It's much faster than on the ground. It was great, sir." Recognising his facial expression as disapproval, she sighed. "I'm sorry, Colonel O'Neill. It won't happen again."

"Please, also accept my apologies, colonel. I should have known better and respected the chain of command. Next time, I will ask for your permission first. I'll see to it that I'll be adequately punished for my oversight."

Mollified and slightly puzzled by her words, O'Neill answered. "There's no need to go to such extreme measures, Xena. Apology accepted. - So, did you have fun, Carter?"

"Oh, yes, sir. It was like flying. I felt... I felt alive, at home, somehow."

Before Carter could drive herself crazy by dwelling on her unfamiliar feelings, they reached the edge of the forest and looked down on a long sloped plain with a small village bustling below. There were about fifty to seventy huts, built of wood and a few bigger one's made of stone. It was a scene out of a high budget Hollywood movie and everyone expected to see an army of villains ride in and destroy the peaceful atmosphere - but nothing happened.

"The big building to the right is the communal dining hall and the one on the other side are the council chambers. The third stone building holds a part of our library and the fourth belongs to our healers. The training grounds for the warriors are further down the valley. The same goes for

the laboratories and power plants." Xena explained. "We'll follow the path to the right around the village and reach the guest palace in about fifteen to twenty ... minutes."

For a couple of minutes they walked along in silence. Suddenly O'Neill asked. "Why did you send the escort away? Aren't you afraid that we could take advantage of you?"

She laughed - the carefree laugh of a mother whose child just had said something incredibly funny and even more stupid. Carter surprised herself to find it extremely attractive. O'Neill, however, didn't react this favourably to it.

"Perhaps I should show you. Some people only learn by experience."

That only got him another heartfelt laugh. Then she answered. "Colonel, no offence meant, but one of our apprentices threw you with a simple move. Don't you think that the one teaching them should be even better able to handle anything you and your team mates have to offer?"

He took a fighting stance and growled between clenched teeth. "She took me by surprise, the young pup. That's an advantage you will not have."

"I didn't say this to mock you or hurt your pride, Colonel O'Neill. I know you're a very good fighter and an even better soldier and commander, one leading with his head as well as with his heart. Use your head now; I don't want to fight you."

O'Neill didn't answer at first but then took a calming breath and said. "I apologise, Xena. Must be this hormonal thing you mentioned. Usually my temper is not this volatile."

"There's no need to apologise, Colonel. My words were much too provocative. It is I that once again has to apologise." She said with a bow of her head.

"We spend entirely too much time doing this. Let's get going, time's a-wasting; we're not getting any younger, daylight's burning."

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When they rounded the next bend they came in view of a one storey stone building. Large blocks had been neatly aligned, a row of marble columns in front, delicately carved. There were no doors at the big entrance to the ceiling-less patio that was dominated by a gnarled, old olive tree with two small, wooden statues in front of it. Five girls came from the side, each of them carrying a brass bowl with steaming water and a towel. "Please wash your hands. The Queen is expecting us."

Xena bowed deep when they passed the olive tree. Carter and Daniel followed suite, even Teal'c slightly moved his head; only O'Neill frowned and had to remind himself that he just wasn't at his best at the moment. They came through a reception hall with an unoccupied throne standing

on a dais and then to a much smaller but very cosy room with innumerable cushions scattered on the marble floor.

A woman with golden hair was sitting at a low table, her head resting on one hand and murmuring while rapidly writing. They waited at the door to be acknowledged. O'Neill was getting impatient when finally her eyes left the parchment she had been writing on and green eyes captured Major Carter and the rest of SG-1.

The tall woman entered and bowed deeper than in front of the statues at the tree. Then she lowered herself to her right knee, laid her fist on her heart and said, her eyes half closed.

"My Queen, please, punish me for disrespecting and provoking our guests. I disrespected the chain of command by taking Samantha Carter for a walk through the treetops without asking the permission of her commanding officer and I provoked Colonel Jack O'Neill when he insinuated I would never stand a chance against his fighting skills."

"I suppose you already apologised to the colonel?"

"Yes, your majesty. I propose an exemplary punishment in front of the whole Nation, my queen."

"There's no need for a punishment," Carter found herself saying, "Colonel O'Neill accepted the apology. This doesn't have to go any further."

Xena turned her head towards the tall blond already three paces closer to the table. "Thank you for your words, Samantha Carter, but I broke the law and no one stands above the law, no apprentice, no guest and certainly not the queen's consort."

"Not even the queen herself stands above the law, Samantha Carter. This is what makes a society strong and stable. I don't have a choice. - Xena, report to me after the evening meal. There will be no public punishment and no mention of it in the records; sometimes you're taking this humble bit really too far. And now back to business."

"Welcome to Gaia, members of SG-1, I am Gabrielle, High Queen of Amazonia. Please have a seat. Would you care for some refreshments?"

At a sign from her Queen the tall warrior quietly left the room and returned shortly after with two girls in tow, carrying heavy platters with fresh fruit and drinks. She then sat down to the right of the blond woman and slightly behind her.

In the debriefing with General Hammond Daniel remarked that compared to other first contact situation the ceremonialism displayed on Gaia had been a puzzling change. It was almost as if it came natural to every participant, as natural as walking and eating. Before he began to speculate on the reasons, however, a still slightly edgy Jack brought him back on track.

"I know you all have a lot of questions. I apologise for the side effect our energy field has on

most men. It will wear off within the next hour, at the latest. Among other functions, it was designed to identify men and send them back from where they came. We modified it to let you through. General Hammond certainly would have been worried if you all would have gone through the wormhole, only to reappear shortly after but without Samantha Carter. It certainly wouldn't have helped with your trust in us. I hope it wasn't damaged by the irresponsible behaviour of one of my warriors and my Consort."

Though her words obviously had been meant for O'Neill, Doctor Jackson answered. "Rest assured, Queen Gabrielle, that no harm was done. We are all looking forward to get to know you and your people better."

Gabrielle nodded and then turned her attention once again towards O'Neill. "Colonel?"

The Colonel looked into her deep green eyes and finally said. "As he said, Queen Gabrielle. No harm was done, and though it didn't look like it then, it was nothing more than a bit of banter among soldiers." He was slightly surprised by his words and his thoughts.

Though he really had meant what he said a small, the still very aggressive part of his mind relished the thought that the imposing warrior so thoroughly deferred to the visibly smaller and younger woman. Before his mind could come up with all sorts of incongruous images, he changed topic.

"You know a lot about us. How?"

"Earth is from where we once came from, Colonel O'Neill. We've always kept an eye on your world one way or the other. Let me tell you a story to make you understand. - I will not start with the beginning because it would take far too long and isn't intended for the ears of strangers. No offence meant."

"And none taken." Carter heard herself answer.

Gabrielle smiled at the blonde who looked slightly embarrassed by her words.

"The Amazon Nation once had been proud and strong, numbering in the thousands but when the Roman Empire was at the peak of its glory and its expansion, all that was left were about two dozen villages scattered all over what now is know as Greece, Turkey, and Persia. After the death of Gaius Julius Caesar, a new queen convinced the different villages and tribes to join forces and leave this world dominated by men who were afraid of strong, independent women.

"The queen and her consort knew about the secret of the stone ring Queen Cleopatra had successfully hidden from Roman greed. Thanks to the Goddesses Artemis and Athena they also knew where to go. That's how the last survivors of the Amazon Nation left the old Earth to find a new home on this planet, on Gaia.

"When they stepped through Athena's Ring, the Stargate, they were greeted by a Nation of woman warriors already living there, some of them for more than seventy generations. They

already had reached a technical level very similar to the one you have now; so the newcomers had a lot to learn and some of them even fell prey to the new ease of life.

"On Gaia they then had the same problems you have now: different tribes or countries fighting each other, either openly or from behind; their environment polluted to the point that some of them had begun to search for a new planet to live; attacks from the Goa'uld... Though at the beginning the newcomers didn't have the knowledge their sisters had, they had sharp minds and were quick learners.

"And they had something the others had lost: a sense of community, of belonging together. They had traditions to rely on the others long since had forgotten and they had the security of knowing that their goddesses never would enslave or forsake them. They had been the missing link, and together, newcomers and natives, changed the fate of this world.

"The System Lords tried to defeat them but their Jaffa were sent back through the gate without ever setting foot on Gaia. They sent ships but their weapons couldn't breach the shield protecting our atmosphere. One day, more than thousand years ago, Bastet and Toth sent an army of female Jaffa. As they had hoped they were not rejected by the energy shield but their weapons had been disabled and all of them finally decided to stay and start a new life free from slavery."

Teal'c and Carter looked at each other and slightly shook their heads. A gesture not unnoticed by the queen. "There aren't any Goa'uld larvae on this planet, Samantha Carter, except for the one Teal'c carries.

"With the help of Artemis and Athena our ancestors were able to create an antitoxin and undo the genetic changes the Goa'uld made. It took about two years for the body to adjust to the changes but not one of our former enemies died during the transformation. Meanwhile we improved the process, just like we also always improve and update our defensive systems. Now, it only takes a couple of moons, depending on the strength and health of the Jaffa treated. We're willing to give it to you if you want it, Teal'c, but you have to know that you will lose some of your strength. Though you still would be stronger than the strongest human, it would from now on be much more difficult for your body to heal."

"Thank you, Queen Gabrielle, I will think about it."

"Why are you doing this?" O'Neill finally asked. "You obviously are technically a lot more advanced than we are. You don't need us. Why do you freely offer what everyone else is denying?"

"I know it's hard to believe, colonel, but we are neither the Tolans nor the Nox. You are right, in terms of technical knowledge we don't need you but Earth once was our home, we never forgot about it and we tried to help whenever we had a chance without your rulers ever being the wiser.

"Athena's Ring, what you call the Stargate was lost to us soon after we came here. At first we sent ships but some generations later we built a new one under the surface of the moon. - And no, Samantha Carter, we won't teach you how to build Athena's Ring, a Stargate. When Athena

died about three hundred years ago we promised her that we always would keep the secrets of her people."

"So Athena wasn't Goa'uld, she was an Ancient." Carter stated flatly.

"Yes Samantha Carter. She was an Ancient, one of the few that chose not to rise to a new plane of existence, and she was the host of Artemis. They were a lot like the Goa'uld who call themselves Tok'ra but that's all I'm allowed to say in this context."

"She had eyes as green as yours, Queen Gabrielle, and with her long black hair and high cheekbones she looked a lot like you do, Xena." Carter said, her eyes pleading with Xena and her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes, she did, Samantha Carter. Please be patient, now is not the time nor the place. There are some questions we can answer and some questions we will not. I know patience isn't one of your skills; I don't have much of it either. But don't forget, even the queen doesn't stand above the laws." Xena smiled at her and got a smile back.

"There must be something you want from us." O'Neill insisted, "And you know far too much about us. How? Spying on us from the moon just doesn't do it. We're supposed to be a top secret facility, fer crying out loud."

"Top secret is a relative term, Colonel O'Neill. We have our ways, and as soon as we get to know each other better, we will tell you. But you're right. We want something." Gabrielle answered. "As I said, Earth once was our home; our roots are there and always will be. We don't want to see it destroyed by the Goa'uld and we want to give our young warriors the chance to get a feeling for the home of their ancestors. We always found a way to live among you but with the help of the SGC it would be much easier."

"That's all?" Jackson asked incredulously.

"Our young ones can be a handful. It's not that easy to keep them in line, especially when they want to explore. We want them to learn more about Earth and in return we offer you the chance to learn more about us, about our life, our history, our healing, and some of our technology, the part we can freely give without breaking any promises."

"Why didn't you make contact earlier?"

"We had to wait until you were ready to learn. When Catherine Langford first began to unbury the Stargate after the program had been stopped in 1945, do you really think your leaders would have been receptive to ideas coming from a technologically advanced society of women. Even now a few of the council members think that it's too early, that we never should have allowed this contact. The members of the SGC have learned to be more open minded but considering some of the laws even in your country that can't be said for everyone. That's why we decided to leave it up to chance and didn't seek you out. It's fortunate that it happened now because we think that soon you'll need all the help you can get." Gabrielle said gently.

"Where's the catch?" The colonel insisted.

"As I said we are a Nation of women. Not all of them were born here, some of them we brought back from visits to other planets.

"Aria, the leader of your escort came from a culture very similar to the Chavadai before Samantha Carter changed their ways, only much worse. All her life men abused her in every way imaginable and she is just now beginning to go on with her life. And she is far from being the only one. For us to teach you, you will have to live with us, share our lives."

"You want a team consisting of women only? That should not be a problem," Carter answered, "once we convince General Hammond."

"Would we be allowed to visit, to check up on the team?"

"Of course, colonel. We only ask you to return to your own world in the evening."

"Then it's settled. I don't see any problems getting the general's approval. We will have a team for you by tomorrow morning. I'll go back to the Stargate and tell him. Perhaps one of these days I can tempt you to a friendly sparring match, Xena?"

"It would be my honour, Colonel. There's one more thing." Xena saw his shoulders tensing, but this was important. "There probably will be more than one group coming subsequently to our world. We'd like to have Major Samantha Carter and Major Janet Fraiser on the first team."

"Why?" Daniel asked, his curiosity reflected by Teal'c raising his left eyebrow slightly.

"They are the highest ranking female officers on base, Doctor Jackson, and thus the obvious choice for a first contact team. They are friends and work well together. That's a rare feat. We know of their brilliance and their inherent goodness. They could be good role models for their colleagues and our young warriors. Besides, I think your second in command can't wait to once again go tree climbing with my Consort." She answered with a wink that made Carter blush slightly.

Chapter Two: Getting Started

"Colonel, are you sure their offer is genuine?"

"Yes sir. I'm looking forward to meeting them again." The colonel answered. "I think their sense of honour and discipline is by far greater than ours. The team will be safe there but I still like to send a few soldiers. I'm sure they can learn a great deal from these women, especially

considering hand-to-hand combat."

"This still sounds too good to be true." General Hammond objected. "Major Carter mentioned some sort of hormonal imbalance. Doctor Fraiser?"

"Teal'c showed..." Noticing her commanding officer's lack of patience she shortened her answer. "Whatever the energy shield did has long worn off. I found no indication of anything unusual in their bloodstream and the queen supplied us with the specifics of an antidote to be administered before the jump."

"All right, Major Carter, you'll be in command. We'll try this for a period of two weeks, to see if it works out. I have your personnel request here. Doctor Fraiser? No, this isn't a good idea. She's needed here."

"Sir, they specifically asked for Dr. Fraiser. I understand that it's a question of rank. Queen Gabrielle specifically mentioned that they wanted the highest ranking female officers of the base in the first team. I already spoke to Doctor Fraiser. She sees no problem in the infirmary, and Cassandra just left this morning for three weeks of summer camp. She's looking forward to the trip."

Hammond still wasn't convinced.

"Sir, should there be a problem that requires her special touch we can get her back within the hour. We have permission to return to visit whenever we want. I really see no problems, expect for the question of how to replace Carter while she is on Gaia."

"There will be no replacement for Major Carter, Colonel. SG-1 will be reduced to a three member-team for now. All right, you all have your orders and a lot to do until tomorrow. I'll see you in the Gate room at 0800. Dismissed."

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"Xena, are you finished with your diary?"

"Almost, my love. What is it?"

"Aria is here for her punishment."

"Oh damn, I almost forgot. Could you tell her to wait for a few candledrops. I'm almost done."

"We'll make some small talk. Take your time." Gabrielle turned away from the door to face the young woman waiting skittishly at the entrance. "Come on in, Aria. Xena's still busy. Sit down and tell me, why did you lose your temper."

"I already apologised to Consort Xena, Colonel O'Neill, and Master Teal'c, my queen." She answered defensively.

"I know, little one."

Coming from a woman a few inches shorter than most of her subjects, the term of endearment might have seemed somehow ironic but everyone knew that it came from genuine affection, and even the oldest of the elders were honoured being referred to as such.

"Xena told me what happened. Now, I want you to understand it. Tell me, why did you lose your temper?"

The young woman closed her eyes, recalling the scene step by step, as the High Priestess of the Amazons had taught her. "We only had the traditional, ceremonial weapons but he was mocking us, by commenting on the escort being armed 'to the teeth'. I knew he didn't know any better. But then he insinuated that we were taking them to a man in charge, 'the guy in charge', that's when I lost it. I shouldn't have but some... No, there's no excuse to my actions." Aria fell silent.

"You soon will be forgiven, Aria. Don't think about it as an excuse but as an explanation."

"Sometimes my past comes back to haunt me, your majesty, and I feel helplessness and anger and hate and the need to hurt someone, anyone. This was one of these moments and Colonel O'Neill putting his hand on my arm was just a convenient excuse." She hung her head.

Half a heartbeat later, she felt a strong hand at her chin and looked into the queen's green eyes.

"Some lessons are harder to learn than others, Aria; and some lessons have to be repeated every now and then to stay valid. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Xena said you did well, and she's not easy to please."

"Yes, you did well, Aria. Do you need some more time, your majesty, or can we begin?"

"Begin. Everything that needed to be said has been said. Aria, do you want me to leave?"

"No, my Queen. I would be honoured if you'd consent to be my witness."

"It will be my honour, little one."

Xena walked to a small closet and took a strap from one of the numerous nails inside. "Aria, child of Artemis, you now will be punished for disobedience. Your punishment is 12 strokes with the strap. Do you accept this punishment or do you prefer an alternative?"

"Yes, your highness, before this witness I accept the punishment with gratitude." She gave the traditional answer with a slight tremble in her voice.

"Take off your skirt and your breeches and bent over the desk, please. I will count the strokes;

you just concentrate on staying still."

When the first stroke found the tender skin of her backside, she flinched. The consort didn't pull her strokes but she also didn't use the leather strap to its fullest. There would be some welts for a couple of days but it could have been much worse. After the last stroke she just stayed in position to take a deep breath and relax her tense muscles, not really aware that her whole body had been as tight as a bowstring during the last blows. She finally gathered her strength, stood, and then came down on her right knee.

"Thank you, your highness."

"You did well, Aria. As a punishment for losing your temper you will go to the temple and meditate until midnight. Then you'll receive the kiss of forgiveness."

~*~

"Heading out already, Sam? I thought you would be there working on something singularly complex up 'til the last minute."

"Hey, Janet. There's nothing pending on my work list. The light duty you ordered after the last incident did wonders for my out box. I have to get to the dry cleaners before they close to get my dress uniform. General Hammond insists on making this as official as possible. At first he had been very sceptical but Colonel O'Neill's report, surprisingly, was full of glowing praise."

"Why don't we talk about it over a drink? I'll pay if you can get my uniform too. Let's meet at Murphy's, say in about two hours? That should give me enough time to finish up my instructions for Warner, pack my things, and call Cassandra. Is it really true that all we'll need are some clothes?"

"Yes, that's what Xe... the queen's consort said. I'll bring your uniform but let's meet at O'Malley's. I'm not in the mood to deal with a bunch of overzealous Airmen or Marines."

"I'm game, see you later. At least at O'Malley's we'll also get something to eat - something not swimming in grease."

~*~

"Aria, I want you to wait outside for a few candledrops. Xena will go with you; she also is in need of contemplation." Xena stepped closer to her Royal wife and whispered in her ear. Gabrielle continued, "Aria, Xena asks you to be the witness of her unofficial punishment."

The young woman was so stunned; she merely nodded.

"Xena of Amphipolis, Chosen of Athena, you now will be punished for disrespect, provocation and losing your temper. You'll spend the whole night at the temple to contemplate your actions, and now you will receive 12 strokes with the cane and 24 with the strap on your bare behind. Do you accept this punishment?"

"Yes, your majesty, before this witness I accept the punishment with humility and gratitude."

"Then take your position, and Xena, don't block the pain, feel it."

"Yes, my love." The tall woman removed the belt holding her shift and slipped the soft fabric over her head, revealing her naked body. She bent at the waist holding onto her ankles.

Gabrielle's hand gently patted Xena's ass before taking aim and hitting her hard on the upper thigh. She gasped and uttered between clenched teeth. "One, thank you, my queen."

"Only every third stroke, Xena."

When the 'a' left Gabrielle's mouth the cane hit the most fleshy part of her buttocks. "Two."

"Six. Thank you, my queen."

"Nine, thank you, my queen." There now was a definite strain to Xena's voice, evidently fighting for composure.

One of the most persistent rumours about the High Queen was that she was well versed in the art of discipline, and now Aria was getting a taste of how good she really was. There now were eleven welts colouring Xena's skin, evenly spaced, evenly coloured.

"Twelve. Thank you, my queen." The penitent took a steadying breath. "May I now have the next part of my punishment, my queen?"

"Yes, my love." There was tenderness in Gabrielle's voice and a hint of sadness. She then whispered. "Don't forget: your pain is your gift to me." It was too low for Aria to understand but more than loud enough for Xena's exceptionable hearing.

And then it began again. By the time the tall warrior once again said, "Twelve. Thank you, my queen," both women were openly crying: One shedding silent tears as she always had; the other sniffing in the sleeve of her oversized shirt.

The day before, Aria never would have thought possible what she now was witnessing. This woman was not the imposing commander of the Amazon army, not the passionate, patient, but demanding teacher, not the confidante ready to listen to the turmoils of her students' hearts. Suddenly she was more human than she'd ever seen her, not invincible, not indestructible, not infallible.

One would have expected that the young woman's respect for her commanding officer would be diminished but instead Aria felt it growing with every stroke Xena took. Suddenly, for the first time, one of her favourite sayings began to make sense: 'Not even the queen is standing above the law' and she translated it in her mind to: 'Even the queen and her consort are human.' It was a revelation, one she would have to think about for a long time.

"Twenty-three. - Twenty-four. Thank you, my queen." Xena slowly stretched her thigh muscles and while still turning around sank on both knees. She kissed Gabrielle's hands and Aria suddenly had the impression of intruding on a very intimate moment. "Thank you, Gabrielle, my queen."

The small blonde took another step towards her wife and kissed her on top of her head. "I love you, Xena. You will be forgiven after two days of probation."

"Kitchen duty?"

"No, don't forget it was an unofficial punishment. I want you to care for our guests. Leave the temple at dawn. I'll need help with these damned beads and feathers and you'll also need a few candledrops to slip into your uniform."

"Yes, my love. I'll be with you, shortly after dawn." An instant later she was back on her feet and belted her tunic. "Come, Aria, there's a temple waiting for us."

~*~

"Janet, over here. Glad you made it on time."

"Oh good, you already ordered, and exactly what the doctor subscribed." She took a healthy sip of her Chardonnay. "Sam, tell me once again why I let you talk me into adopting a child in the first place."

"Well," Samantha answered with her best imitation of a Texan cowboy, "there's the undeniable fact of her irresistible charm, and then there's your good heart that never would have allowed a child to become the victim of NID bureaucracy. And you're a really good mum."

"According to Cassie, I'm, and I quote, a selfish brat, traipsing through the galaxy on vacation, leaving her dying in a Goa'uld invented summer camp. End quote." She took another swallow of her wine.

"She has her cell with her?"

"Yes, of course but don't. Please don't call to read her the riot act. She's just a kid and the first day at summer camp always is somewhat of an ordeal."

"Told you, you're a good mum. When you call her tomorrow evening, everything will be back to normal."

"Sam, we'll be at the edge of nowhere tomorrow."

"Xe... the Royal Consort told me that the Stargate would be opened every evening to allow the transfer of data and private communication. There's a slight time differential but it won't be a problem. They don't want us to feel left alone or isolated while being on their planet."

"Whow!; gives the word 'long distance call' an entirely new meaning. - But what's up with you? That's the second time you slipped when speaking about the queen's consort. Do you have a crush or something?"

"A crush...? She's a woman, Janet. It's against the regulations. And besides, she's head over heels in love with the queen."

In Janet's head still rung the word 'regulations' but she had the presence of mind to insist. "So, what is it then?" Internally she was chiding herself that Freud had been right after all and women tended to masochism.

"Something... I don't know, Janet. I don't understand it myself. There was something in her eyes, in her voice, calling to me. When I first looked into her bright blue eyes, it was as if I had known her all my life. And since she left us at the gate, I can't stop thinking about her. I just don't know, Janet." Samantha answered dejectedly.

"All right, don't get your leathers in a wad. We'll get this sorted out. Describe her, every detail you remember."

Samantha knew it probably wasn't the brightest thing to do but she couldn't resist the temptation - and perhaps her best friend's medical experience would shed some light on her weird obsession with this woman. She didn't even notice Janet's strange choice of words.

So, Samantha Carter began to recall the day's events with a sense for detail and atmosphere sadly lacking in her report for General Hammond, not that he usually required such thoroughness.

"Daniel was standing with his weapon aiming at the girl, the Amazons were closing in on us; suddenly a low melodious voice ordered us all to stand down. When I heard this voice I knew that everything would be all right and that I was safe. Someone passed me by, someone almost as tall as Teal'c, with raven black hair and a narrow waist. She reprimanded the girl but I don't remember what exactly was said. I only knew that I wanted her to keep on talking. Jack acted like a son of a biscuit, being even more obnoxious than he usually is. By the way..."

"Oh no, Sam, no change of subject. The injections for the men to counteract the testosterone rush already are prepared. Tomorrow nothing will go wrong. What happened when you were on your own with her?"

"She took me tree walking."

"Tree walking? You mean tree climbing, don't you? Why would she do something like this?"

"I don't know why but it was great, and yes, I'm talking about tree walking. Well, you have to get up there first but she had some sort of springy rope that really made it easy. She taught me what to do and we were jumping from branch to branch, using the rebound to get further and further ahead of the men. It was like flying. It was like walking on air. I felt free. I felt at home. It felt like something I had done a hundred, a thousand times before. The thought to be able to have a another go at this alone makes me want to shout for joy."

For a long time, Janet watched her friend. The joy of her experience still radiating from her, though personally, the thought of having to climb anything higher than a foot-stool made her queasy. She hated to burst Sam's bubble but the question had to be asked. "Do you think it was another of Jolinar's memories?"

"Yes and no." The answer came alarmingly fast. "Yes, I'm sure it was a memory of sorts. No, I don't think that Jolinar has much to do with it. Jolinar's memories are different. On the one hand they are more intense, on the other hand most of the time they feel like I'm prying into the dreams of someone else. Whenever I think of Xena, it's like something that's really a part of me and at the same time it's just out of my reach." Samantha cast an apologetic glance towards her friend. "I'm sorry that I don't make any sense. I'm spoiling your evening."

Samantha's left hand was kneading the napkin the waiter had brought, her eyes fixed on her fingers. Suddenly a small firm hand stilled her movements. She heard a soft voice, a voice that more than once had freed her of a dark dream -- and this time she allowed herself to believe.

"Sam, whatever happens, where ever we'll end up, I'll never regret the time we spent together. You are more than a friend and a second mother to my daughter; you are even more than my best friend. You can always rely on me. I'll be there for you. You are..." Janet fell silent, knowing herself well enough to be sure that even one measly, single word more would change their relationship forever - and this was something she never would risk.

Blue eyes, pale in the dim light of the bar, found her brown orbs. She didn't answer, at least not with words - but Janet instinctively knew that she would have done anything to see that expression one more time. She desperately wanted to say something but when she finally had the courage the waiter delivered their pastas and the enchantment was broken.

They spent the rest of the night talking about the newest gossip, discussing medicinal plants and Asgard technology - an evening like many others before. The waiters just had called for the last round to be served when they called a cab to spend the rest of the night at Janet's. Samantha crashed in the guest room and Janet fell face first and still clothed on her king-size bed in the master bedroom.

The next morning the alarm went off at 0530, blaring rock music in Janet's ears instead of her customary classic station, courtesy to a very sneaky teen currently at summer camp. Thanks to

the noise disturbing their dreams both of them arrived just in time at Stargate Command, after getting both of their cars from O'Malley's.

~*~

It was midnight and time for her to leave the temple and get some sleep. She just had received the kiss of forgiveness; there was no reason for her to stay.

"Go and get some sleep, young Aria. You will be my assistant in dealing with our guests."

"May I ask a question, your highness?" Xena nodded. "Why? Why did you want me as a witness to your punishment? Why did you allow me to see you hurt and vulnerable?"

"You will find out, when the time is right, little one. For the moment, don't think about it, the answer will come when you are ready to hear it. Now, go to bed."

Chapter Three: The First Day

"I hate it; I hate it; I hate it. I always did and I always will. Tell me again why I don't change the queen's dress code."

"Well," Xena answered, dropping her voice a few registers to sound like a Goa'uld, "there's always tradition. And then, if you don't change it, animals will be hurt only every other century or so. Your people just love to see you like this and your wife can't wait to get you out of it."

"You always know what to say to cheer me up, don't you?"

"I had a lot of time to find out, my queen. And I still can't wait to help you get out of it."

"You can help but that's as far as we will go. You will have to take care of our guests and I will take the general and his team for a tour. And there still is the inconvenience of you..."

"...being on probation. I forgot, my queen. Do you know what I hate most when I have to be punished?"

"That you are not the only one to suffer, my love, but it can't be helped. It's not the first time and it won't be the last. Don't worry about it. - Go and get yourself in your uniform. They want regalia and decorum, and they'll get it. Though I doubt General Hammond knew what he bargained for."

~*~

When SG-1, the research team, their guards, and General Hammond with his diplomatic staff stepped through the event horizon they were greeted by a sight as different as one can get to the day before. Where there had been nothing but a cushion of green grass, there now was a mass of people standing head to head, only in the last few rows towards the back human faces were visible. Everyone else was wearing strange masks, ranging from bird heads to large predators but most of them looked as if they came right out of the minds of fantasy film creators.

The Stargate Team had been briefed on what to expect, but they still were overwhelmed by the multitude and sheer magnificence of what they were seeing. And even Colonel O'Neill who usually prided himself on not being easily intimidated, couldn't help the thought that he wouldn't want such fierce looking warriors anywhere but on his own side in a battle.

After just standing there for more than only a couple of minutes, General Hammond finally found his voice.

"Greetings to you, proud members of the Amazon Nation. We come to you from far away to share your wisdom and learn your ways. We come with respect and an open mind. We come sharing a common past, a present enemy, and hopefully a future united by trust, friendship, and more. I am George Hammond, General of the United States Air Force."

To say that the Amazons were surprised at his words would have been an understatement. It was as if someone had read their old scrolls and adapted them to today's occasion. But Gabrielle had more than enough experience to deal with the unexpected, so she quickly stepped forward as if the exchange of formalities had been rehearsed beforehand and answered.

"I am Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, Artemis' Chosen, Queen of Gaia. Greetings to you General Hammond, and to your people. Hail to you from Gaia. You are welcome to share our food, our lodgings, and our knowledge." Gabrielle took a few steps forward and finally pushed her owl's mask on top of her head. All of her people followed suite. "Now let us meet and mingle to celebrate the union of two halves that never should have been parted."

An almost imperceptible nod started some flutes and low-key drums, helping to diffuse the tension between the two groups. "General Hammond, thank you very much for making this easier for us by your inspired words."

"It's not I you'll have to thank. I found them on my desk this morning and when I saw you all they seemed appropriate. Thank Major Carter. It was her handwriting though she didn't sign it."

"Thank you for telling us, general. Would you please follow me to the table to your right? There's a treaty to sign. It's short and sweet, leaving a lot of manoeuvring space for both of us. Please take your time to read it. I'm sure Major Carter will relish the opportunity to introduce me to the rest of her team. Meanwhile, my consort will try to answer all of your questions."

Xena's eyes followed her, her foul look quickly turning into adoration and desire. Not a good time to be aroused, she cautioned herself.

One of the general's aides was reading the treaty draft Gabrielle had sketched out last night - and the general was asking questions, just like the queen had warned Xena he would. However, she hadn't expected some of them being this personal.

"How many queens did the Amazons have before Queen Gabrielle?"

A simple enough question, Xena thought. "The origins of Amazon history are lost; even we don't have more to go on than legends and myths. We don't have any scrolls or artefacts telling us about it but there must have been countless generation before my Queen took the mask, General Hammond."

"Is this the only world where one would be liable to find Amazons?"

"No, General, sir. There are about a dozen others; some of them having decided to forego modern technology as a whole; some of them living it at its fullest while still caring for the protection of the environment."

"Where are they?"

Xena's smile this time didn't reach her eyes. "I'm sorry, General Hammond. Even if you already would have signed the treaty, I wouldn't be at liberty to tell you. We are honour-bound to protect them. I hope we can be allies and still have one or two secrets."

There was a curt nod of acknowledgement and a long, uncomfortable period of silence but finally the next question came - around a blind corner. "Doctor Jackson mentioned in his report that you were not born an Amazon. Where did you come from?"

Telling the truth was out of question, Xena knew, but she also didn't know how to frame her answer. So, she was extremely grateful when O'Neill passed by, asking the general if there were any problems with the treaty; thus giving her enough time to think of something plausible and not too far from the truth. Finally, she decided to be as honest as possible - without however, telling him too much.

"Please don't be offended if I don't answer the question. But there's one thing you should know: I was well on the way to lose my soul to hatred and darkness when Queen Gabrielle saved me. She rescued my heart and my soul. -- I would be grateful if we could change topic. It still hurts to remember that time, General Hammond."

She could feel the tension settling between her shoulder blades and immediately after felt the comforting touch of Gabrielle's hand drawing tiny circles at the small of her back.

"We all have some dark corners in our lives." He answered with a sympathetic smile and then

turned his attention to the newly arrived Queen. "Queen Gabrielle, should we get this ball rolling?"

"It would be my pleasure, general." They signed the treaty and Xena was dragged along for another round of socialising.

~*~

Even when she still was a rampaging warlord on the way to conquer all of Greece, she had hated crowds. They made her uncomfortable and on the edge. Some things never change; so Xena as soon as possible found herself a quiet corner, far away from the centre of attention. It was a strategic hiding space, close enough to join in the action or bolt away from it - whatever was necessary. She was enjoying the quiet and calm, when suddenly someone slightly shorter than herself, with a more delicate bone structure but evenly developed muscles, slid in next to her.

"Samantha Carter, you should enjoy yourself instead of hiding and missing all the fun."

"Why do I think that this is the pot calling the kettle black, your highness?" Samantha Carter answered with the hint of bantering in her voice. Then she added, "I hate crowds. I never understood the need to mingle and exchange meaningless social niceties. Not talking at all is better than talking without saying anything."

"There's that, and then there are the smells." Xena answered.

"Too many people, too close together. Living in a dormitory at boarding school was pure hell, except for the winter season when my nose was too stuffed to smell anything. Though, looking at it now, compared to some of our missions, the smell of a room full of hormonal girls would appear like a heavenly perfume."

The tall blonde who still only came to Xena's nose answered, casting a longing glance to the forest behind them.

"I don't consider dress uniforms particularly suited for tree walking, Samantha Carter, as much fun as it would be." The dark haired woman said with a smile of her own.

"The secret to being a good soldier is to always be prepared." The younger woman said and before Xena could answer Samantha pulled her hip hugging skirt up to her waist, revealing black spandex shorts. An instant later she had exchanged her formal heels against soft sport slippers from her bag. "Ready to go, your highness?"

There was a sad smile appearing on Xena's face. "I'd really love to but not today. I have to get back to my duties but I promise you a longer outing the day after tomorrow." Easily reading the disappointment on the blonde's face she continued. "I have to get back to the queen but you don't have to miss out on the fun, Samantha Carter."

Xena whistled and a heartbeat later Aria dropped out of a tree to the right of them. "Aria, Major Carter wants to take a walk through the treetops. See to it that she doesn't risk her health and teach her what she needs to know. She's a natural but she only had her first practice run yesterday. One candlemark tops."

"Yes, your highness. I'll do my best to keep her safe."

Xena acknowledged the young woman's words with a nod and then headed towards the crowd to find her wife who probably was in the midst of charming every single official of Stargate Command.

"Please follow me, Major Carter."

~*~

The other two headed a few paces further into the woods and Aria taught the newcomer how to use a tree rope, also known as a tree whip. She got it with the second try - and this was considerably faster than any apprentice of her class ever did, including herself. Aria was becoming intrigued. In her mind's eye she already had seen the stranger staggering clumsily through the trees after being hauled up here by force. A few candlemarks later, she was convinced that the consort had been kidding her. This couldn't be only the second time the other woman had done something like this; it simply was impossible.

So when they took a small break to decide on where to go next she asked. "Are you sure that yesterday was the first time you did something like this, Major Carter?"

"Yes. Why? Do I do something wrong?"

"No, you're doing great. The general was right, you're a natural."

"The general?"

"Sorry, Consort Xena. She doesn't like to be called 'General' though she is the head of our armies. She says it brings back too many shadows of her past, so we only do it behind her back. Of course she knows about it but I still would be grateful if you didn't mention it to her."

"I won't - Aria, isn't it?" The younger woman nodded. "I think she would look good at the head of an army, sitting atop a proud war horse, riding in front of her men, her hair flying in the wind, her war cry alone chilling her enemies to the deepest level of their souls."

'Now, where did this image suddenly come from?' Samantha asked herself. She didn't know but she was sure that for some reason she shouldn't dwell on it.

"Let's get going again." Without waiting for a reply she started off in a new direction.

Aria had her work cut out with trying to keep up with the longer legs of her charge, who made up for her lack of experience with agility and an incredible sense of balance. One could almost feel the joy it gave her. And then she suddenly stopped, a slender but firm arm steadying her guide when she also tried to come to a halt.

"Why the day after tomorrow?"

"Pardon?" Aria panted.

"Xe... Consort Xena, she said we could go tree walking the day after tomorrow. Why then, why not this evening or tomorrow morning? Why not now? I saw it in her eyes. I know she wanted to." Samantha said almost to herself, never expecting an answer.

In retrospect, Aria didn't know why she answered what she did; perhaps it were the familiar blue eyes, commanding blue eyes, she was used not to question. "The consort is on probation, Major Carter."

"On probation? That sounds like she did something wrong." Samantha said incredulously.

"No one stands above the law, major. She was punished for what happened with your commanding officer. The next two days she is supposed to only do her duty and to retire to her room in her free time to think about her transgressions. Only after that she will be forgiven."

The other woman was still looking at her as if she just had birthed a two-headed Centaur, so she continued talking.

"Usually, probation time is spent doing some manual labour, something the penitent doesn't like to do. It's different for everyone but one is supposed to do it with the same amount of dedication we usually put in our chosen professions. However, this was an unofficial punishment; that's why she is not relieved of her normal duties but she still has to adhere to the rules."

"Does this happen often? And when it's unofficial, how do you know about it?"

"Only the oldest among the elders can remember the consort being officially punished, so, no, it's a rare occurrence. And for your other question, that's more difficult to answer. Unofficial only means that it will not be marked down in her personal record, it doesn't mean that no one knows about it. In this case the consort honoured me with making me a witness to her punishment. But everyone else also knows. They saw it in the way she and the High Queen came to Athena's Ring. Usually the consort is walking one step behind the queen, today it were three. It indicates that at the moment she is not allowed the intimacy of the queen's touch. Unofficial punishments happen every once in a while, I was told."

Taking the first part of the answer as some sort of saying, Samantha concentrated on the second part and her mind focused on one particular part. "You witnessed her punishment? I..., I don't

understand. You surely are not talking about some kind of beating or something?"

"Perhaps you should ask her about our laws yourself." Aria tried to get out of this increasingly uncomfortable questioning.

"Yes. Perhaps I should, but I want some answers now and I want them from you." The blonde snarled in an uncharacteristic show of temper. "And didn't she say that you too were to be punished?"

Definitively the same eyes, the Amazon apprentice thought. She sighed and began to recount yesterday evening's events as best as she remembered. She ended. "I can see that you're not comfortable with the concept of physical punishment, but it's worked for our Nation since the time we started writing down our history and that's almost five thousand years ago."

Samantha's mind snapped back to the time when she was in the headmistress' office, bending over the back of a heavy leather chair and being caned for something she didn't even do. She felt the same shame and humiliation she had experienced then; and she simply couldn't imagine the proud, intimidating woman she was just getting to know in a far more humiliating position.

The expression in her eyes now had changed to something between pain, puzzlement, and indignation. So once again Aria decided to continue talking. "This morning the consort told me that you and your team mates know about my past, about where I come from. - Please, let me finish. It will help you to understand. - I'll have to cut this short but it's important that you understand.

"I grew up with the conviction that all women and girls are good for is birthing sons and serving as a punching bag for men. I grew up with daily beatings and humiliations. The queen and the consort got me out of there and offered me a chance at a new life, but I needed a long time before I was able to stand up for myself and learned to see myself as an equal to these strong women, this great Nation. I'm still haunted by the shadows of my past from time to time."

The blond woman's expression now showed sympathy and understanding, not the pity she had come to expect.

"When I learned that the Amazons often rely on physical punishment I was afraid that it would be as it always has been in my old tribe. But the first time I earned myself a punishment, nothing could have been farther from the truth. It's not about humiliation and it's not merely physical. It means that you accept responsibility for your actions and acknowledge in front of the Nation or one of your superiors that you were wrong and will try to do better next time. That's also what the probation period is for: to better understand your actions. It's hard to explain but it's almost like a spiritual cleansing."

"What about the children?"

"Children?" Aria took some time to understand the underlying meaning of Samantha's question, but then... "Oh no, physical punishment is for adults only. No Amazon ever would raise a hand

against one of our children. No one would even think of doing this.

"Besides, no one is forced to undergo physical punishment. There are other options like community service, wearing restraints for some time, spending time in the purification hut, and other things like that. Most of us choose the physical punishment because it's fast and over with quickly. It may sound strange but Amazon justice reinforces our sense of community."

"Not even the queen stands above the law. I think I understand, but I still have a lot to think about. Thank you for telling me, Aria. - Perhaps we should head back. If your candlemarks are as long as one of our hours we even have to hurry to be back in time. We've been up there for more than an hour now."

"Thank you for reminding me, Major Carter. And if you ever have questions you don't know whom to ask, I'll gladly try and give you the answers, even if it should go against our laws."

Samantha surprised herself with her words. "I gratefully accept your offer, Aria, and then I'll be in your debt. I only ask that should it be against your laws you tell me before answering, to give me the chance to reconsider my question."

"I will, Samantha Carter."

They had almost reached the clearing when a series of birdcalls echoed through the woods. Aria immediately stopped and this time Samantha had difficulties to keep her balance. "What is it?"

"Just a friendly warning. Your comrades are searching for you, for quite some time now. Some of them are worried. The signals said that we should go down at the other side of the clearing but at least a stone's throw from the edge of the forest - and that we should try to get you cleaned up."

Samantha only looked down to her feet, taking in her rumpled dress uniform, laughed and took off towards the other side.

~*~

"Will you now stop worrying, Janet Fraiser?" A low voice asked from behind and above her left ear.

"It looks like flying. No wonder, she was so enthusiastic when telling me about it. - Why didn't they see us? We were practically on top of them." The small, brown eyed doctor asked while holding on to the branch with both hands and desperately trying not to look down. Thankfully aware of the firm grip Xena had around her waist.

"I didn't want them to see us. To be the Amazons' commanding officer also means I have to be always one step ahead of the best of them - and Aria has the potential to one day be among the

best of the best. And for my reasons, let's simply say that Major Carter is not ready to know that she had had an audience. Close your eyes and I'll get us down. We'll be back with the others at about the same time your missing team leader will."

Doctor Janet Fraiser, M.D., Major of the United States Air Force, Chief Medical Officer of one of the best guarded secrets of the world, obediently closed her eyes. She heard a slight rustling of leaves, air rushing around her and shortly after, without experiencing even a jolt she was gently set back on the ground. She had to tilt her head almost all the way back to look into the consort's eyes, twinkling with a mischievous blue she only knew from a handful of private moments with someone else.

To get her mind back to reality she said, "Thank you, your highness." The tall woman just raised an eyebrow, in a suggestive way that would have made a certain Jaffa warrior envious. "Thank you for indulging my irrational worries."

"It is never irrational to worry about someone we care for and it was my pleasure, Janet Fraiser. You were very brave up there, despite your fear of heights."

"I knew that you would keep me safe, your highness." She answered without thinking, immediately after asking herself what the hell had got into her. She tried to regain her composure. "I think you read my file at the SGC computers?"

"There is that, and the fact that the moment you began looking for Major Carter you eyed the tree tops with the expression of someone about to do battle with one of her most notorious enemies."

Janet laughed but quickly found her sobriety. "Why are you so sure that she would have been disturbed by an audience?"

"Samantha Carter is a very private woman. She keeps up the pretence that she is nothing more than some sort of calculating machine, without fears, without emotions, without weaknesses, the perfect soldier. She has forged a certain image of herself, an image she knows how everyone will react to. You, Janet Fraiser, however, also know another side of her, a side that is funny and mischievous and has an evil sense of humour, a side that is sensitive and caring and loving. It's a side of her only you and Cassandra know about. And you know about her fears and insecurities because she trusts you with her soul." Xena gauged the smaller woman's face and then added. "I know you still have a lot of questions but now isn't the time or the place. Try to be patient."

~*~

They arrived just in time for General Hammond's lecture - with Colonel O'Neill making his most smug 'I told you so'-face behind his back. "Major, this is not behaviour befitting a responsible senior officer. If it weren't for our new allies I would relegate you to desk duty for the next two weeks. I never want something like this to happen again."

Before Samantha even had a chance to answer, Aria stepped forward. "General Hammond, sir, I apologise for occupying so much of Major Carter's valuable time. It is just that I am very curious about your world." She ended with her most innocent expression.

He turned around, making sure that he was out of earshot of his staff except for the members of SG-1. "I see you already inspired some loyalty, Major. I hope you had fun with your - what did you call it, O'Neill?"

"Tree walking, sir. Definitely an occupation for women; the branches would break from the weight of a muscular male body."

Xena luckily saw the teasing twinkle in the colonel's eyes and joined in his banter. "That's why you don't do it on Earth, colonel. The trees there are just not sturdy enough. But I'd love to give you a short lesson. Let's say, the day after tomorrow - to give your team a chance to settle in."

"I'm game, your highness. Besides, you still owe me a sparring match, if I remember well."

"It will be my pleasure, Colonel Jonathan O'Neill." The tall woman answered with a smile O'Neill interpreted as seductive while Samantha and the Amazons recognised it as feral and despite their annoyance over his bravado instantly felt sorry for him.

"Queen Gabrielle, I think you promised us a tour through your village?" General Hammond refocused everyone's attention.

"Of course, general. It will be my pleasure. I hope you don't mind if my consort takes your research team to their quarters, they can get comfortable and will be taken to a tour of their own. You have to understand that for you and your men even visiting our village is a unique occurrence in Amazon history."

"We're looking forward to see whatever you feel comfortable of sharing with us, your majesty." The general answered with a rare smile usually reserved for his grandchildren.

He offered her an arm she surprisingly took, all the time thinking that this delicate woman that easily could have been his youngest daughter was far too innocent and young to be leading a Nation of woman warriors, but he also sensed that there was more to her than the eye could see.

"Major Carter, research team take care of yourselves. Contact the SGC whenever you need but remember that there will be a standing line every evening between 20h00 and 21h00 local. Dismissed."

~*~

The twelve members of Samantha's team followed Xena to the guest palace SG-1 had visited the day before - this time they took the direct way. They entered the patio and the blonde half

expected to see half an army of serving girls waiting for them to help them wash their hands. This time, however, they passed straight through the court, though Xena still bowed in front of the statues. She led them to a long corridor lined with private quarters: double occupancy suites with a small living room, two even smaller bedrooms, and a big bathroom behind a simple door. Pair after pair, they were assigned their quarters. Finally only Samantha and Janet were left; they stood in front of an ornate double door Xena opened for them.

They were looking at a big room with two comfortable leather chairs, a small table, and a double king-size bed. To the right was another door, probably leading to the bathroom. "I'm sorry, it's not what you expected but this is the only room left. The other wing of the palace is reserved for the regents of the other villages scheduled to come here less than a week from now. Most of them will be quartered in the village but our capacities are limited. Think about it. If there are any problems we'll see that one of you can bunk down somewhere else. - We'll meet in three of your hours in the patio."

Samantha and Janet stood on the threshold, staring into the room; both of them locked tight into their own minds. Candelights passed; Janet found Samantha's hand and pulled her forwards, murmuring. "It's a big bed, you know. - And after your disappearance this morning, I don't really want to let you out of my sight more than necessary."

"So, I'll stay?"

"Yes, Sam. I want you to stay here. I need you to stay with me. Make yourself comfortable."

Samantha closed the door, only then realising the possible impact of Janet's words. 'I need you to stay with me.' Her heart started to beat faster and she tried to rationalise them to regain her equilibrium. For a second, still turned towards the door, her face showed joy and hope, but with an effort she re-established her usual noncommittal expression before facing her friend. Janet already was in the midst of unpacking, so the blonde decided to get some breathing space. "I'll go and take a quick shower, Janet, and slip into someth... and get out of this uniform."

"All right, Sam, take your time."

With her usual efficiency Samantha was back less than ten minutes later, dressed in fatigues and an Air Force regulation black t-shirt, her hair still damp. "Your turn, Janet. There's a whole row of lightly scented soaps and a stack of fluffy towels at your disposal. Take care that you don't get lost in the tub; it's big enough to house all of SG-1 and then some."

Coming from Colonel O'Neill she would have taken the words as an insult referring to her height or the lack thereof but coming from Samantha she knew it was just an innocent remark. So, she smiled, grabbed a change of clothes, and headed towards the bathroom.

Samantha made short work of her own unpacking and then settled on the bed to have a look at the regulation book waiting on the night-stand. She idly leaved through it, marvelling at the elegance of Amazon hierarchy; about how they were able to combine punishment with dignity. And at the same time she asked herself how she was able to see these things in something that

seemed to be nothing more than a very long list of laws, traditions, conduct rules and the punishments one risked when breaking them. While puzzling over this paradox, she uncharacteristically fell asleep, in the middle of the day and with the still opened book lying on her chest.

~*~

"Xena, come, join us." Gabrielle called her partner from the other side of the communal dinner hut. She was sitting at the Royal table, with the remaining three members of SG-1 and General Hammond. The rest of the staff already had gone back through Athena's Ring. "Did you get the team settled?"

"Yes, your majesty. I showed them to their rooms and told them to get comfortable and also to try and get some sleep. The village is already literally buzzing with anticipation of the upcoming party."

"A party? And you didn't invite us, your majesty; I'm hurt, deeply hurt." O'Neill quibbled in, thinking of himself as the life of every party.

"I'm sorry, colonel, but men are not allowed." He tried giving the adorable blonde his best pleading look.

"Tell me, Colonel O'Neill, Doctor Jackson, how many times were you invited to dine and party with the men of a planet you visited while Major Carter had to stay in the background, tucked away in the women's quarters?" Daniel looked at her in understanding and O'Neill had at least the decency to stay quiet. "Perhaps now you can understand her annoyance after such missions."

"You have a point there, your highness. The queen just offered to take us to have a look at the training grounds. Care to join us?"

Xena exchanged a look with Gabrielle and then answered. "It will be my pleasure, Colonel."

On the way the queen was amiably chatting with General Hammond and Daniel Jackson while Xena and the others were ambling along in companionable silence. They reached the training grounds shortly after the midday break. A class of advanced staff students had just started and for a few minutes they just stood at the edge and observed. Then one of the girls saw their Queen.

She ran over and fell to her right knee. "Your majesty, could you please help us with a disagreement we have?" Only then did she realise that the queen and her Consort were not alone. "I'm sorry, your majesty. I didn't see our guests. It can wait."

"It's all right, Kanith. I'm here, so stand up and tell me what your disagreement is about?" Gabrielle answered with a smile.

"Yesterday, the consort taught us this backhanded sweep to take out a taller opponent's legs, and it works one time out of two. But what do you do when your sparring partner simply jumps over the staff? I know there must be some counter moves we don't know yet but we still got in a discussion if staff fighting is better suited for smaller or bigger people." She answered with a nervous glance towards the consort.

"I'm quite sure Consort Xena explained the principles of staff fighting to all of you, even before you held a staff for the first time. So you should know that what really counts is your centre of balance and speed." The girl was thoroughly embarrassed and didn't dare to look her Queen in the eyes. "But I suppose this is not really about you not knowing. Am I right?"

"Yes, your majesty, as always. It's a rare feat to find you at the training grounds, so we hoped you would give us a demonstration." She stammered.

"So what do you think, Xena, care to give our guests a little show?" Gabrielle said with a smirk.

"Yes, my queen." Under her breath the tall woman muttered. "Can't wait to get my ass kicked."

"Sorry, what did you say?"

Xena had the grace to blush almost imperceptibly and answered. "I can't wait to get started, your majesty."

The raven-headed woman shrugged out of her tight jacket. The staves were brought to them and they took position in the centre of the square, quickly attracting an audience other than their male guests. They began rather slowly, with Gabrielle taking the role of the teacher and giving a running commentary to every move.

"There are a lot of things you can do when the first reverse sweep doesn't work. You can follow it up by a second one, fast enough after the first to let your opponent not regain equilibrium. When this also doesn't work you can change direction, bring the staff between your opponent's legs and make her topple over. - You take all the fun out of things when you make it this easy for me, Xena."

"I'm sorry, your majesty. I thought this was to teach a couple of new moves. You know it has to go step by step; that's the only way to learn."

"Yes, my love. And now for the show I promised. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Go easy on me, please. It's been centuries since I stood a chance against you."

Once again they began slowly. When they were sufficiently warmed up, they started in earnest. Xena knew that she didn't have to pull her blows like she usually did, and Gabrielle relished the chance to go full out without the fear of harming her partner. To the inexperienced observer they

were nothing more but a blur of movement but the soldiers watching were impressed to see a combination of agility, speed, balance, and mastery of the body none of them, not even the Jaffa ever had encountered. It was like a ballet, a ballet on a tight rope; only one slip by either of them and they could have been severely injured. As it was, Xena took a rather hard hit to her ribs and had been taken down two times, but each time was back on her feet and on the move before the other woman could take advantage of the situation.

When they returned to their guests, Xena was still buttoning her jacket. Teal'c said in his usual deadpan manner. "O'Neill, I think you should reconsider this sparring session."

"You're right my friend, if I were a sane man, I'd postpone the sparring for at least a few years, unfortunately I'm a bit nuts and I always keep my word. Though it's pretty obvious that I will get my ass kicked this time."

"My wife has a hell of a lot experience in all sorts of combat. I'm sure you both will have fun."

"Thank you for the demonstration, your majesty. It was very enlightening and I can see that my team will be in good hands with you. I'll send Teal'c and Colonel O'Neill back the day after tomorrow to get a first report from Major Carter and also for this sparring lesson. Would you mind accompanying us back to the Stargate?"

"Of course not, general. Don't you want to say another good-bye to the team?"

"No, your majesty, that won't be necessary. They're grown women and I don't want them to feel too coddled."

~*~

After seeing the men off, the queen and her Consort retired to their hut to change into something more comfortable than the formal attire in which they had been sparring. When the door was closed, Xena fell to her right knee in front of her Queen. "I'm sorry, your majesty. I didn't watch my tongue."

"Please, rise, my Consort. There's no need for this. It was nothing more than a lapse. I'm sure even Daniel will think that it's some sort of proverbial saying - and when the time is right we will have to tell them the truth anyway. - Now, help me out of these things and take a shower with me."

"You're cruel, my love, to torture me this way." Xena said with concern in her eyes and a hopeful glint in her eyes.

"You'd deserve it, my big dumb warrior, for trying to hide away during the reception and for almost getting Samantha into trouble by letting her run around in the trees. But I won't torture you; we'll just take some time out from your probation. I need to feel your touch. The hungry

eyes of some of the men the general brought had me really on edge."

"I can always go through the Ring and blind them, my love." Xena answered in a low purr while patiently undoing knot after knot to reveal her wife's perfectly sculpted body.

"Strip for me, slowly."

The tall woman took two steps back and began to unbutton the dark blue jacket of her uniform. She then discarded the white t-shirt underneath, leaving her naked from the waist upwards. She then turned sideways and began to unlace her knee-high leather boots. She once again turned around, taking her time with coming to a standing position. She found Gabrielle's eyes and held them. Meanwhile her strong hands opened the belt around her waist and slowly drew it out of the belt loops. She loosely coiled it like one would a whip and deposited the sturdy leather strap in front of Gabrielle's feet. She then began to open the buttons holding her black leather pants. When she was down to the second to last, she heard Gabrielle's command.

"Stop it. Put your hands behind your neck. Close your eyes and don't move."

Xena had a hard time not to tremble in anticipation. The last two buttons now were open and Gabrielle tucked the black leather over her hips. The trousers were of a rather wide and comfortable cut; they simply would have dropped to the floor; instead they were guided downwards, slowly and gently caressing the skin of her thighs and calves. She instinctively stepped out of them, immediately fearing that her unauthorised movement would bring the game to an end. Her breeches quickly followed the trousers.

She felt her lover's eyes on her skin, felt her hands tracing the still vivid marks of her punishment and the quickly forming bruise at her right side, just where the lower ribs had been hit. Gabrielle's lips now were touching her, kissing every stripe from the strap and every welt from the cane. Wetness was trickling down her inner thighs, evidence of her steadily growing arousal. She felt it licked away and soon the tongue was entering her and she more felt than heard the command. "Come for me, my love."

And she did - to the feeling of three strong fingers thrusting in and out of her nether lips, hitting the special spot inside of her that only Gabrielle was able to find. Another climax washed over her and she fell to her knees into the waiting arms of her wife. The smaller woman settled them on the ground with Xena's head cradled on her stomach, gently stroking her long hair. Some time later, blue eyes found green, and the loving adoration in the blue eyes made Gabrielle's heart skip a beat.

"Thank you, my love, my soul. You don't know how much I love to be taken this way, how much I sometimes need to be taken this way. Thank you, my queen."

"And I love taking you this way. You're always incredibly beautiful when you come but when your climax comes out of your surrender you're even more beautiful. I'm glad that you are mine and mine alone."

"Yours, for as long as you let me. Hey, didn't you say something about a shower?" Xena came to her feet, scooped the smaller woman in her arms, and carried her to their bathroom.

Had they been in their hut in the village instead of the larger, isolated house in the forest, the whole village would have known that everything was as it always had been between the queen and her consort.

~*~

"I can't believe it. They left us at the mercy of barbarians." Janet's outburst brought Samantha instantly out of her dreams and back to reality. Janet was sitting next to her on the bed waving the regulation book she had fallen asleep reading.

The tall blonde had a good idea what her friend was talking about; nevertheless she asked to gain some time.

"What I'm talking about? As if you didn't know, don't try this innocent act with me Major Samantha Gabriella Carter. You know I'm talking about this physical punishment thing."

"I was afraid it was what has you this agitated." She answered quietly, immediately cursing herself for her answer when the usually level-headed, controlled doctor began a tirade followed by a lecture she would have given a lot to be able to tune out.

Finally, when the other woman had to stop to take a breath, she said. "Please, calm down, Janet. Yes, I know, they prefer physical punishment to other methods and I'm sure this book contains a list of punishments for every possible transgression. They believe that no one stands above the law, not even the queen or her consort and certainly not their guests. But you don't need to worry; physical punishment can always be substituted by other things like community service and stuff."

"That doesn't make it any better, Sam. If they have physical punishment for adults, and this book is very detailed concerning all kinds of whips and straps and paddles and what not. If they do this to adults, can you imagine what they let their children go through?"

"That's the point, Janet. Physical punishment is for adults only. I spoke with Aria while we were gone. At first I was as shocked as you are but when I insinuated that they beat their children she almost fell out of the tree. She said, and I quote: 'No Amazon would ever raise her hand against a child.' I believe her."

"So, you think they will let us choose another way should it become necessary?"

"I'm sure of it, Janet."

"Hey Sam, you have the same name as the queen; well almost, one letter difference is close

enough, Samantha Gabriella Carter. How cool is that."

"It can't be more than mere coincidence, Janet. Besides, my father always hated the name because it came from my mother's mother. After my mother's death, I was never allowed any contact with my grandmother. When he learned that I had sought her out while at college, he was as furious as I ever had seen him - even more than when Michael was caught driving under influence in a stolen car. She died from a car accident during the Golf War. I didn't have the chance to attend her funeral and there isn't a grave for me to visit. She wanted to be cremated and her ashes spread over the ocean."

"Sounds like you loved her very much, Sam."

"Yes, I did. We didn't have much time together but she reminded me a lot of my mother, and she had a joy in life I never before had experienced. It was one of the few times in my life I openly defied my father's orders."

Janet knew it probably was a big mistake, but she still followed her heart's desire and took the taller woman in her arms, gently rocking her to and fro'. Surprisingly Samantha didn't pull away but leaned into the touch and let herself be comforted. Cradled in the competent arms of her CMO she felt safe and for the first time in more than ten years, on a planet almost 53000 light years from her home, she allowed herself to cry for her grandmother.

When the tears had subsided Janet demanded. "Tell me about her, Sam."

"She was a doctor, the head of the children's cancer station. Her name was Catherine, perhaps that's why I always got along with Doctor Langford. She was working hand-in-hand with a research team at the university in Washington; that's how I found her. My father had told me that she was living at the West Coast. I was sixteen and felt very alone. One evening I went to her house to ask why she never visited in the three years since my mother's death. That's when I learned that my father had had her served with a court order forbidding her to approach any member of his family the day before my mother's funeral. She tried to attend but he had her removed from the graveyard by some of his Air Force buddies before she had a chance to get even close to the grave.

"The first evening I spent with her was very emotional but we soon learned that we had a lot in common. She was the only one who didn't laugh when I told her that I wanted to become a fighter pilot. We discussed astrophysics and music and psychology, her research and my mother's childhood. For a long time she was my best friend."

"She sounds like someone I would have loved to know, Sam." After a long moment of silence she tentatively asked. "Why did your father hate her so much? It's not like the Jacob Carter I know."

"He has changed a lot since being joined with Selmac. He's a much nicer person now." Samantha turned in Janet's arms and sought the brown eyes of her friend. "She was gay, Janet."

"She wasn't in the military; it shouldn't have made a difference." Janet blurted out.

"No, it shouldn't but it did for him. It was strange in a way. He taught us to respect other religious beliefs and cultures. He taught us to respect different live styles and sexual orientations but in his own family he couldn't tolerate it."

"It's hard to be on the receiving end of something like that. I always was close with my grandfather. He was the one to encourage me when I decided to join the Air Force but when I volunteered for a front line posting during Dessert Storm he firmly objected. He said that this was not our war to fight and that he was disappointed. Ever since our relationship has been strained, to say the least. We exchange birthday and seasonal cards but we no longer talk. So, to a certain extent, I know how it feels. I'm sorry you and your grandmother had to suffer because of your father's fears but I'm happy that you got a chance to get to know her."

"Thank you for listening to me. I'm happy that I have a best friend like you, Janet. I..." Before she could say anything else, there was a knock on the door, reminding them that it was time to meet with the consort.

~*~

When they joined the others a few minutes later in the patio, they found them animatedly talking about the regulation book. Samantha ordered them to stay calm. She told them about the possibility of choosing an alternate punishment and that she saw no reason not to trust their hosts. When Xena arrived, ten minutes late, she rushed through the entrance, but still took the time to bow to the statues.

"I'm sorry for the delay. I hope you all had the chance to get some rest. I see you already got a copy of the regulation book. It contains our most important laws and rules affecting everyday life. I wanted to give it to you myself but something must have gone wrong. I'm well aware that it might need some explaining."

"Do you really expect us to let some Amazon beat up on us?" A tall brunette asked provocatively.

"Watch your mouth, Lieutenant Jenson. This is not the way to speak with our hosts, to be exact; this is no way to speak to anyone. Apologise immediately!" Samantha barked.

"I apologise for my ill-chosen words, your highness."

"Apology accepted, and to answer your question: as long as you stay in our world, you all are my responsibility. So it wouldn't be 'any' Amazon charged to mete out a punishment, it would be me. But, and this is why I wanted to talk to you before giving you the book...

"As long as you stay in this world you will have to adhere to our regulations and live according

to our law and customs. Not even the queen stands above the law, Lieutenant."

The tall woman turned her head slightly to include the others. "We know that most of you are not comfortable with the notion of physical punishment. I'm sure you see it as barbaric and uncivilised. To us it's a physical as well as a spiritual experience. We don't believe in discipline for its own sake.

"We believe in discipline as a way to create a balance between heart and hand, body and soul. Breaking the laws or losing your temper, as I did yesterday, disturbs this balance. For most of us the pain of physical punishment re-establishes the balance.

"Over the centuries we learned that it doesn't work this way for everyone. That's why there always is the possibility of choosing an alternate punishment - ranging from communal services like kitchen duty or caring for the elders or the children to imprisonment, purification rituals, and other things. However, we never would force you to endure something you think you can't stand. So, should it become necessary, you can choose to either return to Earth or to accept our form of justice. And you can be assured that no one will think any less of you should you decide to go back to your world."

"I think this is something we can live with, your highness." Karen Jenson answered to make up for her earlier burst of temper.

"That's good to hear, Lieutenant. Let's get going, there's a lot to show you before the party starts."

"Party? You never mentioned a party. I mean we just had this get together, wouldn't it be better to get started with the mission?" Carter asked, with a hint of nervousness in her voice. She just hated parties.

"It is part of the mission, Samantha Carter. You will be introduced to the people you'll work with and learn from. To understand us, you have to get to know us not only on a professional level. Besides, Amazons just love to party. Queen Gabrielle would have a riot on her hands if she even tried to miss out on such a great opportunity. And this socialising thing before, well, it was just that, and soon you will see, it doesn't qualify as a party, not even remotely. One word of warning though, the wine and ale we serve is pretty strong and goes straight to the head. So, if you don't want to regret it tomorrow, you shouldn't drink more than two or three mugs. And now, would you please follow me, we'll begin the tour with something familiar, our laboratories. Everyone's preparing for the party, so you can familiarise yourself with the place without getting in the way."

~*~

It had been a long afternoon; visiting the laboratories and the power plant alone had taken more than four hours. They just had enough time for a quick visit to the so-called healer's hut and even

Janet who prided herself of her state-of-the-art infirmary was more than impressed with the efficiency and simplicity of its layout. Then the party had started, and now, a couple of hours after midnight it still was in full swing.

Samantha had crept away from the crowd and the noise a little over an hour ago and simply dreaded the thought of going back. She had to admit that for a while even she had had fun. Most of the Amazons were friendly and obviously as curious about them as they were about the Amazons. Some of them had been a little too friendly, openly inviting her and other members of her team to their beds. She even had had to fight a burst of jealousy when one of them had flirted with Janet. The small doctor hadn't even acknowledged the other woman's overtures but Samantha still wished she would have been able to openly step in and claim the brown-eyed beauty as her own.

She sighed; she knew it was nothing but wishful thinking. Janet was straight; the woman had been married - and even if she weren't she didn't feel anything but friendship for her, Samantha rationalised. And then there was the small problem with the military and its stupid policies.

Samantha almost jumped out of her skin when someone sat down next to her. "Do you see the big bright star just over the hillock to your right, Samantha Carter?"

"Yes, your highness."

"From there, count ten stars to the left and seven up. What does the pattern look like? And please call me Xena as long as we're alone."

"It will be my pleasure, Xena. Please call me Sam. It looks like a woman, a very well developed woman. What is it called?"

"It represents Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Love. It is said that praying to her turns even the most complicated relationship into a happy one." Samantha didn't know how the consort was doing it but she seemed to look straight into her soul.

"Yeah, and if wishes were hor..." She stopped herself. The taller woman didn't deserve to become the scapegoat for her anger at herself, at her inability to get a certain five foot two doctor out of her mind. "I'm sorry, Xena. It has been a long day. - The energy shield at your gate. It makes men more aggressive. Do you think it makes women more emotional?"

"No, I don't think so. It picks up on the different hormone distribution patterns in men and women by way of submolecular nanites that are absorbed in the body when passing through. This is what causes the testosterone output with men, but there are no records of a women ever being influenced in any way. Why? Have you or one of your team mates have experienced any problems?"

"No, I... it just was a specula..." Samantha stopped in mid-sentence. She suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to be honest to this woman. "I don't know but I surprise myself doing and saying and feeling things I never would have allowed myself to do, say, and feel in any other

situation. Take this morning, my playing hooky with Aria. I knew that it was wrong and usually I'm the type of officer doing everything in her power not to anger my commanding officers. Obeying orders and always acting appropriately seems to be something I was born with. But today it simply didn't count. It was absolutely unimportant in comparison to the joy of being up there in the trees. Perhaps I should have Janet run a few tests on me. My reaction could be related to the protein marker and the naqada in my blood stream."

"You really are worried about this, aren't you?" Xena studied her face.

"Yes, Xena. You have to know that usually, I'm not a very emotional person. I'm a soldier; we're not supposed to have any emotions at all - and suddenly it feels as if I were about to burst at the seams if I don't show what I'm feeling. It's scary."

"I know, Sam. It's hard to suddenly find out you have a heart beating strongly for someone else when all you felt before was emptiness and loneliness. But I think you are wrong. Having no emotions at all and not easily showing any emotions are as different from each other as fire is from ice. Not even someone as brilliant as you are can live with hiding their fears and desires for an extended period. Believe me; the price would be too high to pay. Either you end up really losing your emotions or they break through with force. Give your feelings a chance; explore them before you think of putting them away once again."

"The problem is that I know what I'm feeling, Xena. I just can't afford to act on my feelings." The blonde answered in a subdued voice, asking herself why she was this open to someone who was nothing more than a stranger.

"You'll find the answer when the time is right and it has nothing to do with our energy field. But to assuage your fears, we'll get Janet Fraiser and run a few tests."

"Now?"

"Why not? It's as good as any other time and by the way the party is still going; there won't be much work done tomorrow. Hung-over Amazons are worse than partying Amazons, I have to tell you."

The dark haired woman offered her a hand up and when she touched it, the naqada in her blood began to practically scream. Samantha jerked back. "Don't be afraid, Sam." Xena's soft voice said. "You're in no danger from me. Like you I once was the host to a Tok'ra. One of these days I'll tell you the story. Let's go and get Janet Fraiser; she probably is out of her mind with worry about you."

By the sadness in Xena's eyes Samantha could tell that there was a long, possibly heartbreaking story to be heard but she also knew that now was not the moment to dwell on it. "So, did you search for me or were you just passing by?"

"Janet Fraiser was getting worried and the queen sent me to find you. I knew where to find you but I took my time to have a few minutes of quiet."

"So, you won't get into trouble with this probation thing?"

"No, no trouble. I presume Aria told you?"

"Yes, she did, Xena, but please don't be angry with her. I think it was important for me to know, though I do not know why. - I still have some problems with the whole concept of physical punishment; I think."

"Did you ever lose control and do something you later were ashamed of, Sam?" Xena asked.

"Yes, of course, who didn't?"

"I was ashamed of my behaviour with Colonel O'Neill. Telling the queen, submitting to, and receiving my punishment made me feel better in my skin. And when tomorrow night she gives me the kiss of forgiveness, the balance in my soul will be re-established once again. The pain gives me a chance to forgive myself."

"I think I understand. When I was a child and did something wrong I always felt awful until my mother found out. When it was out in the open, I knew that I no longer had to fear anything."

"Yes, Sam, it works along the same parameters. - Ready to face the crowd?"

~*~

The Amazons were dancing to the steady, hypnotising rhythm of the drums and most of the members of her team obviously had loosened up enough to join in. This looked like a promising start for the mission. When they passed through the mass of undulating bodies, Samantha saw one of the women put a hand on Janet's arm, obviously trying to drag her on the dance floor. They were close enough to hear the small doctor saying. "No!" It was the woman who had been ogling her earlier and this one word was all the excuse the blond soldier needed.

"What part of 'No' didn't you understand? Take your hands off of her, now." Samantha Carter said with a low growl permeating her words, suddenly standing next to Janet with her arms folded across her chest.

"Hey, I was just being friendly." The obviously drunk woman slurred. "Besides, it's none of your business, blonde."

"I just made it my business, and even if I didn't know her it still would be my business. I don't allow the men on my planet to force themselves on women, and I certainly will not condone it now, especially when a woman is doing the bullying, a woman who should know better."

While speaking Carter had inched forward and now was standing in front of Fraiser, face to face

with the Amazon.

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm acting like a lowly male, stranger?"

"If the shoe fits, Amazon." Samantha answered with a snarl, surprised by the strength of her anger.

Out of the corner of her eyes, the blonde saw the queen, evidently on the verge of interfering, held back by her consort. Instead of an answer the Amazon aimed a right hook at her. The Air Force major easily deflected it and shoved the woman away. She stumbled backwards, landing hard on her behind.

Samantha felt a familiar touch at the small of her back and turned around. "You all right, Janet?"

"Yes, Sam. Always the protector, aren't you? Let's get going before this ends like our last outing at O'Malley's."

"Hey, it wasn't my fault. They started it."

"And you ended up with a cracked rib and a lot of bruises."

"They looked worse, and I still think they deserved..." Her answer was cut short by someone taking a hold of her shirt; she went with the pull, let herself fall to the ground into some sort of back somersault, and came back to her feet having put at least a body length of distance between herself and her assailant.

"You insulted me, stranger."

"Wouldn't have happened if you could hold your liquor, Amazon. Go to bed, I'm not in the mood to play." Carter snapped back in her best Jack O'Neill imitation.

Of course the woman was far beyond listening. She attacked and found herself at the receiving end of a roundhouse kick that sent her flying and effectively knocked her out when she collided with one of the numerous benches.

"All right, the show is over," Xena's voice rang out. "Kari, Reana, see that Niva gets to bed. You are responsible for getting her to the training grounds one candlemark after sunrise. And everyone else, get back to whatever you were doing." She then closed the distance between her and the two humans. "You did well, Samantha Carter. Still think that you need to be checked out?"

"More than ever, your highness. I hope I didn't make an enemy tonight."

"I don't think so, not after she sobers up. It's not her style to behave like this; she just has lost someone dear to her heart. We probably should cut her some slack here. Let's go to the infirmary, care to join us, my Queen?"

"Infirmary? Is someone ill? Niva didn't even get a chance to touch her."

"No, everything's all right, my love," the consort answered. "Samantha Carter is just worried that our defensive shield could have messed with the naqada in her bloodstream or somehow have influenced the protein marker. We'll run some tests, just to prove to her that everything's all right."

"Let's go; so we can put your worries to rest, Samantha Carter." The Queen answered with a smile.

"Won't we need one of your doctors?" Fraiser asked.

"Xena is more than just a soldier. Samantha Carter will be in good hands. Xena is one of the best healers we have."

Chapter Four: Getting Closer

Janet woke to the sun shining through the big window. She was lying on something soft that was moving in a regular rhythm. It felt good, she felt at home, and for a moment she thought that she still was dreaming. But then she felt eyes on her and turned her head to be greeted by twinkling blue orbs. "Good morning, Janet."

"Sam," she said while trying to put some distance between her and the tantalising body. "I'm crushing you. Why didn't you push me away?"

"You were looking so peaceful and innocent and young. When I woke up it felt so right having you right there. I hadn't the heart to move you."

"So I won't have to apply for new quarters?"

"No, Janet. I want you to stay here. I need you to stay with me."

"It's against the regulations. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Now close your eyes and try to get some more sleep, Xena said that nothing would happen before midday and it was close to dawn when the queen put a halt to your questions."

"Wait 'til you get to work with the consort in their science labs, and then we'll talk about a stream of endless questions, your nerdiness."

"Touché." Samantha answered still smiling while the smaller woman snuggled back to her, putting the head on her shoulder and closing her eyes. For a while the tall blonde basked in the sensation of the soft body pressed close to hers, rationalising that Janet's behaviour was probably nothing more than her way of dealing with the long day and even longer night they had had.

~*~

At the same time, a few minutes walk away, an Amazon warrior stood on very shaky legs facing a very annoyed Consort. "So what do you have to say for yourself, weapons' master?"

"I'm sorry and I'll go and apologise to our guests." She answered, warding off the dizzy spell that threatened to take her down.

"You'll have to do better than this, Niva."

"I'm sorry I got drunk and I'm sorry I shamed the entire Nation. She took me down as if I was some first time apprentice, and a very clumsy one at that. I'm not worthy of being your second in command, your highness. Please choose someone not as irresponsible as I am." The woman answered while lowering herself to her right knee. "I'm expecting my punishment in humility, your highness."

"When I planned to come here this morning, I was of a mind to take you through a few sparring sessions to get your head back straight on your shoulders. The Queen convinced me otherwise. You have been emotionally unpredictable lately; you know this as well as I do. I hoped it would go away if I just ignored it, give you the time to cope. It didn't work. You're on a path of self-destruction. I know the pattern, I did it once myself. You drink to forget but the alcohol only makes you remember everything more vividly. It's a vicious circle and it has to be stopped. Queen Gabrielle and I have not given up on finding her and getting her back. I know how hard it is but you shouldn't either."

"Please help me, your highness. I know what I'm doing is wrong but I can't help myself. I will take any punishment you deem appropriate."

"Will you accept corporal punishment, weapons' master?"

"Yes, your highness, of course."

"Good. - At midday, when most of our sisters have recovered from last night's overindulgence, you will apologise to our guests at the village square. You lost your temper and for this you will receive twelve strokes of the cane on your bare behind, and another twelve for attacking our guests. Then you will go to the temple and perform a full purification ritual. After your return you will be on probation for a full moon. You will return to your duties but you will not be allowed to drink anything stronger than apple juice, your spare time will be used teaching Samantha Carter and Janet Fraiser hand-to-hand combat. Do you accept this punishment,

weapons' master?"

"Yes, your highness. You and her majesty are very generous. The warrior and the healer, do they want to learn?"

"Not yet, my friend. But they will, after your return. And now let's get you back to your feet, you're looking like crap. I know you don't like wine, so how many mugs of ale did you have?" Xena said offering the other woman a hand to help her stand.

"I lost count when the pyramid I was building toppled over at the fifth level. That was when I first approached the healer. She didn't pay me any attention but the eyes of the warrior eagerly would have sent me to Tartarus given the slightest chance. - She should claim the healer for herself. It's obvious that they belong together."

"They are not ready yet. It will take some time for them to see it as clearly as we do. But it will not be easy because they will also have to find the strength to act on their feelings instead of denying them. Such a relationship could ruin their careers in the military and even cost them a child they both dearly love. They may decide that it's not worth the risk. Sometimes it's scary to pass from pure friendship on to something else, Niva. - Let's go, the hot springs are waiting."

~*~

Shortly before midday Carter and her team were called to the village and found almost as many people there as the night before, though some of them still looked the worse for wear. They were shoved to the front row, all of them clad in BDUs and black t-shirts. A drum was announcing the queen's arrival, her Consort three steps behind her. She took her place on a dais in front of something that looked like a tethering bar out of a western.

"Sisters, we came here to see justice satisfied. Yesterday, one of our sisters lost her temper and thus insulted our honoured guests to the point that they had to defend themselves. There are extenuating circumstances; that's why it was decided that the culprit would undergo a combination of corporal punishment and the participation in a purification ritual. Come forward, Niva, daughter of Telana."

The woman stepping out of the crowd was about one or one and a half inches shorter than Samantha and much more heavily muscled. She moved with a purpose and confidence that made the Major understand that yesterday she must have been tanked to the rim, else she never would have stood a chance. She bowed before the queen but quickly turned her attention to the tall soldier and the small doctor.

She knelt in front of the women, seeking first eye contact with Fraiser. "Major Janet Fraiser, I apologise for my behaviour. It was unworthy of an Amazon warrior. I never wanted to hurt or frighten you. I am sorry, Doctor."

"Apology accepted and offence forgotten, Niva, daughter of Telana." Fraiser answered with a smile, glad of having taken the time to read the regulation book more thoroughly.

Niva then turned her attention to the Major. "Major Samantha Carter, I apologise for my behaviour. I attacked you from behind and let myself be consumed by anger. This is not behaviour fitting for an Amazon. I never intended to hurt or frighten Major Fraiser. I am sorry, warrior."

Carter also had finished reading the book, so she answered. "I know there was no offence intended and none was taken. Apology accepted." Then she knelt down herself. "But I also have to apologise for deliberately pushing your buttons. I never intended to insult you or your sisters; I just wanted you to lose your focus. For this I apologise and I have to thank you for going easy on me during our short fight."

"No, thank you, Major. You did nothing wrong. Keeping an enemy mentally off balance is good strategy. I would be honoured if you would agree to be my guardian during the first part of my punishment."

Everything Samantha ever had learned about the proper conduct in situations like this screamed at her to stay out of it. They were here to study the culture and its technology not to become a part of it. But she didn't listen to the voice of duty, so Samantha answered. "It will be my honour, Niva, but you'll have to guide me. I know that I will have to count the number of strokes but that's all I know."

"You will have to strip me, take hold of my hands to prevent me from moving around too much, count the strokes, and help me to the temple where the second part of my punishment will take place."

"It will be my honour, Niva."

They both stood and walked over to the tethering bar. Samantha undid the belt around Niva's waist and pulled the short dress over her head. She was naked underneath. She bent over the horizontal beam and the blonde grabbed her forearms in a very firm warrior handshake. Xena hopped down from the dais, picked up the cane lying at the queen's feet, and came to them. The first stroke left Samantha with a tingling sensation in her hands. She could hear a second blow but there was no reaction coming from her charge. From her perspective it took ages until she finally could count the last stroke. "Twenty-four."

Though the strong woman didn't really need the help she allowed herself a short moment of being cuddled. She apologised to the Nation and the queen and then was led to the temple.

~*~

The rest of the day passed quickly, her team being despatched to different sections in the large

research facility. Xena was going over the specifications of the energy field with Samantha, from time to time drifting to a more theoretical discussion of the principles behind the deceptively simple mechanism.

From the numerous reports about SG-1 and the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, they already had known that the tall blonde had more than just a quick mind. The consort was delighted to see for herself just how absolutely brilliant Samantha Carter really was. She never needed more than one or two hints to understand how something worked. In a few weeks she would be able to do more than just learn, she would be able to actively contribute.

"You said that if you hadn't modified the shield the men simply would have been sent back - but how can this be? Wormholes are supposed to be one way." Samantha finally asked the question that had been bothering her almost since the beginning.

"I've been waiting for this question for candlemarks, Sam. - Radio signals aren't the only energy signatures that can travel both ways. Theoretically it's possible to transform human energy patterns and send them back this way but that's not how we do it. The easiest way would be to describe it as a hidden re-dialing process. The women pass through while the men are held back just a fraction before passing the event horizon. The Ring shuts down and re-dials the original address shortly after; with a delay of 0.21 nanoseconds."

Before the major could ask more questions, the taller women felt a familiar presence and continued. "Sam, Janet Fraiser and the queen will be here any moment now. It's late, we should at least pretend to shut a few of the systems down."

"We just got started, Xena. It can't be that late."

"It's three candlemarks after sunset, Sam."

"Uh uh." She answered and began to shut down the computer she was sitting in front of; suddenly remembering her dinner date with the small doctor. She heard the door open and a slight brush of fresh air touching the naked skin of her lower arms.

She turned around and saw the queen and Janet Fraiser entering the room. Gabrielle's voice was calm and low but wielding authority with a natural grace that would put even the best commanding officer of the Forces to shame.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you were to report to me a candlemark ago."

Xena immediately knelt in front of the smaller woman. "I'm sorry, your majesty. The time slipped away from us. I..., it..."

"I know you got stuck playing with your machinery, again. And your new playmate already seems to be as addicted to this technical mumbo jumbo as you are, so addicted that she forgot her dinner date with Janet Fraiser."

Samantha had the grace to blush when Janet muttered under her breath. "Happens all the time on earth."

"Xena of Amphipolis, Consort to Queen Gabrielle of the Amazon Nation, your probation has ended. Receive now, the kiss of forgiveness." The blond bent down and kissed Xena on the forehead. "But your behaviour gives me no choice than to punish you again, the both of you. Xena of Amphipolis, Major Samantha Carter." One look of these sea-green eyes had Samantha mimicking Xena's position. "As a punishment you both will stay out of the lab for the next two days and tomorrow evening you will treat us to a picnic with all the trimmings."

"But your majesty, there's so much to learn." Samantha dared to protest.

"Should I make it four days, Samantha Carter?"

"No, your majesty, please don't. I accept the punishment." She answered with a certain amount of panic in her voice.

"Wise decision. We'll wait outside, you have five minutes to shut all the machinery down."

When the door once again was closed, Samantha asked. "Why did you let her do this to us, Xena? I can't afford to loose two days."

"Let her? She is the queen. She doesn't need anyone's permission, Sam. It definitively could have been worse."

"Worse? How?" The young blonde asked with a pout.

"Instead of simply preparing a picnic, she could have told us to cook dinner." Xena deadpanned.

"Uhh..." This definitively sounded like torture but her next thought brought a smile on Samantha's face. "No, Janet never would subject anyone to my cooking. I'm more likely to transform the kitchen in a chemistry lab than to produce something edible. One day, I volunteered to make some pasta and warm up the sauce going with it for Cassandra because Janet got stuck at the infirmary. I managed to put the pasta into the boiling water but then I decided to quickly check my emails. Well, the pasta was ready before I was and I had to order in, not to mention the trip to the mall to get Janet a new pasta pot. - Really, I'm a menace to any kitchen."

The dark haired woman smiled one of her half smiles. "I learned, over the years, but I still don't like it; so believe me, we got lucky. Let's get going before we get into more trouble."

"Xena, why doesn't the queen share your love for science?"

"Oh, she does. Most of the infirmary's equipment is her design as well as some of our defensive technology. We simply have a different approach to things. When I am working on something, I easily lose track of the outside world, night and day, sleeping and eating, the people around me.

She hates when I get too single-mindedly focused, especially when there is no urgent need to do so.

"Bottom line is, though she can sometimes get a bit bossy, it's really good to have someone to look after you, to care for you, especially someone who cares enough to take a stand against you if necessary."

In Samantha's mind an image flashed: Two airmen dragging her out of her lab and escorting her to her quarters on base to get at least six hours rest, on Janet's orders. She had been angry then but before she fell on her bed she had to admit to herself that it felt good to have someone care.

"Janet does this a lot." She whispered - and suddenly changing topic, she added. "So do we go tree walking tomorrow?"

"I always keep my promises, Samantha."

~*~

In front of the building a similar conversation was taking place. Janet and Gabrielle were sitting on a bench about seventy paces from the entrance.

"I can't believe you did this, your majesty. Not even General Hammond ever got her away from her lab for more than a day."

"Call me Gabrielle, when we're alone, Janet. Samantha Carter's file says that she's a workaholic, just like my beloved Consort. But it also says that she didn't take a single day off in the last five months, except for medical leaves she always cut short one way or the other. And the last day off she took without being bullied into was when the two of you went to this forensic symposium. All in all, she has enough leave rolled up to stay at home for almost a year. In my book, two days off are exactly what she needs right now."

"You are wise beyond your years, your.... Gabrielle. But I still doubt that Sam will follow your orders."

"I am older than I look, Janet. And my consort will make sure that my orders are followed. It's in her interest. As the senior of the two she will be held responsible for Samantha Carter's actions. - Ah, here they come, just in time."

Janet looked up, and for the first time was flabbergasted by the striking resemblance between the two taller women. With the exception of their complexion, they easily could pass as sisters. The moonlight was caressing their silhouettes and being reflected by twin pairs of silvery blue eyes. She shook herself out of her stupor.

"Sam, before I forget. Lieutenant Sabrina Harper has asked to return to Earth immediately. Her

sister's baby decided to hurry. Colonel O'Neill wants to know who should take her place."

"I feared something like this would happen, Janet." Samantha answered. "General Hammond insisted that I choose in order of seniority but Sabrina warned me that she possibly would have to return earlier than planned. She's her sister's birthing partner and has to go back."

She then turned her attention to the queen. "I apologise for the inconvenience, your majesty."

"There is no apology needed, Sam. And please call me Gabrielle when we're alone. So, do you have someone in mind?"

"Yes, Gabrielle. Her name is Jennifer Hailey; she was just promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and has finished her SG training. She's a good soldier and an even better scientist. Having her here will make my life a lot easier."

"I know you like the kid, Sam, but don't you overestimate her abilities? Her file is full of reprimands for insubordination and she almost got thrown out of the Academy for getting in a fight."

"Oh, Janet, now you sound like the general. She was a model student after seeing what was waiting for her after graduation, and she didn't get into a fight, she just slugged a guy making disrespectful remarks about a fellow student. That's all, no big deal. Believe me, she'll do fine."

"I don't know. I just think she is too young; she's only twenty-two."

A smile lit up Xena's face. "I remember reading something about a very young resident at the ER of California Central, telling her supervisor to... what was it again?"

"I told him to stuff his head back in his ass and get out of my way so I could do my duty. The son of a bitch wanted to send a small boy with multiple fractures of his left leg away untreated just because his mother didn't have their insurance card with her. And except for my choice of words, I would do it again." Janet said in remembered indignation.

"And you're telling me that I'm pulling stunts when I get into a discussion with one marine or the other. I bet you got in a boatload full of trouble for this one, Jan."

"Yes and no, Sam. Five minutes after finishing with the boy I was suspended and the next day they threw me out. With this in my file no other hospital would take me and I found my career at an end before it even got started.

"I planned on going back to school and going into research but then I received an invitation to the Pentagon. As it turned out, the boy I had treated was the godson of General Robert Hayes of the Joint Chiefs. He sort of recruited me for the military. He told me that if I learned to hold my tongue I one day would make, and I quote, a damn fine CMO, bossy enough to get things done but bright enough to know when to back off. End quote."

"I guess he was right, my Napoleonic power monger." Samantha said with gentle affection and quite a hint of teasing in her voice.

Seeing the question marks in Xena's and Gabrielle's eyes, Janet explained. "That's one of the nicer terms, Colonel O'Neill uses to describe me."

There was a dangerous glint in Xena's eyes. "Xena, you promised to take it easy on him. Remember, he's a friend."

"Of course I will, my love, but I also have a reputation to maintain. SG-1 is scheduled to arrive around ten. How about I'll get you at eight for some tree walking, Sam?"

"Sounds good to me."

~*~

Major Carter and the consort arrived at the clearing when the last chevron was locked and the Ring came to life. SG-1 stepped through, with young Hailey in tow. "Hey Carter, General Hammond thought you wouldn't mind four-foot-nine as the replacement for Harper. And he muttered something about blasted female instincts."

"Colonel, I'm glad you could make it on time." She answered, mortified by his blatant disregard of protocol.

Daniel stepped closer and whispered something in his ear. "Your highness, please forgive my rudeness," O'Neill finally remembered his manners. "Let me introduce you to Lieutenant Jennifer Hailey. She is to replace Lieutenant Harper. Hailey, this is Xena, consort to Queen Gabrielle."

Hailey saluted, standing at attention. "Venerable consort, I'm humbled to meet you."

"At ease, lieutenant. I'm pleased to see that you obviously already had the chance to have a look at the regulation book we sent to Stargate Command. My assistant will see to it that a more detailed version will be made available at the SGC and distributed among Major Carter's team. While the address was a bit formal but acceptable; your choice of words should only be reserved for the queen herself. We all are equal before the law but nonetheless we are a highly hierarchical society, and though I am the queen's consort and her champion, I'm still nothing more than one of her subjects."

"Thank you for correcting me, your highness. I'll try to pay better attention next time." The small lieutenant said with a bow.

"You are welcome, Jennifer Hailey. Aria here will escort you to your quarters and get you settled in. After the midday meal she will introduce you to our head scientist Cameria of Sappho. - Gentlemen, I think we have a sparring date."

~*~

Less than half a candlemark later, Xena was facing off against Jack O'Neill and Teal'c. They first tried to attack her one by one but even the experience of the Jaffa's long life and hundreds of battles didn't give him the edge to even touch the consort. The men changed tactics, now working as a team but time and again Xena used their momentum and brute force against them without having to rely on her own considerable strength. It didn't take long for them to get winded and give up. The dark haired warrior woman, however, just seemed to be getting warmed up.

"Anyone else?" She asked with a cocky grin.

"I'd like to try." Hailey and Carter said almost at the same time. Hailey was dropping out of a tree, followed closely by a sheepishly grinning Aria. The consort also grinned having expected nothing else.

The blond women teamed up from the beginning. They were agile and quick, planning their moves in advance as if they were acting with one mind. This turned out to be fun, Xena thought when she only barely avoided a roundhouse kick by Samantha whose balance now was more than precarious. Instead of using her advantage, she turned around, dropped to the ground, and downed Hailey. Her next move sent the blond Major flying. She waited till they got back to their feet but before they could decide on another strategy a voice stopped them.

"It's close to midday, I think you had enough fun for the morning, Xena."

"Your will is mine, your majesty. Let me introduce you to our new guest."

The young blonde once again saluted and stood at attention. "Lieutenant Junior Grade Jennifer Hailey, your majesty, at your command."

"At ease, Jennifer Hailey. Our head scientist is already expecting you at the dining hall. Gentlemen, would you please join us for the midday meal."

On the way to the village, Xena was busy explaining some of her moves to a curious Teal'c, comparing them to elements in Jaffa training with O'Neill as an avidly listening public. Daniel Jackson was speaking with Gabrielle and Samantha held Jennifer's attention with her description of the research laboratory.

"Samantha Gabriella Carter," the blonde immediately snapped to attention, "you'll get my Consort in trouble if you don't stop talking shop. She will be held responsible if you don't obey my orders. No laboratory also means not talking about it."

"I understand, your majesty. It won't happen again." She answered with a bow and then turned to

explain the situation to the young lieutenant.

The midday meal was a leisurely affair, Hailey had been whisked away by the elderly head scientist; and Xena and Gabrielle easily joined in the light banter of the members of SG-1 and Doctor Fraiser who practically had to be forced to leave the infirmary. After handing over a preliminary report for General Hammond, Xena and Samantha returned to the practice field. The young blonde was eager to learn and Xena willingly complied. Four candlemarks into their workout, Aria stopped them.

"Your highness, I was to remind you that you have a picnic to prepare."

"Thank you, Aria. You may return to your normal duties now."

"Are you sure that you don't want my help with your preparations, your highness?"

"It is the queen's wish that we do that ourselves, Aria, but thanks for the offer."

~*~

A candlemark before sunset, Xena and Samantha walked into the infirmary; they had everything prepared, had taken a shower and changed into fresh clothing. Xena was wearing a set of Amazon leathers; it's dark, rusty brown complimenting her skin tone and leaving very little to the imagination. Her hair had been braided and adorned with several beads and feathers. She had explained to the younger woman that they identified her as the queen's Consort and Champion and told everyone that this evening she would be her servant.

Samantha thought she looked incredibly beautiful. She herself had donned a pair of cream coloured slacks and a form fitting red blouse, the only civilian attire she had brought with her. A delicate gold chain with a locket had replaced her dog tags and as usual her short hair defied any attempt at keeping it under control.

Xena easily came down on a knee in front of Gabrielle. "My Queen! May I have the honour to escort you to the picnic site?"

"You may, my warrior."

Samantha mimicked her actions in front of Janet who had a look of utter surprise on her face. "Samantha Carter, stand up immediately. This isn't right."

"You first have to answer my question, Janet Regina Fraiser, please will you let me escort you to the picnic site we chose?"

"You're welcome to do so, Samantha Gabriella Carter. And now get up." Samantha did as she was told and they followed the Royal couple out of the spacious room.

They walked for about half a candlemark. For the longest time obscured by a copse of trees they came in view of the secluded campsite. A fire was waiting to be lit with enough additional logs nearby to keep it going all night. Two blankets were on the ground with a couple of soft cushions. Only a few paces away a small stream was adding to the romantic scenery. The taller women guided their companions to sit on the blanket and began to unpack the basket with their supplies and lit the fire. Janet started to help.

"No, Janet, don't. Tonight is for you to enjoy. Just sit back and relax, I will do all the work. For tonight, you will be my queen and I'll be your humble servant." Samantha said softly.

"It's not right, Sam. You shouldn't be doing this. This picnic thing probably wasn't a good idea."

"Please, Janet, indulge me. See it as a scant repayment for all the times I stood you up because I simply didn't realise how late it was. Please." The blond soldier said with pleading eyes, a look the doctor was utterly unable to resist. So, she simply nodded.

The first course of their dinner consisted of a plate with pre-cut fruits, banana, apple, mango, and sweet peaches. They were sitting in comfortable, familiar silence. Gabrielle was finger-feeding Xena every other piece and after a few minutes of observing them Janet caught on and started to give the tall blonde her share of the meal, resisting the urge to also use her fingers to do so. At first she felt slightly awkward but soon got into the spirit.

"Would you like a glass of wine while we prepare the fish, mylady?"

"Fish?"

"Yes, Xena caught them less than an hour ago. It was amazing. She just waded into the water and caught them with her bare hands. Her reflexes are so fast, it's incredible." Remembering that she wasn't supposed to speak unless asked, she continued. "Wine?"

"Yes, please."

Samantha got to her feet and filled two glasses with the sparkling white wine when she saw Xena's signal. She brought one over and returned to Janet's side. She then took the already cut up pieces of fish and wrapped them in big leaves after having packed them with lemon grass and other spices. Xena then brought them over to the fire where she buried them in the smouldering ashes.

"Tell me, Sam, what did you do today, apart from preparing all this?"

"I suppose you heard that Xena ran the colonel and Teal'c ragged this morning and then continued with Hailey and me. I asked her for some pointers and before we knew it, it was time to prepare the picnic. It was great, though I probably will feel it tomorrow."

"Xena, what did I tell you about training sessions?" The Queen reprimanded the taller woman.

"You told me to make sure that my students don't overestimate their reserves, my queen. Samantha Carter is in very good shape and she's a very gifted student. It's a joy to teach her."

"Thank you, Xena. It's easy to learn when one has such a good teacher." Samantha answered though she knew she shouldn't. "I can't wait for our next session. The Amazon Nation should be very grateful to have someone like her among them, your majesty."

"Don't worry, Sam. Her contribution to the Nation is well appreciated. Don't you think so, Xena?"

"You know that I always will be indebted to the Amazon Nation and its Queen." The raven-haired warrior answered solemnly and with sadness and regret in her voice.

"Xena, please don't do this to yourself. It's long in the past and you paid for your crimes."

"You know, I can't help it, my love. The guilt and shame are as much a part of me as my hands or my eyes." She answered softly. "It keeps me from being overwhelmed by my darkness."

"I know, my heart," the blond answered, the other two women temporarily forgotten. Her right hand cupped Xena's left cheek. "I don't have to like it, though. Get yourself something to drink, my warrior." Gabrielle only then turned her attention to Janet. "I apologise, Janet. The demons of the past have the annoying habit of popping up at the most inconvenient moments. I promise that one day I will tell you the story behind our words."

"It is me who has to apologise, Gabrielle. We disrespected your privacy by listening in." Janet answered while Xena knelt to the right and slightly behind the queen, a mug of apple juice in her hand. "Could you please explain to me why we are playing this mistress-servant game? It certainly wasn't in the regulation's book."

"It's much more than a game, Janet. By serving us, Xena and Samantha are forced to focus on us and on us alone. It's easy to serve someone you love, someone you care for but at the same time it's very difficult because both of them are naturally dominant. It's a change of perspective that can be very cleansing and educating. I do it myself from time to time."

The fish was delicious and after watching a spectacular sunset they ended the meal with berries and nutbread. And though there wasn't much talking before they went to bed all four of them had the distinct impression of being closer to each other.

~*~

Once again Samantha woke to the feeling of a soft body intertwined with her own. A quick glance at the clock told her that she still had more than an hour before she had to get up to meet with Xena at the training grounds. She was looking forward to the lesson but for the moment she

intended to enjoy the feeling of the woman in her arms as best as she knew how. It felt so right, so safe. Janet was still dead to the world, so she didn't resist the temptation and ran her fingers through silky brown hair and caressed a slender neck. The smaller woman snuggled closer and Samantha marvelled at how perfect their bodies fit together.

She knew she shouldn't be thinking this way about her best friend, reciting to herself every reason why it was insane and dangerous and simply wrong. However, when she compared her perfectly reasonable reasons to the blissful feeling just holding Janet gave her they suddenly seemed unimportant. The doctor was still sleeping, so it was safe to tell her what was getting harder to hold in every day. "I love you, Janet Fraiser, I'm in love with you. I always was and I always will. I love you."

"Love you too, Samantha Carter." A sleepy voice answered. The tall soldier's confession had taken her by surprise, almost as much as her instinctive answer to it but she decided to stick to her gut instinct. "I lost my heart when you first entered the infirmary. If not for Colonel O'Neill's whining I would have drowned in your impossibly blue eyes."

"And I thought that you possibly were the most beautiful woman I ever saw. Then I got to know you better and learned that you are not only beautiful but also kind and smart and patient and funny. The more I learned about you, the more I fell for you. I know we will not be able to act on it but I'm glad that you know."

"You're right. There's more at stake than just our careers. We have Cassy to think of. I don't know how she would take this. But as long as we are here, in the privacy of this room, I refuse to hide what I'm feeling. I want you to hold me while we sleep, I want to feel your fingers on my skin."

"I want to kiss you, Jan." Samantha whispered.

They kissed, tentatively at first, undemanding. Janet opened her lips slightly and when their tongues danced around each other it was as overwhelming as seeing the Stargate open for the first time, no, it was more than that, the small brunette thought. It was like coming home after having spent her whole life out in the cold. They didn't stop until the lack of oxygen made them dizzy.

Samantha pulled the other woman on top of her body, wanting to feel her everywhere. "You're so beautiful but I must be squishing you."

"You're a light weight, my Jan, and I want to feel you as close as possible. I know this can't go any further, we can't afford to lose control but I want to make the most of the time we have together."

"You're so beautiful, inside and out."

They kissed again, pouring their very souls in the touch of their lips and tongues, content with just holding onto each other. They didn't know it at the time but this second kiss was much more

than just a kiss, it was the beginning of something wondrously bigger.

~*~

At the same time in the Royal hut blue eyes found green and with one voice their owners said. "It has started."

~*~

Samantha spent the morning on the training grounds, working with Xena and a few of the other instructors. Her team met at midday to report to her and they ate together. The blond soldier had a hard time keeping her eyes off Janet; it was as if she were irresistibly drawn towards the smaller woman.

Xena had promised her another tree walking lesson after lunch and she happily set out to meet with the taller woman. They were making good time coming from a part of the forest where the trees were further apart to show her how to jump from one to the other and still stay invisible and silent and using momentum to go faster. Suddenly, Xena pulled Samantha to a stop and snatched a crossbow bolt out of thin air, whirled around and caught a second coming from the opposite direction.

"That's enough, you two. Show yourself or do I have to come and get you? We're going to touch ground and I want you down there before the count of ten."

Two young warriors, girls really, appeared shortly after Samantha had assured the consort that she was all right. They fell to their knees. "Please, forgive us, your highness. We didn't see that you were not alone. We apologise for putting you in danger. Please don't show any leniency in our punishment, your highness."

"Do you really want to tell me that you didn't see Major Carter? I can't believe that you would be so sloppy in your assessment of the situation." She gauged the guilty expression on the young faces. "Or did you think that with someone else around I would be distracted enough for you to succeed? If that's the case you just lied to me. I give you one more chance to tell the truth."

There was a long moment of silence, then the other young woman said. "We lied to you, your highness." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "We saw you moving to the southern edge of the forest and we knew you would probably choose this way to return to the village. We saw the way Major Carter moved through the trees. We didn't think that she would get in the line of fire. We totally misjudged the situation, your highness. We didn't think this through."

"That's right, you didn't think, not for one blasted heartbeat. You blatantly disregarded an order, endangered one of our guests, and you lied. You should be treated with all the severity our laws

have to offer, and you know it. Samantha Carter, do you want to press assault charges against these irresponsible kids?"

"No, your highness. I'm sure this was just an unfortunate mistake. I don't think that they wanted to harm anyone. Please, don't punish them too hard. As you said, they're nothing more than kids, eager to impress their commanding officer." Samantha answered.

"The incident will go in your records. For your disobedience you will do fifteen additional shifts of guard duty. For lying you will report to Euterpe and spend fifteen evenings of your spare time caring for the elders while wearing a sign plate naming your crimes. I hope this will make you think twice if you ever contemplate to pull such a stupid stunt again. And now, get out of my sight."

"Thank you, your highness." They whispered and were gone in the blink of an eye.

"You're a cruel woman, Xena. Am I right to suppose that the elders will give them a hard time, when they read about disobedience and lying?" Xena only answered with a cocky smile and a raised left eyebrow. "Remind me never to get on your bad side. Can I ask you a question?"

"You can always ask and I can always choose not to answer but let's do it while walking. There's a council session I have to attend. What do you want to know?"

"Why do you so easily submit to the queen? I observed you with the others; your mere presence let them try just a bit harder. You command every room you walk into. You're possibly the best fighter I'll ever know. If you'd chose to challenge the queen, you could rule in her stead and everyone would follow you. Why, why do you submit to her?"

Xena studied the blond major's blue eyes before answering. "There's a difficult and an easy answer to your question. The easy answer is that I love Gabrielle. Without her my life wouldn't be worth living. She completes me; she makes me whole. She not only is in my heart and my soul; she is my heart and my soul. Her inner strength, her kindness, her love make the burden of my past bearable. It's easy to submit to someone you love. This is the easy answer. Now, for the other. Yesterday, when you were serving Janet Fraiser, what did you feel?"

"I thought you were nuts when you talked me into this servant thing. I felt utterly ridiculous when I knelt in front of her and at the same time thrilled to be able to finally do something for her. She gives so much and never asks for something in return. At first I feared that serving someone, serving her would make me smaller, a lesser woman but it didn't. I felt free when putting her needs and wants before mine. I knew that I could trust her, that she would always take care of me."

"Then you have your answer, Samantha."

"I have my answer, not yours, Xena, but I understand if it's too personal or too painful to talk about."

"It's both but it also is too soon to reveal all the secrets of the Amazon Nation to you, Sam. I know it's hard but try to be patient."

~*~

In the infirmary a girl of about ten was treated for a broken arm she got from tree climbing. To take her mind of the bone knitters currently mending her limb, Gabrielle told her her favourite story. To be honest it was the favourite stories of not only the children but most of the adult Amazons.

"When Prometheus created the humans he made them with four legs and four arms and two heads but only one soul. They were living happily and didn't have a care in the world. They didn't need the Gods because they had everything they ever wanted right there with them, in their souls. They didn't worship the Gods and Zeus, the father of all Gods, became very, very angry. One night, a very dark night, without any moon or stars to guide the mortals, he sent his lightning bolts down to earth. The humans tried to run but every bolt unerringly found its intended target. They split the four-legged creatures in half and they were so afraid that they didn't think of holding on to their other halves. When finally the night gave way to a murky morning, they looked at each other. Every one of them now only had one head and two arms and two legs...."

"But only half a soul," the child continued the story. "Since then every one of us is searching for the other half of one's soul. And when we are very lucky, like you and Xe, sorry Consort Xena, then we'll find our other half and will once again be complete. Just like we were at the beginning of time."

"That's right, sweetie. Now, hop down, and no tree climbing or wrestling or staff practice for the next three or four days." The girl smiled and left the infirmary. "Let's take a break, Janet Fraiser. We earned ourselves a cup of tea and some cookies. My wayward champion should be back with Samantha in a few minutes."

When they were settled at the Royal table with two steaming mugs in front of them, Janet asked. "The story you told. It's more than just a children's story, right?"

"Yes, Janet, much more."

"What would you do if the other part of your soul were out of your reach?" The brunette asked while staring in her mug.

"The only way this could happen were if one of us were dead - and even then I know she would wait for me at the other side as I would wait for her."

When she saw the dejected expression on the other woman's face, Gabrielle switched to storyteller mode.

"I wasn't born as an Amazon, Janet. I grew up in a small pre-industrial rural village. One day, we, my younger sister, me, and a bunch of other young women were out gathering herbs and picking berries. We were attacked by a band of ruffians looking for slaves. I offered to go willingly with them if they let the other women go. They only laughed and one of them threatened to beat me with his whip. He took aim but his arm got stuck in mid-air. He turned around and was looking straight at a tall woman, holding the other end of the whip, looking at him with a disdainful smile - though she didn't have any armour or weapons.

"There were at least ten men but she defeated them as if they were nothing more than flies on the wall. I just stood there and looked at her, then her eyes found mine and I was lost in the deepest, bluest eyes I've ever seen. This same night I left my home and followed her. For a long time, my family thought that I just did it for the adventure, and when they finally understood my father disowned me. Neither my mother nor my sister was allowed to talk to me 'til the day he died but it was a price I willingly paid.

"From this first moment I knew that she was what I had been waiting for all my life. She also felt this connection from the first moment on but it took us years to finally admit our feelings for each other. We were too afraid to lose our friendship, and then we were afraid of letting anyone see our affection for fear of repercussions but it simply got too strong. We had some really hard times but I wouldn't change one single...."

Though Gabrielle was sitting with her back to the door she said. "Here they come!" Moments before the door to the dining hall opened for Xena and Samantha.

One look at the blonde was enough to make Janet stand, grab Samantha by the elbow and leading her firmly towards the infirmary. "You're hurt, Sam."

"It's nothing, Janet."

"That's for me to decide. So, what did you do this time, oh one of your stupid stunts."

"Being stupid," the taller woman grinned, "and overconfident. When we came out of the forest Consort Xena did a double somersault to come down and..."

"...and you couldn't resist the temptation to follow suite. Damn stupid competitive streak."

"Yes, only I landed wrong and sort of twisted my ankle - and it wasn't about competition. I'm not stupid enough to think that I'd even come close to ever beating your consort, Queen Gabrielle." Meanwhile they had reached the infirmary, Xena and Gabrielle in tow.

"Oh, warrior mine." Gabrielle growled.

"Please, your majesty. Your consort is not responsible. She warned me that I wasn't ready to do any somersaults or double flips without her monitoring me. I wanted to show off and it backfired. Sometimes, I'm too ambitious and too reckless for my own good, just ask the good

doctor here."

"So, Doctor Fraiser, what's your diagnosis?"

"She'll live, your majesty. It's really nothing more than a sprain. On Earth I would prescribe a few days rest but here she will once again be up to par by tomorrow afternoon. - So, no tree walking and no sparring for you, Sam. Tomorrow evening I'll have another look and will probably declare you fit for duty."

"Yes, ma'am."

Chapter Five: Revelations

Samantha was just about to shut down the computer where she had spent the afternoon studying the schematics for an advanced naqada reactor when a knock brought her out of her musings. Over the last couple of days she even had learned to keep a semblance of regular hours. A rather anxious and very nervous looking Lieutenant Jessica Morgan came in. She was one of the two historians of her team, assigned to study Amazon history at the central library.

"Major, I know it's probably inconvenient but I have to speak to you. It's about the queen and the consort... I don't know where to begin."

"Take a seat and calm down, lieutenant. Sit down, Jessica, this can stay off record, if you want to."

"No, it cannot, not in the long run. But perhaps it can for now. You know that I have been working on translating the texts about early Amazon history on Gaia, the time before the last group from Earth arrived. In one of the last documents I found a link to another one, not included in what had been given to me and I got curious. It didn't lead to just another document. It lead to a whole different section of the library, a library in its own right really, thousands of books and scrolls and data pads. It was amazing. Since I found out, four days ago, I went there whenever I got a chance and borrowed some of the texts."

"What did they say, Jessica?"

"The last group coming from Earth, their queen's name was Gabrielle and her consort was named Xena. At first I thought that name and social standing go together, that once you became queen of the Amazon Nation your name was changed to Gabrielle, like a catholic cardinal changes his name when being elected as the next pope." She fell silent.

"And?" Carter asked.

"I know it sounds crazy but now I think that the Gabrielle ruling now is one and the same as the one that came here almost two thousand years ago. They have a report on every party they ever celebrated but not one hint of a crowning ceremony or a queen's funeral pyre. I mean, yes, there were Royal naming ceremonies and funerals but not even a hint about a coronation or something similar." The woman let her words sink in.

Instead of bombarding her with thousand questions of simply declaring her a complete fool, Carter asked. "Do they know that you know?"

"I'm not sure but I think they suspect something. That's why I came to you in the first place; I would have rather spent some more time reading the most ancient scrolls. They tell of a time before the exodus, a time that Xena and Gabrielle spent travelling all over Greece, helping villagers and defeating warlords."

Carter didn't answer and the other woman studied Samantha's face. "Major Carter, Sam, I just told you that they both are more than two thousand years old, more than sixty generations. You never were one to accept something like this at face value, not without finding a scientific explanation. You should at least be surprised or incredulous. Why aren't you?"

"Why do you want to keep this off record for now? It's against the regulations and usually you are rather a stickler to the rules."

"It's hard to explain, Sam. Sometimes, when you're playing with the consort..."

"Playing?"

"Tree walking, sparring. It's what Queen Gabrielle calls it when speaking with the doc. I'm sorry."

"Well, it is a lot of fun." Samantha countered with a grin. "So, what is when I'm 'playing' with Consort Xena?"

"We talk, share our experiences. We all are fascinated by the atmosphere of study, easy going, without ambition overruling one's judgement. And though they are so far ahead of us, we never had the impression of being thought of as inadequate or primitive like the Tolans did. But there's more to it than just that. We feel comfortable here, most of us feel..."

"... at home. You trust them."

Jessica nodded.

"A week ago, when SG-1 first set foot on this planet, when I first saw Consort Xena I knew that we would be safe. It was a feeling so bone deep that I immediately suspected some sort of manipulation. At my demand Doctor Fraiser ran some additional tests on me but there was nothing wrong. Whenever I talk to the consort or the doc talks to the queen we hit some kind of roadblock. They admit that there is a secret but always tell us that it's too early for us to know the

truth. What you suspect, as illogical as it may sound, it would explain a lot. Gabrielle and Xena didn't appear to be much older than in their early respectively late twenties but their knowledge goes far beyond that, their knowledge and their wisdom."

Making a decision, the blond woman rose. "Does anyone else know?"

"Karen, Naomi, Claude, and Jennifer all have their suspicions. Jennifer probably came closest when she found an ID-code on an old data pad signed the way the consort usually does. But none of these suspicions and speculations ever found its way in our reports."

Samantha Gabriella Carter, Major of the United States Air Force, knew that she just was about to deliberately commit blank insubordination. The poster child was about to become a rebel. She remembered Colonel O'Neill's words -- shortly before he stepped through the Ring, the Stargate, she corrected herself. 'Remember, Carter, good old Earth is waiting for you.' She knew she was acting against everything she ever had held sacred: the integrity of the Forces, the chain of command, but from the bottom of her heart she knew it was the right thing to do.

"I hate to ask but is there..."

"... someone we cannot trust? No, I don't think so. Though not all of us feel at home here; we still all trust them. They're a part of our history though we never knew it. A lot of incidents in our history would have played out differently had it not been for visitors from Gaia setting them straight somehow. Claude is bustling over with stories though she probably never will be able to tell anyone outside of the SGC. Mankind isn't ready to know yet, hell, I wouldn't have been ready a couple of years ago. It will be a hard enough sell, even for General Hammond."

"You may be right. That's why we'll have to speak to the queen and the consort. It's time to get some answers. Get the team together. We'll meet at the guest palace. I'll go and get Janet."

~*~

Samantha headed for the training grounds where she found Janet facing off against Niva. The weapons' master was grinning proudly.

At first Janet had been reluctant to brush up on her hand-to-hand fighting skills. She knew they were part and parcel of being in the Air Force, just like wearing a gun from time to time but she never had been particularly ambitious in this area. It took a sparring match between Samantha and Queen Gabrielle to convince Janet that one didn't have to be as tall as an old tree to be able to hold one's own in a fight. Well, holding one's own wasn't quite right. Even before coming here and learning new moves, Samantha had been an excellent fighter, focused, fast, and strong but she hadn't been fast and strong enough to best the small queen or to even stand a chance, to be honest.

After the end of the purification rites, the first few lessons with the weapons' master had been

rather painful for Janet. She found herself lying or sitting on the hard ground more times than she cared to count - and hadn't it been for the tender, thorough, and not wholly therapeutic massages Samantha lavished on her body every evening, she would gladly have given up. But then Niva changed her teaching style, explaining the complex moves of defence and offence as if they were steps in different kinds of surgery - doing a little bit of harm to prevent much greater harm.

From this moment on, Janet learned and she proved to be a quick learner. Judging from the expression on the stoic weapons' master's face, she did more than just good. From her own lessons, every morning shortly after dawn, she knew how hard a taskmaster Niva could be.

Samantha allowed herself the luxury to spend a few minutes just watching them from behind a tree. Her eyes focused on Janet's smoothly flowing movements. Suddenly she whirled around, ducked, and only barely avoided being hit by the blunt end of a sai in the face. Another one was headed towards her chest; she jumped and kicked at it when it was only inches away from her breasts. She managed to back off a few paces and took a defensive stance, wishing fervently she had some sort of weapon at her disposition, preferably a staff.

Samantha didn't have to wait for the next attack. From an intellectual viewpoint she knew that the weapons' master had been testing her and that she had failed. She knew she would be reprimanded for losing track of her environment, and she knew she deserved it.

Twice she managed to fend Niva off. However, she had been so concentrated on the other woman's hands that she forgot to think about her own feet, she caught her foot in a root loop, and fell. The slightly shorter, stockier woman immediately was on top of her, the length of both sais left and right against her neck, threatening to cut off her breathing.

"Take Janet Fraiser as an example, open your mind, and learn, Samantha Carter. And now, tell me, what did you do wrong?"

The prone woman closed her eyes, replaying the last couple of minutes in her mind's eye and then answered. "I twice focused on one point only instead of seeing the whole picture, Master Niva."

"Tomorrow, we'll start a candlemark earlier, perhaps the pre-dawn air will help you learn this lesson." Samantha only nodded. "And now tell me why you so rudely interrupted your partner's lesson?"

'Partner', it sounded good but it couldn't be. It took all her strength of mind not to stutter her answer. "A situation has come up that requires Major Fraiser's presence. We also need to speak to the queen and the consort. It's important."

Surprisingly Niva didn't ask any questions but simply told them that the queen was in a council session to finalise the preparation for the impending arrival of the other village and planet Regents who were due to arrive the following day to have a meeting and celebrate the summer solstice.

"You'll find Consort Xena at the smithy. It's just a couple of candledrops' walk to the west of the labs. You can't miss it; just follow your ears and your noses. - Janet Fraiser, you can come out now. I'm not going to hurt the young warrior; you can let go of that stick you picked up twenty paces ago. I'll let you go for today, you did well."

~*~

Compared to everything else they had seen on this planet where ancient, almost primitive settings were usually nothing more than a camouflage for the most advanced technology, the big, smouldering fire, the enormous pair of bellows, and the anvil not only were outdated, they appeared like something transplanted from another world, elemental and untamed. In a way it was fitting.

Especially when observing the woman working the anvil. Xena was wearing a pair of tight leather trousers and some sort of tank top, obscured by a heavy leather apron shielding her from the sparks. Her usually unobtrusive muscles never had been as prominent before. In front of Samantha's eyes flashed the image of her wearing a short leather dress, brass armour, and a broad sword slung at her back. She saw her unsheathing the weapon and wielding it with ease and joy. Xena's hammer hit the red glowing metal and the sound snapped the blonde back to reality.

Two hand signals told her that her presence had been noted and that Xena would be there in a few candledrops.

As had become natural over the course of the last few days Samantha and Janet drifted close together like magnetised metal bits whenever they thought themselves unobserved. They hadn't gone further, yet, but both of them were honest enough to admit to themselves that even thinking of ever losing this closeness would hurt more than they thought they could stand. They knew they had to keep it out of Cheyenne Mountain but to completely miss out on it was simply unimaginable and completely out of question. They didn't break their embrace when Xena left the smithy, wiping sweat and grime away with a piece of cloth.

"It's time to give us a few answers, your highness. We have to decide what to put in our reports to General Hammond."

"Samantha Carter, you just lost me a bet. I was sure it would take you all until after the Great Council and the festival to find out or even get suspicious. Once again Gabrielle was right. I'll take a shower and get her. We'll meet at the guest palace a candlemark from now."

~*~

When Carter and Fraiser entered the patio, the other members of the away team were clustered on and around two benches in the far corner, obviously in the middle of a vivid argument.

"... we can't keep something this important from General Hammond."

"We can't tell anyone on Earth, Karen. It would bring Kinsey, his NID buddies and Hades knows whom else breathing down our necks. Sabrina told me two days ago they are already putting a lot of pressure on the general. They want him to wrangle more weapons' technology out of the Amazons. If they had even an inkling of an idea of what we suspect they would try anything to get their hands on them. That's something we can't allow. There's no telling what they'd try to do." Lieutenant Hailey angrily retorted.

"Calm down, all of you." Carter bellowed and every single one of them snapped to attention. "As you were, folks. The point is: you are both right. Yes, General Hammond has to know, sooner or later; and yes, it has the potential to bring a whole load of trouble to the SGC and the Amazons. But at the moment all we have are impressions, ideas, and suspicions."

"During the first two or three days of our stay here, I heard more than once that we were not ready to know the truth. I think Queen Gabrielle wanted us to first get to know her people and their way of life before getting us in a situation that could well jeopardise all our careers. Rationally I know that they are true and well capable of taking care of themselves but I also feel the need to protect them. Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena will be here shortly. I suggest, we listen to them and then we'll decide."

~*~

A few minutes later Aria led them to the room where the queen had met with SG-1 for the first time. The cushions still were there, and a few low tables with food and drink scattered about. They all found a place to sit, Samantha next to Janet, leaving the two biggest and softest cushions for the Royal couple. The young Amazon had told them to eat because it would probably be some time before the queen could get out of the council session, and so they did. Talking about their day, about what they had learned or discovered. Samantha soon found herself in a conversation with Hailey and Aria discussing the different advantages of sais over chobos, and Janet soon was speaking about the possibility to implement a new procedure for post mission physicals based on the machinery used by the Amazons. When Xena and Gabrielle arrived a few minutes after sunset everyone fell silent.

"Thank you for entertaining our guests, Aria. You are dismissed." Xena ordered while she sat down to the right and slightly behind the blonde Queen.

The young woman reluctantly left and closed the door. "Your majesty," Samantha said with a small bow, "I apologise for the strain we put on your valuable time and for taking you away from the preparations for the Great Council."

"Everything is squared away, Samantha Carter, there's no need to apologise. I understand you have some questions?"

"Yes, your majesty. But I don't really know where to begin. Some of us, most of us think that you, your majesty, and your venerable Consort are immortal but we don't understand how or why. None of us think that you mean any harm to us or Earth but..."

"I understand, Samantha. Make yourself comfortable, all of you. I'll tell you a story, a true story and though I will not be able to go into too many details it still will be a long one." Xena handed her Queen a mug of apple juice. "Thank you, love." Her right hand touched the ravenhead's cheek. "Return to the smithy, my warrior. I'll be all right."

Xena's eyes were almost pathetically grateful, Samantha thought, but she didn't act on it. She kissed the queen's palm and slid behind her, whispering in her left ear, giving the young major the opportunity to read her lips.

"My place is at your side, my love, always has been, always will be."

Samantha averted her eyes with a slight blush, so she didn't see the queen turning her head and planting a soft kiss on the taller woman's cheek. Xena drew her closer and the smaller woman snuggled into her arms. When Samantha once again looked up for the fraction of a heartbeat she thought that there was a golden shine enveloping them.

"From the initial SG-1-report and the scrolls you had access to you already know that Artemis started to evacuate women from Earth about two thousand and five hundred years before your current calendar. She sent a friend with them but she stayed behind to prepare another group. When they were ready, Athena's Ring, the Stargate was gone, hidden by Ra's servants still on earth. They had no choice but to stay on Earth, and thus started the Amazon Nation.

"In Ancient Greece and Asia they became a considerable military and moral force. About a thousand years later, Artemis was captured by Ares and a coalition of other minor Goa'uld, and the Amazons used to her presence and advice fell prey to internal squabbles and external enemies. Athena, the host of Artemis, escaped. She and her symbiote had been badly injured by the torture the Olympians, that's what her captors called themselves, had inflicted on her to get access to the knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients. Athena was one of them and knew all their secrets.

"It took her over a hundred years to heal from all her injuries, and even then she wasn't strong enough to overthrow the Olympians or annihilate their influence on the humans. Untypical for the Goa'uld as you know them, the Olympians had an agreement. They vowed never to attack each other and that every one of them should stick to a chosen field of influence, so Ares became the God of War, Hera the Goddess of the Hearth and Marriage, Aphrodite the Goddess of Love and so on. So Artemis/Athena did the only thing she could think of: she joined them to protect what was left of the Amazons: Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt and the Moon, protector of the Amazons.

And the knowledge of the Ancients Athena possessed practically predestined her to be seen as the Goddess of Wisdom though the original Olympians never accepted her in that role. They

tolerated her because the Humans believed in her but nothing more."

Gabrielle took a deep breath and Xena closed her arms more firmly around her wife's waist.

"One day, centuries later, a child was born to an innkeeper in a little out-of-the-way village in Greece. Her childhood was rather ordinary, except that she didn't have any interest in the things other girls did. She preferred to play with her younger and her older brother -- hide and seek, hero and warlord. Her name was Xena."

The tall warrior could feel the eyes of nearly everyone in the room turning towards her but her own gaze stayed unfocused, her mind busy with warding off still hurtful memories.

"She was stronger and faster and smarter than anyone else her age, her energy seemed to be inexhaustible, and she had a restless curiosity no teacher ever was able to fully satisfy. Soon she drew the attention of the Olympians who were always looking for new servants and hosts. They came to her in dreams, they came disguised as merchants, travelling bards, mercenaries, but she was happy with her life and didn't want to change anything.

"Their vow, their agreement didn't allow them to influence her in any other way; they only were allowed to claim a mortal another one of them also was interested in with the mortal's agreement. It must have been damned inconvenient for them but it worked and it kept their alliance alive for a long time. When Xena turned fifteen, one of the warlords scourging the Greek countryside attacked her village. She and her younger brother, Lyceus, organised a defence and really succeeded in pushing the enemy back - but they had to pay a high price.

"When Xena held the bleeding body of her younger brother in her arms something inside of her also died and for the first time she began to listen to the voice in her dreams, in her head.

"Ares promised her revenge, he promised her a way to keep the rest of her family and her village safe. He took her under his protection, amplifying her natural skills and also twisting them to fit his own needs. She soaked up everything like a dry sponge. She became Ares' Chosen and in his name conquered half of Greece.

"At the head of her army she committed every crime imaginable, but there was one thing she never condoned: rape. Every soldier in her army, from the kitchen help to her second in command knew that they would have to pay with their lives and that their deaths wouldn't be fast or painless.

"One day they came to a small village that refused to pay them tribute. Xena gave them an ultimatum until the next morning but her second in command a brutal guy named Darphus decided that he was weary of waiting and ordered to kill everyone alive, every man, woman, and child, every horse, dog, cat, sheep, and chicken. Xena was on a scouting mission and when she returned the village was burning. She killed two of her men in the midst of raping a young girl and saved the life of a baby. She tried to get her men back in line but they had tasted blood and they wanted more. Darphus promised them more, a lot more.

"He refused to fight her one on one. He knew he never would stand a chance. They made her run the gauntlet instead. Xena did what no one ever did before: she survived. She survived to exact revenge on Darphus, to stop her men who had gone from soldiers to rapists and murderers in the blink of an eye; and she survived to get the baby boy she had saved out of harm's way. She quickly found allies, among them the father of the boy, and together they stopped Darphus once and for all. Two thirds of her men were dead and the survivors were ready to once again swear fealty to her but she simply walked away. Ares had finally lost his hold on her soul and her real personality began to reassert itself."

Gabrielle took another sip of her juice and looked into the expectant eyes of her public. Some of them spoke of disbelief, some of doubt, some of rapt fascination; there also was compassion, bewilderment, and pity. Samantha and Janet maintained a closely guarded expression, keeping their emotions even from showing in their eyes. But the blond ruler of the Amazons still saw how deeply they were affected by her words, her story: they were holding hands, openly, for everyone to see.

"Xena walked away from her life as a warlord. She wanted to go back to Amphipolis, to her mother and to her brother's grave. On her way home, she passed a village named Poteideia and saved the village girls from a bunch of slavers. One of the girls was so impressed by her actions, standing up against ten men, unarmed, and so mesmerised by her blue eyes that she left her father's house in the middle of the night and followed the stranger. Her name was Gabrielle and she never before had been out of her village. She was afraid, terrified by every sound she heard, but she also was sure that this was what she was meant to do.

"Two days later she arrived at Amphipolis. The village seemed deserted but there were loud angry voices coming from the inn. Xena's weapons were on a table in front of her. The villagers stood a few paces away and were throwing stones at her but she didn't try to duck, didn't try to fend them off. Obviously almost fifteen years of absence hadn't made Xena more popular in her hometown. They didn't want to remember that it had been her leadership that had enabled them to defeat the warlord Cortese. They only remembered that their sons and husbands and fathers had died this day.

"Gabrielle, at first, didn't know what to do. She only knew that this had to be stopped. So, she stepped forward, coming between the tall warrior and her aggressors and succeeded in talking them out of killing her. The same day Xena repaid the stoning attempt by defeating a warlord in single combat, a staff battle, and thus once again kept her home village safe.

"From this day on, Xena and Gabrielle stayed together. They travelled all over Greece; the tall warrior was trying to atone for her dark past by defeating warlords, fighting against thieves, risking her life and sometimes just getting a frightened kitten out of a tree - fighting darkness and evil wherever they reared their ugly heads. They even found a name for what they were doing: fighting for the Greater Good. The blond village girl at first only tagged along, driving Xena crazy with her endless chatter and her countless questions but also giving the warrior something else to think about than the shadows of her past.

"Gabrielle began to tell stories about their adventures, about Xena's change from warlord to hero.

One of these adventures led them to an Amazon village in Thessaly. They picked up a heavily armed guard but their bows and crossbows and swords were impotent against the ambush they walked into, against the cloud of arrows descending down on them, arrows with the markings of the Centaurs, a horselike race of warriors with a human torso and head and long time enemy of the Amazons. One of these arrows killed Terreis, the leader of their guards. Before she died she gave her right of caste to Gabrielle who had unsuccessfully tried to save her, to shield her from the arrows. Terreis was the sister of Melosa, and Melosa was the queen of the Amazons. So, from this moment on Gabrielle was an Amazon Princess.

"Melosa and her tribe wanted to avenge Terreis' death by attacking and killing the Centaurs, and Gabrielle should go with them, side by side with the queen. Xena and Ephiny, Terreis' best friend, found proof that someone else had been behind the ambush; a sneaky warlord who wanted Amazons and Centaurs to fight and kill each other, ready to pick up and profit from the pieces when it was over, and claim their land as his own. Instead Amazons and Centaurs became allies.

"Gabrielle, the newly appointed princess and heir to the queen's mask, could have stayed with the Amazons, some even saw it as her duty to do so but Melosa allowed her to stay with Xena instead. Xena taught her how to use a staff; she protected her and saved her life time and again because Gabrielle had an unparalleled propensity for getting into trouble. The friendship they had forged over the seasons gradually changed to something deeper, something neither of them wanted to admit to - and then Xena died."

The Queen felt the grip around her waist tighten slightly. This part of the story was one of the reasons Xena had refused to leave her, regardless of how many years had passed, regardless of the pain that came later and the many pleasures and joys to balance the dark times, remembering still hurt - and fortunately it wasn't often that she had to speak about it.

The looks of incredulity and pity had disappeared to be replaced by respect and awe. The faces of Janet and Samantha still were unreadable but the doctor's hold on Samantha's hand had tightened to the point of making her white-knuckled. Gabrielle closed her eyes and let the comfort of Xena's presence wash over her and enter her soul. Then she continued.

"It was a simple village, far away from the main trading routes. A band of cannibalistic primitives worshipping Hera was harassing them. They believed that eating the flesh of virgins would make them invincible and immortal. On a shortcut to Athens Xena and Gabrielle passed through the area. They intercepted the cannibals on the way to their abode, a group of women and children in tow. They managed to get them all out but Xena was hit by a log trap crashing down from a tree.

"She was seriously injured with broken ribs and internal bleeding.

"Gabrielle had taken a knife wound to the left thigh but at her request she brought Xena to a healer with the name of Niklios. His knowledge of the human body, of herbs, and the use of pressure points was unparalleled - but it wasn't enough to save Xena's life. At first Gabrielle refused to believe him. She refused to believe that the proud woman who successfully had fought

Ares' influence on her life and soul would so easily give up. When it finally sank in, she took Xena's horse Argo to bury her friend in her family's crypt in Amphipolis, just as she had promised.

"She didn't want to think any further, all she knew was that she had just lost the best part of her life and her soul. She would do her duty to her friend and then... They were living in dangerous times, there were a lot of ways to die or get killed.

"The fastest route to Amphipolis cut through Amazon territory. There, Gabrielle learned that Queen Melosa had been killed. Her adoptive daughter Velasca had offered a challenge and lost but instead of accepting her defeat she had stabbed the queen from behind. According to Amazon law she had forfeited her life and Gabrielle became next in line.

"She thought that being killed by the next power hungry Amazon coming along wouldn't be a half bad way to die, so, she accepted the queen's mask. The council decided to honour Xena by giving her a traditional Amazon funeral. Gabrielle's eyes were empty and dull when she shot the blazing arrow to set the funeral pyre aflame.

"Only a heartbeat later, she heard Xena's distinct battle cry and a tall man clad in green landed on the coffin. His name was Autolykos and he called himself the King of Thieves but he had his heart in the right place and was a good friend to both of them. Half a dozen Amazon bows immediately were trained on him. He grabbed Xena's chakram and threw it. It sliced their weapons in two and returned to his hand. Then he whistled for Argo and stole the coffin with Xena's body from right under the Amazons' noses. Only then did Gabrielle dare to hope that what he had told her earlier really had been the truth; only Xena was able to control the chakram and Argo only obeyed Xena's command. He had told her that Xena's soul now was in his body and that there was a way to save her - now she began to believe it. Xena knew where a stash of Ambrosia was hidden; it wouldn't take more than a small bite to bring her back to the living.

"Ambrosia then was also called the Food of the Gods, at the time no one knew that it was refined liquid naqada. Naqada counts among the rare elements in the universe but compared to liquid naqada it's as common as dirt - and the secret of refining it was lost even before the Goa'uld took over the gate system of the Ancients. The Ambrosia worked. Xena opened her eyes and saw the gamut of emotions crossing Gabrielle's face and silently vowed never to leave her. Little did she know that the Ambrosia not only had brought her back; it had also made her immortal."

The blonde emptied her mug in one swallow. Samantha now had both arms protectively around Janet's torso that was trembling with silent sobs. The story had been hitting too close to home for the sensitive brunette with Samantha being at the brink of death more than once and only barely making it through. Gabrielle knew it would get worse before it got better, so she decided to change her style of storytelling. Instead of lingering on details and emotions she was determined to stick to the facts though her first phrase seemed to belie her decision.

"After Xena's resurrection they became lovers, finally finding the courage to show their feelings to the other. They no longer were two separate beings but only one: soulmates, two halves of one soul, a balance of strength and weakness, wisdom and passion, power and love, darkness and

light. But at first they kept their connection to themselves. They didn't dare to let anyone know for fear of Gabrielle becoming a target for Xena's enemies. So, they once again became a target for the Goa'uld.

"It's a long story and I don't feel up to it just right now. But to explain how I also ended up immortal, there are at least some things you need to know. Xena and Gabrielle had to fight a young Goa'uld intend on ruling Earth named Dahok. He was defeated but during the fight Gabrielle jumped in a lava pit to save Xena's life. At the time, they didn't know that she had become immortal; so she did what she thought she had to do to keep her lover alive. Gabrielle was convinced that the tall warrior still had a lot to give to the world.

"Xena had thought she had lost her lover for good and she tried to join her in the after life. She even went to the Amazon Land of the Death - in vain, because Gabrielle was alive. Artemis/Athena had rescued her body from the lava pit and brought her back to life with a small piece of Ambrosia. She was back among the living but didn't know that she too had become an immortal. It took them almost two more years to find out.

"In a nutshell, that's our story. I know you still have a lot of questions but what I just told you should be sufficient for you to come to a decision." Gabrielle ended her long monologue.

"Just to be on the safe side," Xena suddenly said, "there are a few more things General Hammond certainly will want to know: Yes, we are immortals; though we can get hurt and feel pain, Gabrielle and I are unable to die. No, there's no Ambrosia left on Earth. It was destroyed before we left and there's no way to reproduce or synthesise it. We know that our existence alone makes us a prime target for every Goa'uld - who wouldn't want an immortal host. When we arrived here on Gaia, Artemis changed our body chemistry to make sure that we could not be used as hosts. Our bodies reject the symbiotes after a few days and kills them. The System Lords know that we are useless for them. Unfortunately the changes don't work with mortals.

"Let us know what you'll do. You'll find us in our hut in the village."

~*~

When the door closed behind them, the silence in the room slowly became oppressive. It had been a lot to digest. True to form, it was Samantha who first found a semblance of balance. "I'd like to hear your suggestions, ladies."

"We shouldn't have forced them to tell us. Remembering hurt both of them deeply. We should have found another way." Lieutenant Michaela Neddes, first assistant of SGC's resident psychiatrist MacKenzie - and not only in Janet's eyes better qualified to do the job than he ever will be - answered.

"Yes, I also could feel their pain but we needed to know," Janet said, still nestled in Samantha's arms. "We needed to learn how they became what they are. We had to understand that they are

not less but perhaps more human because of it. We had to understand, not only with our head and our minds but also with our hearts."

"So, what are we going to do?" Jennifer Hailey asked.

"I can only speak for myself but I'll keep any hint of their immortality out of my reports. There's always a way to say things without really saying them. - I think you all should do the same."

"The Doc is right." - "I concur with Major Fraiser." - "Good idea, Janet." and similar remarks soon filled the room.

Slowly Samantha disentangled herself from Janet and stretched to her full height, patiently waiting until everyone had quietened down. "I can't let you do this! At attention!"

Military training asserted itself and a few heartbeats later the other eleven women stood ramrod straight.

"As the commanding officer of this mission, I give you the order to keep every hint of what we learned tonight out of your reports to the SGC. I'll take full responsibility for this course of action." Seeing Janet open her mouth, the blonde major continued. "This is not up for discussion. It's an order. Dismissed!"

The women questioningly looked at each other and then quietly left the room. They just had been absolved of all responsibility when circumventing the regulations in their reports. If things blew up, Major Carter would take all the blame - and most of them felt more than only slightly uneasy at the thought but they also wouldn't dishonour her potential sacrifice by questioning her orders.

~*~

Once again the door was closed and silence reigned. "I presume you disapprove, Janet?"

The small doctor took two steps to stand in front of Samantha. Her hand went up to the blonde's cheek. "I'm not thrilled by your decision, Sam, and I think the others aren't either but it's so typically you, I knew from the beginning that it would end this way. Protecting others is in your blood; you can't help it. You always have to stand in the line of fire, shielding others if need be with your own body, always the knight in shining armour."

"Army fatigues hardly qualify as armour or shining." Samantha grumbled under her breath. "And I'm not a knight, I just..."

Further protests were silenced by a kiss. "Sam, you save the world from total destruction on a regular basis. Every man on the base would give his right arm to go on a romantic date with you. You're so brilliant it defies description," Samantha blushed, "and you're absolutely, adorably cute when you're flustered. Not to mention that you actually can work with Colonel O'Neill without

ending up killing him half the time. But it could be that I'm biased."

Samantha took her in her arms. "You know that we just blew what little we had as cover to all hell, don't you?" She kissed the smaller woman. "But when I took you in my arms I knew it was the right thing to do. I needed to touch you as much as you needed to be held. I won't regret it and I don't care about the possible fall-out."

"Sam, your career is your life. Don't throw it away, please." Janet replied while putting a modicum of distance between their upper bodies.

"I spent a lot of time thinking about this, Janet, these past few days. Whenever we wake up, wrapped around each other and I feel as safe and free as never before in my life; when I wake up from a bad dream and though still asleep yourself you're chasing the darkness away by stroking my hair and humming a lullaby. You are right, though: I made my career my life. It was the only way to fight the emptiness and loneliness that threatened to overwhelm me after my mother's death. It was the only way to fight the darkness I feel lingering in my soul.

"But then you joined the Stargate Project.

"I didn't allow myself to want more than friendship but still you slowly filled the emptiness and soon thinking about you was enough to keep the darkness at bay. Before I loved you I would have obeyed orders and simply left Cassandra in this damned compound. I only would have seen a threat to the Gate and Earth, not a frightened child that just had lost her family, her whole world. You made me feel again, and I won't deny these feelings any longer." Samantha took a deep breath. "But it's not only my career we're talking about. You have at least as much to lose. So, it's up to you. I will abide by your decision."

The heartfelt confession left the smaller woman speechless. Janet searched her friend's face for clues but the stoic mask was firmly in place - except for the eyes, there was an undercurrent of insecurity and fear she couldn't help but respond to. Samantha averted her eyes. "Sit with me for a moment, Sam." The taller woman let herself reluctantly be pulled to the ground.

"First of all, this was the most awesome confession of love I ever heard and I am humbled that you think so highly of me."

She paused for a moment, fighting the modesty induced urge to doubt her impact on Samantha's life.

"That's why I don't doubt the sincerity of your words. You were not the only one who felt cut off from her feelings. When I joined the SGC I was on the way to become a heartless bitch. - Please let me speak my mind, love. - Outside of my job, I didn't have any emotions left and even in the infirmary I was more or less just going through the motions. The light shining in your eyes made me reconsider, and the more I began to love you, the more I was able to give others.

"So, yes, I want you to be a part of my life - and as more than a friend. I want to wake up with you as often as possible and one day soon I want to make love to you. I want to study your body

with the eyes of a lover; I want to get to know every little square inch of your skin."

"But what about Cassandra? If they find out and throw us out of the forces, they could take Cassy away from you. Do you really want to risk this?"

"There's no danger of that ever happening, Sam. I cut a deal with General Hammond when I adopted Cassy. I wanted to make sure that whatever happened to the Stargate Project or to my standing within the military, she would stay with me. I wanted to make sure that she would not be pushed around unnecessarily. The general talked to the President who sent a written guarantee that no one will be allowed to take her away from me - well, unless I'll be convicted on criminal charges and last time I checked being gay isn't against the law."

"Are you really sure?"

Sam was silenced by a kiss. "Yes, my big brilliant soldier. And I intend to prove it to you as soon as possible. But first we have a job to do. It won't take long to tell them about the team's decision - and the night is still young."

~*~

They left the guest palace with Samantha's arm draped over Janet's shoulder and shortly after knocked on the door of the queen's hut. Xena opened and motioned them in. Janet lingered in the background while Samantha saluted them and said. "Your majesty, your highness, we decided to keep quiet about what you told us this evening.

"The alliance between Gaia and Earth could be compromised if certain parts of our government learn things they are not able to understand or to accept. They still have a hard enough time dealing with a few strong and independent women among their own ranks, not to talk about a whole Nation of strong women, to learn that two of them are immortal could lead them to do something ill-advised."

"Please, take a seat, Sam. You too, Janet." The Queen said. "We appreciate your effort to protect us but we were wrong to even ask you to make such a decision. Xena reminded me of the military chain of command. It would be compromised beyond recognition if we let you keep this quiet."

"We know of the risks, your majesty," Samantha answered. "That's why I ordered the others to do it. This way their careers won't be jeopardised."

Xena shot Gabrielle an 'I told you so'-glance and smirked.

"I know that there are a lot of people in your world who could become rather annoying but they are no danger to us. On the other hand, they could make a lot of trouble for all of you, and Senator Kinsey and the NID are only a few of them. Tell me, Sam, do you trust General

Hammond?"

"Yes, Gabrielle." Samantha fell silent and Xena got up to serve them a mug of tea. No one said a word but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence, giving the blonde the chance to think about the queen's question. "You are right, Gabrielle. I'll go and speak to the general. He trusted my judgement more than once even though he didn't completely understand what I had in mind. It's my turn to trust him. He will know what to do and whom to trust. I planned on doing some research on the possibility of upgrading the iris with your energy shield tomorrow. May I instead be allowed to return to Earth to speak with General Hammond?"

"Permission granted. As long as you're back for the party, Sam." The tall blonde rolled her eyes. Xena only grinned and continued. "As we speak a pad with all necessary historical and medical data is prepared, so you can prove your words. I'll give it to you after your training session. And now, there are a few other things we have to talk about. Get comfortable, this probably will take some time."

Samantha questioningly raised her left eyebrow in an almost Xena-like fashion.

"Do you trust us, Sam?"

"We wouldn't be here if we didn't, Gabrielle."

"No, Sam, I'm talking about a deeper kind of trust. Would you trust us to do what we ask even if you thought it would endanger Cassandra's or Janet's life? Please think carefully before you answer."

The tall blonde closed her eyes to block out the world and the expectant gazes around her. She then turned sideways and searched Janet's warm brown orbs. She saw love and unconditional trust, without letting her out of sight she answered.

"I don't trust easily but from the moment I saw the two of you together I knew that I could trust you. Yes, I'd even trust you with Janet's life but you're getting me really nervous here."

"I know and we're sorry, Sam, but it can't be helped. What Gabrielle told the others were the bare basics. There is a lot more to say but it simply would take too long and despite all the things you both have seen during the last few years you're not yet ready to believe what we have to say. - Bottom line is: we want you to undergo a special training while you are here, Samantha Carter, to teach you to better use your natural skills and to tap into the energy and knowledge and skills given to you by Jolinar. It will be physically and mentally taxing and you will need Janet's support, Janet's love to see you through but we feel that it's important for the future that you do it. Will you ta..."

Xena was silenced by a hand on her upper arm. "No, my love, we can't ask her to make this decision on trust alone."

Gabrielle turned her attention to the other women who now were sitting next to each other, as

close as one can get without actually sharing the other's skin.

"The things we want you to learn will do more than simply improve your skill set, your physical prowess and your intellectual abilities. It will change the way you see the world, the way you see the people around you, the way you see yourself. It will not change who you are and what you feel, though it may allow you a better access to your feelings. It will have an impact on your everyday life. - That's why you have to know more about the bigger picture, so to speak.

"Today, I told you that Artemis sent a friend to Gaia with the first set of settlers. She was more than a friend, however. They had been lovers for centuries and longer, and Athena/Artemis wanted to keep her safe during the final stages of the battle against Ra on Earth. When the Ring was lost, they were separated, Artemis was thought dead - and in her grief her lover vowed to take revenge on Ra whom she held responsible. Her..."

"Her name was Egeria, the mother of the Tok'ra."

"Yes, Janet. Her name was Egeria and she was the first Tok'ra - but there are more ways to become a Tok'ra than being created by Egeria. I'm sorry it simply would take too long to go into any detail. Egeria devoted all her time and energy to fight Ra and the other System Lords. She had a rather direct approach and wanted to destroy them one by one. Her children finally convinced her that the only way to fight the Goa'uld was to destroy them from within, to destroy them with their own weapons. Centuries passed and she was so absorbed in her task that she lost track of what was happening on this planet, with the people of her lover.

"She had given them the means for technological development, the means to protect themselves. Not as good as we do now but enough to keep the Goa'uld and others away. Unfortunately there was no spiritual power to counteract or to avoid the misuse of the technical knowledge. That's how we found them when we came here with the last remnants of the Amazon Nation. Egeria saw what her single-minded focus on revenge and hatred had inadvertently done and Artemis/Athena had a hard time to talk her out of her guilt. But whenever something went wrong with the Tok'ra or the people on Gaia she retired to Gaia's temple, seeking solitude. The last time was when Athena ascended and Artemis ceased to exist. She hasn't left the underground of the temple since. She says it hurts too much to see all the places where she had been happy with her lover."

"But you said that this happened more than three hundred years ago, Gabrielle?"

"Yes, Samantha, 324 years and five moons. She says that she will be there for us when we'll need her, when the time has come. She also told us that now she needs the time alone to calm her spirit and gather her strength. From time to time she calls for me and we talk, about the time we spent here, together - but mostly we talk about the years on Earth, the decades before we came here. Sometimes she warns us about the plans of the Goa'uld.

"Egeria's spiritual powers always have been above average; else she wouldn't have been capable of creating the Tok'ra. They wouldn't have been any different than the Goa'uld otherwise. Since Artemis left us, Egeria gave free reign to this spirituality.

"Every once in a while she can tap into the minds of the System Lords and the other Goa'uld.

"She saw that some of them are afraid of something, of someone. You probably already heard of him. He picked up where Apophis failed - but he's much older, more powerful and countless times more cunning than Apophis or even Sokar ever would have thought possible."

"Anubis!"

"Anubis, yes, Janet. Five or six thousand years ago the System Lords defeated Anubis but even then couldn't kill him. It was the first and last time that they really worked together - not just tolerating each other like they usually do. They really combined their forces to get rid of someone by whom they all felt threatened. They put his body in a small spacecraft and sent it into deep space, hoping that he would stay there forever. He's back now and more powerful than ever. The System Lords have every reason to fear him but at the moment, dealing with the Tau'ri, with Earth is not paramount in his plans. Sooner or later his priorities will change. You already did too much damage to the Goa'uld to be totally left alone, despite the agreement with the Asgard.

"However, there's no guarantee that what we want you to do will contribute to save your planet 'cause the future is still unwritten. However, we feel that aside from your personal growth, the chances for Earth - and in the long run for us - could be improved but it also could be the other way round."

Samantha took a sip of her already cooled down tea. She absentmindedly played with Janet's fingers, stroking them, caressing them, holding them gently between her own hands. "Anubis is this powerful?"

"He's not invincible and though the host's body seems to be immortal, the symbiote can be killed. The future can't be foretold." Xena answered. "It's like in a fight; once it's on a lot of unpredictable things can happen."

"Like in a baseball game. There's a set of ground rules but everything else is up to skill, chance, and luck." Samantha said, still holding on to Janet she turned her attention back to Gabrielle.

"Egeria, is she reliable?"

"Yes, she is - and she proved it more than once."

"You said this training will be mentally taxing. What exactly does this mean?"

"You will learn how to access what is left of Jolinar without any technical help. Using Goa'uld technology no longer will be a problem to you, and to a certain degree you also will have access to their genetic memory." Noting the gleam in Samantha's eyes Xena continued. "Don't get too excited, Samantha. It only will be a very limited access. And there is a down side: Jolinar has to become a part of you, almost as if she were still sharing your body but without being able to dominate it, to control it. It's not easy and you will need the stability of Janet's love but it can be

done."

"It is not only about the knowledge, Samantha. It's more about personal growth. Jolinar's memories no longer would be so hurtful and threatening, disturbing your dreams. And it could give you the chance to work through the guilt you still feel for her death."

"Why me? What makes me so special? Is it just because I once was a host to Jolinar?"

"No, Sam, but it's still too early to tell you everything. Please have some patience. And, Janet, Samantha won't be in any danger. She won't speak with Jolinar's voice or something but she will be able to communicate with her. She will come out of this even stronger and more sure of herself."

Samantha's body language told the brown-eyed doctor that she already had decided to do it. She saw it as a challenge and the soldier in her never could resist a challenge. So, she closed her eyes, tightened her grip around Samantha's fingers and finally asked. "What will we have to do, Gabrielle?"

"Xena will work with Sam and I will work with you. I will teach you how to help her. You can only be successful together because Jolinar will only be the first step. What you now feel for each other will increase tenfold. It will become difficult to conceal the changed nature of your relationship from prying eyes. That's why we want you to take your time deciding. Tell us after the party." The Queen answered.

Janet and Samantha excused themselves, and as soon as the door was closed, Gabrielle asked. "Do you think we did the right thing by not telling them?"

"We didn't have a choice, Gab, and you know this. Sam is mentally very strong but sooner or later what is left of Jolinar would have overpowered her, using her own darkness to do so. She has to learn how to control her darkness and the best way to do this is by controlling Jolinar. At the moment Sam sees this whole thing as a challenge, and she's competitive enough not to resist a challenge. Telling her means she would do it out of fear; she would become suspicious of her actions, of her thoughts, of her feelings. We didn't have a choice, my love."

"I know, Xena. It's just that I really wish we could tell her the whole truth."

"We will, as soon as she is ready to hear it."

"You're right, my warrior - and now I think you have to pay for the bet you lost."

"I'm at your command, my beloved."

"I think we'll start with a full body massage."

Chapter Six: Learning Curve

Samantha and Janet came to their room after a slow walk through a peaceful and idyllic scenery. They consciously took the long way back to the guest palace, giving Samantha the chance to think about the evening's revelations. They were holding hands, and every once in a while the brunette squeezed the bigger hand. She wouldn't have been able to explain it but a big part of her was convinced that this day somehow had changed their lives - and more than just by openly showing what they felt for each other in front of their team mates.

When they had closed the door to their quarters, Samantha finally broke the silence. "So, what do you think about this special training?"

Janet smiled at the blonde, having anticipated this question since they left the queen's hut. "If it really can help with your nightmares, it could be worth the risk - and to be honest, I'm kind of intrigued by what they told us. I like spending time with Gabrielle, and I'd really like to learn from her."

"So, we'll do it?"

"It has to be your decision, Sam. What do you want?"

"I want to make love to you, Janet Rebecca Fraiser."

"Sam, please answer my question. This is serious."

"I'm perfectly serious, Jan. Yes, we'll do it, and yes, I want to make love to you."

The sparkle in Samantha's eyes was more than the small brunette could resist. So, she stepped closer and unbuckled the belt of Samantha's trousers. She slowly and sensually slid it out of the belt loops and let it drop to the floor. The taller woman tried to pluck Janet's T-shirt out of the waistband of her BDU's but two smaller hands gripped her wrists.

"Stand at ease, my warrior, and don't move. I only see you naked when you're injured and your clothing has to be cut off. I want to savour this moment. I want to discover your body with a lover's eyes. Please, indulge me!"

"Your wish is my command, my Janet, my love. -- It's so strange to finally be able to say it out loud. The nights I spent at your house, I always dreamed of tiptoeing over to your room and just snuggling down next to you."

Janet looked up from her task of unbuttoning Sam's AF trousers with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "So, even your dreams about me are rather chaste. Should I be disappointed?"

"There's no reason for that. Taking you in my arms was only the beginning. You would wake up

after a few minutes and shrug out of your nightshirt. Your brown eyes would pin me to the bed. You'd ordered me to get out of my boxers and" She was silenced by a kiss and with a little help Janet pulled Samantha's black T-shirt over her head, leaving her in a black military issue sports bra, her nipples straining against the soft material.

Janet's hands trailed down the sides of Samantha's body, repainting the contours with tender fingertips, barely touching her but still sending tingles down her spine. The rather rough cloth of her trousers was peeled over her hips and with the same movement she got rid of the socks and slippers. Starting with Samantha's left knee she began to kiss her way upwards, pleasantly surprised by the strong scent of arousal. She then slid the breeches down and found herself facing a neatly trimmed tuft of blond hair. It was hard but she resisted the temptation and kissed her way down to the right knee.

Samantha stepped out of her underwear, got rid of her bra and pulled Janet up to stand in front of her. Their eyes held each other for endless seconds before their lips met. This time there was no gentleness, no exploring. The kiss was feral, hungry; both of them trying to put all their pent-up energy and passion in this single kiss.

When they had to come up to breathe, Samantha said with a catlike purr. "You're way overdressed, my Jan. Let me help you out of this cumbersome clothing."

"No, chance, my love. Go and get on the bed. I'll strip for you."

Janet began to sway her hips in a sensuous rhythm; this alone would have made Samantha's heart beat faster. And though Janet wished that she was wearing a long, flowing skirt instead of her functional training's attire, she made the best of it. She first pulled her T-shirt over her head, revealing a pink sports bra. She then turned around, still swaying her hips. The bra swiftly followed the shirt. Samantha's breath paused at the sight of the play of muscles the simple movement made visible. She always had thought of Janet as the soft, feminine type - but she should have known better, at least since their first encounter with Hathor. The small woman hauled the bodies of marines two and three times her weight around on an almost daily basis.

All thought fled the blonde when Janet made a half turn and began to slowly unlace her combat boots. She took her time with standing to her full five foot two inches in height. Another half turn brought her to once again face the bed. Sam's hungry eyes were all the encouragement she needed; but she stuck to her plan and kept up her slow seduction. One after the other the buttons of her trousers were opened, revealing the upper edge of pink panties. Together they landed on the floor.

She stepped out of them directly into Samantha's waiting arms. The blonde had left the bed. Only looking at Janet's beautiful body was not enough; she needed to feel her skin against her own.

"You're so beautiful, Jan. It's still dark outside but in this room the sun just rose. Looking at you, feeling your skin on mine, makes me happy. I'm at home, finally at home."

The blonde's hands were roaming all over her body and Janet closed her eyes to memorise the

feeling. She then stood on the tip of her toes and whispered in Sam's ear. "You're the one who's beautiful, my brilliant warrior. You don't know how much of a turn-on it is to feel the hard muscles under your soft skin. I also feel at home in your arms. Please, make me yours."

"Beautiful, inside and out." Sam murmured while nibbling Janet's ear, pulling her closer, and carrying her to the bed. With hands and mouth they explored each other, slowly, savouring the texture of the other woman's skin, internalising her scent. Finally, Samantha was on top, mindful to keep most of her weight on her hands and arms and off of Janet. Their hips were moving with the same sensuous rhythm the smaller woman had held while undressing. They were in perfect sync; grinding against each other, pelvis touching pelvis. They came together in an explosion of energy neither of them had ever experienced before.

Still panting, Samantha rolled on her back, pulling the brunette with her, enveloped in a strange and yet eerily familiar sense of togetherness. Minutes passed without either of them moving or talking, and then both said. "Thank you, my love."

Blue eyes found brown and they burst out laughing. Some time later, Janet had manoeuvred herself in her usual spot at Samantha's side, her head pillowed on the taller woman's shoulder, she asked. "Why did you thank me, Sammy?"

"Because for the first time in my life I understand what all this talk about sex, about making love is about. You're the first to make me feel this way and I hope you also will be the last." Samantha answered almost in a whisper.

"The first?"

"The first, my Jan. Don't get me wrong, I've had sex before, but now I know that I've never made love before. It's the most wonderful feeling. For the first time I don't feel like I have to prove something or that you'd expect me to react in a certain way. I didn't know that it could be like this."

Janet kissed the side of Samantha's breast and chuckled at the immediate reaction the almost innocent touch provoked. "Yes, Sammy, it's the most wonderful feeling." She whispered and continued her exploration of the soft skin in front of her. Her efforts were rewarded with a low moan. Her lips found an already taut nipple and she began to suckle like a hungry child. With her left knee between Samantha's thighs they once again were on their way to Cythera, paying tribute to Aphrodite.

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A couple of hours later, someone was banging on the door. They had only been asleep a few minutes. Relying on years of crisis management, they instantly were awake and Samantha remembered that she should have been at the training grounds half an hour ago. Janet sent her to the bathroom, slipped a robe over her naked body, and opened the door.

"Master Niva, please come in and have a seat. Samantha will be with us in a few minutes. We sort of overslept."

When Niva saw the piles of clothing strewn on the ground, she pretty much guessed what really had made them late. She simply couldn't pass this chance up and teased. "Would it be wrong to presume that you had a hand in Samantha Carter's sudden, uncharacteristic forgetfulness, Janet Fraiser?"

"One could see it that way, weapons' master. Actually, I most certainly did. I accept full responsibility".

"No, she doesn't." Samantha said while closing the bathroom door. "What will my punishment be, Master Niva?"

"For once, I accept extenuating circumstances, young warrior; so, I'll let it go with another extra candlemark of drilling at the end of today's session. Now, go and start with your warm-up exercises. I have to speak with the healer."

Samantha walked towards the door, but was called back by Janet who closed the distance between them and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Now, you may go." She closed the door behind her and then turned her attention towards the weapons' master. "I'm really sorry, Master Niva. Please, don't be too hard on her."

"Do not worry, healer. I remember what being in love feels like." The taller woman answered with a hint of sadness in her voice and a knowing grin on her face that made Janet blush. "But now, back to business. Consort Xena informed me that I would have to attend the whole session of the Great Council. So we will have to reschedule your training. I'll leave it to you. We can just do two sessions tomorrow or we can do it now."

"Now, please!"

"So be it. I want you at the training grounds half a candlemark after sunrise. Enough time to take a long shower and clean up the room. Don't be late."

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Five hours later, a freshly showered and very tired Major Samantha Carter stepped through Athena's Ring and onto the platform in the Gate Room of Cheyenne Mountain. Her official report didn't take long; and she easily was granted that her team should stay on longer than the initially planned two weeks. She argued that they made good progress, and that it would be counterproductive to bring in new people right now.

Shortly after the debriefing she left the base, officially to fetch a few things for Janet and herself,

which she did. Her true purpose, however, was to meet with General Hammond privately. Leaving his office she had slipped him a message. It said. 'We have to talk, Uncle George.' Followed by two eyes in a circle.

Samantha had just finished packing the worn UCLA sweat shirt Janet had asked for in the big gym bag she intended to bring back to Gaia when the general arrived. She made some coffee, and then began to tell him about Gabrielle's and Xena's immortality and the fact that Egeria was living on their planet.

George Hammond listened without interrupting. He manifested no anger, disappointment, or surprise at her decision to keep it out of her written report. In fact he seemed relieved.

"I'm glad that you told me, Sam. There was a message from the High Council of the Tok'ra, warning us about them. Doctor Jackson also has some suspicions. Perhaps, ... yes, call him and ask him to come over. He's better able to explain."

While they waited for Daniel to make the twenty minutes' drive to Janet's house, Samantha talked about Gaia and the Amazons; for once not reigning in her fascination and enthusiasm by coating it with scientific objectivity. To Hammond, it was as if a part of the carefree child she once had been, before her mother's death, had finally returned.

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A few minutes later, Daniel Jackson arrived with Teal'c and O'Neill in tow, and Samantha gave them a short version of what she just had told the general.

"Damn it! She was right all these years - and I won't be able to tell her."

"Tell whom?"

"A friend, Doctor Sabrina Levinson. She's a research assistant in Washington. She's brilliant and would be at the head of her own department by now, if not for this stupid, insane theory that she simply refused to denounce after it accidentally got published. And now -- to know that she was right."

"Danny-boy, calm down. Start at the beginning, would you? Without the rather cryptic message from the Tok'ra, I would have a hard time accepting Carter's story. I know you already know what Daniel has to say, sir, but I'd really like a chance to understand better."

"Doctor Jackson only told me about his suspicions, not how he came to develop them. I'd also like to hear it, colonel." The general answered.

"The message the Tok'ra sent said that the High Queen of the Amazon Nation and her Consort are, and I quote, 'older than most, cunning, and quick to stick their fingers where they're not

wanted'. End quote. It was their names that finally triggered my memory. When I was working with Professor Jordan, Sabrina was one of his junior assistants. She has an innate understanding of languages, Egyptian, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic... You may think that I am good with languages but compared to her I'm nothing but an illiterate babe in the woods. Even the most ancient dialects are no problem for her."

"She would be a worthy candidate for the Stargate Project, Daniel Jackson." Teal'c said.

"Yes, she probably would, but she hates the military and, as far as I know, never would work within our command structure. - Anyway. She wrote a highly-applauded thesis about the trading routes between Egypt and Greece in the centuries before the Roman occupation. But her real interest lay somewhere else. Her grandmother died when she was still in high school. Among the things she left her was a diary and three old scrolls, story scrolls in Ancient Greek. These scrolls are the reason why she made a double major in Archaeology and Linguistics.

"They told about the adventures of a great warrior woman named Xena and her companion Gabrielle. She tried to prove that they really had existed; it was like an obsession. She found their names in the ruins of an Artemis' temple in Thessaly, hints in Britannia, and even in China. She even was able to find two more scrolls. One of them told how Cecrops, the mariner cursed by Poseidon, was set free and the other one was about a trip to India, and how the demon, Indrajit was defeated by Xena. She didn't have the intention to go public but it somehow happened and she refused to distance herself from her theories. She still does.

"Though the authenticity of the scrolls couldn't be denied, no one wanted to see more in these scrolls than products of an overactive imagination. It ruined her reputation but she never gave up.

"We spoke at Professor Jordan's funeral, before this whole mess with Osiris happened. She told me that she had found three more of the scrolls, one of them telling a strange story of this Xena living as a slave among the Amazons. She is certain that they are authentic, but she also harbours a great deal of bitterness."

Daniel now looked at the general. "I know that this has the potential to endanger the Stargate Program but if there is one thing in this world I trust it's her integrity and reliability.

"I really would love to tell her that she was right the whole time. - Sam, do you think you could speak with the queen on her behalf?"

"I'll try Daniel, but I can't make any promises. - If you all don't mind. I have to get back. I promised not to be late for the party."

"Another party? What are you doing out there, working or enjoying yourself?" O'Neill grumbled.

"Oh we're working hard, as our reports should prove abundantly, but the Amazons as a rule don't forget to also enjoy the other side of life. They know how to have a good time - and in their eyes this opportunity is just too good to pass up on. Today the Regents of the other villages on Gaia and from the other planets belonging to the Amazon Nation are holding their annual meeting.

They call it the High Council; they are talking the whole day and in the evening they relax. Hey, even I enjoyed myself last week and that's no small feat. Besides, our hosts would be disappointed were we not to attend, sir."

"This is so unfair," Jack whined.

"That's enough, Colonel O'Neill." George Hammond's deep voice retorted sharply. "Back to business. Major Carter!" Samantha immediately stood at attention. "Let Queen Gabrielle know that the story you told me and the data she gave to you will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Only the President himself will be informed. There will be no trace of it in Area 51 or any other database. And now, go, call Cassandra before you return."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. - Concerning Cassy, Colonel O'Neill. She will stay at summer camp for another two weeks. With the general having approved of a prolongation of our stay, Doctor Fraiser will not be back in time. Could you take her on a fishing trip or something 'til the end of the holidays? She would be thrilled to spend some time with you."

"With Doctor Jackson doing the cooking and Teal'c actually catching some fish, it could turn into a good trip for the girl." Hammond said with a smirk. "Consider yourself on recruiting duty, O'Neill."

"General, I'm hurt. You have to know I'm a magician with a grill." O'Neill answered, sporting a grin himself. "Yes, Carter, I'll do it. It will be fun to have the little sprout for a few days."

'Little sprout!' Cassandra would have a major fit had she heard him say that. She was quickly becoming a hormone-driven, typical American teen; the Colonel would have his hands full with her. She was always ready to break the rules, test her boundaries, and drive her parents crazy with worry and doubt. No one would have thought that she had been born on an alien planet and to a totally different social structure. Samantha knew it wasn't exactly fair but instead of dampening Jack's enthusiasm with a dose of reality she simply said.

"I'm sure you all will have a lot of fun, sir. - And now let me call and break the news to her. See you at the base in about an hour."

~*~

Samantha made it back in time for the big party, but Janet and she only stayed as long as absolutely necessary to be polite and then retired to their room where they spent the night exploring each other's body and making love.

The next day was a day of holiday. It was meant to give the regents the opportunity to talk privately or to finalise a trading agreement or other deal. In reality most of the Amazons used at least the first part of the day to nurse their hangovers. Samantha and Janet had explicit orders to enjoy this day off and to stay out of shouting range of the infirmary and the laboratories. So,

Samantha led her new lover to a secluded spot a candlemark's walk to the North of Athena's Ring, an hour North of the Stargate, she corrected herself - in both cases far away from grumpy Amazons with a killer headache and the temptations of work.

According to Xena it was one of the most romantic sites on the whole planet and perfectly suited to 'celebrate the joining of a soul and the union of two bodies'. That's what the consort had called it but Samantha had been too busy with blushing to really think about her words.

The consort had been right. They had followed a sun-speckled path through the forest; in deference to Janet's aversion against heights they took the long way and stayed on the ground. It was basically the same setting as the spot where the four women had had their picnic about a week, and in Samantha's eyes another darker life ago, with the added bonus of a thirty foot waterfall and a miniature beach with fine white sand. They were mesmerised by the tiny rainbows the cascading water let dance on its surface, and for a long time they simply stood still and soaked up the peaceful atmosphere surrounding them.

The spell was broken by a hunting hawk's cry; and at first Samantha thought that it was Xena announcing her arrival, having learned that the hawk was the birdcall used to identify the consort, but then she saw the animal in question circling high above their heads. She studied the elegant creature for a long moment, brought back to more interesting things by Janet intensifying her hold around her waist and snuggling closer in her embrace. Her brown eyes were twinkling when Samantha looked down to an open invitation the blonde was unable and unwilling to resist.

They spent the day making love on the beach, with and without the benefit of a blanket. Both vowed they never again would do something this stupid, though the task of removing the grains of sand from the other's skin and from places sand really wasn't meant to be in the nearby pond turned out to be a very pleasurable experience. They slept a little and ate. They made love in the water with Janet clinging to Samantha's taller frame, and they made love standing under the waterfall. They let their bodies do all the talking, and basked in the ever-growing feeling of belonging together.

When afternoon turned into evening, they regretfully returned to the guest palace to keep their dinner date with the other members of the research team. They had to tell them that Samantha would be out of reach for the next three days. They still hadn't decided if they should tell them the truth, but when Samantha saw their expectant faces she found that they deserved to know as much of the real reasons for her training with the consort as she was able to communicate. The others seemed to be content with her explanation.

She still couldn't shake off the feeling that there was more to the special training and getting in contact with Jolinar than the queen and Xena had been willing to tell. And though Gabrielle only this morning, before their picnic, had tried to give her a clearer picture of what would happen; it still boiled down to one simple question: trust. Did she trust both of them enough to do what was asked of her without really understanding why?

For the soldier in her, it should have been very simple. She only had to accept Xena and Gabrielle as her commanding officers - and following orders was something she was well

accustomed to do. It would be easy to follow their orders, very easy but the soldier in her always had been at war with the scientist who wanted to know the why and how of an order, who wanted to know the reasoning behind it - and over the years this part of her had been getting stronger and stronger.

Before Janet joined the Stargate Project Samantha never had acted on her feelings alone, but now she felt it was the right thing to do - not only regarding this training's schedule, but also her relationship with Janet. It still was slightly disconcerting for her not to question her emotions but instead to comfortably rely on them.

~*~

"Let's go for a walk, Janet Fraiser!"

The tone of the queen's voice left no doubt that it wasn't a question or an invitation but an order. And Janet knew why - and she also didn't miss the almost pathetically grateful expressions of some of the infirmary staff. She had been prickly and on the edge since Samantha had left with Xena that morning. The rational part of her mind knew that her lover was in no physical danger, and she also was well aware that before the end of the first day she would be a nervous wreck if she kept this level of tension up.

They walked in silence and finally came to the queen's house in the forest where they sat on the comfortable chairs on the back porch. "I'm sorry, I lost my temper, Queen Gabrielle."

"It's understandable, Janet. They all know why you're on the edge. It's all right."

"But I'm a doctor. I should have more control." The brunette answered.

"I have news for you, doc," Gabrielle answered with a smile, "being a healer, a doctor, doesn't make you any less human, my friend. In fact being human is what makes you such a good healer." The brown eyed woman blushed slightly.

"Healer, I like the word. The first few times Master Niva used it I thought she wanted to make fun of me. A healer is so much more than a doctor, someone who not only cares for the body but also for the souls of their patients - No, I don't think, I'm a healer, Gabrielle."

"A healer knows that there has to be a balance between the body and the soul. You care for your patients, Janet. You never forget that they are human; you respect their feelings and their fears. You never let them wake up alone in the infirmary not knowing what is going on. You are a healer - but you also are a woman in love, worrying about your beloved-one. Don't disregard your feelings."

"Rationally, I know, your Consort will take good care of her, but..." There was a long period of silence.

"Let's try something. Do you trust me, Janet?" The other woman nodded. "Do you see the mobile at the other end of the porch?" Janet once again nodded. "Look at it, closely, as closely as you can. Nothing in the world exists but this mobile and my voice. Breathe, in and out, in and out. See the mobile sparkling in the sun. See how it's slowly turning. Breathe in and out. Look at the mobile. In and slowly out. Your eyelids are starting to drop. Don't fight it. Continue to breathe, slowly. There's darkness surrounding you, but very far away there's a tiny point of light. Breathe. The light slowly gets bigger, in rhythm with your breathing. In and out. It gets bigger as if you were walking towards it. Concentrate on the light. That's all that counts. Concentrate on the light. My voice is fading away. Concentrate on the light. It's getting closer and closer."

Gabrielle fell silent. Janet no longer needed her guidance.

Some time later brown eyes reopened and a happy smile graced her face. "Thank you, Gabrielle. Now, I know that she is all right. - How did you do it?"

"You did it, Janet. I only showed you the way, that's all."

"I saw Sam. Sam was the light. I could feel her love for me. I knew what she was feeling. But I still don't understand."

"It's the most simple and the most amazing thing all in one. - You feel her love for you because she is a part of you, part of what and who you are. She is the light in your darkness, just as you are the light in hers."

"It's that story you told: one soul in two bodies. What Xena said to Sam, celebrate the joining of a soul." Gabrielle didn't answer but she also didn't deny the other woman's words. "It makes sense, in a weird sort of way. Sam and I felt drawn to each other almost from the beginning. I never had a best friend before, but Sam and I, we became friends almost from the first moment. I know when she enters a room without even having to look. Yes, it makes sense. She completes me. We're soulmates. Wow!"

"Yeah, wow! This is only the beginning. Soon, you will have no need to close your eyes to know what Samantha is feeling and in time she will know what you are feeling. It is a great gift, but it also can be a curse. You not only will feel positive emotions but all emotions. And if one of you is in turmoil, if you are angry with each other, it will be hell. There's nothing more hurtful than this; believe me, I know."

"You knew about us from the beginning, Xena and you, right?"

"We suspected from the first mission report we read about the two of you, about P3X-759, what Doctor Jackson called 'the Broca divide'. Don't be alarmed; the signs were too subtle for your superiors to see and interpret correctly. We know about your strange regulations.

"It was more what was not in the report that let us know, well at least suspect. Janet, you were in Samantha's cell for more than five minutes before she was hurt by a new arrival. She didn't harm

you in any way; she didn't see you as an intruder in her territory like the other woman was."

"You're right, she didn't attack me. She was gentle and caring before the SF's brought in this ensign. I could feel that woman's eyes on me and Sam shielded me with her body and disabled her, not without being hurt herself in the process.

"Put like that," the small doctor continued, "Sam only was trying to protect me when she attacked the other female.

"Oh god, I never before thought of it this way. It should have been so obvious, even this early. I could kick myself for all the precious time we lost."

"Hindsight, Janet! Hindsight always 20:20, but that's not what this is about. You have two lifetimes to find out what you want, yours and Samantha's.

"We knew, since we first saw you together, but you had to find out on your own. It's not something that can be forced. Your souls always will be calling to each other. Letting them meld together has to be a conscious decision.

"I was fascinated by Xena the first moment I saw her, but it took us more than two years before we acknowledged our mutual feelings."

"You said that Sam 'in time' will be able to feel my emotions. Why only then? Why doesn't she react to our connection as I do?"

"She will. She just needs more time. - Samantha is a very complex woman. After her mother's death, her father didn't have the slightest idea how to raise a girl, so, he brought her up as a soldier. A soldier never cries, a soldier never shows fear, a soldier never admits to pain, a soldier always obeys orders - and Samantha became a very good soldier. But she's so much more. She could easily combine being a soldier and being a brilliant scientist, but that's not all there is to her. She had her feelings locked up for such a long time; it's hard for her, very hard."

"And having Jolinar's memories to deal with didn't make it any easier, I suppose."

"Yes, Janet. That's where you come in."

"I don't understand." The doctor answered, but her voice clearly betrayed how uneasy she still felt about the whole incident. "Jolinar let Samantha go because she had no other choice."

"No, Janet, you should know better. Jolinar consciously yielded to the Ashrak's torture to save Samantha; only half a minute later and Anyway, it was a conscious act. If she hadn't let her go, Samantha would be dead by now. - It's hard to explain, Janet.

"On the rare occasions a symbiote leaves its host voluntarily the host at the most can remember its time together with the symbiote but he or she has no recollection of the symbiote's life prior to the joining or of the symbiote's genetic knowledge."

"Are you trying to tell me that Sam should not be able to access Jolinar's memories, Gabrielle?" Janet asked.

"We know of cases like Sam's, it happens every once in a while but it needs a conscious effort of the part of the symbiote. We can only speculate why Jolinar gave Sam her memories. She only might have been afraid to completely let go of life. She also might have wanted to leave Sam with a gift. We'll probably never know." Gabrielle said.

"A gift? It does not look like a gift to me. Jolinar's memories are giving her nightmares," Janet objected.

"I know, Janet, but it's still a possibility. Until now, Samantha has tried to control Jolinar by ignoring her as best as she could. She has her tucked away in a dark part of her mind - hoping she simply would disappear. But it's not as easy as that

"All Xena can do in these three days is to open the door, but it will be up to Samantha to decide what to do with these new possibilities. She can try to return to the way it was before. She can try to only use the factual knowledge Jolinar left behind. She can try to accept Jolinar as an integral part of her own soul, relying on her as one would upon a friend. She can try to fuse Jolinar's shadow with her own mind.

"It cannot be done in one step or two. It's a rather slow process. And it will be your job to give her the strength to make the right decision. You will be her guiding spirit, her beacon of light."

"How? How can I guide her when I don't have the slightest idea which of these options would be the best of her?"

"That's not the question. You will guide her by giving her strength. You will guide her with your belief in her, with your trust in her. You will guide her with your love - but whatever happens, it still will have to be her decision, and hers alone.

"As for the how! - That's why we are here. That's what I already have started to teach you. It's hard to explain but easier to do."

~*~

There was a faint knock on one of the support beams of the porch's ceiling. Gabrielle turned her attention to the young Amazon standing on the steps and fidgeting nervously.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, your majesty. The record keeper sent me. She wants to archive this week's disciplinarian report."

"Oh, yes. Thanks for reminding me. I promised to see to it this morning. It's on my desk in the

study, go and get it for me, please. I'll have a quick look; then you can take it to your mistress."

The girl nodded, disappeared into the house, and was back mere heartbeats later. She knelt in front of the queen and presented her with a short scroll.

"Sit down. This will take a few candledrops."

"If you don't mind, my Queen, I'd prefer to stand." The young woman said quietly.

Gabrielle studied her for a moment and asked. "Will I find your name in there, Hilaria?"

The girl blushed and stammered. "Yes, my queen."

The blonde immortal read. "Only five offences on the whole planet. That's not bad. - Tell me, Hilaria, what made your mistress triple the usual sentence for disrespect?"

The young woman's blush deepened; her voice was barely audible when she answered. "I made out with my girlfriend instead of working. It got a bit heated and we somehow crashed against one of the scroll cases and it toppled over, spilling its content on the floor. I deserved it, your majesty. I volunteered for double shifts to make it up to Mistress Raina."

"Have the cane marks been treated?"

"Yes, your majesty. The record keeper escorted me herself to the infirmary."

"Have you been forgiven, Hilaria?"

"Yes, my queen, and I promised that I will keep my private life out of the archives from now on."

"That's good to hear. Do you like working with the record keeper? Raina can be very demanding."

"At first I didn't. I thought it was dull and boring but then I began to listen to what Mistress Raina was telling me. I began to learn things about our traditions and our history I never would have thought possible. I think of staying on after the end of my community service, my queen. Raina said that she needs an apprentice." The young woman said softly. "My mother will be furious but I'm prepared to stand her wrath."

"Your mother is a very proud warrior but I'm sure that she will approve of your heart's decision, Hilaria. Niva didn't follow in her own mother's footsteps, so she can't expect it of you. I'm here if you need someone to lend you a willing ear."

"Thank you, my queen." She answered, bowed deeply, and disappeared between the tree trunks.

"Community service, Gabrielle?"

"Oh yes, we never talked about our education system. Young Amazons do community service after school and after they have finished with basic weapons' training. They work in the kitchen or the dining hall, the playpen or the infirmary, the archive; wherever help is needed. They rotate every couple of weeks and gain a better understanding of how our society works, and they get the chance to decide what they want to do with their life. With the help of the SGC spending time on Earth soon will be part and parcel of this time."

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes and then Janet said pensively. "There's something I don't understand, Gabrielle. The punishment thing, corporal punishment; I don't understand why you didn't abandon it centuries ago. It doesn't seem consistent with everything I've heard about you and everything I've seen of you. It just doesn't make any sense to me. You have the soul of a healer, a philosopher. How can you condone harming your people this way? Sam tried to tell me that it's a spiritual thing but..."

"I know how you feel, Janet, believe me. I needed a lot of time to accept it, to understand it. It's not easy to explain. When I became an Amazon Princess I slowly learned about their rules and traditions. Queen Melosa was on a journey to a neighbouring village when I first was confronted with the penal system of the Amazons. Then there was no choice between spiritual or corporal punishments. A young Amazon had been found guilty of dereliction of duty and cowardice. She had not shown up for her shift of guard duty at the outer edges of the territory to punish the woman on duty before her, her former girlfriend for cheating on her. The scouting party of a minor warlord had come upon her at the end of the double shift and the other woman had almost been killed because she had been too tired. She was to be whipped, twenty strokes with a cat-of-nine-tails; by modern standards this would be considered barbaric.

"I spoke with the girl and the weapons' master, her commanding officer. They all were convinced that it was a just punishment, and that it would be right for her to wear the marks of her shame for the rest of her life. The decision had been made before I arrived at the village. I wanted to change the sentence but Xena convinced me that there was nothing I could do without disrespecting their culture.

"I got Xena to treat her back to keep it from scarring but I still had nightmares even weeks later. In my eyes, the young Amazon had been nothing more but a child. It revived some dark memories. My father always had been the master of the house. He regularly beat us, my sister as well as my mother and me. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why I was so eager to leave the village.

"In your terms, what my father did was child abuse, and that's what I thought was happening in the Amazon village. As it turned out, I was wrong. Even then, no Amazon would ever have raised her hand against a child. I misjudged the situation. Ephiny tried to explain it but then I didn't want to understand. When I took the mask, I had resigned myself to 'their' ways; but to me it had nothing to do with me, with my life, with my character. Then, I didn't see myself as an Amazon.

"After the crucifixion, my view of the world changed. I suppose you know about our trip to India

and what we found there."

Janet hesitatingly nodded. Yes, she had heard Jessica telling stories about Xena finding the way of the warrior and Gabrielle trying to follow the path of love - but she never had taken them seriously. It seemed that once again she had been wrong.

"I killed trying to save Xena's life, and it changed my perspective. I learned the hard way that sometimes violence is needed to stop violence. You know this and you accepted it, otherwise you never would have joined the Air Force or stayed on after the first patient died in your arms."

"But there's a difference, Gabrielle, between accepting violence as a necessary evil and to condone violence as a tool to keep one's people in-line. I don't want to insult you or the Amazon Nation, Queen Gabrielle, but in my book that's dangerously close to tyranny."

"I'm not offended, Janet. It's what I said to Xena and my first Regent, Ephiny, when they tried to make me understand. In a way you're even right. The mostly unquestioned power an Amazon Queen or even a Regent has over their subjects can easily be abused and turn into tyranny. It has more than once in the past; power tends to corrupt and poison a person's soul.

"Our penal system, however, is about something else. It has a lot to do with the mindset of the Amazons as a whole, their core identity, so to speak. Over the centuries, I learned that regardless of how much their lives change and vary, of how many changes there are; there is one thing that never changed.

"Amazons are warriors at heart, even if they spend all of their adult lives working in the infirmary or the archives. From the beginning of their existence they have been warriors, but never just for the sake of fighting, a few exceptions not withstanding. They fight to defend their homes and their families. They fight to protect the innocent, the community, and the individual. That's what they all are convinced they were born to. That is what Amazon honour and Amazon justice ultimately are all about."

"So, any shortcomings would be regarded as a threat to the stability of the community as well as the individual. And because warriors are rather hands-on using corporal punishment is the easiest way for them as well as for society to regain the lost balance."

"Yes, Janet. That's how I learned to see it. There's more to it, especially considering warriors as proud and honour-bound as Master Niva, my stubborn Consort, and a certain astrophysicist. If you want to we can talk some more about this tomorrow. For now, I want you to once again conjure up the light of Samantha's soul with your inner eye. Feel free to use the mobile as your starting point. I'll get us some tea."

Janet's eyes followed the queen's graceful movement until the door to the hut closed behind her. She still had a lot of questions but for now she would have to take the queen's words at face value.

She obediently turned her attention towards the mobile though she doubted that she would

succeed without the blonde woman's help. But surprisingly it worked. - And more surprisingly Samantha was having fun, lots of fun. She and the consort probably were chasing each other through the treetops. She concentrated on the feeling, and a few heartbeats later it was as if she were taking part in whatever her lover just did. It was more than just great. It was a feeling of completeness, of fulfilling, of home - and she never wanted to lose it.

Then there was another presence in her mind; a presence clouding her view and slowly bringing her back to reality. She reluctantly opened her eyes, and found herself face to face with Gabrielle's green orbs. "Are you all right, Janet?"

"What happened? I was with Sam - and then there was a barrier between us. - Why did you do this, Gabrielle?" The small doctor asked still slightly confused.

"What's the last thing you remember, Janet?"

"I remember you telling me to try and make contact with Sam, no, you told me to search for the light of Samantha's soul in my mind."

"Yes, I did -- but that was more than three candlemarks ago. -- You were lost in Samantha's emotions. -- It can be a blessing, but also a rather confusing experience. It's very tempting, but you shouldn't be ready to experience it, yet."

"What are you talking about, Gabrielle?"

"We didn't know that your connection with Samantha was already this strong. We didn't take into account that the two of you were so intimately connected before becoming intimate. - I'm sorry!"

"Don't! -- It felt great but I'd really like an explanation. I presume that I'll need a certain level of distance to be able to help Samantha."

"Yes; I'll teach you how to maintain this distance and a few other things - but not now. It's long after lunch time, and I'm hungry. We will talk after grabbing something to eat."

The cook provided them with a leisurely late lunch. Janet never ceased to be in awe of Gabrielle's interactions with her subjects. Regardless of what they asked of her, how inane or superfluous their questions seemed to be; she answered them all with dignity, patience, and humour. It was almost like magic seeing these proud and strong women eager to please their small Queen.

They returned to the queen's hut, and Janet once again settled on the swing of the back porch. "When a soul joins its other half..."

~*~

It was more than two days later and Janet was pacing. The sun already had gone down; Samantha should have been back by now. She was getting worried, more and more every minute. Gabrielle had told her that her lover probably would be exhausted after spending two days and two nights in a sweating hut, and that otherwise she would be okay. Janet wasn't convinced.

It was one hour after sunset when the blonde finally came through the door. Janet took in her slightly slumped shoulders and the missing sparkle in her eyes - and she immediately knew that she was more mentally exhausted than physically. So, she did the only thing she could think of, she took her in her arms. Samantha didn't answer the fierce hug with one of her own; after a few minutes, however, she began to relax into the embrace and let herself be guided to the couch.

"Lie down, my love, get some rest!" Janet sat down and cradled Samantha's head and shoulders in her lap. Thanks to Gabrielle's training, she could easily feel that her lover had been wounded by the experience. She still was very tense.

The brunette began to hum while stroking Samantha's hair. She began to sing, an old lullaby she usually only used to chase one of Cassandra's nightmares away. They had been a regular occurrence in the beginning. Sam gradually relaxed and they slipped in a comfortable silence.

"I talked to her." The tall warrior said after some time. "She was so angry. She said that I would kill her bit by bit every day by ignoring her. She said she regretted giving her life for me. She was so angry, Janet, so angry." There were tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know what I was doing to her. I wanted to tell her but she didn't listen. I know how it feels to be trapped; no one should feel this way."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, baby. You only tried to protect yourself as best as you knew how. Talk to her, tell her now."

"Xena said I shouldn't risk the sweating hut on my own." Samantha knew that she was just making excuses.

And Janet didn't let her get away with it. "You don't need the sweating hut, Sam. It was only needed to establish the first contact. Just close your eyes and talk to her. I know you can do it."

"I'm afraid, Jan."

"Don't be. She's a voice in your head but she's dead now, Sammy. She is dependent on you. Setting her free was the right thing to do. However, it's only the first step. It will have been basically in vain if you don't use what she has to offer." Janet said calmly.

"Help me!" Samantha said.

"That's what I'm here for. I'll be with you the whole time, my love."

Samantha snuggled closer and obediently closed her eyes, using what Xena had taught her in the sweating hut. Janet gently rubbed the small of her back in a soothing rhythm, conveying to her a

sense of belonging and security. She then closed her own eyes and called upon the light in her own soul. Instead of melding with it, she maintained a certain distance, ready to come to her assistance whenever needed.

They spent the whole night in this position, shifting slightly every once in a while but never losing contact. Janet had to make closer contact with Samantha's soul a few times, reassuring her, calming her. A couple of hours before dawn they both drifted off to sleep.

To say that all was well from this night on would have been an exaggeration but it did go better than either, Xena or Gabrielle, had anticipated. Janet began to feel Samantha's emotions as an ongoing presence in her mind, just like some kind of background noise -- and thus knew whenever the blonde needed her. And Samantha was slowly gaining more confidence in her conversations with Jolinar's ghost who in turn was step by step getting over her accumulated animosity for the human.

Samantha still had her training sessions with the weapons' master in the hours before and just after dawn. She then worked for a few hours on acquiring new knowledge, and the afternoon and early hours of the evening were dedicated to her lessons with the consort.

Sometimes Xena only repeated and deepened what Master Niva had tried to teach her in the early morning candelmarks. Sometimes they were meditating. Sometimes they discussed wormhole physics and more convoluted technological and theoretical issues Samantha would have rejected as pointless speculations only weeks before. Sometimes Xena took her for a ride.

Samantha knew that every time they were together she learned something or had found something to think about but it never felt like lessons or training. It was more like spending time with an older friend, a friend she grew closer to every day.

Janet followed a similar schedule. She was with the queen from the early morning hours until midday, then worked with Niva to get rid of some pent-up tension and finished her workday at the infirmary. The two couples usually dined together at the queen's house in the forest or with the rest of the research team in the communal dining hall.

Chapter Seven: Negotiations

About three weeks into their mission on Gaia, Janet Fraiser was escorted to the council chamber by a very anxious looking Aria. It had been a quiet day. She had spent it with studying a couple of old medicinal scrolls and she was rather pleased with her progress. Initially she had had some problems with the ancient Greek in which they were written. And for the first time in her life she was thankful to her grandfather insisting on giving her and her brothers a classical education. She had felt a certain amount of anxiety coming through her link with Samantha only a few minutes ago but it had quickly subsided; so she felt rather relaxed and didn't expect any surprises.

The nervous energy the usually calm and easygoing younger woman put out nonetheless quickly had her worried. On their short way a number of reasons for this atypical behaviour popped up in her mind but outwardly she kept her calm.

To say that the atmosphere in the council chamber was tense would have been an understatement of vast proportions. Janet was surprised to see Samantha and even more intrigued when the taller woman immediately came over from her conversation with Xena and the queen. She visibly was worried, and before she could reach her Janet asked. "It's Cassy, isn't it? She's been hurt? What..."

Samantha's arms closed around her. She felt soft lips on her head and heard the whispered words. "Everything will be all right, my love."

Before she had a chance to further question Samantha, they both were called to the throne. Though there were tables and chairs neatly arranged in the room everybody remained standing in front of the dais where Gabrielle's simple throne was standing. Xena was in her habitual spot slightly behind the queen, one hand calmly resting on the smaller woman's shoulders. Janet had gotten to know Gabrielle well enough over the last couple of weeks to see that there definitively was something wrong, that she also was worried, really worried.

"Attention! I'll make this as short as possible. About a candlemark after midday we received word from our outpost at the moon that a cloaked al'kesh has landed on Earth. We informed Stargate Command and sent a couple of scouts to observe them. They had orders to report back every other candlemark. They missed the last two calls. We only can presume that they are dead or were taken as prisoners."

To Janet's trained ears, the small Queen had to make a real effort to keep her voice calm and steady.

"Ten candledrops ago, General Hammond informed us that Cassandra Fraiser is missing." Janet couldn't help but gasp at her words. Samantha's arms around her waist kept her reasonably calm. "She was on a hike with a small group of other children and one of the caretakers, a hike they all had done before and wanted to do again on their last day. The group apparently came under some kind of attack that left them all unconscious. When they came to, there was no sign of their aggressors, but there also was no sign of Cassandra. The al'kesj was marked with the sign of Nirrti."

Janet only needed to hear the name of this specific Goa'uld to have all her worst nightmares come alive. Gabrielle's determined voice called her back to reality.

"We have reason to believe that Nirrti is responsible for Cassandra's disappearance. She not only caused the genocide on Hanka, Cassandra's home world, and made her into a living and breathing bomb. We also know from the Tok'ra that Nirrti performed genetic tests on the population of Hanka."

This particular information caused Janet and Samantha to questioningly look at each other.

"It was a long time experiment by which she wanted to create the perfect host, a Hok'taur, someone stronger, smarter, faster, and with an almost perfect immune system.

"The Tok'ra also let us know that the System Lords didn't support her efforts. One Goa'uld would potentially become too dangerous to the others should they really succeed in creating the perfect host.

"But Nirrti never was one for playing by the rules. When she killed the inhabitants of Hanka it not only was to try to destroy the Stargate program by blowing up the Gate. That only would have been a bonus. We think that her main goal was to protect herself from the retaliation of the System Lords concerning her illegal experiments by burning the bridges, so to speak.

"General Hammond has accepted our offer to help. We will meet with SG-1 and SG-3 to get her back unharmed. All they are waiting for is us. Let's go!"

Janet found herself slightly surprised but also very relieved to learn that no one would object to her participation in this rescue mission, though she also was sure that she would have a hard time convincing General Hammond.

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Only a quarter candlemark later, the group from Gaia stepped through the Gate and into the Gate room. The group consisted of Samantha and Janet, Xena and Gabrielle, Niva and six of her best warriors. They also had a lot of equipment with them.

For once, Colonel O'Neill showed some sensitivity by by-passing the others and immediately taking Janet in a big hug. "We'll get her back, Janet, that's a promise."

"Cassandra is one of us, Janet Fraiser, and we never leave our own behind." Teal'c confirmed Jack's words in his usual confident and straight-to-the-core-of-things manner.

"General Hammond, gentlemen, I think we have work to do."

"Yes, Consort Xena, we do. The helicopter is ready and waiting. The EM-impulse generator you requested already has been loaded. We're ready to go." The bald man answered. Like all the others he was dressed in a camouflage uniform, complete with weapons and radio. If nothing else this unusual behaviour would have told Samantha and Janet more than enough about the seriousness of the situation.

They immediately were ushered to the elevators and boarded a helicopter, completely equipped with a small medical facility and an impressive range of firepower. On their half-hour flight, they were informed that SG-7, sent as reinforcement earlier this day, had just reported back. They had

found the body of one of the scouts, as well as clear evidence of a fight. Nirrti's ship was under observation from afar. Unfortunately, they had not been able to have a closer look at the ship or its crew due to some kind of force field they hadn't been able to penetrate.

While still in the air, Niva distributed small devices looking like very small PDAs to every member of the task force. The weapons' master explained. "We call them FFPs, force field penetrators. Emitting randomly changing EM-impulses they are able to let us pass through every Goa'uld created force field - and before you ask, Sam, no, they can't be used or modified to break the shields of a ha'tak or even a death glider. They're based on different technical principles. As long as the spaceships are on the ground they are vulnerable; and with the FFPs we'll use it to our advantage."

"As soon as we land, Sam and I will take point, followed closely by Colonel O'Neill, Master Teal'c, Daniel Jackson, and four of our warriors. Niva and the other fighters will take charge of the EM-generator. SG-7 and SG-3 will be our backup, together with Queen Gabrielle, Janet Fraiser, and General Hammond. - I know that's not the way you're used to do things. I know you're used to be in charge, Colonel..."

"Stop it, Consort Xena, I understand. This is the perfect opportunity to prove to our government what the Amazons are capable of doing for us. We are just along for the ride - and for the first time I feel all right with doing so. I'm looking forward to see you kicking butt." Jack answered with a crooked smile.

"You probably will have to do more than just looking, Colonel," Xena said with a smile of her own. "Nirrti may be a typical Goa'uld, arrogant, overbearing, a pain in the butt, but she's not stupid. She knows that the force field will keep the Tau'ri out, but she still will take some precautions. I'm sure that she will have at least two or three Jaffa patrols protecting the ship and she will also be prepared to take off as soon as she has what she came to get. That's what the EM-generator is for. It will not disable her engines but will make it impossible for them to take off. When we pass through the force field, their sensors will read it as an energy fluctuation. We have to be prepared for an attack."

~*~

Everything worked as planned: They all stepped through the force field and took out the patrol sent to investigate the power fluctuations. Niva and two other warriors set up the EM-generator while the others were getting ready to enter the al'kesh. Immediately after crossing the threshold two Jaffa patrols attacked and were effectively taken down. When they rounded the next corner, however, they suddenly faced one of Anubis' super soldiers. Xena and Samantha emptied the magazines of their Carter specials. O'Neill and Teal'c quickly took over but the warriors still seemed unharmed and unimpressed.

While the men were continuing their ineffective assault, the two women simultaneously reached into a pouch at their belts and dug out a Goa'uld ribbon device. They aimed for the breast plate of

the soldier without success. Ducking his return fire Samantha's next shot went off target and hit his throat, just where helmet and face mask joined the body armour. He flew through the air, propelled backwards by the bright light coming from the ribbon device. He impacted the wall and stayed there, unmoving. Two of the Amazons stayed behind to guard the super soldier, modified zats at the ready. The others continued on, towards the operations deck and the cargo bay.

The bridge was guarded by another two of Anubis' Super Soldiers but since Samantha and Xena now knew for what to air, they quickly succumbed to the same fate as their companion. The last two of the Amazon warriors were left behind to guard them while the rest of the team entered the hangar bay. From the preliminary scans the moon station had been able to make while the ship approached Earth they already knew that the ring device usually located there had been deactivated. The large room obviously was needed for something else.

Janet didn't dare to think what this could be and she desperately tried to keep her emotions in check; but just before Xena pushed the buttons to open the door she felt a wave of encouragement washing over her, coming directly from her link with Samantha. At the time she didn't know if it had been deliberate or not but nonetheless she relished the feeling. She closed her eyes to firmly store it in her memories -- but suddenly was yanked out of it by the distinctive sound of energy weapons bursting all around her.

Without giving it any conscious thought she took a defensive stance; getting up the staff she initially had found superfluous, and thus warding off a lethal hit coming from the right, aimed for her throat. Yes, she blocked them but Gabrielle knocked the two Jaffa warriors out with a few well-placed hits and sweeps.

Janet had been so intent on the things happening around her that she missed the few heartbeats it took Xena and the others to enter the next room. When she once again focused her attention forwards it took all her willpower not to freeze on the spot. -- She saw a couple of Jaffa lying on the ground, unconscious or dead. The remains of what only could have been another one of Anubis' super soldiers were lying in a far corner, torn to shreds by more than just a single blast of the ribbon device.

There was a medical examination table in the middle of the room and a whole load of other equipment similar to the things they had found on Hanka, all those seasons ago. At the time they hadn't been able to make heads or tails of it. Now Janet at least had an idea what they were designed to do and how to use most of them. The weapons of her companions were trained at a strange woman stretching a hand device in front of her as if for protection and pressing a knife to Cassandra's throat with the other hand.

"Let the girl go, Nirrti, and you have my word that we'll let you survive." Xena said calmly.

The Goa'uld answered with a sneer, the knife breaking the girl's skin slightly. A single drop of blood was slowly rolling down her pale skin. "Shut up, shol'va ka'taka. I will make no deal with the likes of you."

"Let my daughter go!" Samantha growled, the centre stone of her hand device already glowing.

"One day you will make a good host, Ta..." Teal'c who had used the distraction created by Xena and Samantha to sneak up behind her suddenly jerked the hand holding the knife away from Cassandra. The teen instinctively dropped to the floor and began to crawl towards the others.

Janet's sigh of relief was cut short by Nirrti's next movement. She dropped the knife, turned her arm in Teal'c's grasp, and threw him over her shoulder as if the six foot five giant was nothing more than a rag doll. She trained the hand device on the escaping girl but before it could hit her in the back, the Goa'uld was bowled over by a certain blonde Air Force major. For a few seconds they rolled on the ground and then suddenly disappeared.

"Niva, SG-teams, battle stations! Nirrti and Major Carter are somewhere out there. If you see them, let us know but don't interfere. Neither Carter nor the host are to be harmed. Don't interfere." Xena's voice rang through the communication units with a certain sense of urgency. She then searched Gabrielle's eyes, the queen answered with a nod, and the tall raven haired warrior left the room at a run, Teal'c and O'Neill hard on her heels.

Janet was kneeling next to Cassandra on the ground, holding her tight, and murmuring gentle, reassuring words to the frightened teen. The others left the laboratory and returned to the bridge where the two Amazon guards left behind were still training their weapons on the dead super soldiers. It was only then that Gabrielle began taking charge.

"Mari, help Doctor Fraiser with Cassandra. Torana, check the computer to find our missing scouts. Jora, come in, status report!"

"Yes, your majesty!" came over the small communicator the blonde was wearing at her left shoulder. "Nirrti's Jaffa resisted our attempts to restrain them and had to be killed. From the men in the hallway four are dead, three more are bound and sedated."

"Got them!" the woman called Torana muttered.

"Stand by, Jora. -- Where?"

"The main cargo bay. A part of it has been converted into a holding cell. You'll have to open the door by force - and better hurry, their life signs are anything but stable. They need medical attention."

"We're on our way. Permission to beam up, your majesty?"

There was the shadow of a smile crossing Gabrielle's face when she answered. "You spend entirely too much time watching science fiction shows, Jora. The force field around the cargo ship has been enforced by the EM-generator. We have to wait 'til Xena has taken care of the Goa'uld before we can use the transporter. We can't risk her getting away. I'll send Mari over."

"Is there anything I can do, Gabrielle?" Janet asked, her voice, despite all of her efforts, clearly

betraying her anxiety about the sudden disappearance of her lover and instinctively knowing that there was nothing she could be doing.

However, military training had left its mark on her. She simply couldn't let anyone know how much she cared, so she tried to concentrate on the one person she was allowed to show emotions about, her adoptive daughter. Knowing this was one thing, to keep from acting on it quite another.

"Janet, how is your daughter?" General Hammond asked, thus cutting short her slightly romantic notion of going in the field and keep her lover out of trouble.

Janet brought herself back under control with an effort. "She seems physically unharmed."

Seeing how comfortable her mother was with the blonde stranger and further calmed by General Hammond's silent presence, Cassandra answered. "You guys sure came at the right time. They took some blood samples and had me do some sort of IQ test. When we heard you they were just prepping for some sort of surgery or something. Where's Sam?"

"What do you think, Cassandra?" Hammond answered in an attempt to diffuse the tension.

"Dealing with the bad boy, sorry, girl. She will be all right. - I'll stay with your daughter Doctor, you go and help the prisoners."

Janet hugged the teenager and jogged after the queen towards the cargo bay where they quickly stabilised the wounded scouts. Shortly after a message came through the radio. "Your majesty, please come in."

"Yes, weapons' master?"

"The consort has the Goa'uld restrained but Major Carter needs medical attention, ASAP." This was all they needed to hear to get them running once again. "EM-generator deactivated. You're clear to get the others back, Jora."

~*~

Samantha Carter slowly opened her eyes, blinking a few times to better adapt to the bright light. She found herself in a very familiar environment: the infirmary at the SGC. She had been confined there so often that she could make a copy of every crook and cranny in the ceiling above her from memory alone. She could feel that she was not alone, and she also was sure whom she would find when she turned her head. Janet always was there when a member of SG-1 was hurt, even if it was the Colonel; and even if this hadn't been the case, she still would know who was waiting for her without the shadow of a doubt.

"Hey, sleepy-head. How'd you feel?"

"What happened?" Samantha asked with a hoarse voice.

"Here, take a few chips of ice."

The blonde let the ice melt in her mouth but when she tried to swallow it felt like liquid fire, not cool water. "Hurts."

"I know, baby. You took quite a beating before Xena took over. Just don't try to move, and everything will be all right in a couple of days. I'll give you something to relax your muscles. It will ease the pain. -- No, don't protest. I promise: it won't disorient you."

Samantha closed her eyes in acceptance; something cold touched her throat. There was a faint sound reminding her of an airlock closing, and only a few moments later, her muscles relaxed and she felt much lighter.

"I want to make sure that there are no nasty side effects from the beating. Just tell me what you remember; start with when you attacked Nirrti, okay?"

The small doctor already had a pretty good idea of what had happened. Sam's injuries had told her enough, more than she wanted to know but she also knew that her proud lover had to talk about it in order to forgive herself what in her eyes must have been a shaming defeat.

"It happened so fast; I attacked her and less than a heartbeat later we were outside bouncing off the force field as if it were some kind of rubber. She attacked me with the ribbon device before I could get back to my feet but I somehow was able to ward her off with my own. I saw the back entrance of the al'kesh and realised that we must be at the opposite side of the EM-generator. Somehow I got back on my feet prepared to keep her concentrated on my ribbon device as long as possible - but she changed tactics. She deactivated it, rolled out of the way of my beam; and suddenly she was right on top of me."

Samantha closed her eyes in remembrance. "The mesh of her ribbon device impacted with my stomach, time and again; her other hand closed around my throat. Both of my arms were trapped under my own body; I couldn't move. I tried to get her off of me, I bucked and wriggled but nothing worked. She kept on beating on my stomach and chest.

"My supply of air was getting short. It felt as if there was no air left in my lungs. Somehow, I finally managed to get my feet up and thus lift my upper body up, at least enough to get an arm free. I concentrated the rest of my energy on the ribbon device and she lost her hold on me.

"I'm not really sure what happened then. I know I somehow got back on my feet. She was about three meters away, and I knew that the sensible thing would be to use the ribbon device. But somehow it didn't feel right.

"Nirrti attacked and suddenly it felt as if I were trying to fend off Master Niva. She had a counter move to every counter move I came up with. I don't know how long it took. Out of nowhere a roundhouse kick caught me on the chest, and I was thrown backwards several feet. I tried to crab

crawl away; of course I wasn't near fast enough. She jumped on top of me; the hand with the ribbon device held high, ready to strike. I don't know why she didn't use the damn thing. Instead she thrust two of her fingers on either side of my neck and I no longer was able to move my arms. I was helpless."

She felt her right hand cradled between Janet's smaller ones and reopened her eyes.

"She once again began to use me as a punching bag, all the while screaming at me. I couldn't make out most of it. It had something to do with having been betrayed, and that she had the right to avenge the wrongs she suffered because of us. She also said that I should feel the pain she felt while being tortured by Cronos, and that it was my fault.

"Then I heard Xena's voice. She said: 'You deserve all the suffering and more, you stupid snakehead. Come on, let's play, like true warriors. Or don't you have the spine to face me? Oh, I forgot, you simplistic snakeheads don't have a spine. That's what you need a host for. Don't you? Spineless bastard!' Her words did the trick. Nirrti let go of me. I expected to hear the crackling of the ribbon devices but nothing happened.

"Teal'c helped me to sit up and I saw Xena and Nirrti standing about a body length away from each other. Xena smiled but it was a cold smile, almost feral, her eyes were cold too and locked on Nirrti while she slowly stripped off the hand device, quickly followed by her combat jacket. Nirrti attacked as soon as the jacket hit the ground. She threw a series of kicks and punches. None of them hit their intended target. I never would have thought a Goa'uld capable of such moves. It was like a dance, a lethal dance. She was really, really good but not good enough.

"Xena hit her only twice and each time it took her breath away but she didn't press her advantage and she used only half of the openings the enraged Goa'uld was leaving. It was as if....

"Yes," Samantha spoke almost to herself, "Xena wanted to spare the host as much as possible. I understand: Nirrti's new host, she's an Amazon, an Amazon warrior. That's why none of them interfered. That's why I got my ass kicked. I guess I still have a lot to learn."

The blonde was somehow reluctant to dwell on her undeniable defeat any longer. Recounting the Goa'uld's defeat was much more fun.

"Nirrti didn't stand a chance against Xena, and when this finally sank in she once again resorted to the ribbon device. She missed, not only once or twice but six times. By then Xena was close enough to grip her hand. She jabbed two of her fingers in the side of her neck and her body crumpled to the ground like a scarecrow without its stick. That's when I lost consciousness. Do you think they can save the host?"

"Depends on how the negotiations go, Sammy. The Amazons want the host back at all costs, a few branches of special forces, NID, and a couple of the Joint Chiefs want to keep her blended to gain information from the symbiote. At the moment, Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena are in a conference with the President, General Hammond, Senator Kinsey, Colonel O'Neill and a few others to discuss the situation."

"The colonel and Kinsey? Together? In one room? That doesn't bode well." The blonde answered.

"When the NID insisted on Kinsey taking part, Xena roped Colonel O'Neill in attending too. If you think about it," Janet continued, "it's diabolically sneaky. To the Senator the leader of SG-1 is more dangerous than devil himself. His presence alone will keep Kinsey unbalanced, off-key."

"So, in the end, he will approve of everything and even think that he gained a lot for his cause, but end up doing what the queen wanted them to do right from the beginning."

"You saw Queen Gabrielle interact with her people, Sam." The small doctor answered. "Do you really think any one of them stands a chance? I don't. However, I think there may have been another motivation behind Xena's request."

"So she wouldn't have to suffer alone through a diplomatic function?" Samantha ventured with a smile, remembering the suffering sigh the consort didn't bother to suppress whenever she was forced to attend a council session. "Is Cassy all right? What time is it? What happened when I lost consciousness?"

"You were asleep for almost 10 hours. Don't ask me how it works but they transported us back to the base in the blink of an eye. - Cassandra is fine. I ran a thorough check-up. Nirrti tested her mental and physical abilities but luckily she didn't have enough time to do her any real harm.

"Xena told her about the tree walking; and she can't wait for you to show her how to do it. She insisted on staying at the base until you're discharged. She will spend the remainder of her holidays with us at Gaia. I already have the general's permission; then you can teach her."

"Sorry to disappoint her. The way I feel it will be at least a week before I'm back on my feet again. Everything hurts. I don't want to whine, but I never thought a few bruises could hurt this much."

"It was more than just a few bruises, Sam. She broke five of your ribs; your kidneys were slightly damaged. You had a broken ankle and more bruises than I could count. Usually you would have been out for at least three weeks and on light duty for at least another three. Xena healed the worst of your injuries with a healing device. You'll be back to par by tomorrow morning."

Initially, Janet had been frantic when she learned the extent of her beloved's injuries. If not for Xena she could have died out there. She had been so angry at her lover for once again rushing headlong into danger, it had taken her almost the whole ten hours the blonde had been asleep to calm down and accept that Samantha had only acted in character and out of concern for Cassandra.

"I know you hurt, baby, but there's nothing I can do. The shot I gave you is a muscle relaxant; I can't give you anything else. Using the ribbon device has considerably elevated the concentration

of naqada in your blood. It neutralises classical painkillers. No, don't look so worried. It's only temporary. The naqada level will go back to normal in a few days time. Xena assures me that it's perfectly normal. Now, try to rest and get some sleep."

"Janet, the host, who is she?" Samantha asked while stifling a yawn.

The brunette doctor smiled, and knowing that her lover wouldn't be satisfied with less than the whole truth, regardless of how tired she was, she answered. "Her name is Larina. She's the Captain of the Royal Guard - and the bondmate of the weapons' master."

"They're married?"

"They're joined; it's the Amazons' equivalent. According to Xena Larina is one of the best fighters the Amazons have; that's why you didn't stand a chance against her."

"What happened? How did Nirrti take her?" Samantha wanted to know.

"About two moons ago, she accompanied the queen and the consort on their annual tour of the other Amazon planets. They were out hunting when she got separated from the others. She found Nirrti's body; there was so much blood, she was sure the Goa'uld was dead. She was wrong and she is still paying the price for her mistake. Nirrti and Larina are locked up in one of the holding cells -- under sedation. Queen Gabrielle told me that they have a method of separating the host and the symbiote, even against the symbiote's will, just like the Tok'ra did with Clorel and Ska'ara."

"Then I don't understand what there should be to talk about in the first place. Larina has to be freed from Nirrti."

"I have no doubt that she will be. Now close your eyes. Your body will heal faster when you sleep. I'll help you. Listen to my voice..." Janet closed her own eyes and concentrated on the light in her mind's eye that was Samantha's soul, making her feel safe and cherished above everyone else. She even managed to take away some of her lover's pain.

~*~

When Samantha woke up, she felt worlds better and she was alone - though she was rather surprised not to find her lover next to her. Janet always had been there for her. She slowly sat up and took a deep breath; she let her legs dangle down the side.

The pain that had held her captive only a few hours ago was almost gone. She tested her ability to stand and took a couple of experimental steps. Pleased with her progress she made it to the door and opened it to the familiar confines of SGC corridors where she found herself face to face with a very serious looking, older Amazon warrior, she vaguely remembered from the day prior, wearing the colours of the Royal Guard instead of the usual SF.

"Please go back to bed, Major Carter. You need to rest."

"Where's Doctor Fraiser? She never leaves me alone in the infirmary."

"Queen Gabrielle asked her to accompany her to Washington together with your President. Please go back to bed. I have strict orders to insure that you get lots of rest."

"Your orders mean nothing to me; you're in my world and you're outside of my chain of command." Samantha answered with irritation evident in her voice.

"My orders come directly from the consort and Major Janet Fraiser, your chief medical officer. I'm honour bound to obey my commanding officer."

After a moment's deliberation the Major nodded and closed her eyes for the fraction of a heartbeat. "What's your name?"

"Ilianna, second in command of the Royal Guard."

"I apologise Ilianna. It wasn't my intention to insult you. I shouldn't have questioned your orders. You're right; Doctor Fraiser is my superior in all things medical. I'll go back to bed, but I'm not tired anymore. -- Could we just talk for a while?"

"It would be my pleasure, Major Carter."

"Please call me Sam."

"Sam, it is. -- The Consort was full of pride when telling us how you stood up to the captain, to Nirrti."

"Stood up? I took the most thorough beating of my life. Are you kidding?"

"The gene...," the warrior answered while Samantha got back into bed. "The consort said that it took her almost a quarter of a candlemark to get to you. She also said your training is far from being finished. The host Nirrti has taken is one of the best fighters the consort ever has trained. It's an honour to serve under her command. I'm looking forward to her being reinstated. Ever since she was a junior, I didn't last longer than five candledrops when we were sparring. And I doubt anyone on this planet could beat her. On Gaia I only know of three fighters that can. Believe me, it's a major accomplishment to hold her off for as long as you did, Sam."

"I was just lucky, Ilianna."

"The consort said you'd say something like that. - Is it really true that she evaded six shots with the ribbon device before taking Nirrti down? I was inside of the ship. I really would have loved to have seen that."

Samantha offered her a small smile. "Yes, it's true. Xe... the consort was amazing. Her movements... she was so fast; I've never seen someone fight like that. It was deadly but also so beautiful. It was poetry in motion; I've never seen something like this. I know she had a lot of time to perfect her fighting skills but still ... It was astonishing; no, astonishing is too weak a word to describe it. I doubt there are words adequate to make it real."

"Did you ever see her exercise or fight with a sword?" Samantha shook her head in the negative. "Now, that's a sight to behold. Perhaps you'll get a chance to see her spar with Larina soon."

"Larina, yes. How did the negotiations go?"

"The negotiations? Oh, yes, the talks with your leader and a few other males. I was one of the guards in the room. It's always a pleasure to observe our queen at work. She even charmed this cold-eyed grey-head into submission."

"Kinsey?"

"Yes, that's how he introduced himself. He's such a... I don't mean any disrespect but he's an asshole."

"To put it mildly. First, he made it his life's mission to destroy the Stargate program, to shut it down. Now, he aims to control it, to use it; not to defend Earth against the Goa'uld but to control Earth, to control American politics. Most of the time he's just a nuisance but sometimes he can get outright dangerous."

"How did it go? What did they agree upon?"

"I don't know for sure, Sam, not the overall plan. As I said, I was one of the guards during the initial talks. After the break I was reassigned to guard your rest. Queen Gabrielle and her consort are on their way to your capital, together with your lea..., your president. They will have to talk about a lot of things; I presume. On the other hand, your president agreed that we'd be the ones responsible for the Goa'uld and the host." The Amazon answered.

"This couldn't have gone down well with the NID and Kinsey. They'd do everything to get their hands on one of those snakeheads, believing they somehow could control it." Samantha said with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"Well, they were arguing a lot - though arguing isn't the appropriate term: This Kinsey guy was spouting insults, and only the queen's hand on her shoulder kept the consort from losing her patience, but you could easily see that it was by a hair's breadth. This man is so utterly self-centred; I never saw someone like him. Even the queen began to get impatient, but then your president simply overruled him. He was blustering and then gaping open-mouthed like a fish on dry land; especially when the president told him that there were quite a few other suitable candidates for his position. He didn't say word one after that, and so they quickly decided that it would be up to us to deal with the Goa'uld and the host. In recompense you will keep the al'kesh. We have no need for it anyway."

"Where are they now? What will happen to Larina?" Samantha wanted to know. "What will become of Nirrti?"

"She's still in your holding cell, sedated. As soon as we return home, she will be dealt with."

"Dealt with?" The blonde woman obviously didn't like the choice of words. "What do you intend to do with her?"

"The host will be restored and the Goa'uld will never again harm anyone. It never was done in my lifetime, but I heard that there are ways to neutralise a Goa'uld."

"I understand." Silence descended in the room. "I know it sounds childish but would you please tell me a story, about Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena?"

"It isn't childish, Sam. I'm not very good at story telling, not gifted like our Queen and a few others but stories are an important part of our history and identity. Let me think about it for a moment."

"About every other moon Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena leave Gaia to explore one of the worlds our deep space telemetry has come up with. Most of the time they can rely on the Ring system. One and a half year ago we got intel about an inhabited planet in the next solar system that had been hidden from our monitoring systems until then due to some sort of nebula."

"It's very small with only a few thousand inhabitants, no energy readings to speak of, but with what looked like very interesting geo-thermic readings. There were no permanent settlements, just nomadic tribes, nothing special. The Queen wanted to have a closer look and we took a ship to explore. It was a purely scientific endeavour."

"The monitoring didn't prove challenging enough for the consort, and I believe, even the queen was beginning to get bored because the irregularities the long range sensors had shown proved not to be irregular at all but natural tectonic activity. The planet had a lot of big thick forests with lots of deer and other wild animals in it. So, it was decided to end this trip with a hunting expedition."

"Queen Gabrielle doesn't particularly like hunting, though she knows how. She opted to stay at a small creek with a couple of guards. I think she wanted to work on her scrolls. The rest of us split in two groups. One group followed deer tracks; the second group went after the tracks of what resembled a very large boar. We were gaining considerably on the animal when the consort suddenly signalled us to stop. She cocked her head as if listening to something, jumped to the treetops, and took off. We followed suit and soon also heard what had made her react this way: the voices of men, shouting and leering, the sound of whips hitting flesh, and the crying and begging of a woman as a faint echo in between."

"The consort's lead was growing with every step and even before we finally arrived at the edge of the forest it was eerily silent, even the crying had subsided. We saw ten men lying

unconscious on the ground, sticks and whips hazardously strewn around them. In the middle were two women. One of them, the older one, was prone on the ground, the younger woman was on her knees to her right, shielding the elder with her body as best as she could. Without being told to we bound the men and set a perimeter watch.

"Consort Xena was on her knees next to the women and checked on the older one first. I'm not a medic but even I could see that her left arm was broken and that she was in an overall bad physical shape. She was rail thin, as if she hadn't properly eaten in moons, her ribs were prominent under the threadbare dress. The consort was carefully checking her neck while the younger woman simply looked on, wide-eyed and very obviously frightened.

"The Consort took her medical kit out of her backpack and gave her something to ease the pain. She then radioed the queen and ordered a bunch of medical supplies sent down from the ship. She immobilised the older woman's neck with a brace and quickly set her arm; luckily there was no internal bleeding. Only then she turned her attention to the young woman."

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Xena asked her if she were all right but didn't get an answer. Instead she said. "You came out of the forest like a demon and yet you cared for my grandmother like an angel. What are you?"

"I'm a woman; I come from very far away," Xena answered. "Let me have a look at your back. You took quiet a beating protecting your grandmother."

The young woman whispered. "I've had worse." And she obviously had. Her whole back was covered with scars and they also didn't stop at the back.

The Consort began to gently clean the most recent wounds and to regenerate the skin while asking. "Can you tell me what happened? Why did these men want to kill you? No crime in the world warrants such ill-treatment."

The young woman slightly turned around to look at the consort. "You really must come from very far away. My grandmother has reached 'the age', but I didn't want her to die. I gave her what I could of my food but my mother found out about it and told the men. They wanted to stone her. My sister warned me in time and we ran away. They quickly caught up with us and then you were there."

One of the guards then asked. "She doesn't look older than sixty summers, that's not that old."

The older woman opened her eyes. "Fifty-one season cycles I've seen. Are you a dream, raven head, or one of the guardians of the afterworld?" She asked the consort.

"No, venerable elder, I'm not a dream, and you are well and truly alive, as is your granddaughter. You both are safe with us. My name is Xena."

"I see the wisdom of age in your eyes and yet your body still can give birth to strong sons."

"Strong daughters, venerable elder. Where we come from, there are no men." Xena answered softly.

"So, the stories we no longer are allowed to tell are the truth. You live without men and share your beds with women. You are free to do whatever you want without fear of punishment?"

"Not entirely; we have laws we have to obey. Every society needs laws and customs to stay stable, but every one of us has the freedom to choose. If one wants to one can leave," the consort answered.

The younger woman gasped. "You're the oiorpata. You exist, the men slayers."

"Some men called us thus, but we only kill when given no other choice." Gabrielle said while leaving the cover of the forest.

Xena turned around, shifted on her knees, and bent her head. "My queen!"

"I thought we agreed that we wouldn't interfere in the internal affairs of this planet, Xena!"

"I couldn't let them be killed by the misogynistic bastards," she answered, turning her head towards the still unconscious men.

"So, you acted within your right, my Consort. Saving the lives of the oppressed is our prime directive. Can they be transported?"

"I don't see any problems with... I'm sorry ... I didn't even ask your name?"

"Aria, and this is Ariana. Are you really a Queen? The leader of your people? You're so young - and you're a woman. Women are not capable of ruling."

"That's what we were taught, my child," Ariana said, "but I'm beginning to doubt the truth of the teachings. We also were taught that no single woman would stand a chance against even the weakest of men in a fight, and yet I saw one woman taking out ten of our best fighters in less time than it takes to take a deep breath."

She paused and asked. "Am I right that there's something wrong with my back?"

"Yes, Ariana. The bones in your neck are broken, that's why it would be very dangerous to move you now. But you don't have to worry, there's a way to repair the damage. Your other injuries will take longer to heal because you're extremely under-nourished. The only question you both will now have to answer is what you intend to do. You can come with us to our home planet or you can take your chances and stay here."



"It won't be worth your effort to heal me if we stay, if I decide to stay here. That's what you wanted to say, isn't it?"

"No, there's no condition on my help, on our help. It's totally up to you. However, we learned from past experiences that men as afraid of women as your men seem to be tend to strike back as soon as we turn our back on their society."

"Men never are afraid!" Aria chimed in.

Xena was about to answer when Gabrielle interfered. "I know it's a lot to take in right now, Aria. It can't be explained in a few candlemarks' time. For the time being you'll just have to trust us."

"We intend to change the way women on this planet are treated but that's a long and arduous process. We learned that it's impossible to change any given society in one shot and from the outside. We can offer a choice to the people in your tribe and the whole planet. It will take time and especially in the beginning there always is a lot of resistance."

"Male dominated tribal societies like yours tend to take their anger and frustration out on whoever first made contact with us. So, it would be better for you if you didn't have any contact with your people, at least for the immediate future."

"I'm not sure, I understand half of what you just said, your majesty," Ariana answered. "It's not important what happens to me but I want my granddaughter to have a chance at a different life."

"Is this what you also want, Aria?" The queen asked.

"Yes, it is. I never felt like I belonged but I have to return at least once. I have to offer the same chance to my sister. She risked a lot by warning me."

"I understand, Aria, and we will find a way. Ilianna, concentrate the perimeter watch towards the plain. I want everyone armed with stun weapons, just in case. Erect a force field around our prisoners; I don't want to be bothered by them tonight. Xena, I presume you'll use the healing device to take care of Ariana's neck?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes, my Queen. With your permission, I'd like to go back to the ship to prepare." As an answer the small blonde kissed Xena on the forehead.

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The Amazon guard fell silent, convinced that her public had fallen asleep. "I'm glad, you guys saved Aria." Samantha suddenly said. "What happened to her sister, her grandmother, the other women of her tribe?"

"You're awake?"

"Yeah, just rested my eyes. So?"

"Ariana is living on Gaia, she works at daycare. Only two moons ago she joined with one of our head cooks. Aria's sister refused the offer to leave her world. She's married to the young Chieftain of another tribe, a tribe that is less misogynistic than her own. We also sent mediators from one of our other plan..."

This time Samantha really had fallen asleep. The Amazon tucked a light blanket around her and whispered. "Pleasant dreams, Princess."

Chapter Eight: Show and Tell

The next morning, Cassandra entered her room just a couple of minutes after she came to her senses. Samantha couldn't help but admit that she really missed Janet's comforting presence right next to her and decided that sleeping without her really sucked. Having Cassy here was at least something, in her book. However, it wasn't enough.

"Hey Sam, you all right? Mom told me you got hurt fighting Nirrti."

"I'm all right, little one. Got kicked around a little, but Consort Xena was there in time to stop her. Did she hurt you, Cassy?"

The teenager smiled reassuringly. "No, Sam, she didn't. At least I don't think so. She ran a lot of tests. Mom also put me through all kind of tests; she didn't find anything. However, she wants to do a few more when we arrive on Gaia."

"How do you feel about spending the rest of your holidays away from Earth, Cassy? You don't have to, you know. It's entirely up to you. Colonel O'Neill's offer to take you fishing still stands."

"Fishing? I don't think so. Uncle Jack is fun but fishing - it really sucks." Samantha raised an eyebrow. "Sorry, Sam, but it's boring. He never catches anything; I even doubt that there are any fish in this pond of his. I'd rather have you teaching me how to tree walk. Now, that sounds like fun. I'm really looking forward to this. Mom called. I'm to tell you that Queen Gabrielle and the President agreed on an alliance. Daniel and you are expected to join her, Uncle Jack, and the others in Washington; meanwhile Teal'c will help me pack. Mom put some clothes on the bed in your quarters. Do you need help?"

"No, I can manage but you still could join me and fill me in on what happened while I was confined to the infirmary."

~*~

Samantha and Daniel met the Amazons in the Gate room. Soon after, a white light was enveloping all of them and a few heartbeats later they found themselves in what Samantha presumed to be the Amazon's base on the moon. Ilianna exchanged a few words with the woman apparently in charge and took a long, round packet from her. Once again they were enveloped in a white light and found themselves in some sort of hotel room.

The blonde major barely acknowledged the presence of her superior officer by nodding in his direction; her attention solely focused on Janet. Three steps forward and her arms closed firmly around the smaller body. "I missed you, Jan."

"Missed you too, Sammy-baby," the doctor whispered back while trying to give the impression of checking her patient. "We're making a show out of ourselves, my love."

"I don't care, love you."

Before Janet could answer, Colonel O'Neill chimed in. "So, now that Carter finally has ended her beauty sleep, can we get on with the program, your majesty?"

Janet used the distraction to place a quick kiss on her taller lover's mouth, very aware of the danger it put them in but also of how much Samantha right now needed the reassurance.

"You have a point, colonel," the queen answered. "Ilianna and two of the guards will accompany you to the Air Force Academy. We decided to start our co-operation with the implementation of a new hand-to-hand training's program. The Joint Chiefs want proof that it's superior to your usual routine. Daniel Jackson and the rest of us will go to the Smithsonian Institute to talk with his friend. Did you bring the scroll, Ilianna?"

"As you requested, your majesty, one of the early ones - about the Titans."

"Definitively not the one I would have chosen. I was such a wide-eyed, stupid child then. Well, I'll live. Let's go."

Neither Samantha nor Janet missed the friendly squeeze and the quiet words Xena had for her queen. "Not stupid, my love, just a tad naive and excitable - and only you were capable of sending them back to sleep. I was so proud of you that day."

"Charmer!" The small blonde whispered.

~*~

Half an hour later, they asked for Doctor Levinson at the reception desk and were directed to the

basement and a place called 'the hole'. It was Sunday morning, and the only light streaming out of a door was at the far end of the basement corridor. It was a room without the slightest bit of natural light; all visible walls were decorated with overflowing shelves from floor to ceiling, filled with books and artefacts.

In the middle of the room was an old wooden desk equally stacked with piles and piles of papers and folders, not facing the door but at an almost 30° angle. Behind the desk a head could be seen, dark red hair with a strand of white at the left temple bent over and concentrated on something.

On the way over they had decided that Daniel would do the first round of talking without the others barging in or intimidating her. They still would be close enough to hear the entire conversation.

"Doctor Sabrina Levinson?"

There was no answer. "Doctor Levinson!"

"What the hell! It's my day off! I was told that I would be left alone on my days off; it was a guarantee. Put your request in my work-file and I'll tend to it as soon as possible." The head answered without looking up.

"Sabrina, it's me, Daniel. Please look at me." He unconsciously softened his voice, reacting to the cross of irritation, annoyance, distress, and frustration evident in his friend's words.

Finally, she looked up. "Daniel? Daniel Jackson? What are you doing here?" She placed her laptop on one of the piles at the front edge of her desk. She raised herself to her feet, taking a few steps forward and gathering the archaeologist in a hug. They finally parted.

"It's a rather long story but we don't have time to go into any details right now, Sabrina. A friend of mine gave me something and I want you to have a look at it. I think, it might confirm your theories."

"Confirm my theories? You've got to be kidding, Daniel. They didn't believe me then, and they won't now. My scientific fate isn't any different than yours."

"Please, just have a look at it." He handed the scroll to the red-haired woman who was only slightly shorter than himself.

She took it and slowly studied it from the outside, immediately recognising the fragments of the broken seal. She unrolled it and her eyes lit up in wonder. She stared at the handwriting, noting every familiar curve and dot. She began to read out loud.

"I am Gabrielle, bard of Poteidaia, and I sing of a time of darkness, when the gods played with the lives of the mortals, when a world in turmoil and fear cried out for a hero. There was only one woman who took up the challenge. She was a warrior, her strength won in countless battles. Her soul had once been imprisoned by darkness, but she found her way back to the light. She

now fights for those who cannot fight for themselves.

"Daniel, this is incredible. She always varies the introductory words but it's definitively her style and her handwriting. The parchment is old, but it's been perfectly preserved. I've never seen one in such a mint condition. I'm almost sure that it's genuine; there's only one thing I yet have to check."

She turned slightly to get a better angle in the artificial light, concentrated on the bottom of the scroll. Her elbow inadvertently brushed against the pile of papers the laptop was resting upon. It became unbalanced and started to fall down. Samantha, who had been watching from the sidelines together with the others, reacted on instinct. She launched herself forward as if intending to save a rare artefact and caught the machine before it could crash.

"Gotcha!" The tall blonde answered with a grin.

"Nice catch, Sam! Need a hand up?"

"Always, Danny-boy." She took his hand, though they both knew that she didn't really need his help. "Care to introduce us?" Samantha asked as soon as she was back on her feet, had stepped around the desk, and placed the laptop securely on top of its seat.

"You're right, Sam. It's time to come clean." Gabrielle said.

She and her consort, who had been nothing more than observers until then, now were standing in the doorway. Before she could say anything else the attention of the others was redirected to Sabrina Levinson when they heard a loud slap.

"And I thought you were different, Daniel." A very surprised archaeologist rubbed his cheek. "To put together a scam of such magnitude, just to once again humiliate me. Just get out of here, all of you, immediately! I refuse to take the bait."

"Doctor Levinson, I assure you, this is not a scam. The scroll is genuine," Gabrielle said, taking two short steps into the room. "Please give us at least the benefit of the doubt. I presume that you have been hurt before because of your dedication to your research. Had I known, we would have found another way to approach you. I apologise."

"I'm sorry, Brina. It never was my intention to hurt you. All I wanted was for you to know the truth. Is there anywhere we can go sit and talk?"

"It's I who's sorry, Daniel. I shouldn't have hit you. I apologise." Sabrina then turned her attention towards the two women still standing just inside the doorway. "You look like them. But it can't be; they lived two thousand years ago."

"We know that it's asking a lot. You don't know us, and you have no reason to trust us." Xena said in her deep voice. "Just give us a chance, please."

"But you can't be them. It's against every law of nature I know. It simply is unbelievable."

"I can imagine how you feel. I'm a scientist and until a few years ago I thought that everything in the world, in the universe has a logical, scientific explanation. Experience taught me otherwise. I can see the doubt in your eyes." Samantha said. "The stories about the warrior princess and the bard, don't they tell of them doing things that should be physically impossible?"

"Like coming back from the death and jumping a few hundred feet from a cliff onto the deck of a cursed ship, things like these?"

"Exactly, Doctor Levinson." Samantha said in a perfect, only half conscious imitation of Teal'c's deadpan manner.

"The things Xena does on a regular basis are one of the reasons no one believed me. Even I started to think of them as some sort of exaggeration, poetic licence, if you will." There was the sound of hurried footsteps coming closer. "Perhaps we should take this some place more comfortable and more private."

At this moment, a portly man wearing a dark grey three-pieces suit entered without even bothering to knock. He quickly looked around, dismissing most of the people present. His eyes locked on Gabrielle.

"Your Majesty, please accept my heartfelt apologies. It is just now that I was informed of your visit by the chief of staff to the President. I'm Doctor Rodney Tucker, the director of this institution. I'm sorry for the inappropriate welcome you received." He slightly turned his head. "This will have consequences, Doctor Levinson. I've been far too lenient with you. Now, your Majesty, if you would please follow me to the conference room; there are some refreshments waiting for you and your retinue."

"Director Tucker, I ass..." Xena's hand on her forearm effectively silenced the red headed linguist. The raven-head then turned her attention to the rather short man.

"Mister Tucker, this isn't an official visit. The Queen came here to meet with Doctor Levinson, and Doctor Levinson only. Her research is of interest to the queen and our Nation. It has nothing to do with her work here. However, we accept the use of your conference room for the rest of our talks. You may be excused, Mister Tucker. Doctor Levinson, can you lead us there?" She said with a smile and a twinkle in her eyes.

A strange mixture of indignation and anger crossed the man's face at the consort's obvious dismissal but his official persona quickly reasserted itself and he insisted on personally escorting them to the conference room. On the way up to the second floor he didn't stop talking for more time than he needed to fill his lungs with air. Queen Gabrielle looked at her consort, and Xena sent a barrage of hand signals to Samantha, leaving Janet with question marks in her eyes and Samantha with a vague smile.

~*~

Director Tucker courteously held the door open when they arrived at the stately conference room. Samantha was the last one to step through, but turned around half-way. "Director Tucker, may I have a word?"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" He retorted, seemingly not intimidated by her topping him more than a couple of inches.

"Major Samantha Carter, United States Air Force," the door closed behind her, "on temporary assignment in the service of Queen Gabrielle and her retinue. You're being alerted of the queen's visit by an official channel equals a security breach of unacceptable proportions. I want you to give me the name of the person or persons who informed you of this private visit. Should this make the papers, you won't like the consequences."

"Queen Gabrielle is an official dignitary. I won't give in to military intimidation."

Samantha's eyes grew cold, blue changing to silver. "Mister Tucker, it would be in your best interest to listen to me, and listen carefully. This is a question of national security."

"As Consort Xena already told you, this was intended to be a private visit, with the emphasis on private. The queen is grateful for having the use of your facilities, but this won't change the nature of her visit, nor her need for privacy. I count on your sense of propriety to keep quiet about this visit - if only for the sake of future contacts with the Nation."

"Angering the queen has the potential of seriously impeding diplomatic relations between our two countries, and I assure you, you do not want to be on the receiving end of the President's temper if anything goes wrong."

Once again anger flickered over the man's face; once again it was gone in the blink of an eye. "I understand the queen's need for privacy and will respect it. However, Doctor Levinson should have known better. There's a standing order that all visiting dignitaries have to be reported to the administration immediately. She always has been an embarrassment in the scientific field and I won't put up with it any longer. She has outstayed my patience."

"You may not give in to military intimidation. - I don't give in to civilian posturing. Doctor Sabrina Levinson is not to blame. She has nothing to feel guilty for. We didn't introduce ourselves. She's a brilliant linguist, and I would consider it an honour would she be working with me. And believe me she really would be an asset."

"An asset? She's at best a pain in the behind, at worst a lunatic. She tends to get obsessed with details, forgets about the greater picture."

"The greater picture? Do you even know what the greater picture is?" Recognising the bland, self satisfied expression on the suited man's face - an expression she had seen more times than she

cared to remember on her superiors, her commanding officers, her teachers, Samantha's temper snapped. "I don't think you do. You don't have the intellectual capability to do so. Doctor Levinson's research is more important than you can even dream to imagine. And this research has nothing to do with your institute, and it has nothing to do with you."

~*~

About half an hour and a still rather angry director later, Samantha closed the big doors to the conference room. She quickly turned around and scanned the room. As always the consort was easy to pick out in an assembly, being the tallest. She dropped on her right knee in front of Xena.

"Your highness, please accept my apologies. I failed you. I have the names you wanted and as we speak they will be taken care of, but I'm afraid my interference made Director Tucker even angrier than before and he possibly intends to take out his anger on Doctor Levinson. I take full responsibility and accept any punishment for my failure." She lowered her eyes on the ground.

"Rise, Major Carter!" The Queen said. "We all know that this man is an arrogant prick with a chip on his shoulder the size of Mount Olympus and far too much power. Should it be necessary, I'll smooth things over with him, but at the moment I'm still optimistic that Doctor Levinson will take us up on our offer." Gabrielle turned her attention back to the stunned linguist. "You by now know the rough outlines. It now is time to make some proper introductions. Please, stand up, Sam. Daniel Jackson, would you please be so kind?!"

"It will be my pleasure, your majesty. Sabrina, may I introduce Major Samantha Carter, US Air Force, doctor in astrophysics and philosophy, leading expert in wormhole physics, and Major Janet Fraiser, Chief Medical Officer of Stargate Command, medical doctor, apparently, expert in virology and infectious diseases, oh and in taming mouthy Colonels and big marines."

"Don't forget accident prone, bespectacled archaeologist, Daniel." Samantha chimed in.

"Or frequently injured brilliant blondes." He bantered back.

"You're really with the military, Dan? How could you bring them here? All they do is kill people. Your majesty, may I be excused? I don't want anything to do with these people."

"Brina, please, forget the past for a moment. What I do with them is important. It saves lives." Daniel implored but the redhead wasn't that easily swayed.

"Forget the past? How could I? Forget the army transport that rammed her car and killed her, killed the only family I've ever known. The driver was drunk. So, don't you tell me to forget her, Daniel. It's hard enough to know that he walked away without paying for his crimes."

Samantha saw the genuine pain in the woman's eyes and answered. "I know how you feel, Doctor Levinson. I lost my mother in a car accident when I was not yet fourteen. My father

failed to pick her up because he was too busy with his work in the Air Force. She took a cab and died in the middle of a multi-car pile-up caused by a drunk driver."

"I'm sorry for your loss, major, but it was nothing more than an accident. She wasn't murdered by the military."

The blonde's eyes found her lover's face and her encouraging smile. "My father's an Air Force General. Then he was a Lieutenant Colonel, Doctor Levinson. He forgot to pick her up at the campus because of some stupid meeting. It wasn't a question of life and death, just bureaucracy. When he told me what happened, I accused him of murder. I told him that he loved his job and his career more than her life; I told him he could as well have taken his sidearm and shot her."

Janet now was standing next to the taller woman, rubbing the small of her back with one hand while the other rested reassuringly on the blonde's shoulder. "It took me a long time, but eventually I saw what having lost her had done to him and I forgave him."

"Doctor Levinson, before we came to you we ran a few database checks. The sergeant responsible for the death of your grandmother was sentenced to twenty years of prison. He killed himself two years later. He paid for what he did to you and the other two families who lost loved-ones." Xena's soothing voice said. "I think there is no one in this room who hasn't lost people we loved, and chances are that we will again in the future. That's the price we have to pay for living, but what we gain far outweighs this price, love, happiness, new friends, new experiences. This is what..."

The beeping of a cell phone interrupted her. Xena fished a small communicator out of her back pocket and flipped it open. "Yes, I understand. Give us a few candledrops. We're not yet finished here. Wait for my signal." The tall woman turned her attention back to the others. "I'm sorry; we'll have to cut this short. - My queen, High Priestess Melosa relayed a message to the moon station. Egeria wants to speak with us as soon as possible, both of us. Melosa said that it's urgent."

"Both of us? That's strange. She tends to cut our conversations short whenever you come with me, and refuses to explain her reasons."

"We'll soon find out, my love, but I doubt that this request is about me." The tall woman answered with sadness tinting her voice.

"We'll see. We have to leave now. Our presence is needed at home, but first, please hear our offer, Sabrina Levinson. The scrolls about the Warrior Princess you know of are only a fraction of what I had written at the time. When we left Greece a lot of them were left behind and were lost. I sort of had to write new versions. We want you to find the rest of the missing scrolls and will provide you with all the funds necessary. There must be at least another two or three score of them. To do this successfully you will have to familiarise yourself with our life here on Earth and all the things we did. We could give you digital copies but to really get a feel for them you should study the originals, on Gaia."

"Where's the catch?"

"We want your word of honour that nothing you'll learn will be revealed to the public on Earth without my permission. Earth is not ready to know. Samantha, Janet, and Daniel Jackson will answer all of your questions. Just keep your mind open for the unbelievable. - Major Carter, as of now, Sabrina Levinson has top security clearance. Just put it in your report as a direct order and the President will approve."

Samantha wanted to ask if the queen were really sure about this. It had the potential to become a security nightmare, but one look at the consort let her keep quiet. "Yes, your majesty."

"Here, Sam, take this. We'll call as soon as possible." Gabrielle handed her another one of the tiny cell phones. Xena pressed a button on her own device; the two of them were immediately enveloped in a white light and disappeared.

Sabrina stared at the floor where they stood only a heartbeat before with her mouth hanging open.

"Doctor Levinson, I once again apologise for making your life here harder by further angering the director. Talking to the natives and calming them usually is Daniel's job."

"Dan, did I just drop straight into an episode of Star Trek or The Twilight Zone? Is this a trick? How did they do it?"

"You'll have to ask Sam for the technical details, Sabrina, but no, it definitely isn't a trick. Just give us a chance to explain. The universe is much more intriguing than even the most imaginative of science fiction writers ever would have thought possible. It's all true: thousands of different worlds and different cultures, big bad enemies, new strange friends. It's all true, please, trust us."

"I'll try, Daniel. And there's nothing to apologise for, Major Carter. This man could easily exhaust the patience of an archangel. It is me who has to apologise. I tend towards aggression when I'm confused. At first I thought you all were totally nuts and now I wait for little green men to appear out of thin air."

"Actually, they're grey."

"Daniel, you've spent too much time with Colonel O'Neill." Janet chastised him. "I can understand that you're confused, Doctor Levinson. It's a lot to take in at once. Perhaps we should leave this place and go somewhere where you feel more comfortable; your office, our hotel, wherever. We could have room service and get to know each other better."

"Let's go to my apartment. It's only ten minutes on foot and there should be enough stuff in the fridge to put something together - if you don't mind vegetarian food."

The other three nodded enthusiastically. Home-cooked meals were scarce with their usual

schedules, even for Janet who had a teenager to feed.

"I'm still not comfortable with you being part of the military or working with them, but I trust you, Daniel, and as strange as it sounds to me, I'd really like to trust you too, Majors."

"Why don't you start by calling us Sam and Janet? It could help you to see beyond our uniforms." Janet answered.

"Let's go, and please, call me Sabrina." They left the Smithsonian through a back door after having picked up the laptop and jacket left in the 'hole'.

~*~

It was only shortly after midday, but the narrow street they followed was mostly dark. The creepy atmosphere sent Samantha immediately into soldier mode. Her senses concentrated on the outside world she almost jumped out of her skin when Sabrina suddenly asked.

"If you hold the Air Force responsible for your mother's death, why did you join them?"

"There are a lot of reasons. My godfather made me understand that any other job also had the potential to keep my father from picking her up. The Air Force was the only connection I had to my father, the only thing he could relate to. But that was only a bonus."

Samantha knew that she never was this open to her colleagues but she also had sensed the queen's need to draw the redheaded woman on their side. If she had learned one thing during her sessions with the consort it was that sharing one's feelings and thoughts was not a sign of weakness.

"From the moment I was big enough to climb a chair and look through my mother's telescope I knew that I wanted to become an astronaut. I wanted to be the first woman to walk on the Moon, the first human travelling to Mars. The Air Force was the only way to come close to that goal."

"And did you realise your dream?"

"I found something better, much better... Danny, hostiles in front; cover our six. Janet, protect Sabrina. I'll deal with them."

The road in front of them was suddenly blocked by four broad shouldered men armed with baseball bats - and Sam didn't have a gun on her or at least a zat'nikitel.

"Give us your money and jewellery, and we might let you go to live another day," the biggest of the thugs said, the bat resting almost casually on his shoulder. He topped Samantha by far more than half a foot.

"We don't have anything worth your efforts. It would be in your interest to let us go unharmed." Samantha said in the vain hope of reasoning with the men.

"Three good looking chicks! You bet your ass, there's something worth our efforts, blondie." The man to the leader's right said and tried to reach around Samantha to grab Janet.

He found himself on the ground, his arm at an off angle, obviously broken. The man to her far left started forwards, his cry "You bitch!" cut short by a roundhouse kick to his throat, which propelled him to the ground but left her slightly unbalanced.

The first one used this opening to his advantage and the club grazed her ribcage. She hissed in pain but immediately compensated. She dropped to the ground, grabbed the discarded bat from the second man, and brought it up in time to block another attack aimed for her head. The rebound hit the man in the head, not hard enough to knock him out but hard enough to give her a chance. Samantha got inside his defences, punched his throat, and followed up with a knee to his groin. He sank to his knees and a jab to the chin knocked him out.

Meanwhile her second attacker had regained his feet and drew a six inch blade. He still had some problems breathing from the blow to his throat but that didn't make him any less dangerous. Two down, two more to go. Samantha kept the fourth in her line of sight while she fended off his rather clumsy attempts. She simply knocked him out with her elbow and the fourth one suddenly wised up and ran.

Meanwhile Daniel had taken care of a fifth one sent to keep them from running.

"You okay, Sam?" Janet snapped to doctor mode.

"Yes, Jan. I'm all right. My ribs might need re-bandaging, that's all. Let's go before these guys decide to wake up."

A few minutes later they arrived at Sabrina's apartment. The linguist had been strangely quiet since the fight. Reading Samantha's and Janet's body language Daniel decided to give them some privacy and dragged Sabrina away to buy something to drink.

The liquor store was only half a block down, and a quarter of an hour later they re-emerged with a six-pack of Bud and two six-packs of root beer.

"Dan, you could have asked. I have beer back home - and besides, shouldn't we report this to the police?"

"It's not about the beer, Brina. Sam and Janet need some time alone. Sam tends to act out the soldiers-know-no-pain routine when she feels observed."

"Typical military mind-set." Sabrina snorted.

"No, not really. Most soldiers I know are cry-babies as soon as they enter Janet's infirmary. Sam

is different. She is stoic and calm and rational, a scientist to the core. Her IQ ratings are so far off scale one can get dizzy even thinking about it. At the same time she is the best friend one can have. She is funny and compassionate, kind-hearted and loving."

"Sounds as if you have a crush on her."

"You should know me better than that, but the obvious aside: it would be easy to fall in love with Sam, and I really love her, as a sister and one of my best friends. Stargate Command has forged a very strange, very big family."

An almost uncomfortable silence descended, so, Sabrina decided to change the subject. "The police; why didn't you call them? I even had the impression that you never thought of doing so."

"Do you really want to spend hours on end on a police station, waiting for someone to write down your testimony, having to tell the same story time and again, having to identify them in a line-up, being called to testify a few months later, and all this only to let them go free because Sam didn't warn them about her combat skills?"

"No, Brina. But I'm sure that Sam or Janet already have arranged something that will keep us out of it and still land them in jail."

~*~

They opened the door to find Janet closing the last button on the blonde's shirt. "Hey, Daniel, I hope you brought something non-alcoholic. The Doc insists on giving me painkillers." Samantha said with a pout.

"I swear you took lessons from Cassandra. - She doesn't get away with it, and neither will you. Sabrina, how about we go find something for lunch? Daniel, please help Sam to the couch."

The two women disappeared through the door and Daniel did as he had been told. "You okay, Sam?"

"Yeah, more or less. Janet said that one of the bruised ribs now is broken, but that it's not likely to cause any problems. The bone knitters on Gaia will take care of it. I'll be back to par in no time, Daniel. You didn't get hurt out there, right?"

"I'm fine, Sam. Give me some credit here, it was only one man, and you took on four of these guys. Jack never will believe me. I know you're good, but I don't remember you being this good."

"Gaia not only has good fighters but also good teachers, Daniel."

"Yes, it seems like you learned an awful lot, both of you." He let the silence linger for a moment.

"I'm happy for you and Janet, Sam."

For a moment she looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights, and then she said. "Thank you, Daniel. Your support means a lot to us, both of us. We'll also have to tell Teal'c and the colonel before we go back to the SGC. They deserve to know."

"Neither Teal'c nor Jack will let you down. Your happiness is all that counts for us, and for him. That it's someone as smart and beautiful as Janet will make it easier for Jack. You won't have to worry about SG-1, but at the base you'll have to be more careful than you were in this hotel room. Hammond probably will have a hard time, and I don't even want to think about what will happen should Kinsey or the NID find out."

"As Master Bratac would say, we'll build that bridge when we come to the river. And General Hammond knows that I'm gay. I came out to my family when I turned eighteen."

"What about this Hanson fellow?"

"My one and only trip to boy-town - and the biggest mistake I ever made. He was the son-in-law my father dreamed of; career military, a good field officer. He didn't want to know that he also was an abusive bastard. - However, when I introduced them, it was the first time in the three years since I had come out that Dad spoke to me. He still thinks that being gay is nothing more than a phase, and that I'm just looking for mister right."

"In a way it's good that he's with the Tok'ra. That way it won't be so hard when he once again stops talking to me."

"Don't you think that blending with Selmac hasn't taught him a thing or two?"

"He has changed a lot but not that much. He's the most stubborn man in the known universe. - Pass me a root beer?"

~*~

Meanwhile Janet and Sabrina had decided to go for a vegetable lasagna, and had a similar conversation after the small doctor had thanked Sabrina for the use of her emergency kit. "You're welcome, Janet. Who's Cassandra?"

"She's my daughter - actually, she's our daughter. Sam and I raise her together. She just turned fifteen."

"You're not old enough to have a teenage daughter, Janet."

"I'm thirty-three. It would have been possible. I adopted Cassandra when she was eleven. Her parents were killed and Sam saved her life. I didn't give birth to her, but nonetheless, she's my daughter." The small brunette said.

"You and Samantha make a cute couple."

"Thank you, I think."

"Cassandra is lucky to grow up with so much love."

Janet blushed. "It's a rather recent development. I only told her yesterday. We have been best friends for years. But only a couple of weeks ago, we admitted to each other that there was more than friendship. Cassy was not surprised."

"Is it worth the risk? I mean this whole don't-ask-don't-tell thing?"

"We know the risk. We know this could ruin our careers and get our security clearances revoked. But, yes, it's worth it. Sam completes me. - Can you pass me the onions?"

They worked for a few minutes in silence. "You're a doctor; you took a vow to save lives. Why did you join the Air Force?"

"In the last year of my residency, I butted heads with one of my superiors. They threw me out and my career was ruined before it began. An Air Force General recruited me, and it was the only chance to continue doing what I wanted to do, work as a doctor and help people. My father was an Army Major when he retired. I grew up with the conviction that it was alright to fight to protect your people. I learned how to use weapons, but I have never had to kill anyone - and I hope I never will.

"My experience as a field medic as well as a CMO taught me that those who don't have problems with killing and hurting others are more of a danger to every team they are a part of than the enemy ever could be. It's reckless."

"What Samantha did out there in the street was pretty reckless in my book." Sabrina retorted.

"Our options were pretty limited. There was not enough time to call for backup. Sam was unsuccessful when she tried to talk to them; so, the only other option would have been to run, and that wouldn't have been possible with the guy behind us Daniel took out. Sam was injured not 24 hours ago. She had been badly beaten and wouldn't have been up to running. Taking them out as quickly as possible was our only viable option - and even then, this big brute broke one of her ribs."

"Shouldn't this be checked out at a hospital?" The redhead wanted to know.

"She not only is my best friend; I'm also her regular physician. It's a clean break that won't cause any problems. Her ribs now are tightly bound. She'll be okay."

"I didn't want to accuse her, and I don't want to sound like an ungrateful bitch. But I never saw something like that, and it's left me disconcerted. She fought for all of us and took these bullies on as if it were an everyday occurrence. It was scary and eerily fascinating." Sabrina said cautiously.

"Sam has the heart of a warrior but she also is a scientist to the core - and she is a soldier, a very good soldier. But something like this is by no means an everyday occurrence. She spends days on end buried in her lab, surviving on coffee and blue jello alone. Everything she does, she does with great focus and intensity. She's a very complex woman and every time I think that I finally have figured her out, she goes and surprises me."

"I think you also are not easy to figure out, Janet. - You were right, talking to you helped to alleviate some of my fears. There's only one thing I still don't understand." Sabrina said while putting the lasagna in the oven. "Why are you so honest with me? You don't know me; you have no reason to trust me. I could sell you out to the next tabloid."

Janet chuckled. "Never going to happen. Daniel told us that you're a friend and he trusts you. All these years you had the chance to turn your back on your research and make a name for yourself but you didn't. No, you'd never sell us out, not even for enough money to finance your research for the next ten years."

"Our dinner will need another half hour. Let's go back to the others. I have a lot of questions, and I still cannot believe that the two women I've seen in my office really are the Xena and Gabrielle from grandmother's scrolls. It's against everything I've ever learned."

"As Consort Xena said: Prepare to believe the unbelievable."

~*~

They talked the rest of the day and the better part of the night with Samantha dozing off every once in a while in Janet's arms. Sabrina went from astonishment to disbelief to incredulity to fascination to wide-eyed wonder. When Janet finally also had fallen asleep the two archaeologist-linguists were sitting on the floor nursing the last two beers.

"Do you know how incredible this all is, Dan?"

"What? Travelling to other planets? Fighting parasites with delusions of god-hood? Meeting immortals?" Daniel asked with a smile.

"Well, yes. But what I was really talking about is us, Dan, you and me. They all were laughing about our theories - and you know what?! We were right all along."

"Damned ironic, isn't it?"

"Yeah!" They fell silent. After a while Sabrina had another question. "Doesn't it drive you crazy? To know that you were right and not being able to tell anyone?"

"Sometimes; I usually don't have the time to dwell on it, Brina. We really make a difference out

there; it's ironic in a way. When I decided to follow the footsteps of my parents and grandfather, everyone thought that I was nuts. They told me that I was wasting my time and talent with dusty stones and dead languages, that it served absolutely no purpose. Then, I told them that knowledge about the past could help to understand the future and that's still true. But what I do now is different. SG-1 and the other teams save the world on almost a regular basis. We've freed a lot of people from oppression. Science fiction doesn't even come close to what we see and live through almost every day. There are times when I'm frightened out of my wits, but it's well worth it. We gain so much."

"Now, you sound suspiciously like Consort Xena."

"Well, Brina, listen to the wisdom of age." He answered after having drained his bottle, and they both broke into giggles.

Blue eyes opened at the noise. She found herself outstretched on the couch, her head cradled in Janet's lap. The doctor's head was tilted backwards and she was snoring softly. "Danny," she whispered, "you're my witness. She does snore!"

"I don't hear anything, Sam. Don't forget, the woman you're talking about is in charge of my next physical - and believe me, I'm not brave enough to risk an encounter with her really, really..."

"Really big, honking needles. You're a wise man, space monkey." Janet mumbled still half asleep.

"Space monkey? Who did come up with this name?" The linguist asked.

"Jack O'Neill, our commanding officer," Samantha answered without giving up her comfortable position on Janet's legs, "another wise man afraid of a few measly needles."

"Not afraid enough to stop calling me names. Did you hear his last one? He really had the nerve to call me 'mini-Stalin'. Would you believe it? I rather prefer Napoleonic Power Monger." A suddenly very awake doctor said. "Colonel O'Neill has a very unique sense of humour. It's his way of dealing with things he cannot control."

"You know, he doesn't mean it in any derogatory way, Jan. It's also his way of showing respect without sullyng his reputation as a cynic and without compromising the chain of command."

"There's no need to plead his cause, Sammy. Sometimes, he really can get on one's nerves, he does on yours, but he's a great commanding officer, and an even better friend. And, whether I like it or not, he's a great father figure and a good playmate for Cassy." - 'And he's in love with my lover, but we won't mention that.' Janet thought to herself.

Samantha struggled to sit up and then asked. "Will you take Queen Gabrielle up on her offer, Sabrina?"

"I don't know yet. It's a big step and quite a handful to take in. I just learned that reality is far

more fantastic than even my wildest dreams. I learned that the Warrior Princess and her Bard are not figments of anyone's imagination, but living and breathing women who just happen to be more than two thousand years old. I was given a chance of a life time. And to make things even more confusing I learned that the Greek and Roman, Egyptian and Norse Gods are nothing more than a race of parasitical beings intent on enslaving all of mankind.

"To make things even weirder, I saw my peace-loving friend Daniel, the one who was at my side during more peace marches than I can remember, I saw sweet Daniel take down a muscle packed bully half a head taller than himself without breaking a sweat. And the biggest surprise of all: I find myself genuinely liking two members of the military. I think I have the right to be royally confused."

"I can at least partially relate to what you must be feeling right now," Janet answered. "Before I joined Stargate Command I was working as a virologist at the CDC. The work was challenging and I had a good time. Then I suddenly was reassigned, to take over as the CMO of a base at Cheyenne Mountain, presumably dedicated to deep space radar telemetry.

"At first I thought that I finally had pissed off the wrong member of the brass and that this was to be my punishment. When General Hammond told me what they were really doing, I was full of disbelief. I saw the Gate in action, and I still didn't believe it. I read the mission reports and didn't believe it. I had to deal with my first staff wound and almost the whole base being reduced to Neanderthals to begin to understand that I was in for the greatest adventure of my life."

Sabrina didn't answer immediately. "Do you think I could get to know them better before deciding, the queen and the consort?"

"I think that's a great idea, Sabrina. The queen will certainly approve. What about your job? When do you think you can get a few days off?"

"My job... It's nothing to worry about. Last week, I was notified that my contract would not be renewed. I don't feel any obligation towards any of them, not Director Tucker, and not my co-workers. They're not exactly a friendly bunch. I'll have to go back to get my personal belongings, notes and books, and a few artefacts, leave my resignation note, and that's all I owe them."

Sabrina answered and the blonde astrophysicist instinctively knew that the Amazons would have to teach her more than just about the queen's scrolls. They would have to help her get back her self-esteem and self-confidence.

"So, all we'll have to do is to wait for Consort Xena to call us on the cell she gave Sam and go and pack your things in the morning." Daniel said. "It's a quarter past three. We should all try and get some rest. I know we should go back to the hotel but I'm just too tired to move. I hope you don't mind when we crash here."

"Not a problem, Danny. Sam and Janet can snuggle on the couch and I'll get an air mattress and blanket for you."

"Thanks, Brina."

It was a short rest. The cell phone rang at five past six. Samantha got it on the second ring, with Janet still soundly asleep right in front of her.

"Yes, your majesty. - No, she hasn't decided yet. She asked for the chance to get to know you better, you and your people, before committing herself. - No, she wants to resign. - Yes, of course. Excellent idea. - Going the direct way might freak her out, your majesty. - I heed and obey, Queen Gabrielle. I'll do my best to prepare her. - Yes, I'll send word as soon as possible."

When she put the cell away, she was greeted by Janet's sleepily blinking eyes, Daniel adjusting his glasses and sitting up, and the sound of Sabrina rummaging in the kitchen. A few minutes later, Samantha eyed her companions over the rim of her coffee mug. Janet and Daniel as always celebrated their first mug with almost religious intensity, and Sabrina seemed to be no different. She knew from experience that she wouldn't get more than a grunt out of Janet, and not even as much from Daniel. On off-world missions Samantha always had a family-sized packet of espresso candies in her pocket to get him going.

All three of them were focused on the black brew right in front of them. For her, coffee was a way to stay awake when one had to, but for enjoyment she personally preferred tea.

"So, Sam, what did the queen say?" Daniel finally asked.

"She wants us to return to Gaia not later than midday local time; that gives us roughly seven hours to work with. She didn't go into any details but it has to do with some sort of ritual she wants us to participate in, Janet and me; and the rest of you to bear witness. They will activate the transporter on the moon station as soon as I give them the signal and we will return to Gaia through their gate. She also said that she will take care of your resignation letter, emphasising your worth for the Amazon Nation. It will also hold the door open should you decide to return. Cassy, Teal'c, and the Colonel will go through the gate before us. Do you think this will give you enough time, Sabrina?" Before the redhead could answer Samantha continued. "Queen Gabrielle also wants you to know that you can return to Earth whenever you want."

"Well, let's get started. I'll take a quick shower and start packing my notebooks and stuff. I don't have much of a wardrobe but to speed things up, I would be grateful if you, Janet and Sam, could pack a few changes of clothing for me. You know better what to expect with the weather on Gaia."

"It will be our pleasure, Sabrina." Janet answered with a smile, silently wishing that she would have had the foresight to bring a change of clothing. Taking a shower would be high on her list of things to do after their return, after properly treating Samantha's injuries, of course.

Chapter Nine: The Transference

Less than five hours later, they had packed up Sabrina's personal belongings from the Smithsonian and were back at her apartment. Samantha called the moon station and a few minutes later they were standing on another world, on Gaia. They were officially greeted by an honour guard under Master Niva's command and Consort Xena. Daniel and Sabrina were escorted to the guest palace where Hammond, O'Neill, Teal'c, Davis, and Cassandra were already waiting. Meanwhile Janet whisked her lover away to the infirmary to check on her and treat her ribs. Fresh sets of Amazon BDUs were waiting for them after their shower.

Sabrina immediately hit it off with Lieutenant Jessica Morgan who filled her in on what she already had read about the queen and her consort. Daniel felt comfortable at leaving her when the men shortly after midday were asked to return the next morning.

Cassandra at first had been clinging to Samantha and Janet - more shaken about her ordeal with Nirrti than she was ready to admit. They easily picked up on her uncharacteristic behaviour and wanted her to share their quarters, but the girl didn't take them up on their offer. She obviously sensed that they needed some time alone. Janet still insisted but finally had to relent when Aria offered to let Cassandra bunk with her and the other young Amazons in training. Jennifer Hailey also volunteered to keep an eye on Cassandra.

While Samantha had been in the infirmary and unconscious, Janet had filled the girl in on the changes in their relationship. They had planned to do it together but Cassandra had simply come out and asked her. She then had told her mother that it had been about time, and that this was what she had wanted from the beginning. It had turned out that on Hanka there was a legend very similar to the story of soulmates Gabrielle had told them. They had talked for several hours, about Samantha's and Janet's friendship with the queen and her consort, their special training, and finally how Janet was able to sense her lover's emotions.

This way, Janet and Samantha would have two hours of potential rest before meeting with Gabrielle and Xena as requested.

They had yet to get over the traumatic events of the last days: the kidnapping of Cassandra, Samantha's fight with Nirrti, and the thwarted robbery in a back street of Washington. So, they both felt the need to reconnect on a more basic level than the touches and glances they had been able to share until then. Janet especially felt the irrefutable need to intimately inspect the blonde's injuries. The check-up naturally and unsurprisingly turned into something else, exploring one another's body as if it had been for the first time.

Shortly before they were to meet with Xena and Gabrielle, Janet securely cradled in her taller lover's arms, she said. "It definitively is worth the risk."

"As Teal'c would say: I agree, Doctor Fraiser," Samantha whispered in her ear. "But what brought this on?"

"It was one of the questions Sabrina asked me yesterday. She asked me if loving you was worth

to risk ruining my career and yours. It is worth risking everything, Sammy."

"Do you know how much I love you? I love you more than my next breath. I love you more... I don't care if I never again can step through the Gate as long as you are at my side, as long as I get the chance to wake up with you in my arms every morning of every day for the rest of my life."

Janet had closed her eyes. The light that in her mind's eye was Samantha's love for her was shining brighter than ever before. She finally opened her dark brown eyes in wonder and they searched for her blue counterparts.

"You really mean it! Oh god, Sam. The Stargate is your child. Even before Daniel appeared on the playing field, it was you who made it happen - and you would give it up to be with me. I love you so much, Samantha Gabriella Carter."

Janet began to kiss her way down to Samantha's right nipple and rolled herself on top of her taller lover, careful to keep the weight of her upper body away from her lover's still bandaged rib cage. Though the Amazon bone knitters had done their job, the blonde still was sore. This time the doctor was going slowly, determined not to make her wince like before when the urgency to reconnect had overwhelmed common sense.

Samantha, however, had other ideas. She tucked the residual pain away in a part of her brain where it didn't interfere anymore, sending a silent thank you to Xena who had taught her how to perfect her technique. She turned the tables and started to kiss and suckle her way down Janet's body; lavishing special attention to the subtle curve leading from the waist to the hipbone and gently kissing the butterfly shaped birthmark, an extremely sensitive spot. It didn't take long to reach her real destination but to Janet it seemed like an eternity.

At the beginning of Sam's erotic assault she was close to switching into doctor mode, fearing the blonde would overexert herself. By now, all rational thought had left her. It was as if every square inch of her skin was a raw nerve ending that only could be soothed by her lover's touch.

Her orgasm began to build when Samantha touched the birthmark at her hip with the tip of her tongue, gently and slowly. She shivered when the tongue shortly thereafter entered her folds, eagerly licking up her juices. She undulated her hips to obtain better contact, being instantly rewarded by two lips closing around her unhooded clit. Her blood began to boil and roar in her ears; her back arched, three fingers entered her, her inner muscles clenched.

She pulled the taller woman towards her mouth, suddenly needing more contact. Samantha's hand quickly stroked her to another climax, their lips met and their eyes locked, forgetting everything around them. Two quick showers and a few minutes later and they were only fashionably late for their late lunch date with the queen and her consort.

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"Come in, take a seat. There's a lot to talk about. But first, how do you feel, Sam?"

"Still a bit sore when I think about it, but nothing I can't manage or a little TLC won't cure, your majesty." The blonde answered with a smile.

"That's good to hear, Sam. And how are you coping, Janet?" Xena asked.

"It wasn't I who was injured two days in a row, Xena. I'm fine."

"You're among friends, Janet. There's no need for pretence."

"Really, I'm fine, Gabrielle; I'm fine now. It's not the first time the ones I love have been in danger - and this time nothing serious happened. Cassandra hasn't been harmed, either physically or, it seems, mentally. She's a bit shaken up, but I know her well enough that I believe she will bounce back quickly with all the distractions and new experiences around here.

"Sam saved our baby and was hurt, but she will be fine soon. I was frightened to the core. I always am, but I'm all right now. Everything worked out - besides, what will happen to Nirrti? Will you call the Tok'ra to separate host and symbiote?"

"The Tok'ra know how to do this because we taught them how to do it." Xena and her Queen exchanged a short glance and Gabrielle gave her wife the go-ahead. "Nirrti and Larina are the main reason why we asked to talk to you this soon. I would have preferred to give the two of you more time to regroup, but Egeria has assured us that it has to be done before sunset tomorrow. Please, have a seat."

"I apologise for the frugal meal but it's part of the ritual we will ask you to take part in." On the table in front of the fireplace was a pitcher with water, four cups, and a platter of sliced bread.

"Now, you've gotten me really curious," Samantha muttered while taking her usual place on one of the cushions and pulling Janet towards her.

Gabrielle also took her seat in Xena's arms. "Yesterday, when we were called back to speak with Egeria... it was very special. Egeria usually only speaks to Gabrielle. My presence makes her uncomfortable because I'm responsible..."

A simple gesture kept the consort from saying whatever she had been trying to say, and looking in her eyes Samantha was sure that it would have been an admission of guilt. So, Gabrielle took over and began to relate what Egeria had told them. She even quoted her word for word.

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"At the beginning of the Tok'ra there were only a few of us, about three dozen. I didn't want to warn our enemies by creating too many dissidents at once. Now, Garshaw and Selmac are the

only ones left of this first generation.

"More than a thousand of your years ago, Sokar captured one of my first children. In an attempt to placate the System Lords, he handed her over to them, for questioning and torture. She and her host were strong, very strong.

"They refused to give up any of our operatives or locations or plans, regardless of how many times they tried. Even the sarcophagus didn't work as they predicted. She fought its effect time and time again, making the System Lords so frustrated that they decided to change tactics.

"Instead of trying to extract information, they manipulated the sarcophagus to erase her memories and create an entirely new personality. They made her one of them. The Tok'ra named 'Tirrin' became the Goa'uld 'Nirrti'."

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"Nirrti was Tok'ra? That's incredible. Is there any way to reverse the process?" Janet asked.

"According to Egeria there is," Gabrielle continued, "but we will need your help, Janet, yours and Sam's. You and I will only have to lend them support, keep them anchored in the here and now; Xena and Samantha will have to do the hard work. To reverse the change and bring back Tirrin's personality, they both will have to rely on what is left from their previous hosts. That's the only way Tirrin can be brought back."

"What does Larina want? It's her body we're talking about after all." Samantha wanted to know.

"We told her about her choices and she also knows about the risks. There's no question that Larina will be separated from the symbiote. The question is how. We can kill the symbiote or run the risk to it getting killed when we try to give it a new personality and let it join as a new member of the Tok'ra. The third option is to try and restore Tirrin's original personality and let her then change hosts. The Tok'ra movement would be given back one of their oldest members, one of their leaders.

"Larina chose the last option. And before you ask; the Tollans gave us the blueprints for the device they used on Ska'ara. The Tok'ra are on stand-by and will take her as soon as it's successfully done. They assured us that they would have a willing host ready and waiting."

"Why the deadline?"

"Egeria said that once Nirrti is captured, some sort of hypnotic conditioning would kick in. If she doesn't manage to set herself free in what roughly amounts to seventy-two of your hours, the conditioning will take over and she will try to kill the host. - And before you ask about the time she spent as Cronos' prisoner. We think that he killed her every two or three days and the time in the sarcophagus sort of reset the time frame. It's also possible that he found another way to

circumvent the conditioning, after all he had been one of the System Lords creating her in the first place.

"You said that Larina knows about the risks. What risks are we talking about?" Janet wanted to know.

"I don't want to sugar coat this, it won't be easy, healer. Nirrti will try everything she can to stay in control. She could damage the host's central nervous system; and if push comes to shove Xena and Samantha could be overwhelmed by her darkness. That's where we will come in." Gabrielle answered.

Silence fell over the room. Not the comfortable silence both pairs had learned to cherish during their evenings together but a silence laced with insecurities and questions. Finally, Samantha stood and asked. "May we speak in private, Janet and I?"

"Of course, Sam, why don't you go for a short walk or take some fresh air on the porch." Samantha helped Janet to her feet and they left through the back door.

"Take me in your arms and hold me, Jan. I don't know why but the whole thing scares me."

"You know, I'll be there for you, Sammy, whatever you decide to do. I love you. It's my job to guard your six."

"It's not for me alone to decide, Jan. Gabrielle said that Xena and I would need your help. You will ground me, and I love you too much to give up on this connection."

"You won't have to, baby. I'll be there for you, no matter what. You're the other half of my soul. I too will not give up on our love."

"So, we'll do it?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, my love. We'll do it. They didn't say anything, but I think that they really need our help. Don't ask me how I know but Gabrielle is worried about Xena."

"Xena can't be more affected by her former symbiote than I am, right?"

"Theoretically not, Sam, but I have a feeling she is. When you were unconscious, after Xena's fight with Nirrti, she immediately treated you with a healing device. She already had started when Gabrielle and I came running. She was looking straight ahead and I could see her eyes.

"Usually they are sky blue, just like yours; then they were dark blue and rapidly changed to black. She stopped and took a few steps back; then she fell on her knees, her eyes still as black as a dark night.

"The other Amazons seemed to give her a wide berth. Gabrielle slowly stepped closer, making sure to stay in her line of sight. Xena's eye colour began to change back to normal but it took as

long as I needed to take care of you."

"So, Xena is more susceptible than I am?"

"I don't know, Sam. All I know is that Gabrielle is afraid of something. Her body language speaks volumes."

"We'll find out soon enough. Let's go and tell them."

The preparations would last the rest of the day and the whole night. So, they first found Cassandra and let her know about their plans. They didn't want the teen to feel left out or left alone. Soon after, Xena and Samantha went to a sweat hut only a few minutes walk from the queen's forest home while Gabrielle and Janet prepared to spend their time at the temple.

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The next morning Major Davis, General Hammond, and the rest of SG-1 stepped through the Stargate on Gaia. A delegation of Elders escorted them to the edge of the forest where the temple was situated. The main entrance looked upon a plain filled with Amazons in traditional garb but without their masks. A small area had been cordoned off for the Elders and their guests, including the research team, Cassandra, and Sabrina.

After only a couple of minutes, Melosa, the head priestess of the Amazon Nation arrived. She stood on the top step and bowed her head - a simple gesture but more than enough to bring every single Amazon in attendance on her knees, as well as a considerable number of their visitors. It was a simple sign of respect.

"Members of the Amazon Nation, honoured guests, rise and bear witness."

Larina/Nirrti was led out of a side entrance of the temple. Her feet were hobbled and her hands firmly bound behind her back and attached to a belt around her waist. Her eyes were blazing fire, but a gag kept her from saying anything. In front of the temple was a marble plate, 12 x 12 feet, with different sets of iron rings carefully embedded. Two of the royal guards that escorted her forced her to her knees while the other two fixed her ankle cuffs to two of the rings. A set of chains also fixed her knees to the ground. Another chain went to her collar.

Drums started from seemingly out of nowhere. What at first had sounded rather random; soon became a strange but hypnotising rhythm, even Teal'c had a hard time resisting. The rhythm changed to something more regular and less mind-consuming.

Xena and Samantha approached the prisoner from opposite sides, and Jack O'Neill's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw his XO. Not that anyone could have blamed him; she was a sight to behold. She was wearing a simple dark blue tunic with ample cleavage and ending mid-thigh. Her feet were bare, and she seemed to radiate energy.

The rhythm and the volume of the drums changed again as soon as they reached the prisoner, standing on each side of the bound woman. Queen Gabrielle and Doctor Fraiser left the temple. They both bowed to the priestess and for a second time this morning O'Neill's breath almost stopped. The small doctor was wearing Amazon leathers that left little to the imagination and perfectly matched the colour of her hair. She stopped two short steps behind Samantha, the drums fell silent, and the priestess began to chant.

Daniel cocked his head in an effort to understand. The language sounded vaguely familiar and reminded him of ancient Greek, but at the same time it was totally different, much older, somehow. He cast a questioning glance to Sabrina who began to translate the words as if she had heard it her entire life.

"...here to witness the liberation of two souls, one trapped in her own body, the other one enslaved by the forces of evil for more than 10 centuries. Open your hearts for what will come and pave the way for those who will risk their own souls to get them back."

Xena and Samantha sank to their knees, and Janet stepped directly behind her lover and put her hands on the blonde's shoulders. On the other side Gabrielle did the same. Xena entwined the fingers of her right hand with Samantha's left behind Nirrti's back. The consort's left hand lay on the prisoner's forehead and Samanta's right on her heart. Nirrti tried to skirt away from the touch, but she was too tightly bound. A wave of energy seemed to pulse through her body.

"May Gaia give them strength," the priestess shouted.

As if in answer the Amazons began to chant. "Gaia protect them! Gaia protect them! Gaia protect them! Gaia protect them!" Again and again. The rhythm and the tone of their voices seemed to energise the whole plain.

O'Neill was vaguely aware of Daniel and Cassandra and a few others joining in - and despite his special ops training he had a hard time to resist the pull of the voices.

The sun was still climbing up and there was not a single cloud to be seen, but Jack was convinced that the light somehow focused on the five women in front of him, enveloping them in a bright light he instinctively associated with Asgard teleportation beams.

They stayed perfectly still. Janet's and Gabrielle's eyes were closed, a smile gracing their faces. Samantha's eyes were focused on her right hand, and squinting his own eyes he could see their colour change from the familiar sky blue to pale blue to white - and suddenly they were glowing as if she was possessed by a Goa'uld.

All his instincts commanded him to sprint over and somehow shake her out of it but he stayed on his seat, his trust in his second-in-command overruling his misgivings. Xena's eyes also began to glow, as did Nirrti's who pulled on her restraints to no avail.

They stayed like this for a long time, perfectly still - but Jack could see the strain it put on the

women. Sweat was pouring down Samantha's face and Janet's hands, hands that stayed calm under the most strenuous circumstances slightly began to shake. The Amazons still repeated their chant and he silently added his own mantra. "Let them succeed; let them be okay!"

Jack lost track of time while he concentrated his attention on the Goa'uld and its host.

Her breathing rhythm seemed to gradually slow down. Her eyes slowly closed, but she still fought her restraints. Xena's and Samantha's eyes now were also closed. After another half eternity, the priestess joined them and began to undo Nirrti's restraints beginning with the gag.

His hand automatically went to his side, but at the request of their hosts they had come unarmed. To Jack's utter surprise she didn't even try to get away or say something; she just held her position. The priestess returned to her spot at the entrance of the temple and the chanting abruptly stopped.

Finally the prisoner's breathing returned to a more normal rate and she opened her eyes, but he was sure that she wasn't really aware of her surroundings. She just stared straight ahead, her arms hanging lifelessly at her sides. The sun seemed to reflect in her eyes and once again they seemed to glow.

She put her left hand on top of Samantha's and her right on top of Xena's. They both opened their eyes and smiled at the other woman.

"I am Tirrin, child of Egeria. I am Tok'ra," she said.

Once again the voice of the priestess filled the whole plain and reached to the last row of the waiting women. "Tirrin of the Tok'ra, you are welcome on Gaia. May we speak with your host?"

"Of course," the woman lowered her head and looked up to the priestess. "I am Larina, Captain of the Royal Guard of Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation. I speak freely and without censure."

At this moment the silently watching Amazons jumped to their feet and began to shout. "Hail Larina! Hail Xena! Hail Samantha!"

Janet and Gabrielle helped their partners to stand and they in turn assisted the former Goa'uld. The priestess silenced the assembly with a small wave of her hand.

"Women of Gaia, visitors from Earth, today you had the honour to witness a moment in the history of the Amazon Nation that shall forever be remembered and revered.

"Today, one of our warriors has been returned to us, and our time of mourning has finally come to an end. Today, a great evil has been destroyed, never to return, thanks to the spiritual powers of two great warriors we are honoured to count among our numbers.

"Today, the child of Egeria has been freed. She who was forced to be Nirrti now once again is

Tirrin. She who has been tortured by the evil that is Goa'uld; she who has suffered for more than a thousand years now can once again take her life into her own hands.

"Today, Earth and Gaia for the first time in almost two thousand years have joined forces; what has been severed now can become one again. Keep this day in your hearts and in your minds forever. - And now please return to your assigned tasks. The party will begin at sundown."

Melosa joined the queen and the other women. "I'll send word to the Tok'ra to come two candlemarks before sunset. You all should try and get some sleep."

"Thank you, my friend. We'll hold the party at the guest palace; this way the men will have the opportunity to take part in the festivities. Please entertain General Hammond and his men while we rest. - Larina, Tirrin, do you want to rest in your own home or would you prefer to use one of our guest quarters?"

"The guest quarters will be fine, my Queen. I want to be my real self before I return home - no offence meant, Tirrin."

The tall woman lowered her head for a moment and the deeper, double-toned voice of the symbiote answered. "None taken, Larina. I understand better than you may think."

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Samantha and Janet returned to their room, and as soon as the door closed behind them Janet took the taller woman protectively in her arms. "Are you all right, Sammy-baby?"

"You saw what I saw, Jan. What do you think?" The blonde answered defensively.

"I only saw it, but you also felt it. That's a big difference, my love. I'm always there if you want to talk, and if you don't want to talk I'll simply hold you in my arms for as long as you need me to."

"I want to talk, my love. I need to talk but I don't know where to begin."

"Let's sit down, baby." Janet urged.

"We wouldn't have been able to do it without you and Gabrielle. You were our strength, our light. It would have been so easy to succumb to the darkness emanating from Nirrti. All these atrocities committed in the name of scientific research, and we had to see and feel it all before we reached what was left of Tirrin. She was so paralysed from everything she had to live through.

"We destroyed Nirrti just as sure as if she had been hit over and over again with a staff weapon. It was a team effort. It wasn't just Xena and I. Alone we probably wouldn't have stood a chance,

but we were not alone. You were there and Gabrielle and Larina and Jolinar and Artemis. - Jolinar wants to talk to you."

Samantha disentangled herself from Janet's embrace and closed her eyes. Her voice seemed slightly deeper than normal, but that could have been pure imagination on Janet's part.

"Thank you, Janet. Thank you for helping us today. I never met Tirrin. She had been changed before I joined the Tok'ra, but she is a legend among us. Thank you for taking care of Samantha. She needs your love like air to breathe. Your connection is so strong. Thank you for loving her."

When Samantha once again opened her eyes, Janet stared at her open-mouthed. "Janet, are you all right?" No reaction. "Janet, speak to me; look at me, please!"

"What the hell just happened? How did she control you? Xena said she wouldn't be able to do something like this. We have to do something to get her out of you."

Samantha closed her fingers around Janet's smaller hands and drew her closer to her body until she practically cradled her in her lap. "Everything's all right, Jan. Jolinar didn't control me. I allowed her to speak. She's no threat, not now, not ever. I'm still me, and I love you. She was right, you know, I need your love even more than I need air to breathe."

"But how did it work? Why..."

"Why did her memories not so long ago cause me pain and confusion, and now it is almost as if she were still within me?" Janet nodded. "I can't explain it in medical terms but technically speaking, Jolinar is nothing more than an erased memory block on a hard drive. The information it contained is still there, but it can no longer be accessed. After her death I tried to make sure that the memory stayed this way. However, a human mind is no hard drive which simply needs reformatting to once again work properly.

"Bits and pieces of her memories began to pop up every now and again, and I decided to use them. Xena's lessons and your help gave me the courage to run some sort of backup program and salvage the erased memory blocks."

"And now, they are in a special folder, ready for easy access?"

"In a way, yes. There isn't a second voice in my head or something, giving her two-cents to everything, but now I can easily access her memories if I want to. I no longer fear her influence."

Janet still didn't look entirely convinced.

"I'm sorry for not explaining myself better, my love. It's entirely possible that my mind conjured the image of speaking with Jolinar as an unconscious filter to protect me from the darker part of her memories. It's possible that 'letting' her speak is nothing more than my own unconscious making itself known. Is it really important to you to find out? I'll speak with a shrink if you want me to." Samantha said with earnest.

Janet kissed her taller lover, and when she saw the scared expression in her eyes, there no longer was any doubt for her.

"I love you, Sam. And no, it's not important. Jolinar gave her life for you. In a way it's comforting to know that some part of her survived. Let's go and get some sleep, my love. We both need it, and this sure will be one hell of a party."

Samantha summoned her puppy dog look. "No, Sammy-baby, we can't stay away and hide. All of our friends will be there. But we'll try to make it an early evening, I promise."

They quickly discarded their clothing and slipped under the light summer comforter, the almost sleepless nights and the physical and emotional stress of the last days finally catching up with them.

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One hell of a party, indeed!

Samantha had fun, though Janet insisted that she kept to juices and water because she still was on light painkillers. Observing how O'Neill wasted his best pick-up lines on clearly disinterested Amazons was almost as hilarious as Daniel trying to learn one of the easier dances. Shortly after midnight, however, she needed a break and left the guest palace to seek a few minutes of peace and quiet. All in all this evening on a scale from one to ten definitively rated an eight in weirdness, at least an eight.

A few minutes before the scheduled arrival of the Tok'ra Samantha and Janet had sought out the rest of SG-1, to tell Teal'c and O'Neill about their new relationship.

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Janet felt slightly uneasy at the prospect because she knew of Jack's feelings for his second-in-command, but SG-1 was more than a team, in every aspect but blood they were a real family. They had the right to know.

Samantha had mentally practised what she wanted to say but the words simply refused to leave her mouth when she stood in front of her best friends. So, Janet took over and crossed her fingers that Jack's reaction wouldn't hurt her lover too much.

"Well, it was pretty obvious after the show you put on in a certain hotel room in Washington, and I have to say it took the two of you long enough to figure it out. More than three years is a damned long time to finally admit what everyone else could see right from the beginning. And they tell me that you're our resident genius, Carter."

"Indeed, Major Carter." Teal'c said with something as close to a smile as Janet had ever seen him.

The blonde stared at them for a moment and then smiled. "So, who won the pot?"

"No one. We were not patient enough and gave up on you." Daniel chimed in.

"That would be a first. Daniel Jackson, remember I'm the one with the needles. So, who won and how much?" Janet asked.

"No can tell; it was anonymous, but we're talking about almost seven hundred bucks, the biggest pot ever." O'Neill answered.

Samantha sought Teal'c's eyes, but he only imperceptibly raised his eyebrow.

Then their attention was drawn to the arrival of an al'kesh landing on the left side of the guest palace. The queen and her consort left the Guest Palace in the company of General Hammond. All three of them were wearing ceremonial garb; the general was in dress blues, Gabrielle in leathers and mask, and Xena in her wide leather trousers and dress shirt.

Samantha and Janet looked at each other. In preparation for the party they had donned comfortable jeans. Janet's were light blue combined with a white shirt and a simple, purple cardigan draped over her shoulders. Samantha's jeans were dark grey with a long sleeved sweatshirt in pink and white. The men also wore civvies.

When the queen and the others were about fifty paces from the ship, the door finally opened and Garshaw/Yussef stepped out, followed by Selmac/Jacob and a young, doe-eyed woman, soon to be Tirrin's new host. The blond soldier instinctively wanted to go and hug her father, but one of Xena's hand signals held her back.

For a couple of minutes they exchanged formalities. To Janet they all looked rather tense. Then Garshaw's host took control and everything changed. She took two steps forward and then lowered herself on her right knee. "My queen..."

"Rise, Yussef, my child. It's good to see you again."

"It's been too long, my second mother." The woman answered while standing up and giving the smaller woman a heartfelt hug that was willingly returned. Then she turned to Xena and was engulfed in the taller woman's arms.

"Will we have time to talk?"

"We have orders to return as soon as possible. The High Council is anxious to meet Tirrin." Yussef answered before Garshaw took over. "I'm sorry, Xena. We have to return as soon as possible. Having Tirrin back will considerably change the balance of power in the High Council.

Some of us count on her strategic mind, others on her scientific knowledge, others on her wisdom and compassion.

"May I introduce, Queen Gabrielle, Consort Xena. This is Gabro. She volunteered to blend with Tirrin."

The young woman stepped at Garshaw's side. "I'm honoured to meet those who saved my symbiote-to-be."

"We are honoured to meet someone willing to share her life and her mind." Xena answered. She turned her head towards Samantha and Janet and simply nodded. When they had joined the small group she continued. "May I introduce Samantha Carter and Janet Fraiser. It was their help that made our endeavour successful."

The young woman moved to bow to them, but Samantha stopped her. "No, there's no need. We are humbled that we have been able to help. May I ask a question?" Gabro nodded. "I learned that there are three kinds of humans willing to blend with a Tok'ra. Those mortally ill, as my father was, those acting out of hatred and a need for revenge, and those fighting the Goa'uld because it is the right thing to do. I don't want to offend you in any way, but why do you want to be blended?"

"Sokar killed my family; he destroyed the whole planet, except for a few of us. He left us alive to bear witness of his greatness. He used us as an example when coming to new a planet. Sokar may be dead, but no one should be forced to live through something like this. So, I guess I'm part of the second group, Samantha Carter."

"No, you are not. Garshaw and Selmac wouldn't have chosen you if hatred and revenge were all there is on your mind." Larina said joining the group from the direction of the guest palace with the weapons' master at her side. "My mate Niva requests the honour to guard the transference."

"Of course." Gabro said with a small bow and the three of them walked towards a tent at the edge of the forest.

When the flaps of the tent closed behind them Jacob Carter for the first time made his presence known. He hugged his daughter and then greeted the others, beginning with General Hammond. "The transference will take some time. Why don't you seize the chance to have a chat with Queen Gabrielle, Yussef?"

"Good idea, Jacob. If you are agreeable, my queen?"

"Let's go for a walk. Xena would you entertain our guests?"

"It will be my pleasure, my Queen." She answered and followed them with her eyes for a long time before turning her attention back to the others. "Doctor Jackson, you look like you have a lot of questions."



"It's noth..., I'm confused, your highness. The Tok'ra practically told us to stay away from the Amazons, but what I just witnessed didn't look like there was much tension or mistrust."

"The message to the SGC," Selmac answered for Xena, "was sent without Garshaw's or my consent, with a majority of one vote."

"As you know almost all Tok'ra are the children of Egeria, but of the first generation only two are left, now three, Garshaw, Tirrin, and myself. The others are much younger and they resent the Amazons and their rulers because our mother, our creator chose them over us."

"Some two hundred years ago, a group of renegade Tok'ra tried to abduct her. They wanted her to create another generation to gain strength in numbers." Xena said.

"Renegade Tok'ra? Doesn't that make them Goa'uld?" Jack wondered.

"No," Selmac answered. "They just thought that our long term approach wasn't working and that we lost ourselves in politics instead of preparing for war. Personally, I think that the answer is somewhere in the middle, as does Garshaw and the High Councillor Per'sus. At the moment we are slightly outnumbered. It's as Garshaw said, Tirrin's return will change the balance of power."

Silence fell over the group. "It's not only about Egeria. Some of the Tok'ra resent the queen and the consort because they are immortal, and because they cannot be used as hosts." Samantha suddenly said. "Anise is one of them."

"That's why she is not welcome on Gaia. The last time she was here, she sneaked into our bedroom to try and get a sample of Gabrielle's blood."

"I remember," Selmac continued, "she ended up with the needle in her behind and was unceremoniously tossed through the wormhole. This story is the only thing that keeps Jacob from throttling her whenever she comes up with one of her hair-brained plans."

"She wasn't tossed, Selmac. The Queen simply had her escorted to Athena's ring," the consort corrected him with mock indignation.

"Oh, yes, escorted - and made her land face first in the sand."

"Can I help it when she's clumsy and stumbles over my foot when stepping through Athena's Ring?" The tall warrior asked innocently.

The wry humour made them change topics to less serious matters and for the next candlemark and a half they talked and bantered after having made themselves comfortable on the sun dried grass and accepting some refreshments. The guest palace was bustling with party preparations, so they unanimously had opted to stay out of the way.

Only a few candledrops after Queen Gabrielle and Garshaw/Yussef had joined them the flaps of the tent opened. Larina and Gabra stepped out. The Amazon immediately took her bondmate in

her arms and kissed her soundly. By the time the three of them reached the queen's party the others were back on their feet.

Larina knelt in front of the Royals. "Request permission to skip the party, your majesty."

"Permission granted. Go and reconnect with your wife, but don't forget, whenever you need to talk, Xena and I will listen."

"Thank you, my Queen." She rose and they turned towards the village.

"Queen Gabrielle, Consort Xena, Samantha Carter, Janet Fraiser, please accept my heartfelt thanks for making this blending possible." Gabro said in her own voice. "Tirrin and I will always be in your debt. The transference was very taxing for her, and she still is resting, but she hopes to have the opportunity to thank you personally one day soon."

"It will be our pleasure to have you visit whenever it suits you." The Queen answered.

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They said their good-byes, but then Jacob Carter turned around. "Samantha, may I have a word?"

"Of course, Selmac." They took a few steps away from the others to have a modicum of privacy. "Is something wrong with my father?"

"No, not really. He's angry right now, very angry but given time, I'll get him to calm down."

Samantha managed to keep her internal reaction from showing on her face. She could have feigned ignorance, but she had to know. "So, he knows about Janet and me?"

"Yes, he knows. He has shown signs of being judgmental in the past, but I never expected such a strong reaction when I told him. He should be glad that his daughter finally has found the other half of her soul." Seeing the blonde's deer-in-the-headlights expression, Selmac quietly chuckled. "Oh, please, don't look at me as if I have suddenly grown two additional heads - and don't worry. Not everyone can see your connection, but it's obvious if you know what to look for."

"Your father won't make any problems for you, not on Earth, not elsewhere. I will work on him, and he will come around. He might be stubborn, but I am Tok'ra, I know how to wait things out. One day you will have his blessing."

"Please don't get yourself into trouble with my father. I knew how he would react. When I turned eighteen I told him that I was gay, and he didn't speak to me for the next three years. I tried to live up to his expectations and got engaged."

"What I have with Janet is too important for me to back off. I fear he will not either. I can live

with his wrath." She answered softly, a mixture of resignation and determination in her voice.

"You won't have to, Samantha; that's a promise. Your father is proud and stubborn, but he also is proud of you, and he loves you with every fibre of his heart. He will come around. I have to go now."

"Thank you for telling me, Selmac. May the stars shine on your success."

"We never shared that specific saying with the Tau'ri." Selmac said with surprise.

"Consort Xena taught me how to better communicate with what is left of Jolinar. I would be grateful if you kept this to yourself. The High Council used my memories of her once. I don't want that to happen again."

"I will honour your request, Samantha."

"Thank you, Selmac."

Janet joined her lover, immediately after Selmac/Jacob had left her. Her lover's body language told her that this was not good news, and she also felt that Samantha was in emotional pain. The blonde visibly relaxed when she felt Janet's hand at the small of her back. "Let's go for a walk, Sammy-baby."

As soon as they were in the forest and out of sight, Janet found a comfortable spot at the base of an old oak tree and took her lover protectively in her arms.

One and a half candlemarks later, with the party already in full swing, Samantha was composed enough to return and participate. The doctor hadn't been able to put all her worries to rest, but she was much calmer now. The knowledge that she loved Janet and was loved by her, unconditionally, was all she really needed.

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A voice snapped her back to the here and now. "Samantha Carter, I don't want to disturb you in your contemplation but there's something I have to say."

"You didn't disturb me. Go ahead. What can I do for you?"

The captain of the Royal Guard knelt down in front of her. "Major Carter, I came to apologise for what I did to you while Nirrti was in my body. I hurt you and yet you helped to save Tirrin and me. I wanted you to know that I already notified the queen and my commanding officer. I want to pay for what I did to you, but they both said that pressing charges would be entirely up to you. So, please, let justice be served." The woman said and then lowered her eyes to the ground.

"Please stand up, Larina. It wasn't you that hurt me. You were not in control. I know how that feels, and I know it won't make you feel less guilty, but it's the truth."

"Nirrti used my fighting skills, and Amazon warriors are trained to withstand mental controlling. I am responsible, and have to pay for what I did to you and what I almost did to the girl." Larina answered stubbornly, never moving a muscle.

"Have a seat next to me, would you? I want to tell you a story." Samantha said while sitting down and leaning back against the wall. Larina reluctantly complied. "A couple of years ago the Goa'uld attacked a peaceful world named Nasyia. They had been left alone for more than three hundred years, and we hadn't been there long enough to attract any attention. Deathgliders were over our heads, trying to kill as many people as possible. I was trying to revive one of the Nasyian men when I suddenly found myself a prisoner in my own body.

"I'm a soldier; I too was trained to fight outside influences, but there was nothing I could do. I lied to my commanding officer, to my friends. I threatened an innocent child, a child I love as if she were my own. I scared her so badly. No, Jolinar scared her but I felt guilty. I tried to reason with what I thought was a Goa'uld, to bargain with it, but she couldn't be swayed.

"I later learned that she simply had been too afraid to tell me the truth from the beginning, and she gave her life to save mine in the end.

"Cassandra, the child I threatened, has forgiven me a long time ago, but even now there are moments when I can't help but feel guilty for what I did to her. No amount of punishment will ever change this, and if I insisted on being punished it would belittle Cassandra's and my friend's forgiveness. Of course they still insist that there's nothing to forgive.

"I think it is all a question of perspectives. Now, it's your turn to decide what point of view you want to take, Larina."

"I know that's what Consort Xena said, but I had to try; and I still think that I somehow should pay for what my body did during all these moons." Larina answered.

"Master Niva will help you to live with your memories. But there's something you could do for me, Captain. I'd consider it an honour if you would consent to become my teacher. Next to Consort Xena and Master Niva, you're the best fighter I have ever seen. I want to avoid something like this happening again."

"I'd be honoured to be counted among your teachers, Samantha Carter. You have given me a lot to think about. If you'll excuse me, there's someone else waiting to speak to you."

Samantha looked towards the light coming out of the doorway, outlining a very familiar figure. She jumped to her feet and stood at attention. "General Hammond, Sir!"

"Relax, Samantha. The general is off-duty."

"Uncle George?"

"Yes, little one. I just wanted you to know that I approve of your choice. Janet Fraiser is all I ever wanted the partner of my goddaughter to be. She's beautiful, smart, caring, cunning, compassionate, strong enough to let you know when you're out of line, understanding enough to forgive you when you still get carried away, wise enough to know when to rely on your strength. From the very beginning her friendship has been good for you, Sam, and your love will make you a better and stronger person. Even blowing up a star can't compare to true love. I'm happy for both of you."

"Thank you, Uncle George, but how did you find out?" The blonde asked visibly stunned.

"Samantha, give me some credit here. I've known you all your life, how could I miss something as important as you falling in love. I knew that you were in love with her before you even suspected, and I spent enough time waiting with her in the control room for you to come back from a mission to know that the feeling was mutual. I knew when you came back to the SGC for the first time.

"It was only a question of time. Doctor Fraiser cares for all her patients. She sits with all her critical patients, but she only sings for you. Last time it took a direct order and Teal'c as an escort to pry her away from your bedside to get some rest herself."

"What about the SGC? What about Air Force regulations?"

"Everyone at the SGC knows that the two of you are close friends, best friends even. As long as you don't get caught making out in one of the storage closets I don't see any problems. The general won't ask and you won't tell."

Samantha blinked in surprise and a heartbeat later one of her rare smiles spread over her face.

"So, what do you intend to do with your win, Uncle George?"

"Win? As the commanding officer of the SGC I do not condone betting, young lady." He said with a smile. "Now, go and get back to your love before she decides to dance with someone else. You've done enough sulking in the dark for one night."

All the tall blonde could think of doing was to give the older man a hug and whisper. "Thank you, Uncle George. Your blessing means a lot to me."

"You're welcome, little one." He answered; and then walked towards the path leading to the Stargate where a group of people already were waiting for him, including a pouting Colonel Jack O'Neill who thought that he just was cheated out of the better part of the festivities.

Five out of six, she thought when she started back towards the party, not bad as a track record, but still it had been a weird evening, far exceeding an eight. This bordered on 9.5 - at least.

For a few seconds, she thought about topping it with a slow, sensual dance with her lover, but

when she found Janet half asleep next to a bonfire they both decided to call it a night. They quickly fell asleep, after making sure that the alarm was set for 08:30 the next morning.

A message from the queen had asked them to come to breakfast at ten. As after every full scale Amazon celebration there wouldn't be much work done the next day; so Samantha didn't feel guilty about missing her training's session - especially since she was convinced that the weapons' master had more important and more pleasurable things to do.

## **Chapter Ten: Shadows of the Past**

They were right on time and breakfast was waiting for them on the back porch. They talked about the party and finally Janet asked about Yussef. "You two seem very close, Gabrielle."

"It's been more than twenty years since we last had the opportunity to talk privately. It's a simple story: We found her some 300 years ago when she was barely more than a toddler. Her parents were dead and we raised her. She became a member of the Royal Guard and on one of our rare joint missions with the Tok'ra, Garshaw's former host was wounded beyond her ability to heal her. Yussef volunteered."

The Queen's answer lacked her usual detail and thoroughness. This led the two Air Force Officers to believe that there was a lot more to this story than she was ready to tell. "I didn't want to bring up hurtful memories, Queen Gabrielle."

"You didn't, Janet. In fact we asked you to come here because we think that you deserve to know the whole story about what happened yesterday, and why it worked. In a way Yussef is a part of this story. I suggest we go inside and make ourselves comfortable." Xena said.

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They took their usual seats to the right and left of the unlit fireplace with Gabrielle nestled in Xena's arms and Samantha cradling Janet. They had spent many evenings this way, talking about SG-1's missions and Amazon history, about their days in the infirmary and the laboratories. They found that there were very few topics they couldn't discuss; sometimes very passionately.

"Xena usually is not one for many words; that's more my domain. But today my cinsists that she has to be the one telling the story that has to be told."

"Gabrielle had just found Yussef. She was three years old and alone in a big city where no one cared if she lived or died. Her mother had died a couple of days earlier, and she was aimlessly wandering the streets. She clung to Gabrielle as if she were a lifeline. We couldn't take away her

pain, but we could offer her a new life; so we brought her back to Gaia.

"Our annual trip to the other planets was about to begin, but Yussef was still very shy with strangers; so we decided that for once I would go without the queen. All these new faces and places would be too disturbing, too frightening for the girl.

"We had a new scout ship, faster than anything the Goa'uld ever had, and I was eager to test its flight capabilities. At first I wanted to go alone. I was sure that I would be able to deal with any threats without help. On a whim Athena offered to come with me. She told me that she had a case of cabin fever.

"The trip went smoothly and we were way ahead of schedule. On the way back to Gaia we received a distress signal from the Tok'ra. Artemis had a bad feeling about it, but Athena and I wanted to help. We intercepted the ship and ran into an ambush. We escaped but Athena was severely injured." Xena said with pain in her voice.

Gabrielle subtly changed her position, allowing her to put a comforting hand on her wife's back. "Artemis also was wounded and too weak to heal her host. She needed a new host and I was the only one available. We both knew that it could only be a temporary solution because my body sooner or later would reject the symbiote due to the changes she herself had made in my physiology and body chemistry.

"If I hadn't been too arrogant to take a couple of guards, they never would have been able to harm Athena.

"As soon as the transference was made, Athena's body changed. She became pure, white energy and simply disappeared. Artemis' knowledge and feelings were overwhelming for me.

"I could feel the pain Athena's passing caused her, and I could feel her anger at having walked into an ambush - her growing need for revenge. It was a feeling I could relate to and it grew stronger every minute, fuelled by my own darkness.

"Artemis has always been a warrior, but she was a warrior without darkness in her heart or her soul. She enjoyed her skills, but she always tried not to kill. This changed the moment she blended with me.

"The darkness in my soul was poisoning her, step by step. I could feel it growing inside of me and of her, and I knew that I would lose the battle. It was an all too familiar feeling.

"I programmed an automated course back to Gaia, disabled my access codes, left a note, and locked myself in one of the storage rooms." The raven haired woman fell silent.

"When the ship landed..." Gabrielle continued.

"Please, my love. I have to tell this story." Xena pleaded.

"I know, Xena, but I don't have to like it. Take your time." Gabrielle answered.

"By the time the ship arrived on Gaia I had reverted back to what I once was: Xena, Destroyer of Nations. There was no love and no compassion left in me, only the desire to kill all those responsible for Athena's death. I wanted revenge.

"After sedating me and getting me off the ship, Gabrielle and Egeria were successful in separating my body from the symbiote but the darkness was not easily overcome. Artemis was as helpless against it as I was, but she at least tried to fight it.

"I didn't; I greeted the darkness like an old friend, the old friend it is for me. Artemis was held in a suspension tank, but Egeria had no way to bring her old personality back. So, she erased her memory and gave her a new Tok'ra identity."

"Jolinar!" Samantha said slightly stunned. "That's why the thing with Tirrin worked. Artemis and Jolinar did it. Xena and I were only along for the ride."

"No, Samantha, you're wrong. When Egeria first explained to us what had to be done, Xena and I thought that we could handle it alone. We didn't want you in harm's way. She warned us that Nirrti's darkness was too strong for Xena to face alone, even with my help. She could have fallen prey to it once again. We all were needed to succeed. You were far more than just along for the ride. Please, my love, let me tell the rest." Gabrielle asked.

"No, Gabrielle. It's my fault and my shame, so it also is my duty to talk about it. It may have happened 300 years ago, but it still burns in my soul. And I have to do this the right way."

The tall woman closed her eyes for a moment and scooted out from behind her wife. She knelt with her back to the fireplace, her knees slightly apart, and her hands with the palms upwards on top of her knees.

Over the last few weeks Samantha had learned enough about Amazon ways and customs to let her heart hurt at the sight of the formidable warrior in such a position of servitude. Her eyes quickly wandered towards the queen whose face spoke loudly of her misgivings and the pain she felt at her partner's self-humiliation.

"I speak as one who has sinned against the Amazon Nation. I speak as one who has sinned against her queen, and against her wife. I speak as one who has dishonoured herself. Hear the story of my shame."

"Xena, this isn't necessary." Janet said unable to stand it any longer.

"It is, Janet. It's necessary for both of you. In time you will understand. Let me do what has to be done." The kneeling woman answered.

There was so much pain in her eyes; every instinct and every nerve ending in her body told Janet to somehow make it stop. However, after having witnessed Samantha dealing with the aftermath



of Jolinar's actions and her sacrifice, she knew that sometimes talking, confessing was the only way to ease the burden of guilt.

"I think I understand, your highness. Accept my apologies for the delay."

Xena took a deep breath and then looked directly at Samantha and Janet while speaking. "Hear the story of my shame!

"From the very beginning there was darkness in my soul. After my brother died, Ares used that darkness and I became a warlord. I was barely alive when Caesar put me on a cross. I only survived because Ares left his host and joined with me. He didn't try to control me, but instead fuelled my anger and darkness. He revelled in my ruthlessness and whispered encouragements to me.

"I left Greece and headed East. At the time I was nothing more than a killing machine, that's all I was interested in. One day I met a woman and wanted to kill her, but without even trying she beat me, and only a few days later she saved my life and sent Ares running. She touched me and he left my body and fled into one of my soldiers - though at the time I didn't understand what had happened to me."

"Ares was gone, but the darkness in my soul lingered as strong as before. Over the years I learned to control it. Usually the darkness in my soul only makes itself known when I have to fight a battle or use the healing device.

"By the time we had arrived back at Gaia the darkness had won, and it became even stronger when I was separated from the symbiote. Despite everything Artemis' strength had held it at bay.

"Everything for which I had fought for hundreds of years; everything I held sacred was forgotten. Everything I had felt, everything I stood for all of a sudden didn't have any worth anymore. There was only one dominant thought in my mind: I wanted revenge.

"I wanted to kill the ones responsible for setting the trap that had killed Athena and ultimately Artemis. I wanted to kill them with my bare hands and I didn't care what I would have to do to achieve this goal. Gabrielle felt the darkness in my heart, and she tried to snap me out of it by telling me about our past, our love, our people, but I was blind to the light she offered.

"They held me prisoner, but when I stopped threatening the queen and stopped trying to escape, the guards became complacent, and I was able to get free. I took the queen hostage and forced the Royal Guard to follow my command. We found the trail of the cargo ship and tracked them to a trading outpost, neutral territory. Three of our attackers were still alive. I killed two of them and tortured the last. They were head-hunters, free lancers. Shiva, a minor Goa'uld with aspirations of becoming a System Lord, had put a price out for every Tok'ra or supporter of the Tok'ra. We were just a chance hit and I held him responsible.

"His home planet was easy to find and he obviously felt very safe there. It was almost too easy to get my hands on him; there was no satisfaction in it for me at all. We simply walked in his palace

and brought him to our ship via a ring transporter. His personal guard was not worth the price of their weapons. I killed them, and then slowly began to torture him; nothing any Ashrak ever did to his victims comes close to what I made him endure. I literally cut him to pieces. Gabrielle pleaded with me. She wanted me to back off, but I didn't listen.

"He was dead, but my need for revenge was far from satisfied. It still burned in my soul, and I would have done everything to satisfy it. So, I set out to destroy every sign that he ever existed. We captured a Ha'tac belonging to Ra and used it to destroy every temple ever erected in his name; I didn't care how many people were in there. Sometimes it was an air raid; sometimes we went down to a planet and planted a bomb. The others refused at first. Their thirst for revenge had been assuaged by the death of the head-hunters and the end of Shiva. They only complied when I threatened to kill Gabrielle the same way I had killed Shiva.

"Eleven planets all but shot to ruins, hundreds of people dead, dozens killed by my own hands. We left Ra's ship in orbit of the main planet and returned to Gaia.

"The only good it did was that Shiva's sons Ganesha and Karttikeya held Ra responsible, and destroyed a big part of his fleet, to the point of threatening his position as a System Lord."

The tall warrior fell silent and a single glance at the queen's face told the other women that the worst was yet to come. Xena took another deep breath but now her eyes refused to meet anyone else's in the room.

"When we returned to Gaia three squadrons were ready to overwhelm me and fight for the liberty of their queen. They were willing to die in order to save her but Gabrielle stopped them. She ordered them to leave us alone and not to interfere, under any circumstances.

"This house didn't exist yet; in its place was a small hut for honeymoons and spiritual retreats. I brought her here and kept her as my slave. All I did was drink and drill. When I was training, I had her restrained and always in my line of sight. She was nothing more than an object for me, a possession, something to command. Gabrielle daily tried to reach me; she tried to get me to see reason, to get me to remember our love.

"In time I began to listen and to remember. I remembered the good times; all the centuries we stood together, all the times we made love, but I couldn't stand it. One night I woke up, and I didn't see the plaything, the slave. Instead I saw someone not deterred by the hardships I put her through. She told me daily that she still loved me and after a fortnight I bolted.

"I also remembered the bad times and the sacrifices she'd made, when she had jumped down a lava pit, trying to save my life, when I had dragged her behind a horse, when we found ourselves side by side on a Roman cross. I couldn't stand it any longer. I knew I didn't deserve her. I took the cargo ship and left. It was hard to accept what I had allowed myself to become but I also couldn't stay away for long. So, I offered myself up to Amazon justice."

She raised her eyes from the ground and looked straight at Samantha and Janet.

"No amount of punishment can wash away my guilt or my shame. These feelings are a part of who I am and they always will be, just as much as I still feel guilty for the first village I ever raided. The darkness is an integral part of me. Your participation made it easier for me to withstand the temptation of darkness. I'll always be in your debt."

"It was our honour to help, your highness." Samantha answered. "We know of the temptation to follow the call for revenge, and to act out against those we love when we're hurt. What happened then will in no way influence our respect for you."

"If it does anything, your confession elevates our respect. Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us, your highness." Janet confirmed and emphasised her lover's words.

Xena looked at both of them with unbelieving eyes. "Please, excuse me!" She practically fled the room and silence fell.

Samantha's eyes were locked on the closing door for what seemed to Janet a long time. The blond head turned and the doctor only nodded. "Where can I find her, Queen Gabrielle?"

"Either at the training grounds or at the smithy. Physical exertion has always been her favourite way to deal with emotional stress."

"I'll check the smithy first. If you would excuse me, your majesty." The queen nodded, Samantha kissed her partner and left the house. Janet was hard on her heels when Gabrielle called her back.

"My place is with Sam." Janet said defiantly, but still stopped dead in her tracks.

"Not this time, Janet. Give them some space; this is a warrior thing. Xena won't be able to let go of her old demons, if she doesn't get the chance to tell the parts of the story she has, if not totally left out, glossed over. The fortnight we spent at the cabin in retrospect was a lot harder on her than it was on me.

"The whole time she held me captive, I knew that she never would really hurt me. I knew that her love for me was stronger than all the darkness in the universe. I knew that eventually she would come back to me. I could see the light of her love burning brightly behind a veil of darkness. I knew that the Xena I loved would come back to me sooner or later. She didn't have my confidence. She has come a long way, but she still is terrified that one day she once again could lose control.

"Xena has to talk about it, and she won't do it in front of you or me, but chances are that she will open up for Samantha. They are two of a kind, and since this whole thing happened my beloved wife never found the right person to whom she could speak. I hope she does now. The fortnight she held me captive still haunts her in her dreams."

"Why do warriors always have to be this irrational, Gabrielle?"

"It's a question of perspectives, Janet. We both know how to defend ourselves, but we never will

be warriors at heart. What is irrational for us; makes perfect sense for them. They never would even think to reconsider. Remember your first evening on Gaia, the confrontation between Sam and Niva?"

"Of course I do. I was so scared for Sam, and at the same time I was so angry. I was sure that there would have been another way than just fighting it out. I was sure I could have talked Master Niva out of it." The brunette fell silent for a moment. "And at the same time I was bursting with pride at her willingness to defend me."

"So, you see, it's all a question of perspectives. Give them the time they need." Gabrielle answered.

They sat in silence for a few minutes then Gabrielle said. "Let's go for a walk and try and find your daughter. I'd like to get to know her better. Sam and Xena will be back when they are ready. You probably will feel a big deal of unease over the day, but Sam will have to see this through on her own."

"What are you talking about, Gabrielle?" Janet's voice was definitively alarmed by now.

"I don't know for sure, but I think a few of the things Xena said hit a bit too close to home for your love. She will tell you; don't worry."

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Xena was already at the smithy, trying to get the smouldering fire to burn hotter.

"I'll get the bellows." Sam said.

They worked together in companionable silence. She allowed herself to succumb to the rhythm of the work and the heat. Only a couple of candelmarks later it occurred to Samantha how strange this really was. She never before had been in a smithy and yet there seemed to be no need for instructions or orders. She simply knew what she had to do. It was eerie.

In the early afternoon candelmarks Xena stopped. "There's nothing more we can do right now. The blade has to cool out before we can work on it again. Let's go and take a bath."

"A bath sounds wonderful. I definitively could use it. Why do you need a new sword? Are there still uses for swords in a battle? I mean no offence, but you used guns and zats and the ribbon device against Nirrti, not swords or bows. Conflicts nowadays usually require long range weapons."

"Never go into an unknown situation without having at least a faint idea of what to expect. With Nirrti, we thought we knew exactly what to expect."

"You knew about Anubis' new warriors? And you didn't tell us?"

"No, of course not. You're right. We only thought that we knew what to expect. I initially thought two ribbon devices a bit overboard, but we needed them. In the past Nirrti always has been independent. She was one of the few Goa'uld who didn't base her influence on her Jaffa, but more on her knowledge and ingenuity. We didn't expect her to work with Anubis. Had I known, I would have insisted that Janet and Gabrielle stay at the base.

"We were lucky that the ribbon devices worked. I was surprised. According to your report the armour should have absorbed the energy."

"Different kind of energy than a staff weapon, I think. And it would be very un-Goa'uld-like to create a warrior they had no means to subdue somehow. They might be arrogant in the extreme, but as a rule they also are paranoid. By the way, where are we going?" Samantha asked obviously content with the consort's explanation.

"A cave, further down the hills; hot springs just waiting for us. You might be on the right track. Zat'nikitels and staff weapons both rely on naqada as power sources. A ribbon device on the other hand reacts to the emotions of the wearer and uses the naqada in the bloodstream not as a power source but rather as a catalyst. You really could have come up with something, Sam, but we'll have to wait for the metallurgic analysis of the armour to make more knowledgeable guesses.

"And to answer the other part of your question. Like Earth, most of the new planets we come in contact with have developed beyond the bow, arrow, and sword stage but not all of them. We try not to overwhelm less developed societies with our technical advancements. It doesn't always work out, but we try not to interfere with their natural development. So, on a practical level, sword skills still are viable and in direct combat with Jaffa warriors swords come in rather handy."

"But that's not the only reason, right?"

"No, it isn't. It's much more than this. For me, sword drills are better than meditation. I'm looking forward to teach you. It will be an enlightening experience for you. Don't look at me with disbelieving eyes. I know: you're a soldier and a scientist; I know this spiritual stuff can be a bit disconcerting. It took me a long time to come to terms with it, and you will too. It's worth it, believe me." Xena said with a smile.

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There was a long, long moment of silence while both women stripped, slid into the steaming water, and stretched their limbs.

"What did you do after you left the Amazons?" Samantha finally asked. "You don't have to tell

me if it's too personal."

"That's why we're here. Gabrielle sent you after me to get me to talk about the things I left out, right?"

"She didn't send me. I just felt that you shouldn't be alone, but I might have been wrong."

"It's strange; you know. My years as a warlord, the time I tried to kill Gabrielle, and the moons after Athena's death; among others, they always are close to my conscious mind, but speaking about it..."

"It's as if speaking about it makes it more real, as if it could come back to haunt you and then threaten to take over." Samantha said softly. When there was no immediate reaction she continued. "You read my service file, right?" She didn't really expect an answer and her voice changed to a tone Xena had never heard from her before.

"During Desert Storm, on the way back from a recon mission, my fighter was shot down over enemy territory. We ejected just in time but my back-seat died from a broken neck. When I found him he was already dead, and I still don't know if it was from the force of the ejection or the hard landing. I also had been injured and was taken prisoner. They were not pleased to find a woman wearing a man's uniform, doing a man's job. I was held in a small village, an oasis of about ten houses.

"I was beaten regularly. They wanted me to admit that our way of life was wrong; they wanted me to publicly confess to my sins and tell the world that I had seen the wisdom of Allah. They spent hour after hour talking to me, forcing me to learn their language; and if I didn't react the way they wanted me to I was punished, beaten, starved. But in a way I still was lucky.

"They were very traditional in their beliefs. The men were convinced that touching me in any sexual way would sully their souls or something like that. They beat me; one of them carved letters in my back. It was a constant struggle to even stay conscious.

"One day, about two or three weeks later, a young man who had been among the more enthusiastic of my captors decided that I was worth risking his soul. He tried to rape me. I killed him with the k-bar he had taken from me and used to shred the remnants of my 'scandalous' clothes. There were a few Jeeps just outside of my prison. My chances to escape were rather good; take one, disable the others, but I didn't go. I didn't really care about my freedom; I wanted revenge.

"With every kick and every punch raining down on me I had sworn that I would make them pay, dearly. I wanted them to pay for every lash mark they put on me, and for every time I had to beg them for water.

"When my knife slit his throat, the bruises and cuts on my body, the broken and cracked ribs, the pain simply ceased to exist. With him it had been in self-defence, but when I started to kill the other men, one after the other, it was nothing more than murder.

"Sometimes I wish someone would have stopped me, and I still don't know where I found the strength to do it. I'd like to think that it was some kind of nightmare or a hallucination. But it wasn't. I did these things.

"It was I who put my knife in their hearts; it was I who twisted their necks; it was I who slashed their guts; it was I who cut their throats. I killed all of them, every single man in the oasis, with my knife or my bare hands. I ended eighteen lives in less than an hour and a few of them didn't even have a chance to fight back. They didn't know what hit them.

"I didn't care whether they had been among my tormentors. I killed them all, but I still wasn't satisfied. I knew that there also were women and children; I had heard them from my cell, but I wanted the village destroyed. I wanted nothing of this place to remain; just like you wanted Shiva to disappear from the face of the universe.

"It wasn't just some out of the way nomadic village; they had satellite communication, electricity, and solar power. The solar cells all were channelled to a power centre and I rigged it for overload. The village exploded. I didn't know that they had a cache of explosives buried, but also didn't particularly care when I witnessed the amount of destruction.

"The women all had assembled for some kind of purification ritual in a tent near the small lake, a few hundred paces from the bulk of the buildings. That's why they were spared, but at the time I didn't know, and I deliberately accepted the possibility of their deaths.

"When the Air Force later had the area checked there was nothing left of the village, only ruins.

"I drove the last functioning Jeep to a vantage point on top of a dune and saw them scrambling around in fire and smoke, apparently crying for their men. I laughed, instead of driving away and trying to get back behind our lines, I stood there and laughed."

Hundreds of years of experience had prepared the consort for Samanta's confession, especially for the things she didn't say.

She knew what she should have been doing and what in the past for someone else, someone not so much like her had worked: reassuring the young woman that what she had done was only due to a lapse of judgement; telling her that it would never happen again, that what she was feeling was not real, but she couldn't. She knew it wouldn't have been the truth. So, she held her tongue and waited.

"When I reached the first of our outposts I told them that I had been captured and was able to escape when their power system blew. I told them that I had been beaten whenever I was conscious, and they insisted that I see a shrink as well as a doctor. The man to whom they sent me was good, but he also was predictable. It was easy to lead him on. He wrote in his report that I probably had been raped, but was coping well and that there was nothing speaking against my return to duty.

"No one ever asked what really had happened, and there's only one other person who knows. He thinks that it only was due to the adrenaline coursing through my body. He thinks that I exaggerated, and simply doesn't want to believe that his goddaughter was ... is capable of killing in cold blood.

"I lost control that day, and that's a thing a Carter never does. Carters don't cry; Carters don't feel; Carters don't ask for forgiveness, and Carters never, ever lose control."

"And yet, you still feel guilty." Xena said softly.

"Carters follow orders, and there's no guilt in following orders."

One of Xena's eyebrows rising slightly was the only answer she got.

"I don't regret ending their lives. I regret killing them the way I did. I never felt so powerful and I never was so afraid, afraid of what I did, afraid of what I would be able to do.

"I killed them in their beds, caught them from behind. Hatred and anger were driving me on, consuming all my thoughts, all my actions, frightening and intoxicating. They made me strong, invincible.

"My father made me believe that this kind of killing is part and parcel of being a soldier; nothing more than a job well done. He told me a few stories to dissuade me from special ops training. He thought that I wanted to become a more deadly fighter, but I did it to become more detached. I wanted to find a way to keep a lid on the darkness, one way or the other.

"It didn't work. The darkness was always there. I could feel the darkness then, and I still do. It's stronger when I fight, but it's still there, even now, this moment."

Samantha searched the eyes of the raven-haired warrior and found sadness and understanding.  
"I'm sorry, Sam."

"Why? It was my failure. I let my control slip, and more than once."

"When you fought Nirrti, did you feel the darkness?" Xena asked.

"No, I didn't. Yes, I did." Silence once again permeated the cavern. "I had no problem controlling it while fighting Nirrti, but all in all it doesn't make any difference: Hathor, Apophis, Cronos, a First Prime, or an ordinary Jaffa, one chieftain or the other; it doesn't make any difference.

"It's always there. Waking up, working in the lab, going to sleep, it doesn't make any difference. It's always there, every morning and every evening, every waking hour. It's in my dreams, my nightmares.

"I learned to live with the darkness, and I learned how to hide it to the outside world. I came close to succumbing to it more than once, but I'm mortally afraid of the day I won't be able to



keep it in check - when the darkness instead controls me."

Samantha stared straight ahead, well aware of the taller woman at her side, but still reluctant to really rely on her comforting presence.

"Had Nirrti harmed Cassandra in any way, no fighting skills in the world would have saved her. When the darkness takes over I'm faster and stronger. I would have killed her, and I would have done so laughing."

*"Promise me that you won't become a monster if something should happen to me."* The taller woman said with a dreamy expression.

Samanta looked at Xena with question marks in her eyes.

"It's what Gabrielle asked of me, right at the beginning of our journey together. I didn't always keep my promise, but it kept me from totally losing it more times than I care to remember. I know that it's hard, Samantha, but you can control the darkness, and you can always rely on me to help you through should the temptation become too strong."

The blonde instinctively scooted closer to the other woman and suddenly was cradled in strong arms, Xena humming a lullaby. That's when the tears came, tears she never before had allowed herself to cry, tears for the men she had killed and for herself, for the loss of her innocence. And for the first time in her life, except when being with Janet, she didn't feel ashamed or weak for having shown her feelings.

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Some time later, when there were no more tears left for the moment and Samantha had resumed her former place, she asked. "Your darkness came from Ares. Where does mine come from?"

"The dark part of my soul didn't come from Ares or any other Goa'uld. I had it before. Everyone has it, every living being; some of us have just a harder time to keep darkness and light balanced. Even Janet and Gabrielle have it but their light easily outweighs the darkness. Before this whole thing with Artemis happened I was convinced that I had accepted the darkness in me, that I had a handle on it, that I could control it in every situation.

"You know about the death of my son and how I tried to kill Gabrielle?" The dark haired warrior continued; Samantha confirmed with a nod. "We didn't have much contact with the Amazons afterwards. Gabrielle knew that I would have to pay for the crimes committed against their queen, the queen's regent, and the Amazon Nation, and she didn't want me to be punished.

"After my broken back had healed - the one I'd had just before our crucifixion -, Artemis asked for our help in reuniting the Amazons scattered in small tribes all over the world, and we decided to start with Gabrielle's tribe. Six summers had passed since the day I dragged Gabrielle out of

the village behind a horse. They had not forgotten, as I knew they wouldn't. Gabrielle tried to argue with the Council and the acting queen but I convinced her that I had to pay for what I did.

"At the time Amazon Justice was of the an-eye-for-an-eye variety. Gabrielle talked the Council into something else; some kind of spiritual challenge and a few moons spent as a slave to the Amazon Nation. Then, I would have preferred a few sound whippings."

They had lifted themselves out of the water, sitting at the edge of the pool with their feet still dangling in the water, both of them reluctant to leave the safe harbour of hot, moist air and dim light.

"I thought that I had found my way while we were in India, but I learned a lot about myself facing the trials the head priestess had set for me, and later, while I was a slave, it was the memory of my time at the temple that helped me to stay calm and see it through. And at the end I was convinced that I never would lose control like this again."

"But it took a hell of a lot to push you this far, Xena, to get you to lose control; and I'm convinced that even when you treated Gabrielle as a slave, you never physically harmed her."

"How can you be so sure? You've never seen me when I'm like that."

"No, I didn't, but no amount of darkness can completely obscure the love I see within you, between the two of you. I think you would rather harm yourself than raise a hand against her. You said that when you held her prisoner, you spent the balance of the day drilling. You could have found other ways to burn out excess energy, but you didn't want to hurt her. That's how I know."

"You're a good listener, Sam, but you are wrong. What I did was far worse than beating her. I abused her, verbally and sexually."

"I tried to make her feel small and worthless, and I know a lot of the things I said hurt her very much. I knew what buttons to push, but instead of paying me back equally she gave me tenderness and compassion. She always knew me better than I knew myself. That was true then, and it is now. Only a few words would have been enough to send me running, but she didn't even try. She never wavered in her belief that the woman she loved one day would come back to her."

"I took her to bed and played with her body without regard for her feelings or her needs, and when I was finished I threw her out and made her sleep on the ground. I treated her like an object and cared more for my sword and armour than for her. I didn't think to ask for her consent either. I suppose she didn't want me to wake up to the feeling that I forced her into something, but I know better."

"What I did to her during those fifteen days and nights was rape, nothing less - and when I finally understood what I had been doing I didn't owe up to my crimes, I ran. I didn't want to see the love in her eyes replaced by pity. I was a coward and simply took off."

"A coward would not have come back, Xena. Sometimes I wish that I could take responsibility for what I did to these men; that I could pay for my crimes. I think I have gotten to know you well enough to know that you couldn't live long with your guilt and shame."

Xena looked at her younger companion with a sad, pain-filled smile. "I fled with the cargo ship we had taken from the head hunters. I didn't have a plan or a destination; I just ran. I finally ended up in an out-of-the-way corner of the universe in a joint frequented by thugs and drunkards.

"Suddenly eternity became far too long for me.

"As long as I had been with Gabrielle, I didn't mind living for eternity. I had accepted being forced to witness the death of people I've grown to love time and time again, standing and singing at their funeral pyres, mourning their loss; to live through the deaths of our children.

"But without Gabrielle, everything suddenly became unbearable. I couldn't think; I couldn't breathe; I didn't want to think. I knew that without Gabrielle the darkness would return sooner or later, and then there would be no way back.

"So, I drank. It dulled my senses. It made it possible for me to breathe, but I still could hear my thoughts; and my mind replayed everything I had done to her, every law I had broken, every worshipper of Shiva I had killed. I wanted to bury myself in the bottom of a bottle, but all I ended up with were a lot of hefty hangovers. I was a pathetic excuse for a woman and a warrior.

"Then one night, almost a moon later, I looked up at the night sky and I saw a constellation similar to the one we call 'Aphrodite'. Then I knew that I had to go home and at least try to make amends. I knew what I did would never be forgotten and I knew it should never be forgiven, but I felt the need to kneel in front of my love and at least ask for her forgiveness."

Just like the older woman earlier had known that Samantha had been far from finished with her surprising confession, the blonde instinctively felt that Xena still had a lot to say. So, she draped a towel around the taller woman's shoulders and let her hands rest there for a long moment to silently convey her support and understanding; then she wrapped another one around herself and quietly waited for Xena to speak again.

"I stepped through the Ring, but instead of the detachment of the Royal Guard I had expected ..."

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Xena dialled the co-ordinates of Gaia. The planet had for more than one and a half millennia been a home for her, but it was with a certain degree of apprehension that she pushed the central button of the DHD.

She knew Amazon laws and customs by heart, having participated in the writing or amending of quite a lot of them over the centuries; she should have been able to anticipate what to expect, but she didn't.

There simply were no precedents to what she had done, neither in history nor in theory. The Council would have been in its right to order her death for treason, rape, and murder.

She didn't fear death; it would be infinitely better than living without her beloved. They could decide to just incarcerate her and throw away the key. They could cut her to pieces and bury the different parts in different corners of the universe. They could send her away, a never-ending exile.

Her imagination was running wild. In the end, the decision would be Gabrielle's and Gabrielle's alone - not because she was the queen. As an injured party she didn't even have the right to vote with the Council, but regardless of how angry some of her sisters might be, they never would...

Her mind was running wild and she knew she was stalling. Taking a deep breath she stepped through the shimmering pool and found herself surprisingly alone in the clearing. The surveillance cameras would tell the Council of her arrival, and they probably would send some guards. So, she sat down in front of the ring and waited.

She didn't have to wait long; her senses first picked up the rustling of leaves and then she felt eyes on her, surrounding her. She even could have put a name to most of the eyes watching her. She stood up and waited for them to come forward and take her into custody. But nothing happened, and then she felt the presence of her soulmate.

When Gabrielle left the cover of the trees, the tall woman's breath caught in her chest. The blonde was every inch the queen with her ceremonial leathers and the mask firmly in place. Xena instinctively fell to her knees. Gabrielle stopped at two arm lengths' distance.

Xena didn't dare to raise her eyes, but she couldn't help noticing that her partner had lost weight. Once more guilt and shame swept through her like a tidal wave. She continued to stare straight ahead, not sure what to say to her beloved.

"Look at me, Xena."

The mask had been pulled back and she looked into a face marked by lack of sleep and green eyes lacking their familiar spark. She began to tremble; remembering the only time her beloved had looked this desperate, shortly after Solan's death.

"I want you to listen to me, listen carefully. It's about the Council's decision. They refused to let me take part in the sessions or even tell me what they decided. They think that when it comes to you my judgement is seriously flawed, and maybe they are right.

"I only know that they took a long time to come to a decision and that's why I'm here to remind you of your choice, the choice every lawbreaker has. You can choose exile. Then we both will

leave Amazon territory forever or you can choose to be punished."

"We?" Xena's voice was barely above a whisper.

"We, as in you and me, Xena, together; the last moon has been hell for me. Leaving me here was the worst thing you possibly could have done. I knew where you were, and that you were trying to drown yourself in alcohol, and with every report I received I hurt a bit more. I need you more than I need air to breathe. Please, let us go and start a new life. I don't want you punished for what was out of your control. We can work everything out between us."

"I thought I had lost your love."

"No, my big dumb warrior, I need you in my life. There is no me without you. Let's leave here!"

"Gabrielle," the taller woman, still on her knees answered, "my real home is in your heart, but this is our home too. I will not run away, not for a second time. No one stands above the law.

"I can't spend centuries teaching it, and then not live by the law. I'll submit to the Council's punishment. I'll do everything I have to, to regain the trust of the Nation and to be worthy of your love and forgiveness."

"Are you sure, my love?" The raven-head nodded. "Without knowing what they have in mind?" She nodded again. "I would feel better if we simply left."

"Is this really what you want? I know you want to make it easier for me, but think about the consequences. Would you leave our home, our family, our friends, our children?" Xena asked her.

"I feel that I have to pay for my crimes against the Amazon Nation and its queen. I have to pay for what I did to the innocents on Shiva's planets, and for what I forced your warriors to do. It can never be enough, but it's a step in the right direction," she continued.

"However, I never will be able to pay enough for what I did to you, the woman who holds my heart and my soul and always will; I will never, ever be able to pay for what I did while I held you hostage. So, this is your call. If you really want me to run away from my responsibilities, I will. I'll let you decide."

"I knew that you wouldn't take them up on their offer. It's against everything that you are, my love. I don't know what they have in mind, but I will be with you every step of the way." She quickly embraced her lover, gave her a passionate kiss, stepped back, and put the mask over her face. "Guards, do what you have to do."

Xena stayed on her knees while two members of the Royal Guard dropped out of the trees, and shackled her hands behind her back. They ordered her to stand up and held her firmly at the elbows while two other Amazons secured her feet with cuffs and a connecting chain.

The chains were strong enough to hold an angry Jaffa, but all of them knew that these restraints wouldn't by far be strong enough to hold her should she really decide to try and escape. The guards also knew that the consort wouldn't even think of doing something like this. They knew she wouldn't even try and defend her actions; that was just who she was.

There were two guards on her right side and two on her left, two following and two preceding her. They escorted her to the village square, all of them with their ceremonial masks firmly in place, but none of them were armed.

'Why? She should be treated as an enemy to the Amazon Nation. Their bearing spoke of at least a modicum of respect she felt she had lost any right to. Why did they do this? And why didn't she pick up on their lack of weapons earlier; she should have sensed it while they still were hidden in the trees.'

The closer they came to the main village the more Xena's mind reeled with questions. She had expected the whole village to be present for her trial and sentencing, but when they finally came to the central square it was completely empty. Except for the queen and her guards, she hadn't seen a single soul.

The big double winged doors to the council hall opened. Her escort changed formation, with half of them now walking in front of her while the other four followed closely behind. Quick repeated glances taught her that not only the Council of Gaia, but also the better part of Gabrielle's regents were present, filling the rows as if it were a High Council Meeting.

Her guards stayed with her until she had reached the front row, and then filed out to the left and the right to stand along the side walls.

"Please take off the consort's restraints." The chairwoman and queen's regent Solo ordered.

Xena had a hard time to limit her reaction to this rather surprising order to a raised eyebrow. The irons were removed and the tall woman lowered herself to her right knee to show her respect for the High Council.

"Xena of Amphipolis, Consort to Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, Commander in Chief of the Amazon Army, you have been accused of murder, rape, and abuse of power. Do you contest this Council's right to judge your behaviour?"

"No, Regent Solo." The dark haired warrior wanted to say more but was held back by the sense of ceremony she couldn't shake.

"The High Council already has come to its conclusions but we want to make sure. Do you accept responsibility for these crimes?"

"No, I don't." More than a few of the women behind her audibly gasped. "Let's not play with semantics. - *I am guilty* of murder, rape, abuse of power, and a lot of other crimes. I will humbly submit to the judgement of the Council." Xena answered and lowered her eyes to the ground.

"Xena of Amphipolis rise and hear the verdict of the Grand Council." The tall woman came back to her feet.

'The High Council'. It had been more than four hundred years since all of the regents and vice-queens had been summoned for a court session. They probably had been waiting for her to come back all these quarter moons, but she thought while the other women in the room also stood, rationally it had been the only choice. Usually it was the prerogative and the duty of the queen to decide about the punishment for capital crimes, but Gabrielle not only was one of her victims, she also was her bondmate.

To all outer appearances Xena was the picture of calmness. She nonetheless suddenly found her heart beating faster. The feeling of doom she had in the centre of her stomach since dialling Gaia now growing exponentially. She quickly closed her eyes to get herself back under control.

The representatives of the 'Grand Council' had put their ceremonial masks in place. "Consort Xena, you have been found guilty of abuse of power and multiple murders. However, we declare you not guilty of rape.

"High Queen Gabrielle's statement made it abundantly clear that everything that happened between the two of you after your return from Shiva's worlds, happened with mutual consent. She also left no doubt that she would be disappointed and displeased should this Council take it upon itself to interfere in her private life.

"After interviewing the members of the Royal Guards," the Regent continued, "who witnessed your behaviour during the mission, we came to the unanimous decision that we have no legal ground to find you guilty of rape or other forms of domestic violence, but we also want you to know that in the interest of our queen's safety we will keep your conduct under close scrutiny."

The masked woman fell silent to let her words sink in. Xena found the eyes of the Regent and gave her a short approving nod.

"For abuse of power you will be sentenced to fifteen moons of servitude to the Amazon Nation. You will live as a servant, working in the kitchens and the food hut. During this time, you will be relieved of your command; you will not be allowed to handle weapons of any kind. You will have no access to the laboratories or the infirmary or the library. Off-duty you will be confined to your quarters or at the discretion of the queen. As a sign of your servitude you will wear plain leathers without rank markings or honour badges."

Xena had a hard time to keep the surprise and consternation she felt at the regent's words from showing on her face. They didn't even make her a slave - why? She had used part of the defensive forces to satisfy her need for revenge. She had used them to commit capital crimes. It didn't feel right to let her off the hook this easily.

Her consternation obviously showed on her face because the Regent continued. "The Grand Council decreed that the military operation against the murderers of Artemis and Athena and

against their client was well within the boundaries of Amazon honour and Amazon justice. The same however can not be said about the rest of the mission. Reviewing your actions, the 'Grand Council' found you guilty of murder in 87 cases. Had you been in your right mind, we wouldn't have a choice but to try and find a punishment equivalent to a death sentence. After checking all available data and speaking with the venerable Egeria we are convinced that there were indeed extenuating circumstances.

"At the time you were not responsible for your actions. The Council sees your timely return and your willing submission to our judgement as a sign of your regret and repentance.

"These souls rest on your shoulders; and nothing we possibly could do to you could diminish your sense of guilt or be harder than what your conscience does to yourself.

"As a symbolic gesture, for every death you will receive three strokes with a single tail whip on your bare back after having spent three days and three nights in the sweating hut.

"Xena of Amphipolis, Consort to Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, do you accept the sentence?"

Xena sought the eyes of every single one of the thirteen women standing before her, searching for signs of discomfort or animosity. Finally, she answered. "Yes, venerable members of the 'Grand Council', I accept your decision and submit to the punishment with humility and gratefulness. But I have a question: Why? Why do you make it so easy for me?"

Regent Solo, a tall redhead with doe eyes, took off her mask and smiled at the other woman. "There are a lot of possible answers to this question, Consort Xena, but only two that really count: the Amazon Nation is what it is now only because of you and our queen. Gabrielle is our heart and our soul and you are our strength and our confidence. You belong together like two molecules of oxygen. Deciding on any other punishment would have taken the both of you from us.

"But more importantly: We know you; all of us have known you our whole lives. We grew up listening to Queen Gabrielle's stories, and we learned that all of them are true. We know who you are. We saw the emptiness in your eyes when you came back with the news of Athena's death. We saw the hate when you killed Shiva and the head hunters, Shiva's priests and worshippers.

"That was not all we saw. We also saw the tiny flicker of life every time your eyes found the queen's. We observed from afar how you tried to drown your sorrow and pain and memories. We observed how, despite all of this, the woman we all know and love slowly fought her way back to the surface. You and the queen taught us not to give up on people and we certainly will not start with you."

Xena could feel a blush of embarrassment spreading over her cheeks but before she began to feel totally uncomfortable the Regent ordered.

"Guards, escort Consort Xena to her quarters. The sweating hut will be ready for her tomorrow

morning."

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"Two hundred and sixty-one strokes, that's..."

"I know, Sam, but please remember: I'm immortal. It took me almost a moon to recover from the beating - and Gabrielle was not really happy with me and the High Council, but in the end I convinced her that it was the right thing to do, for the Amazons and for me - and ultimately, for her, it was the right thing too."

"I suppose that she was angry with you - for running away, for not trusting your love, for treating her the way you did. She never said a word, though, right?"

"What I did was rape. The Council knew it; I knew it. But Gabrielle..."

"What did she do when she finally acknowledged her anger and disappointment?"

"It was hard. Gabrielle began to question herself, her decisions, even her feelings. She never even considered questioning me and the darkness lingering in my soul. We spent time together, but we didn't share our lives. We talked but we didn't really - well, talk. It was if there was something between us, something big and ominous."

"A big pink elephant sitting in the centre of the room." Seeing the confusion on the other woman's face Samantha continued. "Everyone can see it, sitting there and taking up space but no one wants to acknowledge its existence. No one wants to acknowledge that you have to walk around it to cross the room."

"Sounds as if you're talking out of experience, Sam."

"In a way, Xena, but it's in no way comparable to what you probable went through. About a year ago, Janet asked me to take care of Cassandra while she was stuck at the base with an emergency. I blew it, big time. In the end, we all were angry at each other, but none of us wanted to talk about it. We ended up having a very loud, very passionate discussion and cleared the air. - Nothing compared to what you went through."

"A pink elephant?! Yes, that's close enough. We also found a way to 'clear' the air."

"But you could not turn back the hands of time. Your relationship never became what it was before, right? That's why the Xena of the stories and the one I know seem to be two totally different persons."

"You're defiantly too perceptive, Samantha Gabriella."

The blonde looked at her taller companion questioningly, but then sighed and said. "I know, one day you will answer my questions, but it's too early yet."

Xena started to smile, but then locked eyes with her younger companion. There was a certain seriousness in the blue orbs that made her reconsider to simply change subject.

"You're concerned that something similar could happen to you and Janet?"

The blonde nodded dejectedly.

"You're not like me, Sam. You will never turn your darker instincts against those you love, because you never were completely under the spell of the darkness; you never willingly embraced it like I did time and time again. But to put your mind more at ease I will tell you how we made it through this particular obstacle course.

"After I paid my debt to the Amazon Nation the first time, still on Earth, after the crucifixion, Gabrielle and I changed the way Amazon queens ruled their people right from the beginning. The Queen, Artemis' Chosen, was regarded as the ultimate authority for just about everything. Everyone from the lowest slave to her consort was under her unquestioned command.

"Gabrielle didn't want to rule alone, especially considering the task ahead of us, uniting a Nation in diaspora - scattered all around the known world in small tribes that sometimes even didn't know that there were still others like them. So, in time, the Amazons became accustomed to see us as one, and to accord us the same authority, and whenever I became too bossy towards my wife Athena brought me back to my senses.

"Being stripped of my rank and relegated to kitchen duty changed this. The Amazons had no choice but to come to Gabrielle with their concerns and suggestions - and my beloved bard learned that she was a great queen in her own right and didn't need my help.

"At first it intensified her insecurities, fears, and anger, but in public she hid it well. I had the chance of observing her in action; as strange as it may sound, I never really had seen her. To me it almost was as if she had finally stepped out of the shadows and into the light.

"Well into the fifth moon of my punishment, a group of young Amazon warriors came from a remote planet to finish their education. They were an obnoxious band of wannabes with delusions of self-importance and the first ones that treated me, what they thought was, according to rank. Strangely enough they didn't know what had happened and that serving food and cleaning tables was only a temporary assignment. Servants were not very high on the social ladder, and one day I couldn't take it any longer.

"They treated me with their usual disdain, and one of them started to talk about Gabrielle: how she needed a real warrior to satisfy her, someone who wasn't such a loser as the consort; how she would make her scream in lust, and lead the Nation to victory against the Goa'uld. Not loud, just enough to be heard by her buddies at the table. She saw that I had heard her and started to bitch about the soup not being hot enough. I took the whole cauldron and emptied it over her

head. It had been hot enough to give her second degree burns."

Even after more than three hundred years, there still was a satisfied glint in the raven-haired woman's eyes.

"I reckon you also burned your hands lifting the cauldron." Samantha quipped.

Xena smiled, but instead of answering she just continued with her story. "Of course, it was Gabrielle's duty as the queen to punish me. A servant hurting a warrior - that was unthinkable. A lot of things have changed since then. Today, both parties would be punished, one for losing their temper, the other for disrespecting a fellow Amazon, but at the time she didn't have a choice.

"Gabrielle had to order me punished. But Gabrielle wouldn't be Gabrielle if she hadn't insisted on doing it herself. The law didn't leave her much of a choice. She either had to order one of her people to do it or do it herself. I was whipped in the centre of the village, the normal punishment doubled, because of what I am.

"We thought that we had already talked about all our issues, but it turned out that nothing could be further from the truth.

"When they bound me to the whipping post I could feel it flowing towards me, like a tidal wave. I could feel her anger, her outrage. I could feel her fighting with the urge to let the whip go full force. And for the first two lashes she really did. Then she stopped. The rest of the strokes were still very hard, but they no longer were intended to really harm me.

"Later she felt horrible for nearly losing control, but it got us to talk, really talk, about everything. It was the first step on a long road. It's hard to explain, Samantha.

"It was as if the first two strokes had finally made her aware of her anger and disappointment, no, disappointment is not the right word; as if it had opened a door, for both of us. Over the centuries, she had had to face my darkness more than once; and more than once it had been directed against her, but that had only been for a few candlemarks or a couple of days.

"Gabrielle never would have needed my help to lead the Nation. She could have done it on her own, right from the beginning. That's something we both had to learn. For centuries I had been the leader of the Amazon warriors; instead of supporting the queen's decisions I had become the power behind the queen, the queen's power.

"When I was reinstated everyone expected me to simply slip back into my old role but we found that we could not. Gabrielle and I, we both had changed. The way we act now wasn't born in a day. It took some time but finally I no longer felt the need to stand in the spotlight. Gabrielle still asks for my advice but she also knows that she has my support even if I might disagree with her."

"But you are no longer regarded as her equal."

"As a human being I'm her equal but according to Amazon law I'm not. She's the queen. I'm her consort, and that's how it should have been from the beginning. We still argue that I often exaggerate in public. At the beginning I only did it to make everyone understand who's in charge, so to speak; but over the decades and centuries it has become natural to me. It has become part of who I am, of how I feel comfortable in my skin. I built the house in the forest to always make us remember that time, and to remind us that there always will be a future."

Then the tall woman changed subject and Samantha knew that the questioning was over for the time being.

"Gabrielle and Janet are probably walking a trench somewhere, waiting for us to come back to them. It's nearly time for dinner."

So, she decided to let it be. "Yeah, I could eat something. Xena, thank you for sharing with me."

"Back at you, Sam, and thank you for listening."

They wrapped themselves in fresh towels and left the bathing cavern, both of them unwilling to once again slip into their sweaty and forge-soiled clothes. A set of leathers with all the markings for rank and honour was waiting for Xena and a simple white tunic, similar to the one the weapons' master had been wearing not too long ago, for Samantha. On top of the tunic, there was a note.

*Sam,*

*You didn't show up for our training session this morning. To your credit, I assume that you just succumbed to the usual after-party-laxness. Nonetheless, you neglected your duty and not for the first time, I might add, and thus should face the consequences - that is if you don't decide to use the option of instead returning to your home planet. Take a look at the regulations' book before you make your decision, and don't forget that you have the choice between corporal punishment or something more spiritual.*

*I will see you tomorrow morning at the training grounds. Let me know by then or return to Earth.*

*Niva*

~\*~

Xena and Samantha shared a short and rather monosyllabic evening meal with their partners. Gabrielle and Janet did all the talking, telling them about their day, about spending time with Cassandra and the young Amazons and about the girl's plan to participate in their training. Before the two Earth women retired to their room, Gabrielle emphatically reminded Samantha of

her choices concerning the impending punishment.

Janet felt that her lover was emotionally drained from her long talk with the consort and that it probably wasn't all about Xena. A few times this day, she had been tempted to storm off in search of her lover when a particularly distressing emotion came through what she now saw as their link. She knew that Samantha would talk to her when she was ready, so the small doctor didn't ask any questions. She just offered warmth and comfort.

They fell asleep on their bed, still clothed, and Samantha dreamed of a ball of light appearing before her, shimmering and warm. It soon was joined by another ball; it also was of a shimmering white but with dark spots and patches. The balls gravitated towards each other and fused. They now emitted so much light that the dark spots were barely visible.

## **Chapter Eleven: Absolute Certainty**

Almost three months later Samantha Carter remembered this dream. She was sitting on a bench like boulder close to the top of Cheyenne Mountain and looked up at the cloudy sky without really seeing the impending storm gathering up there. She had spent the whole afternoon aimlessly roaming the countryside on the back of her Harley after a really nasty fight with Janet. The sun had just gone down and she was shivering in the late October evening. The light jacket she had grabbed when storming out of the house earlier was no real protection against the cold wind.

Never being anything less than honest with herself, she admitted that she had blown things totally out of proportion, but it had hurt so damn much, seeing her lover in the arms of that man. She simply had snapped - and now she found herself on top of Stargate Command, alone. She knew she had no reason not to trust her lover, but it was as if she just could not help herself. She knew she had acted like a spoiled child; she knew she had risked the best thing in her whole life.

After their return from Gaia at the beginning of the new school year, it was as if a dream had come true.

Thanks to the inspired argumentation of Lieutenant Michaela Neddes, the psychologist in charge of Cassandra, she had been officially allowed to move in with Janet and Cassy. Mike, Michaela, had argued that Cassandra needed more than just one parent to be able to cope with the traumatic events of her kidnapping. General Hammond supported her recommendation - and surprisingly the Pentagon approved of the plan, very much to the dislike of Mackenzie, the chief psychologist of the SGC, who at the time had thought it too much beneath his station to care for the alien girl and so had her care transferred to his assistant, a decision he probably was regretting by now.

The whole of the SGC had pitched in to help and three days after the permission from the Joint Chiefs and the White House had been delivered to General Hammond's office all of Samantha's worldly possession had been packed up and moved to Janet's house. Daniel and Teal'c moved

into her house, the house her father had given to her after joining the Tok'ra. She didn't want to sell it, and she knew it would be well taken care of this way.

Samantha Gabriella Carter, air-headed genius, sharp shooter, Air Force Major, fighter pilot, and a born loner, finally had a family.

Her nights, and occasionally late afternoons and mornings with her small lover were pure bliss. She never before had been this deliriously happy. They were more than just a patchwork family - they really belonged together.

That night on Gaia, waking from the strange dream, she for the first time had been really sure of Janet's love. She had known with absolute certainty that she finally had come home, that her real home was the small brunette cradled in her arms and holding her tight - the military and its regulations be damned. It had been like an epiphany.

Samantha closed her eyes and suddenly her mind's eye brought up the bright ball of light. It was as if she suddenly knew what her lover was thinking and feeling at this very moment; as if she suddenly had become cognizant of a connection between them, a connection that had always been there. She instinctively knew that Janet was half ill with worry, but she also was angry with her for running off like this, without giving her a chance to explain and without her helmet.

She almost ran back to her bike. Janet needed her, and even if she had to spend some time in the doghouse, in the end it would be worth it.

~\*~

Half way home it began to rain, the cold drops soon had her soaking wet; they were whipping against her face and quickly the rain turned into the first snow. She didn't even bother to put her beloved hog in the garage or under the car port but stormed the four steps to the wrap-around porch. She already had her hand on the door knob when her courage left her and she froze.

Samantha had faced down Goa'uld and blown up a sun; she was able to fight seasoned Jaffa warriors in hand-to-hand combat and come out as the winner, but here she was standing on her own porch, dripping wet and half frozen stiff from the cold, afraid to face a slip of a woman.

Instead of using her key, the blonde Major rang the door bell. It seemed to echo through the house and for a moment she was afraid that Janet wouldn't let her in.

An eternity later, the door opened but it wasn't Janet. Instead it was the reason for the angry words she had thrown at her lover before running away.

"She's in the living room," the young man said when he ushered her in. He had dark blond hair with a hint of red in it and was about her height. His body told her that he regularly worked out, for strength not for bulk. He seemed to be in his late twenties.

"Thank you." Samantha answered while slipping out of the jacket and her shoes.

"Stephen, my name is Stephen. Better go in; she's been worried about you."

Samantha nodded and quickly took the few steps to the living room. Janet was sitting in her favourite armchair and was staring in the flickering flames burning in the fire place. The blonde knew that she had heard her coming back, but this time she wouldn't make it easy for her. One of the patented smiles, the smiles she only reserved for her lover this time wouldn't be enough to make it up to the doctor.

She stepped closer and for a moment stood helplessly in front of the other woman. Without conscious thought she dropped to her knees and took Janet's hands between her own.

"Jan, baby..."

"Don't you Jan-baby me, Samantha Gabriella Carter; don't you dare," was the angry retort, but at least she didn't try to take her hands away from the blonde's.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you, Janet. I acted like some insecure, jealous teenager. I'm sorry I'm such a dork. I didn't even give you a chance to introduce us. It hurt seeing you so comfortable in his arms. I'm sorry for not trusting you. Please forgive me."

Samantha tentatively looked up, a thick drop fell from her hair and hit the tip of her nose.

"You look like a drowned rat."

No Sammy or Sam, not even a Samantha, this was bad, really bad, the blonde thought.

Her head dropped and her eyes focused on the back of Janet's hands still being held by her own. She relaxed her grip with an effort, leaving it to the brunette to change their position. Janet withdrew one of her hands and Samantha flinched at the loss of contact. Then the hand was gently touching her left cheek; thumb and index finger under her chin made her look up.

"It was never a question of trust, Samantha. I know you trust me with your life and your heart, but I will not watch my every move just because you get it in your head to be insecure or jealous. I love only you and I expect that you have a better handle on your emotions next time. Stephen is a very good friend and he's family, nothing more. And now, get out of these wet clothes and take a long, hot shower."

Samantha turned her head and kissed the palm of her lover's hand. She murmured, "I'm sorry, my love. I'm so afraid to lose you, sometimes my brain just short circuits. I love you, Jan."

She closed her eyes and quietly remembered her dream and the two balls of light. Janet studied her face with a surprised smile.

"And I love you, Sammy, but when you first stormed away I really wanted to punish you for being this stupid. I wanted to make you bend over and put a strap to your behind."

"I would let you do it and thank you for every stroke, my love." The blonde whispered in response.

"No my big dumb fly-girl. It was hard enough to watch it once on Gaia. I don't want a repeat performance, ever." Janet drew her still kneeling lover closer and gently kissed her on the lips. "Go and take your shower, Sam, or I will have to ground you for becoming ill."

Samantha kissed her lover's small but strong hands and answered, "Yes, Ma'am."

Janet smiled at her and sent her off with another quick kiss. Her head turned towards the fire but her mind was wandering back to the day of Samantha's punishment on Gaia.

It had been the day after Sam's long and obviously deeply disturbing talk with Consort Xena. For once they were early at the training grounds. Janet had insisted on being at Samantha's side when the blonde told the weapons' master that she had decided to submit to corporal punishment, despite or rather because of her fears. That first and a couple of other conversations with Queen Gabrielle had helped Janet to come to terms with the Amazons' strange juridical system but that didn't mean that she was happy with her lover's decision.

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"Samantha Gabriella Carter, what do you have to say for yourself?" Master Niva asked as soon as the major had lowered herself to her knees.

"Nothing, weapons' master. It is true that I thought there would be no training because of the party the day before. I presumed - but that's no excuse and I accept full responsibility for my neglect of duty." The blonde answered with her eyes to the ground.

"Do you accept corporal punishment, young warrior?"

"Yes, Master Niva." Samantha said, and despite her prior resolve she couldn't keep a slight tremble off her voice.

"I understand why you made the mistake you did, so, at this point I see no need for a public punishment. Report to my hut at sundown and we will take care of this. You're welcome to bring a witness.

"And now, let's train. Healer, I know, it's not your usual time, but it would be more convenient for me if you could rearrange your schedule." Janet only nodded.

"Young warrior, from now on Larina will be your primary instructor. Obey her commands. She's

not as lenient as I am."

Three candlemarks later, Samantha and Janet found themselves in the bathroom, sharing a shower, and massaging sore muscles. "Are you really sure you want to go through with this, Sam? Master Niva surely would understand. The regulations allow for other forms of punishment."

"Yes, Jan, I'm sure."

"Are you sure that this is really about the missed training session, Sammy? While you were with Xena, I could feel your distress, sometimes like a distant memory, sometimes like a bleeding wound. Are you sure that your decision has not more to do with whatever happened in the past than with our present?"

"I know you can sense my feelings, my emotions. I didn't want to burden you with all of this. One day soon, I will tell you what I told Xena. It's in the past and it should no longer have any impact on my life. However, in a way, it still does, but it also has nothing to do with this punishment. What I did then can't be paid for with a few strokes of a strap or a cane or whatever." The blonde answered with sadness tinting her voice.

"Yesterday, I broke the rules and I have to pay for it; I want to pay for it. I don't know how to explain it, but it's the right thing to do. I enjoy all the good and bright sides of life here. They share with us, have taken us in their hearts. It may sound nuts to you, but I really think that this is a way to give them something back, to show them that I really respect their way of life." Samantha smiled insecurely.

"No, Sammy, it's not nuts. I needed a little help from Queen Gabrielle to come to terms with this punishment thing, but now I have. Sometimes, I don't understand what makes you military types tick, but this I can understand."

"I hate to point it out, baby, but you're also a Major of the US Air Force. - No, don't tell me: it's different because you're of the nice and peaceful kind. - Will you be my witness, Janet?"

"I would be honoured, my love. And now, let's face the rest of the day; we both have a lot of work to do."

~

The whole day, Janet felt her lover's nervousness and growing apprehension through their link. Samantha had a hard time to concentrate on anything but the impending punishment, and finally in the early afternoon hours gave up on getting any work done.

She searched out Cassandra who was happy to spend time with her other mother and eager to learn how to tree-walk. She wanted Sam to teach her and no one else, so she had resisted any

attempts of her new friends to rope her into a lesson.

The young woman as always was a quick study. No surprise there, she was a straight A-student, tested way ahead of her age in any test thrown her way, was captain of the volley-ball team and had assured her team's victory more than once by her quick thinking and quicker reflexes. Tree-walking was just another challenge, and Cassandra loved challenges; she was as much an adrenaline junkie as her blonde mother and playmate or her Uncle Jack.

Janet was relieved that her lover had succeeded in putting the evening's events out of her mind, but for a moment she feared that she also would forget about their appointment at the weapons' master's house.

She was about to go in search of her tall partner when the door opened and a sweaty and very relaxed major entered their room. She kissed her soundly and whirled her around in unrestrained mirth until they finally ended in a heap on the bed.

"Your daughter really is something else, you know, Jan?!"

"And what, pray tell, did *my* daughter do?"

"We had a little race through the tree tops, and to make it more interesting we had a little bet going. She tried to distract me and it very nearly worked. She told me that when we were out hiking last year, you always stayed at the rear not because you were out of breath but to have a good look at my butt."

"The little imp! I was out of breath from looking at your butt, Sam. The last day she came up to me from the side and asked me if I was enjoying the view. I blushed. I guessed I wasn't very subtle when staring at you." Janet answered with a smile. "So, what did she win?"

"Oh, she didn't win. It was her first day; I couldn't let her get too cocky. When we go back to Earth, she'll spend a weekend of our choice at Jack's, no phone calls, no friends of hers coming over; just you and me."

"Now, who's getting cocky, Sam? Want to share a shower with me? You really need one."

They were exactly on time when Samantha knocked on Master Niva's door, but they had to run part of the way.

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"What's this beautiful smile for, Janet?"

Startled out of her reverie, the brunette almost jumped out of her seat at the sound of Stephen's voice. "I'm sorry, Stevie, I'm not the hostess I should be. Hey, you're all wet."

"I put the bike in the garage and wiped it down. Such a beaut shouldn't be sitting in the rain, but I suppose her owner had more urgent things on her mind." He added teasingly.

"She's off limits, Stevie." Janet somehow got her voice to sound threatening, but her mischievous smile still gave her away.

"Oh, Janet, I'm wounded. You know that I'm only a tease. I'm a safe bet with the ladies. Besides, everyone who saw the expression on her face when she came back would know that she has eyes only for you." He answered with a smile that brought out his dimples and quickly changed the subject. "You know that I positively hate being called Stevie, except when you are doing it?"

"And why is that?" She asked genuinely interested.

Before he could answer a deeper voice came from the other side of the room. "Stephen, I apologise for my earlier behaviour. Any friend of Janet is also a friend of mine."

"Stephen, may I finally introduce Major Samantha Carter, my best friend, my lover, and the other half of my soul. Sam, this is Stephen Harrington, my former brother-in-law."

They firmly shook hands and Samantha said. "I hope you give me the chance to prove that usually I'm not a total idiot, Stephen."

She smiled at him, not one of her Janet-smiles, but close enough to one to make him begin to understand why the small doctor was so taken with her.

When Janet had first told him on the phone that she was in love with a woman and a fellow officer at that, he thought that she simply was lonely and needed the fantasy to keep her going. She adopted a child and they raised her together, and then a couple of months ago she had told him that they now were officially living together.

There had been so much joy in her voice and when she had opened the door a few hours earlier at his unexpected visit she literally had radiated happiness, a happiness quickly replaced by anger and worry when that tall blonde Amazon had yelled at her and stormed off.

His protective instincts had flared to life in a heartbeat but seeing her now, with Janet's arm possessively encircling her waist, he was willing to give her another chance.

So, he decided to goad her a little bit. "Hmm, I don't know. It might be true what they say about blondes."

This certainly got a reaction, but not the one he had been looking for. Samantha just smiled but Janet pushed herself in front of her taller partner, almost bristling with protectiveness.

"Sam holds a doctorate in astrophysics and philosophy, so don't ever say or think something like that again. I don't want you to act like your thick-headed, pea-brained brother."

"I give, Jan. It was only a joke, nothing..." He looked at the blonde, suddenly dumbstruck.  
"Doctor Sam Carter? The Sam Carter? Author of 'Theory of Wormhole Physics'?" Janet nodded.  
"Holy shit! It was such a thrill to read. I almost know it by heart. I dreamed of getting a chance to discuss it with you. There are so many things I wanted to ask you..."

"And guess what, Stevie? You'll get your chance. I have to pick Cassandra up and will bring some Chinese take-away for dinner. Meanwhile, you guys can talk shop."

Though his physique told another story, Stephen still was a nerd at heart and always would be, just like the scientist in her blonde lover more often than not took precedence over the soldier and even the lover.

"Be careful, Jan, it's still snowing out there." That got a scowl from the smaller woman but she also got a gentle kiss. Samantha's eyes followed her until she closed the front door behind her.  
"She's still angry at me," she stated.

"She was frantic when she saw you tearing down the road without a helmet." He simply answered.

"Oh damn, the bike. I left it out there."

He just managed to grab her by the hood of her sweater. "Easy. I put it in the garage and wiped it dry. Did you restore it? It's a real beauty."

"Don't tell me you not only know astrophysics but also love bikes?" He only smiled in answer.  
"Thank you for taking care of her. Yes, I sort of had to build her up from the frame. It was a challenge."

"But you just love a challenge, right?" Now it was Samantha's turn to resort to a smile. "Janet is stationed at the Air Force Academy Hospital, but what does an astrophysicist, what does 'the' astrophysicist do with the Air Force?"

"Deep space radar telemetry." Samantha simply answered.

"NORAD?"

"I have a nice, sunny office there, yes." She didn't add: 'A rarely used nice, sunny office.' Instead she asked. "And what are you doing for a living?"

"I was with ARIN, the Astrological Research Institute Nevada. I resigned when I found my lover in a storage closet with a woman."

"I'm sorry that you have been hurt, Stephen," she simply answered.

"Marc never offered me the forever-after, but I had expected better of him." If Samantha was

surprised to find that his lover had been a man she didn't show it.

"Anyway," Stephen continued, "I thought I make a stop here before having to decide what to do with my life."

"You're welcome to stay for as long as you like, Stephen." Samantha reacted to the pain and defeat in his voice more than to his words. "The guest room is yours."

They then quickly delved in a discussion about quantum physics and wormholes. Samantha found that he not only had read the thick volume she had written while under the influence of the Ataniek armbands; he also was good enough to contest some of her theories, and she had to admit that without the evidence of the Stargate she would have been hard pressed to find them liable herself.

The arrival of Janet and Cassandra with their dinner put an end to their discussion, but by then the young man had promised to stay at least the weekend, so they would have other chances to talk.

~\*~

It was late at night when they retired to their room. Janet snuggled close to her, her head on Samantha's shoulder and one of her arms wrapped protectively around her waist. They usually talked about their respective days before falling asleep or making love but this night the brunette just closed her eyes.

"Are you still angry with me, Jan?" Samantha quietly asked.

"You scared me, Sam." Janet answered without opening her eyes.

"I'm sorry, my love. Perhaps you really should punish me like they do on Gaia. I felt better afterwards."

Janet's mind once again snapped back to the evening of her lover's punishment.

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They were exactly on time when Samantha knocked on the weapons' master's door, but they had to run part of the way.

Larina, the captain of the Royal Guard, let them in where Master Niva, Queen Gabrielle, and Consort Xena were already waiting for them. Samantha was slightly shocked; she had hoped that this would stay between them and the weapons' master, even though Xena knew about it. She

quickly regained her composure and knelt in front of the three women.

"I am ready to accept my punishment with humility and gratitude."

"Samantha Gabriella Carter, daughter of Rebecca, grand-daughter of Catherine, you now will receive 24 strokes with a strap on your bare behind as punishment for deliberately neglecting your duty. Have you chosen your witness?" Niva asked.

"Doctor Janet Fraiser has consented to be my witness, Master Niva."

"So be it." Niva said and left the hut together with Larina and the queen.

"Please strip and bend over the desk, Samantha. I will count the strokes; you just concentrate on holding your position."

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The brunette abruptly sat up, startling her taller companion. "You know, there's been something about this whole punishment thing that's been bugging me for quite some time now."

"What is it, Janet? You admitted yourself that apart from the initial pain there was no harm done."

"That's not it. Xena is an expert; I'll never doubt that. What I can't figure out is why she did it and not Master Niva."

"We were her responsibility, Jan. She told us the first day that she would be the one to mete out punishments if need be. I shouldn't have been surprised to see the consort at Niva's." Samantha answered.

"That's just it, Sam. She didn't, at least not with others, well, at least one other. A few weeks ago, Jennifer told me over lunch how she had screwed up one of your experiments with the energy shield just before you had to go off-world. She told me how angry you were and that she wished she could make things like this just go away by getting her behind blistered. She then told me that she had once been punished by Cameria for not being careful enough with one analysis. The consort had been told, but she didn't do it herself; she didn't even offer to do it herself."

"Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that I was the leader of our team, or Xena couldn't get away from whatever she had been doing when it was Jennifer's turn. It could be as simple as that, my love."

To Janet it seemed as if Samantha wanted desperately to convince herself that there had been nothing special about her punishment or the fact that the queen herself had come to give them an ointment that would help her heal faster. The doctor let her head sink back on her lover's

shoulder but she couldn't stop thinking about it.

The Amazons had welcomed all of them. The whole team had been treated like long lost family members, but only Samantha and she had developed a special relationship to the queen and her consort; perhaps due to their bond, their connection to each other that was so similar to what Gabrielle and Xena shared.

They all had formed strong friendships with the people on Gaia; in some cases even more than friendship, Janet thought with a smile. But between Samantha and Xena there also was more than friendship or some sort of mentor-student relationship. She couldn't pin it down but was sure that it went much deeper than this. The tone of her lover's voice, however, told her clearly that she was not ready to discuss this any further; and there also was something else she aimed to find out.

So, she once again closed her eyes and concentrated on the light in her mind, on their connection and for the first time Samantha answered, for the first time she got something back. The ball of light she usually saw was not only there, it was pulsing with an energy it never had before. This afternoon, when the blonde had come back and knelt in front of her, she had thought that she had felt her lover actively reaching out for her, but she hadn't been sure, not really.

Whatever had been left of her anger and disappointment at Samantha's unexpectedly immature and insecure behaviour disappeared at this discovery. Living with the woman she loved had been bliss, but this, the knowledge that their bond really was mutual, this finally made it real, real enough for every nerve ending, every cell in her body to understand and trust in it.

Janet almost unconsciously began to move the arm draped over her lover's midsection. She first circled the belly button. Her fingers then traced taut abdominal muscles and then moved upwards to her lover's breasts. Instead of gently caressing her partner's firm globes and teasing her until she felt compelled to take over, as was usually the case, this night she felt a sense of urgency that couldn't be denied. So, she began to knead and squeeze the blonde's smooth skin.

She quickly was rewarded by the sight of two very perkily protruding, very hard nipples though only one of them was actually receiving attention. Something that could easily be corrected; so, her left hand began to mimic the movements of her right. The blonde's breathing rhythm changed and a moan escaped her lips. She arched into the small physician's touch. Janet searched for her lover's eyes and found them dilated in arousal, and at the same time a spike of light roared through her soul.

As a rule, the brunette was perfectly content to let Samantha take control in their bedroom; it simply was part of her character, but there were times when she needed something different, especially when she felt vulnerable, when she needed something more forceful without it being outright aggressive or domineering.

The only question left to answer was if the blonde would accept it but that also turned out quiet all right. "Jan, Janet, plea..." She sealed her lover's lips with a kiss that quickly became passionate. The light of their love now seemed to pulse with the rhythm of their heartbeat. Their

tongues began an intricate, very familiar dance.

Samantha continued to seek body contact and Janet happily obliged. She slowly rolled her body on top of the blonde's. She put as much of her body weight on her arms and still made sure that her breasts and nipples directly touched her lover's. All her instincts were telling her to take her partner hard and fast but another part told her that this would be too easy, too fast, for both of their sakes.

So, Janet lowered herself down on her elbows, trying to immobilise the taller woman who was starting to thrust up her hips. When she broke the kiss, she brought her lips close to Samantha's right ear and whispered.

"I love you, Sammy. Even if I'm angry with you, I'll always love you."

"Love you, too," the blonde whispered hoarsely back. "Please, take me."

"No, Sammy. I will not take you. You're mine as I am yours. I will not take you but I will make love to you." Samantha's wide eyes grew even wider at her words and the light intensified further.

Janet repositioned her right leg to rest between the blonde's thighs and pressed down. She could feel how wet Samantha was, and for a split second she imagined going down on her and bring her to a quick release with her lips and tongue. But this was not what she wanted this night to be about.

She once again sought her lover's eyes, and intensified the contact between their bodies. She kissed Samantha's throat and suckled the sensitive point just above the collar bone. Janet let the tip of her tongue trail over the soft skin as if she wanted to check out every single pore. She sought out the jugular vein and pressed the flat of her tongue against it. She relished feeling her lover's quickly beating heart, fast but not frantic; and concluded that she was ready for the next step.

Janet brunette shifted her weight back on her hands and arms, lifting her upper body away from Samantha's torso. She smiled slightly at the disappointed moan and kissed her lover, brushing lips against lips. She then turned her attention towards the blonde's breast, beginning with the soft, sensitive skin at their sides. Every now and then she let the tip of her tongue dance over one of the blonde's nipples to keep them hard.

She methodically kissed all around the base of the fleshy globes, leaving a trail of love bites. Samantha's hips began to move of their own accord but the small doctor somehow managed to hold her in place. The blonde spread her legs wider and Janet had to adjust her position to make sure that her nether lips stayed right on top of her lover's.

Janet stopped the ministrations to her partner's breast and established eye contact.

"Look at me, Sammy-baby, look at me. I want you to see what I do." She asked, knowing how



difficult it could be to keep one's eyes open when other parts of her body insistently demanded attention.

The blonde's eyes opened even wider, and for a moment it was as if she had to gather all of her strength to offer a faint nod.

'O Goddess, she was so beautiful when she allowed herself to be open and vulnerable.' Her blonde, strong lover was never more beautiful than on these rare occasions, Janet thought.

Janet was almost painfully aware of her own arousal, but this evening was more about Samantha than her. She refocused her attention on the inviting breasts, determined to assuage at least some of the blonde genius' fears and insecurities she could still feel through their bond, now combined with a big dose of self-recriminations at her running away.

She suckled the taut nipples and enjoyed how the body beneath her squirmed in anticipation; Samantha was close, very close. "Please, Jan, please..."

"Come for me, baby. Let me see how you come for me."

The intensively dark blue eyes closed for the fraction of a heartbeat. Then Samantha captured Janet's brown orbs. Energy was pulsing through them, making their muscles contract. Ever since returning from Gaia they had been aware of their connection like a golden thread between their hearts and souls, but now it suddenly flared to life, an explosion of light that enveloped them, drowned them.

Finally, Janet collapsed on top of her taller lover, and Samantha rolled them over 'til they came to their sides. She closed strong arms around the doctor's frame, whispered. "I love you, Janet, love you so much. You're my light."

"And you, my brave warrior, are mine, always." Janet answered with a bright smile. She stretched a bit and softly kissed the taller woman on sleepily dropping eyelids. "Sleep, my love."

She didn't receive an answer and hadn't expected one, knowing from experience that emotional stress took a greater toll on her usually self-reliant lover than mere physical exertion ever could.

Janet also was tired, but for the moment she felt energised by the explosion of light, by the all encompassing power of their love. Deep in her heart she knew that this day, this night had brought them even closer together, had strengthened their bond in a way they had yet to explore. Before falling asleep herself, she remembered her grandfather's favourite Shakespeare sonnet.

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth bringeth  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Her last coherent thought was that she wouldn't change what she had with the beautiful, brilliant blonde for anything or anyone in the universe.

~\*~

Janet woke to an empty bed and a steaming mug of coffee waiting for her on the nightstand. She spared a thought to last night before grabbing it and smiled.

Samantha usually was the first one up and the coffee told her that her restless lover already had been out on her morning run and now was probably sitting in the kitchen with a cup of Chinese tea and the morning paper, her hair still wet from her shower. The brunette finished her coffee and decided that she would make pancakes for breakfast.

The paper was neatly folded on the kitchen table, but Samantha was nowhere to be seen. Janet checked the garage and the den and finally found her in the study, a small, sunny room the doctor used to do some of her paperwork. She was intently studying the computer screen and almost jumped when Janet suddenly appeared at her side.

"You performed a security check on Stephen? Why? I thought you like him."

"I like him, Jan, and he seems to be very good at his job. I spoke to the director of ARIN. They want him back. I promised to speak with him about it, but I also will offer him another option, now that the security check has come through clean." Samantha answered with one of her special smiles.

"At the base? Will General Hammond approve?"

"Since Coombs and Felger transferred to Area 51 my science department is a bit short-handed. We could use the help, and he's more than qualified." Samantha simply stated. "Do you think he would be able to stand the pressure?"

"Stephen is tough, Sam. When his parents found out that he was gay, they disowned him. He worked his way through College and still was Valedictorian. Neither his parents nor his brother were at the graduation."

"So, that's why my ears were ringing, talking about me behind my back." Stephen said from the door. "And Jan, you were there. That's all the family I needed."

"Thanks Stevie. Yes, we were talking about you. Sam might have a job for you if you don't mind working with the military."

His big eyes lit up but only briefly. "At NORAD? I once applied for a job there, but they told me to come back when I'm a commissioned officer. I don't think they have changed their policy about civilians. Not to speak about 'Don't ask, don't tell'. I didn't exactly make a secret of my sexual orientation."

"I let the two of you talk and get some breakfast going." Janet said and left the room with an

encouraging pat on Stephen's shoulder.

"Take a seat, Stephen." The young man complied. "It wouldn't be at NORAD, officially yes, but not really. And 'Don't ask, don't tell' doesn't apply to you because you would still stay a civilian - as long as you keep your sex life out of work, there won't be a problem.

"I'm heading the science division of a facility under Cheyenne Mountain. You would be working for me, but there are a few things you'll have to know before you make any decision.

"First of all, I had a short talk with Professor Eagleton at ARIN. He wants you to come back and promised that your former partner would then be permanently transferred to night shift. He praised your quick thinking and your ability to improvise as well as your constant questioning and search for answers outside the box. That's exactly what we need at the base - but I have to warn you, it can get rather dangerous from time to time."

"I saw some of your scars when you were stretching before your run this morning, and one doesn't get a body like yours by sitting in a plush office. Deep space radar telemetry is only a cover story, right?"

"It's a cover story. I knew you were bright, Stephen. What we do is top secret. So, at the moment I can't tell you much more. It can be very dangerous, sometimes we get a lot of pressure from the brass and such, and we have to do things we don't like but it also is a wild ride, wilder than my wildest dreams."

"I'll think about it, Sam."

"That's all I ask. Take your time."

"I will. I'll go and help Janet in the kitchen. Do you mind if I ask her opinion?"

"Not at all; she's the Chief Medical Officer of the base. No one knows better than she does how dangerous our work can be."

~\*~

"So, what do you want to know, Stevie?" Janet asked as soon as he came to the kitchen.

"I still can't get over it. She's 'the' Sam Carter! I lay awake half of the night, and I still can't get over it. I studied her theories even before the book came out. She's a legend in my field. Why does she let everyone believe that she's a man? And there also is no mention that she's an Air Force Officer."

"She told me that her identity was easy enough to find out if one really wanted to know. She thinks it's better for her work at the base when she's not in the public spotlight. So, will you go

back to Nevada?"

"You never were one to beat around the bush, Jan. Tell me, is it really this dangerous?"

"It can be, Stephen. Every time Sam goes on an away-mission, there's a chance that she comes back injured or not at all. You would be working on the base, that's not half as dangerous, but in the past four years we have had some close calls. I'm sorry, Stevie but I can't go into any details as long as you have not been cleared by General Hammond, our commanding officer."

"Is it worth the danger and the pain, Janet?" The young man asked.

A barrage of images flashed through her mind, of all the occasions she almost had lost Samantha, of all the times she had to stand by helplessly when one of her charges died.

"It can be hard and frightening, Stephen, but yes, it's worth the pain and the danger. We learn so much about life and the universe; we make a difference for our world."

They fell silent. Janet knew that she had told him too much, but still not enough to make an informed decision. Stephen leaned against one of the kitchen counters with an enigmatic smile on his face.

"I would be working with the Sam Carter, every day." He said almost to himself.

"Not every day, Stephen. I'll be gone more times than not and you would have your own projects to work on - but yes, from time to time we would be working together." Samantha answered from the doorway.

"Then my decision is made. I take the job, whatever it may be." He smiled like a kid in a candy store.

"Are you sure, Stephen?" Janet asked. "It really can be very dangerous."

"Jan, not accepting such an offer would be plain stupid. It would be like refusing to work with Einstein or Schroedinger or Heisenberg."

Samantha blushed up to her hairline and made a hasty exit by telling them. "I'll go and call the general."

"Did I say something wrong, Janet?"

"No, Stevie. Sam may be a card-carrying genius, but she also is very modest. She'll get over it. Don't worry."

Janet closed her eyes and tapped into their link. Last night had been special and she didn't expect any miracles, but when Samantha signalled her that she was all right a bright smile spread across her face.

She opened her eyes and continued. "She'll be all right, Stevie."

Less than a week later the science team of the SGC had a new member and Stephen turned out to be a very valuable asset to the base at Cheyenne Mountain. He was level-headed, resourceful, patient, and easy to work with. Samantha enjoyed working with him because she didn't have to dumb down her thought processes in order to get things done. He was a quick study, and at first had to be forced to leave the sanctuary of the lab for any length of time. The childlike wonder he had for the numerous new toys there reminded the blonde very much of a certain archaeologist.

***THE END***

Stay tuned for the sequel "GAIA - The Princess", coming soon.

Feedback welcome under [romansilence@yahoo.de](mailto:romansilence@yahoo.de).

Flames will be answered with flames, but I'm thankful for constructive criticism (means: should you want to tell me that I suck - good, do so, I can take it, but also tell me why and/or how to make it better, to allow me to avoid it next time; rant at me that I'm too pro/contra ... (whatever)... but be prepared for my answer).

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Disclaimer: [See Part 1](#)

### **Chapter Three: The First Day**

"I hate it; I hate it; I hate it. I always did and I always will. Tell me again why I don't change the Queen's dress code."

"Well," Xena answered, dropping her voice a few registers to sound like a Gao'uld, "there's always tradition. And then, if you don't change it, animals will be hurt only every other century or so. Your people just love to see you like this and your wife can't wait to get you out of it."

"You always know what to say to cheer me up, don't you?"

"I had a lot of time to find out, my Queen. And I still can't wait to help you get out of it."

"You can help but that's as far as we will go. You will have to take care of our guests and I will take the General and his team for a tour. And there still is the inconvenience of you..."

"...being on probation. I forgot, mistress. Do you know what I hate most when I have to be punished?"

"That you are not the only one to suffer, my love, but it can't be helped. It's not the first time and it won't be the last. Don't worry about it. - Go and get yourself in your uniform. They want regalia and decorum, and they'll get it. Though I doubt General Hammond knew what he bargained for."

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When SG-1, the research team, their guards, and General Hammond with his diplomatic staff stepped through the event horizon they were greeted by a sight as different as one can get to the day before. Where there had been nothing but a cushion of green grass, there now was a mass of people standing head to head, only in the last few rows towards the back human faces were visible. Everyone else was wearing strange masks, ranging from bird heads to large predators but most of them looked as if they came right out of the minds of fantasy film creators.

The Stargate Team had been briefed on what to expect, but they still were overwhelmed by the multitude and sheer magnificence of what they were seeing. And even Colonel O'Neill who usually prided himself on not being easily intimidated, couldn't help the thought that he wouldn't want such fierce looking warriors anywhere but on his own side in a battle.

After just standing there for more than only a couple of minutes, General Hammond finally found his voice.

"Greetings to you, proud members of the Amazon Nation. We come to you from far away to share your wisdom and learn your ways. We come with respect and an open mind. We come sharing a common past, a present enemy, and hopefully a future united by trust, friendship, and more. I am George Hammond, General of the United States Air Force."

To say that the Amazons were surprised at his words would have been an understatement. It was as if someone had read their old scrolls and adapted them to today's occasion. But Gabrielle had

more than enough experience to deal with the unexpected, so she quickly stepped forward as if the exchange of formalities had been rehearsed beforehand and answered.

"I am Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, Artemis' Chosen, Queen of Gaia. Greetings to you General Hammond, and to your people. Hail to you from Gaia. You are welcome to share our food, our lodgings, and our knowledge." Gabrielle took a few steps forward and finally pushed her owl's mask on top of her head. All of her people followed suite. "Now let us meet and mingle to celebrate the union of two halves that never should have been parted."

An almost imperceptible nod started some flutes and low-key drums, helping to diffuse the tension between the two groups. "General Hammond, thank you very much for making this easier for us by your inspired words."

"It's not I you'll have to thank. I found them on my desk this morning and when I saw you all they seemed appropriate. Thank Major Carter. It was her handwriting though she didn't sign it."

"Thank you for telling us, General. Would you please follow me to the table to your right? There's a treaty to sign. It's short and sweet, leaving a lot of manoeuvring space for both of us. Please take your time to read it. I'm sure Major Carter will relish the opportunity to introduce me to the rest of her team. Meanwhile, my consort will try to answer all of your questions."

Xena's eyes followed her, her foul look quickly turning into adoration and desire. Not a good time to be aroused, she cautioned herself.

One of the General's aides was reading the treaty draft Gabrielle had sketched out last night - and the General was asking questions, just like the Queen had warned Xena he would. However, she hadn't expected some of them being this personal.

"How many Queens did the Amazons have before Queen Gabrielle?"

A simple enough question, Xena thought. "The origins of Amazon history are lost; even we don't have more to go on than legends and myths. We don't have any scrolls or artefacts telling us about it but there must have been countless generation before my Queen took the mask, General Hammond."

"Is this the only world where one would be liable to find Amazons?"

"No, General, sir. There are a few others; some of them having decided to forego modern technology as a whole; some of them living it at its fullest while still caring for the protection of the environment."

"Where are they?"

Xena's smile this time didn't reach her eyes. "I'm sorry, General Hammond. Even if you already would have signed the treaty, I wouldn't be at liberty to tell you. They're on other planets and we are honour-bound to protect them. I hope we can be allies and still have one or two secrets."

There was a curt nod of acknowledgement and a long, uncomfortable period of silence but finally the next question came - around a blind corner. "Doctor Jackson mentioned in his report that you were not born an Amazon. Where did you come from?"

Telling the truth was out of question, Xena knew, but she also didn't know how to frame her answer. So, she was extremely grateful when O'Neill passed by, asking the General if there were any problems with the treaty; thus giving her enough time to think of something plausible and not too far from the truth. Finally, she decided to be as honest as possible - without however, telling him too much.

"Please don't be offended if I don't answer the question. But there's one thing you should know: I was well on the way to lose my soul to hatred and darkness when Queen Gabrielle saved me. She rescued my heart and my soul. -- I would be grateful if we could change topic. It still hurts to remember that time, General."

She could feel the tension settling between her shoulder blades and immediately after felt the comforting touch of Gabrielle's hand drawing tiny circles at the small of her back.

"We all have some dark corners in our lives." He answered with a sympathetic smile and then turned his attention to the newly arrived Queen. "Queen Gabrielle, should we get this ball rolling?"

"It would be my pleasure, General." They signed the treaty and Xena was dragged along for another round of socialising.

~\*~

Even when she still was a rampaging warlord on the way to conquer all of Greece, she had hated crowds. They made her uncomfortable and on the edge. Some things never change; so Xena as soon as possible found herself a quiet corner, far away from the centre of attention. It was a strategic hiding space, close enough to join in the action or bolt away from it - whatever was necessary. She was enjoying the quiet and calm, when suddenly someone slightly shorter than herself, with a more delicate bone structure but evenly developed muscles, slid in next to her.

"Samantha Carter, you should enjoy yourself instead of hiding and missing all the fun."

"Why do I think that this is the pot calling the kettle black, your highness?" Samantha Carter answered with the hint of bantering in her voice. Then she added, "I hate crowds. I never understood the need to mingle and exchange meaningless social niceties. Not talking at all is better than talking without saying anything."

"There's that, and then there are the smells." Xena answered.

"Too many people, too close together. Living in a dormitory at boarding school was pure hell, except for the winter season when my nose was too stuffed to smell anything. Though, looking at



it now, some of our past missions make this appear like some sort of heavenly perfume."

The tall blonde who still only came to Xena's nose answered, casting a longing glance to the forest behind them.

"I don't consider dress uniforms particularly suited for tree walking, Samantha Carter, as much fun as it would be." The dark haired woman said with a smile of her own.

"The secret to being a good soldier is to always be prepared." The younger woman said and before Xena could answer Samantha pulled her hip hugging skirt up to her waist, revealing black spandex shorts. An instant later she had exchanged her formal heels against soft sport slippers from her bag. "Ready to go, your highness?"

There was a sad smile appearing on Xena's face. "I'd really love to but not today. I have to get back to my duties but I promise you a longer outing the day after tomorrow." Easily reading the disappointment on the blonde's face she continued. "I have to get back to the Queen but you don't have to miss out on the fun, Samantha Carter."

Xena whistled and a heartbeat later Aria dropped out of a tree to the right of them. "Aria, Major Carter wants to take a walk through the treetops. See to it that she doesn't risk her health and teach her what she needs to know. She's a natural but she only had her first practice run yesterday. One candlemark tops."

"Yes, your highness. I'll do my best to keep her safe."

Xena acknowledged the young woman's words with a nod and then headed towards the crowd to find her wife who probably was in the midst of charming every single official of Stargate Command.

"Please follow me, Major Carter."

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The other two headed a few paces further into the woods and Aria taught the newcomer how to use a tree rope, also know as a tree whip. She got it with the second try - and this was considerably faster than any apprentice of her class ever did, including herself. Aria was becoming intrigued. In her mind's eye she already had seen the stranger staggering clumsily through the trees after being hauled up here by force. A few candledrops later, she was convinced that the Consort had been kidding her. This couldn't be only the second time the other woman had done something like this; it simply was impossible.

So when they took a small break to decide on where to go next she asked. "Are you sure that yesterday was the first time you did something like this, Major Carter?"

"Yes. Why? Do I do something wrong?"

"No, you're doing great. The General was right, you're a natural."

"The General?"

"Sorry, Consort Xena. She doesn't like to be called 'General' though she is the head of our armies. She says it brings back too many shadows of her past, so we only do it behind her back. Of course she knows about it but I still would be grateful if you didn't mention it to her."

"I won't Aria, isn't it?" The younger woman nodded. "I think she would look good at the head of an army, sitting atop a proud war horse, riding in front of her men, her hair flying in the wind, her war cry alone chilling her enemies to the deepest level of their souls."

"Now, where did this image suddenly come from?" Samantha asked herself. She didn't know but she was sure that for some reason she shouldn't dwell on it.

"Let's get going again." Without waiting for a reply she started off in a new direction.

Aria had her work cut out with trying to keep up with the longer legs of her charge, who made up for her lack of experience with agility and an incredible sense of balance. One could almost feel the joy it gave her. And then she suddenly stopped, a slender but firm arm steadying her guide when she also tried to come to a halt.

"Why the day after tomorrow?"

"Pardon?" Aria panted.

"Xe... Consort Xena, she said we could go tree walking the day after tomorrow. Why then, why not this evening or tomorrow morning? Why not now? I saw it in her eyes. I know she wanted to." Samantha said almost to herself, never expecting an answer.

In retrospect, Aria didn't know why she answered what she did; perhaps it were the familiar blue eyes, commanding blue eyes, she was used not to question. "The Consort is on probation, Major Carter."

"On probation? That sounds like she did something wrong." Samantha said incredulously.

"No one stands above the law, Major. She was punished for what happened with your commanding officer. The next two days she is supposed to only do her duty and to retire to her room in her free time to think about her transgressions. Only after that she will be forgiven."

The other woman was still looking at her as if she just had birthed a two-headed Centaur, so she continued talking.

"Usually, probation time is spent doing some manual labour, something the penitent doesn't like to do. It's different for everyone but one is supposed to do it with the same amount of dedication we usually put in our chosen professions. However, this was an unofficial punishment; that's

why she is not relieved of her normal duties but she still has to adhere to the rules."

"Does this happen often? And when it's unofficial, how do you know about it?"

"Only the oldest among the elders can remember the Consort being officially punished, so, no, it's a rare occurrence. And for your other question, that's more difficult to answer. Unofficial only means that it will not be marked down in her personal record, it doesn't mean that no one knows about it. In this case the Consort honoured me with making me a witness to her punishment. But everyone else also knows. They saw it in the way she and the High Queen came to Athena's Ring. Usually the Consort is walking one step behind her Majesty, today it were three. It indicates that at the moment she is not allowed the intimacy of the Queen's touch. Unofficial punishments happen every once in a while, I was told."

Taking the first part of the answer as some sort of saying, Samantha concentrated on the second part and her mind focused on one particular part. "You witnessed her punishment? I..., I don't understand. You surely are not talking about some kind of beating or something?"

"Perhaps you should ask her about our laws yourself." Aria tried to get out of this increasingly uncomfortable questioning.

"Yes. Perhaps I should, but I want some answers now and I want them from you." The blonde snarled in an uncharacteristic show of temper. "And didn't she say that you too were to be punished?"

Definitively the same eyes, the Amazon apprentice thought. She sighed and began to recount yesterday evening's events as best as she remembered. She ended. "I can see that you're not comfortable with the concept of physical punishment, but it's worked for our Nation since the time we started writing down our history and that's almost five thousand years ago."

Samantha's mind snapped back to the time when she was in the headmistress' office, bending over the back of a heavy leather chair and being caned for something she didn't even do. She felt the same shame and humiliation she then had experienced; and she simply couldn't imagine the proud, intimidating woman she was just getting to know in a far more humiliating position.

The expression in her eyes now had changed to something between pain, puzzlement, and indignation. So once again Aria decided to continue talking. "This morning the Consort told me that you and your team mates know about my past, about where I come from. - Please, let me finish. It will help you to understand. - I'll have to cut this short but it's important that you understand.

"I grew up with the conviction that all women and girls are good for is birthing sons and serving as a punching bag for men. I grew up with daily beatings and humiliations. The Queen and the Consort got me out of there and offered me a chance at a new life, but I needed a long time before I was able to stand up for myself and learned to see myself as an equal to these strong women, this great Nation. I'm still haunted by the shadows of my past from time to time."

The blond woman's expression now showed sympathy and understanding, not the pity she had come to expect.

"When I learned that the Amazons often rely on physical punishment I was afraid that it would be as it always has been in my old tribe. But the first time I earned myself a punishment, nothing could have been farther from the truth. It's not about humiliation and it's not merely physical. It means that you accept responsibility for your actions and acknowledge in front of the Nation or one of your superiors that you were wrong and will try to do better next time. That's also what the probation period is for: to better understand your actions. It's hard to explain but it's almost like a spiritual cleansing."

"What about the children?"

"Children?" Aria took some time to understand the underlying meaning of Samantha's question, but then... "Oh no, physical punishment is for adults only. No Amazon ever would raise a hand against one of our children. No one would even think of doing this."

Besides, no one is forced to undergo physical punishment. There are other options like community service, wearing restraints for some time, spending time in the purification hut, and other things like that. Most of us choose the physical punishment because it's fast and over with quickly. It may sound strange but Amazon justice reinforces our sense of community."

"Not even the Queen stands above the law. I think I understand, but I still have a lot to think about. Thank you for telling me, Aria. - Perhaps we should head back. If two of your candlemarks are close to two of our hours we even have to hurry to be back in time. We've been up there for more than an hour now."

"Thank you for reminding me, Major Carter. And if you ever have questions you don't know whom to ask, I'll gladly try and give you the answers, even if it should go against our laws."

Samantha surprised herself with her words. "I gratefully accept your offer, Aria, and then I'll be in your debt. I only ask that should it be against your laws you tell me before answering, to give me the chance to reconsider my question."

"I will, Samantha Carter."

They had almost reached the clearing when a series of birdcalls echoed through the woods. Aria immediately stopped and this time Samantha had difficulties to keep her balance. "What is it?"

"Just a friendly warning. Your comrades are searching for you, for quite some time now. Some of them are worried. The signals said that we should go down at the other side of the clearing but at least a stone's throw from the edge of the forest - and that we should try to get you cleaned up."

Samantha only looked down to her feet, taking in her rumpled dress uniform, laughed and took off towards the other side.

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"Will you now stop worrying, Janet Fraiser?" A low voice asked from behind and above her left ear.

"It looks like flying. No wonder, she was so enthusiastic when telling me about it. - Why didn't they see us? We were practically on top of them." The small, brown eyed doctor asked while holding on to the branch with both hands and desperately trying not to look down. Thankfully aware of the firm grip the Queen's Consort had around her waist.

"I didn't want them to see us. To be the Amazons' commanding officer also means I have to be always one step ahead of the best of them - and Aria has the potential to one day be among the best of the best. And for my reasons, let's simply say that Doctor Carter is not ready to know that she had had an audience. Close your eyes and I'll get us down. We'll be back with the others at about the same time your missing team leader will."

Doctor Janet Fraiser, M.D., Major of the United States Air Force, Chief Medical Officer of one of the best guarded secrets of the world, obediently closed her eyes. She heard a slight rustling of leaves, air rushing around her and shortly after, without experiencing even a jolt she was gently set back to the ground. She had to tilt her head almost all the way back to look into the Consort's eyes, twinkling with a mischievous blue she only knew from a handful of private moments with someone else.

To get her mind back to reality she said, "Thank you, your highness." The tall woman just raised an eyebrow, in a suggestive way that would have made a certain Jaffa warrior envious. "Thank you for indulging my irrational worries."

"It is never irrational to worry about someone we care for and it was my pleasure, Janet Fraiser. You were very brave up there, despite your fear of heights."

"I knew that you would keep me safe, your highness." She answered without thinking, immediately after asking herself what the hell had got into her. She tried to regain her composure. "I think you read my file at the SGC computers?"

"There is that, and the fact that the moment you began looking for Doctor Carter you eyed the tree tops with the expression of someone about to do battle with one of her most notorious enemies."

Janet laughed but quickly found her sobriety. "Why are you so sure that she would have been disturbed by an audience?"

"Doctor Carter is a very private woman. She keeps up the pretence that she is nothing more than some sort of calculating machine, without fears, without emotions, without weaknesses, the

perfect soldier. She has forged a certain image of herself, an image she knows how everyone will react to. You, Janet Fraiser, however, also know another side of her, a side that is funny and mischievous and has an evil sense of humour, a side that is sensitive and caring and loving. It's a side of her only you and Cassandra know about. And you know about her fears and insecurities because she trusts you with her soul." Xena gauged the smaller woman's face and then added. "I know you still have a lot of questions but now isn't the time or the place. Try to be patient."

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They arrived just in time for General Hammond's lecture - with Colonel O'Neill making his most smug 'I told you so'-face behind his back. "Major, this is not behaviour befitting a responsible senior officer. If it weren't for our new allies I would relegate you to desk duty for the next two weeks. I never want something like this to happen again."

Before Carter even had a chance to answer, Aria stepped forward. "General Hammond, sir, I apologise for occupying so much of Major Carter's valuable time. It is just that I am very curious about your world." She ended with her most innocent expression.

He turned around, making sure that he was out of earshot of his staff except for the members of SG-1. "I see you already inspired some loyalty, Major. I hope you had fun with your - what did you call it, O'Neill?"

"Tree walking, sir. Definitely an occupation for women; the branches would break from the weight of a muscular male body."

Xena luckily saw the teasing twinkle in the colonel's eyes and joined in his banter. "That's why you don't do it on earth, Colonel. The trees there are just not sturdy enough. But I'd love to give you a short lesson. Let's say, the day after tomorrow - to give your team a chance to settle in."

"I'm game, your highness. Besides, you still owe me a sparring match, if I remember well."

"It will be my pleasure, Colonel Jonathan O'Neill." The tall woman answered with a smile O'Neill interpreted as seductive while Carter and all of the other Amazons recognised it as feral and despite their annoyance over his bravado instantly felt sorry for him.

"Queen Gabrielle, I think you promised us a tour through your village?" General Hammond refocused everyone's attention.

"Of course, General. It will be my pleasure. I hope you don't mind if my Consort takes your research team to their quarters, they can get comfortable and will be taken to a tour of their own. You have to understand that for you and your men even visiting our village is a unique occurrence in Amazon history."

"We're looking forward to see whatever you feel comfortable of sharing with us, your majesty."

The General answered with a rare smile usually reserved for his grandchildren.

He offered her an arm she surprisingly took, all the time thinking that this delicate woman that easily could have been his youngest daughter was far too innocent and young to be leading a Nation of woman warriors, but he also sensed that there was more to her than the eye could see.

"Major Carter, research team take care of yourselves. Contact the SGC whenever you need but remember that there will be a standing line every evening between 20h00 and 21h00 of this time. Dismissed."

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The twelve members of Samantha's team followed Xena to the guest palace SG-1 had visited the day before - this time they took the direct way. They entered the patio and the blonde half expected to see half an army of serving girls waiting for them to help them wash their hands.

This time, however, they passed straight through the court, though Xena still bowed in front of the statues. She led them to a long corridor lined with private quarters: double occupancy suites with a small living room, two even smaller bedrooms, and a big bathroom behind a simple door. Pair after pair, they were assigned their quarters. Finally only Carter and Fraiser were left; they stood in front of an ornate double door Xena opened for them.

They were looking at a big room with two comfortable leather chairs, a small table, and a double king-size bed. To the right was another door, probably leading to the bathroom. "I'm sorry, it's not what you expected but this is the only room left. The other wing of the palace is reserved for the regents of the other villages scheduled to come here less than a week from now. Most of them will be quartered in the village but our capacities are limited. Think about it. If there are any problems we'll see that one of you can bunk down somewhere else. - We'll meet in three of your hours in the patio."

Samantha and Janet stood on the threshold, staring into the room; both of them locked tight into their own minds. Candelights passed; Janet found Samantha's hand and pulled her forwards, murmuring. "It's a big bed, you know. - And after your disappearance this morning, I don't really want to let you out of my sight more than necessary."

"So, I'll stay?"

"Yes, Sam. I want you to stay here. I need you to stay with me. Make yourself comfortable."

Samantha closed the door, only then realising the possible impact of Janet's words. 'I need you to stay with me.' Her heart started to beat faster and she tried to rationalise them to regain her equilibrium. For a second, still turned towards the door, her face showed joy and hope, but with an effort she re-established her usual noncommittal expression before facing her friend. Janet already was in the midst of unpacking, so the blonde decided to get some breathing space. "I'll go

and take a quick shower, Janet, and slip into someth... and get out of this uniform."

"All right, Sam, take your time."

With her usual efficiency Samantha was back less than ten minutes later, dressed in fatigues and an Air Force regulation black t-shirt, her hair still damp. "Your turn, Janet. There's a whole row of lightly scented soaps and a stack of fluffy towels at your disposal. Take care that you don't get lost in the tub; it's big enough to house all of SG-1 and then some."

Coming from Colonel O'Neill she would have taken the words as an insult referring to her height or the lack thereof but coming from Samantha she knew it was just an innocent remark. So, she smiled, grabbed a change of clothes, and headed towards the bathroom.

Samantha made short work of her own unpacking and then settled on the bed to have a look at the regulation book waiting on the night-stand. She idly leaved through it, marvelling at the elegance of Amazon hierarchy; about how they were able to combine punishment with dignity. And at the same time she asked herself how she was able to see these things in something that seemed to be nothing more than a very long list of laws, traditions, conduct rules and the punishments one risked when breaking them. While puzzling over this paradox, she uncharacteristically fell asleep, in the middle of the day and with the still opened book lying on her chest.

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"Xena, come, join us." Gabrielle called her partner from the other side of the communal dinner hut. She was sitting at the Royal table, with the remaining three members of SG-1 and General Hammond. The rest of the staff already had gone back through Athena's Ring. "Did you get the team settled?"

"Yes, your majesty. I showed them to their rooms and told them to get comfortable and also to try and get some sleep. The village is already literally buzzing with anticipation of the upcoming party."

"A party? And you didn't invite us, your majesty; I'm hurt, deeply hurt." O'Neill quibbled in, thinking of himself as the life of every party.

"I'm sorry, Colonel, but men are not allowed." He tried giving the adorable blonde his best pleading look.

"Tell me, Colonel, Doctor Jackson, how many times were you invited to dine and party with the men of a planet you visited while Major Carter had to stay in the background, tucked away in the women's quarters?" Daniel looked at her in understanding and O'Neill had at least the decency to stay quiet. "Perhaps now you can understand her annoyance after such missions."



"You have a point there, your highness. The Queen just offered to take us to have a look at the training grounds. Care to join us?"

Xena exchanged a look with Gabrielle and then answered. "It will be my pleasure, Colonel."

On the way the Queen was amiably chatting with General Hammond and Daniel Jackson while Xena and the others were ambling along in companionable silence. They reached the training grounds shortly after the midday break. A class of advanced staff students had just started and for a few minutes they just stood at the edge and observed. Then one of the girls saw their Queen.

She ran over and fell to her right knee. "Your majesty, could you please help us with a disagreement we have?" Only then did she realise that the Queen and her Consort were not alone. "I'm sorry, your majesty. I didn't see our guests. It can wait."

"It's all right, Kanith. I'm here, so stand up and tell me what your disagreement is about?" Gabrielle answered with a smile.

"Yesterday, the Consort taught us this backhanded sweep to take out a taller opponent's legs, and it works one time out of two. But what do you do when your sparring partner simply jumps over the staff? I know there must be some counter moves we don't know yet but we still got in a discussion if staff fighting is better suited for smaller or bigger people." She answered with a nervous glance towards the Consort.

"I'm quite sure Consort Xena explained the principles of staff fighting to all of you, even before you held a staff for the first time. So you should know that what really counts is your centre of balance and speed." The girl was thoroughly embarrassed and didn't dare to look her Queen in the eyes. "But I suppose this is not really about you not knowing. Am I right?"

"Yes, your majesty, as always. It's a rare feat to find you at the training grounds, so we hoped you would give us a demonstration." She stammered.

"So what do you think, Xena, care to give our guests a little show?" Gabrielle said with a smirk.

"Yes, my Queen." Under her breath the tall woman muttered. "Can't wait to get my ass kicked."

"Sorry, what did you say?"

Xena had the grace to blush almost imperceptibly and answered. "I can't wait to get started, your highness."

The raven-headed woman shrugged out of her tight jacket. The staves were brought to them and they took position in the centre of the square, quickly attracting an audience other than their male guests. They began rather slowly, with Gabrielle taking the role of the teacher and giving a running commentary to every move.

"There are a lot of things you can do when the first reverse sweep doesn't work. You can follow it up by a second one, fast enough after the first to let your opponent not regain equilibrium. When this also doesn't work you can change direction, bring the staff between your opponent's legs and make her topple over. - You take all the fun out of things when you make it this easy for me, Xena."

"I'm sorry, your majesty. I thought this was to teach a couple of new moves. You know it has to go step by step; that's the only way to learn."

"Yes, my love. And now for the show I promised. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Go easy on me, please. It's been centuries since I stood a chance against you."

Once again they began slowly. When they were sufficiently warmed up, they started in earnest. Xena knew that she didn't have to pull her blows like she usually did, and Gabrielle relished the chance to go full out without the fear of harming her partner. To the inexperienced observer they were nothing more but a blur of movement but the soldiers watching were impressed to see a combination of agility, speed, balance, and mastery of the body none of them, not even the Jaffa ever had encountered. It was like a ballet, a ballet on a tight rope; only one slip by either of them and they could have been severely injured. As it was, Xena took a rather hard hit to her ribs and had been taken down two times, but each time was back on her feet and on the move before the other woman could take advantage of the situation.

When they returned to their guests, Xena was still buttoning her jacket. Teal'c said in his usual deadpan manner. "O'Neill, I think you should reconsider this sparring session."

"You're right my friend, if I were a sane man, I'd postpone the sparring for at least a few years, unfortunately I'm a bit nuts and I always keep my word. Though it's pretty obvious that I will get my ass kicked this time."

"My wife has a hell of a lot experience in all sorts of combat. I'm sure you both will have fun."

"Thank you for the demonstration, your majesty. It was very enlightening and I can see that my team will be in good hands with you. I'll send Teal'c and Colonel O'Neill back the day after tomorrow to get a first report from Major Carter and also for this sparring lesson. Would you mind accompanying us back to the Stargate?"

"Of course not, General. Don't you want to say another good-bye to the team?"

"No, your majesty, that won't be necessary. They're grown women and I don't want them to feel too coddled."

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After seeing the men off, the Queen and her Consort retired to their hut to change into something more comfortable than the formal attire in which they had been sparring. When the door was closed, Xena fell to her right knee in front of her Queen. "I'm sorry, your majesty. I didn't watch my tongue."

"Please, rise, my Consort. There's no need for this. It was nothing more than a lapse. I'm sure even Daniel will think that it's some sort of proverbial saying - and when the time is right we will have to tell them the truth anyway. - Now, help me out of these things and take a shower with me."

"You're cruel, my love, to torture me this way." Xena said with concern in her eyes and a hopeful glint in her eyes.

"You'd deserve it, my big dumb warrior, for trying to hide away during the reception and for almost getting Samantha into trouble by letting her run around in the trees. But I won't torture you; we'll just take some time out from your probation. I need to feel your touch. The hungry eyes of some of the men the General brought had me really on edge."

"I can always go through the Ring and blind them, my love." Xena answered in a low purr while patiently undoing knot after knot to reveal her wife's perfectly sculpted body.

"Strip for me, slowly."

The tall woman took two steps back and began to unbutton the dark blue jacket of her uniform. She then discarded the white t-shirt underneath, leaving her naked from the waist upwards. She then turned sideways and began to unlace her knee-high leather boots. She once again turned around, taking her time with coming to a standing position. She found Gabrielle's eyes and held them. Meanwhile her strong hands opened the belt around her waist and slowly drew it out of the belt loops. She loosely coiled it like one would a whip and deposited the sturdy leather strap in front of Gabrielle's feet. She then began to open the buttons holding her black leather pants. When she was down to the second to last, she heard Gabrielle's command.

"Stop it. Put your hands behind your neck. Close your eyes and don't move."

Xena had a hard time not trembling in anticipation. The last two buttons now were open and Gabrielle tucked the black leather over her hips. The trousers were of a rather wide and comfortable cut; they simply would have dropped down to the ground; instead they were guided downwards, slowly and gently caressing the skin of her thighs and calves. She instinctively stepped out of them, immediately fearing that her unauthorised movement would bring the game to an end. Her breeches quickly followed the trousers.

She felt her lover's eyes on her skin, felt her hands tracing the still vivid marks of her punishment and the quickly forming bruise at her right side, just where the lower ribs had been hit. Gabrielle's lips now were touching her, kissing every stripe from the strap and every welt from the cane. Wetness was trickling down her inner thighs, evidence of her steadily growing arousal.

She felt it licked away and soon the tongue was entering her and she more felt than heard the command. "Come for me, my love."

And she did - to the feeling of three strong fingers thrusting in and out of her nether lips, hitting the special spot inside of her that only Gabrielle was able to find. Another climax washed over her and she fell to her knees into the waiting arms of her wife. The smaller woman settled them on the ground with Xena's head cradled on her stomach, gently stroking her long hair. Some time later, blue eyes found green, and the loving adoration in the blue eyes made Gabrielle's heart skip a beat.

"Thank you, my love, my soul. You don't know how much I love to be taken this way, how much I sometimes need to be taken this way. Thank you, my Queen."

"And I love taking you this way. You're always incredibly beautiful when you come but when your climax comes out of your surrender you're even more beautiful. I'm glad that you are mine and mine alone."

"Yours, for as long as you let me. Hey, didn't you say something about a shower?" Xena came to her knees, scooped the smaller woman in her arms, and carried her to their bathroom.

Had they been in their hut in the village instead of the larger, isolated house in the forest, the whole village would have known that everything was as it always had been between the Queen and her Consort.

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"I can't believe it. They left us at the mercy of barbarians." Janet's outburst brought Samantha instantly back to reality. Janet was sitting next to her on the bed waving the regulation book she had fallen asleep reading.

The tall blonde had a good idea what her friend was talking about; nevertheless she asked to gain some time.

"What I'm talking about? As if you didn't know, don't try this innocent act with me Major Samantha Gabriella Carter. You know I'm talking about this physical punishment thing."

"I was afraid it was what has you this agitated." She answered quietly, immediately cursing herself for her answer when the usually level-headed, controlled doctor began a tirade followed by a lecture she would have given a lot to be able to tune out.

Finally, when the other woman had to stop to take a breath, she said. "Please, calm down, Janet. Yes, I know, they prefer physical punishment to other methods and I'm sure this book contains a list of punishments for every possible transgression. They believe that no one stands above the law, not even the Queen or her Consort and certainly not their guests. But you don't need to

worry; physical punishment can always be substituted by other things like community service and stuff."

"That doesn't make it any better, Sam. If they have physical punishment for adults, and this book is very detailed concerning all kinds of whips and straps and paddles and what not. If they do this to adults, can you imagine what they let their children go through?"

"That's the point, Janet. Physical punishment is for adults only. I spoke with Aria while we were gone. At first I was as shocked as you are but when I insinuated that they beat their children she almost fell out of the tree. She said, and I quote: 'No Amazon would ever raise her hand against a child.' I believe her."

"So, you think they will let us choose another way should it become necessary?"

"I'm sure of it, Janet."

"Hey Sam, you have the same name as the Queen; well almost, one letter difference is close enough, Samantha Gabriella Carter. How cool is that."

"Who told you? Oh, yes, my personal file. - It can't be more than mere coincidence, Janet. Besides, my father always hated the name because it came from my mother's mother. After my mother's death, I was never allowed any contact with my grandmother. When he learned that I had sought her out while at college, he was as furious as I ever had seen him - even more than when Michael was caught driving under influence in a stolen car. She died from a car accident during the Golf War. I didn't have the chance to attend her funeral and there isn't a grave for me to visit. She wanted to be cremated and her ashes spread over the ocean."

"Sounds like you loved her very much, Sam."

"Yes, I did. We didn't have much time together but she reminded me a lot of my mother, and she had a joy in life I never before had experienced. It was the only time in my life I openly defied my father's orders."

Janet knew it probably was a big mistake, but she still followed her heart's desire and took the taller woman in her arms, gently rocking her to and fro'. Surprisingly Samantha didn't pull away but leaned into the touch and let herself be comforted. Cradled in the competent arms of her CMO she felt safe and for the first time in more than ten years, on a planet almost 53000 light years from her home, she allowed herself to cry for her grandmother.

When the tears had subsided Janet demanded. "Tell me about her, Sam."

"She was a doctor, the head of the children's cancer station. Her name was Catherine, perhaps that's why I always got along with Doctor Langford. She was working hand-in-hand with a research team at the university in Washington; that's how I found her. My father had told me that she was living at the West Coast. I was sixteen and felt very alone. One evening I went to her house to ask why she never visited in the three years since my mother's death. That's when I

learned that my father had had her served with a court order forbidding her to approach any member of his family the day before my mother's funeral. She tried to attend but he had her removed from the graveyard by some of his Air Force buddies before she had a chance to get even close to the grave.

"The first evening I spent with her was very emotional but we soon learned that we had a lot in common. She was the only one who didn't laugh when I told her that I wanted to become a fighter pilot. We discussed astrophysics and music and psychology, her research and my mother's childhood. For a long time she was my best friend."

"She sounds like someone I would have loved to know, Sam." After a long moment of silence she tentatively asked. "Why did your father hate her so much? It's not like the Jacob Carter I know."

"He has changed a lot since being joined with Selmac. He's a much nicer person now." Samantha turned in Janet's arms and sought the brown eyes of her friend. "She was gay, Janet."

"She wasn't in the military; it shouldn't have made a difference." Janet blurted out.

"No, it shouldn't but it did for him. It was strange in a way. He taught us to respect other religious beliefs and cultures. He taught us to respect different live styles and sexual orientations but in his own family he couldn't tolerate it."

"It's hard to be on the receiving end of something like that. My father always told us how important our armed forces are for the security of our country, but since I joined the Air Force he refuses to speak to me. I know how it feels. I'm sorry you and your grandmother had to suffer because of your father's fears but I'm happy that you got a chance to get to know her."

"Thank you for listening to me. I'm happy that I have a best friend like you, Janet. I..." Before she could say anything else, there was a knock on the door, reminding them that it was time to meet with the Consort.

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When they joined the others a few minutes later in the patio, they found them animatedly talking about the regulation book. Samantha ordered them to stay calm. She told them about the possibility of choosing an alternate punishment and that she saw no reason not to trust their hosts. When Xena arrived, ten minutes late, she rushed through the entrance, but still took the time to bow to the statues.

"I'm sorry for the delay. I hope you all had the chance to get some rest. I see you already got the regulation book. It's an abridged version of our most important laws and rules affecting everyday life. I wanted to give it to you myself but something must have gone wrong. I'm well aware that it might need some explaining."

"Do you really expect us to let some Amazon beat up on us?" A tall brunette asked provocatively.

"Watch your mouth, Lieutenant Jenson. This is not the way to speak with our hosts, to be exact; this is no way to speak to anyone. Apologise immediately!"

"I apologise for my ill-chosen words, your highness."

"Apology accepted, and to answer your question: as long as you stay in our world, you all are my responsibility. So it wouldn't be 'any' Amazon charged to mete out a punishment, it would be me. But, and this is why I wanted to talk to you before giving you the book...

"As long as you stay in this world you will have to adhere to our regulations and live according to our law and customs. Not even the Queen stands above the law, Lieutenant."

The tall woman turned her head slightly to include the others. "We know that most of you are not comfortable with the notion of physical punishment. I'm sure you see it as barbaric and uncivilised. To us it's a physical as well as a spiritual experience. We don't believe in discipline for its own sake.

"We believe in discipline as a way to create a balance between heart and hand, body and soul. Breaking the laws or losing your temper, as I did yesterday, disturbs this balance. For most of us the pain of physical punishment re-establishes the balance.

"Over the centuries we learned that it doesn't work this way for everyone. That's why there always is the possibility of choosing an alternate punishment - ranging from communal services like kitchen duty or caring for the elders or the children to imprisonment, purification rituals, and other things. However, we never would force you to endure something you think you can't stand. So, should it become necessary, you can choose to either return to Earth or to accept our form of justice. And you can be assured that no one will think any less of you should you decide to go back to your world."

"I think this is something we can live with, your highness." Karen Jenson answered to make up for her earlier burst of temper.

"That's good to hear, Lieutenant. Let's get going, there's a lot to show you before the party starts."

"Party? You never mentioned a party. I mean we just had this get together, wouldn't it be better to get started with the mission?" Carter asked, with a hint of nervousness in her voice. She just hated parties.

"It is part of the mission, Samantha Carter. You will be introduced to the people you'll work with and learn from. To understand us, you have to get to know us not only on a professional level. Besides, Amazons just love to party. Queen Gabrielle would have a riot on her hands if she even

tried to miss out on such a great opportunity. And this socialising thing before, well, it was just that, and soon you will see, it doesn't qualify as a party, not even remotely. One word of warning though, the wine and ale we serve is pretty strong and goes straight to the head. So, if you don't want to regret it tomorrow, you shouldn't drink more than three or four mugs. And now, would you please follow me, we'll begin the tour with something familiar, our laboratories. Everyone's preparing for the party, so you can familiarise yourself with the place without getting in the way."

~\*~

It had been a long afternoon; visiting the laboratories and the power plant alone had taken more than four hours. They just had enough time for a quick visit to the so-called infirmary and even Janet who prided herself of her state-of-the-art infirmary was more than impressed with the efficiency and simplicity of its layout. Then the party had started, and now, a couple of hours after midnight it still was in full swing.

Samantha had crept away from the crowd and the noise a little over an hour ago and simply dreaded the thought of going back. She had to admit that for a while even she had had fun. Most of the Amazons were friendly and obviously as curious about them as they were about the Amazons. Some of them had been a little too friendly, openly inviting her and other members of her team to their beds. She even had had to fight a burst of jealousy when one of them had flirted with Janet. The small doctor hadn't even acknowledged the other woman's overtures but Samantha still wished she would have been able to openly step in and claim the brown-eyed beauty as her own.

She sighed; she knew it was nothing but wishful thinking. Janet was straight; the woman had been married - and even if she weren't she didn't feel anything but friendship for her, Samantha rationalised. And then there was the small problem with the military. Not even General Hammond would turn a blind eye to two of his senior officers having an affair, and both of them being women, to boot.

Samantha almost jumped out of her skin when someone sat down next to her. "Do you see the big bright star just over the hillock to your right, Samantha Carter?"

"Yes, your highness."

"From there, count ten stars to the left and seven up. What does the pattern look like? And please call me Xena as long as we're alone."

"It will be my pleasure, Xena. Please call me Sam. It looks like a woman, a very well developed woman. What is it called?"

"It represents Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Love. It is said that praying to her turns even the most complicated relationship into a happy one." Samantha didn't know how the Consort was



doing it but she seemed to look straight into her soul.

"Yeah, and if wishes were hor..." She stopped herself. The taller woman didn't deserve to become the scapegoat for her anger at herself, at her inability to get a certain five foot two doctor out of her mind. "I'm sorry, Xena. It has been a long day. - The energy shield at your gate. It makes men more aggressive. Do you think it makes women more emotional?"

"No, I don't think so. It picks up on the different hormone distribution patterns in men and women by way of submolecular nanites that are absorbed in the body when passing through. This is what causes the testosterone output with men, but there are no records of a women ever being influenced in any way. Why? Have you or one of your team mates have experienced any problems?"

"No, I... it just was a specula..." Samantha stopped in mid-sentence. She suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to be honest to this woman. "I don't know but I surprise myself doing and saying and feeling things I never would have allowed myself to do, say, and feel in any other situation. Take this morning, my playing hooky with Aria. I knew that it was wrong and usually I'm the type of officer doing everything in her power not to anger my commanding officers. Obeying orders and always acting appropriately seems to be something I was born with. But today it simply didn't count. It was absolutely unimportant in comparison to the joy of being up there in the trees. Perhaps I should have Janet run a few tests on me. My reaction could be related to the protein marker and the naqada in my blood stream."

"You really are worried about this, aren't you?" Xena studied her face.

"Yes, Xena. You have to know that usually, I'm not a very emotional person. I'm a soldier; we're not supposed to have any emotions at all - and suddenly it feels as if I were about to burst at the seams if I don't show what I'm feeling. It's scary."

"I know, Sam. It's hard to suddenly find out you have a heart beating strongly for someone else when all you felt before was emptiness and loneliness. But I think you are wrong. Having no emotions at all and not easily showing any emotions are as different from each other as fire is from ice. Not even someone as brilliant as you are can live with hiding their fears and desires for an extended period. Believe me; the price would be too high to pay. Either you end up really losing your emotions or they break through with force. Give your feelings a chance; explore them before you think of putting them away once again."

"The problem is that I know what I'm feeling, Xena. I just can't afford to act on my feelings." The blonde answered in a subdued voice, asking herself why she was this open to someone who was nothing more than a stranger.

"You'll find the answer when the time is right and it has nothing to do with our energy field. But to assuage your fears, we'll get Janet Fraiser and run a few tests."

"Now?"

"Why not? It's as good as any other time and by the way the party is still going; there won't be much work done tomorrow. Hung-over Amazons are worse than partying Amazons, I have to tell you."

The dark haired woman offered her a hand up and when she touched it, the naqada in her blood began to practically scream. Samantha jerked back. "Don't be afraid, Sam." Xena's soft voice said. "You're in no danger from me. Like you I once was the host to a Tok'ra. One of these days I'll tell you the story. Let's go and get Janet Fraiser; she probably is out of her mind with worry about you."

By the sadness in Xena's eyes Samantha could tell that there was a long, possibly heartbreaking story to be heard but she also knew that now was not the moment to dwell on it. "So, did you search for me or were you just passing by?"

"Janet Fraiser was getting worried and the Queen sent me to find you. I knew where to find you but I took my time to have a few minutes of quiet."

"So, you won't get into trouble with this probation thing?"

"No, no trouble. I presume Aria told you?"

"Yes, she did, Xena, but please don't be angry with her. I think it was important for me to know, though I do not know why. - I still have some problems with the whole concept of physical punishment; I think."

"Did you ever lose control and do something you later were ashamed of, Sam?"

"Yes, of course, who didn't?"

"I was ashamed of my behaviour with Colonel O'Neill. Telling the Queen, submitting to, and receiving my punishment made me feel better in my skin. And when tomorrow night she gives me the kiss of forgiveness, the balance in my soul will be re-established once again. The pain gives me a chance to forgive myself."

"I think I understand. When I was a child and did something wrong I always felt awful until my mother found out. When it was out in the open, I knew that I no longer had to fear anything."

"Yes, Sam, it works along the same parameters. - Ready to face the crowd?"

~\*~

The Amazons were dancing to the steady, hypnotising rhythm of the drums and most of the members of her team obviously had loosened up enough to join in. This looked like a promising start for the mission. When they passed through the mass of undulating bodies, Samantha saw

one of the women put a hand on Janet's arm, obviously trying to drag her on the dance floor. They were close enough to hear the small doctor saying. "No!" It was the woman who had been ogling her earlier and this one word was all the excuse the blond soldier needed.

"What part of 'No' didn't you understand? Take your hands off of her, now." Samantha Carter said with a low growl permeating her words, suddenly standing next to Fraiser with her arms folded across her chest.

"Hey, I was just being friendly." The obviously drunk woman slurred. "Besides, it's none of your business, blondie."

"I just made it my business, and even if I didn't know her it still would be my business. I don't allow the men on my planet to force themselves on women, and I certainly will not condone it now, especially when a woman is doing the bullying, a woman who should know better."

While speaking Carter had inched forward and now was standing in front of Fraiser, face to face with the Amazon.

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm acting like a lowly male, stranger?"

"If the shoe fits, Amazon." Samantha answered with a snarl, surprised by the strength of her anger.

Out of the corner of her eyes, the blonde saw the Queen, evidently on the verge of interfering, held back by her Consort. Instead of an answer the Amazon aimed a right hook at her. The Air Force Major easily deflected it and shoved the woman away. She stumbled backwards, landing hard on her behind.

Samantha felt a familiar touch at the small of her back and turned around. "You all right, Janet?"

"Yes, Sam. Always the protector, aren't you? Let's get going before this ends like our last outing at O'Malley's."

"Hey, it wasn't my fault. They started it."

"And you ended up with a cracked rib and a lot of bruises."

"They looked worse, and I still think they deserved..." Her answer was cut short by someone taking a hold of her shirt; she went with the pull, let herself fall to the ground into some sort of back somersault, and came back to her feet having put at least a body length of distance between herself and her assailant.

"You insulted me, stranger."

"Wouldn't have happened if you could hold your liquor, Amazon. Go to bed, I'm not in the mood to play." Carter snapped back in her best Jack O'Neill imitation.

Of course the woman was far beyond listening. She attacked and found herself at the receiving end of a roundhouse kick that sent her flying and effectively knocked her out when she collided with one of the numerous benches.

"All right, the show is over," Xena's voice rang out. "Kari, Reana, see that Niva gets to bed. You are responsible for getting her to the training grounds one candlemark after sunrise. And everyone else, get back to whatever you were doing." She then closed the distance between her and the two humans. "You did well, Samantha Carter. Still think that you need to be checked out?"

"More than ever, your highness. I hope I didn't make an enemy tonight."

"I don't think so, not after she sobers up. It's not her style to behave like this; she just has lost someone dear to her heart. We probably should cut her some slack here. Let's go to the infirmary, care to join us, my Queen?"

"Infirmary? Is someone ill? Niva didn't even get a chance to touch her."

"No, everything's all right, my love," the Consort answered. "Samantha Carter is just worried that our defensive shield could have messed with the naqada in her bloodstream or somehow have influenced the protein marker. We'll run some tests, just to prove to her that everything's all right."

"Let's go; so we can put your worries to rest, Samantha Carter." The Queen answered with a smile.

"Won't we need one of your doctors?" Fraiser asked.

"Xena is more than just a soldier. Samantha Carter will be in good hands. Xena is the best healer we have."

## **Chapter Four: Getting Closer**

Janet woke to the sun shining through the big window. She was lying on something soft that was moving in a regular rhythm. It felt good, she felt at home, and for a moment she thought that she still was dreaming. But then she felt eyes on her and turned her head to be greeted by twinkling blue orbs. "Good morning, Janet."

"Sam," she said while trying to put some distance between her and the tantalising body. "I'm crushing you. Why didn't you push me away?"

"You were looking so peaceful and innocent and young. When I woke up it felt so right having

you right there. I hadn't the heart to move you."

"So I won't have to apply for new quarters?"

"No, Janet. I want you to stay here. I need you to stay with me."

"It's against the regulations. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Now close your eyes and try to get some more sleep, Xena said that nothing would happen before midday and it was close to dawn when the Queen put a halt to your questions."

"Wait 'til you get to work with the Consort in their science labs, and then we'll talk about a stream of endless questions, your nerdiness."

"Touché." Samantha answered still smiling while the smaller woman snuggled back to her, putting the head on her shoulder and closing her eyes. For a while the tall blonde basked in the sensation of the soft body pressed close to hers, rationalising that Janet's behaviour was probably nothing more than her way of dealing with the long day and even longer night they had had.

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At the same time, a few minutes walk away, an Amazon warrior stood on very shaky legs facing a very annoyed Consort. "So what do you have to say for yourself, weapons' master?"

"I'm sorry and I'll go and apologise to our guests." She answered, warding off the dizzy spell that threatened to take her down.

"You'll have to do better than this, Niva."

"I'm sorry I got drunk and I'm sorry I shamed the entire nation. She took me down as if I was some first time apprentice, and a very clumsy one at that. I'm not worthy of being your second in command, your highness. Please choose someone not as irresponsible as I am." The woman answered while lowering herself to her right knee. "I'm expecting my punishment in humility, your highness."

"When I planned to come here this morning, I was of a mind to take you through a few sparring sessions to get your head back straight on your shoulders. The Queen convinced me otherwise. You have been emotionally unpredictable lately; you know this as well as I do. I hoped it would go away if I just ignored it, give you the time to work through your loss. It didn't work. You're on a path of self-destruction. I know the pattern, I did it once myself. You drink to forget but the alcohol only makes you remember everything more vividly. It's a vicious circle and it has to be stopped."

"Please help me, your highness. I know what I'm doing is wrong but I can't help myself. I will take any punishment you deem appropriate."

"Will you accept corporal punishment, weapons' master?"

"Yes, your highness, of course."

"Good. - At midday, when most of our sisters have recovered from last night's overindulgence, you will apologise to our guests at the village square. You lost your temper and for this you will receive twelve strokes of the cane on your bare behind, and another twelve for attacking our guests. Then you will go to the temple and perform a full purification ritual. After your return you will be on probation for a full moon. You will return to your duties but you will not be allowed to drink anything stronger than apple juice, your spare time will be used teaching Samantha Carter and Janet Fraiser hand-to-hand combat. Do you accept this punishment, weapons' master?"

"Yes, your highness. You and her majesty are very generous. The warrior and the healer, do they want to learn?"

"Not yet, my friend. But they will, after your return. And now let's get you back to your feet, you're looking like crap. I know you don't like wine, so how many mugs of ale did you have?" Xena said offering the other woman a hand to help her stand.

"I lost count when the pyramid I was building toppled over at the fifth level. That was when I first approached the healer. She didn't pay me any attention but the eyes of the warrior eagerly would have sent me to Tartarus given the slightest chance. - She should claim the healer for herself. It's obvious that they belong together."

"They are not ready yet. It will take some time for them to see it as clearly as we do. But it will not be easy because they will also have to find the strength to act on their feelings instead of denying them. Such a relationship could ruin their careers in the military and even cost them a child they both dearly love. They may decide that it's not worth the risk. Sometimes it's scary to pass from pure friendship on to something else, Niva. - Let's go, the hot springs are waiting."

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Shortly before midday Carter and her team were called to the village and found almost as many people there as the night before, though some of them still looked the worse for wear. They were shoved to the front row, all of them clad in BDUs and black t-shirts. A drum was announcing the Queen's arrival, her Consort three steps behind her. She took her place on a dais in front of something that looked like a tethering bar out of a western.

"Sisters, we came here to see justice satisfied. Yesterday, one of us lost her temper and thus insulted our honoured guests to the point that they had to defend themselves. There are

extenuating circumstances; that's why it was decided that the culprit would undergo a combination of corporal punishment and the participation in a purification ritual. Come forward, Niva, daughter of Telana."

The woman stepping out of the crowd was about one or one and a half inches shorter than Samantha and much more heavily muscled. She moved with a purpose and confidence that made the Major understand that yesterday she must have been tanked to the rim, else she never would have stood a chance. She bowed before the Queen but quickly turned her attention to the tall soldier and the small doctor.

She knelt in front of the women, seeking first eye contact with Fraiser. "Major Janet Fraiser, I apologise for my behaviour. It was unworthy of an Amazon warrior. I never wanted to hurt or frighten you. I am sorry, Doctor."

"Apology accepted and offence forgotten, Niva, daughter of Telana." Fraiser answered with a smile, glad of having taken the time to read the regulation book more thoroughly.

Niva then turned her attention to the Major. "Major Samantha Carter, I apologise for my behaviour. I attacked you from behind and let myself be consumed by anger. This is not behaviour fitting for an Amazon. I never intended to hurt or frighten Major Fraiser. I am sorry, warrior."

Carter also had finished reading the book, so she answered. "I know there was no offence intended and none was taken. Apology accepted." Then she knelt down herself. "But I also have to apologise for deliberately pushing your buttons. I never intended to insult you or your sisters; I just wanted you to lose your focus. For this I apologise and I have to thank you for going easy on me during our short fight."

"No, thank you, Major. You did nothing wrong. Keeping an enemy mentally off balance is good strategy. I would be honoured if you would agree to be my guardian during the first part of my punishment."

Everything Samantha ever had learned about the proper conduct in situations like this screamed at her to stay out of it. They were here to study the culture and its technology not to become a part of it. But she didn't listen to the voice of duty, so finally Samantha answered. "It will be my honour, Niva, but you'll have to guide me. I know that I will have to count the number of strokes but that's all I know."

"You will have to strip me, take hold of my hands to prevent me from moving around too much, count the strokes, and help me to the temple where the second part of my punishment will take place."

"It will be my honour, Niva."

They both stood and walked over to the tethering bar. Samantha undid the belt around Niva's waist and pulled the short dress over her head. She was naked underneath. She bent over the

horizontal beam and the blonde grabbed her forearms in a very firm warrior handshake. Xena hopped down from the dais, picked up the cane lying at the Queen's feet, and came to them. The first stroke left Samantha with a tingling sensation in her hands. She could hear a second blow but there was no reaction coming from her charge. From her perspective it took ages until she finally could count the last stroke. "Twenty-four."

Though the strong woman didn't really need the help she allowed herself a short moment of being cuddled. She apologised to the Nation and the Queen and then was led to the temple.

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The rest of the day passed quickly, her team being despatched to different sections in the large research facility. Xena was going over the specifications of the energy field with Samantha, from time to time drifting to a more theoretical discussion of the principles behind the deceptively simple mechanism.

From the numerous reports about SG-1 and the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, they already had known that the tall blonde had more than just a quick mind. The Consort was delighted to see for herself just how absolutely brilliant Samantha Carter really was. She never needed more than one or two hints to understand how something worked. In a few weeks she would be able to do more than just learn, she would be able to actively contribute.

"You said that if you hadn't modified the shield the men simply would have been sent back - but how can this be? Wormholes are supposed to be one way." Samantha finally asked the question that had been bothering her almost since the beginning.

"I've been waiting for this question for candlemarks, Sam. - Radio signals aren't the only energy signatures that can travel both ways. Theoretically it's possible to transform human energy patterns and send them back this way but that's not how we do it. The easiest way would be to describe it as a hidden re-dialing process. The women pass through while the men are held back just a fraction before passing the event horizon. The Ring shuts down and re-dials the original address shortly after; with a delay of 0.21 nanoseconds."

Before the major could ask more questions, the taller women felt a familiar presence and continued. "Sam, Janet Fraiser and the Queen will be here any moment now. It's late, we should at least pretend to shut a few of the systems down."

"We just got started, Xena. It can't be that late."

"It's three candlemarks after sunset, Sam."

"Uh uh." She answered and began to shut down the computer she was sitting in front of; suddenly remembering her dinner date with the small doctor. She heard the door open and a slight brush of fresh air touching the naked skin of her lower arms.



She turned around and saw the Queen and Janet Fraiser entering the room. Gabrielle's voice was calm and low but wielding authority with a natural grace that would put even the best commanding officer of the Forces to shame.

"Xena of Amphipolis, you were to report to me a candlemark ago."

Xena immediately knelt in front of the smaller woman. "I'm sorry, your majesty. The time slipped away from us. I..., it..."

"I know you got stuck playing with your machinery, again. And your new playmate already seems to be as addicted to this technical mumbo jumbo as you are, so addicted that she forgot her dinner date with Janet Fraiser."

Samantha had the grace to blush when Janet muttered under her breath. "Happens all the time on earth."

"Xena of Amphipolis, Consort to Queen Gabrielle of the Amazon Nation, your probation has ended. Receive now, the kiss of forgiveness." The blond bent down and kissed Xena on the forehead. "But your behaviour gives me no choice than to punish you again, the both of you. Xena of Amphipolis, Major Samantha Carter." One look of these sea-green eyes had Samantha mimicking the taller woman's pose. "As a punishment you both will stay out of the lab for the next two days and tomorrow evening you will treat us to a picnic with all the trimmings."

"But your majesty, there's so much to learn." Samantha dared to protest.

"Should I make it four days, Samantha Carter?"

"No, your majesty, please don't. I accept the punishment." She answered with a certain amount of panic in her voice.

"Wise decision. We'll wait outside, you have five minutes."

When the door once again was closed, Samantha asked. "Why did you let her do this to us, Xena? I can't afford to loose two days."

"Let her? She is the Queen. She doesn't need anyone's permission, Sam. It definitively could have been worse."

"Worse? How?" The young blonde asked with a pout.

"Instead of simply preparing a picnic, she could have told us to cook dinner." Xena deadpanned.

"Uhh..." This definitively sounded like torture but her next thought brought a smile on Samantha's face. "No, Janet never would subject anyone to my cooking. I'm more likely to transform the kitchen in a chemistry lab than to produce something edible. One day, I

volunteered to make some pasta and warm up the sauce going with it for Cassandra because Janet got stuck at the infirmary. I managed to put the pasta into the boiling water but then I decided to quickly check my emails. Well, the pasta was ready before I was and I had to order in, not to mention the trip to the mall to get Janet a new pasta pot. - Really, I'm a menace to any kitchen."

The dark haired woman smiled one of her half smiles. "I learned, over the years, but I still don't like it; so believe me, we got lucky. Let's get going before we get into more trouble."

"Xena, why doesn't the Queen share your love for science?"

"Oh, she does. Most of the infirmary's equipment is her design as well as some of our defensive technology. We simply have a different approach to things. When I am working on something, I easily lose track of the outside world, night and day, sleeping and eating, the people around me. She hates when I get too single-mindedly focused, especially when there is no urgent need to do so.

"Bottom line is, though she can sometimes get a bit bossy, it's really good to have someone to look after you, to care for you, especially someone who cares enough to take a stand against you if necessary."

In Samantha's mind an image flashed: Two airmen dragging her out of her lab and escorting her to her quarters on base to get at least six hours rest, on Janet's orders. She had been angry then but before she fell on her bed she had to admit to herself that it felt good to have someone care.

"Janet does this a lot." She whispered - and suddenly changing topic, she added. "So do we go tree walking tomorrow?"

"I always keep my promises, Samantha."

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In front of the building a similar conversation was taking place. The brunette and the blonde were sitting on a bench about seventy paces from the entrance.

"I can't believe you did this, your majesty. Not even General Hammond ever got her away from her lab for more than a day."

"Call me Gabrielle, when we're alone, Janet. Samantha Carter's file says that she's a workaholic, just like my beloved Consort. But it also says that she didn't take a single day off in the last five months, except for medical leaves she always cut short one way or the other. And the last day off she took without being bullied into was when the two of you went to this forensic symposium. All in all, she has enough leave rolled up to stay at home for almost a year. In my book, two days off are exactly what she needs right now."

"You are wise beyond your years, your.... Gabrielle. But I still doubt that Sam will follow your orders."

"I am older than I look, Janet. And my Consort will make sure that my orders are followed. It's in her interest. As the senior of the two she will be held responsible for Samantha Carter's actions. - Ah, here they come, just in time."

Janet looked up, and for the first time was flabbergasted by the striking resemblance between the two taller women. With the exception of their complexion, they easily could pass as sisters. The moonlight was caressing their silhouettes and being reflected by twin pairs of silvery blue eyes. She shook herself out of her stupor.

"Sam, before I forget. Lieutenant Sabrina Harper has asked to return to earth tomorrow morning. Her sister's baby decided to hurry. Colonel O'Neill wants to know who should take her place."

"I feared something like this would happen, Janet." Samantha answered. "General Hammond insisted that I choose in order of seniority but Sabrina warned me that she possibly would have to return earlier than planned. She's her sister's birthing partner and has to go back."

She then turned her attention to the Queen. "I apologise for the inconvenience, your majesty."

"There is no apology needed, Sam. And please call me Gabrielle when we're alone. So, do you have someone in mind?"

"Yes, Gabrielle. Her name is Jennifer Hailey; she was just promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade and has finished her SG training. She's a good soldier and an even better scientist. Having her here will make my life a lot easier."

"I know you like the kid, Sam, but don't you overestimate her abilities? Her file is full of reprimands for insubordination and she almost got thrown out of the Academy for getting in a fight."

"Oh, Janet, now you sound like the General. She was a model student after seeing what was waiting for her after graduation, and she didn't get into a fight, she just slugged a guy making disrespectful remarks about a fellow student. That's all, no big deal. Believe me, she'll do fine."

"I don't know. I just think she is too young; she's only twenty-two."

A smile lit up Xena's face. "I remember reading something about a very young resident at the ER of California Central, telling her supervisor to... what was it again?"

"I told him to stuff his head back in his ass and get out of my way so I could do my duty. The son of a bitch wanted to send a small boy with multiple fractures of his left leg away untreated just because his mother didn't have their insurance card with her. And except for my choice of words, I would do it again." Janet said in remembered indignation.

"And you're telling me that I'm pulling stunts when I get into a discussion with one marine or the other. I bet you got in a boatload full of trouble for this one, Jan."

"Yes and no, Sam. Five minutes after finishing with the boy I was suspended and the next day they threw me out. With this in my file no other hospital would take me and I found my career at an end before it even got started.

"I planned on going back to school and going into research but then I received an invitation to the Pentagon. As it turned out, the boy I had treated was the godson of General Robert Hayes of the Joint Chiefs. He sort of recruited me for the military. He told me that if I learned to hold my tongue I one day would make, and I quote, a damn fine CMO, bossy enough to get things done but bright enough to know when to back off. End quote."

"I guess he was right, my Napoleonic power monger." Samantha said with gentle affection and quite a hint of teasing in her voice.

Seeing the question marks in Xena's and Gabrielle's eyes, Janet explained. "That's one of the nicer terms, Colonel O'Neill uses to describe me."

There was a dangerous glint in Xena's eyes. "Xena, you promised to take it easy on him. Remember, he's a friend."

"Of course I will, my love, but I also have a reputation to maintain. SG-1 is scheduled to arrive around ten. How about I'll get you at eight for some tree walking, Sam?"

"Sounds good to me."

~\*~

Major Carter and the Consort arrived at the clearing when the last chevron was locked and the Ring came to life. SG-1 stepped through, with young Hailey in tow. "Hey Carter, the General thought you wouldn't mind four-foot-nine as the replacement for Harper. And he muttered something about blasted female instincts."

"Colonel, I'm glad you could make it on time." She answered, mortified by his blatant disregard of protocol.

Daniel stepped closer and whispered something in his ear. "Your highness, please forgive my rudeness," O'Neill finally remembered his manners. "Let me introduce you to Lieutenant Jennifer Hailey. She is to replace Lieutenant Harper. Hailey, this is Xena, Consort to Queen Gabrielle."

Hailey saluted, standing at attention. "Venerable Consort, I'm humbled to meet you."

"At ease, Lieutenant. I'm pleased to see that you obviously already had the chance to have a look at the regulation book we sent to Stargate Command. My assistant will see to it that a more detailed version will be made available at the SGC and distributed among Major Carter's team. While the address was a bit formal but acceptable; your choice of words should only be reserved for the Queen herself. We all are equal before the law but nonetheless we are a highly hierarchical society, and though I am the Queen's Consort and her Champion, I'm still nothing more than one of her subjects."

"Thank you for correcting me, your highness. I'll try to pay better attention next time." The small Lieutenant said with a bow.

"You are welcome, Jennifer Hailey. Aria here will escort you to your quarters and get you settled in. After the midday meal she will introduce you to our head scientist Cameraia of Sappho. - Gentlemen, I think we have a sparring date."

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Less than half a candlemark later, Xena was facing off against Jack O'Neill and Teal'c. They first tried to attack her one by one but even the experience of the Jaffa's long life and hundreds of battles didn't give him the edge to even touch the Consort. The men changed tactics, now working as a team but time and again Xena used their momentum and brute force against them without having to rely on her own considerable strength. It didn't take long for them to get winded and give up. The dark haired warrior woman, however, just seemed to be getting warmed up.

"Anyone else?" She asked with a cocky grin.

"I'd like to try." Hailey and Carter said almost at the same time. Hailey was dropping out of a tree, followed closely by a sheepishly grinning Aria. The consort also grinned having expected nothing else.

The blond women teamed up from the beginning. They were agile and quick, planning their moves in advance as if they were acting with one mind. This turned out to be fun, Xena thought when she only barely avoided a roundhouse kick by Samantha whose balance now was more than precarious. Instead of using her advantage, she turned around, dropped to the ground, and downed Hailey. Her next move sent the blond Major flying. She waited till they got back to their feet but before they could decide on another strategy a voice stopped them.

"It's close to midday, I think you had enough fun for the morning, Xena."

"Your will is mine, your majesty. Did you see Lieutenant Harper off?"

"Yes, and I made sure that she knew that we honour her reasons. I suppose your sparring partner is Lieutenant Hailey?"

The young blonde once again saluted and stood at attention. "Lieutenant Junior Grade Jennifer Hailey, your majesty, at your command."

"At ease, Jennifer Hailey. Our head scientist is already expecting you at the dining hall. Gentlemen, would you please join us for the midday meal."

On the way to the village, Xena was busy explaining some of her moves to a curious Teal'c, comparing them to elements in Jaffa training with O'Neill as an avidly listening public. Daniel Jackson was speaking with Gabrielle and Samantha held Jennifer's attention with her description of the research laboratory.

"Samantha Gabriella Carter," the blonde immediately snapped to attention, "you'll get my Consort in trouble if you don't stop talking shop. She will be held responsible if you don't obey my orders. No laboratory also means not talking about it."

"I understand, your majesty. It won't happen again." She answered with a bow and then turned to explain the situation to the young lieutenant.

The midday meal was a leisurely affair, Hailey had been whisked away by the young head scientist; and Xena and Gabrielle easily joined in the light banter of the members of SG-1 and Doctor Fraiser who practically had to be forced to leave the infirmary. After handing over a preliminary report for General Hammond, Xena and Samantha returned to the practice field. The young blonde was eager to learn and Xena willingly complied. Four candlemarks into their workout, Aria stopped them.

"Your highness, I was to remind you that you have a picnic to prepare."

"Thank you, Aria. You may return to your normal duties now."

"Are you sure that you don't want my help with your preparations, your highness?"

"It is the Queen's wish that we do this ourselves, Aria, but thanks for the offer."

~\*~

A candlemark before sunset, Xena and Samantha walked into the infirmary; they had everything prepared, had taken a shower and changed into fresh clothing. The black haired woman was wearing a set of Amazon leathers; it's dark, rusty brown complimenting her skin tone and leaving very little to the imagination. Her hair had been braided and adorned with several beads and feathers. She had explained to the younger woman that they identified her as the Queen's Consort and Champion and told everyone that this evening she would be her servant.

Samantha thought she looked incredibly beautiful. She herself had donned a pair of cream

coloured slacks and a form fitting red blouse, the only civilian attire she had brought with her. A delicate gold chain with a locket had replaced her dog tags and as usual her short hair defied any attempt at keeping it under control.

Xena easily came down on a knee in front of Gabrielle. "My Queen! May I have the honour to escort you to the picnic site?"

"You may, my warrior."

Samantha mimicked her actions in front of Janet who had a look of utter surprise on her face. "Samantha Carter, stand up immediately. This isn't right."

"You first have to answer my question, Janet Regina Fraiser, please will you let me escort you to the picnic site we chose?"

"You're welcome to do so, Samantha Gabriella Carter. And now get up." Samantha did as she was told and they followed the Royal couple out of the spacious room.

They walked for about half a candlemark. For the longest time obscured by a copse of trees they came in view of the secluded campsite. A fire was waiting to be lit with enough additional logs nearby to keep it going all night. Two blankets were on the ground with a couple of soft cushions. Only a few paces away a small stream was adding to the romantic scenery. The taller women guided their companions to sit on the blanket and began to unpack the basket with their supplies and lit the fire. Janet started to help.

"No, Janet, don't. Tonight is for you to enjoy. Just sit back and relax, I will do all the work. For tonight, you will be my queen and I'll be your humble servant." Samantha said softly.

"It's not right, Sam. You shouldn't be doing this. This picnic thing probably wasn't a good idea."

"Please, Janet, indulge me. See it as a scant repayment for all the times I stood you up because I simply didn't realise how late it was. Please." The blond soldier said with pleading eyes, a look the doctor was utterly unable to resist. So, she simply nodded.

The first course of their dinner consisted of a plate with pre-cut fruits, banana, apple, mango, and sweet peaches. They were sitting in comfortable, familiar silence. Gabrielle was finger-feeding Xena every other piece and after a few minutes of observing them Janet caught on and started to give the tall blonde her share of the meal, resisting the urge to also use her fingers to do so. At first she felt slightly awkward but soon got into the spirit.

"Would you like a glass of wine while we prepare the fish, mylady?"

"Fish?"

"Yes, Xena caught them less than an hour ago. It was amazing. She just waded into the water and caught them with her bare hands. Her reflexes are so fast, it's incredible." Remembering that she

wasn't supposed to speak unless asked, she continued. "Wine?"

"Yes, please."

Samantha got to her feet and filled two glasses with the sparkling white wine when she saw Xena's signal. She brought one over and returned to Janet's side. She then took the already cut up pieces of fish and wrapped them in big leaves after having packed them with lemon grass and other spices. Xena then brought them over to the fire where she buried them in the smouldering ashes.

"Tell me, Sam, what did you do today, apart from preparing all this?"

"I suppose you heard that Xena ran the colonel and Teal'c ragged this morning and then continued with Hailey and me. I asked her for some pointers and before we knew it, it was time to prepare the picnic. It was great, though I probably will feel it tomorrow."

"Xena, what did I tell you about training sessions?" The Queen reprimanded the taller woman.

"You told me to make sure that my students don't overestimate their reserves, mistress. Samantha Carter is in very good shape and she's a very gifted student. It's a joy to teach her."

"Thank you, Xena. It's easy to learn when one has such a good teacher." Samantha answered though she knew she shouldn't. "I can't wait for our next session. The Amazon Nation should be very grateful to have someone like her among them, your majesty."

"Don't worry, Sam. Her contribution to the Nation is well appreciated. Don't you think so, Xena?"

"You know that I always will be indebted to the Amazon Nation and its Queen." The raven-haired warrior answered solemnly and with sadness and regret in her voice.

"Xena, please don't do this to yourself. It's long in the past and you paid for your crimes."

"You know, I can't help it, my love. The guilt and shame are as much a part of me as my hands or my eyes." She answered softly. "It keeps me from being overwhelmed by my darkness."

"I know, my heart," the blond answered, the other two women temporarily forgotten. Her right hand cupped Xena's left cheek. "I don't have to like it, though. Get yourself something to drink, my warrior." Gabrielle only then turned her attention to Janet. "I apologise, Janet. The demons of the past have the annoying habit of popping up at the most inconvenient moments. I promise that one day I will tell you the story behind our words."

"It is me who has to apologise, Gabrielle. We disrespected your privacy by listening in." Janet answered while Xena knelt to the right and slightly behind the Queen, a mug of apple juice in her hand. "Could you please explain to me why we are playing this mistress-servant game? It certainly wasn't in the regulation's book."



"It's much more than a game, Janet. By serving us, Xena and Samantha are forced to focus on us and on us alone. It's easy to serve someone you love, someone you care for but at the same time it's very difficult because both of them are naturally dominant. It's a change of perspective that can be very cleansing and educating. I do it myself from time to time."

The fish was delicious and after watching a spectacular sunset they ended the meal with berries and nutbread. And though there wasn't much talking before they went to bed, all four of them had the distinct impression of being closer to each other.

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Once again Samantha woke to the feeling of a soft body intertwined with her own. A quick glance at the clock told her that she still had more than an hour before she had to get up to meet with Xena at the training grounds. She was looking forward to the lesson but for the moment she intended to enjoy the feeling of the woman in her arms as best as she knew how. It felt so right, so safe. Janet was still dead to the world, so she didn't resist the temptation and ran her fingers through silky brown hair and caressed a slender neck. The smaller woman snuggled closer and Samantha marvelled at how perfect their bodies fit together.

She knew she shouldn't be thinking this way about her best friend, reciting to herself every reason why it was insane and dangerous and simply wrong. However, when she compared her perfectly reasonable reasons to the blissful feeling just holding Janet gave her they suddenly seemed unimportant. The doctor was still sleeping, so it was safe to tell her what was getting harder to hold in every day. "I love you, Janet Fraiser, I'm in love with you. I always was and I always will. I love you."

"Love you too, Samantha Carter." A sleepy voice answered. The tall soldier's confession had taken her by surprise, almost as much as her instinctive answer to it but she decided to stick to her gut instinct. "I lost my heart when you first entered the infirmary. If not for Colonel O'Neill's whining I would have drowned in your impossibly blue eyes."

"And I thought that you possibly were the most beautiful woman I ever saw. Then I got to know you better and learned that you are not only beautiful but also kind and smart and patient and funny. The more I learned about you, the more I fell for you. I know we will not be able to act on it but I'm glad that you know."

"You're right. There's more at stake than just our careers. We have Cassy to think of. I don't know how she would take this. But as long as we are here, in the privacy of this room, I refuse to hide what I'm feeling. I want you to hold me while we sleep, I want to feel your fingers on my skin."

"I want to kiss you, Jan." Samantha whispered.

They kissed, tentatively at first, undemanding. Janet opened her lips slightly and when their tongues danced around each other it was as overwhelming as seeing the Stargate open for the first time, no, it was more than that, the small brunette thought. It was like coming home after having spent her whole life out in the cold. They didn't stop until the lack of oxygen made them dizzy.

Samantha pulled the other woman on top of her body, wanting to feel her everywhere. "You're so beautiful but I must be squishing you."

"You're a light weight, my Jan, and I want to feel you as close as possible. I know this can't go any further, we can't afford to lose control but I want to make the most of the time we have together."

"You're so beautiful, inside and out."

They kissed again, pouring their very souls in the touch of their lips and tongues, content with just holding onto each other. They didn't know it at the time but this second kiss was much more than just a kiss, it was the beginning of something wondrously bigger.

~\*~

At the same time in the Royal hut blue eyes found green and with one voice their owners said. "It has started."

~\*~

Samantha spent the morning on the training grounds, working with Xena and a few of the other instructors. Her team met at midday to report to her and they ate together. The blond soldier had a hard time keeping her eyes off Janet; it was as if she were irresistibly drawn towards the smaller woman.

Xena had promised her another tree walking lesson after lunch and she happily set out to meet with the taller woman. They were making good time coming from a part of the forest where the trees were further apart to show her how to jump from one to the other and still stay invisible and silent and using momentum to go faster. Suddenly, Xena pulled Samantha to a stop and snatched a crossbow bolt out of thin air, whirled around and caught a second coming from the opposite direction.

"That's enough, you two. Show yourself or do I have to come and get you? We're going to touch ground and I want you down there before the count of ten."

Two young warriors, girls really, appeared shortly after Samantha had assured the Consort that

she was all right. They fell to their knees. "Please, forgive us, your highness. We didn't see that you were not alone. We apologise for putting you in danger. Please don't show any leniency in our punishment, your highness."

"Do you really want to tell me that you didn't see Major Carter? I can't believe that you would be so sloppy in your assessment of the situation." She gauged the guilty expression on the young faces. "Or did you think that with someone else around I would be distracted enough for you to succeed? If that's the case you just lied to me. I give you one more chance to tell the truth."

There was a long moment of silence, then the other young woman said. "We lied to you, your highness." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "We saw you moving to the southern edge of the forest and we knew you would choose this way to return to the village. We saw the way Major Carter moved through the trees. We didn't think that she would get in the line of fire. We totally misjudged the situation, your highness. We didn't think this through."

"That's right, you didn't think, not for one blasted heartbeat. You blatantly disregarded an order, endangered one of our guests, and you lied. You should be treated with all the severity our laws have to offer, and you know it. Samantha Carter, do you want to press assault charges against these irresponsible kids?"

"No, your highness. I'm sure this was just an unfortunate mistake. I don't think that they wanted to harm anyone. Please, don't punish them too hard. As you said, they're nothing more than kids, eager to impress their commanding officer." Samantha answered.

"The incident will go in your records. For your disobedience you will do fifteen additional shifts of guard duty. For lying you will report to Euterpe and spend fifteen evenings of your spare time caring for the elders while wearing a sign plate naming your crimes. I hope this will make you think twice if you ever contemplate to pull such a stupid stunt again. And now, get out of my sight."

"Thank you, your highness." They whispered and were gone in the blink of an eye.

"You're a cruel woman, Xena. Am I right to suppose that the elders will give them a hard time, when they read about disobedience and lying." Xena only answered with a cocky smile and a raised left eyebrow. "Remind me never to get on your bad side. Can I ask you a question?"

"You can always ask and I can always choose not to answer but let's do it while walking. There's a council session I have to attend. What do you want to know?"

"Why do you so easily submit to the Queen? I observed you with the others; your mere presence let them try just a bit harder. You command every room you walk into. You're possibly the best fighter I'll ever know. If you'd chose to challenge the Queen, you could rule in her stead and everyone would follow you. Why, why do you submit to her?"

Xena studied the blond major's blue eyes before answering. "There's a difficult and an easy answer to your question. The easy answer is that I love the Queen. Without her my life wouldn't

be worth living. She completes me; she makes me whole. She not only is in my heart and my soul; she is my heart and my soul. Her inner strength, her kindness, her love make the burden of my past bearable. It's easy to submit to someone you love. This is the easy answer. Now, for the other. Yesterday, when you were serving Janet Fraiser, what did you feel?"

"I thought you were nuts when you talked me into this servant thing. I felt utterly ridiculous when I knelt in front of her and at the same time thrilled to be able to finally do something for her. She gives so much and never asks for something in return. At first I feared that serving someone, serving her would make me smaller, a lesser woman but it didn't. I felt free when putting her needs and wants before mine. I knew that I could trust her, that she would always take care of me."

"Then you have your answer, Samantha."

"I have my answer, not yours, Xena, but I understand if it's too personal or too painful to talk about."

"It's both but it also is too soon to reveal all the secrets of the Amazon Nation to you, Sam. I know it's hard but try to be patient."

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In the infirmary a girl of about ten was treated for a broken arm she got from tree climbing. To take her mind of the bone knitters currently mending her limb, Gabrielle told her a story.

"When Prometheus created the humans he made them with four legs and four arms and two heads but only one soul. They were living happily and didn't have a care in the world. They didn't need the Gods because they had everything they ever wanted right there with them, in their souls. They didn't worship the Gods and Zeus, the father of all Gods, became very, very angry. One night, a very dark night, without any moon or stars to guide the mortals, he sent his lightning bolts down to earth. The humans tried to run but every bolt unerringly found its intended target. They split the four-legged creatures in half and they were so afraid that they didn't think of holding on to their other halves. When finally the night gave way to a murky morning, they looked at each other. Every one of them now only had one head and two arms and two legs...."

"But only half a soul," the child continued the story. "Since then every one of us is searching for the other half of one's soul. And when we are very lucky, like you and Xe, sorry Consort Xena, then we'll find our other half and will once again be complete. Just like we were at the beginning of time."

"That's right, sweetie. Now, hop down, and no tree climbing or wrestling or staff practice for the next three or four days." The girl smiled and left the infirmary. "Let's take a break, Janet Fraiser. We earned ourselves a cup of tea and some cookies. My wayward champion should be back with

Doctor Carter in a few minutes."

When they were settled at the Royal table with two steaming mugs in front of them, Janet asked. "The story you told. It's more than just a children's story, right?"

"Yes, Janet, much more."

"What would you do if the other part of your soul were out of your reach?" The brunette asked while staring in her mug.

"The only way this could happen were if one of us were dead - and even then I know she would wait for me at the other side as I would wait for her." When she saw the dejected expression on the other woman's face, Gabrielle switched to storyteller mode. "I wasn't born as an Amazon, Janet. I grew up in a small pre-industrial rural village. One day, we, my younger sister, me, and a bunch of other young women were out gathering herbs and picking berries. We were attacked by a band of ruffians looking for slaves. I offered to go willingly with them if they let the other women go.

"They only laughed and one of them threatened to beat me with his whip. He took aim but his arm got stuck in mid-air. He turned around and was looking straight at a tall woman, holding the other end of the whip, looking at him with a disdainful smile - though she didn't have any armour or weapons. There were at least ten men but she defeated them as if they were nothing more than flies on the wall. I just stood there and looked at her, then her eyes found mine and I was lost in the deepest, bluest eyes I've ever seen.

"This same night I left my home and followed her. For a long time, my family thought that I just did it for the adventure, and when they finally understood my father disowned me. Neither my mother nor my sister was allowed to talk to me 'til the day he died but it was a price I willingly paid.

"From this first moment I knew that she was what I had been waiting for all my life. She also felt this connection from the first moment on but it took us years to finally admit our feelings for each other. We were too afraid to lose our friendship, and then we were afraid of letting anyone see our affection for fear of repercussions but it simply got too strong. We had some really hard times but I wouldn't change one single...."

Though Gabrielle was sitting with her back to the door she said. "Here they come!" Moments before the door to the dining hall opened for Xena and Samantha.

One look at the blonde was enough to make Janet stand, grab Samantha by the elbow and leading her firmly towards the infirmary. "You're hurt, Sam."

"It's nothing, Janet."

"That's for me to decide. So, what did you do this time, oh one of your stupid stunts."

"Being stupid," the taller woman grinned, "and overconfident. When we came out of the forest Consort Xena did a double somersault to come down and..."

"...and you couldn't resist the temptation to follow suite. Damn stupid competitive streak."

"Yes, only I landed wrong and sort of twisted my ankle - and it wasn't about competition. I'm not stupid enough to think that I'd even come close to beating her." Meanwhile they had reached the infirmary, Xena and Gabrielle in tow.

"Oh, warrior mine." Gabrielle growled.

"Please, your majesty. Your Consort is not responsible. She warned me that I wasn't ready to do any somersaults or double flips without her monitoring me. I wanted to show off and it backfired. Sometimes, I'm too ambitious and too reckless for my own good, just ask the good doctor here."

"So, Doctor Fraiser, what's your diagnosis?"

"She'll live, your majesty. It's really nothing more than a sprain. On earth I would prescribe a few days rest but here she will once again be up to par by tomorrow afternoon. - So, no tree walking and no sparring for you, Sam. Tomorrow evening I'll have another look and will probably declare you fit for duty."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Disclaimer: [See Part 1](#)

## **Chapter Five: Revelations**

Samantha was just about to shut down the computer where she had spent the afternoon studying the schematics for an advanced naqada reactor when a knock brought her out of her musings.

Over the last couple of days she even had learned to keep a semblance of regular hours. A rather anxious and very nervous looking Lieutenant Jessica Morgan came in. She was one of the two archaeologists of their team, assigned to study Amazon history at the central library.

"Major, I know it's probably inconvenient but I have to speak to you. It's about the Queen and the Consort... I don't know where to begin."

"Take a seat and calm down, Lieutenant. Sit down, Jessica, this can stay off record, if you want to."

"No, it cannot, not for the long run. But perhaps it can for now. You know that I have been working on translating the texts about early Amazon history on Gaia, the time before the last group from earth arrived. In one of the last documents I found a link to another one, not included in what had been given to me and I got curious. It didn't lead to just another document. It lead to a whole section of the library, a library in its own right really, thousands of books and scrolls and data pads. It was amazing. Since I found out, four days ago, I went there whenever I got a chance and borrowed some of the texts."

"What did they say, Jessica?"

"The last group coming from earth, their Queen's name was Gabrielle and her Consort was named Xena. At first I thought that name and social standing go together, that once you became Queen your name was changed to Gabrielle, like a catholic cardinal changes his name when being elected as the next pope." She fell silent.

"And?" Carter asked.

"I know it sounds crazy but now I think that the Gabrielle ruling now is one and the same as the one that came here almost two thousand years ago. They have a report on every party they ever celebrated but not one hint of a crowning ceremony or a Royal funeral pyre." The woman let her words sink in.

Instead of bombarding her with thousand questions of simply declaring her a complete fool, Carter asked. "Do they know that you know?"

"I'm not sure but I think they suspect something. That's why I came to you in the first place; I would have rather spent some more time reading the most ancient scrolls. They tell of a time before the exodus, a time that Xena and Gabrielle spent travelling all over Greece, helping villagers and defeating warlords."

Carter didn't answer and the other woman studied Samantha's face. "Major Carter, Samantha, I just told you that they both are more than two thousand years old, more than sixty generations. You never were one to accept something like this at face value, not without finding a scientific explanation. You should at least be surprised or incredulous. Why aren't you, Samantha?"

"Why do you want to keep this off record for now? It's against the regulations and usually you

are rather a stickler to the rules."

"It's hard to explain, Samantha. Sometimes, when you're playing with the Consort..."

"Playing?"

"Tree walking, sparring. It's what Queen Gabrielle calls it when speaking with the Doc. I'm sorry."

"Well, it really is a lot of fun." Samantha countered with an impish grin. "So, what is when I'm 'playing' with Consort Xena?"

"We talk, share our experiences. We all are fascinated by the atmosphere of study, easy going, without ambition overruling one's judgement. And though they are so far ahead of us, we never had the impression of being thought of as inadequate or primitive like the Tolans did. But there's more to it than just that. We feel comfortable here, most of us feel..."

"... at home. You trust them."

Jessica nodded.

"A week ago, when SG-1 first set foot on this planet, when I first saw Consort Xena I knew that we would be safe. It was a feeling so bone deep that I immediately suspected some sort of manipulation. At my demand Doctor Fraiser ran some additional tests on me but there was nothing wrong. Whenever I talk to the Consort or the Doc talks to the Queen we hit some kind of roadblock. They admit that there is a secret but always tell us that it's too early for us to know the truth." Making a decision, the blond woman rose. "Does anyone else know?"

"Karen, Naomi, Claude, and Jennifer all have their suspicions. Jennifer probably came closest when she found an ID-code on an old data pad signed the way the Consort usually does. But none of these suspicions and speculations ever found its way in our reports."

Samantha Gabriella Carter, Major of the United States Air Force, knew that she just was about to deliberately commit blank insubordination. The poster child was about to become a rebel. She remembered Colonel O'Neill's words -- shortly before he stepped through the Ring, the Stargate, she corrected herself. 'Remember, Carter, good old Earth is waiting for you.' She knew she was acting against everything she ever had held sacred: the integrity of the Forces, of the chain of command but from the bottom of her heart she knew it was the right thing to do.

"I hate to ask but is there..."

"... someone we cannot trust? No, I don't think so. Though not all of us feel at home here; we still all trust them. They're a part of our history though we never knew it. A lot of incidents in our history would have played out differently had it not been for visitors from Gaia setting them straight somehow. Claude is bustling over with stories though she probably never will be able to tell anyone outside of the SGC. Mankind isn't ready to know yet, hell, I wouldn't have been



ready a couple of years ago. It will be a hard enough sell, even for General Hammond."

"You may be right. That's why we'll have to speak to the Queen and the Consort. It's time to get some answers. Get the team together. We'll meet at the guest palace. I'll get the Doc."

~\*~

Samantha headed for the training grounds where she found the small doctor facing off against a proudly grinning weapons' master.

At first Janet had been reluctant to brush up on her hand-to-hand fighting skills. She knew they were part and parcel of being in the forces, just like wearing a gun from time to time but she never had been particularly ambitious in this area. It took a sparring match between the blond major and Queen Gabrielle to convince Janet that one didn't have to be as tall as an old tree to be able to hold one's own in a fight. Well, holding one's own wasn't quite right. Even before coming here and learning new moves, Samantha had been an excellent fighter, focused, fast, and strong but she hadn't been fast and strong enough to best the small queen or to even stand a chance, to be honest.

After the end of the purification rites, the first few lessons with the weapons' master had been rather painful for the doctor. She found herself lying or sitting on the hard ground more times than she cared to count - and hadn't it been for the tender, thorough, and not wholly therapeutic massages the tall blonde lavished on her body every evening, she would gladly have given up. But then Niva changed her teaching style, explaining the complex moves of defence and offence as if they were steps in different kinds of surgery - doing a little bit of harm to prevent much greater harm.

From this moment on, Major Fraiser learned and she proved to be a quick learner. Judging from the expression on the stoic weapons' master's face, she did more than just good. From her own lessons, every morning shortly after dawn, she knew how hard a taskmaster Niva could be.

Samantha allowed herself the luxury to spend a few minutes just watching her friend from behind a tree, absorbed in the other woman's smoothly flowing movements. Suddenly she whirled around, ducked, and only barely avoided being hit by the blunt end of a sai in the face. Another one was headed towards her chest; she jumped and kicked at it when it was only inches away from her breasts. She managed to back off a few paces and took a defensive stance, wishing fervently she had some sort of weapon at her disposition, preferably a staff.

The blonde didn't have to wait for the next attack. From an intellectual viewpoint she knew that the weapons' master had been testing her and that she had failed. She knew she would be reprimanded for losing track of her environment, and she knew she deserved it.

Twice she managed to fend Niva off. However, she had been so concentrated on the other woman's hands that she forgot to think about her own feet, she caught her foot in a root loop, and

fell. The slightly shorter, stockier woman immediately was on top of her, the length of both sais left and right against her neck, threatening to cut off her breathing.

"Take Janet Fraiser as an example, open your mind, and learn, Samantha Carter. And now, tell me, what did you do wrong?"

The prone woman closed her eyes, replaying the last couple of minutes in her mind's eye and then answered. "I twice focused on one point only instead of seeing the whole picture, Master Niva."

"Tomorrow, we'll start a candlemark earlier, perhaps the pre-dawn air will help you learn this lesson." Samantha only nodded. "And now tell me why you so rudely interrupted your partner's lesson?"

'Partner', it sounded good but it couldn't be. It took all her strength of mind not to stutter her answer. "A situation has come up that requires Major Fraiser's presence. We also need to speak to the Queen and the Consort. It's important."

Surprisingly Niva didn't ask any questions but simply told them that the Queen was in a council session to finalise the preparation for the impending arrival of the other village and planet Regents who were due to arrive the following day to have a meeting and celebrate the summer solstice.

"You'll find Consort Xena at the smithy. It's just a couple of candledrops' walk to the west of the labs. You can't miss it; just follow your ears and your noses. - Janet Fraiser, you can come out now. I'm not going to hurt her; you can let go of that stick you picked up twenty paces ago. I'll let you go for today, you did well."

~\*~

Compared to everything else they had seen on this planet where ancient, almost primitive settings were usually nothing more than a camouflage for the most advanced technology the big, smouldering fire, the enormous pair of bellows, and the anvil not only were outdated, they appeared like something transplanted from another world, elemental and untamed. In a way it was fitting.

Especially when observing the woman working the anvil. Xena was wearing a pair of tight leather trousers and some sort of tank top, obscured by a heavy leather apron shielding her from the sparks. Her usually unobtrusive muscles never had been as prominent before. In front of Samantha's eyes flashed the image of her wearing a short leather dress, brass armour, and a broad sword slung at her back. She saw her unsheathing the weapon and wielding it with ease and joy. Xena's hammer hit the red glowing metal and the sound snapped the blonde back to reality.

Two hand signals told her that her presence had been noted and that Xena would be there in a

few candledrops.

As had become natural over the course of the last few days Samantha and Janet drifted close together like magnetised metal bits whenever they thought themselves unobserved. They hadn't gone further, yet, but both of them were honest enough to admit to themselves that even thinking of ever losing this closeness would hurt more than they thought they could stand. They knew they had to keep it out of Cheyenne Mountain but to completely miss out on it was simply unimaginable and completely out of question. They didn't break their embrace when Xena left the smithy, wiping sweat and grime away with a piece of cloth.

"It's time to give us a few answers, your highness. We have to decide what to put in our reports to General Hammond."

"Samantha Carter, you just lost me a bet. I was sure it would take you all until after the great council and the festival to find out or even get suspicious. Once again Gabrielle was right. I'll take a shower and get her. We'll meet at the guest palace a candlemark from now."

~\*~

When Carter and Fraiser entered the patio, the other members of the away team were clustered on and around two benches in the far corner, obviously in the middle of a vivid argument.

"... we can't keep something this important from the General."

"We can't tell anyone on Earth, Sabrina. It would bring Kinsey, his NID buddies and Hades knows whom else breathing down our necks. They would do everything to get their hands on Gaia's technology and I won't even begin to think about what they would try to do to the Queen and her Consort or any other Amazon they can get their hands on." Lieutenant Hailey angrily retorted.

"Calm down, all of you." Carter bellowed and every single one of them snapped to attention. "As you were, folks. The point is: you are both right. Yes, General Hammond has to know, sooner or later; and yes, it has the potential to bring a whole load of trouble to the SGC and the Amazons. But at the moment all we have are impressions, ideas, and suspicions.

"During the first two or three days of our stay here, I heard more than once that we were not ready to know the truth. I think Queen Gabrielle wanted us to first get to know her people and their way of life before getting us in a situation that could well jeopardise all our careers. Rationally I know that they are true and well capable of taking care of themselves but I also feel the need to protect them. Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena will be here shortly. I suggest, we listen to them and then we'll decide."

~\*~

A few minutes later Aria led them to the room where the Queen had met with SG-1 for the first time. The cushions still were there, and a few low tables with food and drink scattered about. They all found a place to sit, Samantha next to Janet, leaving the two biggest and softest cushions for the Royal couple. The young Amazon had told them to eat because it would probably be some time before the Queen could get out of the council session, and so they did. Talking about their day, about what they had learned or discovered. Samantha soon found herself in a conversation with Hailey and Aria discussing the different advantages of sais over chobos, and Janet soon was speaking about the possibility to implement a new procedure for post mission physicals based on the machinery used by the Amazons. When Xena and Gabrielle arrived a few minutes after sunset everyone fell silent.

"Thank you for entertaining our guests, Aria. You are dismissed." Xena ordered while she sat down to the right and slightly behind the blonde Queen.

The young woman reluctantly left and closed the door. "Your majesty," Samantha said with a small bow, "I apologise for the strain we put on your valuable time and taking you away from the preparations for the great council."

"Everything is squared away, Samantha Carter, there's no need to apologise. I understand you have some questions?"

"Yes, your majesty. But I don't really know where to begin. Some of us, most of us think that you, your majesty, and your venerable Consort are immortal but we don't understand how or why. None of us think that you mean any harm to us or Earth but..."

"I understand, Samantha Carter. Make yourself comfortable, all of you. I'll tell you a story, a true story and though I will not be able to go into too many details it still will be a long one." Xena handed her Queen a mug of apple juice. "Thank you, love." Her right hand touched the ravenhead's cheek. "Return to the smithy, my warrior. I'll be all right."

Xena's eyes were almost pathetically grateful, Carter thought, but she didn't act on it. She kissed the Queen's palm and slid behind her, whispering in her left ear, giving the young major the opportunity to read her lips.

"My place is at your side, my love, always has been, always will be."

Samantha averted her eyes with a slight blush, so she didn't see the Queen turning her head and planting a soft kiss on the taller woman's cheek. Xena drew her closer and the smaller woman snuggled into her arms. When Samantha once again looked up for the fraction of a heartbeat she thought that there was a golden shine enveloping them.

"From the initial SG-1-report and the scrolls you had access to you already know that Artemis started to evacuate women from Earth about two thousand and five hundred years before your current calendar. She sent a friend with them but she stayed behind to prepare another group.

When they were ready, Athena's Ring, the Stargate was gone, hidden by Ra's servants still on earth. They had no choice but to stay on Earth, and thus started the Amazon Nation.

"In Ancient Greece and Asia they became a considerable military and moral force. About a thousand years later, Artemis was captured by Ares and a coalition of other minor Gao'uld, and the Amazons used to her presence and advice fell prey to internal squabbles and external enemies. Athena, the host of Artemis, escaped. She and her symbiote had been badly injured by the torture the Olympians, that's what her captors called themselves, had inflicted on her to get access to the knowledge and wisdom of the Ancients. Athena was one of them and knew all their secrets.

"It took her hundreds of years to heal from all her injuries, and even then she wasn't strong enough to overthrow the Olympians or annihilate their influence on the humans. Untypical for the Gao'uld as you know them, they came to an agreement. They vowed never to attack each other and that every one of them should stick to a chosen field of influence, so Ares became the God of War, Hera the Goddess of the Hearth and Marriage, Aphrodite the Goddess of Love and so on. So Artemis/Athena did the only thing she could think of: she joined them to protect what was left of the Amazons: Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt and the Moon, protector of the Amazons.

"One day, centuries later, a child was born to an innkeeper in a little out-of-the-way village in Greece. Her childhood was rather ordinary, except that she didn't have any interest in the things other girls did. She preferred playing with her younger and her older brother -- hide and seek, hero and warlord. Her name was Xena."

The tall warrior could feel the eyes of nearly everyone in the room turning towards her but her own gaze stayed unfocused, her mind busy with warding off still hurtful memories.

"She was stronger and faster and smarter than anyone else her age, her energy seemed to be inexhaustible, and she had a restless curiosity no teacher ever was able to fully satisfy. Soon she drew the attention of the Olympians who were always looking for new servants and hosts. They came to her in dreams, they came disguised as merchants, travelling bards, mercenaries, but she was happy with her life and didn't want to change anything.

"Their vow, their agreement didn't allow them to influence her in any other way; they only were allowed to claim a mortal another one of them also was interested in with the mortal's agreement. It must have been damned inconvenient for them but it worked and it kept their alliance alive for a long time. When the girl turned fifteen, one of the warlords scourging the Greek countryside attacked her village. She and her younger brother organised a defence and really succeeded in pushing the enemy back - but they had to pay a high price.

"When Xena held the bleeding body of her younger brother in her arms something inside of her also died and for the first time she began to listen to the voice in her dreams, in her head.

"Ares promised her revenge, he promised her a way to keep the rest of her family and her village safe. He took her under his protection, amplifying her natural skills and also twisting them to fit his own needs. She soaked up everything like a dry sponge. She became Ares' Chosen and in his

name conquered half of Greece.

"At the head of her army she committed every crime imaginable, but there was one thing she never condoned: rape. Every soldier in her army, from the kitchen help to her second in command knew that they would have to pay with their lives and that their deaths wouldn't be fast or painless.

"One day they came to a small village that refused to pay them tribute. Xena gave them an ultimatum until the next morning but her second in command decided that he was weary of waiting and ordered to kill everyone alive, every man, woman, and child, every horse, dog, cat, sheep, and chicken. Xena was on a scouting mission and when she returned the village was burning. She killed two of her men in the midst of raping a young girl and saved the life of a baby. She tried to get her men back in line but they had tasted blood and they wanted more. Darphus, her second in command, promised them more, a lot more.

"He refused to fight her one on one. He knew he never would stand a chance. They made her run the gauntlet instead. She did what no one ever did before: she survived. She survived to exact revenge on Darphus, to stop her men who had gone from soldiers to rapists and murderers in the blink of an eye; and she survived to get the baby boy she had saved out of harm's way. She quickly found allies, among them the father of the boy, and together they stopped Darphus once and for all. Two thirds of her men were dead and the survivors were ready to once again swear fealty to her but she simply walked away. Ares had finally lost his hold on her soul and her real personality began to reassert itself."

Gabrielle took another sip of her juice and looked into the expectant eyes of her public. Some of them spoke of disbelief, some of doubt, some of rapt fascination; there also was compassion, bewilderment, and pity. Samantha and Janet maintained a closely guarded expression, keeping their emotions even from showing in their eyes. But the blond ruler of the Amazons still saw how deeply they were affected by her words, her story: they were holding hands, openly, for everyone to see.

"Xena walked away from her life as a warlord. She wanted to go back to Amphipolis, to her mother and to her brother's grave. On her way home, she passed a village named Poteideia and saved the village girls from a bunch of slavers. One of the girls was so impressed by her actions, standing up against ten men, unarmed, and so mesmerised by her blue eyes that she left her father's house in the middle of the night and followed the stranger. Her name was Gabrielle and she never before had been out of her village. She was afraid, terrified by every sound she heard, but she also was sure that this was what she was meant to do.

"Two days later she arrived at Amphipolis. The village seemed deserted but there were loud angry voices coming from the inn. Xena's weapons were on a table in front of her. The villagers stood a few paces away and were throwing stones at her but she didn't try to duck, didn't try to fend them off. Obviously almost fifteen years of absence hadn't made Xena more popular in her hometown. They didn't want to remember that it had been her leadership that had enabled them to defeat the warlord Cortese. They only remembered that their sons and husbands and fathers had died this day.

"Gabrielle, at first, didn't know what to do. She only knew that this had to be stopped. So, she stepped forward, coming between the tall warrior and her aggressors and succeeded in talking them out of killing her. The same day Xena repaid the stoning attempt by defeating a warlord in single combat, a staff battle, and thus once again kept the village safe.

"From this day on, Xena and Gabrielle stayed together. They travelled all over Greece; the tall warrior was trying to atone for her dark past by defeating warlords, fighting against thieves, risking her life and sometimes just getting a frightened kitten out of a tree - fighting darkness and evil wherever they reared their ugly heads. They even found a name for what they were doing: fighting for the Greater Good. The blond village girl at first only tagged along, driving Xena crazy with her endless chatter and her countless questions but also giving the warrior something else to think about than the shadows of her past.

"Gabrielle began to tell stories about their adventures, about Xena's change from warlord to hero. One of these adventures led them to an Amazon village in Thessaly. They picked up a heavily armed guard but their bows and crossbows and swords were impotent against the ambush they walked into, against the cloud of arrows descending down on them, arrows with the markings of the Centaurs, a horselike race of warriors with a human torso and head and long time enemy of the Amazons. One of these arrows killed Terreis, the leader of their guards. Before she died she gave her right of caste to Gabrielle who had unsuccessfully tried to save her, to shield her from the arrows. Terreis was the sister of Melosa, and Melosa was the Queen of the Amazons. So, from this moment on Gabrielle was an Amazon Princess.

"Melosa and her tribe wanted to avenge Terreis' death by attacking and killing the Centaurs, and Gabrielle should go with them, side by side with the Queen. Xena and Ephiny, Terreis' best friend, found proof that someone else had been behind the ambush; a sneaky warlord who wanted Amazons and Centaurs to fight and kill each other, ready to pick up and profit from the pieces when it was over, and claim their land as his own. Instead Amazons and Centaurs became allies.

"Gabrielle, the newly appointed Princess and heir to the Queen's mask, could have stayed with the Amazons, some even saw it as her duty to do so but Melosa allowed her to stay with Xena instead. Xena taught her how to use a staff; she protected her and saved her life time and again because the young woman had an unparalleled propensity for getting into trouble. The friendship they had forged over the seasons gradually changed to something deeper, something neither of them wanted to admit to - and then Xena died."

The Queen felt the grip around her waist tighten slightly. This part of the story was one of the reasons Xena had refused to leave her, regardless of how many years had passed, regardless of the pain that came later and the many pleasures and joys to balance the dark times, remembering still hurt - and fortunately it wasn't often that she had to speak about it.

The looks of incredulity and pity had disappeared to be replaced by respect and awe. The faces of Janet and Samantha still were unreadable but the doctor's hold on Samantha's hand had tightened to the point of making her white-knuckled. Gabrielle closed her eyes and let the

comfort of Xena's presence wash over her and enter her soul. Then she continued.

"It was a simple village, far away from the main trading routes. A band of cannibalistic primitives worshipping Hera was harassing them. They believed that eating the flesh of virgins would make them invincible and immortal. On a shortcut to Athens Xena and Gabrielle passed through the area. They intercepted the cannibals on the way to their abode, a group of women and children in tow. They managed to get them all out but Xena was hit by a log trap crashing down from a tree.

"She was seriously injured with broken ribs and internal bleeding.

"Gabrielle had taken a knife wound to the left thigh but at her request she brought Xena to a healer with the name of Niklios. His knowledge of the human body, of herbs, and the use of pressure points was unparalleled - but it wasn't enough to save the warrior's life. At first Gabrielle refused to believe him. She refused to believe that the proud woman who successfully had fought Ares influence on her life and soul would so easily give up. When it finally sank in, she took Xena's horse Argo to bury her friend in her family's crypt in Amphipolis, just as she had promised.

"She didn't want to think any further, all she knew was that she had just lost the best part of her life and her soul. She would do her duty to her friend and then... They were living in dangerous times, there were a lot of ways to die or get killed.

"The fastest route to Amphipolis cut through Amazon territory. There, Gabrielle learned that Queen Melosa had been killed. Her adoptive daughter Velasca had offered a challenge and lost but instead of accepting her defeat she had stabbed the Queen from behind. According to Amazon law she had forfeited her life and Gabrielle became next in line.

"She thought that being killed by the next power hungry Amazon coming along wouldn't be a half bad way to die, so, she accepted the Queen's mask. The council decided to honour Xena by giving her a traditional Amazon funeral. Gabrielle's eyes were empty and dull when she shot the blazing arrow to set the funeral pyre aflame.

"Only a heartbeat later, she heard Xena's distinct battle cry and a tall man clad in green landed on the coffin. His name was Autolycos and he called himself the King of Thieves but he had his heart in the right place and was a good friend to both of them. Half a dozen Amazon bows immediately were trained on him. He grabbed Xena's chakram and threw it. It sliced their weapons in two and returned to his hand. Then he whistled for Argo and stole the coffin with Xena's body from right under the Amazons' noses. Only then did Gabrielle dare to hope that what he had told her earlier really had been the truth; only Xena was able to control the chakram and Argo only obeyed Xena's command. He had told her that Xena's soul now was in his body and that there was a way to save her - now she began to believe it. Xena knew where a stash of Ambrosia was hidden; it wouldn't take more than a small bite to bring her back to the living.

"Ambrosia then was also called the Food of the Gods, at the time no one knew that it was refined liquid naqada. Naqada counts among the rare elements in the universe but compared to liquid



naqada it's as common as dirt - and the secret of refining it was lost even before the Gao'uld took over the gate system of the Ancients. The Ambrosia worked. Xena opened her eyes and saw the gamut of emotions crossing Gabrielle's face and silently vowed never to leave her. Little did she know that the Ambrosia not only had brought her back; it had also made her immortal."

The blonde emptied her mug in one swallow. Samantha now had both arms protectively around Janet's torso that was trembling with silent sobs. The story had been hitting too close to home for the sensitive brunette with Samantha being at the brink of death more than once and only barely making it through. Gabrielle knew it would get worse before it got better, so she decided to change her style of storytelling. Instead of lingering on details and emotions she was determined to stick to the facts though her first phrase seemed to belie her decision.

"After Xena's resurrection they became lovers, finally finding the courage to show their feelings to the other. They no longer were two separate beings but only one: soulmates, two halves of one soul, a balance of strength and weakness, wisdom and passion, power and love, darkness and light. But at first they kept their connection to themselves. They didn't dare to let anyone know for fear of Gabrielle becoming a target for Xena's enemies. So, they once again became a target for the Gao'uld.

"It's a long story and I don't feel up to it just right now. But to explain how I also ended up immortal, there are at least some things you need to know. Xena and Gabrielle had to fight a young Gao'uld intent on ruling the world named Dahok. He was defeated but during the fight Gabrielle jumped in a lava pit to save Xena's life. At the time, they didn't know that she had become immortal; so she did what she thought she had to do to keep her lover alive. Gabrielle was convinced that the tall warrior still had a lot to give to the world.

"Xena had thought she had lost her lover for good and she tried to join her in the after life. She even went to the Amazon Land of the Death - in vain, because Gabrielle was alive. Artemis/Athena had rescued her body from the lava pit and brought her back to life with a small piece of Ambrosia. She was back among the living but didn't know that she too had become an immortal. It took them almost two more years to find out.

"In a nutshell, that's our story. I know you still have a lot of questions but what I just told you should be sufficient for you to come to a decision." Gabrielle ended her long monologue.

"Just to be on the safe side," Xena suddenly said, "there are a few more things General Hammond certainly will want to know: Yes, we are immortals; though we can get hurt and feel pain, Gabrielle and I are unable to die. No, there's no Ambrosia left on earth. It was destroyed before we left and there's no way to reproduce or synthesise it. We know that our existence alone makes us a prime target for every Gao'uld - who wouldn't want an immortal host. When we arrived here on Gaia, Artemis changed our body chemistry to make sure that we could not be used as hosts. Our bodies reject the symbiotes after a few days and kill them. The System Lords know that we are useless for them. Unfortunately the changes don't work with mortals.

"Let us know what you'll do. You'll find us in our hut in the village."

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When the door closed behind them, the silence in the room slowly became oppressive. It had been a lot to digest. True to form, it was Samantha Carter who first found a semblance of balance. "I'd like to hear your suggestions, ladies."

"We shouldn't have forced them to tell us. Remembering hurt both of them deeply. We should have found another way." Lieutenant Michaela Neddes, first assistant of SGC's resident psychiatrist MacKenzie - and not only in Janet's eyes better qualified to do the job than he ever will be - answered.

"Yes, I also could feel their pain but we needed to know," Janet said, still nestled in Samantha's arms. "We needed to learn how they became what they are. We had to understand that they are not less but perhaps more human because of it. We had to understand but not only with our head and our minds but also with our hearts."

"So, what are we going to do?" Jennifer Hailey asked.

"I can only speak for myself but I'll keep any hint of their immortality out of my reports. There's always a way to say things without really saying them. - I think you all should do the same."

"The Doc is right." - "I concur with Major Fraiser." - "Good idea, Janet." and similar remarks soon filled the room.

Slowly Samantha disentangled herself from Janet and stretched to her full height, patiently waiting until everyone had quietened down. "I can't let you do this! At attention!" Military training asserted itself and a few heartbeats later the other eleven women stood ramrod straight. "As the commanding officer of this mission, I give you the order to keep every hint of what we learned tonight out of your reports to the SGC. I'll take full responsibility for this course of action." Seeing Janet open her mouth, the blonde major continued. "This is not up for discussion. It's an order. Dismissed!"

The women questioningly looked at each other and then quietly left the room. They just had been absolved of all responsibility when circumventing the regulations in their reports. If things blew up, Major Carter would take all the blame - and most of them felt more than only slightly uneasy at the thought but they also wouldn't dishonour her potential sacrifice by questioning her orders.

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Once again the door was closed and silence reigned. "I presume you disapprove, Janet?"

The small doctor took two steps to stand in front of Samantha. Her hand went up to the blonde's

cheek. "I'm not thrilled by your decision, Sam, and I think the others aren't either but it's so typically you, I knew from the beginning that it would end this way. Protecting others is in your blood; you can't help it. You always have to stand in the line of fire, shielding others if need be with your own body, always the knight in shining armour."

"Army fatigues hardly qualify as armour or shining." Samantha grumbled under her breath. "And I'm not a knight, I just..."

Further protests were silenced by a kiss. "Sam, you save the world from total destruction on a regular basis. Every man on the base would give his right hand to go on a romantic date with you. You're so brilliant it defies description," Samantha blushed, "and you're absolutely, adorably cute when you're flustered. Not to mention that you actually can work with Colonel O'Neill without ending up killing him half the time. But it could be that I'm biased."

Samantha took her in her arms. "You know that we just blew what little we had as cover to all hell, don't you?" She kissed the smaller woman. "But when I took you in my arms I knew it was the right thing to do. I needed to touch you as much as you needed to be held. I won't regret it and I don't care about the possible fall-out."

"Sam, your career is your life. Don't throw it away, please." Janet replied while putting a modicum of distance between their upper bodies.

"I spent a lot of time thinking about this, Janet, these past few days. Whenever we wake up, wrapped around each other and I feel as safe and free as never before in my life; when I wake up from a bad dream and though still asleep yourself you were chasing the darkness away by stroking my hair and humming a lullaby. You are right, though: I made my career my life. It was the only way to fight the emptiness and loneliness that threatened to overwhelm me after my mother's death. It was the only way to fight the darkness I feel lingering in my soul.

"But then you joined the Stargate Project.

"I didn't allow myself to want more than friendship but still you slowly filled the emptiness and soon thinking about you was enough to keep the darkness at bay. Before I loved you I would have obeyed orders and simply left Cassandra in this damned compound. I simply would have seen a threat to the Gate and Earth, not a frightened child that just had lost her family, her whole world. You made me feel again, and I won't deny these feelings any longer." Samantha took a deep breath. "But it's not only my career we're talking about. You have at least as much to lose. So, it's up to you. I will abide by your decision."

The heartfelt confession left the smaller woman speechless. Janet searched her friend's face for clues but the stoic mask was firmly in place - except for the eyes, there was an undercurrent of insecurity and fear she couldn't help but respond to. Samantha averted her eyes. "Sit with me for a moment, Sam." The taller woman let herself reluctantly be pulled to the ground.

"First of all, this was the most awesome confession of love I ever heard and I am humbled that you think so highly of me." She paused for a moment, fighting the modesty induced urge to

doubt her impact on Samantha's life. "That's why I don't doubt the sincerity of your words. You were not the only one who felt cut off from her feelings. When I joined the SGC I was on the way to become a heartless bitch. - Please let me speak my mind, love. - Outside of my job, I didn't have any emotions left and even in the infirmary I was more or less just going through the motions.

"The light shining in your eyes made me reconsider, and the more I began to love you, the more I was able to give others. So, yes, I want you to be a part of my life - and as more than a friend. I want to wake up with you as often as possible and one day soon I want to make love to you. I want to study your body with the eyes of a lover; I want to get to know every little square inch of your skin."

"But what about Cassandra? If they find out and throw us out of the forces, they could take Cassy away from you. Do you really want to risk this?"

"There's no danger of that ever happening, Sam. I promised General Hammond it would stay confidential but now you have to know. When adopting Cassy I wanted to make sure that whatever happened to the Stargate Project or to my standing within the military, she would stay with me. I wanted to make sure that she would not be pushed around unnecessarily. The General talked to the President who sent a written guarantee that no one will be allowed to take her away from me - well, unless I'll be convicted on criminal charges and last time I checked being gay isn't against the law."

"Are you really sure?"

Sam was silenced by a kiss. "Yes, my big brilliant soldier. And I intend to prove it to you as soon as possible. But first we have a job to do. It won't take long to tell them about the team's decision - and the night is still young."

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They left the guest palace with Samantha's arm draped over Janet's shoulder and shortly after knocked on the door of the Queen's hut. Xena opened and motioned them in. Janet lingered in the background while Samantha saluted them and said. "Your majesty, your highness, we decided to keep quiet about what you told us this evening.

"The alliance between Gaia and Earth could be compromised if certain parts of our government learn things they are not able to understand or to accept. They still have a hard enough time dealing with a few strong and independent women among their own ranks, not to talk about a whole Nation of strong women, to learn that two of them are immortal would definitely scare them away."

"Please, take a seat, Sam. You too, Janet." The Queen said. "We appreciate your effort to protect us but we were wrong to even ask you to make such a decision. Xena reminded me of the

military chain of command. It would be compromised beyond recognition if we let you keep this quiet."

"We know of the risks, your majesty," Samantha answered. "That's why I ordered the others to do it. This way their careers won't be jeopardised."

Xena shot Gabrielle an 'I told you so'-glance and smirked.

"I know that there are a lot of people in your world who could become rather annoying but they are no danger to us. On the other hand, they could make a lot of trouble for all of you, and Senator Kinsey and the NID are only a few of them. Tell me, Sam, do you trust General Hammond?"

"Yes, Gabrielle." Samantha fell silent and Xena got up to serve them a mug of tea. No one said a word but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence, giving the blonde the chance to think about the Queen's question. "You are right, Gabrielle. I'll go and speak to the General. He trusted my judgement more than once even though he didn't completely understand what I had in mind. It's my turn to trust him. He will know what to do and whom to trust. I planned on doing some research on the possibility of upgrading the iris with your energy shield tomorrow. May I instead be allowed to return to Earth to speak with General Hammond?"

"Permission granted. As long as you're back for the party, Sam." The tall blonde rolled her eyes. Xena only grinned and continued. "As we speak a pad with all necessary historical and medical data is prepared, so you can prove your words. I'll give it to you after your training session. And now, there are a few other things we have to talk about. Get comfortable, this probably will take some time."

Samantha questioningly raised her left eyebrow in an almost Xena-like fashion.

"Do you trust us, Sam?"

"We wouldn't be here if we didn't, Gabrielle."

"No, Sam, I'm talking about a deeper kind of trust. Would you trust us to do what we ask even if you thought it would endanger Cassandra's or Janet's life? Please think carefully before you answer."

The tall blonde closed her eyes to block out the world and the expectant gazes around her. She then turned sideways and searched Janet's warm brown orbs. She saw love and unconditional trust, without letting her out of sight she answered.

"I don't trust easily but from the moment I saw the two of you together I knew that I could trust you. Yes, I'd even trust you with Janet's life but you're getting me really nervous here."

"I know and we're sorry, Sam, but it can't be helped. What Gabrielle told the others were the bare basics. There is a lot more to say but it simply would take too long and despite all the things you

both have seen during the last few years you're not yet ready to believe what we have to say. - Bottom line is: we want you to undergo a special training while you are here, Samantha Carter, to teach you to better use your natural skills and to tap into the energy and knowledge and skills given to you by Jolinar. It will be physically and mentally taxing and you will need Janet's support, Janet's love to see you through but we feel that it's important for the future that you do it. Will you ta..."

Xena was silenced by a hand on her upper arm. "No, my love, we can't ask her to make this decision on trust alone."

Gabrielle turned her attention to the other women who now were sitting next to each other, as close as one can get without sharing the other's skin.

"The things we want you to learn will do more than simply improve your skill set, your physical prowess and your intellectual abilities. It will change the way you see the world, the way you see the people around you, the way you see yourself. It will not change who you are and what you feel, though it may allow you a better access to your feelings. It will have an impact on your everyday life. - That's why you have to know more about the bigger picture, so to speak.

"Today, I told you that Artemis sent a friend to Gaia with the first set of settlers. She was more than a friend, however. They had been lovers for centuries and longer, and Athena/Artemis wanted to keep her safe during the final stages of the battle against Ra on Earth. When the Ring was lost, they were separated, Artemis was thought dead - and in her grief her lover vowed to take revenge on Ra whom she held responsible. Her..."

"Her name was Egeria, the mother of the Tok'ra."

"Yes, Janet. Her name was Egeria and she was the first Tok'ra - but there are more ways to become a Tok'ra than being created by Egeria. I'm sorry it simply would take too long to go into any detail. Egeria devoted all her time and energy to fight Ra and the other System Lords. She had a rather direct approach and wanted to destroy them one by one. Her children finally convinced her that the only way to fight the Gao'uld was to destroy them from within, to destroy them with their own weapons. Centuries passed and she was so absorbed in her task that she lost track of what was happening on this planet, with the people of her lover.

"She had given them the means for technological development, the means to protect themselves. Not as good as we do now but enough to keep the Gao'uld and others away. Unfortunately there was no spiritual power to counteract or to avoid the misuse of the technical knowledge. That's how we found them when we came here with the last remnants of the Amazon Nation. Egeria saw what her single-minded focus on revenge and hatred had inadvertently done and Artemis/Athena had a hard time to talk her out of her guilt. But whenever something went wrong with the Tok'ra or the people on Gaia she retired to Gaia's temple, seeking solitude. The last time was when Athena ascended and Artemis ceased to exist. She hasn't left the underground of the temple since. She says it hurts too much to see all the places where she had been happy with her lover."

"But you said that this happened more than three hundred years ago, Gabrielle?"

"Yes, Samantha, 324 years and five moons. She says that she will be there for us when we'll need her, when the time has come. She also told us that now she needs the time alone to calm her spirit and gather her strength. From time to time she calls for me and we talk, about the time we spent here, together - but mostly we talk about the years on Earth, the decades before we came here. Sometimes she warns us about the plans of the Gao'uld.

"Egeria's spiritual powers always have been above average; else she wouldn't have been capable of creating the Tok'ra. They wouldn't have been any different than the Gao'uld otherwise. Since Artemis left us, Egeria gave free reign to this spirituality.

"Every once in a while she can tap into the minds of the System Lords and the other Gao'uld.

"She saw that some of them are afraid of something, of someone. You probably already heard of him. He picked up where Apophis failed - but he's much older, more powerful and countless times more cunning than Apophis or even Sokar ever would have thought possible."

"Anubis!"

"Anubis, yes, Janet. Five or six thousand years ago the System Lords defeated Anubis but even then couldn't kill him. It was the first and last time that they really worked together - not just tolerating each other like they usually do. They really combined their forces to get rid of someone they all felt threatened by. They put his body in a small spacecraft and sent it into deep space, hoping that he would stay there forever. He's back now and more powerful than ever. The System Lords have every reason to fear him but at the moment, dealing with the Tau'ri, Earth is not paramount in his plans. Sooner or later his priorities will change. You already did too much damage to the Gao'uld to be totally left alone, despite the agreement with the Asgard.

"However, there's no guarantee that what we want you to do will contribute to save your planet 'cause the future is still unwritten. However, we feel that aside from your personal growth, the chances for Earth - and in the long run for us - could be improved but it also could be the other way round."

Samantha took a sip of her already cooled down tea. She absentmindedly played with Janet's fingers, stroking them, caressing them, holding them gently between her own hands. "Anubis is this powerful?"

"He's not invincible and though the host's body is immortal, the symbiote can be killed. The future can't be foretold." Xena answered. "It's like in a fight; once it's on a lot of unpredictable things can happen."

"Like in a baseball game. There's a set of ground rules but everything else is up to skill, chance, and luck." Samantha said, still holding on to Janet she turned her attention back to Gabrielle.

"Egeria, is she reliable?"

"Yes, she is - and she proved it more than once."

"You said this training will be mentally taxing. What exactly does this mean?"

"You will learn how to access what is left of Jolinar without any technical help. Using Gao'uld technology no longer will be a problem to you, and to a certain degree you also will have access to their genetic memory." Noting the gleam in Samantha's eyes Xena continued. "Don't get too excited, Samantha. It only will be a very limited access. And there is a down side: Jolinar has to become a part of you, almost as if she were still sharing your body but without being able to dominate it, to control it. It's not easy and you will need the stability of Janet's love but it can be done."

"What you're talking about sounds like some sort of multiple personality disorder. It sounds dangerous, and I don't like it."

"But Janet, think about all the good I could do with knowledge like this!" Samantha answered excitedly.

"It is not about the knowledge, Samantha. You can get this from my Consort. She was a host twice. No, it's more about personal growth. Jolinar can become a guiding spirit to you. Her memories no longer would be so hurtful and threatening, disturbing your dreams. And it could give you the chance to work through the guilt you still feel for her death."

"Why me? What makes me so special? Is it just because I once was a host to Jolinar?"

"No, Sam, but it's still too early to tell you everything. Please have some patience. And, Janet, Samantha won't be in any danger. She won't speak with Jolinar's voice or something but she will be able to communicate with her. She will come out of this even stronger and more sure of herself."

Samantha's body language told the brown-eyed doctor that she already had decided to do it. She saw it as a challenge and the soldier in her never could resist a challenge. So, she closed her eyes, tightened her grip around Samantha's fingers and finally asked. "What will I have to do, Gabrielle?"

"Xena will work with Sam and I will work with you. I will teach you how to help her. You can only be successful together because Jolinar will only be the first step. What you now feel for each other will increase tenfold. It will become almost impossible to conceal the changed nature of your relationship from prying eyes. That's why we want you to take your time deciding. Tell us after the party." The Queen answered.

Janet and Samantha excused themselves, and as soon as the door was closed, Gabrielle asked. "Do you think we did the right thing by not telling them?"

"We didn't have a choice, Gab, and you know this. Sam is mentally very strong but sooner or later what is left of Jolinar would have overpowered her, using her own darkness to do so. She



has to learn how to control her darkness and the best way to do this is by controlling Jolinar. At the moment Sam sees this whole thing as a challenge, and she's competitive enough not to resist a challenge. Telling her means she would do it out of fear; she would become suspicious of her actions, of her thoughts, of her feelings. We didn't have a choice, my love."

"I know, Xena. It's just that I really wish we could tell her the whole truth."

"We will, as soon as she is ready to hear it."

"You're right, my warrior - and now I think you have to pay for the bet you lost."

"I'm at your command, my beloved."

"I think we'll start with a full body massage."

## **Chapter Six: Learning Curve**

Samantha and Janet came to their room after a slow walk through a peaceful and idyllic scenery. They consciously took the long way back to the guest palace, giving Samantha the chance to think about the evening's revelations and what she just had consented to. They were holding hands, and every once in a while the brunette squeezed the bigger hand. She wouldn't have been able to explain it but a big part of her was convinced that this day somehow had changed their lives - and more than just by openly showing what they felt for each other in front of their team mates.

When they had closed the door to their quarters, Samantha finally broke the silence. "So, what do you think about this special training?"

Janet smiled at the blonde, having anticipated this question since they left the Queen's hut. "If it really can help with your nightmares, it could be worth the risk - and to be honest, I'm kind of intrigued by what they told us. I like spending time with Gabrielle, and I'd really like to learn from her."

"So, we'll do it?"

"It has to be your decision, Sam. What do you want?"

"I want to make love to you, Janet Rebecca Fraiser."

"Sam, please answer my question. This is serious."

"I'm perfectly serious, Jan. Yes, we'll do it, and yes, I want to make love to you."

The sparkle in Samantha's eyes was more than the small brunette could resist. So, she stepped closer and unbuckled the belt of Samantha's trousers. She slowly and sensually slid it out of the belt loops and let it drop to the ground. The taller woman tried to pluck Janet's T-shirt out of the waistband of her BDU's but two smaller hands gripped her wrists.

"Stand at ease, my major, and don't move. I only see you naked when you're injured and your clothing has to be cut off. I want to savour this moment. I want to discover your body with a lover's eyes. Please, indulge me!"

"Your wish is my command, my Janet, my love. -- It's so strange to finally be able to say it out loud. The nights I spent at your house, I always dreamed of tiptoeing over to your room and just snuggling down next to you."

Janet looked up from her task of unbuttoning Sam's AF trousers with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "So, even your dreams about me are rather chaste. Should I be disappointed?"

"There's no reason for that. Taking you in my arms was only the beginning. You would wake up after a few minutes and shrug out of your nightshirt. Your brown eyes would pin me to the bed. You'd ordered me to get out of my boxers and ...." She was silenced by a kiss and with a little help the smaller woman pulled Sam's black T-shirt over her head, leaving her in a black military issue sports bra, her nipples straining against the soft material.

Janet's hands trailed down the sides of Sam's body, repainting the contours with tender fingertips, barely touching her but still sending tingles down her spine. The rather rough cloth of her trousers was peeled over her hips and with the same movement she got rid of the socks and slippers. Starting with Samantha's left knee she began to kiss her way upwards, pleasantly surprised by the strong scent of arousal. She then slid the breeches down and found herself facing a neatly trimmed tuft of blond hair. It was hard but she resisted the temptation and kissed her way down to the right knee.

Sam stepped out of her underwear, got rid of her bra and pulled Janet up to stand in front of her. Their eyes held each other for endless seconds before their lips met. This time there was no gentleness, no exploring. The kiss was feral, hungry; both of them trying to put all their pent-up energy and passion in this single kiss.

When they had to come up to breathe, Sam said with a catlike purr. "You're way overdressed, my Jan. Let me help you out of this cumbersome clothing."

"No, chance, my love. Go and get on the bed. I'll strip for you."

Janet began to sway her hips in a sensuous rhythm that alone would have made Samantha's heart beat faster. And though Janet wished that she was wearing a long, flowing skirt instead of her functional training's attire, she made the best of it. She first pulled her T-shirt over her head, revealing a pink sports bra. She then turned around, still swaying her hips. The bra swiftly followed the shirt. Samantha's breath paused at the sight of the play of muscles the simple movement made visible. She always had thought of Janet as the soft, feminine type - but she

should have known better, at least since their first encounter with Hathor. The small woman hauled the bodies of marines two and three times her weight around on an almost daily basis.

All thought fled the blonde when Janet made a half turn and began to slowly unlace her combat boots. She took her time with standing to her full five foot two inches in height. Another half turn brought her to once again face the bed. Sam's hungry eyes were all the encouragement she needed; but she stuck to her plan and kept up her slow seduction. One after the other the buttons of her trousers were opened, revealing the upper edge of pink panties. Together they landed on the floor. She stepped out of them directly into Sam's waiting arms.

"You're so beautiful, Jan. It's still dark outside but in this room the sun just rose. Looking at you, feeling your skin on mine, makes me happy. I'm at home, finally at home."

The blonde's hands were roaming all over her body and Janet closed her eyes to memorise the feeling. She then stood on the tip of her toes and whispered in Sam's ear. "You're the one who's beautiful, my brilliant warrior. You don't know how much of a turn-on it is to feel the hard muscles under your soft skin. I also feel at home in your arms. Please, make me yours."

"Beautiful, inside and out." Sam murmured while nibbling Janet's ear, pulling her closer, and carrying her to the bed. With hands and mouth they explored each other, slowly, savouring the texture of the other woman's skin, internalising her scent. Finally, Samantha was on top, mindful to keep most of her weight on her hands and arms and off of Janet. Their hips were moving with the same sensuous rhythm the smaller woman had held while undressing. They were in perfect sync; grinding against each other, pelvis touching pelvis. They came together in an explosion of energy neither of them had ever experienced before.

Still panting, Samantha rolled on her back, pulling the brunette with her, enveloped in a strange and yet eerily familiar sense of togetherness. Minutes passed without either of them moving or talking, and then both said. "Thank you, my love."

Blue eyes found brown and they burst out laughing. Some time later, Janet had manoeuvred herself in her usual spot at Samantha's side, her head pillowed on the taller woman's shoulder, she asked. "Why did you thank me, Sammy?"

"Because for the first time in my life I understand what all this talk about sex, about making love is about. You're the first to make me feel this way and I hope you also will be the last." Samantha answered almost in a whisper.

"The first?"

"The first, my Jan. Don't get me wrong, I've had sex before, but now I know that I've never made love before. It's the most wonderful feeling. For the first time I don't feel like I have to prove something or that you'd expect me to react in a certain way. I didn't know that it could be like this."

Janet kissed the side of Sam's breast and chuckled at the immediate reaction the almost innocent

touch provoked. "Yes, Sammie, it's the most wonderful feeling." She whispered and continued her exploration of the soft skin in front of her. Her efforts were rewarded with a low moan. Her lips found an already taut nipple and she began to suckle like a hungry child. With her left knee between Samantha's thighs they once again were on their way to Cythera, paying tribute to Aphrodite.

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A couple of hours later, someone was banging on the door. They had only been asleep a few minutes. Relying on years of crisis management, they instantly were awake and Samantha remembered that she should have been at the training grounds half an hour ago. Janet sent her to the bathroom, slipped a robe over her naked body, and opened the door.

"Master Niva, please come in and have a seat. Samantha will be with us in a few minutes. We sort of overslept."

When Niva saw the piles of clothing strewn on the ground, she pretty much guessed what really had made them late. She simply couldn't pass this chance up. "Would it be wrong to presume that you had a hand in Samantha Carter's sudden, uncharacteristic forgetfulness, Janet Fraiser?"

"One could see it that way, weapons' master. Actually, I most certainly did. I accept full responsibility".

"No, she doesn't." Samantha said while closing the bathroom door. "What will my punishment be, Master Niva?"

"For once, I accept extenuating circumstances, warrior; so, I'll let it go with another extra candlemark of drilling at the end of today's session. Now, go and start with your warm-up exercises. I have to speak with the healer."

Samantha walked towards the door, but was called back by Janet who closed the distance between them and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Now, you may go." She closed the door behind her and then turned her attention towards the weapons' master. "I'm really sorry, Master Niva. Please, don't be too hard on her."

"Do not worry, healer. I remember what being in love feels like." The taller woman answered with a hint of sadness in her voice and a knowing grin on her face that made Janet blush. "But now, back to business. Consort Xena informed me that I would have to attend the whole session of the Great Council. So we will have to reschedule your training. I'll leave it to you. We can just do two sessions tomorrow or we can do it now."

"Now, please!"

"So be it. I want you at the training grounds half a candlemark after sunrise. Enough time to take

a long shower and clean up the room. Don't be late."

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Five hours later, a freshly showered and very tired Major Samantha Carter stepped through Athena's Ring and onto the platform in the Gate Room of Cheyenne Mountain. Her official report didn't take long; and she easily was granted that her team should stay on longer than initially planned. She argued that they made good progress, and that it would be counterproductive to bring in new people right now.

Shortly after the debriefing she left the base, officially to fetch a few things for Janet and herself, which she did. Her true purpose, however, was to privately meet with General Hammond. Leaving his office she had slipped him a message. It said. 'We have to talk, Uncle George.' Followed by two eyes in a circle.

Samantha had just finished packing the worn UCLA sweat shirt Janet had asked for in the big gym bag she intended to bring back to Gaia when the General arrived. She made some coffee, and then began to tell him about Gabrielle's and Xena's immortality and the fact that Egeria was living on their planet.

George Hammond listened without interrupting. He manifested no anger, disappointment, or surprise at her decision to keep it out of her written report. In fact he seemed relieved.

"I'm glad that you told me, Sam. There was a message from the high council of the Tok'Ra, warning us about them. Doctor Jackson also has some suspicions. Perhaps, ... yes, call him and ask him to come over. He's better able to explain."

While they waited for Daniel to make the twenty minutes' drive to Janet's house, Samantha talked about Gaia and the Amazons; for once not reigning in her fascination and enthusiasm by coating it with scientific objectivity. To Hammond, it was as if a part of the carefree child she once had been, before her mother's death, had finally returned.

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A few minute later, Daniel Jackson arrived with Teal'c and O'Neill in tow, and Samantha gave them a short version of what she just had told the general.

"Damn it! She was right all these years - and I won't be able to tell her."

"Tell whom?"

"A friend, Doctor Sabrina Levinson. She's a research assistant in Washington. She's brilliant and

would be at the head of her own department by now, if not for this stupid, insane theory that she simply refused to denounce after it accidentally got published. And now -- to know that she was right."

"Danny-boy, calm down. Start at the beginning, would you? Without the rather cryptic message from the Tok'Ra, I would have a hard time accepting Carter's story. I know you already know what Daniel has to say, Sir, but I'd really like a chance to understand better."

"Doctor Jackson only told me about his suspicions, not how he came to develop them. I'd also like to hear it, Colonel." The General answered.

"The message the Tok'ra sent said that the High Queen of the Amazon Nation and her Consort are, and I quote, 'older than most, cunning, and quick to stick their fingers where they're not wanted'. End quote. It was their names that triggered my memory. When I was working with Professor Jordan, Sabrina was one of his junior assistants. She has an innate understanding of languages, Egyptian, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic... You may think that I am good with languages but compared to her I'm nothing but an illiterate babe in the woods. Even the most ancient dialects are no problem for her."

"She would be a worthy candidate for the Stargate Project, Daniel Jackson." Teal'c said.

"Yes, she probably would, but she hates the military and, as far as I know, never would work within our command structure. - Anyway. She wrote a highly-applauded thesis about the trading routes between Egypt and Greece in the centuries before the Roman occupation. But her real interest lay somewhere else. Her grandmother died when she was still in highschool. Among the things she left her was a diary and three old scrolls, story scrolls in Ancient Greek. These scrolls are the reason why she made a double major in Archaeology and Linguistics.

"They told about the adventures of a great warrior woman named Xena and her companion Gabrielle. She tried to prove that they really had existed; it was like an obsession. She found their names in the ruins of an Artemis' temple in Thessaly, hints in Britannia, and even in China. She even was able to find two more scrolls. One of them told how Cecrops, the mariner cursed by Poseidon, was set free and the other one was about a trip to India, and how the demon, Indrajit was defeated by Xena. She didn't have the intention to go public but it somehow happened and she refused to distance herself from her theories. She still does.

"Though the authenticity of the scrolls couldn't be denied, no one wanted to see more in these scrolls than products of an overactive imagination. It ruined her reputation but she never gave up.

"We spoke at Professor Jordan's funeral, before this whole mess with Osiris happened. She told me that she had found three more of the scrolls, one of them telling a strange story of this Xena living as a slave among the Amazons. She is certain that they are authentic, but she also harbours a great deal of bitterness."

Daniel now looked at the General. "I know that this has the potential to endanger the Stargate Program but if there is one thing in this world I trust it's her integrity and reliability.

"I really would love to tell her that she was right the whole time. - Sam, do you think you could speak with the Queen on her behalf?"

"I'll try Daniel, but I can't make any promises. - If you all don't mind. I have to get back. I promised not to be late for the party."

"Another party? What are you doing out there, working or enjoying yourself?" O'Neill grumbled.

"Oh we're working hard, as our reports should prove abundantly, but the Amazons as a rule don't forget to also enjoy the other side of life. They know how to have a good time - and in their eyes this opportunity is just too good to pass up on. Today the Regents of the other villages on Gaia and from the other planets belonging to the Amazon Nation are holding their annual meeting. They call it the High Council; they are talking the whole day and in the evening they relax. Hey, even I enjoyed myself last week and that's no small feat. Besides, our hosts would be disappointed were we not to attend, sir."

"This is so unfair," Jack whined.

"That's enough, Colonel O'Neill." George Hammond's deep voice retorted sharply. "Back to business. Major Carter!" Samantha immediately stood at attention. "Let Queen Gabrielle know that the story you told me and the data she gave to you will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Only the President himself will be informed. There will be no trace of it in Area 51 or any other database. And now, go, call Cassandra before you return."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. - Concerning Cassie, Colonel O'Neill. She will stay at summer camp for another two weeks. With the General having approved of a prolongation of our stay, Doctor Fraiser will not be back in time. Could you take her on a fishing trip or something 'til the end of the holidays? She would be thrilled to spend some time with you."

"With Doctor Jackson doing the cooking and Teal'c actually catching some fish, it could turn into a good trip for the girl." Hammond said with a smirk. "Consider yourself on recruiting duty, O'Neill."

"General, I'm hurt. You have to know I'm a magician with a grill." O'Neill answered, sporting a grin himself. "Yes, Carter, I'll do it. It will be fun to have the little sprout for a few days."

'Little sprout!' Cassandra would have a major fit had she heard him. She was quickly becoming a hormone-driven, typical American teen; the Colonel would have his hands full with her. She was always ready to break the rules, test her boundaries, and drive her parents crazy with worry and doubt. No one would have thought that she had been born on an alien planet and to a totally different social structure. Samantha knew it wasn't exactly fair but instead of dampening Jack's enthusiasm with a dose of reality she simply said. "I'm sure you all will have a lot of fun, sir. - And now let me call and break the news to her. See you at the base in about an hour."

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Samantha made it back in time for the big party, but Janet and she only stayed as long as necessary not to arouse any suspicions and then retired to their room where they spent the night exploring each other's body and making love.

The next day there was to be no training or other activities scheduled due to the expected general hangover. They had explicit orders to enjoy this day off and to stay out of shouting range of the infirmary and the laboratories. So, Samantha led her new lover to a secluded spot a candlemark's walk to the North of Athena's Ring, an hour North of the Stargate, she corrected herself - in both cases far away from grumpy Amazon with a killer headache and the temptations of work.

According to Xena it was one of the most romantic sites on the whole planet and perfectly suited to 'celebrate the joining of a soul and the union of two bodies'. That's what the Consort had called it but Samantha had been too busy with blushing to really think about her words.

The Consort had been right. They had followed a sun-speckled path through the forest; in deference to Janet's aversion against heights they took the long way and stayed on the ground. It was basically the same setting as the spot where the four women had had their picnic a few days ago with the added bonus of a thirty foot waterfall and a miniature beach with fine white sand. They were mesmerised by the tiny rainbows the cascading water let dance on its surface, and for a long time they simply stood still and soaked up the peaceful atmosphere surrounding them.

The spell was broken by a hunting hawk's cry; and at first Samantha thought that it was Xena announcing her arrival, having learned that the hawk was the birdcall used to identify the Consort, but then she saw the animal in question circling high above their heads. She studied the elegant creature for a long moment, brought back to more interesting things by Janet intensifying her hold around her waist and snuggling closer in her embrace. Her brown eyes were twinkling when Sam looked down to an open invitation the blonde was unable and unwilling to resist.

They spent the day making love on the beach, with and without the benefit of a blanket. Both vowed they never again would do something this stupid, though the task of removing the grains of sand from the other's skin and from places sand really wasn't meant to be in the nearby pond turned out to be a very pleasurable experience. They slept a little and ate. They made love in the water with Janet clinging to Samantha's taller frame, and they made love standing under the waterfall. They let their bodies do all the talking, and basked in the ever-growing feeling of belonging together.

When afternoon turned into evening, they regretfully returned to the guest palace to keep their dinner date with the other members of the research team. They had to tell them that Samantha would be out of reach for the next three days. They still hadn't decided if they should tell them the truth, but when Samantha saw their expectant faces she found that they deserved to know as much of the real reasons for her training with the Consort as she was able to communicate. The others seemed to be content with her explanation.



She still couldn't shake off the feeling that there was more to the special training and getting in contact with Jolinar than the Queen and Xena had been willing to tell. And though Gabrielle only this morning, before their picnic, had tried to give her a clearer picture of what would happen; it still boiled down to one simple question: trust. Did she trust both of them enough to do what was asked of her without really understanding why?

For the soldier in her, it should have been very simple. She only had to accept Xena and Gabrielle as her commanding officers - and following orders was something she was well accustomed to do. It would be easy to follow their orders, very easy but the soldier in her always had been at war with the scientist who wanted to know the why and how of an order, who wanted to know the reasoning behind it - and over the years this part of her had been getting stronger and stronger.

Before Janet joined the Stargate Project Samantha never had acted on her feelings alone, but now she felt it was the right thing to do - not only regarding this training's schedule, but also her relationship with Janet. It still was slightly disconcerting for her not to question her emotions but instead to comfortably rely on them.

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"Let's go for a walk, Janet Fraiser!"

The tone of the Queen's voice left no doubt that it wasn't a question or an invitation but an order. And Janet knew why - and she also didn't miss the almost pathetically grateful expressions of some of the infirmary staff. She had been prickly and on the edge since Samantha had left with Xena that morning. The rational part of her mind knew that her lover was in no physical danger, and she also was well aware that before the end of the first day she would be a nervous wreck if she kept this level of tension up.

They walked in silence and finally came to the Queen's house in the forest where they sat on the comfortable chairs on the back porch. "I'm sorry, I lost my temper, Queen Gabrielle."

"It's understandable, Janet. They all know why you're on the edge. It's all right."

"But I'm a doctor. I should have more control." The brunette answered.

"I have news for you, Doctor," Gabrielle answered with a smile, "being a healer, a doctor, doesn't make you any less human, my friend. In fact being human is what makes you such a good healer." The brown eyed woman blushed slightly.

"Healer, I like the word. The first few times Master Niva used it I thought she wanted to make fun of me. A healer is so much more than a doctor, someone who not only cares for the body but also for the souls of their patients - No, I don't think, I'm a healer, Gabrielle."

"A healer knows that there has to be a balance between the body and the soul. You care for your patients, Janet. You never forget that they are human; you respect their feelings and their fears. You never let them wake up alone in the infirmary not knowing what is going on. You are a healer - but you also are a woman in love, worrying about your beloved-one. Don't disregard your feelings."

"Rationally, I know, your Consort will take good care of her, but..." There was a long period of silence.

"Let's try something. Do you trust me, Janet?" The other woman nodded. "Do you see the mobile at the other end of the porch?" Janet once again nodded. "Look at it, closely, as closely as you can. Nothing in the world exists but this mobile and my voice. Breathe, in and out, in and out. See the mobile sparkling in the sun. See how it's slowly turning. Breathe in and out. Look at the mobile. In and slowly out. Your eyelids are starting to drop. Don't fight it. Continue to breathe, slowly. There's darkness surrounding you, but very far away there's a tiny point of light. Breathe. The light slowly gets bigger, in rhythm with your breathing. In and out. It gets bigger as if you were walking towards it. Concentrate on the light. That's all that counts. Concentrate on the light. My voice is fading away. Concentrate on the light. It's getting closer and closer."

Gabrielle fell silent. Janet no longer needed her guidance.

Some time later brown eyes reopened and a happy smile graced her face. "Thank you, Gabrielle. Now, I know that she is all right. - How did you do it?"

"You did it, Janet. I only showed you the way, that's all."

"I saw Sam. Sam was the light. I could feel her love for me. I knew what she was feeling. But I still don't understand."

"It's the most simple and the most amazing thing all in one. - You feel her love for you because she is a part of you, part of what and who you are. She is the light in your darkness, just as you are the light in hers."

"It's that story you told: one soul in two bodies. What Xena said to Sam, celebrate the joining of a soul." Gabrielle didn't answer but she also didn't deny the other woman's words. "It makes sense, in a weird sort of way. Sam and I felt drawn to each other almost from the beginning. I never had a best friend before, but Sam and I, we became friends almost from the first moment. I know when she enters a room without even having to look. Yes, it makes sense. She completes me. We're soulmates. Wow!"

"Yeah, wow! This is only the beginning. Soon, you will have no need to close your eyes to know what Samantha is feeling and in time she will know what you are feeling. It is a great gift, but it also can be a curse. You not only will feel positive emotions but all emotions. And if one of you is in turmoil, if you are angry with each other, it will be hell. There's nothing more hurtful than this; believe me, I know."

"You knew about us from the beginning, Xena and you, right?"

"We suspected from the first mission report we read about the two of you, about P3X-759, what Doctor Jackson called 'the Broca divide'. Don't be alarmed; the signs were too subtle for your superiors to see and interpret correctly. We know about your strange regulations.

"It was more what was not in the report that let us know, well at least suspect. Janet, you were in Samantha's cell for more than two minutes before she was hurt by a new arrival. She didn't harm you in any way; she didn't see you as an intruder in her territory like the other woman was."

"You're right, she didn't attack me. She was gentle and caring before the SF's brought in this ensign. I could feel that woman's eyes on me and Sam shielded me with her body and disabled her, not without being hurt herself in the process.

"Put like that," the small doctor continued, "Sam only was trying to protect me when she attacked the other female.

"Oh god, I never before thought of it this way. It should have been so obvious, even this early. I could kick myself for all the precious time we lost."

"Hindsight, Janet! Hindsight always is an easy way out, but that's not what this is about. You have two lifetimes to find out what you want, yours and Samantha's.

"We knew, since we first saw you together, but you had to find out on your own. It's not something that can be forced. Your souls always will be calling to each other. Letting them meld together has to be a conscious decision.

"I was fascinated by Xena the first moment I saw her, but it took us more than two years before we acknowledged our mutual feelings."

"You said that Sam 'in time' will be able to feel my emotions. Why only then? Why doesn't she react to our connection as I do?"

"She will. She just needs more time. - Samantha is a very complex woman. After her mother's death, her father didn't have the slightest idea how to raise a girl, so, he brought her up as a soldier. A soldier never cries, a soldier never shows fear, a soldier never admits to pain, a soldier always obeys orders - and Samantha became a very good soldier. But she's so much more. She could easily combine being a soldier and being a brilliant scientist, but that's not all there is to her. She had her feelings locked up for such a long time; it's hard for her, very hard."

"And having Jolinar's memories to deal with didn't make it any easier, I suppose."

"Yes, Janet. That's where you come in. It's hard to believe and we still are not able to come up with a scientific explanation. We're not only talking about Jolinar's memories or her knowledge. What Jolinar left behind, would more exactly be described as the shadow of her personality and her soul. It usually only happens when the symbiote leaves the body of the host of its own free

will - and even then it has to be a conscious act from the symbiote."

"I don't understand." The doctor answered, but her voice clearly betrayed how uneasy she still felt about the whole incident. "Jolinar let Samantha go because she had no other choice."

"No, Janet, you should know better. Jolinar consciously yielded to the Ashrak's torture to save Samantha; only half a minute later and .... Anyway, it was a conscious act. If she hadn't let her go, Samantha would be dead by now. - It's hard to explain, Janet.

"Usually, a host has no recollection of its symbiote, even if it surprisingly does survive. Not because there's nothing left of the host, but because they have nothing in common."

Janet wanted to voice an objection.

"The fact that Sam has been able to tap into even a small part of Jolinar's memories is a sure indicator.

"Until now, Samantha has tried to control Jolinar by ignoring her as best as she could. She has her tucked away in a dark part of her mind - hoping she simply would disappear. But it's not as easy as that, Jolinar keeps on popping up in her nightmares.

"All Xena can do in these three days is to open the door, but it will be up to Samantha to decide what to do with these new possibilities. She can try to return to the way it was before. She can try to only use the factual knowledge Jolinar left behind. She can try to accept Jolinar as an integral part of her own soul, relying on her as one would upon a friend. She can try to fuse Jolinar's shadow with her own mind.

"It cannot be done in one step or two. It's a rather slow process. And it will be your job to give her the strength to make the right decision. You will be her guiding spirit, her beacon of light."

"How? How can I guide her when I don't have the slightest idea which of these options would be the best of her?"

"That's not the question. You will guide her by giving her strength. You will guide her with your belief in her, with your trust in her. You will guide her with your love - but whatever happens, it still will have to be her decision, and hers alone.

"As for the how! - That's why we are here. That's what I already have started to teach you. It's hard to explain but easier to do."

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There was a faint knock on one of the support beams of the porch's ceiling. Gabrielle turned her attention to the young Amazon standing on the steps and fidgeting nervously.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, your majesty. The record keeper sent me. She wants to archive this week's disciplinarian report."

"Oh, yes. Thanks for reminding me. I promised to see to it this morning. It's on my desk in the study, go and get it for me, please. I'll have a quick look; then you can take it to your mistress."

The girl nodded, disappeared into the house, and was back mere heartbeats later. She knelt in front of the Queen and presented her with a short scroll.

"Sit down. This will take a few candledrops."

"If you don't mind, my Queen, I'd prefer to stand." The young woman said quietly.

Gabrielle studied her for a moment and asked. "Will I find your name in there, Hilaria?"

The girl blushed and stammered. "Yes, my Queen."

The blonde immortal read. "Only five offences on the whole planet. That's not bad. - Tell me, Hilaria, what made your mistress triple the usual sentence for disrespect?"

The young woman's blush deepened; her voice was barely audible when she answered. "I made out with my girlfriend instead of working. It got a bit heated and we somehow crashed against one of the scroll cases and it toppled over, spilling its content on the floor. I deserved it, your majesty. I volunteered for double shifts to make it up to Mistress Raina."

"Have the cane marks been treated?"

"Yes, your majesty. The record keeper escorted me herself to the infirmary."

"Have you been forgiven, Hilaria?"

"Yes, my Queen, and I promised that I will keep my private life out of the archives from now on."

"That's good to hear. Do you like working with the record keeper. Raina can be very demanding."

"At first I didn't. I thought it was dull and boring but then I began to listen to what Mistress Raina was telling me. I began to learn things about our traditions and our history I never would have thought possible. I think of staying on after the end of my community service, my Queen. Raina said that she needs an apprentice." The young woman said softly. "My mother will be furious but I'm prepared to stand her wrath."

"Your mother is a very proud warrior but I'm sure that she will approve of your heart's decision, Hilaria. Niva didn't follow in her own mother's footsteps, so she can't expect it of you. I'm here if

you need someone to lend you a willing ear."

"Thank you, my Queen." She answered, bowed deeply, and disappeared between the tree trunks.

"Community service, Gabrielle?"

"Oh yes, we never talked about our education system. Young Amazons do community service after school and after they have finished with basic weapons' training. The work in the kitchen or the dining hall, the playpen or the infirmary, the archive; wherever help is needed. They rotate every couple of weeks and gain a better understanding of how our society works, and they get the chance to decide what they want to do with their life. With the help of the SGC spending time on Earth soon will be part and parcel of this time."

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes and then Janet said pensively. "There's something I don't understand, Gabrielle. The punishment thing, corporal punishment; I don't understand why you didn't abandon it centuries ago. It doesn't seem consistent with everything I've heard about you and everything I've seen of you. It just doesn't make any sense to me. You have the soul of a healer, a philosopher. How can you condone harming your people this way? Sam tried to tell me that it's a spiritual thing but..."

"I know how you feel, Janet, believe me. I needed a lot of time to accept it, to understand it. It's not easy to explain. When I became an Amazon Princess I slowly learned about their rules and traditions. Queen Melosa was on a journey to a neighbouring village when I first was confronted with the penal system of the Amazons. Then there was no choice between spiritual or corporal punishments. A young Amazon had been found guilty of disobedience and cowardice. She had been late for her guard shift at the outer edges of their territory. She was to be whipped, twenty strokes with a cat-of-nine-tails; by modern standards this would be considered barbaric.

"I spoke with the girl and the weapons' master, her commanding officer. They all were convinced that it was a just punishment, and that it would be right for her to wear the marks of her shame for the rest of her life. The decision had been made before I arrived at the village. I wanted to change the sentence but Xena convinced me that there was nothing I could do without disrespecting their culture.

"I got Xena to treat her back to keep it from scarring but I still had nightmares even weeks after. In my eyes, the young Amazon had been nothing more but a child. It revived some dark memories. My father always had been the master of the house. He regularly beat us, my sister as well as my mother and me. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why I was so eager to leave the village.

"In your terms, what my father did was child abuse, and that's what I thought was happening in the Amazon village. As it turned out, I was wrong. Even then, no Amazon would ever have raised her hand against a child. I misjudged the situation. Ephiny tried to explain it but then I didn't want to understand. When I took the mask, I had resigned myself to 'their' ways; but to me it had nothing to do with me, with my life, with my character. Then, I didn't see myself as an Amazon.

"After the crucifixion, my view of the world changed. I suppose you know about our trip to India and what we found there."

Janet hesitatingly nodded. Yes, she had heard Jessica telling stories about Xena finding the way of the warrior and Gabrielle trying to follow the path of love - but she never had taken them seriously. It seemed that once again she had been wrong.

"I killed trying to save Xena's life, and it changed my perspective. I learned the hard way that sometimes violence is needed to stop violence. You know this and you accepted it, otherwise you never would have joined the Air Force or stayed on after the first patient died in your arms."

"But there's a difference, Gabrielle, between accepting violence as a necessary evil and to condone violence as a tool to keep one's people in-line. I don't want to insult you or the Amazon Nation, Queen Gabrielle, but in my book that's dangerously close to tyranny."

"I'm not offended, Janet. It's what I said to Xena and my first Regent, Ephiny when they tried to make me understand. In a way you're even right. The mostly unquestioned power an Amazon Queen or even a Regent has over their subjects can easily be abused and turn into tyranny. It has more than one time in the past; power tends to corrupt and poison a person's soul.

"Our penal system, however, is about something else. It has a lot to do with the mindset of the Amazons as a whole, their core identity, so to speak. Over the centuries, I learned that regardless of how much their lives change and vary, of how many changes there are; there is one thing that never changed.

"Amazons are warriors at heart, even if they spend all of their adult lives working in the infirmary or the archives but from the beginning of their existence they never have been warriors just for the sake of fighting, a few exceptions not withstanding. They fight to defend their homes and their families. They fight to protect the innocent, the community, and the individual. That's what they all are convinced they were born to. That is what Amazon honour and Amazon justice ultimately are all about."

"So, any shortcomings would be regarded as a threat to the stability of the community as well as the individual. And because warriors are rather hands-on using corporal punishment is the easiest way for them as well as for society to regain the lost balance."

"Yes, Janet. That's how I learned to see it. There's more to it, especially considering warriors as proud and honour-bound as Master Niva, my stubborn Consort, and a certain astrophysicist. If you want to we can talk some more about this tomorrow. For now, I want you to once again conjure up the light of Samantha's soul with your inner eye. Feel free to use the mobile as your starting point. I'll get us some tea."

Janet's eyes followed the Queen's graceful movement until the door to the hut closed behind her. She still had a lot of questions but for now she would have to take the Queen's words at face value.

She obediently turned her attention towards the mobile though she doubted that she would succeed without the blonde woman's help. But surprisingly it worked. - And more surprisingly Samantha was having fun, lots of fun. She and the Consort probably were chasing each other through the treetops. She concentrated on the feeling, and a few heartbeats later it was as if she were taking part in whatever her lover just did. It was more than just great. It was a feeling of completeness, of fulfilling, of home - and she never wanted to lose it.

Then there was another presence in her mind; a presence clouding her view and slowly bringing her back to reality. She reluctantly opened her eyes, and found herself face to face with Gabrielle's green orbs. "Are you all right, Janet?"

"What happened? I was with Sam - and then there was a barrier between us. - Why did you do this, Gabrielle?" The small doctor asked still slightly confused.

"What's the last thing you remember, Janet?"

"I remember you telling me to try and make contact with Sam, no, you told me to search for the light of Samantha's soul in my mind."

"Yes, I did -- but that was more than three candlemarks ago. -- You were lost in Samantha's emotions. -- It can be a blessing, but also a rather confusing experience. It's very tempting, but you shouldn't be ready to experience it, yet."

"What are you talking about, Gabrielle?"

"We didn't know that your connection with Samantha was already this strong. We didn't take into account that the two of you were so intimately connected before becoming intimate. - I'm sorry!"

"Don't! -- It felt great but I'd really like an explanation. I presume that I'll need a certain level of distance to be able to help Samantha."

"Yes; I'll teach you how to maintain this distance and a few other things - but not now. It's long after lunch time, and I'm hungry. We will talk after grabbing something to eat."

The cook provided them with a leisurely late lunch. Janet never ceased to be in awe of Gabrielle's interactions with her subjects. Regardless of what they asked of her, how inane or superfluous their questions seemed to be; she answered them all with dignity, patience, and humour. It was almost like magic seeing these proud and strong women eager to please their small Queen.

They returned to the Queen's hut, and Janet once again settled on the swing of the back porch. "When a soul joins its other half..."

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It was more than two days later and Janet was pacing. The sun already had gone down; Samantha should have been back by now. She was getting worried, more and more every minute. Gabrielle had told her that her lover probably would be exhausted after spending two days and two nights in a sweating hut, and that otherwise she would be okay. Janet wasn't convinced.

It was one hour after sunset when the blonde finally came through the door. Janet took in her slightly slumped shoulders and the missing sparkle in her eyes - and she immediately knew that she was more mentally exhausted than physically. So, she did the only thing she could think of, she took her in her arms. Samantha didn't answer the fierce hug with one of her own; after a few minutes, however, she began to relax into the embrace and let herself be guided to the couch.

"Lie down, my love, get some rest!" Janet sat down and cradled Samantha's head and shoulders in her lap. Thanks to Gabrielle's training, she could easily feel that her lover had been wounded by the experience. She still was very tense.

The brunette began to hum while stroking Samantha's hair. She began to sing, an old lullaby she usually only used to chase one of Cassandra's nightmares away. They had been a regular occurrence in the beginning. Sam gradually relaxed and they slipped in a comfortable silence.

"I talked to her." The tall warrior said after some time. "She was so angry. She said that I would kill her bit by bit every day by ignoring her. She said she regretted giving her life for me. She was so angry, Janet, so angry." There were tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know what I was doing to her. I wanted to tell her but she didn't listen. I know how it feels to be trapped; no one should feel this way."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, baby. You only tried to protect yourself as best as you knew how. Talk to her, tell her now."

"Xena said I shouldn't risk the sweating hut on my own." Samantha knew that she was just making excuses.

And Janet didn't let her get away with it. "You don't need to, Sam. Just close your eyes and talk to her. I know you can do it."

"I'm afraid, Jan."

"Don't be. She's a voice in your head but she's dead now, Sammy. She is dependent on you. Setting her free was the right thing to do. However, it's only the first step. It will have been basically in vain if you don't use what she has to offer." Janet said calmly.

"Help me!"

"That's what I'm here for. I'll be with you the whole time, my love."

Samantha snuggled closer and obediently closed her eyes, using what Xena had taught her in the sweating hut. Janet gently rubbed the small of her back in a soothing rhythm, conveying to her a sense of belonging and security. She then closed her own eyes and called upon the light in her own soul. Instead of melding with it, she maintained a certain distance, ready to come to her assistance whenever needed.

They spent the whole night in this position, shifting slightly every once in a while but never losing contact. Janet had to make closer contact with Samantha's soul a few times, reassuring her, calming her. A couple of hours before dawn they both drifted off to sleep.

To say that all was well from this night on would have been an exaggeration but it did go better than either, Xena or Gabrielle, had anticipated. Janet began to feel Samantha's emotions as an ongoing presence in her mind, just like some kind of background noise -- and thus knew whenever the blonde needed her. And Samantha was slowly gaining more confidence in her conversations with Jolinar's ghost who in turn was step by step getting over her accumulated animosity for the human.

Samantha still had her training sessions with the weapons' master in the hours before and just after dawn. She then worked for a few hours on acquiring new knowledge, and the afternoon and early hours of the evening were dedicated to her lessons with the Consort.

Sometimes Xena only repeated and deepened what Master Niva had tried to teach her in the early morning candlemarks. Sometimes they were meditating. Sometimes they discussed wormhole physics and more convoluted technological and theoretical issues Samantha would have rejected as pointless speculations only weeks before. Sometimes Xena took her for a ride.

Samantha knew that every time they were together she learned something or had found something to think about but it never felt like lessons or training. It was more like spending time with an older friend, a friend she grew closer to every day.

Janet followed a similar schedule. She was with the Queen from the early morning hours until midday, then worked with Niva to get rid of some pent-up tension and finished her workday at the infirmary. The two couples usually dined together at the Queen's house in the forest or with the rest of the research team in the communal dining hall.

[Continued in GAIA pt. IV](#)

# ~ GAIA ~

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Disclaimer: [See Part 1](#)

## Chapter Seven: Negotiations

About three weeks into their mission on Gaia, Janet Fraiser was escorted to the council chamber by a very anxious looking Aria. It had been a quiet day. She had spent it with studying a couple of old medicinal scrolls and she was rather pleased with her progress. Initially she had had some problems with the ancient Greek in which they were written. And for the first time in her life she was thankful to her grandfather insisting on giving her a classical education. She had felt a certain amount of anxiety coming through her link with Samantha only a few minutes ago but it had quickly subsided; so she felt rather relaxed and didn't expect any surprises.

Only the day before Gabrielle had told her that she soon would be allowed to witness a council session. The strange mixture of hierarchy and democracy the Amazons' government was based on intrigued her to no end; and she really was looking forward to personally see how it worked. The nervous energy the usually calm and easygoing younger woman put out nonetheless quickly had her worried. On their short way a number of reasons for this atypical behaviour popped up in her mind but outwardly she kept her calm.

To say that the atmosphere in the council chamber was tense would have been an understatement of vast proportions. The small doctor was surprised to see Samantha and even more intrigued when the taller woman immediately came over from her conversation with Xena and the Queen. She visibly was worried, and before she could reach her Janet asked. "It's Cassy, isn't it? She's been hurt? What..."

The blonde's arms closed around her. She felt soft lips on her head and heard the whispered words. "Everything will be all right, my love."

Before she had a chance to further question Samantha, they both were called to the throne. Though there were tables and chairs neatly arranged in the room they remained standing in front of the dais where Gabrielle's simple throne was standing. Xena was in her habitual spot slightly behind the Queen, one hand calmly resting on the smaller woman's shoulders. Janet had gotten to know Gabrielle well enough over the last few weeks to see that there definitively was something wrong, that she also was worried, really worried.

"Attention ladies! I'll make this as short as possible. About a candlemark after midday we received word from our outpost at the moon that a cloaked telt'ac has landed on Earth. We informed Stargate Command and sent a couple of scouts to observe them. They had orders to report back every other candlemark. They missed the last two calls. We only can presume that they are dead or were taken as prisoners."

To Janet's trained ears, the small Queen had to make a real effort to keep her voice calm and steady.

"Ten candledrops ago, General Hammond informed us that Cassandra was missing." Janet couldn't help but gasp at her words. Samantha's arms around her waist kept her reasonably calm. "She was on a hike with a small group of other children and one of the caretakers, a hike they all had done before and wanted to do again on their last day. The group apparently came under some kind of attack that left them all unconscious. When they came to, there was no sign of their aggressors, but there also was no sign of Cassandra. The telt'ac was marked with the sign of Nirrti."

Janet only needed to hear the name of this specific Gao'uld to have all her worst nightmares come alive. Gabrielle's determined voice called her back to reality.

"We all know that Nirrti was responsible for the genocide on Hanka, Cassandra's home world, and also for making the girl into a living and breathing bomb. We also know from the Tok'ra that Nirrti performed genetic tests on the population of Hanka."

This particular information caused Janet and Samantha to questioningly look at each other.

"It was a long time experiment by which she wanted to create the perfect host, a Hok'tar, someone stronger, smarter, faster, and with an almost perfect immune system.

"The Tok'ra also let us know that the System Lords didn't support her efforts. One Gao'uld would potentially become too dangerous to the others should they really succeed in creating the perfect host.

"But Nirrti never was one for playing by the rules. When she killed the inhabitants of Hanka it not only was to try and take us out; she also wanted to protect herself from the retaliation of the System Lords concerning her illegal experiments by burning the bridges, so to speak.

"Baring any hard proof, we are convinced that Nirrti is responsible for Cassandra's abduction. We will meet with SG-1 and SG-3 to get her back unharmed. All they are waiting for is us. Let's go!"

Janet found herself slightly surprised but also very relieved to learn that no one would object to her participation in this rescue mission, though she also was sure that she would have a hard time convincing General Hammond.

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Only a quarter candlemark later, the group from Gaia stepped through the Gate and into the Embarkation room. The group consisted of Samantha and Janet, Xena and Gabrielle, Niva and six of her best warriors. They also had a lot of equipment with them.

For once, Colonel O'Neill showed some sensitivity by by-passing the others and immediately taking Janet in a big hug. "We'll get her back, Janet, that's a promise."

"Cassandra is one of us, Janet Fraiser, and we never leave our own behind." Teal'c confirmed Jack's words in his usual confident and straight-to-the-core-of-things manner.

"General Hammond, gentlemen, I think we have work to do."

"Yes, Consort Xena, we do. The helicopter is ready and waiting. The EM-impulse generator you requested already has been loaded. We're ready to go." The bald man answered. Like all the others he was dressed in a camouflage uniform, complete with weapons and radio. If nothing else this unusual behaviour would have told Samantha more than enough about the seriousness of the situation.

They immediately were ushered to the elevators and boarded a helicopter, completely equipped with a small medical facility and an impressive range of firepower. On their half-hour flight, they were informed that SG-7, sent as reinforcement earlier this day, had just reported back. They had found the body of one of the scouts, as well as clear evidence of a fight. The telt'ac was under observation from afar. Unfortunately, they had not been able to have a closer look at the ship or its crew due to some kind of force field they hadn't been able to penetrate.

While still in the air, Niva distributed small devices looking like very small PDAs to every member of the task force. The weapons' master explained. "We call them FFPs, force field penetrators. Emitting randomly changing EM-impulses they are able to let us pass through every Gao'uld created force field - and before you ask, Sam, no, they can't be used or modified to break the shields of a hatac or even a death glider. They're based on different technical principles. As long as the spaceships are on the ground they are vulnerable; and with the FFPs we'll use it to our advantage."

"As soon as we land, Sam and I will take point, followed closely by Colonel O'Neill, Master Teal'c, Daniel Jackson, and four of our warriors. Niva and the other fighters will take charge of the EM-generator. SG-7 and SG-3 will be our backup, together with Queen Gabrielle, Janet Fraiser, Daniel Jackson, and General Hammond. - I know that's not the way you're used to do things. I know you're used to be in charge, Colonel..."

"Stop it, Consort Xena, I understand. This is the perfect opportunity to prove to our government what the Amazons are capable of doing for us. We are just along for the ride - and for the first time I feel all right with doing so. I'm looking forward to see you kicking butt." Jack answered with a crooked smile.

"You probably will have to do more than just looking, Colonel," Xena said with a smile of her own. "Nirrti may be a typical Gao'uld, arrogant, overbearing, a pain in the butt, but she's not stupid. She knows that the force field will keep the Tau'ri out - at least for a while. But there still are at least three Jaffa patrols circling the ground. She also will have taken some precautions to take off as soon as she has what she came to get. That's what the EM-generator is for. It will not

disable her engines but will make it impossible for them to take off. When we pass through the force field, their sensors will read it as an energy fluctuation. We have to be prepared for an attack."

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Everything worked as planned: They all stepped through the force field and took out the patrol sent to investigate the power fluctuations. Niva and two other warriors set up the Em-generator while the others were getting ready to enter the telt'ac. Immediately after crossing the threshold two Jaffa patrols attacked and were effectively taken down. When they rounded the next corner, however, they suddenly faced two of Anubis' super soldiers. Xena and Samantha emptied the magazines of their Carter specials. O'Neill and Teal'c quickly took over but the warriors still seemed unharmed and unimpressed.

While the men were continuing their ineffective assault, the two women simultaneously reached into a pouch at their belts and dug out a Gao'uld ribbon device. Samantha aimed for the left, Xena for the right one of Anubis' soldiers; they flew through the air, propelled backwards by the bright light coming from the women's hands. They impacted the wall and stayed there, unmoving. Two of the Amazons stayed behind to guard the super soldiers, modified zats at the ready. The others continued on, towards the operations deck and the cargo bay.

The bridge was guarded by another two of Anubis' Super Soldiers but they quickly succumbed to the same fate as their friends. The last two of the Amazon warriors were left behind to guard them while the rest of the team entered the hangar bay. From the preliminary scans the moon station made they already knew that the ring device usually located there had been deactivated. The large room obviously was needed for something else.

Janet didn't dare to think what this could be and she desperately tried to keep her emotions in check; but just before Xena pushed the buttons to open the door she felt a wave of encouragement washing over her, coming directly from her link with the blonde Major. At the time she didn't know if it had been deliberate or not but nonetheless she relished the feeling. She closed her eyes to firmly store it in her memories -- but suddenly was yanked out of it by the distinctive sound of energy weapons bursting all around her.

Without giving it any conscious thought she took a defensive stance; getting up the staff she initially had found superfluous, and thus warding off a lethal hit coming from the right, aiming for her throat. Yes, she blocked them but Gabrielle knocked the two Jaffa warriors out with a few well-placed hits and sweeps.

Janet had been so intent on the things happening around her that she missed the few heartbeats it took Xena and the others to enter the next room. When she once again focused her attention forwards it took all her willpower not to freeze on the spot. -- She saw a couple of Jaffa lying on the ground, unconscious or dead. The remains of what only could have been another one of Anubis' super soldiers were lying in a far corner, torn to shreds by more than just a single blast of

the ribbon device.

There was a medical examination table in the middle of the room and a whole load of other equipment similar to the things they had found on Hanka, all those seasons ago. At the time they hadn't been able to make heads or tails of it. Now Janet at least had an idea what they were designed to do and how to use most of them. The weapons of her companions were trained at a strange woman stretching a hand device in front of her as if for protection and pressing a knife to Cassandra's throat with the other hand.

"Let the girl go, Nirrti, and you have my word that we'll let you survive." Xena said calmly.

The Gao'uld answered with a sneer, the knife breaking the girl's skin slightly. A single drop of blood was slowly rolling down her pale skin. "Shut up, shol'va ka'taka. I will make no deal with the likes of you."

"Let my daughter go!" Samantha growled, the centre stone of her hand device already glowing.

"One day you will make a good host, Ta..." Teal'c who had used the distraction created by Xena and Samantha to sneak up behind her suddenly jerked the hand holding the knife away from Cassandra. The teen instinctively dropped to the floor and began to crawl towards the others.

Janet's sigh of relief was cut short by Nirrti next movement. She dropped the knife, turned her arm in Teal'c's grasp, and threw him over her shoulder as if the six foot five giant was nothing more than a rag doll. She trained the hand device on the escaping girl but before it could hit her in the back, the Gao'uld was bowled over by a certain blonde Air Force major. For a few seconds they rolled on the ground and then suddenly disappeared.

"Niva, SG-teams, battle stations! Nirrti and Major Carter are somewhere out there. If you see them, let us know but don't interfere. Neither Carter nor the host are to be harmed. Don't interfere." Xena's voice rang through the communication units with a certain sense of urgency. She then searched Gabrielle's eyes, the Queen answered with a nod, and the tall raven haired warrior left the room at a run, Teal'c and O'Neill hard on her heels.

The small doctor was kneeling next to Cassandra on the ground, holding her tight, and murmuring gentle, reassuring words to the frightened teen. The others left the laboratory and returned to the bridge where the two Amazon guards left behind were still training their weapons on the dead super soldiers. It was only then that Gabrielle began taking charge.

"Mari, help Doctor Fraiser with Cassandra. Torana, check the computer to find our missing scouts. Jora, come in, status report!"

"Yes, your majesty!" came over the small communicator the blonde was wearing at her left shoulder. "Nirrti's Jaffa resisted our attempts to restrain them and had to be killed. From the men in the hallway four are dead, three more are bound and sedated."

"Got them!" the woman called Torana muttered.

"Stand by, Jora. -- Where?"

"Cargo bay. It has been converted into a holding cell. You'll have to open the door by force - and better hurry, their life signs are anything but stable. They need medical attention."

"We're on our way. Permission to beam up, your majesty?"

There was the shadow of a smile crossing Gabrielle's face when she answered. "You spend entirely too much time watching science fiction shows, Jora. The force field around the tel'tac has been enforced by the EM-generator. We have to wait 'til Xena has taken care of the Gao'uld before we can use the transporter. We can't risk her getting away. I'll send Mari over."

"Is there anything I can do, Gabrielle?" Janet asked, her voice, despite all of her efforts, clearly betraying her anxiety about the sudden disappearance of her lover and instinctively knowing that there was nothing she could be doing.

However, military training had left its mark on her. She simply couldn't let anyone know how much she cared, so she tried to concentrate on the one person she was allowed to show emotions about, her adoptive daughter. Knowing this was one thing, to keep from acting on it quite another.

"Janet how is your daughter?" General Hammond asked, thus cutting short her slightly romantic notion of going in the field and keep her lover out of trouble.

Janet brought herself back under control with an effort. "It seems as if Nirrti only took a few blood samples and had her do some IQ and physical tests."

Seeing how comfortable her mother was with the blonde stranger and further calmed by General Hammond's silent presence, Cassandra answered. "You guys sure came at the right time. When we heard you they were just prepping for some sort of surgery or something. Where's Sam?"

"What do you think, Cassandra?" Hammond answered in an attempt to diffuse the tension.

"Dealing with the bad boy, sorry, girl. She will be all right. - I'll stay with your daughter Doctor, you go and help the prisoners."

Janet hugged the teenager and jogged after the Queen towards the cargo bay where they quickly stabilised the wounded scouts. Shortly after a message came through the radio. "Your majesty, please come in."

"Yes, weapons' master?"

"The Consort has the Gao'uld restrained but Major Carter needs medical attention, ASAP." This was all they needed to hear to get them running once again. "EM-generator deactivated. You're clear to get the others back, Jora."



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Samantha Carter slowly opened her eyes, blinking a few times to better adapt to the bright light. She found herself in a very familiar environment: the infirmary at the SGC. She had been confined there so often that she could make a copy of every crook and cranny in the ceiling above her from memory alone. She could feel that she was not alone, and she also was sure whom she would find when she turned her head. Janet always was there when a member of SG-1 was hurt, even if it was the Colonel; and even if this hadn't been the case, she still would know who was waiting for her without the shadow of a doubt.

"Hey, sleepy-head. How'd you feel?"

"What happened?" Samantha asked with a hoarse voice.

"Here, take a few chips of ice."

The blonde let the ice melt in her mouth but when she tried to swallow it felt like liquid fire, not cool water. "Hurts."

"I know, baby. You took quite a beating before Xena took over. Just don't try to move, and everything will be all right in a couple of days. I'll give you something to relax your muscles. It will ease the pain. -- No, don't protest. I promise: it won't disorient you."

Samantha closed her eyes in acceptance; something cold touched her throat. There was a faint sound reminding her of an airlock closing, and only a few moments later, her muscles relaxed and she felt much lighter.

"I want to make sure that there are no nasty side effects from the beating. Just tell me what you remember; start with when you attacked Nirrti, okay?"

The small doctor already had a pretty good idea of what had happened. Sam's injuries had told her enough, more than she wanted to know but she also knew that her proud lover had to talk about it in order to forgive herself what in her eyes must have been a shaming defeat.

"It happened so fast; I attacked her and less than a heartbeat later we were outside bouncing off the force field as if it were some kind of rubber. She attacked me with the ribbon device before I could get back to my feet but I somehow was able to ward her off with my own. I saw the back entrance of the tel'tac and realised that we must be at the opposite side of the EM-generator. Somehow I got back on my feet prepared to keep her concentrated on my ribbon device as long as possible - but she changed tactics. She deactivated it, rolled out of the way of my beam; and suddenly she was right on top of me."

Samantha closed her eyes in remembrance. "The mesh of her ribbon device impacted with my stomach, time and again; her other hand closed around my throat. Both of my arms were trapped

under my own body; I couldn't move. I tried to get her off of me, I bucked and wriggled but nothing worked. She kept on beating on my stomach and chest.

"My supply of air was getting short. It felt as if there was no air left in my lungs. Somehow, I finally managed to get my feet up and thus lift my upper body up, at least enough to get an arm free. I concentrated the rest of my energy on the ribbon device and she lost her hold on me.

"I'm not really sure what happened then. I know I somehow got back on my feet. She was about three meters away, and I knew that the sensible thing would be to use the ribbon device. But somehow it didn't feel right.

"Nirrti attacked and suddenly it felt as if I were trying to fend off Master Niva. She had a counter move to every counter move I came up with. I don't know how long it took. Out of nowhere a roundhouse kick caught me on the chest, and I was thrown backwards several feet. I tried to crab crawl away; of course I wasn't near fast enough. She jumped on top of me; the hand with the ribbon device held high, ready to strike. I don't know why she didn't use the damn thing. Instead she thrust two of her fingers on either side of my neck and I no longer was able to move my arms. I was helpless."

She felt her right hand cradled between Janet's smaller ones and reopened her eyes.

"She once again began to use me as a punching bag, all the while screaming at me. I couldn't make out most of it. It had something to do with having been betrayed, and that she had the right to avenge the wrongs she suffered because of us. She also said that I should feel the pain she felt while being tortured by Cronos, and that it was my fault.

"Then I heard Xena's voice. She said: 'You deserve all the suffering and more, you stupid snakehead. Come on, let's play, like true warriors. Or don't you have the spine to face me? Oh, I forgot, you simplistic snakeheads don't have a spine. That's what you need a host for. Don't you? Spineless bastard!' Her words did the trick. Nirrti let go of me. I expected to hear the crackling of the ribbon devices but nothing happened.

"Teal'c helped me to sit up and I saw Xena and Nirrti standing about a body length away from each other. Xena smiled but it was a cold smile, almost feral, her eyes were cold too and locked on Nirrti while she slowly stripped off the hand device, quickly followed by her combat jacket. Nirrti attacked as soon as the jacket hit the ground. She threw a series of kicks and punches. None of them hit their intended target. I never would have thought Nirrti capable of such moves. It was like a dance, a lethal dance. She was really, really good but not good enough.

"Xena hit her only twice and each time it took her breath away but she didn't press her advantage and she used only half of the openings the enraged Gao'uld was leaving. It was as if....

"Yes," Samantha spoke almost to herself, "Xena wanted to spare the host as much as possible. I understand: Nirrti's new host, she's an Amazon, an Amazon warrior. That's why none of them interfered. That's why I got my ass kicked. I guess I still have a lot to learn."

The blonde was somehow reluctant to dwell on her undeniable defeat any longer. Recounting the Gao'uld's defeat was much more fun.

"Nirrti didn't stand a chance against Xena, and when this finally sank in she once again resorted to the ribbon device. She missed, not only once or twice but six times. By then Xena was close enough to grip her hand. She jabbed two of her fingers in the side of her neck and her body crumpled to the ground like a scarecrow without its stick. That's when I lost consciousness. Do you think they can save the host?"

"Depends on how the negotiations go, Sammy. The Amazons want the host back at all costs, a few branches of special forces, NID, and a couple of the joint chiefs want to keep her blended to gain information from the symbiote. At the moment, Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena are in a conference with the President, General Hammond, Senator Kinsey, Colonel O'Neill and a few others to discuss the situation."

"The Colonel and Kinsey? Together? In one room? That doesn't bode well." The blonde answered.

"When the NID insisted on Kinsey taking part, the Consort roped Colonel O'Neill in attending too. If you think about it," Janet continued, "it's diabolically sneaky. To the Senator the leader of SG-1 is more dangerous than devil himself. His presence alone will keep Kinsey unbalanced, off-key."

"So, in the end, he will approve of everything and even think that he gained a lot for his cause, but end up doing what the Queen wanted them to do right from the beginning."

"You saw the Queen interact with her people, Sam." The small doctor answered. "Do you really think any one of them stands a chance? I don't. However, I think there may have been another motivation behind the Consort's request."

"So she wouldn't have to suffer alone through a diplomatic function?" Samantha ventured with a smile, remembering the suffering sigh the Consort didn't bother to suppress whenever she was forced to attend a council session. "Is Cassy all right? What time is it? What happened when I lost consciousness?"

"You were asleep for almost 10 hours. Don't ask me how it works but they transported us back to the base in the blink of an eye. - Cassandra is fine. I ran a thorough check-up. It's just as you thought, Nirrti tested her mental and physical abilities but luckily she didn't have enough time to do her any real harm."

"Xena told her about the tree walking; and she can't wait for you to show her how to do it. She insisted on staying at the base until you're discharged. She will spend the remainder of her holidays with us at Gaia. I already have the General's permission; then you can teach her."

"Sorry to disappoint her. The way I feel it will be at least a week before I'm back on my feet again. Everything hurts. I don't want to whine, but I never thought a few bruises could hurt this

much."

"It was more than just a few bruises, Sam. She broke five of your ribs; your kidneys were slightly damaged. You had a broken ankle and more bruises than I could count. Usually you would have been out for at least three weeks and on light duty for at least another three. Xena healed the worst of your injuries with a healing device. You'll be back to par by tomorrow morning."

Initially, Janet had been frantic when she learned the extent of her beloved's injuries. If not for Xena she could have died out there. She had been so angry at her lover for once again rushing headlong into danger, it had taken her almost the whole ten hours the blonde had been asleep to calm down and accept that Samantha had only acted in character and out of concern for Cassandra.

"I know you hurt, baby, but there's nothing I can do. The shot I gave you is a muscle relaxant; I can't give you anything else. Using the ribbon device has considerably elevated the concentration of naqada in your blood. It neutralises classical painkillers. No, don't look so worried. It's only temporary. The naqada level will go back to usual in a few days time. Xena assures me that it's perfectly normal. Now, try to rest and get some sleep."

"Janet, the host, who is she?" Samantha asked while stifling a yawn.

The brunette doctor smiled, and knowing that her lover wouldn't be satisfied with less than the whole truth, regardless of how tired she was, she answered. "Her name is Larina. She's the Captain of the Royal Guard - and the bondmate of the weapons' master."

"They're married?"

"They're joined; it's the Amazons' equivalent. Larina is the captain of the Royal Guard; that's why you didn't stand a chance against her."

"What happened? How did Nirrti take her?" Samantha wanted to know.

"About five moons ago, she accompanied the Queen and the Consort on their annual tour of the other Amazon planets. They were out hunting when she got separated from the others. She found Nirrti's body; there was so much blood, she was sure the Gao'uld was dead. She was wrong and she is still paying the price for her mistake. Nirrti and Larina are locked up in one of the holding cells -- under sedation. Queen Gabrielle told me that they have a method of separating the host and the symbiote, even against the symbiote's will, just like the Tok'ra did with Clorel and Skaara."

"Then I don't understand what there should be to talk about in the first place. Larina has to be freed from Nirrti."

"I have no doubt that she will be. Now close your eyes. Your body will heal faster when you sleep. I'll help you. Listen to my voice..." The small doctor closed her own eyes and

concentrated on the light in her mind's eye that was Samantha's soul, making her feel safe and cherished above everyone else. She even managed to take away some of her lover's pain.

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When Samantha woke up, she felt worlds better and she was alone - though she was rather surprised not to find her lover next to her. Janet always had been there for her. She slowly sat up and took a deep breath; she let her legs dangle down the side.

The pain that had held her captive only a few hours ago was almost gone. She tested her ability to stand and took a couple of experimental steps. Pleased with her progress she made it to the door and opened it to the familiar confines of SGC corridors where she found herself face to face with a very serious looking, older Amazon warrior, she vaguely remembered from the day prior, wearing the colours of the Royal Guard instead of the usual SF.

"Please go back to bed, Major Carter. You need to rest."

"Where's Doctor Fraiser? She never leaves me alone in the infirmary."

"Queen Gabrielle asked her to accompany her to Washington together with your President. Please go back to bed. I have strict orders to insure that you get lots of rest."

"Your orders mean nothing to me; you're in my world and you're outside of my chain of command." Samantha answered with irritation evident in her voice.

"My orders come directly from the Consort and Major Janet Fraiser, your chief medical officer. I'm honour bound to obey my commanding officer."

After a moment's deliberation the Major nodded and closed her eyes for the fraction of a heartbeat. "What's your name?"

"Ilianna, second in command of the Royal Guard."

"I apologise Ilianna. It wasn't my intention to insult you. I shouldn't have questioned your orders. You're right; Doctor Fraiser is my superior in all things medical. I'll go back to bed, but I'm not tired anymore. -- Could we just talk for a while?"

"It would be my pleasure, Major Carter."

"Please call me Sam."

"Sam, it is. -- The Consort was full of pride when telling us how you stood up to the Captain, to Nirrti."

"Stood up? I took the most thorough beating of my life. Are you kidding?"

"The Gene...," the warrior answered while Samantha got back into bed. "The Consort said that it took her almost a quarter of a candlemark to get to you. She also said your training is far from being finished. The host Nirrti has taken is one of the best fighters the Consort ever has trained. It's an honour to serve under her command. I'm looking forward to her being reinstated. Ever since she was a junior, I didn't last longer than five candledrops when we were sparring. And I doubt anyone on this planet could beat her. On Gaia I only know of three fighters that can. Believe me, it's a major accomplishment to hold her off for as long as you did, Sam."

"I was just lucky, Ilianna."

"The Consort said you'd say something like that. - Is it really true that she evaded six shots with the ribbon device before taking Nirrti down? I was inside of the ship. I really would have loved to have seen that."

Samantha offered her a small smile. "Yes, it's true. Xe... the Consort was amazing. Her movements... she was so fast; I've never seen someone fight like that. It was deadly but also so beautiful. It was poetry in motion; I've never seen something like this. I know she had a lot of time to perfect her fighting skills but still ... It was astonishing; no, astonishing is too weak a word to describe it. I doubt there are words adequate to make it real."

"Did you ever see her exercise or fight with a sword?" Samantha shook her head in the negative. "Now, that's a sight to behold. Perhaps you'll get a chance to see her spar with Larina soon."

"Larina, yes. How did the negotiations go?"

"The negotiations? Oh, yes, the talks with your leader and a few other males. I was one of the guards in the room. It's always a pleasure to observe our Queen at work. She even charmed this cold-eyed grey-head into submission."

"Kinsey?"

"Yes, that's how he introduced himself. He's such a... I don't mean any disrespect but he's an asshole."

"To put it mildly. First, he made it his life's mission to destroy the Stargate program, to shut it down. Now, he aims to control it, to use it; not to defend Earth against the Gao'uld but to control Earth, to control American politics. Most of the time he's just a nuisance but sometimes he can get outright dangerous."

"How did it go? What did they agree upon?"

"I don't know for sure, Sam, not the overall plan. As I said, I was one of the guards during the initial talks. After the break I was reassigned to guard your rest. Queen Gabrielle and her Consort are on their way to your capital, together with your lea..., your president. They will have to talk

about a lot of things; I presume. On the other hand, your president agreed that we'd be the ones responsible for the Gao'uld and the host." The Amazon answered.

"This couldn't have gone down well with the NID and Kinsey. They'd do everything to get their hands on one of those snakeheads, believing they somehow could control it." Samantha said with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"Well, they were arguing a lot - though arguing isn't the term appropriate: This Kinsey guy was spouting insults, and only the Queen's hand on her shoulder kept the Consort from losing her patience, but you could easily see that it was by a hair's breadth. This man is so utterly self-centred; I never saw someone like him. Even the Queen began to get impatient, but then your president simply overruled him. He was blustering and then gaping open-mouthed like a fish on dry land; especially when the president told him that there were quite a few other suitable candidates for his position. He didn't say word one after that, and so they quickly decided that it would be up to us to deal with the Gao'uld and the host."

"Where are they now? What will happen to Larina?" Samantha wanted to know. "What will become of Nirrti?"

"She's still in your holding cell, sedated. As soon as we return home, she will be dealt with."

"Dealt with?" The blonde woman obviously didn't like the choice of words. "What do you intend to do with her?"

"The host will be restored and the Goa'uld will never again harm anyone. It never was done in my lifetime, but I heard that there are ways to neutralise a Gao'uld."

"I understand." Silence descended in the room. "I know it sounds childish but would you please tell me a story, about Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena?"

"It isn't childish, Sam. I'm not very good at story telling, not gifted like our Queen and a few others but stories are an important part of our history and identity. Let me think about it for a moment.

"About every other moon Queen Gabrielle and Consort Xena leave Gaia to explore one of the worlds our deep space telemetry has come up with. Most of the time they can rely on the Ring system. One and a half year ago we got intel about an inhabited planet in the next solar system that had been hidden from our monitoring systems until then due to some sort of nebula.

"It's very small with only a few thousand inhabitants, no energy readings to speak of, but with what looked like very interesting geo-thermic readings. There were no permanent settlements, just nomadic tribes, nothing special. The Queen wanted to have a closer look and we took a ship to explore. It was a purely scientific endeavour.

"The monitoring didn't prove challenging enough for the Consort, and I believe, even the Queen was beginning to get bored because the irregularities the long range sensors had shown proved

not to be irregular at all. The planet had a lot of big thick forests with lots of deer and other wild animals in it. So, it was decided to end this trip with a hunting expedition.

"The Queen doesn't particularly like hunting, though she knows how. She opted to stay at a small creek with a couple of guards. I think she wanted to work on her scrolls. The rest of us split in two groups. One group followed deer tracks; the second group went after the tracks of what resembled a very large boar. We were gaining considerably on the animal when the Consort suddenly signalled us to stop. She cocked her head as if listening to something, jumped to the treetops, and took off. We followed suit and soon also heard what had made her react this way: the voices of men, shouting and leering, the sound of whips hitting flesh, and the crying and begging of a woman as a faint echo in between.

"The Consort's lead was growing with every step and even before we finally arrived at the edge of the forest it was eerily silent, even the crying had subsided. We saw ten men lying unconscious on the ground, sticks and whips hazardingly strewn around them. In the middle were two women. One of them, the older one, was prone on the ground, the younger woman was on her knees to her right, shielding the elder with her body as best as she could. Without being told to we bound the men and set a perimeter watch.

"The Consort was on her knees next to the women and checked on the older one first. I'm not a medic but even I could see that her left arm was broken and that she was in an overall bad physical shape. She was rail thin, as if she hadn't properly eaten in moons, her ribs were prominent under the threadbare dress. The Consort was carefully checking her neck while the younger woman simply looked on, wide-eyed and very obviously frightened.

"The Consort took her medical kit out of her backpack and gave her something to ease the pain. She then radioed the Queen and ordered a bunch of medical supplies sent down from the ship. She immobilised the older woman's neck with a brace and quickly set her arm; luckily there was no internal bleeding. Only then she turned her attention to the young woman."

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Xena asked her if she were all right but didn't get an answer. Instead she said. "You came out of the forest like a demon and yet you cared for my grandmother like an angel. What are you?"

"I'm a woman; I come from very far away," the Consort answered. "Let me have a look at your back. You took quiet a beating protecting your grandmother."

The young woman whispered. "I've had worse." And she obviously had. Her whole back was covered with scars and they also didn't stop at the back.

The Consort began to gently clean the most recent wounds and to regenerate the skin while asking. "Can you tell me what happened? Why did these men want to kill you? No crime in the world warrants such ill-treatment."

The young woman slightly turned around to look at the Consort. "You really must come from very far away. My grandmother has reached 'the age', but I didn't want her to die. I gave her what I could of my food but my mother found out about it and told the men. They wanted to stone her. My sister warned me in time and we ran away. They quickly caught up with us and then you were there."

One of the guards then asked. "She doesn't look older than 60 summers, that's not that old."

The older woman opened her eyes. "51 season cycles I've seen. Are you a dream, raven head, or one of the guardians of the afterworld?" She asked the Consort.

"No, venerable elder, I'm not a dream, and you are well and truly alive, as is your granddaughter. You both are safe with us. My name is Xena."

"I see the wisdom of age in your eyes and yet your body still can give birth to strong sons."

"Strong daughters, venerable elder. Where we come from, there are no men." Xena answered softly.

"So, the stories we no longer are allowed to tell are the truth. You live without men and share your beds with women. You are free to do whatever you want without fear of punishment?"

"Not entirely; we have laws we have to obey. Every society needs laws and customs to stay stable, but every one of us has the freedom to choose. If one wants to one can leave," the Consort answered.

The younger woman gasped. "You're the oiorpata. You exist, the men slayers."

"Some men called us thus, but we only kill when given no other choice." Gabrielle said while leaving the cover of the forest.

Xena turned around, shifted on her knees, and bent her head. "My Queen!"

"I thought we agreed that we wouldn't interfere in the internal affairs of this planet, Xena!"

"I'm well aware of my transgression, my Queen, and I take full responsibility. I couldn't let them be killed by the misogynistic bastards," she answered, turning her head towards the still unconscious men.

"So, you acted within your right, my Consort. Saving the lives of the oppressed is our prime directive. Can they be transported?"

"I don't see any problems with... I'm sorry ... I didn't even ask your name?"

"Aria, and this is Ariana. Are you really a Queen? The leader of your people? You're so young -

and you're a woman. Women are not capable of ruling."

"That's what we were taught, my child," Ariana said, "but I'm beginning to doubt the truth of the teachings. We also were taught that no single woman would stand a chance against even the weakest of men in a fight, and yet I saw one woman taking out ten of our fighters in less time than it takes to take a deep breath."

She paused and asked. "Am I right that there's something wrong with my back?"

"Yes, Ariana. The bones in your neck are broken, that's why it would be very dangerous to move you now. But you don't have to worry, there's a way to repair the damage. Your other injuries will take longer to heal because you're extremely under-nourished. The only question you both will now have to answer is what you intend to do. You can come with us to our home planet or you can take your chances and stay here."

"It won't be worth your effort to heal me if we stay, if I decide to stay here. That's what you wanted to say, isn't it?"

"No, there's no condition on my help, on our help. It's totally up to you. However, we learned from past experiences that men as afraid of women as your men are tend to strike back as soon as we turn our back on their society."

"Men never are afraid!" Aria chimed in.

Xena was about to answer when the Queen interfered. "I know it's a lot to take in right now, Aria. It can't be explained in a few candelmarks' time. For the time being you'll just have to trust us.

"We intend to change the way women on this planet are treated but that's a long and arduous process. We learned that it's impossible to change any given society in one shot and from the outside. We can offer a choice to the people in your tribe and the whole planet. It will take time and especially in the beginning there always is a lot of resistance.

"Male dominated tribal societies like yours tend to take their anger and frustration out on whoever first made contact with us. So, it would be better for you if you didn't have any contact with your people, at least for the immediate future."

"I'm not sure, I understand half of what you just said, your majesty," Ariana answered. "It's not important what happens to me but I want my granddaughter to have a chance at a different life."

"Is this what you also want, Aria?" The Queen asked.

"Yes, it is. I never felt like I belonged but I have to return at least once. I have to offer the same chance to my sister. She risked a lot by warning me."

"I understand, Aria, and we will find a way. Ilianna, concentrate the perimeter watch towards the

plain. I want everyone armed with stun weapons, just in case. Erect a force field around our prisoners; I don't want to be bothered by them tonight. Xena, I presume you'll use the HD to take care of Ariana's neck?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes, my Queen. With your permission, I'd like to go back to the ship to prepare." As an answer the small blonde kissed Xena on the forehead.

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The Amazon guard fell silent, convinced that her public had fallen asleep. "I'm glad, you guys saved Aria." Samantha suddenly said. "What happened to her sister, her grandmother, the other women of her tribe?"

"You're awake?"

"Yeah, just rested my eyes. So?"

"Ariana is living on Gaia, she works at daycare. Only two moons ago she joined with one of our head cooks. Aria's sister refused the offer to leave her world. She's married to the young Chieftain of another tribe, a tribe that is less misogynistic than her own. We also sent mediators from one of our other plan..."

This time Samantha really had fallen asleep. The Amazon tucked a light blanket around her and whispered. "Pleasant dreams, Princess."

## **Chapter Eight: Show and Tell**

The next morning, Cassandra entered her room just a couple of minutes after she came to her senses. Samantha couldn't help but admit that she really missed Janet's comforting presence right next to her and decided that sleeping without her really sucked. Having Cassy here was at least something, in her book. However, it wasn't enough.

"Hey Sam, you all right? Mom told me you got hurt fighting Nirrti."

"I'm all right, little one. Got kicked around a little, but Consort Xena was there in time to stop her. Did she hurt you, Cassy?"

The teenager smiled reassuringly. "No, Sam, she didn't. At least I don't think so. She ran a lot of tests. Mom also put me through all kind of tests; she didn't find anything. However, she wants to do a few more when we arrive on Gaia."

"How do you feel about spending the rest of your holidays away from Earth, Cassy? You don't have to; you know. It's entirely up to you. Colonel O'Neill's offer to take you fishing still stands."

"Fishing? I don't think so. Uncle Jack is fun but fishing - it really sucks." Samantha raised an eyebrow. "Sorry, Sam, but it's boring. He never catches anything; I even doubt that there are any fish in this pond of his. I'd rather have you teaching me how to tree walk. Now, that sounds like fun. I'm really looking forward to this. Mom called. I'm to tell you that Queen Gabrielle and the President agreed on an alliance. Daniel and you are expected to join her, Uncle Jack, and the others in Washington; meanwhile Teal'c will help me pack. Mom put some clothes on the bed in your quarters. Do you need help?"

"No, I can manage but you still could join me and fill me in on what happened while I was confined to the infirmary."

~\*~

Samantha and Daniel met the Amazons in the gate room. Soon after, a white light was enveloping all of them and a few heartbeats later they found themselves in what Samantha presumed to be the Amazon's base on the moon. Ilianna exchanged a few words with the woman apparently in charge and took a long, round packet from her. Once again they were enveloped in a white light and found themselves in some sort of hotel room.

The blonde major barely acknowledged the presence of her superior officer by nodding in his direction; her attention solely focused on Janet. Three steps forward and her arms closed firmly around the smaller body. "I missed you, Jan."

"Missed you too, Sammy-baby," the doctor whispered back while trying to give the impression of checking her patient. "We're making a show out of ourselves, my love."

"I don't care, love you."

Before Janet could answer, Colonel O'Neill chimed in. "So, now that Carter finally has ended her beauty sleep, can we get on with the program, your majesty?"

Janet used the distraction to place a quick kiss on her taller lover's mouth, very aware of the danger it put them in but also of how much Samantha right now needed the reassurance.

"You have a point, Colonel," the Queen answered. "Ilianna and two of the guards will accompany you to the Air Force Academy. We decided to start our co-operation with the implementation of a new hand-to-hand training's program. The Joint Chiefs want proof that it's superior to our usual routine. Daniel Jackson and the rest of us will go to the Smithsonian Institution to talk with his friend. Did you bring the scroll, Ilianna?"

"As you requested, your majesty, one of the early ones - about the Titans."

"Definitively not the one I would have chosen. I was such a wide-eyed, stupid child then. Well, I'll live. Let's go."

Neither Samantha nor Janet missed the friendly squeeze and the quiet words Xena had for her Queen. "Not stupid, my love, just a tad naive and excitable - and only you were capable of sending them back to sleep. I was so proud of you that day."

"Charmer!" The small blonde whispered.

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Half an hour later, they asked for Doctor Levinson at the reception desk and were directed to the basement and a place called 'the hole'. It was Sunday morning, and the only light streaming out of a door was at the far end of the basement corridor. It was a room without the slightest bit of natural light; all visible walls were decorated with overflowing shelves from floor to ceiling, filled with books and artefacts.

In the middle of the room was an old wooden desk equally stacked with piles and piles of papers and folders, not facing the door but at an almost 30° angle. Behind the desk a head could be seen, dark brown hair with a strand of white at the left temple bent over and concentrated on something.

On the way over they had decided that Daniel would do the first round of talking without the others barging in or intimidating her. They still would be close enough to hear the entire conversation.

"Doctor Sabrina Levinson?"

There was no answer. "Doctor Levinson!"

"What the hell! It's my day off! I was told that I would be left alone on my days off; it was a guarantee. Put your request in my work-file and I'll tend to it as soon as possible." The head answered without looking up.

"Sabrina, it's me, Daniel. Please look at me." He unconsciously softened his voice, reacting to the cross of irritation, annoyance, distress, and frustration evident in his friend's words.

Finally, she looked up. "Daniel? Daniel Jackson? What are you doing here?" She placed her laptop on one of the piles at the front edge of her desk. She raised herself to her feet, taking a few steps forward and gathering the archaeologist in a hug. They finally parted.

"It's a rather long story but we don't have time to go into any details right now, Sabrina. A friend of mine gave me something and I want you to have a look at it. I think, it might confirm your

theories."

"Confirm my theories? You've got to be kidding, Daniel. They didn't believe me then, and they won't now. My scientific fate isn't any different than yours."

"Please, just have a look at it." He handed the scroll to the red-haired woman who was only slightly shorter than himself.

She took it and slowly studied it from the outside, immediately recognising the fragments of the broken seal. She unrolled it and her eyes lit up in wonder. She stared at the handwriting, noting every familiar curve and dot. She began to read out loud.

"I am Gabrielle, bard of Poteidaia, and I sing of a time of darkness, when the Gods played with the lives of the mortals, when a world in turmoil and fear cried out for a hero. There was only one woman who took up the challenge. She was a warrior, her strength won in countless battles. Her soul had once been imprisoned by darkness, but she found her way back to the light. She now fights for those who cannot fight for themselves.

"Daniel, this is incredible. She always varies the introductory words but it's definitively her style and her handwriting. The parchment is old, but it's been perfectly preserved. I've never seen one in such a mint condition. I'm almost sure that it's genuine; there's only one thing I yet have to check."

She turned slightly to get a better angle in the artificial light, concentrated on the bottom of the scroll. Her elbow inadvertently brushed against the pile of papers the laptop was resting upon. It became unbalanced and started to fall down. Samantha, who had been watching from the sidelines together with the others, reacted immediately. She launched herself forward as if intending to save a rare artefact and caught the machine before it could crash.

"Gotcha!" The tall blonde answered with a grin.

"Nice catch, Sam! Need a hand up?"

"Always, Danny-boy." She took his hand, though they both knew that she didn't really need his help. "Care to introduce us?" Samantha asked as soon as she was back on her feet, had stepped around the desk, and placed the laptop securely on top of its seat.

"You're right, Sam. It's time to come clean." The Queen suddenly said.

She and her Consort, who had been nothing more than observers until then, now were standing in the doorway. Before she could say anything else the attention of the others was redirected to Sabrina Levinson when they heard a loud slap.

"And I thought you were different, Daniel." A very surprised archaeologist rubbed his cheek.

"To put together a scam of such magnitude, just to once again humiliate me. Just get out of here, all of you, immediately! I refuse to take the bait."

"Doctor Levinson, I assure you, this is not a scam. The scroll is genuine," Gabrielle said, taking two short steps into the room. "Please give us at least the benefit of the doubt. I presume that you have been hurt before because of your dedication to your research. Had I known, we would have found another way to approach you. I apologise."

"I'm sorry, Brina. It never was my intention to hurt you. All I wanted was for you to know the truth. Is there anywhere we can go sit and talk?"

"It's I who's sorry, Daniel. I shouldn't have hit you. I apologise." Sabrina then turned her attention towards the two women still standing just inside the doorway. "You look like them. But you can't be they; they lived two thousand years ago."

"We know, that it's asking a lot. You don't know us, and you have no reason to trust us." Xena said in her deep voice. "Just give us a chance, please."

"But you can't be them. It's against every law of nature I know. It simply is unbelievable."

"I can imagine how you feel. I'm a scientist and until a few years ago I thought that everything in the world, in the universe has a logical, scientific explanation. Experience taught me otherwise. I can see the doubt in your eyes." Samantha said. "The stories about the warrior princess and the bard, don't they tell of them doing things that should be physically impossible?"

"Like coming back from the death and jumping a few hundred feet from a cliff onto the deck of a cursed ship, things like these?"

"Exactly, Doctor Levinson." The tall blonde said in a perfect, only half conscious imitation of Teal'c's deadpan manner.

"The things Xena does on a regular basis are one of the reasons no one believed me. Even I started to think of them as some sort of exaggeration, poetic licence, if you will." There was the sound of hurried footsteps coming closer. "Perhaps we should take this some place more comfortable and more private."

At this moment, a portly man wearing a dark grey three-pieces suit entered without even bothering to knock. He quickly looked around, dismissing most of the people present. His eyes locked on Gabrielle.

"Your Majesty, please accept my heartfelt apologies. It is just now that I was informed of your visit by the chief of staff to the President. I'm Doctor Rodney Tucker, the director of this institution. I'm sorry for the inappropriate welcome you received." He slightly turned his head. "This will have consequences, Doctor Levinson. I've been far too lenient with you. Now, your Majesty, if you would please follow me to the conference room; there are some refreshments waiting for you and your retinue."

"Director Tucker, I ass..." Xena's hand on her forearm effectively silenced the red headed

linguist. The raven-head then turned her attention to the rather short man.

"Mister Tucker, this isn't an official visit. The Queen came here to meet with Doctor Levinson, and Doctor Levinson only. Her research is of interest to the Queen and our Nation. It has nothing to do with her work here. However, we accept the use of your conference room for the rest of our talks. You may be excused, Mister Tucker. Sabrina, can you lead us there?" She said with a smile and a twinkle in her eyes.

A strange mixture of indignation and anger crossed the man's face at the Consort's obvious dismissal but his official persona quickly reasserted itself and he insisted on personally escorting them to the conference room. On the way up to the second floor he didn't stop talking for more time than he needed to fill his lungs with air. Queen Gabrielle looked at her Consort, and Xena sent a barrage of hand signals to the blonde Major, leaving Janet with question marks in her eyes and Samantha with a vague smile.

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Director Tucker courteously held the door open when they arrived at the stately conference room. Samantha was the last one to step through, but turned around half-way. "Director Tucker, may we have a word?"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" He retorted, seemingly not intimidated by her topping him more than a couple of inches.

"Major Samantha Carter, United States Air Force," the door closed behind her, "on temporary assignment in the service of Queen Gabrielle and her retinue. You're being alerted by an official channel equals a security breach of unacceptable proportions. I want you to give me the name of the person or persons who informed you of this private visit. Should this make the papers, you won't like the consequences."

"Queen Gabrielle is an official dignitary. I won't give in to military intimidation."

Samantha's eyes grew cold, blue changing to silver. "Mister Tucker, it would be in your best interest to listen to me, and listen carefully. Yes, I'm Air Force but that's none of your concern right now, and it has nothing to do with my current assignment.

"As Consort Xena already told you, this was intended to be a private visit, with the emphasis on private. The Queen is grateful for having the use of your facilities, but this won't change the nature of her visit, nor her need for privacy. I count on your sense of propriety to keep quiet about this visit - if only for the sake of future contacts with the Nation.

"Angering the Queen has the potential of seriously impeding diplomatic relations between our two countries, and I assure you, you do not want to be on the receiving end of the President's temper if anything goes wrong."



Once again anger flickered over the man's face; once again it was gone in the blink of an eye. "I understand the Queen's need for privacy and will respect it. However, Doctor Levinson should have known better. There's a standing order that all visiting dignitaries have to be reported to the administration immediately. She always has been an embarrassment in the scientific field and I won't put up with it any longer. She has outstayed my patience."

"You may not give in to military intimidation. - I don't give in to civilian posturing. Doctor Sabrina Levinson is not to blame. She has nothing to feel guilty for. We didn't introduce ourselves. She's a brilliant linguist, and I would consider it an honour would she be working with me. And believe me she really would be an asset."

"An asset? She's at best a pain in the behind, at worst a lunatic. She tends to get obsessed with details, to forget about the greater picture."

"The greater picture? Do you even know what the greater picture is?" Recognising the bland, self satisfied expression on the suited man's face - an expression she had seen more times than she cared to remember on her superiors, her commanding officers, her teachers, Samantha's temper snapped. "I don't think you do. You don't have the intellectual capability to do so. Doctor Levinson's research is more important than you can even dream to imagine. And this research has nothing to do with your institute, and it has nothing to do with you."

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About half an hour and a still rather angry director later, Samantha closed the big doors to the conference room. She quickly turned around and scanned the room. As always the Consort was easy to pick out in an assembly, being the tallest. She dropped on her right knee in front of the raven head.

"Your highness, please accept my apologies. I failed you. I have the names you wanted and as we speak they will be taken care of, but I'm afraid my interference made Director Tucker even angrier than before and he possibly intends to take out his anger on Doctor Levinson. I take full responsibility and accept any punishment for my failure." She lowered her eyes on the ground.

"Rise, Major Carter!" The Queen said. "We all know that this man is an arrogant prick with a chip on his shoulder the size of Mount Olympus and far too much power. Should it be necessary, I'll smooth things over with him, but at the moment I'm still optimistic that Doctor Levinson will take us up on our offer. You by now know the rough outlines. It now is time to make some proper introductions. Please, stand up, Sam. Daniel Jackson, would you please be so kind?!"

"It will be my pleasure, your Majesty. Sabrina, may I introduce Major Samantha Carter, US Air Force, doctor in astrophysics and philosophy, leading expert in wormhole physics, and Major Janet Fraiser, Chief Medical Officer of Stargate Command, medical doctor, apparently, expert in virology and infectious diseases, oh and in taming mouthy Colonels and big marines."

"Don't forget accident prone, bespectacled archaeologist, Daniel." Sam chimed in.

"Or frequently injured brilliant blondes." He bantered back.

"You're really with the military, Dan? How could you bring them here? All they do is kill people. Your majesty, may I be excused? I don't want anything to do with these people."

"Brina, please, forget the past for a moment. What I do with them is important. It saves lives." Daniel implored but the redhead wasn't that easily swayed.

"Forget the past? How could I? Forget the army transport that rammed her car and killed her, killed the only family I've ever known. The driver was drunk. So, don't you tell me to forget her, Daniel. It's hard enough to know that he walked away without paying for his crimes."

Samantha saw the genuine pain in the woman's eyes and answered. "I know how you feel, Doctor Levinson. I lost my mother in a car accident when I was fourteen. My father failed to pick her up because he was too busy with his work in the Air Force. She took a cab and died in the middle of a multi-car pile-up caused by a drunk driver."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Major, but it was nothing more than an accident. She wasn't murdered by the military."

The blonde's eyes found her lover's face and her encouraging smile. "My father's an Air Force General. Then he was a Lieutenant Colonel, Doctor Levinson. He forgot to pick her up at the campus because of some stupid meeting. It wasn't a question of life and death, just bureaucracy. When he told me what happened, I accused him of murder. I told him that he loved his job and his career more than her life; I told him he could as well have taken his sidearm and shot her."

Janet now was standing next to the taller woman, rubbing the small of her back with one hand while the other rested reassuringly on the blonde's shoulder. "It took me a long time, but eventually I saw what having lost her had done to him and I forgave him."

"Doctor Levinson, before we came to you we ran a few database checks. The sergeant responsible for the death of your grandmother was sentenced to twenty years of prison. He killed himself two years later. He paid for what he did to you and the other two families who lost loved-ones." Xena's soothing voice said. "I think there is no one in this room who hasn't lost people we loved, and chances are that we will again in the future. That's the price we have to pay for living, but what we gain far outweighs this price, love, happiness, new friends, new experiences. This is what..."

The beeping of a cell phone interrupted her. Xena fished a small communicator out of her back pocket and flipped it open. "Yes, I understand. Give us a few candledrops. We're not yet finished here. Wait for my signal." The tall woman turned her attention back to the others. "I'm sorry; we'll have to cut this short. - My Queen, High Priestess Melosa relayed a message to the moon station. Egeria wants to speak with us as soon as possible, both of us. Melosa said that it's

urgent."

"Both of us? That's strange. She tends to cut our conversations short whenever you come with me, and refuses to explain her reasons."

"We'll soon find out, my love, but I doubt that this request is about me." The tall woman answered with sadness tinting her voice.

"We'll see. We have to leave now. Our presence is needed at home, but first, please hear our offer, Sabrina Levinson. The scrolls about the warrior princess you know of are only a fraction of what I had written at the time. When we left Greece a lot of them were left behind and were lost. I sort of had to write new versions. We want you to find the rest of the missing scrolls and will provide you with all the funds necessary. There must be at least another score of them. To do this successfully you will have to familiarise yourself with our life here on Earth and all the things we did. We could give you digital copies but to really get a feel for them you should study the originals, on Gaia."

"Where's the catch?"

"We want your word of honour that nothing you'll learn will be revealed to the public on Earth without my permission. Earth is not ready to know. Samantha, Janet, and Daniel Jackson will answer all of your questions. Just keep your mind open for the unbelievable. - Major Carter, as of now, Sabrina Levinson has top security clearance. Just put it in your report as a direct order and the President will approve."

Samantha wanted to ask if the Queen were really sure about this. It had the potential to become a security nightmare, but one look at the Consort let her keep quiet. "Yes, your Majesty."

"Here, Sam, take this. We'll call as soon as possible." Gabrielle handed her another one of the tiny cell phones. Xena pressed a button on her own device; the two of them were immediately enveloped in a white light and disappeared.

Sabrina stared at the ground where they stood only a heartbeat before with her mouth hanging open.

"Doctor Levinson, I once again apologise for making your life here harder by further angering the director. Talking to the natives and calming them usually is Daniel's job."

"Dan, did I just drop straight into an episode of Star Trek or The Twilight Zone? Is this a trick? How did they do it?"

"You'll have to ask Sam for the technical details, Sabrina, but no, it defiantly isn't a trick. Just give us a chance to explain. The universe is much more intriguing than even the most imaginative of science fiction writers ever would have thought possible. It's all true: thousands of different worlds and different cultures, big bad enemies, new strange friends. It's all true, please, trust us."

"I'll try, Daniel. And there's nothing to apologise for, Major Carter. This man could easily exhaust the patience of an archangel. It is me who has to apologise. I tend towards aggression when I'm confused. At first I thought you all were totally nuts and now I wait for little green men to appear out of thin air."

"Actually, they're grey."

"Daniel, you've spent too much time with Colonel O'Neill." Janet chastised him. "I can understand that you're confused, Doctor Levinson. It's a lot to take in at once. Perhaps we should leave this place and go somewhere where you feel more comfortable; your office, our hotel, wherever. We could have room service and get to know each other better."

"Let's go to my apartment. It's only ten minutes on foot and there should be enough stuff in the fridge to put something together - if you don't mind vegetarian food."

The other three nodded enthusiastically. Home-cooked meals were scarce with their usual schedules, even for Janet who had a teenager to feed.

"I'm still not comfortable with you being part of the military or working with them, but I trust you, Daniel, and as strange as it sounds to me, I'd really like to trust you too, Majors."

"Why don't you start by calling us Sam and Janet? It could help you to see beyond our ranks." Janet answered.

"Let's go, and please, call me Sabrina." They left the Smithsonian through a back door after having picked up the laptop and jacket left in the 'hole'.

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It was only shortly after midday, but the narrow street they followed was mostly dark. The creepy atmosphere sent Samantha immediately into soldier mode. Her senses concentrated on the outside world she almost jumped out of her skin when Sabrina suddenly asked.

"If you hold the Air Force responsible for your mother's death, why did you join them?"

"There are a lot of reasons. My godfather made me understand that any other job also had the potential to keep my father from picking her up. The Air Force was the only connection I had to my father, the only thing he could relate to. But that was only a bonus."

Samantha knew that she never was this open to her colleagues but she also had sensed the Queen's need to draw the redheaded woman on their side. If she had learned one thing during her sessions with the Consort it was that sharing one's feelings and thoughts was not a sign of weakness.

"From the moment I was big enough to climb a chair and look through my mother's telescope I knew that I wanted to become an astronaut. I wanted to be the first woman to walk on the Moon, the first human travelling to Mars. The Air Force was the only way to come close to that goal."

"And did you realise your dream?"

"I found something better, much bet... Danny, hostiles in front; cover our six. Janet, protect Sabrina. I'll deal with them."

The road in front of them was suddenly blocked by four broad shouldered men armed with baseball bats - and Sam didn't have her gun.

"Give us your money and jewellery, and we might let you go to live another day," the biggest of the thugs said, the bat resting almost casually on his shoulder. He topped Samantha by far more than half a foot.

"We don't have anything worth your efforts. It would be in your interest to let us go unharmed." Samantha said in the vain hope of reasoning with the men.

"Three good looking chicks! You bet your ass, there's something worth our efforts, blondie." The man to the leader's right said and tried to reach around Samantha to grab Janet.

He found himself on the ground, his arm at an off angle, obviously broken. The man to her far left started forwards, his cry "You bitch!" cut short by a roundhouse kick to his throat, which propelled him to the ground but left her slightly unbalanced.

The first one used this opening to his advantage and the club grazed her ribcage. She hissed in pain but immediately compensated. She dropped to the ground, grabbed the discarded bat from the second man, and brought it up in time to block another attack aimed for her head. The rebound hit the man in the head, not hard enough to knock him out but hard enough to give her a chance. Samantha got inside his defences, punched his throat, and followed up with a knee to his groin. He sank to his knees and a jab to the chin knocked him out.

Meanwhile her second attacker had regained his feet and drew a six inch blade. He still had some problems breathing from the blow to his throat but that didn't make him any less dangerous. Two down, two more to go. Samantha kept the fourth in her line of sight while she fended off his rather clumsy attempts. She simply knocked him out with her elbow and the fourth one suddenly wised up and ran.

Meanwhile Daniel had taken care of a fifth one sent to keep them from running.

"You okay, Sam?" Janet snapped to doctor mode.

"Yes, Jan. I'm all right. My ribs might need re-bandaging, that's all. Let's go before these guys decide to wake up."

A few minutes later they arrived at Sabrina's apartment. The linguist had been strangely quiet since the fight. Reading Samantha's and Janet's body language Daniel decided to give them some privacy and dragged Sabrina away to buy something to drink.

The liquor store was only half a block down, and a quarter of an hour later they re-emerged with a six-pack of bud and two six-packs of root beer.

"Dan, you could have asked. I have beer back home - and besides, shouldn't we report this to the police?"

"It's not about the beer, Brina. Sam and Janet need some time alone. Sam tends to act out the soldiers-know-no-pain routine when she feels observed."

"Typical military mind-set." Sabrina snorted.

"No, not really. Most soldiers I know are cry-babies as soon as they enter Janet's infirmary. Sam is different. She is stoic and calm and rational, a scientist to the core. Her IQ ratings are so far off scale one can get dizzy even thinking about it. At the same time she is the best friend one can have. She is funny and compassionate, kind-hearted and loving."

"Sounds as if you have a crush on her."

"It would be easy to fall in love with Sam, and I really love her, as a sister and one of my best friends. Stargate Command has forged a very strange, very big family."

An almost uncomfortable silence descended, so, Sabrina decided to change the subject. "The police; why didn't you call them? I even had the impression that you never thought of doing so."

"Do you really want to spend hours on end on a police station, waiting for someone to write down your testimony, having to tell the same story time and again, having to identify them in a line-up, being called to testify a few months later, and all this only to let them go free because Sam didn't warn them about her combat skills?"

"No, Brina. But I'm sure that Sam or Janet already have arranged something that will keep us out of it and land them in jail."

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They opened the door to find Janet closing the last button on the blonde's shirt. "Hey, Daniel, I hope you brought something non-alcoholic. The Doc insists on giving me painkillers." Samantha said with a pout.

"I swear you took lessons from Cassandra. - She doesn't get away with it, and neither will you."

Sabrina, how about we go find something for lunch? Daniel, please help Sam to the couch."

The two women disappeared through the door and Daniel did as he had been told. "You okay, Sam?"

"Yeah, more or less. Janet said that one of the bruised ribs now is broken, but that it's not likely to cause any problems. The bone knitters on Gaia will take care of it. I'll be back to par in no time, Daniel. You didn't get hurt out there, right?"

"I'm fine, Sam. Give me some credit here, it was only one man, and you took on four of these guys. Jack never will believe me. I know you're good, but I don't remember you being this good."

"Gaia not only has good fighters but also good teachers, Daniel."

"Yes, it seems like you learned an awful lot, both of you." He let the silence linger for a moment. "I'm happy for you and Janet, Sam."

For a moment she looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights, and then she said. "Thank you, Daniel. Your support means a lot to us, both of us. We'll also have to tell Teal'c and the Colonel before we go back to the SGC. They deserve to know."

"Neither Teal'c nor Jack will let you down. Your happiness is all that counts for us, and for him. That it's someone as smart and beautiful as Janet will make it easier for him. You won't have to worry about SG-1, but at the base you'll have to be more careful than you were in this hotel room. Hammond probably will have a hard time, and I don't even want to think about what will happen should Kinsey or the NID find out."

"As Master Bratac would say: we'll cross that bridge when we come to the river. And General Hammond knows that I'm gay. I came out to my family when I turned eighteen."

"What about this Hanson fellow?"

"My one and only trip to boy-town - and the biggest mistake I ever made. He was the son-in-law my father dreamed of; career military, a good field officer. He didn't want to know that he also was an abusive bastard. - However, when I introduced them, it was the first time in the three years since I had come out that he spoke to me. He still thinks that being gay is nothing more than a phase, and that I'm just looking for mister right."

"In a way it's good that he's with the Tok'ra. That way it won't be so hard when he once again stops talking to me."

"Don't you think that blending with Selmac hasn't taught him a thing or two?"

"He has changed a lot but not that much. He's the most stubborn man in the known universe. - Pass me a root beer?"

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Meanwhile Janet and Sabrina had decided to go for a vegetable lasagna, and had a similar conversation after the small doctor had thanked Sabrina for the use of her emergency kit. "You're welcome, Janet. Who's Cassandra?"

"She's my daughter - actually, she's our daughter. Sam and I raise her together. She just turned fifteen."

"You're not old enough to have a teenage daughter, Janet."

"I'm 33. It is possible. I adopted Cassandra when she was eleven. Her parents were killed and Sam saved her life. I didn't give birth to her, but nonetheless, she's my daughter." The small brunette said.

"You and Samantha make a cute couple."

"Thank you, I think."

"Cassandra is lucky to grow up with so much love."

Janet blushed. "It's a rather recent development. I only told her yesterday. She doesn't know yet. We have been best friends for years. But only a couple of weeks ago, we admitted to each other that there was more than friendship."

"Is it worth the risk? I mean this whole don't-ask-don't-tell thing?"

"We know the risk. We know this could ruin our careers and get our security clearances revoked. But, yes, it's worth it. Sam completes me. - Can you pass me the onions?"

They worked for a few minutes in silence. "You're a doctor; you took a vow to save lives. Why did you join the Air Force?"

"In the last year of my residency, I butted heads with my superiors. They threw me out and my career was ruined before it began. An Air Force General recruited me, and it was the only chance to continue doing what I wanted to do, work as a doctor and help people. I learned how to use weapons, but I have never had to kill anyone - and I hope I never will.

"My experience as a field medic as well as a CMO taught me that those who don't have problems with killing and hurting others are more of a danger to every team they are a part of than the enemy ever could be. It's reckless."

"What Samantha did out there in the street was pretty reckless in my book." Sabrina retorted.



"Our options were pretty limited. There was not enough time to call for backup. Sam was unsuccessful when she tried to talk to them; so, the only other option would have been to run, and that wouldn't have been possible with the guy behind us Daniel took out. Sam was injured not 24 hours ago. She had been badly beaten and wouldn't have been up to running. Taking them out as quickly as possible was our only viable option - and even then, this big brute broke one of her ribs."

"Shouldn't this be checked out at a hospital?" The redhead wanted to know.

"She not only is my best friend; I'm also her regular physician. It's a clean break that won't cause any problems. Her ribs now are tightly bound. She'll be okay."

"I didn't want to accuse her, and I don't want to sound like an ungrateful bitch. But I never saw something like that, and it's left me disconcerted. She fought for all of us and took these bullies on as if it were an everyday occurrence. It was scary and eerily fascinating." Sabrina said cautiously.

"Sam is a fighter at heart but she also is a scientist to the core - and she is a soldier, a very good soldier. But something like this is by no means an everyday occurrence. She spends days on end buried in her lab, surviving on coffee and blue jello alone. Everything she does, she does with great focus and intensity. She's a very complex woman and every time I think that I finally have figured her out, she goes and surprises me."

"I think you also are not easy to figure out, Janet. - You were right, talking to you helped to alleviate some of my fears. There's only one thing I still don't understand." Sabrina said while putting the lasagna in the oven. "Why are you so honest with me? You don't know me; you have no reason to trust me. I could sell you out to the next tabloid."

Janet chuckled. "Never going to happen. Daniel told us that you're a friend. All these years you had the chance to turn your back to your research and make a name for yourself but you didn't. No, you'd never sell us out, not even for enough money to finance your research for the next ten years."

"Our dinner will need another half hour. Let's go back to the others. I have a lot of questions, and I still cannot believe that the two women I've seen in my office really are the Xena and Gabrielle from grandmother's scrolls. It's against everything I've ever learned."

"As Consort Xena said: Prepare to believe the unbelievable."

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They talked the rest of the day and the better part of the night with Samantha dozing off every once in a while in Janet's arms. Sabrina went from astonishment to disbelief to incredulity to

fascination to wide-eyed wonder. When Janet finally also had fallen asleep the two archaeologist-linguists were sitting on the floor nursing the last two beers.

"Do you know how incredible this all is, Dan?"

"What? Travelling to other planets? Fighting parasites with delusions of god-hood? Meeting immortals?" Daniel asked with a smile.

"Well, yes. But what I was really talking about is us, Dan, you and me. They all were laughing about our theories - and you know what?! We were right all along."

"Damned ironic, isn't it?"

"Yeah!" They fell silent. After a while Sabrina had another question. "Doesn't it drive you crazy? To know that you were right and not being able to tell anyone?"

"Sometimes; I usually don't have the time to dwell on it, Brina. We really make a difference out there; it's ironic in a way. When I decided to follow the footsteps of my parents and grandfather, everyone thought that I was nuts. They told me that I was wasting my time and talent with dusty stones and dead languages, that it served absolutely no purpose. Then, I told them that knowledge about the past could help to understand the future and that's still true. But what I do now is different. SG-1 and the other teams save the world on almost a regular basis. We've freed a lot of people from oppression. Science fiction doesn't even come close to what we live through almost every day. There are times when I'm frightened out of my wits, but it's well worth it. We gain so much."

"Now, you sound suspiciously like Consort Xena."

"Well, Brina, listen to the wisdom of age." He answered after having drained his bottle, and they both broke into giggles.

Blue eyes opened at the noise. She found herself outstretched on the couch, her head cradled in Janet's lap. The doctor's head was tilted backwards and she was snoring softly. "Danny," she whispered, "you're my witness. She does snore!"

"I don't hear anything, Sam. Don't forget, the woman you're talking about is in charge of my next physical - and believe me, I'm not brave enough to risk an encounter with her really, really..."

"Really big, honking needles. You're a wise man, space monkey." Janet mumbled still half asleep.

"Space monkey? Who did come up with this name?" The linguist asked.

"Jack O'Neill, our commanding officer," Samantha answered without giving up her comfortable position on Janet's legs, "another wise man afraid of a few measly needles."

"Not afraid enough to stop calling me names. Did you hear his last one? He really had the nerve to call me 'mini-Stalin'. Would you believe it? I rather prefer Napoleonic Power Monger." A suddenly very awake doctor said. "Colonel O'Neill has a very unique sense of humour. It's his way of dealing with things he cannot control."

"You know, he doesn't mean it in any derogatory way, Jan. It's also his way of showing respect without sullyng his reputation as a cynic and without compromising the chain of command."

"There's no need to plead his cause, Sammy. Sometimes, he really can get on one's nerves, he does on yours, but he's a great commanding officer, and an even better friend. And, whether I like it or not, he's a great father figure and a good playmate for Cassy." - 'And he's in love with my lover, but we won't mention that.' Janet thought to herself.

Samantha struggled to sit up and then asked. "Will you take Queen Gabrielle up on her offer, Sabrina?"

"I don't know yet. It's a big step and quite a handful to take in. I just learned that reality is far more fantastic than even my wildest dreams. I learned that the Warrior Princess and her Bard are not figments of anyone's imagination, but living and breathing women who just happen to be more than two thousand years old. I was given a chance of a life time. And to make things even more confusing I learned that the Greek and Roman, Egyptian and Norse Gods are nothing more than a race of parasitical beings intent on enslaving all of mankind.

"To make things even weirder, I saw my peace-loving friend Daniel, the one who was at my side during more freedom marches than I can remember, I saw sweet Daniel take down a muscle packed bully half a head taller than himself without breaking a sweat. And the biggest surprise of all: I find myself genuinely liking two members of the military. I think I have the right to be royally confused."

"I can at least partially relate to what you must be feeling right now," Janet answered. "Before I joined Stargate Command I was working as a virologist at the CDC. The work was challenging and I had a good time. Then I suddenly was reassigned, to take over as the CMO of a base at Cheyenne Mountain, presumably dedicated to deep space radar telemetry.

"At first I thought that I finally had pissed off the wrong member of the brass and that this was to be my punishment. When General Hammond told me what they were really doing, I was full of disbelief. I saw the gate in action, and I still didn't believe it. I read the mission reports and didn't believe it. I had to deal with my first staff wound and almost the whole base being reduced to Neanderthals to begin to understand that I was in for the greatest adventure of my life."

Sabrina didn't answer immediately. "Do you think I could get to know them better before deciding, the Queen and the Consort?"

"I think that's a great idea, Sabrina. The Queen will certainly approve. What about your job? When do you think you can get a few days off?"

"My job... It's nothing to worry about. Last week, I was notified that my contract would not be renewed. I don't feel any obligation towards any of them, not Director Tucker, and not my co-workers. They're not exactly a friendly bunch. I'll have to go back to get my personal belongings, notes and books, and a few artefacts, leave my resignation note, and that's all I owe them."

Sabrina answered and the blonde astrophysicist instinctively knew that the Amazons would have to teach her more than just about the Queen's scrolls. They would have to help her get back her self-esteem and self-confidence.

"So, all we'll have to do is to wait for Consort Xena to call us on the cell she gave Sam and go and pack your things in the morning." Daniel said. "It's a quarter past three. We should all try and get some rest. I know we should go back to the hotel but I'm just too tired to move. I hope you don't mind when we crash here."

"Not a problem, Danny. Sam and Janet can snuggle on the couch and I'll get an air mattress and blanket for you."

"Thanks, Brina."

It was a short rest. The cell phone rang at five past six. Samantha got it on the second ring, with Janet still soundly asleep right in front of her.

"Yes, your majesty. - No, she hasn't decided yet. She asked for the chance to get to know you better, you and your people, before committing herself. - No, she wants to resign. - Yes, of course. Excellent idea. - Going the direct way might freak her out, your majesty. - I heed and obey, Queen Gabrielle. I'll do my best to prepare her. - Yes, I'll send word as soon as possible."

When she put the cell away, she was greeted by Janet's sleepily blinking eyes, Daniel adjusting his glasses and sitting up, and the sound of Sabrina rummaging in the kitchen. A few minutes later, Samantha eyed her companions over the rim of her coffee mug. Janet and Daniel as always celebrated their first mug with almost religious intensity, and Sabrina seemed to be no different. She knew from experience that she wouldn't get more than a grunt out of Janet, and not even as much from Daniel. On off-world missions Samantha always has a family-sized packet of espresso candies in her pocket to get him going.

All three of them were focused on the black brew right in front of them. For her, coffee was a way to stay awake when one had to but for enjoyment she personally preferred tea.

"So, Sam, what did the Queen say?" Daniel finally asked.

"She wants us to return to Gaia not later than midday local time; that gives us roughly seven hours to work with. She didn't go into any details but it has to do with some sort of ritual she wants us to participate in, Janet and me; and the rest of you to bear witness. They will activate the transporter on the moon station as soon as I give them the signal and we will return to Gaia through their gate. She also said that she will take care of your resignation letter, emphasising your worth for the Amazon Nation. It will also hold the door open should you decide to return."

Cassy, Teal'c, and the colonel will go through the gate before us. Do you think this will give you enough time, Sabrina?" Before the redhead could answer Samantha continued. "Queen Gabrielle also wants you to know that you can return to Earth whenever you want."

"Well, let's get started. I'll take a quick shower and start packing my notebooks and stuff. I don't have much of a wardrobe but to speed things up, I would be grateful if you, Janet and Sam, could pack a few changes of clothing for me. You know better what to expect with the weather on Gaia."

"It will be our pleasure, Sabrina." Janet answered with a smile, silently wishing that she would have had the foresight to bring a change of clothing. Taking a shower would be high on her list of things to do after their return, after properly treating Samantha's injuries, of course.

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Disclaimer: [See Part 1](#)

## **Chapter Nine: The Transference**

Less than five hours later, they had packed up Sabrina's personal belongings from the Smithsonian and were back at her apartment. Samantha called the moon station and a few minutes later they were standing on another world, on Gaia. They were officially greeted by an honour guard under Master Niva's command and the Consort. Daniel and Sabrina were escorted to the guest palace where Hammond, O'Neill, Teal'c, Davis, and Cassandra were already waiting. Meanwhile Janet whisked her lover away to the infirmary to check on her and treat her ribs. There a fresh set of BDUs was waiting for them after their shower.

Sabrina immediately hit it off with Lieutenant Jessica Morgan who filled her in on what she already had read about the Queen and her Consort. Daniel felt comfortable at leaving her when the men shortly after midday were asked to return the next morning.

Cassandra at first had been clinging to Samantha and Janet - more shaken about her ordeal with Nirrti than she was ready to admit. They easily picked up on her uncharacteristic behaviour and

wanted her to share their quarters, but the girl didn't take them up on their offer. She obviously sensed that they needed some time alone. Janet still insisted but finally had to relent when Aria offered to let Cassandra bunk with her and the other young Amazons in training. Jennifer Hailey also volunteered to keep an eye on Cassandra.

While Samantha had been in the infirmary and unconscious, Janet had filled the girl in on the changes in their relationship. They had planned to do it together but Cassandra had simply come out and asked her. She then had told her mother that it had been about time, and that this was what she had wanted from the beginning. It had turned out that on Hanka there was a legend very similar to the story of soulmates Gabrielle had told them. They had talked for several hours, about Samantha's and Janet's friendship with the Queen and her Consort, their special training, and finally how Janet was able to sense her lover's emotions.

This way, Janet and Samantha would have two hours of potential rest before meeting with Gabrielle and Xena as requested.

They had yet to get over the traumatic events of the last days: the kidnapping of Cassandra, Samantha's fight with Nirrti, and the thwarted robbery in a back street of Washington. So, they both felt the need to reconnect on a more basic level than the touches and glances they had been able to share until then. Janet especially felt the irrefutable need to intimately inspect the blonde's injuries. The check-up naturally and unsurprisingly turned into something else, exploring one another's body as if it had been for the first time.

Shortly before they were to meet with Xena and Gabrielle, Janet securely cradled in her taller lover's arms, she said. "It definitively is worth the risk."

"As Teal'c would say: I agree, Doctor Fraiser," Samantha whispered in her ear. "But what brought this on?"

"It was one of the questions Sabrina asked me yesterday. She asked me if loving you was worth risking ruining my career and yours. It is worth risking everything, Sammie."

"Do you know how much I love you? I love you more than my next breath. I love you more..."

"I don't care if I never again can step through the Gate as long as you are by my side, as long as I get the chance to wake up with you in my arms every morning of every day for the rest of my life."

Janet had closed her eyes. The light that in her mind's eye was Samantha's love for her was shining brighter than ever before. She finally opened her dark brown eyes in wonder and they searched for her blue counterparts.

"You really mean it! Oh god, Sam. The Stargate is your child. You made it happen - and you would give it up to be with me. I love you so much, Samantha Gabriella Carter."

The brunette began to kiss her way down to Samantha's right nipple and rolled herself on top of

her taller lover, careful to keep the weight of her upper body away from her lover's still bandaged rib cage. Though the Amazon bone knitters had done their job, the blonde still was very sore. This time the doctor was going slowly, determined not to make her wince like before when the urgency to reconnect had overwhelmed common sense.

Samantha, however, had other ideas. She tucked the residual pain away in a part of her brain where it didn't interfere anymore, sending a silent thank you to Xena who had taught her how to do it. She turned the tables and started to kiss and suckle her way down Janet's body; lavishing special attention to the subtle curve leading from the waist to the hipbone and gently kissing the butterfly shaped birthmark, an extremely sensitive spot. It didn't take long to reach her real destination but to Janet it seemed like an eternity.

At the beginning of Sam's erotic assault she was close to switching into doctor mode, fearing the blonde would overexert herself. By now, all rational thought had left her. It was as if every square inch of her skin was a raw nerve ending that only could be soothed by her lover's touch.

Her orgasm began to build when Samantha touched the birthmark at her hip with the tip of her tongue, gently and slowly. She shivered when the tongue shortly thereafter entered her folds, eagerly licking up her juices. She undulated her hips to obtain better contact, being instantly rewarded by two lips closing around her unhooded clit. Her blood began to boil and roar in her ears; her back arched, three fingers entered her, her inner muscles clenched.

She pulled the taller woman towards her mouth, suddenly needing more contact. Samantha's hand quickly stroked her to another climax, their lips met and their eyes locked, forgetting everything around them. Two quick showers and a few minutes later and they were only fashionably late for their late lunch date with the Queen and her Consort.

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"Come in, take a seat. There's a lot to talk about. But first, how do you feel, Sam?"

"Still a bit sore when I think about it, but nothing I can't manage or a little TLC won't cure, Your Majesty." The blonde answered with a smile.

"That's good to hear, Sam. And how are you coping, Janet?" Xena asked.

"It wasn't I who was injured two days in a row, Xena. I'm fine."

"You're among friends, Janet. There's no need for pretence."

"Really, I'm fine Gabrielle; I'm fine now. It's not the first time the ones I love have been in danger - and this time nothing serious happened. Cassandra hasn't been harmed, either physically or, it seems, mentally. She's a bit shaken up, but I know her well enough that I believe she will bounce back quickly with all the distractions and new experiences around here.

"Sam saved our baby and was hurt, but she will be fine soon. I was frightened to the core. I always am, but I'm all right now. Everything worked out - besides, what will happen to Nirrti? Will you call the Tok'ra to separate host and symbiote?"

"The Tok'ra know how to do this because we taught them how to do it." Xena and her Queen exchanged a short glance and Gabrielle gave her wife the go-ahead. "Nirrti and Larina are the main reason why we asked to talk to you this soon. I would have preferred to give the two of you more time to regroup, but Egeria has assured us that it has to be done before sunset tomorrow. Please, have a seat."

"I apologise for the frugal meal but it's part of the ritual we will ask you to take part in." On the table in front of the fireplace was a pitcher with water, four cups, and a platter of sliced bread.

"Now, you've gotten me really curious," Samantha muttered while taking her usual place on one of the cushions and pulling Janet towards her.

Gabrielle also took her seat in Xena's arms. "Yesterday, when we were called back to speak with Egeria... it was very special. Egeria usually only speaks to Gabrielle. My presence makes her uncomfortable because I'm responsible..."

A simple gesture kept the Consort from saying whatever she had been trying to say, and looking in her eyes Samantha was sure that it would have been an admission of guilt. So, Gabrielle took over and began to relate what Egeria had told them. She even quoted her word for word.

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"At the beginning of the Tok'ra there were only a few of us, about three dozen. I didn't want to warn our enemies by creating too many dissidents at once. Now, Garshaw and Selmac are the only ones left of this first generation.

"More than a thousand of your years ago, Sokar captured one of my first children. In an attempt to placate the System Lords, he handed her over to them, for questioning and torture. She and her host were strong, very strong.

"They refused to give up any of our operatives or locations, regardless of how many times they tried. Even the sarcophagus didn't work as they predicted. She fought its effect time and time again, making the System Lords so frustrated that they decided to change tactics.

"Instead of trying to extract information, they manipulated the sarcophagus to erase her memories and create an entirely new personality. They made her one of them. The Tok'ra named Tirrin became the Gao'uld Nirrti."


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"Nirrti was Tok'ra? That's incredible. Is there any way to reverse the process?" Janet asked.

"According to Egeria there is," Gabrielle continued, "but we will need your help, Janet, yours and Sam's. You and I will only have to lend them support, keep them anchored in the here and now; Xena and Samantha will have to do the hard work. To reverse the change and bring back Tirrin's personality, they both will have to rely on what is left from their previous hosts. That's the only way Tirrin can be brought back."

"What does Larina want? It's her body we're talking about after all." Samantha wanted to know.

"We told her about the possibilities and she also knows about the risks. There's no question that Larina will be separated from the symbiote. The question is how. We can kill the symbiote or run the risk to it getting killed when we try to give it a new personality and let it join as a new member of the Tok'ra. The third option is to try and restore Tirrin's original personality and let her then change hosts. The Tok'ra movement would be given back one of their oldest members, one of their leaders.

"Larina chose the last option. And before you ask; the Tollans gave us the blueprints for the device they used on Ska'ara. The Tok'ra are on stand-by and will take her as soon as it's successfully done. They assured us that they would have a willing host ready and waiting."

"Why the deadline?"

"Egeria said that once Nirrti is captured, some sort of hypnotic conditioning would kick in. If she doesn't manage to set herself free in what roughly amounts to 72 of your hours, the conditioning will take over and she will try to kill the host. - And before you ask about the time she spent as Cronos' prisoner. We think that he killed her every two or three days and the time in the sarcophagus sort of reset the time frame. It's also possible that he found another way to circumvent the conditioning, after all he had been the System Lords creating her in the first place.

"You said that Larina knows about the risks. What risks are we talking about." Janet wanted to know.

"I don't want to sugar coat this, it won't be easy, healer. Nirrti will try everything she can to stay in control. She could damage the host's central nervous system; and if push comes to shove Xena and Samantha could be overwhelmed by her darkness. That's where we will come in." Gabrielle answered.

Silence fell over the room. Not the comfortable silence both pairs had learned to cherish during their evenings together but a silence laced with insecurities and questions. Finally, Samantha stood and asked. "May we speak in private, Janet and I?"

"Of course, Sam, why don't you go for a short walk or take some fresh air on the porch."  
Samantha helped Janet to her feet and they left through the back door.

"Take me in your arms and hold me, Jan. I don't know why but the whole thing scares me."

"You know, I'll be there for you, Sammy, whatever you decide to do. I love you. It's my job to guard your six."

"It's not for me alone to decide, Jan. Gabrielle said that Xena and I would need your help. You will ground me, and I love you too much to give up on this connection."

"You won't have to, baby. I'll be there for you, no matter what. You're the other half of my soul. I too will not give up on our love."

"So, we'll do it?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, my love. We'll do it. They didn't say anything, but I think that they really need your help. Don't ask me how I know but Gabrielle is worried about Xena."

"She can't be more affected by her former symbiote than I am, right?"

"Theoretically not, Sam, but I have a feeling she is. When you were unconscious, after Xena's fight with Nirrti, she immediately treated you with a healing device. She already had started when Gabrielle and I came running. She was looking straight ahead and I could see her eyes.

"Usually they are sky blue, just like yours; then they were dark blue and rapidly changed to black. She stopped and took a few steps back; then she fell on her knees, her eyes still as black as a dark night.

"The other Amazons seemed to give her a wide berth. Gabrielle slowly stepped closer, making sure to stay in her line of sight. Xena's eye colour began to change back to normal but it took as long as I needed to take care of you."

"So, Xena is more susceptible than I am?"

"I don't know, Sam. All I know is that Gabrielle is afraid of something. Her body language speaks volumes."

"We'll find out soon enough. Let's go and tell them."

The preparations would last the rest of the day and the whole night. So, they first found Cassandra and let her know about their plans. They didn't want the teen to feel left out or left alone. Soon after, Xena and Samantha went to a sweat hut only a few minutes walk from the Queen's forest home while Gabrielle and Janet prepared to spend their time at the temple.

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The next morning Major Davis, General Hammond, and the rest of SG-1 stepped through the Stargate on Gaia. A delegation of elders escorted them to the edge of the forest where the temple was situated. The main entrance looked upon a plain filled with Amazons in traditional garb but without their masks. A small area had been cordoned off for the elders and their guests, including the research team, Cassandra, and Sabrina.

After only a couple of minutes, Melosa, the head priestess of the Amazon Nation arrived. She stood on the top step and bowed her head - a simple gesture but more than enough to bring every single Amazon in attendance on her knees, as well as a considerable number of their visitors. It was a simple sign of respect.

"Members of the Amazon Nation, honoured guests, rise and bear witness."

Larina/Nirrti was led out of a side entrance of the temple. Her feet were hobbled and her hands firmly bound behind her back and attached to a belt around her waist. Her eyes were blazing fire, but a gag kept her from saying anything. In front of the temple was a marble plate, 12 x 12 feet, with different sets of iron rings carefully embedded. Two of the royal guards that escorted her forced her to her knees while the other two fixed her ankle cuffs to two of the rings. A set of chains also fixed her knees to the ground. Another chain went to her collar.

Drums started from seemingly out of nowhere. What at first had sounded rather random; soon became a strange but hypnotising rhythm, even Teal'c had a hard time resisting. The rhythm changed to something more regular and less mind-consuming.

Xena and Samantha approached the prisoner from opposite sides, and O'Neill's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw his XO. Not that anyone could have blamed him; she was a sight to behold. She was wearing a simple dark blue tunic with ample cleavage and ending mid-thigh. Her feet were bare, and she seemed to radiate energy.

The rhythm and the volume of the drums changed again as soon as they reached the prisoner, standing on each side of the bound woman. The Queen and Doctor Fraiser left the temple. They both bowed to the priestess and for a second time this morning O'Neill's breath almost stopped. The small doctor was wearing Amazon leathers that left little to the imagination and perfectly matched the colour of her hair. She stopped two steps behind Samantha, the drums fell silent, and the priestess began to chant.

Daniel cocked his head in an effort to understand. The language sounded vaguely familiar and reminded him of ancient Greek, but at the same time it was totally different, much older, somehow. He cast a questioning glance to Sabrina who began to translate the words as if she had heard it her entire life.

"...here to witness the liberation of two souls, one trapped in her own body, the other one enslaved by the forces of evil for more than 10 centuries. Open your hearts for what will come

and pave the way for those who will risk their own souls to get them back."

Xena and Samantha fell to their knees, and Janet stepped directly behind her lover and put her hands on the blonde's shoulder. On the other side Gabrielle did the same. Xena entwined the fingers of her right hand with Samantha's left behind Nirrti's back. The Consort's left hand lay on the prisoner's forehead and the blonde's right on her heart. Nirrti tried to skirt away from the touch, but she was too tightly bound. A wave of energy seemed to pulse through her body.

"May Gaia give them strength."

As if in answer the Amazons began to chant. "Gaia protect them! Gaia protect them! Gaia protect them! Gaia protect them!" Again and again. The rhythm and the tone of their voices seemed to energise the whole plain.

O'Neill was vaguely aware of Daniel and Cassandra and a few others joining in - and despite his special ops training he had a hard time to resist the pull of the voices.

The sun was still climbing up and there was not a single cloud to be seen, but Jack was convinced that the light somehow focused on the five women in front of him, enveloping them in a bright light he instinctively associated with Asgard teleportation beams.

They stayed perfectly still. Janet's and Gabrielle's eyes were closed, a smile gracing their faces. Samantha's eyes were focused on her right hand, and squinting his own eyes he could see their colour change from the familiar sky blue to pale blue to white - and suddenly they were glowing as if she was possessed by a Gao'uld.

All his instincts commanded him to sprint over and somehow shake her out of it but he stayed on his seat, his trust in his second-in-command overruling his misgivings. Xena's eyes also began to glow, as did Nirrti's who pulled on her restraints to no avail.

They stayed like this for a long time, perfectly still - but Jack could see the strain it put on the women. Sweat was pouring down Samantha's face and Janet's hand that stayed calm under the most strenuous circumstances slightly began to tremble. The Amazons still repeated their chant and he silently added his own mantra. "Let them succeed; let them be okay!"

Jack lost track of time while he concentrated his attention on the Gao'uld and its host.

Her breathing rhythm seemed to gradually slow down. Her eyes slowly closed, but she still fought her restraints. Xena's and Samantha's eyes now were also closed. After another half eternity, the priestess joined them and began to undo Nirrti's restraints beginning with the gag.

His hand automatically went to his side, but at the request of their hosts they had come unarmed. To Jack's utter surprise she didn't even try to get away or say something; she just held her position. The priestess returned to her spot at the entrance of the temple and the chanting abruptly stopped.

Finally the prisoner's breathing returned to a more normal rate and she opened her eyes, but he was sure that she wasn't really aware of her surroundings. She just stared straight ahead, her arms hanging lifelessly at her sides. The sun seemed to reflect in her eyes and once again they seemed to glow.

She put her left hand on top of Samantha's and her right on top of Xena's. They both opened their eyes and smiled at the other woman. "I am Tirrin, child of Egeria. I am Tok'ra."

Once again the voice of the priestess filled the whole plain and reached to the last row of the waiting women. "Tirrin of the Tok'ra, you are welcome on Gaia. May we speak with your host?"

"Of course," the woman lowered her head and looked up to the priestess. "I am Larina, captain of the Royal Guard of Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation. I speak freely and without censure."

At this moment the silently watching Amazons jumped to their feet and began to shout. "Hail Larina! Hail Xena! Hail Samantha!"

Janet and Gabrielle helped their partners to stand and they in turn assisted the former Gao'uld. The priestess silenced the assembly with a small wave of her hand.

"Women of Gaia, visitors from Earth, today you had the honour to witness a moment in the history of the Amazon Nation that shall forever be remembered and revered.

"Today, one of our warriors has been returned to us, and our time of mourning has finally come to an end. Today, a great evil has been destroyed, never to return, thanks to the spiritual powers of two great warriors we are honoured to count among our numbers.

"Today, the child of Egeria has been freed. She who was forced to be Nirrti now once again is Tirrin. She who has been tortured by the evil that is Gao'uld; she who has suffered for more than a thousand years now can once again take her life into her own hands.

"Today, Earth and Gaia for the first time in almost two thousand years have joined forces; what has been severed now can become one again. Keep this day in your hearts and in your minds forever. - And now please return to your assigned tasks. The party will begin at sundown."

Melosa joined the Queen and the other women. "I'll send word to the Tok'ra to come two candlemarks before sunset. You all should try and get some sleep."

"Thank you, my friend. We'll hold the party at the guest palace; this way the men will have the opportunity to take part in the festivities. Please entertain General Hammond and his men while we rest. - Larina, Tirrin, do you want to rest in your own home or would you prefer to use one of our guest quarters?"

"The guest quarters will be fine, my Queen. I want to be my real self before I return home - no offence meant, Tirrin."

The tall woman lowered her head for a moment and the deeper, double-toned voice of the symbiote answered. "None taken, Larina. I understand better than you may think."

~\*~

Samantha and Janet returned to their room, and as soon as the door closed behind them Janet took the taller woman protectively in her arms. "Are you all right, Sammy-baby?"

"You saw what I saw, Jan. What do you think?" The blonde answered defensively.

"I only saw it, but you also felt it. That's a big difference, my love. I'm always there if you want to talk, and if you don't want to talk I'll simply hold you in my arms for as long as you need me to."

"I want to talk, my love. I need to talk but I don't know where to begin."

"Let's sit down, baby." Janet urged.

"We wouldn't have been able to do it without you and Gabrielle. You were our strength, our light. It would have been so easy to succumb to the darkness emanating from Nirrti. All these atrocities committed in the name of scientific research, and we had to see and feel it all before we reached what was left of Tirrin. She was so paralysed from everything she had to live through.

"We destroyed Nirrti just as sure as if she had been hit over and over again with a staff weapon. It was a team effort. It wasn't just Xena and I. Alone we probably wouldn't have stood a chance, but we were not alone. You were there and Gabrielle and Larina and Jolinar and Artemis. - Jolinar wants to talk to you."

Samantha disentangled herself from Janet's embrace and closed her eyes. Her voice seemed slightly deeper than normal.

"Thank you, Janet. Thank you for helping us today. I never met Tirrin. She had been changed before I joined the Tok'ra, but she is a legend among us. Thank you for taking care of Samantha. She needs your love like air to breathe. Your connection is so strong. Thank you for loving her."

When Samantha once again opened her eyes, Janet stared at her open-mouthed. "Janet, are you all right?" No reaction. "Janet, speak to me; look at me, please!"

"What the hell just happened? How did she control you? Xena said she wouldn't be able to do something like this. We have to do something to get her out of you."

The blonde closed her fingers around Janet's smaller hands and drew her closer to her body until

she practically cradled her in her lap. "Everything's all right, Jan. Jolinar didn't control me. I allowed her to speak. She's no threat, not now, not ever. I'm still me, and I love you. She was right, you know, I need your love even more than I need air to breathe."

"But how did it work? Why..."

"Why did her memories not so long ago cause me pain and confusion, and now it is almost as if she were still within me?" The brunette nodded. "I can't explain it in medical terms but technically speaking, Jolinar is nothing more than an erased memory block on a hard drive. The information it contained is still there, but it can no longer be accessed. After her death I tried to make sure that the memory stayed this way. However, a human mind is no hard drive which simply needs reformatting to once again work properly."

"Bits and pieces of her memories began to pop up every now and then, and I decided to use them. Xena's lessons and your help gave me the courage to run some sort of backup program and salvage the erased memory blocks."

"And now, they are in a special folder, ready for easy access?"

"In a way, yes. There isn't a second voice in my head or something, giving her two-cents to everything, but now I can easily access her memories if I want to. I no longer feel her influence."

Janet still didn't look entirely convinced.

"I'm sorry for not explaining myself better, my love. It's entirely possible that my mind conjured the image of speaking with Jolinar as an unconscious filter to protect me from the darker part of her memories. It's possible that 'letting' her speak is nothing more than my own unconscious making itself known. Is it really important to you to find out? I'll speak with a shrink if you want me to." Samantha said with earnest.

Janet kissed her taller lover, and when she saw the scared expression in her eyes, there no longer was any doubt for her.

"I love you, Sam. And no, it's not important. Jolinar gave her life for you. In a way it's comforting to know that some part of her survived. Let's go and get some sleep, my love. We both need it, and this sure will be one hell of a party."

Samantha started to summon her puppy dog look. "No, Sammie-baby, we can't stay away and hide. All of our friends will be there. But we'll try to make it an early evening, I promise."

They quickly discarded their clothing and slipped under the light summer comforter, the almost sleepless nights and the physical and emotional stress of the last days finally catching up with them.

~\*~

One hell of a party, indeed! - Samantha had fun, though Janet insisted that she kept to juices and water because she still was on light painkillers. Observing how O'Neill wasted his best pick-up lines on clearly disinterested Amazons was almost as hilarious as Daniel trying to learn one of the easier dances. Shortly after midnight, however, she needed a break and left the guest palace to seek a few minutes of peace and quiet. All in all this evening on a scale from one to ten definitively rated an eight in weirdness, at least an eight.

A few minutes before the scheduled arrival of the Tok'ra the lovers had sought out the rest of SG-1, to tell Teal'c and O'Neill about their new relationship.

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Janet felt slightly uneasy at the prospect because she knew of Jack's feelings for his second-in-command, but SG-1 was more than a team, in every aspect but blood they were a real family. They had the right to know.

Samantha had mentally practised what she wanted to say but the words simply refused to leave her mouth when she stood in front of her best friends. So, Janet took over and crossed her fingers that Jack's reaction wouldn't hurt her lover too much.

"Well, it was pretty obvious after the show you put on in a certain hotel room in Washington, and I have to say it took the two of you long enough to figure it out. More than three years is a damned long time to finally admit what everyone else could see right from the beginning. And they tell me that you're our resident genius, Carter."

"Indeed, Major Carter." Teal'c said with something as close to a smile as Janet had ever seen him.

The blonde stared at them for a moment and then smiled. "So, who won the pot?"

"No one. We were not patient enough and gave up on you." Daniel chimed in.

"That would be a first. Daniel Jackson, remember I'm the one with the needles. So, who won and how much?"

"No can tell; it was anonymous, but we're talking about almost 700 bucks, the biggest pot ever." O'Neill answered.

Samantha sought Teal'c's eyes, but he only imperceptibly raised his eyebrow.

Then their attention was drawn to the arrival of an alkesh landing on the left side of the guest palace. The Queen and her Consort left the palace in the company of General Hammond. All

three of them were wearing ceremonial garb; the General was in dress blues, Gabrielle in leathers and mask, and Xena in her wide leather trousers and dress shirt.

Samantha and Janet looked at each other. In preparation for the party they had donned comfortable jeans. Janet's were light blue combined with a white shirt and a simple, purple cardigan draped over her shoulders. Samantha's jeans were dark grey with a long sleeved sweatshirt in pink and white. The men also wore civvies.

When the Queen and the others were about fifty paces from the ship, the door finally opened and Garshaw/Yussef stepped out, followed by Selmac/Jacob and a young, doe-eyed woman, soon to be Tirrin's new host. The blond soldier instinctively wanted to go and hug her father, but one of Xena's hand signals held her back.

For a couple of minutes they exchanged formalities. To Janet they all looked rather tense. Then Garshaw's host took control and everything changed. She took two steps forward and then lowered herself on her right knee. "My Queen..."

"Rise, Yussef, my child. It's good to see you again."

"It's been too long, my second mother." The woman answered while standing up and giving the smaller woman a heartfelt hug that was willingly returned. Then she turned to Xena and was engulfed in the taller woman's arms.

"Will we have time to talk?"

"We have orders to return as soon as possible. The High Council is anxious to meet Tirrin." Yussef answered before Garshaw took over. "I'm sorry, Xena. We have to return as soon as possible. Having Tirrin back will considerably change the balance of power in the High Council. Some of us count on her strategic mind, others on her scientific knowledge, others on her wisdom and compassion.

"May I introduce, Queen Gabrielle, Consort Xena. This is Gabro. She volunteered to blend with Tirrin."

The young woman stepped at Garshaw's side. "I'm honoured to meet those who saved my symbiote-to-be."

"We are honoured to meet someone willing to share her life and her mind." Xena answered. She turned her head towards Samantha and Janet and simply nodded. When they had joined the small group she continued. "May I introduce Samantha Carter and Janet Fraiser. It was their help that made our endeavour successful."

The young woman moved to bow to them, but Samantha stopped her. "No, there's no need. We are humbled that we have been able to help. May I ask a question?" Gabro nodded. "I learned that there are three kinds of humans willing to blend with a Tok'ra. Those mortally ill, as my father was, those acting out of hatred and a need for revenge, and those fighting the Gao'uld

because it is the right thing to do. I don't want to offend you in any way, but why do you want to be blended?"

"Sokar killed my family; he destroyed the whole planet, except for a few of us. He left us alive to bear witness of his greatness. He used us as an example when coming to new a planet. Sokar may be dead, but no one should be forced to live through something like this. So, I guess I'm part of the second group, Samantha Carter."

"No, you are not. Garshaw and Selmac wouldn't have chosen you if hatred and revenge were all there is on your mind." Larina said joining the group from the direction of the guest palace with the weapons' master at her side. "My mate Niva requests the honour to guard the transference."

"Of course." Gabro said with a small bow and the three of them walked towards a tent at the edge of the forest.

When the flaps of the tent closed behind them Jacob Carter for the first time made his presence known. He hugged his daughter and then greeted the others, beginning with General Hammond. "The transference will take some time. Why don't you seize the chance to have a chat with Queen Gabrielle, Yussef?"

"Good idea, Jacob. If you are agreeable, my Queen?"

"Let's go for a walk. Xena would you entertain our guests?"

"It will be my pleasure, my Queen." She answered and followed them with her eyes for a long time before turning her attention back to the others. "Doctor Jackson, you look like you have a lot of questions."

"It's noth..., I'm confused, your highness. The Tok'ra practically told us to stay away from the Amazons, but what I just witnessed didn't look like there was much tension or mistrust."

"The message to the SGC," Selmac answered for Xena, "was sent without Garshaw's or my consent, with a majority of one vote."

"As you know almost all Tok'ra are the children of Egeria, but of the first generation only two are left, now three, Garshaw, Tirrin, and myself. The others are much younger and they resent the Amazons and their rulers because our mother, our creator chose them over us."

"Some two hundred years ago, a group of renegade Tok'ra tried to abduct her. They wanted her to create another generation to gain strength in numbers." Xena said.

"Renegade Tok'ra? Doesn't that make them Gao'uld?" Jack wondered.

"No," Selmac answered. "They just thought that our long term approach wasn't working and that we lost ourselves in politics instead of preparing for war. Personally, I think that the answer is somewhere in the middle, as does Garshaw and the High Councillor Per'sus. At the moment we

are slightly outnumbered. It's as Garshaw said, Tirrin's return will change the balance of power."

Silence fell over the group. "It's not only about Egeria. Some of the Tok'ra resent the Queen and the Consort because they are immortal, and because they cannot be used as hosts." Samantha suddenly said. "Anise is one of them."

"That's why she is not welcome on Gaia. The last time she was here, she sneaked into our bedroom to try and get a sample of Gabrielle's blood."

"I remember," Selmac continued, "she ended up with the needle in her behind and was unceremoniously tossed through the wormhole. This story is the only thing that keeps Jacob from throttling her whenever she comes up with one of her hair-brained plans."

"She wasn't tossed, Selmac. The Queen simply had her escorted to Athena's ring," the Consort corrected him with mock indignation.

"Oh, yes, escorted - and made her land face first in the sand."

"Can I help it when she's clumsy and stumbles over my foot when stepping through?" The tall warrior asked innocently.

The wry humour made them change topics to less serious matters and for the next candlemark and a half they talked and bantered after having made themselves comfortable on the sun dried grass and accepting some refreshments. The guest palace was bustling with party preparations, so they unanimously had opted to stay out of the way.

Only a few candledrops after Queen Gabrielle and Garshaw/Yussef had joined them the flaps of the tent opened. Larina and Gabra stepped out. The Amazon immediately took her bondmate in her arms and kissed her soundly. By the time the three of them reached the Queen's party the others were back on their feet.

Larina knelt in front of the Royals. "Request permission to skip the party, your Majesty."

"Permission granted. Go and reconnect with your wife, but don't forget, whenever you need to talk, Xena and I will listen."

"Thank you, my Queen." She rose and they turned towards the village.

"Queen Gabrielle, Consort Xena, Samantha Carter, Janet Fraiser, please accept my heartfelt thanks for making this blending possible." Gabro said in her own voice. "Tirrin and I will always be in your debt. The transference was very taxing for her, and she still is resting, but she hopes to have the opportunity to thank you personally one day soon."

"It will be our pleasure to have you visit whenever it suits you." The Queen answered.

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They said their good-byes, but then Jacob Carter turned around. "Samantha, may I have a word?"

"Of course, Selmac." They took a few steps away from the others to have a modicum of privacy. "Is something wrong with my father?"

"No, not really. He's angry right now, very angry but given time, I'll get him to calm down."

Samantha managed to keep her internal reaction from showing on her face. She could have feigned ignorance, but she had to know. "So, he knows about Janet and me?"

"Yes, he knows. He has shown signs of being judgmental in the past, but I never expected such a strong reaction when I told him. He should be glad that his daughter finally has found the other half of her soul." Seeing the blonde's deer-in-the-headlights expression, Selmac quietly chuckled. "Oh, please, don't look at me as if I have suddenly grown two additional heads - and don't worry. Not everyone can see your connection, but it's obvious if you know what to look for."

"Your father won't make any problems for you, not on Earth, not elsewhere. I will work on him, and he will come around. He might be stubborn, but I am Tok'ra, I know how to wait things out. One day you will have his blessing."

"Please don't get yourself into trouble with my father. I knew how he would react. When I turned 18 I told him that I was gay, and he didn't speak to me for the next three years. I tried to live up to his expectations and got engaged."

"What I have with Janet is too important for me to back off. I fear he will not either. I can live with his wrath." She answered softly, a mixture of resignation and determination in her voice.

"You won't have to, Samantha; that's a promise. Your father is proud and stubborn, but he also is proud of you, and he loves you with every fibre of his heart. He will come around. I have to go now."

"Thank you for telling me, Selmac. May the stars shine on your success."

"We never shared that specific saying with the Tau'ri." Selmac said with surprise.

"Consort Xena taught me how to better communicate with what is left of Jolinar. I would be grateful if you kept this to yourself. The High Council used my memories of her once. I don't want that to happen again."

"I will honour your request, Samantha."

"Thank you, Selmac."

Janet joined her lover, immediately after Selmac/Jacob had left her. Her lover's body language told her that this was not good news, and she also felt that Samantha was in emotional pain. The blonde visibly relaxed when she felt Janet's hand at the small of her back. "Let's go for a walk, Sammy-baby."

As soon as they were in the forest and out of sight, Janet found a comfortable spot at the base of an old oak tree and took her lover protectively in her arms.

One and a half candlemarks later, with the party already in full swing, Samantha was composed enough to return and participate. The doctor hadn't been able to put all her worries to rest, but she was much calmer now. The knowledge that she loved Janet and was loved by her, unconditionally, was all she really needed.

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A voice snapped her back to the here and now. "Samantha Carter, I don't want to disturb you in your contemplation but there's something I have to say."

"You didn't disturb me. Go ahead. What can I do for you?"

The captain of the Royal Guard knelt down in front of her. "Major Carter, I came to apologise for what I did to you while Nirrti was in my body. I hurt you and yet you helped to save Tirrin and me. I wanted you to know that I already notified the Queen and my commanding officer. I want to pay for what I did to you, but they both said that pressing charges would be entirely up to you. So, please, let justice be served." The woman said and then lowered her eyes to the ground.

"Please stand up, Larina. It wasn't you that hurt me. You were not in control. I know how that feels, and I know it won't make you feel less guilty, but it's the truth."

"Nirrti used my fighting skills, and Amazon warriors are trained to withstand mental controlling. I am responsible, and have to pay for what I did to you and what I almost did to the girl." Larina answered stubbornly, never moving a muscle.

"Have a seat next to me, would you? I want to tell you a story." Samantha said while sitting down and leaning back against the wall. Larina reluctantly complied. "A couple of years ago the Gao'uld attacked a peaceful world named Nasyia. They had been left alone for more than three hundred years, and we hadn't been there long enough to attract any attention. Deathgliders were over our heads, trying to kill as many people as possible. I was trying to revive one of the Nasyian men when I suddenly found myself a prisoner in my own body.

"I'm a soldier; I too was trained to fight outside influences, but there was nothing I could do. I lied to my commanding officer, to my friends. I threatened an innocent child, a child I love as if she were my own. I scared her so badly. No, Jolinar scared her but I felt guilty. I tried to reason with what I thought was a Gao'uld, to bargain with it, but she couldn't be swayed.

"I later learned that she simply had been too afraid to tell me the truth from the beginning, and she gave her life to save mine in the end.

"Cassandra, the child I threatened, has forgiven me a long time ago, but even now there are moments when I can't help but feel guilty for what I did to her. No amount of punishment will ever change this, and if I insisted on being punished it would belittle Cassandra's and my friend's forgiveness. Of course they still insist that there's nothing to forgive.

"I think it is all a question of perspectives. Now, it's your turn to decide what point of view you want to take, Larina."

"I know that's what Consort Xena said, but I had to try; and I still think that I somehow should pay for what my body did during all these moons." Larina answered.

"Master Niva will help you to live with your memories. But there's something you could do for me, Captain. I'd consider it an honour if you would consent to become my teacher. Next to Consort Xena and Master Niva, you're the best fighter I have ever seen. I want to avoid something like this happening again."

"I'd be honoured to be counted among your teachers, Samantha Carter. You have given me a lot to think about. If you'll excuse me, there's someone else waiting to speak to you."

Samantha looked towards the light coming out of the doorway, outlining a very familiar figure. She jumped to her feet and stood at attention. "General Hammond, Sir!"

"Relax, Samantha. The general is off-duty."

"Uncle George?"

"Yes, little one. I just wanted you to know that I approve of your choice. Janet Fraiser is all I ever wanted the partner of my goddaughter to be. She's beautiful, smart, caring, cunning, compassionate, strong enough to let you know when you're out of line, understanding enough to forgive you when you still get carried away, wise enough to know when to rely on your strength. From the very beginning her friendship has been good for you, Sam, and your love will make you a better and stronger person. Even blowing up a star can't compare to true love. I'm happy for both of you."

"Thank you, Uncle George, but how did you find out?" The blonde asked visibly stunned.

"Samantha, give me some credit here. I've known you all your life, how could I miss something as important as you falling in love. I knew that you were in love with her before you even suspected, and I spent enough time waiting with her in the control room for you to come back from a mission to know that the feeling was mutual. I knew when you came back to the SGC for the first time.

"It was only a question of time. Doctor Fraiser cares for all her patients. She sits with all her critical patients, but she only sings for you. Last time it took a direct order and Teal'c as an escort to pry her away from your bedside to get some rest herself."

"What about the SGC? What about Air Force regulations?"

"Everyone at the SGC knows that the two of you are close friends, best friends even. As long as you don't get caught making out in one of the storage closets I don't see any problems. The General won't ask and you won't tell."

Samantha blinked in surprise and a heartbeat later one of her rare smiles spread over her face.

"So, what do you intend to do with your win, Uncle George?"

"Win? As the commanding officer of the SGC I do not condone betting, young lady." He said with a smile. "Now, go and get back to your love before she decides to dance with someone else. You've done enough sulking in the dark for one night."

All the tall blonde could think of doing was to give the older man a hug and whisper. "Thank you, Uncle George. Your blessing means a lot to me."

"You're welcome, little one." He answered; and then walked towards the path leading to the Stargate where a group of people already were waiting for him, including a pouting Colonel Jack O'Neill who thought that he just was cheated out of the better part of the festivities.

Five out of six, she thought when she started back towards the party, not bad as a track record, but still it had been a weird evening, far exceeding an eight. This bordered on 9.5 - at least.

For a few seconds, she thought about topping it with a slow, sensual dance with her lover, but when she found Janet half asleep next to a bonfire they both decided to call it a night. They quickly fell asleep, after making sure that the alarm was set for 08:30 the next morning.

A message from the Queen had asked them to come to breakfast at ten. As after every full scale Amazon celebration there wouldn't be much work done the next day; so Samantha didn't feel guilty about missing her training's session - especially since she was convinced that the weapons' master had more important and more pleasurable things to do.

[Continued in GAIA pt. VI](#)

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# ~ GAIA ~

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Disclaimer: [See Part 1](#)

## Chapter Ten: Shadows of the Past

They were right on time and breakfast was waiting for them on the back porch. They talked about the party and finally Janet asked about Yussef. "You two seem very close, Gabrielle."

"It's been more than twenty years since we last had the opportunity to talk privately. It's a simple story: We found her some 300 years ago when she was barely more than a toddler. Her parents were dead and we raised her. She became a member of the Royal Guard and on one of our rare joint missions with the Tok'ra, Garshaw's former host was wounded beyond her ability to heal her. Yussef volunteered."

The Queen's answer lacked her usual detail and thoroughness. This led the two Air Force Officers to believe that there was a lot more to this story than she was ready to tell. "I didn't want to bring up hurtful memories, Queen Gabrielle."

"You didn't, Janet. In fact we asked you to come here because we think that you deserve to know the whole story about what happened yesterday, and why it worked. In a way Yussef is a part of this story. I suggest we go inside and make ourselves comfortable." Xena said.

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They took their usual seats to the right and left of the unlit fireplace with Gabrielle nestled in Xena's arms and Samantha cradling Janet. They had spent many evenings this way, talking about SG-1's missions and Amazon history, about their days in the infirmary and the laboratories. They found that there were very few topics they couldn't discuss; sometimes very passionately.

"Xena usually is not one for many words; that's more my domain. But today my Consort insists that she has to be the one telling the story that has to be told."

"Gabrielle had just found Yussef. She was three years old and alone in a big city where no one cared if she lived or died. Her mother had died a couple of days earlier, and she was aimlessly wandering the streets. She clung to Gabrielle as if she were a lifeline. We couldn't take away her pain, but we could offer her a new life; so we brought her back to Gaia.

"Our annual trip to the other planets was about to begin, but Yussef was still very shy with strangers; so we decided that for once I would go without the Queen. All these new faces and



places would be too disturbing, too frightening for the girl.

"We had a new scout ship, faster than anything the Gao'uld ever had, and I was eager to test its flight capabilities. At first I wanted to go alone. The Queen's Consort doesn't necessarily warrant a Royal Guard and I was sure that I would be able to deal with any threats without help. On a whim Athena offered to come with me. She told me that she had a case of cabin fever.

"The trip went smoothly and we were way ahead of schedule. On the way back to Gaia we received a distress signal from the Tok'ra. Artemis had a bad feeling about it, but Athena and I wanted to help. We intercepted the ship and ran into an ambush. We escaped but Athena was severely injured." Xena said with pain in her voice.

Gabrielle subtly changed her position, allowing her to put a comforting hand on her wife's back. "Artemis also was wounded and too weak to heal her host. She needed a new host and I was the only one available. We both knew that it could only be a temporary solution because my body sooner or later would reject the symbiote due to the changes she herself had made in my physiology and body chemistry.

"If I hadn't been too arrogant to take a couple of guards, they never would have been able to harm Athena.

"As soon as the transference was made, Athena's body changed. She became pure, white energy and simply disappeared. Artemis' knowledge and feelings were overwhelming for me.

"I could feel the pain Athena's passing caused her, and I could feel her anger at having walked into an ambush - her growing need for revenge. It was a feeling I could relate to and it grew stronger every minute, fuelled by my own darkness.

"Artemis has always been a warrior, but she was a warrior without darkness in her heart or her soul. She enjoyed her skills, but she always tried not to kill. This changed the moment she blended with me.

"The darkness in my soul was poisoning her, step by step. I could feel it growing inside of me and of her, and I knew that I would lose the battle. It was an all too familiar feeling.

"I programmed an automated course back to Gaia, disabled my access codes, left a note, and locked myself in one of the storage rooms." The raven haired woman fell silent.

"When the ship landed..." Gabrielle continued.

"Please, my love. I have to tell this story." Xena pleaded.

"I know, Xena, but I don't have to like it. Take your time." Gabrielle answered.

"By the time the ship arrived on Gaia I had reverted back to what I once was: Xena, Destroyer of Nations. There was no love and no compassion left in me, only the desire to kill all those

responsible for Athena's death. I wanted revenge.

"After sedating me and getting me off the ship, Gabrielle and Egeria were successful in separating my body from the symbiote but the darkness was not easily overcome. Artemis was as helpless against it as I was, but she at least tried to fight it.

"I didn't; I greeted the darkness like an old friend, the old friend it is for me. Artemis was held in a suspension tank, but Egeria had no way to bring her old personality back. So, she erased her memory and gave her a new Tok'ra identity."

"Jolinar!" Samantha said slightly stunned. "That's why the thing with Tirrin worked. Artemis and Jolinar did it. Xena and I were only along for the ride."

"No, Samantha, you're wrong. When Egeria first explained to us what had to be done, Xena and I thought that we could handle it alone. We didn't want you in harm's way. She warned us that Nirrti's darkness was too strong for Xena to face alone, even with my help. She could have fallen prey to it once again. We all were needed to succeed. You were far more than just along for the ride. Please, my love, let me tell the rest." Gabrielle asked.

"No, Gabrielle. It's my fault and my shame, so it also is my duty to talk about it. It may have happened 300 years ago, but it still burns in my soul. And I have to do this the right way."

The tall woman closed her eyes for a moment and scooted out from behind her wife. She knelt with her back to the fireplace, her knees slightly apart, and her hands with the palms upwards on top of her knees.

Over the last few weeks Samantha had learned enough about Amazon ways and customs to let her heart hurt at the sight of the formidable warrior in such a position of servitude. Her eyes quickly wandered towards the Queen whose face spoke loudly of her misgivings and the pain she felt at her partner's self-humiliation.

"I speak as one who has sinned against the Amazon Nation. I speak as one who has sinned against her Queen, and against her wife. I speak as one who has dishonoured herself. Hear the story of my shame."

"Xena, this isn't necessary." Janet said unable to stand it any longer.

"It is, Janet. It's necessary for both of you. In time you will understand. Let me do what has to be done." The kneeling woman answered.

There was so much pain in her eyes; every instinct and every nerve ending in her body told the small doctor to somehow make it stop. However, after having witnessed Samantha dealing with the aftermath of Jolinar's actions and her sacrifice, she knew that sometimes talking, confessing was the only way to ease the burden of guilt.

"I think I understand, your highness. Accept my apologies for the delay."

Xena took a deep breath and then looked directly at Samantha and Janet while speaking. "Hear the story of my shame!"

"From the very beginning there was darkness in my soul. After my brother died, Ares used that darkness and I became a warlord. I was barely alive when Caesar put me on a cross. I only survived because Ares left his host and joined with me. He didn't try to control me, but instead fuelled my anger and darkness. He revelled in my ruthlessness and whispered encouragements to me.

"I left Greece and headed east. At the time I was nothing more than a killing machine, that's all I was interested in. One day I met a woman and wanted to kill her, but without even trying she beat me, and only a few days later she saved my life and sent Ares running. She touched me and he left my body and fled into one of my soldiers - though at the time I didn't understand what had happened to me."

"Ares was gone, but the darkness in my soul lingered as strong as before. Over the years I learned to control it. Usually the darkness in my soul only makes itself known when I have to fight a battle or use the healing device.

"By the time we had arrived back at Gaia the darkness had won, and it became even stronger when I was separated from the symbiote. Despite everything Artemis' strength had held it at bay.

"Everything for which I had fought for hundreds of years; everything I held sacred was forgotten. Everything I had felt, everything I stood for all of a sudden didn't have any worth anymore. There was only one dominant thought in my mind: I wanted revenge.

"I wanted to kill the ones responsible for setting the trap that had killed Athena and ultimately Artemis. I wanted to kill them with my bare hands and I didn't care what I would have to do to achieve this goal. Gabrielle felt the darkness in my heart, and she tried to snap me out of it by telling me about our past, our love, our people, but I was blind to the light she offered.

"They held me prisoner, but when I stopped threatening the Queen and stopped trying to escape, the guards became complacent, and I was able to get free. I took the Queen hostage and forced the Royal Guard to follow my command. We found the trail of the cargo ship and tracked them to a trading outpost, neutral territory. Three of our attackers were still alive. I killed two of them and tortured the last. They were head-hunters, free lancers. Shiva, a minor Gao'uld with aspirations of becoming a System Lord, had put a price out for every Tok'ra or supporter of the Tok'ra. We were just a chance hit and I held him responsible.

"His home planet was easy to find and he obviously felt very safe there. It was almost too easy to get my hands on him; there was no satisfaction in it for me at all. We simply walked in his palace and brought him to our ship via a ring transporter. His personal guard was not worth the price of their weapons. I killed them, and then slowly began to torture him; nothing any Ashrak ever did to his victims comes close to what I made him endure. I literally cut him to pieces. Gabrielle pleaded with me. She wanted me to back off, but I didn't listen.

"He was dead, but my need for revenge was far from satisfied. It still burned in my soul, and I would have done everything to satisfy it. So, I set out to destroy every sign that he ever existed. We captured a Ha'tac belonging to Ra and used it to destroy every temple ever erected in his name; I didn't care how many people were in there. Sometimes it was an air raid; sometimes we went down to a planet and planted a bomb. The others refused at first. Their thirst for revenge had been assuaged by the death of the head-hunters and the end of Shiva. They only complied when I threatened to kill Gabrielle the same way I had killed Shiva.

"Eleven planets all but shot to ruins, hundreds of people dead, dozens killed by my own hands. We left Ra's ship in orbit of the main planet and returned to Gaia.

"The only good it did was that Shiva's sons Ganesha and Karttikeya held Ra responsible, and destroyed a big part of his fleet, to the point of threatening his position as a System Lord."

The tall warrior fell silent and a single glance at the Queen's face told the other women that the worst was yet to come. Xena took another deep breath but now her eyes refused to meet anyone else's in the room.

"When we returned to Gaia three squadrons were ready to overwhelm me and fight for the liberty of their Queen. They were willing to die in order to save her but Gabrielle stopped them. She ordered them to leave us alone and not to interfere, under any circumstances.

"This house didn't exist yet; in its place was a small hut for honeymoons and spiritual retreats. I brought her here and kept her as my slave. All I did was drink and drill. When I was training, I had her restrained and always in my line of sight. She was nothing more than an object for me, a possession, something to command. Gabrielle daily tried to reach me; she tried to get me to see reason, to get me to remember our love.

"In time I began to listen and to remember. I remembered the good times; all the centuries we stood together, all the times we made love, but I couldn't stand it. One night I woke up, and I didn't see the plaything, the slave. Instead I saw someone not deterred by the hardships I put her through. She told me daily that she still loved me and after a fortnight I bolted.

"I also remembered the bad times and the sacrifices she'd made, when she had jumped down a lava pit, trying to save my life, when I had dragged her behind a horse, when we found ourselves side by side on a Roman cross. I couldn't stand it any longer. I knew I didn't deserve her. I took the cargo ship and left. It was hard to accept what I had allowed myself to become but I also couldn't stay away for long. So, I offered myself up to Amazon justice."

She raised her eyes from the ground and looked straight at Samantha and Janet.

"No amount of punishment can wash away my guilt or my shame. These feelings are a part of who I am and they always will be, just as much as I still feel guilty for the first village I ever raided. The darkness is an integral part of me. Your participation made it easier for me to withstand the temptation of darkness. I'll always be in your debt."

"It was our honour to help, your highness." Samantha answered. "We know of the temptation to follow the call for revenge, and to act out against those we love when we're hurt. What happened then will in no way influence our respect for you."

"If it does anything, your confession elevates our respect for you. Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us, your highness." Janet confirmed and emphasised her lover's words.

Xena looked at both of them with unbelieving eyes. "Please, excuse me!" She practically fled the room and silence fell.

Samantha's eyes were locked on the closing door for what seemed to Janet a long time. The blond head turned and the doctor only nodded. "Where can I find her, Queen Gabrielle?"

"Either at the training grounds or at the smithy. Physical exertion has always been her favourite way to deal with emotional stress."

"I'll check the smithy first. If you would excuse me, your majesty." The Queen nodded, Samantha kissed her partner and left the house. The doctor was hard on her heels when Gabrielle called her back.

"My place is with Sam." Janet said defiantly, but still stopped dead in her tracks.

"Not this time, Janet. Give them some space; this is a warrior thing. Xena won't be able to let go of her old demons, if she doesn't get the chance to tell the parts of the story she has, if not totally left out, glossed over. The fortnight we spent at the cabin in retrospect was a lot harder on her than it was on me.

"The whole time she held me captive, I knew that she never would really hurt me. I knew that her love for me was stronger than all the darkness in the universe. I knew that eventually she would come back to me. She didn't have my confidence. She has come a long way, but she still is terrified that one day she once again could lose control.

"Xena has to talk about it, and she won't do it in front of you or me, but chances are that she will open up for Samantha. They are two of a kind, and since this whole thing happened my beloved wife never found the right person to whom she could speak. I hope she does now. The fortnight she held me captive still haunts her in her dreams."

"Why do warriors always have to be this irrational, Gabrielle?"

"It's a question of perspectives, Janet. We both know how to defend ourselves, but we never will be warriors at heart. What is irrational for us; makes perfect sense for them. They never would even think to reconsider. Remember your first evening on Gaia, the confrontation between Sam and Niva?"

"Of course I do. I was so scared for Sam, and at the same time I was so angry. I was sure that

there would have been another way than just fighting it out. I was sure I could have talked her out of it." The brunette fell silent for a moment. "And at the same time I was bursting with pride at her willingness to defend me."

"So, you see, it's all a question of perspectives. You are more than just a warrior or a healer or a scientist. Give them the time they need." Gabrielle answered.

They sat in silence for a few minutes then Gabrielle said. "Let's go for a walk and try and find your daughter. I'd like to get to know her better. Sam and Xena will be back when they are ready. You probably will feel a big deal of unease over the day, but Sam will have to see this through on her own."

"What are you talking about, Gabrielle?" Janet's voice was definitively alarmed by now.

"I don't know for sure, but I think a few of the things Xena said hit a bit too close to home for your love. She will tell you; don't worry."

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Xena was already at the smithy, trying to get the smouldering fire to burn hotter.

"I'll get the bellows." Sam said.

They worked together in companionable silence. She allowed herself to succumb to the rhythm of the work and the heat. Only a couple of candlemarks later it occurred to Samantha how strange this really was. She never before had been in a smithy and yet there seemed to be no need for instructions or orders. She simply knew what she had to do. It was eerie.

In the early afternoon candlemarks Xena stopped. "There's nothing more we can do right now. The blade has to cool out before we can work on it again. Let's go and take a bath."

"A bath sounds wonderful. I definitively could use it. Why do you need a new sword? Are there still uses for swords in a battle? I mean no offence, but you used guns and zats and the ribbon device against Nirrti, not swords or bows. Conflicts nowadays usually require long range weapons."

"Never go into an unknown situation without having at least a faint idea of what to expect. With Nirrti, we thought we knew exactly what to expect."

"You knew about Anubis' new warriors? And you didn't tell us?"

"No, of course not. You're right. We only thought that we knew what to expect. I initially thought two ribbon devices a bit overboard, but we needed them. In the past Nirrti always has been independent. She was one of the few Gao'uld who didn't base her influence on her Jaffa, but

more on her knowledge and ingenuity. We didn't expect her to work with Anubis. Had I known, I would have insisted that Janet and the Queen stay at the base.

"We were lucky that the ribbon devices worked. I was surprised. According to your report the armour should have absorbed the energy."

"Different kind of energy than a staff weapon, I think. And it would be very un-Gao'uld-like to create a warrior they had no means to subdue somehow. They might be arrogant in the extreme, but as a rule they also are paranoid. By the way, where are we going?" Samantha asked obviously content with the Consort's explanation.

"A cave, further down the hills; hot springs just waiting for us. You might be on the right track. Zat'nikitels and staff weapons both rely on naqada as power sources. A ribbon device on the other hand reacts to the emotions of the wearer and uses the naqada in the bloodstream not as a power source but rather as a catalyst. You really could have come up with something, Sam, but we'll have to wait for the metallurgic analysis of the armour to make more knowledgeable guesses.

"And to answer the other part of your question. Like Earth, most of the new planets we come in contact with have developed beyond the bow, arrow, and sword stage but not all of them. We try not to overwhelm less developed societies with our technical advancements. It doesn't always work out, but we try not to interfere with their natural development. So, on a practical level, sword skills still are viable."

"But that's not the only reason, right?"

"No, it isn't. It's much more than this. For me, sword drills are better than meditation. I'm looking forward to teach you. It will be an enlightening experience for you. Don't look at me with disbelieving eyes. I know: you're a soldier and a scientist; I know this spiritual stuff can be a bit disconcerting. It took me a long time to come to terms with it, and you will too. It's worth it, believe me." Xena said with a smile.

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There was a long, long moment of silence while both women stripped, slid into the steaming water, and stretched their limbs.

"What did you do after you left the Amazons?" Samantha finally asked. "You don't have to tell me if it's too personal."

"That's why we're here. Gabrielle sent you after me to get me to talk about the things I left out, right?"

"She didn't send me. I just felt that you shouldn't be alone, but I might have been wrong."

"It's strange; you know. My years as a warlord, the time I tried to kill Gabrielle, and the moons after Athena's death; among others, they always are close to my conscious mind, but speaking about it..."

"It's as if speaking about it makes it more real, as if it could come back to haunt you and then threaten to take over." Samantha said softly. When there was no immediate reaction she continued. "You read my service file, right?" She didn't really expect an answer and her voice changed to a tone Xena had never heard from her before.

"During Desert Storm, on the way back from a recon mission, my fighter was shot down over enemy territory. We ejected just in time but my back-seat died from a broken neck. When I found him he was already dead, and I still don't know if it was from the force of the ejection or the hard landing. I also had been injured and was taken prisoner. They were not pleased to find a woman wearing a man's uniform, doing a man's job. I was held in a small village, an oasis of about ten houses.

"I was beaten regularly. They wanted me to admit that our way of life was wrong; they wanted me to publicly confess to my sins and tell the world that I had seen the wisdom of Allah. They spent hour after hour talking to me, forcing me to learn their language; and if I didn't react the way they wanted me to I was punished, beaten, starved. But in a way I still was lucky.

"They were very traditional in their beliefs. The men were convinced that touching me in any sexual way would sully their souls or something like that. They beat me; one of them carved letters in my back. It was a constant struggle to even stay conscious.

"One day, about two or three weeks later, a young man who had been among the more enthusiastic of my captors decided that I was worth risking his soul. He tried to rape me. I killed him with the k-bar he had taken from me and used to shred the remnants of my 'scandalous' clothes. There were a few Jeeps just outside of my prison. My chances to escape were rather good; take one, disable the others, but I didn't go. I didn't really care about my freedom; I wanted revenge.

"With every kick and every punch raining down on me I had sworn that I would make them pay, dearly. I wanted them to pay for every lash mark they put on me, and for every time I had to beg them for water.

"When my knife slit his throat, the bruises and cuts on my body, the broken and cracked ribs, the pain simply ceased to exist. With him it had been in self-defence, but when I started to kill the other men, one after the other, it was nothing more than murder.

"Sometimes I wish someone would have stopped me, and I still don't know where I found the strength to do it. I'd like to think that it was some kind of nightmare or a hallucination. But it wasn't. I did these things.

"It was I who put my knife in their hearts; it was I who twisted their necks; it was I who slashed



their guts; it was I who cut their throats. I killed all of them, every single man in the oasis, with my knife or my bare hands. I ended eighteen lives in less than an hour and a few of them didn't even have a chance to fight back. They didn't know what hit them.

"I didn't care whether they had been among my tormentors. I killed them all, but I still wasn't satisfied. I knew that there also were women and children; I had heard them from my cell, but I wanted the village destroyed. I wanted nothing of this place to remain; just like you wanted Shiva to disappear from the face of the universe.

"It wasn't just some out of the way nomadic village; they had satellite communication, electricity, and solar power. The solar cells all were channelled to a power centre and I rigged it for overload. The village exploded. I didn't know that they had a cash of explosives buried, but also didn't particularly care when I witnessed the amount of destruction.

"The women all had assembled for some kind of purification ritual in a tent near the small lake, a few hundred paces from the bulk of the buildings. That's why they were spared, but at the time I didn't know, and I deliberately accepted the possibility of their deaths.

"When the Air Force later had the area checked there was nothing left of the village, only ruins.

"I drove the last functioning Jeep to a vantage point on top of a dune and saw them scrambling around in fire and smoke, apparently crying for their men. I laughed, instead of driving away and trying to get back behind our lines, I stood there and laughed."

Hundreds of years of experience had prepared the Consort for the blonde's confession, especially for the things she didn't say.

She knew what she should have been doing and what in the past for someone else, someone not so much like her had worked: reassuring the young woman that what she had done was only due to a lapse of judgement; telling her that it would never happen again, that what she was feeling was not real, but she couldn't. She knew it wouldn't have been the truth. So, she held her tongue and waited.

"When I reached the first of our outposts I told them that I had been captured and was able to escape when their power system blew. I told them that I had been beaten whenever I was conscious, and they insisted that I see a shrink as well as a doctor. The man to whom they sent me was good, but he also was predictable. It was easy to lead him on. He wrote in his report that I probably had been raped, but was coping well and that there was nothing speaking against my return to duty.

"No one ever asked what really had happened, and there's only one other person who knows. He thinks that it only was due to the adrenaline coursing through my body. He thinks that I exaggerated, and simply doesn't want to believe that his goddaughter was ... is capable of killing in cold blood.

"I lost control that day, and that's a thing a Carter never does. Carters don't cry; Carters don't feel;

Carters don't ask for forgiveness, and Carters never, ever lose control."

"And yet, you still feel guilty."

"Carters follow orders, and there's no guilt in following orders."

One of Xena's eyebrows rising slightly was the only answer she got.

"I don't regret ending their lives. I regret killing them the way I did. I never felt so powerful and I never was so afraid, afraid of what I did, afraid of what I would be able to do.

"I killed them in their beds, caught them from behind. Hatred and anger were driving me on, consuming all my thoughts, all my actions, frightening and intoxicating.

"My father made me believe that this kind of killing is part and parcel of being a soldier; nothing more than a job well done. He told me a few stories to dissuade me from special ops training. He thought that I wanted to become a more deadly fighter, but I did it to become more detached. I wanted to find a way to keep a lid on the darkness, one way or the other.

"It didn't work. The darkness was always there. I could feel the darkness then, and I still do. It's stronger when I fight, but it's still there, even now, this moment."

Samantha searched the eyes of the raven-haired warrior and found sadness and understanding.  
"I'm sorry, Sam."

"Why? It was my failure. I let my control slip, and more than once."

"When you fought Nirrti, did you feel the darkness?" Xena asked.

"No, I didn't. Yes, I did." Silence once again permeated the cavern. "I had no problem controlling it while fighting Nirrti, but all in all it doesn't make any difference: Hathor, Apophis, Cronos, a first prime, or a Jaffa, one chieftain or the other; it doesn't make any difference.

"It's always there. Waking up, working in the lab, going to sleep, it doesn't make any difference. It's always there, every morning and every evening, every waking hour. It's in my dreams, my nightmares.

"I learned to live with the darkness, and I learned how to hide it to the outside world. I came close to succumbing to it more than once, but I'm mortally afraid of the day I won't be able to keep it in check - when the darkness instead controls me."

Samantha stared straight ahead, well aware of the taller woman at her side, but still reluctant to really rely on her comforting presence.

"Had Nirrti harmed Cassandra in any way, no fighting skills in the world would have saved her. When the darkness takes over I'm faster and stronger. I would have killed her, and I would have

done so laughing."

*"Promise me that you won't become a monster if something should happen to me."* The taller woman said with a dreamy expression.

The blonde looked at Xena with question marks in her eyes.

"It's what Gabrielle asked of me, right at the beginning of our journey together. I didn't always keep my promise, but it kept me from totally losing it more times than I care to remember. I know that it's hard, Samantha, but you can control the darkness, and you can always rely on me to help you through should the temptation become too strong."

The blonde instinctively scooted closer to the other woman and suddenly was cradled in strong arms, Xena humming a lullaby. That's when the tears came, tears she never before had allowed herself to cry, tears for the men she had killed and for herself, for the loss of her innocence. And for the first time in her life, except when being with Janet, she didn't feel ashamed or weak for having shown her feelings.

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Some time later, when there were no more tears left for the moment and Samantha had resumed her former place, she asked. "Your darkness came from Ares. Where does mine come from?"

"The dark part of my soul didn't come from Ares or any other Gao'uld. I had it before. Everyone has it, every living being; some of us have just a harder time to keep darkness and light balanced. Even Janet and Gabrielle have it but their light easily outweighs the darkness. Before this whole thing with Artemis happened I was convinced that I had accepted the darkness in me, that I had a handle on it, that I could control it in every situation.

"You know about the death of my son and how I tried to kill Gabrielle?" The dark haired warrior continued; Samantha confirmed with a nod. "We didn't have much contact with the Amazons afterwards. Gabrielle knew that I would have to pay for the crimes committed against their Queen, the Queen's Regent, and the Amazon Nation, and she didn't want me to be punished.

"After my the broken back had healed - the one I'd had just before our crucifixion -, Artemis asked for our help in reuniting the Amazons scattered in small tribes all over the world, and we decided to start with Gabrielle's tribe. Six summers had passed since the day I dragged Gabrielle out of the village behind a horse. They had not forgotten, as I knew they wouldn't. Gabrielle tried to argue with the council and the acting Queen but I convinced her that I had to pay for what I did.

"At the time Amazon Justice was of the an-eye-for-an-eye variety. Gabrielle talked the council into something else; some kind of spiritual challenge and a few moons spent as a slave to the Amazon Nation. Then, I would have preferred a few sound whippings."

They had lifted themselves out of the water, sitting at the edge of the pool with their feet still dangling in the water, both of them reluctant to leave the safe harbour of hot, moist air and dim light.

"I thought that I had found my way while we were in India, but I learned a lot about myself facing the trials the head priestess had set for me, and later, while I was a slave, it was the memory of my time at the temple that helped me to stay calm and see it through. And at the end I was convinced that I never would lose control like this again."

"But it took a hell of a lot to push you this far, Xena, to get you to lose control; and I'm convinced that even when you treated Gabrielle as a slave, you never physically harmed her."

"How can you be so sure? You've never seen me when I'm like that."

"No, I didn't, but no amount of darkness can completely obscure the love I see within you, between the two of you. I think you would rather harm yourself than raise a hand against her. You said that when you held her prisoner, you spent the balance of the day drilling. You could have found other ways to burn out excess energy, but you didn't want to hurt her. That's how I know."

"You're a good listener, Sam, but you are wrong. What I did was far worse than beating her. I abused her, verbally and sexually."

"I tried to make her feel small and worthless, and I know a lot of the things I said hurt her very much. I knew what buttons to push, but instead of paying me back equally she gave me tenderness and compassion. She always knew me better than I knew myself. That was true then, and it is now. Only a few words would have been enough to send me running, but she didn't even try. She never wavered in her belief that the woman she loved one day would come back to her."

"I took her to bed and played with her body without regard for her feelings or her needs, and when I was finished I threw her out and made her sleep on the ground. I treated her like an object and cared more for my sword and armour than for her. I didn't think to ask for her consent either. I suppose she didn't want me to wake up to the feeling that I forced her into something, but I know better."

"What I did to her during those fifteen days and nights was rape, nothing less - and when I finally understood what I had been doing I didn't owe up to my crimes, I ran. I didn't want to see the love in her eyes replaced by pity. I was a coward and simply took off."

"A coward would not have come back, Xena. Sometimes I wish that I could take responsibility for what I did to these men; that I could pay for my crimes. I think I have gotten to know you well enough to know that you couldn't live long with your guilt and shame."

Xena looked at her younger companion with a sad, pain-filled smile. "I fled with the cargo ship we had taken from the head hunters. I didn't have a plan or a destination; I just ran. I finally

ended up in an out-of-the-way corner of the universe in a joint frequented by thugs and drunkards.

"Suddenly eternity became far too long for me.

"As long as I had been with Gabrielle, I didn't mind living for eternity. I had accepted being forced to witness the death of people I've grown to love time and time again, standing and singing at their funeral pyres, mourning their loss; to live through the deaths of our children.

"But without Gabrielle, everything suddenly became unbearable. I couldn't think; I couldn't breathe; I didn't want to think. I knew that without Gabrielle the darkness would return sooner or later, and then there would be no way back.

"So, I drank. It dulled my senses. It made it possible for me to breathe, but I still could hear my thoughts; and my mind replayed everything I had done to her, every law I had broken, every worshipper of Shiva I had killed. I wanted to bury myself in the bottom of a bottle, but all I ended up with were a lot of hefty hangovers. I was a pathetic excuse for a woman and a warrior.

"Then one night, almost a moon later, I looked up at the night sky and I saw a constellation similar to the one we call 'Aphrodite'. Then I knew that I had to go home and at least try to make amends. I knew what I did would never be forgotten and I knew it should never be forgiven, but I felt the need to kneel in front of my love and at least ask for her forgiveness."

Just like the older woman earlier had known that Samantha had been far from finished with her surprising confession, the blonde instinctively felt that Xena still had a lot to say. So, she draped a towel around the taller woman's shoulders and let her hands rest there for a long moment to silently convey her support and understanding; then she wrapped another one around herself and quietly waited for Xena to speak again.

"I stepped through the Ring, but instead of the detachment of the Royal Guard I had expected, ..."

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Xena dialled the co-ordinates of Gaia. The planet had for more than one and a half millennia been a home for her, but it was with a certain degree of apprehension that she pushed the central button of the DHD.

She knew Amazon laws and customs by heart, having participated in the writing or amending of quite a lot of them over the centuries; she should have been able to anticipate what to expect, but she didn't.

There simply were no precedents to what she had done, neither in history nor in theory. The council would have been in its right to order her death for treason, rape, and murder.

She didn't fear death; it would be infinitely better than living without her beloved. They could decide to just incarcerate her and throw away the key. They could cut her to pieces and bury the different parts in different corners of the universe. They could send her away, a never-ending exile.

Her imagination was running wild. In the end, the decision would be Gabrielle's and Gabrielle's alone - not because she was the Queen. As an injured party she didn't even have the right to vote with the council, but regardless of how angry some of her sisters might be, they never would...

Her mind was running wild and she knew she was stalling. Taking a deep breath she stepped through the shimmering pool and found herself surprisingly alone in the clearing. The surveillance cameras would tell the council of her arrival, and they probably would send some guards. So, she sat down in front of the ring and waited.

She didn't have to wait long; her senses first picked up the rustling of leaves and then she felt eyes on her, surrounding her. She even could have put a name to most of the eyes watching her. She stood up and waited for them to come forward and take her into custody. But nothing happened, and then she felt the presence of her soulmate.

When Gabrielle left the cover of the trees, the tall woman's breath caught in her chest. The blonde was every inch the Queen with her ceremonial leathers and the mask firmly in place. Xena instinctively fell to her knees. Gabrielle stopped at two arm lengths' distance.

Xena didn't dare to raise her eyes, but she couldn't help noticing that her partner had lost weight. Once more guilt and shame swept through her like a tidal wave. She continued to stare straight ahead, not sure what to say to her beloved.

"Look at me, Xena."

The mask had been pulled back and she looked into a face marked by lack of sleep and green eyes lacking their familiar spark. She began to tremble; remembering the only time her beloved had looked this desperate, shortly after Solan's death.

"I want you to listen to me, listen carefully. It's about the council's decision. They refused to let me take part in the sessions or even tell me what they decided. They think that when it comes to you my judgement is seriously flawed, and maybe they are right.

"I only know that they took a long time to come to a decision and that's why I'm here to remind you of your choice, the choice every lawbreaker has. You can choose exile. Then we both will leave Amazon territory forever or you can choose to be punished."

"We?" Xena's voice was barely above a whisper.

"We, as in you and me, Xena, together; the last moon has been hell for me. Leaving me here was the worst thing you possibly could have done. I knew where you were, and that you were trying

to drown yourself in alcohol, and with every report I received I hurt a bit more. I need you more than I need air to breathe. Please, let us go and start a new life. I don't want you punished for what was out of your control. We can work everything out between us."

"I thought I had lost your love."

"No, my big dumb warrior, I need you in my life. There is no me without you. Let's leave here!"

"Gabrielle," the taller woman, still on her knees answered, "my real home is in your heart, but this is our home too. I will not run away, not for a second time. No one stands above the law.

"I can't spend centuries teaching it, and then not live by the law. I'll submit to the council's punishment. I'll do everything I have to, to regain the trust of the Nation and to be worthy of your love and forgiveness."

"Are you sure, my love?" The raven-head nodded. "Without knowing what they have in mind?" She nodded again. "I would feel better if we simply left."

"Is this really what you want? I know you want to make it easier for me, but think about the consequences. Would you leave our home, our family, our friends, our children?" Xena asked her.

"I feel that I have to pay for my crimes against the Amazon Nation and its Queen. I have to pay for what I did to the innocents on Shiva's planets, and for what I forced your warriors to do. It can never be enough, but it's a step in the right direction," she continued.

"However, I never will be able to pay enough for what I did to you, the woman who holds my heart and my soul and always will; I will never, ever be able to pay for what I did while I held you hostage. So, this is your call. If you really want me to run away from my responsibilities, I will. I'll let you decide."

"I knew that you wouldn't take them up on their offer. It's against everything that you are, my love. I don't know what they have in mind, but I will be with you every step of the way." She quickly embraced her lover, gave her a passionate kiss, stepped back, and put the mask over her face. "Guards, do what you have to do."

Xena stayed on her knees while two members of the Royal Guard dropped out of the trees, and shackled her hands behind her back. They ordered her to stand up and held her firmly at the elbows while two other Amazons secured her feet with cuffs and a connecting chain.

The chains were strong enough to hold an angry Jaffa, but all of them knew that these restraints wouldn't by far be strong enough to hold her should she really decide to try and escape. The guards also knew that the Consort wouldn't even think of doing something like this. They knew she wouldn't even try and defend her actions; that was just who she was.

There were two guards on her right side and two on her left, two following and two preceding

her. They escorted her to the village square, all of them with their ceremonial masks firmly in place, but none of them were armed.

'Why? She should be treated as an enemy to the Amazon Nation. Their bearing spoke of at least a modicum of respect she felt she had lost any right to. Why did they do this? And why didn't she pick up on their lack of weapons earlier; she should have sensed it while they still were hidden in the trees.'

The closer they came to the main village the more Xena's mind reeled with questions. She had expected the whole village to be present for her trial and sentencing, but when they finally came to the central square it was completely empty. Except for the Queen and her guards, she hadn't seen a single soul.

The big double winged doors to the council hall opened. Her escort changed formation, with half of them now walking in front of her while the other four followed closely behind. Quick repeated glances taught her that not only the council of Gaia, but also the better part of Gabrielle's Regents were present, filling the rows as if it were a High Council Meeting.

Her guards stayed with her until she had reached the front row, and then filed out to the left and the right to stand along the side walls.

"Please take off the Consort's restraints." The chairwoman and Queen's Regent Solo ordered.

Xena had a hard time to limit her reaction to this rather surprising order to a raised eyebrow. The irons were removed and the tall woman lowered herself to her right knee to show her respect for the council.

"Xena of Amphipolis, Consort to Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, Commander in Chief of the Amazon Army, you have been accused of murder, rape, and abuse of power. Do you contest this Council's right to judge your behaviour?"

"No, Regent Solo." The dark haired warrior wanted to say more but was held back by the sense of ceremony she couldn't shake.

"The Council already has come to its conclusions but we want to make sure. Do you accept responsibility for these crimes?"

"No, I don't." More than a few of the women behind her audibly gasped. "Let's not play with semantics. - *I am guilty* of murder, rape, abuse of power, and a lot of other crimes. I will humbly submit to the judgement of the Council." Xena answered and lowered her eyes to the ground.

"Xena of Amphipolis rise and hear the verdict of the Grand Council." The tall woman came back to her feet.

'The Grand Council'. It had been more than four hundred year since all of the regents and vice-queens had been summoned for a court session. They probably had been waiting for her to come

back all these weeks, but she thought while the other women in the room also stood, rationally it had been the only choice. Usually it was the prerogative and the duty of the Queen to decide about the punishment for capital crimes, but Gabrielle not only was one of her victims, she also was her bondmate.

To all outer appearances Xena was the picture of calmness. She nonetheless suddenly found her heart beating faster. The feeling of doom she had in the centre of her stomach since dialling Gaia now growing exponentially. She quickly closed her eyes to get herself back under control.

The representatives of the 'Grand Council' had put their ceremonial masks in place. "Consort Xena, you have been found guilty of abuse of power and multiple murders. However, we declare you not guilty of rape.

"High Queen Gabrielle's statement made it abundantly clear that everything that happened between the two of you after your return from Shiva's worlds, happened with mutual consent. She also left no doubt that she would be disappointed and displeased should this Council take it upon itself to interfere in her private life.

"After interviewing the members of the Royal Guards," the Regent continued, "who witnessed your behaviour during the mission, we came to the unanimous decision that we have no legal ground to find you guilty of rape or other forms of domestic violence, but we also want you to know that in the interest of our Queen's safety we will keep your conduct under close scrutiny."

The masked woman fell silent to let her words sink in. Xena found the eyes of the Regent and gave her a short approving nod.

"For abuse of power you will be sentenced to fifteen moons of servitude to the Amazon Nation. You will live as a servant, working in the kitchens and the food hut. During this time, you will be relieved of your command; you will not be allowed to handle weapons of any kind. You will have no access to the laboratories or the infirmary or the library. Off-duty you will be confined to your quarters or at the discretion of the Queen. As a sign of your servitude you will wear plain leathers without rank markings or honour badges."

Xena had a hard time to keep the surprise and consternation she felt at the Regent's words from showing on her face. They didn't even make her a slave - why? She had used part of the defensive forces to satisfy her need for revenge. She had used them to commit capital crimes. It didn't feel right to let her off the hook this easily.

Her consternation obviously showed on her face because the Regent continued. "The Grand Council decreed that the military operation against the murderers of Artemis and Athena and against their client was well within the boundaries of Amazon honour and Amazon justice. The same however can not be said about the rest of the mission. Reviewing your actions, the 'Grand Council' found you guilty of murder in 87 cases. Had you been in your right mind, we wouldn't have a choice but to try and find a punishment equivalent to a death sentence. After checking all available data and speaking with the venerable Egeria we are convinced that there were indeed extenuating circumstances.

"At the time you were not responsible for your actions. The Council sees your timely return and your willing submission to our judgement as a sign of your regret and repentance.

"These souls rest on your shoulders; and nothing we possibly could do to you could diminish your sense of guilt or be harder than what your conscience does to yourself.

"As a symbolic gesture, for every death you will receive three strokes with a single tail whip on your bare back after having spent three days and three nights in the sweating hut.

"Xena of Amphipolis, Consort to Gabrielle, High Queen of the Amazon Nation, do you accept the sentence?"

Xena sought the eyes of every single one of the thirteen women standing before her, searching for signs of discomfort or animosity. Finally, she answered. "Yes, venerable members of the 'Grand Council', I accept your decision and submit to the punishment with humility and gratefulness. But I have a question: Why? Why do you make it so easy for me?"

The Regent, a tall redhead with doe eyes, took off her mask and smiled at the other woman.

"There are a lot of possible answers to this question, Consort Xena, but only two that really count: the Amazon Nation is what it is now only because of you and our Queen. Gabrielle is our heart and our soul and you are our strength and our confidence. You belong together like two molecules of oxygen. Deciding on any other punishment would have taken the both of you from us.

"But more importantly: We know you; all of us have known you our whole lives. We grew up listening to Queen Gabrielle's stories, and we learned that all of them are true. We know who you are. We saw the emptiness in your eyes when you came back with the news of Athena's death. We saw the hate when you killed Shiva and the head hunters, Shiva's priests and worshippers.

"That was not all we saw. We also saw the tiny flicker of life every time your eyes found the Queen's. We observed from afar how you tried to drown your sorrow and pain and memories. We observed how, despite all of this, the woman we all know and love slowly fought her way back to the surface. You and the Queen taught us not to give up on people and we certainly will not start with you."

Xena could feel a blush of embarrassment spreading over her cheeks but before she began to feel totally uncomfortable the Regent ordered.

"Guards, escort Consort Xena to her quarters. The sweating hut will be ready for her tomorrow morning."

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"Two hundred and sixty-one strokes, that's..."

"I know, Sam, but please remember: I'm immortal. It took me almost a moon to recover from the beating - and Gabrielle was not really happy with me and the Council, but in the end I convinced her that it was the right thing to do, for the Amazons and for me - and ultimately, for her, it was the right thing too."

"I suppose that she was angry with you - for running away, for not trusting your love, for treating her the way you did. She never said a word, though, right?"

"What I did was rape. The Council knew it; I knew it. But Gabrielle..."

"What did she do when she finally acknowledged her anger and disappointment?"

"It was hard. Gabrielle began to question herself, her decisions, even her feelings. She never even considered questioning me and the darkness lingering in my soul. We spent time together, but we didn't share our lives. We talked but we didn't really - well, talk. It was if there was something between us, something big and ominous."

"A big pink elephant sitting in the centre of the room." Seeing the confusion on the other woman's face Samantha continued. "Everyone can see it, sitting there and taking up space but no one wants to acknowledge its existence. No one wants to acknowledge that you have to walk around it to cross the room."

"Sounds as if you're talking out of experience, Sam."

"In a way, Xena, but it's in no way comparable to what you probable went through. About a year ago, Janet asked me to take care of Cassandra while she was stuck at the base with an emergency. I blew it, big time. In the end, we all were angry at each other, but none of us wanted to talk about it. We ended up having a very loud, very passionate discussion and cleared the air. - Nothing compared to what you went through."

"A pink elephant?! Yes, that's close enough. We also found a way to 'clear' the air."

"But you could not turn back the hands of time. Your relationship never became what it was before, right? That's why the Xena of the stories and the one I know seem to be two totally different persons."

"You're defiantly too perceptive, Samantha Gabriella."

The blonde looked at her taller companion questioningly, but then sighed and said. "I know, one day you will answer my questions, but it's too early yet."

Xena started to smile, but then locked eyes with her younger companion. There was a certain seriousness in the blue orbs that made her reconsider to simply change subject.

"You're concerned that something similar could happen to you and Janet?"

The blonde nodded dejectedly.

"You're not like me, Sam. You will never turn your darker instincts against those you love, because you never were completely under the spell of the darkness; you never willingly embraced it like I did time and time again. But to put your mind more at ease I will tell you how we made it through this particular obstacle course.

"After I paid my debt to the Amazon Nation the first time, still on Earth, after the crucifixion, Gabrielle and I changed the way Amazon Queens ruled their people right from the beginning. The Queen, Artemis' Chosen, was regarded as the ultimate authority for just about everything. Everyone from the lowest slave to her Consort was under her unquestioned command.

"Gabrielle didn't want to rule alone, especially considering the task ahead of us, uniting a Nation in diaspora - scattered all around the known world in small tribes that sometimes even didn't know that there were still others like them. So, in time, the Amazons became accustomed to see us as one, and to accord us the same authority, and whenever I became too bossy towards my wife Athena brought me back to my senses.

"Being stripped of my rank and relegated to kitchen duty changed this. The Amazons had no choice but to come to Gabrielle with their concerns and suggestions - and my beloved bard learned that she was a great Queen in her own right and didn't need my help.

"At first it intensified her insecurities, fears, and anger, but in public she hid it well. I had the chance of observing her in action; as strange as it may sound, I never really had seen her. To me it almost was as if she had finally stepped out of the shadows and into the light.

"Well into the fifth moon of my punishment, a group of young Amazon warriors came from a remote planet to finish their education. They were an obnoxious band of wannabes with delusions of self-importance and the first ones that treated me, what they thought was, according to rank. Strangely enough they didn't know what had happened and that serving food and cleaning tables was only a temporary assignment. Servants were not very high on the social ladder, and one day I couldn't take it any longer.

"They treated me with their usual disdain, and one of them started to talk about Gabrielle: how she needed a real warrior to satisfy her, someone who wasn't such a looser as the Consort; how she would make her scream in lust, and lead the Nation to victory against the Gao'uld. Not loud, just enough to be heard by her buddies at the table. She saw that I had heard her and started to bitch about the soup not being hot enough. I took the whole cauldron and emptied it over her head. It had been hot enough to give her second degree burns."

Even after more than three hundred years, there still was a satisfied glint in the raven-haired woman's eyes.

"I reckon you also burned your hands lifting the cauldron." Samantha quipped.

Xena smiled, but instead of answering she just continued with her story. "Of course, it was Gabrielle's duty as a Queen to punish me. A servant hurting a warrior - that was unthinkable. A lot of things have changed since then. Today, both parties would be punished, one for losing their temper, the other for disrespecting a fellow Amazon, but at the time she didn't have a choice.

"Gabrielle had to order me punished. But Gabrielle wouldn't be Gabrielle if she hadn't insisted on doing it herself. The law didn't leave her much of a choice. She either had to order one of her people to do it or do it herself. I was whipped in the centre of the village, the normal punishment doubled, because of what I am.

"We thought that we had already talked about all our issues, but it turned out that nothing could be further from the truth.

"When they bound me to the whipping post I could feel it flowing towards me, like a tidal wave. I could feel her anger, her outrage. I could feel her fighting with the urge to let the whip go full force. And for the first two lashes she really did. Then she stopped. The rest of the strokes were still very hard, but they no longer were intended to really harm me.

"Later she felt horrible for nearly losing control, but it got us to talk, really talk, about everything. It was the first step on a long road. It's hard to explain, Samantha.

"It was as if the first two strokes had finally made her aware of her anger and disappointment, no, disappointment is not the right word; as if it had opened a door, for both of us. Over the centuries, she had had to face my darkness more than once; and more than once it had been directed against her, but that had only been for a few candlemarks or a couple of days.

"Gabrielle never would have needed my help to lead the Nation. She could have done it on her own, right from the beginning. That's something we both had to learn. For centuries I had been the leader of the Amazon warriors; instead of supporting the Queen's decisions I had become the power behind the Queen, the Queen's power.

"When I was reinstated everyone expected me to simply slip back into my old role but we found that we could not. Gabrielle and I, we both had changed. The way we act now wasn't born in a day. It took some time but finally I no longer felt the need to stand in the spotlight. Gabrielle still asks for my advice but she also knows that she has my support even if I might disagree with her."

"But you are no longer regarded as her equal."

"As a human being I'm her equal but according to Amazon law I'm not. She's the Queen. I'm her Consort, and that's how it should have been from the beginning. We still argue that I often exaggerate in public. At the beginning I only did it to make everyone understand who's in charge, so to speak; but over the decades and centuries it has become natural to me. It has become part of who I am, of how I feel comfortable in my skin. I built this house to always make

us remember that time, and to remind us that there always will be a future."

Then the tall woman changed subject and Samantha knew that the questioning was over for the time being.

"Gabrielle and Janet are probably walking a trench somewhere, waiting for us to come back to them. It's nearly time for dinner."

So, she decided to let it be. "Yeah, I could eat something. Xena, thank you for sharing with me."

"Back at you, Sam, and thank you for listening."

They wrapped themselves in fresh towels and left the bathing cavern, both of them unwilling to once again slip into their sweaty and forge-soiled clothes. A set of leathers with all the markings for rank and honour was waiting for Xena and a simple white tunic, similar to the one the weapons' master had been wearing not too long ago, for Samantha. On top of the tunic, there was a note.

*Sam,*

*You didn't show up for our training session. To your credit, I assume that you just succumbed to the usual after-party-laxness. Nonetheless, you neglected your duty and not for the first time, I might add, and thus should face the consequences - that is if you don't decide to use the option of instead returning to your home planet. Take a look at the regulations' book before you make your decision, and don't forget that you have the choice between corporal punishment or something more spiritual.*

*I will see you tomorrow morning at the training grounds. Let me know by then or return to Earth.*

*Niva*

~\*~

Xena and Samantha shared a short and rather monosyllabic evening meal with their partners. Gabrielle and Janet did all the talking, telling them about their day, about spending time with Cassandra and the young Amazons and about the girl's plan to participate in their training. Before the two Earth women retired to their room, Gabrielle emphatically reminded Samantha of her choices concerning the impending punishment.

Janet felt that her lover was emotionally drained from her long talk with the Consort and that it probably wasn't all about Xena. A few times this day, she had been tempted to storm off in search of her lover when a particularly distressing emotion came through what she now saw as their link. She knew that Samantha would talk to her when she was ready, so the small doctor

didn't ask any questions. She just offered warmth and comfort.

They fell asleep on their bed, still clothed, and Samantha dreamed of a ball of light appearing before her, shimmering and warm. It soon was joined by another ball; it also was of a shimmering white but with dark spots and patches. The balls gravitated towards each other and fused. They now emitted so much light that the dark spots were barely visible.

## **Chapter Eleven: Absolute Certainty**

Four months later Samantha Carter remembered this dream. She was sitting on a bench like boulder close to the top of Cheyenne Mountain and looking up at the cloudy sky without really seeing the impending storm gathering up there. She had spent the whole afternoon aimlessly roaming the countryside on the back of her Harley after a really nasty fight with Janet. The sun had just gone down and she was shivering in the early December night. The light jacket she had grabbed when storming out of the house earlier was no real protection against the cold wind.

Never being anything less than honest with herself, she admitted that she had blown things totally out of proportion, but it had hurt so damn much, seeing her lover in the arms of that man. She simply had snapped - and now she found herself on top of Stargate Command, alone. She knew she had no reason not to trust her lover, but it was as if she just could not help herself. She knew she had acted like a spoiled child; she knew she had risked the best thing in her whole life.

After their return from Gaia at the beginning of the new school year, it was as if a dream had come true.

Thanks to the inspired argumentation of Lieutenant Michaela Neddes, the psychologist in charge of Cassandra, she had been officially allowed to move in with Janet and Cassy. Mike, Michaela, had argued that Cassandra needed more than just one parent to be able to cope with the traumatic events of her kidnapping. General Hammond supported her recommendation - and surprisingly the Pentagon approved of the plan, very much to the dislike of Mackenzie, the chief psychologist of the SGC, who at the time had thought it too much beneath his station to care for the alien girl and so had her care transferred to his assistant, a decision he probably was regretting by now.

The whole of the SGC had pitched in to help and three days after the permission from the Joint Chiefs and the White House had been delivered to General Hammond's office all her stuff had been packed up and moved to Janet's house. Daniel and Teal'c moved into her house, the house her father had given to her after joining the Tok'ra. She didn't want to sell it, and this way she knew it would be well taken care of.

Samantha Gabriella Carter, air-headed genius, sharp shooter, Air Force Major, fighter pilot, and a born loner, finally had a family.

Her nights, and occasionally late afternoons and mornings with her small lover were pure bliss.

She never before had been this deliriously happy. They were more than just a patchwork family - they really belonged together.

That night on Gaia, waking from the strange dream, she for the first time had been really sure of Janet's love. She had known with absolute certainty that she finally had come home, that her real home was the small brunette cradled in her arms and holding her tight - the military and its regulations be damned. It had been like an epiphany.

Samantha closed her eyes and suddenly her mind's eye brought up the bright ball of light. It was as if she suddenly knew what her lover was thinking and feeling at this very moment; as if she suddenly had become cognizant of a connection between them, a connection that had always been there. She instinctively knew that Janet was half ill with worry, but she also was angry with her for running off like this, without giving her a chance to explain and without her helmet.

She almost ran back to her bike. Janet needed her, and even if she had to spend some time in the doghouse, in the end it would be worth it.

~\*~

Half way home it began to rain, the cold drops soon had her soaking wet; they were whipping against her face and quickly the rain turned into the first snow. She didn't even bother to put her beloved hog in the garage or under the car port but stormed the four steps to the wrap around porch. She already had her hand on the door knob when her courage left her and she froze.

Samantha had faced down Gao'uld and blown up a sun; she was able to fight seasoned Jaffa warriors in hand-to-hand combat and come out as the winner, but here she was standing on her own porch, dripping wet and half frozen stiff from the cold, afraid to face a slip of a woman.

Instead of using her key, the blonde Major rang the door bell. It seemed to echo through the house and for a moment she was afraid that Janet wouldn't let her in.

An eternity later, the door opened but it wasn't Janet. Instead it was the reason for the angry words she had thrown at her lover before running away.

"She's in the living room," the young man said when he ushered her in. He had dark blond hair with a hint of red in it and was about her height. His body told her that he regularly worked out, for strength not for bulk. He seemed to be in his late twenties.

"Thank you." Samantha answered while slipping out of the jacket and her shoes.

"Stephen, my name is Stephen. Better go in; she's been worried about you."

Samantha nodded and quickly took the few steps to the living room. Janet was sitting in her favourite armchair and was staring in the flickering flames burning in the fire place. The blonde



knew that she had heard her coming back, but this time she wouldn't make it easy for her. One of the patented smiles, the smiles she only reserved for her lover this time wouldn't be enough to make it up to the doctor.

She stepped closer and for a moment stood helplessly in front of the other woman. Without conscious thought she dropped to her knees and took Janet's hands between her own.

"Jan, baby..."

"Don't you Jan-baby me, Samantha Gabriella Carter; don't you dare," was the angry retort, but at least she didn't try to take her hands away from the blonde's.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you, Janet. I acted like some insecure, jealous teenager. I'm sorry I'm such a dork. I didn't even give you a chance to introduce us. It hurt seeing you so comfortable in his arms. I'm sorry for not trusting you. Please forgive me."

Samantha tentatively looked up, a thick drop fell from her hair and hit the tip of her nose.

"You look like a drowned rat."

No Sammy or Sam, not even a Samantha, this was bad, really bad, the blonde thought.

Her head dropped and her eyes focused on the back of Janet's hands still being held by her own. She relaxed her grip with an effort, leaving it to the brunette to change their position. Janet withdrew one of her hands and Samantha flinched at the loss of contact. Then the hand was gently touching her left cheek; thumb and index finger under her chin made her look up.

"It was never a question of trust, Samantha. I know you trust me with your life and your heart, but I will not watch my every move just because you get it in your head to be insecure or jealous. I love only you and I expect that you have a better handle on your emotions next time. Stephen is a very good friend and he's family, nothing more. And now, get out of these wet clothes and take a long, hot shower."

Samantha turned her head and kissed the palm of her lover's hand. She murmured, "I'm sorry, my love. I'm so afraid to lose you, sometimes my brain just short circuits. I love you, Jan."

She closed her eyes and quietly remembered her dream and the two balls of light. Janet studied her face with a surprised smile.

"And I love you, Sammy, but when you first stormed away I really wanted to punish you for being this stupid. I wanted to make you bend over and put a strap to your behind."

"I would let you do it and thank you for every stroke, my love." The blonde whispered in response.

"No my big dumb fly-girl. It was hard enough to watch it once on Gaia. I don't want a repeat

performance, ever." Janet drew her still kneeling lover closer and gently kissed her on the lips. "Go and take your shower, Sam, or I will have to ground you for becoming ill."

Samantha kissed her lover's small but strong hands and answered, "Yes, Madam."

Janet smiled at her and sent her off with another quick kiss. Her head turned towards the fire but her mind was wandering back to the day of Samantha's punishment on Gaia.

It had been the day after Sam's long and obviously deeply disturbing talk with Consort Xena. For once they were early at the training grounds. Janet had insisted on being at Samantha's side when the blonde told the weapons' master that she had decided to submit to corporal punishment, despite or rather because of her fears. That first and a couple of other conversations with the Queen had helped her to come to terms with the Amazons' strange juridical system but that didn't mean that she was happy with her lover's decision.

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"Samantha Gabriella Carter, what do you have to say for yourself?" Master Niva asked as soon as the major had lowered herself to her knees.

"Nothing, weapons' master. It is true that I thought there would be no training because of the party the day before. I presumed - but that's no excuse and I accept full responsibility for my neglect of duty." The blonde answered with her eyes to the ground.

"Do you accept corporal punishment, warrior?"

"Yes, Master Niva." Samantha said, and despite her prior resolve she couldn't keep a slight tremble off her voice.

"I understand why you made the mistake you did, so, at this point I see no need for a public punishment. Report to my hut at sundown and we will take care of this. You're welcome to bring a witness.

"And now, let's train. Healer, I know, it's not your usual time, but it would be more convenient for me if you could rearrange your schedule." Janet only nodded.

"Warrior, from now on Larina will be your primary instructor. Obey her commands. She's not as lenient as I am."

Three candelmarks later, Samantha and Janet found themselves in the bathroom, sharing a shower, and massaging sore muscles. "Are you really sure you want to go through with this, Sam? Master Niva surely would understand. The regulations allow for other forms of punishment."

"Yes, Jan, I'm sure."

"Are you sure that this is really about the missed training session, Sammy? While you were with Xena, I could feel your distress, sometimes like a distant memory, sometimes like a bleeding wound. Are you sure that your decision has not more to do with whatever happened in the past than with our present?"

"I know you can sense my feelings, my emotions. I didn't want to burden you with all of this. One day soon, I will tell you what I told Xena. It's in the past and it should no longer have any impact on my life. However, in a way, it still does, but it also has nothing to do with this punishment. What I did then can't be paid for with a few strokes of a strap or a cane or whatever." The blonde answered with sadness tinting her voice.

"I broke the rules and I have to pay for it; I want to pay for it. I don't know how to explain it, but it's the right thing to do. I enjoy all the good and bright sides of life here. They share with us, have taken us in their hearts. It may sound nuts to you, but I really think that this is a way to give them something back, to show them that I really respect their way of life." Samantha smiled insecurely.

"No, Sammy, it's not nuts. I needed a little help from Queen Gabrielle to come to terms with this punishment thing, but now I have. Sometimes, I don't understand what makes you military types tick, but this I can understand."

"I hate to point it out, baby, but you're also a Major of the US Air Force. - No, don't tell me: it's different because you're of the nice and peaceful kind. - Will you be my witness, Janet?"

"I would be honoured, my love. And now, let's face the rest of the day; we both have a lot of work to do."

~

The whole day, Janet felt her lover's nervousness and growing apprehension through their link. Samantha had a hard time to concentrate on anything but the impending punishment, and finally in the early afternoon hours gave up on getting any work done.

She searched out Cassandra who was happy to spend time with her other mother and eager to learn how to tree-walk. She wanted Sam to teach her and no one else, so she had resisted any attempts of her new friends to rope her into a lesson.

The young woman as always was a quick study. No surprise there, she was a straight A-student, tested way ahead of her age in any test thrown her way, was captain of the volley-ball team and had assured her team's victory more than once by her quick thinking and quicker reflexes. Tree-walking was just another challenge, and Cassandra loved challenges; she was as much an adrenaline junkie as her blonde mother and playmate or her uncle Jack.

Janet was relieved that her lover had succeeded in putting the evening's events out of her mind, but for a moment she feared that she also would forget about their appointment at the weapons' master's house.

She was about to go in search of her tall partner when the door opened and a sweaty and very relaxed Major entered their room. She kissed her soundly and whirled her around in unrestrained mirth until they finally ended in a heap on the bed.

"Your daughter really is something else, you know, Jan?!"

"And what, pray tell, did *my* daughter do?"

"We had a little race through the tree tops, and to make it more interesting we had a little bet going. She tried to distract me and it very nearly worked. She told me that when we were out hiking last year, you always stayed at the rear not because you were out of breath but to have a good look at my butt."

"The little imp! I was out of breath from looking at your butt, Sammy. The last day she came up to me from the side and asked me if I was enjoying the view. I blushed. I guessed I wasn't very subtle when staring at you." Janet answered with a smile. "So, what did she win?"

"Oh, she didn't win. It was her first day; I couldn't let her get too cocky. When we go back to Earth, she'll spend a weekend of our choice at Jack's, no phone calls, no friends of hers coming over; just you and me."

"Now, who's getting cocky, Sam? Want to share a shower with me? You really need one."

They were exactly on time when Samantha knocked on Master Niva's door, but they had to run part of the way.

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"What's this beautiful smile for, Janet?"

Startled out of her reverie, the brunette almost jumped out of her seat at the sound of Stephen's voice. "I'm sorry, Stevie, I'm not the hostess I should be. Hey, you're all wet."

"I put the bike in the garage and wiped it down. Such a beaut shouldn't be sitting in the rain, but I suppose the beautiful blonde had more urgent things on her mind." He added teasingly.

"She's off limits, Stevie." Janet somehow got her voice to sound threatening, but her mischievous smile still gave her away.

"Oh, Janet, I'm wounded. You know that I'm only a tease. I'm a safe bet with the ladies. Besides, everyone who saw the expression on her face when she came back would know that she has eyes only for you." He answered with a smile that brought out his dimples and quickly changed the subject. "You know that I positively hate being called Stevie, except when you are doing it?"

"And why is that?" She asked genuinely interested.

Before he could answer a deeper voice came from the other side of the room. "Stephen, I apologise for my earlier behaviour. Any friend of Janet is also a friend of mine."

"Stephen, may I finally introduce Major Samantha Carter, my best friend, my lover, and the other half of my soul. Sam, this is Stephen Harrington, my former brother-in-law."

They firmly shook hands and Samantha said. "I hope you give me the chance to prove that usually I'm not a total idiot, Stephen."

She smiled at him, not one of her Janet-smiles, but close enough to one to make him begin to understand why the small doctor was so taken with her.

When Janet had first told him on the phone that she was in love with a woman and a fellow officer at that, he thought that she simply was lonely and needed the fantasy to keep her going. She adopted a child and they raised her together, and then a couple of months ago she had told him that they now were officially living together.

There had been so much joy in her voice and when she had opened the door a few hours earlier at his unexpected visit she literally had radiated happiness, a happiness quickly replaced by anger and worry when that tall blonde Amazon had yelled at her and stormed off.

His protective instincts had flared to life in a heartbeat but seeing her now, with Janet's arm possessively encircling her waist, he was willing to give her another chance.

So, he decided to goad her a little bit. "Hmm, I don't know. It might be true what they say about blondes."

This certainly got a reaction, but not the one he had been looking for. Samantha just smiled but Janet pushed herself in front of her taller partner, almost bristling with protectiveness.

"Sam holds a doctorate in astrophysics and philosophy, so don't ever say or think something like that again. I don't want you to act like your thick-headed, pea-brained brother."

"I give, Jan. It was only a joke, nothing..." He looked at the blonde, suddenly dumbstruck.

"Doctor Sam Carter? The Sam Carter? Author of 'Theory of Wormhole Physics'?" Janet nodded. "Holy shit! It was such a thrill to read. I almost know it by heart. I dreamed of getting a chance to discuss it with you. There are so many things I wanted to ask you..."

"And guess what, Stevie? You'll get your chance. I have to pick Cassandra up and will bring

some Chinese take-away for dinner. Meanwhile, you guys can talk shop."

Though his physique told another story, Stephen still was a nerd at heart and always would be, just like the scientist in her blonde lover more often than not took precedence over the soldier and even the lover.

"Be careful, Jan, it's still snowing out there." That got a scowl from the smaller woman but she also got a gentle kiss. Samantha's eyes followed her until she closed the front door behind her. "She's still angry at me," she stated.

"She was frantic when she saw you tearing down the road without a helmet." He simply answered.

"Oh damn, the bike. I left it out there."

He just managed to grab her by the hood of her sweater. "Easy. I put it in the garage and wiped it dry. Did you restore it? It's a real beauty."

"Don't tell me you not only know astrophysics but also love bikes?" He only smiled in answer. "Thank you for taking care of her. Yes, I sort of had to build her up from the frame. It was a challenge."

"But you just love a challenge, right?" Now it was Samantha's turn to resort to a smile. "Janet is stationed at the Air Force Academy Hospital, but what does an astrophysicist, what does 'the' astrophysicist do with the Air Force?"

"Deep space radar telemetry." Samantha simply answered.

"NORAD?"

"I have a nice, sunny office there, yes." She didn't add: 'A rarely used nice, sunny office.' Instead she asked. "And what are you doing for a living?"

"I was with ARIN, the Astrological Research Institute Nevada. I resigned when I found my lover in a storage closet with a woman."

"I'm sorry that you have been hurt, Stephen," she simply answered.

"Marc never offered me the forever-after, but I had expected better of him." If Samantha was surprised to find that his lover had been a man she didn't show it.

"Anyway," the dark blonde continued, "I thought I make a stop here before having to decide what to do with my life."

"You're welcome to stay for as long as you like, Stephen." Samantha reacted to the pain and defeat in his voice more than to his words. "The guest room is yours."

They then quickly delved in a discussion about quantum physics and wormholes. Samantha found that he not only had read the thick volume she had written while under the influence of the Ataniek armbands; he also was good enough to contest some of her theories, and she had to admit that without the evidence of the Stargate she would have been hard pressed to find them liable herself.

The arrival of Janet and Cassandra with their dinner put an end to their discussion, but by then the young man had promised to stay at least the weekend, so they would have other chances to talk.

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It was late at night when they retired to their room. Janet snuggled close to her, her head on Samantha's shoulder and one of her arms wrapped protectively around her waist. They usually talked about their respective days before falling asleep or making love but this night the brunette just closed her eyes.

"Are you still angry with me, Jan?" Samantha quietly asked.

"You scared me, Sam." Janet answered without opening her eyes.

"I'm sorry, my love. Perhaps you really should punish me like they do on Gaia. I felt better afterwards."

Janet's mind once again snapped back to the evening of her lover's punishment.

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They were exactly on time when Samantha knocked on the weapons' master's door, but they had to run part of the way.

Larina, the captain of the Royal Guard, let them in where Master Niva, Queen Gabrielle, and Consort Xena were already waiting for them. Samantha was slightly shocked; she had hoped that this would stay between them and the weapons' master, even though Xena knew about it. She quickly regained her composure and knelt in front of the three women.

"I am ready to accept my punishment with humility and gratitude."

"Samantha Gabriella Carter, daughter of Rebecca, grand-daughter of Catherine, you now will receive 24 strokes with a strap on your bare behind as punishment for deliberately neglecting your duty. Have you chosen your witness?" Niva asked.

"Doctor Janet Fraiser has consented to be my witness, Master Niva."

"So be it." Niva said and left the hut together with Larina and the Queen.

"Please strip and bend over the desk, Samantha. I will count the strokes; you just concentrate on holding your position."

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The brunette abruptly sat up, startling her taller companion. "You know, there's been something about this whole punishment thing that's been bugging me for quite some time now."

"What is it, Janet? You admitted yourself that apart from the initial pain there was no harm done."

"That's not it. Xena is an expert; I'll never doubt that. What I can't figure out is why she did it and not Master Niva."

"We were her responsibility, Jan. She told us the first day that she would be the one to mete out punishments if need be. I shouldn't have been surprised to see the Consort at Niva's." Samantha answered.

"That's just it, Sam. She didn't, at least not with others, well, at least one other. A few weeks ago, Jennifer told me over lunch how she had screwed up one of your experiments with the energy shield just before you had to go off-world. She told me how angry you were and that she wished she could make things like this just go away by getting her behind blistered. She then told me that she had once been punished by Cameria for not being careful enough with one analysis. The Consort had been told, but she didn't do it herself; she didn't even offer to do it herself."

"Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that I was the leader of our team, or Xena couldn't get away from whatever she had been doing when it was Jennifer's turn. It could be as simple as that, my love."

To Janet it seemed as if Samantha wanted desperately to convince herself that there had been nothing special about her punishment or the fact that the Queen herself had come to give them an ointment that would help her heal faster. The doctor let her head sink back on her lover's shoulder but she couldn't stop thinking about it.

The Amazons had welcomed all of them. The whole team had been treated like long lost family members, but only Samantha and she had developed a special relationship to the Queen and her Consort; perhaps due to their bond, their connection to each other that was so similar to what Gabrielle and Xena shared.



They all had formed strong friendships with the people on Gaia; in some cases even more than friendship, Janet thought with a smile. But between Samantha and Xena there also was more than friendship or some sort of mentor - student relationship. She couldn't pin it down but was sure that it went much deeper than this. The tone of her lover's voice, however, told her clearly that she was not ready to discuss this any further; and there also was something else she aimed to find out.

So, she once again closed her eyes and concentrated on the light in her mind, on their connection and for the first time Samantha answered, for the first time she got something back. The ball of light she usually saw was not only there, it was pulsing with an energy it never had before. This afternoon, when the blonde had come back and knelt in front of her, she had thought that she had felt her lover actively reaching out for her, but she hadn't been sure, not really.

Whatever had been left of her anger and disappointment at Samantha's unexpectedly immature and insecure behaviour disappeared at this discovery. Living with the woman she loved had been bliss, but this, the knowledge that their bond really was mutual, this finally made it real, real enough for every nerve ending, every cell in her body to understand and trust in it.

Janet almost unconsciously began to move the arm draped over her lover's midsection. She first circled the belly button. Her fingers then traced taut abdominal muscles and then moved upwards to her lover's breasts. Instead of gently caressing her partner's firm globes and teasing her until she felt compelled to take over, as was usually the case, this night she felt a sense of urgency that couldn't be denied. So, she began to knead and squeeze the blonde's smooth skin.

She quickly was rewarded by the sight of two very perkily protruding, very hard nipples though only one of them was actually receiving attention. Something that could easily be corrected; so, her left hand began to mimic the movements of her right. The blonde's breathing rhythm changed and a moan escaped her lips. She arched into the small physician's touch. Janet searched for her lover's eyes and found them dilated in arousal, and at the same time a spike of light roared through her soul.

As a rule, the brunette was perfectly content to let Samantha take control in their bedroom; it simply was part of her character, but there were times when she needed something different, especially when she felt vulnerable, when she needed something more forceful without being outright aggressive or domineering.

The only question left to answer was if the blonde would accept it but that also turned out quiet all right. "Jan, Janet, plea..." She sealed her lover's lips with a kiss that quickly became passionate. The light of their love now seemed to pulse with the rhythm of their heartbeat. Their tongues began an intricate, very familiar dance.

Samantha continued to seek body contact and Janet happily obliged. She slowly rolled her body on top of the blonde's. She put as much of her body weight on her arms and still made sure that her breasts and nipples directly touched her lover's. All her instincts were telling her to take her partner hard and fast but another part told her that this would be too easy, too fast, for both of their sakes.

So, Janet lowered herself down on her elbows, trying to immobilise the taller woman who was starting to thrust up her hips. When she broke the kiss, she brought her lips close to Samantha's right ear and whispered.

"I love you, Sammy. Even if I'm angry with you, I'll always love you."

"Love you, too," the blonde whispered hoarsely back. "Please, take me."

"No, Sammy. I will not take you. You're mine as I am yours. I will not take you but I will make love to you." Samantha's wide eyes grew even wider at her words and the light intensified further.

Janet repositioned her right leg to rest between the blonde's thighs and pressed down. She could feel how wet Samantha was, and for a split second she imagined going down on her and bring her to a quick release with her lips and tongue. But this was not what she wanted this night to be about.

She once again sought her lover's eyes, and intensified the contact between their bodies. She kissed Samantha's throat and suckled the sensitive point just above the collar bone. Janet let the tip of her tongue trail over the soft skin as if she wanted to check out every single pore. She sought out the jugular vein and pressed the flat of her tongue against it. She relished feeling her lover's quickly beating heart, fast but not frantic; and concluded that she was ready for the next step.

The brunette shifted her weight back on her hands and arms, lifting her upper body away from Samantha's torso. She smiled slightly at the disappointed moan and kissed her lover, brushing lips against lips. She then turned her attention towards the blonde's breast, beginning with the soft, sensitive skin at their sides. Every now and then she let the tip of her tongue dance over one of the blonde's nipples to keep them hard.

She methodically kissed all around the base of the fleshy globes, leaving a trail of love bites. Samantha's hips began to move of their own accord but the small doctor somehow managed to hold her in place. The blonde spread her legs wider and Janet had to adjust her position to make sure that her nether lips stayed right on top of her lover's.

Janet stopped the ministrations to her partner's breast and established eye contact.

"Look at me, Sammy-baby, look at me. I want you to see what I do." She asked, knowing how difficult it could be to keep one's eyes open when other parts of her body insistently demanded attention.

The blonde's eyes opened even wider, and for a moment it was as if she had to gather all of her strength to offer a faint nod.

'O Goddess, she was so beautiful when she allowed herself to be open and vulnerable.' Her

blonde, strong lover was never more beautiful than on these rare occasions.

Janet was almost painfully aware of her own arousal, but this evening was more about Samantha than her. She refocused her attention on the inviting breasts, determined to assuage at least some of the blonde genius' fears and insecurities she could still feel through their bond, now combined with a big dose of self-recriminations at her running away.

She suckled the taut nipples and enjoyed how the body beneath her squirmed in anticipation; Samantha was close, very close. "Please, Jan, please..."

"Come for me, baby. Let me see how you come for me."

The intensively dark blue eyes closed for the fraction of a heartbeat. Then Samantha captured the brunette's brown orbs. Energy was pulsing through them, making their muscles contract. Ever since returning from Gaia they had been aware of their connection like a golden thread between their hearts and souls, but now it suddenly flared to life, an explosion of light that enveloped them, drowned them.

Finally, Janet collapsed on top of her taller lover, and Samantha rolled them over 'til they came to their sides. She closed strong arms around the doctor's frame, whispered. "I love you, Janet, love you so much. You're my light."

"And you, my brave warrior, are mine, always." Janet answered with a bright smile. She stretched a bit and softly kissed the taller woman on sleepily dropping eyelids. "Sleep, my love."

She didn't receive an answer and hadn't expected one, knowing from experience that emotional stress took a greater toll on her usually self-reliant lover than mere physical exertion ever could.

Janet also was tired, but for the moment she felt energised by the explosion of light, by the all encompassing power of their love. Deep in her heart she knew that this day, this night had brought them even closer together, had strengthened their bond in a way they had yet to explore. Before falling asleep herself, she remembered her grandfather's favourite Shakespeare sonnet.

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth bringeth  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Her last coherent thought was that she wouldn't change what she had with the beautiful, brilliant blonde for anything or anyone in the universe.

~\*~

Janet woke to an empty bed and a steaming mug of coffee waiting for her on the nightstand. She spared a thought to last night before grabbing it and smiled.

Samantha usually was the first one up and the coffee told her that her restless lover already had been out on her morning run and now was probably sitting in the kitchen with a cup of Chinese tea and the morning paper, her hair still wet from her shower. The brunette finished her coffee and decided that she would make pancakes for breakfast.

The paper was neatly folded on the kitchen table, but Samantha was nowhere to be seen. Janet checked the garage and the den and finally found her in the study, a small, sunny room the doctor used to do some of her paperwork. She was intently studying the computer screen and almost jumped when Janet suddenly appeared at her side.

"You performed a security check on Stephen? Why? I thought you like him."

"I like him, Jan, and he seems to be very good at his job. I spoke to the director of ARIN. They want him back. I promised to speak with him about it, but I also will offer him another option, now that the security check has come through clean." Samantha answered with one of her special smiles.

"At the base? Will General Hammond approve?"

"Since Coombs and Felger transferred to Area 51 my science department is a bit short-handed. We could use the help, and he's more than qualified." Samantha simply stated. "Do you think he would be able to stand the pressure?"

"Stephen is tough, Sam. When his parents found out that he was gay, they disowned him. He worked his way through College and still was Valedictorian. Neither his parents nor his brother were at the graduation."

"So, that's why my ears were ringing, talking about me behind my back." Stephen said from the door. "And Jan, you were there. That's all the family I needed."

"Thanks Stevie. Yes, we were talking about you. Sam might have a job for you if you don't mind working with the military."

His big eyes lit up but only briefly. "At NORAD? I once applied for a job there, but they told me to come back when I'm a commissioned officer. I don't think they have changed their policy about civilians. Not to speak about 'Don't ask, don't tell'. I didn't exactly make a secret of my sexual orientation."

"I let the two of you talk and get some breakfast going." Janet said and left the room with an encouraging pat on Stephen's shoulder.

"Take a seat, Stephen." The young man complied. "It wouldn't be at NORAD, officially yes, but not really. And 'Don't ask, don't tell' doesn't apply to you because you would still stay a civilian - as long as you keep your sex life out of work, there won't be a problem.

"I'm heading the science division of a facility under Cheyenne Mountain. You would be working

for me, but there are a few things you'll have to know before you make any decision.

"First of all, I had a short talk with Professor Eagleton at ARIN. He wants you to come back and promised that your former partner would then be permanently transferred to night shift. He praised your quick thinking and your ability to improvise as well as your constant questioning and search for answers outside the box. That's exactly what we need at the base - but I have to warn you, it can get rather dangerous from time to time."

"I saw some of your scars when you were stretching before your run this morning, and one doesn't get a body like yours by sitting in a plush office. Deep space radar telemetry is only a cover story, right?"

"It's a cover story. I knew you were bright, Stephen. What we do is top secret. So, at the moment I can't tell you much more. It can be very dangerous, sometimes we get a lot of pressure from the brass and such, and we have to do things we don't like but it also is a wild ride, wilder than my wildest dreams."

"I'll think about it, Sam."

"That's all I ask. Take your time."

"I will. I'll go and help Janet in the kitchen. Do you mind if I ask her opinion?"

"Not at all; she's the Chief Medical Officer of the base. No one knows better than she does how dangerous our work can be."

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"So, what do you want to know, Stevie?" Janet asked as soon as he came to the kitchen.

"I still can't get over it. She's 'the' Sam Carter! I lay awake half of the night, and I still can't get over it. I studied her theories even before the book came out. She's a legend in my field. Why does she let everyone believe that she's a man? And there also is no mention that she's an Air Force Officer."

"She told me that her identity was easy enough to find out if one really wanted to know. She thinks it's better for her work at the base when she's not in the public spotlight. So, will you go back to Nevada?"

"You never were one to beat around the bush, Jan. Tell me, is it really this dangerous?"

"It can be, Stephen. Every time Sam goes on an away-mission, there's a chance that she comes back injured or not at all. You would be working on the base, that's not half as dangerous, but in the past four years we have had some close calls. I'm sorry, Stevie but I can't go into any details

as long as you have not been cleared by General Hammond, our commanding officer."

"Is it worth the danger and the pain, Janet?" The young man asked.

A barrage of images flashed through her mind, of all the occasions she almost had lost the blond soldier, of all the times she had to stand by helplessly when one of her charges died.

"It can be hard and frightening, Stephen, but yes, it's worth the pain and the danger. We learn so much about life and the universe; we make a difference for our world."

They fell silent. Janet knew that she had told him too much, but still not enough to make an informed decision. Stephen leaned against one of the kitchen counters with an enigmatic smile on his face.

"I would be working with the Sam Carter, every day." He said almost to himself.

"Not every day, Stephen. I'll be gone more times than not and you would have your own projects to work on - but yes, from time to time we would be working together." Samantha answered from the doorway.

"Then my decision is made. I take the job, whatever it may be." He smiled like a kid in a candy store.

"Are you sure, Stephen?" Janet asked. "It really can be very dangerous."

"Jan, not accepting such an offer would be plain stupid. It would be like refusing to work with Einstein or Schroedinger or Heisenberg."

Samantha blushed up to her hairline and made a hasty exit by telling them. "I'll go and call the General."

"Did I say something wrong, Janet?"

"No, Stevie. Sam may be a card-carrying genius, but she also is very modest. She'll get over it. Don't worry."

Janet closed her eyes and tapped into their link. Last night had been special and she didn't expect any miracles, but when Samantha signalled her that she was all right a bright smile spread across her face.

She opened her eyes and continued. "She'll be all right, Stevie."

Less than a week later the science team of the SGC had a new member and Stephen turned out to be a very valuable asset to the base at Cheyenne Mountain. He was level-headed, resourceful, patient, and easy to work with. Samantha enjoyed working with him because she didn't have to dumb down her thought processes in order to get things done. He was a quick study, and at first

had to be forced to leave the sanctuary of the lab for any length of time. The childlike wonder he had for the numerous new toys there reminded the blonde very much of a certain archaeologist.

## ***THE END***

I know there are a lot of open questions and maybe a slight cliff-hanger or two. The sequel already has been started though I don't have all the answers yet. It's always easier to write something new if you know that there's someone out there appreciating what you're doing. And besides: I'm open for ideas and suggestions.

So, any and all feedback is welcome under [romansilence@yahoo.de](mailto:romansilence@yahoo.de).

Flames will be answered with flames, but I'm thankful for constructive criticism (means: should you want to tell me that I suck - good, do so, I can take it, but also tell me why and/or how to make it better, to allow me to avoid it next time; rant at me that I'm too pro/contra ... (whatever)... but be prepared for my answer).

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